

# Cultural Clash between the Malays and Chinese in Malaysia: An Analysis on the Formation and Implementation of National Cultural Policy

Wan Norhasniah Wan Husin<sup>+</sup>

Department of Nationhood and Civilization, National Defense University of Malaysia

**Abstract.** This article discusses on the cultural clash between the Malays and Chinese in Malaysia, whereby the source of the conflict can be traced a century ago and is still continuing. When there is a provocation on the core cultural values of any ethnic, the conflict will ensue and to some extent will affect the progress of nation-building activities. Among the core cultural values for the Malay culture are the Malay language and Islam and as for the Chinese, the values include the Chinese language and Chinese education. In order to build a united nation, the government has introduced national culture policy. However, this policy has been fiercely debated because it has adopted several aspects of Malay cultural values since the Malays are the original inhabitants of the land, and they constitute the majority of the population. The Chinese were the recent immigrants accepted as citizens only after the independence. Yet, the Chinese have not stopped the struggle to preserve their cultural values. This article is based on textual analysis that tries to prove that the ultimate root cause of the ethnic conflict in Malaysia is due to differences in cultural values.

**Keywords:** Cultural conflict, Malay, Chinese, National Culture Policy, Malaysia

## 1. Introduction

The debate on clash of civilization was put at the central stage by Huntington [1] in his famous work, *The clash of civilization and the remaking of world order*. Future conflicts are predicted not only due to differences in ideologies or economic factors but also to be rooted on differences in cultural values. With the emerging of global villages that encourage more interactions among people of different ethnics, some argued that mixing people is a recipe for trouble. Although this view was heavily criticised by scholars like Schafer, [2], seeing ethnic conflicts happening around the globe today like in Pakistan, Southern Sudan, Southern Thailand, Middle East, Central Asian Republics, it is almost fulfilling albeit with different intensities. To a smaller degree, similar conflicts are also taking place in Western Europe due to demographic changes in certain countries especially on arrivals of immigrants from northern Africa. The migration of Muslims from Algeria and Maghreb to France, for an instance, has created tensions with regard to the practice of Islamic values such as the wearing of veil among Muslim woman in a Catholic majority society. The sound of calling for prayer (*azan*) and the segregation between male and female for certain activities have been subjected to scrutiny as such practices are incongruent with the French culture [3]. In South East Asia, ethnic conflicts are still brewing in Southern Philippines and Southern Thailand [1517]. In Malaysia although the armed conflict between the Communist party of Malaya led by the Chinese and the government forces which were dominated by the Malays ended for almost two decades ago, the cultural values of each communities are still considered as sensitive matters and any effort that disturbs and provokes any of these values will create an uproar.

Malaysia is an example of a highly pluralistic society, populated by more than 80 ethnic groups. However, there are three major ethnics; the Malays constitute more than 60% of the population followed by the Chinese with approximately 25%, however are economically powerful, and 7% of the Indian. Both the

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<sup>+</sup> Corresponding author. Tel.: + 603-90514449; fax: +603-90514458.  
E-mail address: wanhasniah@yahoo.com/hasniah@upnm.edu.my.

Chinese and Indian are the descendants of immigrants who came to Malaya during the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century to fill up the labour gap required to spur colonial economic activities.

The interactions between the Malays and the Chinese can be traced as early as the third century. They shaped harmonious relationships especially in trade and there were no issues on economic domination or freedom to practise one's cultural values. However, with the recent immigrants operated under the British policy of divide and rule, each community was physically segregated and there were almost no interactions between these two communities and this was done under the pretext to avoid any possible conflicts. There was a period when the immigrants overwhelmed the locals in numbers, however, the Malays were assured by the British of their rightful ownership of the land and accorded them with special privileges and the immigrants were given freedom to venture in economic activities. Over time once they felt localized, the Chinese started to express their dissatisfaction towards the special privileges granted to the Malays. Their discontent worsened after the Japanese rule because during the occupation the Japanese favoured the Malays and discriminated the Chinese. The latter was discriminated due to the support given to their motherland during Japan-Sino war in 1883. After that, the cleavages between the Malays and Chinese were growing and reaching its peak with the eruption of ethnic riot in 1969.

