

SIAMESE IN A MALAY-MUSLIM STATE:
IDENTITY, BELONGING, AND INTEGRATION IN
TERBAK VILLAGE, TUMPAT, KELANTAN

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By

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ABSTRACT

Situated at the intersection of Thai cultural heritage and Malaysian citizenship, the Siamese community in Kelantan occupies a complex position as a non-Muslim Bumiputera minority within a sociopolitical landscape increasingly defined by Malay-Islamic dominance. Despite being legally recognized, this community navigates structural limitations and assimilative pressures within governance frameworks that provide symbolic, incomplete inclusion. While previous scholarship has documented the historical and anthropological aspects of Siamese Malaysians, particularly in Kedah, significant gaps remain regarding how communities in Kelantan respond to these contemporary sociopolitical pressures. To address this gap, this study examines the identity negotiation and adaptive strategies of the Siamese community in Terbak Village, Tumpat, Kelantan. Using an ethnographic design grounded in participant observation and in-depth interviews, it explores how Terbak's Siamese maintain cultural resilience while adapting to their environment. The findings reveal that the community negotiates assimilative pressures through *adaptive identity positioning*, a dynamic and situational approach that allows them to strategically balance their Thai-Buddhist heritage with adaptive integration. Despite generational shifts, the community exhibits minimal erosion of its identity, instead engaging in a dual process of identity rearticulation and consolidation that reinforces core cultural anchors while navigating new social realities. Furthermore, they construct a grounded national identity defined by civic participation and dual symbolic loyalty, demonstrating agency within constraints rather than succumbing to simple assimilation or resistance. This

research sheds light on minority identity negotiation within multicultural contexts characterized by power imbalances, highlighting the need for genuinely inclusive policies that acknowledge cultural diversity as a national asset, rather than a threat to cohesion.

Keywords: Siamese community, ethnic identity, cultural resilience, multicultural societies, integration

Subject Area: HT1501-1595 Races

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AST	Adaptive Identity Positioning
AST	Anglo-Siamese Treaty
DOSM	Department of Statistics Malaysia
EIT	Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory
IPSR	Institute of Postgraduate Studies and Research
IPG	Institute of Teacher Education Malaysia
KPC	Kelantan Peranakan Chinese
NCP	National Culture Policy
NEP	New Economic Policy
PAS	Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party
PSKn	Kelantan Siamese Association
RQ	Research Question
RQ	Research Objectives
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SERC	Scientific and Ethical Review Committee
SIT	Social Identity Theory
SUHAKAM	Human Rights Commission of Malaysia
TLDCS	Thai Language, Dhamma, and Culture School
UMNO	The United Malays National Organisation
UTAR	Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman
UTARRF	UTAR Research Fund

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of Study

The Siamese Malaysians, or *Orang Siam* in the Malay language, are a small but significant ethnic minority in Malaysia, comprising individuals of Thai ancestry who have resided in the northern Malaysian states for centuries. Their primary settlements are located in Kedah, Kelantan, Perlis, Penang, and Perak (Kuroda, 2019; Samrong, 2014). The historical presence of the Siamese in these areas reflects the deeply intertwined histories of the Malay Peninsula¹ and the Kingdom of Siam (also known as “Siam,” modern-day Thailand), marked by centuries of cultural, political, and economic exchanges (Human Rights Commission of Malaysia [SUHAKAM], 2010; Suwannathat-Pian, 1984). While the Anglo-Siamese Treaty (AST) of 1909 formalized the political boundaries between Siam and British Malaya², it maintained the cultural and social connections that still shape the identity and heritage of the Siamese Malaysians (Johnson, 2010; Kaecosanit, 2016). As a result, this community has maintained a unique dual identity, blending Thai cultural heritage with Malaysian citizenship.

¹ The Malay Peninsula is narrow stretch of land in Southeast Asia that connects Thailand in the north to Malaysia in the south, and it has been an important area for trade, travel, and cultural exchanges throughout history.

² British Malaya refers to the period when the British Empire controlled parts of what is now Malaysia, from the 18th century until the mid-20th century, administering the region and influencing its political and economic systems.

The migration and settlement of the Siamese in northern Malaysia predate the emergence of modern nation-states, shaped by wider patterns of political turbulence and shifting regional authority across the upper Malay Peninsula. These dynamics facilitated significant southward movements into areas such as Kelantan and Terengganu, a process examined in more detail later in Chapter 2. Their incorporation into the northern Malay polities was further supported by the accommodating approaches of Malay rulers, who integrated Siamese communities into local governance and agricultural economies (Suwannathat-Pian, 1984). Despite their integration, the Siamese retained their cultural distinctiveness, establishing Theravada Buddhist temples (*wats*) as cultural and religious centers that continue to play a central role in their communities (Johnson, 2012; Mohamed Yusoff, 2010a). These temples serve as the heart of social life, functioning not only as places of worship for the predominantly Theravada Buddhist population but also as centers for community gatherings, festivals, traditional arts, and education (Sama-ae & Tohleheng, 2017).

Kelantan, in particular, provides an attractive context for studying the Siamese Malaysians. Known for its strong adherence to Malay traditions and Islam, Kelantan is governed by the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS; or Parti Islam Se-Malaysia), which enforces policies that emphasize Malay-Islamic values and has pursued the implementation of Syariah laws, including *hudud* provisions (Tayeb, 2022; Junaaid & Nurbaiti, 2024). Accounting for only about 1% of the state's population (Johnson, 2002), the Kelantan Siamese, one of the smallest communities, skillfully yet carefully navigate a setting where

assimilative pressures are particularly pronounced. Local policies often impose restrictions on non-Muslim cultural and religious expressions, affecting their ability to fully participate in the state's sociopolitical framework (Sharifah, 2023a, 2023b; Stark, 2004). Further examples of such pressures and restrictive policies against non-Muslims are discussed in greater detail in Subchapter 2.8.

The broader Malaysian sociopolitical landscape has further shaped the experiences of the Kelantan Siamese. While Malaysia's governance has frequently emphasized integration, it often operates within a framework of Malay dominance (Cheah, 2002) and the ideology of Malay supremacy (*Ketuanan Melayu*) (Chin, 2020; Hamayotsu, 2018). In recent years, however, this governance framework has evolved into Malay-Islamic supremacy (*Ketuanan Melayu Islam*), which has affected the standing of non-Muslims in the country (Chin, 2020; Hamayotsu, 2018).

The Federal Constitution anchors Malaysia's character as a secular and multicultural state, affirming Islam as the religion of the Federation while safeguarding religious freedom under Article 3(1) and equality before the law under Article 8. This constitutional vision is reinforced by national principles such as the Rukun Negara (Government of Malaysia, 1970), judicial interpretation in *Che Omar bin Che Soh v Public Prosecutor* (1988), and inclusive policy frameworks like Vision 2020 (Mahathir, 1991). Although the Constitution upholds the principles of multiculturalism and religious freedom, the practical implementation of national policies frequently reflects an assimilative tendency, prioritizing Malay identity and Islamic values over the pluralistic ideals envisioned at independence (Chin, 2020; Muhammad Asad,

2024; Neo, 2006). Policies such as the National Culture Policy (NCP) introduced in 1971, and subsequent initiatives, have further reinforced this narrative, often sidelining the cultural contributions of non-Malay communities (Cheah, 2002). Therefore, the pressures the Siamese community faces as a minority group are twofold: at both the federal and state levels.

The external challenges discussed above are compounded by internal dynamics, including generational shifts shaped by modern education, urbanization, and globalization. These processes have weakened youth engagement with traditional practices (Kuroda, 2002, 2005). Yet, at the communal level, the Siamese have maintained notable cultural resilience, preserving key aspects of their heritage while navigating their Malaysian identity. In Kelantan, minority communities, including the Siamese, are widely recognized for integrating effectively with local Malays and adapting well to the Kelantanese way of life (Golomb, 1978; Mohamed Yusoff, 1987; Pue et al., 2019; Pue & Shamsul, 2011; Rajo, 2018; Tan et al., 2017).

Building on this communal resilience, younger generations continue to sustain their identity through cultural practices such as Theravada Buddhism, community festivals like Songkran (Thai New Year), and the use of the southern Thai dialect (Na Thalang, 2015; Johnson, 2012). While maintaining the dialect, they are increasingly bilingual, speaking both Thai and Kelantan Malay, which facilitates integration into broader Malaysian society and supports cultural exchange, reflecting their adaptability within a multicultural setting (Johnson, 2012). The community's cultural resilience is further exemplified by the presence of Theravada Buddhist temples, which serve as centers for religious

and social activities, ensuring the continuity of Siamese cultural traditions despite pressures to conform to the dominant cultural framework (Johnson, 2012; Mohamed Yusoff, 2010b).

Amid national policies that prioritize the sociopolitical interests of the Malay majority, sometimes limiting space for non-Malay cultural expressions (Nah, 2003; Shamsul, 2001), this study aims to explore how the Siamese Malaysian community of Kampung Terbak (hereafter “Terbak Village” or “Terbak”) in the Tumpat district of Kelantan maintains its cultural identity and navigates its position within Malaysia’s multicultural framework. Tumpat hosts the majority of Kelantan’s Siamese population and contains some of the state’s earliest Siamese settlements (Suziana & Nur Azuki, 2017), making it a critical site for examining minority experiences. Within this context, Kampung Terbak stands out as a focal site for exploring how the Siamese negotiate cultural continuity and national belonging amid structural pressures of assimilation. As a key center of Siamese religious and educational life, anchored by Wat Phikulthong Vararam and its Thai school, Terbak provides an ideal lens for analyzing resilience and integration within a Malay-Muslim sociopolitical milieu (Tayeb, 2022; Suziana & Nur Azuki, 2017).

Building on the sociopolitical context at both the national and state levels, this thesis highlights the increasing expectations placed by the governments on non-Muslim communities to align with Malay-Islamic norms and values. I describe these expectations, which have become especially pronounced in recent years due to shifting power dynamics and sociopolitical transformations (Chin, 2020), as “assimilative pressures” throughout this thesis.

Nevertheless, it is essential to clarify that using this term does not imply that Malaysia's governance model, as discussed in greater detail in Subchapter 2.7, constitutes a complete assimilation model. Instead, I argue that these pressures point toward a discernible shift toward a more homogenized national identity, whether deliberate or perceived. This trajectory appears to place greater emphasis on alignment with Malay-Muslim norms, which may unintentionally constrain the full expression of multicultural inclusion within the country's supposedly secular framework.

By situating this investigation within the larger discourse on multiculturalism and minority identity in Southeast Asia, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the resilience and adaptability of ethnic minorities in navigating cultural and political challenges. Furthermore, this research also advocates for more inclusive policies that recognize and support the cultural contributions of minority communities, such as the Siamese Malaysians. By shedding light on their experiences, this study highlights the importance of promoting a truly multicultural society that values diversity as an asset rather than a challenge. Such an approach enriches Malaysia's cultural fabric and strengthens national cohesion by ensuring all communities feel represented and respected in the nation's sociopolitical framework.

1.2 Research Problem

Malaysia, a nation renowned for its multiracial and multicultural composition, boasts a rich mosaic of ethnic and cultural diversity. The Federal Constitution affirms Malaysia as a secular and multicultural state; however, post-

independence developments reveal a drift towards monoculturalism. Policies and incidents over the decades suggest a narrowing of the country's cultural pluralism, which increasingly prioritizes a Malay-Muslim identity. This transition, rooted in the political concept of Malay supremacy, has evolved into a Malay-Islamic hegemony, as noted by Chin (2020) and Hamayotsu (2018) in their works. This shift coincides with the framing of various events through racial and religious lenses, leading to heightened tensions among different communities (Amir & Bedi, 2023; Chew, 2019; ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2023; Lemièrre, 2023).

From the NCP to Bangsa Malaysia³ and education reforms promoting Malay-medium instruction, these initiatives have raised concerns, especially among non-Malay communities, about their lack of alignment with multiculturalism and the creation of a singular, homogeneous national identity that could challenge the distinct ethnic and cultural identities that exist within Malaysia. Moreover, the Malaysian government enforces affirmative action policies like the New Economic Policy⁴ (NEP), which prioritize ethnic Malays in education, business, and public-sector employment, often disadvantaging

³ Bangsa Malaysia was introduced under *Vision 2020*—then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's 1991 blueprint for a fully developed, united nation by 2020—to promote a shared identity beyond ethnicity. While it aimed to foster unity by encouraging a shared sense of citizenship and allegiance to the Constitution, scholars have critiqued it as a top-down initiative that risks marginalizing ethnic diversity and reinforcing Malay-centric narratives (Mohamed Mustafa, 2002).

⁴ The New Economic Policy in Malaysia, established by the National Operations Council in 1971 under Razak's leadership following the 1969 racial riots, sought to create a more equitable societal structure through prioritizing Malays and indigenous groups in education, business, and public sector employment. It was significantly influenced by political considerations (Torii, 1997).

non-Malays (Torii, 1997). Additionally, legislation such as the Syariah Courts (Criminal Jurisdiction) Act reinforces Malaysia's dual legal system—civil law for all citizens and Syariah law for Muslims—raising concerns among non-Muslims over jurisdictional overlaps and questions of legal equity (Harding, 2012).

Besides, incidents such as the development of a national history curriculum shaped by dominant Malay and Islamic narratives and the inclusion of Jawi-Khat in schools are seen as imposing singular, Malay-Islamic cultural elements, sidelining non-Malay cultural contributions, and fostering a homogenized national identity over Malaysia's diverse multicultural tapestry (Mlhi, 2021; "Expert Slams History Textbooks," 2021; "Jawi and Khat Not Malaysia's Identity," 2019). Although Malaysia has not enforced overt cultural assimilation, as seen in neighboring countries like Thailand and Indonesia, efforts toward subtle assimilation persist. Such measures are evident in the increasing dominance of Malay-Muslim narratives and the diminishing space for cultural diversity, particularly as the population has grown significantly since independence (Hirschman, 1980; Department of Statistics Malaysia [DOSM], 2024).

This sociopolitical climate is further complicated in Kelantan, a conservative state often referred to as Serambi Mekah (Verandah of Mecca) due to its significant role in Islamic education and governance (Johnson, 2012). Governed predominantly by PAS, known for its Islamic orthodoxy, Kelantan is characterized by demographic homogeneity and an unequal social landscape, in which minority groups must navigate and adapt strategically to dominant Malay-

Muslim norms (Rajo & Ngeow, 2014). Against this backdrop, the Kelantan Siamese, a non-Muslim Bumiputera⁵ minority, face sustained assimilative pressures. Despite their long-standing presence in the region and recognition as “sons of the soil,” the Siamese experience social and political marginalization, exacerbated by their cultural and religious differences (SUHAKAM, 2010).

Juggling a dual identity, the Kelantan Siamese navigate a complex interplay between their heritage and Malaysian identity. They are both Thai and Malaysian, shaped by historical ties to Thailand and their contemporary status in Malaysia. While they integrate linguistically and socially with the dominant Malay community, they also maintain their distinct identity through Theravada Buddhism, traditional festivals like Songkran, and cultural practices centered on Theravada Buddhist temples (Mohamed Yusoff, 1987). This includes safeguarding unique performance arts like the Manora, a traditional dance-drama that blends Siamese and Malay cultural elements and is often performed during festivals (Suziana & Nur Azuki, 2017). These efforts enable them to resist complete assimilation despite their small numbers, even as subtle generational shifts in identity suggest that “Siamness” may be evolving in contemporary Malaysia.

While earlier studies have acknowledged the historical and anthropological presence of the Siamese in Kelantan, they have largely stopped

⁵ In Malaysia, the term “Bumiputera” refers to ethnic groups considered to be indigenous to the country, including Malays and various indigenous peoples, who benefit from affirmative action policies intended to address historical socioeconomic inequalities.

short of interrogating how contemporary sociopolitical transformations, particularly the intensification of Malay-Islamic dominance, shape everyday identity negotiations within this community. These gaps are explored in the following section. In doing so, this study departs from classical ethnographic accounts (e.g., Golomb, 1978; Kershaw, 1969; Mohamed Yusoff, 1987) by situating the Kelantan Siamese within Malaysia's evolving political-religious landscape and connecting their localized experiences in Terbak Village to the broader national discourse on majoritarian cultural dominance and cultural resilience. This approach establishes the originality of the research problem and bridges historical ethnography with contemporary sociological inquiry.

However, classical frameworks, including Berry's (1997) acculturation model, which presuppose a bidirectional integration process on a level playing field, are insufficient for explaining minority survival in the asymmetrical reality of post-1990 Kelantan. These models fail to capture the structural constraints imposed by federal Malay-centric governance and state-level Islamization. Such policies enforce Malay-Muslim normativity, granting the community only symbolic recognition while marginalizing their substantive needs. Accordingly, the present study introduces a novel empirical and analytical focus, examining identity negotiation as a dynamic, lived process rather than a static cultural inheritance.

This critique underscores the need for empirical investigation, prompting the following critical questions: How do the Kelantan Siamese negotiate their dual identity in a predominantly Malay-Muslim environment? What patterns of adaptation and potential shifts in identity emerge in their interactions with the

dominant culture? Finally, what are their conceptions of Malaysia and Malaysian identity, and how do they situate themselves within the broader national narrative? These inquiries delve into the lived realities of a minority group striving to maintain its cultural heritage while navigating the pressures towards an increasingly monocultural trajectory in Malaysia. By situating these questions within the contemporary legacies of the NEP and Islamization, this study offers original empirical insights into minority identity negotiation, contributing to a more informed understanding of multiculturalism, integration, and resilience in Malaysia's complex sociopolitical context.

1.3 Research Gaps

Existing scholarship has extensively documented the historical and cultural significance of Siamese Malaysians, particularly in Kedah and Kelantan, the two states with the largest populations of this community. Studies have emphasized their role in enriching Malaysia's multicultural landscape through contributions to religion, architecture, festivals, and traditional practices (e.g., Ab. Aziz, 1998; Chuapram & Tapparut, 2022; Eh Tat & Azizi, 2019; Golomb, 1978; Johnson, 2012; Mohamed Yusoff, 1987). However, much of this research has focused on the anthropological and historical aspects of the Siamese Malaysian community, with relatively little attention to the sociological dynamics that shape how the community engages with the dominant culture. Furthermore, the literature lacks discussion on contemporary identity shifts among Siamese Malaysians, especially in Kelantan, where pressures to assimilate are heightened by local sociopolitical dynamics under PAS governance (Johnson, 2002; Mohamed Yusoff, 1987).

In Kelantan, home to the second-largest Thai population in Malaysia, empirical research has been relatively scarce compared to Kedah, despite Kelantan's sociocultural significance within Malaysia's ethnic landscape. While classical works by Kershaw (1969, 1979, 1982), Golomb (1978), and Mohamed Yusoff (1987, 2010a, 2010b) offer foundational insights into the Siamese communities in Kelantan, these studies are now significantly dated and reflective of historical contexts that have evolved. These foundational studies were conducted before PAS regained power in Kelantan in 1990, a significant geopolitical shift that has since intensified the state's Malay-Islamic sociopolitical ethos and the corresponding assimilative pressures on minorities described in the problem statement. The most recent study on the Kelantan Siamese by Zuriati and Nur Azuki (2014) examines the concept of assimilation in Kampung Tendong, though its treatment of this topic remains preliminary. This leaves a research gap in both depth and geographic coverage, particularly given that a decade has passed since this analysis was conducted. The focus on Kampung Tendong also differs from the location of the present study, further underscoring the need for additional investigation.

This study addresses these research deficiencies through an in-depth examination of the Siamese community of Terbak Village, Tumpat, Kelantan, focusing on how they negotiate their identity amid Kelantan's assimilative pressures and within Malaysia's multicultural framework, which privileges the dominant Malay-Muslim norms. Situating the study within this gap provides updated empirical data and new insights into the resilience and adaptability of the ethnic minority in the state as they navigate cultural and political challenges.

Additionally, it seeks to contribute to a more geographically balanced representation of the Siamese community in academic discourse by highlighting the unique sociocultural dynamics specific to the Siamese of Kelantan's Terbak Village, while acknowledging the limitations of a single-site study.

1.3.1 Theoretical Gap

The Kelantan Siamese population in the deeply conservative Malay heartland of Kelantan represents a minority community navigating interethnic relations in a context dominated by Malay Muslim culture. While existing research has extensively examined the assimilation and acculturation of other minority groups in Kelantan and Terengganu, such as the Peranakan Chinese (e.g., Mohd Shahrul & Bustami, 2015; Pue & Shamsul, 2011; Pue et al., 2019; Tan, 1982; Tan et al., 2017; Tan & Kamarudin, 2012; Teo, 2003), the sociocultural dynamics and processes of identity negotiation among the Siamese community remain relatively underexplored. This highlights a theoretical gap in understanding how Kelantan's assimilative pressures influence the community's ethnocultural and national identities, as well as how they negotiate or engage with the dominant society.

Instead of merely examining their identity as static or "essentialized," this study draws on Berry's (1997) acculturation theory as a point of departure. While useful, Berry's model focuses on static, individual-level outcomes (e.g., integration, assimilation) and does not fully account for the collective, strategic processes of negotiation required within a context of symbolic inclusion and power asymmetry. This study addresses the gap by moving beyond these static

outcomes to conceptualize *adaptive identity positioning*. This framework examines identity as a layered, dynamic, and situated process, specifically highlighting how the Siamese strategically navigate the tension between cultural resilience and the state's performative multiculturalism.

1.3.2 Practical Gap

An incident illustrating the challenges faced by the Siamese community involved a PAS Youth leader's derogatory characterization of the Thai New Year festival, Songkran, as a *pesta maksiat* (vice festival) (Nambiar, 2019). This prompted swift disapproval from Aknan Ehtook, the then sole Siamese senator in the Dewan Negara, the upper house of the Malaysian Parliament, who called for a better understanding of the tradition and emphasized the need for tolerance. This unwarranted incident, alongside those discussed in Subchapter 2.8, reveals the underlying tensions and limited intercultural tolerance in Malaysia's multicultural society, especially as the drift toward monoculturalism and Malay-Muslim dominance heightens the risk of interethnic conflict.

I echo Aknan's call for fostering a more informed understanding of Malaysia's diverse cultural landscape, recognizing that ethnic pluralism should not be a source of division. By shedding light on the experiences of the Siamese community in Kelantan's Terbak Village, this study underscores the importance of inclusive policies that promote cultural understanding, respect, and interethnic harmony. In particular, the findings can inform strategies to ensure that minority communities, such as Terbak's Siamese, feel represented and integrated within

Malaysia's sociopolitical framework, thereby strengthening the nation's multicultural fabric and cohesion.

1.4 Research Questions

This study aims to explore and explain the following research questions (RQs):

- RQ1. How do the Siamese of Terbak Village, Tumpat, Kelantan, negotiate their identity in a predominantly Malay-Muslim setting?
- RQ2. To what extent have there been identity shifts among the Siamese of Terbak Village, Tumpat, Kelantan?
- RQ3. How do the Siamese of Terbak Village, Tumpat, Kelantan, conceive of Malaysian national identity?

1.5 Research Objectives

Based on the research questions above, the objectives of this study (ROs) are designed to systematically investigate the identity dynamics of the Terbak's Siamese within the context of their interactions with Kelantan society. These objectives aim to provide a detailed understanding of the processes, changes, and perceptions that characterize their unique ethnic experience:

- RO1. To examine the strategies employed by the Siamese of Terbak Village, Tumpat, Kelantan, in negotiating their ethnic identity within a predominantly Malay-Muslim environment.
- RO2. To determine the extent of identity shifts among the Siamese of Terbak Village, Tumpat, Kelantan.
- RO3. To explore how the Siamese of Terbak Village, Tumpat, Kelantan, conceive of and relate to the Malaysian national identity.

1.6 Significance of Study

This research holds both theoretical and practical importance as it explores the complex dynamics of identity negotiation among the Kelantan Siamese in Terbak Village. Positioned within the broader context of Malaysia's multiculturalism, this study contributes to academic discourse and provides practical insights for policymaking and community development.

1.6.1 Theoretical Contributions

This research addresses a crucial theoretical gap by examining how the Siamese community in Terbak Village negotiates its identity in predominantly Malay-Muslim Kelantan, a topic that has been underexplored in contemporary scholarship. While existing studies have provided foundational insights into the historical, religious, cultural, and anthropological dimensions of the Siamese in Malaysia, they often overlook the sociological processes related to assimilation,

acculturation, and cultural resilience within the state's unique sociopolitical context.

Building on the theoretical gap identified in Subchapter 1.3.1, this study introduces four context-specific frameworks and several concepts, developed and discussed in greater detail in the analytical chapters, which essentially extend and refine existing acculturation models to capture the layered, dynamic, collective, and situational processes of identity negotiation among Terbak's Siamese. These frameworks illuminate how cultural continuity is maintained amid Malay-Muslim dominance, highlighting the lived experiences of the minority group and the mechanisms that sustain adaptive engagement.

Furthermore, by examining the Siamese community's negotiation of "Siamness" alongside a broader Malaysian identity, the study contributes a nuanced analysis of how dual cultural affiliations are actively managed within the specific sociopolitical context of symbolic inclusion and power asymmetry, also raised in the theoretical gap. This dualism illustrates how ethnic heritage can coexist with and enhance national belonging, offering essential perspectives on negotiating identity within Malaysia's unique multicultural framework. These findings are poised to deepen the understanding of minority identity and cultural dualism, illustrating how such dynamics shape and are shaped by Malaysia's sociopolitical and cultural fabric.

1.6.2 Practical Relevance

The findings of this study hold substantial practical relevance for advancing Malaysia's multicultural harmony and inclusivity. By examining the lived experiences of the Kelantan Siamese, the study provides critical insights that can inform inclusive policymaking. The findings emphasize the value of preserving ethnic diversity as a national asset through fair representation, safeguarding cultural heritage, and strategies that promote dialogue, tolerance, and mutual respect. They also reflect the assimilative pressures faced by the Siamese community, particularly in culturally homogeneous regions like Kelantan, and the need to strengthen interethnic collaboration, thereby enhancing Malaysia's multicultural fabric and promoting unity in diversity.

Moreover, this study lays the groundwork for community advocacy by amplifying the voices of the Siamese, thereby providing evidence to support their rights and recognition within Malaysia's sociopolitical landscape. As Gomez and Saravanamuttu (2012) highlight, economic policies and state-driven developmental frameworks often sideline minority communities, making advocacy efforts to address systemic inequalities imperative. Cultural misrepresentation further compounds these challenges, as evident in instances such as depicting Songkran as a "vice festival" (Nambiar, 2019). In response to such issues, this study advocates for intercultural education and dialogue to minimize ethnic and religious tensions. Furthermore, it highlights the resilience of the Siamese in preserving their cultural identity amid external pressures, offering valuable lessons for sustaining Malaysia's diverse cultural heritage.

These contributions highlight the crucial role of inclusive policies and community empowerment in fostering a united and harmonious society.

1.6.3 Broader Implications

This research contributes to both academic and practical fields, supporting Malaysia's broader objectives of promoting national unity and harmony amid diversity, in line with the Malaysia Madani vision of fostering an inclusive and just society. By focusing on the Siamese in Terbak Village, the study underscores the importance of recognizing and valuing minority groups as integral to Malaysia's multicultural tapestry, reflecting the Madani principles of respect and trust in strengthening national solidarity (Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia, 2023). Additionally, the findings enhance understanding of how ethnic minorities assert their identity and cultural heritage within diverse national contexts across Southeast Asia, including Thailand, Indonesia, and Singapore.

Furthermore, this research aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities and SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions. This study highlights the distinct experiences of the Siamese of Terbak Village, promoting fair treatment and social inclusion while tackling disparities rooted in ethnicity and culture. SDG10 emphasizes the need to minimize inequalities between and within nations, promoting inclusivity to ensure that no one is marginalized (United Nations, 2015). This study supports this goal by examining the challenges faced by the Siamese minority group, thereby informing strategies that recognize and

integrate its identity into national narratives without marginalizing the community.

Likewise, SDG 16 emphasizes the creation of peaceful and inclusive societies, where diversity is seen as a strength rather than a challenge (United Nations, 2015). This study's actionable insights provide a basis for reinforcing Malaysia's multicultural framework, enhancing social cohesion, and developing policies that reflect Malaysia's rich ethnic tapestry. Ultimately, this research bridges the gap between theory and practice, contributing to the academic literature on identity negotiation while offering actionable insights to strengthen Malaysia's multicultural society and advance global goals for equity and peace.

1.7 Definition of Key Concepts

To ensure clarity and precision in the analysis of the Siamese community's lived experiences, the following conceptual definitions are adopted for the key terms used throughout this thesis. Several of these concepts, specifically *adaptive identity positioning* and *adaptive integration*, are frameworks developed within this study to capture the specific nuances of the findings.

1. Adaptive identity positioning: A conceptual framework developed in this study to describe the collective and strategic process wherein a minority group selectively deploys aspects of its identity. It involves balancing cultural resilience (the inward maintenance of ethnocultural practices) with adaptive integration (the outward engagement with dominant

structures) to sustain distinctiveness, maintain social cohesion, and negotiate legitimacy within a shifting and asymmetrical power field.

2. Adaptive integration: A specific strategy within the AIP framework that captures the deliberate, context-sensitive negotiation between sustaining tradition and engaging with dominant societal structures. It differs from passive assimilation by emphasizing the community's capacity for flexible adaptation (e.g., modifying rituals to suit local sensitivities) while rejecting total absorption into the dominant Malay-Muslim culture.
3. Assimilative pressures: Refers to the explicit and implicit expectations placed by the state and societal norms for non-Muslim communities to align with Malay-Islamic values. In this study, it describes the discernible shift toward a homogenized national identity that challenges the secular and multicultural foundations of the nation.
4. Authority-defined identity: Drawing on Shamsul (1996), this refers to labels and categories imposed by the state through institutions, census categories, legal frameworks, and national policies (e.g., the classification of Siamese as "*Bumiputera lain*"). It represents the top-down mechanism that shapes who is recognized, supported, and rendered legible within the nation-state.
5. Cultural resilience: Drawing on Clauss-Ehlers (2004), this refers to the community's capacity to draw on cultural values, traditions, and institutions (such as the *wat* and language school) to sustain a distinct

identity despite external sociopolitical challenges. Within the AIP framework, it serves as the internal anchor that enables safe external adaptation.

6. Everyday-defined identity: Also drawing on Shamsul (1996), this refers to the identity that arises from lived experience and community-level meaning-making. It represents the bottom-up reality constructed by the community, which often conflicts with or exists in tension with the authority-defined categories imposed by the state.
7. Identity consolidation: Drawing on Erikson's (1968) developmental framework and elaborated by Pals (1999), this refers to the process of integrating and reinforcing a coherent sense of self through the internalization of cultural values and inherited meanings. In this study, it describes how the community strengthens existing identity structures (e.g., transitioning from oral tradition to structured literacy) to preserve core cultural anchors.
8. Identity rearticulation: Based on Grossberg (1996) and Hall (1996), this refers to the contingent and strategic reconstruction of identity in response to shifting cultural and political contexts. It describes how meanings and subject positions are actively reconfigured, rather than merely preserved (e.g., the expansion from bilingualism to multilingualism), to navigate external pressures.

9. Performative multiculturalism: Refers to a state-led model of diversity that publicly endorses pluralism and symbolic inclusion (e.g., through festivals or official rhetoric) but fails to implement the structural changes necessary for genuine minority inclusion. In this context, diversity is celebrated rhetorically but constrained in practice by dominant cultural norms and institutional inequalities.
10. Siamese Malaysians: Refers to a distinct ethnolinguistic group of Thai descent who were born and bred in Malaysia, hold the Malaysian identification card, and have resided in the country for generations. In this study, they are conceptually distinguished from Thai nationals (“Thais”) to emphasize their unique status as a minority group negotiating a dual identity within the Malaysian nation-state.
11. Siamness (*khwam pen thai*): Literally translating to “Thainess,” this term is conceptualized in this study as “Siamness” to refer to the specific ethnoreligious identity of the Kelantan Siamese. Distinguished primarily by the practice of Theravada Buddhism and the use of the Chehe dialect, it represents an immutable cultural core protected through identity consolidation. Crucially, while this identity shares historical and linguistic roots with Thailand, it is distinct from the political or national identity of Thai citizens (“Thais”), serving instead to define the community as a unique indigenous minority within Malaysia.

1.8 Overview of Chapters

I structure this thesis into seven chapters to comprehensively explore the research topic. Chapters 1 through 3 lay the foundational components of the study: Chapter 1 sets the stage by introducing the background of the study, outlining the problem it seeks to address, and establishing the conceptual definitions of key terms used throughout the thesis; Chapter 2 presents a thorough literature review that I try to contextualize, to the best of my ability, the research within the existing body of knowledge; and Chapter 3 describes the methodology employed in the study, detailing the research design and data collection methods.

Chapters 4 through 6 address the three research questions posed in the study, each focusing on a distinct aspect of my ethnographic study of the Siamese community in Terbak Village, Tumpat, Kelantan. Chapter 4 explores the critical aspect of identity negotiation amid assimilative pressures. Chapter 5 examines potential shifts in identity, and Chapter 6 delves into how the community conceptualizes Malaysian identity within the context of Kelantan. Each chapter presents the findings and discussions that respond to the research questions outlined in Chapter 1, connecting these insights to the broader concepts established earlier in the thesis. This structure ensures a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics at play within the community.

Finally, Chapter 7 serves as the concluding chapter, where I draw the main conclusions, discuss the study's limitations, and propose directions for

future research. This structure ensures a logical flow from the introduction of the topic to the detailed exploration and final synthesis of the research findings.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Global and Regional Perspectives on Minority Identity and State Relations

Before examining the specific history of the Siamese in Malaysia, it is essential to situate their experience within the broader global and critical discourse on minority-majority relations. Globally, the management of ethnic diversity within the nation-state remains a central tension, yet dominant theoretical models often fail to capture the specificities of the postcolonial condition in Southeast Asia.

Western frameworks, particularly the “civic assimilation” models prominent in Europe (e.g., France), posit that minority integration requires the relegation of ethnic and religious distinctiveness to the private sphere in exchange for equal citizenship (Bowen, 2007). However, this model is fundamentally incongruent with the Malaysian context. Unlike the French *laïcité* model, which, in principle, seeks to suppress or erase visible cultural and religious differences in the public sphere (Bowen, 2007), the Malaysian state maintains a form of institutionalized or managed pluralism: ethnic identities are formally recognized, maintained, and regulated through constitutional, legal, and policy frameworks that both preserve difference while reinforcing ethnocentric hierarchies (Likhitthammarot & Samathi, 2021; Shamsul, 1996a).

While the theoretical mechanisms of assimilation versus acculturation are explored in depth in Subchapter 2.9, it is crucial here to highlight the political

divergence: in Malaysia, the refusal to assimilate is not merely a community choice but a structural feature of a state apparatus designed to uphold the special position of the demographic majority (Cheah, 2002; Likhitthammarot & Samathi, 2021). Consequently, Western acculturation theories that assume a neutral state (Kymlicka, 1995) are insufficient for analyzing contexts where the state itself is the primary agent of ethnoreligious definition.

A more relevant global comparison can be found in the status of religious minorities within other Muslim-majority nation-states, such as the Coptic Christians in Egypt and the Ahmadiyya in Pakistan. Like the Siamese in Kelantan, these groups are indigenous minorities negotiating identity within states increasingly defined by Islamic normativity. However, a closer examination of these cases reveals a critical distinction. While Copts have historically faced sporadic sectarian violence and an existential struggle for physical security (Tadros, 2013), and Ahmadis in Pakistan confront a constitutional framework that explicitly criminalizes their religious self-identification (Saeed, 2016), the Siamese Malaysians navigate a different challenge: bureaucratic marginalization amid peaceful coexistence. This comparison highlights a specific gap in the literature: while conflict-driven minority studies are abundant globally, there is relatively little theoretical work on adaptive resilience, particularly on how minorities maintain distinctiveness in peaceful yet structurally unequal ethnocracies.

Regionally, the dynamics of identity negotiation in Southeast Asia further complicate these global models. In this region, minorities frequently navigate identity within “unmixing” nation-states that seek to homogenize diverse

populations. A critical comparison with the Chinese minority in Indonesia offers a revealing counterpoint. As Hoon (2006a, 2006b) and Suryadinata (2015) observe, the Suharto regime enforced a policy of total assimilation, mandating the erasure of linguistic and cultural markers. In contrast, the Siamese in Malaysia faced a mechanism of segmented inclusion. Unlike the Chinese in Indonesia, who were forced to become “indistinguishable,” the Siamese were legally categorized as Bumiputera and preserved as distinct but unequal subjects. This highlights that minority marginalization in Southeast Asia oscillates between forced erasure (Indonesia) and hierarchical management (Malaysia).

Furthermore, the experience of the Siamese in Kelantan shares an inverted parallel with that of the Malay-Muslim minority in southern Thailand. Both represent “stranded minorities” separated from their kinstate by colonial borders. However, scholarly analysis reveals divergent outcomes: while Malay-Muslims in Thailand have historically engaged in resistance against assimilationist policies that imposed “Thainess” (Jerryson, 2011; McCargo, 2008), the Siamese in Malaysia have largely adopted strategies of non-confrontational adaptation. This contrast exposes the limitations of treating “resistance” as the primary lens for analyzing indigenous minorities.

Therefore, the Siamese experience represents a unique sociological phenomenon that defies standard global and regional categorizations. They are not subjected to the forced assimilation of the West or Indonesia, nor the sectarian precarity or legal exclusion of the Middle East and Pakistan, nor the separatist resistance of southern Thailand. Instead, they occupy a space of “performative multiculturalism,” where distinctness is permitted provided it

does not challenge the dominant Malay-Islamic superstructure. To understand how this specific and complex dynamic emerged, it is necessary to examine the historical and territorial shifts that severed these communities from Siam and integrated them into the Malay state structure.

2.2 The Siamese Malaysians in Historical and Cultural Perspectives

To understand how the dynamics of “segmented inclusion” and “bureaucratic marginalization” described earlier operate in practice, it is important to consider the historical trajectory of the Siamese in Malaysia. Within a regional context shaped by shifting borders and evolving state structures, the Siamese Malaysians emerge as a distinct case study of a “stranded minority,” as described earlier. They are individuals of full or partial Thai ancestry who hold Malaysian nationality and reside in Malaysia. The name “Siam” is a historical exonym for the Thai people, derived from ancient forms such as “Sam,” “Sayam,” and “Sian,” which were used to refer to the broader Tai or Thai ethnic groups (Nuansanong, 2017).

This community is predominantly located in the northern Malaysian states of Kedah (known as “Saiburi” in Thai), Perlis, Penang, and Kelantan along the east coast, as well as Perak in central-northern Malaysia (Kuroda, 2019; Samrong, 2014). The community is culturally and historically significant, representing centuries of shared heritage and interaction between the Thai and Malay civilizations. This historical connection underscores the enduring ties between the northern Malay states of the Malay Peninsula and the Kingdom of

Siam, shaped by mutual influences in culture, trade, and governance (Suwannathat-Pian, 1984).

This connection is further reflected in the presence of shared traditions, architectural styles, and linguistic exchanges, among other aspects, that persist to this day. Over the centuries, the Siamese Malaysians have maintained a dual identity, balancing their Thai heritage and nationality, which adds to the rich multicultural fabric of Malaysia (Johnson, 2002, 2012; Rajo, 2018). The distinctiveness of their cultural and religious practices, such as Theravada Buddhism and community festivals, further emphasizes the symbolism of Buddhism in their ethnic identity while highlighting their role in cultural preservation, integration, and their unique place in Malaysia's multiethnic tapestry (Johnson, 2012; Mohamed Yusoff, 2010a).

The Siamese's presence in the northern Malay states predates the 20th century and the signing of the AST in 1909, reflecting a long history of migration and settlement. Some communities trace their lineage as far back as the Sukhothai Kingdom (c. 1257 CE), a connection supported by linguistic evidence suggesting that the Kelantan dialect, known as the Chehe or Tak Bai dialect, evolved directly from the Sukhothai vernacular. This early movement is often associated with the Ayutthaya conquest of Sukhothai in 1437 CE, which prompted certain groups to migrate further south. Over subsequent centuries, migration into the Malay Peninsula occurred for various reasons, including the search for fertile land and livelihoods, the relocation of war captives, and the desire to evade legal constraints in Siam (Nuansanong, 2017).

More clearly documented movements occurred in the late 18th century (Sharom, 1971; SUHAKAM, 2010; Suwannathat-Pian, 1984). In 1770, many Siamese from Nakhon Si Thammarat sought refuge in the northern Malay states during King Taksin of Thonburi's campaign against the rebel ruler Nu. This military conflict, part of Taksin's broader effort to reunify Siam after the fall of Ayutthaya, displaced civilians who fled into Kelantan and Terengganu, where Malay rulers offered protection (SUHAKAM, 2010). Some scholars trace the origins of Siamese settlement even further back, suggesting migration as early as the mid-13th century (Nur Azuki et al., 2017). In Tumpat, widely regarded as one of the earliest Siamese settlements, archaeological discoveries of ancient Buddha images and early temple structures indicate a continuous Siamese presence for over 600 years (Suziana & Nur Azuki, 2017).

These longer historical patterns are reflected in the distribution of communities across the northern states. In Kelantan, villages such as Tumpat and Pasir Mas developed over centuries around Buddhist temples that continue to anchor community life (Mohamed Yusoff, 2010a, 2010b; Suziana & Nur Azuki, 2017). In Kedah, settlers gravitated toward inland areas such as Pendang and Alor Setar, with migration over the past 300 years bringing Siamese Buddhists and Samsam Muslims from Phatthalung and Nakhon Si Thammarat in pursuit of agricultural opportunities and sociopolitical autonomy (Kaeosanit, 2016; Kuroda, 2019). In Perlis, proximity to southern Siam facilitated steady migration, tied to farming and trade, with temples serving as enduring cultural institutions (Kuroda, 2019; Tassanawongwara & Hussin, 2018). In Terengganu, although communities were smaller in number, similar patterns of agricultural

livelihood and temple-based identity preservation are evident (Mohamed Yusoff, 2010b).

Sharom (1971) highlights how these migrations illustrate the intertwined histories of Siam and the northern Malay Peninsula. Suwannathat-Pian (1984) similarly emphasizes that local rulers often accommodated the displaced or migrating Siamese, integrating them into local sociopolitical structures while allowing them to retain cultural distinctiveness. These processes produced long-standing settlements that combined adaptation with the preservation of Siamese identity, creating the cultural foundations upon which present-day Siamese Malaysians continue to build.

2.3 The Anglo-Siamese Treaty of 1909: A Turning Point in Territorial and Cultural Identity

The AST of 1909 further solidified the presence of the Siamese communities in Malaysia. The modern-day Malaysian states of Perlis, Kedah, Kelantan, and Terengganu were once part of the Kingdom of Siam. This historical arrangement meant that these northern states were under Siamese political control before they were transferred to British administration in 1909 (Nuansanong, 2017). These states transitioned from being tributaries of the Kingdom of Pattani to coming under Siam's authority by the late 18th century, as Pattani's influence waned, and Siam expanded its control. However, these territories were ceded to British Malaya under the AST, signed during the reign of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) (Kuroda, 2002). For the Siamese people already living in Kelantan, this political shift did not result in a mass exodus; historical sources indicate that they

were generally satisfied and chose to remain under the new British administration (Sama-ae & Tohleheng, 2017).

The agreement marked a decisive moment in the territorial realignment of the Malay Peninsula, as it transferred the sovereignty of the four territories from Siam to British control. This was part of a broader strategy by the British to consolidate their influence in Southeast Asia while maintaining Siam as a buffer state against French expansion in Indochina (Johnson, 2012; Kaeosanit, 2016). The treaty formalized these territorial transfers by delineating definitive borders, notably designating the Golok River as a prominent boundary marker for Kelantan. These borders significantly redefined the boundaries between modern-day Malaysia and Thailand, marking an important change in the region's geopolitical landscape. The borders established under this agreement remain in effect today, solidifying these territories as integral states within Malaysia (Kaeosanit, 2016).

The Siamese Malaysians in Kelantan, Perlis, Kedah, and Terengganu continued to maintain their communities, cultural practices, and religious institutions despite the administrative shift. While specific settlement histories and temples have been detailed in 2.2, it is worth noting that these communities were already established and functioned as centers of social and cultural life, coexisting alongside the predominantly Malay-Muslim population (Mohamed Yusoff, 2010a, 2010b).

The AST thus formalized their political incorporation into British Malaya, but their cultural and religious identity has remained resilient. Despite

these geopolitical shifts, the Siamese Malaysians have preserved their unique cultural identities through religious practices, community festivals, and linguistic traditions, enriching Malaysia's multicultural society. Their distinct identity has evolved over centuries of interaction with Malay and Thai cultures, as well as other minority groups in the country (Na Thalang, 2015). This cultural continuity highlights the profound connections that transcend national boundaries, underscoring the Siamese community's strong cultural ties to its Thai heritage. Moreover, their enduring presence reflects their adaptability and resilience within Malaysia's multicultural society (Johnson, 2010; Kaeosanit, 2016).

2.4 Demographic Distribution and Population of Siamese Malaysians

The population size of Siamese Malaysians is uncertain because the national census has never enumerated this community as a separate category from the year of Malaysia's independence in 1957 to the most recent 2020 Census (DOSM, 2024). Consequently, available figures vary by source and year. Hansard records from Malaysia's upper house placed the population at 38,353 in 2001 (Parliament of Malaysia, 2001), while later estimates ranged from 60,000 in 2007 (Na Thalang, 2015), to about 70,000 in 2014 (Samrong, 2014), and over 50,000 in 2018 ("Book on Malaysian-Thai," 2018). At the higher end of these estimates, the Siamese Malaysian population has been reported to be approximately 80,000 citizens (Nuansanong, 2017).

Kedah is believed to host the largest population of the Siamese Malaysian community. Within Kedah, settlements are spread across seven districts: Kubang

Pasu, Pendang, Sik, Padang Terap, Kuala Muda, Baling, and Kulim (Rajo, 2018). As of 2007, unofficial reports placed the Siamese population in Kedah at approximately 30,000 individuals (“RM178,000 Presented to Siamese,” 2007; Na Thalang, 2015).

Kelantan houses the second-largest population of Siamese Malaysians after Kedah. Estimates of their numbers, too, vary, with some independent studies suggesting it could be as high as 25,000, spread across seven districts: Tumpat, Pasir Mas, Tanah Merah, Pasir Puteh, Bachok, Kota Bharu, and Machang (Nuansanong, 2017; Sama-ae & Tohleheng, 2017). Meanwhile, community-level sources indicate a total of around 15,000 across the state and 30 villages (Lanjusoh & Mohd Yusri, 2008; Suziana & Nur Azuki, 2017). At the district level, a 2007 study by the Thailand Research Fund (as cited in Na Thalang, 2015) reported approximately 6,500 Siamese concentrated in Tumpat, with other sources suggesting around 8,000 in the same district.

These varying figures underscore the scarcity of official, up-to-date demographic data, compelling scholars to rely on secondary sources and estimates (Suwannathat-Pian, 1994). Unlike later Thai migrants, the Siamese have been formally recognized as Bumiputera, granting them access to certain privileges such as government aid (Na Thalang, 2015). This legal recognition affirms their integration into Malaysia’s national framework and distinguishes them from more recent Thai arrivals.

The Siamese community in Malaysia, holding Malaysian citizenship and associated privileges, continues to maintain strong cultural ties to their Thai

heritage. Residing along the Malaysia-Thailand border for generations, this community possesses a unique cultural identity that is predominantly Thai, yet deeply affiliated with Malaysia, embodying a dual identity of cultural heritage and political citizenship (Jaafar et al., 2016; Montesano & Jory, 2008). Georgiou (2013) discusses how individuals navigate these overlapping cultural and political affiliations, reflecting the experiences of Siamese Malaysians.

Horstmann (2005) describes the Siamese community in Malaysia as “trapped minorities,” existing in a liminal space, caught between a historically restrictive host state and an absent mother-nation. Malaysia’s historical use of forceful measures, such as raids and beatings, to control illegal Thai entries exacerbates this positioning. Consequently, Siamese Malaysians navigate a delicate balance of loyalty, oscillating between Thai and Malaysian nationalistic sentiments (Rajo, 2018). This balancing act highlights their cultural connection to Thailand and political loyalty to Malaysia, illustrating their complex identity.

2.5 Siamese Practices and Participation amid Structural Barriers in Multicultural Malaysia

The Siamese Malaysians embody a harmonious blend of Thai heritage and a Malaysian way of life, seamlessly preserving their unique traditions while adapting to their local surroundings. This cultural continuity, deeply rooted in the historical integration of regions such as Kedah, Kelantan, Perlis, and Terengganu into the Siamese tributary system, and sustained by the resilience of Thai-speaking Buddhist practices, has withstood the shifts brought about by the AST of 1909; this has allowed these communities to retain their heritage while

fully participating in the Malaysian sociopolitical life. For instance, blending traditional Thai governance structures with the Malay Sultanate system exemplifies a historical accommodation that persists in certain cultural expressions today (Johnson, 2002; Kuroda, 2005). Additionally, the strategic location of these states along historical trade routes facilitated the exchange of traditions, enriching both Thai and Malay cultures (Kuroda, 2019).

The Siamese community, predominantly Theravada Buddhists, has preserved its religious and cultural identity by establishing and maintaining temples, which serve as centers for spiritual and communal life. Temples such as Wat Lamdin in Kedah and Wat Uttamaram in Kelantan, with centuries-old histories, continue to play a central role in the daily lives of Siamese communities, serving as hubs for religious ceremonies, cultural festivals, and social gatherings (Kuroda, 2002; “Wat Uttamaram,” 2019). Beyond worship, these temples function as comprehensive community institutions, supporting death rituals, traditional medicine, and community meetings, and often serving as educational centers that provide monastic instruction, vocational training in traditional crafts, and language classes, with one report noting 16 such language schools operating within temples in Kelantan (Johnson, 2010; Kuroda, 2019; Sama-ae & Tohleheng, 2017). While modernization and urban migration have challenged the continuity of these traditions, especially among the younger generation, the temple remains a vital anchor of communal identity.

The temple architecture, as explored by Johnson (2010), often embodies a blend of Thai religious symbolism and vernacular Malay craftsmanship, particularly in borderland temples of Kelantan. This hybrid style reflects deep-

rooted interactions between Buddhist Thai communities and their predominantly Malay-Muslim surroundings, producing architectural forms that merge thick stucco walls, wooden eaves, and minimal ornamentation with traditional Thai layouts. For example, the ordination hall at Wat Nai retains its original Kelantan-Thai architectural style, featuring high plastered walls, simple gables, and decorative elements inspired by Malay architectural motifs (Johnson, 2010). Similarly, Wat Khok juxtaposes an older ordination hall with Malay-inspired features alongside a newly constructed Central Thai-style belfry, illustrating the architectural dialogue between local tradition and imported Thai aesthetics (Johnson, 2010).

Wat Machimmaram also adopts Malay-inspired designs, including arched elements replacing traditional columns to support the roof and decorative roof features, demonstrating the temple's adaptation to the local architectural aesthetic (Khoruamdech, 2013). This architectural hybridity is common, with many temples in Kelantan displaying a range of styles, from pure southern Thai art and contemporary designs to, most notably, Thai-Chinese fusion architecture, reflecting the close relationship and financial support from the local Chinese community (Sama-ae & Tohleheng, 2017).

In Kelantan, the Siamese community exemplifies cultural adaptation while maintaining its heritage. Linguistically, they speak a southern Thai dialect but are often bilingual in Malay, facilitating their integration into the broader Malaysian society. This bilingualism supports cultural exchange and helps maintain harmony in a multicultural setting. Celebrations like Songkran have been localized, combining Thai customs with Malay elements, creating a vibrant

festival that resonates with both cultures. This blending is evident in other practices, such as community rituals and shared public spaces like markets and schools, highlighting a deeply interconnected social fabric (Johnson, 2012). Additionally, traditional Thai dances and ceremonies are sometimes adapted to include Malaysian cultural elements, reflecting an evolving yet rooted cultural identity (Kuroda, 2005). Key cultural performances that are still maintained include the Manora, Wayang Gedek (shadow puppetry), and Ramvong (a social dance), all of which are performed during major festivals or celebrations (Suziana & Nur Azuki, 2017).

Economically, the Siamese community has traditionally relied on agriculture, especially paddy farming, tobacco cultivation, and vegetable planting, which have been passed down through generations and reflect the rural character of their settlements along the Malaysian-Thai border (Golomb, 1978; Suziana & Nur Azuki, 2017). This agrarian lifestyle underscores the community's enduring connection to the land and its role in sustaining both livelihood and cultural continuity (Golomb, 1978). In the context of Kedah, this connection was shaped by historical migration from southern Thailand, which brought their agricultural traditions to the region (Kuroda, 2005, 2019). Despite the challenges posed by modernization and urban migration, many Siamese have managed to sustain their agricultural practices, which are often tied to traditional festivals and rituals, further reinforcing their cultural heritage. Additionally, local markets and cooperative systems have supported their economic resilience, allowing them to thrive within a modernizing Malaysia (Kuroda, 2005, 2019).

Despite their cultural contributions and economic significance, the Siamese community in Malaysia faces considerable challenges, including limited representation in national censuses and a lack of formal recognition as a distinct ethnic group. Many also hold only the Malaysian permanent resident identity card (commonly known as the “red IC”) despite being born in the country, and face barriers to obtaining the “blue IC,” Malaysia’s citizenship identity card, due to literacy challenges and examination requirements. This marginalization often leads to difficulties in accessing government resources and educational opportunities tailored to their unique needs (SUHAKAM, 2010).

In states such as Kedah and Perlis, land ownership remains insecure, as the *Sijil Siam*, a historical document issued to ethnic Siamese as proof of long-term residence, now lacks clear legal standing, and communities face displacement threats linked to state development policies. Poor access to documentation services has also contributed to statelessness among some members, further limiting access to education, healthcare, and employment. These overlapping issues compound their socioeconomic vulnerability and exclusion from broader national development efforts (SUHAKAM, 2010).

