

Languages of the Heart: How Families Can Preserve Their Heritage in the Age of English

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Twenty years ago, as a teenager, I remember our family dinner table being filled with lively conversations in Bahasa Malaysia (Malay language).

My parents would often use expressions like keadaan masa tu memang cacamarba (“back then, the situation was truly chaotic”), effortlessly weaving the richness of our ethnic language into everyday life.

Reflecting on these moments, I realize how much language has evolved—not just in Malaysia but across the world.

Today, Malaysia’s linguistic landscape has shifted dramatically. Words like cacamarba (‘chaotic’) have become unfamiliar, almost foreign to the younger generation. In many urban areas, family conversations are now often a mix of ethnic languages and English—or, in some cases, entirely in English.



At this rate, it's highly possible that within a generation, English could completely replace ethnic languages in families. This isn't just a hypothetical scenario; it's a reality quietly unfolding in households worldwide. As English continues to dominate, the vibrancy and identity embedded in ethnic languages risk being diminished, sidelined in the pursuit of modernity and global communication.

Muslim-majority countries, like Malaysia, are blessed with incredible linguistic diversity. Malaysia's official language is Bahasa Malaysia (Malay language). Alongside it, Mandarin, Tamil, and countless regional and indigenous languages are actively spoken within communities, forming a unique tapestry of identity.

Adding to this multilingual richness is English, a legacy of colonization, which now plays a dominant role in urban areas. In cities like Kuala Lumpur, English is viewed as the key to better education, career success, and global opportunities.

However, this narrative is not unique; many non-native English-speaking families from Jakarta to Johannesburg, and even the diaspora in London or New York, face similar challenges in balancing linguistic heritage with the demands of a globalized world.

But here's the challenge: as English rises in prominence, ethnic languages are slowly being sidelined. This isn't just a linguistic shift; it's an alarming cultural transformation. The Quran reminds us of the value of diversity in languages and cultures:

"And among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the diversity of your languages and your colors. Indeed, in that are signs for those of knowledge." (Surah Ar-Rum, 30:22) (<https://www.islamicity.org/quransearch/?q=30%3A22>)

The question is, how do we strike a balance? How can we embrace English for its benefits while preserving the ethnic languages that define us?

The Hidden Costs of Anglicization

In many households across urban, non-native English-speaking communities, English is becoming the dominant language. It's increasingly spoken at home, prioritized in schools, and woven into daily life.

While this shift may seem like progress, it comes with an unspoken cost: the gradual erosion of ethnic languages and the cultural identities they embody.

Languages are more than words—they're vessels of history, values, and worldview. When a language disappears, it takes with it a unique way of understanding the world.

For instance, imagine a Tamil-speaking grandmother in Malaysia or a Punjabi-speaking elder in London struggling to connect with their English-speaking grandchildren. This isn't just a language barrier; it's a disconnect that weakens familial bonds and cultural identity.

“Whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day, let him uphold the ties of kinship.” (Sahih Bukhari 6138 (<https://www.islamicity.org/hadith/search/?q=Sahih%20Bukhari%206138&sss=1>))

He (صلى الله عليه وسلم) also linked maintaining family ties to tangible blessings, stating: “Whoever wishes for his provision to be increased and his life to be extended, let him maintain the ties of kinship.”

(Sahih Bukhari 5985) (<https://www.islamicity.org/hadith/search/?q=Sahih%20Bukhari%205985&sss=1>)

While these hadiths focus on familial bonds, a question arises: how do we practically maintain these bonds?

When we speak in a language that our family and relatives use, doesn't that act as a powerful way to strengthen these ties? Language is more than just communication-it carries shared memories, values, and identity, making it a vital tool for building stronger connections within the family.

Losing ethnic languages not only affects families but also undermines multicultural identities across the Muslim world-a heritage that should unite us as an ummah.

Families: Guardians of Language and Identity

In this linguistic shift, families, especially parents, find themselves at the heart of the conversation. As primary caregivers and decision-makers, both mothers and fathers shape the languages spoken at home and passed down to future generations.

Whether they realize it or not, these daily choices create ripple effects that influence linguistic landscapes globally.

Family Language Policy-the conscious or unconscious decisions families make about language use -is often guided by shared efforts between parents and extended family members.

