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The Practice of ‘Othering’ during COVID-19 Pandemic in Malaysia: From the cities to the highlands

Poline Bala¹ and Linda A. Lumayag²

Abstract

This paper attempts to throw light on the concept of ‘othering’ previously framed through the prism of identity politics. As COVID-19 continues to ravage our economy and social life, we turn to looking at two contested sites of the highland national borders and the urban cities to understand how the ‘othering’ idea manifests itself right when the pandemic began in late December 2019. The first situation is described in social media as Malaysia’s mass rage and xenophobic rants against Rohingya refugees and the second scenario is the closure of international borders between Sarawak and East Kalimantan in the uplands located in the northeast of Central Borneo. By analysing texts in the form of narratives, anecdotes and communication encountered through social media, the paper raised questions whether these were manifestations of specific forms of marginalisation of people based on perceived group differences or simply expressions of fear of COVID-19 disease and anxiety about scarcity of resources as a result of the pandemic.

Keywords: “othering”; COVID-19; xenophobia; Rohingya communities; pandemic; migration; border communities

Introduction

The global pandemic currently embodied by COVID-19 infections continues to wreak havoc in our economy, lifestyles, social interaction and political governance (Sirkeci and Cohen, 2020). More than a year since COVID-19 came to ravage human lives, it is clearly shaping the contours of our new everyday practices across countries from the movement restrictions to health protocols. At the same time, however, countries behave and respond differently to the pandemic. These responses at the national and international level vary from providing immediate relief care packages in the form of food aid and cash, moratorium of monthly loan payments and rentals, suspension of the physical school-based learning, and closing of the national borders, for example. One obvious, although less well articulated at the national level of countries, is the crystallisation of social inequality that is simmering despite the popular belief of economic growth in certain industries such as in the digital technology and communication, online food services and others, as a consequence of the different policies, strategies and policy actions, persistence of negative ‘othering’ attitudes and practices. One of the simmering manifestations of social inequality is the practice of wedging divisions based on citizenship, ethnicity/race, gender, geographical location, and class made more glaring in this time of pandemic.

¹ Poline Bala, PhD. Director, Institute of Borneo Studies, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak 94300 Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia. Email: bpoline@unimas.my.

² Linda A. Lumayag, PhD. (corresponding author) Programme Coordinator and Senior Lecturer, Politics and Government Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences & Humanities, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak 94300 Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia. Email: allinda@unimas.my.



This paper attempts to explore the idea of 'othering' expressed in the global South Malaysia, home to about 29 million citizens and six million migrants, immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers. The aim is twofold. The first is to contribute to the evolving debates concerning the social, political and economic ordering of society as a result of COVID-19 crisis. The second is to highlight the crucial importance of challenging 'othering' and to expand the circle of human concern, especially in the face of a specific yet common health problem on a global scale. In this attempt, efforts are made to explore the concept of 'othering' as observed in a WhatsApp and Facebook group owned by a small membership from the Kelabit indigenous community. Traditionally, 'othering' can be analysed in different ways and fashion (see for example the classic works of Said (1978), Bauman (2016), Appadurai (1994), and Handlin (1954), and as time passes, analysis is largely dependent on a much broader context – in terms of economic, social and political circumstances as well as technological and media development. Nowhere has 'othering' been analysed in the context of an epidemic that is of global proportion especially in the context of a pandemic on border crossers situated in the highlands of Sarawak, and migrants and refugee communities in west Malaysia. The double-sided setting to describe 'othering' is purposely to make tentative observations that 'othering', in the time of pandemic is yet another social prelude to a seemingly dormant practice but is subtly enforced when in dire situations such as the unprecedented expansive effect of COVID-19.

This paper has three sections. The first section begins with a vignette from a former student that challenges a lecturer's stance on the presence of thousand Rohingya refugees in Malaysia, and another is an interesting exchange of messages that the authors are privy to from a group of people living in the highlands of Sarawak. The second sharing from the highlands may be considered an opinion shaper, an influencer of sort, and may well be considered as one of the earliest narratives on COVID-19 in border communities in Malaysia. The two encounters provide the context of the idea of 'othering' which has been laid dormant in many ways and, surprisingly, it springboards a flurry of exchanges that border on latent exclusion and xenophobia.

