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## **Maximising the Overlapping Area: Multiculturalism and the Muslim Identity for Madrasahs in Singapore**

**Charlene Tan**

### **Abstract**

This paper discusses the recent efforts by the Singapore government to construct the Muslim identity for the madrasahs in Singapore. By promoting a prescribed set of desired attributes for the Muslims and introducing new curriculum materials for the madrasahs, the government aspires to construct a Muslim identity that is compatible with the principle and practice of ‘hard multiculturalism’ in Singapore. Through a content analysis of the textbooks for Islamic Social Studies used at the primary level, this paper argues that the Muslim identity that is privileged by the state is one where a ‘good’ Muslim is a good citizen who is well-adjusted as full members of a secular society; is enlightened and appreciates richness of other civilisations; is inclusive and practises pluralism; and is a blessing to other communities.

### **Introduction**

As a city-state with over 4.2 million people, Singapore is a multicultural country that was founded as a British trading post and colony in 1819 and became independent in 1965. A majority of the population are followers of Buddhism (42.5%), followed by Islam (14.9%), Christianity (14.6%), Taoism (8.5%), Hinduism (4.0%), other religions (0.6%), and no religion (14.8%) (Singapore Department of Statistics 2000). The Singaporean model of multiculturalism has been described as ‘hard multiculturalism’ as it affirms group difference by acknowledging cultural differences in the public (Vasu, 2008). In contrast, ‘mild multiculturalism’, while recognising the diversity of cultures within a polity, believes that the state should be neutral towards questions of cultural diversity in the public sphere. Hence hard multiculturalism “distinguishes itself from the more procedural nature of mild multiculturalism by being openly in support of differences through the defence of specific cultural differences (Taylor 1994, as cited in Vasu 2008, 23). Within the framework of hard multiculturalism, the Singapore government adopts the approach of ‘religious pragmatism’ where it views religious values to be of mainly instrumental worth to promote national unity and maintain national identity (Tan 2008). Unsurprisingly for a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society, the preservation of religious harmony is of utmost importance for the state. Religious believers in Singapore are constantly reminded that their religious beliefs and practices should not be at the expense of religious harmony. As long as the Muslim community confines its religious beliefs to the private sphere, the government is content to leave any religious discussions and debates to its religious leaders (Tan 2007). This has been the case for all religious believers in Singapore, including the

Muslims, until recent years. This paper discusses the recent efforts by the government to construct the Muslim identity for madrasahs (Islamic or Muslim schools) by identifying specific desired attributes for Muslims in Singapore, and introducing new curriculum materials for the madrasahs.

## **The Context of Multiculturalism in Singapore**

Before our discussion of the state's construction of the Muslim identity in Singapore, it is helpful to understand the concept and practice of multiculturalism in Singapore. Multiculturalism is more accurately described as 'multiracialism' in Singapore as the government classifies everyone based on four racial identities according to one's paternal line: Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Others (CMIO). The state introduces an ethnic pedagogy of public 'recognition' that provides for both the education of national citizenship and the relegation of ethnic identities to the parochial (Goh 2008). The cultural identities are essentialised by the state which invests each 'race' with specific cultural characteristics through homogenisation and erasure (Chua 2003; PuruShotam 2000; Chua 2006; [Bokhorst-Heng 2007](#); [Vasu 2008](#)). The three 'homogenised' Asian races are the Chinese-Confucian, Indic, and Malay-Islamic cultures ([Chua 2005](#)). One's 'race' is reflected on his or her identity card and reinforced through education, housing and other public policies. A 'mother tongue language' is assigned for each of the three 'races' – Mandarin (Putonghua) for the Chinese, Malay for the Malays and Tamil for the Indians. Other cultural markers such as food, attire, religious and cultural festivals are also ascribed to the three races. This view of 'multiculturalism' involves 'surface culture' (Weaver 2000) which focuses on the art, music, drama, dance, dress, cooking, and other cultural artefacts ([Bokhorst-Heng 2007](#)). This is manifested in a 'food and festival' or 'heroes and holidays' approach to multicultural education ([Banks 2001](#); [Nieto 2000](#), both cited in [Bokhorst-Heng 2007](#)). What is neglected is 'deep culture' which refers to the often implicit values, assumptions and worldviews embraced by people.

