# Table Of Content

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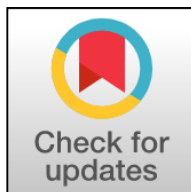
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# Cultural Adaptation by Bangladeshi Migrant Workers in Sarawak, Malaysia: An Empirical Study

## *Adaptasi Budaya oleh Pekerja Migran Bangladesh di Sarawak, Malaysia: Sebuah Studi Empiris*

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## Abstract

Cultural adaptation occurs in a wide range of socio-cultural contexts which describe the acquisition of skills and knowledge. The aim of the study was to assess the process of cultural adaptation by the Bangladeshi workers in Sarawak and to compare it with their own culture. This was a cross-sectional study conducted among the Bangladeshi migrant workers in the selected districts in Sarawak. A total of 314 Bangladeshi workers were successfully interviewed using structured questionnaire. Data were collected by face-to-face interview. Data analysis was done by IBM SPSS version 22.0. Data analysis was done in three domains of cultural adaptation which was language adaptation, cultural behaviour and cultural knowledge using 22 items of question. Analysis revealed that language adaptation was quick and sustained which accounted for 53%, while, gaining cultural knowledge was 24% and cultural behaviour was 21%. Overall, 34% adapt local culture of the country of destination and 67% practiced their own culture and the difference was statistically significant (p<0.05). A multiple linear regression analysis revealed that nature of job, income, mode of payment, marital status and health insurance appeared to be important motivating factors for cultural adaptation in Malaysia (p<0.05). The

findings suggest that Bangladeshi migrant workers are integrating into Malaysian society, keeping uphold their own culture. Though this study did not depict the overall scenarios, a cross-cultural issues with a rigorous working framework are warranted to get more in-depth cultural adaptation and process among the migrant workers in the country of destination.

# INTRODUCTION

An international migrant worker is a person who seeks employment in another country on a temporary basis in which the person is not the citizen of the host country ("Oxford Dictionaries," n.d.). They are also known as expatriates if they are a professional working class. Globally, it is estimated that there are 244 million international migrants that consists of about 3.3% of the world's population[1] . This migration can be either legal or illegal and the employment is either skilled or unskilled ones. The legal migrant worker enters host country through a proper channel and underwent all the procedures as stated in the related rules and regulations. Majority of migrant workers are men but there is some increasing number of women migrant workers observed[2] . Furthermore, Asia Pacific region has the largest flow of migrant, mainly between neighbouring countries compared with the other regions in the world. There is an estimated 30 million migrant workers in this region[3] .

The international migrants constitute 11.3% of the total migrants in Malaysia in 2016[4] . However, the high volume of undocumented or irregular labour migration that occurs alongside migration through formal government processes in Malaysia makes accurate estimates of the total number of migrant workers in this country, difficult to ascertain. Malaysia is a renowned destination among migrants because of the country's advanced economy[5] . However, Sarawak had shown a reduction in number of international migrant influx in 2015-2016 compared to 2014-2015 period. Malaysia is one of the main primary host countries in the South-East Asian region in 2017 with 2,703,629 international migrants recorded along with Thailand (3,588,873) and Singapore (2,623,404)[6] . Bangladesh is the second main source countries of the international migrants in Malaysia (365,600) in 2017 behind Indonesia (1,091,841). There are many reasons for the Bangladeshi to migrate to Malaysia such as to gain better income to earn a better quality of life[7] .

Different cultures between the host and source countries require good effort of self-adaptation among the international migrant workers. Culture is defined as the set of shared attitudes, values, customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious or social group in which have the capacity to learn and transmit it to the succeeding generations [8] . The cultural adaptation is a process of assimilating into a new culture over the time in order to carry out the person's daily functions[9] . It is a complex process of effective interaction skills in a culture that is different from the migrants had ever been originally socialized[10] in their home country. Therefore, it combines the intrinsic and extrinsic elements harmoniously or preserves the conflict of understanding and daily interaction according to circumstances. In fact, this is a part of three main results of acculturation besides perception and reaction[11] . The perception refers to adopting differences in behaviour and value of the new culture by mastering its differences whereby reaction appertains to prioritizing the psychological factors in the movement toward various counter-acculturations.

