Deciphering the Stereotyping of Arabs, their language and religion by the Bruneians

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the stereotype on Arabs by the Bruneians' points of view. It investigates Arabic terms related to race and faith. The data used in this study were drawn from an online questionnaire. About 185 Bruneians participated in the survey. Quantitative and qualitative approaches were used to analyse the data. The findings revealed that the majority of the respondents associate the "Arab" term with Islamic perspectives. About half of the respondent were aware of the fact that being an Arab is not necessarily means being a Muslim. The researchers argued that there is a conflict between the term "Arab" and the faith "Islam". The majority of the respondents also believed that the use of Islamic greeting *"Salam"* and the use of Islamic phrases such as *"InshaAllah" and "Alhamdulillah",* are only confined to Muslims.

Keywords:
Arabs; Islamic names; Islamic terms; Brunei, stereotype

INTRODUCTION

The Arab World, like most Muslim countries, is bedevilled by the widening-range of socio-political chaos across the multitude of societies ranging from economic, cultural, and ideological boundaries. Moreover, many of the Muslim countries are also divided along ethnic, regional and sectarian lines. The allegedly Muslim attack in September 11 in the US has brought the attention of non-Muslims and the Western eyes to the Muslims, the Arabs and Islam. This has created a huge impact on perception of the West and non-Muslim majority towards the Muslims, Islam and the Arabs on a negative light and negative underpinnings' discourses. The vast number of non-Muslims and the people from the West are seemingly unaware that there are atheists, pagans, Jews and Christians among Arabs while the Muslims themselves are hugely diverse in terms of ethnicity, sect, cultural background and origin. This shows that majority of non-Muslim people have no clear understanding of what Islam is, who are the Arabs, and who are Muslims. Meanwhile, some Muslim countries have limited knowledge about the Arabs and their language. The Arab World is less or more equal to the area known as Middle East and North Africa (MENA). It

has many diverse linguistic groups and ethnic minorities. That is, there is not a single Arab society or culture since the geographic territories of the Arab World has many diverse groups, communities, and cultures. These diverse groups, communities, and cultures even exists within the same country. In fact, there are twenty-two members of the Arab League. According to Nydell (2012), the term 'Arab' does not mean that all Arab countries have the same ethnic origin, but rather it is a political and cultural term. Arabs do not look alike since there are regional dissimilarity in their appearance and customs. They also speak different dialects of Arabic, even within the same country. Hence, the term 'Arab' refers to all Arabic-speaking people regardless of their appearance and origin. For example, numerous dark-skinned Sudanese speak Arabic dialects.

Many people in the West and other parts of the world associate the Arabs with Islam, which is a kind of stereotyping since the Arab world has people from different religious faiths such as Muslims, Christians and Jewish. For much of history, the earliest Christians were from countries which are part of the Arab world, and Jews have lived alongside Christians and Muslims peacefully. Nydell (2012) states that the majority of Arabs are Muslims and others practice other religions such are Christianity and Judaism. He adds that Arab Christians mainly live in Egypt, Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon; while a few thousand Jewish live mainly in Morocco, Tunisia, Syria, and Egypt. In addition, contrary to those who stereotype that all Muslims are Arabs, only 20 percent of Muslims, throughout the world, are Arabs (Ibid). Huari (2017) states that there is no general fixed number for the Arab Christians but rather an estimated numbers. For example, the Arab Christians represent about 10% of the total population in Egypt, about 11% form the total population in Syria, and about 40% of the total population in Lebanon. Meanwhile, there are different branches of Islam and Christianity in the Arab world; for example, there are Muslim Sunni, Shia', and Abazi. Other religious faiths exist in the Arab world such as Druze, who mainly live in the Eastern Mediterranean. Nydell (2012, p.2) states that Islam has an influence on Arabs' beliefs, even for those who are not Muslims.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Stereotype is defined by social psychologists as product of cognitive processes which are structurally based on superficial knowledge, belief system and expectations about social groups i.e. Malays, Indians, Chinese, Filipinos, British, and or race such as Mongoloid (Asian), Negroid (Black), Caucasian (White), etc. (Pauker, Ambady & Apfelbaum, 2010). Based on the broadening definition on stereotypes as posited by social psychologists, their general perspectives on stereotype can be simplified as the generalization of a certain group based on their social, racial, geographical and cultural background differences. Moreover, stereotypes were associated to the generalization of a group based on how they were categorized and described with respect to their characteristics and or how they behave (Rohaizahtulamni *et al.*, 2018). Meanwhile, stereotyping could be positive and negative traits or depending on how people perceive a person or a group (Operario & Fiske, 2003) primarily based on the quality of information that a person has received on such group or individual (Schneider, 2004; Tan et al., 2010). Thus, studying stereotypes is based on the perception or psychological processes when such social ideologies are constructed towards a person or group. Cognitively, stereotypes are generalized beliefs and views about a person or groups based on simplified information or limited knowledge (Tan et al., 2010). For instance, Malays are often described as lazy, hence they wanted to be served (Faisal and colleagues, 2010), while Chinese are portrayed as greedy and or good in handling businesses (Shamsul, 2011; Chua et al., 2013), whereas, Indians are categorized as drunkards or followers of Hinduism (Ramli *et al.*, 2018).

