

**COVERING RACE AND RELIGION: THE MOORTHY AND
NYONYA TAHIR CASES IN FOUR MALAYSIAN
NEWSPAPERS**

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Reporting on issues like race and religion in a multi-racial and multi-religious society is not an easy media responsibility. In a country like Malaysia where racial and religious sensitivities abound, the media have to constantly tread on precarious ground, balancing between what to write and how to write it. Much of the concern over the reporting of sensitive issues stems from the belief that a wrong move may have dire consequences, as seen in the recent controversy and furore over the Prophet Muhammad caricature published in the Danish newspaper, Jyllands-Posten.

This study analyses two recent racial/religious issues – M. Moorthy and Nyonya Tahir cases – as reported in the New Straits Times (NST), Utusan Malaysia (UM), Malaysia Nanban (MN) and Sin Chew Daily (SCD). The former case caused a stir when there was a tussle between Moorthy's Indian/Hindu family and the Federal Territory Islamic Affairs Council which argued that Moorthy had converted to Islam when he was alive without the family's knowledge. The latter was a case of a Malay/Muslim woman who, while alive, had denounced Islam and lived as a Chinese practising Buddhism.

This study analyses how the two race and religion-related controversial issues were treated in the various language newspapers in Malaysia. A preliminary finding showed that, true to the communal nature of the

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Malaysian press, there was an apparent slant in how the ethnic press covered these two issues. For instance, in terms of prominence given to the stories, SCD, while downplaying the Moorthy story, dedicated more space to the Nyonya Tahir case. Similarly, MN highlighted the Moorthy story and downplayed the Nyonya Tahir case. The different newspapers were also seen to "favour" the subject they covered according to the ethnicity.

Keywords: Race, Religion, Sensitivities (racial/religious issues, sentiments), Ethnocentrism, Vernacular, Nyonya Tahir, Moorthy

INTRODUCTION

Reporting on issues like race and religion in a multi-racial and multi-religious society is not an easy media responsibility. In a country like Malaysia where racial and religious sensitivities abound, the media constantly tread on precarious ground, balancing between what to write and how to write it. Much of the concern over the reporting of sensitive issues stems from the belief that a wrong move may have dire consequences, as seen in the recent controversy and furore over the Prophet Muhammad caricature published in the Danish newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*.

Reporting sensitive issues also raised the concern of fair reporting. Journalists are responsible for emphasising fairness and balance in news coverages of conflict (Fico & Drager, 2001). Nevertheless, it has to be acknowledged that reporting of any type of news is not value-free; reports are written in the context of the values of the reporters, the superiors, the norms of work setting, the goals and resources of the media organisation and the position of the organisation within the broader society (Fico & Drager, 2001). Reese and Shoemaker (1996) called these values the "hierarchy of influences" that would shape media content.

The lesson that must be learned from the recent furore over the Prophet Muhammad caricature is that insensitivity on the part of the reporter or a media organisation may have dire consequences. While one party may view the incident as its right to freedom of press, speech or expression,

another may perceive it as a blatant disregard for religious sensitivity. Goonasekera and Ito (1999) advocated that the concept of the free marketplace of ideas in multicultural, multi-party democracies in Asia may result in the heightening of racial and religious tensions and arousing emotions. Partisan media can flood the marketplace with racially divisive information, confuse the people and set the country in a course of racial strife and even civil war (Mohd. Azizuddin, 2005). Media practitioners and the public in Malaysia are always mindful of the racial and religious sensitivities of a multi-ethnic society; the bitter racial feud of 13 May 1969 would always be a constant reminder of the folly of disturbing the racial hornet's nest.

Since then, news bearers have always erred toward caution rather than test the tolerance level of the different races. This has been apparent in the coverage of several racial skirmishes over the years, for example, the Kampong Medan incident in 2001. The Malaysian media, in general, have acted with commendable decorum and have not exploited racial conflicts. The former Information Minister, Datuk Zainuddin Maidin, said that the Malaysian media have, by agreement, decided to stay away from contentious issues of racial and religious sensitivities in order not to create unnecessary tensions and even hatred among the people. "The media played an important role in toning down issues that could incite certain sections of a community...it is better to have peace with compromise rather than freedom without peace." (*The Star*, 31 May 2006: 15).

