



Incorporation and Exploration of Local Imageries and Identities in Malaysia's Graffiti Art

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Abstract. The production of graffiti art in Malaysia can be traced back to the late 1990's. Since then, graffiti art has been embraced by local municipalities as well as the National Visual Art Gallery (NVAG) in their public programming and activities. Despite these positive developments, how the local graffiti artists infused local imageries and identities in their work had not been examined. The parallels between graffiti art practices and the development of modern art in Malaysia, made the emergence of forms and themes that reflect local identity in graffiti art not a surprise, as these were also the inherent issues explored by local artists in the domain of fine arts. This paper, hence, discusses the different approaches taken by Malaysia's graffiti artists, how they incorporate and explored their visual ideas rooted in hip hop culture and the New York City Subway graffiti, with local imageries and identities. This paper will also discuss the history and background of Malaysia's graffiti art as well as how Malaysian graffiti artists employed various local imageries and identity.

Keywords: *graffiti art; local identities; Malaysian graffiti art; urban culture.*

1 Introduction

From the point of etymology, graffiti was derived from the classical Greek word *graphein* meaning writing and from Italian's *graffito* referring to 'scratches.' Therefore, graffiti refers to scratches or paintings on a wall surface [1]. If viewed in this context, then the history of graffiti could be argued to be connected to early drawings from prehistoric times done on cave walls intended for communication [2].

In these modern times, the term is associated with the city or the urban environment, including all forms of simple to complex signs and color compositions using spray paint, sweep paint, marker pens, stickers as well as stencils [3]. In Malaysia, the development of graffiti art was rather slow. It must be noted, however, that in the context of this paper, the authors use the word 'artist' in reference to graffiti artist, as opposed to the word 'writer' as the topic of this discussion is not limited to the writing style in the form of graffiti.

A few initial local writings stated that graffiti's earliest appearance was in Batu Pahat in the state of Johor during the late 1990s. At that time, a young crew known as Phobiaklik started doing graffiti before they moved to Kuala Lumpur [4-6]. The term "crew" is used among graffiti artists referring to graffiti art that often work together [7]. This development was an interesting parallel with the emergence of Hip hop music in Malaysia in the early 1990s with groups such as KRU, 4U2C and Nico, as well as artists like Too Phat and Poetic Ammo in the latter part of the nineties. Some music videos use graffiti as background, such as music videos by Too Phat, Jezebel, Just A Lil Bit and Anak Ayam-Freak to the Beat. With hip hop music, video clips, stage sets, graffiti demonstrations became another set of attraction during the hip hop concerts. Since then, many graffiti art could be seen around Kuala Lumpur such as in Petaling Street, Bangsar, Bukit Bintang, Central Market, Klang River, Jelatek River and Pudu. Graffiti art also became a tourist attraction in Malacca along the Bandar Hilir River, part of the Malacca River Art Project.

The context of Malaysian graffiti art development and trajectories is far removed from the influence of graffiti art in the United States. In modern history, graffiti art began in the United States, during the late 1960s in Philadelphia and then became popular in New York. The appearance of graffiti was later associated with a new culture or sub-culture among youth community groups aligned with the hip hop music and culture, known as Hip hop graffiti or the New York style [8]. Hip hop and rap emerged in the mid-1970s among the African American population in New York. There are four elements of Hip hop culture, such as rap, DJ, break-dancing and graffiti art [9-10]. In its early appearances, the graffiti could be detected in the form of graffiti 'tag' -- a signature of the graffiti artist's own name written in a particular style on the wall. During that time, however, the size and number of tags were still limited and seen in certain areas only [11,7,2].

The history of graffiti art in Malaysia is shorter; yet, graffiti art is now accepted as part of the entertainment program, marketing approach of certain brand names, and even as part of arts and recreation programs. Brand names such as Levi's, Lee Jeans, Nike, Adidas, Hugo Boss, Sunway Lagoon, Pavilion, Cineleisure, Pepsi, The Curve, Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank (HSBC), TV3, DiGi, ICI Dulux, were among the companies using graffiti art as a form of branding and promotion of their products. Competitions and demonstrations of graffiti arts were held such as the Wall Lords competition organized by big companies like F&N to promote local graffiti arts talents at international level.

