Women's Roles and Participation in Rituals in the Maintenance of Cultural Identity: A Study of the Malaysian Iyers

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the roles and rituals practiced by Malaysian Iyer women. The Iyers are a small community of Tamil Brahmins who live and work mainly in the Klang Valley. As an Indian diasporic community, who moved to Malaysia from the early 1900s, they have been slowly shifting from Tamil to English and Malay. They are upwardly mobile and place great emphasis on education but at the same time, value their traditions and culture. Data was derived from interactions between women and men from the Malaysian Iyer community together with personal observations made during visits to their homes, weddings and prayer sessions. This data was studied to obtain insights into cultural elements that ruled their discourse. The findings show that for this diasporic community that was slowly losing its language, ethnic identity can still be found in their cultural practices. Women were seen as keepers of tradition and customs that are important to the community. They followed certain cultural and traditional practices in their homes: practiced vegetarianism while cooking and serving food in their homes, followed taboos regarding food preparation, maintained patriarchal practices especially in religious practices and lived in extended families which usually included paternal grandparents. Malaysian Iyer women are seen to continue with the traditional roles given to women of the community.

Keywords: Ethnic identity, language and women, women and tradition

1. INTRODUCTION

The Malaysian Iyers are a small community of Tamil Brahmins who live and work mainly in the Klang Valley. They are upwardly mobile and place great emphasis on education but at the same time, value their traditions and culture (Sankar, 2005). Sankar found that the Malaysian Iyers had shifted largely to the English language for economic and social reasons.

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The Malaysian Iyers, who are the subject of this study, are Tamil speakers who form part of the larger Tamil population in Malaysia. They form a distinct socio-cultural group known as Brahmins[1] with respect to their dialectal variety of Tamil known as Iyer[2] or Brahmin Tamil (Bright and Ramanujam, 1981: 2; Karunakaran and Sivashanmugam, 1981: 59; Varma, 1989: 188). They live in closely-knit networks established through migration patterns and kinship ties (Sankar, 2005).

The Malaysian Iyers are categorized under 'Tamils' and comprise about 0.09% of the Indian population in Malaysia. The approximate size of the Malaysian Iyer population was determined at approximately 1000 people, based on interviews with senior members of the community..

The Malaysian Iyers originate from India. The Iyers started migrating to Malaysia from the early decades of the 20th century in order to seek economic prosperity and to take advantage of the migration policy that existed during the British colonial days (personal interviews: elders of the community). There were several reasons cited by elders of the community for leaving India, such as the Dravidian Nationalist Movement in Tamil Nadu (Arooran, 1980; Irschick, 1986), the economic drudgery of their lives and the need to improve their lot in life, and to join family members. Some of the elders interviewed said that they came to work as employees of Indian companies that had established branches in Malaysia. An association called the Brahmana Samajam Malaysia (BSM) was formed in 1954 for the promotion and practice of their culture and religion in Malaysia (Sankar, 2005).

1.1 Research Objectives

Sankar's (2005) study had established a language shift away from the Tamil language. However, the study also found religion and culture is maintained despite the shift away from the mother tongue. In this study, the objective is to look for markers of identity when the mother tongue shifts to other languages. Sankar's study made a mention of the home domain as an important area for maintenance of religion and culture. This study aimed to explore the role of women in maintaining cultural identity as women are often seen as guardians of the home. To study this objective further, the following specific objectives were set:

1. To study the roles that Malaysian Iyer women adopt and play as daughters, daughters-in-law, wives and mothers.

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[1]Saraswathy (1996) says the word 'Brahmin' is taken from the four fold caste system where Indian society is divided into economic divisions. The original philosophy of the caste system comes from the Bhagavad Gita. The Brahmins formed the priestly class who delved into philosophy and the maintenance of temples. The caste system that exists among Indians today is no longer based on the original idea of grouping society according to their job functions. According to Varma (1989), castes are maintained along hereditary lines today.

[2]The word 'Iyer' refers to one of the two Tamil Brahmin groups. The word 'Iyer' is commonly used among Tamils to mean a temple priest. Iyer Tamil refers to the dialectal variety spoken by Iyers.

2. To identify the rituals that the Malaysian Iyer women conform to and adopt in their lives.
3. To identify the markers of the Malaysian Iyer community.

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

In this section, a number of studies related to women and their roles in the culture of their societies is explored in order to study and provide a background on the role of the Malaysian Iyer women. Societal attitudes to women from time immemorial have relegated women to, at best, a position complementary to men and, at worst, secondary and subservient to men (Basanti Devi, 2003). Literature often depicts women negatively as physical entities of beauty or as sex objects portrayed in a derogatory linguistic representation (Swilla, 2000). The following paragraphs study the place of women in different cultural contexts, so that we can place the Iyer women of this study in a more global context.

