Culture and Identity in Selected New Media Artworks in Malaysia 1993-2007

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Abstract. Contextual analysis studies based on cultural and identity aspects of fine art practice are still limited in Malaysia, especially concerning new media art, although new media as an artistic tool was introduced as early as the 1990s. Since the seminal exhibition on E-art was in 1997, since then systematic examination of new media artworks and their role in the Malaysian art history has only been limitedly done. The early approaches of new media art were varied, yet the subject matter, as discussed in this paper, was still mostly informed by the general proclivities of Malaysia artists at that time. Thus, it can be seen that despite the new technology used and explored, the subject matter of these works is still aligned with similar concerns and contents as can be found in contemporaneous works using traditional media. Thus, as this paper demonstrates, the themes of cultural identity and culture related issues and concerns still persisted as the main subject matter of early Malaysian new media artworks, as can be seen in the oeuvres of Hasnul Jamal Saidon, Liew Kungyu, Niranjan Rajah, Yee I-Lann and T.C. Liew.

Keywords: *culture and identity; Malaysian art; National Cultural Policy; New Media art; postmodernity.*

1   Introduction

The development of information and communication technologies has brought many changes to every aspect of life, be it social, economic, or political conditions, which will undoubtedly shape the thinking and behavior of people. In fact, as stated by Manuel Castells:

> "*Networks constitute the new social morphology of our societies, and the diffusion of networking logic substantially modifies the operation and outcomes in processes of production, experience, power, and culture*" [1].

As we are living in an information-based society in the midst of rapid technological change, we may not be able to get away from our dependence on technology. For example, the concept of the *global* or *universal village*, introduced in 1960 [2], describes the interactive world's future without boundaries as a result of the development of information technology. Now, almost 60 years later, the concept is actually a condition that is happening in our

life whether we realize it or not, on top of that, Malaysia is a multi-ethnic nation with different cultural backgrounds and ways of life, Malaysia has always had to deal with the complexity of nation building as well as the constant technological change and advancement.

Following the racial riots on the 13th of May 1969, the National Movement Council introduced *Rukun Negara* as the national ideology of the country. It outlines five fundamental national principles of Malaysia: belief in God, loyalty to the King and country, supremacy of the constitution, rule of law, and values and morality. Subsequently, other policies have attempted to rectify the social gaps in this multicultural society since the 13th of May racial riots, such as the New Economic Policy (1971-1990), National Development Policy (1991-2000), and National Vision Policy (2001-2010), and beyond that the '*Rancangan Malaysia*' (Malaysia Plan), which is framed for every five years.

In 1991, Tun Mahathir Mohamad's concept *Wawasan 2020* (Vision 2020) raised again the polemic on identity by espousing a *Bangsa Malaysia* (Malaysian nation) in terms of racial or *bangsa* (ethnic) identification that can only be achieved with the existence of positive economic, political and social indicators [3]. In 2009, Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak then introduced *1Malaysia*, another rhetoric device to achieve ethnic and national unity, and efficient governance. Such calls for national identity were always implemented through government policies that encouraged unity and tolerance between individuals from the different racial and cultural backgrounds inherited from Malaysia's history under British colonization.

The National Culture Policy (NCP), inspired by the National Culture Congress (NCC) in 1971, was an impetus for the search of a national identity in the Malaysian art scene. It has been described as a policy that indicates the shape of, and creates and supports the nation's identity at a higher level, in line with the government's aspirations for national development [4].[1] This policy has encouraged artists to use local cultural elements as the basis of exploration for their art. Since then the interrelated impact of the relationships between social and cultural constructions on identity building or the questioning process in art practice can be observed in the work produced by Malaysian artists.

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[1] The following three main principles are the basis of this idea: first, the national culture of Malaysia based on the original culture of the people in this region; second, elements from other cultures that are appropriate and desirable and are accepted as part of national culture; and third, Islam as the most important element in the formation of this national culture.

