Between ethnicization and globalisation: Mediating contesting cultural identities of Malaysian youths

Ang Siew Mun[1], Chiok Phaik Fern[1], Low Choo Chin[2]

[1]Department of Journalism, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Tunku Abdul Rahman University, Jalan Universiti, Bandar Barat, 31900, Kampar, Perak, Malaysia, [2]History Section, School of Distance Education, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 11800 Minden, Penang, Malaysia

Correspondence: Low Choo Chin (email: lowc@usm.my)

Abstract

Globalization brings with it not only socio-economic challenges but also cultural unhingement. This study takes a closer look at the cultural experiences of Malaysian youths within the context of this unhingement by examining the youths' perspective on the reality of 'Malaysian' culture amid cultural contestation precipitated by the globalisation forces, and the manner in which they negotiate their own cultural identities between ethnicization and globalization. The findings reveal that the younger generations have been subjected to the state's nation building ideology which is based on Malay cultural nationalism while allowing sufficient breathing space for the development of their ethnic culture. At the same time, they are receptive to a global culture as a new basis for the development of their cultural identity. There are indications that the youths are grappling with their sense of a Malaysian culture. We suggest that a key solution to the Malaysian cultural problem is not necessarily that of harmonising the various ethnic traditions in order to shape a common culture, but that of creating an ethnically neutral national identity compatible with diversity.

Keywords: ethnicization, globalization, intranational subcultures, multiculturalism, national identity, youth culture

Introduction

When asked by a foreigner "Where are you from?" a typical Malaysian would answer that he/she is from Malaysia. Many Malaysians may be surprised by the subsequent question "Are you a Malay?" While the non-Malaysian is right to point out that Malay culture is the dominant identity of Malaysia, he/she overlooks the fact that the Malaysian community does not constitute a homogeneous group. Evident distinctions exist between national identity and ethnic or cultural identities. Indeed the main issue that makes the evolution of a national identity difficult in Malaysia is that the majority of the population (*the bumiputera*) and the sizeable minorities compete to maintain their separate identities and demand that their cultures be given recognition in the nation's cultural policy (Nagata, 1979; Mohd Nasir Hashim & Jomo, 1990; Shamsul, 1998; Zawawi, 2004). One of the major issues confronted by contemporary Malaysian youth is how to construct their idea of national belonging within the rigid boundaries of the state's conception of national identity.

National identity is not distinct in multicultural Malaysia as no particular ethnic group dominates the national identity even though Malay is the dominant race (Hng Hung Yong, 2004: p.2). National identity construction draws on an essentialistic notion of the political project that takes the state into rigid distinctions between Malay/non-Malay or Muslim/non-Muslim identities. Hoffstaedter is right to point out that "In Malaysia the desire of many people for a ready-made identikit to deal with the onslaught of modernity and the ensuing identity crisis we face is coupled with the government's attempts to control the

identikit of Malayness and Islamicity. Thus the problem is not Islam or Malayness but the way the politicization of a religion (in this case Islam) continues to dominate identity politics in Malaysia" (2013, p. 49). The idea of a "national culture" is thus part of a political project. Within the context of the politicized national identity, many Malaysians [including youths] are differentiated along the lines of ideological and ethnicized construction of such binary identities (2013, p. 49).

In this article, we focus on the national identity articulation of youths. The contested nature of of Malay/non-Malay identity has a significant impact upon contemporary youth. An examination on Malaysian youth identity needs to take into consideration the geopolitical circumstances from which the process of construction takes place. "National culture" is part of a political project and it is thus examined as an analytical concept. This study attempts to contribute to contemporary discourse on three problems. Firstly it examines the present understanding of the Malaysian youth about their perceived definition of a "Malaysian identity". In doing so, this study theorizes the relationship between ethnic orientation, state-building ideology and youth's exposure to globalization. Secondly, we sought to analyze the most important elements of national culture which these youth cherish and their view on culture in general. It shows that many youth still cherish their "Malaysian" root and this feeling plays a dominant role in the conception of a national identity. Thirdly, we asked if the conception of their identity is influenced by globalization concerns. To contextualize the issues, this paper examines the problems involved in defining Malaysian culture given its multi-ethnicity and the deep roots of the colonial economic policy it is set under.