However, the community has demonstrated resilience, which is evident in their continued cultural celebrations, intergenerational transmission of traditions, and efforts to advocate for their rights. Recognizing the Siamese as an integral part of Malaysia’s multicultural society is essential for fostering inclusion and preserving their rich cultural heritage (Johnson, 2010; SUHAKAM, 2010). Furthermore, their contributions to the nation’s cultural diversity highlight the importance of integrating minority voices into national

identity discussions, thereby enriching Malaysia's broader social narrative (Kuroda, 2002).

2.6 Modern Influences and Identity Shifts in Malaysian Minority

Communities: The Siamese and Beyond

Identity is a dynamic construct shaped by cultural, linguistic, and sociopolitical influences (Lee, 2003). This subchapter examines generational identity shifts among minority communities, beginning with the Siamese in Kedah and Kelantan and extending to Peranakan Chinese groups in Kelantan and Terengganu, to reflect on how modern sociocultural forces are reshaping minority identities in Malaysia. Several studies have pointed to signs of identity shifts, manifesting in various forms, among the younger generations of Siamese in Kedah and Kelantan. In Kedah, younger-generation Siamese often struggle with learning Thai characters and comprehending the language, primarily due to the pervasive influence of Malay education, which leaves limited opportunities to practice speaking Thai (Kuroda, 2002, 2005). As the younger generation adapts to the demands of living within a modern nation-state, the motivation to learn Thai in Malaysia appears to diminish significantly (Kuroda, 2005). This phenomenon has even elicited concern from a Bangkok monk, who expressed worry about the potential erosion of Thai-Siamese identity among Malaysia's Siamese.

In Kelantan, Johnson (2003) observes that many younger Siamese prefer Hollywood movies and Thai drama series over Malay programs, which they often perceive as dull. This preference seemingly contrasts with the conventional

image of Kelantan Siamese embracing the Malay way of life. Furthermore, younger Siamese villagers are increasingly proficient in English, which they learn as a second language in school, and some are conversant in Mandarin, having attended national-type Chinese schools rather than national Malay-medium schools (Johnson, 2003). This modernization trend is also evident in economic activity. While the older generation was anchored in agricultural work, younger community members show less interest in farming, which some describe dismissively as “playing with mud.” Equipped with formal education, they increasingly seek employment in fields such as mechanics, skilled labor, or secure positions in the government sector, while women may open their own businesses as tailors or hairdressers (Suziana & Nur Azuki, 2017). Unlike three decades ago, when interaction between Siamese villagers in Kelantan and people from Thailand was minimal, contemporary Kelantan Siamese villagers are subject to significant cultural and religious influences from modern Thailand (Johnson, 2012). Johnson (2002) also highlights that technology-savvy young Thais are utilizing the Internet to engage in “ethnocultural standardization processes” (p. 13) with their Thai counterparts across the border.

Similar identity shifts can be observed among other minority groups in Malaysia, such as the Peranakan Chinese in Kelantan and Terengganu. These states, located on the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia, share geographical proximity and a similar political landscape, with governance historically influenced by Islamic-oriented policies and strong Malay cultural dominance. The Peranakan Chinese communities, known for their acculturated identity distinct from that of mainstream Chinese communities elsewhere, are also

transforming. Pue et al. (2019) note a decline in Malay language proficiency among the younger generation of Kelantan Peranakan Chinese, a departure from the linguistic skills of the older generation. Exposure to non-Peranakan groups through the education system and professional spheres, as well as attendance at Chinese schools, has increased the younger generation's fluency in Mandarin (Pue & Shamsul, 2011). Consistent with these findings, Mohd Zahirwan et al. (2016) report that the younger generation of Kelantanese Chinese is more inclined towards modern lifestyles, distancing themselves from traditional practices upheld by the older generation.

In Terengganu, the identity shift is particularly evident among the third generation of Tirok Peranakan Chinese who have undergone Chinese-medium education. This shift has resulted in a shared ethnic boundary with the mainstream Chinese community, affecting the older and second generations, “who now have to negotiate their identity if they want to be included within the ethnic boundaries of the current third generation” (Tan & Kamarudin, 2012, p. 74). The scenarios highlighted above underscore the importance of examining whether and how Siamness has evolved among the Kelantan Siamese in modern Malaysia, as reflected in RQ2 of this study. Understanding these changes is critical to comprehending the broader dynamics of cultural identity and adaptation in the face of a shifting sociopolitical and cultural landscape.

2.7 Integration or Assimilation? The Governance Framework of Malay

Dominance and Malay-Islam Supremacy in Malaysia

While Subchapter 2.1 theoretically defines the Malaysian state as an “ethnocratic” apparatus practicing managed pluralism, this section examines the specific policy mechanisms employed to maintain that structure. Since its independence, Malaysia’s governance and social framework have often been characterized by a balance of racial consensus aimed at maintaining national stability. Nonetheless, the management of its diverse ethnic and cultural composition has frequently been criticized for initially privileging Malay supremacy, and over time evolving toward Malay-Islam supremacy (Chin, 2020; Neo, 2006). Although the Malaysian Constitution envisages a multiracial and multireligious nation-state grounded in secularism, the government’s implementation of its policies has significantly diverged from ideals of integration that also protect minority identities.

Over the years since the country’s independence, the Malaysian government has emphasized integration as a key component of its national development strategy, evident in initiatives such as the 1971 NCP, 1991 Bangsa Malaysia, 2009 1Malaysia, 2021 Keluarga Malaysia, and 2023 Malaysia Madani, which aim to foster unity and inclusivity among its ethnically and culturally diverse population. This aligns with Berry’s (1997) integration strategy, which is designed to promote a two-way process of cultural adaptation and recognizes the value of cultural diversity. However, the practical application of the government initiatives has always been contested as one-sided.

According to Cheah (2002), the Malaysian integration model operates within a framework of Malay dominance. This model avoids outright cultural assimilation of the Chinese and Indian communities but ensures that political, economic, and cultural narratives remain anchored in Malay identity and hegemony. This policy landscape reinforces the structural refusal to assimilate discussed earlier (Cheah, 2002; Likhitthammarot & Samathi, 2021), maintaining distinct ethnic boundaries to uphold the privileged position of the demographic majority. For instance, the Rukun Negara, introduced in 1970, was part of broader nation-building efforts following the 1969 racial riots. While it aimed to promote national unity and inclusivity, its implementation occurred alongside policies like the NCP that prioritized Malay and Islamic values as central to the national identity, thereby creating a perception of cultural hegemony and raising questions about the inclusivity of Malaysia's nation-building approach. This approach drew criticism for marginalizing non-Malay cultural expressions, thereby highlighting tensions between unity and cultural pluralism (Mandal, 2008).

Moreover, economic policies, particularly those stemming from the NEP introduced in 1971, have institutionalized preferential treatment for Malays under the pretext of addressing socioeconomic disparities. While supposedly aimed at fostering equity, these policies have inadvertently reinforced Malay supremacy in various domains, including business ownership, public-sector employment, and university admissions. For example, the Bumiputera communities receive special quotas in public universities, often at the expense of merit-based admissions for Chinese and Indian students (Gomez &

Saravanamuttu, 2012). As such, Embong (2001) highlights that such policies have contributed to ethnic divides, compelling non-Malay communities to navigate a system perceived to prioritize Malay identity in public spheres.

These dynamics reflect a broader pattern within Malaysia's governance system, aligning with Shamsul's (1996) observation that identity formation in Malaysia operates within two competing realities: the "authority-defined" reality, dominated by Malay-Islamic narratives, and the "everyday-defined" reality, which reflects Malaysia's multicultural lived experiences. It is contended that state policies, despite being presented as inclusive and integrative initiatives, often institutionalize Malay-Islamic identity as central to the nation's character, thereby shaping national narratives in ways that may inadvertently limit the broader cultural pluralism envisioned by the Constitution (Global Centre for Pluralism, 2023). Chin (2020) expands on this by highlighting how the growing institutionalization of Malay-Islamic supremacy through state policies, especially over the recent years, has prioritized a singular national identity that is heavily religiously skewed, progressively sidelining the Constitution's pluralistic vision and raising concerns about inclusivity and equality in Malaysia's multicultural framework.

The prominence of Malay-Islamic identity is a defining feature of Malaysia's national character, anchored by the constitutional recognition of Islam as the religion of the Federation. Although the Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, Islam's privileged status permeates legislation, education, and public culture in ways that consolidate Malay-Islamic norms as the national default (Shamsul, 2001). For many non-Malay communities, these institutional

arrangements are not experienced as neutral state-building measures but rather as structured expectations to align with Malay-Islamic values, revealing the enduring tension between an official commitment to multiculturalism and the primacy accorded to Malay-Islamic identity (Cheah, 2002).

In the realm of religious administration, differences in administrative processes are evident. Non-Muslim places of worship often face bureaucratic challenges and extended timelines in obtaining permits, while mosques generally receive state support with streamlined approvals and funding. These practices reflect the elevated role of Islam in Malaysia's societal and administrative frameworks (U.S. Department of State, 2002, 2021). Issues such as the unilateral conversion of minors to Islam, restrictions on non-Muslim religious practices, and the inequitable allocation of religious spaces further underscore the marginalization of diversity within Malaysia's religious landscape (Johnson, 2012; Tayeb, 2022; U.S. Department of State, 2021).

Similarly, educational policies and legal frameworks reinforce this dynamic by prioritizing Malay-Islamic narratives and institutional structures. This is evident in the removal or marginalization of non-Malay contributions in history textbooks, which predominantly feature Malay heroes and Islamic milestones (Mlhi, 2021; "Expert Slams History Textbooks," 2021). Besides, in 2019, the government's decision to incorporate Jawi-Khat calligraphy into Chinese and Tamil vernacular schools sparked significant controversy and criticism, particularly from members of these communities, who viewed it as an imposition on their cultural and linguistic identities (Lee & Chin, 2020). Furthermore, policies like the Syariah Courts (Criminal Jurisdiction) Act

promote an increasingly Islamic-centric legal framework, raising concerns about the potential curtailment of non-Muslim rights (Harding, 2012). Recent court rulings, such as the Federal Court's decision to nullify several provisions of the Kelantan Syariah Criminal Code for being unconstitutional (Junaid & Nurbaiti, 2024), show that some Syariah laws have exceeded constitutional boundaries and require judicial intervention to ensure compliance.

While these dynamics are observable at the national level, comparable patterns of Malay-Islamic influence, along with expectations for non-Muslims to accommodate prevailing norms, are evident in states governed by PAS, each shaped by unique local contexts and intensities. Kelantan, for instance, illustrates how state-level policies may deepen the incorporation of Islamic values into public governance and social life, with implications for how non-Muslim communities navigate the state's institutional environment (Stark, 2004). This localized application of Malay-Islamic dominance underscores the persistent tension between Malaysia's constitutional commitment to multiculturalism and the reality of policies that favor assimilation over integration. While avoiding outright cultural erasure, these measures, whether implemented by the state or federal government, require non-Malay communities to navigate a framework dominated by Malay-Islam supremacy, often undermining secularism and the multicultural foundations envisioned at independence.

2.8 Kelantan and Its Sociopolitical Background

Building on the preceding discussion of Malaysia's governance, the influence of Malay-Islamic supremacy, and interethnic relations, this section focuses on

Kelantan as the primary setting of this study. Demographically, Kelantan Malays, who comprise 93.6% of the state's 1.88 million population, are the dominant ethnic group (DOSM, 2024). Based on DOSM's data, Malays account for as much as 95.5% of the state's population if non-citizens are excluded. In comparison, the Kelantan Chinese represent 2.3% of the population, making them the largest ethnic minority (DOSM, 2024). Meanwhile, the Siamese community accounts for approximately 1%, as indicated by earlier data (Johnson, 2002). Consequently, Kelantan is considered one of Malaysia's least ethnically heterogeneous states (Winzeler, 1985).

Widely acknowledged as Malaysia's most conservative state, Kelantan has remained a stronghold of Malay culture, preserving customs that have largely disappeared elsewhere (Raybeck, 1980). The state is also historically characterized by its strong commitment to Islam. This is evidenced by the prominence of Kelantan's religious schools, the high number of Qur'an recitation champions from the state, and the enduring success of PAS (Mohamed Yusoff, 1987; Winzeler, 1975). PAS, the oldest mainstream Islamist party in Malaysia, resonates strongly with the Kelantan Malays, who are noted for their adherence to orthodox Islamic practices and form a particularly exclusive identity within Peninsular Malay society. PAS is notable for its diplomatic and ideological connections with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and its allies, reflecting its broader Islamic affiliations (Müller, 2017; Rajo & Ngeow, 2014).

Since Malayan⁶ independence in 1957, PAS has maintained a significant presence in Kelantan's political landscape, governing the state from 1959 to 1977 before the tenure ended. Following intense political contestation between PAS and the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), Kelantan came under UMNO's control in 1978. However, in 1990, PAS regained power and has since dominated the state government (Tayeb, 2022). This 1990 shift marked a turning point, initiating a more concerted and sustained effort by the PAS-led government to construct and implement its Islamic model of governance (Stark, 2004), which has since intensified the Malay-Islamic sociopolitical ethos of the state (Liow, 2011). Consequently, Kelantan is often regarded as synonymous with PAS, a perception reinforced by its consistent electoral success in the state.

This dominance has been supported by PAS's ability to intertwine Islamic principles with its political and governance agenda, which appeals strongly to the predominantly Malay-Muslim population (Liow, 2011; Tayeb, 2022). However, this strategy, while effective in solidifying its Islamic credentials, has at times sparked tensions with federal authorities and non-Muslim communities (Liow, 2011). Additionally, PAS's grassroots engagement, through initiatives like establishing religious schools and welfare programs, has been instrumental in building a loyal support base. These efforts, though

⁶ Malaya is a historical region that became independent from British colonial rule in 1957 and later formed the core of Malaysia when it was expanded in 1963 to include Singapore, Sabah, and Sarawak. Singapore separated from Malaysia and became an independent nation on 9 August 1965.

impactful, have also been interpreted by some observers as furthering the party's political agenda rather than purely altruistic endeavors (Liow, 2011).

Through the integration of Islamic principles into its governance and the implementation of grassroots initiatives, PAS has not only consolidated its political influence but also shaped Kelantan's sociopolitical environment. The state government's policies demonstrate a deliberate and systemic effort to intertwine Islamic values into the fabric of public life, a move that has frequently raised concerns among non-Muslim communities. For instance, the government's explicit aim to convert the *Orang Asli* (indigenous people in Peninsular Malaysia) to Islam within 30 years highlights a systemic approach to assimilating indigenous peoples into the Islamic faith, raising concerns over the erosion of their cultural and religious heritage ("Kelantan Aims to Convert Orang Asli," 2019). Similarly, the organizer of a Buddhist Loy Krathong⁷ concert in the state was fined up to RM10,000 after some Muslims attended the event, with authorities deeming the gathering inappropriate and lewd, illustrating how public expressions of non-Muslim religious and cultural practices face scrutiny and penalties ("Kelantan Fines Organiser," 2023).

Additionally, some Kelantanese Chinese businesses have expressed concerns about the increasing restrictions imposed by the new state government, citing mandates that newly constructed commercial buildings in Kota Bharu

⁷ Loy Krathong is a Thai festival of gratitude and renewal, marked by floating decorated offerings to honor the water goddess.

incorporate “Islamic” design elements and feature Jawi text on shop panels (Mohamed Nawab, 2018). These concerns were highlighted following a 2012 mandate that stipulated Islamic designs are a requirement for the construction of a Buddhist building in the state (Mohamed Nawab, 2018; Rahimy, 2012). Besides, Kelantan’s enforcement of moral policing, such as summoning youths to religious authorities for wearing shorts and fining female hair salons for allowing female workers to cut a male customer’s hair, highlights the imposition of Islamic values on public behavior, affecting both Muslims and non-Muslims who may not subscribe to these norms (Sharifah, 2023a, 2023b). Together, these incidents reveal the structural and systemic challenges non-Muslims face in a state where Malay-Islamic dominance continues to shape public life.

While the Siamese have historically maintained cordial relations with the local Malay population, often residing in the same villages or as neighbors while preserving their distinct cultural and religious practices (Suziana & Nur Azuki, 2017), such coexistence reflects pragmatic accommodation within an asymmetrical sociopolitical structure rather than an absence of tension. Golomb (1978) observes that Siamese culture has “continued to absorb numerous assimilative trappings” (p. 24) through close interactions with their Malay and Chinese neighbors. Contemporary studies also emphasize such close interactions and cultural assimilation among non-Malay communities, particularly through their fluency in the Kelantan Malay dialect while simultaneously maintaining proficiency in their respective mother tongues (e.g., Mohamed Yusoff, 1987; Pue & Shamsul, 2011; Pue et al., 2019; Rajo, 2018; Tan et al., 2017). This

multilingual ability represents a form of linguistic adaptability that further facilitates integration with the broader community.

Moreover, incidents in Kelantan, combined with state policies discussed earlier, have influenced how minority communities navigate their incorporation into Kelantan's developmental and sociopolitical trajectory. These policies and governance practices, which emphasize Malay-Islamic values, create a structural environment that shapes the everyday experiences of non-Malay communities, including the Siamese. Within this context, the question of whether the Siamese community is fully assimilated, or the degree to which they have adapted and integrated, remains open and warrants further investigation.

2.9 Classical and Contemporary Acculturation Theories

Having examined the structural constraints imposed by Malay-Islamic governance at both the national level and in Kelantan, it is essential to explore how the Siamese navigate these contexts. Understanding their strategies requires a framework that accounts for both the pressures of state ethnoreligious dominance and the agency of minority communities. In this regard, acculturation theory offers a lens for analyzing how cultural practices are adopted, modified, or resisted within asymmetrical sociopolitical environments. Building on this foundation, classical works such as Park's (1950) "race relations cycle" and Gordon's (1964) analysis of assimilation offer a framework for understanding the broader dynamics of minority adaptation, situating assimilation within the broader process of acculturation.

Park's (1950) "race relations cycle" suggests that intergroup relations evolve through a predictable progression of competition, conflict, accommodation, and eventually, assimilation. He views assimilation as an almost inevitable outcome in democratic and industrialized settings, where ethnic distinctions gradually diminish, and individuals are judged on merit rather than race. However, this model underexplores the mechanisms of cultural change, and the complex, bidirectional dynamics of adaptation remain insufficiently addressed.

Gordon (1964) builds on Park's framework, offering a more detailed analysis of the assimilation process by distinguishing between its cultural and structural components. Cultural assimilation, akin to acculturation, involves adopting the dominant group's language, customs, and values, laying the groundwork for further integration. In contrast, structural assimilation refers to the inclusion of minority groups into the dominant society's primary networks and institutions. Gordon argues that while cultural assimilation may be a preliminary step, genuine integration requires structural inclusion, without which minorities risk what he terms "Americanization without equality": cultural adaptation without equitable access to socioeconomic opportunities.

Building on and challenging these classical models, Portes and Zhou's (1993) segmented assimilation theory introduces a more nuanced understanding of immigrant adaptation in stratified societies. Their framework outlines three possible pathways for immigrants in the American context: upward mobility through assimilation into the middle class, downward mobility into the urban underclass, and selective acculturation, where cultural retention coexists with

economic integration. This theory rejects the assumption of a uniform or inherently positive assimilation path. Instead, it emphasizes how structural conditions, generational shifts, and community networks jointly shape outcomes, thereby opening up space for context-dependent and nonlinear processes of adaptation.

Berry's (1997) acculturation model advances this discussion by identifying four strategies: assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization. He conceptualizes assimilation as a process where individuals relinquish their original cultural identity to fully integrate into the dominant culture, a view that is partially consistent with Gordon's claim that cultural adaptation is often a prerequisite for structural inclusion. However, Berry's model introduces the idea of integration as a viable and distinct strategy, whereby individuals maintain elements of their original culture while actively engaging with the dominant society. Unlike the linearity assumed in earlier theories or the stratified trajectories proposed in segmented assimilation, Berry foregrounds mutuality by emphasizing that acculturation outcomes depend not only on minority agency but also on the host society's openness.

Portes and Rumbaut (2001) similarly highlight the importance of social networks and intergenerational dynamics. They contrast the linear "straight-line" model of Warner and Srole (1945) with Gans's (1979, 1996) "bumpy-line" perspective. These perspectives show the multidimensional nature of acculturation, where assimilation serves as one of many potential pathways. The variability in outcomes also demonstrates that cultural adaptation is a complex process, influenced by both personal choices and structural forces.

Contemporary scholars, including Alba and Nee (2003), have further reconceptualized assimilation not as erasure, but as the weakening of differences based on ethnic origin. This perspective reflects the increasing cultural diversity of modern societies and a shift toward valuing pluralism, acknowledging that cultural adaptation can coexist with the preservation of heritage.

However, while these frameworks provide a robust vocabulary for understanding cultural shifts, they often operate within Western assumptions of individual choice and neutral sociopolitical fields. Their limitations are critically exposed when examined through a postcolonial lens. Acculturation frameworks often overlook how structural inequities constrain minority strategies (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988), as shown in Waters' (1999) study of West Indian immigrants who maintained distinct identities as social capital to navigate racism, and in Bhatia's (2002) analysis of postcolonial subjects where acculturation emerges as a contested process of resistance. These insights suggest that the "strategies" open to Terbak's Siamese are not freely available but structured by the dominance of a state ethnoreligious identity, thus shifting attention from individual choice to community agency.

Similarly, concepts within postcolonialism, such as Bhabha's (1994) hybridity, highlight how models like Berry's can oversimplify culture into a binary between "maintained" and "lost." While identity fusion (hybridity) is less characteristic of Terbak's Siamese, where cultural boundaries are deliberately maintained rather than merged, Bhabha's work serves as a valuable reminder of the fluid and negotiated nature of cultural practices.

In the context of multicultural Malaysia, this distinction is especially significant. Rather than viewing acculturation as a neutral choice between strategies, this study adopts a critical view where integration is a navigated response to power. These perspectives highlight the fluidity and context-dependence of cultural adaptation, offering a comprehensive framework for understanding how the Siamese negotiate their identity within the broader spectrum of acculturation.

2.10 Key Literature on Siamese Malaysians

Research on Siamese Malaysians is characterized by a diverse range of academic inquiries into their sociocultural, religious, and identity dynamics. With Kedah boasting the largest population of Siamese Malaysians, it is unsurprising that many studies on the community were centered around the context of Kedah. Studies such as those by Kuroda (2002, 2005, 2015, 2019) provide detailed historical and sociopolitical analyses of the Siamese communities in Kedah, examining their adaptations within the Malaysian nation-state and their maintenance of cultural identity amid broader societal changes. Kaeosanit (2014, 2016) adds depth to this discussion by focusing on the dynamic construction of ethnic identity through communication, emphasizing the active role of rituals, language, and cultural practices in preserving identity.

The Siamese in Kedah have also been studied in the context of cultural communication strategies, as highlighted by Kaeosanit et al. (2016), who analyze the interplay between sociopolitical influences and identity preservation. The findings reveal that the community actively engages in strategies to sustain

their ethnic boundaries while fostering integration. This theme of balancing integration with the maintenance of ethnic identity is also evident in Kuroda's (2015, 2019) investigations into the sociocultural and historical dynamics of inland Kedah. Such studies highlight Kedah's role as an exemplary cultural and historical hub for Siamese Malaysians, offering rich insights into their identity and integration strategies. However, while these works demonstrate the adaptability and resilience of the Siamese in Kedah, their findings are situated within a specific sociopolitical milieu that differs significantly from the more religiously conservative governance found in Kelantan.

In contrast, Kelantan, the second-most populous Siamese state, has been explored largely through historical, architectural, or cultural-religious lenses. Works such as those by Mohamed Yusoff Ismail (1987, 2010a) have focused on the role of Theravada Buddhism in defining and preserving Siamese identity in Kelantan. Likewise, Tohsan's (2020) work highlights the role of religious practices in maintaining cultural identity among the Semarak community in Kelantan. These studies illustrate how Siamese temples serve as a central pillar of their cultural distinctiveness in a predominantly Malay-Muslim state. Additionally, Johnson (2002, 2010, 2012) has examined architectural forms and their sociopolitical significance, illustrating how religious spaces facilitate the mediation of cultural identity and pride.

Yet, a critical gap persists: this existing body of work is largely descriptive and rooted in frameworks that may no longer fully capture contemporary reality. For instance, Golomb's (1978) seminal work on economic adaptation explored how the Siamese historically navigated trade and livelihood,

while Kershaw's (1969, 1982) analyses focused on cultural boundaries and communal practices. However, both predate the definitive geopolitical shift of 1990, when PAS regained control of Kelantan. Consequently, these classical frameworks do not account for the intensified religious bureaucracy and moral policing that characterize contemporary Kelantan, limiting their explanatory power for understanding current identity negotiation strategies.

Furthermore, while more recent scholarships have attempted to address these modern sociopolitical dimensions, they remain limited by a macro-level or legalistic focus. Amnuay et al. (2019) highlight the structural constraints on political agency, and Likhiththamarot and Samathi (2021) critique the inequitable implementation of Bumiputera policy regarding land and tenders. While valuable for diagnosing structural inequality, these studies treat the community primarily as passive subjects of policy. They stop short of examining the psychological and cultural agency exercised by ordinary members to navigate these "second-class" realities in their daily lives. Similarly, while Zuriati and Nur Azuki (2014) explore assimilation in Kampung Tendong, their reliance on survey methods limits the depth of insight into the nuanced, lived negotiation of identity that an ethnographic approach can provide.

Therefore, this study addresses a critical theoretical and empirical deficit. The current literature bifurcates into either the anthropological past (rituals and temples) or the legalistic present (policies and rights). Yet, neither fully explains the dynamic strategies the community employs to navigate the space between cultural preservation and political survival. This thesis addresses this by introducing *adaptive identity positioning*, a conceptual framework designed to

examine these sociological processes rather than define the community by a fixed category. Specifically, it investigates how the Siamese in a high-density enclave like Terbak Village actively negotiate the tension between performative multiculturalism and lived Malay-Muslim supremacy. By situating this investigation within these specific sociopolitical tensions, this study moves beyond description to offer a new framework for understanding minority resilience in a dominant religious state. For a detailed overview of literature specifically concerning this community, refer to Appendix I: Summary of Key Literature on Siamese Malaysians.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

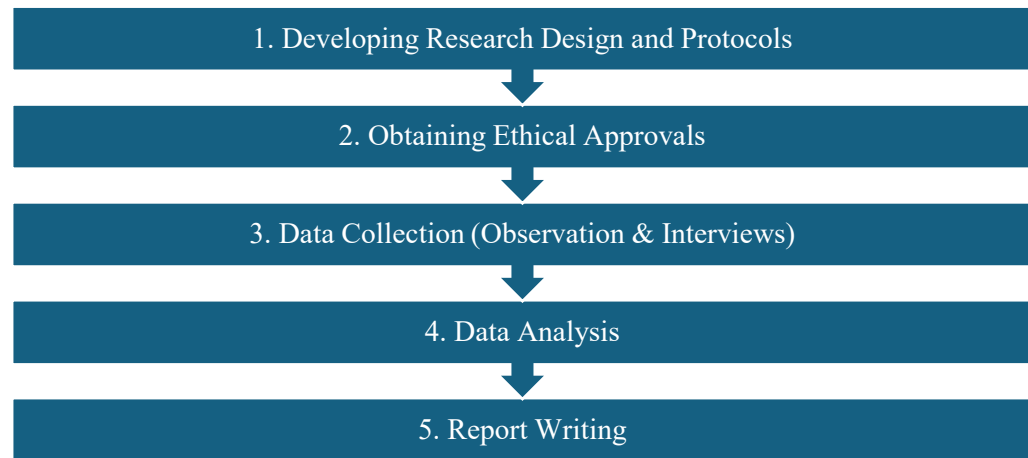
This section provides a comprehensive overview of the methodology employed in this study, detailing the research approach and design, and explaining the chosen research tools along with their advantages and limitations. It aims to rationalize the decisions behind the methodology, ensuring that my research is positioned to yield valid and reliable results. It also outlines how the methodology aligns with the research objectives and questions, setting a clear path to achieving each.

In the discussion, I present the data collection methods and analytical techniques utilized, emphasizing their relevance, efficacy, and adherence to ethical standards in addressing the research questions. This section not only guides the reader through the methodological and ethical frameworks but also establishes the foundational elements for the analytical processes integral to supporting the conclusions of this study.

Figure 3.1 provides a clear overview of the sequential steps undertaken in this research, from the initial planning stages through data collection and analysis to the final phase of reporting. It illustrates the structured and methodological approach adopted to ensure the rigor and validity of the findings, and serves as a crucial reference for discussing each phase of the study.

Figure 3.1

The Research Process



Note. Source: Developed for this study.

3.2 Qualitative Research Approach

This study is grounded in the qualitative research tradition and meticulously designed to explore the complex sociocultural tapestry of the Siamese community residing in Terbak Village, Tumpat, Kelantan. My intention is to delve into the complexities of how this community navigates its cultural identity amid prevailing cultural dominance and ethnocentrism. These influences are evident both at the state level in Kelantan, a region profoundly shaped by its robust Malay-Muslim ethos, and at the national level.

Through the qualitative method to be discussed later in this subsection, I am eager to describe the processes through which these individuals negotiate their traditions, values, and identities under the sway of a dominant Malay-Muslim cultural force that exerts considerable influence over sociocultural

norms and practices. I also seek to describe a shift in identity among the community members, spurred by external forces or influences that challenge or redefine their sense of self and community. Furthermore, this research examines the Siamese's perceptions of Malaysia and the broader Malaysian identity, as well as how their unique sociocultural standpoint informs their concepts of belonging and nationality. The qualitative lens has enabled a rich, in-depth examination of non-numerical data, such as the subjective experiences of being Kelantan Siamese, including their attitudes and behaviors. Through this approach, I aim to interpret and gain a comprehensive understanding of their social reality, free from the constraints of quantification, aligning with Kumar's (2014) advocacy for qualitative methodologies in capturing the essence of a community's lived experiences.

3.2.1 Interpretivist Paradigm

At the core of this study's methodological framework is the interpretivist paradigm, which posits that truth and knowledge are subjective, culturally situated, and historically contingent. As Ryan (2018) and Willis (2007) suggest, this perspective emphasizes the importance of individuals' experiences and interpretations, enabling a deeper comprehension of the phenomena under investigation. The interpretivist approach has been instrumental in this research, enabling me to understand the unique sociocultural context of Kelantan Siamese and the complexities it entails. By adopting this stance, I reject the notion of a singular, objective reality that characterizes both positivism and post-positivism. Instead, I embrace the multifaceted and constructed nature of social phenomena, as discussed by Creswell and Creswell (2018) and Ritchie and Lewis (2003).

The choice of interpretivism over positivism and post-positivism is deliberate and motivated by the specific objectives of this study. The constructs of “the influence of dominant culture on minority’s identity,” “identity shift,” and “concepts of nation and national identity” are inherently complex and defy straightforward quantification. Positivism, emphasizing objective reality and quantitative analysis, falls short in accommodating the depth and intricacy of these constructs. This standpoint is supported by the critiques of positivism’s limitations in addressing human intentions, attitudes, and thoughts, as argued by Hammersley (2013) and Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004), who stress the importance of inductive reasoning and the generation of theories that reflect local understandings. On the other hand, while post-positivism acknowledges the provisional nature of knowledge and allows for subjective influences, it still leans towards empirical observation, measurement, and hypothesis testing, which can limit understanding of deep, contextual meanings in social settings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lincoln et al., 2011).

In conducting this research, I have been guided by the belief that the Siamese’s experiences and perspectives on their ethnic identity, the government’s policies and governance frameworks, and being Malaysian, are deeply personal and context-specific. Therefore, due to their unique sociocultural context, these cannot be generalized across different ethnicities or even Siamese communities from other villages or parts of the country. This study, therefore, adopts a qualitative and interpretivist approach to uncover the rich, subjective realities of the Siamese residing in Tumpat’s Terbak Village,

aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding of their identity negotiation and their conceptualization of Malaysia and Malaysian identity.

3.2.2 Philosophical Assumptions of Study

Building on the research paradigm outlined earlier, it is essential to present the four philosophical assumptions that underpin this qualitative study. Each assumption offers a distinct lens through which the research on the Siamese Malaysian community in Terbak Village should be viewed. These assumptions, encompassing ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological perspectives, have guided the entire research process, ensuring that my investigation is grounded in a coherent and reflective framework.

First, the ontological assumption in this study acknowledges the complexity of reality as perceived by the Siamese of Terbak Village. Recognizing that their experiences of cultural identity and integration into the dominant culture are inherently subjective, this research adopts a constructivist view. Within this context, reality is not a fixed entity but a construct shaped by social interactions and cultural contexts (Smith & McGannon, 2020). This view posits that the identities and perceptions of the community members are constructed through their unique experiences, interactions, and the meanings they ascribe to them, highlighting the fluidity and multiplicity of their realities.

As discussed in the preceding subchapter, this study positions itself within the interpretivist paradigm. Therefore, understanding the experiences of the Kelantan Siamese through the subjects' own viewpoints, as interpreted by

myself in my role as a researcher, is imperative. The epistemological assumption asserts that knowledge is co-constructed between the researcher and the subjects, valuing the subjective insights and meanings that emerge from their narratives (Creswell & Poth, 2024). By engaging in empathetic and reflexive dialogue, this research seeks to bridge the gap between the researcher's interpretations and the subjects' lived experiences, thereby fostering a more nuanced and contextualized understanding of their cultural identity negotiations.

The axiological assumption of this research reflects a commitment to acknowledging and integrating values within the research process. It recognizes that both the researcher's and the subjects' values influence the study, from the framing of questions to the interpretations of data (Creswell & Poth, 2024). This transparency about the value-laden nature of the research is crucial in understanding how personal and cultural values shape the narratives around the identity of Terbak Village's Siamese. Given the inherent biases that have existed throughout the study's duration, I have consistently sought to reflect on these biases and preconceived notions to minimize their influence on the research outcomes. Rather than attempting to avoid these biases entirely, I have chosen to acknowledge and address them. In Subchapter 3.4, I elaborate on my role as a researcher, including my key personal and professional experiences, and explore how these factors could have shaped my interpretations of the research data.

Methodologically, the study embraces a qualitative approach that prioritizes the richness and depth of data collected through narrative interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. This approach aligns with the

belief that exploring the nuanced processes of identity negotiation requires an immersive, flexible research design that can adapt to the complexities of human experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2024; Lincoln et al., 2011). By employing a few qualitative methods, the research aims to capture the multifaceted realities of the Kelantan Siamese, offering insights into their perceptions and experiences that quantitative methods might overlook.

3.3 Ethnographic Research Design

This study employs an ethnographically grounded and cross-disciplinary methodology, drawing on Baumann et al. (2020), who advocate for integrating the interpretive depth of social anthropology with sociological and philosophical perspectives to better understand the interplay between cultural meaning and social structure. Rather than merely blending methods, this approach situates ethnographic inquiry within broader theoretical debates on power, inequality, and emplacement, emphasizing how localized lifeworlds reflect and refract broader social processes. Baumann et al. (2024) further assert that ethnography, while rooted in sociocultural anthropology, is increasingly utilized across various disciplines, including sociology, to explore social phenomena, particularly issues of inequality.

In adopting this framework, the study aims for an emic and immersive understanding of the Siamese community in Terbak Village, focusing on how its members negotiate ethnic and national identity within an asymmetrical sociopolitical field characterized by Malay-Muslim dominance. Ethnographic engagement enables a nuanced interpretation of the community's social

relations, cultural practices, and everyday strategies of coexistence and adaptation.

Central to this method is immersion through participant observation, which entails sustained involvement in the community's daily life to apprehend the embodied and relational dimensions of social experience. Such immersion captures how external pressures and internal dynamics shape local beliefs, values, and practices. Following Cohen et al. (2018), this adaptive and reflexive approach ensures responsiveness to the fluidity of social realities, while achieving the “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) necessary to uncover the layered meanings embedded in Terbak's cultural and communal life.

The research employs triangulation, as this technique enables research objectives to be approached from multiple standpoints. Cohen et al. (2018) caution that reliance on a single method may distort the researcher's view of the reality being investigated. The researcher needs to be assured that the data generated are not merely artefacts of one specific method of data collection (Lin, 1976). Thus, to enhance the analysis and interpretation of findings and broaden my insights into the issues underlying the Siamese community and their identity, this study employs “methodological triangulation,” as introduced by Denzin (2009). There are two types of triangulation: the “across method” and the “within method” (Denzin, 2009). This study relies on the latter, involving the data collection methods of participant observation and in-depth interviews, both of which are discussed in Subchapters 3.6 and 3.7, respectively.

My decision to focus on and observe the Siamese community residing in Terbak Village, Tumpat, Kelantan, which is discussed more extensively in Subchapter 3.5.1, highlights the necessity for a research design that is both sensitive and comprehensive. Ethnography, with its inherently sensitive and in-depth nature, is instrumental in navigating the complex sociocultural landscape of the village, marked by a notable temple featuring a larger-than-life Standing Buddha statue within its compound. This temple symbolizes the Buddhist faith and a commitment to cultural heritage. It serves as a focal point for community gatherings, religious ceremonies, and educational activities through the temple's Thai school located within its complex.

The selection of the site and subjects was not incidental but deliberate, mirroring the intricate interplay of cultural preservation, identity formation, and negotiation amid the challenges posed by living in a predominantly Malay-Muslim state and district. The coexistence of Malay and Siamese communities within and surrounding Terbak Village adds layers of complexity to the sociocultural dynamics, where mutual respect, understanding, and careful cross-cultural negotiations underpin their relationships. This delicate balancing act highlights the distinctiveness of the Siamese identity within the majority Malay-Muslim setting. This ethnographic approach respects and values the complexity of the community's experiences, thereby enhancing the depth of the investigation while ensuring that the research is conducted with utmost ethical consideration and cultural sensitivity (Madison, 2022).

Incorporating a reflexive stance, this study employs an iterative process that enables continuous reflection and adaptation based on emerging insights.

This iterative nature is fundamental to ethnography, enabling the researcher to remain attuned to the community's shifting realities and to adjust the research focus or methodology as necessary (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). It fosters a dynamic and responsive research environment crucial for accurately capturing the complexities of identity negotiation within the Siamese community. This method is adept at understanding the lived experiences of the minority group and remains essential for addressing the research questions in this study (Davies, 2008).

This reflexive approach is not only a methodological preference but a foundation of ethnographic research, emphasizing the importance of the researcher's self-awareness and the impact of their presence within the field (England, 1994). By engaging in continuous self-examination and adapting to the emerging realities of the community, the researcher can navigate the complexities of cultural dynamics more effectively, ensuring that the research remains relevant and sensitive to the subjects' perspectives (Schensul & LeCompte, 1999). Additionally, by prioritizing cultural immersion and ethical engagement, the study aims to capture the essence of the identity negotiation processes of the Siamese in Terbak Village, providing profound and impactful insights. This interdisciplinary approach, which combines anthropological methods with sociological analysis, underscores the value of ethnography in examining the multifaceted nature of identity and belonging, making significant contributions across various disciplines, including sociology and anthropology.

3.4 The Researcher's Role

In qualitative research, the researcher's role as the primary instrument for data collection necessitates a rigorous self-assessment of personal values, assumptions, and biases at the outset of the study to ensure data integrity. This approach emphasizes the importance of establishing rapport with the subjects for authentic data collection and the necessity of maintaining disciplined subjectivity, as well as engaging in critical self-examination.

Authoritative sources, such as Creswell and Creswell (2018) and Patton (2014), emphasize these principles, reinforcing the necessity for qualitative researchers to approach their work with an awareness of their potential influence on research outcomes. Additionally, Neuman (2009) supports the idea that the researcher's self-awareness is crucial for maintaining objectivity and authenticity within the research process. The researcher's involvement in his or her study can be helpful and positive rather than detrimental (Locke et al., 2013).

My understanding of the Siamese community, set against the Kelantan sociopolitical and cultural context, has been influenced by a combination of personal and professional experiences, including my readings on the research subject and Kelantan, the opinions and remarks I have come across, previous visits to Kelantan prior to my ethnographic fieldwork, and a period spent in southern Thailand. This multifaceted exposure has shaped my perspective on how I approached the lived experiences of the Siamese community in Terbak Village.

In 2009, I was a tutor in the Faculty of Arts and Social Science of Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman [UTAR] (Kampar campus) before resigning and joining the Legenda Education Group, where I served as Program Coordinator and Head of Department from 2012 to 2015. In 2015, I took a hiatus to travel across Asia, which led me to Chumphon, Thailand. There, I eventually embarked on a teaching journey. Returning to Malaysia in 2017, I joined INTI International College Penang as the Head of Program for the Diploma in Mass Communication. Presently, I am the Head of the Department of Mass Communication at UTAR's Sungai Long campus and actively contribute as a researcher to UTAR's Tun Tan Cheng Lock Research Institute.

Throughout my professional journey, I have had the privilege of interacting and collaborating with individuals across various levels and sectors, including industry and educational partners, chief executives, presidents, lecturers, and parents. My extensive interactions with individuals from various sectors and positions throughout my career have significantly deepened my understanding and appreciation of diverse roles and contexts, allowing me to understand and navigate the complexities of different hierarchical positions. This broadened perspective has retrospectively enhanced my awareness, knowledge, and sensitivity towards the myriad of challenges, decisions, and issues I encountered during my fieldwork. Such insights were invaluable in facilitating my engagement with the subjects in this study.

Having spent a significant amount of time in southern Thailand, where I got to deeply engage with the community members through living, socializing extensively, and teaching the school children, I recognize that I may carry certain

biases and preconceived notions into my study of the Siamese in Malaysia, a Thai-speaking community in a neighboring country. My intimate connection to the region, coupled with my marriage to a Thai national from Chumphon, where I previously taught, has undoubtedly influenced my perspective. Additionally, after being extensively exposed to the local setting for two years, my ability to converse in and understand a moderate level of the Thai language has further enriched my understanding of the Chumphon community. Such an understanding would further contribute to my perspective on the Kelantan Siamese in this research. While I am committed to maintaining objectivity in my research, I am mindful that these personal and professional experiences may subtly shape my interpretations of the data collected and my overall understanding of the cultural dynamics at play.

Also, my fieldwork in Terbak Village included participant observation. While participant observation offers profound insights, it also poses the risk of over-involvement, which can potentially compromise objectivity. Acknowledging this, I have worked to the best of my ability to maintain a balance, drawing on the guidance provided by DeWalt and DeWalt (2010) and Emerson et al. (2011) to ensure that my personal experiences enhance rather than skew my research.

3.5 Scope and Context of Study

This subsection outlines a detailed description of the specific setting, community, and research period central to my study. This will include a detailed

explanation of the geographical, social, and temporal contexts that frame my study.

3.5.1 Setting

The ethnographic focus of this study is on Terbak Village, a predominantly Siamese community in the Tumpat district of Kelantan, Malaysia. Terbak Village encompasses residential, commercial, and traditional zones, providing a comprehensive view of the Siamese community's lifestyle. This village, uniquely characterized by the presence of a prominent Theravada Buddhist temple, Wat Phikulthong Vararam (henceforth known as "Wat Phikulthong"), alongside its Thai Language, Dhamma, and Culture School (henceforth known as "TLDCS" or "temple school"), serves as the focal point for the study. The temple's significance extends beyond religious practices, acting as a social, cultural, and educational hub for the Siamese community in Terbak Village.

The selection of Terbak Village is academically critical because it encapsulates the sociological and historical dynamics central to this study, serving as the principal ecclesiastical, educational, and administrative nexus for the Siamese minority in Kelantan. The village's centrality is underscored by the presence of Wat Phikulthong, which was the earliest site in Kelantan to systematically introduce Thai language classes in the early 1940s (Nuansanong, 2017). The antiquity of Wat Phikulthong is reflected in its ancient Buddha images and early temple structures, attesting to a longstanding Siamese presence in Terbak Village spanning several centuries (Suziana & Nur Azuki, 2017). This historical continuity positions the *wat* and its Thai school as foundational

institutions for sustaining cultural transmission and Buddhist pedagogy within a Malay-Muslim dominated milieu (Patimoh Sama-ae & Tohleheng, 2017).

Furthermore, the village hosts the Kelantan Siamese Association (PSKn, an abbreviation of its Malay name, Persatuan Siam Kelantan) and contains ancient artifacts suggesting a settlement history of over six centuries (Suziana Razali & Nur Azuki Yussuf, 2017). This concentration of religious, institutional, and historical significance offers a unique advantage for ethnographically examining how the Siamese community negotiates its identity, providing updated empirical insights into the dynamics of acculturation and resilience within Kelantan's deeply Islamized sociopolitical environment.

Given this context, Terbak Village serves as an ideal site for in-depth observation of the community's daily life, their interactions, and the influence of the broader Malay-Muslim setting on their identity and practices. I spent a considerable amount of time stationing myself in Wat Phikulthong, especially during the initial stages of my research fieldwork, when gathering local knowledge and insights was crucial. The interactions with community members, participation in various cultural and religious activities, and observations of villagers' day-to-day lives form the core of my ethnographic work.

Observations within this area, coupled with my interviews with the locals, have proven pivotal for understanding how Wat Phikulthong functions not only as a religious landmark but also as a central figure in the social fabric of the Terbak Village community, influencing its members' patterns of socialization, education, and cultural preservation. They also allow for a deeper

understanding of the intricate relationships between the key institutions in Terbak Village, its Siamese villagers, and other stakeholders. For more detailed information on Terbak Village and Wat Phikulthong, please refer to Chapter 4.

3.5.2 Community

The key participants for observations and interviews in this study have been carefully selected to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the cultural and identity dynamics within the Siamese community in Terbak Village. Notable among these are the leaders of PSKn and Wat Phikulthong, as well as various individuals affiliated with Wat Phikulthong's TLDCS, including its heads and volunteer teachers. These figures, some of whom are influential, play a pivotal role in shaping and preserving the community's cultural identity, while simultaneously helping its members attune to the development of the state and nation. These factors make them indispensable sources of insight for this research.

In addition to these key informants, the study extends to the grassroots level by including interviews with Siamese villagers living in Terbak Village. This approach is instrumental in capturing a broader spectrum of perspectives, allowing for an in-depth exploration of how the community's cultural and identity aspects manifest in daily life. The inclusion of villagers not only enriches the data with diverse viewpoints but also highlights the community's internal dynamics and the influence of its leaders and educational initiatives on individual and collective identity.

Observational research complements these interviews, providing a more informed understanding of how the key and grassroots participants navigate their daily lives and roles within the community. Observations of the behavior and activities of known and unknown residents in Terbak Village offer invaluable contextual information, shedding light on the subtle ways ethnocultural and national identities are maintained and negotiated. Subchapters 3.6 and 3.7 will elaborate on the dual approach of observing and interviewing, detailing how this methodology enhances qualitative research by combining direct participant engagement with the observation of behaviors and interactions.

3.5.3 Period of Research

The period dedicated to my research on the Siamese community in Tumpat's Terbak Village spanned several distinct phases, each contributing significantly to the depth and breadth of my understanding and insights. The initial phase of my study commenced on 6 November 2022, when I first arrived in Tumpat. This preliminary visit, which lasted until 19 November 2022, was focused on surveying Tumpat broadly to identify the villages where the Siamese Malaysian community resides. During this exploration period, I gained a deeper understanding of the social and cultural context of the area from a broader perspective. This was different from what I read about Tumpat and its Siamese settlements in relevant texts and literature.

My subsequent visit took place between 16 and 30 December 2022, marking a deeper phase of engagement with the community. During this period, I discovered Terbak Village, home to the prominent Wat Phikulthong. This visit

allowed me to become more familiar with the location and some of its residents, setting the stage for the comprehensive fieldwork that would follow.

The core of my research took place from 8 January to 15 June 2023. This period of fieldwork, spanning just over five months, was when I immersed myself within the community, participating in and observing daily life, cultural practices, and the intricate dynamics that define the Siamese Malaysian identity in this locale. This intensive phase was essential for collecting primary data through participant observation and conducting in-depth interviews, enabling a more informed understanding of the community's lifestyle and interactions.

After wrapping up my fieldwork on June 15, 2023, I had to take a break from the field. My sabbatical leave, which began in January 2023, had come to an end, and I had to head back to work. However, recognizing the value of continued engagement and the potential for evolving insights, I took the initiative to return to Terbak Village for short visits afterwards. These visits occurred between September 2023 and April 2024, timed around important community events as informed by my local informants. Cumulatively, these efforts totaled 197 days spent in Terbak Village, demonstrating my commitment to and immersion in this study.

It is important to note that dedicating half a year to ethnographic observations is sufficient for a deep understanding of a community or cultural setting (Bernard, 2017; Bryman, 2016; Fetterman, 2019; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). This duration enables researchers to experience a wide range of cultural and religious events, the everyday life of the community members,

and their interethnic dynamics, among many other things, thereby providing a comprehensive view that shorter engagements might miss. In my case, the extended and varied periods of study, supplemented by targeted visits for specific events and in-depth interviews, have ensured a robust understanding of the community's dynamics, practices, and identity.

3.6 Participant Observation

In my ethnographic fieldwork, I utilized participant observation as a cornerstone method to delve into the community's life in Tumpat's Terbak Village. This approach is a methodological choice and a philosophical commitment to understanding the intricacies of sociocultural practices and identity negotiation from within the community. It enables firsthand insights into the community's cultural practices and the dynamics of identity negotiation. By participating in daily routines and community events, I developed a unique perspective on the mechanisms through which cultural adaptation, integration, and identity formation occur.

This technique embodies the philosophical stance that understanding a community requires more than mere observation from a distance; it necessitates active participation to grasp the complexity of social interactions and the cultural meanings they convey. It echoes the thoughts of Malinowski (2014), who argues for the necessity of immersing oneself in the community's life to truly understand its norms and values. The technique's participatory aspect emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between observer and observed,

challenging researchers to reflect critically on their role and influence within the research setting (Spradley, 2016).

During fieldwork in Terbak Village, my observations focused on the community's religious practices, language use, cultural expressions, and interactions with other races, among other aspects. Special attention was given to significant religious, cultural, and educational events, such as Buddhist Days, Songkran, and Thai language examinations, as well as to the role of Wat Phikulthong in the community's social and spiritual life. Observations also included activities organized by the government and community events.

My observations also extended to how the community responded to unexpected events or information, such as the announcement of and changes in government policies that affected the community, as well as global events that impacted local traditions. It is paramount for this study to understand the community's response to these challenges and the strategies its members employ to preserve their cultural heritage and strengthen community bonds in the face of adversity linked to cultural dominance and ethnocentrism in a Malay state.

Also, it is worth mentioning that the locales of my observations, from the religious environs of the temple and its school to the bustling activity of local eateries and shops, among other locations, serve as more than just physical settings of this study; they are vibrant contexts for illustrating the rich tapestry of community life. This aligns with Bernard's (2017) methodological emphasis on situating oneself within the correct settings to capture social phenomena authentically.

3.6.1 Protocols

During my ethnographic study in Terbak Village, adhering to proper codes of conduct was crucial in upholding the respect and dignity of community members. Before embarking on participant observation, I ensured that I obtained informed consent from all individuals involved, explaining my research's objectives and intended outcomes in detail. This process adhered to both UTAR's guidelines and the principles set forth by the American Sociological Association [ASA] (2018), which emphasize the importance of voluntary participation and the right of participants to withdraw at any stage. I also made a concerted effort to maintain an open and transparent communication channel with the community, allowing them to voice any concerns or questions they may have regarding my research.

Data collected was anonymized throughout to protect the participants' identities. Reflecting on my positionality, I was fully aware of my presence's influence on the community and strived to minimize disruptions to their daily lives. In line with best practices for ethnographic research, my approach to participant observation was deeply rooted in reflexivity, where I continuously examined my biases and the impact of my cultural background on the research process (Lassiter, 2005). This reflexivity extends beyond the fieldwork phase to encompass the interpretation and representation of the community's cultural practices and sociocultural dynamics in my findings. This ensures that my findings will not impose my cultural understandings but represent the community's perspectives as closely as possible. Further insights into my ethical procedures are elaborated in Subchapter 3.8.

During participant observation, I employed several data collection techniques to document interactions and practices. These included taking notes, photographing, and occasionally recording short video clips using my phone, although the latter was limited due to storage constraints. These tools were selected based on their unobtrusiveness and suitability for capturing contextual detail without disrupting the setting. When using visual or audio recording methods, particularly for close-up shots or identifiable voices, I ensured prior verbal consent was obtained, in line with field protocols developed for responsive engagement in community-based research.

Recognizing the temporary nature of the informants' actions and sociocultural dynamics, I also used voice notes on my phone to record descriptions of my observations and reflections soon after they occurred. This practice was driven by a concern for accuracy and a desire to capture the moment's richness, fearing that crucial details might fade from memory over time. These recorded voice notes have proven extremely useful, serving as a repository of immediate impressions and insights and complementing the other more structured data collection techniques.

3.6.2 Sampling Techniques

In the context of my ethnographic observation of the community in Terbak Village, my sampling strategy for whom to engage and observe is a blend of purposive and snowball sampling. This approach reflects the flexible nature of participant observation as my cornerstone data collection method. Below, I will

describe how I approached both techniques, which have enabled me to gain deep and rich qualitative insights that extend beyond the scope of the study.

Purposive Sampling. Initially, my observations and interactions within the community centered on key individuals integral to the community's daily and spiritual life, as well as their settings. These individuals included, among others, the abbot of Wat Phikulthong, who provided invaluable insights into the religious underpinnings and practices of the community; one of the two administrators of the temple school I encountered, who was pivotal in helping me understand the operations of the temple school, its educational system, educational values, and cultural transmission among the young; and the owners of several Thai eateries in Terbak Village, where I usually dined, offering a perspective on the socioeconomic aspects of community life. The selection of these individuals for engagement and observations was guided by their potential to offer deep insights into the community's fluid, dual identity, and most importantly, by the criterion that they must be from Kampung Terbak, Tumpat, Kelantan. This approach aligns with Patton's (2014) advocacy for purposive sampling in qualitative research, where the focus is on selecting information-rich cases that illuminate the questions under study.

