

## IDENTITY IN MALAYSIA – PUBLIC RECEPTION AND COMMUNAL PRACTICE

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### ABSTRACT

*Identity has continuously been a topic in Malaysian public discourse since the foundation of the Malaysian nation in 1957. This research paper is following the terminological connotations of identity in Malaysia through the analysis of Malaysian print media and publicly accessible written material with the objective to discover continuity and change in a national concept of visionary status. The qualitative method of assessing public opinions by way of corpus analysis is expected to support the hypothesis that identity in Malaysia has been changing from ethnically dominated particulars through state enforced intervention to a wider and more general meaning that reaches across the social context of ethnic, religious and political constraints towards a cosmopolitan and global composure of diversity. Following academic trials and tribulations of interdisciplinary nature such process confirms the theoretical evidence that complex societies will never sustain officially administrated ideological visions of national identity.*

Key words: Identity in Malaysia; National identity; Identity terminology; Identity in Malaysian print media; Identity and culture

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### Introduction – Approaching the self

Malaysian identity comprises a multitude of influences from cultures in a history of changing geographical spaces. They emanate from tribal origins, merchant settlers and migrating communities with different mythological sources, behavioral patterns, cultural manifestations and visions over centuries.

Perception and analysis of such multi-faceted identity could start at any point in time and constitute itself into specific narrative semantics of indigenous nature. Alternatively, identity can be perceived and analyzed through the magnifying lens of terminology that originates from the global discourse of research and the etymology of every-day life since Malaysia had become an independent nation.

Identity as an international academic topic of multi-disciplinary scope flared up in the 1970s and spread from psychology to philosophy and anthropology across social sciences into the humanities with linguistics and translation:

The total number of self- and identity-related abstracts (not counting duplicated listings) were 9,752 for 1974 to 1983 and 21,798 for 1984 to 1993. [...] The grand total of psychology publications on self and identity for 1974 to 1993 is 31,550. (Straub 2000, 3).

Even beyond academia, identity has ever since been a favorite visitor in the public discourse of the media.

Etymologically the term identity refers to something that is and remains *the same* as indicated by the Latin word *idem*. Its public use dates back to the scholastic Middle-Ages and to a later revival in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. (Harper 2015)

In modern social science identity is less seen as an individual phase of individual construction but rather as something that is socially constituted and a dynamic product of social, historical and political contexts. (Cronin 2006, 9)

As much as the unity of characteristic constituents may be at the core of the question what identity is all about, it also raises the question how the meaning of the term has been affected by its ubiquitous use in research and public domain. Even though the terminology of identity has always been scrutinized from the specific perspectives of different subject areas there were also early philosophical attempts in the 1970s to completely deny the possibility of its reasonable existence in complex societies. (Habermas 1995/1976, 92-126)

The political efforts of Malaysia in the 1970s to create and formulate its own vision of national identity as a young and federated state with its different complex ethnic and cultural characteristics prompted the motivation for this study by raising the following questions: How did Malaysia define its own vision of identity? Were there any explicit strategies to ingrain national identity markers in the diverse Malaysian population? How was political interference discussed and received by the media? Did the concept of identity change in the course of its implementation? What are the noticeable results and how are they related to sociological claims that identity cannot be intentionally developed in complex societies as mentioned before?

The general epistemic perspective and the specific Malaysian interest in the development of a coherent identity will be juxtaposed in this research paper and the diachronic yet selective media reception of the identity issue by Malaysian English daily newspapers will accompany the answers in which direction Malaysia has developed its notion of identity within the six decades of its existence.

The public media perception of Malaysian identity will be complemented with historical reviews of Malaysian cultural developments in literature, theatre, fine arts, dance and film. Such cultural view is meant to compare the media reception of identity with the creative identity production of artists themselves within the history of their own communities.

The voices of young Malaysian university students on the topic of identity will conclude this research approach with the perspective of a generation that was born into a social identity career that had been envisaged and politically managed as much as it had been growing at its own liberty and pace under the protection of educational institutions throughout Malaysia's young existence.

The qualitative method of assessing public opinions by way of corpus analysis is expected to support the hypothesis that identity in Malaysia has been changing from ethnically dominated particulars through state enforced intervention to a wider and more general meaning that reaches across the social context of ethnic, religious and political constraints towards a cosmopolitan and global composure of diversity. Following academic trials and tribulations of interdisciplinary nature such process confirms the theoretical evidence that complex societies will never sustain officially administrated ideological visions of national identity.

### **Malaysia and the quest of identity - In search of the Grail**

When Malaysia's independence was proclaimed on 31 August 1957 by a united government of the Alliance Party, the Malayan Chinese Association and Malaysian Indian Congress the new country presented its first constitution. This constitution was extended on Federation Day of 16 September 1963 on the basis of a new national composition which also incorporated the former British Crown Colonies of Sarawak and Sabah. The Malaysian basic law - the country's constitution - defines the rights, obligations and boundaries of all individual, communal and state ingredients, it also shows the common will to be a united multi-ethnic and multi-cultural democratic entity in a Federal Constitutional Elective Monarchy which respects secular and Islamic principles. (Federal Constitution 2010)

Malaysian press media have referred to public discussions of identity throughout the decades from the 1960s to the 2010s. Since media reception is the major indicator of public sentiment in creating and presenting facts, views and opinions such identity discourse will be observed. *Chronicle*, the cooperative anthology of the French-Malaysian publishing house Millet Didier and the New Straits Times Publishers provide the corpus of journalistic highlights. (Mathews 2013) It was considered a research bonus that the editors focused on national identity as a metaphor of Malaysia's history and its vision of the future. (Mathews 2013, 360)

### **Constitutional identity markers - Language, for example**

Out of many headlines quoted in the *Chronicle* from the New Straits Times (NST) that refer to public discussions of early Malaysian identity in the 1960s, it was mainly the language topic that constituted a first general profile of Malaysia's self-image.

