

**The Impact of Communication Technologies on
the Cultural Identities of Rural Malaysia.**
Experiences from twenty years of social engineering

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Introduction

Abu Kassim hails from a fishing village in the coastal district of Marang, Terengganu. Che' Su is from a paddy farming community of rural Kedah. Both are now attending a government boarding school in Kuala Lumpur. Every now and then Abu Kassim makes a telephone call to his family in Terengganu. So does Che' Su; whenever she can, she telephones her mother, father, brothers and sisters in Kedah. In this manner, Abu Kassim and Che' Su manage to remain "home," even though they are physically distant from their respective families.

Abu Kassim and Che' Su are lucky. They are able to pursue their education in a good and well-equipped school. Their parents are hoping that their future are ensured through better education. In the old days, the scenario was different. Malay parents seldom let their children go simply for the fear that they would not be able to watch over their children and their children would not be able to help them at home. Nowadays, Malay parents are able to "watch over" their children with the use of technologies such as the telephone. The children too can stay close to their families by using the telephone. And so families remain relationally intact even though they are physically distant.

Abu Kassim, Che' Su and their families are standing at the dawn of a new era. They are witnessing new ways, new styles and new forms of old practices. They are demonstrating a new experience of rural Malaysia that has been brought about by a technological invention. That invention has not changed their value of familial proximity, rather it has created a new form of familial proximity in the midst of new circumstances and new challenges in modern day Malaysia.

So what are these new circumstances, new challenges and new era?

In rural Malaysia, there are many things that may be labeled new. Communication technologies that are old elsewhere may be new in the villages of Malaysia. This is because most basic communication infrastructures have only been laid out in rural Malaysia under the New Economic

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Policy introduced in 1970. Thence this paper attempts to examine descriptively the impact of communication technologies on the cultural identities of rural Malaysia.

By communication technologies, we are referring to the currently available technologies such as computers, telephones, the electronic media of television, video and radio, and the print media of newspaper, magazine and the like. Satellite communication has not yet arrived in rural Malaysia since policies regarding it are still at the discourse table wanting cautious deliberations.

In this paper, rural Malaysia refers to the Malay populace. It is an undeniable historically-driven fact that rural Malaysia is predominantly Malay. In fact, it is said that rural Malaysia is synonymous to the Malay ethnic group. Therefore this paper focuses on the cultural identities of the Malays since the advent of communication technologies in Malaysia. Before we dwell on this matter, allow us to take a quick peek into a functionally relevant theoretical notion.

Lerner (1958), Schramm (1964), and Rogers (1969) posited that the communication media plays a vital role in the socio-economic development of a community. The media was assumed to be one of the antecedent variables to achieve the consequent variable of development; to “magically multiply” the people’s participation in various development efforts; and to create a healthy climate for the acceptance of development ideas. Critics jumped at this notion when the magic did not happen. Even though much was invested into the setting up of communication infrastructures and facilities, the people’s participation in development programmes did not multiply. So what went wrong?

It is undeniable that communication is a necessary prerequisite to the socio-economic development of a country. However, it is foolish to assume that communication can do the job alone. Communication on its own is not sufficient toward this effort. Communication necessarily requires a back-up in the form of a wholesome facilitative system consisting of basic infrastructures, credit facilities, technical know-how and an integrated planning and implementation strategy. A country in the path of development, therefore, needs to consider such a strategy in order for the magic to begin. The experiences of Malaysia is related in this paper.

A glimpse of rural Malaysia

Malaysia’s 10.2 percent growth in Gross National Product is not achieved through some magical charm. Instead it is the result of hard work by government planners and the people who are the beneficiaries of development. Like any developing country, Malaysia once shared the primary characteristics such as physical isolation, nonexistence of telephone services, high level of illiteracy, and apathy and fatalism in the rural communities who were often

locked in a pattern of bare subsistence.