2.1 Cultural and Traditional Values Placed on Women

In India, literature dating back to hundreds of years have traditionally placed blame on women for various natural occurrences such as the death of a husband (being the fault of his wife as she is inauspicious), inability to conceive (seen as a curse brought on a family by a daughter-in-law) or even sudden financial difficulties faced by a family (seen as the bad luck caused by the daughter-in-law)(Basanti Devi, 2003). In Tanzania, women are portrayed as despicable and evil who will siphon off men's health and wealth. In their short stories, women are shown in stark black or white terms, usually in a position unequal and weaker to men. Women are further seen as seductresses on whom sexual aggression is justified (Swilla, 2000).

In Bangladesh, Sultana (2011) revealed the plight of elderly women in a strict patriarchal system that seldom pays attention to the problems faced by women. Elderly women suffer from ailments such as arthritis, nerve disorders and back pain who seldom receive any medical attention. The situation arises due to several reasons such as poverty, lack of government involvement in the care of the elderly and the patriarchal system which places women's issues at the bottom of the pile. Ismail (2010) reported that Pakistani women too face a 'glass ceiling' in workplaces that prevent them from moving beyond a certain level to managerial positions.

The values placed on women stem from obedience to the husband (Husanova and Utarova, 2000), ability to produce male children (Basanti Devi, 2003) and the ability to take instructions in her new household (Imamura, 1990). These findings are very revealing about how cultural norms tend to give women a secondary position to men in many cultures that stretch from countries in the African continent to those in the Asian continent. Even in western nations, Christian wedding ceremonies traditionally have used the words 'man and wife' to describe the couple joined in a marriage ceremony. This phrase emphasizes the unequal power relationship between the genders because while the male is given a persona, the female is given a role which defines her in relation to a man (Bate and Bowker, 1997:102).

While the earlier description of position of women may hold true in some parts of the world, Kasi (2013) argues that the roles played by women, especially Indian women, as role models for the family cannot be underplayed as they are responsible for the well-being of their children. In recent times, Indian women have taken to cottage industries in order to supplement family income or in some instances, be the breadwinner. The development of the sericulture cottage industry in India is a success due to the diligence of women. They can be relied upon to work diligently as they take their roles as breadwinners and carers of their family very seriously. He argues that the role of women in community-based projects can either make the project a success or a failure.

French (2010) concurs as her work on the Mayan people found that the Mayan women felt the strongest sense of cultural responsibility to transmit their values to future generations. This gendered responsibility of reproducing traditional culture is attributed to the intrinsic moral strength of Mayan women.

Collier (2006) in her study of Senegalese women in the United States found that unique trade and cultural practices that occur within African hair braiding shops may serve as a maintenance model for future immigrant groups. Migrant women from Africa were resourceful in navigating the two worlds where linguistic and diverse cultural identity allow them to learn the host language while maintaining native cultural practices at the same time.

3.   THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this study, a framework called 'The Ethnography of Communication' was used. This theory provides the framework for analyzing information that is not necessarily language-based but also information based on the culture and ethnography of a community.

The ethnography of a community refers to the analysis of communication within the wider social and cultural practices and the belief systems of a particular cultural or ethnic group. It was proposed by Hymes (1977) as an approach towards analyzing speech patterns within a speech community. This was proposed to accommodate non-vocal and non-verbal characteristics of communication especially when one is concerned with the way in which a speech event fits into the whole cultural belief system; then we may find that we are describing things that are external to the talk (Cameron, 2001).

Using this framework, it is possible to show that while the domain analysis of language is capable of providing a macro picture of language maintenance and language shift, and code-switches tell us more about individual language choice, neither method facilitates an examination of what is said or meant beyond the words used in communication. Language maintenance and language shift should be investigated beyond what is said because different societies speak differently. These differences reflect different societal values and norms (Wierzbicka, 1994). In this study, the objectives were to investigate maintenance of cultural identity in a community that has shifted away from its mother tongue. A study of the ethnography of communication will aid in finding answers to this research objective. The following paragraphs explain the theory.

3.1   Shared Community Norms

Community differences make a difference to the ethnography of communication because 'every society has a shared set of norms' (Wierzbicka, 1994:83) which only they understand. These differences can lead to very different 'expectations and rights among speakers' (Gumperz, 1982:12). If one wants to know the reasons why people shift from one language to another, then one needs to be aware of the rules that govern speaking in the second language (Bamgbose, 1995). To achieve native-like competence in a second language, one has to shift from one's native culture to the culture of the second language; otherwise, there is bound to be interference in communication.

However, if one were to acquire a second language, it can disrupt the basics achieved in the first language. This can result in bilinguals losing a part of themselves in the process of acquiring another language because membership to a community makes language functional for communication (Ehlich, 1994:115). This then brings about the question of language as a measure of one's identity. Researchers such as Pandaripande (1992) found no co-relation between loss of language and loss of identity in her study of language shift in India. David (2001:194) found similar results with the Malaysian Sindhis. She stated that 'the Malaysian Sindhis…fiercely proud of their ethnicity…….do not appear to see language maintenance as critical for the preservation of their culture and identity'. Therefore, the fear that the acquisition of a second (or third) language could erode one's ability in the first language needs to be investigated although some research shows, as seen above, that identity is not necessarily affected in the process of acquiring a second language.