Contextualizing youth and cultural identity in Malaysia

This article conceptualizes the question of youth identity using two frameworks – cultural contestations and globalisation forces. The first framework derives from Hng Hung Yong's thesis that the creation of identity is "the result of a contest between competing identities" (2004, p. 5). Local scholars believed that it is difficult to develop a truly Malaysian cultural policy, which was acceptable to all ethnic groups. The Malaysian cultural identity was and still is unclear because a number of minority groups demanded a fair share in the country's cultural policy. Indeed the main issue that makes the evolution of a national identity difficult in Malaysia is that the majority of the population (*the bumiputera*) and the sizeable minorities compete to maintain their separate identities and demand that their cultures be given recognition in the nation's cultural policy (Nagata, 1979; Mohd Nasir Hashim & Jomo, 1990; Shamsul, 1998; Zawawi, 2004). The ethnic composition of the Malaysian population is mainly comprised of the Malays, Chinese, Indians, orang Asli, and the indigenous communities in East Malaysia. The Malays, orang Asli and the indigenous communities in East Malaysia are classified as *bumiputera* (literally refers to sons of the soil).

Although there are attempts to project Malaysian culture as multicultural, a more widespread view among scholars of Malaysia is that Islamization is a far more perceptibe trend, certainly among Malays. The Islamization process witnessed the official attempts to infuse Islamic values into bureaucratic institutions and to establish key Islamic institutions (Norani, 2008: p. 253). According to Chandra Muzaffar, "Islamization is that process by which what are perceived as Islamic laws, values and practices are accorded greater significance in state, society and culture." (as cited in Liow, 2009: p. 43) Islamization policies have been actively being implemented in the public domain since the period of Mahathir administration. A parallel legal system based on syariah laws and Islamic bureaucaracy were created. (Holst, 2012: p. 107)

Besides "cultural contestation", youth identity is also articulated with globalization forces. We are interested in whether the two factors are mutually exclusive or mutually inclusive in determing Malaysian culture. To what extent does ethnicization and globalization facilitate the youth's understanding and practices of culture? Youth's cultural experiences are transforming as a result of the rising tide of globalization. Cultural globalization challenges the formation of national identity and the sense of cultural belongingness of youth from a variety of aspects such as language, food, fashion, music, internet technology and lifestyles (Suárez-Orozco & Qin-Hilliard 2004: p. 20) Facing the challenge of globalization, one of the issues confronted by Malaysian youth is that of cultural identity. Youth have to

manage multiple competing cultures, which include ethnic culture, national culture and global culture. According to Suárez-Orozco and Qin-Hilliard, "in a global world, identity is no longer best conceived as an achievement that involves overcoming or giving up certain cultural identifications. Instead, youth who are players in a global stage must cultivate the multiple identities that are required to function in diverse, often incommensurable cultural realities" (2004, p. 22).

As a result of globalization, there has been cultural differentialism or heterogenization, cultural convergence or homogenization, and cultural hybridization (Pieterse, 2004). Most scholars of globalisation suggest that all three tendencies are present, sometimes in conflictual or competitive ways. (Ritzer, 2010; Hannerz, 2002; Barber, 1995). According to differentialism, there are barriers that prevent the global flows and caused cultures to remain distinct. In the notion of cultural convergence, the barriers are much weaker and the global flows stronger resulting in the growing similarity in the cultures of the world. Hybridization takes place when local and global cultures interact and combine to produce a unique cultural hybrid (Ritzer, 2010: p. 154-155).

Globalization is viewed positively since it enriches the country's "multicultural synergy" compared to the previous practice of ethnic diversification. Malaysian youth have vital roles to play in this development (Zawawi, 2004: p. 134). While globalization has lessened the state's exclusionary cultural policy, globalisation forces have not sufficiently shaped the direction of Malaysian cultural identity. The challenge to an accomodating policy stems from domestic concerns rather than external influences. Mandel argued that,

> *Globalization did not play a defining role in the formation and progress of the NCP. The primary constraints to government capacity in relation to cultural policy were internal, namely the multi-ethnic character of Malaysian society and the unresolved nationalism of an exclusionary cultural leadership* (2008, p. 296).

This paper discuss how Malaysian youth from different cultural background responded to globalising influences by maintaining their cultural differences, converging to the global flows and producing new hybrid forms. We contend that small shoots of cultural hybridization have occurred with global cultural characteristics acting as emulsifiers. Therefore, a young, emerging "Malaysian culture" of sorts has also emerged.

