

Diversified Cultural Representations on Malaysian Television

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Abstract: *The Malaysian society is known for its rich traditional beliefs and culture and is home to people of various ethnicities, which include Malays, Chinese, Indians and various aboriginal tribes. Admittedly, there are social distances between the various races and "most Malays do not know Chinese values very well and most Chinese are quite ignorant of Malay values, despite the fact that they have been living side by side for so long" (Syed Hussin, 2008: 171). This is where mass media, according to Siapera (2010), especially television, can play a big role. In light of this matter, Syed Hussin (2008) commented that mass communication has not been used to its full effect to promote a better understanding of people of different cultures and values. Hence, the core of this paper involves looking at the content of television programs in Malaysia, in order to unearth how the diversified cultures are being portrayed on television. By relating it to the regimes of representation (Siapera, 2010) I intend to investigate if the various races are equally represented. Also, I am interested to gauge the possible aspects one can learn about their culture from the program. To help answer this question, a qualitative content analysis was conducted on Buletin Utama¹, to ascertain the forms of culture that are being represented in the program most watched by the Malaysian audience.*

Introduction

Malaysia is situated in Southeast Asia, surrounded by the South China Sea and the Straits of Malacca. It consists of two lands, separated by the South China Sea: the peninsular Malaysia bordering Thailand, Indonesia and Singapore and Sabah and Sarawak which is situated in the northern part of the island of Borneo bordering Brunei and Indonesia. It is sometimes referred to as being part of the Malay Archipelago and is currently inhabited by over 27 million people made up of a multi-racial composition which include Malays (63.1 per cent), Chinese (24.6 per cent), Indians (7.3 per cent) and various indigenous ethnic groups² (4.3 per cent) which forms the major population of Sabah and Sarawak and others (0.7 per cent) (Population And Housing Census, Malaysia 2010).

Ever since colonisation, there exist marked differences between Malays, Chinese and Indians in language, religion, culture, education and area of residences. However, they do occasionally interact with each other and as noted by Syed Husin (2008: 165), there exist a limited inter-ethnic relation, which may occur at the level of friendship, institution or organisational level.

When British colonised Malaysia (know as Tanah Melayu before independence in 1957), they implemented a divide and rule policy that kept the major racial groups politically, socially and economically separated (Tai Suet Yee, 1997: 484). Malays were mostly farmers and lived in villages and some held government posts. Chinese immigrants came by throngs to work in the tin mines and also set up entrepreneurship businesses while Indian immigrants were mostly doing hard labour and were brought in by the British from India to help out with the then flourishing rubber estate and plantations. Because of this, the majority of Chinese and only a handful of Malays were living an affluent and luxurious lifestyle while others only made pittance and had to live on a meager amount of money.

The different positions which they held in the society and segregation of job scopes further intensify the feeling of resentment towards each other and subsequently led to the tumultuous event of 13 May 1969, which saw a clash between Chinese and Malays and prompted the Malaysian government to announce the state of national emergency. Since the bloody incident, the government tried to foster unity, reduce racial tension and economic disparity by introducing the New Economic Policy (NEP) and also the *Rukunegara* (National Principles) and highlighting it through television programs.

Now, the current Prime Minister, Dato' Sri Mohd Najib Razak, in his speech to celebrate the 100th day of being Malaysia's Prime Minister, introduced the concept of 1Malaysia, which spells out his effort to create unity in diversity, a vision he has for Malaysia and especially in the phase of modernization. He believed that unity is vital for a country with plural society like Malaysia. Likened to a *keluarga besar* (big family), the citizens of Malaysia which consist of people from various races, cultures and beliefs, he said is an important component in determining the successful future of the country

¹ The daily news aired during prime time on one of Malaysia's free to air channel.

² The indigenous ethnic groups include Iban, Kadayan, Dusun, Bidayuh, Murut and Melanau are also known as *Bumiputera*.

(Mohd Najib Razak, 2009). In his own words, the plural society in Malaysia is an 'asset and competitive advantage that has and will continue to put us head and shoulder above our global competitors.' (Mohd Najib Razak, 2009). Hence, it could be said that the concept of 1Malaysia is a vision to create a harmonious Malaysian society, which is important in order for Malaysia to attain a developed country status and to be considered as successful.