3.2   Societal Rules of Interaction and Interpretation

Variation in a community's speech patterns can sometimes hinder proper communication of the speaker's intentions. Communicative intent could sometimes be unsuccessful due to a lack of understanding of the speech patterns used by the speakers. This is because the cultural background of the speakers plays a role in communicative patterns (Clyne, 1994). In order to understand differences or variations in communicative intent, a 'communicative competence' (Hymes, 1977:60) is required. Communicative competence refers broadly to the acquisition of the ability to understand the grammatical system of a language as well as the system of its use such as the attitudes and beliefs regarding language use. A member of a community has communicative competence when 'he is able to participate in it as a communicative member' (Hymes, 1977:61).

The above views do not mean that communication across different communities is possible. Cross-cultural communication is made possible because a 'universal conversational contract' (Keesing, 1994:4) makes such communication possible to be understood despite the differences in culture. Guibernau and Rex (2010:77) further stated that global society has reached an age of 'universal high culture' where people should be able to move from place to place and communicate easily with ease wherever they are despite cultural and other differences. Therefore, this replaces all other forms of high culture of previous times. A man's education is by far his most precious investment and therefore in effect, confers him his identity.

Each community will attach specific behaviours and proprieties to speaking. These may be considered as the unwritten rules which govern speaking. Rules on appropriate behaviour during speech events such as one should not interrupt or one may do so freely and turn-taking rules will be enforced by the community during interactions (Hymes, 1977). Part of communicative competence is the understanding of such rules or traditions of the community.

Rules of interaction can be understood when a community's socio-cultural practices are investigated (Hymes, 1977). Interpretation of a community's speech patterns would depend on the belief system of a community. The communicative competence of a community should include the understanding of the rules of interaction and interpretation of community values. When a community shifts from its ethnic language to another more dominant language for reasons of survival and economic necessity, they do not lose their identity completely. Part of a community's communicative strategies includes what is said and done within a framework of cultural knowledge because what is said and done has meaning only within such a context.   Schiffrin (1994:185) explains this well when she says:

> *The ways that we organize and conduct our lives through language are thus ways of being and doing that are not only relative to other possibilities for communicating, but also deeply embedded within the particular framework by which we – as members of our own specific communities – make sense out of experience.*

An understanding of the rules of communication that exist within each community is important to interpreting them. Rules regarding face-saving devices such as non-confrontation and avoidance of a direct affront can be found in some communities such as the Vakinankaratra of Madagascar (Keenan, 1974:126). Other customs such as visiting neighbours daily just to check that all is well exists with some people in Iceland (Coulthard, 1985:56), politeness and power strategies to maintain privilege among church leaders (Pearson, 1988), expressing social status through different modes of greeting (Irvine, 1974) and direct confrontation strategies among Arabs (Watson and Graves as cited in Coulthard, 1985) exist among different ethnic communities. Therefore, without a clear understanding of the underlying rules of each community's social norms, it will be difficult to interpret language use.

It is important to have an understanding of the community's socio-cultural practices as these will give insight into the community's value system. The Malaysian Iyers' social and cultural practices were studied to gather better insights on their motivation to preserve their cultural identity and the role that women play as keepers of language and culture.

4. METHODOLOGY

Fifty (50) families were visited to observe traditional practices found in Malaysian Iyer homes and to document markers of their identity, if any. In addition, conversations among 30 women in various situations occurring naturally was selected for analysis, aided through participant observation. The families, homes and women were selected through phone calls made to various members of the community with the help of the

Brahmana Samajam Malaysia's Directory of Members. They were chosen based on their willingness to be visited, audiotaped and observed.

4.1   Research Approach

Information derived from the observation of intra-community interaction and audiotaped conversations that involved the roles of women were studied to obtain insights into discourse involving women so that cultural elements (if any) that ruled such discourse could be studied. Qualitative research techniques were employed to analyze the dynamics of language use among the subjects, so that cultural norms practiced by the community could be better understood. Three qualitative approaches were used:

1. Visits to homes – This method aided in recording the cultural markers of a Malaysian Iyer home.
2. Observation of intra-community interaction – The observation techniques aided with the interpretation of conversational non-verbal communication.
3. Audiotaped conversations – This technique aided in obtaining information from women on the roles and rituals observed by them in the maintenance of their cultural identity.

4.2   Data Collection

The sample studied is a small and close-knit urban community. Access to the community was facilitated by the fact that the researcher is a member of this community. Data collection for this study was facilitated through 50 home visits and the audiotaping of 30 women in conversation with one another at community functions or in their homes. Participant observation aided in documenting non-verbal data which could be observed. These three approaches for collecting data aided in documenting traditions and customs practiced by the community and the roles that women played in maintaining their cultural identity. The data collected enabled a study of the ethnography of communication (made possible through home visits, audiotaped conversations and participant observation of social discourse between community members).