Defining Malaysian culture: Issues and problems

The discourse on national culture is essential as national culture portrays a national characteristic so that the country is recognized through its national identity and not ethnic identity (Abdul Aziz, 2003: p. 148). As Hng Hung Yong observed, "National culture helps to define national identity. If there is no agreement about what national culture is, it will be difficult to have agreement on the identity of a national character" (2004: p. 6). On the other hand, the author argued that the notion of national culture has lost its meaning. Instead of a single Malaysian culture, the concept of "unity in diversity" is more cherished by our younger generation. In the midst of diversity, there is a common understanding that the blending of diverse culture has produced a unique Malaysian culture, different from those envisaged by the government in the 1970s.

We suggest that it is not the case that the national culture 'project' has failed in Malaysia. Rather the regulation of a national culture came about too late. The National Culture Policy was only formulated in 1971. Cultural pluralism had existed prior to the coming of western colonialism and the process of colonialism further strengthened this "initial pluralism" which then resulted in the cultural contestation among different ethnicities (Zawawi, 2004: p. 115-117). Malaysian cultural identity is heightened by the unclear and controversial position of national culture. Is there a mainstream culture, which is shared by the majority of the Malaysian population? What are governmental views of what Malaysian culture should be? An early attempt to regularize a National Culture Policy (NCP) took place in 1971 after the 13th May 1969 racial clashes had sparked interest amongst scholars and politicians about the possibility of identifying a culture which is truly "Malaysian" in nature. The NCP spells out three principles as

guidelines for the formation of a national culture and national identity. These are: 1) It must be based on the indigenous (Malay) culture, 2) Other cultural elements from minority communities will be accepted as part of this national culture if they are found to be suitable, and 3) The official state religion, Islam, is an important component in the development of this national culture (National Department for Culture and Arts, Ministry of Information Communication and Culture).

After 10 years of implementing the NCP, former Minister of Culture, Youth and Sports, Mokthar Hashim admitted that, "It would be difficult for anyone to say exactly when a national culture would be achieved as culture was a growing and developing issue." (as cited in Kua Kia Soong, 1990: p. 12) The vagueness of Malaysian culture has been made complicated by global cultural influence through the globalization of entertainment and the information industry (2006: p. 8). Globalization has made the notion of cultural identity that projects the culture of a single cultural group less relevant in favour of multiculturalism (Zawawi, 2004: p. 134).

This paper aims attempts to understand young people's ideas of national belonging. We suggest that young people's cultural identities are influenced by two factors. The first one is related to ethnicization as the main source of tension in contemporary Malaysia. Given that ethnicization is the main source of tension, we suggest that the problem is not necessarily that of harmonising the various ethnic traditions to shape a common culture. Rather it is of creating an ethnically neutral national identity compatible with diversity. (see Brown, 2013: p. 1036-1037; Brown, 1994: p. 64) Secondly, globalization and the trend of multiculturalism in the world is a factor that contributes to an ethnically neutral identity. This is because some Asian and Western ways of life are quite acceptable to us and they are more neutral in the sense that they do not carry much political connotations or emotional baggage for any of the ethnic groups in the country. Hence, they are considered as "safe" to be adopted by all and sundry without any of the ethnic groups having to compromise their identities or "lose face" over whose cultural values and ideas should take precedence in the country.

Survey methodology

An online survey was carried out from May to December 2011. The targeted respondents were Malaysian students studying in local universities (both government and private universities and university colleges) as well as universities abroad (UK and Australia). The survey covers 3 Sections, namely the respondents' demographic profile, their perception on "Malaysian Culture" as a national culture and their perception on Global Culture. Section 2 of the survey attempted to plot the respondents' level of understanding on the essential elements of a National Culture as defined by the policy makers (in this case, the government) and Malaysian Culture as perceived by individuals (in this case, the respondents), the advantages and disadvantages of having an emerging Malaysian Culture, and the foundation of a National Culture in the eyes of the individuals. Section 3 of the survey questionnaire investigates the perception of respondents towards "Global Culture" in relations to the emerging Malaysian culture.

A total of 60 respondents (that is, 24 males and 33 females, while 3 respondents did not state their gender) took part in the online survey. The majority of the respondents are in the age range of 21-25 years old (63%). Chinese constituted the largest group of respondents (78 %) followed by Malays (8 %), Indians (7%) and others (7%). A total of 39 respondents or 65% are pursuing Arts and Social Sciences programmes. This paper is written with two main objectives: 1) to find out the students' perspectives of the top elements that should make up Malaysian culture and 2) to examine their view on global culture and its roles in enriching Malaysian culture. The survey was designed to get the youth's responses on different aspects of culture.