In Islam, the family is a central institution where responsibilities are distributed. The Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم) emphasized the importance of collective responsibility within the family, stating:

“Each of you is a shepherd, and each of you is responsible for his flock. The leader of people is a guardian and responsible for his subjects; a man is the guardian of his family and responsible for them; a woman is the guardian of her husband's home and his children and is responsible for them; and the servant of a man is a guardian of the property of his master and is responsible for it. No doubt, every one of you is a shepherd and is responsible for his flock.” (Sahih al-Bukhari 7138 (<https://www.islamicity.org/hadith/search/?q=Sahih%20al-Bukhari%207138&sss=1>))

In our current times, parents face overwhelming societal pressures. In urban settings, the emphasis on English as a marker of success often sidelines the preservation of ethnic languages.

Private and international schools reinforce this narrative, while societal norms equate English fluency with modernity and progress. While ensuring children are fluent in English is important, it should not come at the cost of ethnic languages. These languages serve as vital carriers of cultural identity, making their preservation an important responsibility for families as a whole.

Challenges and Opportunities

The challenges parents face are real and systemic. Educational policies, societal expectations, and the fast pace of urban life all contribute to the dominance of English. For many families, prioritizing English feels less like a choice and more like a necessity.

But there is hope. Islam encourages intentionality and balance in all aspects of life. Allah reminds us:

“Indeed, Allah will not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves.”

(Surah Ar-Ra’d, 13:11) (<https://www.islamicity.org/quransearch/?q=13%3A11>)

Simple, deliberate actions can make a significant difference. Families can create spaces for ethnic languages at home through storytelling, traditional songs, or even dedicating mealtimes to speaking the language. Encouraging children to spend time with grandparents who speak the ethnic language can also bridge generational gaps and enhance proficiency.

Communities and schools can amplify these efforts. Imagine a school hosting an Ethnic Language Day, where students, teachers, and even the principal use a designated ethnic language for the day. Such initiatives can inspire families to take similar steps at home, creating a supportive environment for language preservation.

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Parents, as well as extended family members, are uniquely positioned to shape the linguistic future of their communities. Their everyday choices about language use ripple outward, influencing not just their children but also the broader ummah.

However, this isn’t a task they should shoulder alone. Schools, policymakers, and communities must come together to provide the support families need. Practical steps include:

1. Family practices: Dedicate time for ethnic language use during meals or bedtime. Engage children in conversations with grandparents who speak these languages, creating a meaningful connection to their roots.
2. Community initiatives: Organize workshops, cultural festivals, and study circles in ethnic languages to reinforce their importance and normalize their use in public spaces.
3. Policy changes: In a multilingual country like Malaysia, introduce mandatory ethnic language classes alongside English and the national language. This initiative can help future generations grow up multilingual and culturally enriched, preserving linguistic diversity and strengthening their connection to their heritage.

For parents, this effort goes beyond cultural preservation-it is an act of worship. In Islam, fulfilling one's responsibilities toward the family and ensuring the transmission of beneficial knowledge are highly valued deeds. Preserving heritage, including language, contributes to maintaining family ties, which is deeply emphasized in Islamic teachings.

Preserving Linguistic Diversity: A Shared Responsibility

The rise of English in non-native English-speaking households and nations, including many Muslim-majority societies, is inevitable. However, this shift doesn't have to come at the cost of linguistic diversity.

As highlighted earlier, the diversity of languages is a sign of Allah's wisdom, and thus, multilingualism should be celebrated. By making conscious efforts to integrate ethnic languages into daily life, families, educators, and policymakers can ensure children grow up confident and multilingual-fluent in English, yet deeply connected to their cultural roots.

This effort must be collective. Communities, educators, and policymakers all have a role to play in creating an environment where all languages are celebrated. Together, we can ensure that linguistic and cultural diversity remains a strength of the ummah worldwide.

By embracing this diversity, we strengthen bonds and promote mutual understanding, ensuring the richness of our heritage is preserved for generations to come.

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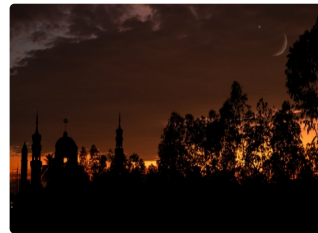
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