Arabs have misrepresentations and they are always stereotyped with traits such as, *all men are "oil-rich Sheiks", all women are oppressed by men, and all women are veiled.* Studies show that negative stereotypes toward Arab Muslims are predominant in the US media. Among these stereotypes are (i) Arab men are violent, angry, and oftentimes seen as

terrorists as embodied by negative portrayals of Osama bin Laden (Jackson, 2010); and (ii) Arab Muslims are part of the out-group (Saeed, 2007). Additionally, Arab Muslim women are often portrayed as oppressed by both their male counterparts and their religion (Stadlbauer, 2012). In specific, Muslim women who wear veils such as *hijab* or *burqa* are represented by many who live in a non-Muslim country as being oppressed (Wagner, Sen, Permanadeli, & Howarth, 2012) without knowing the fact that the veil is a distinct symbol of one who follows Islam.

On the broader views on Arabs, portrayal in the Western media, Brown et al., (2017) explore whether children in elementary school in the US endorsed stereotypes about Arab Muslims relative to other groups. Children's responses show that Arab Muslim females are more oppressed than others, whereas Arab Muslim males are more anti-American and hostile, as consistent with prevalent media stereotypes. Children who were familiar with Islam felt more positively toward Arab Muslims than less informed children. In addition, children perceived the Muslim Arab Americans to be the angrier and less American relative to other ethnic groups. Moreover, even children with limited knowledge of Arab Muslims endorsed culturally held stereotypes similar to adults, which indicates that children are absorbing culturally biased messages.

As Harb (2016) opined, the looming ideas on Arabs sprang from the Orientalists' thoughts. Edward Said (1891) defined Orientalist thoughts as "an imaginative and yet drastically polarized geography dividing the world into two unequal parts, the larger 'different' one called the Orient, the other, also known as 'our' world called the Occident or the West". The emergence of "otherness" in this framework creates a binary social classification where the West appeared to be always privileged over the Orient, whereas the Orient is portrayed as unique, exotic, wild, and savage. This contrasting social construct based on biases had paved way how the West stereotypes the Arabs. Edward Said (1995) added that Orientalism became ethnocentrically biased school of knowledge since academic research overlook the perspectives on different socio-political issues about Orientalism (Ibid.).

The researchers encountered difficulties in gathering related literature on the stereotypes of the Malay people, particularly the Bruneians towards the Arabs. Thus, the reviewed literature in this study is limited.

Significance and Motivation of the Study

There are misconceptions and vague understanding about Arabs, Arabic language, and Islam (Marciano, Kimhi, & Eshel, 2020). This leads to discriminations and stereotypes against the Arabs who are always represented from a very limited perspective within their sub-culture (Lindstedt, 2018). This also promotes Islamophobia, conflicts, and mistrusts between and among Muslims and non-Muslims (Patoari, 2019). Therefore, this study is important since it elevates understandings on Arabs, Arabic language and Islam. This study also contributes to other fields of studies such as humanities and social sciences including applied linguistics, cultural studies, ethnography, and religions studies in a way that this study covers the Bruneian-Malays stereotype towards Arabs, their religion, and language. Therefore, this study is relevant to the limited literature on stereotype towards the Arabs from Muslim Malay perspectives.