There was an urgent endeavor to anchor the culturally and ethnically diverse population in common grounds and language obviously promised to be a strong ingredient for cultural identity, especially with education in its prospective view: How to express the common visions of this newly united national body if not with a national language? Such idealistic view that the choice of language could be publicly discussed and was open for democratic decision was, however, not always considered by the Malay majority in the country which claimed to have the "collective worth and legitimacy" to "symbolic categories like language, religion and the national anthem, which became very strong signs of identification". (Kaur 2008, 2)

Historians argued about the socio-psychological causes of such a decision, when they considered the establishment of a national language as "the most powerful symbolic vehicle of nationalism." (Coulmas 1988, Preface)

Language as an authoritative medium of power – and its failure - had long ago even been metaphorically expressed in the literary colonization of 'Caliban' in Shakespeare's 'Tempest' (Duckett 2015) and the powerful concept of France's Direct Colonial Rule - which was based on the believe that who speaks French, thinks French and is French - had proverbial effects on the identity of colonized countries in Africa (like the 'Negritude' movement of Senghor in Senegal) and particularly in the Caribbean with the first rebellions against colonialism and the earliest successful independence moves. (Fenwick 2009)

In the Malaysian case it was soon politically decided that the Malay language should be given the status of the official national language and be used in administration and education by the name of Bahasa Malaysia. The NST reflected sparse public discussion about this from the mid-1960s in their *Chronicle* under the headline of "Chinese urged to accept national language ... (in) help (of) rural people (to) achieve a better standard of living". (NST, 27 Feb 1966; Mathews 2013, 58)

In the middle of the politically turbulent year of 1969 the language issue was settled in favor of the Malay language. It was decided that "All school subjects to be taught in Malay" (NST, 10 July 1969; Mathews 2013, 81) and accordingly everything was prepared to raise the common standards of Bahasa Malaysia by training the trainers. (NST, 17 March 1970; Mathews 2013, 86)

The consolidation of Bahasa Malaysia as the national language was an ongoing process throughout the 1970s and early 1980s with focus on "spelling", "sign-boards", "subtitles", "pollution", "thesaurus" or newly conceived cultural products in BM like the musical "Uda dan Dara". (NST, 13 Aug 1972; Mathews 2013, 101)

The government of Dr. Mahathir (1981-2003) confirmed the status of Bahasa Malaysia and finalized closure of English schools even though the media could not but express some contradictory remarks as to the national language's coexistence with other languages:

Bahasa Malaysia's status confirmed. The Education Act 1995 ... would affirm the status of Bahasa Malaysia as the national language ... Dato' Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad ... said there would be no compromise on the status ... though exemptions had to be accorded in certain areas ... national-type schools would also be exempted from using Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction. 'Exemptions can also be given to certain subjects like science and technology.' (NST, 6 Aug 1995)

Recent attempts by the Sultan of Johor who called for English to be brought back with the argument that "Singapore's system has proven to be successful ... (it has) helped to unite the races (there)," was countered by the Deputy Prime Minister with a straight "No to ENGLISH" and there is "no plan to revert the medium of instruction from BAHASA MALAYSIA in national schools." (The Sun, 7 May 2015)

The global demands appeared to have made a language policy dysfunctional that was meant to unite the races in the shared identity of Bahasa Malaysia as their main and common national language.

The Sultan of Johor elaborates his vision in The Star of 12 June 2015,

English schools are neutral grounds ... The Malays go to national schools where the Chinese feel alienated, while the Indians go to Tamil schools. Where is the unity? ... The richer Malaysians send their children to private and international schools where English is the medium of instruction. So, who says there are no English-medium schools? But they are only available to the middle and upper-middle class from urban areas. So, soon we will also have a class issue. This is all due to the myopic planning and thinking of our politicians. (p. 32)

The Sunday Star on 21 June 2015 rounds this public argument up and brings it to a pointed conclusion:

One for all, all for one! Education is for all, it's time we think of the bigger picture affecting our children. ... As his Royal Highness the Sultan of Johor said, these politicians are using nationalism and race to champion communal rights and the Malay language at the expense of the English language. ... We must also be clear that the lack of proficiency in English cuts across all races. ... Many shy away from the national schools because there is a strong perception that these schools have turned more religious in character<sup>1</sup> with a single race dominant in the overall attendance. ... The English-medium schools were neutral grounds as students of all races attended such schools and the best friendships were forged there. (p. 21)

These practical and reasonable arguments indicate a social shift through common public agreement from the importance of Bahasa Malaysia as the prime ethnic domain of national identification towards the English language as a major unifying force across racial and religious boundaries on national and global levels<sup>2</sup> - in spite of its colonial flavor for Malaysia.

### Malaysian identity - Some media coverage

As useful as the NST/Didier Millet source of the *Chronicle* was for the portrayal, implementation and public reception of the national languages policy, its selection of significant NST articles does not supply any information on the identity of religion or culture in Malaysia. However, since the New Straits Times Publishers grant free digital access<sup>3</sup> to their collection of articles through key word search procedures this research on media reflection of identity - as in connection with literature, music and religion etc. - could make use of the respective *Image Archive* (1949 to 2015) and the *Text Archive* (1991-2015) of this NST Resource Centre.

Going through the *Image Archive*<sup>4</sup> rendered 84 results with identity mentioned as key word in the textual body of articles from 1957 to 2015 and 504 results in the *Text Archive* with articles 1991-2015. Since *Image* and *Text Archives* contain different texts the complete amount of findings in both archives accounts for a total of 588 usages of the identity word.