According to Mohd Najib, the unique thing about the 1Malaysia concept is that it is not trying to assimilate the various cultures and create a national identity; instead it celebrates the diversity of cultures and considers it as an asset. The concept stresses on the acceptance of other cultures within the Malaysian realm (most prominently the Malays, Chinese, and Indian). Hence, in an effort to create unity within the diversity of cultures, Mohd Najib listed eight core values which should be practised by all the different races in Malaysia, in order "to preserve and enhance this unity in diversity which has always been our strength" (source: 1Malaysia Booklet). The eight values which are listed in the 1Malaysia concept are perseverance, acceptance, education, integrity, meritocracy, humility, loyalty and culture of excellence.

Seeing the importance of the 1Malaysia concept makes me wonder how the media, especially the television are being used to promote this concept. It must be pointed out that the concept places importance on both celebrating the diversity of cultures and inculcating common values which could be practised by everyone. Is that possible? As said by Siapera (2010: 58), "Failure to theorise the role of the media as mediators of relationships between and within communities results in a failure to grasp the complex interplay between universal and common values and the specific values particular to certain groups only". This means, the media is an important tool in ensuring that the diverse cultures are equally represented and at the same time does not neglect the universal and common values which can be practised by everyone.

The research I partook will shed some light into this issue. In particular, I will look at how the culturally diverse society and the concept of 1Malaysia are being represented on television. As commented by Syed Hussin (2008), mass communication have not been used to its full effect to promote a better understanding of people of different cultures and values. Hence, the core of this paper involves looking at the content of television programs in Malaysia, in order to unearth how the diversified cultures are being portrayed on television. By relating it to the regimes of representation (Siapera, 2010) I intend to investigate if the various races are equally represented.

Siapera, in *Cultural Diversity and Global Media* (2010) claimed that the Regimes of Representation was loosely based on Michel Foucault's (1977) concept of 'regimes of truth', in which she tries to map out how one can understand the types of representation shown in the media. However, the concept – regime of representation – is not really new as it has been used earlier by Stuart Hall (1990) in his article *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* when he investigated the idea of representation of cultural identity, especially in relations to minority or the 'other'.

Siapera however, dug deeper into the regime by introducing five regimes of representation that is said to be able to explain representation. The regimes are racist regime of representation, the domesticated regime of representation, the regime of commodification, essentialist regime of representation and alternative regime of representation. The racist regime puts people as members of a specific race or ethnicity which are expected to possess an unchangeable biological or cultural characteristic. Domesticated difference regime are portrayals which gives the impression that the difference within and among various cultures are accepted by showcasing what is deemed as similarities within the cultures but at the same time, it only serves to create homogeneity. The regime of commodification of difference seeks to look at ways in which the various cultures and ethnicities can be used for marketing purposes while the essentialising regime only serves to contain a specific culture from within. The alternative regime, meanwhile, allows for "the expression and reconstruction of cultural difference (Siapera, 2010: 132)" which leaves room for changes.

Here, Siapera concluded that "no single representational regime is capable of fully controlling the field of representation" (p. 131), which means that the regimes are not mutually exclusive and could overlap. She also voiced the importance of acknowledging the existence of such regimes like racism in order to make way for a just representation of multiculturalism. As pointed out by Siapera, "[...] – equality refers to the need both to recognize the existence, integrity, and specificity of certain ethno-cultural identities, and to move towards a more equitable distribution of wealth and power, which will include these communities and address their needs"(p. 106).

For this paper, I will firstly elaborate on the methodology utilised for this research. To ascertain the forms of culture that are being represented in a Malaysian program, a qualitative content analysis was conducted on *Buletin Utama*³, the most watched program by Malaysian audience. This will be followed with the findings which discuss two emerging themes: Portrayal of the different cultures on television and Malaysian and the concept of 1Malaysia.

³ The daily news aired during prime time on one of Malaysia's free to air channel.

Methodology

The method utilised for this research was qualitative content analysis. I prepared a coding sheet which addresses significant items I aim to look out for in an attempt to understand the representations of the various cultures in Malaysia on Malaysian television. Specifically, I looked at what I termed as cultural uniqueness, common Malaysian values and Malaysian cultural dimension. In cultural uniqueness, I set out to find how the various races in Malaysia are represented on television programs while common Malaysian values saw me sifting through the programs for elements of 1Malaysia. Analysing contents based on Hofstede's (2001) dimension of culture in Malaysia, meanwhile, is an attempt to dissect contents about culture as seen through the eyes of a non-local.