There are various definitions for the word "culture". Many anthropologists and sociologists have given their own interpretations and definitions. For example, American anthropologists like Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn had compiled a list of 160 different definitions for this word (Bodley, 1999). The diverse definitions can be categorized into, among other things, topical, behavioral, normative, structural, and symbolic categories. However, generally, culture "involves at least three components: what people think, what they do, and the material products they produce" (Bodley, 1999). According to John

Macionis (2010), even though cultures vary greatly, they all have common elements. The five basic elements of culture are symbols, language, values and beliefs, norms, and material culture. These five elements were incorporated into our survey questions too.

Findings

A strong identification with Malaysian culture

The findings revealed that almost half of those students (43%) are aware of the existence of Malaysia's National Culture Policy which, among other things, stated that it should be Malay-based. However, when asked to comment on the policy, many respondents advocated that a national culture should be based on multiculturalism in direct contradiction to the National Culture Policy. For example, one of the respondents stated that a mix of Malay, Chinese, Indian and other indigenous cultures is great and it reflects the "Asian-ness" of Malaysia:

> *This cultural mix is unique to Malaysia and it is well known throughout the world that Malaysia is a multicultural society, with every step you go, you taste a different bit of Asia in every corner.*

Some respondents (33%) feel that they have a clear idea of what constitutes a Malaysian culture and described it as a mixture of different cultures. Respondents used the term *"rojak"* (a typical Malaysian dessert) or "mixed fruit basket" to show the important contributions of each and every culture towards the growth of the Malaysian culture. Each culture has contributed to the uniqueness of this emerging Malaysian culture which is assimilative in nature. One of the respondents stated, "Malaysian culture is like *rojak*, there is a bit of everything mixed together. IF [emphasis is from the respondent] one ingredient is missing, the *rojak* will not taste good. But if you add something new to the *rojak*, it will still be a *rojak*."

Many respondents understand that the Malaysian culture should be closely associated with language (most voted – refer to appendix), followed by food, norms and customs, values and beliefs, arts, symbols, fashion, and lastly artefacts. (termed as material culture in Macionis 2010) The emergence of our unique Malaysian language and food is especially obvious among the student respondents. When asked to describe Malaysian culture, a respondent mentioned,

> *If the need to define it persists, I would point out two aspects, the employment of different languages as used by the average Malaysian eg 'chun,' 'kao tim,' 'sama,' in Cantonese etc; and the varieties of food in Malay, Chinese and Indian that are widely available in Malaysia.*

Respondents admitted that they are so used to Malaysian slang that they continue to add suffixes at the end of sentences such as "-eh", "-lah" and "-mah". Therefore, despite clearly knowing that this is not standard English Language, Malaysians continue to use it and as such, share a distinctive spoken English Language derogatively called "Manglish", which may sound horrible but is easily understood by all and is seen as contributing to a common national identity.

When it comes to food, all those students answered positively that our food is uniquely Malaysian. A student exclaimed, "Nasi lemak. Oh yeah." Other respondents also agreed that they indulge in foods that do not belong to their culture of origin. A student mentioned, "Take for example *sambal belacan*. It is accepted by all Malaysians." Judging from the fact that Malaysian culture is a culture that belongs to all the ethnic groups, "mamak" (i.e. Indian Muslim) restaurants can be considered as a Malaysian one too, according to a student. This is because people from all ethnicities enjoying *teh tarik* and *roti canai* at the "mamak" restaurants. An Indian Engineering student summarized Malaysian culture in three aspects; "Mamak" food, good food (food again) and bad politics.

A master student noticed that different races have well adapted the food of other races to suit their own culture. This is also true in fashion.

> *Malays cook chinese style food, without pork. Chinese cook curry (originate from malays/indians) with pork. Or mixed up the ingredients or cooking style to come up with something new - Unique and delicious! Clothes/ fashion. We have cheong sam collared baju kebaya! What a nice mixed of culture.*

This sense of identification with the Malaysian or Malay Language and food is even stronger among overseas students. Manglish is widely used by overseas students. Overseas students constantly sought Malaysian food such as *Nasi Lemak / Roti Canai/ Bak Kut Teh* in their host countries. Therefore, using the example of food, a student commented that the identification of Malaysian culture is clearer overseas. It is easier to find Malaysian restaurants overseas.

