

Cultural maintenance and Chetti identity in the Melaka Chetti (Chetti) community, Kampung Chetti, Gajah Berang, Melaka

EILEEN LEE [0009-0003-9224-5418]

BERJAYA University College
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
lee.eileen@berjaya.edu.my

LATHA RAVINDRAN (Corresponding author)
[0000-0002-5830-2437]

SEGi University
University
Selangor, Malaysia
latharavindran@segi.edu.my

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on cultural maintenance and Chetti identity in the Melaka Chetti (or Chetti) community at Kampung Chetti, Gajah Berang, Melaka. The study examines two very important Chetti cultural practices at Kampung Chetti and how community members identify themselves as Chetti, particularly in the prospect of impending assimilation into the larger Indian community due to exogamy. Participant observation and video documentation of the Bhogi Parchu and Mengammay at Kampung Chetti reveal that these annual cultural practices serve as vital platforms for the manifestation and maintenance of Chetti culture. Interviews conducted with senior and younger members of the community provided views and insights on Chetti culture, identity, and assimilation. The older generations view identity as a 'brought along' predetermined variable, while for the younger Chettis, their multiple, fluid identities are co-constructed, negotiated and 'brought about' in different social contexts. The older generations are more concerned and wary of assimilation and extinction. Three factors (religion, cultural maintenance, Kampong Chetti) may determine the community's survival; however, in the event of assimilation into the larger Indian community, a less distinct Chetti community may emerge. It would be a significant loss to our multicultural mosaic if this distinct Peranakan Indian community ceases to exist; nevertheless, given recognition as a 'heritage community' by the Melaka government and as a 'symbol of national unity' in the recent Peranakan Festival 2023, the Chetti community may ultimately strive to survive. In conclusion, the Bhogi Parchu and Mengammay practices at Kampung Chetti not only play a pivotal part in carefully preserving the complex tapestry of Chetti cultural tradition but also contribute significantly to the dynamic and ongoing construction of a resilient identity among its members.

Keywords: Melaka Chetti, culture maintenance, identity, heritage community, Peranakan Indian

Received: 31 December 2023

Accepted: 2 April 2024

Published: 26 April 2024

This work is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

To cite this article: Lee, E. & Ravindran, L. (2024). Cultural maintenance and Chetti identity in the Melaka Chetti (Chetti) community, Kampung Chetti, Gajah Berang, Melaka. *International Journal of Language, Literacy and Translation* 7(1), 46-64.
<https://doi.org/10.36777/ijollt2024.7.1.098>

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.36777/ijollt2024.7.1.098>

INTRODUCTION

Historic Melaka can boast of three creole communities dating back to the fifteenth-century Malacca Sultanate: the Baba Nyonya (Peranakan Chinese) community, the Kristang (Malacca Portuguese) community and the Melaka Chetti (Peranakan Indian) community. These communities were the products of social amalgams (interethnic marriages) between the foreign (mainly Chinese or Indian) merchants or Portuguese conquerors and the local female population. Existing alongside the other ethnic communities, they form the multiethnic and multicultural mosaic of Malaysia as Peranakan (locally born from mixed marriages between foreign traders and local women) communities. A prominent feature of these Peranakan communities is the degree of sociocultural adaptation with the dominant Malay community living in the Malay Archipelago. These heritage communities have managed to survive, but due to their diminishing population and intermarriage outside their communities, concerns have been raised about the threat of extinction. Our study investigates whether there is cultural maintenance at Kampung Chetti, Gajah Berang, Melaka and Chetti identity (what it means to be Chetti) in this Peranakan Indian community.

According to Karpaya and Muthusamy (2017), 'Chitty' (or Chetty/Cheti as variations) was a Tamil trading caste name with reference to the South Indian traders that came to the Malay Peninsula to trade during the Malacca Sultanate in the 15th century. These South Indian merchants from Kalingapatnam and Tamilnadu on the Coromandel coast in India married the local women in Malaya, immersed themselves in the different local cultures and evolved into a unique community known as the Melaka Chetti community (Chuang & Müller, 2016; Dhoraisingam, 2005) or the Peranakan Indians/Peranakan Hindus of Melaka (Moorthy, 2009). The community is concentrated at Kampung Chetti, Jalan Gajah Berang, which houses about a hundred plus Malay-speaking Hindus (Pillai, 2015). As a Creole community, the Chetti hybrid culture is reflected in their way of worship and beliefs, their food, attire, and their 'language', the Chetti Malay Creole.

The Melaka Chetti kept their Hindu faith, particularly Shaivism (Shiva worship). Still, as Peranakan Indians, they developed their own unique rituals of worship, such as the *Bhogi Parchu* (Chetti ancestor worship). Like the Chinese *Qing Ming*, they also have a cemetery cleaning day called *Naik Bukit*. Likewise, the Sri Muthu Mariamman Temple *Thiruvizha* (prayers) devoted to Goddess Mariamman is known as *Mengammay* or the *Dato Chachar* prayers, given the local belief that this deity cures chickenpox infections. The first and second-generation Chetti beliefs extended beyond their Hindu faith, incorporating local beliefs in *bomoh* (Malay shamans) and observing Malay cultural taboos and restrictions.

Chetti cuisine and cooking utilise local produce such as fresh chilli, turmeric, lemongrass, galangal, ginger, and torch ginger buds, blended with Malaysian ingredients such as *belacan* (shrimp paste) and coconut milk to produce nativised dishes. In terms of food preparation, in a Chetti home, one finds a traditional *batu giling* alongside a modern blender for grinding herbs and spices.