There are four phases of cultural adaptation namely honeymoon, negotiation or hostility, adjustment or integration and mastery or home [12] . The honeymoon phase usually occurs during the first few weeks whereby the person has the emotion of excitement, euphoria, interest, anticipation and eagerness as if a feeling of a tourist. The negotiation or hostility phase usually experienced after a few months in which the person feels the cultural differences between the native country and the current resided country as a troublesome. This may lead to the symptoms of insomnia, sadness, homesickness, exhaustion, anxiety, frustration and even some psychosomatic symptoms such as stomach upset. The third phase is the adjustment or integration whereby the person becomes more familiar and comfortable with culture, people, food and language of the host country. This is generally experienced by the migrants after 6 to 12 months and later the homesickness subsided, and they start making friends and handling well their negative emotions. The mastery or home is the final phase of cultural adaptation by which the migrants feels less like a foreigner and accept the host country as their second home. They are able to assimilate into the new culture as well as preserving their own home culture.

The cultural adaptation among migrant workers has a substantial effect over their physical and mental health[13] . Furthermore, the interactions among individual, family and community members may influence the migrants' settlement phase [14] . In fact, racial discrimination, aillnesses, growth milestone and unexpected incidence may become the main stressors that later may ffect their health. Therefore, the resilience coping behaviour including effective decision-making, self-control and self-regulation are crucial for better cultural adaptation. Moreover, the migrants' coping strategies is substantial in mediating between stress and the adaptation outcome [15] . Thus, it is important to identify and categorize the wide range of coping behaviour practised by the migrant workers in order to help them in adapting towards the culture of the host country.

In view of the high number of Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia with undoubted contribution to the economy of this country, it is vital to understand and learn the Bangladeshi migrant workers' adaptation into the Malaysian culture. Subsequently, a social policy may be worked out to facilitate their cultural adaptation and coping strategies by which may promote their health and well-being [16] through their cultural adaptation process in Malaysia. This is important in order to allow the worker to perform his duty optimally especially at their workplace. In addition, the Bangladeshi migrant workers have been well-known for their good performance and providing excellent services in all sectors of development[17] .

Akhtaruzzaman & Hoque found that adapting with local foods and climate was also a challenging experience for the Bangladeshi during the initial time of being in Malaysia[10]. However, these were coped well later and in fact, they

begin to enjoy them. Although the study on the cultural adaptation among migrant workers towards the culture of the host country is vital, there are very few studies conducted over the cultural adaptation among Bangladeshi migrant workers especially in Sarawak, Malaysia. Thus, this current study was performed with the objective of assessing the cultural adaptation particularly among the male Bangladeshi migrant workers in Sarawak, Malaysia. Considering this view, this study was aimed to determine the process of cultural adaptation by the foreign workers in the local settings.

# MATERIALS AND METHODS

## Study design and sampling methods

This cross-sectional quantitative study was conducted among the Bangladeshi workers working in Kuching, Bau and Lundu district under Kuching Division, Sarawak. The workers aged 18 years and above living in their primary place of residence were included in this study. Initially, a total of 401 sample size was calculated using the prevalence of morbidity [18] . However, only 314 workers were successfully interviewed with a response rate of 87.2%.

## Instruments and data collection

The data collection instruments had several components viz. socio-demographic characteristics, morbidity pattern and care seeking behaviour, perception on health care delivery system and acculturation adaptation. In the present study, cultural adaptation in Malaysia was analyzed. Firstly, the data collection instrument was developed into English and then translated into Bengali, the mother tongue of the workers. Back translation was done to assess the consistency of the questions. The data collection tool was pretested in the non-sample area mostly among the foreign student in the university from the same country. A minor change was made following pretest. A key person was identified for easy access to their residence. Data collection was done on Saturday and Sunday. A university student speaking the same language was recruited for data collection. Data was collected by face to face interview. The project leader verifies the data for accuracy and consistency. The project took the field note after informal discussion with the workers.

## Operational Definition and variable of interest

For determination of acceleration process, three domains of cultural adaptation which are language, cultural behavior and cultural knowledge were adapted with a view to capture the complex social-psychological context in which the acculturative process occurs[19] . Considering the workers in his new environment, this instrument measures the level of cultural adaptation compared to their own heritage of culture. A total of 22 item of questions were asked to assess the cultural adaptation.

**Language adaption**: The assessment of language adaptation had four questions with Likert's scale varies from "not at all" to "very much". A high score indicates more adaptation. The questions were to assess the following, a) comfort feeling of using local language, b) using local language in regular basis, c) workplace speaking and d) writing. The same questions were asked for their country of origin. For example, a question was "How comfortable are you with using the Malay language?" followed by the same question to assess the language of country of origin such as "How comfortable are you in using the Bangla language".

**Cultural behavior**: For the assessment of cultural behavior, four item questions were asked such as a) watching television, b) watching movies, c) reading newspaper and d) listening to music. Each question was scored from "not at all" to "very much".

