

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC DESCRIPTIONS OF INDONESIAN DOMESTIC WORKERS IN SELECTED MALAYSIAN MIDDLE CLASS HOMES: CASE STUDY IN KLANG, SELANGOR

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ABSTRACT

Migrant workers began flooding the labour market of the country since the Malaysian economy achieved rapid growth rates, particularly in the late 1980s. The transition of change towards becoming an industrial country has also changed the family system in Malaysia. These changes have led to a new pattern of life among women to go out to work. This increased female participation in the workforce together with the expansion of the middle class households, led to an immediately heightened demand for migrant domestic workers in Malaysia towards the end of 20th century. Most of the demand for live-in maids is being met from neighbouring Indonesia. Though maids are foreigners and considered as strangers, they are accepted as a part of the households by the host families. Naturally, these maids bring along their cultural values, norms and beliefs into the Malaysian homes of different ethnicities. In the process of communication and interaction, they will experience cultural differences. Therefore, it is the intention of this paper to highlight the cross-cultural experiences of Indonesian maids as well as the host families in the process of adaptation within the households specifically in the aspect of cooking and food preparation. Fifteen local families who employed Indonesian maids in their homes were interviewed intensively to obtain responses for this study. In this paper, the researcher hopes to provide insights that both the employers' families and their maids do influence each other culturally within the household context which lead to different degree of social adjustment process and eventually establish various patterns of cross cultural relationship between them.

Keywords: Migrant domestic workers, Indonesian maids, Malaysian employers, social adjustments, cross-cultural relationships

INTRODUCTION

The presence of foreign workers in the Malaysian labour market is not new. This phenomenon has existed even before Malaysia gained its independence, especially during the British rule. The reluctance of the locals to venture into other sectors, especially plantation and mining sectors other than traditional agricultural activities caused English investors and foreign miners to experience trouble in getting the local workforce at the time. This situation forced the British

colonial to permit and bring in foreign workers specifically the Chinese and Indians to work in different economic activities. The Chinese workers were stationed in the tin mines (Fong, 1978) and the Indians were assigned to work in the rubber plantations and coffee as well as in the construction sector (Ramachandran, 1994). At the same time, there is also the arrival of the Javanese from Indonesia who concentrated in plantation work and they are called as contract workers (Ooi Jin Bee, 1968).

After the end of the colonial period, the issue of migration in Malaysia turned to the issue of migrant workers or foreign workers. The entry of foreign workers into Malaysia has increased dramatically beginning in 1971 with the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP) as there were labour shortages locally particularly for the opening of new farms and plantations. This trend progresses and by the late 1980s, migrant workers began flooding the labour market of the country as Malaysian economy achieved rapid growth rates. A little different than before, the country of origin of many foreign workers is now more focused on neighbouring countries such as Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka as the government gave serious emphasize to the development of Malaysia towards becoming an industrialized country.

Meanwhile, the increased levels of education among Malaysians have also resulted in many of them beginning to migrate to the cities and work in offices. Thus, they no longer want to toil their labour in difficult, dirty and dangerous (3D) work which caused the employers to open up opportunities for foreign workers to fill those needs as in Figure 1.



The transition of change towards becoming an industrial country has also changed the family system in Malaysia (Rohana Ariffin, 2001). These changes have led to a new pattern of life among women to go out to work and equally boost economic growth while increasing family income. The increased female participation in the workforce either at the middle level as well as in high positions, together with the expansion of the middle classes households, led to an immediately heightened demand for migrant domestic workers in Malaysia towards the end of 20th century.

Migrant Domestic Workers

Migrant Domestic Workers (MDWs) are a special group of migrants. They are women who come from the remotest villages of the third world countries, tend to be the least informed, work in isolated work conditions, are unrecognised and with the least protection. The majority of MDWs are female and relatively young (between 17 to 45 years old). (Tenaganita, 2012).

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention No. 189 defines domestic work as “work performed in or for a household or households”. It include tasks such as housekeeping, house-cleaning, cooking, washing and ironing clothes, taking care of children, or elderly or sick members of a family, gardening, guarding the house, or even taking care of household pets. Thus, for a MDW, a private home becomes the work place where the work performed is of a ‘genuine domestic nature’, and is carried out within the sphere of the home, in the employer’s residence or his or her premises and is paid for. In short, a MDW is a person “who is engaged in a remunerated activity in a household within a state of which he or she is not a national”.