Snowball Sampling. Following the initial purposive selection, I employed snowball sampling to further enrich my understanding of the community. This technique involved asking my initial contacts to introduce me to other community members with whom I could observe or interact. Through this method, I could access a wider network of participants, including those whose voices might not have been heard otherwise. Snowball sampling proved

especially valuable in identifying and engaging with segments of the community that were initially difficult for me to access. This strategy, endorsed by Biernacki and Waldorf (1981), emphasizes its effectiveness in qualitative research for accessing deeper levels of community networks and uncovering layers of social interaction and dynamics that are not immediately apparent.

3.7 In-Depth Interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted intermittently, complemented by field observations, to deepen the insights gathered during the fieldwork phase of this study. These interviews were crucial in capturing the complex perspectives and interpretations of the informants regarding their identity as Siamese in a Malay state and their worldviews; this would complement and triangulate the data obtained through observations. The strength of in-depth interviews lies in their ability to facilitate multisensory engagement, encompassing both verbal and nonverbal communication, as well as the dynamics of speaking and listening (Cohen et al., 2018). This approach has ensured that my research could gather comprehensive information in a personal and intimate manner, allowing for a deeper exploration of complex issues related to the subjects' identity that quantitative methods, such as surveys, might overlook or be unable to capture adequately.

The flexibility of in-depth interviews has also proven particularly advantageous, offering the latitude to probe for detailed responses and navigate the conversation dynamically based on the flow of dialogue and emerging points. This approach was crucial for delving into intricate aspects of the subjects' lives

and identities, which required a profound understanding that went beyond surface-level inquiry.

My fieldwork consisted of a series of semi-structured interviews with Siamese people in various professional roles. They were guided by sets of fundamental questions, known as “topic guides,” that align with the research objectives of this study (Patton, 2014). More details about this will be provided in Subchapter 3.7.3. The semi-structured format was chosen for its adaptability, allowing for an exploratory approach well-suited to the study’s objectives. It was designed to uncover the nature rather than the extent of the issues, phenomena, or attitudes under investigation, emphasizing the diversity and variability within the community’s experiences (Kumar, 2014). This method aligns with the study’s goals, aiming to understand the multifaceted and dynamic nature of the subjects’ identities and their perspectives on various issues.

Key informants for these interviews included influential figures within the community, such as PSKn and Wat Phikulthong’s leaders, as well as the heads and volunteer teachers of Wat Phikulthong’s TLDCS. Additionally, interviews with Siamese villagers from the Terbak Village provided valuable grassroots perspectives, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the community’s cultural and identity dynamics. A detailed list of participants who were engaged in my in-depth interviews is provided in Table 3.1. All identifying details have been anonymized and presented in generalized form to ensure participant confidentiality in accordance with ethical research standards. The table offers an overview of the demographic spread and occupational diversity

among participants, which helps contextualize the range of perspectives captured in the study.

Table 3.1

List of Study Participants with Relevant Demographic Information

Label	Gender	Age Range	Ethnic Background and Community Affiliation	Occupation / Role	Education Level (and Type, if applicable)	Household Arrangement
P01	Male	70's	Full Siamese; born and raised in Terbak	Retired academic; community leader	Tertiary	Lives with spouse
P02	Male	50s	Sino- Siamese; born and raised in Kampung Tanah Merah	University administrator; community leader	Tertiary	Lives with spouse and children
P03	Male	50s	Full Siamese; born and raised in Terbak	Community leader	Tertiary	Lives with spouse and child
P04	Male	50s	Full Siamese; born and raised in Terbak	Community leader	Secondary	Resides within a religious community

P05	Female	20s	Sino-Siamese; born and raised in Bandar Tumpat	Lecturer; TLDCS administrator and teacher	Tertiary (Chinese primary)	Lives with spouse and in-laws
P06	Female	60s	Full Siamese; born and raised in Terbak	TLDCS administrator and teacher	Diploma	Lives with spouse
P07	Male	30s	Full Siamese; born and raised in Terbak	TLDCS teacher	Tertiary	Lives with family
P08	Female	20s	Tri-ethnic parentage; born and raised in Terbak	TLDCS teacher; university student	Tertiary	Lives with family
P09	Male	20s	Sino-Siamese; born and raised in Terbak	TLDCS teacher; university student	Tertiary (Chinese primary)	Lives with family
P10	Female	20s	Full Siamese; born and raised in Terbak	TLDCS teacher; university student	Tertiary	Lives with family

P11	Female	20s	Sino-Siamese; born and raised in Kubang Panjang	TLDCS teacher; university student	Tertiary (Chinese primary)	Lives with family
P12	Female	40s	Full Siamese; born and raised in Terbak	Unemployed individual	Secondary (Chinese primary)	Lives with children
P13	Male	50s	Full Siamese; born and raised in Terbak	Sales supervisor	Undisclosed	Lives with spouse and children
P14	Female	30s	Full Siamese; born and raised in Terbak	Food vendor	Undisclosed	Lives with family
P15	Female	50s	Full Siamese; born and raised in Terbak	Food vendor	Undisclosed	Lives with spouse and children

3.7.1 Protocols

During my fieldwork, I adhered to the essential protocols detailed below to the best of my ability when conducting in-depth interviews. These protocols were crucial for ensuring the interviews' accuracy, smoothness, and ethical conduct,

so that an environment conducive to open and respectful dialogue could be fostered:

Preparation was key to my method. I ensured the questions I asked during interviews, based on a list of prearranged topic guides, were properly aligned with this study's objectives. This careful planning and mapping enabled me to approach the community's unique sociocultural aspects and worldviews with greater accuracy, sensitivity, and understanding. To enhance the clarity and contextual relevance of my topic guide, I conducted pilot interviews with two participants who were also part of my main sample. The results of this pilot study confirmed that the questions, drawn from the thematic areas within the topic guide (see Appendix II), were appropriate and clearly understood by participants.

The primary amendment to the protocol was not a significant alteration of the questions but rather minor refinements to terminology to enhance cultural sensitivity, along with confirmation that the flexible, semi-structured format, which allows for emergent follow-up questions or probes, remained the most effective approach. These initial interviews allowed me to refine the guide through grounded, real-time interactions, aligning with recommended qualitative research practices (Creswell & Poth, 2024). Given that the core topic guides remained stable, and the adjustments were minor refinements to flow rather than content, a comparative table of "before and after" questions is not included.

While the topic guide served as an initial framework, the semi-structured format of my interviews allowed for considerable flexibility and adaptability. As

fieldwork progressed, I occasionally adapted, rephrased, or improvised questions in response to emerging themes or contextual cues. I found this especially invaluable for uncovering unexpected insights. As Patton (2014) explains, this method supports both consistency and adaptability, allowing the interview to evolve based on participant responses. This approach is further supported by Heyl (2001), who emphasizes that ethnographic interviewing is inherently interactive and iterative, allowing researchers to engage meaningfully with participants and co-construct knowledge through a responsive dialogue.

Complementing this flexible approach was the careful selection of interview settings. Choosing the proper interview settings was vital in making participants feel open and comfortable. Hence, I opted for neutral, private locations, such as cafes, eateries, and classrooms, whenever possible, to minimize interruptions.

I meticulously adhered to ethical guidelines during my interviews by ensuring each participant gave informed consent. It was important to me that everyone understood their rights thoroughly, particularly the freedom to withdraw at any moment should they feel uneasy. I also maintained the anonymity of all participants and the confidentiality of their input. These are essential ethical standards in qualitative research, as outlined by Denzin (2009) and Patton (2014). I also tried my best to practice active listening and learn my participants' nonverbal cues as accurately as possible.

After each interview, I dedicated time to transcribing and anonymizing the data, a step that was tedious but critical for maintaining participant

confidentiality. As interviews were conducted in multiple languages (primarily English and Malay, with some Chinese and minimal Thai), I transcribed the audio recordings directly into English. This process involved the simultaneous translation of non-English portions to create a consistent, English-language dataset for thematic analysis.

Finally, making reflective voice notes using my smartphone immediately after the interviews became an occasional practice during fieldwork. This allowed me to capture my impressions of the participants, the non-verbal cues observed, and the initial interpretations. If I found any part of what participants said to be unclear, I would make a note of it and later double-check with them for clarification.

3.7.2 Sampling Techniques

For in-depth interviews, I employed a meticulous method for selecting participants that combined both purposive and snowball sampling strategies. This dual strategy enabled a more thorough investigation into the diverse and complex sociocultural narratives and aspects of identity within the Siamese community.

Purposive Sampling. Central to my participant selection strategy was purposive sampling, a method in which individuals who are key informants are chosen based on their knowledge or experience relevant to the study's focus areas (Bernard, 2017; Bryman, 2016). This approach is vital for deepening the understanding of the complex aspects of Siamese identity and worldviews. The

selection of the 15 informants was guided by specific inclusion and exclusion criteria, rooted in the study's ethnographic focus on Terbak Village as the community's primary institutional hub. The inclusion criteria were: (1) being a Terbak villager who actively practiced the Siamese way of life; (2) having a direct connection to the research site, either as a resident of Terbak Village or as an active, key member of a core institution centered in Terbak (i.e., PSKn or TLDCS); and (3) being 18 years or older and willing to provide informed consent. The primary exclusion criterion was any individual who did not meet all three of the above inclusion criteria.

By selecting participants who held varied roles within the community, ranging from influential figures such as the leaders of PSKn and Wat Phikulthong to grassroots members like villagers and volunteer teachers, I ensured a comprehensive exploration of the community's sociocultural and identity narratives. This iterative process, in which new participants were often identified through referrals from initial interviewees (Johnson & Christensen, 2019), allowed the inclusion of individuals who differed in age, gender, professional background, and social standing. Employing a maximum variation approach helped capture a broad spectrum of experiences and identify shared patterns across them, thereby enriching the depth and credibility of the qualitative findings (Creswell & Poth, 2024; Patton, 2014). This diversity strengthened both the analytical depth and representativeness of my ethnographic insights.

Snowball Sampling. Snowball sampling became an instrumental complement to purposive sampling, particularly in identifying participants who

were not readily accessible through direct selection methods. Snowball sampling involves asking current participants to refer others who meet the research criteria, thereby leveraging their networks to access a broader and potentially more diverse group of individuals (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This method proved particularly effective in reaching out to various community members whom I might not have been able to directly access or connect with otherwise. It facilitated the inclusion of voices that might otherwise have been overlooked. Through this iterative and expansive approach, the research captured the nuanced dynamics of Siamese identity within the broader cultural landscape, offering a robust and comprehensive exploration of its multifaceted nature.

On the number of participants, the sample size of 15 informants was not predetermined but was guided by the principles of achieving analytical depth and informational adequacy. In line with Creswell and Poth's (2024) view that qualitative inquiry should remain flexible and responsive to field realities, this ethnographic study prioritized contextual and interpretive depth over the pursuit of a rigid saturation point. Interviews were therefore concluded based on the researcher's assessment that additional conversations were no longer yielding substantively new insights. This aligns with qualitative best practices, which suggest that thematic saturation can often occur within a relatively small, information-rich sample (Guest et al., 2006). In this study, such richness was achieved through the deliberate inclusion of participants representing diverse positions, experiences, and social connections within the community, facilitated through purposive and snowball sampling strategies. The 15 interviews, supplemented by extensive participant observation, provided the necessary

heterogeneity of perspectives to ensure the findings were analytically robust and contextually meaningful.

3.7.3 Instrument

This study used a semi-structured interview protocol as its primary data collection instrument, consistent with ethnographic research practices. This tool was carefully developed to align with the research questions and was informed by existing literature on the Siamese community, identity negotiation and formation, as well as the concept of nationhood. The interview questions were structured around a comprehensive topic guide, a widely used method in ethnographic fieldwork that provides a flexible framework for eliciting participants' perspectives while ensuring that key thematic areas are addressed (Bernard, 2017; Patton, 2014). This approach enabled the collection of rich, contextually grounded data, with the topic guide serving as a scaffold to maintain consistency across interviews without constraining the natural flow of conversation. Each item in the topic guide drew its guidance from relevant journal articles, as detailed in Appendix II: Research Questions, Topic Guide, and Literature Mapping.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

In this subsection, I must discuss my commitment to upholding the highest ethical standards throughout the study. This includes obtaining ethical approvals, adhering to my university's guidelines, ensuring informed consent, and safeguarding participant privacy and data confidentiality. I hope that by

providing such detailed consideration to ethics, this study not only demonstrates my respect for ethical standards but also strengthens its credibility and reflects my commitment to contributing responsibly to the field.

3.8.1 Ethical Clearance

I began drafting a series of semi-structured questions for ethnographic interviews between September and November 2022. According to Fetterman (2019) and Spradley (2016), these questions are pivotal in facilitating deep, insightful conversations with the subjects, adhering to ethical guidelines while striving to extract meaningful data relevant to my research objectives.

To enhance the quality and ethical soundness of my interview questions, I sought feedback from my supervisory team, which included Dr. Samuel Chibundu Ihediwa, my main supervisor at the time, and Dr. Chin Yee Mun, my co-supervisor. Their insights were invaluable, prompting me to revise my questions extensively in December 2022. Creswell and Creswell (2018) emphasize the importance of this iterative process, ensuring that the questions are methodologically sound and aligned with ethical research practices.

As I approached the submission of my questions for ethical clearance in January 2023, I encountered an unforeseen administrative hurdle. UTAR's Institute of Postgraduate Studies and Research (IPSR) informed me that my application could not proceed due to a discrepancy between the original research title I used to register for my PhD and the title used during my Proposal Defense in October 2020. Although this was an administrative issue, it highlighted a

broader principle emphasized in the literature on research methods: the importance of consistency across research documentation in ensuring transparency and integrity (Bernard, 2017; Bryman, 2016).

Addressing this issue promptly, I revised my research title to ensure consistency with the one approved by my examiners during my Proposal Defense. This step was necessary to align with the administrative requirements of the IPSR, allowing me to proceed with my ethical clearance application. Resolving this administrative issue highlights the importance of adhering to all ethical and procedural guidelines established by my institution, as discussed by Baxter and Jack (2008).

On 24 March 2023, I received ethical approval for my study from UTAR's Institutional Review Board, also known as the UTAR Scientific and Ethical Review Committee (SERC). The approval was valid from 24 March 2023 to 23 March 2024, under the reference number U/SERC/74/2023 (see Appendix III, which contains the official approval letter bearing one of the earlier working titles of this study). This approval, as outlined in UTAR (2024), marked a significant milestone in my research journey, affirming that my study met the ethical standards required for conducting research involving human participants.

However, my research journey took an unexpected turn with the resignation of Dr. Ihediwa, necessitating a change in my main supervisor to Prof. Dr. Cheah Phaik Kin on 3 November 2023. This change prompted me to request an updated ethical clearance letter to reflect the change in my supervisory team.

On 24 January 2024, I received an updated ethical clearance letter from the SERC, bearing the reference number U/SERC/92-A03/2024, and with my new main supervisor's name (see Appendix IV). This document is crucial for maintaining the integrity of my research, ensuring that all ethical documentation accurately reflects the current state of my supervisory team, as recommended by Guillemin and Gillam (2004).

3.8.2 Handling of Research Data

In the entire research journey, I have taken the necessary steps to ensure the secure storage and handling of research data, consent forms, and personal data, aligning with ethical standards and privacy concerns. Research data, consent forms, and personal data in digital format are encrypted and password-protected and stored in my OneDrive account, accessible only through a secure password. This measure is put in place to safeguard the confidentiality and integrity of the data collected. Although my phone is password-protected, I deleted all audio, image, and video recordings from the device immediately after transferring them to my OneDrive account to minimize any risk in case of loss or theft.

For any data that existed in hard copy or physical format, I have secured it in my home cabinet locker, thereby ensuring the physical security of the data. I have also ensured that access to the data is controlled as tightly as possible to maintain privacy and confidentiality. I am the primary individual with access to the collected data, which ensures a consistent approach to data handling and analysis. However, upon specific requests, encrypted files may be shared with my main and co-supervisors, with passwords sent via separate emails.

A structured plan is in place for the disposal of data and consent forms upon project completion. Raw data and interview transcripts must be retained for at least seven years after the termination of the last SERC approval period, specifically until 23 March 2031. This period allows for potential reanalysis, verification, and responses to any questions or challenges related to the research. Upon reaching the date, digital files stored on OneDrive, including those in the “Bin,” will be permanently deleted to ensure their secure disposal. Similarly, any hardcopy files or consent forms will be shredded. This disposal method ensures that no unauthorized access or misuse of data can occur in the post-research stage.

Throughout this study, I have remained acutely aware of the ethical implications of my research, from formulating interview questions and managing the administrative details of ethical clearance to handling my research data. This journey, though fraught with challenges and learning opportunities, has not only reinforced the ethical foundations of my research but also highlighted the importance of adaptability and diligence in navigating the ethical landscape of academic research. The entire experience has enabled me to gain a deeper understanding of the importance of ethical considerations in conducting methodologically sound research that respects the rights, privacy, and welfare of all subjects, aligning with the sentiments of Bernard (2017) and Bryman (2016).

3.9 Research Funding

In this subsection of Chapter 3, it is crucial to acknowledge the financial assistance provided by the UTAR Research Fund (UTARRF), which was

instrumental in executing my fieldwork. This acknowledgment not only underscores the importance of such support for academic research but also underlines the contribution of the UTARRF in enabling me to carry out my project effectively, thereby advancing academic knowledge. The grant I received was vital in covering essential costs critical to the research process, as outlined in Locke et al. (2013).

My journey towards securing this funding began with the submission of my application on 13 August 2021 for Cycle 2 of the 2021 UTARRF application. This process was marked by a rigorous evaluation and scrutiny of my research proposal, which resulted in the successful award of RM5,700 on 17 December 2021. The grant, awarded under project number IPSR/RMC/UTARRF/2021-C2/K02, was designated for specific expenditures, including travel and accommodation for fieldwork in Kelantan, printing and photocopying of materials, and tokens of appreciation for my interviewees, in alignment with the stipulations of the UTARRF Agreement. Appendix V includes the official offer letter, which bears the original working title of this research project, a preliminary formulation that has since been refined as the study progressed.

The original timeline for my research, from 20 December 2021 to 19 December 2022, was disrupted due to the unforeseen challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, including lockdowns enforced by the government. This led to a necessary postponement of my fieldwork, reflecting the unpredictable nature of conducting research under such conditions, a reality that has been increasingly acknowledged in recent discussions of research methodology (Bernard, 2017; Bryman, 2016).

In response to these unforeseen delays, I applied for an extension of my UTARRF research project in November 2022. The extension was granted on 10 November 2022, extending the project's duration until 19 June 2023. This additional time was crucial in ensuring that I could complete my research without compromising its quality or depth, a vital aspect for maintaining the integrity of the research process.

Financial support from UTARRF was essential not just for the logistical aspects of conducting the research but also for adhering to ethical standards in research practice. Providing thoughtful tokens of appreciation to interviewees, such as UTAR souvenirs and KFC vouchers, approved as part of my UTARRF application, served as a practice that acknowledged and valued the time and contributions of my participants. This approach not only demonstrated respect but also fostered positive relationships, aligning with the sentiments of Hillerns (2013). The grant thus facilitated a more comprehensive approach to fieldwork, enabling me to gather rich and more genuine data while maintaining ethical standards.

Adhering to the funding agreement's guidelines was a responsibility that I took seriously to ensure that the grant was utilized in a manner that maximized the benefit to my research and contributed to the body of knowledge in my field. This approach to fund management reflects best practices in research methodology, emphasizing the efficient and ethical use of resources, which aligns with UTAR policies and the guidelines by Locke et al. (2013).

3.10 Data Analysis

In this ethnographic study, I undertook data analysis through a manual process of thematic analysis applied to transcripts from the 15 in-depth interviews. Microsoft Excel spreadsheets were used as the primary tool to manage this manual process, allowing me to organize, compare, and iteratively refine codes and emergent themes from both interview and observational data. This decision was made deliberately, grounded in the belief that manual engagement with interview data enables a more profound understanding of the data. Creswell and Poth (2024) describe qualitative data analysis as a “spiral” (p. 254), where researchers repeatedly cycle through reading, memoing, coding, and thematizing the data. This iterative and reflexive nature of analysis resonates with Braun and Clarke’s (2006) assertion that thematic analysis is a flexible and recursive process rather than a linear or prescriptive one. By coding manually within this spreadsheet structure, I could stay connected to this spiral, maintaining constant engagement with the participants’ narratives and capturing nuanced, context-rich details that automated tools might overlook.

Patton (2014) further reinforces this choice by highlighting the value of immersion and reflexivity in qualitative research, emphasizing that sustained, direct engagement with data enables researchers to think deeply, remain flexible, and adapt to emerging patterns rather than relying on automated processes that might distance them from participant narratives. This dynamic and iterative interaction fosters constant refinement of codes and themes as understanding evolves. Building on this, both Patton (2014) and Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) emphasize that ethnographic analysis necessitates sensitivity to

sociocultural contexts, something best achieved through close, hands-on engagement with the data.

In my analysis, manual coding has enabled me to remain intimately connected to participants' voices, allowing for the development of themes grounded in their narratives and reflective of the broader sociocultural complexities observed in Tumpat's Terbak Village. This approach has also ensured that my analysis remains authentic, rigorous, and aligned with the ethos of ethnographic inquiry, prioritizing depth and reflexivity over mechanical efficiency.

To ensure methodological rigor while maintaining this interpretive flexibility, the analysis followed the six-phase framework outlined by Nowell et al. (2017), progressing systematically from data familiarization to the refinement and naming of themes. For instance, during the early rounds of manual coding, excerpts describing the use of Thai and Kelantan Malay in different social contexts, the presence of Malay-language signage at the *wat*, and the bilingual announcements and materials used during temple festivals to accommodate mixed audiences were initially coded under the category of "language adaptation." Through repeated engagement with the data and reflexive memoing, consistent with the iterative, spiral process described by Creswell and Poth (2024) and the recursive flexibility emphasized by Braun and Clarke (2006), these descriptive codes were reinterpreted as part of a broader pattern of strategic cultural negotiation. This process culminated in the refined theme "Navigating Siamese Identity through Ethnolinguistic Adaptation in a Malay-Muslim Environment."

In the presentation of my findings and discussion from Chapters 4 to 6, each addressing RQ1, RQ2, and RQ3, the discussion is organized around the themes and subthemes that emerged through this process. This thematic structure is supplemented and enriched by insights from my participant observation, reflecting ethnographic methodology's emphasis on integrating multiple data sources (i.e., observation and interviews) to provide a rich, contextualized understanding of sociocultural meanings (Creswell & Poth, 2024; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Patton (2015) further highlights that presenting qualitative findings through emergent themes and triangulating data sources enhances the depth and credibility of analysis. In this light, the data analysis described here demonstrates how close engagement with interview transcripts enabled me to develop well-grounded themes, enriched by observation, which in turn support a meaningful and context-sensitive interpretation.

3.11 Data Trustworthiness

Enhancing the trustworthiness of data in qualitative research, especially within ethnographic studies like mine focusing on the Kelantan Siamese community, necessitates a multifaceted and diligent approach. My efforts to deepen the reliability of the observations and interviews conducted throughout this study were guided by several established strategies, aiming to capture the complex sociocultural dynamics in Terbak Village with integrity and depth by addressing the core components of trustworthiness: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Nowell et al., 2017).

Immersive Methodology for Credibility. Firstly, prolonged engagement in the field emerged as a cornerstone of my methodology to enhance credibility. Over the course of six months, I immersed myself in the community, participating in daily activities and observing local cultural practices. This extended period was not merely about data collection but about building a rapport with community members, which fostered a more open and trusting environment for sharing insights and experiences. Such depth of engagement is crucial for ethnographic research, as it enables a richer and more nuanced understanding of the community's cultural nuances and ensures the interpretations are believable from the participants' perspective (Patton, 2014).

Triangulation for Credibility and Confirmability. Secondly, the triangulation of data sources played an important role in enhancing the reliability of my findings. In this study, I integrated observational data with in-depth interviews, a form of within-method triangulation, as mentioned in Subchapter 3.3. I was able to cross-validate the information gathered, thereby reinforcing the credibility (accuracy) and confirmability (reducing observer bias) of my data presentation and conclusion. Triangulation not only confirms the consistency of findings across different data sources but also enriches the research by providing multiple perspectives on the phenomena under study (Cohen et al., 2018; Denzin, 2009).

Linguistic Flexibility for Credibility. Thirdly, given my moderate ability to speak and understand Thai, there were situations where I attempted to conduct interviews in the participants' native language, which was sometimes intertwined with our national language (i.e., Malay) and English. On certain

occasions, I used a combination of Mandarin and Thai to communicate with some villagers who attended the Chinese primary school and could speak that language. This linguistic flexibility facilitated a deeper connection with interviewees, allowing them to express themselves more fully and accurately. This linguistic adaptability is primarily attributed to the multilingual nature of the Kelantan Siamese, who thrive in Malaysia's diverse, multiracial, and multicultural context. This stands in stark contrast to their counterparts in Thailand, highlighting the unique linguistic landscape shaped by the complex interplay of different races, cultures, and languages in Malaysia.

It is essential to note that the Siamese community in my research predominantly speaks the "Chehe" Thai dialect, which is said to have roots in the Tak Bai district within the Narathiwat province of Thailand (Nookunga & Burusphat, 2021). Despite this dialectal preference, the community is well-acquainted with the standard Thai language. My familiarity is more with standard Thai, which aligns with the exposure many community members have to it through their education in the temple school and their consumption of Thai drama series. By navigating my conversations between the subjects' native language, the national language, and at times Mandarin, I minimized potential misunderstandings and biases that could arise. This linguistic flexibility significantly enhanced the authenticity of the data collected, ensuring a more accurate understanding that strengthens the credibility of the subjects' perspectives and experiences (Temple & Young, 2004).

Reflexivity for Confirmability. Additionally, reflexivity was an ongoing component of my research process to ensure confirmability. I regularly

reflected on my positionality, biases, and the impact of my presence within the community. As an outsider to the community, my presence and interactions inevitably had an impact on the research context. By regularly reflecting on my positionality and the dynamics of the researcher-researched relationship, I aimed to mitigate these effects and ensure a more transparent and ethical engagement with the subjects. This reflexivity, as discussed by England (1994), is vital for maintaining the integrity of the research process, ensuring that the findings reflect the subjects' realities rather than the researcher's preconceptions.

Member Checking for Credibility. Member checking has also served as a crucial validation step, reinforcing the accuracy and credibility of my findings with the subjects' experiences. I would check with three members of the Siamese community, with whom I have built rapport, to verify specific facts I was unsure about. This process was twofold. First, given that the transcription involved direct translation into English (as described in Subchapter 3.7.1), I employed informal member checking specifically to validate the accuracy of the translation. I discussed the final English transcripts of key quotes and cultural concepts with several of my bilingual or multilingual key informants (including P01, P04, P05, and P06) to confirm that their intended meanings and cultural nuances were accurately conveyed.

Second, this process was extended from simple fact-checking to broader analytical validation, where I presented preliminary interpretations and emerging themes to these key informants to confirm their resonance and accuracy. This collaborative approach helps validate the research findings and empowers the

subjects by involving them in the research process, ensuring their voices and perspectives are accurately represented (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Peer Debriefing for Dependability and Confirmability. To further enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis, I engaged in regular peer debriefing with my supervisory team (Prof. Dr. Cheah Phaik Kin and Dr. Chin Yee Mun). This process involved presenting emerging themes, interpretive choices, and analytical challenges to experienced peers, who could act as a sounding board (Creswell & Poth, 2024). This scholarly dialogue challenged my assumptions, probed for potential biases, and ensured the interpretations remained consistently and logically grounded in the data. This check was vital for strengthening both the dependability (consistency) and confirmability (neutrality) of the thematic analysis.

Detailed Documentation for Dependability (Audit Trail). Finally, to maintain a consistent and transparent methodology that supports dependability, I kept detailed field notes and recorded interviews with the consent of my interviewees, which were transcribed verbatim. Such a meticulous documentation practice allowed for the traceability of data and enhanced the reliability of the data analysis process, creating a clear audit trail (Nowell et al., 2017). As ethical considerations were pivotal in the research process, I also ensured confidentiality and anonymity for all subjects by obtaining informed consent and being transparent about my role as a researcher in Terbak Village over the six months. Such ethical rigor helped protect the informants and lent credibility to the research process, as ethical integrity is closely linked to data trustworthiness (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

The strategies detailed above were driven by my commitment to research ethics and accuracy, ensuring the credibility of data gathered from my study of the Siamese community. Through these strategies, I sought to explore the community's identity experiences with both sensitivity and analytical depth. I aimed to produce work that contributes to academic discourse while accurately reflecting the lived experiences of community members.

CHAPTER 4

IDENTITY NEGOTIATION OF TERBAK’S SIAMESE UNDER MALAY-MUSLIM DOMINANCE

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I present the data I have collected and analyze it in relation to RQ1, specifically focusing on how the Siamese community in Tumpat’s Terbak Village negotiates its identity within Kelantan’s Malay-Muslim context and under the Malaysian government’s assimilative pressures. It is essential to clarify that the term “Siamese,” as used here, refers to a distinct ethnolinguistic group of Thai descent who were born and raised in Malaysia, hold Malaysian identification cards, and have resided in Kelantan for many generations. They should not be confused with Thai citizens. The subjects of this study, despite their Thai origins, identify specifically as Siamese to differentiate themselves from their counterparts across the border in Thailand.

I organize the findings thematically, with each theme and subtheme emerging from a thematic qualitative data analysis. These themes are supported by quotes from interviews conducted with various stakeholders, including community leaders, villagers, the temple authority, and teachers. The quotes are verbatim, presenting the essence and authenticity of the participants’ voices. I also interweave the thematic analysis with ethnographic data, specifically the insights gathered and photos taken during my participant observation in Tumpat’s Terbak Village between November 2022 and April 2024, as detailed in Chapter 3. This approach enables a rich and comprehensive understanding of my

research subjects in Kelantan, providing context and depth to the findings and offering a more informed perspective on the daily lives and practices of villagers as they strive to reinforce their ethnocultural identity, being a minority in both the state and the country.

In this chapter, the analysis focuses on the contestation of identity; it highlights the complex processes through which Terbak Village's Siamese community maintains a distinct ethnic, cultural, and religious identity while simultaneously navigating the expectations of assimilation. The themes discussed will illustrate how members of the community navigate the tensions, compromises, and adaptations involved in balancing their Siamese identity while adapting to life in Kelantan, a state known for its strong Islamic influence and one of the most ethnically homogeneous populations in Malaysia (DOSM, 2024; Rajo & Ngeow, 2014). This includes their approaches to Thai education, cultural and religious practices, social and economic integration, and their sense of identity and national affiliation.

To ensure a logical progression of analysis, this chapter is structured to first establish the ethnographic background and institutional context of the community (Subchapters 4.2 to 4.6). Establishing this baseline is a prerequisite for understanding the complex strategies of identity negotiation discussed in the subsequent themes (Subchapters 4.7 to 4.10). The outcomes of these negotiation strategies, specifically the extent of identity shifts and consolidation, are examined separately in Chapter 5.

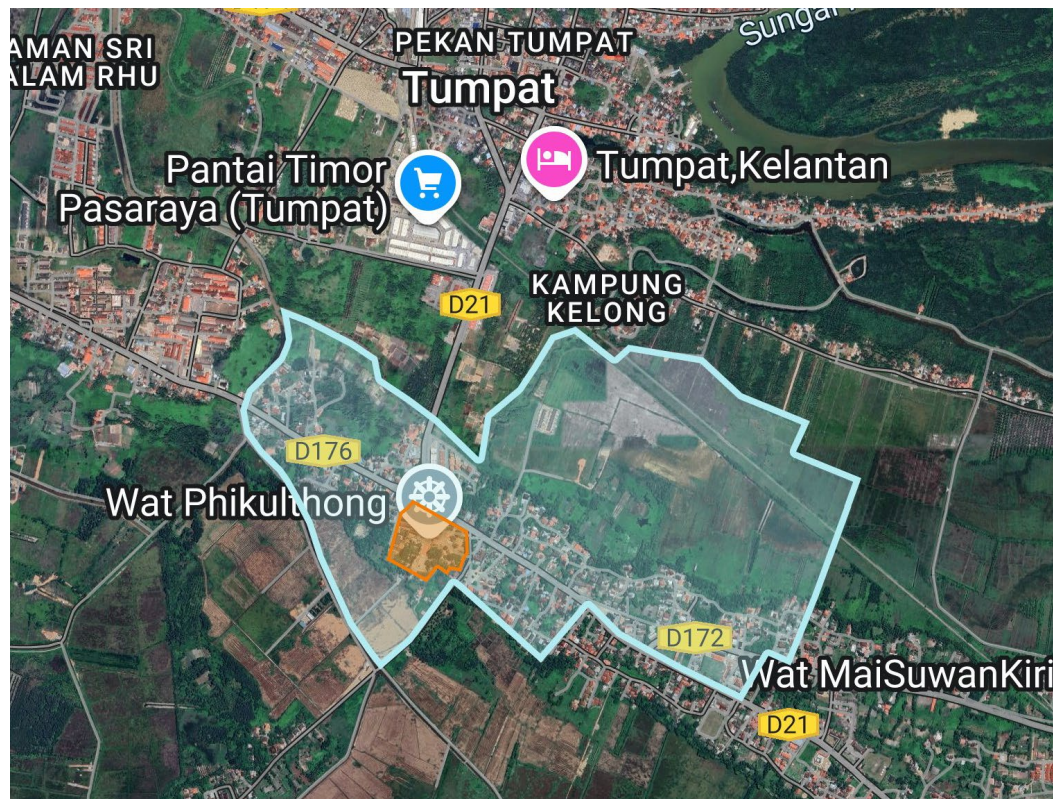
4.2 Terbak Village and Its Environs

Before presenting and analyzing the community's negotiation strategies, I wish to establish, to the best of my ability, the sociocultural baseline and identity context of Terbak Village and its surroundings from this point until Subchapter 4.6. This village serves as the focal point of this ethnographic study examining the identity and sociocultural dynamics of the Siamese community there. Terbak Village, also known as Kampung Terbak in Malay, is a key village in the Tumpat district of Kelantan, Malaysia. The main road running through the village is Tumpat Road, also known as State Route D21. Terbak is one of the first villages in Tumpat that travelers encounter when arriving from the city center of Kota Bharu via this route.

At a junction within the village, directly in front of Wat Phikulthong Vararam, the main Theravada Buddhist temple discussed in the following section, the road splits: the northward branch continues as Dato Keramat Road toward Tumpat's old town, while the westward branch continues as Terbok-Kelaboran Belukar Road. In Figure 4.1, the area representing Terbak Village is outlined in light blue. Tumpat's old town lies beyond the northern boundary of Terbak Village and is therefore not depicted in the figure.

Figure 4.1

Map of Terbak Village, Tumpat, Kelantan, and Its Surrounding Areas



Note. The Kampung Terbak area is based on data from Jabatan Perancangan Bandar dan Desa (n.d.) and was recreated using Google (n.d.). A larger, high-resolution version of this figure is available in Appendix VI.

To avoid confusion, it is important to clarify that this village is locally known as “Kampung Terbok” (note the “o” in Terbok) in the Kelantan dialect. This distinction is necessary to differentiate it from another village of the same name located in Kupang, Kedah. Most Siamese in Tumpat and the Thais from the other side of the border—only about 12 kilometers away—refer to Terbak Village as “Baan Bo Samet” in Thai, which is often shortened to “Ban Bomet.” The Malay equivalents of Kampung Terbak and Kampung Terbok are more commonly used by the Malays in the area. Mohd Amirul et al. (2016) and

“Kampung Terbak” (n.d.) attribute the origin of Terbak Village to the Terbak tree. When verifying this fact with P04, a temple authority at Wat Phikulthong who also hails from the same village, it appears that the village name may have two origins.

One story of origin traces back to a large Terbak tree in the area, locally known as *Tabak* or *Bak* by the Siamese and Thais, which provided shade for traveling merchants from the Tumpat town who would rest there during their journeys. This led the area to be called *tai bak*—meaning “under the tree,” which was mispronounced as “Terbak” by the local Malays over time. The second origin relates to an ancient, dense forest filled with Samet, a type of paperbark tree, with a particularly large one growing beside a large well that served as a significant water source. This well, located in the forest, acted like an oasis, providing essential water for wild animals like elephants, buffaloes, and even smaller creatures such as tigers and rhinos. Over time, people too began to depend on this water source, leading them to settle in the area. In Thai, the word *bo* means “well,” which contributed to the name Bo Samet. Eventually, the community grew around this resource, leading to the formation of a village that came to be known as “Baan Bo Samet,” with “baan” meaning “village.”

According to the Jabatan Perancangan Bandar dan Desa (n.d.), Terbak Village covers an estimated 153.8892 hectares and comprises approximately 60 houses with a population of about 300 residents, indicating a small and tightly knit settlement. By contrast, Mohd Amirul et al. (2016) suggest that Terbak Village comprises approximately 150 houses, accommodating between 1,000 and 2,000 villagers, indicating a significantly larger population. Mohd Amirul et

al. (2016) further noted that the population is predominantly Siamese (approximately 85%), alongside smaller numbers of Malays (around 10%) and Chinese (about 5%). Approximately 90% of the population are farmers, 4% own small businesses, and 1% work in government (Mohd Amirul et al., 2016). This information aligns with the findings of Chuapram and Tapparut (2022), who suggest that most villagers in Terbak Village and nearby Siamese villages are engaged in agriculture, including rice farming, rubber cultivation, coconut cultivation, vegetable cultivation, and mixed orchards.

The study area of Terbak Village encompasses the residences of Siamese villagers, two Thai *wats*, several shops, including Thai-Siamese eateries, the district's Agriculture Office, and a Unity Complex. A newly developed commercial area, situated just outside Terbak Village at the northern part of the given map (i.e., Figure 4.1) towards its upper edge, features several cafés, a prominent supermarket chain called “Pantai Timor Pasaraya,” and a wet market. This “new town” is designed to meet the needs of nearby residents and complement what the adjacent Pekan Tumpat, or old town, lacks. The latter is located close to the Tanjung Che Mas Jetty at the mouth of the Kelantan and Mak Nerelang Rivers, where fishing boats unload their catch. The old and new towns present a blend of traditional and modern elements and built environments.

It is also worth noting that the only Chinese primary school in Tumpat, SJK(C) Yuk Tse, where many local Siamese and Malays attend, is approximately a kilometer from Wat Phikulthong, a notable cultural landmark in Terbak Village. Four other national schools, including the primary schools SK Seri Tumpat 1 and SK Seri Tumpat 2, and the secondary schools SMK Tumpat and SMK Dato' Biji

Wangsa, are also located near Wat Phikulthong. While these public schools are within the vicinity, they are not situated in Terbak Village. This setting, which I consider rural, offers an insightful view of the Siamese lifestyle, from the religious to the mundane, allowing for a detailed exploration of their social, cultural, and religious engagements, far removed from the bustling urban city center of Kota Bharu.

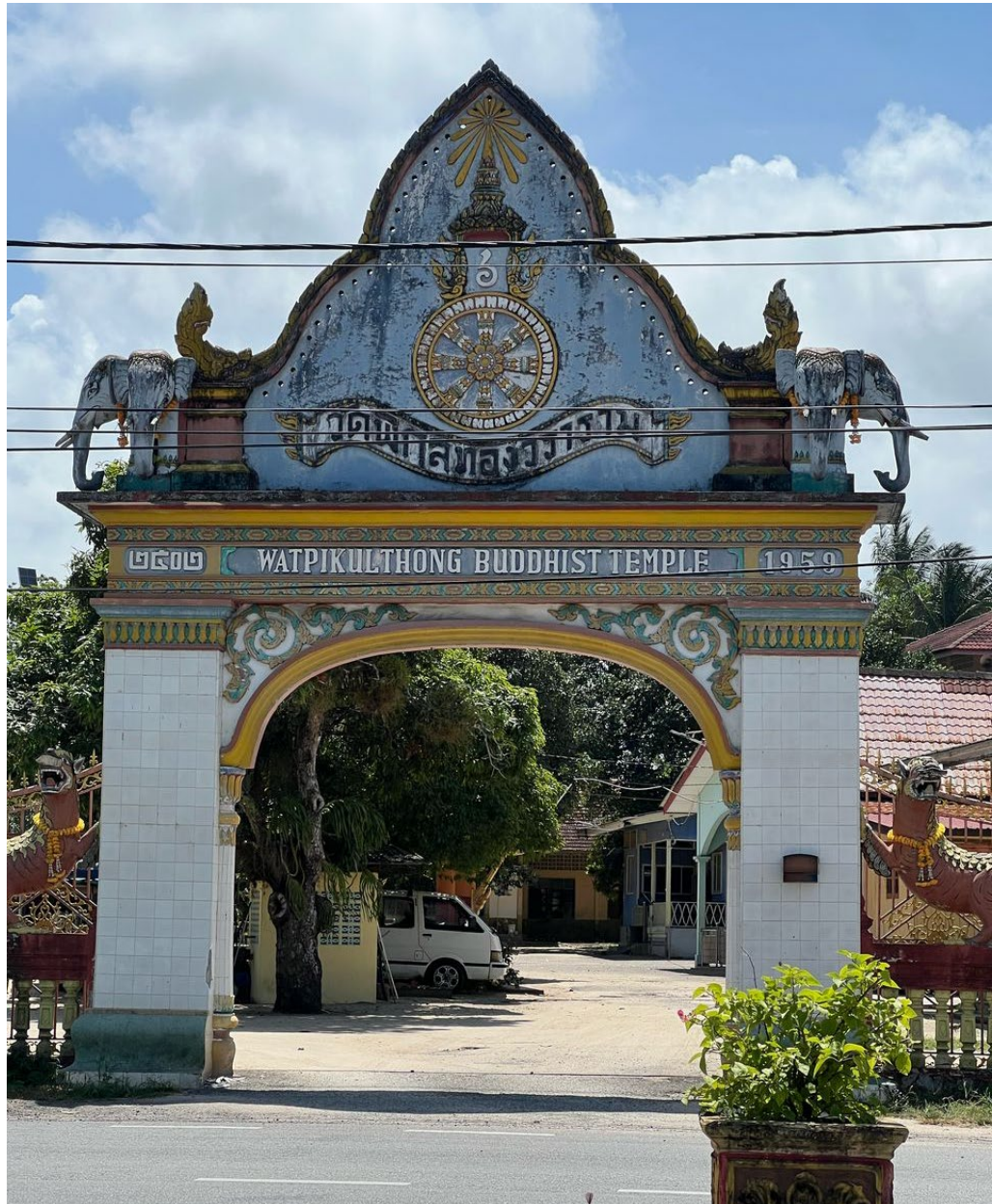
4.3 Wat Phikulthong Vararam as the “Heart” of Terbak’s Siamese Community

Situated at the GPS (Global Positioning System) latitude and longitude of 6.183498746027632, 102.16781165818117, Wat Phikulthong Vararam stands as a significant icon in Terbak Village, serving as a vibrant hub for religious, educational, cultural, and social activities for the local Siamese community. As shown in Figure 4.1, the temple, represented by the area marked in orange, is quite literally positioned at the heart of Kampung Terbak, near the village’s central point.

Figure 4.2 depicts the temple’s iconic front entrance, which was constructed in 1959. Beyond its role as a Thai-Theravada Buddhist temple, Wat Phikulthong also houses its Thai Language, Dhamma, and Culture School (TLDCS) and serves as the “headquarter” of the Kelantan Siamese Association (PSKn), both of which play vital roles in preserving the community’s language, traditions, and social cohesion. These institutions will be introduced in the following two sections.

Figure 4.2

Front Entrance of Wat Phikulthong



Note. Source: Author's fieldwork (2023).

This significant Thai-Theravada Buddhist *wat* has a profound influence on the daily routines and social practices of Terbak's Siamese villagers, reinforcing its status as the "heart" of the community and strengthening community bonds and cultural identity by hosting communal activities such as

chanting and praying, merit-making, and festivals, among others. While the *wat*'s origins are believed to date back approximately 700 years, its current structure includes a chapel renovated and expanded in 1924 from the original building. The grounds also feature a sacred *pikun* or Spanish Cherry tree (Figure 4.3) estimated to be about 300 years old ("The Consulate-General," 2022). Beyond serving as a religious center, the *wat* is a crucial "gateway" to Terbak Village and its people, especially for outsiders unfamiliar with the locality of this area. For me as a researcher, it was the primary entry point into the community's sociocultural landscape.

Figure 4.3

300-Year-Old Phikul Tree at Wat Phikulthong.



Note. Source: Author's fieldwork (2023).

For outsiders, Wat Phikulthong is commonly known as the “temple of the Standing Buddha.” It is home to a remarkable 60-meter-tall Buddha statue in the standing pose, known as Phra Phuttha Leela Maha Mongkhon (Figure 4.4), which took ten years to complete (Saengthai, 2008; Zurairi, 2013). This *wat* attracts a multitude of visitors, both local and international, especially during significant Thai-Buddhist festivals such as Songkran, Visakha Bucha (Wesak), Kathina, and Loy Kratong, underscoring its importance in the religious and cultural life of the community. The *wat*’s prominence and visibility make it an essential landmark and point of reference for those seeking to engage with the local Siamese community.

Figure 4.4

The “Standing Buddha” at Wat Pikulthong



Note. Source: Author’s fieldwork (2023).

In contrast to the larger Wat Phikulthong, Wat Cheng Buddhavas, a less prominent temple that receives fewer visitors, is located directly across from it. While Wat Phikulthong is commonly known among locals as Wat Nai (inner temple), Wat Cheng is referred to as Wat Nok (outer temple), indicating that Wat Cheng is located before Wat Phikulthong along State Route D21 (Tumpat Road) when traveling from the state capital, Kota Bharu. The *wat* complex houses several significant structures and sacred sites, including the *ubosot* (ordination hall) and the *kuti* (living quarters) of prominent, historical monks Luang Pho Thuat and Luang Pho To, which were constructed in 2005 by Chinese Buddhist devotees (“The Consulate-General,” 2022).

During my visits to these *wats*, I could not help but notice the striking differences in the *pa cha* or cemeteries within the respective *wat* compounds. At Wat Cheng, I was surprised by the abundance of Chinese-style graves, each designed as a small, cubicle-like structure with distinctive curved roofs, in contrast to the typical stupa-shaped designs seen in traditional Thai graves. This suggests that Wat Cheng is supported by Chinese Buddhist devotees, likely practicing Mahayana Buddhism, who mostly come from outside Terbak Village, as the local Chinese population is small. In contrast, the cemetery at Wat Phikulthong featured the more familiar Thai-style graves with pointed tops, reflecting the predominant Theravada Buddhist tradition among the Siamese villagers. These contrasting cemeteries indicate the coexistence of diverse Buddhist practices within the same village context and highlight the ethnoreligious composition of support for the two *wats*.

4.4 Wat Phikulthong's Thai Language, Dhamma, and Culture School (TLDCS)

The presence of Wat Phikulthong's TLDCS within the *wat* complex further highlights the *wat*'s role as an educational and cultural center. The *wat* school, depicted in Figure 4.5, offers a vital yet unique service to the Siamese population in Terbak Village, which is not found in the vernacular education systems of other ethnic communities in the country. Its roots stretch back to the colonial era. Although Kelantan had already come under British Malaya following the AST of 1909, it was during the Japanese occupation in the early 1940s that Thai language classes were first systematically introduced at Wat Phikulthong. Drawing on the precedent of Siam's 1921 Compulsory Primary Education Act, the *wat* is regarded as the earliest site in Kelantan to offer Thai classes at the primary level, while also accommodating adults through supplementary literacy programs. These adult education classes utilized materials such as practice reading books from the Ministry of Education (Nuansanong, 2017).

This initial period of systematic education during World War II, however, lasted only about three years. Following Japan's surrender on August 16, 1945, formal Thai language education in Kelantan diminished significantly. Despite this decline, some informal instruction was maintained in several Siamese villages, taking place in homes and at the *wats*. A formal, integrated education system for the Thai language was not re-established until 1989. This effort led to the establishment of a foundation or center for Thai language and culture, as well as Buddhism, which is administered under Wat Machimmaram in Jubakar Village, Tumpat (Nuansanong, 2017).

Figure 4.5

Main Classroom Building at Wat Phikulthong's TLDCS



Note. Source: Author's fieldwork (2023).

Building on its historical foundation, the school is today established to preserve and promote the Thai language and culture, as well as the Dhamma (the teachings and moral principles of Buddhism). It provides a structured curriculum that spans six years, from beginner to advanced levels. Students learn the Thai language, cultural elements, and Buddhist teachings, which help them maintain their Siamese identity. The school is operated under the auspices of Wat Phikulthong and is deeply connected to it. Its educational program is overseen by two dedicated principals, who guide the school's activities, and a team of approximately 15 to 20 volunteer teachers. Together, they ensure that the school remains aligned with traditional values and the community's evolving needs. At

the time of research, the school recorded an enrollment of approximately 150 students, the majority of whom were Siamese with a handful of Chinese students or those of mixed Siamese parentage.

As I spent much time at the *wat* school understanding its operations, it became evident how intertwined the *wat* and its educational institution are. The *wat* serves not just as a religious center but as the backbone of the school's activities. Volunteer teachers, some of whom have studied in Thailand and most of whom have graduated from the *wat* school, are highly dedicated to imparting the knowledge and skills they have acquired. The dedication of the school's staff is evident in their efforts to teach Thai education to both younger primary students and older youth, despite challenges such as funding shortages. These educators work tirelessly, earning an hourly wage based on donations from the locals and the Chinese communities from outside Terbak Village, as well as grants from the Malaysian government, to ensure that the children have access to a quality education that emphasizes Thai cultural heritage while equipping them for success in tertiary education and preparing them for the challenges of the modern world. With guidance from its principal and vice-principal, both experienced teachers and respected members of the local community, the TLDCS has become a valued institution within the local Siamese community.

The dedication of the students was particularly evident. While many are from Terbak Village, some travel from surrounding villages, and a few even return from larger cities to reconnect with their roots. During the weekdays, which in Kelantan run from Sunday to Thursday (unlike most other Malaysian states, which run from Monday to Friday), these students attend the national

school. On weekends, they dedicate their time to the *wat* school. This demanding schedule leaves them with very little break. While deeply rooted in Thai traditions and culture, the Thai curriculum is not merely a relic of the past; it is an evolving education system. Currently, it aligns with the modern educational standards of Thailand. According to P05, vice-principal of the TLDCS, plans are underway to further enrich the Thai culture curriculum by incorporating local Siamese Malaysian elements.

The core curriculum and these updates are being designed by the Prawichianmolee Foundation, headed by Prawichianmolee, the abbot of Chai Mongkol Temple in Songkhla, Thailand. These enhancement aims to ensure that students not only meet contemporary Thai educational expectations but also remain grounded in their cultural and religious roots. The TLDCS plays a central role in maintaining Siamese customs and values, equipping students with essential knowledge and skills. This foundation enhances their ethnic consciousness, helping them to tactfully navigate the sometimes subtle, sometimes overt assimilative pressures from the government as they adeptly integrate into the predominantly Malay community of Kelantan and Malaysian society at large.

4.5 The Kelantan Siamese Association (PSKn)

Within Wat Phikulthong, the Kelantan Siamese Association, also known as PSKn (an abbreviation of its Malay name, Persatuan Siam Kelantan), a registered entity that oversees the affairs and well-being of Kelantan's Siamese communities, operates virtually and without its own office, utilizing the *wat* as

its central hub for activities. In my view, this arrangement reflects the close-knit relationship between the Siamese communities and their religious institutions. The *wat* serves as the focal point for cultural and religious events such as Songkran and merit-making ceremonies, which the association helps organize and coordinate.

P01, one of the association's key leaders, explained that beyond cultural events, the association also functions as a bridge between the Siamese community and the government, particularly because most *wats* and their activities are not formally registered. This role allows the association to secure governmental support for local festivals and educational initiatives, such as Thai language and Dhamma classes for the Siamese students. I found this quite impressive, as it shows the association's adaptability in maintaining its relevance despite limited physical resources.

Additionally, the association plays a crucial role in addressing the social and political needs of the community. For instance, it regularly collaborates with local and national government agencies, ensuring the community remains informed about key issues, such as land management and policies that may affect its members. The leader noted that the association often facilitates talks with government bodies, including the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission, among others, to help educate the local Siamese and monastics on governance, financial, and various other matters. The association is also actively advocating for the Siamese people to be recognized as a distinct ethnicity and cultural identity, instead of being grouped under the "*Bumiputera lain* (Other Bumiputera)" category in national statistics.

However, maintaining these traditions presents challenges, particularly as younger generations are drawn toward mainstream foreign and Chinese cultural influences. The association has made concerted efforts to engage younger Siamese through initiatives such as educational awards and local sports events. P01 also emphasized the importance of organizing sociocultural and religious activities such as Dhamma sharing or workshops by prominent monks from Thailand and motivational talks by successful Siamese professionals to reinforce the community's cultural roots and uplift their lives. From my perspective, while these efforts are commendable, I sensed the leader's concern about the association's long-term sustainability, particularly given the challenges of filling leadership positions and expanding its membership base. Nonetheless, through its ongoing dedication to cultural preservation and advocacy, the PSKn remains an essential pillar of the community, ensuring that its identity and traditions endure.

4.6 The Sociopolitical Landscape and Assimilative Pressures

While institutions such as Wat Phikulthong and the PSKn provide internal cohesion, they operate within a broader sociopolitical environment characterized by distinct assimilative pressures. Understanding these structural constraints is crucial for contextualizing the community's negotiation strategies, which are discussed in the subsequent sections. Based on the literature reviewed and the field observations in Terbak, these pressures manifest across three primary dimensions.

First, religious and cultural regulatory pressures are pervasive due to the state's administration by PAS, which enforces a governance model emphasizing Malay-Islamic values (Stark, 2004; Tayeb, 2022). This environment imposes strict regulations on public cultural expressions, creating a dynamic where non-Muslim practices are often scrutinized or restricted to private and temple grounds to avoid conflict with dominant Islamic norms (Liow, 2011; U.S. Department of State, 2021).

Second, bureaucratic erasure and ambiguity challenge the community's official standing. Despite their historical presence and constitutional recognition, the Siamese often encounter administrative misrecognition, frequently categorized as "*lain-lain*" (others) or "*Bumiputera lain*" (other Bumiputera) in official data (SUHAKAM, 2010). This lack of specific disaggregation renders the community statistically invisible, complicating their ability to claim targeted state resources despite their indigenous status (Na Thalang, 2015).