Rural Malaysia is home to the Malays and other indigenous people. The Malays who represent 56 percent of Peninsular Malaysia's population are mostly engaged in agriculture in the rural areas. In East Malaysia the indigenous group accounts for 70 percent of Sarawak's population, and 84 percent in Sabah. The indigenous people of the East Malaysian states are also mostly found in the rural areas.

In 1970, it was indicated that some 800,000 families out of 1.6 million families in Malaysia were poor. A majority of these poor families, i.e., 89 percent, was located in the rural areas. In Peninsular Malaysia, 74 percent of poor families were found to be among the Malay ethnic group. Figures along ethnic lines then showed such a vast disparity existed between the three major ethnic groups in Malaysia. Among the Malays, 65 percent were poor; the Chinese 26 percent; and the Indians 39 percent. The New Economic Policy introduced under the Second Malaysia Plan was the government's monumental effort to rectify the imbalance.

The immediate catalyst that sparked the formulation of the New Economic Policy was the May 13 racial riot of 1969. This policy, introduced in 1970, was then an attempt to address the imbalances through a more equitable distribution of income and economic opportunities between various ethnic groups. Today, Malaysia's development is charted under the Sixth Malaysia Plan (1990 - 1996) and the New Economic Policy is still being addressed under the long term development plan projected till the year 2000. From 1970 till 1990, the New Economic Policy was a social engineering process to eradicate poverty among the Malays and other indigenous people, and at the same time, increase their participation in trading and commercial activities.

The widespread poverty in the rural areas can be attributed to the historical "mishap" in British Malaya. The cultural identities of rural folks as apathetic, fatalistic and contented with subsistence farming have its roots in the colonial administration. The dualistic approach of British policy in pre-independent Malaysia officially maintained the traditional economy and kept the Malays and other indigenous people of the land 'to grow food for the new and fast expanding cities under the impetus of colonial rule' (Syed Hussein, 1977).

The colonial policy towards traditional economy went a long way in preserving and reinforcing the poverty of the indigenous people in the rural areas. On the other hand, everything possible was done to boost capitalism by importing Indian labourers and allowing Chinese immigrants to exploit the economic resources of the country.

According to Shahrudin (1988) the injustices of colonial capitalism is camouflaged by attributing the backwardness of the indigenous people to their indolence and negative attitudes. The Malays were regarded as lack in self-reliance, perseverance, sense of responsibility, sense of duty, self-sacrifice

and public spiritedness. (Are these characteristics racial, cultural or more of racial stereotyping?)

Government policies in the early years of independence did not change much with regard to the dualistic economy. It was thought that the Malays and other indigenous people preferred to be in the traditional, agrarian and subsistence rural economy.

Tunku Abdul Rahman, the first Prime Minister in post independent Malaysia, was somewhat convinced that the Malays being tradition-bound, fatalistic and indolent were completely devoid of capitalistic aspirations and economic ambitions. The Chinese were regarded as materialistic whose interest was in business and to make profits (Shahrudin, 1988).

The racial riot of May 13, 1969 was really a blessing in disguise. Government leaders realised that imbalances and economic dualism is not an appropriate strategy to fulfil the indigenous people's aspirations in an independent country. And so the twenty years of social engineering process under the New Economic Policy began.

The experiment with social engineering has brought about both positive and negative effects on the rural society. There was improvement in their livelihood both in terms of income and the quality of life. There were also changes in the cultural identities of the rural folks. Some of these changes are as follows:

- a) **Changes in working and living habits.** Assistance from the government agencies, by informing and motivating the rural people and by passing on know-how and making available the necessary inputs to which they would otherwise have no access, helped change their attitudes toward work and productivity. Those changes in working and living habits improved rural mean income from RM 200 in 1970 to RM853 in 1987 (Malaysia, 1980; 1990).
- b) **Economic migration.** The Malays and other indigenous people began to be aware of other economic opportunities beside the security of their traditional economy. The unemployed began to look out for other opportunities and try their luck in petty trading and small businesses with the assistance of government credit facilities.
- c) **Educational migration.** Malay parents started to realise the value of education as a way out of their poverty cycle. The rural children were persuaded to stay longer in schools instead of dropping out during primary schools to help support their families. More schools were made available in rural areas and bright students were sent to fully residential schools. Rural students and their parents were made aware of the privileges in terms of scholarships for higher education among rural students. The New Economic Policy has been successful in terms

of persuading students to migrate out of their rural settings in search of better educational opportunities in urban areas.