Generally, domestic work is not considered as work since it is a natural role for women as the work entailed is simple and women do not need training to be able to perform it as they should be familiar with it. But in reality, the work is not simple at all as it requires workers to be multi-skilled which means they must be able to do all types of house chores. Domestic work is often considered as unproductive work because of the perception of the informal nature of the work and it involves tasks related to social reproduction which are considered to be the sole responsibility of women rather than as a shared responsibility with men, family or state. It is also economically invisible because it takes place within a family and its immediate products are used for direct consumption within the household and not exchanged directly in the market and therefore its market value is not recognized.

The Emergence of Multi-Ethnic Middle Classes in Malaysia

The impact of the implementation of state policies related to industrialization, the economic structure of Malaysia has changed from an agricultural-based country to the industrial and services based country. During the industrial labor-intensive export-oriented, jobs were created and widely open to most of the nation's workforce, including women and simultaneously encourage rural migration to the cities.

The impact of the introduction of various policies by the government, Malaysia was not only transformed economically, politically and socially in terms of structure, relationships and

institutions but the people who were formerly known as traditional villagers has been transformed into modern city people with more than 71 percent of the population in the 2000s lived in urban areas. Various ethnic communities who were previously identified through their economic functions and places of settlement have changed and led to the emergence of the middle class across ethnic groups. Abdul Rahman (2007) stated that the emergence of a middle class along with national industrialisation processes have formed the educated and expanded multi-ethnic middle-class and also an increase in the number of multi-ethnic corporate class.

As reported in Eleventh Malaysian Plan, in 2014, the middle class households' income range between RM3,855 and RM8,135, where the mean and median income was RM5,662 and RM5,465 respectively. Currently there are 2.67 million middle class households, of which 83 percent reside in urban areas while 17 percent are in rural areas. About 85.9 percent of the middle-class households live in Peninsular Malaysia and both husbands and wives are working in most middle-class households nowadays.

Hence, the care of the household by a domestic worker came to be seen as a necessity for the middle and upper class families in Malaysia. A combination of traditional values regarding the family and the simultaneous demands of the workplace were difficult for women in Malaysia to cope with. Since local domestic help is either not available or too costly, employers turn to cheap migrant domestic workers as one solution.

The immigration of female domestic workers in Malaysia continues in the 21st century primarily because of demands for household labour that emanate from the expanding Malaysian middle classes of different ethnicities. Ironically, although domestic work is considered to be of low social status, the hiring of a domestic worker has come to symbolize employing families' achievement of "middle classhood." Migrant maids not only free female employers from performing more laborious household tasks and child care but they also serve as status symbols for middle-class families (Chin, 1997).

Demand for Migrant Domestic Workers in Malaysia

Malaysian industrialization since the early 1970s has induced more autonomous female migration to cities (Heng, 1994; Khoo & Pirie, 1984). The majority of workers in the Malaysian Export Processing Zones (EPZs) are young rural females between the ages of 16 to 25 years old who have migrated for factory work (Fatimah, 1985; Jamilah, 1984, 1994) instead of being domestic helpers or servants in others' households. Thus, in the late 1980s, the decline in local servant was exacerbated greatly as young working class Malaysian Malay, Chinese and Indian women were attracted and even encouraged by the state to the work of sewing garments and assembling electronic chips in factories owned by transnational corporations (Jamilah, 1992; Lim, 1987; Ong, 1987). The relatively higher wage and factory work status with regulated work environment and specified rest days caused a major exodus from the home environment to the factory. Therefore, Malaysian employers of domestic servants solved their household labour problems initially by illegally hiring low-wage female migrants especially from Indonesia and The Philippines.

The trend of hiring MDWs continues to the extent that foreign live-in maids have become a dominant feature of Malaysian homes nowadays. In 2010, more than 30.3 percent of all foreign workers in Malaysia are women, and they dominated the domestic services (Azizah, 2012). Live-in maids are needed in many Malaysian families as substitute homemakers of the households especially because both husband and wife are working and therefore spent a large amount of their daily time outdoors, especially in their workplace. Maids are needed in order for the female employer to balance the demands of working beyond the home and taking care of the family since most men usually refuse to do any housework due to their traditional role as the sole breadwinner of the family and their patriarchal belief that housework is unproductive work (Chin, 1997).