Under those prevailing circumstances one of the initiatives made by the government to strengthen the unity was, through the introduction of national culture policy. The policy aims for all communities to embrace these national cultural values which function as the binding forces for this culturally diverse community. However, the primary source of the policy was severely debated when most of it were derived from the Malay culture. This notion was spontaneously rejected by the Chinese with the conviction that their cultural values were more superior. Therefore this paper will analyse and discuss further on the clash of cultural values during the formation as well as the implementation of the national culture policy.

## **2. Civilization and Ethnic Relations**

### **2.1. The scope of civilization and culture**

Civilization and culture are intimately related since both depend on human actions on its development. High achievement attained by a civilization will reflect the quality of a culture of the people who developed it [4]. Through the process of interactions of communities from different civilizations via travelling, trade and other activities, the core elements of civilizations such as religion, custom, language, economy, politics, arts and literatures were mutually infused. The process is undoubtedly strengthen new emerging civilizations by learning from the current and past civilizations. On contrary, one major question still remains. Did these produce positive encounters or acrimonious bump specifically when elements of other civilization were unfairly treated?

In relation to a nation, the core values held by the people will reflect the identity of the nation. When civilization is viewed from this perspective, it is something that is expanding and changing since people have to keep adapting to the ever changing circumstances in order to continue their survival, like the threat of global warming and the emerging of green technologies. In this sense, civilization could be viewed as the highest achievement of a culture. Culture in short could be defined as an organization which covers all aspects of life that may include actions, thought, believe, knowledge, language, arts which evolve around attitude and values of a society. Indirectly it means, wherever there is a community, there bound to be a culture either in a primitive or modern forms. Since culture and civilization share many similar values, some researchers argue that both are similar but of different degrees [5].

Although some communities may share the same civilizational values even one comes from different cultures and grow under different environments, the practice of the values may vary. As a result although they may profess the same faith but some forms of implementation may differ. The practices of Islam among the Malays in certain forms are different from the Arabs and the same can be seen to the culture of northern Italian which is different from Southern Italian although both share the Italian culture [1]. Therefore an individual who comes from a different surrounding will practice a different lifestyle. Because of environmental factors there are people who are more tolerant or aggressive in their attitudes [6]. Since a culture represents the image of a society and hence the identity of a nation, the practice of the core values

such as language or religion of a community will portray the image of a nation. In a homogenous nation, the core values are shared by all segments of the society therefore any display of certain core values either in private or in public will be a non event. However in a culturally heterogeneous community, the competing attitudes towards displaying of one core values may lead to conflicts.

Distinctiveness theory in social psychology states that people define themselves by what makes them different from others. It means that there is a strong propensity for an individual to establish close relationship or associate himself to his fellow ethnics during the process of identify formation. Such close association is due to the sharing of many core values and for survival purposes. So strong the attachment sometimes one dares to sacrifice himself for the continuity of his cultural identity or preservation of the community core values. This perplexing issue is pervading in most of pluralistic societies and the gyration between different communities continues. In order to create a stable society that is fundamental for an economic prosperity, the government needs to streamline the education as well as value systems under the so-called 'national' to unite the nation.

The noble objective of the formation of national culture is to build a united society. However to obtain voluntarily nods from all the communities is almost impossible and in certain circumstances some forms of forced agreement is applied. Although while fighting for country independence, some form of unity among the ethnics may be evident in order to present a united force against the colonizers, once independence was achieved, the cracks started to appear [7]. Therefore, differences in the cultural values are the prime reason of the conflict in a pluralistic society.

### **3. National Cultural Policy**

After gaining the independence in 1957, the demographic landscape of Malaya changed from an ethnically homogenous society who shares the same cultural values to an ethnically heterogeneous one due to the acceptance of the Chinese and Indians as citizens of a new nation. Not only they differ physically from the locals, they are practicing different sets of civilizational values which eventually will be competing for space with the Malays. After the eruption of several ethnic conflicts the government introduced a national culture policy in 1970s by defining a set of values that have to be embraced by all communities. The introduction of this policy is crucial in a nation-building process and projecting the identity of the country. The Malay community is known for their tolerance, accommodative and cooperative attitudes with the aim to maintain peace and harmony in the country. The Chinese is known for their hardworking nature and their tendency to only mingle within their fellow ethnic, and as a result hardly any full hearted cooperation is established with the non Chinese. When the government formulated the national culture policy, there were no positive responses from the non Malay communities [8], although the issues of making the Malay cultural values as the framework for the national culture policy had been long highlighted by the Prime Minister in the Parliament.