4.2.1 Home Visits

The researcher made 50 home visits. These visits were made solely to qualitatively assess any commonalities that could be found across the homes visited so that they could be documented as a marker of an Iyer home. These observations were limited to documenting any physical markers that occurred consistently over several homes.

4.2.2 Observations

Observations were made on the Malaysian Iyer community through home visits and audiotaping in authentic and natural situations so that the physical markers of an Iyer home could be documented and the roles and rituals that the women of the community play in order to maintain their cultural identity were noted down. Participant observations were made personally by the researcher during home visits and during audiotaping so that the findings could be triangulated. During these visits and conversations, the researcher took part in the conversations that were being carried out. Personal observations and the taped conversations were documented

from the field notes and the audiotapes. In order to understand customs and practices observed by this community, visits were made to the 50 homes in the Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya areas, where they were mostly concentrated. As a member of the community, the researcher found that access to members' homes was not difficult.

As the main aim of the observations was to obtain ethnographic information about the community, the researcher visited the homes with an open mind to firstly observe commonalities in the way the homes appeared or were managed. Once these personal observations were made and many commonalities were observed especially with regard to how the kitchen was managed and religious altars were maintained, further enquiries were made with reference to socio-cultural patterns such as joint/extended family arrangements and patriarchy so that patterns could be seen.

4.2.3 Audiotaping
The sample for the audiotaped conversations consisted of 30 women who were taped at their homes and at social functions such as weddings, dinner parties and a community outing (the researcher accompanied members of the Malaysian Iyer community on a three-day holiday retreat to the seaside holiday resort of Port Dickson so that community interactions could be studied). For a list of venues and occasions for both audiotaping and observation, see Tables 1a and 1b.

Table 1a. Functions attended for observation and audiotaping

Function	Number
Interactions in the home (home domain)	9
Interactions at social functions (social domain)	3
Interactions at religious functions (religious domain)	4
Total	16

Table 1b. Sample description

Sample description	Role	Number
First generation	Mother, mother-in law, wife, grandmother	7
Second generation	Mother, wife, daughter-in-law, daughter	15
Third generation	Daughter, granddaughter	8
Total		30

4.3 Analysis of Data

4.3.1 The Matrix Language Frame (MLF) Model and the Ethnography of Communication using the SPEAKING Grid
In order to interpret the functional uses of the Tamil language, code-switches from English to Tamil were studied. In order to do that, conversations were separated

into matrix language and embedded language using Myers-Scotton's MLF Model (1993). The MLF was used as a device to separate the languages that were used in a conversation.

Matrix language refers to the main language used in utterances while embedded language refers to the language that plays the lesser role. The basic premise is to establish the hierarchy of two or more languages used in a single conversation. When the frequency of morphemes in a language is more than another language, then that language is the matrix language. The embedded language is another language that is chosen by the speaker to use together with the dominant or matrix language in one conversation exchange. Once the conversations were separated into matrix or dominant and intrusive or embedded language, they were analyzed using the Ethnography of Speaking Model (Hymes, 1977).

Cultural values that are retained depend on the perceptions of the people under study and the social and cultural environment in which they exist. Therefore, the process of research in this study is data driven where patterns of cultural observances were derived from the data collected. Generally when dealing in non-numerical data, 'usually linguistic units in oral or written form', a qualitative approach is used (Seliger and Shohamy, 1989:201). Thus, this approach was selected for the purpose of attempting to find the roles women adopted in maintaining their cultural practices.

For the purposes of this paper, the data was studied using Hymes Ethnography of Communication and the SPEAKING grid (Hymes, 1977; Schiffrin, 1994). Table 2 shows how the SPEAKING grid is used for analyzing data in this study; the components for describing speech are shown mnemonically in the table.

Table 2. SPEAKING grid

S	Setting Scene	physical circumstances subjective definition of an occasion
P	Participants	speaker/sender/addressor hearer/receiver/audience/addressee
E	Ends	purposes and goals outcomes
A	Act sequence	message form and content
K	Key	tone, manner
I	Instrumentalities	channel (verbal, non-verbal, physical) forms of speech drawn from community repertoire
N	Norms	of interaction and interpretation specific proprieties attached to speaking interpretation of norms within cultural belief system
G	Genre	textual categories

Source: Schiffrin (1994:142)

An ethnography of communication using all of the above techniques is capable of revealing information about the physical setting and scene of the speech act (S), the speakers or participants (P), the purposes or goals of the speech act (E), the form and content of the message (A), the non-verbal communication techniques used (K), the forms of speech (I), the norms of interaction and interpretation (N) and the genre (G) of the speech act. Any movements or shifts in any one of the components of speaking can signal that a community speaking rule is present. For example, a shift from a normal tone to a whisper, from formal language to slang, correction, praise, embarrassment, withdrawal, evaluative responses, etc. could in fact mean that a rule of speaking is being observed.