Out of the 84 articles in the *Image Archive* 74 items deal with identity card issues of Malaysians, 3 with arts and religious subjects. 2 items deal with the identity of architecture and the identity crisis of the city of Penang, 2 articles deal with ethnic communities, 1 article deals with education and 1 with tourism.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See also The Star, 1 July 2015, where Mohamed Ghouse Nasuruddin pleads for "a bilingual (English/Malay) single-stream national education system" ... "to uphold sanctity of the national language", p. 28

<sup>2</sup> ... the continuation of Mohamed Ghouse Nasuruddin, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Language is key in education, -views -: "It is crystal clear that English is an integral part of governance, corporate enterprises, the entertainment and creative industries as well as in the majority of our daily lives," p. 28

<sup>3</sup> The free search with key-word leads to the (extended) headlines of all articles that contain the actual key-word, but the whole article can only be read and printed out for payment.

<sup>4</sup> The search took place on 9 June 2015 and the number of articles found is covering the time before that date and will change with every day after.

The articles on art were published in the course of forty years. In chronological sequence they reflect their decades in such a way that the 1988 article advises artists to have their own identity and image to reflect Malaysian values and to “not be influenced by foreign stars” because their long hair reflects Western values. The second article from the early 1990s deals with an exhibition on “Islamic Identity in Contemporary Malaysian Art” and transports the religious message to avoid figurative painting. Twenty years later (NST, 8 Dec 2014) cartoonist Lat receives an award for his “outstanding contribution to the promotion of Malaysia’s cultural identity through the use of cartoons”. ... “Lat shows us ... (how) to live in harmony”.

Apart from the value of harmony as one traditional value of exemplary nature, none of the other articles explicitly focuses on identity in an explanatory fashion. One of them maintains that foreign artists’ identity should not be mistaken with Malaysian identity, especially with regards to public appearance and conduct, the other one shows typical Islamic painting style that is appreciated by Malaysian audiences as an expression of Malaysian identity.

The two heritage related articles are of recent origin (2015). They focus on the natural and cultural environment of Penang and instigate the preservation of romantic identities (Penang is still seen as the ‘Pearl of the Orient’).

Identity references to ethnic communities in the state of Johor (1996) and in the whole of Malaysia (2012) are marketing references as we know them when something comes to an end and needs to be saved by public attention. Setting up of special community centres for the promotion of identity groups in Johore expresses a similar intention as the “Intercultural Dialogue” sixteen years later that is meant to create awareness of community and national identity. In both cases, the loss of identity is being felt and methods are thought of to save what is gradually getting lost.

Educational identity was a topic of the late 1960s and 1970s and the article on the newly founded National University (UKM) on 29 May 1972 fits into the timely investigation of educational identity on tertiary level.

2013 was a particularly successful year for the Malaysian Tourism industry in which the physical identity of natural phenomena like Mount Santubong (Sarawak) was equally brand-worthy as the cultural traditions of music and dance. Following the exchange value of products it seems that the identity of a mountain is equal to the market-worth of its authenticity and uniqueness: there is only one true Mount Santubong.

The 504 identity-relevant results from the *Text Archive* of the NST can be classified by an alphabet of key words that reaches from the identity of animals, Baba Nyonya and corporate values across ethnic culture, family, handicrafts and Islamic greetings through law, nature and product branding into traditions, tourism and United Nation Heritage protection.

As wide and general as the use of identity had become to characterize anything of individual character, they reflect the social side of identity related terminology on the higher generic level of education, literature, culture and traditions within ethnic communities – all of which are considered parts of the nation’s heritage which deserve the right of respect and preservation.

Such concept of identity is evoking a semantic frame (Fillmore 1977) that characterizes and authorizes the unquestionable traditional value of good and old, through pictures of indigenous dancers with traditional costumes accompanied by texts that postulate “identity (is) to be preserved and respected”. (NST, 12 June 2015, 24)

Identity has become the branding seal for animals in their natural habitat, for books in romantic narrative style, for healthy communities in their original ways as they are depicted by Lat in his cartoon stories of *Kampung Boy*<sup>6</sup>: simple, harmonious and full of patriotic love for the family, the community, the land, the country and the nation.

These nostalgic schemes conjure up images and metaphors that emerge in the readers’ mind out of the general goodness of nostalgic and romantic embellishment. Identity has turned into the ideal of the ‘good old days’.

Apart from the “magic” (NST, 16 May 2015) of this heritage-related use of identity there is hardly any other specific usage that expressly states any concrete example of meaning apart from the above mentioned review of Lat’s cartoons that emphasize simplicity, harmony and patriotism as major ingredients of Malaysian identity.

All articles on identity in the *Chronicle* as well as in the *Image Archive* and *Text Archive* of NST portray the 1960s in historical perspective as a decade of active changes: common ethnic denominators and identity markers were constitutionally established and politically enforced. The implementation of Bahasa Malaysia as the national language is a typical example for this period.

The 13<sup>th</sup> of May 1969 with its immediate effects on the social situation and economic policies fitted the new decade of the 1970s into a corset of rigidity which claimed the quick verification and realization of visions that had been embedded and sealed into the common constitution. Legality, legitimacy and the public service execution thereof formally and officially united the parts that had been ideologically forged together before.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The articles mentioned – apart from the 74 identity card articles - are listed by date and key word in the reference section, page 14, from a) through e) under References/NSTP Resource Centre.

<sup>6</sup> Here, rendered with the English translation of the Malay title *Budak Kampung*, as used in the *Chronicle*, p. 32-33; interesting to say that one of my UM students could not find a Bahasa version of the book anywhere in Kuala Lumpur in October 2015!?

