

Tradition and Transition of Malaysian Society across Time

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Abstract

Tradition is a ritual, belief or subject passed down within a society. They illustrate the identity of a society, and it is still maintained until today. Polemic appears generally when tradition is urged within time frame, where it eliminates the flow of tradition from older generation to present generation. Tradition is an asset of society which is related with ancient history therefore invented on purpose. Transition in tradition that took place in Malaysian context begins when British Colonial brings in migrants from India and China to work in Malay Federation which eventually formed a multiracial society in Malaysia. Malaysian society has undergone many phases of situation either political or policy change within the state that lead to culture accommodation among different ethnics. Acculturation also took place whereby the difference or uniqueness of a culture is combined with another cultures from different ethnic. The time frame had been the most prominent factor for the overall changes in the world.

Keywords: tradition, transition, accommodation, acculturation, time, culture

1. Introduction

The competing European powers, painfully aware of the need for an open trade route to India and the Far East, sought to establish their own trading ports at the source. In 1511, Portuguese colonized Malacca and its golden age had come to an end. The Portuguese constructed a massive fort in Malacca A' Famosa and which later captured by Dutch about 16th century. This would give the Dutch an almost exclusive lock on the spice trade until 1785, then the British East India Company colonized Malay Nation about 200 years. British enable to capture Malay Nation through internal factors such as Malay Kingdom Conflicts, Pirate attacks and others meanwhile the external factors will be the Industrial Revolution, Fights among the colonial countries and so on. Today's Malaysia successfully transformed as a multiracial nation and beautiful paradise which also been home for hundreds of colourful festivals, foods, beliefs and others. It's undeniable that Malaysian love celebrating and socializing. Geographically, Malaysia is almost as diverse as its culture. Malaysia is considerably a small country consist of eleven states and two federal territories (Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya) in Peninsular Malaysia which are separated by the South China Sea from East Malaysia which includes two states (Sabah and Sarawak on the island of Borneo) and a third federal territory, Labuan.

2. Terminology

According to The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition, Tradition defined as a belief or story relating the past that are commonly inherited and established through verbal transmission from one generation to another generation. Tradition is an important identity that describes a society briefly. Culture, Symbol, Language, Values,

Norms, Gestures are main component of a tradition that strictly uphold by each society and accept it as a path of life. Cultures are the ideas, customs, and social behavior of a particular people or society and different society have different cultures as stated in Oxford Online Dictionary. Culture also defined as the beliefs, values, behavior, material objects shared by a particular people. But, culture involves more than simply adding up all the ways people act and think, and assessing the sum of their possessions, (Soyinka 1991). Symbols are acts or objects that have come to be socially accepted as standing for something else. They come to represent other things through the shared understandings people have. Symbols can be in the form of tangible items or intangible items. Language is the verbal code that has been introduced long times ago and has been an important factor of society continuity. The language has been important tools to translate, interpret and analyze the verbal communication among humans. The early languages that exist in the world would be Sanskrit, Arabic and others. Values are an important aspect in all the society. Values reflect the characteristics of the society in general and also representing a society's identity to others in the aspect of behaviour. Norms can be defined as informal guidelines on what are correct and wrong attitudes in a particular social group. Norms is collective expectations and play a key part in social control by exerting a pressure on the individual to conform. A gesture is a movement of body to express an ideas or attitudes. It is also something said or done by way of formality or symbolic action which can be interpreted by others in a communication process. Some anthropologists claim that no gesture is universal. They point out that even nodding the head up and down to indicate 'Yes' is not universal, because some parts of the world, such as areas of turkey, nodding the head up and down mean 'No' (Ekman et. Al 1984) [4]