During their stay in Brunei, the researchers observe the misunderstandings of local people towards Arabs, in some cases, assuming that Arabs are all Muslims, and believing that only Muslim Arabs have the so-called "Muslim-name" while non-Muslims cannot share their cultural practices including names and greetings. This observation motivated the researchers to conduct this study not only to explore the stereotypes traits towards Arabs but also to examine the people's perception toward Arabic language. In addition, the literature shows that the perception of Arabs is mainly studied from the Western point of view, unlike this study which specifically looks at the perception of Muslim Malays, as mentioned earlier.

Brunei Background

Puni or Buni were the archaic names of Brunei Darussalam. It is one of the ancient kingdoms which was established in the Malay Archipelago. Originally, Puni was established in 'Garang' which was in the Temburong district of present-day Brunei Darussalam. Darussalam literally means 'abode of peace' is one of the names of Paradise (Haji Serudin, 2013). It homes to over 400,000 indigenous Malay tribes, Chinese and non-Malay tribes. Islamic religion is the religion of the Muslim Malay Bruneians which make most of the population of Brunei Darussalam (Ibid.). Brunei Darussalam is one of the member states of regional organization in Asia, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Objectives and Research Questions

This study specifically examines the perceptions on Arabs from Southeast Asian Malay people's points of view, specifically, the Malay Bruneians. This study also explores the terms which are related to race and faith. Data were drawn from an online survey. Thus, the following research questions were proposed:

(i) What are the perceptions of participants toward the word "Arab"?
(ii) Do participants have any conflict between Arabic terms and faith?
(iii) Are the participants familiar with the meaning of Islamic names?

METHODOLOGY

The participants of this study were Malay Bruneians, who graduated from universities in Brunei Darussalam or Malay students who are still studying at local universities, including Universiti Brunei Darussalam, Universiti Teknologi Brunei, and Sultan Sharif Ali Islamic University. The researchers selected educated participants because they have access to much information and knowledge, in addition to their acquaintance with Arab their classmates and teachers. In fact, Brunei government offers a number of fully-funded scholarships for international students. A number of 185 Bruneians participated in the survey; 99 of them are male while 86 are female.

An online survey was distributed among participants via a google drive link. The participants were informed that it takes few minutes to fill up the survey. See the survey in Appendix A. The survey consists of four parts which address the research objectives. The survey consists of closed questions, including Yes/No questions and selective questions. It also consists of open-ended questions where participants can express their thoughts and ideas. This study is conducted using a survey questionnaire to utilize the advantages of surveying the attributes and characteristics of a larger group from the perspectives of smaller group (Creswell, 2009, p. 146). In this case, the larger group refers to the Arab group while the smaller group refers to the Malay Bruneians.

The researchers used surveys method to illicit responses from the participants as mentioned earlier. Researchers widely depends upon surveys method to profound information from a larger population. In addition, surveys are used to obtain beliefs, social facts, and personal opinions (Mathiyazhagan and Nandan, 2010). The researchers used a mix approach combining quantitative and qualitative analysis since the survey combines opened and closed-ended questions. Survey research is considered as a method of descriptive research utilised for gathering primary data from the target population or individuals (Ibid). Hence, the researchers used descriptive analysis to analyse the respondents' answers. The following steps to analyse the survey data are used: (1) considered the research questions while viewing the responses of the participants; (2) analysed each question of the survey separately; (3) discussed and interpreted the data; and (4) drew conclusions. The researchers used manual calculations for the closed-ended questions to find out the frequency of the participants' responses.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

In this section, the researchers provided the results of the survey which were distributed to Malay Bruneians. The research questions were answered in this section based on the participants' responses. The researchers also discussed and interpreted the responses of the participants.

