Cultural aspects of information revolution : Malaysian experience

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CULTURAL ASPECTS OF THE INFORMATION
REVOLUTION: MALAYSIAN EXPERIENCE

1. Introduction

This paper attempts to discuss the cultural impact of the information revolution in Malaysia, particularly on the indigenous culture. So far the intensive research in this aspect has not been done by our Malaysian scholar. Bearing that in mind this paper is not based on any emphirical study but based on general observations as well as our experienced on the study of Malay Culture in general. Thus we propose to view the impact of information revolution on the indigenous culture from the cultural historical perspective.

2. Working definition

In this context the information revolution is view as a mode of information transfer and its consequences in the indigenous culture. So, it includes both the material as well as cultural knowledge or system of ideas.[1]

3. Malaysian Experience

To represent our case or to share our experience we have chosen the Malays as an example due to several factors. First, the particular ethnic group is undergoing rapid social and cultural transformation

as a result of economic development. Secondly, the Malay
culture represent the core of the national culture of Malaysia.
It is appropriate to focus our discussion on the impact of
information revolution in this particular group.

4. Traditional Mode of Information Transfer

Based on the mode of information transfer the cultural development
of the Malays can be divided into two: pre-Islamic and Islamic era.
Before Islamic influences established itself in the Malay world,
Hinduism was the main cultural force exerting it influences on to
the indigenous culture in this area.[2] Compared to the Islamic
influences the Hindu influences were not everlasting even though
some traces of its remnant still can be seen today. The not
everlasting effect is due to various factors such as the super-
ficiality of it influences and the nature of its influence. The
main reason for that is due to the mode of information transfer
in which only the istana (court) could act as the cultural center
of learning as well as center for information collection and
distribution.[3]

The court could act as a meeting place between local and foreign
scholars (Brahmin) who especially brought in to teach and educate
the ruling class. Through such meetings and gatherings new

knowledge pertinent to the local dignitaries were collected, "stored" and closely guarded. Whatever the massage that reached the masses was minimal. To say the least the information that trickled to the masses were those information or knowledge that helped to strenghten or sustain the social structure during that time. In such a situation where the information was monopolised by certain class or group of individual the masses did not benefit much.

In that context the cultural impact on the masses was negligible and because of that the Hindu influences in general could not established strongly among the masses. Since the masses attachment to Hinduism was superficial naturally those Hindu influences could be erroded with ease and replaced by other stronger cultural forces such as Islam.

Whatever remain or those considered beneficial were syncritised with Islamic influences.[4]

With the arrival of Islam the situation was different. Islam does not belong to any single individual or certain class of individual. Islam belong to every follower. Every follower has the obligation and responsibility to learn and practice as well as preach Islam.

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Every follower has a role to perform. The follower would be deemed
as a failure if he or she failed to follow the teaching and fulfill
the responsibility and obligation required by Islam. This
revolutionised the mode of information transfer. Such a situation
was ideal for the transfer of information to the masses. The
court is no longer able to monopolised and solely act as a learning
and information "storage" centre. Such a situation is ideal for
the emerging of several forms of formal and informal institutions
that functionally act as a centre of learning and information
transmission. To name a few the formal institutions appeared in
the forms of pondok (religious school), mosque and surau.[5] The
arrival of Islam also strengthened the communal social gatherings
as an informal institutions. Even though these institutions basically
were religion oriented they also acted as an opportunity for the
exchanging of general and specialised knowledge. There were the
places where people met regularly not only to discuss matters
pertaining to religion and performing their obligatory duties, but
also offered the opportunity for the discussion of matters
beneficial to the society as a whole.

New informations were passed to the others or were given some
thought. Previously gained information were given new thought.

Consequently they were not only exposed to new ideas but also increasing their knowledge repertoire because those man of learning who acted as their source of information travelled widely. Some of those scholars frequently travelled to Mecca.[6] Some even stayed in Mecca for several years to study Islam. Thus, through those gatherings opportunity for sharing experiences always exist.

The informed mode of information transferred and shared appeared in the form of theatrical - ritual performances such as <u>Wayang Kulit</u>, <u>Main Puteri</u>, <u>Mak Yong</u>, and <u>Boria</u>. Those performances were interspersed with several comical interludes. Some thought provoking matters related to daily life were presented cynically through those comical interludes. Those performances transferred information to the masses. Those performances depicted life experiences of personalities presented. Since in those days those performances were treated not only as a form of entertainment but also considered as a mode for information transfer the messages were expressed in the layman's terms. Thus, its impact on the masses was significant.