Third, socioeconomic structural exclusion operates through the preferential treatment of the Malay-Muslim majority under national affirmative action policies like the NEP (Gomez & Saravanamuttu, 2012). As explored in the upcoming themes, this systemic hierarchy limits the Siamese community's access to government employment and scholarships, creating a disparity between their nominal status as Bumiputera and their lived reality of economic marginalization (Chin, 2020). These intersecting pressures form the specific sociopolitical context against which the community must negotiate its identity and sustain its cultural resilience.

4.7 Framework of Identity Negotiation

The Kelantan Siamese negotiate their identity through three key themes: navigating Siamese identity through language and cultural adaptations in a Malay-Muslim environment, preservation and adaptive integration of Thai-Buddhist traditions, and balancing social integration and socioeconomic challenges (see Table 4.1). These themes highlight how the community sustains its Thai-Buddhist heritage while adapting to a predominantly Malay-Muslim environment.

This adaptive process plays a key role in identity negotiation, as the community transitions from oral traditions to literacy and bridges generational gaps. Additionally, the Chinese language, as a “third force,” contributes to identity dynamics beyond Malay influence. Religious identity is preserved through Thai-Buddhist traditions, which are selectively adapted to ensure peaceful coexistence with the Malay-Muslim majority. Social and economic strategies involve interethnic relations, selective integration, and navigating ethnic marginalization while ensuring economic survival within a dominant Malay-Muslim framework.

Table 4.1*Themes and Subthemes of Identity Negotiation*

Themes	Subthemes
1. Navigating Siamese Identity through Ethnolinguistic Adaptation in a Malay-Muslim Environment	1a Language Preservation as a Cultural Anchor
	1b Linguistic Dynamics and Adaptation
	1c Chinese Language as a “Third Force” in Siamese Identity Negotiation Beyond Malay Influence
2. Preservation and Adaptive Integration of Thai-Buddhist Traditions in a Malay-Muslim Majority Society	2a Anchoring Identity through Ethnoreligious Continuity
	2b Adaptive Integration of Ethnoreligious Practices for Coexistence
3. Balancing Social Integration amid Structural Challenges within a Dominant Malay-Muslim Framework	3a Preserving Siamese Identity through Interethnic Relations and Selective Integration
	3b Negotiating Ethnic Marginalization and Economic Survival

Note. Source: Developed for this study.

4.8 Theme 1: Navigating Siamese Identity through Ethnolinguistic Adaptation in a Malay-Muslim Environment

This theme is central to understanding how the Siamese in Tumpat's Terbak Village, as a minority group, negotiate their identity in a predominantly Malay-Muslim environment characterized by its strong Islamic influence. The process of identity negotiation involves balancing the preservation of ethnic and cultural traditions with the pressures of assimilation into the larger national identity promoted by the Malaysian government, whether at the state or federal level.

In this context, linguistic identity plays a crucial role in shaping and sustaining ethnic consciousness, as language functions not only as a means of communication but also as a symbol of cultural heritage, group solidarity, and resistance to assimilation (Fishman, 1999; Milner, 2008). Among the Kelantan Siamese, the intergenerational transmission of the Thai language reflects both cultural continuity and adaptation to sociopolitical pressures, with shifts from oral tradition to literacy serving as a strategy for cultural preservation. However, the increasing use of Chinese for socioeconomic mobility highlights a pragmatic adaptation to the dominant linguistic influence beyond Malay. This theme is further divided into three subthemes, which will be discussed below.

4.8.1 Subtheme 1a: Language Preservation as a Cultural Anchor

From oral tradition to literacy, language preservation serves as a cultural anchor for the Siamese community in Tumpat's Terbak Village, helping them maintain a distinct identity within a predominantly Malay-Muslim landscape. Research

has shown that language preservation is closely tied to ethnic identity, serving as both a marker and carrier of culture for minority communities navigating a majority culture (Fishman, 1991; Liebkind, 2001). As Fishman (1991) and Phinney et al. (2001) note, language serves as both a symbol and a means of social connection within these groups.

In his observations, Golomb (1978) found that Thai (read Siamese) villages in Tumpat demonstrated their own “Thainess” as a united front against their Malay neighbors, an identity notably expressed through the use of their Thai dialect. Based on my fieldwork observations, this pattern of presenting a unified identity appears to persist today. Specifically, the Siamese community in this village speaks the “Chehe” dialect in its members’ daily interactions. This variant of Thai traces its origins to Che He, a predominantly Buddhist sub-district in the Tak Bai district of Narathiwat, a province in southern Thailand. Che He is located in the southeastern part of Narathiwat, where the majority of the population is Muslim.

As I observed the linguistic landscape of the region, I noticed possible variations in the dialects spoken across different villages in Tumpat and even into Thailand. Upon consulting P10, a Terbak villager and university student, I learned that the Chehe dialect in Narathiwat is more similar to the variant spoken in Jungkau or Jubakar Village, an adjacent village about ten kilometers away, than to the Chehe dialect found in Terbak Village itself. Despite the geographical proximity of Jungkau and Terbak villages, there are notable distinctions in their dialects, particularly in tonal quality. These differences in tone may be attributed

to Jungkau's closer proximity to Thailand, potentially influencing its linguistic characteristics.

Although the villagers commonly speak the Chehe dialect daily, the TLDCS teaches its students standard Thai, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Several interviewees emphasized the importance of preserving the Thai language. P08, a volunteer teacher at TLDCS, could resonate with it, saying, "I feel it is not okay not to know Thai. It is a language special to us, so we must know how to read and speak."

P07, a teacher of Thai traditional culture and dance, concurred, highlighting that:

The [Siamese] kids must learn Thai. They need to be able to read and write Thai... If they go to Thailand and do not know how to communicate in Thai, it is shameful. When they are Thai illiterate, it will also be difficult for them there... We need to be serious when it comes to our mother tongue education. It reflects who we are.

P07's comment reflects a deep commitment to Thai literacy as essential for preserving cultural identity and dignity among younger Siamese and fostering a sense of belonging to Thailand. By emphasizing the importance of mastering the language, especially given Thailand's proximity, P07 reinforces how language connects them more closely to their cultural roots. This perspective also emphasizes the importance of language competence not only

for individual identity but also for the collective identity of the Thai-Siamese community.

In Tumpat, I realized that while almost everyone speaks Thai fluently, not all can read or write it. This characteristic reflects a linguistic pattern like that in Thailand, where spoken Thai is prevalent in daily interactions, but literacy is less widespread. P06, a senior principal of TLDCS, confirmed this, saying that:

Quite a lot of them [the Siamese] cannot read and write. Most of them could only speak. However, they cannot read the Thai script... Even some from the younger generation are unable to do so, especially when their parents do not send them here [*wat* school] to receive Thai education... If they do not learn, they will lose their mother tongue.

P06 further explained that historically, the community has emphasized oral traditions over formal Thai literacy. Not all places with Siamese communities have access to a proper Thai education system, and it was only after the establishment of TLDCS that proper Thai education was introduced in the village. As a result, spoken Thai remains a vital part of life, with literacy skills now slowly improving, especially among the young.

Meanwhile, the PSKn is committed to ensuring that all Siamese children in the state receive a Thai education, which they believe is essential to sustaining their cultural heritage. P02, one of the leaders of the association, emphasized to me during our interview that the Thai language is more than just a tool for

communication; it is a vital element of the Siamese way of life. Through Thai, the Siamese children can then connect with cultural traditions, religious practices rooted in Theravada Buddhism, and the social values that set their community apart from the majority Malay population.

In addition, the use of Thai in religious ceremonies among the Siamese is a powerful symbol of cultural and linguistic continuity, linking them to their heritage and reinforcing their distinct Siamese identity. Ceremonies such as the annual Songkran festival, the chanting of *phutthah phongsa* (Buddhist prayers), and the *tak bat* (almsgiving) are all conducted in the Thai language, reflecting the community's connection to their cultural roots.

As Geertz (1973) argues in his symbolic anthropology, rituals function both as “models of” and “models for” reality, symbolically depicting how the world is and prescribing how people ought to behave. Through these dual functions, rituals provide frameworks through which communities express and sustain their moral and cosmological order. In the Terbak context, the spoken Chehe dialect during Songkran, Loy Krathong, and temple chants serves not only as a medium of prayer but as a performative enactment of identity, a linguistic enactment that embodies the values of hierarchy, respect, and communal harmony central to their Siamese worldview.

Figure 4.6 depicts the abbot of Wat Phikulthong delivering a Dhamma talk in Thai, specifically the Chehe dialect, to devotees in front of the “Standing Buddha” statue, just before the *wien tien* ceremony (candlelight procession) on the evening of Visakha Bucha Day in 2023.

Figure 4.6

Abbot Delivering a Dhamma Talk on Visakha Bucha Day, 2023



Note. Source: Author's fieldwork (2023).

Beyond its symbolic dimension, language also performs a crucial social function. As noted by P04, this linguistic practice not only reflects their cultural ties to Thailand but also strengthens their sense of belonging within the local community. This aligns with the ethnolinguistic identity theory (EIT) proposed by Giles and Johnson (1987), which posits that language plays a crucial role in reinforcing group solidarity. By using Thai in religious ceremonies, the Siamese community not only maintains its cultural heritage but also solidifies its collective identity, demonstrating the role of language in shaping and preserving cultural groups. Language, therefore, becomes a space of cultural negotiation,

instilling a sense of belonging and continuity within the younger members of the community.

While EIT highlights the social role of language, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis extends this understanding to the cognitive level, suggesting that language shapes perception and worldview (Sapir, 1929; Whorf, 1956/2012). For the Terbak Siamese, the Chehe dialect carries expressions and meanings that reflect how community members understand kinship, religious life, and their relationship to the surrounding world. Through everyday speech and ritual language, they express ideas of respect, social harmony, and spiritual order that are distinctly Siamese in character. Preserving the dialect, therefore, sustains not only linguistic identity but also the shared ways of seeing and interpreting life that bind the community together.

This linguistic resilience among the Terbak Siamese mirrors broader global patterns observed in other minority groups. Fishman (1991) emphasizes that the intergenerational transmission of language within families is pivotal for the survival of minority languages, often outweighing the impact of formal policies. Similarly, Bourgeois et al. (2009) found that among minority Canadian Francophone youth, strong ethnolinguistic identity correlates with active participation in cultural practices, reinforcing language maintenance. These studies highlight that minority communities often rely on grassroots efforts and cultural engagement to sustain their linguistic heritage, particularly when facing pressures from dominant languages.

In the Malaysian context, although specific policies may not directly target the Terbak Siamese, the broader national emphasis on the Malay language and culture creates an environment where minority languages may feel marginalized. This indirect pressure can encourage communities to strengthen their linguistic practices as a means of cultural preservation. Thus, the Terbak Siamese's commitment to using Thai in religious and daily contexts can be seen as part of a broader global pattern where minority groups actively maintain their linguistic identity amid dominant cultural narratives.

In this broader context, the Terbak Siamese community continues to use their native language in daily interactions, Thai education, and religious ceremonies, underscoring its role as a central pillar of cultural identity. For instance, Thai is used within the community and religious settings, while Malay is occasionally employed in formal interactions (discussed further in the following section). This persistent use of Thai illustrates the community's commitment to preserving their language and sustaining cultural cohesion (David & Dealwis, 2009).

These local practices unfold within the broader Malaysian context, where Malay-centric language policies have sparked discourse on cultural identity and linguistic equity, particularly among the country's diverse minority groups (Lee, 2010; Noraini, 2024; Nur Atiqah, 2024). Concerns around cultural marginalization and language erosion frequently arise in discussions of vernacular education and national cohesion. While Terbak participants did not explicitly cite these broader policy tensions, they provide the sociopolitical backdrop in which the community maintains its linguistic practices. As Gill

(2014) notes, Malaysia's language policy landscape is not merely administrative but deeply ideological. It reflects an ongoing negotiation between the pursuit of national unity and the lived realities of its multicultural society, creating a space in which communities like the Terbak Siamese assert their cultural voice.

4.8.2 Subtheme 1b: Linguistic Dynamics and Adaptation

Linguistic dynamics play a crucial role in shaping Siamese identity formation in Kelantan, where intergenerational disparities in language proficiency and cultural retention create a complex sociolinguistic landscape. The Thai language serves not only as a means of communication but also as a vital marker of ethnic identity within a predominantly Malay-Muslim society. However, the pervasive influence of the Malay language extends across Kelantan's minority communities, including the Siamese, Chinese, and Indian populations, affecting language use and cultural integration (Mohamed Yusoff, 1987; Pue & Shamsul, 2011; Pue et al., 2019; Rajo, 2018; Tan et al., 2017).

This influence is particularly pronounced within the Siamese community, which constitutes only 1% of the state's population (Johnson, 2002). Compared to their counterparts in other Malaysian states, minority groups in Kelantan, especially the Chinese, observably exhibit a higher degree of fluency in the local Malay dialect, demonstrating the depth of linguistic integration in the state. These interwoven linguistic interactions shape how the Siamese navigate such Thai-Malay bilingualism, resisting assimilation and maintaining cultural distinctiveness while engaging with the dominant Malay-speaking environment.

While I have observed that both older and younger generations view the Thai language as integral to their ethnic identity, the challenges they face in maintaining the language are inherently different. In the older generation, while fluency in Thai, particularly Chehe, is not an issue, most cannot read or write the Thai script due to a lack of formal Thai education.

For instance, P06 told me that many from the older generation are Thai illiterate, indicating that “most of them can only speak Thai. But when they see Thai script, they cannot read it.” She then cited an example, pointing to a prominent senior from the Siamese community in Terbak Village who “can speak Thai but cannot read or write it. That is why he needs to attend Thai lessons.”

Additionally, P12, who just returned to Terbak village after spending two decades in the southern Malaysian state of Johor and Singapore, said, “I can read a bit of Thai, but I’ve forgotten many words.” Her comment suggests the familiarity yet gradual erosion of Thai literacy over time, especially in a setting that does not prioritize the language, and it also reveals that she, like many from the older generation, was not exposed to much proper Thai education. The observations above highlight a gap in language skills among the older generation, presenting an interesting challenge for them to engage fully with their own culture.

This linguistic shift is further reflected in the bilingual practices observed in Terbak Village, where the community adapts its communication to accommodate varying levels of Thai literacy. For instance, wedding cards are

often written in both Thai and Malay. This bilingual approach is meant to cater to those who may not be fluent in reading Thai, ensuring they understand the messages. Similarly, within the premises of Wat Phikulthong, signage and banners occasionally include the Malay language (see Figure 4.7). Of course, such inclusion of Malay also facilitates better understanding among non-Siamese devotees, especially those from the Chinese community who frequent the *wat*.

Figure 4.7

Bilingual Signage and Banner at Wat Pikulthong



Note. Source: Author's fieldwork (2023).

These variations in everyday language use reveal that bilingualism is not simply functional but deeply symbolic of how the Siamese negotiate identity across generational and cultural lines. Beyond written communication, linguistic adaptation extends into more personal expressions of identity, most notably in naming practices. Another significant way this adaptation manifests is in how some Terbak villagers select meaningful names in Thai and Malay contexts. The account of P08 highlights the significance of naming as a form of identity negotiation:

Like for myself, my name is [Name withdrawn for anonymity]. My father, who named me, said that my name is an international one in the sense that part of it refers to a type of flower in Thai. In Malay, my name is also easy to call.

This deliberate naming strategy demonstrates how some of Terbak's Siamese consciously adapt aspects of their identity to make them more palatable within the dominant Malay-speaking environment while preserving a connection to their Thai heritage. The community employs an integrationist approach by selecting names that hold meaning in both Thai and Malay contexts, ensuring smoother interactions while maintaining their cultural distinctiveness. This pattern aligns with broader linguistic adaptation trends among minorities who recalibrate identity markers to achieve social acceptance while retaining ethnic continuity.

On social media, some individuals from the older generation, such as those in their 50s, as seen in P13 and P15, can be observed using the Latin

alphabet to transliterate Thai, rather than the Thai script, as illustrated in Figure 4.8. This is likely because they are not proficient in typing in the Thai script. Their posts are predominantly mixed with Malay and, occasionally, English. Based on my observations, their greater proficiency in Malay is evident. This practice illustrates how adaptation to language proficiency contributes to the consolidation of a unique Siamese identity within the context of multiracial, multicultural Malaysia, where Malay influence is strong.

Figure 4.8

Facebook Post by a Siamese Resident of Terbak Village Featuring English and Thai Transliterated Description



Note. Source: Author's fieldwork (2023).

While older generations tend to favor transliteration and Malay in digital spaces, a different trend emerges among younger members of the Siamese community. In contrast, they generally demonstrate higher levels of Thai

proficiency, particularly in reading and writing; only a minority among this group has minimal or no literacy. P08 remarked:

Usually in Tumpat, 99% of the Siamese here are able to speak Thai. But for parents who have gone to other states like KL to work, their children might not be able to speak the language well.

However, an observable trend among the younger generation is that, although most can converse comfortably in Chehe and possess stronger Thai literacy than their elders, many do not prefer to use standard Thai in daily interactions. Volunteer teacher P11, a Terbak villager, said many students there have been using Chehe since early childhood. Another volunteer teacher, P08, who teaches standard Thai at the TLDCS, noted the preference for Chehe among her students, “Because they use Chehe every day, the school management would like us to teach standard Thai for them to learn.” In this context, the formal instruction of standard Thai operates alongside their everyday linguistic habits, functioning more as an additional linguistic resource rather than a replacement for their lived dialect practices.

This preference for Chehe is not merely habitual but socially reinforced. Their reluctance to embrace standard Thai is shaped by a social stigma that deters its use among peers. Raised in an environment dominated by Chehe, P05 explained that these young individuals often see standard Thai as pompous or unnecessary, a view that is likely to persist into adulthood. She said,

Many do not want to speak the standard Thai language, even after completing their Thai education with us. They are used to speaking in Chehe... Many people feel shy about speaking in standard Thai, as it sounds pretentious. Just like the Malays here would be fonder of speaking Kalate [Kelantan Malay] instead of the standard Malay language. If a Siamese spoke in standard Thai, his friends would tease him.

This sentiment shows that the use of standard Thai is perceived as impractical and socially risky, which explains the preference for Chehe and leads to the dialect's dominance in both social and personal contexts. This generational dynamic reveals a clear linguistic paradox: while literacy in standard Thai has improved, its spoken use remains socially constrained, cementing Chehe as the default medium of communication. This preference for Chehe over standard Thai represents an internal community identity choice rather than a rejection of broader linguistic engagement.

Within the broader Malay-dominant environment of Kelantan, standard Thai occupies a more formal and limited function (e.g., primarily in Thai education and in official contexts in Thailand). In contrast, Malay remains the primary language required for interaction beyond the immediate Siamese community. Based on my observations and interviews with P05, standard Thai nonetheless continues to play a functional role through the TLDCS curriculum and through Thai-language media accessible near the border, such as television, online content, and news.

These intergenerational patterns, when viewed collectively, underscore that language choice within the Siamese community is shaped not simply by proficiency but by social meaning, identity, and belonging. According to EIT (Giles & Johnson, 1987), the continued use of the Chehe dialect functions as a key marker of in-group membership and solidarity. Its use in festivals, temple gatherings, and everyday exchange reinforces a sense of collective identity anchored in shared heritage. EIT highlights the emotional and relational significance of Chehe, showing how it sustains bonds and a sense of belonging within the community.

Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986) further clarifies the social mechanisms behind these patterns. Within SIT's framework, linguistic behavior expresses in-group and out-group boundaries. While Chehe signals authenticity and local belonging, standard Thai, associated with urban Thais, outsiders, or formal domains, carries connotations of distance from the community's lived identity. As several participants noted, speaking standard Thai risks being seen as pretentious or misaligned with local norms. SIT explains the evaluative and boundary-setting aspect of language use, complementing EIT's focus on emotional solidarity: Chehe not only feels meaningful but also signals membership and authenticity, whereas standard Thai signals potential misalignment. In contrast, retaining Chehe affirms in-group cohesion, whereas Kelantan Malay facilitates engagement with the Malay-majority environment.

These identity-driven and intergenerational linguistic patterns shape not only individual and generational choices but also the visible multilingual practices that permeate everyday life, reflecting both cultural preservation and

adaptive integration. Thai-Malay signage, bilingual wedding invitations, and transliterated Thai on social media exemplify this hybrid strategy, bridging practical needs with symbolic expressions of Siamese identity. Such practices mitigate literacy gaps while maintaining cultural continuity, illustrating a dynamic integration strategy rather than simple linguistic assimilation.

Conceptually, these practices align with Berry's (1997) model of integration, which emphasizes that minority communities can adopt elements of the dominant culture while retaining their distinct identity. In line with Fishman's (2001) argument, minority languages endure when their use remains socially meaningful and contextually strategic, enabling the Siamese to participate in the broader society while preserving cultural distinctiveness and demonstrating agency rather than submission to dominant linguistic norms.

Building on this, the observed multilingual strategies reveal a broader logic underpinning the community's identity work: strategic adaptability rather than passive coexistence. Their language practices demonstrate not only the maintenance of ethnic distinctiveness but also a deliberate responsiveness to shifting social and cultural contexts. It is within this dynamic interplay between adaptation and preservation that the Siamese of Terbak exemplify what I conceptualize as *adaptive identity positioning* (AIP), a concept developed in this thesis to capture context-sensitive multilingual and identity strategies.

This strategic, context-dependent multilingualism illustrates AIP as a form of deliberate "positioning," where community members actively adjust their presentation according to social, cultural, and institutional contexts. They

shift fluidly between Chehe for internal communication and cultural intimacy, standard Thai for formal or educational purposes, and Kelantan Malay for broader social, commercial, and administrative interactions, while also employing transliterated Thai and adopting acculturated naming practices that blend Thai and Malay elements. This fluid positioning enables them to perform their identity flexibly, balancing the preservation of their core cultural anchor (Chehe) with the pragmatic demands of their sociopolitical and economic environment, navigating dominant cultural pressures without assimilation.

Significantly, AIP extends beyond language to encompass situational identity work linked to ethnoreligious practices, interethnic relations, and everyday cultural survival strategies. The Siamese collectively position themselves according to the demands and dynamics of each context, foregrounding their Thainess (Siamness) when necessary while negotiating social expectations and power hierarchies, consistent with Golomb's (1978) observations.

Although this resembles Berry's (1997) integration strategy (i.e., maintaining cultural roots while engaging with broader society), AIP differs in emphasizing the collective, situational, and strategic nature of identity work, responsive to shifting power dynamics, symbolic hierarchies, and structural constraints. Conceptually, Berry's notion of integration corresponds more closely to my conception of *adaptive integration*, a key component of AIP that will be elaborated further from Subchapter 4.9.2 onwards and explained in the Adaptive Identity Positioning Framework in Subchapter 4.11.

4.8.3 Subtheme 1c: Chinese Language as a “Third Force” in Siamese Identity Negotiation Beyond Malay Influence

The influence of the Chinese language as a “third force” adds a new dimension to negotiating Siamese identity within the dominant Malay-Muslim environment. The Siamese community of Terbak village, as a minority group, balances its use of Thai and occasional Malay with the long-standing influence of Chinese. During my fieldwork, I observed that many older Siamese villagers spoke Hokkien, a dialect of the Min Nan branch of Chinese, reflecting a deep history of interaction with the local Chinese population.

This influence was especially evident at Barn Nai Kopitiam, a Siamese-owned eatery regularly visited by Chinese customers and frequented by local villagers. It was in this everyday setting—over shared meals and casual conversations—that I observed how interethnic interactions subtly shaped cultural norms and social relationships. Local Siamese villagers regularly mingled with Chinese patrons, occasionally speaking Hokkien, at the kopitiam, illustrating how such informal spaces foster everyday coexistence and cultural exchange.

While such Hokkien fluency and interethnic mingling are particularly notable among the older generation, especially those of Sino (Hokkien)-Siamese mixed parentage, Chinese influence continues to shape younger Siamese in new ways. Among the younger generation, those who attend Chinese-medium schools, particularly SJK(C) Yuk Tze, the only Chinese primary school in the area, are more proficient in basic Mandarin. Today, a significant number of

Siamese and Malay parents in Terbak choose to send their children to this school, reflecting not only changing patterns of language exposure but also the continued and evolving influence of Chinese culture on local identity formation.

These observations can be understood through the lens of Giles and Johnson's (1987) EIT, which suggests that minority groups often adapt their linguistic practices to negotiate group identity while accommodating external cultural influences. Although Hokkien and Mandarin are not originally part of the Siamese linguistic heritage, these Chinese variants have gradually become integral to the community's ethnolinguistic identity. The selection and retention of these languages reflect the practical and cultural forces that shape identity within this minority group. Acting as a "third force" or counterbalance, the presence of Hokkien and Mandarin in the Siamese linguistic repertoire complicates how cultural boundaries are navigated in a predominantly Malay environment, where the Malay language and culture hold sway.

Despite the Malaysian Chinese comprising only 22.4% of the population as of July 2024, their influence in Malaysia has been significant long before independence, shaping sectors such as the economy, business, education, and politics (Spolsky, 2003; Lee & Tan, 2000). In this context, the decision by many Siamese to adopt Chinese language education becomes a strategic adaptation, mediating between the pressures of assimilation into Malay culture and the practical advantages that Chinese offers.

A key reason for embracing the Chinese language within Terbak's Siamese community is its role as an asset for economic mobility and social

positioning. As P05 said, “the more languages one knows, the better,” a sentiment reflecting the community’s practical outlook toward Chinese education at Yuk Tze. Berry (1997) highlights how multilingualism can facilitate integration into broader economic and social networks.

At the same time, the decision by many Siamese to adopt Chinese language education shows an investment in linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1991), where language proficiency enhances economic mobility and social positioning within Malaysia’s multicultural landscape. This linguistic investment provides access to economic resources and reinforces the community’s agency in navigating economic structures and improving social standing. Furthermore, Norton’s (2000) concept of language learning as an investment in social capital underscores how language acquisition extends beyond economic advantages, shaping an individual’s identity, power relations, and access to opportunities within specific social contexts. These dynamics will be discussed further in Subchapter 4.10.

P12’s experience vividly illustrates this phenomenon. Her decision to enroll her son in SJK(C) Yuk Tze was driven by the need for educational continuity and economic pragmatism rather than cultural assimilation. Having lived in Johor before returning to Tumpat, she noted, “In Johor, we enrolled him into the Chinese school... [so] he knows Chinese”. For parents like P12, this demonstrates how the Chinese language serves as a portable economic asset, valuable not just within the local Tumpat economy but across broader migration networks of Singapore and Malaysia, superseding the cultural pull of national or purely Thai education.

Similar patterns are observable in other cases, as seen in P01's daughter, who directly benefits from her proficiency in Chinese and Thai, receiving additional allowances from her employer for these skills. Such incentives demonstrate how linguistic proficiency translates into tangible economic gains, aligning with Bourdieu's (1991) concept of linguistic capital while also reflecting Norton's (2000) idea that language learning is an investment in social capital, shaping access to social networks, identity, and power relations. In this way, the Chinese language serves as a strategic third option for the Kelantan Siamese, enabling them to expand their opportunities beyond the confines of the dominant Malay language and culture.

The decision to adopt Chinese education reflects a broader pattern of strategic adaptation among minority communities as they navigate sociocultural and economic structures. Rather than passively assimilating into the dominant culture, groups like the Siamese actively engage with multiple cultural influences to maximize their opportunities while maintaining their distinct identity. In this context, Portes and Zhou's (1993) segmented assimilation theory offers a perspective on how minority groups negotiate cultural and linguistic adaptation in ways that facilitate socioeconomic mobility without necessitating complete absorption into mainstream society.

Although Portes and Zhou's (1993) model is termed "segmented assimilation," it is worth noting that it does not necessarily imply a linear or inevitable process of cultural absorption into the dominant society. Unlike Gordon's (1964) classical assimilation model, which assumes a one-way trajectory toward full integration and the eventual loss of minority cultural traits,

Portes and Zhou's (1993) framework recognizes multiple adaptation pathways. It allows for selective integration, where minority groups can adopt certain socioeconomic and linguistic practices for mobility while preserving their distinct cultural identity. Rather than following a rigid progression toward assimilation, minority groups negotiate their adaptations based on both structural factors and individual agency, selectively integrating into certain aspects of society while maintaining cultural distinctiveness.

In the case of Terbak's Siamese, their adoption of Chinese education serves as a strategic adaptation that enhances socioeconomic mobility while allowing them to retain their ethnic identity. This process demonstrates a negotiated form of integration, where linguistic and cultural practices are selectively adopted based on practical advantages rather than external pressures alone.

Nevertheless, such integration of the Chinese language occasionally introduces a tension among some members. P11, despite being of mixed Chinese and Siamese heritage, highlighted the hurdles of balancing linguistic absorption and cultural preservation. In Yuk Tze, while speaking Chinese was actively encouraged, she thought it often came at the expense of her mother tongue, which anchors her cultural identity. She recalled instances of being "scolded by teachers" for using Chehe when speaking with fellow Siamese classmates, reflecting the school's ongoing emphasis on Chinese as the primary medium of instruction. However, she still tried to accommodate the teachers' requests to get by in the setting.

In P11's case, the institutional preference for Chinese over Thai exemplifies this dynamic, where language choice is strategically employed to conform to the school environment and adhere to its norms. This aligns with Heller's (2007) concept of "bilingualism as a social approach," which views language not merely as a means of communication but as a strategic tool for navigating and managing diverse social contexts. The scolding for using Chehe at the Chinese school highlights the tension in managing bilingual identities, where individuals must negotiate between maintaining their native language and adapting to another language that holds social or institutional power. By navigating these tensions, P11 embodies Heller's (2007) perspective, illustrating how social, cultural, and institutional factors shape bilingualism.

Moreover, P11's account of her family dynamics sheds light on the complexities of language use at home:

At home, we mainly speak Chehe among ourselves... But sometimes if some of us have younger siblings and we do not want them to understand what we are saying, we intentionally speak in Chinese.

The above illustrates how language choice is both a form of cultural preservation and a means of adapting to external expectations. This switch in language use keeps certain conversations private among the older siblings and reflects a deeper, strategic engagement with their linguistic repertoire. By choosing when and with whom to speak each language, P11 and her family illustrate how language choice serves as a tool for managing personal

interactions while preserving cultural heritage amid the influences of broader societal norms.

The phenomenon of non-Chinese families enrolling their children in Chinese-language schools like Yuk Tze further highlights the role of Chinese as a significant force in the community's identity formation. The fact that many Siamese and Malay students are now enrolling in these schools, which were traditionally attended by Chinese students and are now even outnumbering them, despite the presence of two other national schools nearby, signifies a considerable shift in the perceived value of Chinese language skills and education. Gudeman (2002) notes that multicultural environments can foster individual adaptations while simultaneously generating group tensions, a dynamic evident in Malaysia's debates over vernacular schools.

Despite mounting sociopolitical pressure against vernacular schools in Malaysia, the Siamese of Terbak Village continue to embrace the Chinese language as an important bridge to broader societal participation. This is exemplified in the personal story of P08, who recounted the compromise between her parents, where her father (a Siamese) agreed with her mother's (a Sino-Siamese) request to provide Chinese tuition, despite his preference for Malay-medium schooling. This decision to embrace Chinese education not only reflects ongoing cultural negotiations but also demonstrates the influence of Chinese as a third force that facilitates economic and social integration while offering a means of resisting full assimilation into the Malay cultural mainstream.

Therefore, the multilingual practices of Terbak's Siamese community reflect a complex negotiation of cultural identity, where Chinese serves as a third linguistic force beyond the dominant Malay influence. This choice to integrate Chinese is shaped by both economic motivations and a desire to assert a hybrid identity, balancing the pressures of a predominantly Malay-Muslim society with the opportunities provided by Chinese language skills. Barth's (1969) concept of "ethnic boundaries" is particularly relevant here, as language serves not just as a marker of cultural distinction but also as a bridge across different social groups. In the case of Terbak's Siamese community, the members' proficiency in Hokkien and Mandarin, and their ability to alternate between the two "external" languages, allows them not only to maintain their unique cultural identity but also to cleverly navigate the different social contexts within the broader Malaysian society and counterbalance the Malay influence.

The ability to shift between linguistic codes based on context suggests that ethnic identity is not merely a matter of heritage but of active, strategic negotiation. The use of Chinese as a linguistic resource does not necessarily indicate cultural assimilation into the Chinese community; rather, it represents a tactical adaptation that enables the Siamese to maintain their distinction while benefiting from the economic and educational advantages associated with Chinese-language proficiency.

Barth's (1969) distinction between "thick and thin" ethnic boundaries further clarifies the Siamese community's position. While a thick boundary implies rigid cultural separation, the Siamese exhibit a thin boundary, engaging in fluid interactions across ethnic lines while preserving a core sense of identity.

This thin boundary is evident in how the older generation, particularly those of Sino-Siamese descent, retained Hokkien, while the younger generation is shifting toward Mandarin for educational and economic purposes.

However, the continued use of Chehe within the home and community settings suggests that, while external adaptations occur, the internal cultural core remains intact. This selective permeability of ethnic boundaries supports Barth's (1969) argument that ethnic identity is not fixed but negotiated based on social, economic, and political conditions. Thus, the Siamese of Terbak exemplify how minority groups strategically engage with external cultural forces to optimize their social positioning while safeguarding their distinct heritage.

4.9 Theme 2: Preservation and Adaptive Integration of Thai-Buddhist Traditions in a Malay-Muslim Majority Society

Theme 2 describes how the Thai-Buddhist community navigates its religious identity while living in a predominantly Malay-Muslim environment, where Malay-Muslim culture and governmental integration policies exert a subtle yet pervasive influence. This inquiry explores the community's strategies for preserving its distinct ethnoreligious identity in the face of assimilative pressures. This negotiation reflects a complex process where Terbak's Siamese engage in a form of integration that is both selective yet adaptive, allowing them to interact with dominant religious, cultural, and sociopolitical norms without fully compromising their own.

Preservation of Thai-Buddhist practices serves as a form of cultural resilience, understood as the ability of a community to draw on cultural values, traditions, and environmental supports to sustain a distinct identity within a broader society that may not share or fully recognize these traditions (Clauss-Ehlers, 2004; HeavyRunner & Morris, 1997). At the same time, the community, as I observed, has adapted certain practices to align with local customs, facilitating peaceful coexistence. This dual approach of cultural retention and adaptation illustrates how the Siamese balance between self-assertion and adept integration within the dominant framework.

4.9.1 Subtheme 2a: Anchoring Identity through Ethnoreligious Continuity

Terbak's Siamese community demonstrates a notable ability to sustain its Thai-Buddhist identity and cultural heritage in the context of Kelantan's power imbalances, highlighting Wat Phikulthong's central role not only as a religious institution but also as a social, cultural, and educational hub. As Bauman and Saunders (2009) and Ouassini (2019) have noted, religious institutions often serve as "anchors" for minority communities, fostering community cohesion, consolidating their ethnic identity, and resisting assimilative pressures.

A recurring narrative strand in the accounts of Terbak's Siamese is their commitment to preserving their Thai-Buddhist traditions within a broader national framework that emphasizes a unified identity through a Malay-Islamic lens. Given the national emphasis on Malay culture and Islam in mainstream policies, the transmission of Thai cultural heritage and the Dhamma often falls outside the scope of state-supported initiatives. This has prompted the

community to actively safeguard their cultural and religious identity, with the *wat* serving as a central hub for these efforts.

P05 emphasized the *wat*'s role in sustaining cultural and religious education, ensuring that young Siamese receive proper instruction in Thai culture, as well as Buddhist values and traditions: "Here [In Wat Phikulthong and TLDCS], we just want to ensure that they get enough Thai and Dhamma education, since it is not covered in national schools. Otherwise, our Siamese culture could slowly disappear." Through the TLDCS, monks and teachers transmit cultural, linguistic, and religious knowledge, making the *wat* both a protective buffer against assimilation and an active agent in sustaining and reinforcing identity.

This finding resonates strongly with prior research in Kelantan. Mohamed Yusoff (1987, 2010a) has consistently argued that the Buddhist *wat* is the central institution for the Siamese, serving as the primary basis for defining their ethnic identity in a manner analogous to Islam for the Malays. More recently, Tohsan (2020) argued that religious mechanisms, such as Dhamma and preaching, are deliberately employed as a strategy for "building people" (p. 98), thereby preventing cultural hybridization and reinforcing a distinct "Thainess" (Siamese identity) in the face of declining religious faith and the surrounding Malay-Muslim environment. The present study thus confirms that Wat Phikulthong and its TLDCS function both as an anchor and an active institution in sustaining identity.

Beyond its institutional and religious functions, the *wat* also operates as a lived, social space where everyday interactions reinforce community bonds and a shared sense of belonging. P08 noted, “The *wat* is not just a place to pray but also a place for socialization,” highlighting the *wat*’s multifaceted role as a communal space. Temple authority P04 echoed this view, describing the *wat* as a “multi-purpose venue” for various social, cultural, and religious activities. He further added that “before the *wat* even had its [proper] school, it began with *pho than* [historical abbots],” emphasizing the pivotal role past abbots played in establishing the *wat*’s long-standing function in sustaining identity and traditions.

Moreover, during fieldwork, I frequently observed Siamese community members actively engaging in social activities, from youths playing football in the compound to elderly individuals gathering at the *sala* (an open Thai-style pavilion) for casual conversations. These everyday interactions further demonstrate how the *wat* fosters solidarity and social cohesion. The multifaceted functions of the *wat* align with existing research, such as McLellan’s (1999), which posits that religious institutions play a vital role in preserving minority identities by providing communal spaces for social interaction and cultural reinforcement.

P01 further reinforced the *wat*’s centrality in Thai cultural education, stating, “We always start things from the *wat*, like having Thai education, religious classes, activities, and so on, so that the Siamese have some basic knowledge about our roots.” By anchoring Thai language, Buddhist education, and cultural practices within the *wat*, Terbak’s Siamese create a consistent

framework for younger generations to engage with their heritage. While these initiatives are largely community-driven, limited government support has helped strengthen the community's sense of inclusion within Malaysia's broader cultural and institutional landscape.

Religious practices such as *tak bat* are not only spiritual acts but visible expressions of Siamese identity. Terbak villager P07's description of participating in religious practices illustrates how these customs not only cultivate a sense of unity but also reinforce the Siamese religious belief within a predominantly Muslim community:

For us Siamese, *tak bat* is a regular activity during *bin ta bat* [the monks' traditional morning alms round]... When we do this, it makes us feel more Thai... like who we really are, in this place [outside Thailand].

Similarly, P08's participation in *tak bat* during her trips home to Tumpat during university semester breaks further emphasizes the role these practices play in fostering cultural continuity. Through these shared rituals, community members expressed both religious devotion and a clear commitment to their ethnoreligious identity.

Thai festivals, such as Songkran and Loy Krathong, further serve as vibrant expressions of Siamese ethnic identity in the public sphere. Songkran, for instance, has been gazetted by the Kelantan government as a holiday for the Siamese, representing symbolic recognition that stands out within an environment where minority cultural expressions are seldom given formal

visibility. It also highlights the negotiation between minority visibility and dominant cultural norms. P03 noted that this recognition is a point of pride for community leaders, as it underscores the importance of preserving and celebrating their distinct traditions within a broader religious and cultural landscape.

Despite the symbolic recognition and multicultural participation, the celebration of Songkran also underscores the challenges of expressing minority cultural practices in a predominantly Muslim environment. While the festival is primarily cultural, its embedded religious elements, such as *tham bun* (merit-making) and *song nam phra* (the ceremonial pouring of water over monks' hands), introduce layers of complexity in how it is perceived and received. These subtleties become especially significant in a context where religious sensitivities shape interethnic interaction and community engagement. The noticeable absence of Malays, therefore, reflects the ongoing caution and boundaries surrounding the visibility of minority cultures.

This delicate balance is vividly illustrated in Figure 4.9, which captures Wat Phikulthong bustling with locals and visitors of various ethnic backgrounds, including Chinese, Indians, and Thais from across the border, during the Songkran celebration on 6 April 2023. The image highlights the festival's broader multicultural appeal, underscoring its potential to foster cross-cultural understanding and appreciation. Nevertheless, the absence of Malays in this vibrant gathering reflects deeper complexities. Casual conversations with villagers revealed that some Malays remain cautious about participating, reflecting broader sensitivities around religious and cultural boundaries.

Figure 4.9

Songkran Celebration at Wat Phikulthong



Note. Source: Author's fieldwork (2023).

This context reveals a deeper challenge: minority communities often struggle to communicate the cultural, rather than religious, significance of ethnoreligious celebrations like Songkran. Activities such as water dousing, festive gatherings, street festivals, and public performances, although largely social in nature, remain closely tied to religious traditions, making it difficult to fully separate them in the public imagination.

P03's pride in the official recognition of Siamese identity within a Malay-majority state, therefore, sits alongside a broader tension between achieving cultural visibility and fostering meaningful cross-community engagement. This

tension illustrates the delicate negotiation minority communities must make to maintain identity within a dominant cultural environment.

Ultimately, the practice of temporary monkhood among young Siamese men serves as a vital cultural rite, signifying maturity and social acceptance within the Siamese community. P04's explanation that young men must enter monkhood to be considered fully grown illustrates the cultural importance of this practice:

Like in Thailand, Siamese men here are encouraged to go through temporary monkhood. They will enter what is called the *bhikkhu* realm [the state of monkhood]... If one has reached 20 years old, he must become a monk. If not, he is not considered to be a "mature" individual, as in, not an adult yet.

While this practice is still strongly encouraged among most Siamese communities in Malaysia, just as it is in Thailand, it is more challenging in the Malaysian context due to the different social and religious dynamics. As P04 further explained, "When a man's family proposes marriage, the other family often asks, 'Has he been ordained yet?' If not, they would feel uneasy."

P08 shared that her younger brother, who was 19, had not yet undergone temporary monk ordination because he was still studying. However, it is common for young Siamese men to "*buad* [be ordained] after studying and before they go find a job." P09 provided a candid view of the generational decline in this practice. He admitted that despite being 23, he had not yet

undergone ordination, revealing that among his cohort, “not many, like only 3 or 4 among my peers around the same age as myself” had completed the ritual. While he affirmed his intention to eventually do so as “a form of filial piety,” his hesitation highlights the tension young Siamese men face between modern educational commitments and traditional religious expectations. Meanwhile, P11 added that many families believe ordination should precede marriage.

Kottak and Kozaitis (2012) emphasize that ethnic groups maintain their cultural identity and continuity through rituals, customs, and ceremonies, a notion reflected in the Siamese temporary monkhood tradition, which reinforces shared values and collective heritage. This practice not only marks a young man’s spiritual maturity and readiness for adult responsibilities but also reinforces a lifelong connection to Buddhist values, strengthening community identity and ensuring these cultural principles are preserved for future generations.

4.9.2 Subtheme 2b: Adaptive Integration of Ethnoreligious Practices for Coexistence

Building on their efforts to preserve cultural and religious heritage, the Siamese community actively engages in what I refer to as *adaptive integration*, a term I employ to capture the deliberate, context-sensitive negotiation between sustaining tradition and engaging with dominant societal structures within Kelantan’s asymmetrical power field, where Malay-Muslim norms hold significant influence. While conceptually informed by Berry’s (1997) integration strategy, this term emphasizes not only the integrative dimension but also the

community's capacity for flexible adaptation in response to local sociopolitical pressures emanating from this unequal power dynamic. In this sense, adaptive integration operates as a context-specific refinement of Berry's model, foregrounding negotiation under asymmetrical power rather than assuming a neutral acculturation environment.

This strategic adaptation is necessary as dominant state narratives often marginalize minority experiences, reflecting dynamics described by Said (1978) regarding power and representation. This stands in contrast to passive assimilation, referring to the gradual and often unintentional absorption of a minority group into the dominant society, ultimately leading to the erosion of distinct cultural identities over time (Teske & Nelson, 1974; Yu, 2015). Through adaptive integration, Terbak's Siamese demonstrate how minority communities can assert agency—albeit constrained, as Spivak (1988) might argue regarding subaltern voice—by blending religious autonomy with pragmatic adaptations for peaceful coexistence in the Kelantan context. This positions adaptive integration as a form of agency that is negotiated rather than freely chosen, shaped by the dominant sociopolitical environment.

One illustrative case is the appointment of Theravada abbots in the state, which involves a dual endorsement process, reflecting the unique integration of Theravada Buddhist monastic traditions within local governance structures. This arrangement, distinct from Thailand's centralized Buddhist administration, exemplifies a hybrid model of adaptation grounded in contextual negotiation between religious authority and state regulation. This system serves as a prime example of adaptive integration in practice, representing a sophisticated, long-

standing negotiation that secures “political and social legitimacy” (Mohamed Yusoff Ismail, 2010a, p. 326) for the Siamese within a Muslim-majority state by symbolically acknowledging the Sultan’s authority.

While this pragmatic accommodation reinforces the Sultan’s role as the “symbolic patron” and “protector” (*phutthasasanu pathampok*) of the local Buddhist religion, it simultaneously allows the Kelantan Sangha to operate with relative autonomy and maintain transnational religious ties with the Thai Sangha. In doing so, the community demonstrates a form of strategic positioning that ensures institutional survival and peaceful coexistence within an uneven power field, reinforcing its resilience and adaptive capacity.

In Thailand, abbots are appointed by the Sangha Supreme Council and receive ceremonial endorsement from the monarchy through *Samnak Phra Ratchawang* or the Bureau of the Royal Household. In contrast, the process begins differently in Malaysia, according to temple authority P04. The Kelantan Sangha Council selects the *wat* leaders and submits their names for initial approval to the Sangha Supreme Council in Bangkok. After receiving this approval, a ceremonial endorsement from the Thai monarchy, also through the Bureau, is sought.

P04 described the next step: “Once the positions have been determined, we report the appointments to the Kelantan royalty to seek their endorsement.” This additional step highlights the distinct role of local cultural and political frameworks in governing Buddhist communities, allowing the Kelantan Siamese to maintain their transnational religious ties while aligning with the local

political structure. This dual-endorsement practice resonates with Shamsul's (1996a, 1996b) two-social-reality framework, showing how the community's everyday-defined social reality negotiates and adapts identity in practice, even when dominant, authority-defined norms prevail.

Besides, the adaptation of event planning to accommodate sociopolitical and religious sensitivities, local contexts, and government initiatives demonstrates the Siamese community's strategic interaction with government entities. For example, when organizing a funding management seminar aimed at training monks from all the *wats* in Kelantan on proper fund management in line with government integrity policies, the Kelantan Siamese community adjusted the event to meet the needs of Malay-Muslim officers by relocating it from a *wat* to a neutral venue. P01 noted, "Being Muslims, the officers said they could not go into a *wat*. So, we have to follow their wish and do it at the Dewan Perpaduan (Unity Complex)."

Another observation linked to the above point on event planning is that the annual Songkran celebration at Wat Phikulthong has been uniquely adapted to fit the local cultural and social context. Despite sensitivities surrounding non-Islamic rituals, the local fire and rescue station, comprising mostly Muslim personnel, adopts a secular and inclusive stance by supporting the water festival, an act that may be viewed unfavorably by some within the Muslim community.

Every year, community leader P03 formally writes to the fire and rescue department, requesting a fire truck to participate in the celebration by spraying water during the festival, as the temple's own water resources are insufficient to

support the water-splashing activities of Songkran. Dispatching a fire truck in conjunction with the Thai water festival appears to be a practice unique to Kelantan, where the celebration retains a strong sense of cultural rootedness and community significance, contrasting with the more commercialized and entertainment-focused festivities commonly seen in many parts of Thailand.

P03 has worked diligently to maintain a good relationship with the department, fostering mutual respect, understanding, and cooperation. This relationship has been instrumental in ensuring the department's continued support for the event, despite potential religious or public sensitivities. However, during the same Songkran celebration observed earlier, P03 was heard advising villagers not to post photos of the fire truck on social media to avoid potential public backlash, particularly as Songkran often coincides with the hottest season of the year, a time when certain areas in the state may experience water shortages. By carefully navigating these dynamics and sociopolitical boundaries, P03 ensures that the celebration remains a harmonious cultural tradition, fostering unity and sustaining cultural visibility while mitigating the risk of controversy.

Building on these efforts to maintain harmony, the Siamese communities and temple authorities in Tumpat have further implemented thoughtful adjustments to Songkran celebrations, particularly concerning festival concerts, to harmonize with the sociopolitical context shaped by the predominantly Malay-Muslim population and their Islamic beliefs. Recognizing local concerns that their festivities might be perceived as religious events conflicting with Islamic values, these adjustments are carefully planned.

For instance, P05 revealed that *wats* in Kelantan no longer hold large-scale events and confine their festivities strictly within the *wat* compounds. Furthermore, they ensure that signage is clearly displayed, clarifying that the celebrations are intended exclusively for non-Muslims. P05 also noted that a previous effort to organize a large-scale Songkran event in an area near Lotus's Kota Bharu, a major hypermarket chain, encountered resistance from local authorities, citing cultural sensitivities, necessitating further adjustments to align with Kelantan's social and religious norms.

Such cautious adjustments reflect broader trends not only in PAS-led states like Kelantan and Terengganu, where cultural and religious expressions are closely regulated to align with Islamic principles, but also in other regions influenced by PAS. These trends include cases where activities deemed to conflict with PAS's interpretation of Islam are restricted, such as a Loy Krathong concert organizer receiving a heavy fine (Bernama, 2023), opposition to cultural festival celebrations (Aida, 2023), enforcement of religious-based dress codes (Fong, 2023), and broader reshaping of social norms in line with conservative Islamic practices (Radya & Bedi, 2022).

The U.S. Embassy in Malaysia (2023) notes that such measures impact the cultural and religious expressions of minority communities, highlighting the ongoing need for cultural accommodation in regions like Kelantan. Nevertheless, the community's response illustrates a nuanced effort to maintain its traditions within limits defined by the majority's cultural expectations, in the interest of peaceful coexistence, demonstrating that cultural continuity can be achieved through negotiated integration rather than confrontation.

Beyond festivals and public events, the community also adapts individual religious practices to local socioeconomic realities, such as adjustments to the duration of monkhood among the Siamese. Traditional monkhood in Thailand is often a long-term commitment. Even most temporary monkhood programs are structured around a three-month duration, aligned with *khao phansa*, which marks the beginning of a monastic retreat that monks observe during the rainy season, typically starting in July. However, in Malaysia, the shorter duration of monkhood is not a systemic change but rather a personal preference for some individuals. As P15, a food vendor in Terbak Village, observed, “Sometimes, young people here do not even observe it for three months. Instead, they only commit to a week.”

This adjustment addresses the challenges faced by Malaysia’s smaller Thai-Theravada Buddhist and Siamese communities, along with differing family structures and societal expectations. As P04 explained, these factors make it more practical for some individuals in Malaysia to opt for shorter durations of monkhood. Prolonged monastic commitments are less feasible for many Siamese, who may need to further their studies or work to support their families. By reducing the traditional period, the Kelantan Siamese can then maintain their religious rites in a form that suits their circumstances, a process of cultural maintenance within a modified framework.

The Siamese’s adaptive, pragmatic, and respectful approach, illustrated through the scenarios above, demonstrates their strategic interaction with the stakeholders and their commitment to cultural integrity. By accommodating religious sensitivities, aligning with government policies in local event planning,

and adjusting religious practices to suit socioeconomic realities, the community's practices reflect Berry's (1997) integration strategy, one of the four key acculturation outcomes he identified. However, at this stage, my decision to return to Berry serves not only to reiterate the theoretical foundation but also to show, through the specific practices I observed in Terbak's Siamese community, how adaptive integration operates as a context-specific variant of the integration outcome.

Unlike Gordon's (1964) model of structural assimilation, which suggests that minority groups gradually lose their distinct identity through absorption into the dominant culture, Berry (1997) conceptualizes integration as a two-way process in which both minority and majority groups participate in mutual adaptations. The Siamese community of Terbak Village exemplifies this process by adopting sociopolitical adjustments that respect Malay-Muslim sensitivities while actively maintaining their Thai-Buddhist traditions. Their engagement with local authorities and negotiation over what aspects of their practices can or cannot undergo adaptations signify a form of integration, as the community exercises agency in ensuring its peaceful coexistence within the Kelantan sociopolitical structure.

Nevertheless, this process unfolds within a government framework of Malay dominance, as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, which operates on an integrationist model requiring minorities to align with state-defined cultural and political parameters (Cheah, 2002). While the government's framework allows for participation and coexistence, it simultaneously imposes top-down, authority-defined strategies that frequently constrain the scope of adaptations, at

times reflecting an assimilative tendency despite the community's efforts to maintain its religious and cultural distinctiveness within Malaysia's multicultural framework. This tension highlights why adaptive integration should be viewed as a negotiated integration under constraint, rather than as an idealized, symmetrical process.

With integration being a specific form of acculturation (Berry, 1997), the Siamese in this study exemplify selective adaptation to sociopolitical norms while preserving their ethnoreligious identity, rather than undergoing full absorption as described by Gordon (1964). These strategic modifications of events and rituals align with local socioreligious norms without compromising core religious practices, reaffirming that their adjustments reflect negotiated acculturation rather than assimilation.

This approach also illustrates a form of negotiated acculturation that not only sustains their transnational religious and cultural ties but also reinforces their ability to function within the Malaysian sociopolitical landscape without undergoing ethnic erosion. By engaging in what I call adaptive integration, the Siamese community demonstrates how minority groups can actively preserve their traditions while navigating the constraints and opportunities within Kelantan's sociopolitical landscape, which operates within Malaysia's broader multicultural setting. Collectively, these examples demonstrate how adaptive integration functions as a context-sensitive refinement of Berry's integration model, consolidating empirical observations into a coherent framework.

4.10 Theme 3: Balancing Social Integration amid Structural Challenges within a Dominant Malay-Muslim Framework

This third theme explores the Siamese community's intercommunity relations to understand the balance between the desire to preserve their distinct cultural and religious identity (e.g., through language, rituals, traditions) and the need to integrate into a predominantly Malay-Muslim environment. Their deciding when and how to “fit in” or “stand out” is part of constructing a fluid, situational identity. Additionally, they demonstrate resilience and strategic agency in economic participation by navigating structural challenges that support the preservation of their cultural distinctiveness. By selectively engaging with government support and creatively utilizing available livelihood opportunities, they assert their identity while constructively adapting to the dominant sociopolitical environment.