The second section examines earlier studies on 'othering' of migrants and refugees and how related concepts of stigmatisation and marginalisation interface a new sudden phenomenon. Furthermore, the third section discusses the different threads of 'othering' practices enacted in the textual sharing of opinions and other narratives and present some unifying conceptual elements to explain 'othering' in the context of Malaysia – a popular destination country for refugees, migrants and immigrants.

Method-wise, this paper draws its observations primarily from two sources- the social media exchanges in WhatsApp and Facebook, predominantly popularised by users based in the highlands in East Malaysia, and the online English news media. Using textual analysis, several key themes were identified to provide an understanding on how 'othering' is expressed in vulnerable communities at the time of pandemic.

Setting

It was an afternoon – forty two days – after the newly “appointed” Prime Minister of Malaysia has announced the nation's lockdown. The authors received the following WhatsApp notes from a colleague, which read, “Am quite worried how COVID-19 triggers louder ultranationalist and xenophobic voices from our dear Malaysians - take the case of the



Rohingyas. A former university student reached out and asked me why I support the Rohingyas in Malaysia when they are so dirty and poor. I felt so depressed after that chat.... I took it personally - that I failed as her lecturer in sociology of development.” The shared message was rather disturbing. The situation is compounded by one other discussion on a different scenario that unfolded on another WhatsApp wall. On that screen was a situation playing out in a different space located along the inland border of Sarawak on the island of Borneo. The participants of the discussion are mainly members of the Kelabit community of Sarawak.

The first post written in the Lun Bawang language reads:

... seeking help for us to pray for our people far in Krayan. There are already COVID-19 positive cases over there. Moreover, all this while so many people have gathered around with those found positive. It is so worrisome thinking about families who are there. Requesting us all together to pray for them all. Other participants questioned the reliability of the news. Another indicated that he too had seen similar message on a different wall. Apparently 10 Lun Dayeh individuals in East Kalimantan suspected to have been infected by coronavirus.

The discussion took a different turn with the following post:

I heard from my close relative in Lembudud that there would be a convoy of 4x4 Hilux sending supplies of sundries to Long Bawan on 28th April 2020. Why should the government of Malaysia allow that to proceed at this time? Datuk Awang Tengah and Datuk Henry Sum must be very strict on this. This is more worrying than the rest. No doubt Ba’Kelalan will be the entering point of COVID-19 into Lawas district.

We take that these two vignettes are of particular significance consequent to the spread of coronavirus pandemic in Malaysia. This raised an alarm in the context of Southeast Asia’s complex history of immigration, transitory migrants, and populations that have endured in situ since the region’s first settlement’ which led to the very genetic diversity of the region (Tumonggor et al., 2013, p. 165). In addition, the ongoing close knitted kinship relations and the existing religious connections between and amongst the border communities involved are suddenly challenged to perform a set of new social rituals as a result. The Lun Kelabit and Lun Kerayan are two border communities who share common ancestors and homeland who surprisingly began subtly pitting against each other when, earlier, they shared a collective memory in the highlands. In west Malaysia, the Rohingya refugees, who have been around since the 1980s, remain marginalised and vulnerable. Our argument highlights how the processes of ‘othering’, which have heightened in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak in Malaysia, is part and parcel of colossal effects of the pandemic. Hence, this paper raises this question: how are texts and narratives shared in Facebook and WhatsApp and online news reflect ideas of ‘othering’ that demonstrate divisions, exclusion and marginalisation? Do these manifestations of ‘othering’ lead to specific forms of marginalisation of others based on perceived group differences? How possible it is to reframe and replace metaphors to identify and challenge the barriers to a just and inclusive society in the face of a global pandemic. Paying a close attention to the two scenarios can help better understand and effectively challenge “othering” process as it shapes our personal and social realities and consider their implications for human support especially during pandemic outbreaks.