Respondents (20%) who think that the concept of a Malaysian culture is ambiguous believed that political factors such as poor policy implementation, communal politics, and political fractions are responsible for its vagueness. An engineering student believed that the concept is not obvious due to its implementation, "the target is there but no leader in the federal government is implementing the policy." Among the respondents, there were those who were reluctant to identify their race in the survey and identified themselves instead as "Malaysians". A student, who proudly identified his race as "Malaysian" commented, "We are still too divided by 'race'. We are still required to fill in 'race' and 'religion' when we fill in forms. How would my race or religion affects [sic] my chances of applying for something?"

For some, the development of Malaysian culture has been hindered by communalism. One respondent mentioned "As long as our people are divided along racial lines, there would only be Malay culture, Chinese culture, and Indian culture. An assimilated Malaysian culture is unattainable. A Malaysian culture is clear but it was blurred by ethnicity and racial issues." Yet, another student responded, "There is a Malaysian culture but not obvious."

Nevertheless, young Malaysians are optimistic about the emerging Malaysian culture. For example, a total of 40% of the respondents are happy with such an emergence. The reasons chosen include (1) "this means that we are becoming more united as a nation of diverse people", and (2) "this means that the amalgamation of all major local cultures is happening in Malaysia." However, a small group of respondents (7%) expressed unhappiness with this emerging Malaysian culture for fear that "all ethnic groups will begin to lose their own cultural identities."

Looking forward to a brand new Malaysian culture

The online survey further tried to identify elements that could potentially bring the country's major ethnic groups together. The top five unifying elements that the respondents chose were (1) belief in freedom and independence (as outlined in *Rukun Negara*) (35%), (2) tolerance and patience (as outlined in *Rukun Negara*) (38%), (3) belief in family unity (35%), (4) bilingualism and trilingualism (30%), and finally, (5) belief in the importance of good health (27%).

As for material culture, when asked what characteristic of other ethnic groups they liked most, respondents cited food (68%) as top ranking, followed by festive celebrations (17%), costumes (5%) as well as music and entertainments (2%). In terms of cultural norms that are already widely acceptable, three norms were regarded as widely accepted. They are (1) greeting the elderly, (2) taking off shoes when entering a host's or friend's house, (3) shaking hands when someone offers a *salam* (greeting).

The respondents also believe that the emergence of a Malaysian culture as the national culture would mostly benefit the ordinary *rakyat* or citizens (40%), followed by politicians (25%) and then elites (15%). However, they (52%) do not think that the government's national policies and visions like the National Education Policy, the National Language Policy, Vision 2020, and the concept of 1 Malaysia would be successful in uniting all the major ethnic groups. They cited "the presence of Malaysia's race-based politics and constitution" as the number one barrier towards uniting all our people. However, some respondents were optimistic in their view of a Malaysian culture as their national identity because "time allows for the blending of all the major ethnic groups' core beliefs and practices."

The students were also asked to identify which approach of cultural foundation they would like to see in Malaysia. A choice of four alternatives of approaches was given – Western-based approach; Malay

assimilationist approach; synthetic blend of traditional elements found in major communities; amalgamation of all major local cultures and with it, a brand-new Malaysian Culture. The survey found that the concept of amalgamation (often term as melting pot theory) is looked upon favorably by the student-respondents (55%).

To the authors, this does show a great leap forward as Malaysia's approach of national unity still resembles the pluralistic model or "unity in diversity" model (Nagata 1979; Mohd Nasir Hashim and Jomo K. S. 1990; Cheah Boon Kheng 2002). In this pluralism approach, "all cultures are to be allowed to exist separately and equally" (Mohd Nasir Hashim and Jomo K. S. 1990, p. 103). The students' preference for amalgamation perhaps implies that they are not in favor of maintaining the present status quo of "pluralism". They are looking forward to a brand-new Malaysian Culture.

On the other hand, 21.67% of the respondents prefer syncretic blend of traditional elements found in all major communities, 11.67% chose the Malay assimilationist approach, and lastly 6.67% liked the idea of Western-based approach. Some believed cultural pluralism has been quite successful in Malaysia because it draws on each ethnic group's strengths. Many respondents have diverse opinions about whether or not global culture has played a role in this "new" Malaysian culture.