4.10.1 Subtheme 3a: Preserving Siamese Identity through Interethnic Relations and Selective Integration

This community exemplifies a nuanced approach to negotiating its identity within Kelantan. Their interactions with the Malay majority reflect a careful balance between pragmatic engagement and selective boundary maintenance, an expression of adaptive integration in action: participation is context-sensitive and strategically adjusted to the social setting, enabling the community to navigate daily interactions without compromising core Siamese cultural and religious practices. While interethnic relations are characterized by mutual respect and accommodation, the community deliberately preserves certain

spaces for intra-ethnic socialization, highlighting the ongoing importance of cultural and linguistic affinity in everyday life.

This selective approach to social engagement is particularly evident in personal relationships, as P07 recalled when reflecting on his experiences with Malay friends from his secondary school years:

After we left school, we now have our own lives and jobs, so we do not really keep in touch anymore. Except when we say “hi” over the phone or I happen to bump into them at the market. That is about it. I mostly hang out with my Siamese friends.

P11 also mentioned having Malay school friends in primary and secondary schools, but beyond that, interactions were largely limited, demonstrating a consistent pattern of restricted interethnic engagement.

This limited interethnic contact contrasts with the strong sense of camaraderie and comfort observed within the Siamese community. Intra-ethnic closeness is fostered in communal spaces like Wat Phikulthong. Figure 4.10 illustrates Siamese children playing football in the temple compound, highlighting how community bonds are established from a young age and reinforce shared identity and cultural familiarity. P09 and P11 half-jokingly noted that they could better enjoy non-halal food with their fellow Siamese friends, reflecting both a shared cultural practice and the practical limitation posed by the Muslim-majority context in Kelantan, where certain foods such as pork are religiously prohibited for their Malay peers. This intra-ethnic practice

reinforces cultural familiarity and comfort, which are less easily found in interethnic settings.

Figure 4.10

Siamese Children Playing Football in the Temple Compound



Note. Source: Author's fieldwork (2023).

This tendency to lean towards ingroup connections among the Siamese reflects the importance of shared cultural markers such as religion, language, and traditions. Such a preference not only preserves their cultural heritage but also reinforces ethnic boundaries, aligning with Barth's (1969) argument that ethnic groups actively maintain distinctions to preserve their identity within a multicultural landscape. Complementing this perspective, Tajfel and Turner's (1979, 1986) SIT suggests that individuals derive a sense of self-esteem and

belonging from their group affiliations, further motivating the Siamese to maintain strong internal networks while navigating interethnic interactions. Collectively, these frameworks help explain why P07, P09, and P11 prioritize intra-ethnic socialization while their interactions with Malay counterparts remain context-specific and largely functional.

While social interactions remain largely bounded within the Siamese community, interethnic engagement occurs in more structured, pragmatic contexts, such as economic exchanges. P12 provides insight into this dimension, describing the nature of her and her friends' interactions with their Malay counterparts as primarily transactional: "Our interactions are mostly limited to business matters. We always buy vegetables or other things from them [our Malay friends]. I mostly mingle with my Siamese friends." This pattern is consistent with Golomb's (1978) observation of transactional cooperation, demonstrating mutual adaptation while maintaining distinct cultural identities.

In Terbak Village, these boundaries are handled pragmatically, allowing its Siamese to engage in business and economic activities with their Malay neighbors without compromising their cultural distinctiveness. Rather than simply reflecting social preferences, this selective engagement aligns with Barth's (1969) argument that ethnic boundaries are not merely passively maintained but are actively shaped and negotiated in the context. In this case, economic exchanges provide a structured yet limited space for interaction, ensuring that while interethnic cooperation is sustained, it does not necessarily lead to deeper social integration. This reinforces the idea that ethnic boundary maintenance is a dynamic process, where interaction occurs in ways that

preserve cultural distinctiveness while fulfilling practical needs within a shared societal framework.

Nevertheless, despite certain boundaries in social interactions, the Siamese from Terbak Village generally maintain harmonious relations with their Malay friends, particularly among older generations. This pattern is consistent with broader observations in Kelantan, where minority communities are recognized for their ability to coexist and strategically engage with the local Malays and the Kelantanese way of life (Golomb, 1978; Mohamed Yusoff, 1987; Pue et al., 2019; Pue & Shamsul, 2011; Rajo, 2018; Tan et al., 2017).

While Zuriati and Nur Azuki (2014) found that interactions between Buddhists and Muslims in Kampung Tendong were generally positive and marked by visible cultural assimilation, the Terbak case shows that harmonious interethnic relations can coexist with deliberate intra-ethnic boundaries. This illustrates that positive relations do not necessarily require broad assimilation. This practical coexistence is illustrated in the example of P03, a community leader, who emphasized this point:

We have been here peacefully since our ancestors' time. No racial conflicts or quarrels have happened. The different races that reside in Kelantan—Malays, Chinese, Indians, and Siamese—we coexist like brothers and sisters. I have never heard of any racial clashes in Kelantan. As far as I know, this has never happened in the history of Kelantan. I have been here for 56 years.

This sentiment demonstrates a form of adaptive integration, where the Siamese engage with the majority culture while maintaining their distinct identity. P03's personal interactions, such as assisting a Malay couple at his workshop, show that these everyday exchanges are contextually adjusted to respect cultural norms and maintain social harmony, reflecting adaptive positioning rather than uncritical assimilation.

In contrast to prior studies that focused on interethnic relations, the Terbak case highlights selective, intra-ethnic social preferences, particularly among the younger generation, revealing a more bounded but functional pattern of coexistence. This pattern aligns more closely with Ab. Aziz's (1998) observation that the Siamese generally view relations as amicable while still expressing specific dislikes for behaviors they perceive as insulting or coercive. The preference for ingroup socialization, therefore, emerges as a deliberate strategy to maintain cultural comfort and avoid potential sources of tension in interethnic encounters, reinforcing the "thin" but persistent boundaries described by Barth (1969).

The role of language is particularly significant in the Siamese community's identity negotiation. Proficiency in the local Malay dialect enables the Siamese to navigate interethnic interactions fluidly. As influential association leader P01 explained when I asked why the Siamese appeared better integrated into the dominant culture than other minorities in the country, he said, "I think it is partly because the Siamese can speak Kelantan Malay, just like the locals. This makes the Malays more likely to accept us as part of their community."

This linguistic adaptability is consistent with Giles and Johnson's (1987) EIT discussed earlier, which posits that language acts as a bridge, fostering intergroup communication while reinforcing cultural belonging. Beyond mere communication, EIT suggests that linguistic proficiency can influence social perceptions, shaping the extent to which minority groups are seen as insiders or outsiders within a dominant society. In this context, the Siamese community's command of Kelantan Malay not only facilitates smoother interactions but also subtly negotiates their position within the local social hierarchy, affecting how they are perceived and accepted by their Malay counterparts.

P08, a third-year university student studying in the northernmost Malaysian state of Perlis, also reflected on this dynamic:

At university, I have a gang of [Malay] friends. Overall, I am closer to the Malays, especially those from Kelantan. Although I am a Siamese and they are Malays, we feel like home.

Her experience illustrates how shared linguistic practices facilitate a sense of belonging, even amid cultural differences. P08's experience illustrates a broader pattern in which linguistic and regional commonalities can sometimes override ethnic boundaries, forming a functional "in-group," especially when interacting outside Kelantan.

Nevertheless, the preference for intra-ethnic socialization, as observed, remains a defining characteristic of the Siamese community in Terbak Village. Even so, opting for inter-ethnic socialization with their Malay counterparts poses

no issue, as they can easily navigate these interactions. This ease is, in part, due to their deep understanding of the Malay way of life, fostered by living side by side, and their proficiency in the majority's language.

4.10.2 Subtheme 3b: Negotiating Ethnic Marginalization and Economic Survival

The socioeconomic identity of the Siamese community in Terbak Village is shaped by their ability to adapt and assert their Siamese identity amid structural challenges and a certain degree of marginalization, while their economic survival strategies reflect resilience and adaptability in securing livelihoods. My fieldwork provided valuable insights into how these challenges manifest, revealing a complex interplay of economic constraints, limited access to opportunities, and barriers to upward mobility. These structural inequalities align with broader patterns of minority marginalization within Malaysia's socioeconomic landscape, but the Siamese of Terbak respond through localized strategies that reflect both resistance and accommodation.

Although recognized as Bumiputera, the Siamese community negotiates this identity within a system that privileges dominant cultural norms, requiring constant adjustment to maintain visibility and viability. Their experience shows the persistent gaps between policy intent and lived realities, revealing how systemic barriers to economic participation and restricted access to state resources compound their struggles for financial security. This experience resonates with postcolonial critiques, which highlight how state structures, despite formal guarantees of citizenship, often perpetuate ethnic hierarchies and

marginalize subaltern groups (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988). In practice, these structural constraints manifest in several ways: the community's limited representation in decision-making processes restricts their ability to influence policies affecting economic opportunities, while bureaucratic hurdles in obtaining official documentation further hinder access to essential services such as education, employment, and healthcare (SUHAKAM, 2010).

Yet, this sense of marginalization is not new; Golomb (1978) describes the Siamese as sharing an “underprivileged economic status” (p. 52) with their Malay neighbors, which ironically fostered sympathies and reduced economic competition. The community's resilience, therefore, has historically depended on its ability to navigate this marginality creatively. Golomb (1978) also notes how the Siamese survived by positioning themselves as “brokers of morality” (p. 94), filling a unique socioeconomic niche (e.g., as magic specialists, Manora performers, and boar hunters) that served the needs of both Malay and Chinese clients. These historical patterns provide a backdrop against which contemporary economic strategies, particularly among older community members, can be understood.

My fieldwork in Terbak Village reflected this historical continuity, particularly among older community members. Many continue to concentrate in lower-wage sectors such as farming, retail, and construction. While these occupations differ from the historical niches described by Golomb, they similarly enable the older generation to sustain livelihoods, maintain social cohesion, and employ adaptive strategies such as multilingual communication and temple networks. Interviews with P07 and P10, for instance, highlighted the

persistence of agriculture as both a livelihood and a cultural practice, echoing the long-standing continuity among the Siamese noted by Golomb (1978) and Kuroda (2005, 2019).

However, this enduring pattern also reveals intergenerational differences in economic challenges. While older members sustain themselves through traditional livelihoods that provide modest stability yet limited mobility, younger Siamese with tertiary education face structural barriers to securing stable work. As P03 lamented, “[There are] not many opportunities for us right now. There are many [Siamese] young people with tertiary education who do not have a job.” These generational struggles illustrate how the Siamese negotiate their economic and cultural identity, balancing the pursuit of modern aspirations with the persistence of traditional livelihoods amid structural constraints.

Building on these historical and generational patterns, contemporary Siamese continue to draw on distinct identity markers, especially multilingualism (see Subchapter 4.8.3), temple networks, and community enterprises, to sustain economic participation within structural constraints. These strategies demonstrate that adaptive integration extends beyond cultural and religious spheres, enabling the community to navigate structural barriers while preserving its cultural identity.

These efforts to sustain livelihoods and assert identity are further constrained by structural inequities that extend into state institutions, particularly in access to government jobs, scholarships, and development projects, where preference is often given to the Malay majority. Compounding this exclusion,

official racial classifications often categorize the Siamese under “*lain-lain* (others)” instead of recognizing them as a distinct Bumiputera group. Despite being nominally recognized as Bumiputera, the Siamese often find that this status offers limited substantive benefits, forcing them into adaptive identity performances. This administrative ambiguity functions as a subtle form of erasure within a postcolonial bureaucratic system that privileges dominant categories (cf. Said, 1978).

As P03 put it, “It is nothing more than a name... on application forms, there is no ‘Siamese Bumiputera,’ only ‘Other Bumiputera’.” He then highlighted the superficial nature of this status with the Malay expression “*Indah khabar dari rupa,*” suggesting that things sound better than they are in reality.

P08 elaborated on this disparity, noting that the Buddhist Bumiputera receive fewer privileges in certain respects: “Although they [the government] use the word ‘Bumiputera’ to refer to us, it is more for the Malays. For the SPA [government jobs], it is harder for the Siamese to get in.” This perception is echoed by P07, who remarked, “In Kelantan, many opportunities go to the Malays first. For us, there is a quota.” This sentiment also resonates with P09, who agreed that “the privileges they [the Malay-Muslims] get are more than ours.”

P11 shared that gaining admission into Institut Pendidikan Guru (IPG), also known as the Institute of Teacher Education Malaysia, is particularly challenging for non-Malay students. Referring to their *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia*, or the Malaysian Certificate of Education, P11 stated: “If one would like to enter

IPG, it is hard for us to get in. If a Malay gets above 5As, or even below 5As, they can easily get it. For us, we need 7As.” This sentiment suggests not only perceived inequality but the emotional toll of feeling that one’s ethnic identity requires over-performance to be recognized, reinforcing the adaptive strategies the Siamese employ to succeed.

Together, these experiences highlight the gap between nominal inclusion and practical exclusion, emphasizing the structural challenges the Siamese face in accessing education, employment, and other socioeconomic opportunities. They reflect Barth’s (1969) concept of ethnic boundaries, which argues that institutionalized systems symbolically include but practically exclude certain groups. This theory is particularly relevant to how the Siamese tactically assert their ethnic identity while adapting to institutional expectations. Their recognition as Bumiputera illustrates this dichotomy: included in name, yet largely excluded from the benefits typically afforded to recognized groups.

This cultural marginalization limits access to resources and constrains the space within which the Siamese can express and maintain their cultural identity. For instance, the lack of formal registration for the *wats* hampers their eligibility for government support. P01 explained, “The *wat* and *wat* school are not registered entities. So, you cannot apply for anything from the government, such as grants.”

This lack of institutional support, despite their historical presence and Bumiputera status, reflects the uneven power field where minority needs are often overlooked within state frameworks geared towards the majority, a

common challenge in postcolonial nation-building contexts, as noted by Cheah (2002), Lee and Tan (2000), and Shamsul (1996a). This structural marginalization is exemplified by the precarious remuneration for volunteer teachers at the TLDCS, as P05 explained:

The amount one [a volunteer teacher] gets paid is based on his or her years of experience... During [former Prime Minister] Najib Razak's time, if I am not mistaken, each *wat* received RM200,000. So, the remuneration for the volunteer teachers came from this grant. Now we do not receive it anymore.

She elaborated that the allocation previously provided by Najib was only for five years. After Najib and the Barisan Nasional coalition he led were defeated in the 2018 general elections, things became more challenging during the subsequent administration of Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, under the new Pakatan Harapan coalition. Attempts were made to secure an allocation by writing to the relevant ministry, but these efforts were unsuccessful.

To address this, the community plans to establish the Kelantan Volunteer Teachers Association to collectively apply for government grants for all *wat* schools in Kelantan. As P05 noted, "We intend to set up and register this association so that we can apply for government grants for all the *wat* schools in Kelantan through it."

As previously discussed, the difficulty in obtaining recognition and support is reflected in the broader national landscape, both in PAS-governed

states such as Kelantan and Terengganu, and in other parts of Peninsular Malaysia. The continued tightening of regulations, exemplified by penalties against cultural event organizers and increased enforcement of religious guidelines, highlighted the sustained trend toward cultural and institutional marginalization amid a prevailing national narrative emphasizing Malay-Islamic identity. These actions reflect a systematic effort to impose ideological boundaries, effectively excluding cultural practices that diverge from prescribed Islamic norms.

These socioeconomic realities critically test the limits of the community's adaptive integration strategy. While this strategy successfully facilitates coexistence in cultural and religious spheres (as observed in Subchapter 4.9.2), its application in the economic domain faces rigid structural constraints. Unlike the fluid negotiation of social boundaries, the exclusionary policies surrounding Bumiputera privileges and government support create a rigid barrier that limits the community's ability to integrate into the national economic framework fully.

Consequently, the community's AIP shifts in response. When institutional inequities block the pathway to adaptive integration, the community shifts its focus toward its internal mechanisms of cultural resilience. By turning to self-reliance, leveraging internal community networks, and seeking alternative funding sources (such as Chinese philanthropy), the Siamese effectively manage the risks of marginalization. This dynamic illustrates that AIP is not merely a strategy for integration but a responsive mechanism that activates internal resilience when external structural support is absent. In this context,

maintaining distinctiveness becomes a necessary survival strategy rather than a choice of separation.

Furthermore, the persistent lack of active support from the dominant group highlights that adaptive integration is necessarily a one-sided effort in the economic sphere. Without inclusive policies to reciprocate the community's efforts, the Siamese remain in a state of negotiated resilience, participating in the economy where permitted, but retreating to communal self-sufficiency where excluded.

Nevertheless, amid these systemic challenges, the Siamese community does not remain passive. Instead, it has demonstrated remarkable resilience, navigating a sociopolitical landscape shaped by Malay-Islam hegemony (e.g., in Chin, 2020; Ostwald & Muhamad, 2023). Through communal organization, religious persistence, and strategic engagement, these acts of resilience reflect a continuous negotiation of identity within a system that pressures assimilation but does not guarantee inclusion.

Central to these efforts were leaders such as Aknan Ehtook, along with the chairman and deputy chairman of PSKn and Terbak's village head, who played instrumental roles in advocating for the rights of the Siamese and advising on community initiatives. Aknan, who made history as Malaysia's first Siamese senator (MalaysiaGazette, 2020), served two full terms in the upper house of the Parliament of Malaysia before completing his tenure in December 2023.

Based on observations of his public engagements, including Facebook posts and community activities, as well as accounts from villagers I spoke to, he remained actively involved in addressing issues affecting the Siamese community, working to enhance their representation and secure better opportunities. Community initiatives, including associations and grant applications, further exemplify their proactive engagement with structural inequities.

The above efforts demonstrate Barth's (1969) concept of boundary maintenance in practice. The Siamese experience in Terbak Village exemplifies this process: their efforts to form associations, advocate through political representation, and seek institutional support reflect a dynamic negotiation of ethnic boundaries within an uneven power field. Rather than passively accepting exclusionary policies, they actively seek space within the system.

This boundary negotiation does not equate to full integration but reflects an adaptive response to institutional constraints on socioeconomic mobility. The Siamese community's strategic participation in economic and political advocacy demonstrates how they assert their ethnic distinctiveness while engaging with state mechanisms to secure their rights. This approach challenges the notion of passive assimilation, highlighting the agency of ethnic minorities in defining their engagement within the larger sociopolitical order. These initiatives demonstrate both the community's resilience and the limits of institutional inclusion, where formal Bumiputera recognition does not guarantee equitable access to socioeconomic opportunities.

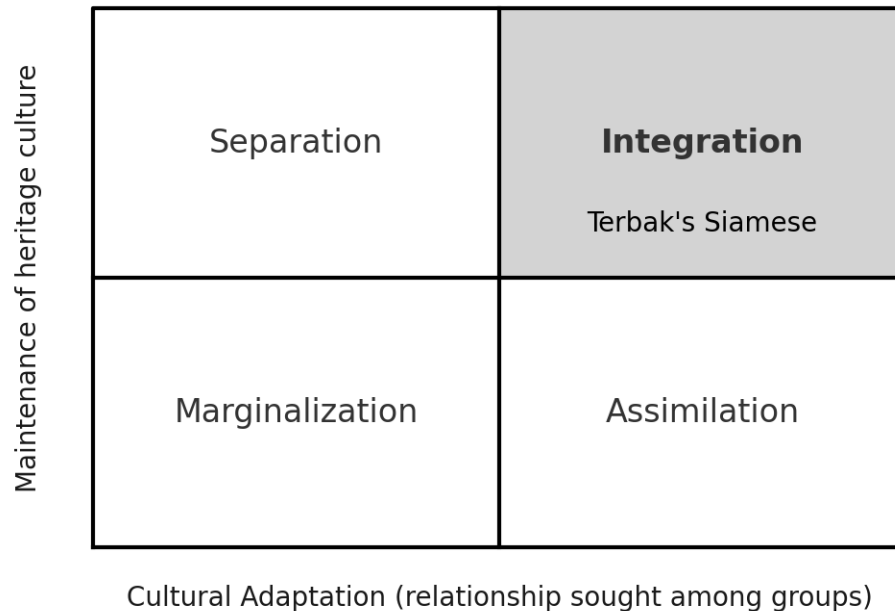
4.11 Chapter Conclusion

The Siamese in Terbak Village navigate their identity amid assimilative pressures in a dominant Malay-Muslim setting through a dynamic interplay of cultural resilience and what I conceptualize as adaptive integration. While informed by Berry's (1997) integration strategy, the term adaptive integration is introduced here to highlight the community's context-specific, negotiated adaptability within Kelantan's asymmetrical sociopolitical landscape. Grounded in broader theoretical perspectives, including Barth's (1969) ethnic boundary maintenance framework and Tajfel and Turner's (1979, 1986) social identity theory, adaptive integration enables the Siamese to negotiate boundaries while engaging with the dominant society, preserving a distinct Thai-Buddhist identity through language, religion, and cultural practice. This strategy, thus, aligns with acculturation rather than assimilation (cf. Gordon, 1964).

To put things into perspective, this study posits that Kelantan, within the broader Malaysian context, largely follows a national integration approach that officially promotes unity while recognizing cultural diversity. However, in practice, this approach often incorporates subtle and, at times, overt assimilative tendencies, particularly through state-led Islamization and Malay-centric policies, exerting pressures on minority groups. Within this broader framework, the Siamese in Terbak operationalize adaptive integration to achieve an outcome similar to Berry's integration strategy, actively engaging with Malaysian society while preserving their distinct cultural and religious identity. Figure 4.11 encapsulates this approach.

Figure 4.11

Berry's (1997) Acculturation Model Highlighting Siamese Integration in Terbak



Note. Source: Adapted from Berry (1997).

While fostering cultural continuity and social cohesion, assimilative pressures in Kelantan necessitate identity negotiation amid Islamization and the consolidation of national identity. Heritage sustenance efforts center around Wat Phikulthong, a pivotal institution for communal, religious, and educational activities, along with the PSKn, which serves as a protective buffer against assimilative pressures. At the same time, the Siamese community skillfully navigates linguistic and cultural adaptations, balancing oral traditions with Thai literacy while maintaining fluent Malay for engagement with the majority.

This capacity for adaptive integration is evident in Thai-Malay bilingualism for public engagement, while cultural distinctiveness is maintained

through Chehe over standard Thai, strategic code-switching, Thai transliteration, and names that balance Thai heritage with Malay societal acceptance. The integration of Chinese as a third linguistic force, especially among young Siamese, reflects economic pragmatism and adaptive multilingualism, signaling a situational hybrid identity that shifts based on social, economic, and political contexts, reinforcing Barth's (1969) concept of ethnic boundary negotiation.

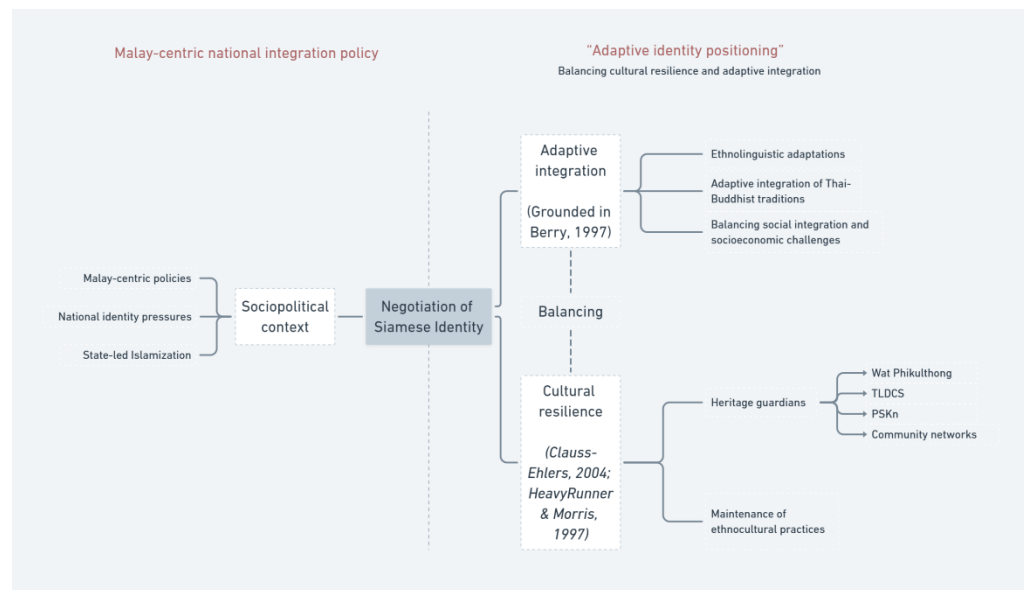
Another facet of their adaptive integration is the preservation and adaptation of Thai-Buddhist traditions within a Malay-Muslim majority environment. Modifying religious practices and celebrations to align with local norms while maintaining cross-border ties with Thailand ensures continuity and coexistence. Their integration of government initiatives into community events reflects a balanced approach, maintaining cultural preservation while actively participating in the broader sociopolitical framework.

Finally, they balance social integration and economic survival by maintaining interethnic relations while preserving their distinct Siamese identity, ensuring coexistence within Kelantan society. Through selective social engagement, economic participation, political advocacy, and resilience against institutional marginalization, they navigate sociopolitical constraints and structural inequalities, asserting their place within Malaysia's broader landscape. Collectively, these strategies form the basis of the Adaptive Identity Positioning Framework, demonstrating how the community moves beyond passive integration to actively position itself for survival and continuity.

Figure 4.12 illustrates the Adaptive Identity Positioning Framework, explaining how Terbak's Siamese community navigates Kelantan's Malay-centric and Islamized sociopolitical context. It represents a collective, strategic process in which a minority group selectively deploys aspects of its identity, balancing adaptive integration (the outward), such as incorporating Thai-Buddhist traditions within broader Kelantan society, with the preservation of Buddhist and Thai cultural practices (the inward) to maintain distinctiveness, social cohesion, and legitimacy within a shifting and asymmetrical power field.

Figure 4.12

Adaptive Identity Positioning Framework Illustrating Cultural Resilience and Adaptive Integration in the Siamese Community of Terbak



Note. Developed for this study. A larger, high-resolution version of this figure is available in Appendix VII.

In practice, AIP functions as an audience-dependent process of identity management, where communal “positioning” is deliberately adjusted according to institutional or social contexts (e.g., state, broader society, or other minority groups). The findings in this chapter support the framework. The community’s ethnolinguistic adaptation (Theme 1), adaptive integration of Thai-Buddhist traditions (Theme 2), and careful balancing of social and economic life (Theme 3) are interconnected facets of the AIP strategy. Built upon the twin mechanisms of cultural resilience as anchor and adaptive integration as engagement, this orientation explains how the Siamese maintain distinctiveness amid Malay-Muslim dominance while sustaining both belonging and difference within the Malaysian nation-state. It reflects a broader *strategic orientation* in which the community emphasizes Siamness or adapts situationally in response to shifting sociocultural expectations and power structures, with adaptive integration and AIP operating together to sustain cultural continuity and agency.

Adding a postcolonial lens, AIP operates within asymmetrical power relations, where Malay-Islamic hegemony defines normative frameworks. Within this context, it functions as a form of subaltern agency, enabling quiet, pragmatic negotiation and selective adaptation that allows the community to resist hegemonic pressures while remaining within socially permissible limits. While this chapter has focused on these dynamics in the context of ethnolinguistic and religious adaptations and on balancing social integration with socioeconomic challenges, the following chapters will build upon this foundation by examining how such positioning evolves in response to intergenerational change, cultural adaptation, and broader sociocultural

influences (Chapter 5) and how it shapes the community's understanding of national identity and belonging within Malaysia's multicultural framework (Chapter 6). This progression highlights the layered and ongoing nature of identity negotiation in a culturally majoritarian context.

CHAPTER 5

IDENTITY RESILIENCE AND SHIFTS AMONG TERBAK'S SIAMESE COMMUNITY

5.1 Introduction

Following the analysis of identity negotiation strategies in the previous chapter, this chapter examines the extent of identity shift among the Siamese community in Terbak Village, Tumpat, Kelantan. While Chapter 4 examined the mechanisms of negotiation (the “how”), this chapter evaluates the outcomes (the “what”), specifically, the degree to which the community’s identity has transformed or endured over time. This analysis corresponds to RQ2 and builds upon the discussion in Subchapter 2.6 (*Modern Influences and Identity Shifts in Malaysian Minority Communities*). Rather than viewing the observed changes as ongoing negotiation tactics, this chapter treats them as realized shifts in the community’s sociocultural profile.

I investigate how external influences have shaped their identity, highlighting that while certain cultural adaptations and linguistic evolutions have occurred, the core Siamese identity, or Siamness, has largely remained intact. Through examining linguistic progressions from oral traditions to enhanced Thai literacy, the chapter reveals an expanded yet stable multilingual capacity that complements rather than undermines their ethnic identity. Additionally, the analysis explores adapted cultural practices, examining intergenerational differences, interactions with Malay and Chinese communities, and the selective

adoption of globalized elements. These themes and subthemes are summarized in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1

Themes and Subthemes of Identity Shift

Themes	Subthemes
1. Sustained Linguistic Identity with Some Evolution	1a. Reinforcing Siamese Identity through Literacy from Oral to Institutional Structures
	1b. Expansion from Bilingualism to Multilingualism without Identity Loss
2. Adapted Cultural Practices and Belonging	2a Shifting Social Networks and Intergenerational Differences in Interaction Patterns
	2b Chinese and Malay Cultural Influences Evident without Overwriting Siamese Identity
	2c Limited Adoption of Globalized Traits

Note. Source: Developed for this study.

While the discussion in this chapter is primarily grounded in the Siamese community's lived experiences and empirical patterns, the concluding subchapter (Subchapter 5.4) will reflect on these findings through broader conceptual lenses, particularly *identity consolidation* and *identity rearticulation*, to provide a deeper understanding of how identity is maintained and negotiated.

Overall, I argue that despite some subtle shifts, the community's cultural core and ethnic identity remain resilient and predominantly unaffected by external social and cultural influences.

5.2. Theme 1: Sustained Linguistic Identity with Some Evolution

The first central theme highlights how the Siamese community of Terbak Village has maintained its core linguistic identity despite noticeable evolutions in its language use. The shift has largely moved from predominantly oral traditions to a growing emphasis on Thai literacy, particularly among younger community members who attend formal educational programs and activities offered through the TLDCS. While older generations often remain proficient only in spoken Chehe due to limited educational opportunities, the younger generation's growing literacy in standard Thai represents linguistic progression without signifying a shift in ethnic identity. Furthermore, the community's linguistic practices have expanded from primarily Thai-Malay bilingualism to a more diverse multilingualism, including Malay, Chinese, and occasionally English. However, this broader linguistic repertoire is seen as situational and functional rather than indicative of any fundamental shift in their ethnic identity.

5.2.1 Subtheme 1a: Reinforcing Siamese Identity through Literacy from Oral to Institutional Structures

The progression from oral Thai fluency to structured, institutional literacy among the Siamese of Terbak Village reflects more than just educational advancement; it functions as a deliberate cultural strategy to preserve and

strengthen ethnic identity in a changing sociolinguistic landscape. While many senior community members remain orally proficient in Thai but face challenges in reading and writing, an observation discussed in Subchapter 4.8.2, the community's increasing participation in structured literacy programs signals a conscious, intergenerational commitment to safeguarding their cultural-linguistic identity. This marks both a departure from and an advancement of the adaptive strategies they have employed, such as relying on Thai transliteration to navigate their Thai illiteracy.

This shift is operationally reinforced by the school's leadership. P06 explained that the curriculum is designed to formalize the language, noting that they “teach grammar first” to ensure students acquire a structural understanding that oral transmission alone cannot provide. This focus on systematic instruction marks a pivotal evolution in the community's approach, laying the groundwork for long-term institutional support.

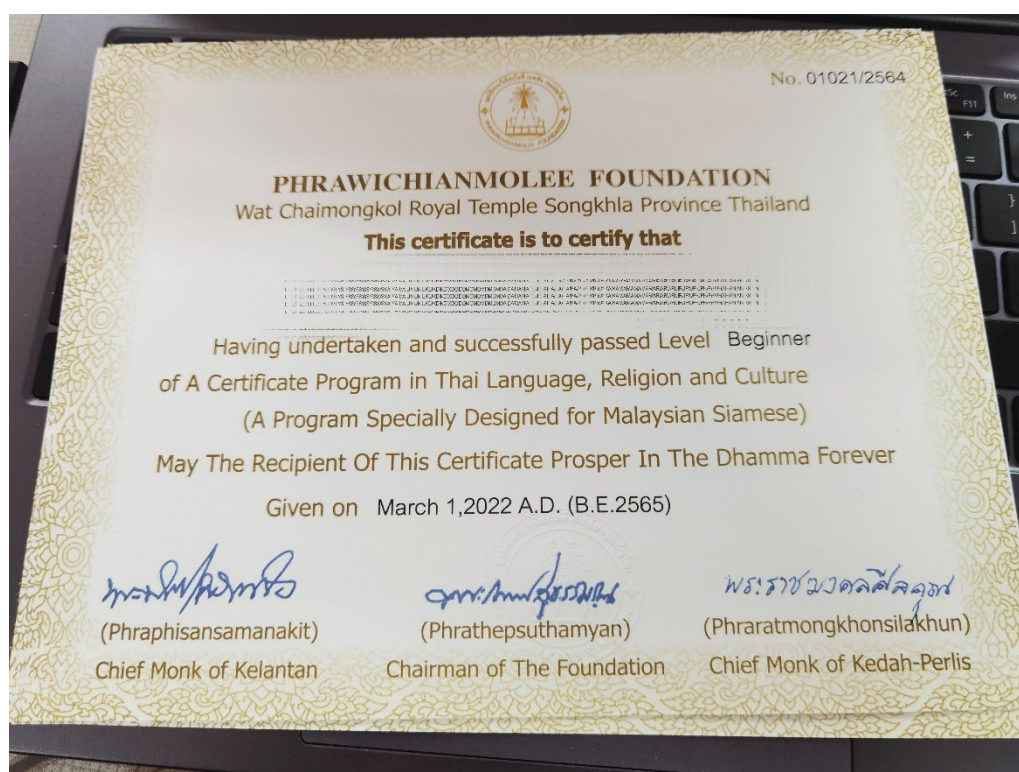
In the past two decades, a structured, tiered educational system and robust infrastructure embedded within Wat Phikulthong's TLDCS have facilitated a gradual improvement in literacy. P05 described the program as one that “guides students through progressively advanced stages, ultimately awarding certificates at the Basic, Intermediate, and Expert levels.” The entire curriculum spans six years, beginning with a foundational level called *po thriam* for those without basic skills, followed by Levels 1 to 3, each lasting two years.

P05 further explained that these certificates are awarded by the Phrawichianmolee Foundation of Thailand, an esteemed institution established

by Wat Chaimongkol in Songkhla province, southern Thailand, which also designs the core curriculum and administers examinations. This certification is both symbolic and practical, recognizing academic effort while honoring the longstanding religious and cultural connections between southern Thailand and Kelantan's Siamese communities. A sample of the certificate is shown in Figure 5.1.

Figure 5.1

Sample Certificate of Completion Awarded by the Phrawichianmolee Foundation to TLDCS Graduates



Note. Source: Author's fieldwork (2023).

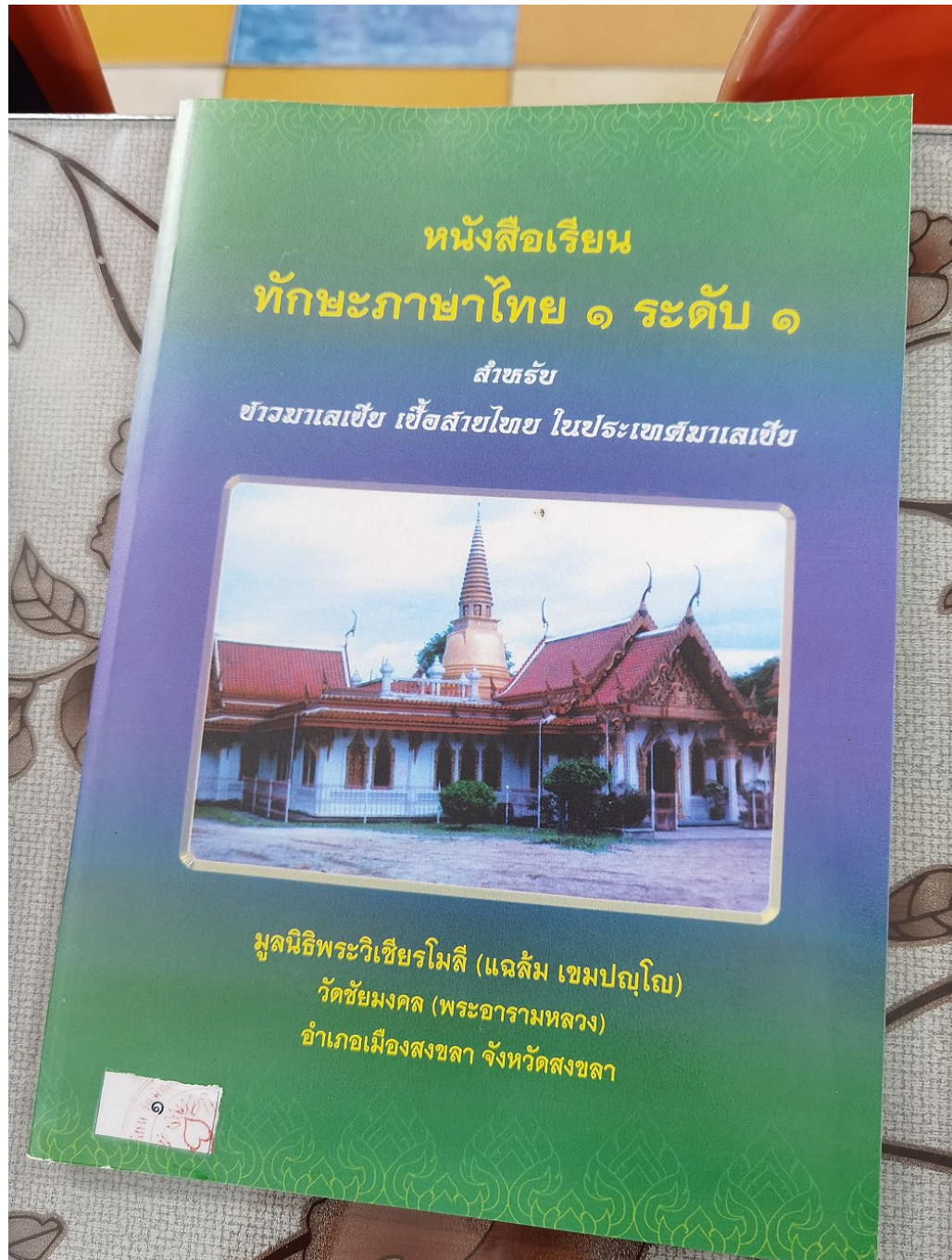
Beyond certification, the foundation provides comprehensive support to sustain literacy and reinforce ethnic identity. This includes designing

standardized textbooks for use in *wat* schools across Kelantan, Kedah, Perlis, and other regions (see Figure 5.2), teacher development through annual workshops, and educational trips to historical sites and the Thai Ministry of Education to strengthen cultural and linguistic roots. These activities are carried out today as a gesture of gratitude to the monks from Kelantan who historically contributed to the development of Wat Chaimongkol. Their past support and dedication are recognized as part of the long-standing cultural and spiritual ties between the regions.

According to P05, students who complete the highest level (Level 3) can use their results to apply for credit transfer for the Thai Language 11001 course under Thailand's Non-Formal and Informal Education Center. The Center, operating under Thailand's Ministry of Education, plays a key role in providing lifelong learning opportunities and formal recognition of educational achievements for individuals who are out of school, supporting national efforts toward inclusive education and cultural preservation. Those who complete the credit transfer process are awarded an official certificate from the Center (Figure 5.3), a qualification that carries higher authority and recognition, facilitating future educational and professional opportunities, especially in Thailand.

Figure 5.2

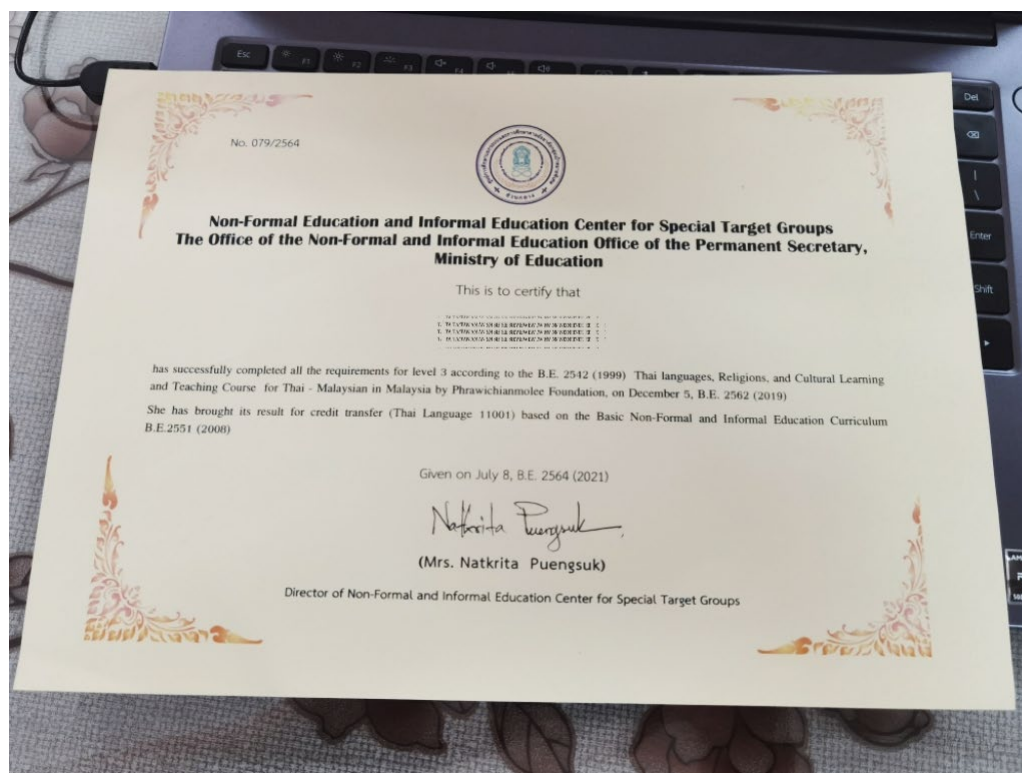
Textbook on Thai Language Skills 1, Level 1, for Learners of “Thai Ethnicity in Malaysia”



Note. Source: Author's fieldwork (2023).

Figure 5.3

Sample Certificate Issued by Thailand's Non-Formal and Informal Education Center



Note. Source: Author's fieldwork (2023).

This well-orchestrated educational pathway reflects a pedagogically sound approach, systematically moving the Siamese community in Terbak Village from oral proficiency to foundational literacy and guiding them toward advanced levels of reading and writing competency. These educational efforts are also concretely supported by purpose-built physical infrastructure.

During my fieldwork, I observed that the temple school operates from a dedicated three-story building, housing eight reasonably equipped classrooms on the first and second floors and a spacious hall (Figure 5.4) on the third floor.

Right opposite this facility is a staff building where principals and volunteer teachers carry out administrative duties and prepare lesson plans, a setup that reflects both capacity and long-term institutional commitment to advancing Thai literacy among the community's youth.

Figure 5.4

TLDCS Students Performing Morning Buddhist Rituals in the Classroom Building Hall



Note. Source: Author's fieldwork (2023).

At the heart of this infrastructure is systematic, language-focused instruction. Teachers, like P07, emphasize language as the foundation of all other learning, using daily routines to strengthen both reading/writing skills, as well as cultural values. This consistency ensures that the move from oral tradition to literacy is transient and deeply rooted in everyday practice.

P07 highlights this in describing his teaching approach:

In the morning, I teach the basic Thai alphabet. In the afternoon, I teach Thai cultural traditions, but we always begin with the language. Every day, we read and write so that students can improve and not forget what they have learned.

This daily emphasis on literacy ensures that the move from oral traditions to structured reading and writing competencies is continually reinforced in classroom practice.

The impact of these combined efforts, from curriculum design to infrastructural support and to consistent pedagogy, is evidenced in rising student enrollments and growing community confidence. As P05 reflected, “We are trying to prove to the community that Thai education is important, and now more people in the community are convinced. This year [In 2023], we have some 60 new students alone, which is an amazing achievement for us.”

This surge in participation is not only a statistic; it represents the community’s gradual yet determined shift to institutionalized literacy,

safeguarding their linguistic identity for future generations. From a sociological perspective, this move reflects a strategic accumulation of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Through a structured curriculum, standardized textbooks, and formal certification from a recognized Thai foundation, oral fluency is transformed into legitimized knowledge. Conducted within the temple school, this formal literacy enhances the community's cultural authority and provides tangible credentials that validate their Siamness.

By contrast, in other contexts, such as Kedah, younger-generation Siamese often struggle with Thai literacy due to the dominance of Malay education (Kuroda, 2002, 2005), which highlights the exceptional role of Terbak's sustained, community-led pathways in preserving the heritage language and stabilizing cultural identity. It symbolically anchors Terbak students to Thailand's cultural and educational standards while reinforcing ethnic boundaries and equipping the younger generation with valued cultural resources in both local and transnational contexts.

Above all, this progression does not suggest an identity shift but rather a deliberate reinforcement of ethnic boundaries and cultural continuity. Fishman's (1991) work on reversing language shift highlights that literacy development within minority communities, when driven from within and supported by heritage institutions, stabilizes rather than transforms identity. In Terbak, literacy initiatives are not externally imposed but deeply embedded within community structures, with Wat Phikulthong serving as the focal point, signaling that these efforts are part of cultural preservation, rather than leading to assimilation or deeper structural integration.

Hornberger's (2004) concept of literacy as a "continua" provides a critical lens for interpreting how literacy functions as both skill acquisition and identity reinforcement. By framing literacy as existing along multiple, fluid dimensions rather than as a fixed skill, the continuum model clarifies how each instructional stage, from foundational *po thriam* to Level 3, systematically converts oral fluency into institutionalized literacy while embedding cultural knowledge and ethnic-linguistic identity within recognizable structures. Rather than treating literacy as merely technical competence, this perspective positions it as a relational and iterative process in which past competencies are consolidated, and new cultural-linguistic resources are incorporated, creating a foundation for subsequent adaptive strategies that extend beyond formal schooling.

This structured shift from oral traditions to institutionalized Thai literacy exemplifies *identity consolidation* (Erikson, 1968). Rather than merely acquiring a skill, the community is actively solidifying its cultural foundation by converting informal oral fluency into a codified, examinable, and certified competency, thereby anchoring the ethnolinguistic core of Siamness against external erosion. In sociological terms, this amounts to a deliberate "hardening" of the cultural core, a move designed to ensure the durability of internal resources before any outward-facing adjustments take place. It is therefore distinct from identity rearticulation, a concept I will explore in subsequent themes, which involves strategically shifting external boundaries to accommodate new social realities; here, the task is inward-facing and stabilizing.

While Chapter 4 detailed the strategies and adaptive practices through which the Siamese of Terbak negotiate their identity in daily life, this subtheme highlights how those negotiations materialize in concrete, institutionalized forms. Although this does not constitute a transformation of identity, it represents a deliberate, structural reinforcement of cultural assets, establishing a stable platform upon which more flexible, adaptive strategies, such as the multilingualism discussed in the next section, can be built safely.

5.2.2 Subtheme 1b: Expansion from Bilingualism to Multilingualism without Identity Loss

The linguistic environment among Terbak's Siamese has expanded over the decades, evolving from traditional Thai-Malay bilingualism among the older generation to increasingly complex multilingualism among the youth. This evolution has taken place without undermining the community's core Siamese identity. Previous studies on Kelantan Siamese (Jaafar et al., 2016; Johnson, 2012; Tohsan, 2020) have documented how Thai-Malay bilingualism has long been a defining feature of the older generation, enabling them to function effectively in Malaysian society while maintaining their native language and religious customs. I observed this bilingualism firsthand during my fieldwork, as older villagers switched fluidly between Thai and Malay in their daily interactions.

Additionally, I observed that many older community members spoke Hokkien, indicating a deep-rooted Chinese influence. This linguistic proficiency likely stems from mixed parentage or prolonged interactions with Hokkien-

speaking Kelantan Peranakan Chinese (KPC), with whom the Siamese have historically shared social and cultural spaces (Kershaw, 1982; Vijayan, 2023; Zuriati & Nur Azuki, 2014). This observation reinforces the idea that multilingualism is not a new phenomenon but an intrinsic part of the community's social fabric.

In recent decades, Chinese vernacular education has become a significant factor in shaping language acquisition patterns. Many Siamese parents have now opted to send their children to SJK(C) Yuk Tse, the only Chinese primary school in Tumpat. Despite being a Chinese school, the student body is predominantly Malay and Siamese, as highlighted by P05, "The Chinese school has maybe only less than 20% Chinese students... the majority are Siamese and Malays."

Through conversations with parents, it is clear that this decision is intentional and aimed at securing future opportunities for their children in a multilingual, multicultural Malaysia where Chinese influence is increasingly significant, positioning Chinese-medium schooling as a pragmatic pathway to linguistic capital and upward mobility. However, this trend is not only driven by economic pragmatism but also by broader geopolitical realities, as China's rise as a global superpower continues to influence education, trade, and diplomatic relations across the region (Suryadinata, 2024). Parents recognize that equipping their children with Chinese language skills positions them advantageously in a landscape where Mandarin proficiency is increasingly valued nationally and internationally.

As a result, younger Siamese now exhibit remarkable linguistic versatility, seamlessly navigating between Thai, Mandarin, Malay, and English for those educated in more affluent areas. Terbak villager P08's experience exemplifies this phenomenon: "My father would speak Malay with me, while my mom would use a mix of Chehe and Mandarin." During our interview, I observed that P08 spoke remarkably fluent English, a skill likely shaped by her tri-ethnic parentage (Thai, Chinese, and Indian) and her exposure to a university environment that encouraged multilingual and multicultural engagement. Her linguistic skill also highlights the complex and dynamic multilingual environment that shapes young Siamese in Terbak Village.

Other villagers, P09 and P11, reflected on the tangible advantages of multilingualism. P09 said, "We get more benefits than the Malays here because we are multilingual. We know English, Chinese, Malay, and Thai. Because of that, we have more opportunities." Although not explicitly stated, these advantages primarily pertain to opportunities in the private sector. Bumiputera privileges, while officially inclusive of other indigenous groups, are generally perceived as benefiting Malays more in practice.

However, this multilingual expansion is not without its cognitive challenges. P06 observed that Siamese students attending Chinese schools sometimes struggle to differentiate the tonal systems of the two languages. She noted, "Some of those students get confused between Thai and Mandarin because Thai has five tones, and Mandarin has four. It takes them a while to differentiate." This insight suggests that while multilingualism is an asset, the internal negotiation of these linguistic systems requires significant cognitive

effort from the community's youth, who must compartmentalize distinct phonological systems to maintain fluency in both.

Despite these cognitive hurdles, these narratives show that multilingualism is treated as a strategic asset rather than a cultural threat. The community's ability to manage linguistic complexity without compromising its ethnic identity demonstrates resilience and confidence in Malaysia's multicultural setting. This evolving linguistic environment reflects a pragmatic response to shifting socioeconomic and geopolitical realities. While not indicating an ethnic identity shift, these linguistic changes remain analytically significant. Whereas the older generation generally embodied Thai–Malay bilingualism (Jaafar et al., 2016; Tohsan, 2020; Johnson, 2012), younger Siamese now navigate a more complex multilingual repertoire that includes Mandarin and English.

Nevertheless, this growing linguistic repertoire remains situational and function-driven, supporting social, educational, and economic engagement rather than redefining ethnic boundaries. This aligns with Pavlenko and Blackledge's (2004) view that multilingual individuals negotiate their identities in response to shifting social and ideological conditions; linguistic expansion does not automatically signal identity transformation but reflects strategic positioning within broader structures of opportunity and constraint. Similarly, Cruz-Ferreira (2010) emphasizes that multilingualism operates as a dynamic social practice, rooted in what speakers do with their languages, rather than as the mere accumulation of discrete linguistic codes.

My fieldwork confirmed this: despite the growing linguistic versatility among younger speakers, the Thai language, particularly the Chehe dialect, remains central to daily interactions, cultural continuity, and intra-community communication. In short, multilingualism in Terbak Village is not indicative of identity shift, but a strategic resource that strengthens the community's capacity to navigate Malaysia's multilingual environment. This serves as another clear example of identity consolidation, where expanded linguistic engagement reinforces rather than weakens the community's core ethnolinguistic identity.

5.3 Theme 2: Adapted Cultural Practices and Belonging

The second main theme illustrates how Terbak's Siamese have selectively adapted their cultural practices while retaining their core ethnic identity. This includes observable shifts in social networks, with younger Siamese generally preferring intra-community bonding compared to older villagers who actively engage with Malay and Chinese neighbors through agricultural or business interactions. Although influences from Chinese and Malay cultures are present, particularly through intermarriage, education, and local philanthropy, these interactions enhance rather than overwrite Siamese traditions and identity. Additionally, the community exhibits limited adoption of globalized traits, as notably reflected in their entertainment choices, which mainly favor Thai media, thereby reinforcing their sustained connection to their ethnic roots.

5.3.1 Subtheme 2a: Shifting Social Networks and Intergenerational Differences in Interaction Patterns

Social networks within the Siamese community reveal apparent generational differences in interaction patterns. While the older generation maintains robust interethnic ties rooted in shared economic and agricultural interdependence, the younger generation generally appears to gravitate more toward intra-community socialization. This divergence signals a shift in how identity is socially constructed, from the “lived integration” of the past to a more “consolidated enclave” model among young people.