- e) **The breaking up of extended family.** As a result of economic and educational migration, extended family which has been one of the strong rural cultures showed signs of breaking up. No longer did children stay with their parents to help with farming and cultivation of uneconomical land plots. The economic migrants stayed in urban and sub-urban areas as their income improved while looking for better economic opportunities. On the other hand, educational migrants having found success in their academic pursuit, experienced social mobility in new-found jobs in urban areas.

The improved condition of rural society was achieved through heavy investments in agricultural and rural development facilities, transportation, education as well as telecommunication facilities. Figure 1 shows the expenditures that had grown steadily since the beginning of the New Economic Policy during the Second Malaysian Plan of 1970-1975.

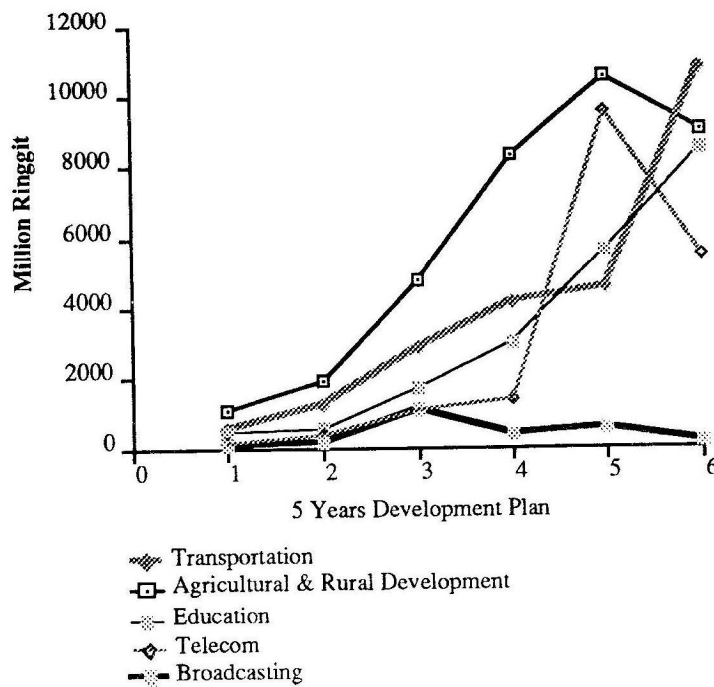


Figure 1 : Development expenditures under six Malaysian development plans

Investments in communication and its impact

Communication technologies are facilitative tools that help bridge the gap between the government and the people in the development process. However, informational linkage is not a sufficient condition to change the people's thinking and shed their negative attitudes. As mentioned earlier, the Malays were considered lazy, and lacking in self-reliance. It was quite a momentous task to change them into industrious people. Nevertheless it is believed that such negative characteristics were cultured by past environment, namely government policies which had confined them to rural and subsistence farming. To remedy the situation, communication was utilized, but this time with the aid of a back-up system comprising of other necessary infrastructures.

MacBride (1983) commented on the integrated need of telecommunication and development: 'It appears to us that the slow development in many countries of postal and telecommunication facilities and services is a real obstacle both to persons and societies. It is not sufficiently recognised that these facilities and services are not only the outcome of economic growth but also a precondition of overall development and even of democratic life'.