Localization is preferred over globalization of culture

Critics of globalization contend that the local culture of youth is severely affected by Western influences. According to them, globalization is seen as "cultural imperialism" and it is destroying cultural diversity by homogeneous cultural practices across the world's borders. On the other hand, those in the opposing camp view globalization favorably as it leads to greater diversity of cultures (heterogenization). Cultural diversity eventually leads to the interchange and integration of cultures, which results in the creation of a new cultural trend known as "cultural hybridization" (Abdul Rahman Embong 2011, p. 17-18).

The survey then went on to explore the presence of a global culture in the consciousness of the respondents and how well it is regarded by them. A good number of the respondents have not heard of talks about a global culture (48%). Only 32% have heard about it. A respondent asked hesitantly, "Something akin to westernization?" Of those who have heard of a global culture, some view it as "a culture accepted worldwide by all communities and all races in all countries around the world." Another respondent regarded the global culture as "western culture which dominates the world through the media, though with some local adaptations in dress and music … e.g. we wear jeans and t-shirts to school, we listen to the Beatles or Lady Gaga etc." A respondent perceived global culture as "a contemporary style of living that implants a negative connotation to the word 'traditional' onto people's mindset; that 'traditional' means ancient. Thus, it can slowly eat up what is unique to the identity of a particular ethnic group."

Therefore, the students have associated global culture with what is universal, western, and contemporary. Some perceived global culture as comprehensive or all-encompassing. For example, they viewed it as an adaption of all cultures in one culture, and a blend/mixture of cultures based on all races from all over the world. There were also those who identified global culture as something which is advanced or hi-tech. A student commented, "I understand the global culture such as the internet and mobile technology is a must have." Yet another student also associated it with material culture:

A way of life that emerged from the western world (America) and that has been brought into other countries and embraced by them. Like the technology and fast paced life.

Would this Western-centric global culture help the newly-emerging Malaysian culture by playing the role of emulsifier (i.e. helping to blend our contesting major ethnic cultures)? A total of 38% of these student-respondents replied sceptically as they chose only "maybe" as the answer to the question while 32% of them answered "yes". Only 13% of these student-respondents disagreed with a "no".

When global culture is compared to Malaysian culture (i.e. the respondents were asked to choose one of these two options), 32% of the respondents supported the growth of a Malaysian culture, followed by 30% of respondents who preferred the growth of a global culture in Malaysia. The respondents who opted for a Malaysian culture over a global culture argued that Malaysians should have their own culture which

is distinct from other people's culture as it symbolizes the national identity. The importance of Malaysian culture is stressed in the following words, "Malaysia should have a culture which belongs to each Malaysian." It would be very pitiful indeed if we disregarded our unique culture for a foreign one as stated by one respondent:

> We have something very unique and good in Malaysia. It will be a waste to throw it away
> or leave our country's potential untapped. Plus, global culture is not the best thing.
> What's wrong with us being unique?

Global culture was also viewed as another form of imperialism. Therefore, many respondents do not wish to see Malaysian as a culturally conquered "desert", devoid of its own uniqueness. Besides the issue of identity and distinctiveness, suitability is another factor explaining the students' preference for localization, i.e. for a Malaysian identity. Some western cultures are not really suitable in the Malaysian context. However, those respondents who supported the growth of a global culture over a Malaysian culture thought that this emerging Malaysian culture would be too conservative, whereas a Western-centric global culture "would help us survive better since this global culture is universally accepted." Global culture was also perceived as being able to help Malaysia progress faster socially such as in eliminating racism and institutionalized discrimination in the country. It is quite advantageous to adopt global culture as the alternative that can push the whole nation forward, especially in terms of business and other advanced knowledge.

Moreover Malaysians cannot reject the rising tide of globalization with the advancement of the mass media, the Internet and the news media. Global culture has already become part of most Malaysians' lives. They have already embraced global culture. Meanwhile students are of the opinion that the choice of whether or not to adopt Malaysian or global culture is very much dependent on the factor of expediency. They said:

> However, in some aspects, people would prefer simple and convenient or things which
> are easier to get. For example, in fashion wise, it is more convenient to dress in a simple
> and comfortable dressing rather than have to wear those traditional clothes. That is the
> reason why we (Malaysians especially the younger generation) prefer to wear shirt and
> jeans rather than wearing those traditional clothes.