<sup>7</sup> For “identity as the new ideology” see Cronin 2013, p.1

A multitude of identity card issues dominated 80 per cent of all identity-related newspaper articles in the *Image Archive* section of the NST. They deal with the formal categorization of indigenous, Bumi Putra Malays, Chinese, Indian and 'lain-lain' ethnicities that was used in the Malaysian public service administration until recently and is still haunting Malaysians today:

... the official stance on race in Malaysia being that it consists of three main races: Chinese, Indian and Malay, and an unceremonious 'others' for those who cannot tick any of the former boxes.<sup>8</sup>

Identity was implicitly looked at as the formal side of belonging and sharing when proof of legitimate participation had to be given. The search for communalities was put off in favor of formal equalization, political balancing and division of economic privileges.

The decade of the 1980s media representation of identity echoes a tone of admonition and appeal for Malaysian artists to represent their own national identity with images that reflect Malaysian values (NST, 13 September 1988) and Malaysian character (NST, 24 September 1996) as opposed and distinguishable from Western values and foreign copies. Such social process of reasserting national identity values against external influences reminds of the group psychological insight that general distinction from outsiders who don't belong to the inner circle creates group cohesion and solidifies insiders' auto-stereotypes. (Hofstätter 1986)

The 1990s articles are dealing specifically with the Malaysian identity of ethnic communities and their respective artistic expressions as they were promoted in public competitions and exhibitions.<sup>9</sup>

The first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century shows a media reflection of identity that widens the scope to the protective imperative that heritage should be saved for its survival. Identity is identical with the positive association to something that is in need of conservative care as expressed in the new 'ideological' vision of the 1Malaysia policy concept (1Malaysia 2015) which only received wider and proactive national recognition in the following 2010s:

I (Tiara) hope that people will be able to take home its (i.e. the musical *Mud*) unity message. This country, this city, was built by everyone. The Malays, Chinese, the Indians, we all contributed to this wonderful city we call our home. It's a timely reminder for us to put our hearts together for Malaysia.<sup>10</sup>

### Malaysian Identity - Some culture-critical responses

When artists, craftsmen and writers were admonished in the media of the 1980s to work creatively within the Malaysian tradition and to avoid copying and following foreign or international trends, how did they themselves react to this and how was their reaction perceived by their critics and reviewers?

While Masters' theses are being written about the creative responses by Malaysian authors to their national identity as Malays<sup>11</sup> there are statements by art critics from the cultural fields of literature, theatre, fine arts, dance and film which give a deeper insight into the reception of standard public identity requirements that were specifically meant to be creatively personified by the artist community.

One corpus of such texts had been collected in the mid-2000s by the German Cultural Centre of Malaysia and was edited and published by the GI and German Alumni Association of Malaysia under the title of *Guests for 50 Years, Goethe in Malaysia, Malaysia in Goethe, the Story of a Cultural Dialogue*. (Wolf 2008, pp. 86-215) All the art critics in this collection are representatives of their trades and well known to the Malaysian public. Their statements were extracted from their individual essays on the social history of their fields. The essays had been commissioned by the GI for conceptual reasons of their own specific cultural work and they are accessible through the GI Malaysia's archive.

Identity as the keyword of interest appears to be closely connected in all of these essays to state intervention in molding the appropriate national character that was expected from Malaysian artists from the 1970s on, especially so in the case of literature:

Following the catastrophic events of 13 May 1969, literary figures attempted to converge to explore the possibilities of a common purpose and destiny. Nevertheless, the event had significantly transformed the political landscape of

<sup>8</sup> NST, 15 March 2012, - Postgraduate - : "Identity, ethnicity and hybridity," by Caryn Lim, Monash University Sunway Campus, "Being 'Mixed' in Malaysia: Perspectives on ethnic diversity," p. 3; see also: The Star, 21 June 2015, - reads - Priya K. : "All about ideas. This year's Cooler Lumpur Festival offered provocative topics and interesting discussions." ... "One particularly interesting exchange was when a woman, identifying herself as the daughter of a Sabahan politician asked about the controversial "Project IC" which was carried out during Dr Mahathir's tenure. Comparing the issue to the situation of post-Independence Malaya, Dr Mahathir replied that he did the same as Tunku Abdul Rahman in "accepting them as citizens," p. 10

<sup>9</sup> See NST of 12 October 1992, 5 November 1996 and 20 November 1996

<sup>10</sup> The Star, Sunday, 21 June 2015, p.5 - arts - Terence Toh: "Breaking new ground. Malaysia's longest-running musical *Mud* revamps itself for the first anniversary," p. 5

<sup>11</sup> Farhana Yon binti Mohamad Fuad's topic of her Masters' Thesis is: "Resisting homogeneity: identity and belonging in the poems of Muhammad Haji Salleh and Salleh Ben Joned," the concept was presented on 5 June 2015, in the Department of English, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Malaya

contemporary Malaysia. Following a period of rule by Emergency decree, efforts were directed at consolidating Malay hegemony, not merely in the political and economic spheres, but in culture, language and literature. In 1971, the National Cultural Congress was convened and resolved that:

- the national culture of Malaysia must be based on the cultures of the people indigenous to the region
- elements from other cultures which are suitable and reasonable may be incorporated into the national culture
- Islam will be an important element in the national culture. (Eddin Khoo 2008, p. 144)

Identity was mainly understood as a corset of compulsion but it was also admittedly recognized as an engine of creative impulse for artistic activities even if only hesitantly appraised as such:

Since the 1970's, the writing of literature in separate languages has concerned itself with one principal purpose - the creation of a corpus of literature that is identifiably Malaysian. While this has proved a driving force (some would say an agenda), there is little to indicate a growing worthiness in Malaysian literature. Malay literature continues to be written according to the chosen contemporary trend; literature being written in English continues to focus its concerns on demonstrating a Malaysian sensibility.