In relation to the first research question about the perception of the participants toward the word "Arab", the participants were asked to list the things that come to their mind when they hear the word "Arab". The findings reveal that the most frequent answer is "religion" or "Islam" in specific, in addition to "Islamic civilization and history". This follows by Arabic language, or the language of the holy Qur'ān as stated by some respondents. In addition, there are respondents who gave answer "the region of the Middle East". Other respondents state "Qur'ān" and "Prophet Muhammad". Meanwhile, other number of answers are related to religious sites including "Mecca" and "Madinah". In addition, some gave answers which indicate the religious practices including "Hajj" and "prayers". Thus, it is clear that majority of the respondents associated the term "Arab" with Islamic perspectives due to the fact that Islam started in Mecca and Madinah, now in Saudi Arabia which is an Arab country, during the time of the prophet Muhammad's and it has spread throughout the world including Brunei, in addition to the fact that, Islam is Brunei's official religion. Furthermore, the findings reveal that there are quite number of references to "Jawi" as one of the responses. This happens because to some extent there are some similarities between Jawi and Arabic alphabets in writing, which perhaps the reason why the respondents gave this answer. Respondents also state some Arabian countries, mainly Saudi Arabia and UAE. They refer to Saudi Arabia perhaps because it is the place where Muslims perform *hajj* or pilgrimage, and it is the center of the Islamic world; while they refer to UAE because it is one of the world's top tourist destinations.

Some types of clothes are also stated by the respondents including "hijab", "iqal", "turbans", "jubah", and "niqab". These dressing codes and garments are symbols for Islamic traditional customs and attires. This again is explained by the association of Arabian region and the start of Islamic faith in that region. Other respondents refer to Arabian food including "kebab", "shawarma", and "dates". Among these foods, there are references for "dates", perhaps because Arab countries are famous of producing dates, in addition, many Muslims in Brunei eat dates during the holy month of Ramadan. Other respondents refer to some traits such as "beautiful ladies", "good-looking men", "tall people", "beard", "big people", "rich", "oil", "stubborn", "sexist", "racist", and "rough". Among these traits, there is a misrepresentation of Arab countries believing that all of them are rich, while in the fact some Arab countries are oil rich, while others have little, or no oil reserves at all. A few references to "war", "violence", "ISIS" are also shown in the findings, due to the unstable situation and politics of chaos in the Middle East as one of the hot-issues in the media.

In relation to the second research question, whether there is a conflict between Arabic terms and faith, the participants are first asked to answer the multiple answer question (What is the religion of the Arabs?), with possible answers (Islam, Christianity, Judaism, could be all). The findings reveal that 51% of the respondents give the correct answer (could be all) and 49% of them answer (Islam). This means that about half of the respondents are aware of the fact that being an Arab does not necessarily means being a Muslim. Hence, it can be argued that there is a conflict between the term "Arab" and their faith "Islam". This again can be explained by the connection of Arabs and the start of Islam as mentioned earlier. A short dialogue is presented. The names of the two speakers in the dialogue are "Ali" and "Omar", two typical Arabic names, these names are intentionally chosen rather than any name in other languages. The dialogue contains common terms, which are, *"salam" "alhamdulilah"* and *"inshaAllah"* that are used in Brunei by Muslims. The participants are asked to tell the possible religion of "Ali" and "Omar", by choosing one of the following answers (Christians, Jewish, Muslims, could be all). As expected, only 26% of the participants gave the correct answer (could be all), while 74% of them gave the answer

(Muslims). In order to understand the reason behind the respondents' answers, they are asked the following question (Why do you think that is their [Ali and Omar] religion?). Some of the respondents who gave the answer (Muslims), believe that the two persons "Ali" and "Omar" are Muslims because of their "Muslim names", e.g., *"Ali and Omar are common names for Muslims",* while others believed so for reasons including *"Islamic greetings of Salam"*, and the use of Islamic phrases *"InshaAllah"* and *"Alhamdulillah".* Other reasons include *"it is uncommon for any other religion to know salam and alhamdulilah"*, *"because prophet Muhammad brings a lot of influence about Islam"*, *"if they are not Muslim, they use the word marhaba instead".* It is also found that even though 26% of the participants gave the correct answer, as mentioned earlier, not all of those participants explain the true reason behind their choice; some of these answers include *"in the 21th century, anyone can be someone without knowing the religion and it's frightening"*, *"anyone could know how to speak this way",* and *"because of the salam they use and Omar didn't reply the salam so he could be all".*