Islam not only encourage religious gatherings but also socio-

religious gatherings. Since Islam is not only a religion but also
a way of life, so human behavior is not only religion-oriented but
also social-oriented. One form of socio-religious gathering is
kenduri. Traditionally such gathering is typical to all Muslim
society, [8] particularly the Malay society which kenduri an irregular
affair. This is one of the ways for reestablishing contacts and
strengthening the espirit de corps. On the other hand these
regular activities could act and was considered as an ideal
opportunity for sharing experiences or exchange of information.

5.   Modern Mode of Information Transfer

With the arrival of the western influences into the Malay world
the mode of information transfer again undergone another revolution.
The British introduced printing press, telecommunication technology,
new education system and new economic system. With the availability
of those networks information could be distributed to the masses
easily faster and wider coverage including local as well as foreign
information.

Malaysians experienced another tremendous change after the colonial
intervention into the Malay States. Although the main concern of
the colonial power was to exploit the main natural resources of the

country, the economic development of the colonial sector had some impact on the cultural development of the Malays.[9] The colonialist concentrated on the development of the urban centers. The colonial urban centers acted as a major center of change. These centers were not only the center of economic and political change but also the center of social and cultural development. The impact of the 19th century industrial revolution in the West were felt in Malaysia through the introduction of new technology and modern knowledge. These were the new sources of the information revolution.

The colonial era had been considered by scholars as the starting point for the introduction of the western concept of modernization and urbanization in this country as a whole. In contrast with the previous cultural forces, the western influences had the capability of effecting structural changes to the Malaysian Society in general. But the rapid development in the urban centers had limited impact on the majority of the Malays who were dominant in the rural areas. The colonial development programs created the economic and social imbalances between the urban and the rural. The urban-based modernization process of this era benefited those Malaysians who were urban-dwellers especially the non-Malays. The Malays were left alone and were allowed to carry on their usual

traditional way of life. The construction of infrastructure such as roads and railway lines throughout the Peninsular especially for the purpose of economic development, provided the communication facilities to the rural Malays. This facilitated the frequent movement and contact of the rural Malays with urban centers and generated information flow from urban to rural areas. In due process urbanization aroused the awareness of the rural society about the rapid development that occured at the urban centers. Thus it not only changed their view of life but most important was the spread of information, for instant, new technology and cultural knowledge.

The colonialist introduced the western concept of western education system to the Malaysians. The western education system were also introduced to the rural areas but with modification so as to ensure that the rural Malays remained a rural Malay. The new education system which was entirely based on western model differed from the traditional - religions "pondok" system. The mode of information transfer became institutionalized. This system which focused on reading and writing helped the Malays to developed their ability to read and write this enabled them to acquire more knowledge and information through reading written materials, such as newspapers, books and periodicals that were

readily available at that time.

Malaysians in general experienced another drastic change with the introduction the technology by colonial power. These technological change not only had facilitated the information revolution, but most important it had changed the social and cultural system of the Malays. The invention and introduction of printing press to this country, initially enabled the British to help producing local newspapers and other periodicals, later followed by the urban Malays and other ethnic groups to publish their own papers respectively.[10] The expansion of modern education system in the country had generated the publication of newspapers, periodicals and books. With the modern technology, reading materials were mass produced and extensively distributed to the masses.

Through these reading materials had help spread the information and knowledge to all walks of life. This phenomenon is entirely different compared to the traditional system of information flow and to some extend marked a change in the mode of information transmission.

The other technological change pertaining to the information revolution included the telecommunication system introduced by

the colonial. But in the early days this system was costly compared to the printed material, so only the rich could afford this facilities.

The modern technology also involved other aspects of everyday life of the masses. It helped improve the economic and social activities of the people.

The modern technology and technological knowledge introduced to Malaysian the society not only had helped and improved their life style, but also had changed their traditional values and world-views such as the traditional belief that spirit that caused sickness had been replaced with the new knowledge of modern medical care.[11]

6.   Post - Independent Mode of Information Revolution

Malaysia, as a developing country was exposed economically and politically to the international influences. Since the colonial era, Malaysia had been dependent on the developed countries, particularly the West, economically and politically. Our natural resources caters the industrial needs of the developed countries, with the consequences of our economic stability depend on the international economic climate.

To develop the country, Malaysia needs trained and qualified people. To obtain such manpower we send our students to study at the higher institutions in developed countries. When these students returned they will apply or transfer what they had learned to their society. This positively as well as negatively influence the cultural development of the nation as a whole. With these modern technological communication facilities information from the developed countries could be transmitted at a faster rate and more effectively. Urban centers in Malaysia acted as the center of change. The information from urban centers in the developed countries flows into our urban centers and from here it spread to all over the country in a short period of time. Although our Malaysian government lately encouraged Malaysian to follow the Japanese economic system (look east policy), this is a matter of restrengthening the cultural, political and economic relationship with the developed countries. So, Malaysian became part of lop-sided relationship and being dependent on developed countries rapidly heightened the flow of cultural elements from the developed countries into Malaysia. With coming in of the printed materials, films, tapes, videos and other medium of communications from the developed countries, Malaysians were exposed to the latest cultural development that took place in the developed countries.