Prime Minister Datuk Sri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi echoed the same concern when he recently urged interfaith groups not to discuss religious issues as these are deemed to cause tension in our multi-religious society (*New Straits Times*, 21 January 2006: 1,4).

In recent months, Malaysia has been experiencing race and religion-related issues that, to some extent, have stirred uneasiness among the different races and religions. This uneasiness began with the conversion cases of M. Moorthy in December 2005 and Nyonya Tahir in January 2006 which culminated in nine non-Muslim ministers submitting a memorandum to the Prime Minister asking for a review of laws affecting non-Muslims. This was further compounded by discussions on Article 121 of the Constitution by various groups, thus prompting the Prime

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Minister, who was too aware of the sentiments on the ground, to urge Malaysians not to do anything to upset racial stability.

The most recent incident that again stoked racial sentiments was of a Muslim who converted to Christianity. Lina Joy, a Malay and a Muslim by birth (birth name, Azlina Jailani), had appealed to the Federal Court to have the word "Islam" removed from her identity card. Joy quoted Article 11 of the Constitution that gave an individual the right to convert to another religion. Though the case is still pending in court, messages via the Short Messaging Services (SMS) and email are actively being circulated alleging that Joy had won and the Muslim community should take immediate action so that the formation of the *Persatuan Melayu Kristian* would not be approved by the authorities.

It is quite obvious that, in the Malaysian context, religious and racial issues, whether big or small, would almost always become sensitive and controversial. Many similar race and religion-related issues have surfaced over the years, and while these have passed without leaving too deep a dent on inter-ethnic unity, they nevertheless contributed to the underlying uneasiness between the different races and religions. There is always the fear (paranoia, even) that this uneasiness would turn into festering wounds.

Thus, it is such scenarios that have compelled the authorities to urge the media to be more cautious in reporting religious and racial sensitivities.

SELECTION OF CASES

Two cases were selected to give an insight into racial and religious reporting in Malaysia: the Moorthy and Nyonya Tahir conflicts with the Islamic Religious Affairs Department. To recapitulate, the Moorthy case caught national attention in December 2005 when the body of Moorthy, a Hindu who had converted to Islam without the family's knowledge, became a tussle between his family and the Islamic Affairs Council over burial rights. Since he died as a Muslim, the *Syariah* High Court ruled that he should be buried according to Islamic rites. The tussle began when Moorthy's family filed an application at the High Court to declare him a Hindu. After eight days of impasse over his religious status, the High Court ruled that he was a Muslim. The controversy did not end

with the burial, but instead continued with an inter-faith group, the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism urging the government to amend Article 121(1)(A) of the Constitution which states that all matters pertaining to Islam should be handled by the *Syariah* Court. The matters became more controversial when nine non-Malay Cabinet ministers sent a memorandum to the Prime Minister calling for a review of laws affecting the rights of non-Malays.

The case became controversial because of two factors: a) the family could not accept the court ruling that Moorthy had converted as he apparently lived as a Hindu throughout his life (in fact, a local television station had interviewed him during a Diwali celebration), and b) the family felt betrayed by the High Court ruling that it could not review the decision of the *Syariah* Court and it has no power to intervene. The *Syariah* Court had earlier ruled that Moorthy was a Muslim.

Though it had similar characteristics that could cause controversy, the Nyonya Tahir case nevertheless, did not cause much of a stir. Nyonya Tahir was born a Muslim, but had renounced Islam and lived the lifestyle of a Chinese practising Buddhism. The case did not cause much controversy when she died because the *Syariah* Court was convinced that Nyonya Tahir was not of the Muslim faith at the time of her death. She had left a declaration or a will stating that she wanted to be buried according to Buddhist rites.

OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

The objectives of this study were to analyse how four different language newspapers in Malaysia, *NST*, *UM*, *SCD* and *MN* covered this religion and race-related issue, and whether they give prominence to one story over the other? The study examines the "structural balance" of both stories in the four newspapers, i.e., in terms of space allocation and story placement. Were the stories given equal space allocation and placement in the four newspapers? The type of story was also analysed to gauge the prominence given to the stories with the assumption that the bigger the story, the more discussion it would generate in the form of editorials, analysis, letters to the editor, etc.