The focus of this essay, however, is to discuss the link between technology and art production by examining a number of selected new media works produced by Malaysian artists. These works, as this paper will argue, reflect the polemics related to the search for a national identity or reflection upon it based on the local socio-cultural context and the concerns of Malaysian artists during the period of investigation. It must be noted that the presence of technology in art brings great significance to the exploration of ideas, media and techniques in the realm of identity and identity search of Malaysian artists. In fact, the exploration by new media artists has caused a paradigm shift in Malaysian art. Although Malaysia was relatively late in adopting the benefits of this development, the basis of commitment and contribution was provided by early artists who explored new media such as computer art, video art and so on.

As has been previously argued, the 1990s witnessed a change in the approach of making art by Malaysian artists, where their themes, approaches and subjects reflected changes in the Malaysian demographics, especially the rise of the Malaysian middle class. Themes such as culture and identity were also an indirect result of the 'mainstream' Malay/Islamic nuance in art production since the late 1970s. Thus, the inclination of artists to produce artworks that reflected their concerns in terms of identity and culture was inevitable. References [5,6], for example, highlight that identity issues and concerns increase in multiracial societies, including Malaysia, or because of any earnest effort of nation building. Thus, the consistent engagement and research in the question of cultural identity was not only limited to those working in cultural studies and sociology within the larger fields of the humanities and the social sciences, but also extended to those working in the context of art who were affected by such rhetoric. As this paper will demonstrate, artworks that involve technology, electronics and digital components also reflect the social, political and cultural impetus of an ethnically diverse country such as Malaysia.

This paper is divided into two sections. The first contains a brief discussion of new media art and the second contains an analysis of specific artworks within the context of Malaysia's identity and cultural issues.

2   New Media Art: Definition and History

Paul [7] has argued that the roots of media art history can be traced through the movements of Dada, Fluxus and conceptual art. Later, works of art became more complex, involving various technologies such as electronics and video. Gere [8] observes that:

> *Since the beginning of the last century some artists have attempted to come to terms with the technological developments of their time,*

including those involving information-communication technologies; and, since the 1960s, artists have engaged seriously in the possibilities of real-time technologies for the making of art under various banners, including computer art, art and technology, New Media art...

Historically, Nam June Paik (1932-2006) was one of the major artists that started the new media art movement through his exploration of electronic images in his video art. "Paik's contribution … his audio visual imagination, and his technological and experimental zeal, were decisive in the recognition of video as an art form" [9]. He was a pioneer of video art and most of his artistic works also had great influence in the late 20th century. Wagner [10] explains:

The fingerprints of Paik's experiments can be found throughout the art world today, as emerging artists continue to push boundaries in the video medium (now, though, they often substitute computer screens for TVs).

Ironically, Paik's experimentation not merely revealed and rejected boundaries in the video medium, Paik also developed an important new art form that challenged and transformed our understanding of visual culture [11]. Hence, this is also the reason why his approach is considered part of new media history [12]. Apart from Nam June Paik, there are also other artists who evolved to keep pace with these policies, including Bill Viola, Joan Jonas, and Bruce Nauman.

The development of technology with the entry of computers around the 1970s is an aspect that has brought about changes to the use of new media in Malaysia. However, its introduction as an art tool only started in the 1980s through minor attempts to produce works of art with machine or computer support. Unlike the impetus of video art as the first form of new media art, early Malaysian new media art was marked by works that were produced digitally and then printed, as initial exploration projects. Thus, in terms of new media art, its development was largely concentrated on practices that integrated media and technology using computer devices, i.e. by using software to manipulate images with the outcome being in the form of digital prints or manipulation of photography and videos that were presented on TV screens.

The series 'Digital Collage' by Ismail Zain, produced in 1988, which includes works such as 'Al Kesah', 'Magic Marker', and 'Nasyid', is a significant example of digital print produced using computers. Thus, digital prints became a new way of creating Malaysian art, although an almost identical work was produced by Kamarudzaman Md Isa by using BASIC programming in his 'Self-Portrait' (1984) [13]. On the other hand, Liew Kung Yu's 'A Passage Through Literacy' (1989) and Baharuddin Arus's 'The Medium is the Massage' (1989)

were also produced in the same year. Both works use multi-channel video installations presented in the form of sculptures and videos.