What is lacking, meanwhile, is a profound exploration of the experiences and psychology that shape the Malaysian character. While there have been efforts, especially by those writing in English, to attempt to carve a niche and space for the generation of independent publishing ventures and opportunities for writing, there is little indication that this leads to a deeper contemplation of literature as an art and craft. (Eddin Khoo, p. 145)

Raman Krishnan, the founder of Silverfish Publishers and a major promoter of English language writing in Malaysia goes back to the basic question of identity when asking himself about:

... the definition of "Malaysian Literature". Malaysian Literature has been, on several occasions (or periods) in the past, defined more by what is not than by what is. Strong nationalists will tell you that only writing in Malay (or Bahasa Malaysia as it is officially known now) qualifies to be called Malaysian Literature. Others are quite vociferously opposed to any such notion. It is not dissimilar to the question of Malaysian culture. So what is included? Or what should be excluded? Should anything be excluded? (Raman 2008, p. 147)

His personal view on the progress of English literature in Malaysia describes the ups and downs of its development:

The National Education Policy, and the narrow interpretation of nationalism associated with it, all but killed English writing. But almost miraculously the language survived.

... although anti-English noise often reached ridiculous levels of cacophony (often with name calling and questioning of one's loyalty and patriotism), economics (and good sense) has generally prevailed amongst those in power, despite the enormous political risks.

It is in this atmosphere of aggressive nationalistic unlearning of the language that writers such as Lloyd Fernando, Lee Kok Liang, KS Maniam, Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Salleh ben Joned, Wong Pui Nam and others wrote in the late seventies and early eighties (with many of them published by Skoob Books in London). With insufficient writers to carry the momentum, the English literature scene once again floundered after that. (Raman 2008, p. 151)

Malay Language theatre obviously profited most from the national identity boost of the 1970s: it became quantitatively ubiquitous, associations were founded, festivals organized and it turned familiar topical scenes of kampung and city life into modern experiences of wider impact:

... frenetic theatrical activity at the state and national level was spurred by a post-1969 consciousness about national identity. The arts became an avenue for such explorations and community building... they were ... fertile ground for the rise and spread of a theatrical and arts consciousness among Malaysians beyond Kuala Lumpur's city limits.

Due in part to the volatile events of 1969 as well as the burgeoning need for an engagement with issues such as urbanity and modernity, and the interface between the contemporary and the traditional, the 70s decade saw the flowering of experimental Malay language theatre.

Some of this experimentation grew out of the university theatrical space, where students were given more freedom to explore the limits of theatre.

UM plays were not solely Malay language, however. Their literary and dramatic society, called LIDRA, mostly mounted English plays.

Apart from the growth of theatre in universities, the 1970s also saw the formation of TEMA (short for Teater Malaysia). TEMA was an umbrella organization that incorporated, in a loose manner, the Malay language theatre companies around the country.

... 1970s activity from these state groups (and even a few private ones) was particularly vibrant due to the existence of the annual National Theatre and Dance festival. (Nge 2008, pp. 185-187)

Things changed for Malay theatre, however, in the 1980s through the national focus on the religious identity marker of Islam:

The 1980s marked a big shift in Malay language theatre due to a worldwide Islamic Revival. Influential figures among the Malay literati began to question the relationship between Islam and the arts, and in particular, to delve into the issue of whether the performing arts were to be viewed as illicit and contrary to the tenets of Islamic law and culture. Once this shift occurred, a lot of Malay language theatre died out because theatre festivals were no longer held at the state and national levels.

Government-sponsored theatre took on the mantle of encouraging drama with Islamic themes, hence the 1981 Prime Minister's Department-sponsored playwriting competition on Islamic drama. (Nge 2008, pp. 187-188)

The English language theatre engaged in the 1970s with their Malay counterparts in a common search for Malaysian identity but ended up in the 1980s with their own national and global fusion of social-critical and satirical perspectives in their own different groups:

After the racial riots of 1969, amateur theatrics gave way to a concerted search for a Malaysian identity and a heightened interest in the Malay traditional arts by non-Malays, who saw such arts as a means by which to establish the meaning of identity within a Malaysian context. People such as Syed Alwi, Faridah Merican, and Krishen Jit, who were engaged with English language theatre at the time, began their foray into the realm of Malay theatre as well as experimental theatre, working alongside Usman Awang and Noordin Hassan, among others.

... By the 1980s, because the question of Malaysian identity became too wrapped up in an overemphasis on Malay identity and Malay language, theatre practitioners such as Krishen Jit, for example, returned to English language theatre with new questions and challenges.

Five Arts Centre (founding members Krishen Jit, Chin San Sooi and Marion D'Cruz) was, in part, formed (in 1984) as a result of these questions and concerns. Fusing an approach that utilizes traditional forms from Malay theatre in contemporary plays, as well as straddling the different forms of artistic practice - theatre, dance, music and visual art - Five Arts developed a way of conceiving Malaysian-ness that was unmoored from its post-1969 reactionary lineage. (Nge 2008, pp. 193-194)

English Theatre in Malaysia and Malaysian theatre in English has had its home in the Actors' Studios of Kuala Lumpur and Penang for decades, followed by interims at the Bangsar Shopping Centre and Lot 10 before it turned into KLPac, the Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre that has developed its own Malaysian national and global identity as it trains talent and practices critical perception of Malaysian life and history. Such creative freedom is cultivated by the Malaysian and Australian personalities of Datuk Faridah Merican and Joe Hasham. They are looking back on 45 years of their very typical Malaysian-ness with musical plays like *Uda dan Dara* as mentioned in the New Straits Times (NST, 13 Aug 1972; Mathews 2013, 101)) on the solid foundation of global values as described by Malaysian 'poeta doctus' Huzir Sulaiman who is now residing in Singapore:

It angers me when after hundreds of years of importing aspects of other people's culture some politician in a 4,000-ringgit Italian suit complains about Western values and such-and-such a thing is not from our culture. Our culture is everybody else's culture. We've never had our own. Deal with it and grow up. (Antares 2008, p.86)