Today, the government of Malaysia has recognized a few countries mainly to be the source countries for the supply of maids to Malaysia. Among them are namely Indonesia, The Philippines, Thailand, Cambodia, Viet Nam, Laos, Myanmar, Nepal, India and Sri Lanka as in Table 1. This clearly shows the increasing influx of MDWs, causing local employers to prefer to hire the services of MDWs as compared to locals. The practice of having MDWs has become a culture in this country. This is probably because many mothers are not housewives anymore as they are employed and they also have better earnings besides the reluctance of local people to be a maid.

TABLE 1 : STATISTICS OF MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS ACCORDING TO COUNTRY OF ORIGIN FROM 2013 TO MARCH 2015

No.	Country of Origin	Migrant Domestic Workers			Total
		2013	2014	2015	
1	Indonesia	83,611	97,524	19,822	200,957
2	Philippines	18,497	25,222	5,716	49,435
3	Cambodia	7,245	4,761	703	12,709
4	Sri Lanka	806	1,183	281	2,270
5	Viet Nam	615	681	118	1,414
6	India	525	696	181	1,402
7	Thailand	276	301	79	656
8	Myanmar	68	69	19	156

9	Nepal	53	67	17	137
10	Laos	37	43	4	84
11	Bangladesh	35	58	21	114
12	Pakistan	18	29	6	53
13	China	1	17	4	22
	Total	111,787	130,651	26,971	269,409

Source: Foreign Workers Division, Immigration Department of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, 2015

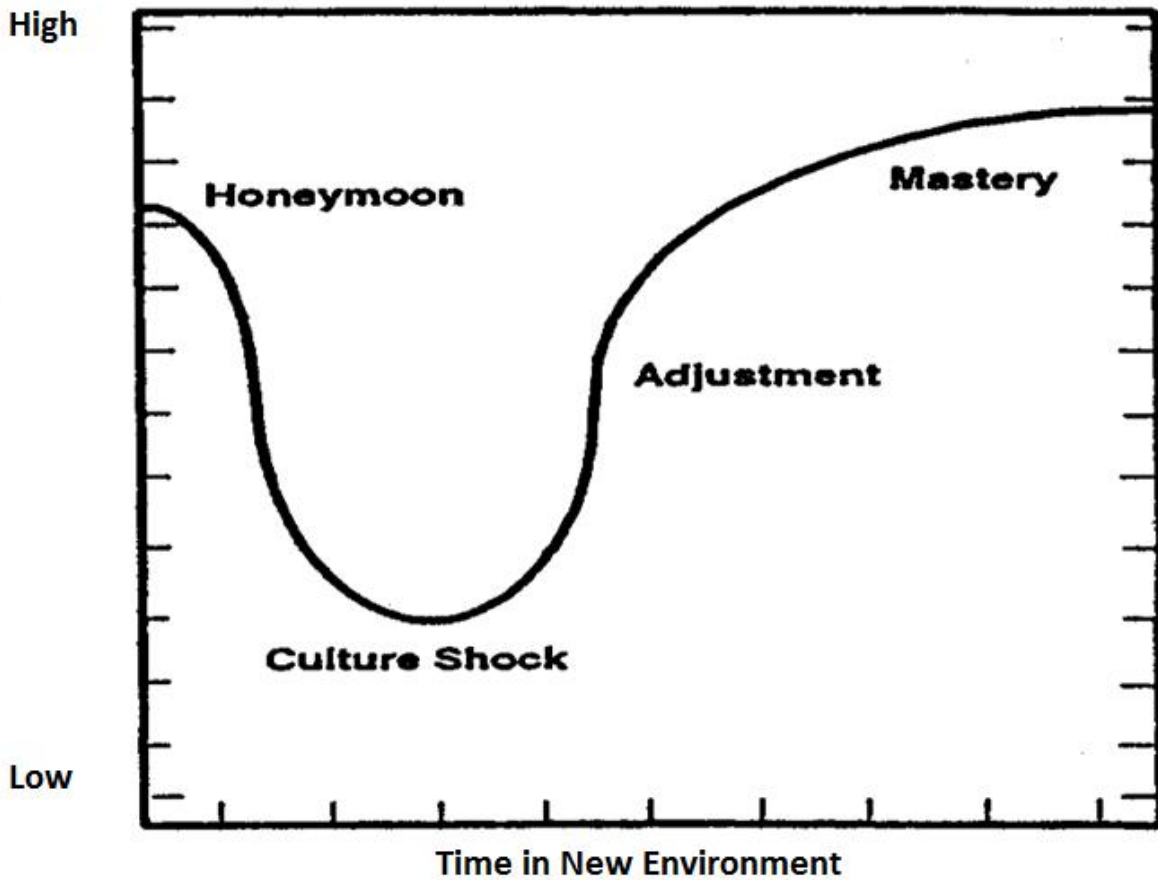
Table 1 also shows that Malaysia is another country with a significant demand for women domestic workers and the demand for Indonesian maids is very much high in Malaysia as compared to maids from other countries¹. This is because, generally, Indonesian maids' wages are lower, they are more obedient, can easily communicate in Malay language, easily adaptable to local culture and they are less demanding as compared to Filipino maids.

