

Contemporary Malaysian Art: An Exploration of the *Songket* Motifs

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Abstract

This paper explores Malay *songket* motifs in relation to Malaysia's cultural identity. An examination of government National Culture policy on fixed identity is contrasted with dynamic reality. The policy was imposed on a multi-racial population based on the concept of 'Malay' with no recognition of others. Divisions amongst the populace were created by Malay specific privileges. Failure to address others becomes the main interest of this research. *Songket* motifs are used to demonstrate the Malay's link with traditional customs. The motifs symbolize Malay dominance in clinging on to power, echoing Malay history. Evidence of the motifs' assimilation with Hindu-Buddhist and Islamic influences proved that there is no Malay 'purity.' The researcher's practice transforms flat images of motifs into artworks. Practice differs from the norm of Malaysian artists, who translate Malay culture into art. A Malaysian artist having worked in the UK and USA, the researcher puts theory into practice.

Background

This paper centers on the Malay *songket* motifs, images found in textile art of Malaysia. The *songket* motifs are examined as a manifestation of the complex nature of cultural identity in Malaysia. An interwoven parallel aim is to describe the symbiotic and dynamic relationship between the researcher's theoretical examination and his practice. The researcher's practice is concerned with contemporary Malaysian art with specific reference to *songket* motifs. It is essential to note that the motifs are Malay cultural products that symbolize the established traditional political, economic and social systems.

In order to understand the current cultural situation in Malaysia, the researcher explores Malaysia as a multi-racial and multi-cultural society. He examines this situation in relation to the Malaysian government's fixed policy on identity, which protects the interests of the Malays/'*Bumiputera*,' the 'sons of the soil.' The government established a policy on cultural identity following

racial riots in 1969 between the Malay and the Chinese people. The current multi-cultural society found in Malaysia is an appropriate basis for examination of an identity that establishes the Malay as the mainstream and places as the 'Other,' the Chinese, Indians, and a few small groups of Arabs and Europeans.

The *songket* motifs, in the researcher's practice, are transformed from functional art found in the traditional Malay costumes to art forms that deal with spaces, human senses and current discourse of identity in Malaysia. Display methods in the practice employ the exploitation of smell, texture, sound, lights and shadows and images. The motifs provide a means of exploring the relationship between cultural identity, national identity and government policy. The *songket* motifs also symbolize the very essence of Malay cultural identity expressed in the creation of its motifs through the practice of oral traditions. However, the *songket* goes beyond the glitter and intricacy of designs and motifs. It has deeper implications for Malaysia's cultural politics and production and apparent cultural identity. The *songket* motifs are examined precisely because they have experienced a change in their 'identity' from being the luxury of the royalty to being at the disposal of the wider public. This event has demonstrated the shift in culture, tradition and location of the *songket* motifs. Edward Said suggested, "Identity is a product of articulation, which lies at the intersection of dwelling and traveling and is claimed of continuity and discontinuity (and vice-versa)." He further described "identity as a politics rather than an inherited marking, its articulation and rearticulation grows out of the very tension raised between these two constructs: one based on socio-cultural determinants, the other on biological ones" (Said, 1994, p.357). Therefore, the *songket* motifs, with their shifting of identity, demonstrate the changing of the Malaysian cultural identity. The objectives of the paper are to a) explore the *songket* motifs in terms of their symbolic meaning and influences, b) examine the shift of Malaysian cultural identity in relation to the *songket* motifs, and c) demonstrate the shift of Malaysian cultural identity in the researcher's practice by exemplifying the theoretical examination in the transformations of the *songket* motifs into artworks.

Malaysia's Cultural Identity

Malaysia is known for its multi-cultural society, a population of almost 21 million people¹. The Malay/*Bumiputera* people are the largest group followed by the Chinese, Indians, smaller groups of Arabs, Sinhalese, Eurasians and Europeans and a few of the indigenous tribes scattered in the Malay Peninsula and in Sabah and Sarawak. The many races comprising a developing Malaysia raise the issue of cultural identity and what forms it should take. The Malay people were the first to occupy the Malay Archipelago and became known as the *Bumiputera*, 'the sons of the soil.' Historically, the Malays went through various stages of cultural development (Deraman, 1994, p.25).

1. Pre-Historic Era, 2500 BC
2. Hindu-Buddhist Influence Era, 1st to 12th centuries AD
3. Islamic Civilization Influence Era, 13th to 16th centuries AD
4. European Influence Era, 16th to 20th centuries AD

The assimilation of Western² civilization into Malay culture was apparent during the British colonial period in the late 1800s, almost a century after its first appearance in Malaysia. The British created “a conflict in the politics, economy, administrative system, traditional values and customs” (Taib, 1998, on 25/11/1998). This was seen as “a civilisation which took over or tried to eradicate the previous foreign influences that came to Malaysia, namely Islam” (Ibid). Conflict between the ‘sons of the soil’ and the British spurred the colonized Malays to fight for their identity and rights during the later part of the British colonial period. Apparently, there was a strong sense of separation - with the seeming consent and co-operation of Malays - of the ‘colonisers,’ the ‘master’ and the ‘slave,’ and, importantly, the ‘civilized’ and the ‘uncivilised.’ However, as tin mining grew, so did demand for labor in the tin mines, pressing the British government to import foreign labor. Southeast Asia was flooded by (mostly southern³) Chinese who fled China due to political instability. The British saw the opportunity to encourage the coming of the Chinese to Malaysia from 1850 onwards to fill the work forces in the tin mines (Mohamad, 1980, p.25). The Indians⁴ were brought in during the early 1900s to work in the tea and rubber plantations. Malaysia began the 20th Century with an immigration of ‘outsiders’ of totally different religions, customs and traditions that characterize Malaysia today.