Among the older generation, interethnic interaction remains both prominent and deeply embedded in daily routines. During interviews with PSKn leader P01 at Tien Jian Coffee Shop, a longstanding *kopitiam* in Tumpat’s old town run by a Chinese proprietor and frequented by locals, I observed frequent greetings exchanged between P01 and Malay and Chinese acquaintances, reflecting his active engagement within the multiethnic community. This coffee shop, shown in Figure 5.5, also functioned as a regular gathering space for older residents of diverse ethnicities, including Malay, Siamese, and occasionally Chinese and Indian individuals. Similarly, P03, the village head, demonstrated this interethnic openness when he interacted warmly with fire brigade officers while they assisted with water provision during the Songkran water-dousing event, exemplifying the routine and convivial nature of cross-ethnic engagement in Terbak.

Figure 5.5

Tien Jian Coffee Shop in Tumpat's Old Town



Note. Source: Author's fieldwork (2023).

Furthermore, a middle-aged Siamese villager, who pursued photography as a part-time hobby, frequently visited local Malay eateries to produce social media content and undertake photography and videography projects for Malay-

owned businesses. During my own visits to village eateries, I also observed older and middle-aged Siamese villagers comfortably socializing with Chinese peers, often alternating between Chehe, Hokkien, and Kelantan Malay, illustrating both their multilingual dexterity and long-standing interethnic ties. This pattern of interaction exemplifies the traditional *kampung* cosmopolitanism of the Siamese, in which identity boundaries remained permeable and were reinforced through daily economic activities and shared rural lifeworlds.

In contrast, the younger generation's social networks are essentially within their own community. P09 and P11 noted that they frequently spent time with their peers at Nasken Coffee, a popular chain and one of the few air-conditioned cafés in Tumpat, while occasionally visiting cafés offering a wider range of options in Kota Bharu, approximately 30 minutes away. Within the temple grounds, I consistently observed groups of secondary-school Siamese students gathering at the *salas*, or Thai-style pavilions used for informal conversation, study, and recreational activities, demonstrating the centrality of communal and cultural spaces in youth socialization.

This inward social orientation, discussed from a different perspective in Subchapter 4.10.1, is reflected by P10, who noted the growing preference among younger Siamese for intra-community bonding: "We feel more comfortable mingling with people from our own community." P09 similarly described their daily social habits, emphasizing proximity and cultural familiarity as shaping factors: "We usually hang out with fellow Siamese friends from around our house... not so much with our Malay or Chinese friends from school or university."

Unlike their parents, whose livelihoods often necessitated deep interethnic interdependence, the younger generation's interactions with the Malay majority are largely institutional (e.g., school, university) rather than organic. Consequently, their social identity is undergoing a process of *rearticulation* (Grossberg, 1996). Whereas consolidation stabilizes the internal cultural core, rearticulation involves the outward adjustment of social boundaries to accommodate new interactional realities. Rather than a simple withdrawal, this represents a strategic reconfiguration of social boundaries: while functional interactions with the Malay majority are maintained in formal spaces, the affective domain of friendship and cultural comfort is increasingly reserved for the internal community. This marks a shift away from the fluid interethnic camaraderie of the past toward a more defined, culturally consolidated internal network.

P09's reflection that his appearance facilitates interaction with Malays, yet he still prioritizes Siamese friendships, underscores that for the younger generation, social networks are shaped less by external integration and more by the enactment of their cultural and ethnic identity, as captured by the local concept of *khwam pen Thai* (Thainess/Siamness).

P11 further articulated this generational divergence, explicitly contrasting her cohort's behaviors with the older generation. She observed, "I think people nowadays are different from their parents. For us, we tend to do our own things... For those who are older... they tend to interact better with others [Malays]." This observation is validated by P12, representing the older generation, who described her interactions with Malays as frequent but

functionally limited by economic necessity: “The interactions are mostly limited to business matters. We always buy vegetables or other things from them.” This comparison confirms that while older villagers maintain functional interethnic bridges for their livelihoods, the youth, unburdened by economic necessities, exercise their agency to retreat into clearer ethnic enclaves for social comfort.

However, this tendency is not without nuance. P08 offered a more balanced perspective, acknowledging the presence of interethnic friendships but emphasizing the stronger emotional ties within her ethnic circle: “I have Malay friends, but I am closer to my Siamese secondary schoolmates.” Her experience suggests that while educational settings promote interethnic connections, the strongest social bonds for young Siamese are still formed within their own community, guided by shared language, traditions, and lived experiences.

This observed generational shift in Terbak mirrors, to some extent, patterns documented among other minority communities in Kelantan. For example, among the KPC community, younger members are increasingly focusing their social networks within their ethnic community, rather than maintaining the historically hybrid and multilingual neighborhood ties once common in their community. Over decades, processes such as modernization, migration, and structural changes in the socioeconomic and educational landscape have compelled many Peranakan individuals to reorient their identity along more precise ethnic boundaries, distancing themselves from their formerly close Malay or Thai neighbors. At the same time, studies of Malaysian youth more broadly indicate that among minority youths, family, especially parents, remains the primary site of ethnic socialization and identity transmission.

External socialization from peers, schoolmates, or neighbors appears limited, and ethnic affiliation among youth tends to remain moderate rather than strongly multicultural (Ting, 2022; David et al., 2016).

This comparative example highlights the broader sociocultural pressures shaping minority youth, underscoring the roles of family socialization, the changing economy, institutional schooling, and community cohesion. Following a similar trajectory, the Siamese of Terbak exhibit a marked preference for temple-centered and intra-community social spaces, while continuing to engage in institutional interactions with Malay peers in educational settings. Because the available studies pertain to different ethnic groups and sociocultural contexts, this comparison should be interpreted as illustrative rather than directly equivalent. What makes the Terbak case analytically valuable is that it offers empirical evidence from fieldwork: a minority group with a distinct religious and linguistic heritage negotiating its identity under modern pressures.

This pattern can also be understood as a broader sociocultural response to the dual pressures of national integration and cultural resilience, in which younger cohorts reinforce ethnic boundaries and strengthen intra-community cohesion. Among the KPC, for example, younger members increasingly gravitate toward mainstream Chinese identity markers, distancing themselves from the blended and acculturated identities of their elders (Pue & Shamsul, 2011; Pue et al., 2019). Building on the observed generational shift, the evolving interaction patterns within the Siamese community reflect a deliberate adaptive strategy to modernity. As the traditional economic bridges that connected Siamese and Malays weaken, the younger generation is actively constructing a

new, more bounded social sphere. This shift does not indicate a loss of integration skills but rather a deliberate rearticulation of social identity to ensure cultural continuity in an era where assimilationist pressures are more subtle and pervasive than in the agrarian past.

5.3.2 Subtheme 2b: Chinese and Malay Cultural Influences Evident without Overwriting Siamese Identity

The Siamese community in Terbak Village navigates Chinese and Malay cultural influences in ways that reflect selective adaptation, a process discussed in the previous chapter, rather than a significant shift in identity. While elements of Chinese and Malay customs, values, and social practices are integrated into their daily lives, these influences remain carefully managed, enriching rather than redefining the community's cultural expressions and social ethos. This subtheme focuses on how cultural norms and social practices are selectively absorbed without altering linguistic identity, distinguishing it from the multilingual developments discussed earlier.

Intermarriages illustrate this accommodation with minimal change. As P01 noted, "There are many intermarriages... many children bear Chinese names but behave more like Siamese." Such naming practices signal surface-level external influence, but they do not correspond to a relinquishment of ethnic identity. Instead, many from such intermarriages exhibit the capability to maintain cultural fidelity within plural familial structures.

During my fieldwork, I encountered several younger villagers whom I was informed, or subsequently discerned, were of mixed parentage, often from Sino-Siamese families. Notably, these individuals tended to affiliate more strongly with their Siamese heritage: they spoke Chehe fluently, actively participated in temple-based cultural activities, and were frequently observed socializing primarily with other Siamese youths. This observation is further affirmed by P02, another leader of PSKn and himself of Sino-Siamese parentage, who noted that many within his close circles share similar mixed backgrounds yet continue to actively practice and identify with Siamese culture.

This likely stems from the fact that many of these intermarriages are with individuals from *Cina kampung* backgrounds. These are rural or semi-rural Chinese in Malaysia who, despite their Chinese ethnicity, have culturally localized identities shaped by sustained interaction with Malay and other ethnic groups, often exhibiting limited adherence to urban Chinese cultural norms (Mohd Zahirwan et al., 2016). As a result, their influence within the family setting often reinforces localized, pragmatic cultural values rather than pulling the family toward a more urban, mainstream Chinese identity. Consequently, the Sino-Siamese youth in Terbak Village maintain active participation in Siamese communal spaces and cultural life.

Besides, support from the Chinese community also plays a vital role in enhancing local educational and temple facilities without altering the community's identity. P05, TLDCS' vice-principal, revealed this collaborative relationship to me:

A good portion of the donations comes from the Chinese community. Many Chinese businessmen come to donate money and materials to us. For example, the photocopy machine and computers in this room are sponsored by the Lions Club of Kota Bharu. Other items, such as the LED lights, are primarily sponsored by the Chinese community. To be honest, the Chinese people have a spirit of giving; they are naturally more philanthropic.

She further explained that while the Siamese contribute as much as they can, financial limitations and less structured giving habits make Chinese philanthropic support important in maintaining the temple school's facilities and resources. The youth wing of the Lions Club of Kota Bharu, the Leo Club, which has strong participation from the local Chinese community, also regularly supports educational and cultural initiatives in the area. The temple school maintains full autonomy over its curriculum and religious instruction, which remain firmly Siamese and Buddhist. The community's ability to integrate external resources while preserving cultural and institutional independence illustrates its strategic resilience and capacity to engage with Chinese partners without compromising Siamese identity.

Mohamed Yusoff (1987, 2010a) repeatedly emphasizes the crucial role of Chinese patronage, noting that "a significant proportion" (p. 324) of temple funding comes from the Chinese and that this "symbiosis with Chinese" (p. 252) is a key survival strategy. This study's findings affirm that this symbiosis continues today, functioning as a practical economic and social alliance that paradoxically allows the Siamese to maintain their distinct religious institutions,

which in turn anchor their identity against assimilation into the Malay majority. This pattern is consistent with Ab. Aziz's (1998) observations, which posit that the primary concern regarding assimilation, as illustrated in his study of conversion to Islam, was not doctrinal but relational, focused on the potential severing of family and community ties. Similarly, in Terbak Village, as long as these core relational and institutional ties remain intact, external influences, whether Chinese patronage or Malay social norms, can be accommodated without causing a fundamental shift in ethnic or religious identity.

While financial support from the Chinese community is imperative, it also represents interethnic collaboration that extends beyond economics. In Bourdieusian terms, this exchange converts economic resources into symbolic and social capital, reinforcing the Siamese community's institutional strength without compromising cultural autonomy. These donations, ranging from school supplies to infrastructure upgrades, carry symbolic value that affirms mutual respect and recognition across ethnic lines. Supporting this, Tamam and Hashmi (2016) emphasize how interethnic bridging social capital, built on trust and intercultural sensitivity, enables effective resource exchange while respecting cultural differences. Notably, the Siamese community maintains control over its temple school's teaching and religious direction, ensuring these collaborations reinforce rather than dilute its identity. Thus, philanthropy acts as a strategic means of cooperation, exchanging resources while preserving cultural boundaries in line with Barth's (1969) model of ethnic interaction.

Similarly, the community's engagement with Malay culture, embedded in daily life through economic interactions and public engagements, reflects a

stable pattern of compartmentalization rather than identity erosion. Given that Malays constitute approximately 95% of Kelantan's population (DOSM, 2024; Johnson, 2002), the frequent use of Kelantan Malay by the Siamese in markets and public institutions is a pragmatic necessity (Jaafar et al., 2016). My observations in Terbak show villagers switching seamlessly between Chehe and Malay when interacting with Malay vendors, yet this fluency remains functionally confined to the public sphere. These interactions demonstrate that while the community has adapted its external behaviors to navigate a multicultural environment, its internal cultural distinctiveness remains insulated from these shifts.

This separation of domains provides the most substantial evidence of identity consolidation. Although Siamese children increasingly enroll in Chinese vernacular schools and master Malay for public commerce, Thai, specifically Chehe, remains the undisputed language of the domestic sphere. In homes across Terbak, the fluid switching observed in public is replaced by a consistent, exclusive use of Thai, reinforcing familial and cultural bonds. P09 and P11, despite their Chinese education, affirmed, "No matter what we speak at school, at home it is always Chehe." This strict linguistic boundary between the educational/public domain and the domestic sphere, a pattern of language choice noted by scholars (Jaafar et al., 2016), confirms that external cultural exposure is not leading to a hybrid identity, but rather strengthening the distinction between "public integration" and "private self."

This dynamic also illustrates the outcome of AIP not merely as a negotiation strategy but as a stabilizing force for identity. By effectively

managing their external positioning and emphasizing “Bumiputera” status or “Chinese-educated” competence when advantageous, the community protects its internal core from being overwritten. This is a clear demonstration of adept adaptation, allowing community members to benefit from bilingualism or multilingualism without compromising its cultural foundations (Berry, 1997; Bourdieu, 1991; Norton, 2000). Much like brand positioning in marketing, the Siamese community maintains an unchanged core identity while adapting its external presentation to different social contexts, thereby asserting consistent distinctiveness. The result is an identity that appears fluid on the surface but is structurally consolidated underneath, resisting the dilution that often accompanies minority integration.

This state of negotiated stability resonates with Hall’s (1990) view of cultural identity as a production that is never complete. For Terbak’s Siamese, the presence of Chinese and Malay influences has added layers to their cultural repertoire without displacing the core markers of ethnic and religious identity. These external influences are treated as additive resources rather than transformative forces; they enhance the community’s social capital without altering the ethnoreligious core, as expressed through communal practices, linguistic fidelity, and rituals.

Such selective permeability mirrors the resilience observed in other Southeast Asian minorities, such as the Moken sea nomads, who adapt to external pressures while fiercely guarding core traditions (Human Rights Watch, 2015). Similarly, research on diasporic South Asians (Maira, 2002) shows that communities often maintain continuity through the careful management of

cultural boundaries. In Terbak, this management has resulted in a state of minimal identity shift: the community has successfully absorbed the utility of Malay and Chinese cultural resources while preventing those influences from altering their fundamental self-conception.

Therefore, in answering the broader question of identity shift, the findings suggest that while the Siamese community exhibits pragmatic cultural adaptation, these adjustments have not led to assimilation or significant identity transformation. Instead, they reflect a process of identity consolidation, where the core of Siamness is reinforced precisely because external adaptations are managed so effectively. By maintaining thin, permeable boundaries for economic and social exchange (Barth, 1969) while keeping thick, impermeable boundaries for domestic and religious life, the community ensures that cultural borrowing serves to strengthen, rather than overwrite, their enduring Siamese identity.

5.3.3 Subtheme 2c: Limited Adoption of Globalized Traits

Globalization has only modestly permeated the lifestyle of the Siamese in Terbak Village, with community members showing a clear preference for maintaining traditional cultural practices and localized markers. My fieldwork observations in Kelantan confirm that many Siamese, both young and old, are not highly proficient in English, a language often associated with global communication and international exposure. As a scholar accustomed to communicating primarily in English, I often had to adjust and speak in standard Malay or Thai during

interviews, as most respondents were unable to confidently express themselves in English.

This observation was confirmed by P05, who explained this to me: “Tumpat is considered a semi-rural area. Many are illiterate in English, except for those from mixed parentage, who have undergone tertiary education in universities, or from more affluent areas.” For instance, during my fieldwork, one community member, P08, and one of her peers were notable exceptions; both had pursued higher education, with her peer studying at a top university in Singapore at the time and briefly returning home during a university break.

Interestingly, these findings offer a partial contrast to Johnson’s (2003) observations, where he notes that younger Siamese villagers are increasingly proficient in English and conversant in Mandarin, having attended national-type Chinese schools. While Johnson’s work indicates a certain degree of engagement with global and regional influences, my fieldwork suggests a more limited proficiency in English, with Mandarin use remaining context-specific, as discussed in Subchapters 4.8.3 and 5.2.2.

This limited linguistic engagement with global languages is mirrored in the community’s selective cultural consumption. Rather than embracing global entertainment, community members display a strong preference for Thai cultural artifacts, further reinforcing the limited adoption of globalized traits. P10, for example, noted, “I listen to Thai music 99% of the time. The remaining 1% is probably English songs.”

This prioritization of Thai-language content over global media reflects the deliberate filtering of external cultural influences. The preference extends beyond language to musical genres, with the community consistently favoring Thai styles over global alternatives. P11 enjoys modern Thai pop that aligns with youth culture in Thailand, while P08 listens to both traditional Thai folk songs (*phleng phuea chiwit*) and modern pop, and P10 favors Thai pop alongside Isaan music, a traditional folk genre from northeastern Thailand. These patterns indicate that even contemporary entertainment choices remain culturally rooted rather than fully globalized.

My fieldwork also observed that many Terbak households are equipped with IPM satellite dishes, granting direct access to Thai television programs, news, and entertainment content. This facilitates continuous exposure to Thai culture while reinforcing ethnic identity within a Malaysian framework. For example, Figure 5.6 shows Barn Nai Kopitiam, a local eatery I frequented, displaying a Thai news program broadcast via IPM satellite, with several customers attentively watching it during their meal.

Figure 5.6

Local Eatery Showing Thai News Program from IPM Satellite



Note. Source: Author's fieldwork (2023).

P11 shared that while she and her peers would occasionally watch foreign television shows, such as Chinese drama series, their primary media consumption remains Thai, accessed via Thai TV channels or YouTube. Echoing this, P09 noted that he and his friends do not actively engage with global content, like Korean or Hong Kong media, preferring Thai-language entertainment instead. Similarly, P08 expressed a strong preference for Thai content over other media, noting that “I mostly watch Thai TV stations like Ch3 and Ch7” through online platforms and apps rather than traditional television.

This preference does not reasonably indicate a global orientation (e.g., toward Chinese, Hong Kong, Korean, or Hollywood content) but instead

reinforces transnational ethnic identity; although accessed through a global platform like YouTube, the content itself remains deeply connected to her cultural and linguistic heritage as a Siamese Malaysian of Thai ethnicity. This pattern echoes Johnson's (2002) observation that technology-savvy young Thais use online platforms not only to communicate with peers across the border but also to engage with Thai media and cultural content, facilitating what he calls "ethnocultural standardization processes" (p. 13). In this case, the villagers' media consumption reflects a selective and culturally grounded alignment with Thai-Siamese norms rather than broad engagement with global cultures, suggesting limited influence from foreign media trends and offering little evidence of international cosmopolitanism.

These patterns of selective engagement extend Johnson's (2002) observations: while Kelantanese youth primarily use online platforms to reinforce Thai-Siamese identity, they also demonstrate some awareness of global media. Johnson's later works (2003, 2012) suggest that younger Siamese in Kelantan often prefer Hollywood movies and Thai drama series over Malay programs, as they perceive these as less engaging. This indicates some openness to global entertainment, but it remains secondary to cultural and ethnic preferences. My fieldwork nuances these findings, showing that in Terbak Village, consumption patterns prioritize ethnocultural reinforcement over cosmopolitan engagement.

Additionally, news consumption patterns reflect minimal influence from global media. Most interviewees, such as P05, P01, and P11, rely on Thai-language sources and local updates shared through temple networks and

community gatherings. This preference for culturally proximate information highlights their commitment to maintaining a distinct sociocultural identity. While these practices are transnational, connecting the community with Thai cultural and religious influences, they are not globalized in the broad Western sense. Even where Hollywood content or English-language skills are present, they do not dominate the cultural landscape. Instead, the community remains anchored in Thai-Siamese traditions and selectively engages with external elements to support cultural continuity rather than embracing global cosmopolitanism.

This strategic cultural pragmatism ultimately functions as a mechanism of identity consolidation. Much like the institutionalization of Thai literacy discussed in Subchapter 5.2.1 and the compartmentalization of domestic spheres in Subchapter 5.3.2, the deliberate filtering of global cultural flows serves to “harden” the community’s ethnocultural core. By prioritizing Thai media and narratives over globalized content, the Siamese of Terbak actively reinforce their internal coherence, ensuring that their identity remains solidified against the potentially diluting forces of globalization.

5.4 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has examined the extent of identity shift among the Siamese community in Terbak Village, Tumpat, revealing that changes have been minimal and largely adaptive rather than transformative. Rather than seeing it simply as an “identity shift,” I contend that the community’s evolving practices can be best understood through the lens of identity rearticulation (Grossberg,

1996), whereby external influences are negotiated and reframed to fit within existing cultural frameworks, and identity consolidation (Erikson, 1968), where these efforts collectively strengthen and affirm core ethnic boundaries. Together, these layered processes highlight the community's resilience and agency, challenging simplistic narratives of assimilation or cultural loss, as discussed in Chapter 4.

Identity rearticulation refers to the contingent and strategic (re)construction of identity in response to shifting cultural and political contexts, where meanings and subject positions are actively reconfigured rather than merely preserved (Grossberg, 1996; Hall, 1996). This dynamic is evident in how the Siamese community selectively reshapes elements of their identity to navigate external pressures and changing societal expectations. Originating in cultural studies and later extended to other disciplines, including sociology (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000), this concept underscores identity as fluid, negotiated, and responsive to power and discourse, rather than fixed or essential.

In contrast, identity consolidation, drawing on Erikson's (1968) developmental framework and further elaborated by Pals (1999), describes how individuals and communities integrate and reinforce a coherent sense of self through internalizing cultural values, social roles, and inherited meanings. In the context of the Siamese community, consolidation is evident in their collective commitment to cultural education, religious practices, and the preservation of their heritage language and traditions. Together, rearticulation and consolidation highlight a critical distinction: rearticulation adapts identity to external

conditions, often by layering new linguistic, cultural, or social elements, whereas consolidation preserves core structures and deepens existing cultural anchors.

Theme 1 highlights a dual movement of identity, characterized by the consolidation of core ethnolinguistic foundations alongside adaptive reconfigurations; both processes serve to minimize identity shifts. The development of structured Thai literacy through institutions like TLDCS exemplifies identity consolidation, as it formalizes and deepens longstanding oral practices through institutional and pedagogical continuity. This literacy shift is not transformative but preservative, rooted in community agency and religious-cultural frameworks. In contrast, the shift from bilingualism to broader multilingualism constitutes rearticulation, as additional competencies respond to socioeconomic and geopolitical changes while layering onto, rather than replacing, the Chehe dialect.

Theme 2 reveals how cultural identity is actively navigated through both inward consolidation and outward-facing adaptation. The generational shift in social interaction patterns, where younger Siamese increasingly prioritize intra-community networks, signals a strategic rearticulation of social identity in response to broader national dynamics, particularly ethnic differentiation and the dominance of Malay-Muslim identity in Kelantan. This recalibration preserves group cohesion rather than diminishing social integration.

Simultaneously, the community's engagement with Chinese and Malay cultural elements, whether through intermarriage, vernacular education, or philanthropic ties, illustrates strategic incorporation rather than assimilation,

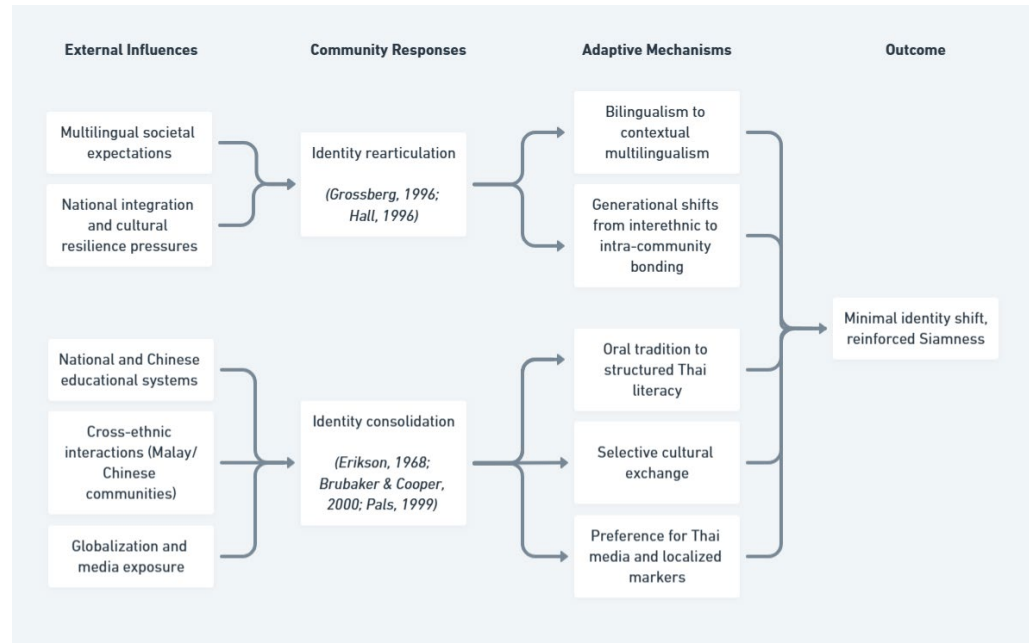
reflecting controlled permeability that reinforces core identity. However, this adaptive flexibility does not signal wholesale transformation. Instead, it coexists with persistent processes of identity consolidation, particularly evident in the community's limited adoption of globalized cultural traits. Finally, despite occasional exposure to foreign media, including Hollywood films, Chinese dramas, and content accessed via digital platforms, youth in Terbak Village largely filter such influences, prioritizing Thai-language entertainment and culturally rooted media that reinforce their Thai-Siamese identity. This selective cultural filtering not only reaffirms ethnocultural boundaries but also contributes to internal identity consolidation, demonstrating how modernity is negotiated on distinctly Siamese terms.

Figure 5.7 illustrates the Identity Shift Management Framework, developed based on the case of Terbak's Siamese. The diagram shows how the community navigates external influences (i.e., multilingual societal expectations, national integration and cultural resilience pressures, national and Chinese educational systems, cross-ethnic interactions with Malay and Chinese communities, as well as globalization and media exposure) through the dual mechanisms of identity rearticulation and consolidation. These mechanisms operationalize the community's broader strategy of AIP.

Figure 5.7

Identity Shift Management Framework Illustrating Siamese Community

Responses in Terbak



Note. Source: Developed for this study. A larger, high-resolution version of this figure is available in Appendix VIII.

Ultimately, the adaptive shifts that occur are partial, strategic, and carefully contained within a larger project of cultural preservation and continuity. As a result, identity shift remains minimal, with the community's core Siamness not only preserved but in many respects strengthened, demonstrating how AIP enables the successful negotiation of external pressures while maintaining ethnic distinctiveness, thereby addressing RQ2.

CHAPTER 6

CONCEIVING THE NATION: THE SIAMESE OF TERBAK AND THE MEANING OF MALAYSIAN IDENTITY

6.1 Introduction

Chapter 6 addresses RQ3 by examining how the Siamese of Terbak Village make sense of and relate to Malaysian national identity in ways shaped by structural limitations and everyday lived experience. Although they are legally recognized as citizens and classified as Bumiputera, the Siamese generally encounter a disconnect between symbolic recognition and substantive inclusion. This chapter highlights how national identity is not simply received from the state, but rather actively interpreted and negotiated by the community. This negotiation unfolds across two key thematic domains.

The first theme explores how national identity is conceived through the lens of negotiated citizenship and a multicultural framework, which, while inclusive in rhetoric, often centers on Malay-Muslim norms. The second theme focuses on how national identity is constructed through cultural grounding and civic loyalty, demonstrating how the Siamese sustain a sense of belonging and pride through everyday practices, even in the absence of full institutional support. Together, these themes reveal that national identity for the Siamese is not static or state-defined, but dynamically shaped through both exclusion and agency. These themes and subthemes are summarized in Table 6.1.

Table 6.1*Themes and Subthemes of Malaysian Identity*

Themes	Subthemes
1. Conceiving Malaysian National Identity through Negotiated Citizenship and Performative Multiculturalism	1a Political Recognition, Citizenship, and Bumiputera Inclusion 1b Malaysian Identity within a Malay-Muslim-Centric Model of Multiculturalism
2. Constructing Malaysian National Identity through Cultural Grounding and National Loyalty	2a Alternative Pathways to National Belonging 2b National Pride and Civic Engagement

Note. Source: Developed for this study.

6.2 Theme 1: Conceiving Malaysian National Identity through Negotiated Citizenship and Performative Multiculturalism

This theme explores how the Terbak's Siamese community engages with Malaysian national identity through two interrelated tensions: symbolic recognition without substantive inclusion, and multicultural ideals constrained by dominant cultural norms. Subtheme 1a highlights how official Bumiputera status provides legal visibility but limited practical benefits, resulting in a form of citizenship that is constantly negotiated rather than fully realized. Subtheme 1b examines how Malaysia's multiculturalism, while inclusive in principle, often

functions performatively, requiring minorities to navigate everyday spaces shaped by Malay-Muslim expectations. Together, these subthemes demonstrate how national identity for the Siamese is shaped not only by state narratives but also through the lived experiences of partial inclusion and quiet resilience.

6.2.1 Subtheme 1a: Political Recognition, Citizenship, and Bumiputera

Inclusion

While the Siamese of Terbak Village are officially recognized as Bumiputera under Malaysian law, this classification provides limited practical benefits in their day-to-day lives. For many in the community, the label exists more as a formality than a functional status. Their experiences reflect a persistent gap between symbolic status and actual inclusion. The category of Bumiputera, although appearing inclusive on paper, operates in a hierarchical and Malay-centric manner in practice, resulting in administrative erasure, inequitable access to benefits, and deep-seated frustration among community members.

P01 summarizes this paradox nicely: “It is nothing more than a name [*Bumiputera sekadar nama, sekadar bunyi*]. When people mention Siamese, they think of Bumiputera. But when it comes to application forms, there is no ‘Siam Bumiputera’.”

The phrase *Bumiputera sekadar nama, sekadar bunyi* captures the association leader’s frustration with a label that holds symbolic meaning but lacks practical substance. It suggests a disconnect between legal recognition and lived exclusion, where being Bumiputera in name does not translate into

meaningful access, visibility, or support. Despite acknowledging the symbolic nature of their Bumiputera status, I observed that some community members would strategically use it in bureaucratic situations. For instance, when applying for government assistance, educational opportunities, or housing, they would emphasize their Bumiputera identity, hoping to access limited benefits or gain institutional legitimacy.

Beyond symbolic classification, the Siamese also face limited political recognition. Their concerns are rarely reflected in national policy discourse, and few formal mechanisms exist for them to influence decisions that directly affect their lives. Aknan Ehtook, a Siamese community leader who hails from Kelantan, made history as Malaysia's first Siamese senator. He served the maximum of two terms (i.e., six years) in the upper house of the Malaysian Parliament before completing his tenure in December 2023 (MalaysiaGazette, 2020). However, no successor has been appointed since, leaving the community without a dedicated voice in federal legislative affairs.

Based on both my field observations and community feedback, Aknan remains a respected figure who symbolizes the peak of political visibility for the Siamese. As P01 remarked:

After Aknan, I am not very sure whether there is any representative for the Siamese community. We used to have a quota from the UMNO... Now that he [Aknan] is in Bersatu [Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia, currently part of the opposition bloc], we are not in a very good position to get another senator after Aknan. We are really hoping to get one.

This underrepresentation in political structures further shapes how the Siamese perceive their citizenship, not as a fully realized right, but as something conditional, partial, and precariously held. While the socioeconomic implications of this paradox were discussed earlier in Chapter 4 (see Subtheme 3b), particularly concerning employment discrimination, limited access to government aid, and barriers to upward mobility, the focus here shifts toward how such institutional dynamics shape the Siamese community's perception of Malaysian national identity, which selectively includes and conditionally recognizes minority citizens.

This contradiction highlights the gap that Shamsul (1996a, 1996b) identifies between *authority-defined identity*, which is constructed and imposed through official state mechanisms, and *everyday-defined identity*, which arises from lived experience and community-level meaning-making. Authority-defined identity encompasses labels assigned through state institutions, census categories, legal frameworks, and national policies, which function as mechanisms that shape who is recognized, who receives support, and who is rendered legible within the nation-state. In the case of the Siamese community, their legal classification as Bumiputera ostensibly positions them within Malaysia's privileged majority grouping. However, this categorization fails to reflect their lived realities, which continue to be marked by marginalization, misrecognition, and invisibility.

For the Siamese, such discrepancies contribute to a fractured sense of citizenship, where formal inclusion does not translate into a substantive sense of belonging. During my field visits and interviews in Terbak, this divergence

occasionally surfaced in bureaucratic interactions. Despite their Bumiputera status on paper, Siamese applicants are often required to tick the “*lain-lain*” (other) box when filling out forms that ask for racial identification. This administrative detail, while seemingly minor, carries significant consequences. It not only undermines their visibility in demographic data and national planning but also symbolically erases their identity, reducing them to a residual category that implies exclusion from the “main” racial groups. Rather than affirming their legal status as the “sons of the soil,” Malaysia’s race-based bureaucratic system quietly reinforces the idea that the Siamese community exists on the margins of the national identity.

P01 explained this frustration clearly: “Other races like the Malays, Chinese, and Indians have their designated categories, but we are ‘*lain-lain*.’ That is a drawback for us.”

From a postcolonial perspective, such bureaucratic categorization functions as a tool of governance that reproduces dominant identities and renders minority voices invisible within the national imaginary, thereby constraining their capacity for claims-making (cf. Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988). These dynamics reveal how the Siamese’s everyday-defined identity, grounded in their self-perception as a culturally distinct community with deep roots in both local and Thai cultural history, and a strong sense of belonging to the place they live, often encounters bureaucratic practices that do not always fully reflect or accommodate this complexity. Shamsul’s (1996) framework reminds us that national identity is not a fixed or one-dimensional category but a space of continual negotiation between top-down classifications and bottom-up lived

experiences. For the Siamese of Terbak, that negotiation can sometimes lead to frustration, as institutional silences and the absence of racial recognition within official classifications tend to overshadow their lived identity. This experience contributes to their perception of national identity as selective and uneven, where citizenship may be legally granted but remains culturally conditional.

This symbolic inclusion is further compounded by data invisibility. P02 highlighted this: “Since we are lumped under ‘*Bumiputera lain*’... Now it is difficult to know exactly how many there are [in the country]. The figures we have are only estimates.”

The lack of demographic disaggregation makes it harder to inform targeted policies and further undermines the community’s visibility in national planning frameworks. Without accurate and differentiated statistics, it becomes difficult to justify or design policies that address the Siamese’s specific needs. The absence of such data reinforces their symbolic marginality and deepens their sense of being peripheral to the national identity.

This lived experience, where symbolic inclusion (*Bumiputera sekadar nama*) is disconnected from substantive recognition, exemplifies what this study terms *performative multiculturalism*, a concept that is advanced in the next section. Here, the state’s classification of the Siamese as Bumiputera serves primarily as a rhetorical gesture of inclusion, a performative form of multiculturalism that projects an image of pluralism while masking underlying structural inequalities. Such symbolic inclusion satisfies the official narrative of diversity while concealing deeper power asymmetries. This dynamic will be

explored further in the next section, situating the Siamese experience within Malaysia's broader Malay-Muslim-centric national framework.

Such marginalization is not only about exclusion from policy mechanisms but also about where the Siamese community fits, or does not fit, in Malaysia's overall power structure that is often driven by race and politics. It positions them in what may be described as a "second-class Bumiputera" tier, reflecting their ambiguous standing: legally recognized, yet not fully embraced. As P05 observed, their position carries only a slight advantage but remains relative: "The Siamese are just slightly better compared to the Chinese in terms of privilege due to us being Bumiputera. Otherwise, we are more or less the same."

For others, like P09, the label provides little tangible benefit: "When it comes to government aid, we hardly get it." These perspectives underscore the symbolic rather than substantive nature of Bumiputera recognition, highlighting persistent exclusion from meaningful state support. Even when villagers like P12 acknowledge that "we get aid like BR1M" and "government jobs sometimes," such instances appear contingent and exceptional rather than evidence of genuine inclusion. This precarious access is highlighted by P10, who noted that jobs "might be difficult to get," and further defined by P12's admission that "the quota is not as much as the Malay race." Ultimately, these restricted advantages do not offset broader inequities or alter the community's subordinate standing within political and bureaucratic hierarchies.

The Siamese continue to rely on informal networks and personal lobbying to navigate systemic neglect, reflecting a lack of formal political representation or targeted state policies. By cultivating ties with local politicians and civil servants, they engage in quiet but persistent forms of advocacy. Through these grassroots efforts, they can draw on common regional identities, highlight their cultural heritage, and leverage personal connections to gain recognition and support. These iterative and discreet efforts ensure that the concerns of the Siamese are at least acknowledged, if not systematically addressed. Nevertheless, such reliance on informal networks highlights the limitations of formal political participation for minority communities in a postcolonial context, where access and responsiveness often depend on established relationships and the dynamics of majority-centered governance.

Taken together, these experiences illustrate how Terbak's Siamese conceive of Malaysian national identity as uneven, stratified, and conditional. While legally recognized as Bumiputera, this status is largely rhetorical. Their daily navigation of bureaucratic ambiguity, political exclusion, and symbolic recognition without support reveals a fractured model of citizenship that offers nominal inclusion but limits genuine belonging in the multicultural nation-state. These lived contradictions are symptomatic of a broader national framework that projects pluralism while centering Malay-Muslim norms as the default cultural and political order. This condition lays the foundation for the following section, which situates their experience within Malaysia's broader Malay-Muslim-centric and performative model of multiculturalism.

6.2.2 Subtheme 1b: Malaysian Identity within a Malay-Muslim-Centric and Performative Model of Multiculturalism

Malaysia's national identity is often officially presented as founded on ethnic and religious diversity, with state narratives such as the National Unity Policy (Kementerian Perpaduan Negara, 2020) emphasizing this commitment. The Federal Constitution supports this rhetoric by guaranteeing freedom of religion in Article 11, thereby recognizing the cultural rights of various communities. However, as the Siamese experience reveals, this pluralism is largely performative, reflecting a state-led discourse that celebrates diversity symbolically while maintaining Malay-Muslim norms as the dominant cultural reference for citizenship, public life, and belonging (Cheah, 2002; Shamsul, 1996b).

For the Siamese in Terbak, this performative inclusion translates into institutional and everyday practices that reinforce a monoethnic national ideal, even within Kelantan's local context, where Malay-Muslim norms are deeply embedded and normalized. It manifests not only in policy but also in the moral expectations that shape daily life. For many Siamese villagers, negotiating belonging thus involves constant awareness of cultural boundaries and everyday pressures to conform. The experience of navigating public life as a minority group often involves subtle but pervasive cultural discipline.

As P07 reflected, the contrast is evident when compared to Thailand, where everyday life remains freer and less constrained by religious expectations, a perspective shaped by his frequent movement between Thailand and Tumpat:

“In Malaysia, there are too many restrictions and rules. In Thailand, we are free to live our lives however we want.”

This sense of constraint is reinforced through everyday acts of self-regulation, where public behavior is shaped not by law but by dominant moral expectations. As P08 put it:

We avoid things that make them [the majority] uncomfortable. My Malay friends would praise me, saying, ‘Oh you are so good. You do not wear sexily.’ If I go shopping in places with a lot of Muslims, I will not wear [shorts]... The Kelantanese mindset about Islam is very strong compared to those in the cities.

These quotes reflect a condition where conformity, especially among non-Muslims, is encouraged through moral surveillance and social pressure rather than law. This tendency echoes scholarly observations of Malaysia’s multicultural framework, which, while inclusive in rhetoric, often functions in ways that elevate Malay-Muslim norms as the dominant cultural reference. As Noraini and Esmaeil (2017) argue, the national unity project continues to face challenges as long as one ethnoreligious tradition is implicitly prioritized over others within public institutions and cultural narratives.

This dynamic was also observable during fieldwork conducted in the month of Ramadan. In Tumpat’s new town, the local supermarket chain Pantai Timor Pasaraya was closed during the evening breaking-of-fast period, effectively pausing business operations in line with religious practices. Similarly,

in the Aeon Mall in Kota Bharu, all restaurants were instructed to shut during fasting hours. Such closures, while not always codified in law, are implemented through administrative directives and enforced uniformly, including on non-Muslim-owned establishments. This illustrates how Islamic observance shapes public and commercial routines while reinforcing a public culture aligned with Malay-Muslim values.

This situation reflects cultural differences and a structural imbalance in how institutional norms engage with diversity. As Parekh (2000) contends, genuine multiculturalism requires more than coexistence; it also requires recognizing different cultural communities and reshaping public institutions to reflect the plural character of society. In practice, however, public life in Malaysia, particularly in more religiously conservative settings like Kelantan, is often shaped by norms closely aligned with the majority tradition. The expectation for minorities to adjust their behavior to align with these norms, as illustrated in the interviews, suggests that the country's multicultural ideals, while affirmed in principle, remain unevenly realized in everyday life.

Religious dominance also extends into deeply personal areas of life, such as marriage and family. In Malaysia, interfaith marriage involving a Muslim is legally complex, as the law requires the non-Muslim partner to convert to Islam for the marriage to be officially recognized. This legal condition places non-Muslims in a difficult position, often forcing them to choose between personal relationships and their religious identity. For some members, this can present a particularly stark conflict between cultural identity and legal conformity. P07 explained with a firm stance:

I cannot. I do not want that. I am *kon thai* [Siamese]. If you want me to convert to Islam, I cannot accept it... For me, if I had to marry someone who is a Muslim, I would choose not to marry. I do not like it.

His statement highlights how the legal requirement to convert poses not just a procedural hurdle, but a fundamental challenge to the preservation of religious and cultural identity. It also reflects the emotional and identity challenges that such policies create for minorities. From the perspective of multicultural citizenship, such legal requirements raise important questions about how national legal frameworks can support cultural pluralism. Kymlicka (1995) suggests that for multicultural citizenship to be meaningful, it must be supported by structures that allow individuals to sustain their cultural and religious identities while fully participating in public life. When policies place pressure on individuals to adjust or abandon aspects of these identities, such as in cases involving interfaith marriage, it reveals a disconnect between the ideals of multiculturalism and the realities experienced on the ground.

This tension is similarly reflected in the experiences of the Siamese community, who, although legally classified as Bumiputera, often occupy the marginal or residual classification in official categorization, as noted earlier. The gap between their legal status and everyday experiences highlights deeper structural limitations within Malaysia's model of multiculturalism, where symbolic recognition exists but meaningful inclusion remains unrealized.

Moreover, the way the Siamese preserve their identity, primarily through temple institutions and cultural education, illustrates what Parekh (2000) would describe as a one-sided responsibility for cultural preservation. P01 noted:

[The country is multicultural, but in practice] there is a limit, especially about religion... we always try to protect it [our religion] as much as possible. That is why we always start things from the *wat*... so that the Siamese have some basic knowledge about our roots.

This grassroots-oriented strategy for cultural survival reflects the absence of institutional frameworks that can support minority expression in a truly multiracial and multiethnic state. Instead, the responsibility of maintaining cultural continuity falls on the community itself.

Here, I find it crucial to distinguish Malaysia's multiculturalism from that of neighboring Indonesia. While Malaysia adopts a national integration policy that formally acknowledges ethnic diversity, as reflected in the maintenance of vernacular schools in Malay, Chinese, and Tamil and the official recognition of religious holidays for different faiths, Indonesia has historically emphasized assimilation, particularly during the New Order era, when cultural expressions of minority groups were heavily regulated, and national identity was strongly centralized. Despite its national motto, "Bhinneka Tunggal Ika" (Unity in Diversity), Indonesia has emphasized a unified national identity over the institutional recognition of ethnic and cultural differences (Hoon, 2006a, 2006b; Suryadinata, 1997). Unlike Malaysia, Indonesia does not provide structural support for minority languages or ethnic-based schooling, reflecting a different

approach to managing diversity. This contrast is important for contextualizing Malaysia's model of multiculturalism, which is distinguished by its formal recognition of ethnic plurality. However, such recognition often lacks the structural support necessary to ensure substantive equality.

Building on the preceding discussion, this thesis develops the concept of performative multiculturalism further by engaging with Tan's (2016) critique of *performative silence* and drawing on theories of performativity. It refers to a state-led model of diversity that publicly endorses pluralism but fails to implement the structural changes necessary for genuine minority inclusion. This concept aligns with postcolonial critiques (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988), which argue that such state narratives often function to regulate differences and preserve existing power structures rather than dismantle them.

In this sense, the concept also resonates with broader academic critiques of multiculturalism's decline or stagnation, often framed under the concept of "post-multiculturalism." Scholars such as Kymlicka (2010) and Modood (2013) contend that while multiculturalism initially promised genuine recognition and structural inclusion, many societies have shifted toward models that retain symbolic inclusion but lack substantive redistribution of power or reform of governing structures. Post-multiculturalism thus marks a phase where diversity is celebrated rhetorically but constrained in practice by dominant cultural norms, civic integration agendas, and assimilationist expectations.

In the Malaysian context, these tendencies are evident in the rhetorical embrace of diversity alongside the persistent privileging of Malay-Muslim

values in national life. This dynamic is reflected in how cultural differences are acknowledged through symbolic gestures and official narratives, but these seldom lead to meaningful changes in public institutions or government policies. As a result, the influence of majority norms is maintained, leaving little space for minority voices to shape public life. The Siamese experience in Terbak, shaped by social expectations, legal constraints, and the need for adaptations, illustrates how multiculturalism in Malaysia functions less as a platform for equality than as a tool for controlled recognition.

6.3 Theme 2: Constructing Malaysian National Identity Through Cultural Grounding and National Loyalty

Theme 2 examines how the Siamese of Terbak construct a sense of Malaysian national identity not through formal recognition, but through grounded, culturally rooted practices and civic expressions of loyalty. Subtheme 2a examines the alternative pathways through which the community maintains national belonging, including temple-based education, inter-village sports, land attachment, and cross-border mobility. These practices reflect a bottom-up mode of integration shaped by cultural continuity rather than state inclusion.

Subtheme 2b highlights the community's quiet yet consistent national pride and civic engagement, characterized by peaceful coexistence, gratitude for non-interference, and a layered sense of symbolic loyalty to both Thai and Malaysian institutions. Together, these subthemes reveal that for the Siamese, national identity is not passively inherited but actively lived; it is negotiated in

the everyday and anchored in both cultural resilience and a sense of place within Malaysia's evolving multicultural society.

In this chapter, I use the term “belonging” not to refer to legal citizenship or state-recognized inclusion, as discussed in Theme 1, but to a more affective and symbolic sense of attachment. This includes emotional ties to the community, participation in cultural life, and everyday practices that generate a sense of rootedness and inclusion. As Antonsich (2010) notes, belonging encompasses both “place-belongingness” (i.e., the personal, intimate feeling of being “at home”) and the “politics of belonging,” which refers to broader sociopolitical processes that define inclusion and exclusion. Similarly, Jahangiri et al. (2016), in their sociological study on national identity, emphasize that national belonging involves emotional solidarity and loyalty to shared cultural symbols, such as land, rituals, and language, rather than just formal legal status.

By drawing on these dimensions, this chapter shows how the Siamese community in Terbak constructs national belonging through cultural participation, intergenerational memory, and civic expressions, often outside formal state frameworks. This usage builds on the distinction made in Theme 1, where citizenship and recognition are explored as authority-defined forms of inclusion. In contrast, Theme 2 focuses on the community-led, culturally grounded enactments of belonging that are experienced and expressed in everyday life.

6.3.1 Subtheme 2a: Alternative Pathways to National Belonging

For Terbak's Siamese community, national belonging is not derived directly from state institutions or top-down frameworks of citizenship. Instead, it emerges through everyday acts of cultural resilience, community-led initiatives, and transborder engagements that offer alternative pathways for expressing and sustaining national belonging. While Malaysia's multicultural framework, as outlined in the national integration policy, claims to embrace ethnic and religious diversity, these ideals are often unevenly realized in practice, as discussed previously, particularly for smaller minority groups like the Siamese.

When state definitions of belonging fall short, communities actively construct their own sense of nationhood, a process that Shamsul (1996b) aptly characterizes as a "nation of intent." This concept highlights how different communities, particularly those outside the dominant national narrative, actively construct and express their own visions of the nation, often in contrast to the state's official version, which tends to reflect the interests of the majority race. This reflects Smith's (1986) view that national identity is shaped not only by state narratives but also by shared memories, stories, and symbols formed outside formal institutions. For the Siamese, these expressions of belonging are rooted in everyday life rather than state-sanctioned channels, making their pathways to national belonging distinctly alternative and community-driven.

Earlier in Chapter 4, I discussed how Terbak's Siamese community negotiates its cultural and religious identity in response to dominant socioreligious norms in Kelantan. While those activities, such as temple

festivals, communal rituals, and Buddhist observances, were presented as strategies of cultural negotiation and resistance, they also create a sense of national belonging that is emotionally grounded in shared culture and community life. In this chapter, I shift focus to how such practices, alongside recreational events like intervillage sports competitions, contribute to a deeper emotional and symbolic attachment to the nation. These activities cultivate a form of belonging that is rooted not in state recognition but in cultural continuity, shared participation, and intervillage solidarity.

During my fieldwork, I observed that a seemingly recreational event, the annual inter-village football competition organized by the PSKn, carries more profound cultural significance. Beyond its surface as a social gathering, it functions as a ritualized communal arena where the Siamese express solidarity and national attachment on their own terms. Each participating village fields a team with a name that symbolically ties them to their locale, such as Terbak F.C., Kubang Panjang F.C., and Jungkau F.C. (with “F.C.” standing for “Football Club”).

These names do more than indicate geographical origin; they signal rootedness, communal pride, and a collective identity articulated through sport. From team names in Thai to the use of the Thai language for announcements and coordination, especially as participating teams from different Siamese villages across Tumpat come together, these events reaffirm a shared sense of Siamness that both anchors and affirms communal belonging within a broader national landscape that often renders them invisible.

Building on Chapter 4's discussion of language as symbolic identity, the spoken Chehe dialect distinguishes "us" (the Siamese community) from "them" (the surrounding Malay- and Chinese-speaking groups). By using their language during the football competition, the community strengthens social cohesion and asserts its cultural identity, turning the event into a meaningful arena for expressing national belonging on its own terms. Operating parallel to, rather than within, the dominant Malay national narrative, this culturally distinct space exemplifies one of the "alternative pathways" through which the Siamese experience and construct attachment to the nation, grounded in everyday life, collective participation, and communal solidarity.

As one participant (P01) observed, sports days "are when we feel most united, not just as villagers but as Siamese." Events like this offer a non-state platform for expressing identity and cultivating cohesion, which is essential in a context where the national identity narrative privileges the Malay-Muslim majority. These grassroots practices operationalize the concept of adaptive integration, allowing the community to maintain its cultural heritage while navigating broader society on its own terms. For Terbak's Siamese, this engagement manifests as *bottom-up integration*, where belonging is developed not through state-driven inclusion but through everyday communal practices that reaffirm their place within the nation.

Besides, land ownership emerges as both a literal and symbolic foundation for national belonging. Amid the broader context of cultural constraints and negotiated belonging discussed above, the Siamese community's attachment to land is a tangible and affective link to their heritage. The emotional

connection to ancestral land was evident in my conversations with several interviewees.

For instance, P03 shared with me a personal account of the government's plan to acquire part of the village's land, including the front portion of his own house, to expand the Berangan-Terbak Road. In response, he told me he had attempted to negotiate with the authorities to halt or delay the decision, viewing it as a direct threat to the community's heritage. I could sense his frustration as he explained the issue to me. "We value our land far more than any government compensation or aid. Monetary payment cannot sustain our grandchildren, but the land can support several future generations," he said.

In Kelantan, the ability to maintain this territorial attachment for non-Malays is increasingly threatened by institutional constraints, particularly the designation of *Tanah Rizab Melayu* (Malay Reserve Land), which effectively bars non-Malay Bumiputera, including the Siamese, from purchasing replacement land should theirs be acquired for development. As P03 lamented, "If we want to buy, other Siamese would not want to sell... We cannot buy the Malay reserve land either!"

This attachment is not simply about owning land, but about sustaining a place where family, memory, and community are rooted. It is also a way of affirming their sense of belonging to the nation from the ground up. This situation leaves the community with limited options: even within their own villages or surrounding areas, purchasing new land is often not viable, forcing them to relocate away from these historically and culturally significant spaces.

In this context, land becomes more than a physical asset; it becomes an asset for survival, identity, and recognition. For the Siamese in Tumpat, the land holds not only economic and residential value but also shared memories and symbolic meaning. This layered attachment reflects what Smith (1986) describes as the ethno-symbolic foundation of identity, in which intergenerational narratives of continuity and belonging shape people's emotional ties to territory.

Similarly, Anderson's (1983) notion of imagined communities reminds us that the nation is sustained through collective memory, often tied to physical spaces that ground an otherwise abstract sense of unity. The Siamese community's resistance to state acquisition thus demonstrates the protective role of territorial belonging as a buffer against cultural erosion and communal dislocation. Here, land functions not just as a ground of livelihood, but as yet another alternative pathway through which national belonging is lived and defended. It also highlights the limitations of Siamese inclusion within a national framework, where even Bumiputera status does not guarantee substantive rights or security.

One of the most recurrent themes in my fieldwork was the community's frequent criss-crossing of the Golok River into Thailand. On the surface, these trips serve pragmatic purposes, such as attending festivals, shopping, or visiting family members who hold Thai citizenship. But underlying these routines is a symbolic re-anchoring of belonging.

P10, a university student studying in another state, said, "If I am in Tumpat, I would go to Thailand maybe once a month, or sometimes twice a

month... We also go there for the food and leisure.” Similarly, another participant, P11, described, “If I am free, I will usually go there... to eat and ‘chillax’. Yes, there is more food there. And the prices of things there are also cheaper.” As P07 reflected, “Deep in our hearts, we know how the Thai society and environment are compared to Kelantan. Every time I come back here from Thailand, I hope to feel the same way as when I am in Thailand.” These regular journeys reveal a fluid and layered sense of national belonging, shaped not solely by state-defined borders but by emotional, cultural, and spiritual geographies.