U-Curve Theory (UCT) of Adjustment

The U-Curve framework is one of the models used by many researchers to describe the cross-cultural or intercultural adjustment process of sojourners or immigrants within a new host culture (Lysgaard, 1955; Black & Mendenhall, 1990; Usunier, 1998). According to this model, there are four stages of adjustment, namely honeymoon stage, culture shock stage, adjustment stage and finally mastery stage. The different stages as highlighted in Figure 2 suggest that there is a transition in cultural understanding and perceived quality of living of newcomers or immigrants when they are in a different environment due to shifting from a home culture to a host country culture.

FIGURE 2 : U-CURVE THEORY OF ADJUSTMENT

Degree of Adjustment



Similarly, this model is used to explain the adjustment process between Malaysian employers and their maids within the Malaysian household context. The migrant maids as newcomers also go through the same stages as they encounter a different host culture encompassing different specific behaviours and generally dissimilar to their home culture. On arrival from Indonesia, the maids may face cultural infatuation caused by the newness of the work environment and the unfamiliar people around them in Malaysia. Cultural shock sets in when they need to cope with the new and unfamiliar setting on a daily basis as they begin to realise and recognise some degree of unpreparedness, psychological uncertainty and anxiety in coping with the new work environment and unfamiliar people.

During the adjustment stage, they experience increasing degree of satisfaction and comfort as they are being able to cope with the cultural norms of the hosts and their families within the household setting. In the mastery stage, due to familiarity with the host culture as time passes, they have gained a better knowledge of how to function effectively with regards to their new job tasks and work roles as well as able to fulfill the Malaysian employers' expectations and needs within the household setting. Hence, it is the capacity and ability of the maids to manage their transition between complex cultural codes within the household setting

that decides the favourable outcome of their experience as well as their cross-cultural relationships with their respective employers and their families within the Malaysian household context.

Social Adjustment between Culturally Distinct Groups

Generally, the stages of social relations between many communities of a society can be seen starting from the detached relationship, which is segregated until well blended shaped relationship, the amalgamation. In the context of Malaysia, the diversity of Malaysian society is further enhanced with the coexistence of foreigners, particularly migrant workers from Indonesia with a large part of them becoming permanent residence of this country. The networking of social relations among the diverse Malaysian communities occurs continuously across ethnic, religious, cultural and language differences through daily interaction between them. Conducive social relations between various ethnic groups in Malaysia are very much important in the achievement of an integrated and cohesive society.

Adjustment or adaptation is a process that must be passed by any individual or group for their survival, especially when they migrate as they need to adapt to their environment (Gillin & Gillin, 1954, Mac Iver & Page, 1949). Adjustments are also defined as a modification that allows an individual or a group of people to live in a particular area (Mac Lory & Townsend, 1979). According to Barbichon (1961), adaptation is actually includes two processes, namely "social adjustment" and "psycho-social adaptation". Social adjustment is an important process among the immigrants or newcomers in an area because they have limited knowledge of their new environment – of its norms and values. And in turn, the locals have little knowledge of the newcomers – of their beliefs, interests and habits. Generally, social adjustment can occur either through accommodation, acculturation, assimilation and amalgamation or through the four together which leads to different stages of cross-cultural relationships developed between the locals and the migrants.