5.   FINDINGS

The following sections outline the roles that women play in the Malaysian Iyer community. An important part of the Iyer identity lies with the customs and traditions that they practice. In Sankar's (2005) study, the majority of participants (43%) looked upon culture and tradition as an important part of their lives. Observations of Iyer homes revealed several customs and traditions that formed an important part of their identity. Women had roles to play in these customs and traditions.

5.1   Customs and Traditions

Important customary practices of the Malaysian Iyers are outlined in the following sections. Personal observations made during home visits aided the writing of this section. Table 3 summarizes these observations.

Table 3. Observations during home visits

Features observed	Count
Tulasi maadam	50
Kolam	37
Prayer altar	50
Vegetarianism	45
Extended family	41

5.1.1 Practices Found in Malaysian Iyer Homes

Traditional practices are an integral part of a community's identity. Fifty (50) home visits were made to ascertain the practice of traditions. During home visits, the researcher found some features in the homes visited. These are outlined in the following paragraphs.

Outside the house, somewhere in the front porch, there is a *tulasi* (basil plant) *maadam* (a square concrete structure in which the *tulasi* plant grows). The *tulasi maadam* has an aperture in the front for a lighted lamp to be housed. In the evening, the lamp is normally lit by the lady of the house. Elders explained this tradition as homage paid to a plant that has come to be revered as it is supposed to have several medicinal properties.

The entrance to a Malaysian Iyer home is usually decorated with a *kolam*. A *kolam* is a hand drawn artwork made of either dried rice flour or a wet rice batter that is worked by hand with a small roll of cotton wool. Colouring is sometimes added for beauty. The *kolam* is drawn by the lady of the home, her daughter or daughter-in-law. This feature is drawn daily in some homes and weekly in others. It serves as both a decoration of the home as well as a bird and ant feed.

Each of the 50 Malaysian Iyer homes visited had an elaborate prayer altar. Most homes had a room assigned for the prayer altar while others set aside space in some part of the house for conducting prayers. The prayer room or altar had pictures of various deities. Some homes had small statues of Hindu gods and goddesses. In the centre of the altar is a *kuttu vilakku* which is a decorative lamp made of silver or brass. The lamp was placed on a *kolam*. The *kuttu vilakku* is cleaned and decorated with *chandanam* (sandalwood paste) and *kumkumam* (a reddish powder made of tumeric powder and lime). A wick made of cotton wool is placed in a recessed part of the lamp which is filled with coconut or sesame oil. The *kuttu vilakku* is lit in the mornings and evenings by the lady of the house. The lady also prepares offerings while the man of the house makes the ritual offering. In all of the 50 homes visited, the hosts reported that incense, flowers and food are offered twice a day, with prayers recited in Tamil and/or Sanskrit.

On leaving a Malaysian Iyer home, married Hindu women are offered *kumkumam* which is placed as a dot in the centre of the forehead. This decorative dot is called *pottu* or *tilakam* and is regarded as a sign of *sowbagya* or the auspiciousness of the married state. On leaving the host's home, the guest is invited to partake of the *kumkumam*. Elders explained that in Iyer heritage, a woman is feted for her auspiciousness when in the married state and thus the state of *sowbagya* is celebrated.

5.1.2 Vegetarianism

In all the homes visited, vegetarianism was followed. In five homes visited, eggs were consumed but the rest did not cook with eggs. This tradition was followed in the homes visited though a few said that they ate some meat outside the home, but never brought meat into their homes. The kitchen of most homes visited had stainless steel utensils, plates, glasses, serving dishes and spoons. The kitchen appeared to be the preserve of the women of the home and few men participated in the preparation of food.

5.2 Patriarchy and Extended Families

In most homes visited, children were expected to obey and respect their parents. The community practiced a patriarchal system. The eldest son is expected to care for his aged parents. Unmarried sons and daughters lived with their parents. Unmarried women lived with their parents and upon their demise lived with their brothers (see Table 4). Men conducted religious rites while the women provided the support services such as preparing the prasadams (food offerings) during religious ceremonies. Sons conducted death rites for parents while daughters and wives took care of all food preparations and played a secondary role in providing support.

Table 4 shows the popularity of the extended family system in the 50 homes that

were visited. Of the 50 homes visited, 40% had unmarried working children living at home, 34% had parents living with them and 8% had unmarried siblings living within the household. Only 18% of the homes visited consisted of nuclear families.

Table 4. Diagrammatic representation of the percentage of extended families living under one roof

Extended families (types of family members living within household)			Nuclear families	Total
Number of families with unmarried working children living with parents	Number of families with parents living with married son	Number of families with unmarried siblings living with a married brother	Parents and children only	
20(40%)	**17(34%)**	**4(8%)**	**9(18%)**	**50**

5.3 Respect for Elders

Respect for elders is common and traditionally, elders are given respect in several ways. Reverence to elders is shown by seeking their blessings when one prostrates at their feet. One does not sit when an elder is standing, nor does one cross one's legs in front of them or show disrespect for them by challenging them openly in any way, even when a point is being disputed.