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Both stories were analysed from the first day the news appeared in the newspapers about the deaths until the funerals. In the case of Moorthy, coverage continued even after the funeral as discussions and debates by interest groups were generated asking the government to review some legislation.

The Malaysian Media – An Overview

It is imperative to first understand the orientation of the Malaysian press to comprehend what is covered in the newspapers.

A characteristic of the Malaysian vernacular newspapers is their tendency to concentrate on events important to their respective communities. It is therefore not surprising to see *UM*, *SCD* or *Tamil Nesan* concentrating on issues pertinent to their respective ethnic group. This concentration in content and organisation has its roots in the colonial era. Early Chinese newspapers in Malaya were partisan and sympathetic to the Chinese Revolution in China or focused their attention on business in Malaya. The seeds of ethnocentrism were further sown when the Malays published Malay newspapers in the 1870s and 1900s that were used to kindle and foster the spirit of nationalism and used as channels to speak out against attitudes that hindered the progress of the Malays. In fact, the development of the Malay political parties was made possible by the Malay press (Syed Arabi, 1989), the most notable among them being *Utusan Melayu*. The Tamil press, too, highlighted Indian interests. Newspapers like *Tamil Nesan* and *Tamil Murasu* carried the plight of the Indians in the estates and other economic sectors, championed Indian education, helped spread literary works and became the vehicle for political demands (Syed Arabi, 1989).

The development of the newspaper industry in the early days (when Malaysia was known as Malaya) could be summarised in two phases. The first phase (1806 till late 1930s) saw the British traders and colonial officials pioneering the printing of English newspapers to satisfy the commercial needs of the British and the Europeans. A large part of the contents of these newspapers was commercial news and advertisements. The contents of the Chinese and Indian newspapers then reflected the cultural, emotional and political attachment of the ethnic groups to their homelands. The Malay newspapers also mirrored the concerns of the community then – religion and later, Malay nationalism. The second

phase (1940s and toward independence in 1957) witnessed a shift in the Chinese and Indian newspapers; when both races realised they were going to make Malaya their home, the newspapers especially the Indian newspapers, campaigned to the readers to remain and become citizens of Malaya. This period saw newspapers further developing a stronger identification with their own ethnic communities (Hamdan, 1993; Dahari, 1992).

The Malays, overwhelmed by the influx of the Indian and Chinese immigrants and realising that they could lose their control on the political and economic affairs of the country, began demonstrating these fears through anti-Chinese and anti-Indian sentiments in their newspapers. The non-Malays became more critical, especially against the pro-Malay attitude of the British administration. The fight for factional interests was prominent in the newspapers at that time (Dahari, 1992).

The racial orientation of the newspapers – where they cater mainly to readers of the same racial group has not changed much from the colonial days. The Mandarin newspapers are generally read by the Chinese, the Tamil and Punjabi dailies by the Indians and the Malay newspapers cater to the Malays. The exceptions are the English-language newspapers whose readership transcends racial groupings. The English newspapers are usually read by the "elites" and English-educated readers who are mostly concentrated in the urban areas.

FINDINGS

A total of 112 stories on Moorthy and 29 on Nyonya Tahir was analysed in the four newspapers. The breakdown of the coverage is shown in Table 1.

There were two phases in the news coverage; the first phase covered the deaths, court hearings and subsequent funerals, the second phase covered the discussions on Article 121 of the Constitution. For the purpose of this study, analysis is done only up to the funerals. The Nyonya Tahir coverage stopped after the funeral unlike the Moorthy case that continued intermittently for a month after the funeral.

Table 1: Number of Stories in Newspapers

Newspaper / Case	Moorthy	Nyonya Tahir
<i>NST</i>	33	7
<i>UM</i>	31	4
<i>SCD</i>	22	15
<i>MN</i>	26	3
Total	112	29

Coverage of the Moorthy Case

As shown in Table 1, the Moorthy case received more coverage compared to that of Nyonya Tahir. Comparatively, *NST* and *UM* had the most coverage with 33 and 31 articles, respectively. *SCD* had the least coverage (22). This may be due to the fact that *SCD*, being a Chinese newspaper catering to the Chinese community, might not have been that interested in a case involving an Indian and Islam.