In the context of this study, the researcher is seeking to identify how different stages of cross cultural relationship is being developed and portrayed within the household settings as both employers and their maids need to do social adjustments. This is because both parties who came from different backgrounds with different cultural habits, values and beliefs are put together under one roof. Hence, they definitely need to make the social adjustments in various activities performed within the household settings in order to gain positively from this new form of relationship as they are dependent on one another whether they like it or not.

STUDY AREA AND METHODS

Methodology

The researcher employed qualitative approach, namely phenomenology perspective in this study. In very general terms, phenomenology is the study of phenomena (Husserl, 1970). Phenomenology is a study based on personal experience that always changed and often happens in this world. This approach find and analyses the experiences of life as it is on us, as human

beings in this world without the need to be interpreted in terms of theory and science. The aim of phenomenology is to understand the nature and depth of its properties or the meaning contained in it through the experiences we go through every day. This approach does not offer us a theory but rather leads us to the direct contact with nature (Van Manen, 1990). This approach is suitable to be used in this study as migration is a social phenomenon and therefore it is appropriate to study the cultural experiences of foreign female domestic workers and their employers through their behaviour and roles in everyday lives. The instrument of the study is in-depth interview via structured questionnaire. The collected data via interview were transcribed and analysed using codes and conceptual categories were identified based on the common themes in the gathered data to develop analytical framework.

It is important to stress that research on foreign female domestic workers (maids) in Malaysia is difficult at best because of the overall unwillingness of Malaysian households to openly discuss and share their views regarding maids since it is considered as a sensitive issue in the country. Furthermore, many Malaysian families are quite reluctant to allow the researcher to enter their house to interview them and their maids. The researcher began with her social and professional networks and over time, the snowball approach produced some potential respondents for this study.

The research was conducted via intensive interviews on fifteen (15) local middle-class families from the three (3) major ethnics, namely Malay, Chinese and Indians who employed Indonesian maids in their homes in Klang area. These locations are selected because these areas are considered as urban areas with many middle class families. Apart from that, many of the female employers of these middle class families are working and therefore they need the maids to take care of their households especially during their absence at home. The unit of analysis for this research is the female and male employers of the three different ethnics as well as their Indonesian maids. The interview sessions were video recorded after the researcher was able to convince them that their identities would be confidential and all information will only be used for the sole purpose of the research. The four aspects of study that are covered in the interviews are:

- a) Cooking and food preparation;
- b) Child care;
- c) Housekeeping attitude; and
- d) Entertainment habits.

These aspects are chosen because maids and host families interact and communicate with each other through various activities performed under these aspects. In the process of interaction and communication, both sides tend to bring in their own culture into these activities causing cultural influences between them which lead to different degree of social adjustment process and eventually establish various patterns of cross cultural relationships between them.

In the context of this study, the four concepts of ethnic relationships used are accommodation, acculturation, segmented assimilation and amalgamation. Each of these concepts is elaborated as below:

a) Accommodation

Within the household setting, accommodation is a type of social relationship between the employers' families and their respective maid whereby they are aware of and respect the norms, collective values and cultures of other person and at the same time hold on and practices each other's cultural values. In this type of relationship, there is understanding, tolerance, trust, mutual respect, interdependence, consensus, compromise, negotiation, boundary maintenance and give and take policy as well as balance between them in order to maintain a harmonious relationship between them.

b) Acculturation

Acculturation is a social process occurring when individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact with subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both groups. For example, the cultural patterns of the employers are borrowed by their maids and gradually accepted and incorporated into their own values, habits and practices by the maids within the household without losing their own cultural values and norms as both sides are in continuous contact with each other. Elements of those cultural patterns picked up by the maids ranged from language, dressing sense, emotional expression, religious practices, personal values to preferences in music and entertainment.

c) Segmented Assimilation

Segmented assimilation involves a variety of adaptive experiences and many different ways that maids may adopt and adapt according to the new environment within the employers' families whereby they only eliminate some of their own cultural identities in order to adapt and adjust within the household setting while still preserving some of their own values and their ethnic solidarity.

d) Amalgamation or Cultural Hybridisation

Generally, amalgamation is a process that is done consciously by some ethnic groups via intervention to fix together different elements of different ethnic groups in a single unified entity either temporarily or permanently. But, within the household context, both employers' families and their respective maids are able to mix together different elements of their own cultural practices to form something new which is a cultural hybrid.