Further artistic experimentation was done in the 1990s by Ponirin Amin through his works in 'Surat Al-Insyirah 94' (1991), a digital compilation with wood mold and the application of the *Deluxe Paint* software on the Amiga platform. Bahaman Hashim's 'Virtual Reality' (1993), on the other hand, used Adobe Photoshop on an Apple Macintosh to produce silkscreen works [3]. These were some of the early works and subsequently other Malaysian artists began to produce artworks using specific software, computers and videos, such as Wong Hoy Cheong, Hasnul Jamal Saidon and Niranjah Rajah. Other artists were Nurhanim Khairuddin, Faizal Zulkifli, Anuar Ayob, Vincent Leong, Norhayati Mokhtar, Kamal Sabran, Fadly Sabran.

Artistic practices that applied these technological tools were rapidly developing during the late 1980s and the 1990s, marking a new approach in artistic practice. In 1997, the 'The First Electronic Art Show' exhibition that took place in the National Gallery exerted a new media art presence in the local art landscape. In 2000, 'Flow-Arus: Electronic Media Art from Australia and Malaysia' and the 2010 Malaysia Japan Video Art Exchange (MJVAX) provided a stage for Malaysian artists to extend their practice in new media art [14]. In addition, solo and group exhibitions involving the application of new media such as 'Relocations: Electronic Art of Hasnul Jamal Saidon & Niranjan Rajah' (2008), 'Fermentation: A Solo Exhibition of New Media art' (2009), and 'Veil of An Artist' (2010) also marked these growing practices.

From a historic perspective, new media art is still new compared to other traditions of fine art in Malaysia, such as painting, sculpture, printmaking and drawing. Saidon argues that this is one of the reasons why the presence of new media art in the history of fine art practices is rather isolated and unorganized [15]. The number of local institutions involved in providing practical exposure to these new media is limited and it was only by the 2000s that institutions such as Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS), Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Limkokwing University, Multimedia University (MMU) and others made new media courses part of their practical modules.

3   Issues of Identity and Culture in Malaysian Context

Despite the technological explorations discussed in the previous section, we have observed that early Malaysian new media artworks were still attuned to the issues of culture and identity that were mainstream in the context of artworks produced during the 1990s. The exploration of identity issues has always had a

significant position in the Malaysian art landscape. Thus, it can be argued that the contribution of new media art cannot be isolated from the point of development of the country when government policies resulted in the rise of a new Malaysian middle class [16].

But how relevant were these policies to the demands and changes of the thematic approach in the context of new media work at that time? This paper highlights how new media art through technological advances has provided artists with new tools of expression and has been a fundamental force in the development and evolution of art. As Omar observes [17]:

> *Penggunaan teknologi dalam aktiviti seni tampak pula telah mengubah kepercayaan tradisi tentang kemahiran tangan dan menyediakan para pelukis kepada proses kreatif yang luas. Alatan elektronik seperti video, komputer dan mesin penyalin menyediakan perubahan, dan anjakan yang hebat terhadap konsep dan perlaksanaan karya seni. Media ini membuka lembaran baru terhadap penerokaan dalam kesenian, meluaskan parameter dan mencipta bentuk-bentuk baru.* [17]

Translation:

> *The use of technology in the visual arts has also changed the tradition of hand skills and prepared artists for an extensive creative process. Electronic devices such as videos, computers and copiers provided change and a shift towards great concepts and art execution. These media opened up a new chapter in the exploration of the arts, extending the parameters and creating new forms.* (Authors' translation)

Yet, as Sulaiman further observes [18], new media could be a purposeful tool for conveying the artists' awareness of cultural identity issues around them in a critical way. This is what she states:

> *Technology's influence on art is exacerbated by the fact that it is easily copied and replicated. Artists have sought originality by delving into aspects of their culture identity helping to differentiate one artist from another in an otherwise homogenous machine world… Malaysian artists have used new media as a critical tool to address issues of cultural heritage.*

The availability of technology and the call for new media artists to be critical of the technology itself warrants a new approach to art making. Artists need to understand how technology driven machines can communicate and execute instructions. As highlighted by Omar [17]:

The use of new materials allows the painter to be more free to produce new shapes and achieve key notions by using contemporary technology.