The hard multiculturalism model in Singapore is premised on the principle of 'unity in diversity' represented by the metaphor of four overlapping circles ([Bokhorst-Heng 2007](#)). This was mentioned by then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in 1999:

If I may use an imagery, our society is made up of four overlapping circles, like the People's Association logo. Each circle represents one community. The four circles overlap each other. What we can do is to maximise the overlapping area. This is the area where all Singaporeans, whatever their race, work and play together. It is an open level playing field with English as the common language, and equal opportunities for all. Outside this common area, where the circles do not overlap, each community has his own playing field. In this separate area, each community can retain and speak its own language and practise its own culture and customs. This practical approach of nation-building whereby every community has two playing fields has given us multi-racial harmony. This approach helps us to build a harmonious nation out of diversity (Goh 1999).

The 'overlapping area' is the common space where Singaporeans meet to study, work and communicate in the public arena. It is marked by the use of English as the common language and the principle of meritocracy. In his speech entitled 'Deepening multiracialism', then Education

Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam asserted that “We will guard the common spaces, in our schools and neighbourhoods, that are essential for a multiracial and multireligious society to work” (Tharman 2005). He noted that it was a real achievement for students in Singapore to attend the same schools without feeling any great discomfort with each other. The schools, in his views, gave students a good basic understanding of and respect for the different cultures through the formal curriculum and informal events such as Racial Harmony Day. He called for a deepening of “the experience of multiracialism” by providing “more opportunities for our students to intermingle more often and more freely, to go through common experiences outside the classroom, and to find themselves developing the natural friendships that come from doing things together and taking on challenges together as they grow up” (Tharman 2005).

Has the government changed its stand on multiculturalism in Singapore? In a recent article, Vasu (2008) avers that the global terrorist threats from Islamist groups have led to the government emphasising commonality through various initiatives. These state initiatives include Inter-Racial Confidence Circles, the Community Engagement Programme, and National Education (citizenship education) for schools. He argues that the government has altered its policy to emphasise commonality and a shared destiny:

The government’s new approach towards multiculturalism seems to have shifted focus away from earlier policies that emphasised racial distinctiveness toward policies that will increase civil commonality among the groups. As such, most obviously, as opposed to lamenting Singapore’s multicultural condition, Singapore’s government has made an attempt to renovate its multiculturalism after its encounter with terrorism (Vasu 2008, 28).

However this paper argues that the government has not altered its policy to shift focus from emphasising racial distinctiveness towards civil commonality. While it is true that the government has ‘renovated its multiculturalism after its encounter with terrorism’, it is not to change its emphasis on cultural diversity within the larger framework of a national identity. What has changed, rather, is the attempt to maximise the overlapping area by constructing the religious distinctiveness of one ‘race’ – the Malays. The goal is to move the ‘separate area’ (Goh 1999) owned by the Muslims into the common space shared by all ‘races’. The constructing process can be seen in the Singapore Muslim Identity project which is underpinned by a vision of a “Muslim Community of Excellence” in Singapore (Tan 2008). Underlying the Singapore Muslim Identity project is a vision of a ‘Muslim Community of Excellence’ in Singapore. Among the desired attributes of Muslims in Singapore are five qualities relevant to the promotion of multiculturalism: believes that a good Muslim is also a good citizen; is well-adjusted in living as full members of secular society; is enlightened and appreciates richness of other civilisations; is inclusive and practises pluralism; and is a blessing to other communities (Muis 2004).

