

Passing Through

Malaysian students face special difficulties in American colleges

There are 344,000 foreign students enrolled at U.S. colleges, and 23,000 of them are Malaysian. That makes students from this Southern Pacific Federation one of the largest foreign contingents here, second only to the Taiwanese in number. Scattered across 450 campuses, Malaysian students must cope with many of the same culture shocks as other foreigners, but these Islamic visitors also have some special difficulties. **NEWSWEEK ON CAMPUS** takes a look at one community, the 29 Malaysians enrolled at American University in Washington, D.C.:

Juneita Acmi sometimes wears a sarong topped by an Esprit T shirt. Her hybrid outfit expresses eloquently the dilemma of so many Malaysian students in the United States: how to become part of American life and still remain Malaysian. Few succeed in breaching the gap; the pressures are enormous. On a number of campuses, extremist Islamic groups court homesick students and encourage them to reject Americans and their ways. From the other side, there are barriers of lifestyle, language, and even food. It's little wonder that Linda Heaney, a consultant with the National Association of Foreign Student Affairs, says, "I don't think they want to be



Remaining isolated: Students sharing keropok (Malaysian crackers) and coffee

here, but they want their degrees and they want to succeed back home."

Malaysian students started coming to U.S. schools in the 1970s as part of an affirmative-action effort by their government. A new, moderate regime wanted to provide better education for native Muslim Malaysians, traditionally the underclass in a society dominated by the descendants of Chinese and Indian immigrants. Since there were so few openings in Malaysian colleges, the government began soliciting scholarships abroad. By 1978 there were 3,000 students here; now there are eight times that number.

Since the Malaysians arrive as part of their government's economic policy, most seek business or technology degrees. As a group, they make good grades and, says Heaney, are well liked by professors. But there can be problems in class. Students

unsure of their English painstakingly translate reading assignments into their native language, and they tend to do less well in class participation. "I have an idea but I cannot jump in," says Karim Hane-piah, a management information systems major at AU. The U.S. system also has its surprises. "I had never done a term paper before," says Zabiha Mahammed Yusoff.

Classroom crises can seem petty next to the problems of social differences. A typical Malaysian's ideas about dating and sex seem Victorian to bolder Americans. In Malaysia, displaying one's feet is viewed as disrespectful, so when an American puts his feet upon chairs and tables, it can be disquieting. And the sight of Americans embracing in public comes as a shock. But most adjust. "It's their culture," says Wazir Muaz, 35, a public-administration major.

Wasting time: Malaysians are harder on their own. When Acmi, a 29-year-old graduate student in business administration, started dating an American two years ago, her friends scolded. "Don't waste your time," they said. Now, even though her boyfriend has converted to Islam and plans to go back home with her, many Malaysians still shun them. That type of behavior inspired Yusoff, who as an undergraduate at Oklahoma State University spent all her time with compatriots, to seek American friends at AU. "They are more open-minded. I can talk to them without fear of judgment. They accept you as you are."

Many Malaysian students are too busy making ends meet to worry about cross-cultural dating. If their families can't help, they must rely on government stipends for pocket money. The going rate of \$450 per month for undergraduates (\$550 for graduate students) doesn't go far in Washington. The U.S. government restricts foreign

Culture shock: Worshipping in an Islamic prayer room on the AU campus

JOHN TROHA—BLACK STAR