In general the policy can be divided into three main criteria. Firstly, the policy is anchored on the culture of the Malay. Secondly, Islam is the major element of the policy and lastly any other values which are considered to be suitable can be accepted [8]. With the above criteria the Malays feel that their position as the original inhabitants of the land is secure in the sense of the continuity of the values that they have been practicing even before the arrival of the immigrants. One of the obvious outcomes of this policy was the implementation of national language whereby Malay language is recognized as the sole official language and Islam is the sole official religion of the country [8]. Predictably the implementation of the above policy was out rightly rejected by the Chinese community and one of the arguments put forward was there is no mandate stated in any Act or in the federal constitution. Since it only recognized the elements of Malay culture and Islam and it was conceived that over time it will erode the cultural values of other communities which undoubtedly mean assimilation [10]. Besides, the Chinese constantly and intuitively believe their cultural values inherited since 5000 years ago are more superior are adamant to preserve it. Besides their identity is very much based on their cultural values and practices. Since the policy is inclined towards Malay-Centrism [9] all the Chinese political parties either in the government like Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), *Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia* (Gerakan) or in opposition like Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Chinese based Non-Government Organization (NGO) united in opposing the policy. MCA and Gerakan strongly

rejected the use of elements of Malay culture in the national cultural policy and advocated the concepts of multiculturalism and inter-culturalism. As for Chinese NGOs like *Dongjiazong* that was responsible in protecting the interests of Chinese vernacular schools, the organization not only advocated multiculturalism but also specifically requested for multilingualism [9].

For the Malays, they justified the usage of Malay culture based on the fact that their culture has been practiced in this part of the world since 2500 years ago. According to Zainal Kling [10], the firm stand opted by the Malay leaders on the above issues was natural and founded. There is no credible arguments that can be put forward by the non Malays to deny that the Malay cultural values have been practiced on this land thousands years ago, and any effort to rework these historical facts can be considered as insolence.

Although there are differences within the Malay culture itself due to differences in geographic locations however, common values such as tolerance and respect are shared. Normally if one moves to a new location he can easily assimilate himself in the new environment. The migration of a group of Malays from Riau province of Sumatra to the west coast of Malaya was easily assimilated to the local values and norms even though for a certain part they are practicing a distinct custom known as matriarch (*Pepateh*) custom which is alien to the rest of the communities. However, with regard to the immigrants either Chinese or Indians their cultures are rooted in China or India respectively. Any effort to grow or expand it here is considered as an infringement, therefore viewed as unacceptable. The ability of the non Malay cultures to take root in this country was due to the British policy of 'divide and rule' in which each community was segregated to their respective community. As a result, each community had the freedom to manage their communities like setting up their own vernacular school and to some extent, they even used syllabus from their motherland. The system was further reinforced and safeguarded through the formation of secret societies mirroring what was happening in the motherland. Although the Malay leaders were firm in protecting the elements of Malay culture in the national cultural policy, when it comes to implementation, records of the last fifty (50) years of independent show that it was full of conciliatory attitudes as noted by the former Deputy Prime Minister, Musa Hitam. "...in our country a Malay remains as a Malay, a Chinese remains as a Chinese, an Indian remains as an Indian and every group has its own prejudices and sensitive aspects in which if extremely exploited will unleash its destructive effects" [11].