Such awareness became apparent to Malaysian development planners. The investment in telecommunication facilities has made it possible for telephone services, radio and television broadcasts to penetrate rural areas. Radio ownership for 1,000 inhabitants increased from 115.9 in 1976 to 428 in 1988. Television ownership for 1,000 inhabitants increased from 44.4 in 1976 to 138.7 in 1988 (Malaysia, 1990). Although there were no figures for rural-urban distribution, it can easily be inferred that ownership in rural areas has drastically increased since 1970 due to improvement in income among rural dwellers and also the availability of cheap transistor radio. The mean monthly gross household income in the rural areas increased remarkably from RM200 in 1970 to RM 853 in 1987. In terms of telephone use, the figures also indicate a remarkable increase. In 1980, there were 599 telephones per 1000 inhabitants. By 1990, the figure grew to 2023 telephones in use per 1000 inhabitants.

Prior to the setting up a private television station in 1984, broadcasting in Malaysia was a virtual monopoly of the government. Government-operated broadcasting stations has become an important development tool to mobilize the people to support development policies. This is clearly stated in the Radio and Television Malaysia's (RTM) operational objectives. Preparation and production of development programmes to inform and motivate the rural audience was undertaken by the Development Division of RTM.

Operating a public broadcasting station without a competitor proves an advantage in the communication-for-development process. The station is not preoccupied with problems of raising money to pay for its operational costs. Information relating to government policies can easily be aired at the prime time belt so as to gain maximum exposure without much hesitation.

In Malaysia, radio has been an instrumental medium to reach the rural population. Motivational messages coupling religious values and modern-living values were targeted to the rural Malay-Muslim population urging them to take advantage of subsidy, credit, new land opening and other facilities offered by the government. Religion was an important factor in many development messages aired over broadcasting stations since Malay-Muslim rural population regards Islam as a way of life.

With regards to modern-living values, a significant one may be observed in the farming methods of the rural folks. Previously, farmers toiled under the sun on small, fragmented and unproductive land plots. Today, farmers are willing to engage in collective farming by signing in their small individual land plots to government development agencies in return for a share in the ownership of the farm and the reaped harvest. Collective farming ensures the farmers less risk in comparison to their previous individual farming, and thus they become more innovative farmers. Bigger land plots also made it possible for better farm management through mechanization and marketing procedures.

Besides achieving its original objective, constant hammering of government subsidies over the airwaves also brought about a negative effect among the rural populace. It created a 'subsidy syndrome' among the Malays. Instead of parting with the image of being lazy, unproductive, apathetic and fatalistic, and stepping into the state of being progressive and dynamic individuals, a new image of the Malays as being too dependent on the government was created.

On a positive note, many rural Malays have responded well to the government initiatives as communicated through the media. The not-so-lucky school leavers are more willing to try their hands on petty tradings at roadsides and markets instead of harbouring hope in the security of a low-paying government job. To accommodate the growing interest among the Malays to venture into petty trading, *pasar malam* (night markets) and *pasar tani* (farmers' markets) were organized by local communities in collaboration with local authorities. These markets are now permanent features in many parts of Malaysia. They have also become a symbol of the new era of Malay entrepreneurship.

The use of communication technologies also left mark in the education sector of the country. The media constantly remind young Malays the need to pursue tertiary education in nontraditional areas such as medicine, law, accounting, engineering, architecture and business studies. This has resulted in greater numbers of rural Malay students furthering their education in these subject matters. Educational competitiveness has become the order of the day among rural youngsters. Opportunities to pursue such nontraditional courses either locally and overseas were made available and grabbed by the young Malays.

The success of these students has created opportunities for social mo-

bility among the new generation of Malays and thus created a new Malay middle class. Prior to 1970, the so-called Malay middle class was mostly those who had deep roots in urban areas. The number of this group of middle-class was relatively small. Today, sons and daughters of farmers, fishermen, and rubber tappers have made good and become a new breed of Malay entrepreneurs and professionals. As a result, the Malay middle-class has grown larger and its sub-groups more varied.

In mid-1980's, government broadcasting stations once again played a very significant role in creating awareness and motivating the Malays and other indigenous people to save their newly-earned income in the *Amanah Saham Nasional* (ASN) or the National Trust Fund. The ASN was set up by the government to inculcate savings behaviour among the indigenous people as well as to acquire equity for them in commercial and trading ventures. The campaign theme of *sikit-sikit lama-lama jadi bukit* (from a little to gradually become a hill) became an instant hit. The ASN, however, had a slow start due to rumours that some portfolios the ASN was investing in sell products considered *haram* to Muslims. The rumours were gradually wiped out by the communication media and investments of the rural populace picked up.