Background of two communities

To provide a quick glimpse of the past related to the presence of Rohingyas in Malaysia, there has been a sustained sometimes clandestine arrival of Rohingya since the 1980s when the then Myanmar militia started discriminating the Rohingya as non-citizens of Myanmar. The non-acceptance of Myanmar Rohingya into the national body politic, militarisation in the Rakhine state forcibly dislocates them in search of a safe place. So then, the presence of Rohingya in Malaysia is rather not a new development as they have been allowed to live in Malaysia and have been holding a refugee status. The outburst of violence in 2012 was between the ethnically Myanmar Buddhist majority and the Muslim ethnic minority Rohingya in Myanmar's Rakhine state. It has led to a serious humanitarian crisis (cf. Brooten 2015, p. 135), and, since then, hundreds of thousands of Rohingyas have been driven from their homes and denied full citizenship rights despite having lived in Myanmar for centuries. Many fled atrocities and lost entire families, escaping with nothing but their shattered lives. Malaysia has provided shelters and 'home' for many of the Rohingya that came as migrants and refugees. As of April 2020, 177,800 refugees and asylum-seekers registered with UNHCR in Malaysia, 153,060 are from Myanmar with 101,280 are Rohingya, 22,470 Chins and 29,310 from other Myanmar communities (UNHCR Malaysia, 2020). Even though many have stayed and lived in Malaysia for decades, many held hopes to return to Myanmar once it is peaceful and safe.

The second scenario unfolded in the mountainous region in Central Borneo, is home to diverse ethnic groups: Lun Dayeh-Lun Bawang, Kayan-Kenyah, Barito-Ngaju, Iban and the Penan, and other related neighbouring groups that have long settled its landscape. The delineation of the international border through the Anglo Saxon Agreement in 1824 has led to a political divide in Central Borneo between Indonesia and Malaysia. But it was after World War II that the cleaving of peoples and villages into two different political entities became robust. This has led to huge disparity in the level of development between the two regions leading to economic interdependence across the border. The porous border serves as a vulnerable lifeline for communities on both sides. Today designated as part of the Heart of Borneo (2003) geographies, the Kelabit and Lun Dayeh are cousin tribes who are divided and served by a mountain border.

'Othering' as an analytic frame

Over the last 10 years, there has been a global escalation of negative 'othering' discourses concerning migrants and refugees and other marginalised groups (Dienne & Turkmen, 2020) in many countries. Some argue it to be the problem of the 21st century and deemed to take place at different scales – national, international and community levels. Stemmed from the seminal work of Edward Said titled 'Orientalism' first published in 1978, the term 'othering' is often used in the context of discourses in which others are represented as different and inferior (e.g., de Beauvoir, 1949; Bhabha, 1983; Spivak, 1999). Said argues that 'othering' takes place through image construction (p. 9). He justifies this simply as a process of differentiation by throwing light on Eurocentric constructions and representations of 'the West' as superior by glossing over of the Orient as simple. The orientalism style of thought, he said, has led to asymmetrical relationship in which the construction of the East makes it a good site for the functioning of 'othering' strategies (p. 13, p. 50). His arguments foreground subsequent debates on the process of 'othering' via language in general, and figurative languages as rhetorical strategies in particular. In that light, dichotomisation of the Self and the Other or a



'Us' versus 'Them' mentality, and the representation of the Other is seen as the practice of 'othering' (Allman, 2013). Because of their particularities, figurative languages in metaphors do not only play significant role in the construction of the 'other,' but also in the power to shape attitudes, social debates and ultimately action. Obviously, they evoke and stimulate emotions in "fear, anger, sense of security, protectiveness, loyalty" (2004, p. 17 cited in Baider & Kopykowska, 2017, p. 207).

Framing a social-political complexity by constructing metaphors becomes an effective mechanism for 'othering' (Buzilla, 2018, p. 50). Research in cognitive linguistics affirms that human beings view the world in metaphoric terms (Johnson, 1987; Lakoff, 1987). From this perspective, a metaphor operates to solidify one's own identity against others by denigrating, objectifying, degrading, mystifying, romanticising and exoticising others as outgroups or enemies (Charteris-Black, 2005, pp. 13, 15, 20; Inokuchi & Nozaki, 2005). Pushing further, 'othering' as a concept is integral to identity formation, indeed, and "as a process in producing otherness (Vukasovic 2018, p. 2). Understanding and interacting with the other to differentiate and distance oneself from those other marks this idea.