Story Placement

In terms of story placement, the news was not given much prominence as it usually appeared in the inside pages, thus giving the impression that the story was not important enough to merit a front-page coverage or that the newspapers did not want to highlight what could potentially play to the racial gallery. Of 112 stories, 16 were placed on the front page. *MN* and *UM* most frequently placed the Moorthy story on their front pages (see Table 2).

In fact, both newspapers highlighted the story on the front pages the first three days and only downplayed the story after the funerals. Again, this is understandable as the Moorthy incident, which was related to an Indian and Islam, was of more interest and relevance to the Indian and Malay-Muslim communities. The Moorthy stories in *SCD* were placed less prominently, i.e., in the inside pages. Thus, in terms of spatial prominence, all four newspapers treated the stories like any other spot news even though the stories had the trappings of a controversy.

Table 2: Placement of News

Page No./ Newspapers	<i>NST</i>	<i>UM</i>	<i>SCD</i>	<i>MN</i>
1	2	5	2	7
2	1	1	0	2
3	0	2	0	1
4-28	30	23	20	16
Total	33	31	22	26

Type of News

This study categorised the news into four main categories: spot news, features, editorials and others. Table 3 shows that the majority of the stories were written as spot news.

Table 3: Type of News

News Type/ Newspaper	<i>NST</i>	<i>UM</i>	<i>SCD</i>	<i>MN</i>	Total
Spot news	20	22	21	19	82
Features	4	8	0	0	12
Editorials	1	1	0	0	2
Others	8	0	1	7	16
Total	33	31	22	26	112

Most of the stories were breaking news that followed the development of the cases. It is interesting to note that only *NST* and *UM* produced features that generated discussions on the topic. There were two types of features – one that discussed the legal aspect of the issue (viewpoints from the Bar Council, *Syariah* Practising Lawyers Association, academics, etc.), and the other promoting toward inter-faith dialogues, and racial and religious unity. For example, peace advocate, Chandra Muzaffar, has advocated on how to tackle inter-religious issues and how to bring about inter-religious understanding and harmony in a way that will not aggravate communal feelings.

The "others" category are letters to the editor. Though letters to the editor are useful for the public to air their views on issues of the day to indicate the different perceptions and perspectives, they nevertheless can also be a bane as this freedom of speech and expression during a

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conflict, like the Moorthy case, may contribute toward fanning already frayed nerves. While the public had the right to question the judgement of the *Syariah* and High Courts, which had been deemed to have made an error in judgment, doing so with cynicism at a time of controversy did not help. For example, a reader questioned whether Moorthy had really converted to Islam when it had already been reported that documentary evidence had shown that he had done so.

In general, letters to the editor in *NST* were analysed as being more critical of the authorities rather than the individuals (for example, Moorthy or his family). For instance, several letters (and even the features) asked why the Religious Affairs Department did not give Moorthy proper guidance after he had converted. They queried why the department was concerned with his religious status only after his death when it was obvious that when he was alive, he lived as a Hindu even though he had converted to Islam.

It should be noted here that during the first few days when the story broke, *NST* and *UM* did not help allay fears with the way they wrote their stories. *UM* used words like *kecoh* (chaos) several times and *cemas* (anxious) to describe the situation outside the court house and the hospital. In fact, *UM* gave unnecessary details like a Moorthy family member "screaming" at a photographer who was taking pictures of Moorthy's wife. *UM* also described in detail the condition of Moorthy's wife when she slipped, fell and bruised her foot. This was seen as unnecessary as that kind of coverage only contributed to a situation that was already tensed. *NST*, on its part, kept using the words "tussle" and "stressful" to describe the situation.

News Size

As per size of news, all four newspapers wrote almost the same amount of news, i.e., between 5 to 300 sq cm (see Table 4). Only *NST* and *UM* had several bigger size news; these were the features that discussed the legal perspective of the issue and inter-ethnic unity. Thus, in terms of giving prominence to a story through space allocation, all four newspapers gave almost equal allocation, the only difference being *NST* and *UM* which had slightly more news and different types of news (features).