### **Constructing the Muslim Identity for the Madrasahs in Singapore**

This resolve to construct the Muslim identity is exemplified in the case of madrasah education in Singapore. Some background on madrasah education in Singapore is instructive here. Muslim children in Singapore could choose to receive full-time education at a secular national school or a madrasah. There are six full-time madrasahs and twenty-seven part-time mosque madrasahs in

Singapore. The madrasahs aim to produce religious elites to lead the community on religious matters, while mosque madrasahs provide part-time basic Islamic education to students who attend national schools. Unlike national schools which focus on the teaching of academic subjects such as English, Mathematics and Science, the madrasahs' priority is the teaching of Islamic subjects, with academic subjects given about 30 and 60 per cent of curriculum time. 4256 full-time students from age 7 to 18 are enrolled in the madrasahs in 2003 in Singapore (Ministry of Education 2005). This accounts for about 4 per cent of the total Muslim students in Singapore. Both religious subjects such as Qur'anic Study and Arabic language, and academic subjects such as English and Mathematics are taught in the madrasahs. Primary students enrolled in these madrasahs have to sit for two examinations: examinations on religious subjects set by the madrasah, and the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) at the end of the six years of primary school. Secondary and pre-university students at the madrasahs have to sit for the examinations by the madrasahs, and may choose to sit for the Cambridge Board General Certificate of Education (GCE) examinations. Full-time students at the madrasahs usually apply for admission to overseas Islamic universities, although those who obtain good academic grades at the GCE 'O' or GCE'A' Level examinations could choose to go to the polytechnics or secular universities in Singapore.

It is easy to see why the madrasahs are perceived to be outside the overlapping area by the government. As madrasahs are not part of the mainstream secular government schools, madrasah students do not have non-Muslim schoolmates in their school compound. Although English is one of the subjects in the madrasah curriculum, madrasah students spend limited curriculum time learning that language (Tan and Kasmuri 2007). The medium of instruction in madrasahs is Arabic and Malay language, unlike in secular government schools where the medium of instruction is English. Unlike secular government schools where racial and religious harmony is explicitly taught through National Education, there is no such emphasis in the madrasahs. The state therefore perceives a need to reform the madrasah curriculum to construct a Muslim identity that is compatible with the conception of multiracialism advocated by the state. The constructing process by the state aims to help madrasah students to be competent in English as the common language; understand and respect different cultures and religions; and develop natural friendships with people of other cultures and religions. The curriculum reforms in the madrasah include the 'Curriculum Development Project' (CDP). It was initiated by the Islamic Council of Singapore (Muis) to "produce a comprehensive, systematic and integrated educational system for the madrasahs in Singapore that would facilitate the teachings of Religious Knowledge with a cross curricular perspective" (Muis 2002, v). What is striking about the materials in CDP is that they are written and taught in English instead of Arabic and Malay.

Among the Religious Knowledge subjects is 'Islamic Social Studies' (ISS). This paper analysed 10 ISS textbooks written and recommended by Muis for the madrasahs at the primary level. The books are for students from primary 1 (seven years old) to primary 5 (11 years old). Each level has two textbooks that are used for the whole year (for example, primary 1 students use 1A and 1B). The contents of the textbook were carefully analysed and the key words were coded based on the five qualities listed under the 'Muslim Community of Excellence' vision: a good Muslim is a good citizen; is well-adjusted as full members of a secular society; is enlightened and appreciates richness of other civilisations; is inclusive and practises pluralism; and is a blessing to other communities (Muis 2004).

The findings show that all the five desired attributes are taught, emphasised and reinforced as the students progress from primary 1 to primary 5. For primary 1 madrasah students, they are taught about the importance of befriending non-Muslims in a pluralistic society, and of being a blessing to them. For example, in a section on ‘Making Friends’, they are instructed: “We like to be friends with our neighbours. There are many ways to be a good friend. ... Look at this picture. Kam Ling has too many things to carry alone. How would you help?” (Muis 2002, 26). The picture shows a Malay boy carrying a box for Kam Ling who is a Chinese non-Muslim girl. The theme of friendship with non-Muslims is reinforced in the primary 2 textbook where the first lesson is ‘Let’s meet our neighbours’. It is about a madrasah girl named Maryam having friends who are non-Muslims. A paragraph teaches the madrasah students: “We help and care for one another. We even visit each other during our different celebrations. We treat our neighbours with respect and kindness. Rasulullah s.a.w [Prophet, peace be upon him] respected and took care of his neighbours. As Muslims, we should follow Rasulullah’s footsteps” (Muis 2003, 3).