The Melaka Chetti traditional costumes are also an intercultural inspiration for Malay and Tamil styles. Chetti men wear the Indian *kurta* and Malay *kain pelikat*, while the Chetti women's outfit is the Peranakan *kebaya*, and Chetti jewellery is a mix of Chinese, Malay and traditional Tamil pieces (Chandran, 2018; Gopal, 2019; Ismail et al., 2015; Roots, 2019).

The Melaka Chetti community speaks Malay Creole, which is very similar to the Malay Creole spoken by the Baba Nyonya community. However, while the Baba Nyonya Malay

creole contains some Hokkien lexicon, Chetti Malay has some Sanskrit and Tamil vocabulary (Raghavan, 1977; Sarkissian, 1997; Sukri, 2017) such as *ubayam* (auspice), *poosari* (priest), *abishegam* (bathing the deity), *viboothi* and *thirunooru* (holy ash worn by some Hindus), *maalai* (garland). As a mother tongue, Chetti Malay is used by the older generations for daily communication, although its use is diminishing across the generations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

WRITINGS AND PAST RESEARCH ON THE MELAKA CHETTI COMMUNITY

Literature on the Melaka Chetti community can be divided into popular (culture) literature and scholarly literature. Popular literature on this heritage community mainly consists of general writings describing the origin of the Chetti community and descriptions of the community's mixed culture, traditions, rituals of worship and way of life (Chandran, 2018; Dhoraisingam, 2005; Karpaya & Muthusamy, 2017; Loh & Velupillay, 2017; Moorthy, 2009). Clearly, the intended readership here is for light reading and general information.

Academic literature on the Melaka Chetti community shows that due to its mixed (interethnic) marriage heritage and ethnic minority status, the Chetti community has been researched and examined from different aspects: its minority group status and marginalisation (Moorthy, 2021; Raghavan, 1977), its endangered heritage (Nagappan, 2020; Pillai, 2015), including a possible loss of Chetti culinary heritage if there is no transmission of Chetti TFK (Traditional Food Knowledge) to the younger Chetti generations (Mohamed, 2009), its Peranakan identity (Chuang & Müller, 2016; Pue, 2016; Siti, 2023) and of course, for its Malay creole language (Bakar et al., 2014; Hamzah et al., 2020; Hamzah & Chong, 2021; Hamzah et al., 2022; Mohamed, 2009; Omar et al., 2016).

As early as 1992, K. Rathabai, who is a Chetti herself, in her undergraduate thesis on the cultural assimilation of the Chetti community, foreshadowed the demise of the Chetti community as she foresees her community will be assimilated into the main Indian culture. Although a few researchers have raised concerns about the possible loss of the Chetti community due to a shrinking Chetti population and the challenges of maintaining its unique culture and identity in these modern times, to date, there has been no study on the maintenance of Chetti culture and identity. The current study investigates cultural maintenance and Chetti identity in the Melaka Chetti community at Kampung Chetti, Gajah Berang, Melaka.

ACCULTURATION AND ASSIMILATION

Acculturation happens when the immigrants possess a strong need to adapt to the lifestyle of the host culture with some degree of cultural adjustment (Barker, 2015). When immigrants settle abroad, they can replace some aspects of their cultural roots with elements of the host culture (Fu, 2015; Stephens, 2016). The process of acculturation can bring about cultural changes for both locals and immigrants (Berry & Sam, 2016; Motti-Stefanidi, 2018), as is the case for multiracial and multicultural Malaysia. With the import of Chinese and Indian labour during British rule, both the locals (the Malays) and the immigrants (the Chinese and the Indians) had to adapt to each other's cultures, and the acculturation process brought about cultural changes which impacted both sides (locals and immigrants).

Closely related to acculturation is assimilation, which often refers to the process by which the minority culture learns to adopt the habits of the majority culture. The progression of assimilation requires incorporating the customs, behaviours, beliefs and ideologies of the dominant culture to the degree that the assimilation group becomes socially undifferentiated from other members of the society (Pillai, 2015; Rumbaut, 2015). In Pillai's (2015) book 'Yearning to Belong', he observed the intricate acculturations and assimilations in the lives of five acculturated ethnic communities in Malaysia and highlights that the terms 'acculturation' and 'assimilation' have often been used loosely and interchangeably, although these terms have specific meanings. In view of this, he clearly defines acculturation as referring to 'the cultural change in the direction of another ethnic group while assimilation is the adoption of the ethnic identity of another group, thus losing one's original identity' (Pillai, 2015: xviii). Further to this, acculturation can be reciprocated whilst assimilation is a one-way process (Berry, 2017; Pillai, 2015) whereby individuals or groups of differing ethnic heritage are absorbed into the dominant culture or society. Assimilation can thus be viewed as the most extreme form of acculturation (Pauls, 2022).

In view of Pillai's definitions and since the Chettis did not lose their ethnic identity, the Melaka Chetti community is a classic example of acculturation between Indians and locals in Malaysia, particularly Malays, due to their interethnic marriages with the locals (Sivanantham & Suberamanian, 2014). However, in this twenty-first century, with increasing exogamy, especially to the larger Indian community, as forewarned by Rathabai (1992) and Moorthy (2021), the shrinking Melaka Chetti community may become submerged and assimilated into the greater South Indian population in Malaysia.