The tolerant attitude of the Malay leaders was seen to be less appreciated by the Chinese community that continued harboring prejudices that the national cultural policy was meant to erode their identity thus continuing in opposing it. To preserve and strengthen the Chinese cultural values, the Chinese associations called for a congress on Chinese culture and it was held in Pinang Island in 1983 with the aim to create solidarity for the revival of Chinese cultural values. As a result National Cultural Movement was formed in 1990s to fight the Malay cultural domination and 700 representatives from various organizations consensually agreed to reject the principle of the national cultural policy and proposed to the government the principle should be based on equality and should also include elements from other ethnic cultural values. To reinvigorate the Chinese culture, Working committee of *Huatuan* (Chinese associations and societies) throughout the country has conducted an annual event known as Malaysian Chinese cultural festival starting in 1984 to revive various cultural presentations and daily practices such as Chinese orchestra, traditional dancing, calligraphy, drum 24, moon cake festival, *Phor Tor* (ghost festival) and many others and all are celebrated in a big way [13]. Although the Chinese associations demanded equality and inclusion of pluralistic nature of Malaysian societies in the national policy, so intense the situation when the then Home Affair Minister, Ghazalie Shafie proposed the lion dance to be converted to tiger dance by incorporating the Malay musical instruments such as *gong*, *nafiri* and *gamelan* so as to reflect the Malaysian attributes it was strongly opposed by the Chinese associations and viewed it as an effort to erode the Chinese culture which is deeply rooted from China. However the rejection was not viewed as racial in nature if compared to the effort to preserve the Malay cultural values and several Chinese leaders articulated that because of the national cultural policy which is gravitated to the Malay culture that cause the ethnic Chinese to spur the spirit of 'Chineseness'. Besides the policy was accused to be part of the obstacles to the implementation of full democracy which in another word it means that had the Malays did not push the policy of national culture, the Chinese would not have reawaken their cultural values [14] As part of the actions *Dongjiazong*, an NGO responsible for the promotion of Chinese language, advocated for the establishment of vernacular school to

counter the government push for the establishment of national school in which the medium of instructions were initially set for the Malay and English languages only with the plan in future only the Malay language will be used as medium of instruction and all these were viewed as another form of assimilation. Even before independent when British commissioned an expert from Oxford University to study the type of education system for Malaya in 1950, Barnes report suggested the abolishment of vernacular education and be replaced with a national education system using Malay and English languages as medium of instructions. As a response to that, the Chinese NGOs, *Dongzong* (1951) and *Jiazhong* (1954) sent a memorandum to the British government and to the President of United Nation urging the authorities to look into the policy of the Federated Malay States on language and education which was accused to lean in towards discrimination [9].

Against the backdrop of rejection among the Chinese community, the government continued the implementation of the national cultural policy like the crowning of Islam as the sole official religion because it has been the religion of the Malays since 700 years ago. The nexus between the Malays and Islam is so strong at some point it has been connoted ...“embracing Islam means embracing Malay..” [13]. By officiating Islam to be one of the foundation legs of the national cultural policy, to the Chinese it will ultimately mean assimilating to the Malay way of life and according to them this undoubtedly will throttle the space for other communities to practice their cultural and religious activities. It was quoted that an Indian woman was not allowed to wear sari, an Indian cultural dress, at certain places and bell rings were not allowed during *the azan*; calling for prayer. In general the Malays reject all those claims because the government never force any community to embrace Islam or practice Islamic way of life, in facts currently all communities can freely practice their cultural values and activities such Dragon dance, celebrating Chinese New Year, and the construction of South East Asia’s biggest idol by Hindu followers in Gombak Selangor has permitted.

As an overall, the conflict in the implementation of the national cultural policy in Malaysia is still brewing due to differences in civilizational values. Although the government has opened up avenues for all communities to practice their cultural activities and officially recognizes it such as Chinese vernacular primary school, public holiday during Chinese New Year and yet it was seen to be less appreciated by the community and voices that they are unfairly treated still can be heard. This partly to be attributed to the tolerant attitudes of the Malay leaders with the aim to preserve unity and according to the former Primer, Dr Mahathir, the less appreciative attitude among the Chinese only happens in Malaysia, in others countries like Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam the issue of rejecting national culture was never raised. Even Muslim in the South of Thailand, although they are the original inhabitant of the land and the territory was acquired through invasion, they were forced to learn everything in Thai language and their mother tongue now has almost disappeared. The Thai government has assimilated the Chinese culture into Thai language, culture and religion through mixed marriage. Besides, restrictions were imposed to Chinese on jobs, business and government posts and more are allocated to local Thais or Thai-Chinese community. Due to stern actions, Chinese associations are afraid to forward demands like establishment of Chinese educations, language or culture. The same is happening in Vietnam, although Chinese used to rule the country for a long period, any effort to spur Chinese culture is prohibited and those found to be speaking Chinese language will be discriminated [14].

#### **4. Conclusion**

Due to differences in culture values, conflicts between the Malays and Chinese are difficult to be reconciled since both communities try to advance their respective values which directly or indirectly reflect their identity. Based on this study, the introduction of national cultural policy with the aim of forging people coming from ethnic communities has been facing a lot of obstacles. Since both sides are adamant to preserve their cultural values, hence this conflict is continuing until today.

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