Pseudonyms abound, such as Snozze, Kioue, Damis, Sonny, Violent, Nay2, Escape, Tha-b, Mile09, The A80's, Medea, RN, Bibi Chun, Jeng, Anokayer, 2pai, acit, Carpetone, Drew1, Sona, Sheiko (just to name a few). As such, this

paper will use nicknames or abbreviations for graffiti artists as graffiti artists are mostly known by their acronyms. Most of these artists attained tertiary education in either design or arts. A few of these artists even set up their own groups or crews like PhobiaKlik (PHBKLIK), Spray With Style (SWS), KL Zinc Nite Crew (KL ZNZ), The Super Sunday (TSS), VLT, Medium Touch, Rolling the City (RTC), Phiber Wryte (PW), Bloody Monkey Bomber (BMB), and Diverse Crew Precision Technicians (DPT). In many instances, graffiti artists joined more than one group. Some of these graffiti artists even have networking with foreign groups from other Asian and even European countries.

Graffiti became popular and accepted as an urban phenomenon, not only with well known companies, but also with the Kuala Lumpur City Hall (Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur or its acronym DBKL), the Ministry of Youth and Sports which showed its support by designating a special place for graffiti artists on the walls of the Klang River and by organizing international events such as KUL Sign Festival since 2010. The "KUL Sign Festival" is an annual international event organized by the Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL) with other corporate sponsors to consolidate graffiti art in a dedicated area to prevent vandalism and encourage the arts among adolescents.

Besides that, the National Visual Arts Gallery (NVAG) also played a role in boosting the development of graffiti art. Events such as 2009 Graff Jamm at the Pavilion Kuala Lumpur, graffiti arts participation in the 2009 Great Anatolian Meeting of Cultures and Youth Word in Turkey, and the recognition of graffiti art as part of the Susurmasa Exhibition in the same year organized by the NVAG, all added to the recognition of graffiti art within the fine and/or visual arts framework in Malaysia.

2 The Exploration of Local Identities Among Malaysian Graffiti Artists

Most graffiti art produced by Malaysian artists in terms of its style was in line with graffiti art in New York due to the fact that graffiti art culture in Malaysia developed quickly with the help of social media via the Internet. Many websites, including photo sharing ones, and social media domains promote graffiti art. Through these domains, artists shared the work they produced, ideas, techniques and skills. Publication of graffiti art books abroad widely available in the local market also helped the promotion of various graffiti art styles among Malaysian graffiti artists.

For example, 'tags' or activities like tagging are still done by these local artists. Tags refers to nicknames or markings of graffiti artists specific to a place, area, territory; the signature or pen name produced in various sizes -- often easy and

simple. It also purports as a code name or identity of the graffiti artists [12]. Although this type has a certain style, according to Tucker, the artistic and aesthetic value is debatable [13]. The history of tag began in the late 1960s in New York when graffiti artists started to write their names on the walls of buildings, billboards and even on public transport like the underground railway known as subway.

In Malaysia, artists use wide magic markers, or spray paint to produce tags such as 'Carpetone,' 'Damis,' 'Sonny,' 'Violent,' 'Nay2,' 'Escape' and others and it also contain the crew's name or initials such as 'TLG,' 'PHBKLLK,' 'SWS,' 'KL ZNZ,' and 'TSS'. As taggers get creative with their colors and lettering, the next step is to produce a 'throw-up' – a fast way of writing names using layers of spray paint in limited colors. Throw-up generally consists of at least one color outline and one layer of full-color. Kioque's throw-up, for instance, consists of bubble shapes that form difficult-to-read letters in blue, red and thick black and red outline. Graffiti artists usually begin with tagging and later develop their own style.