Other scholars have raised concerns about how 'othering' can lead to severe form of exclusion based on perceived group differences through acts of blaming, scapegoating, and attacking the rationality and sanity of the other. Zygmunt Bauman (2016), in his book 'Strangers at Our Door' argues that, more often, immigrants, migrants and refugees are viewed as outsiders, dirty, uneducated and poor by the receiving government or community. Although they may have contributed to the economic well-being of the new homeland, they remain invisible and excluded in the mainstream society. Young (1990, p. 63) also calls this situation of marginalisation as "perhaps the most dangerous form of oppression." This is especially when it leads to denial of the others of humanness, humane treatment, basic human rights and moral consideration (Opatow, 1995, p. 347).

Media and Othering

Media knowingly and unknowingly exploit the power of metaphorical conceptualisations (cf. Reisigl & Wodak, 2001; Musolff, 2017) to create and represent others. As noted by Kamenova (2014), "media has the ability to create powerful images, which seep into logical thinking and unconscious mind of the audience" (p.17). Through the media, society's perception of otherness and their attitudes and tolerance towards others can be shaped. Several scholars have explored and highlighted the most frequent metaphors used in the media concerning migrants. Hart (2010) describes each metaphor used in many ways by listing dimension, for instance, burden (the outgroup needs to be supported by the ingroup), character (the outgroup has certain undesirable characteristics), crime (the outgroup consists of criminals), culture (the outgroup has different norms and values than the ingroup and is unable to assimilate), danger (the outgroup is dangerous), disadvantage (the outgroup brings no advantages is of no use to the ingroup), disease (the outgroup is dirty and carries infectious diseases), displacement (the outgroup will eventually outnumber and/or dominate the ingroup and will gain privileged access to limited socio-economic resources, over and above the ingroup), and exploitation (the outgroup exploits the welfare system of the ingroup) (p. 67). Similarly, Musolff (2012; 2014; 2017) highlights the use of parasite as a metaphor to depict migrants as threats on the values, jobs and safety of host population.

In contemporary world, 'othering' is more possible and complicated with the arrival of the Internet. The internet has revolutionised the speed, scale and fake information is produced, distributed and consumed; and it has transformed communication and information pattern. It is safe to suggest that as of today there is no one modern state which has not been touched by the onslaught of information communication technology manifested in digitisation of communication. This has impacted the social landscape and politics of communication, thus, increasingly shaped by the particularities of online setting itself, which is anonymity afforded by the Internet and the remoteness of users from each other (Christie & Dill, 2016). It creates other dynamics in computer-mediated communication. As noted by C.A. Lopez and R.M. Lopez (2017, p. 11), "In the online world, a place of global relations characterised by a dilution of space-time limitations, anyone with online access offer their opinion, contribute to dialogue and put forth their knowledge and perceptions for the gestation of modern culture or cyberculture."

Today social media makes non-edited news content readily available. Described by some as toxic media, this can lead to uncertainty and turbulence. Isasi and Juanatey (2016) argue the internet has become a space for both expression and dissemination of intolerant ideas and beliefs due to its global, immediate and participatory nature. It can be a platform for advocacy and at the same time spread discrimination that can potentially lead to hate crime. Hence, according to Lopez and Lopez (2017), the potential for deprived persons' and groups' dignity and identity being attacked is grave.

Method

Data for this paper is mainly based on texts of narratives, anecdotes, and communication which we have encountered via daily news reporting, WhatsApp chats, Facebook postings and social media discourses and discussions. These texts have emerged on a rise in xenophobic comments targeting the refugee community in several parts of the Klang Valley in west Malaysia and cross-border communities at the Sarawak-Kalimantan border (Figure 1) during the early phase of the Movement Control Order (MCO) period. Guided by a theoretical framework of 'othering', the data is analysed using an approach to critical discourse analysis adapted from Bacchi's (2009) methodology. This is to decipher what representations and metaphors have emerged and whether their usage has revealed a particular perspective on an issue and influenced the salience of issues among the public, and generated fear thereby creating grounds for verbal and physical aggression targeted at the other.

Findings and Discussion

COVID-19 Outbreak and the 'Othering' of Rohingya Refugees

The new Sars-CoV-2 virus first arrived on Malaysian shores on January 25, 2020. It arrived on the heel of a week of political uncertainty in the country's political landscape as a result of "backdoor government" manoeuvring (Loh, 2020). Malaysia then was challenged by the reawakening of nationalistic fervour and the strengthening of ethno-political fronts and cultural groups, hence, creating a tense situation (Figure 2).