Elders are addressed politely as *mama* or *mami* (uncle or aunt). The respectful term in Tamil '*neengal*' (a respectful 'you') rather than '*nee*' (which is 'you' when referring to peers) is used when addressing them. This tradition was seen to be practiced by the women who participated in the study. Elders expect and receive deference and respect in several ways. The acts of showing respect were obvious during community interactions. The following examples show how respect is shown in interactions with older people. Older women in the groups always expected and received respect in several ways. They were always addressed respectfully, language spoken was changed or shifted to the ethnic language if an older person who did not know English or Malay joined in and open confrontation with an older person was never conducted so that the older person could save 'face'.

5.3.1 Use of Mama and Mami instead of their Names

When addressing elders who are not related to the speaker, the respectful terms *mama* or uncle and *mami* or aunty is used. The use of their names shows distance and disrespect. Excerpt 1 shows how *mami* is used.

> 9. J: It depends on who you are talking to – if I am speaking to some *mami* or to *padma*, then I have a tendency to talk more in Tamil. Otherwise, I find it easier to talk in English.

Excerpt 1

The speaker, a second-generation woman, was having a conversation with a few other second-generation women. She compares *padma* (a term for a friend of the same generation) to *mami* (a generic term for older women). In Excerpt 2, a younger second generation woman refers to an older first-generation woman by the term *mami*.

> 3. S: *Mami, neenga enna ninaikirel?*
> **What do you think, Aunty?**
> (translation in bold)

Excerpt 2

> 7. A: I think what *Mami* says is true.
> **Aunty**
> (translation in bold)

Excerpt 3

> 33. R: Except that *Mami* thinks we should maintain it properly.
> **Aunty**
> 43. R: You know I was speaking to one *Mama* and *Mami*
> **Uncle   Aunty**
> the other day and they were telling me………
> (translation in bold)

Excerpt 4

In the two examples above, a younger person was addressing an older person. In Excerpt 4, *Mama* and *Mami* refer to an elderly couple. Apparently their status as an elderly couple matters more than who they really are, because the younger person talks of the advice they gave and because they were elders, their advice should be considered.

5.3.2 Use of Neengal and not Nee

The Tamil word for 'you' is used in two ways: a respectful '*neengal*' and a casual '*nee*'. Whenever elders in the community were addressed, then the respectful *neengal* was used. Excerpts 5 and 6 show the use of *neengal* while Excerpts 7 and 8 show the use of *nee*.

> 1. S: *Neengal enna ninaikirel*?
> **What do you think?**
> (translation in bold)

Excerpt 5

In Excerpt 5, a second-generation woman of 30 asks a first-generation woman of 65, her opinion on a matter using the respectful term for you – *neengal*. In Excerpt 6, a second-generation woman asks two first-generation women how they arrived, using the respectful *neengal*. She asks once in English and once in Tamil since one elder can speak English and the other cannot, further establishing respect for the elder who cannot speak English. Switching from English to the ethnic language of Tamil is also seen as a form of politeness extended to those who cannot speak English.

> 1.S: *Mami*, you came by bus? *Neengal ellam* bus-*la vanthella*?
>   **Did you come by bus?**
> (translation in bold)

Excerpt 6

> 54. T: *Urundai ah*? *Enga athukku vanthu paarungo. Nee pannuvai illaiya?*
>   **Round is it? Come and see in my house. Do you make it too?**
> (translation in bold)

Excerpt 7

In the same conversation (Excerpt 7), the first-generation woman who was addressed as *neengal*, now addresses a second-generation younger woman as *nee*. In Excerpt 8, a first-generation woman is asked if she plays cards by a second-generation woman with the respectful *neengal*. The first-generation woman answers her with the casual *nee*. However, it is important to note that the younger woman takes no offense at being addressed as *nee* as those are the norms of address; an elder expects and gets respect, a younger person does not. She answers in English knowing that the older woman is bilingual. The older woman continues the conversation in English with the second-generation woman and changes to Tamil only when another first-generation woman who cannot speak English joins the group.

> 34. S: *Mami, neengal cards villaiyadarathu illaiya?*
>   **Aunty, don't you play cards?**
> 35. A: *Nekkum cardskum romba thooram. Nee vilaiyaduvaya?*
>   **Definitely not! Do you play?**
> 36. S: Yes. It's very easy *Mami*.
>   **Aunty**
> (translation in bold)

Excerpt 8

5.3.3 *Avoidance of Open Confrontation*
When arguing a point with someone who is much older, open confrontation is avoided as a face-saving grace for the elder as seen in Excerpts 9, 10 and 11. Elders take it upon

themselves to give advice and expect that they not be crossed. Even when a younger person disagrees, the opposing point of view is not made directly.