3. Literature Review

'Transition in Malaysian Society and Politics: Toward Centralizing Power' article written by Michael Leigh and Belinda Lip emphasize on physical transition that occurs in Malaysia. This article elaborates further on transition in identity where Malaysia as a single ethnicity nation become multiracial nation and the purpose of New Economy Plan (NEP) introduced to stabilize the equality between ethnics. The writer also talks about transition in education and language where education plans, school system and national language act. Other than that, Transition in economy from agriculture sector to service sector was mentioned in findings. Finally, this article focused on the transition in politics, government and leadership that took place in Malaysia. The book 'Ethics and Social Stratification in Peninsular Malaysia' by Charles Hirschman, Department of Sociology, Duke University also studied about society and transitions in few chapters. The authors used descriptive argument with supportive statistical evidence presenting the ethnics composition. This book also touched a bit on intermarriage, assimilation, diffusion process apart from the main discussion which is occupation structure in Malaysia. Zawawi Ibrahim in his article 'Globalization and National Identity: Managing Ethnicity and Cultural Pluralism in Malaysia' defined plural society has been formed in Malaysia due to colonial history. He also briefly discussed about challenges that has to be faced on globalization and retaining the originality of cultures. He also used a term 'Ethnicizing Capitalism' which refers to British government who bring in foreign labours to maximize the revenue from Malaysia and at last caused Malaysia to be a multiracial nation. Abdul Rahman Embong in his book 'The Culture and Practice of Pluralism in Postcolonial Malaysia' mainly discussed on Macro-Pluralism that been reality in Malaysia through colonial history. He also touched about new economic alignment, realignment in social and ethno-religious spheres, under privilege minority ethnics in Malaysia.

4. Methodology

The methodology applied in this research is direct observation, natural ethnography and conceptual framework. Direct observation is done for long-term by collecting the qualitative data to complete this paper and this purely supported through natural ethnography. Writers stay closed or immersed with the discussed society and this is how conceptual framework methodology used in this research.

5. Research Findings

5.1 Ecology Theory

This is an important theory to study the existence of a society and their history background on the transition impacts within the society. Ecology theory basically discussed that a simple society became complex society throughout time frame. The society transform from primitive society to modern industrial society. This transformation occur because the

needs of biological substances, economic maintenance, psychosocial functions and also interaction with the environment. This applied in Malay Land where people evolve from traditional society in Melaka Kingdom, Colonization period and transform to modern society after Malaysia achieves independency.

5.2 Conflict Theory

This theory was introduced by Karl Marx, Father of Philosophy. This theory states that a society tend to change due to the conflict exists within the society. These conflicts exist in the sense of functionalism in a social group. At early stage of society evolution there is no specific role and function for individual or a body to perform a specific task, this finally cause failure in society structure and systems. Karl Marx argue that specific functions need to be determined correspond towards the needs of a society so that the overall society's routine life goes smoothly. Conflict theory has develop the needs of specialization in human functions to enable the society structure perform well. This happen everywhere includes Malaysia, human capital function more specialized across time and this cause various industry specialist expand throughout the world include Malaysia. This aligns with conflict theory where a conflict of functionalism happens and these create a new function to ensure the society routine system goes smooth.

6. Factors that Cause Social Transition in Malaysia

6.1 Colonial History

British stayed as most prominent colonist because there are a lot of changes took place in Malay Land during their colonization era. Firstly, British import labour from India and China to work in tin mines and rubber plantation sectors. This is the initial cause of many social changes that took place in Malay Land later on. British generated high economic profit through highly intensive mining activities by using foreign cheap labours. At the end of colonization, British offered foreign labours to go back their own countries but some decided to just stay in Malay Land and this at last formed a multiracial society in Malaysia.

6.2 Multiracialism

History and geography have collaborated to make Malaysia truly known as multi-racial country. These also mean that there are many ethnics living together and share their norms, language, culture, tradition and others. Malaysia consists of various ethnic people roughly about 60 ethnics groups are living together. Malaysian population currently stands at around 26 million, Multiracial and multi religious describes the totality of Malaysian society. Besides the local Malays and the native groups, immigrants from China, India, Indonesia and other parts of the world have all contributed to the multiracial composition of its population. Its interesting cultural diversity can be largely attributed to the country's long and on-going interaction with the outside world and past colonial rule by the Portuguese, Dutch and the British. Consequently the evolution of the country into a cultural melting pot is evident in the unique blend of religions, socio-cultural activities and traditions, dressing, languages and food.