Unlike tags and throw-ups, graffiti art consists of simple yet complex writings that could also be a diverse mix of realistic images or characters and even abstract elements. Graffiti could be categorized as a form of art due to its own high artistic values. Oftentimes, the work itself involved ideas, planning and consideration of the elements and principles of art and formalistic approach, besides being a rewarding activity. Graffiti art, like visual art, is regarded as a form of emotional release that meets the criteria of aesthetics through the combination of color variations of spray paint techniques [2]. There are a few basic graffiti styles such as stencils, stickers, bubbles, 3D, and blockbuster. Stencil, for example, is made of a picture sprayed from a pre-cut pattern. In Malaysia, although 'stencil' is equally used as a signature like tags, but there are also works in the style of graffiti produced in large scale, such as *Dynamite Soldier* (2008) by Violent (VLT Crew).

Once the graffiti artists have acquired these basic styles, most of them will develop a more complex style or 'piece,' short for 'masterpiece.' Among graffiti artists, 'masterpiece' is considered as the most attractive form of graffiti. It requires less time for painting because its size is larger and more complex [7]. Refined and good graffiti artists will attempt to produce highly complex and stylized letterings of 'wildstyle', 'semi wildstyle' and works like 'blockbuster' in a larger scale. A good 'piece' would exert its own complex style attained from the high formalistic values and visual features in the work produced. Besides that, graffiti art was also influenced by artists and stylistic approaches in art styles such as landscape, realistic and abstract. Jeng,

Bibi Chun and Anokayer are among those who have produced numerous graffiti artworks in this style, including paintings of international actor Jackie Chan in the California Fitness Centre, Kuala Lumpur by Kioue and a realistic portrait of a local director Yasmin Ahmad in *RIP* (2009) by Kioue and Jeng. To draw in this style is considered very challenging and requires high skills as the style requires precision in drawing and coloring using spray paint. Besides that, graffiti art is also highly influenced by popular culture, such as the cartoon approach.

Despite the excitement of exploring the already established graffiti styles, a number of graffiti artists took their own initiative to combine the technique of these modern visual images with various local imageries. Certainly the appearance of new forms of graffiti art produced by graffiti artists around the world inspired local graffiti artists to infuse local cultural visual elements both distinct and unique. The localized artistic style approach that imbued local imageries and nuances were not new in the context of fine arts [14]. Many Malaysian artists in the subsequent decades after Independence were inspired by regional imageries and subjects, an example being the *Pago-pago Series* by Latiff Mohidin. Since then, with the 1970s and the 1980s promulgation of Malay and Islamic identities through the National Cultural Congress and the various Islamisation policies introduced in various sectors in the country, many Malaysian artists began to be preoccupied with their quest to explore and understand the notion of national identity.

It appeared that graffiti artists also became interested in the issue of local identities albeit for different reasons. This interest by these graffiti artists were not because they were highly concerned and aligned with government initiated policies made about two and a half decades before. In the domain of fine arts, this inclination waned since the late 1980s and early 1990s. It can be suggested, however, that the local identities and imageries approach were taken perhaps due to the realization that there was a need for uniqueness or originality to distinguish graffiti art produced here in Malaysia from those produced in New York or any other parts of the world. With the global networks available to them through the internet, Malaysian graffiti artists were introduced to the works of other graffiti artists who infused their local and regional identities in their work.

Graffiti artists like Kwanyin Clan, Shizentomotel and A1one were among those who employed various local imageries as the main elements in their graffiti. Kwanyin Clan, a group of graffiti artists from China, for example, produced graffiti artwork that resembled paper cuttings, adopted Chinese paintings formats and popular local images such as dragons, bamboo plants, layers of mountains, and Chinese calligraphy in the classic Chinese ink painting format.

This resulted in masterpieces that were different from their Western counterparts. Japan's graffiti artists or *rakugaki* also created a unique writing technique combined with *kanji* or Japanese characters. Besides that, images of anime and manga characters of Sumo, Samurai warriors, Geisha girls were among these graffiti artists choice of cultural subjects and imageries. Graffiti artists like Shizentomotel became well known for his usage of Japanese anime and manga subjects. Graffiti artists from Middle Eastern countries such as Iran, Lebanon and Palestine on the other hand, explored the Arab and Persian calligraphy to deliver messages of their countries' internal political uncertainties. In Iran, for example, Alone experimented with a more stylized form of calligraphy in his works *Fall II* (2011) and *Black* (2013).