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6. M: ***Intha kaalathu naakareegam naala,*** *English-le-pesara. Velila pona ellam English upayogama irukku. Aana, namma bashaiyai namba padichi thaan aahanum.*
They speak English because it is modern to do so. If you go out, English is very useful. But, we have to learn our own language.
8. J: *Tamizhyo Englishyo, athu language …*
Tamil or English, whichever language …
9. R: *Illai appadinu illai. Sila per aathule….. En kuzhanthaikalai ye pathukongolen. Shoba vanthu Tamizh……*
No its not quite like that. In some people's houses… just take my children for instance. Shoba's Tamil….

(translation in bold)

Excerpt 9

In Excerpt 9, a first-generation woman M is taking it upon herself to lecture the two younger second-generation women on how to maintain Tamil at home and how she and her son have done it successfully. The younger second-generation woman J begins with a point that the older R thinks might be an inappropriate comment to M and so stops her halfway and relates something about her own home. Both second-generation women do not agree with the first generation woman but do not want her to lose face nor do they want to seem disrespectful. They don't openly tell her she is wrong. Instead, they provide examples about their experiences to make their point without telling the older woman that her views don't always work. Excerpt 10 shows another example of avoiding open confrontation.

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10. K: I will say, "*Om buvar buva swaha*" ten times even
Sanskrit prayer
when I am driving because that's the only free time I get sometimes.
12. AR: *Namma ellarume azhnthu sinthikka vendiyathu enna endraal, Mami sonnathu maathiri Brahmanana Pirapathu arithu arithu maaninanava pirappathu arithu athanidam arithu manitharaha pirapathu. Manithanaha pirapathai vida Brahmanana pirappathu arithu. Aana ethina Brahmanarkalsamprathayathai kadapidikavaarkal enbathuthaan theriyavillai…….*
What we have to think about very deeply is like the mami said, that to be born as a human being is a high birth. To be born as a Brahmin in a human birth is an even higher achievement. However, how many Brahmins actually follow the code of conduct is unclear…….

(translation in bold)

Excerpt 10

In Excerpt 10, both K as well as AR are first-generation women. K is the older person though AR, while being younger, is better read in the scriptures. AR wants to tell K that as a Brahmin. she has a caste duty to perform certain prayers. However, since she does not want to offend the older K, she first agrees with her and then she uses a roundabout manner about what a Brahmin birth means and that there are duties attached to that birth, and that one does not immediately assume superiority if they do not perform their caste duties.

8. S:	Not enough money and for our community requirements it is not necessary at all.
10. K:	I think. the building can also be multifunctional. It can be used for propagating dance and other activities that our community is interested in.
14. S:	Now tell me honestly how many of us take part in games? Very minimal. From my 73 years of life, how many of us take part in such activities?
15. K:	We did not have a common venue.
16. S:	It doesn't matter whether we have a hall or not.
19. K:	What if we don't confine it to our community?
20. S:	Open it up. That's what I have been telling earlier. If the intention is to rent out the hall, generate some income, yes I agree. If we don't generate any income, putting the whole funds into it, whatever we have just for two or three times a month – it's not worth it. All we require is a hall with attached facilities.

Excerpt 11

In Excerpt 11, three first-generation women and one much younger second-generation woman were having a conversation about whether the community needs a hall or not. One elder S thinks it is a waste of money. The younger woman K tries to politely show her that the hall could be put to several uses. However, S is not convinced though all the others appear to agree with K and makes it a point to bring her age in to show that she has more experience than the younger S. K then gives S a face-saving way out by making a suggestion. S takes it up by saying that that is what she has been saying all along, even though she was not!

5.4 Rites and Rituals

Some functions such as the *navarathri* celebrations which last nine days are celebrated in many Malaysian Iyer homes. Married women are offered *manjal kumkumam* (a red powder made from sandalwood powder and tumeric denoting auspiciousness of the married state) by the hostess who decorates her house with an elaborate nine-step structure (*kolu*) with many statues of deities arranged on each step.

The yearly changing of the *poonal* (the holy thread worn by Brahmin men) or *avani avittam* is another important ritual. This function is carried out in the Brahmana Samajam premises every year. Ladies of the community get together and organize a vegetarian meal for those present while the resident priest organizes the changing of the holy thread. Men who have been initiated through the *upanayam* (initiation into

the Brahmin clans) ceremony wear this holy thread and change it during the yearly *avani avittam*.

A death in the family of a community member is usually a rallying point for all members of the community who turn up without invitation. While the men of the community take over the organization of the death rites, the women comfort the bereaved family and prepare meals for them for up to 12 days. This is due to a period of mourning observed by the bereaved family, when they are not allowed to cook during the first 12 days of a family member's death (Ayyar, 1998).

Ceremonies such as weddings and *upanayanams* (where a male child is initiated as a Brahmin) tend to be a celebration for all members of the community as many aid in the conduct of these ceremonies. The decoration of the wedding hall with *kolam*, the wedding dais, the dressing of the bride and groom, etc. are usually taken care of by community members. Provision of drinks and sweetmeats during the ceremonies are made possible by ladies of the community while young girls and boys serve these refreshments to those present.

In much of the observations made of this community, it appears that the women of the Malaysian Iyer community are keepers of traditional and social practices associated with the community and they take on this role seriously.