Still, some expressed disappointment with the current state of affairs. Some respondents did not think that global culture is the best but at the same time know that "the hopes for a truly Malaysian Culture is still out of reach." Others felt that the quest for a Malaysian culture is achievable if the dividing line of ethnicity is eradicated. There is another group of respondents who prefer to adhere to their own ethnic culture. For example, they believe that their own ethnic culture gives them a sense of security and identity, as opposed to the "new" Malaysian culture. Moreover, they would rather choose to practice their own culture because of familiarity.

Two respondents even suggested that there should not be a dividing line between global culture and Malaysian culture. They are not mutually exclusive. One could adopt both at the same time. Culture is a way of life which develops as time goes by and so, "It does not matter if it is Malaysian culture or global culture." It is problematic to posit national identity and cultural globalisation as opposites. Globalising influences do not necessarily need to be rejected in order to maintain a national culture. The question raised across the world consists in finding a balance between globalising modernity and tradition. (Adam et al., 2007: p. 80; Held et al., 1999: p. 369)

Conclusion

How does the changing conceptualization of national culture in Malaysia relate to the idea of globalization? We found that global culture is contributing to the emergence of the Malaysian culture, rather than marking an end to national identity. As we view our national culture as the result of constant negotiation and contestation, we believe that the global culture does have a significant contribution to

play as the emulsifier to this dynamic formation. However the majority of the young respondents preferred Malaysia to preserve its own local culture rather than adopting the global culture, which is something foreign or western. The western-centric global culture was not only seen as threatening their 'new' Malaysian national culture, but more importantly, it undermines their ethnic identity as well. Uniqueness or distinctiveness is a more appreciated concept in comparison to the idea of fashionable modernity when it comes to the issue of cultural belongingness. In other words, the preservation of cultural identity is prioritized before material success. This explains why localization of culture finds more resonance among the youth than the internationalization of culture. This article suggests that a concept of modernity, as opposed to globalization, might have been useful to explain this phenomenon. The respondents wanted to be modern without being victims of cultural imperialism (see Tomlinson, 1999; Tomlinson, 1991).

While the majority of the respondents rejected "cultural imperialism", there is another stream of opinion which favored global culture. Their reasons are based on pragmatic considerations: for survival in the competitive and globalized society. Moreover, they viewed the dominance of global culture as something real, which could not be avoided in their daily lives. The challenge is thus how to adopt the positive sides of global culture without impeding the growth of a young Malaysian culture. Could this be achieved by advancing on the *1 Bangsa Malaysia* (1 Malaysian Nation) concept? Or would it be better to be realized through a 'flexible' cultural strategy, which is opened to the contestation of various multi-faceted cultures including global culture?

In a globalized society, multiculturalism is viewed as "a more pertinent and relevant force" (Ibrahim, 2004: p. 134) Inspired by the question posed by Minkov and Hofstede (2012: p. 134), "is national culture a meaningful concept?", we suggest for a need to rethink our possible and desirable future scenarios in terms of cultural policies. Minkov and Hofstede reminded us that "intranational subcultures" exists within a nation and these subcultures are very different from the other subcultures (2012: p. 135) Caputa rightly pointed out that "culture is understood as a multiplicity of signifying practices rather than a bounded thing" (2005: p. 20). Therefore, we agree with Rais Yatim that the issue of culture is best left unregulated because it will evolve on its own under the combined influences of the competing elements of various ethnicities and globalization (2006, p. 6). Even though Rais Yatim viewed the Malaysian culture as vague and subject to variable interpretations, this paper has already attempted to show that Malaysian culture actually does indeed exist now.

Acknowledgements

References

Abdul Aziz Deraman (2003) *Masyarakat dan kebudayaan Malaysia*. Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur.

Abdul Rahman Embong (2011) The question of culture, identity and globalisation: An unending debate. *Kajian Malaysia* **29** (1), 11-22.

Adams L, Centeno M, Varner C (2007) Resistance to Cultural Globalization – A Comparative Analysis. In: Helmut K. Anheier, Yudhishthir Raj Isar (eds) *The Cultures and Globalization Series 1: Conflicts and Tensions*. Sage, London.

Barber B (1995) *Jihad vs McWorld*. Times Books, New York.

Bodley JH (1994) Definitions and Discussions of Culture: An Anthropological Perspective. In: John H. Bodley (ed) *Cultural Anthropology: Tribes, States, and the Global System*. Mayfield, California.