The infilteration of new cultural aspects easily influenced the

Malaysian on one hand, the information transfer from the developed countries to the underdevelop countries like Malaysia, could helped to improve all aspects of life, but on the other hand, those information particularly the cultural elements have slowly replaced the Malay traditional culture.

Shaped during the colonial era, our values and attitudes a high regard to the western civilization. So, anything brought from the West or developed countries, sometimes were selectively accepted by the Malaysian. Some of those cultural elements symbolised a social status.

Since independent, the Malays felt that their cultural identity had been eroded and weakened by the foreign cultural elements as a result of the rapid information revolution. As an independent nation, the national identity were considered very important by the Malays especially in the context of our relationship with other countries at the international level. So, the process of the national cultural formation has been discussed and became a big issue among the Malaysians. Finally, as agreed in the National Culture Convention in Kuala Lumpur, 1971, the national culture should be based on the indigenous cultural system and Islamic values. But these issues have been raised by other

ethnic groups in Malaysia especially regarding the concept of indigenous which is not clearly define. But it is understood by the majority that the indigenous refers to the Malays.

In the process of national cultural formation we need to identify the cultural tradition of the Malays in particular, and yet on the other hand Malaysia needs to develop and has experienced rapid change culturally. At this juncture, we are facing a delima: on one hand we need to encourage people to appreciate or valued our traditional cultural heritage and element so as maintain our cultural identity. While on the other hand we want to improve our economic well being or our way of life especially to be at par with the developed countries. In this respect, with the coming of foreign cultural elements, especially the elements of popular culture from the developed countries easily influenced and adopted by the younger generation, making it very difficult to stop from influencing the masses. Such cultural development had quickened the pace of replacing our traditional cultural elements with the foreign cultural elements.

The popular culture, which initially emerged during the colonial era, with the help of the modern technology, transmitted the western urban values to the Malaysian urban society. Later, the

popular culture became mass consumption and readily accepted
by the Malays especially the younger generations. To the
underdevelop nation like Malaysia, the popular culture
symbolised the modern and latest cultural development in the
developed countries and thus are internationally recognised.
The Government had been trying aggressively to curb certain
aspects of negative cultural elements followed by Malaysian.
Major part of the popular culture for mass consumption, were
imported from the developed countries in the form of films,
video tapes, music and so forth, were accepted with high regard.
Through these popular cultural elements, Malaysians particularly
Malays have been exposed to the foreign values. The materialistic
and individualistic attitudes of the developed society is becoming
part of our people's way of life. The so-called modern values and
attitudes also easily influenced the rural community including
remote kampung or villages. The traditional values and attitudes
such as the communal sharing system, kerjasama, respect the old
and traditional customs, slowly being eroded and replaced with
the modern and urban values. The process of modernization and
urbanization to certain aspects could be accepted but when the
traditional values and attitudes were slowly eroded, as believed
by some group of Malays, it could not be encouraged. Anyway,
the above effects show that the information transfer from developed

countries to our urban centres could easily be transmitted and to influenced the rural Malays.

As mentioned, education is an effective means of information transfer to the masses. An improvement in our education system had the effect of encouraging rural Malays especially the younger generation to look for a better job in urban centers. The industrial development in urban centers is the major 'pull factor' of these rural Malays. These people who have the social relationship with the rural community could be considered as cultural broker or mediator that effected the cultural change in the rural sector. Besides that, education played a very important role in generating the social mobility of the rural folks. The opportunity given to the rural Malays by the Government helped them to experience the social mobility from traditional to the modern sector.

Recently, the phenomenon of Islamic revival among the Malays perhaps could strike a balance between the rapid socio-economic development and spiritual needs of the society. Actually the Islamic revival is a national as well as international phenomenon, it reflect the world-wide awareness among the Muslims to strengthen their belief. In a way Islamic revival among the Malays is an alternative or as a force to check the rapid westernization process experienced lately

especially among the urban and rural Malays. And an Islamic revival also could be viewed as an idea to transmit the Islamic values to the national cultural formation.