The ASN is very significant in the creation of a new cultural identity among rural Malays. The Malays of today have come to understand what it means to save and invest their money in sectors beyond their immediate control. In the past, the Malays did not have enough and hence could not defer their gratification for their future. As the Malay proverb goes, *kais pagi, makan pagi, kais petang, makan petang* (literally translated as "dig in the morning, eat in the morning, dig in the evening, eat in the evening"). Recognising the need to eradicate the belief in such a from the culture of the Malays, a media blitz was planned whereby advertisements, commercials, jingles, public announcements and documentaries countered *kais pagi, makan pagi, kais petang, makan petang* with *sikit-sikit, lama-lama jadi bukit*. The campaign worked tremendously.

To facilitate investment, the ASN recently installed on-line computer services with its agents such as commercial banks and post offices. With 1,300 computerized agents and many more agents in rural areas, the ASN successfully collected RM 12.7 billion amount of investments from the Malays and other indigenous people who some 20 years ago were considered poor, helpless, indolent and fatalistic.

According to the latest figure (July 1993), 40.03 percent of fishermen deemed qualified to invest with the ASN did so resulting with a total investment of RM55,494,516. Among farmers, 43.50 percent of those qualified invested accounting for RM769,369,909 in the ASN. At the same time, 69.99 percent of land scheme settlers deemed qualified invested an amount of RM 113,822,944 in the ASN.

With the success of communication media roles in mobilizing the rural

population to adopt government development policies, their educational mobility gradually increased and in the process, increase in social mobility ensued. Alongside all these, a new form of family became apparent and is now an accepted norm among the Malays. It is not uncommon now that there are not too many youngsters left in the villages to take over farming from the elderly farmers. They are either attending schools in towns, like Abu Kassim and Che' Su, or working in the cities, or involving in petty trading and other commercial activities in towns.

Besides improved highways which allow physical mobility, 'electronic highways' were also developed facilitating communication between persons who are physically distant. For example, telephone facilities have made the traditional family bond even stronger. It is a common scene in urban houses for children to call their grandparents in the village just to engage in social conversation as though they were together in the same living room. The highly-guarded sentimental value of the extended family is assured and perhaps enhanced. As such, communication technologies, like the telephone, have helped counter a negative effect of rural-urban migration and the break-up of the extended family system. Rural telephone growth rate for 1993 is 12.9 percent compared to 11.1 percent in 1987. The projected growth in 1996 is expected to be around 13.1 percent. The national growth rate for 1993 is 18.3 percent and as for 1996 will be 18.6 percent (Telekom Malaysia, 1993). Abu Kassim and Che' Su are representative examples of the fortunate beneficiaries enjoying this growth.

Conclusion

The twenty year experience in social engineering via the New Economic Policy has in many ways resulted in creating the "new Malay" in contemporary Malaysia. This "new Malay" is not that indolent, lazy, unproductive and complacent rural person, rather the "new Malay" is now the entrepreneur, highly-educated, optimistic and futuristic person who knows his/her worth.

We are not suggesting that such a change was brought about solely by communication technologies. However, communication technologies were there, right on the frontline, urging and spurring the indigenous folks to move forward. It was not an easy task because what needed to be removed or changed was a whole cultural system of beliefs, values, lifestyles, and habits.

And so the stage has been set. Malaysians know that they still have a long way to go to achieve the dream of development. We are much more confident that the dream will be realised since the impetus for change is all ready. The climate for development consisting of basic infrastructures, communication linkages and cultural identities has been established.

The interplay of political will, commitment and belief from the lead-

ership is a pivotal role that led to the success of the social engineering process. Had it not been for the foresight, vision and will of Malaysian political leaders, development planners and implementors, and the skills of communication managers and frontliners, the magic would not have happened.

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