It should be highlighted that the term "Allah" originated with Christian and Jewish Arabs. Christians and Arabic churches have called "Allah" in literature and in prayer. Arab Jewish and Christians called the word "God" as "Allah" before the time of prophet Muhammad (SAW) (Gibb and Kramers, 1974). In general, there are confirmations that in the pre-Islamic literature, such as poetry, which was strongly influenced by Christians and Jews, the word "Allah" often appears (Brockelmann: 1943). Moreover, Thomas (2006) states that there is a long established tradition of the use of the word "Allah" in translations of the Bible. Christians approve this word as their equivalent term for the supreme-being in most of Muslim majority countries. Hence, it is affirmed that the word "Allah" is a generic term dating from pre-Islamic times, used by Muslims, Christians and others. Meanwhile, Muslims in other part of the world refer to "Allah" on their own language, for example, in addition to their familiar use of the word "Allah", Muslims also use the German word *"Gott"*, (Schirrmacher, 2010). Persian used the word *"Khoda"* for the supreme-being. In Kevorkova's (2015) interview with Archbishop Sebastia Theodosios (Atallah Hanna), the only Orthodox Christian archbishop from Palestine stationed in Jerusalem and the Holy Land, he states that *"We Christians also say Allahu Akbar… For us, Allah is not an Islamic term. This is a word used in Arabic to indicate the Creator who's made the world we are living in. So when we say Allah in our prayers we mean the Creator of this world. In our prayers and pleas, in our Orthodox Christian religious ceremonies we use exactly this word. We say, glory be to Allah in all times. We say Allah a lot during our liturgy. It's erroneous to think that the word Allah is only used by Muslims".*

Majority of the respondents believe that "Omar" and "Ali" are Muslim because of Islamic greetings of *"Salam",* and the use of Islamic phrases such as *"InshaAllah"* and *"Alhmadulillah"*, as mentioned earlier. *"Salam"* in Arabic means "Peace", and it is used sometimes for greeting in Arab countries as a short form of *"Asalamualaykum"*, which means "Peace be upon you". It is encouraged in Islam to greet people with these greetings, as evident from the Qur'ān and Sunnah, for example, *"But when you enter the houses, greet one another with a greeting from God, As-salamu Alaikum - blessed and good"* (Qur'ān 24:61). Other Arabic greeting forms include *"Marhaba."* means "hello" and *Ahlan wa sahlan"* means welcome. In addition, the Arabic term *"InshaAllah"* is a phrase which is made up from three words *"in"* which means (if), *"sha"* which means "will" and *"Allah"* means "God". The words are combined into one word for easier pronunciation. The term literally means "if God wills so", and it is widely used by Muslims. This phrase is also recommended to be used in Islam when speaking of future event, as evident from the Qur'ān: *"and never say of anything, "surely, I will do it tomorrow." Except (with the saying), "If Allah wills"* (Al-Kahf 18:23). The other term appears in the survey is *"Alhmadulillah",* means "all praise and thanks belong to Allah" or shortly "thank God", which has three parts *"al"* means "the", *"hamdu"* means "praise", and *"lillah"* which is made up of the dative preposition *"li"* and the noun *"Allah".* This term is frequently used by Muslims around the world because of its centrality to the texts of the Qur'ān and Hadith. It first appears in the first verse of (Al-Fatiha), the first *sura* (chapter) of the Qur'ān: *"All praise is [due] to Allah, Lord of the worlds".* The encouragement of using

such terms in daily conversation form Islamic perspective perhaps is the reason the respondents are sure that "Ali" and "Omar" are Muslims. In fact, Arabs from different religion backgrounds make references to the will of God in their ordinary conversations (Nydell, 2012, p. 76). This includes, *Alhamdulillah* (Thanks be to God), *InshaAllah* (If God wills), *Mashallah* (Said when seeing a child or complimenting someone's health), *Assalamu 'alaykum*. (Peace be upon you), *Allah yibarik feek* (May God bless you), and *Allah yisallimak* (May God make you safe), (Ibid: 221). Nydell (2012, p. 76) confirms that the constant use of Arabic religious terms in Arabs' daily conversations acts as "a formal acknowledgement of the importance of religious faith in Arab society".