IDENTITY AND IDENTIFICATION

By the nineties, the essentialist/culturalist view of identity as constituting static core elements such as ethnicity, features, nationality, and so forth was no longer accurate or useful. With globalisation and increasing movements of people resulting in the crisis and blend of belonging, researchers on identity from various fields (Anthropology, Sociology, Minority Group Studies, Intercultural Communication, Education, Bilingualism, and Psychoanalysis) are rejecting these static categories of identity as they concur with Ewing (1990: 251) that '...in all cultures, people can be observed to project multiple, inconsistent self-representation that are context dependent and may shift rapidly.' In the social constructionist approach, identity is neither fixed nor stable; identity is multiple, fluid and dynamic, constructed and negotiated in interactions. In the same vein, Dervin (2012) contends that the plural self is a negotiation of identities and (cultural) identity is constructed whenever we are in contact with others. To explain further how identity is constructed, it would be useful to refer to Bauman's (2001) demarcation of solid versus liquid identity. The solid conception of identity refers to static (cultural) categories and boundaries whereby people are identified with fixed elements such as race, traits, religion and so forth. In contrast to this product view of identity, the liquid approach to identity does not box identity into fixed representations of oneself. In the fluid approach, identity is a process of identification brought about in the context of interaction with others. Thus, the interlocutors and the context in which the interaction takes place influence and impact acts of identity. Identities, then, are not fixed, formal realities but are fluid and constructed as people position themselves within and between the various social settings in their daily lives (Castells, 2000; Omoniyi & White, 2006).

Moving from identity as an object to identity as a process of identification, Dervin (2013) asserts that investigations on identity need to investigate how identity is co-constructed to

accommodate the consistencies and shifts of self-representation. Thus, instead of asking people or communities, ‘What is your identity?’, the questions should be ‘How do you identify yourself as?’ or ‘How do they construct what they present as their identity?’ Interestingly, responses to questions on Chetti identity in this study revealed stark differences between the older and younger generations on their self-representation of being Chetti, indicating different conceptualisations of identity across the generations.

METHODOLOGY

The study is part of a research training programme to mentor (especially junior) academic staff in the principal investigator’s institution to conduct research. To investigate cultural maintenance and Chetti identity in the Melaka Chetti community, the research questions posed are:

1. What Chetti cultural practices are being maintained in the Melaka Chetti community at Kampung Chetti, Gajah Berang, Melaka?
2. How do older and younger members of the Chetti community identify themselves as Chetti, especially in the face of possible assimilation into the larger Indian community and culture?

In line with the ethnographic approach to collect data, the main research tools used were: a) participant observation and video documentation of two significant Chetti festivities, the ‘*Bhogi Parchu*’ and ‘*Mengammay/Dato Chachar* prayers’ to observe and note how these cultural practices are conducted and maintained; b) ethnographic interviews with the older and younger generations to elicit views and gain insight on Chetti identity as they face the possibility of assimilation into the larger Indian community.

RESEARCH SITE, DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES, PARTICIPANTS

The main research site is at Kampung Chetti, Gajah Berang, Melaka (Figure 1). Aptly cited as ‘the heart of the Straits Indian culture’ (Paulo, 2018), Kampung Chetti is the nucleus of the Chetti community and Chetti culture.

Figure 1

The entrance to Kampung Chetti, Gajah Berang, Melaka



The research team comprises four full-time staff from two institutions: the principal investigator, who was also heading academic staff research development in the faculty, two junior academic staff undergoing research training at the institution and one senior external academic from another institution. With reference to Table 1, participant observations and video documentation of the festivities had to be on the specific dates of the festivals (Data Collections

1 and 2), while interviews with the younger participants (Data Collection 3) had to be conducted during the (Malaysian) school holidays; therefore, fieldwork for data collection was carried out in three stages and spread over two and a half years but due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the schedule for the second session of interviews in Data Collection 3 was postponed/extended:

Table 1
 Data Collection Procedures

Data Collection Stages	Research Site and Tasks
Data Collection 1 <i>Bhogi Parchu</i> celebrations on the Eve of Ponggal. May 13 2017	Participant observation and video documentation of the <i>Bhogi Parchu</i> celebrations in NR's (the principal informant) family house, Kampung Chetti, Gajah Berang, Melaka. Conducted by the principal investigator and two academic staff.
Data Collection 2 <i>Mengammay (Sembahyang Dato Chachar)</i> prayer ceremonies 5 -7 May 2017 (8th – 10th day)	Participant observation and video documentation of the <i>Mengammay (Sembahyang Dato Chachar)</i> at Sri Muthu Mariamman Temple, Gajah Berang and Sri Poyatha Venayagar Moorthy (SPVM) Temple, Jalan Tukang Mas, Melaka. Conducted by the whole research team (all four academic staff).
Data Collection 3 Ethnographic Interviews 1 st session (June 2019) 2 nd session (August 2022)	Interviewed 25 members of the community at Kg. Chetti. (15 older generations (G2 & G3) (10 younger generations (G4 & G5) Conducted by the principal investigator & a senior academic staff.

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION AT THE BHOGI PARCHU AND MENGAMMAY/DATO CHACHAR PRAYERS

The principal investigator and two academic staff attended the *Bhogi Parchu* ancestral worship prayers in NR's (the principal informant) family house to observe and video document the Chetti ancestral worship. For the *Sembahyang Dato Chachar*, participant observation and video documentation were conducted by the whole research team (four academic staff) on the three important days of the festival: the eighth day (the start of the spiritual offering to Goddess Mariamman), the ninth day, a *Chapparam* (small chariot) procession of Goddess Mariamman around the Sri Muthu Mariamman Temple grounds and the tenth day (also known as the Day of Dato Chachar), the climax of the celebrations. Photos and a video link of the festivities are provided in the next section, Findings and Discussion. Following Data Collection 1 and 2, the fieldwork notes from participant observations of the two Chetti festivals were written up, and video documentation of the festivities was edited before Data Collection 3 (the interviews) was carried out.