Johnson (2012) observes in his study of Thai (Siamese) Buddhists in Kelantan that such cross-border practices are not about essentializing identity but about negotiating belonging through ritual continuity, cultural familiarity, and movement. The community’s cross-border practices serve as subtle acts of cultural resilience and as sustained strategies for nurturing belonging through familiarity, ritual, and movement.

During the Hari Raya period in Terbak, I noticed a flyer pinned up at a local Thai eatery advertising a group tour to Thailand (see Figure 6.1), a small but telling reminder of how transnational routines are embedded in the community’s sense of being both Siamese and Malaysian. In this way, cross-border mobility becomes one of several alternative pathways through which Terbak’s Siamese assert their place in the nation, not through formal recognition, but through culturally grounded, everyday acts of belonging.

Figure 6.1

“Tour to Thailand” Advertisement in a Thai Restaurant



Note. Source: Author's fieldwork (2023).

The Siamese community's bottom-up expressions of national belonging should not be viewed as a lack of loyalty or integration that the state envisions, but rather as a contextually grounded response to the structural limitations of formal inclusion. As Anderson (1983) argues, national consciousness is not an organic or inevitable outcome, but rather is historically produced through institutions and narratives that tend to center on dominant groups while rendering others peripheral. From this perspective, the Siamese community's alternative pathways of belonging reflect not a deviation from national identity but a reimagining of it in the absence of full symbolic and institutional recognition.

6.3.2 Subtheme 2b: National Pride and Civic Engagement

Despite experiencing structural exclusion, ranging from statistical misrecognition to limited access to state-supported privileges, the Siamese of Terbak Village demonstrate a grounded and reflective sense of Malaysian national pride. Instead of distancing themselves, many express a quiet form of civic nationalism rooted in peaceful coexistence, cultural continuity, and gratitude for the freedom to practice their traditions without state interference. This mode of engagement reveals that, for the Siamese, national loyalty is not contingent on material benefits or visibility in official records, but is somewhat shaped by affective attachments to place, people, and shared histories.

Several interviewees articulated this sentiment during my interviews with them. P03 offered a clear and direct affirmation of national pride: “I am proud of this land and being Malaysian. We have been living peacefully here with the Malays and other races. We just want our [cultural and religious] activities not to be restricted.”

While sounding simple, this assertion captures the essence of civic belonging for many in the community: autonomy in cultural expression, coupled with a continued assertion of their place within the nation. It is a form of nationalism that is neither publicly demonstrative nor transactional, but one that is deeply tied to local life and communal harmony.

This sense of pride is often accompanied by an appreciation for the relative freedom the community continues to enjoy in Kelantan. While

institutional recognition remains uneven and access to support may not always be consistent, what matters more to many Siamese is the ability to carry out their cultural and religious practices without interference.

P10, reflecting on the community's treatment by the state, offered a measured response: "It may not be perfect, but it is okay with me. At least they do not interfere with us (what we want to do)." P03 echoed this sentiment, observing that "we have never been disturbed by whichever [UMNO or PAS] government... They have always been supportive of us." These remarks reflect a civic mindset that prioritizes stability, autonomy, and mutual respect over partisan loyalties or ideological commitments. For many Siamese, the ability to live peacefully and practice their culture without interference is seen as a key part of good governance, even if deeper recognition or support would still be welcomed.

What is particularly striking is that this national pride often coexists with a dual sense of cultural alignment. P08 reflected on this personal evolution: "When I was young, I really hoped so [to be born in Thailand]... But as I got older, I am grateful [to be Malaysian]." This transition reveals that civic loyalty for the Siamese is not inherited or automatic; it is formed over time, through lived experiences, comparisons across borders, and a deep connection to everyday life in their local surroundings. Rather than aspiring to be part of a different national community, many have come to see their lives in Malaysia as meaningful and rooted, despite continued marginality.

This layered sense of identification can be seen as a form of dual-symbolic loyalty, where respect for both Thai and Malaysian institutions, cultures, and rituals coexist in everyday life. During my interactions with Siamese participants, I found that many were familiar with Malaysian civic rituals, such as singing the national anthem, while also recognizing the Thai national and royal anthems. P09 exemplified this internalized civic loyalty. Despite expressing a strong cultural fondness for Thailand, saying that “Thailand is good,” he affirmed that he could recite the Rukun Negara and was familiar with the history of Malaysia’s formation. His ability to navigate Malaysian civic knowledge while harboring a cultural preference for Thailand exemplifies the community’s compartmentalized loyalty: civically Malaysian, culturally Siamese. Rather than suggesting divided allegiance, these practices reflect the complex, overlapping identities common in borderland communities: identities that do not always fit neatly into rigid, state-defined categories.

As Johnson (2012) notes, the Thai community in Malaysia has often been described as “people with two kings,” capturing their unique position of symbolic loyalty to both the Thai and Malaysian monarchs. This observation resonated with my own fieldwork: in several eateries and homes in Terbak, I occasionally saw framed portraits of the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX) displayed alongside, or occasionally instead of, images of Malaysian royalty or leadership.

This notion of dual-symbolic loyalty is central to understanding the Kelantan Siamese. It illustrates an adaptive integration in which political allegiance to Malaysia coexists with deep cultural reverence for the Thai

monarchy. As discussed in Subchapter 4.9.2, institutional arrangements such as the Kelantan Sangha allow the Siamese to navigate political legitimacy while maintaining cultural continuity, demonstrating how these structures support everyday civic engagement and national belonging. The simultaneous display of both monarchs is not a sign of divided loyalty but a public expression of the community's complex, adaptive, and transnational identity, showing how national pride and civic engagement are expressed through community-driven strategies that balance Malaysian citizenship with ethnoreligious heritage from Thailand.

Figure 6.2 shows a Thai eatery in Tumpat adorned with pictures of Rama IX, reflecting deep cultural and royal reverence among the Siamese there. Drawing on Smith's (1986) ethno-symbolist approach, national identity here encompasses not only legal status and political loyalty but also shared memories, emotional ties, and enduring cultural symbols. In this sense, the Siamese community of Terbak reflects a quiet, plural form of civic nationalism rooted in lived experience rather than state-defined norms.

Figure 6.2

Thai Eatery in Tumpat Displaying Images of Late Rama IX



Note. Source: Author's fieldwork (2023).

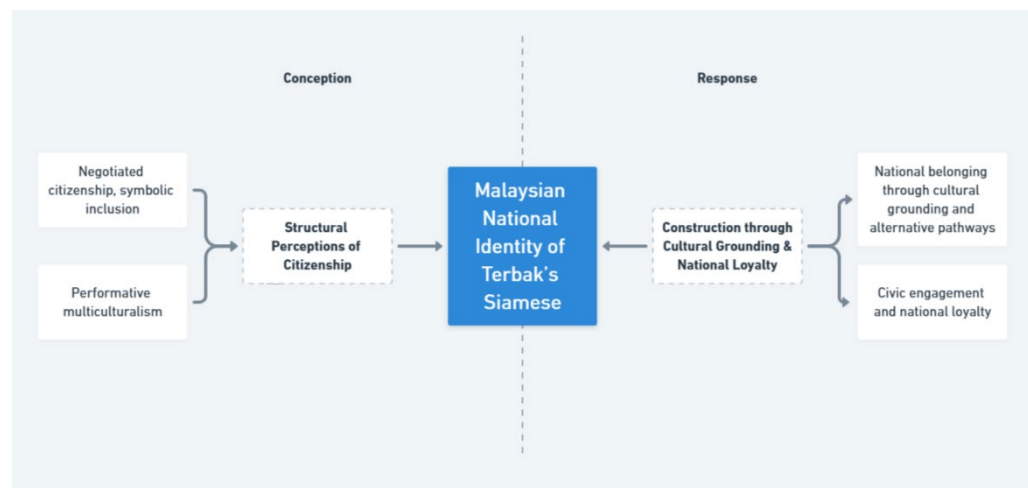
Considering this, the Siamese community's expressions of national pride and civic participation should not be seen as marginal or insignificant. They reflect a deep and genuine connection to the Malaysian nation, shaped not by official expectations but by the community's lived experiences and values. It is this grounded and relationship-based sense of belonging that enables the Siamese to view themselves not as outsiders, but as culturally distinct Malaysians who envision their future within a society shaped by ongoing coexistence and negotiation in Malaysia's multicultural and multireligious landscape.

6.4 Chapter Conclusion

As illustrated in the National Identity Framework of the Siamese Community in Figure 6.3 below, the Siamese of Terbak Village demonstrate a complex understanding of Malaysian national identity shaped by the interplay between structural perceptions of citizenship and their agency in negotiating and constructing a sense of belonging.

Figure 6.3

National Identity Framework of the Siamese Community Illustrating Identity Conception and Construction



Note. Source: Developed for this study. A larger, high-resolution version of this figure is available in Appendix IX.

This understanding emerges from the structural tensions they continually navigate. The community's conception of citizenship and their experience of performative multiculturalism (Theme 1) mean that their national identity cannot be derived solely from top-down state recognition. Such limitations compel the

community to construct a sense of belonging (Theme 2) actively. Because formal inclusion remains largely symbolic, the Siamese cultivate bottom-up forms of belonging, rooted in cultural grounding, land attachment, and civic loyalty, to forge a more meaningful national identity.

At the core of their conception lies the idea of citizenship as an ongoing negotiation. While formally recognized as Bumiputera, this legal classification often fails to translate into substantive inclusion in their daily lives. They experience a gap between symbolic recognition and tangible benefits, leading to a sense that their citizenship is not fully realized but rather a conditional status they must constantly negotiate. This negotiation is evident in their interactions with institutional structures, where formal classifications often fail to capture their Bumiputera identity, highlighting the gap between state-defined and lived identity (Shamsul, 1996a, 1996b). This is also reflected in their selective use of the Bumiputera label for government aid or educational purposes, as well as in the grassroots networks cultivated by local leaders, illustrating how the community actively reshapes citizenship and negotiates structural constraints.

Furthermore, the Siamese understanding of Malaysian national identity is shaped by the nation's multicultural framework, which, while rhetorically affirming diversity through symbolic gestures, fails to ensure substantive equality. This creates a context I term performative multiculturalism, where structural inequalities persist, and minorities are expected to conform to dominant norms. The outward display of multiculturalism thus does not necessarily translate into meaningful changes in power structures or equitable treatment for non-Muslim Bumiputera groups such as the Siamese, highlighting

the gap between official recognition and lived experience. This dynamic is evident in public spaces and institutions, particularly in culturally and religiously homogeneous Kelantan, which are structured around dominant norms and shape how citizenship is experienced. As observed in Chapters 4 to 6, the community's practices and aspirations reflect a lived multiculturalism that navigates these dominant norms while striving for recognition, coexistence, and cultural resilience within Malaysia's multiracial and multireligious society.

Nevertheless, the Siamese of Terbak are not passive recipients of a state-defined national identity. As shown in the diagram above, they actively construct their own sense of belonging through community practices, including cultural grounding and civic expressions of loyalty. They maintain and transmit their cultural heritage through temple institutions and community events, which serve as spaces for cultural continuity and communal recognition within the larger Malaysian society. Intervillage sports and events do more than foster ethnoreligious solidarity and a shared sense of Siamness; they operate as public rituals where the community asserts its presence and belonging within the broader national landscape, demonstrating cultural pride and social cohesion on their own terms. Their attachment to their ancestral land adds another layer of meaning, grounding their sense of belonging in shared traditions and a place they have long called home. These practices reveal how the Siamese negotiate and affirm a layered national identity that embraces their unique heritage while situating them firmly within Malaysia's multicultural fabric.

Finally, the Siamese community's conception of Malaysian national identity is characterized by layered identities and dual loyalties. Their frequent

cross-border movements into Thailand reflect ongoing cultural and social ties that transcend national borders, and the presence of symbols of Thai royalty alongside Malaysian national symbols reinforces what Johnson (2012) describes as “people with two kings,” consistent with Smith’s (1986) ethno-symbolist approach to national identity. Although often quiet and understated, these expressions of national pride and civic engagement reflect a genuine connection to Malaysia, shaped by lived experience and a desire for coexistence and recognition. Rather than deriving from top-down state narratives, this sense of belonging is cultivated from the ground up; it is rooted in lived realities, cultural resilience, and a subtle yet enduring commitment to a Malaysian national identity that embraces, rather than erases, their difference. In essence, Terbak’s Siamese conceive of Malaysian national identity not as a monolithic or state-imposed ideal, but as a lived and negotiated reality that accommodates plural affiliations while affirming their rightful place within the nation.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

This final chapter synthesizes the study's key insights, situating them within broader scholarly discussions on identity, belonging, and multiculturalism in Malaysia. It returns to the research questions that shaped the inquiry and evaluates how the findings address them, while also considering their broader significance in academic, practical, and policy contexts. Building on the lived experiences of the Siamese community in Terbak Village, the chapter reflects on how identity is negotiated and sustained within a dominant cultural framework. These experiences help frame the study's concluding argument and contribute to a more inclusive understanding of national belonging.

More than a summary, this chapter provides space for critical reflection on the community's resilience, the methodological and analytical limitations of the research, and potential directions for future inquiry and engagement. It seeks to bring together the main arguments of the study, combining careful analysis with an understanding of the everyday realities faced by the community.

In the final subchapter, I present a thesis statement that succinctly captures the study's core argument in response to the research problem. This statement integrates the study's empirical findings with its conceptual framework, offering a concise articulation of how the Kelantan Siamese experience and navigate national belonging in a context of cultural narrowing.

This chapter is structured as follows: Subchapter 7.1 introduces the chapter's aims and scope. Subchapter 7.2 offers a summary of the study's key findings, framed through the core analytical chapters and situated in relation to the research questions. It also briefly revisits the research approach to contextualize the findings. Subchapter 7.3 outlines the theoretical and practical contributions of the research. Subchapter 7.4 discusses the study's limitations and proposes recommendations for future research. Finally, Subchapter 7.5 presents the thesis statement that encapsulates the core argument of the study.

7.1 Summary of Study

This study examines how the Siamese community in Terbak Village, Tumpat, Kelantan, negotiates its ethnic identity within a sociopolitical environment characterized by Malay-Muslim norms and values. As a researcher and an observer deeply engaged in the field, I was particularly drawn to understanding how this small, historically rooted community, comprising just roughly 1% of Kelantan's population, managed to uphold its distinct cultural heritage while living in a state governed by Islamic values and facing national policies that exhibit assimilative tendencies.

In pursuing this inquiry, I adopted a qualitative ethnographic approach, conducting long-term fieldwork that included participant observation and in-depth interviews. The study focuses on Wat Phikulthong and its TLDCS, both of which serve as important cultural, religious, and educational institutions for the community. The research engaged key figures from the community, including villagers, schoolteachers, and leaders from the temple, the school, and the wider

community. My methodological stance was interpretivist, aiming to understand the lived experiences and subjective meanings that the Siamese of Terbak attach to their dual identity as both Siamese and Malaysian. What emerges from the field is a rich and complex story of cultural resilience. All three analytical chapters (i.e., Chapters 4-6) reveal that the Siamese of Terbak engage in identity negotiation that is not merely reactive, but purposeful and rooted in lived strategies of adaptation and continuity.

Chapter 4 examines how the community negotiates identity under Malay-Muslim dominance. It is found that language, as both a cultural marker and a framework shaping their worldview, along with religion and social integration, operate as key domains of negotiation. Rather than abandoning their heritage, the Siamese actively engage in AIP, striking a balance between cultural resilience and adaptive integration to maintain both survival and coexistence within the sociopolitical context of postcolonial Malaysia. Institutions like Wat Phikulthong, TLDCS, and PKSn serve as cultural anchors, while interethnic interactions show selective openness that enables both cultural survival and peaceful coexistence.

Chapter 5 focuses on generational dynamics and the extent of identity shifts. It reveals that while young people increasingly operate in multilingual and multivalent environments within the Kelantan context, their Siamness remains largely intact. The shifts observed, such as the expansion from Thai-Malay bilingualism to multilingualism, the formalization of literacy practices, changes in intergenerational interaction patterns, and the selective incorporation of Chinese, Malay, and global cultural influences, reflect identity rearticulation and

consolidation, rather than cultural loss. These evolving practices operationalize adaptive integration, where community members selectively adopt modern influences to reinforce, rather than abandon, their foundational values.

Chapter 6 explores how the community relates to Malaysian national identity. While the Siamese express a sincere sense of belonging through civic duty, their experience highlights the friction of performative multiculturalism, where symbolic inclusion often masks structural marginalization. The community's aspirations call for a deeper, more genuine recognition within the national narrative that acknowledges difference not as a challenge, but as meaningful contributions to Malaysia's rich and pluralistic fabric.

7.2 Theoretical and Practical Contributions

This study offers valuable insights into identity studies, minority integration, and multicultural policy in Southeast Asia. By examining the lived experiences of the Siamese community in Terbak Village, a minority group within Malaysia's multiracial and multicultural context, this research extends beyond conventional assimilation models. It introduces the concept of *adaptive identity positioning*. Unlike static models, this framework explains how minority groups actively curate their visibility to navigate dominant cultural landscapes. Central to this positioning is a strategy of *adaptive integration*. This concept refines Berry's (1997) model by highlighting a community's capacity to adjust to asymmetrical power dynamics not by merging, but by strategically aligning with sociopolitical conditions while insulating their core cultural practices. Through this strategy, the Siamese maintain core cultural practices, such as language, religion, and

ritual, while selectively adopting civic behaviors that enable them to participate meaningfully in national life.

Furthermore, the study contributes to policy discourse by conceptualizing the environment of constraint as *performative multiculturalism*. This term creates a specific lens for analyzing settings where diversity is symbolically celebrated yet constrained by dominant norms. By juxtaposing this authority-defined reality against the community's everyday-defined resilience, this research offers a robust model for understanding identity negotiation in non-secular, majoritarian states. In this context, their identity is carefully curated and projected as a cohesive front, adeptly reinforcing difference while navigating dominant cultural expectations. These conceptualizations add a new dimension to existing models by shedding light on the complex and dynamic nature of identity negotiation, revealing how minority resilience is sustained through strategic positioning, intergenerational consolidation, and grounded national belonging within culturally majoritarian settings.

Three ethnographically derived frameworks, grounded in the specific lived experiences of the Siamese community in Terbak Village, form the core of this study's theoretical contribution, offering context-sensitive insights into minority identity negotiation:

1. The Adaptive Identity Positioning Framework (for RQ1; Chapter 4)
2. The Identity Shift Management Framework (for RQ2; Chapter 5)

3. The National Identity Framework (for RQ3; Chapter 6)

The Adaptive Identity Positioning Framework illustrates how minority communities strike a balance between cultural preservation and strategic adaptation. It advances existing acculturation theories by highlighting agency, fluidity, and intentionality in identity work, explaining how Terbak's Siamese community moves beyond passive models of cultural absorption. The Identity Shift Management Framework captures how cultural shifts across generations are negotiated rather than actively accepted, offering a layered perspective on intergenerational dynamics, hybridity, and cultural resilience. Finally, the National Identity Framework of the Siamese community reveals how its members articulate a grounded, civic-oriented Malaysian identity that contrasts with the state's more prescriptive, symbolic, performative multiculturalism. Together, these frameworks enrich theoretical discourse by providing empirically grounded, adaptable, and scalable models of minority identity formation.

In addition to the frameworks above, this study presents a specific typology of identity for the Siamese of Terbak Village, clarifying the hierarchical nature of their sense of belonging. While distinct from Carstens' (2005) model, the findings reveal a four-tiered typology that is activated situationally through the adaptive identity positioning strategy:

1. Ethnocultural Identity (The Core): Defined by "Siamness," the Chehe dialect, and Theravada Buddhism. This is the primary layer being sustained and defended against assimilative pressures. It is the anchor of

the community's resilience, maintained strictly within the wat and domestic spheres.

2. Territorial Identity (Local/Tumpat): Anchored in the concept of ancestral land and local heritage. This layer distinguishes the Kelantan Siamese from Thais across the border, grounding them as “sons of the soil” in Tumpat, regardless of their official status.
3. Civic National Identity (Malaysian): Characterized by loyalty to the King, the Rukun Negara, and peaceful coexistence. This layer is constructed to facilitate integration and social harmony.
4. Bureaucratic Identity (Bumiputera): Identified as a symbolic or nominal status. This layer is the least internalized and is negotiated strategically to access state resources, serving as a functional tool rather than a source of deep emotional belonging.

This typology demonstrates that identity for the Siamese is not a monolithic construct but a hierarchy of layers. The study concludes that the ethnocultural layer is prioritized for preservation (inward-facing), while the civic and bureaucratic layers are prioritized for adaptation (outward-facing).

On a practical level, the study offers valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and civil society stakeholders. It highlights the critical role of community-led institutions in sustaining minority identity while fostering national belonging. Policymakers should recognize and support such grassroots

initiatives as key components of an inclusive multicultural framework. The findings also call for a shift from performative multiculturalism toward structural inclusion, emphasizing the need for equitable representation, resource allocation, and protection of minority rights.

For minority communities themselves, this research demonstrates that holding both an ethnic and a national identity is not only possible but also that these identities can coexist as mutually reinforcing parts of a whole, with each identity supporting and complementing the other in everyday life. The Siamese experience illustrates that cultural resilience and civic participation are not contradictory but can coexist when institutional conditions allow. By documenting how identity is actively managed, adapted, and affirmed, this study offers a hopeful and practical vision of multicultural citizenship rooted in mutual respect, everyday diversity, and institutional fairness.

7.3 Study Limitations

While this study offers rich ethnographic insights into the Siamese community of Kelantan's Terbak Village, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations and outline potential directions for future research.

The fieldwork period of close to 200 days was substantial and in line with what several methodological references suggest is sufficient for ethnographic immersion (e.g., Bernard, 2017; Bryman, 2016; Fetterman, 2019; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). While I found this duration adequate for establishing trust, observing everyday activities and life, and generating nuanced insights, I also

recognize that a more extended field engagement might have offered additional longitudinal depth, particularly in tracing seasonal rhythms and slow-moving sociocultural changes. This tension is common in ethnographic work, where the desire for extended immersion must be balanced against practical constraints. In my case, the decision to conclude my fieldwork after nearly 200 days was shaped by analytical sufficiency and the need to return to my professional responsibilities.

Another limitation lies in my positionality. As a participant-observer, my presence and interactions inevitably shaped participants' responses, reflecting the "observer effect" that arises when the researcher is the primary instrument in qualitative inquiry (Patton, 2014). I was, however, continually mindful of my presence's impact on participants' behavior and narratives, and I often engaged in reflexive practices to assess my role. Still, my background, assumptions, and the relationships I formed in the field shaped the interpretive lens through which I viewed events and conversations. As both observer and participant, such a dual role was valuable but also introduced unavoidable biases.

The qualitative, single-site design of this study limits the generalizability of its findings. As an ethnographic study focused on one village, the insights are context-specific, reflecting the distinctive social, cultural, and institutional dynamics of Terbak. While this design prioritizes depth and thick description (Geertz, 1973) over breadth, it enhances transferability by allowing readers to assess the relevance of these interpretations to other comparable settings. The conceptual patterns and interpretive frameworks developed here retain analytic value beyond this site and may inform hypothesis-building or future comparative

investigations. Taken together, these limitations highlight research opportunities that extend the temporal scope, employ comparative designs, or explore additional methodological approaches.

7.4 Recommendations for Future Studies

If this work were to be expanded, one clear direction would be to extend the duration of ethnographic engagement. While my nearly 200-day immersion enabled me to capture a wide range of sociocultural practices and establish rapport with participants, a longer-term ethnography, ideally over a full year or more, would make it possible to see slower, seasonal changes that this shorter research period could only capture in part (e.g., Bernard, 2017; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2009). Extended engagement could also reveal how social dynamics shift in response to broader structural or policy changes, particularly in areas such as cultural preservation, language use, or state-community relations.

Another promising direction would be comparative ethnography. The Siamese communities studied here are embedded within a specific local context, but similar communities exist in other villages within the same state and across different states in Malaysia. A comparative approach could help illuminate how geographic, political (e.g., differing state-level political contexts), or economic variations influence the expressions of identity, interethnic relations, or engagement with official institutions among different Siamese populations. Such a study could also shed light on how shared cultural traditions are maintained or adapted across different locations, and how state policies or local demographics might influence the ongoing practice of these cultures. By comparing multiple

field sites, this approach would provide a richer, more differentiated understanding of the wider social and cultural environment in which Siamese communities live.

Additionally, while the specific focus of this study is on the Siamese community in Terbak Village, many of the patterns observed, ranging from negotiated belonging to cultural resilience and experiences of institutional exclusion, may resonate with the experiences of other minority or non-Muslim Bumiputera groups in Malaysia. Communities such as the Orang Asli, Indian Christians, and East Malaysian indigenous peoples like the Dayaks and Kadazan-Dusun also navigate sociopolitical landscapes shaped by Malay-Muslim dominance and institutional marginalization. For example, the Orang Asli experience enduring legal non-recognition and paternalistic development trajectories despite Malaysia's formal endorsement of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which outlines Indigenous rights to cultural preservation, land, and self-determination (Nicholas et al., 2010). Similarly, within East Malaysian Bumiputera communities, particularly among non-Muslim indigenous groups like the Kadazan-Dusun in Sabah, affirmative policies such as the NEP often fail to translate into genuine resource access or political inclusion, especially when compared to their Muslim Bumiputera counterparts (Tangit, 2017). Exploring these parallels across groups and sites would deepen understanding of national minority identity negotiation in Malaysia.

Another avenue for future research involves broadening methodological approaches. While this study's strength lies in its ethnographic depth,

incorporating complementary methods could provide new perspectives. For instance, surveys informed by the conceptual frameworks developed here could identify broader patterns in language adoption and retention, identity negotiation, and attitudes toward institutions among Siamese or other minority populations. Social network analysis could offer a structural view of interpersonal and inter-village connections that shape community life. When combined with continued ethnographic or other qualitative work, such mixed-methods designs would strengthen triangulation and foster dialogue between insider narratives and more systematic, generalizable data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

In acknowledging these recommendations, my intention is not to undermine the contributions of this study, but to recognize the inherent complexities of ethnographic research. Shorter field durations, single-site focus, and the reliance on qualitative methods inevitably leave some questions unresolved. These limitations highlight opportunities for extended engagement, comparative investigations, and methodological diversification, all of which could deepen understanding of minority identity negotiation and cultural resilience in Malaysia. By situating future studies within these directions, researchers can build on the insights generated here while exploring new contexts, perspectives, and levels of analysis.

7.5 Conclusion

As this study draws to a close, it is essential to revisit the broader context that informed its inquiry: the gradual shift away from Malaysia's foundational

multicultural ideals toward a more centralized Malay-Islamic national identity, a shift that continues to raise questions about cultural inclusion and pluralism. While official narratives continue to frame the nation through the language of “unity in diversity,” developments such as affirmative action policies, the Islamization of state institutions, and cultural initiatives that emphasize dominant ethnoreligious narratives reflect a narrowing of multicultural space and the growing prominence of Malay-Muslim norms in defining national belonging. For minority communities like the Siamese of Terbak Village, these dynamics are not just discursive or theoretical; they shape the community's lived reality, particularly in Kelantan, where Islamic norms are more deeply embedded in governance and everyday life.

This research, situated within the broader debate on cultural homogenization and ethnic marginalization in Malaysia, has explored how the Kelantan Siamese, despite their status as non-Muslim Bumiputera, grapple with sociopolitical invisibility and pressures to conform, even as they strive to preserve their cultural and religious distinctiveness. The subsequent discussion revisits the key findings of this study by addressing the research questions, showing how the Siamese engage in complex identity negotiations that reflect both cultural resilience and adaptation within a system structured around the norms and expectations of Malay-Muslim identity.

In addressing RQ1, it is evident that the community's identity negotiation aligns with Berry's (1997) acculturation strategy of integration, whereby individuals or groups maintain key aspects of their cultural heritage while simultaneously engaging with the larger society. For the Siamese of Terbak, this

process is marked by selective adaptation rather than total conformity, as they navigate and preserve core cultural practices within a predominantly Malay-Muslim sociopolitical context. The Siamese of Terbak maintain core cultural practices, such as Thai-Buddhist rituals and customs, Thai language education, and communal festivals, not simply as inherited traditions preserved across generations.

These practices serve as meaningful, ongoing expressions and negotiations of identity, and when interpreted ethnographically through thick description (Geertz, 1973), they reveal the deep-seated meanings that support their cultural resilience. This practice reflects what I put forth in my thesis as adaptive identity positioning, a dynamic process through which the community balances cultural resilience with what is conceptualized as adaptive integration into the Malay-Muslim sociopolitical context. This positioning enables the Siamese to participate in national life while safeguarding their cultural distinctiveness, reflecting a conscious and situated negotiation of identity within a majoritarian environment.

Concerning identity shifts (RQ2), the study found that change does occur, particularly across generations, but it is subtle, negotiated, and rarely linear. This intergenerational dynamic reflects an active process of identity rearticulation and consolidation. What emerges is not cultural loss, but a dynamic hybrid fluency across cultural, linguistic, and social spheres. Such fluency is fostered by embracing multilingualism and, significantly, by strategic engagement with national educational pathways that enable integration without assimilation. Broader social participation further reinforces a cohesive communal identity.

Rather than signaling cultural erosion, these shifts reveal a resilient repositioning of identity rooted in Siamese tradition while adapting to the evolving Kelantan context.

RQ3, which explores how the Siamese conceive of Malaysian national identity, offers compelling insights. Rather than retreating from the national narrative, the community actively seeks deeper inclusion, engaging with national symbols, institutions, and discourses in ways that affirm both their cultural distinctiveness and their place within Malaysia. Their understanding of Malaysian-ness is grounded in civic responsibility, respect for pluralism, and mutual recognition. Yet, their experience illustrates how multicultural rhetoric can fall short, acknowledging diversity in form but not in substantive equity. While the community participates in national rituals and fulfills the responsibilities of citizenship, its members continue to encounter marginalization that reflects the dominance of a Malay-Muslim national imaginary. Their narratives point to a desire not so much for special treatment as a non-Muslim Bumiputera group but meaningful recognition within a genuinely inclusive national framework.

Ultimately, this study reveals that the Siamese of Terbak Village embody a model of adaptive integration that preserves cultural integrity without being absorbed into assimilation. Their lived experiences offer an interesting counter-narrative, resisting binary framings of cultural resistance versus complete absorption into the dominant power structures. Their identity work reflects a subtle and strategic responsiveness to their sociopolitical environment, which this study characterizes as an adaptive mode of positioning that balances cultural

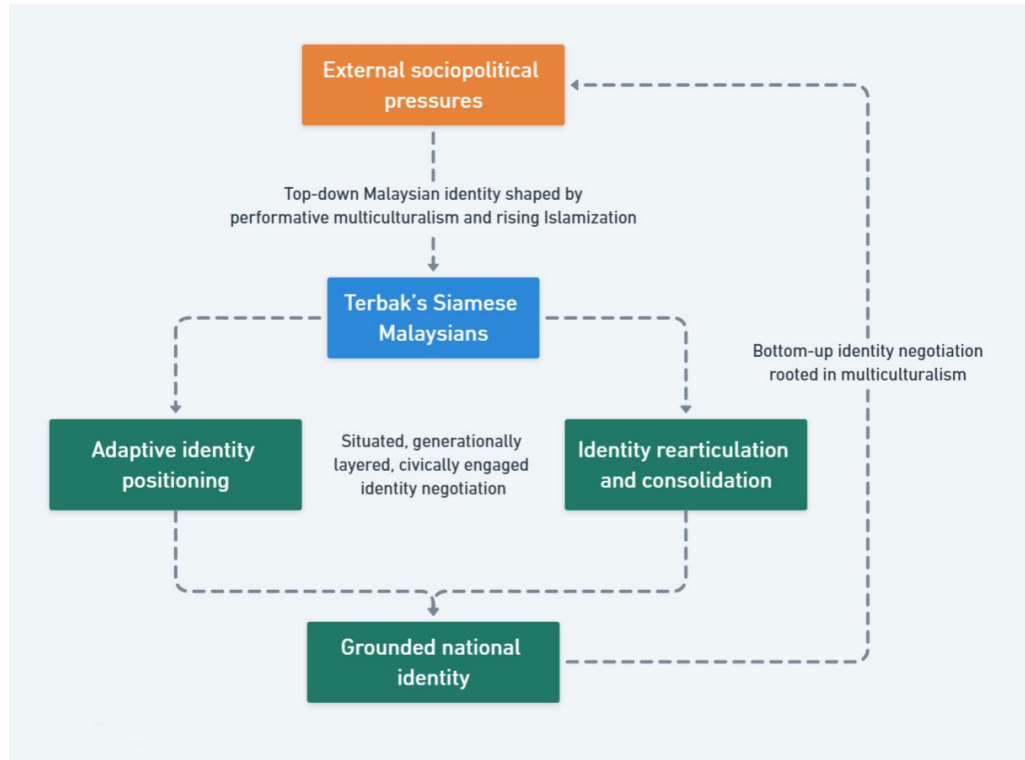
continuity with context-sensitive engagement. This locally grounded negotiation reveals how selective adaptation, hybrid fluency, and civic participation quietly contest Malaysia's top-down version of multiculturalism, a system that, as Shamsul (1996) observes, manages cultural plurality from above while leaving structural inequalities intact.

The thesis statement that emerges from this study is as follows: identity negotiation among the Siamese of Terbak is neither static nor oppositional in the sense of rejecting dominant sociopolitical norms entirely, but a situated, generationally layered, and civically engaged process conducted within the uneven power field of postcolonial Malaysia. Through everyday cultural practices, identity rearticulation and consolidation, strategic adaptive identity positioning, and grounded expressions of national belonging that affirm both Thai heritage and Malaysian nationhood, the community adeptly navigates the pressures of invisibility and marginalization inherent in a system characterized by performative multiculturalism and Malay-Muslim dominance.

This thesis demonstrates that, amid narrowing multicultural space, minority resilience is enacted not through withdrawal or confrontation, but through strategic adaptive integration and positioning that reclaims space within the nation on the community's own terms, challenging top-down narratives of identity from the ground up. This logic is visually synthesized in the final analytical framework (Figure 7.1), which illustrates how Terbak's Siamese community negotiates identity through situated and adaptive strategies that reframe national belonging as contingent on more than symbolic inclusion.

Figure 7.1

Final Analytical Framework: Identity Negotiation among Terbak's Siamese Malaysians



Note. Source: Developed for this study. A larger, high-resolution version of this figure is available in Appendix X.

Their lived experience makes clear that meaningful pluralism cannot be achieved through performative multiculturalism alone. It must be grounded in the structural incorporation of minority communities as co-constructors of the nation's civic identity and collective future.

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APPENDIX I

SUMMARY OF KEY LITERATURE ON SIAMESE MALAYSIANS

N o	Author (Year)	Title	Research Method	Research Subject/Target Population	Location	Research Objectives	Research Framework	Research Findings	Research Significance	Recommendations for Future Studies:
1.	Ab. Aziz Mohd. Zin (1998)	<i>Kajian Tentang Non-Muslim Keturunan Siam di Kelantan</i> [A Study of the non-Muslim Siamese in Kelantan]	Data collection through surveys, interviews, and observations	Siamese Buddhists in 20 Thai temples and villages	Three districts in Kelantan, Malaysia, namely Tumpat, Bachok, Pasir Mas, Pasir Puteh and Tanah Merah	To study the religious understanding, practices, and cultural interactions of the Siamese Buddhist community in Kelantan	Sociological and ethnographic study focusing on religion, cultural assimilation, and inter- community relationships	- The Siamese community in Kelantan predominantly practices Theravada Buddhism but with varying levels of religious adherence - Many Siamese Buddhists lack strong adherence to rituals and religious teachings - Cultural misunderstandings and	Highlights the challenges of religious and cultural integration and provides insights for fostering better inter-community relationships in Kelantan	Not provided

								negative perceptions between the Malay and Siamese communities exist, with Siamese Buddhists often disliking perceived impositions by Malay Muslims • Despite differences, many Siamese view inter-community relations as generally neutral or good		
2.	Alexander Horstmann (2005)	Dual Ethnic Minorities and the Local Reworking of Citizenship at the	Ethnographic research with participant observation, interviews, and analysis of border-	Thai-speaking Muslims in Satun (Thailand) and Thai Buddhists in Kelantan	Thailand-Malaysian border, focusing on Satun (Thailand) and	• To analyze the practices of dual citizenship among ethnic minorities	Citizenship as a social practice negotiated within cultural, social, and power	• Dual citizenship allows ethnic minorities to navigate between Thai and Malaysian	Highlights the role of dual citizenship and border-crossing networks in reworking	Not provided

		Thailand-Malaysian Border	crossing practices and citizenship dynamics	(Malaysia) involved in border-crossing networks and dual citizenship practices	Kelantan (Malaysia)	at the Thailand-Malaysian border • To explore how local reworking of citizenship enables ethnic minorities to navigate constraints imposed by the state • To examine the role of border-crossing networks in shaping ethnic identity and survival strategies	relations; emphasizes post-national belonging in borderlands	systems for personal and economic advantage • Border-crossing networks and kinship ties are central to survival and identity maintenance in a hostile state environment • Ethnic minorities use flexible citizenship to counter state-imposed limitations and discrimination • Dual citizenship reflects the resilience and agency of border communities despite	traditional notions of sovereignty and citizenship in multicultural settings	
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								challenges from state sovereignty • The borderland is both a limiting and empowering space for these communities, facilitating cultural fluidity and identity negotiation		
3.	Amnuay at al. (2019)	The Role in Politics of Malaysian of Thai Race	Qualitative research involving field research study of relevant documents, observation of social and political activities, and interviews with key informants, including	Malaysian people of Siamese descent	Malaysia, particularly the states of Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan	• To study the political role of Malaysian people of Siamese descent • To examine the factors that led to the creation of the political role of	The study examines the political, social, economic, and cultural factors influencing the political role of Siamese Malaysian descent, employing inductive and descriptive analysis	• Siamese descent Malaysians have limited political roles, primarily as political party members at community levels, senators for ethnic representation, and as voters	Highlights the need for increased political engagement and recognition of minority groups, specifically the Siamese ethnic group in Malaysia, for equitable	• Establishing political parties specifically for the Siamese community to strengthen their representation • Studying peaceful and participatory

			local leaders, community leaders, Malaysian citizens of Siamese descent, religious leaders, and academics			Malaysian people of Siamese descent To create a model for establishing a suitable political role for Malaysian people of Siamese descent		- Factors influencing their political roles include political system characteristics, economic status, social history, education, ethnic group dynamics, and cultural aspects including religion and traditions - Despite limited roles, there are opportunities for Siamese descent Malaysians to engage politically through community and senatorial representations	representation	ry political movements as alternatives for minority group empowerment Exploring how democratic political cultures can empower minority groups
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4.	Chuapram & Tapparut (2022)	Plurality of the Vernacular Houses of Orang Siam in the Northern States of Malaysia	Qualitative research including field surveys and documentary analysis	Siamese in the Northern States of Malaysia, specifically Kedah and Kelantan.	Northern States of Malaysia, particularly Kedah and Kelantan	To identify the characteristics of vernacular houses of Orang Siam, their similarities and differences, and the reasons behind these attributes	The study examined physical, environmental, cultural, and political factors influencing the architecture and adaptation of Orang Siam houses	• The vernacular house in Kedah adapted due to external factors including political and administrative changes • Most houses in Kelantan maintained old patterns except for repairs and maintenance • Houses exhibit features like expanded semi-detached structures and gable roofs, reflecting influences from Southern Thai Muslim architecture	Highlights how regional vernacular architecture can represent a mixture of cultural adaptations and the preservation of ethnic and regional identities through architectural styles	Not provided
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5.	Eh Tat & Azizi Bahauddin (2019)	Rebuilding Place with The Siamese Cultural and Architectural Values: Wat Machimmar am, Kelantan	Qualitative research using the phenomenology method, involving interviews, document reviews, and observations of the wat (temple) area and architecture	The Siamese Malaysian community, specifically those associated with Wat Machimmar am in Kelantan	Kampung Jubakar Darat, Tumpat, Kelantan, Malaysia	• To examine how Siamese cultural identity contributes to the rebuilding of Wat Machimmar am • To analyze the influence of Siamese cultural traditions, rituals, and beliefs on architectural values	A cultural and architectural framework focusing on Siamese Buddhist identity and its integration into the temple's architectural and spatial design	• Wat Machimmar am serves as a religious, cultural, and social hub for the Siamese community • The temple's architecture reflects Siamese identity through intricate Thai artistic elements and space planning • Cultural traditions like ordination ceremonies and festivals (e.g., Loy Krathong) emphasize the wat's role in preserving and expressing Siamese culture	Highlights the vital role of Siamese cultural identity in sustaining their traditions and adapting religious spaces within a multi-ethnic, predominantly Muslim context	Not provided
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								• Adaptation of Siamese culture to the local Malay-Muslim majority is evident in their practices and rituals • The wat's rebuilding integrates both heritage preservation and adaptation to the needs of modern Siamese Buddhists		
6.	Golomb (1978)	Brokers of Morality: Thai Ethnic Adaptation in a Rural Malaysian Setting (Monograph based on Golomb's thesis)	Ethnographic research combining participant observation, structured and unstructured interviews, and analysis of cultural and social interactions	Thai ethnic minority communities, particularly in "Siam Village" and their interactions with neighboring Malay and Chinese	Kelantan, Malaysia	• To explore Thai ethnic adaptation in a multiethnic rural Malaysian environment • To analyze socioeconomic,	• Focused on ethnicity as an organizational strategy to define cultural boundaries, analyze adaptation	• Ethnic identity is maintained through distinct cultural boundary-markers, including language, diet, religion, and	Highlights the interplay between culture, economy, and ethnicity in fostering minority community resilience and	Not provided

				communitie s		cultural, and interethnic interactions among Thai, Malay, and Chinese communiti es	n processes, and identify intergrou p relations through economic and social interactio ns	• traditional practices • Economic survival strategies are adapted through interethnic complementarities, such as trade and labor-sharing between Thai, Malay, and Chinese communities • Religious institutions, especially Buddhist temples, serve as central hubs for social cohesion and cultural preservation within Thai communities • Interethnic interactions are often shaped by	adaptability within a pluralistic society	
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								complementarity in economic roles but marked by cultural exclusivity in other areas to maintain ethnic identity • Thai communities leverage cultural distinctiveness as a strategy for economic survival and adaptability in a predominantly Malay-Muslim region		
7.	Johnson (2002)	Movement and Identity Construction Amongst Kelantan's Thai community	Ethnographic fieldwork, including observations and interviews	Villagers of Baan Yai and Baan Chaang Doi	Kelantan, Malaysia	To explore how Kelantanese Thais construct and articulate their ethnocultural identity through cross-border	Incorporates Barth's concept of ethnic boundaries and Donnan & Wilson's perspectives	• Cross-border movements help Kelantanese Thais reinforce their cultural identity while	Highlights the interplay between nation-state influences and community	Not provided

						interactions and cultural practices	on borderlands and nation-states	engaging with Thai traditions and rituals • Thai media, including television and images of the Thai monarchy, plays a central role in shaping cultural perceptions • Kelantanese Thais assert their distinctiveness from both Malaysian and southern Thai counterparts while blending influences from both regions	agency in shaping identity in borderland areas	
8.	Johnson (2010)	New Mosaics on Old Walls: Intimacy	Ethnographic research, combining participant	Thai ethnic minority communities in	Kelantan, Malaysia	• To explore the role of religious	Examines cultural intimacy and materiality in	• Architecture serves as a visible	Highlights the role of architectural forms in	Not provided

		and Architecture along the Malaysian-Thai Frontier	observation, interviews, and analysis of architectural forms and their sociopolitical significance	Kelantan, Malaysia, specifically Thai-populated villages like Baan Phra Suung		architecture in expressing Thai ethnic identity in a predominantly Malay-Muslim context • To analyze the interplay between local traditions and national ideologies in architectural practices • To investigate how material forms of religious buildings mediate cultural and	the context of borderland communities, focusing on religious architecture as a manifestation of identity and historical affiliation	marker of Thai cultural identity and pride amid ethnic marginalization • The transition from traditional Kelantanese styles to Central Thai architectural forms reflects the influence of Thai national ideologies • Local buildings embody a tension between preserving indigenous traditions and adopting standardized Thai aesthetics • Thai Buddhist	sustaining ethnic identity and mediating the tensions between local traditions and broader national narratives	
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						political belonging		temples are sites for cultural negotiations, emphasizing pride in local heritage while seeking national and international recognition Religious materiality fosters a shared sense of identity that bridges affiliations with both Thailand and Malaysia		
9.	Johnson (2012)	The Buddha on Mecca's Verandah: Encounters, Mobilities, and Histories Along the Malaysian-Thai Border (Book)	Ethnographic research, combining participant observation, historical analysis, and interviews	Thai Buddhist communities in Kelantan	Kelantan, Malaysia	- To analyze the role of Buddhist practices in shaping Thai identity in Kelantan - To explore the interactions	Focused on cultural mobility, borderland dynamics, and the interplay of religion and ethnicity in identity formation	- Buddhist temples and rituals are central to sustaining Thai identity in Kelantan - Cross-border interactions play a significant	Highlights the resilience and adaptability of minority communities in maintaining identity through religious	Not provided

						between Kelantanese Thais and the broader Muslim-majority society • To understand the historical and contemporary mobility of Thai Buddhist communities across the border		role in maintaining cultural connections with Thailand • Kelantanese Thais navigate dual identities as Malaysians and as part of the broader Thai cultural sphere • Religious and cultural practices act as a medium for asserting identity and mediating interethnic relations • Kelantanese Thais demonstrate cultural fluidity, adapting to both local and transnational influences	and cultural practices amid sociopolitical and geographical constraints	
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10.	Kaeosanit (2014)	Communication for Maintaining Ethnic Identity of the Siamese Malaysian Community in Malaysia	Qualitative research using in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentary analysis	14 formal and informal community leaders and 30 Siamese Malaysians involved in cultural activities in the villages of Plairamai (Titiakia) and Mai Son (Paya Mak Insun) in Pendang district, Kedah	Pendang district, Kedah, Malaysia	• To Study communication patterns for preserving cultural identity • To analyze the role of personal media in preserving cultural identity • To investigate the status and role of ritual media in creating cultural pride and identity	Four contexts were explored—historical, cultural, relational, and communication—to understand the dynamics of preserving ethnic identity.	• Communication patterns include cultural learning, community participation, and enhancing identity through personal, folk, and mass media • Rituals and traditional practices foster spiritual and cultural values, maintain traditions, and promote community solidarity • Personal and ritual media play crucial roles in strengthening identity and dignity	Demonstrates the importance of communication strategies in maintaining ethnic identity and ensuring the dignity of Siamese Malaysian communities amid cultural diversity	• Investigating the process of identity formation and the role of communication in identity construction • Exploring communication patterns among Siamese Malaysians and other ethnic groups in varying contexts • Analyzing how interactions shape the ethnic identity dynamics of Siamese
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								Factors influencing ritual survival include beliefs, leadership, lineage systems, government policy, and media influence		Malaysians
11.	Kaeosanit (2016)	Dynamic Construction of the Siamese Malaysians' Ethnic Identity, Malaysia (Thesis)	Qualitative research using focus group interviews, in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentary research	Siamese Malaysian communities in Malaysia	Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan, and Terengganu	To study the dynamic construction of Siamese Malaysians' ethnic identity through communication and to analyze the forms and processes of identity construction in the context of the Malaysian nation-state	Constructionism, emphasizing the dynamic and negotiable nature of ethnic identity shaped through communication and sociopolitical contexts	- The ethnic identity of Siamese Malaysians is dynamically constructed through communication processes involving language, religion, and cultural practices - Identity is negotiated and maintained in response to sociopolitical	Highlights the adaptability and resilience of Siamese Malaysians in maintaining ethnic identity within Malaysia's multicultural society	Not provided

								and cultural influences, with different generations perceiving ethnic identity in varied ways • Religious and cultural practices, such as festivals and temple activities, play crucial roles in sustaining community identity		
12.	Kaeosanit et al. (2016)	Ethnic Identity of Siamese-Malaysian in Malaysia	A qualitative study using a constructivist approach, including document analysis and field observations	The Siamese Malaysian ethnic group residing in Malaysia	Malaysia, with a focus on states with significant Siamese Malaysian populations (e.g., Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan,	• To analyze the dynamics of communication, identity, and ethnic boundaries among the Siamese Malaysian community	Based on the constructivist theory, emphasizing the fluidity of identity influenced by context and conditions	• Siamese Malaysians actively construct and adapt their ethnic identity in response to sociopolitical and cultural interactions	Provides insights into the mechanisms of ethnic identity construction and maintenance within a multicultural national framework	Not provided

					Terengganu)	• To examine the impact of sociopolitical and economic changes on the preservation of ethnic identity		• Communication plays a crucial role in maintaining and negotiating ethnic identity in a multicultural society • Political, economic, and social developments have impacted the strategies employed by Siamese Malaysians to sustain their identity • Integration with Malay-majority culture occurs alongside efforts to preserve distinct cultural traditions		
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								Ethnic identity is continuously negotiated and reshaped in line with historical and contextual changes		
13.	Kershaw (1979)	Menace and Reassurance in Malay Circumcision: A Note on Some Attitudes of Kelantan Thais	Ethnographic study, based on participant observation and analysis of cultural interactions between Kelantanese Thais and Malays	Kelantan Thai community, particularly from rural Thai settlements like Semerak in Pasir Puteh District	Kelantan, Malaysia	- To explore circumcision as an ethnic boundary-marker between Kelantanese Thais and Malays - To understand the cultural perceptions of circumcision among the Thai minority - To analyze the sociocultural	Focuses on cultural boundary-marking, ethnic identity, and sociocultural adaptation through rituals and practices	- Circumcision is perceived as a menacing ritual by the Kelantan Thai community and a deterrent against conversion to Islam - Increased Thai-Malay interaction due to modernization leads to both integration and concerns	Highlights the role of rituals in shaping ethnic boundaries and fostering resilience within minority communities against cultural assimilation	Not provided

						dynamics of integration and resistance in a pluralistic society		about cultural assimilation • Resistance to circumcision reinforces Thai cultural identity but also limits full societal integration • Conversion for intermarriage, often involving circumcision, is seen as a significant loss of Thai identity • Despite tension, reciprocal cultural practices (e.g., attendance at ceremonies) promote a level of coexistence		
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14.	Kershaw (1982)	A Little Drama of Ethnicity: Some Sociological Aspects of the Kelantan Manora	Ethnographic research, including participant observation, interviews, and historical analysis of the Kelantan Thai community	The Thai ethnic minority in Kelantan, Malaysia, including Thai-populated villages like Semerak and particularly focusing on Manora performers and their communities	Kelantan, Malaysia	• To explore the role of the Manora dramatic form in articulating ethnic identity among Kelantan Thais • To examine the sociological functions of Manora in interethnic relations between Thai and Malay communities • To analyze the adaptation of Manora amid cultural and economic	Focused on ethnicity, cultural adaptation, and performance arts as mechanisms for identity negotiation and intergroup relations	• Manora serves as both entertainment and a ritual with magical-religious functions, central to Kelantan Thai cultural identity. • It is a boundary-defining link between Thai and Malay communities, fostering coexistence but also cultural distinctiveness • Modernization and urban influences have contributed to the decline of Manora as younger generations prioritize	Highlights the dual role of cultural performances like Manora in preserving minority identities and mediating interethnic relations within a pluralistic society	Not provided
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						modernization		alternative economic and social opportunities • The adaptation of Manora for television and national cultural showcases has shifted its context, distancing it from its traditional community-based origins • The interplay between cultural preservation and adaptation illustrates both resilience and vulnerability within the Thai ethnic minority in Kelantan		
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15.	Kershaw (1969)	The Thais of Kelantan: A socio-political study of an ethnic outpost	Sociopolitical analysis combining participant observation, interviews, field research, and archival document reviews	The Buddhist Thai ethnic minority in Kelantan	Kelantan, Malaysia, particularly focusing on villages such as Baan Sambbrag and others in Pasir Puteh district	- To study the political integration of the Kelantan Thai as a minority ethnic group in Malaysia - To analyze how historical, cultural, and political factors influence their integration and identity	A historical and sociopolitical framework addressing the concepts of integration, assimilation, and identity within the plural society model	- The Kelantan Thai identity is deeply rooted in Buddhist religion and cultural traditions, which serve as key markers of their distinctiveness - Historical experiences under colonial rule fostered some level of integration with the broader Malay community while preserving cultural distinctiveness - Post-independence politics,	Highlights the complexities of minority integration in a plural society and the role of religion, culture, and political structures in shaping identity and assimilation	Not provided
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								characterized by the rise of Malay dominance, posed challenges to the integration and status of the Kelantan Thai community • Despite isolation from Thailand, the Kelantan Thai maintain cultural and linguistic ties that affect their sociopolitical dynamics within Malaysia • Political and economic pressures may lead to potential alienation if integrative		
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								measures are not reinforced		
16.	Khoruamdech . (2013)	Ordination Halls of Thai Temples in Kelantan, Malaysia in Rattanakosin Period	Qualitative research using document analysis and fieldwork	Thai Buddhist ordination halls in Kelantan	Kelantan, Malaysia	To explore the historical, artistic styles, and art relations of Thai ordination halls in Kelantan during the Rattanakosin period	Analyzes artistic and architectural styles across three distinct periods, comparing them to Thai traditional art and influences from Malay, Chinese, and Western styles	• Early ordination halls mixed with local Malay art styles (1782-1908) • Increased influence of traditional Thai art styles in later ordination halls, with some Chinese and Western styles still visible (1909-1956) • Modern period halls purely reflect traditional Thai art, with stylistic developments paralleling those in Thailand (1957-2007)	Highlights the cultural integration and evolution of Thai religious architecture in Malaysia, reflecting broader sociocultural interactions	Not provided