The development of Malaysian Fine Arts took its own separate way:

Due to the National Cultural Policy and the New Economic Policy, the works of this (1970s) period were characterized by strong Malay revivalist tendencies enmeshed with Islamic idealism among Malay artists. While the initial Malay revivalist movement focused on traditional Malay cultural 'roots' (such as influences from traditional architecture embellishments, textile motifs, historical legends and folk tales), the idea of art production became entangled with the pan-Islamic resurgence advocated by Islamic intellectuals. The idea of art quickly veered away from secular Western ideas, materialism, excess and decadence, and adopted a worldview with strict codes of existence based upon the teachings of the Koran and the *Hadith*. (Ooi 2008, p. 108)

While Malay artists experienced their home-made religious identity revival some artists of different ethnic extraction felt left out and grew into supporting the political opposition and subcultural tendencies in their own creative ways, as Wong Hoy Chong, Chinese artist and art critic explains:

Anyway, as I spent more time working abroad in different environments, new problems, questions and issues emerged for me:

What does it mean and feel to be gazed at as an "other", or worse to me, to play to this tune of "otherness" and fulfill these expectations. It all seemed too simple.

It was not easy, since the visual culture I returned to in the late 1980's was still dominated by paintings in the manner of High Modernism, albeit adapted to the Malaysian context and had assumed the guise of "Malaysian-ness", whatever that may be. Abstraction, and its corollary, aesthetics, sat on the top rung of the visual arts and culture ladder. Figurative art, and worse, anything political, languished at the bottom. I belonged to the latter category. (Cheong 2008, p. 121-123)

Dance, in comparison to Fine Arts covered the widest fields in this identity search: for as long as their creative expressions had not yet been discovered as a burgeoning source of income young dancers and choreographers enjoyed the freedom to translate the political encouragement for Malaysian identity willingly into repossessing, owning and modernizing their ethnic traditions while also catching up with the latest international trends.

The search for creativity and identity has primarily occurred in the genre of ethnically based contemporary dance choreography which took a giant leap in the early 1980s with dancers who began the earnest search for a Malaysian vocabulary by recreating and reinventing dance repertoire - the late Lari Leong, Ramli Ibrahim, Wong Fook Choon, Steven Koh and Marion D'Cruz. Lari had worked extensively in Paris, Ramli had his training in Australia and India, Fook Choon in Malaysia and Switzerland, Steven in Taiwan and Hong Kong and Marion in Malaysia and New York. Lari Leong incorporated Tai Chi and Eastern philosophy into his choreography which he weaved into an intriguing blend of dance theatre.

The experience of cross-cultural dialogue is intrinsic in the everyday life of the current generation Malaysian choreographers and their work is a demonstration of the eclectic dance training received. The spiritual core of traditional Malaysian or Asian dance forms is strong and the search for creativity has gone beyond the 'cut and paste' mentality. The influence of this generation of choreographers has been profound since the 1990s. This is due, in large part, to the opening of a smaller performing venue, *The Actors Studio Theatre, SUTRA Amphi*, more private dance schools and the establishment of the only tertiary programme for dance at the *Akademi Seni Kebangsaan* in 1994. Full-time dance training is finally available in Malaysia and young dancers and choreographers are making their presence felt. *Stepping Out!*, an annual project by the *Akademi Seni Kebangsaan* is a healthy breeding ground for choreographic talent.

The *warna* or colour and flavour of the work speak of a multi-cultural approach to dance training championed by the present generation of choreographers. In the *Malaysian Dance Festival 2005*, the contemporary dances displayed a strong base in traditional roots. (Gonzales 2008, pp. 169-172)

Different from the other cultural areas Malaysian dance has become an exemplary case of success for the national identity drive from the early years until today. The political call for creative expression of Malaysian identity either 'fell on listening ears' or it rather meant 'preaching to the converted' for most Malaysian ethnic communities. Dance had always been an important art form within Malay, Chinese and Indian communities that cherished and promoted dances. Family support, lively practice, active groups, associations and institutions, training and performing space and festivals for inter-cultural benchmarking were the most important ingredients for creative growth of communal and thereby Malaysian identity in style and content. International contacts enlarged the artistic vocabulary and increased the pride and knowledge of self and Malaysian identity – even if grounded and cherished in separate practice of various social and ethnic communities.

Malaysian Film in the context of this identity discussion had a difficult start to match Malaysian identity requirements in company with television and foreign film productions.

In 1975, the government began to take the film industry seriously, realizing that film could contribute towards national unity and nation-building. As a result, the National Film Development Corporation (FINAS) was set up in 1981 in response to the film community's appeal for government assistance to improve and develop the industry. (Hassan Muthalib 2008, p. 157)

The media response of that time focused more on the Malay language and the market protection of the homegrown products:

All foreign films must have Bahasa Malaysia subtitles before they could be sent to the Censorship Board ... Advertising films would also be required to have subtitles and would have to have at least 80 per cent local content. (NST, 28 Aug 1976; Mathews 2013, 125)

The early infrastructural help from the government in support of an identifiable Malaysian film production that was to grow into ideological expectations became irrelevant with digitization.