It should be emphasized that the question of identity in the framework of these new media artists is not necessarily related to policies such as the NCP, but rather these works reflect the Malaysian situation during the decade they were created in. These artworks cover various critical questions, which include social and political aspects, the plurality of local and regional cultures, ethnic and marginality issues, the purity and beauty of Islam, the exploration of metaphysical and psychological spaces, universal human themes, and the use of semiotics in interpreting culturally significant meanings of images, signs and texts [19].
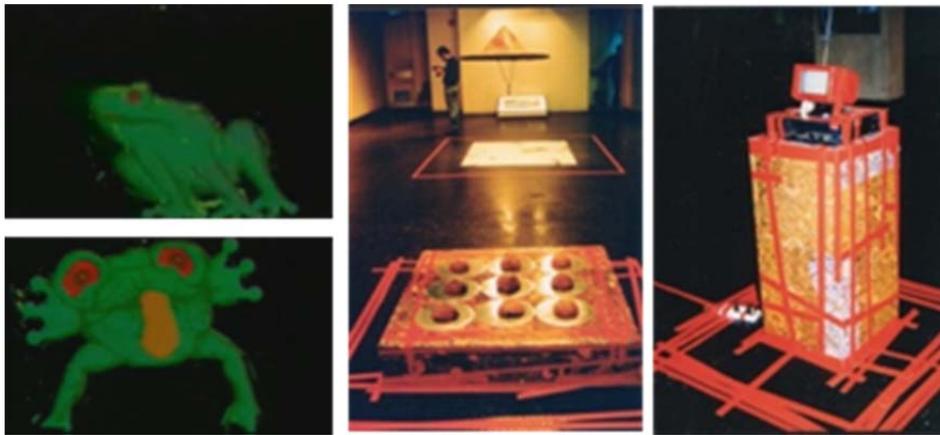

Figure 1 Hasnul Jamal Saidon's '*Kdek-Kdek' Ong!*' (1994), mixed media and video animation on computer [24,25].

In works by both Saidon, such as '*Kdek Kdek Ong!*' and 'Post-colon', and Liew Kung Yu, such as 'Who Am I?' and 'A Song for Ah Kong and Ah Ma', the issues of value and attitude are pertinently raised. Hasnul introduced cultural themes and identities in his experimental video through his criticism of the attitude and negativity of certain people in Malaysian society. Liew Kung Yu, on the other hand, was interested in highlighting the differences between two ethnic Chinese generations in terms of their values and attitudes.

The artwork entitled '*Kdek-Kdek Ong!*' (1994) (see Figure 1) indirectly questions the 'Malay Dilemma' by Tun Mahathir Mohamed [20] by relating it to the Malay proverb '*katak dibawah tempurung*', which literally means, 'a frog under a coconut shell'. In this work, Saidon tried to visualize the narrow-mindedness of people based on this proverb through small monitors that display

the behavior and movements of a frog and the instruments it is surrounded with. Tahir [21] observes that the:

> "*Red tapes haphazardly lashed around the works and over the monitor, hinting at bureaucratic sloth and negating any perception of prettification.*"

A direct reading of this work perhaps visualizes people who are still shackled and are afraid to deal with technological advances, even in their own environment [22]. In an explanation from the artist himself, this work raises the observation that the attitude or suspicion toward technology can be seen as a consequence of the colonial past, as the use of such technology is foreign to people who are closed-minded [23].

If we dig a little deeper, we can perhaps trace the issue raised by the artist by referring to the text 'Malay Dilemma', or the article written by Frank Swettenham entitled 'The Real Malay' from 1903. In this early characterization of the Malay, Swettenham gave the general negative impression that the Malay were known as people who were not receptive to change [26]. This was further reiterated by Tun Mahathir Mohamad in his view on the supposed weakness and inferiority of the Malay, which he presumed to be caused by heredity and environment [27].