The development of Malaysian graffiti art underwent a very positive change. Although many graffiti artists were bound by the stylistic forms introduced by those from the United States and Europe; like their colleagues from China, Japan and Iran, Malaysian artists produced works imbued with more local imageries and features, oftentimes illustrating local scenes and people.

Graffiti art produced by these artists do not only depict the local angst of the Malaysian youngsters like those in New York, but these artists who are mostly art and design graduates incorporate and explored local imageries and cultural identities that are common in the country. Thus, it can be argued that Malaysian graffiti art developed its own form of identities from Malaysian context like how their counterparts from China, Japan and Iran experienced. It must be noted that local identities in this sense, were not limited to visual cultural identity, pertaining to local traditions and crafts, but also included graffiti that visualized the local tropical colors, colloquial Malay language and proverbs, selection of images reflecting local people and life.

Efforts to give a new lease of life to the style of Malaysia's graffiti art could be detected as early as 2009 when a few graffiti artists began to incorporate the local imageries into their work such as Sonny, Bibi Chun and Kioe. These 'Malaysian-style graffiti' was the result of the approach taken by the TLG or the Thalanjang Family, the group established by Sonny, Bibi Chun together with Kioe (from the TSS) also joined by nearly twenty other graffiti artists. The establishment of this approach in the Malaysian graffiti art scene among other things was to redirect the country's graffiti art towards a more all inclusive multiracial concept. As explained by Eva McGovern:

"TLG encourages artists to seek inspiration from their local culture and heritage. Artists are now obsessively using intense tropical colour, as well as direct lifting and re-appropriations of subjects from Malaysian pop and traditional culture. This use of colour and playful

characters reflects the vibe of the community which unapologetically and playfully celebrates life” [15]

Graffiti art works driven by those from the TLG group were mostly in the form of collaboration or individual's work. These styles were driven by themes and ideas as the basis of their graffiti making. These were done by utilizing Malaysian tropical colors, pop culture, traditional culture such as the visual elements inspired by Malaysian hand-drawn *batik* (a cloth that is traditionally made using a manual wax-resist dyeing technique), *wayang kulit* or shadow puppetry, Malay wood carvings and the natural environment such as the visuals inspired by the roots of the *pokok ara* or a ficus tree [16]. They also conveyed expressions and described the identity of the artists, the social and cultural issues, issues of identity construction through graffiti art abstract forms and expressions.

A few of these approaches can be seen in the graffiti art by THEY, Kioue, Sonny, Bibichun and Snozze. THEY or Mahathir Masri's graffiti artwork, for example, were inspired by local hand-drawn *batik* textile. Therefore, his graffiti has more organic shapes, are brightly colored and full of decorative elements like those of *batik* cloth. This tendency resulted from his background as a fashion and textile arts graduate from the Malaysian Institute of Art (MIA). He graduated best student from the institution and won the coveted Endon Batik Award in 2008. His work had the wildstyle graffiti techniques that are difficult to interpret for those unfamiliar with the forms. Wildstyle usually consists of complicated interlocking letters, arrows, embellishments, curved lines and drawn in three-dimension. Instead of only using interlocking letters, THEY treated his wall like a satin textile in which he explored various line qualities and colors. Bright colors such as pink were used for the background and variety of line qualities with lighter shades of vibrant colors were used both in *Mak* (2010) and *Lalang Tak Menang* (2010) (Figure 1). *Lalang Tak Menang* (2010) for example, was designed to be more intricate and complex with layers of bold lines in black and white and a lot of dotting, reminding us of the areas that remain white after using *canting*.