Figure 2. A sign specifically intended for non-citizens in downtown Kuala Lumpur) to undergo compulsory COVID-19 test



With the harsh political climate to begin with, the coronavirus pandemic has led to unprecedented crisis at multiple levels in Malaysia. Turning to two concurrent accounts, this section describes how by differentiating, distancing and disconnecting asylum seekers, refugees and border communities during the pandemic has led to crisis of ‘othering.’ The first situation emerged as Rohingya refugees faced backlash in Malaysia in the form of xenophobic comments that filled Malaysia’s social media for several days. Xenophobia refers more specifically to the fear and intense dislike of foreigners (Naidu & Benhura, 2016). And as Nwabuzo (2014) describes, it is the "attitudes, prejudices and behaviour that reject, exclude and often vilify persons, based on the perception that they are outsiders or foreigners to the community, society or national identity" (p. 8).

The spar was initially linked to would-be boat arrivals of Rohingya refugees entering Malaysian waters prior to COVID-19 pandemic. But during the outbreak the spark has dramatically escalated with unprecedented xenophobic comments made via online forums targeting Rohingya community. Postings reflect deep anger over comments on social media supposedly by Zafar Ahmad Abdul Ghani, the president of the Myanmar Ethnic Rohingya Human Rights Organization Malaysia (Merhrom). He was purported to have called ‘Malaysians stupid and have demanded for access to citizenship rights for the Rohingya. This then led local residents calling for stricter control and further exclusion of the community. Depicted in the media as a uniting factor: “for once, Malaysians have found a topic to unite them across racial and political divisions, that is, their dislike of the Rohingya ethnic group who have fled Myanmar,” "Send them back" and "As anak (children of) Malaysia, we are united and will force Rohingya to leave our country” (Maelzer, 2020).

This tension explicitly demonstrated a situation where Rohingya now fear attacks reflecting the rise in xenophobic temperature. The “safe” haven for the Rohingya that Malaysia once seemed to offer has turned hostile and has reached new heights exacerbated by fears over the coronavirus pandemic that has afflicted poor migrant communities. As revealed by a 37-year-old refugee in Petaling Jaya, Selangor, "I've been randomly spat on and shouted at so many

times, I can still take it. But nothing beats the fear of being threatened with murder just because I am Rohingya” (Nadirah H. Rodzi, 2020).

A news portal carried a headline, “Please don't hate us, Rohingya plead with Malaysians” by R. Bedi (The Star, April 26, 2020). The article describes how Rahman, a 27-year-old Rohingya refugee and activist, who has lived in Malaysia for past six years has never felt as unsafe as he does during COVID-19 outbreak. Because of the hatred and threat comments on the social media, Rahman had to deactivate his social media accounts. Even though his real name and picture has been on the social media but because of the fear, he was also hesitant to his full name. The situation of the Rohingya in west Malaysia has drawn support from those who were once refugees in the country but have now resettled in the United States, saying, “Don't blame us. Help us. We don't have a choice about coming here [Malaysia].” She described the challenging journey traversing deadly seas - she took to escape the violence in Myanmar and expressed her gratitude to Malaysia for being her place of refuge.

‘Othering’ narratives by highlands’ border communities

The second scenario encapsulates a string of border narratives of being vigilant and bold at the border regions. This is specifically about cross border movements at the international border in the highlands region of northeastern Malaysia’s state of Sarawak. Straddling these border regions are indigenous communities (Lun Bawang in Ba’Kelalan, Lun Dayeh in Long Bawang and the Kelabit in Bario), while living in two different nation states are bound to one another by ties of ethnicity, language, kinship, religion, and economics. The Malaysian-Indonesian Immigration Post at Long Midang, locally known as Gate Malindo Ba’Kelalan - Long Midang/Long Bawan is one of the seven border outposts established to regulate and police movement back and forth at the frontiers of the international border between Kalimantan and Sarawak. These vigilant narratives can be seen from the following posts on a community WhatsApp platform (see also Figure 3). Revelations of messages exchanged by at least two participants show like this,

Participant 1: “Is the convoy going in from Sarawak side, meaning from Ba’Kelalan to Long Bawan [located in East Kalimantan]? How reliable is this information Kanid? (W, an enforcement officer)

Participant 2: I have called my in-law yesterday. He said that they have shortage of supplies on sundries goods from Tarakan [located in East Kalimantan]. He said that there is good news about a convoy of transport from Lawas, which will be arranged to arrive on the 28th April. He added that, hope it will go as planned.