**Cultural knowledge**: To assess the cultural knowledge, three questions were asked such as a) Social gathering b) knowledge on national heroes and c) knowledge on national actor and actress.

## Data entry and analysis

The completed data were entered into computer. Data entry was done by Microsoft Excel 2016. However, the quantitative data analysis was done by IBM SPSS version 22.0[20] . After cross-checking and validation of the data, a simple descriptive analysis was done. Each item of questions was converted into percentage for easy expression and analysis. Each item of questions was compared and tested by independent sample t test. Similarly, a composite score of each domain was calculated and test by independent sample test. Finally, domain-was multiple linear regression analysis was done with a view to assess the factors affecting the cultural adaptation of each domain. However, a multiple linear regression was also done with total composite score as dependent variable. The qualitative variables were dummy coded prior to fit in regression model. The result of analysis was presented in

tables. A p-value less than 0.05 was considered as statistically significant.

## Ethical issues

The research proposal was approved by the technical review committee of Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences (FMHS) and Institute of Borneo Studies (IBS) with minor correction. Before field operation, an Ethical approval was also obtained from the Ethics Committee of Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS). Before data collection, the workers were briefed about the a) purpose of the study, b) data confidentiality c) voluntary participation and withdrawal from the study and d) consent to publish without disclosing the identity. A written informed consent was obtained from the participant.

# RESULTS

## Socio-demographic characteristics

Table 1 illustrates the socio-demographic characteristics of the workers. The mean (SD) age of the respondents was 35.9(7.3) years with the minimum age 24 years and maximum age 60 years. Out of 314 respondents, 98.1% were Muslim and the majority were married (84.7%). More than two-fifths (43.3%) had secondary level of education followed by primary level of education (33.8%). However, 15.6% had no formal education. Highest percentage of the workers were engaged in manufacturing job (43%) followed by construction (32.2%) and a variety of job according to the employer desire (22.9%). Majority of them (82.2%) of the workers works on a daily paid basis and only 17.8% had monthly salary. The median monthly income of the workers was MYR 923 with maximum MYR 2000 and minimum MYR 520. More than half of the worker had monthly income ranging from MYR 900 to 1300. Each worker had at least 4 members depends on in his earning. The median duration of working in Malaysia was 10 years with maximum 21 years. More than three fifths (62.4%) of the workers had 10 to 14-year work experience. Majority of the workers (94.6%) had no previous work experience abroad. It was noted that 84.1% were living in shared room. About two-thirds (63.4%) had health insurance in Sarawak. However, 25.5% had no health insurance. One third (36.6%) of the workers reported that the employer did not bear any medical costs and two-fifths (41.1%) bear partial cost and another 22.3% bears all types of costs.

| Variables | Characteristics | Frequency | Percent/Mean |
|---|---|---|---|
| Age in years (Mean, SD) | | 314 | 35.9(7.3) |
| Religion | Islam | 308 | 98.1 |
| | Hinduism | 6 | 1.9 |
| Marital status | Single | 48 | 15.3 |
| | Married | 266 | 84.7 |
| Level of education | No formal education | 49 | 15.6 |
| | Primary | 106 | 33.8 |
| | Secondary | 136 | 43.3 |
| | Higher secondary | 23 | 7.3 |
| Nature of job | Farming | 6 | 1.9 |
| | Construction | 101 | 32.2 |
| | Manufacturing | 135 | 43.0 |
| | Others | 72 | 22.9 |
| Type of salary payment | Daily | 258 | 82.2 |
| | Monthly | 56 | 17.8 |
| Median Monthly income (RM) | | 314 | 923.0 |
| Number of dependent (Median) | | 314 | 4.0 |
| Duration of work in Malaysia (Yrs) | | 314 | 10.0 |
| Working experience other than Malaysia | Yes | 17 | 5.4 |
| | No | 297 | 94.6 |
| Living condition | Shared room | 264 | 84.1 |
| | | | |

# Indonesian Journal of Cultural and Community Development
Vol 4 (2019): September, 10.21070/ijccd.v2i3.91
Village Development Articles

| | Single room | 50 | 15.9 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Ever take sick leave | Yes | 58 | 18.5 |
| | No | 256 | 81.5 |
| Health insurance in Sarawak | Yes | 199 | 63.4 |
| | No | 80 | 25.5 |
| | No idea | 35 | 11.1 |
| Whether company bear treatment cost | Never | 115 | 36.6 |
| | Partial | 129 | 41.1 |
| | All types of cost | 70 | 22.3 |