The program I choose to analyse for the purpose of this paper is rated number 1 amongst Malay, the *Buletin Utama*. *Buletin Utama* is a news programme which is broadcasted in the prime time slot, between 8pm and 9pm. It is divided into several slots which include local news, international news, sports and weather. The programme is presented in *Bahasa Malaysia*. The episodes selected for this research were aired on 14 July 2010, 19 July 2010 and 8 August 2010

Findings and discussion

Portrayal of the different cultures on television

Appearance, in pre-modern settings, according to Tomlinson (1991: 99) was mostly standardised in terms of traditional criteria. He maintained that: "Modes of facial adornment or dress, for example, have always been to some degree a means of individualisation; yet the extent to which this was either possible or desired was usually quite limited." (Tomlinson 1991: 99). What he meant was that the appearances of cultural ethnicities looks different and unique when compared to other cultures, but among the people in the same culture itself, there is not much difference. As mentioned before, the Malaysian society is made up of various ethnicities and each of these has their own special traditional attires. Thus, I see it as an effective way to identify a specific identity.

However, I found that it difficult to identify a specific race or ethnicity through physical appearances and clothes people wear. This is because, in news, the producer has no control on what informants wear as it happens in real time. However, the news presenters are always smartly dressed in blazer, shirts, tie and suits. There were hardly any traditional clothes featured and even in most establishing shot⁴ taken, people were seen wearing t-shirts, jeans and formal suits. The only prominent one was when the Prime Minister's wife wore '*baju kurung*' during the launch of National Heroes Day and during the ESQ issue when some people who were interviewed wore '*songkok*' and '*baju melayu*', an indication that they were Malays. Indians, Chinese and other aboriginal tribe were not prominently featured in the news.

The usage of language, which could be a key indication in identifying a specific culture, was also quite redundant in this analysis. This is because, all the programs were delivered in the Malay language with a minimal use of English. For instance, in *Buletin Utama*, the language used throughout the news, regardless of the race of the news presenter, reporter or people interviewed, is mostly the Malay language.

Although they do not spell it out, it was quite obvious that the *Buletin Utama* was produced to cater to the Malay market. This was made obvious when I noticed that there were issues related to the Malays and Islam being reported but none that specifically touched the non-Malays. Some examples are a news on an emotional and spiritual quotient (ESQ) course which was said to be '*haram*' (forbidden) for Muslims to participate in, a special report on Ramadhan, Palestinian's plight and Islamic relief in Gaza, and closing of the news with montages of mosques and quranic verses. Thus, it was quite obvious that the news is catered more towards Malay and Muslim viewers. Hence, it is not a surprise that the news is not popular amongst other races. But, it must be reiterated that although these issues are of interest to the Malay community, it does not by any means showcase a distinct portrayal of the Malay culture.

Malaysian and the concept of 1 Malaysia

Unity, according to Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak is an important aspect in ensuring that a country can embrace modernization and development. He, however, took particular interest in Malaysia's diversified community and thus created the concept of 1 Malaysia, to simulate the one-ness in diversity. A celebration of the diversified cultures, the

⁴ An establishing shot helps to establish a scene or put it in context (source: <http://www.mediacollege.com/video/shots/establishing.html>)

concept of 1 Malaysia tries to inculcate common values which could and had been practiced by the various cultures since long ago. My question is that, whether the uniqueness of cultures will be over shadowed in the effort to create unity. In the three *Buletin Utama* episodes analysed, findings indicate that the news prioritizes the nation's leaders, especially the Prime Minister. It was quite obvious that the Prime Minister's opinion is regarded as important in issues related to the country. For example, in this news on 14 July, he was featured and interviewed for three different issues. This simply shows that the Prime Minister is regarded as an authoritative figure which is an indication of a high power distance index (Hofstede: 2001) and an example of inculcating loyalty in Malaysians. Political issues take the main stage as the one hour news features politics for about 10 minutes. The Prime Minister's wife, Agong and other political leaders are also featured in all three episodes analysed.