INTERVIEWS WITH THE OLDER AND YOUNGER GENERATIONS

Ethnographic (interactive face-to-face, not online) interviews were conducted with twenty-five members of the Chetti community at their houses in Kampung Chetti: eight members from G2/Generation 2, seven members from G3/Generation 3, seven members from G4/Generation 4 and three members from G5/Generation 5) were interviewed (see Table 2 for their generational categories). No member from G1 (the first generation) was interviewed as there were only three living then, but they were not available to be interviewed (incidentally, the oldest resident in the

Chetti village passed on in June 2021, aged 91 years old); currently, the oldest living resident is 88 years old (personal communication).

Table 2

Interview respondents according to generational cohorts

Generational Cohort	Born Between	Age Range	No. of Interviewees
The older generations			
G1 The Silent Generation	1928 – 1945	91 – 74	0
G2 Baby Boomers	1946 – 1964	73 – 55	8
G3 Gen X	1965 – 1980	54 - 39	7
The younger generations			
G4 Gen Y (Millennials)	1981 – 1996	38 - 23	7
G5 Gen Z (Digital Natives)	1997 - 2012	22 – 7	3
Total			25

With reference to Table 1, the principal investigator and the senior academic staff from the research team conducted two sessions of interviews, one session with fifteen older generations (G2 & G3) in June 2019 and one session with ten younger generations (G4 & G5) in August 2022 (delay due to Covid and MCO in 2020 & 2021). Further verification of the interviewees’ responses and analysis of the interview data were carried out in 2023.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

FIELDWORK OBSERVATIONS OF THE BHOGI PARCHU (CHETTI ANCESTOR WORSHIP)

The *Bhogi Parchu* is a uniquely Chetti family memorial offering and is conducted in the ancestral homes of the Chetti families in the village. In NR’s family, on this day of worship, prayers were conducted for his late father, his grandfather and his aunt. All the siblings of NR return to their ancestral home in Kampung Chetti to partake in this annual Chetti prayer. The focal point of the *Bhogi Parchu* prayer ceremony is the display on the floor of the living room of seven banana leaves placed in a particular order with twenty-one types of food specially cooked for the offering.

Figure 2

Display of offerings for the Bhogi Parchu prayers



The head of the household, NR, initiates the offering by first lighting the *kemenyan* and circling the burner around the altar. At the main entrance of the house, he holds up the incense burner and invites his Chetti ancestors to return. The burning *kemenyan* is then circled in front of the photographs of the deceased ancestors and their belongings. Other family members then carry out the same ritual in order of their seniority. NR then sliced open the top of the coconuts, signalling the end of the ceremony. Friends, researchers, and guests who were present were invited for a meal of the food on the banana leaves, sitting on the living room floor and eating with their hands, Chetti style.

In the *Bhogi Parchu* prayers, the male members of the family organise the display of the offerings. NR, as the eldest son and head of the household, performed the ritual of prayers on this ancestor worship day, followed by other adult family members according to seniority. Although there are two *parchu* prayers taking place yearly, *Bhogi Parchu* is the most important Chetti family prayer that must be observed, and all family members are expected to return to the ancestral home in Kampong Chetti to partake in this solemn ritual.

FIELDWORK OBSERVATIONS OF THE DATO CHACHAR PRAYERS

Mengammy or *Sembahyang Dato Chachar* is a twelve-day devotional and thanksgiving prayer ceremony dedicated to the Hindu Goddess Mariamman for answering the prayers of her devotees. The Dato Chachar prayers are conducted at the Sri Poyatha Venayagar Moorthi (SPVM) Temple at Jalan Tukang Mas (Figure 3) and the Sri Muthu Mariamman Temple at Kampong Chetti (Figure 4).

Figure 3

Sri Poyatha Vinayaga Moorthy Temple (SPVM Temple), Jalan Tukang Mas



Figure 4

Sri Muthu Mariamman Temple, Kampong Chetti



DAY 8 – DAY 10 OF THE SEMBAHYANG DATO CHACHAR

The eighth day of the Dato Chachar prayers (Swami Buka Mata) is the start of spiritual offerings to Goddess Mariamman. In the first ritual, the *Sakthikaragam*, a chosen devotee (a *poosari*) in a trance, carries the *sakthikaragam* (waterpot with neem leaves) around the Chetti village and returns to the Sri Muthu Mariamman Temple to place the *karagam* (waterpot) next to Goddess Mariamman. In the second ritual, the *Aggini Kaparai*, the crowd following the prayer waits for blessings from the *poosari* as he performs the ‘fire’ prayer offering to Goddess Mariamman. The *poosari* is accompanied by devotees and musicians playing religious music.

The ninth day involves a *Chapparam* (small chariot) procession of Goddess Mariamman around the Sri Muthu Mariamman Temple grounds. Before she is placed on the little chariot, a priest breaks a coconut and performs a prayer. At about 7 pm, the Mariamman deity is carried to the *chapparam* (Figure 5).