Figure 3. A Kelabit leader putting up a sign against border trespassers



A message by a person based in Long Bawan (Kalimantan) was forwarded to the WhatsApp chatgroup saying,

“As far as I am concerned the ‘Gate’ was CLOSED since 16th March. It is true that food and sundries at the shops have started to disappear, and, in fact, there is nothing to buy anymore. Basic goods such as sugar and cooking oil are no more. For us as a family we have little stock left perhaps to last us until end of May. After that we will have to look for sugar cane to buy.”

To put context to the messages, Participant 2 writes, “From 2002 to 2007 when I was operating a small business in Long Bawan, supply of my goods always came from Kota Kinabalu and Lawas. At this border exit point, cash in the pocket is the king. Most of the security [personnel] will be the best of all friends to be around. They will salute you if the king is in your pocket. I can easily assume the same today. To me this exit can be the entry point [for coronavirus] to Northern Sarawak. Need constant patrol around the area.”

In response to his comments, Participant 3 writes,

“If guests can buy their way, we need to be vigilant and be bold to not welcome surprise guests to our homes. Our tradition is to always welcome any strangers, visitors and foreigners to enter and shelter in our homes in our villages. We need to care of ourselves before we can extend it to others during this pandemic/MCO.”

The main argument is to halt movement of people and goods between Ba'Kelalan and Long-Bawan and Bario as there were concerns about a transportation that was said to be leaving Ba'Kelalan to send sundry to Long Bawan. Since two members of the chatgroup happened to be overseeing the border surveillance, it was suggested to close the border and to stop the car from going in to bring food. This is disquieting for members of the border communities who organise themselves not only within the confines of national boundaries but also around social ties and interactions that cross these boundaries. The porous mountain border, which for years has served as a vulnerable lifeline to indigenous people across it, now suddenly severed by coronavirus lockdown. Participant 2 noted that both Indonesian and Malaysian soldiers shuttered the borders because of COVID-19, not based on their whims and fancy. Hence, this itself reflects a chiseling away of support of one another over the border. What would this movement hiatus bring and how would it impact the once vibrant mobility of goods, people, and services on both Be'Kalalan and Long Bawan?

Particularly in the economic domain, each looming crisis provides an opportunity for 'othering' to re-emerge. While 'othering' may be hidden and remain unmarked in ordinary times, a different manifestation of 'othering' attitudes projected towards migrants and communities across borders began to emerge during coronavirus lockdown. In fact, Malaysia is now trying to deal with the politics of phobias and seek ways to manage illegal entry to Malaysia. To this end, Malaysia has formed a National Task Force (NTF) with the Armed Forces mandated to coordinate effort. In addition, the following corridors had been identified: West coast of Peninsular Malaysia, East coast of Sabah and along the inland border of Sarawak.

Forms of 'Othering' during Pandemic

COVID-19 disease illuminates how fragile our society is. Nationwide MCO intended to curb the spread of the frightening, rapidly advancing and explosive COVID-19 disease inevitably has led to "othering" processes. This has been exacerbated by the rules of MCO in the form of isolation, quarantine and social distancing. In order to avoid risks and create a sense of being safe, notions such as "don't touch" and keep a one-meter distance has been put in place. All this has led to separation of self and others, an indication that COVID-19 pandemic does not just affect the human body but the environment in which we live. In an environment filled with fear and anxiety that led to a sense of uncertainty and insecurity, a conducive environment for re-emergence of mechanisms of 'othering' cracks open.