There is also a deliberate attempt to encourage the madrasah students to be part of the ‘overlapping area’ as full members of a secular society where people of all races congregate to work and play. A lesson on ‘Our library and community club’ introduces these two social institutions to the madrasah students. It states: “A library and the community club are sources of learning. Seeking knowledge is a life-long process. Rasulullah s.a.w. taught that, ‘Seeking knowledge is *Fard* on every Muslim.’” (Muis 2003, 11). Accompanying this emphasis on social integration is the need to appreciate the richness of other civilisations. In another lesson, the students are taught: “When we meet our non-Muslim neighbours, we say ‘hello’ to greet them. They are important to us. ... We also learn about each other’s customs and cultures. In this way, we become tolerant and understanding neighbours” (Muis 2003, 17). In another textbook for primary 2 students, the madrasah students learn about other religious and cultural festivals - ‘The festival of lights’ or Deepavali for the Hindus, and ‘Mooncake Festival’ for the Chinese. This lesson is imparted to the students: “Islam teaches us the importance of respect for other people’s culture and practice. We learn and know Islamic ways of treating others” (Muis 2004, 22).

Underlining an appreciation of other civilisations is the principle of racial and religious harmony. In the Primary 2 textbook, students are explicitly introduced to ‘Racial Harmony Day’. They read about a community club organising a treasure hunt to “promote interaction and understanding among the different races, as well as to encourage them to get to know their neighbourhood” (Muis 2004, 22). In primary 3, the madrasah students learn about cultural and religious places unique to the Chinese and Indians, namely ‘Chinatown’ for the Chinese, and ‘Little India’ for the Indians. By getting the students to learn and understand about the other ethnic communities and appreciate their heritage and culture, the objective is for them to realise that: “Everyone, regardless of race and religion, lives harmoniously together respecting and appreciating each other’s faith and culture” (Muis 2005a, 18). As the students progress to primary 4, they continue to read about the significance of harmony as members of a multiracial society. In a topic on ‘The gift of Islam’, the students are reminded that Singaporeans of various ethnic groups are able to live in agreement without discord. Under the section ‘Stop and discuss’, the students are asked: “In groups, discuss what you think can happen if we do not take care of the peace and harmony. What are the ways in which we can show our neighbours that Islam is a religion of peace?” (Muis 2005b, 19). Reiterating the point that peace and harmony cannot be taken for granted and that everyone must play a part, the students are told: “We must support

efforts to preserve racial and religious harmony. We need to avoid ill thoughts and bad feelings towards others” (Muis 2005b, 20). On the sensitive topic of religious conversion, the students are instructed to learn from the example of Prophet Muhammad to take care of Muslims and non-Muslims alike: “The Qur’an forbids Muslims from forcing others to accept Islam. The minority non-Muslims then were treated fairly [by prophet Muhammad]. Their well-being was taken care of too” (Muis 2005b, 60).

To understand and treasure the pluralistic nature of Singapore’s society, Primary 4 students are specifically taught about the ‘Multi-cultural world’, ‘Uniting different people’ and ‘Living in harmony’. They are instructed that the basis to support multiculturalism comes from the Qur’an itself: “O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other (not that you may despise each other)” (Al-Hujurat:13, as cited in Muis 2006a, 52). They learn about the different lifestyles of people such as eating habits (for example, slurping and burping are acceptable for the Japanese), different expressions of social interaction (for example, handshakes are seen as a universal form of social greeting), and uniting different people through regional sports and aesthetics. Pointing out that ‘harmonious living is Islamic living’, the students are shown pictures of war and riot, and encouraged to ‘know current issues beyond own community’; ‘know and respect the culture and beliefs of others’; and ‘support and take part of efforts to promote harmony’ (Muis 2006a, 66). Under the section ‘Stop and discuss’, they are asked to take concrete steps to reach out to others outside their madrasah: “Make a list of activities your madrasah can organise to promote interaction and understanding between students and *asatizah* [teachers] of different *madaris* [madrasahs] and even those from the national schools” (Muis 2006a, 65).

