

# Malaysian Culture: Views of Educated Youths about Our Way Forward

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**Abstract.** A study was conducted amongst Malaysian university students who study locally and abroad to understand their views about the important elements of an emerging Malaysian culture. Ethnic cultures, national culture and global culture play different but unique roles in the formation of the Malaysian national identity. It is of academic interests to examine how the young generations of Malaysians are reconciling with the competing yet accommodating elements of the different ethnic cultures in the country. This paper is written with two main objectives: 1) to find out the students' perspectives of the top elements that should make up a Malaysian culture and 2) to examine their view on 'global culture' and its roles in enriching the Malaysian culture as our national culture. The authors suggest that young Malaysians are optimistic about the emerging Malaysian culture and are adapting well to the cultural elements of other ethnic groups despite some differences in opinions about what constituted the Malaysian culture.

**Keywords:** Ethnic culture, Malaysian Culture, National culture, Global culture, The Malaysian national identity.

## 1 Introduction

The National Culture Policy has always been associated with the goal of nation-building. Awareness already exists amongst young Malaysians with tertiary education that nation-building sometimes entails sacrifices, and fears of the unknown. This is especially true when culture is closely tied to a person's identity, life chances and ultimately worldview. According to different demographic profile of our respondents, there are divergences in views among those surveyed on the foundation of a Malaysian culture is. This study discovered a list of cultural norms that students find to be the most important in making up an emerging Malaysian Culture. The cultural norms outlined are very universal and are also very 'Asian' in nature.

## 2 The Diverse Definitions of Culture

The word "culture" has diverse definitions, ranging from a way of life to historical inheritance to knowledge and values transmission, and to many other descriptions. It is complex, and the very word can cause ethnocentrism, war, and anomie in those who believed in it too deeply. In Malaysia, the formulation of the National Culture Policy after the May 13<sup>th</sup>, 1969 racial riots has sparked interest amongst scholars about the possibility of identifying a culture which is truly "Malaysian" in nature.

## 3 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 questionnaire attempts to plot the respondents' level of understanding on the essential elements of a National

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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 pro and cons 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 attempts to investigate the perception of respondents towards 'Global Culture' in relations to the emerging Malaysian culture.

## **4 Findings**

### **4.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents**

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 (78%), stay in urban (48%) and sub-urban areas (33%), undergraduates (67%), in their 2nd (33%) and 3rd (28%) year of study. A total of 39 respondents or 65% are pursuing Arts and Social Sciences programmes.

### **4.2 The Understanding and Perceptions of Malaysian Culture as a National Culture**

The findings revealed that almost half of those surveyed (43%) is aware of the existence of Malaysia's National Culture Policy. When asked to comment on the policy, many respondents believe that a national culture should be based on either multiculturalism or amalgamation. In line with the worldwide image of Malaysia as a multicultural nation-state, a respondent said that a mix of Malay, Chinese, Indian and other indigenous cultures is great and it reflects the "Asian-ness" of Malaysia. This concept of a 'melting pot' or amalgamation is looked upon favourably by the student-respondents. To the authors, this does show a common tendency in the way Chinese Malaysians think of a national culture.

Emotional responses were received when the issues of fairness and equality towards every culture was brought up. Some respondents believed that the same status should be given to other cultures in the country because of the equal contribution of all races towards the country's independence in 1957.

For many respondents, although the concept of a Malaysian culture is not obvious, they understand it as comprising language (most voted), followed by food, norms and customs, values and beliefs, arts, symbols, fashion, and lastly artefacts. This sense of identification with the Malaysian or Malay Language and food is even stronger among overseas students. Overseas respondents admitted that they are so used to the 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 the 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.

For the respondents (33%) who agreed that the concept of a Malaysian culture is obvious, they described Malaysian culture as a mixture of different cultures. Respondents used the term "rojak" (a typical Malaysian dessert) or "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 an emerging Malaysian culture which is assimilative in nature.

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. A respondent commented that as long as our people are divided along racial lines, there would only be Malay culture, Chinese culture, and Indian culture. Therefore, an assimilated Malaysian culture is far from reachable.

Nonetheless, the question of having a national culture is closely related to the question of the Malaysian nation-state. A Malaysian culture is not clear since the concept of a Malaysian race is not evident.

A student, who stated her race as 'Malaysian', said that, "the world looks upon us as Malaysians but we look upon ourselves as Malays, Chinese and Indians." The student also commented on her difficulty in finding Malaysian restaurants locally, as compared to overseas. In Malaysia, there are only Chinese, Malay, Indian, or even Italian restaurants, but not Malaysian restaurants. If the concept of a Malaysian culture is obvious, respondents would not have had to ponder over the question. If it is obvious, the respondents would

have come up with a spontaneous answer too. Moreover, research by Hng Hung Yong (2004) showed that the Malaysian identity was and still is unclear because minority groups demand for a fair share in the country's cultural policy. Hng (2004) also commented that the main issue that makes the evolution of a national identity difficult in Malaysia is that the majority of the population (Malays) and the sizeable minorities (Chinese, Indians and other indigenous groups) compete to maintain their separate identities and demand that their cultures be given recognition in the nation's cultural policy (p. 5).