Brown D (1994) *The State and Ethnic Politics in South East Asia*. Routledge, New York.

Brown D (2013) Ethnic revival: perspectives on state and society. In: John Hutchinson, Anthony D. Smith (eds) *Nationalism: Critical Concepts in Political Science.* Routledge, New York.

Caputo V (1995) Anthropology's silent others: A Consideration of Some Conceptual and Methodological Issues for the Study of Youth and Children's Cultures. In: Vered Amit-Talai, Helena Wulff (eds) *Youth Cultures: A Cross-cultural Perspective*. Routledge, London.

Cheah Boon Kheng (2002) *Malaysia: The making of a nation*. ISEAS, Singapore.

Hannerz U (2002) *Transnational Connections: Culture, People, Places.* Routledge, London.

Held D, McGrew A, Goldblatt D, Perraton J (1999) *Global Transformations: Politics, Economics, and Culture.* Stanford University Press, Stanford.

Hng Hung Yong (2004) *Five Men and Five Ideas: Building National Identity*. Pelanduk, Selangor.

Hoffstaedter G (2013) Religious pluralism in Malaysia: can there be dialogue? In: Joseph Camilleri, Sven Schottmann (eds) *Culture, Religion and Conflict in Muslim Southeast Asia: Negotiating tense pluralism.* Routledge, New York.

Holst F (2012) *Ethnicization and Identity Construction in Malaysia.* Routledge, New York.

Liow JCY (2009) *Piety and Politics: Islamism in Contemporary Malaysia*. Oxford University Press, New York.

Macionis JJ (2010) *Sociology.* 13th Edition. Pearson, Upper Saddle River.

Mandel SK (2008) The National Culture Policy and Constestation over Malaysian Identity. In: Joan M. Nelson, Jacob Meerman, Abdul Rahman Embong (eds) *Globalization and National Autonomy: The Experience of Malaysia*. ISEAS, Singapore.

Maznah Mohamed, Johan Saravanamuttu (1990) The Case for Integration. In: Kua Kia Soong (ed) *Malaysia Cultural Policy and Democracy.* Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall, Kuala Lumpur.

Minkov M, Hofstede G (2012) Is National Culture a Meaningful Concept?: Cultural Values Delineate Homogenous National Clusters of In-Country Regions. *Cross Cultural Research* **46** (2), 133-159.

Mohd Nasir Hashim, Jomo KS (1990) Whither National Culture in Malaysia? In: Kua Kia Soong (ed) *Malaysia Cultural Policy and Democracy.* Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall, Kuala Lumpur.

Nagata J (1979) *Malaysian Mosaic: Perspectives from a Poly-ethnic Society*. University of British Columbia Press, Vancouver.

National Department for Culture and Arts, Ministry of Information Communication and Culture. National Culture Policy [Cited 15/08/2012]. Available from: http://www.jkkn.gov.my/v4/index.php?option=com_contentandview=articleandid=58andItemid=61a ndlang=en.

Pieterse JN (2004) *Globalization and Culture: Global Melange*. Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham.

Rais Yatim (2006) The Malaysian Culture: Dream or Reality. *Beringin Journal of Akademi Seni Kebangsaan* **2**, 5-11.

Ritzer G (2011) *Globalization: The essentials*. John Wiley and Sons, West Sussex.

Ritzer G (2010) *McDonalization: The reader*. 3rd edition. Pine Forge Press, California.

Shamsul Amri Baharuddin (1998) Debating about Identity in Malaysia: A Discourse Analysis. In: Zawawi Ibrahim (ed) *Cultural Contestation: Mediating Identities in a Changing Malaysian Society*. Asean Academic Press, London.

Smith A (1991) *National Identity.* Penguin Books, London.

Suárez-Orozco MM, Qin-Hilliard DB (2004) *Globalization: Culture and Education in the New Millennium*. In: Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco, Desirée Baolian Qin-Hilliard (eds) *Globalization: Culture and Education in the New Millennium*. University of California Press, London.

Tomlinson J (1999) *Globalization and Culture*. Polity Press, Cambridge.

Tomlinson J (1991) *Cultural Imperialism: A Critical Introduction*. John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.

Zawawi Ibrahim (2004) Globalization and National Identity: Managing Ethnicity and Cultural Pluralism in Malaysia. In: Yoichiro Sato (ed) *Growth and Governance in Asia.* Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, Hawaii.