The Characteristics of the Sample of the Study

The respondents of this study are fifteen (15) local middle-class employers from the three (3) major ethnics, namely Malay, Chinese and Indians and their respective Indonesian maids attached to their homes. My sample includes 13 female employers and 2 male employers as

these employers are in charge for hiring the maids as well as overseeing the maids' performance in household activities. The male employers are able to supervise their maids' performance as one of them is a divorcee while the other is a fieldworker with no specific working time and therefore able to monitor the maid.

Many of the employers in this sample are between the age of 31-40 years old while one of them is a single mother and another two of the respondents are divorcees. The religious beliefs of the respondents varied between Muslim, Buddhist, Taoism, Hinduism and Christianity. Most of the employers are university graduates, working and earning an income between RM7,000 to RM9,000 per month and thus fulfilling the characteristics of middle classes in Malaysia.

On the other hand, the maids employed by these employers are mostly between the age of 20 – 30 years old as well as between 41 – 50 years old. There are almost an equal number of single and married maids in this sample. Many of the maids are Javanese, while a few of them are from the sub ethnic of Batak, Aceh, Melayu, Belu and Madura. Most of the maids in the sample are Muslim while a few of them are Christian.

Most of the maids found in this sample are primary school leavers while only five of them attended secondary schools. None of them have tertiary education. A large number of the maids in my sample have been in Malaysia for more than 2 years but less than 6 years while another four of them have been in Malaysia for more than 10 years. Most of the maids also have 2 to 4 years of working experience with the current employers while there are another two maids who have been attached with their current employers respectively for more than 10 years. Almost all of the maids in this study except for one admitted that they never had working experience as a maid before the current job.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

From the analysis of this study, the researcher found that different stages of cross-cultural relationships are being portrayed by the employers and their respective maids in terms of the four aspects chosen in this study. However, for the purpose of this paper, the researcher has limited the scope of discussion only to cover the aspect of cooking and food preparation as it is one of the important activity where adjustment need to be made by the employers and their maids within the household.

Cooking and Food Preparation

In the aspect of cooking and food preparation, both the employer and the maid need to consider a few elements in relation to cooking within a household context. These elements includes questions like who decides on the daily dishes to cook, choice of ingredients for cooking, choice of methods in cooking, types of daily dishes prepared, cultural differences in terms of cooking and whether the maid has willingness to cook local dishes when she is back to her hometown during her holidays.

In terms of decision on what to cook daily, most of the maids in Malaysian households irrespective of the employers' ethnic background are given the freedom to decide. However, most of the employers insist that the menu for lunch and dinner must be based on their own ethnic dishes which mean Indian dishes are cooked in Indian households, Malay dishes are prepared in Malay households and Chinese cooking in Chinese households respectively. This shows that an accommodative relationship exist between them since most maids are given the freedom to choose on what to cook as they are very familiar on the expectations of their employers but the food prepared must be based on the ethnic background of the employers. Examples of such situations within the households can be seen when statements as below was given.

An Indian employer mentioned **“Yeah, I do allow her to cook freely but I insist that the daily food must be Indian cooking because my family prefers Indian cooking. So, she does on her ownlah freely. She cooks anything she decides on the menu because she has been here for more than 2 years so she knows what my family likes and dislikes”**.

Another Chinese employer informed **“I’ll let her cook the Chinese dishes that she’s familiar to cook. For example, in 7 days per week, she cooks 2 days and I cook for 5 days or maybe lunch she cooks and dinner I cook. It’s not a fix kind of things. Both of us cook sometimes, if she’s cutting the vegetables, I’ll do the cooking if my children let me to do it and if not the other way round. We don’t have fix role, we adjust accordingly to the situation”**.