6.3 Diffusion

Diffusion of society occurs where tangible cultures will be immersed in other societies. In Malaysia, Diffusion occurs in various components of cultures and daily routines. This process is occurred through two methods naturally which is adaption and adoption. Adoption is defined as a process of adapt the entire culture or tradition of one society to another society due to the suitability, needs, preference and contacts within the societies. Geographical factor is important for a culture to be adopted whereby a much nearer society to another will easily adopt the culture because they will have almost the same culture with some small differences. On the other hand, Adaption is something related with adoption where as an initial stage society will adopt a suitable culture from external societies and adapt it as their tradition with some modification according to the society needs. Sociologist Talcott Parsons (1966) shared the view that as societies change, they became more complex. Parsons believe that growing complexity is functional because it is basically an adaption mechanism, a response to internal and external forces changes.

6.4 Modernity

Modernity is defined as modern lifestyle of nowadays society has an high impact on customs and tradition. This is because the mentality of people change across time, People might think some of their tradition is ridiculous or meaningless. Modernity also caused a lot of changes on originality of a tradition, where people tend to amend the tradition practices to suit their current preferences and lifestyle. Modernity also caused also of ritual and process in tradition been eliminated due to time consuming factors and easy access through better communication system. Modern society is built along the enhancement of technology from time to time which enables people to transform the practicability of a tradition as their own way. William Ogburn (1964) observed that technology moves quickly, generating new elements of material culture (Like test-tube babies) and outpacing nonmaterial (such as idea about parenthood). Ogburn called this inconsistency culture lag, disruption in a culture system resulting from the unequal rates at which different culture elements change. In Malaysia, Modernity begins from the era of fourth Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed who also known as 'Father of Modernity' in Malaysia. During his period, He brings up a lot of drastic changes to achieve a modern country status for Malaysia. Privatization, liberalization in service sectors, Intensive construction and development caused Malaysia achieve modernity status in short while. This has direct impact on people in the sense of education, social status, income appraisal, modern cultures and others. Today, Malaysia literacy rate is 92.5% and has been announced as second best country among ASEAN countries. Education caused people think in modern way and only apply the logic practices in their life which also include a sense making customs or tradition only.

6.5 Inequality

Inequality doesn't exist in modern Malaysia; this factor may exist in traditional society before independency era where they believe that only man is entitling for the economic and education development. Women only serve as domestic servant for household which mean only serve as a wife and mother in a house. This mentality has been changed from time to time where now more female students are educated and working in professional sectors. Now, 70% of university students are female and many high scale corporate head is filled by women. This totally eliminated the traditional believe on women needs and capabilities, at last eliminate the gender discrimination.

6.6 Immigration

Net Immigration in Malaysia is about 0.37 migrant(s)/1,000 population and this increases from time to time. Foreign labour is needed for industrial purpose and this has been started since the British Colonization eras. Nowadays, Immigration happens where foreign Labour such as from India, Indonesia, Burma, Philippines decided to stay at Malaysia after finish their contract term of employment. They prefer to stay in Malaysia because more safe and peace and this finally caused them applied for permanent resident status to stay in Malaysia for life long. Finally, these lead to a domination of foreign citizen in Malaysia especially from Asia countries. This lead to new cultures transmitted into Malaysia through food, costumes, cultures, routines of the migrants which later on will be adaption by Malaysian in the process of maintaining the unity of the nation.

6.7 Globalization

Globalization is an important concept to be reviewed where many traditions changed through the uniting world process and now we can call our world as 'Global Village'. Today, we can see that world is borderless and this enable peoples all around the world to share their norms and cultures. Malaysia well known as Heaven of Food and the tropical ecosystem make it a perfect tourism location. This caused the internal cultures to be immersed to the outside world and external cultures to be adapted indirectly within the local communities from time to time. This adaption process will be going on naturally as there is sharing processes happening mutually due to open-minded mentality of today's Malaysian. Durkheim's stated that societies evolve from mechanical society, characterized by sameness, to organic solidarity, characterized by diversity. Durkheim also believed that changes occur as a result of internal and external pressures, such as population growth or cross-cultural contacts. According to Durkheim, societies ideally achieve a state of equilibrium or balance, until some internal or external pressure prompts change. Malaysian Government liberalization on education systems has allowed a lot of foreign students to pursue their studies in Malaysia, this lead to an immersion of western or external cultures in the sense of attire, gestures, communication styles, language and others.