Non-inclusion of COVID-19 national care packages

Since the seminal work of Benedict Anderson (1993) on the power of nation states as "Imagined Communities", it is well established by scholars such as Benhabib (2004), Bosniak (2006) and Morris (2010) that access to government support is normally contingent on membership in the national community. National membership and belonging are important criterion for entitlement and access to receive "aid" and support from the government. This includes the care and concerns of other members. On this basis alone, non-members such as refugees and migrants can be 'othered' through differentiation and distancing, leading to their exclusion from any humanitarian assistance. The "care packages" that ensued to the tune of RM250 billion ringgit that the Malaysian government extended during the earlier MCO period has distinctly separated the citizens- the "we" – and the noncitizens – the "others"/"them." Arguably, this is one clear expression of the extent to which 'othering' in times of pandemic



of a colossal grip is best demonstrated (Lumayag, del Rosario & Sutton, 2020). It does not justify the fact that refugees and migrants are excluded, although, in the context of Malaysia, billions of dollars have been lost from the economic impact of COVID-19 (Cheng, 2020), and as noted in various materials (see for example, Baldwin and Weder di Mauro (2020)), COVID-19 is the severest health and economic shock since WWII leading to scarcities of resources.

Unverified news and media's discursive practices toward the other

From the vignettes, we see a concern that the crisis has fueled hostility against refugees and irregular migrants in Malaysia. It is apparent that social media users directed their vitriolic campaigns towards the Rohingya refugees and migrants. The focus is to decry the consumption and use of resources, such as the medical services and infrastructure that would be extended to the Rohingya community. On the back of the pandemic, they were believed to pose a grave threat to the national economy, the veracity of the refugee system and the national security. With their limited access to healthcare and sanitation systems, the possibility of them being infected by the new coronavirus now threatens the livelihood of the local people. Moreover, they were assumed by some quarters to have taken advantage of Malaysia's kindness and generosity, although on the other side of the divide, others were calling for consideration and compassion. This has led to pressure from both sides on the part of the Malaysian government over its handling of the Rohingya (for example, Tashny Sukumaran's *South China Morning Post*, 28 April 2020). One side favours extending assistance to the refugees while the other demands that the resources of the country must be solely for the consumption of Malaysian citizens and to the exclusion of its millions of noncitizen population. The realisation that refugees may be in for the long haul is also observed when the ex-Prime Minister Najib Razak posted on this Facebook wall that, "we do not like it when they don't observe cleanliness [hence dirty], disrespect the law and demand equality." Describing the situation as "sudah diberikan betis nak paha pulak", or Malaysia has already given them an inch and yet refugees will take a mile (FMT Reports, 23 April 2020), alluding to the idea that refugees want more, and that they have crossed the line between hospitality and an overstayed welcome. It should be remembered that before COVID-19, then PM Najib has trumpeted a call for Rohingya's inclusion and protection in Southeast Asia.

The premise for rejecting the refugees from a Foucauldian perspective is the 'pejorative' differentiation and typification of Rohingya whether as dirty, disrespectful and demanding (Bauman, 2016). However, this perspective has been contested and articulated by civil society groups working for migrants and refugees. For instance, Nurainie Haziqah, an activist and lawyer, argues that Malaysians have an entitlement attitude who often think only Malaysians deserve help (Tashny Sukumaran, 28 April 2020). She further claims that Malaysians are very easily influenced by unverified news, and now they are clouded by different stories and judgments of the Rohingya due to overall tensions precipitated from the lockdown. Her statement on "unverified news" which played out in the media suggests the significant roles of the media in 'othering' process. As 'othering' mechanisms, they position refugees, asylum seekers and cross-border communities as pejoratively differentiated, distanced, separated and disconnected from the host communities leading to a culture of fear and loathing. But this has been counter-argued in an open statement by organised groups helping the Rohingya around the globe and even the Rohingya themselves saying,

“Contrary to some unfounded allegations on social media and in some mainstream media, the Rohingya refugees in Malaysia as well as those resettled to third countries have been always grateful to Malaysia and its hospitable people and will always be. They always pray for the well-being of the country (Rohingya Women Development Network and Elom Empowerment, FMT, April 26, 2020).

Similar pattern was highlighted in Australia where political and media discussions employed the terms “illegitimate”, “illegal”, and “threatening” and “burden”, to describe asylum seekers who reached the shores of Australia sometime in August 2001- January 2002, as mentioned in Klocker and Dunn (2003). The same is true in a report on immigrants in the Norwegian media that, 71% of stories on immigration or integration tend to be problem-focused (Media, 2010, see also Leung, 2016). In both accounts, discursive representations of migrants and refugees are overwhelmingly negative.