Figure 2   Hasnul Jamal Saidon, 'Post-colon', a series of short videos from 1993 [15].

Another series of short videos, entitled 'Post-colon' (1993) (see Figure 2), which is a combination of studio performances, computer graphics, computer music and analog audio or video manipulation, features the clash between the artist's comfort zone and the American environment, which occurred when his identity was challenged when he furthered his studies in the United States. This was the period he felt displaced based on his own ethnicity, nationality, historical and cultural background. For many students who pursue their studies

abroad, this is a period when their personal memories become displaced within the context of the host country and the spectacle of mass media that they encounter every day.

In addition to using video as a medium, Saidon is also very prolific in combining the medium with other, more conventional art forms, such as paintings and sculptures, among which 'The Portrait of Van Gogh and Gauguin' (1995), 'Veil of An Artist' (2010) and 'Hijab Nurbaya Series' (2003). These subsequent works that he produced also revolved around the question of cultural identity and the questioning politics of representation in gendered identity.

Besides Hasnul Jamal Saidon, Liew Kung Yu too, in his two works 'Who am I' (1991) (Figure 3) and 'A Song for Ah Kong and Ah Ma' (1994) (Figure 4) used television as a platform of criticism for Chinese traditions and cultural differences between two generations living under one roof [28]. Through the work 'Who am I', he assembled altars of worship for the Chinese community.

Figure 3 Liew Kung Yu, 'Who am I' (1991), installation with video set monitor television on the floor [30].

Figure 4 Liew Kung Yu, 'Sing a Song for Ah Kong and Ah Ma' (1994), Variety TV channel installation [30].

Symbolically, the altar is a tool that has an implied meaning that disseminates cultural identity from the context of Chinese society's cultural practices and traditions. This work allows us to clearly understand the issue of identity through the question of who we are, especially in the context of culture that was produced by unprecedented changes. As observed by Embong [29],

> *Globalisasi hari ini diperhebatkan lagi dengan kemunculan sistem media global, khususnya media elektronik... Di bawah dampak globalisasi, pegangan atau pengaruh situasi lokal ke atas kehidupan manusia menjadi semakin longgar. Masyarakat kini tidak dapat mengelak daripada mengalami perubahan sosial yang pesat, krisis nilai dan transformasi.*

Translation:

> *Globalization today is bolstered by the emergence of a global media system, in particular electronic media... Under the impact of globalization, local beliefs or influence over people's lives become increasingly loose. Current society is unable to avoid rapid social change, crisis and transformation.* (Authors' translation)

Using a similar approach, but on a different platform than Hasnul, Niranjah Rajah produced a work entitled '*Telinga Keling*' (1999) (Figure 5). The work is a photographic self-portrait with *kuih* (a local dish) locally known as '*telinga keling*'.

Figure 5 Niranjah Rajah, 'Telinga Keling' (1999), digital photographic print [31].

Basically, the criticism by Niranjah Rajah through this work is centered on communities and extended in the context of historical and social backgrounds. Historically, *kuih* originates from South India and is widely produced for celebrations such as weddings and Deepavali [32]. Among the Malay community in this country, it is also known by the names '*Peniaram*' and '*Denderam*'. This artwork examines the racial stereotypes that hide behind the

shadow of the cultural diversity in Malaysia [31]. In this case, the term 'keling'[2] leaves a different impression on different communities. Especially to the Indian community, the term 'keling' feels like an insult.

> *If you do the etymology of "keling", you come to all these different theories of Kalinga. "Bunyi dia punya kling kling…ada macam-macam cerita". But the point is usage in context. That's all that matters. What is and is not an insult is very complex.* [33]

Although, the term 'telinga keling' represents stereotypes regarding the perception of issues and races in Malaysia, it can also be accepted as a process of acculturation between cultures throughout the country. However, it may also be considered as an attempt to erode the culture of other ethnic groups. As discussed by Niranjan Rajah himself:

> *But actually, the real message is that the signifier is multifaceted… But the idea of Malay becomes monolithic! So the thing is... that "kuih" is ours. My mother made that "kuih". We call it "athirasam".* [33]

Today, the relationship between humans and technology becomes increasingly familiar. The increase in technological capacity has increased the ability of electronic and digital machines to the point that they can be used as a medium for artists. Nevertheless, despite these advancements, societal issues, values and culture, and humanity remain the subject matter of new media artists.