**Table 1.** *Socio-demographic characteristics of the migrant workers*

## Item-wise cultural adaptation

Table 2 shows the item-wise comparative analysis of language adaptation. Analysis revealed that comfortness of use of local language was highest accounting for 70% followed by workplace speaking of local language (67%) and speaking local language on regular basis (56%). However, they had very limited scope of writing both local and their own language. Regarding cultural behavior, it varies from 17% to 24% of the local culture. Compare to all activities, watching television on local channel was 24.26% compared to country of origin (69.37%). Similarly, there was a difference in watching movies (p<0.001). However, they had very limited scope in reading newspaper both local and country of origin. For reading newspaper, the workers reported that they used best guess of the news after viewing the picture of newspaper. Analysis showed that they had cultural mixed up through social gathering (34.71%) in local setting compared to visiting their friends of country of origin (46.13%). They had very limited knowledge on national heroes and actor or actress in the country of destination.

| Domain | Parameters | Statements | Mean % | SD | p- value |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Language | 1. | 1. | 70.33 | 11.91 | <0.001 |
| | | 2. | 91.77 | 11.32 | |
| | 2. | 3. | 56.00 | 13.47 | <0.001 |
| | | 4. | 79.78 | 14.62 | |
| | 3. | 5. | 66.93 | 16.82 | 0.010 |
| | | 6. | 70.75 | 18.89 | |
| | 4. | 7. | 19.53 | 10.85 | 0.166 |
| | | 8. | 18.95 | 12.39 | |
| Cultural behavior | 5. | 9. | 24.26 | 18.93 | <0.001 |
| | | 10. | 69.37 | 15.90 | |
| | 6. | 11. | 21.66 | 15.70 | <0.001 |
| | | 12. | 64.12 | 18.86 | |
| | 7. | 13. | 17.04 | 3.38 | <0.001 |
| | | 14. | 44.37 | 14.90 | |
| | 8. | 15. | 23.20 | 14.13 | <0.001 |
| | | 16. | 59.77 | 17.83 | |
| Cultural knowledge | 9. | 17. | 34.71 | 8.63 | <0.001 |
| | | 18. | 46.13 | 12.57 | |
| | 10. | 19. | 19.32 | 8.32 | <0.001 |
| | | 20. | 97.08 | 11.36 | |
| | 11. | 21. | 19.27 | 10.88 | <0.001 |
| | | 22. | 97.66 | 12.56 | |

**Table 2.** *Percentage distribution and comparative analysis of cultural adaptation by the foreign workers in Malaysia*

*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001 ; p-value reached from independent sample t test*

## Domain-wise cultural adaptation

Figure 1 shows the domain-wise adaptation of local culture compared to inheritance of culture of their country of origin. Analysis revealed that the workers adapt 53.19% of local language compared to inherit the 65.31% of their country of origin, However, the lowest in cultural behaviour accounted for 21.54% compared to country of origin (59.41%). Cultural knowledge was a little bit higher than the cultural behaviour which accounting for 24.43% against (80.29%) of the country of origin. Overall, 33.84% adapt the local culture compared to inherit 67.25% of the culture of their country of origin. Analysis found a statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) mean difference between local culture and their country of origin.

**Figure 1.** *Domain-wise mean percentage score of cultural adaptation*

## Factors affecting the cultural adaptation by the migrant workers: Stepwise multiple linear regression

A stepwise multiple linear regression analysis was performed to achieve an objective to determine cultural adaptation in the country of destination, i.e. in Malaysian culture. The regression model was fitted initially with domain by domain followed by total score of cultural adaptation as the dependent variable. Table 3 presents the unstandardized beta coefficient in stepwise-regression analysis. The Adjusted $R^2$ indicated the amount of variability explained by the independent variables expressed in percentage. The F ratio with degree of freedom indicating the significance of the model fitting. To fit the regression analysis, the qualitative variables were dummy coded with 0 and 1.

Analysis revealed that farming job ($p < 0.01$), monthly income MYR 1300 and above ($p < 0.01$), having no health insurance ($p < 0.01$) in Malaysia appeared to be positively correlated with language adaptation ($p < 0.001$), while, manufacturing job ($p < 0.001$) and income less than MYR 900 ($p < 0.05$) negatively correlated with language adaptation. Similar to language, the cultural behavior was positively influenced by farming job ($p < 0.001$) and monthly income MYR 1300 and above ($p < 0.05$), whereas, construction job ($p < 0.05$), having insurance ($p < 0.001$) and daily payment ($p < 0.001$) appeared to be negatively correlated with cultural behaviour. Regarding cultural knowledge, monthly income MYR 1300 and above ($p < 0.001$), secondary level of education ($p < 0.01$) and single ($p < 0.05$) were positively correlated with acquisition of cultural knowledge, but having health insurance ($p < 0.01$), daily payment ($p < 0.001$) negatively correlated with acquisition of cultural knowledge ($p < 0.05$).