Figure 5

Goddess Mariamman leaves the temple for her chapparam (little chariot)



The tenth day (Dato Chachar Thiruvizha or the Day of Dato Chachar) is the climax of the prayer ceremonies. At six o’clock in the morning, devotees gather at the SPVM Temple at Jalan Tukang Mas for the start of the Dato Chachar procession. The atmosphere is vibrant, with music from Indian drum bands and devotees in bright yellow and orange costumes carrying *kavadi*. A *kavadi* is carried as penance or vow fulfilled. *Kavadi* can take many forms, such as a skewer poked through one’s cheek, hooks pierced on the back or milk kavadis (pots of milk) on the devotees’ heads. In the SPVM temple grounds, the deity Mariamman is placed on a

ratham (chariot) on bullock carts for the procession to the Sri Muthu Mariamman Temple in Kampung Chetti. Ahead of the procession, devotees with their kavadis and classical Indian musicians lead the procession to the Sri Muthu Mariamman Temple in Kampung Chetti.

Returning to Kampong Chetti, some dance to honour Mariamman while most devotees with skewered kavadis on their bodies are in a mystic trance as they make their way to the Mariamman Temple (view our short video at <https://youtu.be/jjPanVU1oGg>). By late morning, all *kavadi* piercings are removed, and milk from the *kavadi* pots is poured into a large container. Prayers are conducted, and the milk is used to ‘bathe’ the Mariamman deity. This concludes the morning prayer ceremonies.

At six o’clock in the evening, the chariot is first taken around the temple grounds and the Sri Angalaa Parameswari Temple. Finally, the Ratnam (Chariot procession) returns to the SPVM Temple in Jalan Tukang Mas. The twelve-day Dato Chachar prayers are open to the public and draw participants from outside the Chetti community, particularly the Chinese communities living in or near Kampung Chetti, who are familiar with the Chetti way of life and faith (Figure 6).

In the Dato Chachar prayer ceremonies, we again observe men taking a central role in the organisation of the ceremonies and leading the rituals. Women usually partake as devotees carrying kavadi milk pots. In interacting with the Chetti participants, we felt a profound sense of belonging in the community and a poignant reaction if the festivities were no longer practised. Interestingly, despite being surrounded by priests and musicians from India, we note that communication and worship of the Hindu deities is not in Tamil but in their Chetti creole language as their forefathers did.

Figure 6

A non-Hindu Chinese devotee



RESPONSES IN THE INTERVIEWS¹

ON BEING CHETTI AND CHETTI CULTURE

The older generations are very clear about what being Chetti is and what constitutes Chetti culture:

“Usually, religion and culture go together...The Chetti Melaka people follow Hinduism, carry Indian names, cakap Melayu (speak Malay), practise a mixture of local Malay and Indian culture called Chetti Melaka culture.”

(SP, G2)

Albeit staunch Hindus, the older Chettis have a huge respect for other faiths and would adopt some of the communal and belief practices of the other communities living in Malaysia:

“Yes, the Chetti will go to Masjid Kampong Hulu (Kampong Hulu Mosque) to settle a disagreement.”

(ZF, G2)

“Datuk pikul balak (Good Friday) they ask for blessings; Chap Gor Mei (15th day of Chinese New Year) we go to kebun Datuk (Cheng Hoon Teng Temple), light joss sticks & pray...”

(NR, G2)

“When children have some celaka (bad luck), we go to Datuk Harimau (Tiger God) and offer meat and ask for protection. If sick for two weeks, go to Chai Teng (a temple) at Jonker Street, next to kubur Hang Kasturi (Hang Kasturi tomb), give (child’s) name, open buku/chao ja (refer to the geomancer book) and is told what’s wrong and what to do...”

(NR, G2)

“When you suddenly fall sick, you go to kedai ubat (Chinese medicine shop), get medicine to do the buang buang dekat simpang tiga (do the cleansing at the T-junction).”

(VD, G2)

“Kena mata (Spot on the eye): Small children get sick, take rice and salt, go round the child and then throw the rice and salt (to take away the sickness).”

(TR, G2)

“(Our) religion is Hindu with local practices; for example, we burn kemenian (incense) around senja (dusk) on Tuesdays and Fridays – these are local Malay beliefs.”

(PP, G2)

For the older generations, culture also includes their dressing, which is also an intermarriage of cultures:

“Men wear the Malay sarong and kurtha (Figure 7), women wear the sarong kebaya but with Indian elements such as the pottu on the forehead of Indian women.”

(SR, G2)

Figure 7

In Chetti attire for the Dato Chachar ceremonies

¹ All interviewees had signed the consent to be interviewed, their anonymity is guaranteed with the clause that only initials or acronyms are used to present their views and input. The researchers declare no conflict of interest as the ethical aspects have been addressed.



ON THE MAINTENANCE OF CHETTI CULTURE

So far, there is evidence of maintenance of Chetti culture at Kampung Chetti, given that the rituals and ceremonies are practised by the Chetti families living in the village. However, respondents who are living away from the village affirmed that it is impossible to maintain the (Chetti) culture in their homes:

“...Somehow...the feeling...the mood is not there. It’s different when you return to the kampung...you meet family, friends, people in the village, and you feel the atmosphere...the prayers...the cooking...the culture is just here at Gajah Berang.”
(EB, G3)

Intermarriage with a non-Chitty is also a contributing factor to the non-maintenance of Chetti culture at home:

“I live in the capital (KL), and I’m married to a Tamil so for me to maintain the Chetti culture at home is not possible. Even cooking Chetti food or speaking Chetti is difficult. But when we return to Gajah Berang especially for *Bhogi Parchu* and *Mengammy*, automatically we are in, you know what I mean?”
(AA, G3)

Further to this, Chettis who have converted to other religions, such as Christianity, do not practise or partake in the Chetti custom of *Bhogi Parchu* (ancestor worship). Consequently, as more Chetti families convert to other faiths, less Chetti culture and traditions are maintained.