Table 4: Size of News

News Size (sq cm)/ Newspaper	<i>NST</i>	<i>UM</i>	<i>SCD</i>	<i>MN</i>
5–100	14	10	8	10
101–200	9	10	9	9
201–300	6	4	4	5
301–400	1	2	0	1
401–500	1	2	1	1
501–600	0	0	0	0
601 and above	2	3	0	0
Total	33	31	22	26

Visuals

There were 57 photographs with *MN* carrying the most number (21). While most stories had one photograph each (44), *MN* had several stories with two accompanying photographs. Many of the photographs were close-ups of Moorthy, his wife, the lawyers involved and pictures that showed the development of the story, for example, the funeral, meeting with the Deputy Prime Minister, etc. Most of the photographs were between 10–00 sq cm (see Table 5).

Table 5: Number and Size of Visuals/Photographs

Size of Photographs (sq cm)/Newspaper	<i>NST</i>	<i>UM</i>	<i>SCD</i>	<i>MN</i>	Total
10–50	8	4	3	6	21
51–100	4	0	1	6	11
101–150	0	1	2	2	5
151–200	1	3	1	3	8
201–250	1	0	1	4	6
251–300	2	1	0	0	3
301 and above	1	2	0	0	3
Total	17	11	8	21	57

Headlines

Apart from visuals, headlines are used in a story to initially attract readers' attention to read the story. The bigger the headline, the more likely it will attract the attention of readers. Almost two-thirds of the Moorthy story in *NST*, *UM* and *SCD* used almost similar size headlines (up to 36 points); while the rest is equally divided between font sizes of 37–72 points and 72 points or more. The exception was *MN* which used bigger-sized headlines (see Table 6).

Table 6: Size of Headlines

Headline Size/ Newspaper	<i>NST</i>	<i>UM</i>	<i>SCD</i>	<i>MN</i>	Total
< 36 points	26	28	18	11	83
37–72 points	4	2	2	7	15
> 72 points	3	1	2	8	14
Total	33	31	22	26	112

Coverage of the Nyonya Tahir Case

A total of 29 news items was published on Nyonya Tahir during the period of the study. Of this total, *SCD* covered more than the other newspapers (15 news items), compared to *NST* with seven news items, *UM* four news items and *MN* only three news items (see Table 1). This indicates that *SCD*, being a Chinese newspaper, gave more prominence to this case as it involved a Chinese convert whereas the English and Malay newspapers gave moderate importance. The Tamil paper did not give much importance to this case as compared to the Moorthy case. It is quite surprising that *UM* – which usually highlights Malay-Muslim issues did not cover this case extensively considering the fact that Nyonya Tahir was a Malay Muslim who had converted to Buddhism.

News Size

Size of the news published indicates the importance given to that particular news. Generally, controversial news will be given bigger space compared to less important news. In the case of Nyonya Tahir, *SCD* considered the case as important news; this could be seen in Table 7, where *SCD* had more stories in bigger size (101 sq cm – 200 sq cm).

MN only carried one news item of size 148.50 sq cm. This again shows that *SCD* gave more importance to this case in comparison with the other newspapers.

Table 7: Size of News

Size of News (sq cm) / Newspaper	<i>NST</i>	<i>UM</i>	<i>SCD</i>	<i>MN</i>
0–100	2	0	6	2
101–150	3	2	5	1
151–200	1	1	3	0
Above 200	1	1	1	0
Total	7	4	15	3

Number of Photographs

Table 8 shows that *SCD* published more photographs (15 pictures) compared to the other newspapers. Of the 15, 11 photographs were published in a single day and spread over the front and inner front pages. On the other hand, *NST* and *UM* had four and three photographs, respectively. *MN* had only two photographs, one of which was of the Prime Minister with his statement on the issue.