Unfolding intra-ethnic differentiation at the border

The Rohingya community- as well as other noncitizen communities in the country - is portrayed as a threat in both physical and symbolic sense in the context of the pandemic and current economic crisis. Oftentimes these representations and narratives subsume individuals' complex and harrowing stories. In the same breadth, along the inland border of Sarawak, although presumably less intense, one of the participants on the chat group has moulded the attitudes of those who have never been to the border by reframing the situation as “cash in the pocket is king.” Hence a participant living far in Peninsular Malaysia, writes, “be vigilant and bold and not to welcome guests [from across the border] into our homes even though it has always been part of our tradition and way of life.” This is tantamount to borrowing the words of van Houtum and van Naersen (2002, p. 125) in and by “bordering through immobilising people.” This has led to chiseling of support over the border to close relatives and friends who need food. What this suggests is that figures of speech or figurative languages reinforce conscious or subliminal fears related to others such as foreigners and immigrants. This in turn encourages socio-cultural practices as well as interpersonal relations based on rejection or hostility especially in crisis situations. While most of the heightened rhetoric is online, it is inspiring alleged real-world consequences.

'Othering' the other through online xenophobia

Fernand de Varennes, the UN Special Rapporteur, warns that “COVID-19 is not just a health issue; it can also be a virus that exacerbates xenophobia, hate and exclusion” (United Nations News, 2020). The online spar has created a deep division primarily within the Rohingya community. This is made obvious from reports highlighting statements made by several Rohingya organisations based in Malaysia and abroad condemning Zafar, an alleged community leader, even though he denied he has made a call for citizenship, etc. A statement was released to publicly denounce Zafar (New Straits Times, April 26, 2020). Furthermore, Zafar lamented that due to several death threats made towards him he deactivated many of his personal social media accounts. The Facebook account of Merhrom, a local citizen condemning the Rohingya, remains active with hundreds of comments on recent posts calling for their return to Myanmar and suggesting large number of Rohingyas are creating a national security threat.



The Senior Minister in the current Perikatan Nasional government, Ismail Sabri Yaakob, revealed that the police had received a total of 19 reports from the Rohingya community and further admitted that he was personally puzzled by the negative disposition and outbursts towards the community. This is especially in the context that Malaysians, including the former Prime Minister Najib Razak, have been perceived as supportive of the migrants. Some suggest that Malaysians and Najib's responses to the Rohingya community and refugee crises reflect and re-inscribe lines of marginalisation and exclusion. Taken together, they raise the crucial question: is it possible to provide humanitarian support to all in the face of crisis – where the needs of all people are recognised and met?

Conclusion

Using the concept of 'othering' this paper examined the change from one form of differentiation and marginalisation to another in the context of COVID-19 pandemic. The paper casts new light on the roots and dynamics of 'othering' as a process of differentiation as it manifests in the lives of individuals, families, and societies in Malaysia. Diverse expressions of fear of COVID-19 disease and anxiety about scarcity of resources as a result of the pandemic has heightened perceived group differences and led to the emergence of new form of 'othering' (i.e. at the border region) and different degree of otherness (i.e. of the Rohingya refugees). Both situations have a range of crucial consequences including alienation and marginalisation because of being refugees and migrants or being situated at the border regions. The experiences of the Rohingya community in particular threw light on how rhetoric online inspires real-world consequences.

There is little doubt that both scenarios illuminated existing 'othering' dynamics that undergird group marginalisation can pose a challenge to Malaysia's unique multiethnic communities. It also provided an opportunity to explore possibilities for better civic awareness. That is, for Malaysians to engage in a conversation about diagnosing our civic citizenry and finding a shared purpose in order to extend hands to others who are at the fringe of the national community.

There is a need to explore strategies to bridge divisions, combat 'othering', and aim to reduce the chance of harmful practices toward the Other. The fixation on 'othering' can blind us toward possible sources of connection, which can be harnessed during difficult times as means to be part of the solutions. And this is made clear with the communities along the border of Ba'Kelalan and Long Bawan. The media has a critical role in reframing thinking about societal issues, and in crisis situations, humanitarian and health services for refugees and other migrants and those communities living along the border must be configured. This is by promoting inclusion and by helping shape a narrative, which integrates and values the experiences of this population. There is no doubt that the internet and social media can be used to advocate and promote new possibilities of connections especially in liquid modern times. This is by providing means to rethink conditions for connection by shaping experiences and narratives that could provide interesting perspectives for connection.

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