Sensing that the younger generations may not know their roots or may not be connected to the Chetti community and culture after their parents pass on, a small group of Melaka Chetti seniors founded the Malacca Chitty Cultural Association Selangor (MCCAS) on Facebook in mid-2016. Postings on the MCCAS focus on disseminating information on Chetti happenings and culture to assist outstation Chetti families to connect with the community in Malacca. According to the president of the Association, the people at Gajah Berang are very supportive

of the Association and members who return to the village are thrilled to be connected to the Malacca community. She explains that they are trying to ‘...keep the community together, and make sure those who are no longer in Malacca want to come back and be a part of the community’.

To summarise, there is a high degree of cultural maintenance amongst community members at Kampong Chetti, Melaka; the challenge is for Chettis living away from Melaka. Fortunately, the MCCAS is making efforts to help Chettis who have left Kampong Chetti or Melaka to return and participate in these significant Chetti traditions and observances, thereby preserving Chetti's ritual practices and culture.

ON ASSIMILATION AND IDENTITY

The fact that most of the community is marrying (Tamil) Indian spouses, it is highly likely that the community may be assimilated into the more prominent (Malaysian) Indian community, foreshadowing assimilation and the loss of the distinct Chetti identity. Discussions with the older generation interviewees provide views and feelings on this possible evolution:

“Yes, (my) children are all Chitty; grandchildren may not be identified as Chitty, most likely Indian. I expect some younger generation to carry on the Chitty identity, but whether they will, (I) don't know.”
(TR, G2)

“In an exogamous marriage, I feel the *budaya* (culture) is now becoming more ‘mixed’, have some influence from Indian spouses...which can't be helped when one spouse is not Chetti.”
(XY, G3)

Although the older generations are acutely aware that assimilating into the Indian community may be a natural evolution, their sense of being Chetti runs strong:

“Yes, we are assimilating, slowly becoming less in number as we intermarry with the Indians, but we are still Chetti...Our customs, our food, our way of life...”
(GK, G3)

“We can assimilate into the Indian..into any community... but we will still be different, how we pray, our food, our language is different, so if we keep that, we are still Chetti... maybe 75% Indian and 25% Chetti... Is that assimilation?!” [laughter]
(XY, G3)

With younger Chettis, especially children of mixed marriages, their (mixed) fluid identity is often negotiated in the presence of their ‘other’ communities:

“My mum is Indian, so most times I'm Indian. But when I return to my grandma's house, I become Chitty...”
(FF, G5)

“At home, I feel I'm Chetti, but at college, I don't feel or think about it. I'm just an Indian (girl)...”
(QR, G4)

“My mother is Chinese, dad is Chetti. I feel no different from other Indian girls in school, but I can't speak Tamil, so most times cannot be considered Indian.”
(CS, G5)

It is clear that the older and younger generations view identity and assimilation into the larger Malaysian Indian community differently. For the older generations, while assimilation into

the Indian (Tamil) community is inevitable, there is a firm conviction and sentiment that the community will not entirely lose its distinct Chetti identity. In contrast, the younger generations' Chetti identity surfaces depending on who they are with, where they are, how others around them perceive them and when they cannot speak Tamil. In short, identity for the younger Chettis is a process of identification that is interactional and co-constructed in the context of the various settings that they are in.

For the younger generations who live away from Melaka, the Chetti village holds special significance for their Chetti identity:

“When we return to Gajah Berang, when I’m with my cousins here, somehow in the village, I feel very Chitty...”
(ZZ, G4)

“I don’t know all the (Chetti) culture, so difficult...But when we return during the festivals, you feel like one big family in the kampong in Malacca because everyone is Chetti here, so when I’m here, I am Chetti.”
(ZA,

G4)

The quotes mentioned above show how identity can be attached to a place. Sukri and Radzuan (2018: 1) emphasised that ‘people identify themselves to places as it postulates their identity and provoke their sense of belongingness’ as each of the heritage communities interviewed in their study carried a deep sense of attachment to the historic city, which is most likely intricately linked to not only the genesis of their communities but also to the process of their sociocultural adaptation, assimilation, and formation of their identities.

For ethnic minorities, identity has never been straightforward and clear. Pue (2016) explores the notion of plural identity amongst six Peranakan communities (including the Melaka Chetti) in Peninsula Malaysia and concludes that their plural identity is not recognised nor acknowledged by the State’s categorisation of its citizens into four default ethnic categories (Malay, Chinese, Indian, Others). Along the same lines of argument, using materials from Facebook groups frequented by marginalised ethnic groups, Chuang and Müller (2016) highlighted how the recognition of Melaka as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 2008 has provided ethnic minorities such as the Dutch Eurasian and the Melaka Chetti a discursive space to rearticulate their identities in more inclusive ways than the State’s traditionally conceived heritage sites. The Chetti community has also been cited for ethnoracial marginality and ethnic invisibility by Raghavan (1977) and Moorthy (2021), respectively. In his discussion of ethnoracial marginality in West Malaysia, Raghavan (1977) highlighted that Melaka Chetti’s sociocultural assimilation into secular Malay culture is unsurpassed. Still, unfortunately, the community is ignored and faces cultural marginality, which is regrettable as he believes studying these small, marginal ethnic groups may provide assimilationist strategies for unity in multiracial Malaysia. In the Peranakan Festival 2023, three Peranakan communities (the Peranakan Chinese/Baba Nyonya, the Malacca Portuguese/Kristang and the Melaka Chetti/Peranakan Indians) are commended as exemplary models embodying racial unity: Peranakan communities are natural (not forced) cross-cultural assimilation surpassing racial boundaries and are iconic symbols of national unity in the country (Kosmo! May 18 2023) (Figure 8).