Table 8: Number of Photographs

Number of Photographs/ Newspaper	<i>NST</i>	<i>UM</i>	<i>SCD</i>	<i>MN</i>
0	4	1	9	1
1	2	3	5	2
2	1	0	0	0
11	0	0	1	0
Total	7	4	15	3

The Size of Photographs

The size of a photograph is a vital feature to indicate the importance of the news published. Bigger photographs will be able to attract more readers to the news. Table 9 shows that *SCD* not only published more photographs on the Nyonya Tahir case but also had the largest photographs (i.e., 830.75 sq cm). The other five photographs were between 1 to 100 sq cm. In the case of *NST*, one photograph was

published in the size of 201 to 300 sq cm and two photographs in the size of 101 to 200 sq cm. However in *MN*, the size of the photographs are not more than 99 sq cm. This indicates that *SCD* gave more importance to this case compared to *NST* and *UM*, with *MN* giving the least importance.

Table 9: Size of Photographs

Size of Photographs (sq cm)/ Newspaper	<i>NST</i>	<i>UM</i>	<i>SCD</i>	<i>MN</i>
1–100	4	3	14	3
101–200	2	1	0	0
201–300	1	0	0	0
Above 300	0	0	1	0
Total	7	4	15	3

The Size of Headlines

Both *NST* and *SCD* published two news items with larger headlines (above 72 points) compared to *UM* and *MN*. *UM* had only one news item with the headline size between 37–72 points and the rest are less than 36 points. *MN* published one news item with the headline size between 37–72 points (this being the Prime Minister’s statement regarding the case).

Table 10: Size of Headlines

Size of Headline/ Newspaper	<i>NST</i>	<i>UM</i>	<i>SCD</i>	<i>MN</i>
<36 points	5	3	12	2
37–72 points	0	1	1	1
>72 points	2	0	2	0
Total	7	4	15	3

Type of News

Almost all news items written on Nyonya Tahir were spot news. Table 11 shows that all the 15 news reported in *SCD* were published as spot news compared with six news items in *NST*, four in *UM* and two in *MN*.

Only *NST* published one editorial and *MN* published one news in the "others" category, i.e., the Prime Minister's statement.

Table 11: Type of News

Type of News/ Newspaper	<i>NST</i>	<i>UM</i>	<i>SCD</i>	<i>MN</i>
Spot news	6	4	15	2
Editorial	1	0	0	0
Others	0	0	0	1
Total	7	4	15	3

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The Moorthy case created some uneasiness among the Malay and Indian communities. Even though the *Syariah* Court had given its verdict, Moorthy's family did not accept the result and appealed to the High Court which later get rejected because the High Court ruled that it had no power to intervene with the verdict by the *Syariah* Court. By the time the case had gone to court, a degree of tension had already been created between the Muslim and Hindu communities (maybe not apparent, but nevertheless, felt). When Moorthy's family members did not attend the funeral which was conducted according to Islamic rites, this was further seen as a wedge between the races and religions. Tension was seen to be further heightened with the memorandum sent by the non-Muslim ministers.

However, in the case of Nyonya Tahir, the *Syariah* Court allowed her family to conduct the funeral according to Buddhist rites even though she was born a Muslim. No tension was seen to have been created among the Malay and Chinese communities. The newspapers did not give much importance to this case as well except for *SCD* which had comparatively more extensive coverage.

The study found that the Moorthy case was covered more extensively in the English, Malay and Tamil newspapers while *SCD* had the least coverage. However, in the case of Nyonya Tahir, *SCD* had the most coverage, particularly of the funeral. While no newspaper put the Nyonya Tahir case on its front page, the Moorthy case was highlighted

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16 times on the front pages of *MN* and *UM*. This again shows the importance given to the Moorthy case compared to that of Nyonya Tahir.

In conclusion, the data indicate that the newspapers gave extensive coverage to news events deemed important to their respective communities. The Moorthy case was given most coverage by *MN* while the Nyonya Tahir case was by *SCD*. Likewise, since both these cases involved the *Syariah* Court and Islamic issues, the Malay-language *UM* gave prominent coverage to both. The *NST*, on the other hand, catering to all racial groupings, particularly the more educated and English-speaking masses, seemed to give substantial coverage to both the cases. It is thus concluded that this study supports the literature that says that vernacular newspapers in Malaysia are mainly influenced by the interests of their own communities.

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