Today, regional openness, market competition, international exchange and liberalization are the new driving forces for the Malaysian film industry. But there is still the institutionalized identity-restraint that makes the public ask:

Where Is the Great Malaysian Movie? ... a live interview with Finas (National Film Development Corporation Malaysia) director-general Datuk Kamil Othman was a refreshingly candid session on the contemporary Malaysian cinema. ... there was a small yet disturbing revelation of what makes a Malaysian film, well, "Malaysian". "We hardly interfere with the creative probes," said Kamil on the topic of censorship. "But there is a checklist. According to this checklist, a filmmaker is given bonus points for including Malaysiana symbols, like a Proton car. Apparently, shots of



the Kuala Lumpur Twin Towers are afforded less points these days, to encourage establishing shots in other parts of the city. (The Star, 29 June 2015)<sup>12</sup>

### Malaysian Identity – Some Undergraduate opinion

The Malaysian population is young. 45.7% of all Malaysians in the year of 2014 were less than 25 years old:

Table 1: Malaysia Demographics Profile 2014

Population	30,073,353 (July 2014)
Age structure	<b>0-14 years:</b> 28.8% (male 4,456,033/female 4,206,727) <b>15-24 years:</b> 16.9% (male 2,580,486/female 2,511,579) <b>25-54 years:</b> 41.2% (male 6,277,694/female 6,114,312) <b>55-64 years:</b> 7.6% (male 1,163,861/female 1,122,746) <b>65 years and over:</b> 5.5% (male 777,338/female 862,577)

(Demographics 2014)

UM Bachelor students of 2015 who were still in their twenties have gone through an education system that was created and designed by the founding fathers of Malaysia. They have not experienced the national fervor of the early Malaysian Federation they are the second generation that has lived through the official vision of Malaysian identity. What is their personalized believe in national characteristics, what is their own Malaysia-ness like? What does identity mean to them?

Some answers were given to the author by some of his students during their last semester before graduating in the *Bachelor of Languages and Linguistics German with Education Program* in their essay assignment on the topic of “Studying in Germany is exiting and adventurous. How can foreign students profit most from their studies in Germany?”

Student 1<sup>13</sup> formulated the following general guideline to equip himself and his colleagues for the challenge:

If Malaysians want to study in Germany, they should prepare themselves physically and psychologically well; otherwise they may pick up bad influence and lose their identity.

Student 2 suggests that they slowly adapt and bravely cling to what they are:

Living in a totally different country where everything is strange and new often causes cultural shock. It needs time to adapt because we might be afraid to lose our identity if we change too radically towards the customs of our host country and start forgetting our own culture and identity.

Student 3 paints a picture of all the negative consequences that might follow a loss of identity:

The biggest problem we may probably encounter when we decide to study overseas could be to lose our identity. But, how do we lose our identity? Normally, we will have experiences that are completely different from those in our home country. This may still seem to be exiting. But, if we live too many years abroad we will no longer behave as we did before, instead we will act like people in our host country. Some of us may even think that our home country is no longer important for us. All that is important for them is the country in which they currently live and not the country they come from. They do not want to speak their mother tongue any more, they only want to converse in the other language. They are no longer proud of their own country. They feel completely identical with the country they are studying in. They have deeply changed and especially their social conduct is different. These are the signals of lost identity.

Student 4 warns fellow students not to fall prey to cultural shock and lose their personal goals:

There are some people who always think that we may not reach our personal goals if we study overseas. They say so because some students who study in Germany may lose their own identity. They simply want to forget their identity and lose their goals. According to one research study they do not take their studies seriously, waste their time with unproductive activities like going to nightclubs. This situation is otherwise known as culture shock.

<sup>12</sup> See also NST, 10 July 2015, “An already endangered Malay film industry now faces restrictions. Guidelines may stifle Malaysian films. ...the new Film Censorship Board (LPF) guidelines might just (be) snuffing the creative juices of the industry,” p. 14

<sup>13</sup> The discretely hidden names (gender and ethnicity) are known to the Faculty; all students gave their consent to be anonymously translated into English and quoted in this paper by the author of this article

Student 5 argues scientifically and very matter of fact:

Statistics of Universiti Malaya Alumni mention that 36 per cent of all students who studied abroad have lost their identity. Many of them have changed their behavior and have lost the good values of their home country.

Identity had never been discussed in class before, it had never been made explicit in any of their subjects; it was simply part of the students' cultural frame – or rather ideological scheme, vision turned doctrine - and woven into their concept of living or studying abroad.

Germany had been on the students' minds for more than five years. It had actually been their dream to visit Germany but just at the moment when this dream came true and a scholarship would take them to Germany in two weeks' time they felt such fears and became worried that they might lose their identity: lose their national pride, lose the love for their country, change their behavior and conduct, give up their goals, sacrifice their values, break religious taboos and go to nightclubs and bars, become lazy and unproductive, speak no longer their native Malay language.

Identity has no personal connotation in the students' opinions it appears instead to be solely understood as a national identity in the narrow sense of the word which signifies a specific communal relationship within a specific ethnic and religious community which appears to be fragile, easy to corrupt from the outside where unknown forces are waiting to interfere – as if there was no father figure like their prime minister who knows about the fears of his population when he says:

As the PM, I will not allow racial and religious conflicts to occur and I believe there are solutions to solve problems: "Sit down, discuss and talk over at a big *makan*<sup>14</sup> like this. God will lead you if we give and take, love and care for each other and accept our differences.<sup>15</sup>

Interestingly, opinion polls among Malaysian youth have discovered that:

... when it comes to self-identification, Muslim youths ... tend to see themselves as Muslims first, and prefer to put their Islamic identity before their ... Malaysian national or ethnic identities ... (79.9%), which clearly reveal the difficulty of nation building in multi-ethnic Malaysia more than it specifies religious belief: economic success comes relatively easy when compared to the long term achievement of realizing national integration and creating a national identity. (Values, Dreams, Ideals 2011, p. 78)

### Conclusion: Looking back at the future

Comparing the Malaysian identity visions of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s with students' mindset in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century indicates that the early visions of the 1960s may have turned into ideological fixtures. On the one hand, the official admonitions of the 1970s that everybody follow the traditional Malaysian mold seem to have fossilized into an abstract love of the country, of the use of Bahasa Malaysia and of the religiously motivated ethics of good, diligent and productive, whereas the sanctions of the 1980s appear to have morphed into doctrine, fear and taboo.