Figure 8

Peranakan as symbols of national unity



With regards to the future, the Chetti community wants more government support, and they also yearn for progress and a better economic standing:

“We want the Chettis to come up in life, improve their social standing, improve themselves.” (VD, G2)

“...You can’t put us with MIC, that is a political party. We are talking about minority groups here - in comparison with the Babas, Portuguese, Chetti still behind. Government pump money into the Portuguese Square, Baba Nyonya mostly ok financially, Nyonya cuisine well known...Full bumi status would help lah!” (XY, G3)

CONCLUSION

Cultural maintenance refers to the efforts to sustain a culture by keeping one’s traditions alive to pass on from generation to generation. Participant observation and video documentation of the *Bhogi Parchu* and the *Menggamay/Dato Chachar* prayers have shown that these distinct Chetti cultural events are still being celebrated at Kampung Chetti village since their forefathers’ time. As for Chetti identity, for the older generations, being Chetti is closely tied with their way of life, which can be distinguished by visible variables such as their food and speaking the Chetti patois. For the younger generations, their Chetti identity is fluid and interactional. It can be related to a place: for instance, going ‘home’ for celebrations in the Chetti village or interacting with Chetti relatives during Chetti festivals can make them feel they are Chetti. For children of ‘mixed’ (exogamous) marriages, often their identity is being ‘negotiated’ between being Indian and Chetti, depending on where they are and their linguistic capabilities. Most of the younger Chettis do not speak Chetti and disagree that the ability to speak Chetti Malay is an essential part of Chetti's identity. Will the Melaka Chetti community be extinct in the future? Based on our observations and interpretive understanding, we contend that three factors - religion, cultural maintenance, and Kampung Chetti - will have an impact on the survival of the community. Religion and cultural maintenance are closely related: as long as the younger generations are Hindu and can engage in the religious Chetti festivities at Kampung Chetti, the community will

continue to survive. A change of faith will lead to a discontinuance of the religious Chetti rituals and practices and, subsequently, a loss of the community. Lastly, the significance of Kampung Chetti cannot be underestimated, as the Chetti village holds meaningful associations with the Chetti identity and culture. To conclude, it would be a significant loss to our multiethnic and multicultural Malaysia if this unique Peranakan minority community ceases to exist. On an optimistic note, perhaps being accorded the title of 'heritage community' by the Melaka government for the community's predated existence and contribution to the history of Melaka as well as the value given to Peranakan communities in the Peranakan Festival 2023 may catalyse the Chetti community to be proactive and turn the tide of assimilation and loss around.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We are grateful to Berjaya UC for funding this research project (RMC/SASG/072018-19/006) and to members of the Chetti community for their hospitality and assistance.

REFERENCES

- Bakar, A. A., Osman, M. M., Bachok, S., & Ibrahim, M. (2014). An analysis on transmission of ethnic languages in selected communities in the world heritage site of Malacca, Malaysia. *Procedia Environmental Sciences*, 20, 612-621. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.proenv.2014.03.074>
- Barker, G. G. (2015). Choosing the best of both worlds: The acculturation process revisited. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 45, 56-69. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2015.01.001>
- Bauman, Z. (2001). Identity in the globalising world. *Social anthropology*, 9(2), 121-129. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S096402820100009X>
- Berry, J. W. & Sam, D. L. (2016). *Theoretical perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316219218.003>
- Berry, J. W. (2017). *Theories and models of acculturation*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190215217.013.2>
- Castells, M. (2000). Globalisation, identity and the state. *Social Dynamics*, 26(1), 5-17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02533950008458682>
- Chandran, S. (2018 November 6). The unique Deepavali celebrations of Melaka's Chetti community. *The Star Online*. <https://www.thestar.com.my/lifestyle/star2.com-video/2018/11/06/deepavali-melaka-chetti-community>
- Chuang, L. H., & Müller, F. (2016). *Ethnic minorities and multiethnic heritage in Melaka: Reconstructing Dutch Eurasian and Chitty Melaka identities through Facebook*. Anthem Press.
- Dervin, F. (2012). *Cultural identity, representation and othering*. Routledge.
- Dervin, F. (2013). *Researching identity and interculturality: Moving away from methodological nationalism for good?* Cambridge Scholars Publishing. Dhoraisingam, S. S. (2006). *Peranakan Indians of Singapore and Melaka: Indian Babas and Nonyas—Chitty Melaka* (No. 14). Institute of Southeast Asian Studies Publishing.