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%) had expressed unhappiness with this emerging Malaysian culture for fear that "...all ethnic groups will begin to lose their own cultural identities." They see this phenomenon as a threat to the continued well-being and existence of their own ethnic culture.

The online survey further explored the presence of possible unifying cultural elements that could bring all the country's major ethnic groups together and describe themselves as practising a Malaysian culture. The top five unifying elements that the respondents chose are (1) belief in freedom and independence (35%), (2) tolerance and patience (38%), (3) belief in family unity (35%), (4) bilingualism and trilingualism (30%), and finally, (5) belief in the importance of good health (27%). However, when asked about the cultural elements of other ethnic groups which the respondents like the most, they 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 widely acceptable to the respondents, four norms were regarded as highly acceptable. They are (1) greeting the elderly, (2) taking off shoes when entering a host's or friend's house, (3) washing hands before meals, and after using the toilet and (4) 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* (40%), followed by politicians (25%) and then elites (15%). However, they (52%) do not think that the BN government's national policies and visions like the National Education Policy, the National Language Policy, Vision 2020, and the concept of 1Malaysia 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.

### **4.3 Perceptions on Global Culture in Relations to Malaysian Culture**

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% of them have heard about it. 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, with some instances of localization [of attire 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."

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 of the Malaysian nation-state.

However, those respondents who support 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 "...can help me survive better since this global culture is accepted almost everywhere." The global culture is also perceived as being able to help Malaysia progress faster socially such as in eliminating racism and institutionalised discrimination in the country.

There is another group of respondents who prefer to practise their own ethnic culture. For example, they believe that their own ethnic culture gives them a sense of familiarity and thus, security, as opposed to the "new" Malaysian culture. One respondent even reminded us that we cannot force a culture upon ourselves or others and so, the emerging Malaysian culture must be allowed to develop naturally.

Finally, some respondents said they did not care about the topic at all. For example, one of them said that s/he has many other things to think about, and all those are more important than the topic on "the emergence of a Malaysian culture."

## 5 Discussion

The authors have managed to elicit responses, some emotional, from our educated youths who would one day become leaders of the country. Certainly, there is a divergence in views about how Malaysia should proceed in terms of culture. The respondents, mostly Chinese Malaysians, favour the concept of amalgamation or the 'melting pot'. This is probably in direct contrast to the idea of the BN government which first formulated the National Culture Policy in 1971. The policy clearly stated that the foundation of a Malaysian culture or a national culture should be 'Malay'. In short, it seems to show that the BN government actually favours an assimilationist policy. However, this has not been properly articulated, perhaps due to its sensitive agenda. What remains in the country today has been "a contest of opposing cultures" (Mohd Nasir Hashim and Jomo, 1990; Hng, 2004).

About the top five elements that should make up a Malaysian culture, the respondents stated "belief in freedom and independence" as the top value as opposed to our existing *Rukun Negara* or Principles of Nationhood as promoted by the BN government. This could be due to the influence of the West and its media. Moreover, many Chinese Malaysians feel oppressed by the race-based policies of the country. Institutionalised discrimination could be one reason why the respondents cited "belief in freedom and independence" as the topmost cherished cultural element in a Malaysian culture. The other top four elements cited are very understandable in view of our diverse ethnic groups living together in harmony. Moreover, obesity is also already a major health hazard in the country.

There seems to be a misconception among these university students that adopting a national culture that is Malay-based would mean the curtailing of the right of other races to maintain their own cultures. This is wrong. Nevertheless, the respondents are correct to judge that the adoption of "a unified culture would mean erasing the uniqueness of Malaysia as a multicultural society."

There is also an opinion that it doesn't matter which culture is used as the foundation of a national or Malaysian culture; rather, the more important issue at hand is, how to make Malaysia a better place to live in. In our judgement, these are the very issues which would determine if Malaysia would be "a better place to live in." On the other hand, Mohd Nasir Hashim and Jomo (1990) argued that the different cultural elements in the country are contradictory in nature. Therefore, a national culture that recognises Malay culture and Islam as core elements while accepting the elements of other cultures will be problematic as this fails to recognise the competing tendencies in each culture (p.111-112).

Finally, attention should also be given to elements that are promoted by the government through *Rukun Negara* (Principles of Nationhood), especially the first principle – belief in God (rephrased in the survey as 'trust in God or in a Higher Power'). Unfortunately, only 23% of the respondents selected this as the foremost characteristic of what a Malaysian culture should be. Other respondents selected "national unity and harmony" (23%), and 13% chose "patriotism or nationalism" as the 'top most' important element in a Malaysian culture. Other elements that were suggested by respondents to be included in the emerging Malaysian culture are 'respect', 'language', 'moral', and 'understanding'.

## 6 Conclusion

The authors would like to highlight several observations that could allow more of such surveys to be carried out in the future. The majority of the young respondents have awareness about the place which they call 'home'. The issue of 'culture' is complex and affects everyone as it is synonymously linked to one's identity, life chances and ultimately one's worldview, especially in Malaysia. This study is just scratching the tip of the iceberg, so to speak, because when we talk about culture, we imply government policies as well as individual choices in everyday life. Finally, as one respondent said: "Malaysia needs more positive people who believe in the emergence of a Malaysian culture."

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