The theme of ‘good’ citizenship is also introduced and highlighted for Primary 4 and 5 students. The primary 4 students are exhorted to be good citizens by respecting authority and abide by the rules and laws of a secular country. They are reminded that “We have been treated well and are able to practise Islam freely. ... A Muslim is able to live in any country and be an active member of the multi-religious society. A Muslim believes that a good Muslim is also a good citizen” (Muis 2005b, 61). The Primary 5 students are instructed that “Brotherhood of Islam extends to all human beings, regardless of race, language and religion” (Muis 2007, 70). They are further reminded not to isolate themselves but to be full members and active citizens of Singapore: “As Muslims in Singapore, we have an important role to play towards our homeland. We should not isolate ourselves. Muslims must integrate and be part of the bigger society. We should interact with other races and offer solutions faced by the nation. This is possible without losing our Muslim identity” (Muis 2007, 41).

Related to the message on citizenship is the imperative for Muslims to promote peace, eschew violence and manage conflicts and differences through diplomacy. Pointing out that “Islam means peace and Muslims are urged to show kindness and respect to all”, the Primary 5 students are informed that: “It is important to promote understanding and appreciation of the different races and religions in Singapore. The Singapore government encourages and even sponsors many sharing sessions between the leaders of the different religious organisations of Singapore. In this way, misunderstandings and conflicts between the different communities are minimised” (Muis 2006b, 39). Championing diplomacy as the means to resolve conflicts, the students learn that war should be taken “only as a last resort as it disrupts a country’s stability and development”, and that “common interests can be promoted and conflicting interests can be resolved in a peaceful manner” through diplomacy (Muis 2006b, 45). The premium placed on

non-violence is underlined in another textbook where the Primary 5 students are taught that “Islam is not aggressive. It does not condone violence” (Muis 2007, 29). The students learn that the prophet Muhammad himself demonstrated that Islam is a peaceful religion and that Singapore will fall should a riot happen. The students are exhorted to be integrated into the secular society, appreciating other civilisations and be a blessing to others: “To ensure peace, it is essential that we interact with one another and explore the richness of each other’s cultures to expand our knowledge. We must learn to appreciate and respect everyone regardless of race and religion. Muslims as followers of the religion of peace can extend the universal blessings of Islam to fellow citizens” (Muis 2007, 79). What is significant is also the allusion to the current threats of terrorist attacks led by Islamist groups which have unsettled many Singaporeans. The Primary 5 students are informed that given the “many instances of fighting and unrest all over the region”, they “must ascertain that fellow Singaporeans, young and old, and of all races, are not hurt as a result of any aggression by irresponsible groups”, and “play a part in enjoining good and propagating peace among our multi-racial and multi-religious communities to ensure that Singapore remains safe” (Muis 2007, 82).

## **Conclusion**

This paper discussed the efforts by the Singapore government to maximise the overlapping area by focusing on the Muslim identity. Through promoting a prescribed set of desired attributes for the Muslims and introducing new textbooks for Islamic Social Studies, the government aspires to construct a Muslim identity that is compatible with the principle and practice of multiculturalism in Singapore. As this paper has pointed out, the Muslim identity that is privileged by the state is one where a ‘good’ Muslim is a good citizen who is well-adjusted as full members of a secular society; is enlightened and appreciates richness of other civilisations; is inclusive and practises pluralism; and is a blessing to other communities. Two concluding observations can be made about the government’s agenda in imagining the Muslim identity. First, the government continues the hard multiculturalism model where it actively intervenes to recognise and arbitrate the cultural elements of the citizens, in this case, the religious identity of the Malays. Secondly, it appears that the government, in having a say in the Muslim identity, has gone beyond the ‘surface culture’ where the focus is on apparent cultural manifestations. It has treaded on ‘deep culture’ to attempt to reshape the religious worldview of the madrasah students. This is achieved by propagating the notion of a ‘progressive’ Muslim, stipulating his/her desired attributes, and using Islamic teachings to promote multiculturalism (or multiracialism) through the new textbooks.

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