- Fu, K. (2015). A brief literature review on acculturation strategies of overseas students. *English Language Teaching*, 8(8), 121-127. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190215217.013.2>
- Gopal, R. (2019, June 27). The unique Deepavali celebrations of Melaka's Chetti community. *The Hindu*. <https://www.thehindu.com/society/history-and-culture/the-chetti-melaka-community-of-malacca/article28177863.ece>
- Hamzah, F. & Chong S. (2021). Kelestarian Bahasa Chetti. *Jurnal Melayu*, 369-380. <https://ejournal.ukm.my/jmelayu/article/view/52618/12597>
- Hamzah, F., Sharifudin, M. A. S., & Shin, C. (2022). Language shift within Chetti community. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 12(7), 1151 – 1162. <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v12-i7/13079>
- Hamzah, F., Sharifudin, M. A. S., Kamarudin, N. A., & Sopian, A. (2020). A Look at Creole Languages in Melaka: Can They Continue to Survive? *Kolokium Penyelidikan Siswazah (KOPSIS) 2019*
- Ismail, S., Nangkul, U., Mohd Yazid M. Y., Ismail & Arifin, N. F. M (2015). Conservation of cultural heritage in the context of city marketing for developing sustainable urban development strategies—A case of Melaka historical city. *Advances in Environmental Biology*, 9(24), 34-37.
- Loh, K., & Velupillay, J. (2017). *The Chitties of Melaka*. Department of Museum Malaysia:.
- Mohamed, N. (2009). The Malay Chetty creole language of Malacca: A historical and linguistic perspective. *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 55-70. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41493734>
- Mohd Fikri, N. H., Abdul Rahman, A. E., & Noh, I. (2021). Exploring culinary heritage practices among the younger Chetti generations in Melaka. *Journal of Ethnic Foods*, 8(1), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s42779-021-00101-8>
- Moorthy, R. (2009). The evolution of the Chitty community of Melaka. *JEBAT: Malaysian Journal of History, Politics & Strategic Studies*, 36, 1-15. https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/114_89637.pdf
- Moorthy, R. (2021). Hybridity and Ethnic Invisibility of the “Chitty” Heritage Community of Melaka. *Heritage*, 4(2), 554-566. <https://doi.org/10.3390/heritage4020033>
- Motti-Stefanidi, F. (2018). Resilience among immigrant youth: The role of culture, development and acculturation. *Developmental Review*, 50, 99-109. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dr.2018.04.002>
- Muthusamy, P. & Karpaya, N. (2017). *Melaka Chitties: The story of the unique and colourful Melaka-born Hindu community*. University Putra Malaysia Press.
- Nagappan, K. (2020, April 1). *Malaysia: Melaka Chettis, past and future*. Hinduism Today. <https://www.hinduismtoday.com/magazine/apr-may-jun-2020/malaysia-melaka-chettis-past-and-future>.
- Omar, R., Alias, N., & Seong, T. K. (2016). Pemilihan *Bahasa Masyarakat* Chetti di Melaka. *Jurnal Melayu*, 15(2), 210-222. <http://journalarticle.ukm.my/9968/>
- Omoniyi, T., & White, G. (Eds.). (2006). *The sociolinguistics of identity*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Paulo, D. A. (2018, October 21). *Meet the Chetti Melaka, or Peranakan Indians, striving to save their vanishing culture*. CNA Lifestyle. <https://cnalifestyle.channelnewsasia.com/cna-insider>.

- Pauls, E. P. (2022, September 21). *Assimilation*. *Encyclopedia Britannica*.
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/assimilation-society>
- Ewing, K. P. (1990). The illusion of wholeness: Culture, self, and the experience of inconsistency. *Ethos*, 18(3), 251-278. <https://doi.org/10.1525/eth.1990.18.3.02a00020>
- Pillai, P. (2015). *Yearning to Belong: Malaysia's Indian Muslims, Chitties, Portuguese Eurasians, Peranakan Chinese and Baweanese*. ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.
<https://doi.org/10.1355/9789814519687>
- Pue, G. H. (2016). Peranakan as plural identity: cases from Peninsular Malaysia. *Regional Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 1(1), 67-93.
https://www.academia.edu/20244883/Peranakan_as_Plural_Identity_Cases_from_Peninsular_Malaysia
- Raghavan, R. (1977). Ethno-Racial marginality in West Malaysia: The case of The Peranakan Hindu Melaka or Malaccan Chitty community. *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land-en Volkenkunde, (4de Afl)*, 438-458. <https://doi.org/10.1163/22134379-90002605>
- Rathabai, K. (1992). *Asimilasi kebudayaan masyarakat Ceti: Kajian kes di Kampong Gajah Berang, Melaka*. [Unpublished Bachelor's Degree dissertation]. Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.
- Roots (2019). Chetti Melaka of the Straits: Rediscovering Peranakan Indian Communities.
<https://www.roots.gov.sg/stories-landing/stories/chetti-melaka>
- Rumbaut, R. G. (2015). Assimilation of immigrants. *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 2, 81-87. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-097086-8.31109-6>
- Sarkissian, M. (1997). Cultural chameleons: Portuguese Eurasian strategies for survival in post-colonial Malaysia. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 28(2), 249-262.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463400014442>
- Sivanantham, P. & Suberamanian, K. (2014). Cultural assimilation among Malays and Indians in Malaysia. *Journal of Indian Culture and Civilization*, 1.
<http://eprints.um.edu.my/id/eprint/14815>
- Siti, S. N. L. (2023, May 18). Peranakan simbol perpaduan negara. *Kosmo!*.
<https://www.kosmo.com.my/2023/05/18/peranakan-simbol-perpaduan-negara/>
- Stephens, C. S. (2016). Acculturation contexts: Theorising on the role of inter-cultural hierarchy in contemporary immigrants' acculturation strategies. *Migration Letters*, 13(3), 333-349.
<https://doi.org/10.33182/ml.v13i3.287>
- Sukri, S. (2017). *Community Engagement: A case study on the four ethnic groups in Melaka, World Heritage City, Malaysia*. [Unpublished Doctoral dissertation]. University of York.
- Sukri, S., & Radzuan, A. W. (2018). The making of heritage places through the narration of ethnic identity at the Melaka world heritage site. *The Journal of Social Sciences Research*, 791-799. <https://doi.org/10.32861/jssr.spi2.791.799>