Another Indian employer expressed, **“Normally, not much I decide on the dishes. Maybe a few items I decide since I’m vegetarian, otherwise I leave it to her to decide on what to cook daily but of course Indian menu”**.

A Malay employer informed that, **“Yes, I allow her to cook freely whatever she wishes to cook if the menu for the day is Indonesian dishes. But, then she cook mostly Malay dishes daily and sometimes she cooks Indonesian dishes”**.

From the above statements, the phrases used by employers such as “... allow her to cook freely”, “She decides on the menu”, “... not much I decide on the dishes, I leave it to her to decide”, “We don’t have fix role, we adjust accordingly...” clearly reflects that the employers are understanding, tolerant, negotiable, able to compromise and have trust on their maids which clearly highlights an accommodative relationship between them.

In terms of choice of ingredients and methods to cook, most of the maids admitted that they normally use the ingredients and the same method that their employers have taught them to use when cooking. This is because to ensure that the taste of the dishes cooked by the maids are similar to the ones cooked by their employers. However, in some households, the maids are encouraged to cook their own Indonesian dishes and for this kind of cooking, the maids are allowed to use their own traditional ingredients and their own methods to cook their dishes. This shows that the employers and maids are able to compromise and agree in consensus to maintain their boundary limits within the aspect of cooking. Instances of such statements are as below :

An Indian employer stated, “What I mean is she follows the way I cook because I taught her how to cook so the ingredients she uses are our Indian cooking ingredients, the one we normally use such as different curry powders, chilli powder, turmeric powder, other Indian spices, herbs and so on. No difference because she has to follow Indian cooking, so she knows that what I’ve taught her she just follow the instructions, she doesn’t alter the ingredients and so on. Yes, sometimes she cooks Indonesian dishes. Because sometimes, she feels like we are bored of eating the same dishes. So she try to change a little bit, not every time, only occasionally, she used to cook Indonesian curry but it’s a bit different from Indian cooking because she uses raw ingredients such as fresh turmeric root, galangal, chilies then *buah keras* and so on. It means only for Indonesian cooking, she uses different ingredients which we don’t mind. But for Indian cooking, she always follows what I have taught her, the Indian way of cooking using all the Indian herbs and spices. All is our way”.

A Javanese maid stated, “Generally when I cook, I use the local spices and herbs. But sometimes, I want to cook different curry, I cook my traditional dishes from my hometown like using fresh turmeric root, ginger, galangal, *buah keras* and not blended ones like the locals here use”.

A Chinese employer said, “Sometimes, I do notice there is a difference. She has her own way of doing curry. We, Chinese have our way of cooking curry. If it’s what, we don’t like to eat, we’ll advise her not to do it in that manner the next time. She has to change her way and follow our way the next time. Usually, she’ll try to cook something using her own method first like how she do it in her *kampung*, then she’ll ask us whether we like it or not. If ok, she’ll continue to cook that way and if not, she’ll follow the way we asked her to cook. Sometimes, we’ll eat her Indonesian way of cooking because it’s nice also”.

A Christian maid said, “Normally I cook following the employer’s style of cooking. But sometimes, I also try cooking my traditional dishes from my village for my employer’s family. Sometimes, they like to eat these dishes and sometimes, they don’t like what I cook and ask me to change and follow the way that they used to cook that kind of dishes”.

When the researcher posed a question to the maids asking about their opinion whether they think that different cultural background influences the difference in terms of cooking and food preparation, all the maids interviewed in this sample agreed to the question. Their responses were as below:

One of the Javanese maids expressed, “Cultural difference is very important. In Indonesia, all the spices that we used are fresh ones, not ready-made powders but for the Indians here, they use one thousand different spices like mustard seeds, urad dhal, fenugreek seeds, cumin seed, cloves, coriander seed, poppy seed, star anise, black pepper, asafoetida powder, cardamom, cinnamon and a lot more other spices, curry leaves and coriander leaves. In Indonesia, don’t have these things. I agree there are differences in cooking and food preparation among us because we are from different cultures”.

Another Christian maid in an Indian household said, “I agree differences in dishes cooked are due to our different cultures because in my culture back home, cooking never use

powdered spices, we only use what are available, fresh ingredients such as onions, chilies, turmeric root, everything we do on our own there but here it is easy, all in the forms of ready-made packets and also powders. Here, always use powdered spices and herbs as compared to Indonesia”.