6.8 Marriage

Marriage is a form a social alignment and it is a formal constitution in a society. Marriage is a need in a society to continue their existence through biological process. Sharing of love and care also contributed marriage. In early history of Malaysia, the marriage is within the ethnic groups and there is many rules to be followed. But, nowadays mix-marriage is a common things in Malaysia where Malay married Indian become Indian-Muslim, Chinese married Malay become Chinese-Muslim, Chinese married Indian became Chindian. Besides that, there are marriages between Malaysian and foreigner took place either with immigrant labour or western people. These lead to drastic change in marriage and family constitution. Diversity of society became more complex from time to time.

7. Aspect of Transition

7.1 Diversity and Transition in Ethnicity

Today the Malays, make up Malaysia's largest ethnic group. This ethnic became a major ethnic which reach more than 50% of the entire population. In Malaysia, the term Malay refers to a person who practices Islam and Malay traditions and speaks the Malay language. Their conversion to Islam from Hinduism and Buddhism began when the Sultan of Melaka embraced it in the 14th Century. They are known for their good mannerisms.

The second largest ethnic group is the Malaysian Chinese which about 25% of the population. Mostly descendants of Chinese immigrants during the 19th century, they mainly brought to Malay Federation by British to work in Mining areas. Chinese ethnic consist of few sub-ethnics such as Hokkien, Teochew, Hakka and others. Mandarin is widely spoken among the communities and it is used as formal language in Chinese schools. The Chinese are known for their diligence and keen business sense.

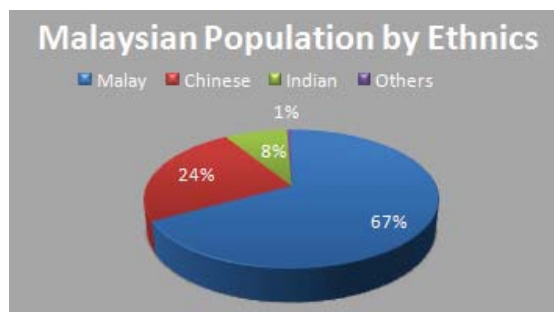
The Indians constitute 10% of the Malaysian population. Indian People were brought by British to Malay Federation to serve in rubber estates mainly during British colonial times. They speaks Tamil and mainly following Hindus religions. The Punjabi speaking Sikh community in Malaysia owes its beginnings in the country to the British connection and in particular with the recruitment of Sikhs for the paramilitary and police units in the 1870s and onwards.

Peranakan, Baba-Nyonya and Straits Chinese are terms used for the descendants of the very early Chinese immigrants (15th century) to the Nusantara region, including both the British Straits Settlements of Malaya and the Dutch-controlled island of Java among other places, who have partially adopted Malay customs in an effort to be assimilated into the local communities.

The Chitty are a distinctive group of Tamil people found mainly in Malacca, who are also known as the Indian Peranakans. Historical records stated that the Tamil traders from Panai in Tamil Nadu settled down in Malacca during the sovereignty of the Sultanate of Malacca. Like the Peranakans, they later freely intermingled with the local Malays and Chinese settlers.

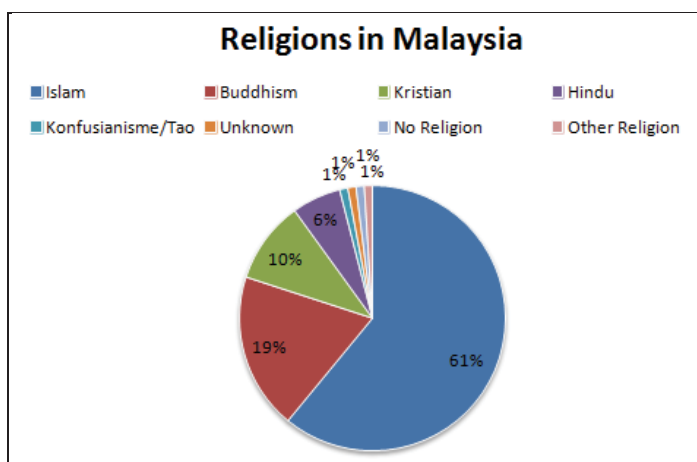
They also known as Eurasians, they are the descendants of the Portuguese who arrived in Melaka in 1511, coming from Goa, India. Upon arrival from Goa, they built settlements and married the locals.