THEY's and Bibi Chun's collaboration piece for Meeting of Style (2010) entitled *Dua Alam* (2010) combined both the elements from *batik* painting and *wayang kulit* or shadow puppet characters. *Wayang kulit*, or shadow puppet, is leather construction of puppets that is associated with the puppet theatre performance based on the Hindu epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. In this graffiti work, both of these elements from the traditional art were given an urban pop twist interpretation. The shadow puppet characters could be seen in the turquoise and pink headed figures on top intertwined with various lines and colors typical of THEY's style at the bottom of the work. Instead of using bright

pink, the background is turquoise and various lines ala *batik* wax resist dyeing technique were explored in the bottom half of the work (Figure 2). The usage of elements from batik and shadow puppetry could also be seen in a graffiti art titled *Graffiti Ala Malaysia* (2009) by Sonny, Bibichun and Kioue that was made for the Great Anatolian Meeting of Cultures and Youth Word (2009) in Turkey, an example of work using the clear local identity. In this work, however, local carvings, batik and wayang kulit characters were injected with a new lease of life in the form of a more urban graffiti design with bright colors like purple, red, yellow, blue and green.



Figure 1 THEY, *Lalang Tak Menang* (2010), graffiti. (Photo courtesy of the artist)

Kioue or Zulkifli Salleh's strengths are his creativity and skills in producing wildstyle graffiti. His exploration of the local identity was in the usage of nature in the tropics that added a unique element to his graffiti artwork. Similarly like THEY, Kioue used more organic forms and bright colors like green, orange and blue in abstract designs to make his work more cheerful and lively. Although his creations had a tropical and organic look, it did not lose the wildstyle effect which was more towards the mechanical and tectonic forms. An interesting feature about his work is that it was inspired by Malay proverbs in the titles such as "Pecah Ruyung" and "Di Sini Langit Dijunjung." It must be noted that in both Kioue and THEY's graffiti, Malay language terms were used as the titles such as "Mak" (which means mother), Malay proverbs such as "Di Sini Langit Dijunjung" and phrases that allude to Malay proverbs were used as titles "Lalang Tak Menang," "Roboh Dinding," "Pohon," and "Susuk Dinding."



Figure 2 THEY and Bibi Chun, *Dua Alam*, 2010, for Meeting of Style Malaysia 2010. (Photo courtesy of the artist)

Besides *batik* and *wayang kulit* elements, local identity in graffiti art in Malaysia could also be found in the works produced by Snozze, a graduate of the Malaysian Institute of Art (MIA). Graffiti artwork entitled *Gajah in Da House* (Elephant in the House) and *Gajah Langgar Kampung* (Elephant Hits the Village) (2010) (Figure 3), produced at the Central Market and Jelatek, Kuala Lumpur are examples with unique local identity values. These graffiti artworks in wildstyle were inspired by the structure of Negeri Sembilan state's Minangkabau roof. Explaining his style as "Minang Kaw Kaw Bau" he clearly showed the cultural identity of a particular ethnic group, residing in a district in Malaysia. He is from Negeri Sembilan where Minangkabau culture and language is strongly practiced by some descendants of migrants from the Minang-speaking region in Sumatra. Like THEY and Kioe, Snozze also produced works using urban and vernacular colloquial language. This could be seen in titles such as *Yo Jang* (2010). On an almost parallel approach, graffiti artists Sonny, Bibichun, Tony and Herman Duang were brought by NVAG and the Ministry of Tourism Malaysia to execute graffiti art on the Minangkabau roof of the Malaysian pavilion at the Shanghai Expo 2010 in China. This roof

was painted large-scale graffiti art with *batik* design patterns on it in bright warm colors [17].