6.   DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Sometimes even when a community shifts away from its ethnic language due to economic pressures, their traditional customs are retained (Asmah, as cited in David, 2001). Therefore, an understanding of a community's cultural practices can aid in analyzing the ethnography of communication. The objective of this study was to study the markers of the Malaysian Iyer community and the roles that women played in maintaining cultural identity and the rituals women adhered to. The Iyer traditions are based on several customs and rituals that mark them as a community. The following sections answer the research objectives.

6.1 Roles Played by Women

6.1.1 Adherence to Patriarchy
This study shows that women adhered to the Iyer customs and traditions by playing a role that was supplementary to that of men, thereby keeping to their patriarchal traditions. They were not the main observers of religious rituals but were helpers in the production of food and making the preparations for all religious ceremonies. Their role was thus confined to that of a helper to the male of the home.

6.1.2 Extended Family Tradition
Daughters-in-law accepted their parents-in-law into an extended family system that included their parents-in-law and any unmarried sibling of their husbands. The system of the extended family unit was prevalent in most of the homes visited.

6.1.3 Keepers of the Vegetarian Tradition
Women of the community kept their kitchens strictly vegetarian; even those who ate

meat reported that they would not bring it into their kitchens. This is to keep the house untainted by meat so that religious traditions could be conducted in the home and food prepared in a kitchen that did not serve meat.

6.1.4 Maintenance of the Home within the Iyer Tradition
Women decorated their homes with a *kolam*, grew a *tulasi* plant and maintained a prayer altar where food offerings were made at least once a day. This was in keeping with traditions that were observed from generation to generation.

6.2 Rituals Observed by Women

6.2.1 The Sowbagya Tradition
Respondents to this study showed an adherence to the *sowbagya* tradition where a woman was revered for her marital status. This was observed by the offering of *kumkumam* (vermillion offering) to married women who visited their homes and the veneration of the married state. Widows were not given this status.

6.2.2 Helpers of their Husbands during Religious Functions
Wives of the community aided their husbands (who performed religious functions) through the preparation of *prasadams* (food offerings) and by being an aide in the conduct of the ceremonies. This is an adherence to the patriarchal system where men conduct religious ceremonies while women tended to the kitchen duties.

6.2.3 Helpers during Community Functions
The women of this community rallied around one another during functions such as the *upanayanam*, weddings and other ceremonies by helping in all areas that needed help; not only with food preparation but also by aiding the priest, getting the bride and groom ready and having flowers ready for prayer offerings.

6.3 Cultural Markers of the Iyer Community

6.3.1 The Home
The Iyer home had traditional prayer altars, *tulasi* plants and *kolam* decorations. An elder of the community said that one of the ways in which they identified homes of Iyers was the presence of a *tulasi maadam* outside the home.

6.3.2 Brahminism
The community is from the Brahmin caste and thus observed rules regarding the conduct of religious rituals, the wearing of the holy thread (*poonal*) and the adherence to the vedic traditions (see footnote 1 on page 1.).

6.3.3 The Vegetarian Tradition
The Iyers were vegetarian and seldom ate meat. The concept of vegetarianism practiced by an Iyer is that a Brahmin's virtue is to subsist by destroying nature the least (Mr. Lakshmanan, priest). The principle is one that is recommended in the Bhagavad Gita (Saraswathy, 1996) and states that one should eat what is suitable for fulfilling ones's duties. The Iyers come from the traditional Brahmin caste which involves priestly

duties, philosophy and other duties involving knowledge. The Bhagavad Gita asks Brahmins to abstain from meat.

6.3.4   Dress

The traditional dress of the Iyer community was only obvious during the wedding ceremonies, death rites and *upanayanam* ceremonies. The married women wore a 9-yard sari called the *madisar* while the married men wore a dhoti that was 6 yards called the *veshtadai*.

In conclusion, from the findings of the above study, it appears that language alone is not an indicator of ethnic identity. Other parameters such as customs and traditions play a role in providing identity to an individual. In the case of the Malaysian Iyer community, even though they have shifted largely to the English language and spoke Tamil functionally to retain cultural and religious lexical items (Sankar, 2005), they do not feel that their ethnic identity is lost. They are able to retain their identity through their dress, food, rites, rituals and customary practices. Hindu lifecycle ceremonies and customs prescribed in Ayyar's *'South Indian Customs'* (1998) are practiced by Malaysian Iyers. The presence of relatives and the extended family ensures that many of the customs are adhered to while the close-knit nature of the community assures interaction, help, advice and attendance at various ceremonies that are conducted.

Fishman (1989) in a discussion on ethnic identity says that two factors potentially give identity to people other than language. One is patrimony (cultural practices) and the other is patriarchy (birthright). In the case of the Malaysian Iyers, even though they are in the process of losing their ethnic language, they are able to retain their ethnic identity through their religious and cultural practices. The women of this community play a large role as keepers of customs and traditions both in their own homes and within the community at large.

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