The Malays lately have extensively experienced an information rev-lution. And this process of course have the impact on the traditional culture. In the aspects of social norms and values, the Malays felt that their tradition should be maintained. They considered the foreign norms and values comparatively were not suitable with their needs. Even though they experienced information revolution in the other aspects the traditional norms and values particularly based on the need of Islam should be practised and developed among the younger generations. In the process of national cultural formation, the common norms and values of all the ethnic groups in Malaysia should be transmitted through the national education system of the country. Those norms and values which are not suitable with the modern needs should then be replaced with the one considered useful for our future cultural development. The traditional world-view which were considered not functional anymore must be replaced with the modern one.

Thus, as discussed above the economic and social change have influenced the cultural development of the Malays. Lately, with

the widespread of electronic medium of communication which are cheaply available in the market and could be owned by the masses, will further generate the process of information transfer. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the Malays in particular, have shown their willingness to accept the new mode of information which have change their way of life. The intensive Government participation in the rural development programme to promote upgrade the life style of the Malays and availability of basic infrastructure mobilised the rural people and exposed them to the process of modernization and urbanization.

7.   What's the Future?

Thus far, we have traced the historical perspective of information revolution and its cultural impact to the Malaysians. No doubt it that the information revolution acts as an impetus for cultural development in Malaysia. The introduction of new technological knowledge and tools revolutionized the mode of information transfer thus making it easier and possible wider coverage of cultural information flow. Its impact on cultural development through the introduction of external cultural forces was tremendous. Within a short span of time Malay culture had felt its impact.

If that is the case, what holds' for the future? It could be

anticipated that Malaysia which is developing rapidly socially and
economically will further experience another surge of information
revolution with the increase of adoption of sophisticated
technology. Malaysians had already joined the "computer club" or
had entered the computer age even though still at an infancy stage.

What is the effect of another surge of information revolution
culturally is everybody's guess. Hypothetically it can be expressed
that the surge will triggers cultural revitalization which could act
as a cultural force for striking a balance or checking and slowing
down of the process of deteriorating the traditional values. Such
cultural revitalization could stimulate the awareness towards the
needs to preserve as well as propogate and inculcate to the society
the traditional values and norms. Such awareness, if appeared at
the right moment, can slow down the rapid disintegration of
indigenous cultural elements.

Such cultural revitalization could further elevates the level of
appreciation of traditional culture because as noted earlier
awareness of their "roots" and of their cultural identity aroused
the masses awareness of where are they heading to or tracing their
steps how far have they deviates from the original path. Such

awareness would be further strengthened with the increase of
government's effort in restoring, projecting and promoting the
appreciating of the traditional values and norms. Through such
efforts society can develop the capability of differentiating
between consumable and tangible cultural elements. Such awareness
could further escalates cultural revitalization which could
further step up the process of reaccessment of the worthiness of
the traditional cultural elements. Elements that could further
enhance the cultural identity will be aggressively propagated.
The propagation of those elements can be easily done through the
full force utilization of new tools for information transfer.
Even though the new mode of information transfer enhance the flow
of western culture forces, the developing countries were supplied
with new means of information transfer that can be profitably use
to counteract or combat the newly introduced cultural elements so
as to maintain the traditional cultural elements.

Notes

1. See Goodenough, Ward H., Cultural Anthroplogy and Linguistics.
    In Report of the 7th Annual Round Table Meeting on Linguistics
    and Language Study, ed. P. Garvin. Washington D.C., George
    Town University Monograph Series Language and Linguistics no.
    9, 1957.

2. See Winstedt, Richard, The Malays: A Cultural History. London:
    (1972 reprint), pp. 26-33.

3. Further discussion see: <u>ibid</u>, pp. 33-44. H.M. Dahlan, <u>Communication in Peasant Community</u>. Kuala Lumpur: 1979.

4. See Mohd. Taib Osman, <u>Bunga Rampai: Aspects of Malay Culture,</u> Kuala Lumpur: 1984, pp. 264-275.

5. As discussed in H.M. Dahlan, <u>op. cit.</u>   William R. Roff (ed.), <u>Kelantan: Religion, Society and Politics in a Malay State,</u> Kuala Lumpur: 1974.

6. See William R. Roff (ed.), <u>ibid</u>.

7. See Brandon, James R. <u>Theatre in Southeast Asia</u>. Harvard University Press, 1967.

8. See Geertz, Clifford, <u>The Religion of Jawa</u>, The Free Press of Gilencoe, Illinois, 1960, Chpt. 1. H.M. Dahlan, <u>op. cit.</u>

9. Further discussion in Roff, W.R. <u>Origins of Malay Nationalism,</u> Kuala Lumpur, 1978.

10. Roff, W.R., <u>Guide to Malay Periodicals 1876-1941</u>, Singapore, 1961.

11. Chan, P.C.Y, Classification and Concept of Causation of mental Illness in a Rural Community. <u>International Journal of Social Psychiatry</u>, 1970, 14: 205-225.