17.	Kuroda (2002)	Siamese in Kedah under nation-state making	Historical records, including documents from the National Archives of Malaysia, census data, and fieldwork conducted in the 1990s	Siamese (Thai Theravada Buddhists) and Samsam (Thai-speaking Malay Muslims) communities	Kedah, Malaysia, with specific focus on Pendang and surrounding districts	To reconstruct the historical experiences of the Siamese communities in Kedah and explore their adaptation during the transition to a nation-state	Historical and ethnographic analysis based on archival data, oral histories, and census records	• Siamese communities were concentrated around inland areas and Thai Buddhist temples • Post-1909 borders limited cultural and social exchanges, creating challenges for these communities • Samsams integrated into Malay Muslim society, while the Siamese remained distinct due to religious and cultural differences • Negative stereotypes	Highlights the historical and cultural dynamics of the Siamese in Kedah, illustrating the impacts of nation-state formation on minority groups	Not provided
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								and economic marginalization affected the Siamese communities		
18.	Kuroda (2005)	Malaysian Nation-making and Thai-speaking Buddhists in Kedah	Historical and ethnographic research using archival records, fieldwork observations (1990s), and historical census data	Thai-speaking Buddhists and Malay-speaking Sam Sams in Kedah	Kedah, Malaysia	To understand the historical experiences of Thai-speaking Buddhists in Kedah during nation-building and analyze their sociocultural and religious adaptation.	Historical review combined with field observations and comparative analysis with Thai-speaking Muslims.	• Thai-speaking Buddhists in Kedah are concentrated inland, near long-standing Thai temples • Migration and border changes influenced settlement patterns and cultural integration • Thai-speaking Buddhists face challenges in maintaining their cultural identity within a majority-	Explores the sociocultural impacts of nation-making on a minority group, shedding light on broader dynamics of borderland communities	Not provided

								Muslim nation-state		
19.	Kuroda (2015)	Inland People of Kedah; Thai Speaker in History	Historical analysis and fieldwork, including analysis of census data (1911) and interviews conducted intermittently from 1990 to 2009	Thai-speaking populations (Samsam and Siamese) in the inland regions of Kedah	Kedah, Malaysia	- To explore the historical governance and sociocultural dynamics of inland Kedah - To examine the integration and interaction of Thai-speaking populations within Kedah	Utilized historical census data, official documents, and field interviews to contextualize the sociopolitical and cultural histories of Kedah	- Inland Kedah historically remained peripheral to the Sultan's governance, with limited control and socioeconomic integration - Samsam (Thai-speaking Muslims) maintained distinct cultural identities, including language use, until the mid-20th century - Siamese (Thai-speaking Buddhists) exhibited distinct habitation patterns and	Highlights the sociocultural diversity and historical complexities of Kedah, emphasizing its role as a crossroads between Malay and Thai influences	Further investigation into pre-18th-century data and the socioeconomic integration of Thai-speaking populations into broader Kedah society

								maintained cultural practices centered around Thai Buddhist temples • Migration and settlement patterns of Thai-speaking populations were influenced by sociopolitical and environmental factors in south Thailand • Inland Kedah represents a sociocultural corridor distinct from the coastal, Malay-dominated areas		
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20.	Kuroda (2019)	A Migrants' World from South Thailand to Kedah — A History of Inland Kedah	Historical analysis utilizing census data (1911), fieldwork interviews (1990s-2009), and archival materials	Thai-speaking Muslims (Samsam) and Siamese communities	Inland Kedah, Malaysia, focusing on historical migration and settlement patterns	To explore how the people of Kedah historically perceived their geopolitical environment and how migration shaped inland Kedah's society	Historical and demographic study using census data, archival sources, and interviews	• Kedah was a strategic port polity with significant inland settlements by Thai-speaking communities • Inland Kedah (Bukit) was beyond the Sultan's full control, populated by Samsam and Siamese migrants from south Thailand • The Thai-speaking Muslims and Siamese communities played a critical role in the region's cultural and social dynamics	Highlights the sociocultural dynamics of migration and its lasting impact on Kedah's inland communities, emphasizing historical geopolitical relationships between Kedah and south Thailand	Not provided
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								Historical ties to Siam influenced local place names, language, and Buddhist temples		
21.	Likhitthammarot & Samathi (2021)	Malaysia's Bumiputera Policy and the Rights of Siamese People in Kedah and Kelantan	Qualitative research	8 key informants including community leaders, religious leaders, special state executive officials, and Siamese individuals knowledgeable about the Bumiputera policy in Kedah and Kelantan	Kedah and Kelantan, Malaysia	- To study the rights of Siamese people under the Bumiputera policy in Kedah and Kelantan - To examine the advantages and disadvantages of the Bumiputera policy for the Siamese people - To identify management	NIL	- Siamese people receive some rights under the Bumiputera policy in economic (e.g., purchasing ASB stocks, Bank Rakyat shares), social (e.g., healthcare, religious freedom), and political aspects (e.g., eligibility for political positions) - Advantages: Access to	Highlights disparities in rights between Siamese and Malays under the Bumiputera policy and calls for gradual legal reforms to ensure equality	- Further research on minority policies in Malaysia, covering economic, social, and political aspects - Comparative studies of the economic, social, and political conditions of Siamese people in Malaysia and displaced Thai

						strategies for Siamese people's rights under the Bumiputera policy		government employment, education quotas, financial aid, and business opportunities Disadvantages: Unequal treatment compared to Malays, restrictions on land ownership, limited access to government tenders, and fewer political opportunities		communities in Myanmar
22.	Mohamed Yusoff Ismail (1987)	Buddhism and Ethnicity: The Case of the Siamese of Kelantan	Qualitative research combining ethnographic fieldwork, historical analysis, and sociological observation	Siamese ethnic minority of Buddhist faith in Kelantan	Kelantan, Malaysia	To examine how Buddhism underpins Siamese ethnic identity in Kelantan	Ethnicity as a socioreligious construct, examining the interplay of religion (Theravada Buddhism) with cultural markers like	Buddhism is central to defining Siamese ethnic identity in Kelantan, analogous to Islam for Malays	Demonstrates how religion acts as a cultural anchor for minority ethnic groups in a pluralistic society,	Not provided

						• To explore the relationship between religion and ethnicity in a multiethnic society • To assess the role of Siamese Buddhist institutions in maintaining cultural distinctiveness	temples and rituals	• Siamese Buddhist institutions, including temples and monkhood, are vital in sustaining their ethnic identity and distinguishing them from other Buddhist adherents (e.g., Chinese Buddhists) • The Siamese maintain cultural and religious distinctiveness despite pressures of assimilation in a predominantly Malay-Muslim society • Chinese patrons also play a role in	contributing to ethnic resilience and cultural preservation	
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								supporting Siamese Buddhist temples, but the Siamese retain control of key religious functions • Ethnic identity is reinforced through ritual participation, temple organization, and the centrality of Theravada Buddhism in community life		
23.	Mohamed Yusoff Ismail (2010a)	Buddhism in a Muslim State: Theravada Practices and Religious Life in Kelantan	Sociological and anthropological analysis, incorporating historical study and field observations of Theravada	The Siamese ethnic group practicing Theravada Buddhism in Kelantan	Kelantan, Malaysia	• To examine how Theravada Buddhism adapts to the predominantly Malay Muslim social and	A mixed framework using sociological, anthropological, and historical approaches to explore religious and	• Theravada Buddhism in Kelantan has adapted to local contexts, including acknowledging the patronage of the Muslim	Highlights the coexistence of Theravada Buddhism and Islam in Kelantan as an example of cultural	Not provided

			practices in Kelantan			cultural context in Kelantan To understand the mechanisms that sustain Buddhism as a minority religion in a Muslim-majority state	ethnic interactions	ruler (the Sultan of Kelantan) - A significant proportion of financial and social support for Buddhist temples comes from Chinese devotees - The Sangha of Kelantan maintains close relationships with the Thai Sangha, enabling access to religious resources and scholarly training - Adaptations include the modification of rituals and temple schedules to align with the local Muslim	adaptation and inter-religious tolerance.	
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								- calendar and sensitivities - Buddhist monks and temples play a role in local social life, including providing traditional medicine and black magic remedies		
24.	Mohamed Yusoff Ismail (2010b)	Tradition and change in Aril, a Siamese village in Kelantan	Ethnographic fieldwork supported by historical and sociological analysis	The Siamese ethnic community residing in Aril, Kelantan	Kelantan, Malaysia	- To document the historical establishment of Aril and its cultural changes - To analyze how the Siamese maintain ethnic identity in a Malay-dominated environment	Analysis of cultural pluralism and adaptation within a socioreligious context	- The wat (Buddhist temple) is central to Siamese ethnic identity, serving religious, cultural, and social roles - Siamese relationships with neighboring Malay and Chinese communities are	Highlights how a minority ethnic group maintains cultural identity and adapts to sociopolitical and economic changes in a pluralistic society	Not provided

						To explore the role of Buddhism in sustaining Siamese traditions and culture		characterized by economic interdependence and shared cultural practices, despite underlying ethnic boundaries - Adaptation to Malay-dominated governance led to changes in traditional Siamese practices, such as reduced reliance on temple education and increased integration into Malay economic systems - Patron-client relationships with the		
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								Chinese provided economic opportunities, while social boundaries with Malays were maintained • Despite pressures, the Siamese community preserved its ethnic identity through Buddhist rituals and cultural traditions		
25.	Ong et al. (2020)	Naming of Siamese People in Three Age Ranges in Tumpat, Kelantan, Malaysia	Fieldwork involving interviews and document analysis	Siamese people of three different age groups in Tumpat, Kelantan, Malaysia	Kelantan, Malaysia	To study the characteristics and origins of the names of Siamese people across three age groups	Investigated naming practices based on syllable count, the individuals responsible for naming, and the cultural or astrological	• Names are mostly monosyllabic or bisyllabic and are influenced by Thai, Malay, and occasionally Chinese cultures	Illustrates the dynamic nature of cultural assimilation and identity through naming practices in a	Not provided

							origins of names	- Naming practices vary with age; older people have simpler, traditional names, while younger people have names with more syllables and varied origins - Names are commonly given by parents, but monks and senior relatives also play a significant role, especially in naming younger individuals	multicultural setting	
26.	Sathian (2018)	Between Worlds: Siamese (Thai) Diaspora in the Northern	Qualitative; based on interviews, field observations, and	Siamese (Thai) communities living in northern Malaysia	Northern Malaysia (including Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan,	To explore the cultural identity and lived realities of the Siamese diaspora in	Thick and thin (van Schendel, 2015)	The Siamese in Malaysia have used their social-cultural	Highlights the agency of diaspora communities in maintaining	Not provided

		Malaysia Region	analysis of historical and cultural contexts		Terengganu , and other areas)	Malaysia, focusing on their sense of belonging and negotiation of cultural and national identities		practices to make their settlement into a place for their community, where the practices are embedded in their collective identity and memory • Theravada Buddhism, Thai monks, temples and temple schools serve as cultural avenues that promote community identity • The Siamese Associations provide social advancement through their focus on land, education and citizenship rights which	dual identities in transborder spaces	
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								collectively advances the place of the community as a diaspora community		
27.	Suwannathat-Pian (1984)	The Quiet Affairs in the Siamese-Malay Relations in the Nineteenth Century	Historical document analysis using primary and secondary sources such as treaties, correspondence, and archival materials	Historical leaders and factions in the Malay states and Siam	Malay Peninsula and Siam (Thailand), with specific references to regions like Kelantan, Perak, and Pattani	- To explore the lesser-known aspects of Siamese-Malay relations in the nineteenth century - To examine how Malay leaders sought assistance from Siam against internal rivals and British advancements	Analysis within the broader context of Anglo-Siamese political rivalries and internal Malay political struggles	- Malay leaders frequently appealed to Siam for assistance against domestic opponents - The Siamese were cautious in their interventions due to external pressures and treaty obligations - Relations fluctuated based on political expediencies rather than consistent allegiance	Highlights a complex perspective of Siamese-Malay relations, challenging colonial narratives of Malay preference for British rule over Siamese suzerainty	Not provided

								• Malay attitudes towards Siam and Britain were dictated by pragmatism, not loyalty • The 1909 Treaty significantly altered the power dynamics in the northern Malay states		
28.	Suwannathat-Pian (1994)	The Sam-Sams: A Study of Historical and Ethnic Assimilation in Malaysia	Historical analysis and fieldwork, using archival records, census data, and interviews	Thai-speaking Muslim communities (Sam-Sams) in Malaysia	• Primary locations include Kubang Pasu, Kota Setar, and Padang Terap in Kedah, Malaysia	To examine the origins, sociocultural development, and assimilation of the Sam-Sams within Malaysia's nation-state framework	Historical and ethnographic study highlighting demographic, cultural, and religious integration	• The Sam-Sams are a Thai-speaking Muslim group that emerged from cultural and religious intermingling • Assimilation into Malay culture occurred due to sociopolitical	Provides insights into ethnic integration and the sociopolitical dynamics of minority groups in a multi-ethnic nation-state	Not provided

					Additional references to Perlis, Perak, and southern Thai provinces such as Satun, Trang, and Songkhla are made for context			policies and shared religion, but cultural markers such as language persisted - The Sam-Sams contributed significantly to agriculture (especially paddy farming) and enriched the cultural landscape of Kedah - Negative stereotypes about their religious practices and association with crime were prominent in colonial records but gradually diminished		
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								post-independence		
29.	Tassanawongwara & Hanafi Hussin (2018)	<i>Klong yao</i> and the Performance of Minority Identity in the Siamese Community of Perlis, Malaysia	Ethnographic study using historical analysis, interviews, and participant observation	Siamese community members in Perlis, Malaysia, including elders, klong yao musicians, and cultural practitioners	Perlis, Malaysia	- To examine the role of klong yao in constructing and expressing Thai identity among the Siamese community - To understand the performance as a medium of cultural preservation and identity formation	Focused on cultural performance and identity formation through the lens of performativity and ethnic consciousness	- Klong yao performances have reshaped the ethnic identity of the Siamese community in Perlis toward a Central Thai cultural reference - The performances integrate songs, dances, costumes, and rituals that reflect Thai cultural practices and reinforce a shared identity - Klong yao is used in religious and secular contexts,	Highlights the role of cultural performance in sustaining minority identities and promoting interethnic recognition in a multicultural society	Not provided

								fostering community solidarity and interethnic interactions • The tradition has adapted to modern influences while maintaining its cultural roots, including competitions judged by Central Thai standards • Klong yao performances serve as markers of Siamese identity in Malaysia and are recognized by other ethnic communities		
30.	Tohsan (2020)	The Creation of “Thainess” through	Qualitative research using interview	Thai-Siamese people in the Semerak	Semerak community , Kelantan, Malaysia	• To study the creation of	Not provided	• The creation of “Thainess” in Semerak is	Highlights the role of religious practices in	The article suggests further research on the creation

		“Dhamma” and “Preaching” of Thai-Siamese People in Semerak, Kelantan State, Malaysia	and participatory observation techniques	community, Kelantan State, Malaysia		“Thainess” of Thai-Siamese in Semerak state, Kelantan State, Malaysia To study the creation of “Thainess” via “Dhamma” and “Preaching” of Thai-Siamese in Semerak state, Kelantan State, Malaysia		closely tied to religious practices involving “Dhamma” and “Preaching” - Religious practices are used strategically to maintain cultural identity and prevent cultural hybridization with the surrounding Malay majority - Activities such as Dhamma Delivery and Mahajati Preaching are crucial in reinforcing the community’s religious and	maintaining cultural identity among minority communities in multicultural settings	of “Thainess” among Thai-Siamese in different states of Malaysia and in communities living with other ethnic groups
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								cultural values		
31.	Zuriati Mohd Rashid & Nur Azuki Yusuff (2014)	Chinese And Siamese Cultures in Malay Muslims Environment	A mixed-methods approach using primary data from interviews and surveys, along with secondary data from books, journals, and official reports	Malay Muslims, Chinese Buddhists, and Siamese Buddhists in Kampung Tendong, Pasir Mas, Kelantan	Kampung Tendong, Pasir Mas, Kelantan, Malaysia	To explore the patterns of social interaction, cultural assimilation, and religious understanding between Muslims and Buddhists in the community	Sociological study focusing on interaction, assimilation, and acculturation within a multi-religious and multi-ethnic society	• Social interaction between Muslims and Buddhists in Kampung Tendong is positive, with shared workplace and leisure activities • Universal religious values encourage peaceful coexistence, while trivial religious differences occasionally hinder deeper integration • Chinese Buddhists in Kelantan have assimilated some Malay	Highlights the potential of shared values in fostering harmony in multi-religious and multi-ethnic communities	Not provided

								and Thai cultural elements, including language, clothing, and food habits • Despite differences, there is no significant hostility or conflict reported between the groups		
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APPENDIX II

RESEARCH QUESTION, TOPIC GUIDE,

AND LITERATURE MAPPING

Interviewee	Topic Guide Item (Literature and RQ Mapping)	Key Guiding Question
Kampung Terbak Village Head	Roles of Village Head (Golomb, 1978; Kershaw, 1969; Amnuay et al., 2019) (RQ1)	1. What are the roles of a village head?
	Linkage with Religious Institution (Eh Tat & Azizi Bahauddin, 2019; Golomb, 1978; Mohamed Yusoff Ismail, 1987) (RQ1)	2. Besides being a village head of Kampung Terbak, what other roles do you play, especially in relation to Wat Phikulthong?
	Government Recognition and Support (Amnuay et al., 2019; Likhiththamarot & Samathi, 2021; SUHAKAM, 2010) (RQ1, RQ3)	3. The Siamese in Kelantan make up less than 1% of the state population. In your opinion, are culture and rights being protected by the state or federal government well enough?
		4. In other words, is the government supportive of the Siamese community as a minority community here?
		5. What initiatives have the local government taken in ensuring that the Siamese here are not behind the majority race in terms of education, job opportunities, and other benefits?
	Siamese Voters' Inclination and Government Preference (Amnuay et al., 2019) (RQ3)	6. In Kelantan, the people have always voted for PAS or BN. They say PAS focuses more on religious development, while BN focuses more on physical development. In your opinion, do the Siamese generally prefer a government with what focus?

	Siamese-Malay Relations (Ab. Aziz Mohd. Zin, 1998; Golomb, 1978; Kershaw, 1979) (RQ1)	7. Bombings sometimes happened in the southern part of Thailand due to separatists who are Muslims. Do incidents like this affect the good relationship between the Siamese and Muslims in Kelantan, since Kelantan and Thailand are so near?
Leader of Persatuan Siam Kelantan (PSKN; Kelantan Siamese Association)	Ethnic and Cultural Demography (Kuroda, 2002; Kuroda, 2005; Kuroda, 2015) (Context)	1. What is the current population of the Siamese (popularly called “Orang Siam” here) in Kelantan now? Is it under 1% like some available data suggests?
		2. How many Kampung Siam (Siamese villages) are there in Kelantan? To ask for a list of the Siamese villages in Kelantan.
		3. It is understood that most of the Orang Siam are Buddhists/non-Muslims. Are there any Muslims within the Kampung Siam?
		4. How many Buddhist temples are there in each Kampung Siam? Does each one come with a temple school?
	Functions and Operations of Association (Kaeosanit, 2014) (RQ1)	5. What are the objectives of PSKN? Why was it set up?
		6. Besides the Orang Siam, who else does the PSKN get in touch with, in its everyday operations?
	Ethnocultural Maintenance (Ab. Aziz Mohd. Zin, 1998; Golomb, 1978; Johnson, 2002; Kaeosanit, 2014; Kaeosanit, 2016; Mohamed Yusoff Ismail, 1987) (RQ1)	7. How does PSKN help the Orang Siam in the aspect of reinforcing the community’s ethnic identity? E.g., through language, customs, and practices, as well as culture, such as Buddhism, etc. To ask for some examples.
		8. Does PSKN get help from the Thai counterparts (individuals, institutions from across the border – Thailand) in the efforts as mentioned above?
		9. Does and in what ways does PSKN help the Siamese community integrate into the dominant culture? Or do Orang Siamese integrate on their own through schools, everyday interactions, etc.?

		10. Does PSKN apply/request money from the government – whether state or federal – to fund ethnocultural activities for the community? If yes, is it a difficult process? What is the success rate like?
	Ethnic Integration Policies (Likhiththamarot & Samathi, 2021) (RQ1, RQ3)	11. Do Siamese individuals approach PSKN for its help to get into the local University or secure a position in the civil service?
		12. From the perspective of PSKN, are there any assimilationist pressures from the government (state or local) in the context of nation-building? Does it welcome government assimilation efforts?
	Cultural Evolution and Identity (Johnson, 2002; Johnson, 2012; Kaeosanit, 2016; Kaeosanit et al., 2016) (RQ2)	13. Is the Orang Siam less “Thai” compared to years or even decades back? Why? Is it due to modernization? Assimilationist policies by the government? Islamization (considering PAS-ruled Kelantan)? Other factors, like the Chinese influence? To ask for examples.
Temple School Administrators/Heads/Teachers	Thai Educational Structure (Mohamed Yusoff Ismail, 1987) (RQ1, RQ2)	1. What subjects does the temple school teach/What kinds of classes are offered by the temple school? To request details such as class days and duration.
		2. How old are the students? Are there any adults?
		3. Are they mostly Orang Siam? Or are there Malays/other races too?
		4. Are they mostly from this village? Or from other villages? Is there a temple school in each Kampung Siam?
		5. When in class, what language do the students speak among themselves?
		6. Are the subjects offered by the temple schools exclusive? I.e., not covered in the national school.
		7. What is the medium of instruction?
		8. Is each class compulsory after one has enrolled?

	Level of Government Involvement/Oversight in Thai Education (Likhitthammarot & Samathi, 2021) (RQ1, RQ3)	9. Over the years, how has the enrollment number been? Increasing/Consistent/Decreasing intake, and why?
		10. Are the curriculum and textbooks brought from Thailand?
		11. Do they need to undertake any assessments?
		12. Who is responsible for marking the assessments? Class teacher or a teacher/specific institution from Thailand?
		13. Is there any certificate awarded? By whom?
		14. Is it difficult to run a temple school? What are the challenges? Does it require any special permit from the authority? If yes, is it easy to get the permit?
		15. Does the syllabus need to be audited by the Malaysian government? Does the government interfere in the operation of the temple school or its curriculum?
		16. Are the teachers local? Where were they trained?
	Degree of Maintenance of Cultural Identity (Kaeosanit, 2014; Kaeosanit, 2016; Mohamed Yusoff Ismail, 1987) (RQ1, RQ2)	17. How do the classes offered in the temple school help the children reinforce their ethnic, Siamese identity?
		18. Does the school attempt to help the Siamese students integrate into the dominant culture?
		19. If most of them are school children, do they study at the Chinese school (if primary) or the national school (primary, secondary)?
		20. Besides the dominant culture, the Chinese culture and education seem to be an influence in Tumpat among the Orang Siam. Do many Siamese families send their kids to the Chinese school (primary)? Do they speak Chinese?
		21. Is there any scholarship for selected students to further their studies in Thailand? If yes, who is funding them? Government? Associations? Temples? Community?

		22. Does Thailand fund the temple schools here? If yes, is it restricted to scholarships? Does Thailand fund anything else, such as equipment or books?
		23. Do teachers hold cultural activities or celebrations for the students? Examples?
		24. Are there any student/lecturer exchange activities between temple schools and educational institutions in Thailand?
	Ethnocultural Proliferation (Johnson, 2010; Kershaw, 1982) (RQ1, RQ3)	25. Have the temple school or its students ever been invited to any exchange programs by the national schools or Malaysian public institutions of higher learning? Or any programs aimed at introducing the Orang Siam community and its culture to the public?
		26. Not many have heard about the Orang Siam here. Does the temple school organize any activities or programs that aim to introduce the community or its culture, food, and other aspects to the public?
Temple Abbot	Villagers Involvement in Temple (Eh Tat & Azizi Bahauddin, 2019; Golomb, 1978; Mohamed Yusoff, 1987, 2010a, 2010b) (RQ1)	1. Do the Siamese villagers come to the temple often?
		2. Are they mostly from this village? Or from other Siamese villages as well?
		3. Do they come to the temple to pray every week? Or only on certain occasions/"big days"?
		4. Do the people here need to be ordained as monks, like in Thailand? It isn't a law or a common practice in Malaysia, but do the Orang Siam practice this among themselves?
		5. I have noticed that in Tumpat, there are many temples, but most of the temples are not kept up very well, probably because the number of monks is few in each temple. May I know what tributes to this?
		6. Are any of the Thai celebrations held at the temple?

		7. Are Abbots and monks invited to perform Buddhist rituals outside the temple? Like at a funeral or a wedding, for example? To ask for examples?
	Thailand's Influence on/Involvement in Malaysian Monastic Affairs (Johnson, 2012; Khoruamdech, 2013) (RQ1, RQ3)	8. Generally, is the monastic life here like Thailand's? Any difference?
		9. How is the Abbot in each Siamese temple elected? Are the monks, temple activities, Buddhist practice, etc., regulated by any authority? From Thailand or Malaysia?
	Government Support/Policies in Upkeeping of Religious Institution (Likhitthamarot & Samathi, 2021; SUHAKAM, 2010; Tayeb, 2022; U.S. Department of State, 2002; U.S. Department of State, 2021; U.S. Embassy in Malaysia, 2023) (RQ1, RQ3)	10. Do the Siamese/Buddhist temples in Tumpat get any funding from the government, local or state?
		11. Are they mostly funded by the public or private companies?
		12. Does the Thai government fund the temples?
		13. There was a report saying that when the Orang Siam community wanted to build a Siamese/Buddhist temple in Tumpat, the authority required the building to incorporate some Islamic design. How true is this?
	Leisure/Pastime/Entertainment (Golomb, 1978; Kershaw, 1982) (RQ1, RQ2)	14. I see that Siamese children like to hang out at the temple compound after school or during the evening. Some would play football, while others would play mobile games in a group. Is this a normal scene/their way of life here?
		15. Do temples encourage such social activities to take place in the compound, other than religious or cultural ones?
	Siamese Villagers	Demography and Socioeconomic (Golomb, 1978; Kuroda, 2002; Kuroda, 2005; Kuroda, 2015) (Context)
		1. To ask for their demographic details – not too directly.
		2. (If an adult) What do you work as?
		3. (If an adult and married) How many children do you have? To inquire about their ages, whether they have grown up and are working, their occupations, and other relevant details.

		4. In the past, many Orang Siam were in the traditional agricultural sector. Is it still the same now?
		5. (If one is a student) Where do you study? Primary, secondary, tertiary level?
	Daily Interactions (Ab. Aziz Mohd. Zin, 1998; Golomb, 1978; Zuriati Mohd Rashid & Nur Azuki Yusuff, 2014) (RQ1, RQ2)	6. What do you normally do in a day?
		7. Are your relatives living in the same village? Are they living nearby?
		8. Do you have any relatives from the Thai side? Do you always visit them?
		9. Do you have many Malay friends? Are most of them from the nearby Kampung Melayu (Malay villages)?
		10. Do you frequently interact with them? Are your interactions limited to business matters, or do you also spend time with them for leisure or social activities?
		11. Do you spend more time interacting with fellow Siamese or your Malay friends?
		12. The Chinese influence here is rather strong, although they are also the minority. Do you have many Chinese friends?
		13. Do you speak Chinese or Hokkien? If yes, who taught you that? Did you attend a Chinese school before?
		14. Do you frequently visit your Malay/Chinese friends' open houses during festivals?
		15. (If one is a student) In school, do you have many Malay friends? About how many percent?
		16. (If one is a student) Do you hang out with them more, or do you hang out with fellow Siamese friends?
		17. (If one is a student) What language do you speak with your Siamese vs. Malay classmates?
	Leisure/Pastime/Entertainment (Golomb, 1978; Kershaw, 1982) (RQ2, RQ3)	18. There isn't much entertainment in Kelantan. What do you do during weekends?

		19. Do you watch Manora and is it popular here? Do you play the Klong Yao? Or any traditional Thai instruments? What about Malay ones?
		20. What kind of music do you listen to? “Phleng phuea chiwit”/Thai folk music? Or Thai popular music? Or do you listen to Malay songs? Do you listen to Thai or Malay radio stations more?
		21. What about movies? There isn’t any cinema here. Do you watch movies or drama series a lot on TV? If yes, what type? Thai movies/drama series/content or local, Malay ones? Do you install satellite dish to receive Thai broadcast channels?
		22. What about the news? Do you follow news from Thailand or Malaysia more?
		23. Older Siamese would do boar hunting. Is it still being practiced now? If not, what is your favorite pastime?
		24. (If one has children) Where would you usually take your children on weekends, considering Kelantan doesn’t have many entertainment options?
		25. It is so easy to travel to Thailand – you only need to cross the river. Do you always go to Thailand? Why?
		26. Do you use your border pass? Or do they just let you cross over without any documents?
	Culture/Religion (Ab. Aziz Mohd. Zin, 1998; Eh Tat & Azizi Bahauddin, 2019; Golomb, 1978; Johnson, 2012; Kaeosanit, 2014; Kaeosanit, 2016; Kaeosanit et al., 2016; Kershaw, 1979; Mohamed Yusoff Ismail, 1987) (RQ1, RQ2)	27. Are you a Buddhist? If so, do you attend the temple whenever there are temple activities?
		28. Are most of your Siamese circle of friends Buddhists?
		29. What about your family members or relatives? Anyone who isn’t a Buddhist?
		30. Do you like temple activities? Why?
		31. Do you always help as a volunteer in these temple

		activities? Like cooking food for the attendees? Etc.
		32. How important are temples and Buddhism to you? Why?
		33. Do you always offer food to the monks during the alms round?
		34. Have you ever been ordained as a monk? If yes, how did that happen? If not, will you consider, and why?
		35. Do Siamese families normally encourage their children or family members to go through monkhood for the short term, like in Thailand?
		36. Are Thai festivals like Songkran, Loy Krathong, etc., important to you?
		37. How do you celebrate them? To ask for some examples.
		38. How are wedding ceremonies carried out here? Are they more or less the same as Thailand? Do you wear the traditional Thai costume and give out invitation cards written in Thai?
		39. Do the Siamese usually hold wedding ceremonies in the home compound? Or do they do it at hotels/wedding halls?
	Thai-language/Dhamma education (Johnson, 2012; Kaeosanit, 2014) (RQ1, RQ2)	40. Are temple schools important to you? Why?
		41. (If one has children) Do you send your kids to attend any Thai-language or Dhamma class at the temple school?
		42. (If one has children) Why did you decide to do that? Is learning the Thai language or Dhamma very important to you? Is it because those are part of your identity as a Siamese?
		43. (If one has children) By knowing how to read and write Thai, do you hope that your children will one day go find work in Thailand? Or would you prefer them to stay in Malaysia? Why?
		44. (If one is a student) Do you attend any Thai-language or

		Dhamma classes at the temple school?
		45. (If one is a student) Do you like those classes? Do you think they are important to you? Why?
		46. (If one is a student) Do you think it is okay not to be able to write and read Thai? Do you think being Thai means having to know how to master the language?
		47. Many people here speak the southern Thai dialect among themselves. Do you also speak southern Thai? Does anyone speak the Central/standard Thai? What about younger children?
		48. Do you feel that the Thai language you speak is localized? Is it different from southern Thailand?
	History and Bumiputra Status (Johnson, 2012; Kuroda, 2019; Likhithammarot & Samathi, 2021) (RQ3)	49. Do you know that Kelantan used to belong to the Kingdom of Siam/Thailand?
		50. Do you know about its history (Kelantan + 3 other states being awarded to Malaysia following the Anglo-Siamese Treaty of 1909)?
		51. Do you know that Siamese Malaysians are considered Bumiputras?
		52. Do you think you get the same rights as other Bumiputras?
	National Identity (Embong, 2001; Horstmann, 2005; Kaeosanit, 2016; Kaeosanit et al., 2016; Shamsul, 1996a, 1996b; Smith, 1986) (RQ3)	53. Between your mother tongue, Thai, and Malay (Kelantan Malay vs. standard Malay), which one do you think is more important to you? Why?
		54. Which one are you better at?
		55. Do you have any friends or relatives who are more well-versed in Thai compared to the Kelantan Malay/Malay language?
		56. Are you able to sing Negaraku? What about the Thai national anthem? Can you tell when the Thai national anthem comes on the radio?

		57. Do you feel that you belong to this land? Why?
		58. Do you wish that you were from the other side (i.e., Thailand)? Do you wish that the place you reside in (i.e., Tumpat) were under Thailand? Why?
		59. How do you normally celebrate Hari Merdeka?
	Idea of Malaysia (Cheah, 2002; Chin, 2020; Embong, 2001; Horstmann, 2005; Kaeosanit, 2016; Kaeosanit et al., 2016; Shamsul, 1996a, 1996b; Smith, 1986) (RQ3)	60. Do you think that Malaysia is a multicultural (read “secular”) country? Or is it an Islamic country?
		61. Have you been to KL? If so, do you prefer a setting like that (less Islamic, more multicultural) or are you comfortable with a setting like Kelantan or Tumpat?
		62. Have you been to or heard of Sabah and Sarawak? (To check interviewee’s understanding of whether he/she think they are countries or Malaysian states)
		63. Would you mind it if you need to adopt a Malaysian/Malay rather than a Thai name in your IC? Why?
		64. Would you mind it if you need to adopt Islam rather than Buddhism as your religion?

APPENDIX III

ORIGINAL ETHICAL APPROVAL LETTER FROM UTAR SERC



UNIVERSITI TUNKU ABDUL RAHMAN DU012(A)

Wholly owned by UTAR Education Foundation Co. No. 578227-M

Re: U/SERC/74/2023

24 March 2023

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Department of Journalism
Faculty of Arts and Social Science
Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman
Jalan Universiti, Bandar Baru Barat
31900 Kampar, Perak

Dear Dr Ihediwa,

Ethical Approval For Research Project/Protocol

We refer to your application for ethical approval for your research project and are pleased to inform you that your application has been approved under Expedited Review.

The details of your research project are as follows:

Research Title	Assimilation and Identity Negotiation of the Malaysian Siamese Community Surrounding Wat Phikulthong Vararam, Kelantan
Investigator(s)	Dr Ihediwa Samuel Chibundu Dr Chin Yee Mun (UTAR) Kenneth Lee Tze Wui (UTAR Postgraduate Student)
Research Area	Social Sciences
Research Location	Tumpat, Kelantan
No of Participants	30 participants (Age: 13 and above)
Research Costs	Self-funded
Approval Validity	24 March 2023 - 23 March 2024

The conduct of this research is subject to the following:

- (1) The participants' informed consent be obtained prior to the commencement of the research,
- (2) Confidentiality of participants' personal data must be maintained; and
- (3) Compliance with procedures set out in related policies of UTAR such as the UTAR Research Ethics and Code of Conduct, Code of Practice for Research Involving Humans and other related policies/guidelines.
- (4) Written consent be obtained from the institution(s)/company(ies) in which the physical or/and online survey will be carried out, prior to the commencement of the research.

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Sungai Long Campus : Jalan Sungai Long, Cheras, 43000 Kajang, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia
Tel: (603) 9086 0288 Fax: (603) 9019 8868
Website: www.utar.edu.my



Should you collect personal data of participants in your study, please have the participants sign the attached Personal Data Protection Statement for your records.

The University wishes you all the best in your research.

Thank you.

Yours sincerely,



Professor Ts Dr Faidz bin Abd Rahman
Chairman
UTAR Scientific and Ethical Review Committee

c.c Dean, Faculty of Arts and Social Science
 Director, Institute of Postgraduate Studies and Research

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APPENDIX IV

UPDATED ETHICAL APPROVAL LETTER REFLECTING

SUPERVISOR CHANGE



UNIVERSITI TUNKU ABDUL RAHMAN DU012(A)
Wholly owned by UTAR Education Foundation Co. No. 578227-M

Re: U/SERC/92-A03/2024

24 January 2024

Mr Kenneth Lee Tze Wui
Department of Mass Communication
Faculty of Creative Industries
Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman
Jalan Sungai Long
Bandar Sungai Long
43000 Kajang, Selangor

Dear Mr Kenneth,

Ethical Approval For Research Project/Protocol

We refer to your request to revise the main supervisor for your project titled “Assimilation and Identity Negotiation of the Malaysian Siamese Community Surrounding Wat Phikulthong Vararam, Kelantan”. We are pleased to inform that your request has been approved.

The revised details of your research project have been included below:

Research Title	Assimilation and Identity Negotiation of the Malaysian Siamese Community Surrounding Wat Phikulthong Vararam, Kelantan
Investigator(s)	Dr Cheah Phaik Kin Dr Chin Yee Mun (UTAR) Kenneth Lee Tze Wui (UTAR Postgraduate Student)
Research Area	Social Sciences
Research Location	Tumpat, Kelantan
No of Participants	30 participants (Age: 13 and above)
Research Costs	Self-funded
Approval Validity	24 March 2023 - 23 March 2024

This letter should be read together with ethical approval letter Re: U/SERC/74/2023 dated 24 March 2023.

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Website: www.utar.edu.my



The University wishes you all the best in your research.

Thank you.

Yours sincerely,



Professor Ts Dr Faidz Bin Abd Rahman
Chairman
UTAR Scientific and Ethical Review Committee

c.c Dean, Faculty of Creative Industries
 Director, Institute of Postgraduate Studies and Research

Kampar Campus : Jalan Universiti, Bandar Barat, 31900 Kampar, Perak Darul Ridzuan, Malaysia
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APPENDIX V

UTARRF GRANT APPROVAL LETTER AND PROJECT DETAILS



UNIVERSITI TUNKU ABDUL RAHMAN DU012(A)

Wholly owned by UTAR Education Foundation (200201010564(578227-M))

Our ref: IPSR/RMC/UTARRF/2021-C2/K02

Date: 17 December 2021

Mr Kenneth Lee Tze Wui
Faculty of Creative Industries
Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman

Dear Mr Kenneth Lee Tze Wui,

RE: UTAR RESEARCH FUND 2021 CYCLE 2

Thank you for your application for funding from the UTAR Research Fund (UTARRF). We are pleased to inform you that your application has been successful. The details of your approved research project are as follows:

Research Title	:	Assimilation and Dual Identity Negotiation of the Kelantanese Thais
Period of Research	:	20 December 2021 - 19 December 2022
Grant Approved	:	RM5,700.00
Project Number	:	IPSR/RMC/UTARRF/2021-C2/K02
Vote Number	:	6550/2K02
Co-Researcher(s)	:	Dr. Chin Yee Mun

You are required to fulfill the following conditions:

1. To send the grant offer acceptance reply slip to Institute of Postgraduate Studies and Research within one week from this offer letter date.
2. To sign one (1) copy of the UTAR Research Fund Agreement on the terms and conditions governing the research funding.
3. To submit application for external funding in UTAR within the project duration.

The University wishes you all the best in your research.

Thank you.

Yours sincerely,

Prof Ts Dr Faiz bin Abd Rahman
Vice President (R&D and Commercialisation)

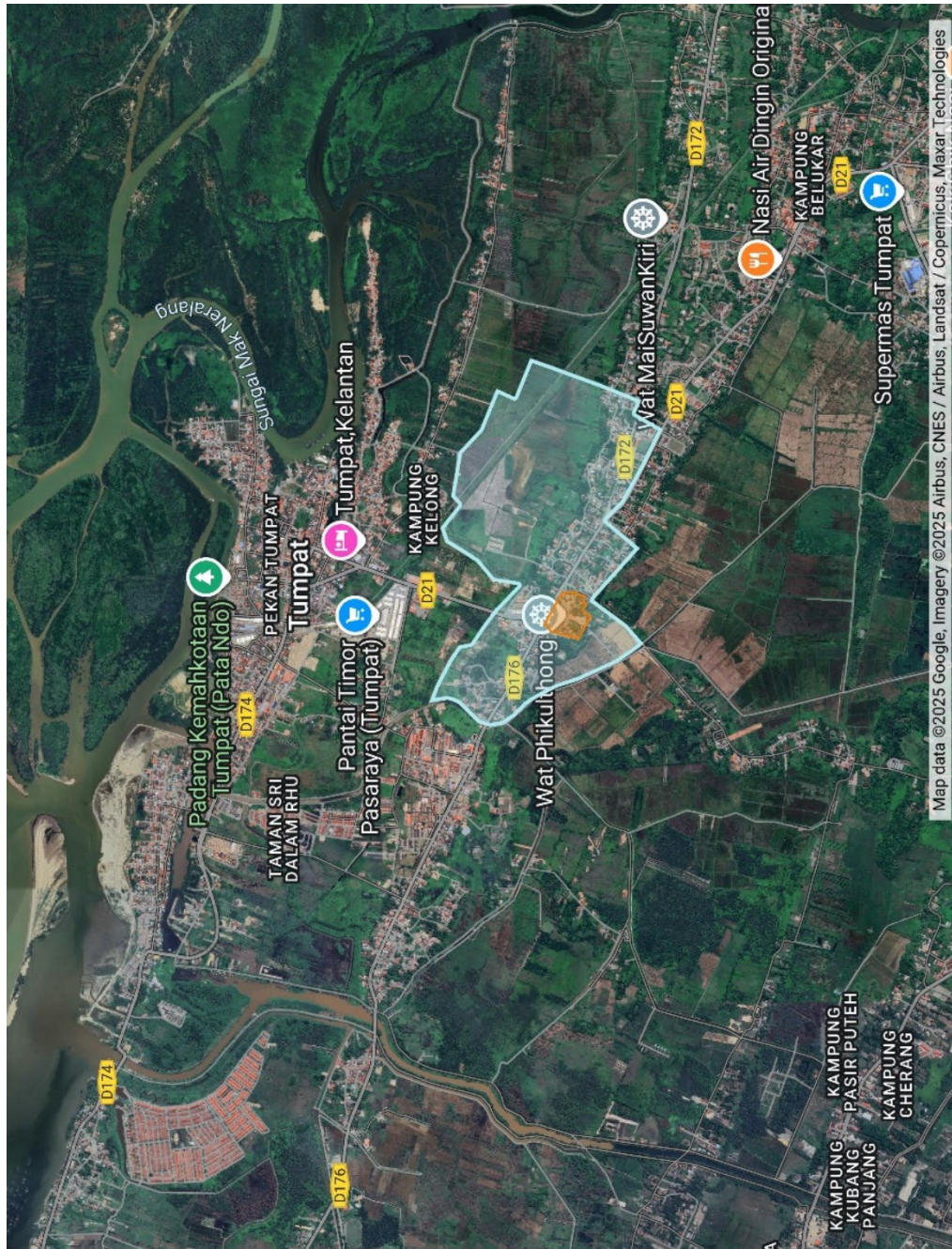
c.c.
President, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman
Director, Institute of Postgraduate Studies and Research

Kampar: Jalan Universiti, Bandar Barat, 31900 Kampar, Perak Darul Ridzuan, Malaysia
Tel: (605) 468 8888 Fax: (605) 466 1313
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APPENDIX VI

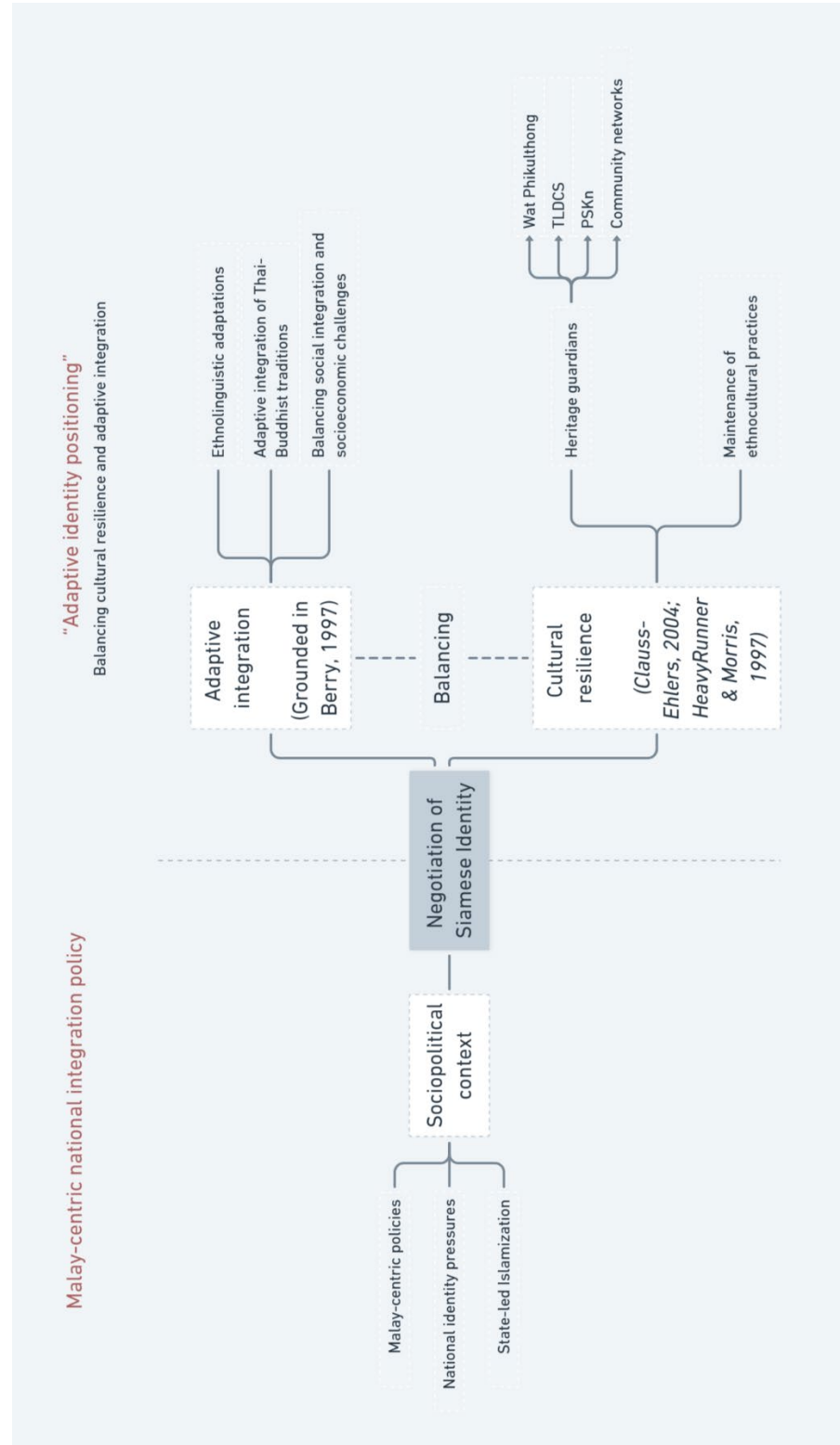
ENLARGED MAP OF TERBAK VILLAGE (FIGURE 4.1)



APPENDIX VII

ENLARGED ADAPTIVE IDENTITY POSITIONING FRAMEWORK

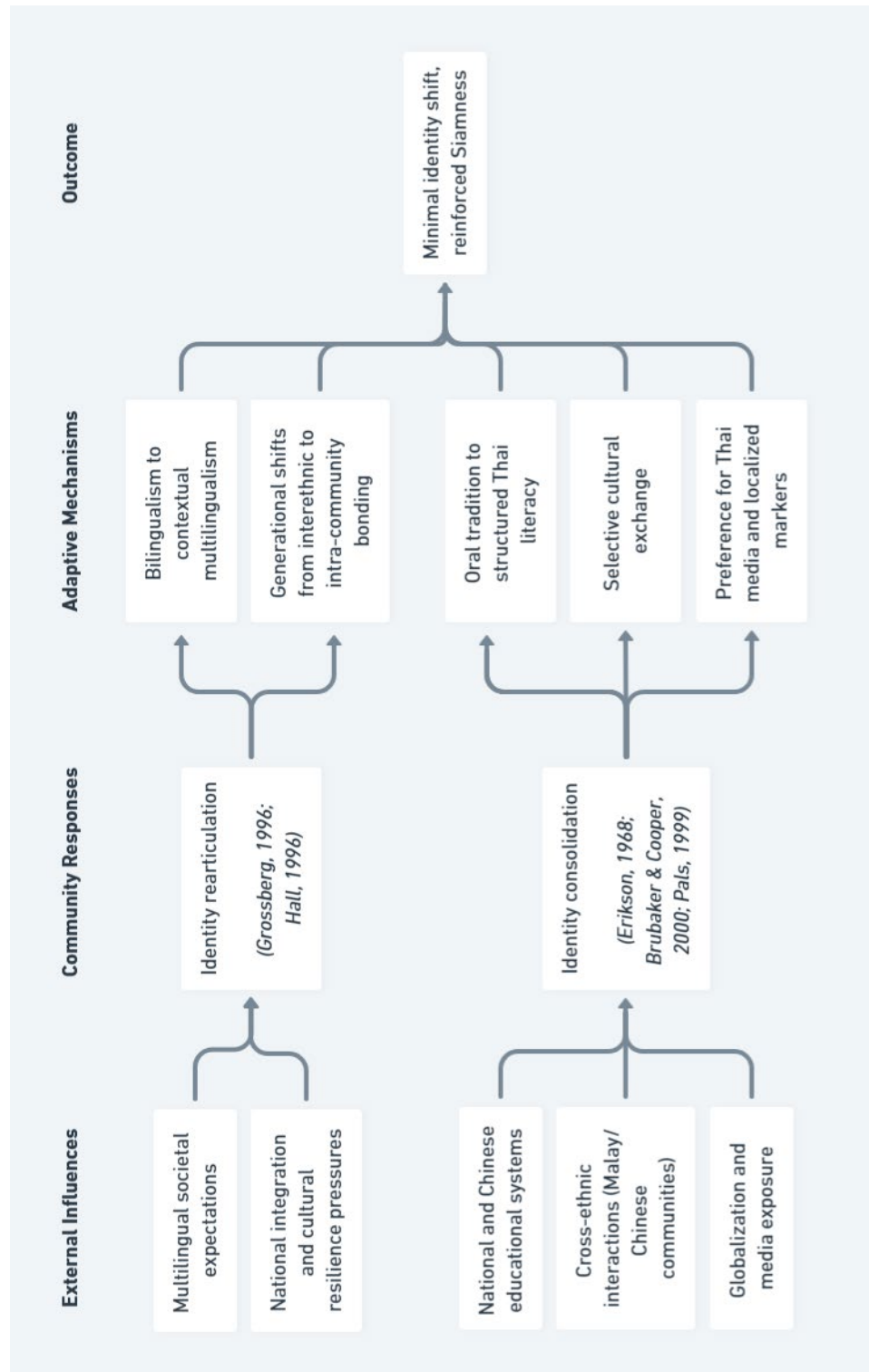
(FIGURE 4.12)



APPENDIX VIII

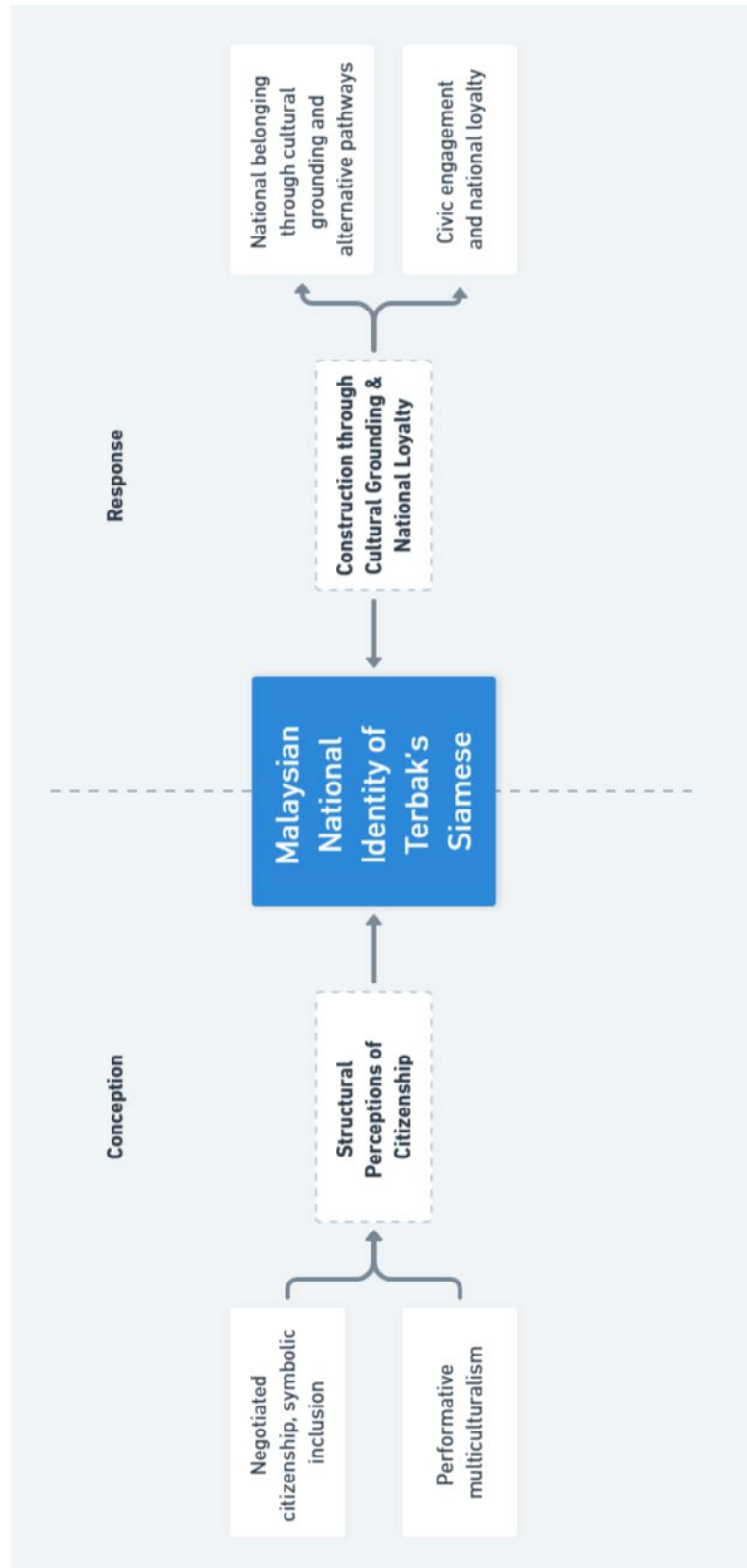
ENLARGED IDENTITY SHIFT MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

(FIGURE 5.7)



APPENDIX IX

ENLARGED NATIONAL IDENTITY FRAMEWORK (FIGURE 6.3)



APPENDIX X

ENLARGED FINAL ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK (FIGURE 7.1)