And yet, the experience of liberated discourse and narrative, the awareness and perception of communal interests, the conscious journey through historical narratives, the emotional realization of aesthetically and emotionally charming and economically advantageous diversity, the maturity of cosmopolitan, global and universal values are all transcending these crusted molds – they are shining between the lines of respective media coverage. It would certainly burst the length and limitation of this study to investigate into such burgeoning growth of democratic discourse but such wide spread public awareness will find its own sociologists and historians in the future. It may suffice to interpret the content of the latest articles on identity in such a way that home grown and naturally sprouting energy currently revitalizes the Malaysian people's perception of identity strongly opposing many of these unsuccessful official efforts to implement identity markers on the foundation of vested interests. This new self-image of Malaysian identity seems to connect Malaysians in their complex society to other international citizens of this global world – a quasi-natural democratic process that had been envisaged by Jürgen Habermas in the 1970s:

... if collective identity would develop in complex societies it would be shaped by a social community in discourse and social experiment. Its content would hardly have any precedents, it would be independent of any specific organizational attachment and its identity related knowledge would come from competing projections of identity through critical memory of tradition or it would be motivated and inspired by science, philosophy and the arts. (Habermas 1995/1976, p.121)

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<sup>14</sup> Language versus food, the Prime Minister automatically conceptualizes the cognitive and language related side of harmony (discussion) with the situational 'script' – to use the psycholinguistic terminology in the extension of 'frame' – for *makan* or sharing food as an obvious communal identifier that seems to be more successful than the commonality of Bahasa Malaysia or English; see also: The Star, 21 June 2015, – reads - Priya K.: "All about ideas. This year's Cooler Lumpur Festival offered provocative topics and interesting discussions." ... "This year also saw the festival including the culinary arts via the Food Fringe Festival led by The BIG Group, which presented conversations ranging from the growth and future of the industry, to how food both signals and ties together our cultural identities," p.10

<sup>15</sup> The PM said this in his speech at the launch of the Christians for Peace and Harmony in Malaysia Movement (CPHM), The Star, 2 June 2015, <http://www.thestar.com.my/News/Nation/2015/06/02/Najib-Perkasa-tone-down/>

If ideals take too long to grow there is still the pragmatic backdrop of Plan B as sketched by Malaysia's Rehman Rashid:

Having abided by our communal identities for so long – having accepted and accommodated our different languages, educational conventions, cultural norms and religious imperatives for three generations – we may now have to live with them forever. Which isn't that awful a prospect. It's the way we've always been, after all. We've become reasonably adept at conflict management. Harmony is a cherished myth, too noble to disdain. But there is dynamism in conflict – in 'equalities of inequity' and it can be harnessed. After tripling our population and increasing gross domestic product a hundred fold in 50 years through ten Five-Year-Plans and 13 elections if we know nothing else, we know how to do Malaysia. (Rehman Rashid, p. 360)

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31 Jalan Riong, 59100 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, Mon-Fri 9am-6pm. Contact [nib@nstp.com.my](mailto:nib@nstp.com.my) or call 03-2282-0717: <http://www.nib.com.my/cross-search/search/> last visited for here given results on June 8, 2015  
In reference to footnote 5, these are the listings of the ten NST Resource articles from the digital *Image Archive* categorized from a) Art to e) Tourism:

a) ART and RELIGION-related Identity articles in the *Image Archive*

13 September 1988

Quote: "Malaysian artists should have their own identity and image which reflect Malaysian values ... (they) should not be influenced by foreign stars ...";

Comment: Long hair reflects Western values, rejecting the foreign, reverting to unspecific Malaysian values

See also *Text Archive*: 24 September 1996

Quote: "Local handicrafts should reflect a Malaysian character instead of being mere copies of foreign handicrafts."

12 October 1992

Paraphrase and Quote: Review of an exhibition by the name of "Islamic Identity in Contemporary Malaysian Art"

Comment: Religious soul-searching and preservation instead of exploring something new; rejection of showing human bodies in Islamic art pieces

8 December 2014

Quote: "(Lat) Merdeka Award for outstanding contribution to the promotion of Malaysia's cultural identity through the use of cartoons

Comment: Romantic image of harmonious village life (Kampung Boy) and the image of a bewildering city space; nostalgic feelings and values

See also *Text Archive*: 15 December 2014

Quote: "Lat shows us the way to live in harmony" by Muhamad Solahudin Ramli; Comment: the key words for identity are 'simple, harmony and patriotic'

b) HERITAGE -related Identity articles in the *Image Archive*

22 May 2015

Quote: "(George Town, Penang) A gazetted heritage building is under threat of losing its identity."

Comment: (Maybe politically motivated – because governed by opposition party?) criticism of the Penang opposition government's destruction of the romantic image of the past

25 May 2015

Quote: "Penang's crisis of identity ... environment and public transports (are) tricky issues in the Pearl of the Orient ..."

c) ETHNIC COMMUNITY-related Identity articles in the *Image Archive*

20 November 1996

Paraphrase: Ethnic communities in Johore to set up special centres to promote an identity

Comment: Preservation of what is slowly getting lost

1 February 2012

Paraphrase: Towards greater awareness, an Intercultural Dialogue on 'Community Identity and National Identity' with various prominent public speakers and personalities in Menara Integriti Kuala Lumpur

Comment: Preservation of what is slowly getting lost

d) EDUCATION-related Identity article in the *Image Archive*

29 May 1972

Paraphrase: Forum on the Identity of Malaysia's National University (UKM)

Comment: Reconsideration of redefinition of the role of higher education

e) TOURISM-related Identity article in the *Image Archive*

1 September 2013

Paraphrase: (Kuching) Santubong, essence of city's physical identity

Comment: Natural branding items for tourism

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