The development of photography and film around the 19th century has led to the beginning of the so-called 'cultural image' that began to replace the printed word as the predominant way to interpret and understand experimental reality or aspects of reality [34]. Photography, for example, is a device that allows people to study past events as well as to criticize the culture of that time [35]. Next to video art, digital manipulations that were later produced in the form of digital prints attest to another type of new media art in Malaysia. In 'Huminodun'[3] (2007) (Figure 6), for example, the work shows the relationship between the landscape, people and culture through digitally manipulated images.

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[2] In addition to referring to the food, the term is also used as a 'janji keling' and 'keling karam' when referring to the proverb; 'Tanjong Keling' and 'Kapitan Keling Mosque' refer to places in Melaka and Penang.
[3] The name 'Huminodun' refers to the image of the woman in the work, which is believed to be a daughter of the 'Kinoingan' the God of the fathers of the Kadazan Dusun. Based on the history and beliefs of the people who inhabit the Borneo archipelago, rice is part of Huminodun's body. These legends and beliefs are represented in rituals practiced every year as a reminder of their sacrifices. For more information see 'Huminodun Legend' [37].

Figure 6 Yee I-Lann, 'Huminodun' (Siri Kinabalu) (2007), digital print 106.5 x 204.5 cm [36].

Based on a local Borneo legend, *Huminodun* is depicted in the work as being pregnant as well as having long hair that is connected to a rice plant. Representing the importance of fertility, the image is a reflection of one of the most important symbols of the *Kadazandusun* and its legend in Sabah. By highlighting the legend of *Kadazandusun*, Yee I-Lann brings to the fore *Kadazandusun* as not one but two of the indigenous people in Sabah in the larger context of Malaysian social-cultural milieu through art. As this work portrays the relationship between the community and the land, the artist raises and highlights the concept of existence, myths and rituals as a paradigm that is part of the formation of an ethnic identity. Thus, the digitally manipulated photographic images, the subject matter and the content conveyed by Yee I-Lann reflect that her work cannot be detached from her own understanding of her immediate social and cultural context.

Figure 7 T.C. Liew, 'Pot Luck' (2007), video documentation [15].

Meanwhile, T.C. Liew in a video documentary entitled 'Pot Luck' (2007) (Figure 7) used a similar approach as Yee I-Lann. In this work, the audience is encouraged to burn joss sticks as a way to pay fate, clean and rejuvenate themselves, as this process is part of a recovery and purification ritual [15].

Based on the analysis and the discussions in this paper, regardless of the medium used, Malaysian artists have incorporated the issues of identity into their work, as highlighted by Piyadasa [38]:

> *The complexities of a search for cultural identity in a polyglot society will continue and it will take generations even before it is finally realised. There is as such a need for honesty and a vision that is big enough to encompass the complexities of a nation that is being transformed by the coming together of diverse cultural influences. The challenge facing visual artists in this country lies in whether they can contribute meaningfully through their artistic creations towards a vision that is finally real to their environment and also real to themselves.*

4   Conclusion

The art landscape in Malaysia has changed due to the influence of technology on media artworks. One feature inherent in new media art is the tendency of media artists to integrate new technologies and then adapt them for various artistic purposes. The changes that have taken place not only involved traditional artistic practices but also influenced new media artists that have used media such as computers, videos and digital component platforms to explore narratives, documentaries and experiments by raising various cultural and identity issues pertaining to the Malaysian social context. Since Malaysia is a multiracial, religious and multicultural community, discussion of the question of identity is crucial, especially in the process of nation-state building. Any artistic activity capable of maintaining identity, racial harmony and national stability is relevant and significant enough to be maintained at present and beyond. As with most arts and cultural fields, new media art can also be used to reiterate social experiences, helping us in forming identities and it also allows us to see ourselves and the whole of our society.

Acknowledgement

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