It could also be concluded that the Royal Malaysian Police task is an invaluable government agency which is very trustworthy and dependable. The news, without fail, would show criminal cases which the police have successfully solved and also the ones that are under investigation. This could lead audiences to feel safe, since the police were seen as doing their job and protecting the wellbeing of the citizens. If looked at closely, the news which features police and criminal cases almost always has shots of the Malaysian flag. Why is that so? Intentional or unintentionally, the usage of shot of Malaysian flag together with news on police, inseminate the idea of a masculine society (Hofstede: 2001), patriotism, loyalty and pride of being a Malaysian. In addition, one of the news on local sports touched on Malaysian young athletes who underwent rigorous training in an effort to prepare themselves for the World Youth Olympics Games 2010 in Singapore, an indication of their perseverance, a 1 Malaysia core value.

Through this analysis, I found that the concept of 1 Malaysia is prevalent in the television programs with loyalty and perseverance as the most common value which showcased. Also, Hofstede's score in the dimension of culture is reiterated through the representation on *Buletin Utama*.

Conclusion

Findings from the content analysis indicated that *Buletin Utama* does not emphasise or give equal weightage on both the portrayal of specific cultural ethnicity and 1Malaysia values at the same time. Although it was quite obvious that the news featured are mostly of interest to the Malay community, there were hardly specific or obvious showcase of the Malay culture. The only indication that the news were mostly catered for the Malay viewers were detected based on *Buletin Utama's* inclination to showcase Islam and Muslim communities as Malays are Muslims.

Aside from that, it was quite obvious that the television programmes echoed Malaysia's Prime Minister's 1Malaysia core values such as perseverance and loyalty. Ironically however, the 1Malaysia concept aims to celebrate the diversity of cultures by not creating a national identity. But, the programme analysed did not seem to reflect that intention as the programme concentrated on highlighting only 1Malaysia values.

Also, elements which were easily detected through the content analysis were values which were indicated in Hofstede's score in Malaysia's dimension of culture. Malaysia's scores, according to Hofstede's Dimension (2001) are as follows:

Cultural dimension	Score
individualism – collectivism	26
low – high uncertainty avoidance	36
low – high power distance	104
masculinity – femininity	50

Table 1. Malaysia's scores in Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Index

Note from the table above that Malaysia scored 50 and 104 on masculinity-femininity and low-high power distance respectively, which indicate that Malaysians tend to accept unequal power distributions, asymmetrical relations, and rewards and sanctions based on rank, role, status, age and perhaps even gender identity (Ting-Toomey, 2005:75) and

places importance on material things and strives for power. These values have been depicted on *Buletin Utama* through the emphasis of the role of the Royal Malaysian Police and prioritising the showcase of images and views of political leaders.

Through this, I deduced that the representation of cultures on *Buletin Utama* follows Siapera's (2010: 139 – 143) "domesticated difference regime" in which difference in the form of the diversified cultures in Malaysia, are understood in superficial terms and are considered safe and non-threatening. In her elaboration on the domesticated difference regime, Siapera noted three distinctive ways in which one can identify if a form of representation belonged to this regime which are excessive showcase of external elements of symbols of cultures such as dress, an emphasis on similarities between the different cultures and the hybridity of culture. Undoubtedly, *Buletin Utama* highlighted a lot of 1Malaysia aspect which is actually an emphasis on similarities between the different cultures. By doing this, the difference between the various ethnicities are buried which in turn may cause the attempt to create a society which are able to understand and live harmoniously to be difficult.

Additionally, the findings indicated the need for a television show to try and include cultures of other ethnicities to create a better understanding of others and also for one to be more informed of his or her cultural identity. Doing so would ensure that the programmes are parallel to the Malaysian Prime Minister's vision which is to create unity by inculcating 1Malaysia values while at the same time celebrating the diversified cultural identities. In the case of *Buletin Utama*, the news featured should not only concentrate on what might interest the Malays. Instead, it should also highlight on plights and issues that may interest the non Malays like Chinese and Indian. This is because, I believe the concept of 1Malaysia can be inculcated only if there is an equal representation of 1Malaysia values alongside representations of the diverse cultures.

Malaysia's effort to establish a stable and harmonious society, without introducing a national identity should be applauded because it strives to ensure that each ethnicity is equally represented and important in the development of the country. The source of information, and mass media in particular, should be fully utilised for this effort.

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