Orang Asli means Original People. These indigenous ethnic groups are found in both East and West Malaysia. Dayak, Bidayuh, Iban is among the indigenous ethnic exist in Sarawak state and Kadazan, Bajau, Murut in Sabah State.



7.2 Diversity and Transition in Religion

Islam is generally practiced in Malaysia and recognize as formal religion of Malaysia. The Malaysian government promotes a moderate version of Islam which is meant to encourage a balanced approach to life and looking outwards. The qualities it values are knowledge, hard work, honesty, good administration and efficiency. Colonization effect is prominent in diversity of religion which practice in Malaysia. Firstly, many Malaysian Chinese practice a mixture of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism and for many Chinese people, religion is an essential part of their cultural life. Besides that, majority Tamil population of Malaysia practice Hinduism, some is practising Telegu and Malayalam cultures. The Sikh community in Malaysia owes its beginnings in the country to the British connection and in particular with the recruitment of Sikhs for the paramilitary and police units which formed the nucleus from which the modern police and military forces of the nation derived. Early international trade played a key role in bringing Christianity to Malaysia. Churches were established in the area with the coming of the Portuguese in 1511, the Dutch in 1641 and the British in 1786. Animism is practised by the indigenous people all around Malaysia who believe on nature power and pray the land, sun, other nature existence as their god.



Source: Department of Statistics Malaysia

7.3 Diversity and Transition in Language

Malay Language is originated from Sumatra and named as Bahasa Melayu, is the national language of Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei. Bahasa Melayu also has words borrowed from some countries such as Arabic, Sanskrit, Tamil, Persian, Portuguese, Dutch, and some Chinese dialects. There are altogether ten dialects of Malay. Chinese Language is generally spoken by the Chinese in Malaysia, but Hokkien is the biggest Chinese dialect in the country, followed by Cantonese, Hakka, Teochew, Fuzhou, Hainanese and Foochow. However, Mandarin is the formal language for Chinese and used as Chinese education medium language. The majority of Indians in Malaysia are Tamil Language and this is the main language in Indian Language. Other Indian languages in Malaysia are Telugu, Malayalam, Hindi, Punjabi and others. Young generation of Indians have started mixing Malay and English words with their respective dialects. English Language is widely spoken in Malaysia and English is actively known as a second language. In Malaysia, it is easy to live in urban by only speaking the English language. Business and General Examinations in Malaysia is conducted in English. The language spoken by the Peranakans, Baba Malay, is a mixture of Bahasa Malaysia and Hokkien is known as Peranakan Language. Unfortunately, not many speak this language anymore. The older generations still maintain the use of this language, but the younger generation has replaced Baba Malay with English. In addition to the languages discussed above, some people in East Malaysia speak Jakulban (Iban), Coastal Kadazan (Kadazan), Bajaw, Kelabit, Bidayuh and Kayan. These languages are considered East Malaysian Languages. Manglish is English with influences from the Malay, Chinese and Indian language. It is a unique dialect of English in Malaysia. For example, the use of 'lah', 'meh' is commonly used filler words and exclamations such as 'cabut' (escape) and 'fuyoh' (exclamation of amazement).

are considered Manglish. BahasaRojak which translates into mixed 'languages,' refers to the Malaysian way of mixing languages when speaking. For instance, a person will start off speaking Bahasa Malaysia, and branch out into English, with some Chinese and Indian language, or Manglish words thrown in. Example, "You memanggilarbetullar" - "You are really mad", is a mix of English, Malay and Manglish.

8. Conclusion

Tradition has been change in Malaysia for many reasons as discussed above. Multi-racial, multi-religious and multi-lingual is the result of British colonization in Malaysia. This directly has impact on population composition and diversity of traditions within the newly formed multi-racial society. Culture assimilation, culture combination, culture adaption, culture adoption keep on occurs which finally formed unity within Malaysian society who shares the values and norms of each other in a respectful manner. In Malaysia, The modernity and globalization brings up a new phases of tradition where Malaysian assimilated with Asia and Global cultures. This will be an interesting topic to be reviewed by coming scholars where there is a lot more to be exposed on the transition in tradition that occurs not only in Malaysia but worldwide. Other than that, the social conflict and unity alignment across history as multi-racial nation in Malaysia also will be an interesting topic to study in future.

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