Data analysis also showed that farming job ($p < 0.001$), monthly income MYR 1300 and above ($p < 0.001$) and single by marital status ($p < 0.05$) appeared to be positively correlated with overall cultural adaptation. On the other hand, having health insurance ($p < 0.001$) and daily salary payment ($p < 0.01$) negatively correlated with cultural adaptation.

| Variables | Language Adaptation | Cultural Behaviour | Cultural Knowledge | OverallAdaptation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Farming | 0.150** | 0.282*** | - | 0.249*** |
| Manufacturing | -0.272*** | - | - | - |
| Construction | - | -0.118* | - | - |
| Income ≤ MYR 900.00 | -0.123* | - | - | - |
| Income ≥ MYR1300.00 | 0.165** | 0.123* | 0.216*** | 0.238*** |
| Having insurance | - | -0.175*** | -0.145** | -0.186*** |
| Having no insurance | 0.148** | - | - | - |
| Daily Payment | - | -0.222*** | -0.244*** | -0.177** |
| Secondary education | - | - | 0.149** | - |
| Single | - | - | 0.107* | 0.092* |
| Constant | 54.388*** | 29.002*** | 27.459*** | 36.842*** |
| Adj. R2 | 0.144 | 0.293 | 0.255 | 0.273 |
| | | | | |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| F(df) | 11.560(5,308) | 22.615(6,307) | 22.468(5,308) | 24.545(5,308) |
| | 314 | 314 | 314 | 314 |

**Table 3.** *Factors affecting the cultural adaptation by the migrant workers: Stepwise multiple linear regression (standardized beta coefficient)*

*Adj. $R^2$= Adjusted R squared; \*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001*

## DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to determine the pattern and factors associated with cultural adaptation among Bangladeshi workers in the local setting. Overall, Bangladeshi workers still hold strongly to their own cultural identity. It has been shown in this study, they only adopt 33.8% of Malaysia culture to manage their own daily life. This situation is quite similar with Bangladeshis in London. In London, they preferred to integrate host culture rather than adapt host culture[21] . There are several factors associated with the degree of culture adaptation among Bangladeshi workers in Sarawak. One of the factors is type of occupation. In this study, Bangladeshi working as a farmer has been found to adopt more host culture compare to other types of job. As a farmer they are required to communicate with local people because they need to know and understand local language and local culture in order to promote and sell their products. A job which need a foreigner worker to interact more with local people would help foreigner more adapted to the host language and culture[22] . However, construction workers are not adopting much to local culture because they just need to understand and follow order from supervisor. They are not involved in lengthy discussion or conversion with local people. Between high and low-income Bangladeshi workers, workers with high income are more adapted to host culture rather than workers with low income. Foreigner worker who have high income usually had good socio-culture relationship with local people. They may participate in local event which help them adapt to local culture [23] . Besides that, high income worker usually had good education level. This type of group worker realize adaptation to local culture would help them to survive and their life would not become troublesome in foreign country. Therefore, they would try to adapt to the local culture without forgetting their own culture. Health insurance also contributes to the degree of cultural adaptation among Bangladeshi workers. Workers who have insurance is less likely to adapt to local culture compare to those who do not have insurance. This is because workers with insurance would not need to seek help from local people for healthcare services because they have been covered by company insurance. This makes them less in contact with local people. Besides that, Bangladeshi workers who are single are more adopted to local culture compare to workers who are already married. Married workers are less likely to socialize with the local because they have family, and this make them feel that they are still in their country of origin. This is in contrast to the study by Angelini, Casi, & Corazzini, who found that married persons were more adopts to the host culture compare to single or not married persons. This may be influenced by their spouse or their children become friends to local family and thus need cultural adaptation.

One of the limitations of this study was that data collected were self-reports from the respondents, where their answers depended on their memory, which may lead to recall bias. Another limitation is that the study only involved certain division in Sarawak. Therefore, the results are not representative of the general population to the rest of Sarawak.

## CONCLUSION

Our study found that overall culture adaptation toward local culture is 33.8%. Factors such as occupation, income, insurance status and marital status are highly associated with level of local culture adaptation. It also shows that Bangladeshi workers who need to interact more with local people would more likely assimilate to host culture.

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