Figure 3 Snozze, *Gajah Langgar Kampung*, 2010, graffiti art at Jelatek Riverbank, Kuala Lumpur. (Photo courtesy of the artist)

A few Malaysian graffiti artists were also highly influenced by popular culture by producing cartoon approach in their graffiti works. Among graffiti artists who regularly use the cartoon style are Bibi Chun, RN or Raduan Noruddin, Snozze, Violent and the SWS group. RN, a painter, was educated in the arts at the Universiti Perguruan Sultan Idris (Sultan Idris Education University) and the University of Malaya. This background, with his ability to write graffiti in Jawi script, added uniqueness to his work mostly in cartoon-styled graffiti. Interestingly, RN's use of a monochromatic scheme in his cartoon styled work is a reminiscent of cartoon characters appearing in a local humor magazine. Cartoon-characters in *pelikat* (sarong for male) and women wearing *tudung* (veil) reflected the Malay culture. His graffiti art such as *Satu Isteri Empat Anak* (One Wife Four Children) (2009) (Figure 4) and *Tembang in Kuale* (2009) in Jelatek, Kuala Lumpur, left the viewer with a deep impression and of Malay life. The use of *jawi* (the Arabic alphabet adapted for writing the Malay language) was also used in the work entitled *Satu Isteri Empat Anak* (One Wife Four Children) (2009).



Figure 4 RN, *Satu Isteri Empat Anak* (One Wife Four Children) (2009) (Photo courtesy of the artist).

The usage of *jawi* either by other local graffiti artists or international artists like Alone, has also inspired Kioue in exploring the art form of calligraphy in his graffiti. This could be seen in a number of works he titled as *Kiouenism* and *Kiouegruffy*.

Graffiti artwork is usually produced on a large scale involving many graffiti artists painting popular images and icons such as leaders such as the *One Malaysia Faces* by Kioue and Mist149, graffiti at Bukit Kiara Sports Complex that portrays Malaysian Prime Ministers, graffiti that features Malaysian iconic buildings and even historical events. In the graffiti produced for One Malaysia Jam 2009 by Violent and Bibi Chun, two characters in cartoon forms, the first in the Chinese traditional attire holding a Malaysian flag and the second a Malay in the *sampin* (male ornate sarong usually worn with Malay attire for male), masked with the Malaysian flag pattern. Various communities in Malaysia often add a unique identity in the art of graffiti. There are also works of graffiti art produced in conjunction with certain festivals, for example, *Selamat Hari Raya* by Barbie, Nas-El and Poison Pills, *Rangooli Festival* (2010) by Sonny, Kioue, Snozze and Tha-B, *Happy Fasting* (2010) by Kioue. In addition, there is also graffiti art produced for National celebrations such as the celebration of the country's Independence, government sponsored youth programs such as the Rakan Muda, and others.

3 Conclusion

Overall, the aspirations reflected in Malaysian graffiti artists in exploring local identities in terms of its imageries were efforts that should be commended and supported. Although still new in exploring the basics pertaining to the Western-style approach, the initiative of - Malaysian graffiti artists in introducing local identity in today's practice is commendable. Most of these graffiti artists did not totally reject, but took a more tolerant and positive stance in trying to expand, or adapt to match the context and point of view of other Malaysians. The appreciation and values of identity, the expression of positive values, the injection of critical and constructive meaning, as well as visible support created a new breath in the local identity in graffiti art in Malaysia. It must be noted that these graffiti artists, no longer self-taught, attained formal education at institutions of higher learning in art and design, a few being local visual artists who treat graffiti art as an alternative form of expression.

More importantly, the awareness of the artists and their enthusiasm for graffiti art were not only motivated by their own personal artistic satisfaction or based on their personal nature, but also espoused the importance of the bilateral response between the viewer and the artist. In view of the fact of these graffiti artworks being usually in the public setting, artists needed to take into account other aspects that would enable graffiti art to be accepted positively without limiting the artist in terms of bold ideas. This should be in tandem with attempts by other Malaysian artists who dared to inject critical ideas in the form of social criticism in the local visual arts scene. Based on these strings of positive developments, we can observe how graffiti art was introduced in institutional and commercial galleries. The efforts made by the BSVN in promoting graffiti arts should be applauded, as in a way, it lifted the graffiti art to a level at par with other forms of visual arts. Placing graffiti art in line with other visual arts was a commendable form of appreciation. It is greatly hoped that more artists active in the realm of graffiti would tirelessly pursue their various forms of exploration in further establishing Malaysia's local identity in their work in the imminent future.

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