Another maid from a Malay household stated, “Yes, certainly because of the culture as we have different cultures, so different ways of cooking also. Sometimes all that is here, not available there and what available there, is not here, surely. But, we try to adjust what we can to make the food more palatable”.

In a Chinese household, the Christian maid informed that, “Yes, there are differences in cooking due to our cultural background is different. We are from different cultures and countries, so of course a lot of dishes cooked and food preparation are different because we are familiar with our own cooked dishes since small, following what our parents have taught us”.

Another Acehnese maid in a Malay household expressed that, “... the differences in the cooking are definitely because the Malay culture and the Indonesian culture are different”.

The responses from the maids proved that they acknowledged that there are differences in culture between them and their employers’ families but they did not see the differences as barriers but rather accept and respect the differences since they know cultural values are instilled in individuals through their upbringing and becomes part and parcel of everyone’s life, hence they make adjustment accordingly within the homes in order to maintain an accommodative relationship between them.

From the total fifteen maids in this study, ten of them informed that they do cook Malaysian dishes back home for their families when they returned to Indonesia during their holidays. This shows that the maids have the willingness and easily accepted as well as adopted Malaysian way of cooking into their lives back home though the dishes they cooked are what they learnt in their employers’ home during their stay here and not originated from their own culture. Their acceptance of the Malaysian menu can be seen from the statements as below:

A Javanese maid in an Indian household expressed, “I made *chapati* and *roti canai*. I brought flour from here to there so the whole family can taste Indian cuisine. My family loves the cooking and told me to do it again the next time also when I returned home. I also cook *chutney* and mutton curry. But unfortunately, in Indonesia there is no curry leaves, so we use bay leaves. If got curry leaves, the fragrance of the dishes will be much better”.

Another Christian maid stated, “Yes, I have. For example, I cook a few types of curry. I try to make curry because the things are available there such as brinjals, cabbages, potatoes and other vegetables. There also got Indian people, so we spend at their place to buy the Indian *masala*. In regular stores, these things don’t sell. My family was very fond of the Indian curries and some gravy that I cooked. Next time round, when I go back I want to try to make the breakfast items like *thosai*, *chapati* and *puri* with potato gravy, definitely it will be yummy and I guess my children will definitely like them”.

A Javanese maid in a Chinese household informed, **“I have tried to make spaghetti, pasta and fried sardine rice following my employer’s western style of cooking when I returned home. My kids really liked them and asked me to cook again when I go back”**.

Another Madurese maid in a Malay household admitted, **“When I returned home, I always cook Malay cuisine in the village. I usually bring all the different curry pastes from here and use them to cook the dishes there. My family members and neighbours in the village like my cooking. My elder children also have already learned from me and already know how to cook Malay cuisine and always cook using spices that I bought from Malaysia”**.

The above statements clearly show that there are elements of borrowings in terms of cooking between the maids and their employers which proved that acculturation occurs. This is because a large number of the maids in this sample have incorporated the cooking of Malaysian dishes into their lives when they returned home which shows that they are more open and willing to accept and try out what their employers have taught them while they were here though the dishes cooked may not be a part of their own cultural way of cooking but something that they newly learnt.

Therefore, in the aspect of cooking and food preparation, accommodation and acculturation are being portrayed by most of the employers and their respective maids within the home setting. This is because they are interdependent and show mutual respect towards each other’s way of cooking, able to negotiate and come to an agreement to maintain their boundary limits when it comes to ethnic based cooking and Indonesian cooking as well as accepting each other’s ethnic based dishes and incorporating each other’s cultural way of cooking into their cooking activity.

CONCLUSION

As MDWs continue to become a part of Malaysian homes as their service is needed for the well-keeping of a house and to care for the young and sick elders at homes, it is very important for employers and maids to understand each other’s needs and expectations well in a household context as their relationship is not only built across different ethnic, religion and culture but also across two national borders.

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ENDNOTES

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ⁱ Information gathered in the discussion with Madam Farah Adura Hamidi, Director of Foreign Workers Division, Immigration Department of Malaysia on 8 April 2015.

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