Some of the respondents believe that the two persons "Ali" and "Omar" are Muslims because of their "Muslim names", as mentioned earlier. In fact, Arabs regardless of their religion can have the same name. Names that derive from the Bible and the Qur'ān such as Yousef "Joseph", Daoud "David", Suleiman "Solomon" and Ibrahim "Abraham do not distinguish whether the person is Christian, Jewish or Muslim. There are hyphenated names using "Abdel-". The name means "Servant of God" and it is followed by one of the attributes of God, for example, Abdel-Rahman, "Servant of the Merciful" and Abdullah "Servant of God/Allah". Even though most of hyphenated names using "Abdel-" are Muslim, there are Christian names of this pattern such as Abdel-Qaddous "Servant of the Most Holy" and Abdel-Malak "Servant of the Angel", (Nydell, 2012, p. 31)

In relation to the third research question, whether the participants are familiar with the meaning of Islamic names, the following question is stated in the survey "Do you think a Muslim name is necessarily equal to an Arabic name?". The findings reveal that 75% of the respondents give the correct answer (No), while the others agree with (yes). To deeply understand the respondents' point of view, the following question is raised "If your answer for the previous question (yes or no), please explain why do you think so?". The findings reveal that a number of the respondents provide a good reason for not necessarily using Arabic language names. Some of these answers include *"because as long as the names have good meaning, they can have names from other ethnicity as well"*, *"I think you can choose any name. But for Islam we just need to have a meaning behind our name"*, *"The important thing is that it has a beautiful meaning because in the akhirah, we'll be called by our name"*, *"I read in my old book that as long as the name does not have a negative meaning, then it can be used as a Muslim name"*, and *"I think as long as the meaning of your name doesn't offend the religion or contradict Islamic beliefs and principles then it's ok"*. However, it is found that a great number of respondents who give a correct answer for the previous question do not really explain the main reason of having Muslim names which is not necessarily an Arabic ones but rather they provide other personal perceptions.

This includes, *"to have Arabic's name is not an indicator that to show that the people is Muslim"*, *"Not necessarily, Islam about faith and believe not base on name"*, *"Because being Islam does not based on names but Iman"*, *"Being a 'Muslim' is not an identity but a way of life"*, *"because not all Arabs are Muslims"*, *"it's depend on their country and what their parents love"*, and *"a name is just a name. the person's adab, attitude & personality will reflect a true Muslim despite his/her name"*. In fact, Muslim names mean that one should have a name with good meaning in any language, not limited to Arabic language. There are number of sayings from the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) regarding the responsibility of the father to choose a good name for his son or daughter. Prophet Muhammad (SAW) says *"On the Day of Judgement you will be called by your names and the names of your fathers, so have good names"* (Abu Dawud). Prophet Muhammed also asked his companions to change their names if the name has bad or an evil meaning; for example, name like *Harb* (war) was changed to *Silm* (peace), the name *Ḥuzun* (sadness) was changed to *Saeed* (happy), the name *Asiyah* (disobedient) was changed to *Jamila* (beautiful), (Abu Dawud). Hence, from Islamic perspective, it is important to have name which does not contradict Islam teachings or have a bad meaning.

CONCLUSION

This study explores the perceptions on Arabs from the Bruneians' points of view. The findings revealed that the participants associate stereotypical ideas with the term 'Arabs' including "tall people", "beard", "big people", "rich", "oil", and "stubborn". Such unclear understanding of the Arabs leads to stereotype the Arabs as a homogenous group. The findings also revealed that there is a great conflict among the participants between Arabic terms and Islam, arguing by the researchers to the fact that Islam first established in an Arab country, Saudi Arabia, during the time of the Prophet Muhammad's (SAW) life and it has spread throughout the world including Brunei. A great number of respondents believed that Arabs are all Muslims, which highlights the misconception towards Arabs and their religions. The study is important as it provides facts on the term "Allah" which is used among non-Muslim Arabs as it was originated with Christian and Jewish Arabs. It also informs that Arabic names are not Islamic names since non-Muslim Arabs can have such names. This study is limited to the perceptions on Arabs from Southeast Asian Malay people's points of view, specifically, the Malay Bruneians. However, other Muslim regions in South Asia could be explored in future studies.

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