By the early 1900s, Malaysia was already facing complications in creating its cultural identity, caught between protecting the natives and appropriating the ‘outsiders.’ Separation, between the ‘colonizer’ and the ‘colonized’ and between the mainstream and the ‘Other,’ became rampant and went on for almost a century under the watchful eyes of the British. Now, the Chinese still hold the commercial powers while the Malays are known for holding political powers and the Indians as non-committal in the country’s development, a stereotyping that is still apparent in Malaysia today. The silent hatred between the Malays and the ‘Others’ brought in by the British was finally shown. The greatest racial conflict in Malaysia occurred on 13 May 1969,⁵ after the general elections. Racial clashes were mainly between the Malay and Chinese people. The government’s claim of racial harmony was questioned. A major source of trouble was the unequal distribution of political and commercial powers among the people, a similar division to that faced when the ‘outsiders’ were brought in by the British. The 13 May 1969 riots led the Malaysian government to introduce “the New Economic Policy in 1971 to provide greater economic opportunities and advancement for the indigenous peoples (the Bumiputera),” and “to ensure the balanced and even distribution of wealth

among the people it mostly benefited to the Malay people, ‘the sons of the soil’” (Ibid, p.5).

The National Culture policy on the other hand is an identity forced upon the people by the government but not without proper and thorough investigations of the history of Malaysia and the importation of the Chinese and Indians. The past is essentialized for the reliving or re-appropriating of the lost or forgotten identity in a contemporary context. The attitudes of the colonizers who applied the ‘divide and rule’ policy sparked the desire for the people to cling to their own set of values. Thus, the Malay people refer to history to anchor their traditions and culture to the cultural identity, agreeing with the concept of “‘history,’ which determines who they are and what they are. Moreover, they are constantly reminded that their ongoing ‘struggle’ is itself continually updating and extending their history” (Chambers, 1991, p.63). This is also a method for the people to use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history. The Malay people claim their dual birthright of history and identity to characterize Malaysia. The issue of the centrality and pivotal position of history in this context is expressed due to the fact that the people have been denied their identity and history by their colonizers, mainly the British. The formulation of the National Culture was agreed to at a Congress on National Culture called by the Malaysian government in August 1971, in response to the 1969 racial riots. The three interrelated principles constituent of the National Culture are (Deraman, 1994, p.178):

1. The National Culture of Malaysia must be based on the culture of the people indigenous to the region, the *Bumiputera*, the sons of the soil.
2. Elements from other cultures that are suitable and reasonable may be incorporated into the National Culture.
3. Islam will be an important element in the National Culture.

These three principles illustrate a clear interrelation among the three and an indication of the Malay/*Bumiputera* cultural elements being applied to Malaysia’s cultural identity. The National Culture was born of the political, economic and apparently social circumstances that divided Malaysians during the colonial and post-colonial periods and even today. In response to Principle 1 of the National Culture policy, concerns for the interpretation of the word ‘Malay’ hover over the implementation of the National Culture policy and consequently of Malay rights as the mainstream. Officially, according to the 1996 Malaysia Information Yearbook, there are three categories of the Malay/*Bumiputera* (The Information Malaysia Yearbook, 1996 accessed on 01/12/1998). They are:

1. the aborigines (*orang asli*)
2. the Malays
3. the Malay-related

The word 'culture' has many definitions that entail practices and a source of identity. The practices involve the arts of description, communication and representation that have relative autonomy from the economic, social and political realms (Ibid). In the Malay society, the heritage of the Malay culture comes in 'material' or spiritual, and 'non-material' or physical forms. The *songket* motifs are both the 'material' and 'non-material' of a Malay culture manifestation and fall under Principle 1 of the National Culture policy. They embody the thoughts and ideas of the Malay culture represented in the richness of oral traditions. Moreover, the motifs symbolize the etiquette of the Malay portrayed in the patterning of the motifs, highlighting and urging the unity of the people. The symbolic meaning found in the motifs was appropriated by the Malays with foreign cultural traditions that came to Malaysia.

Principle 2 in the policy leaves room for other cultures to fit in, mainly the Chinese and Indian cultures counter-arguing the dominance of the culture of the Malay mainstream. Apparently, the Malay cultural identity becomes an essential part of the nation, to protect the interests of the Malay people, politically, socially or economically. This policy, on the other hand, contradicts the notion of identity formulated by Stuart Hall. He suggested that cultural identity is a shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self,' hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves' which people with shared history and ancestry hold in common. Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people,' with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history (Hall, 1990, p.223). After the creation of the National Culture, other racial cultural traditions took the 'side roles' to fit in within the Malay cultural elements. Contemporary discourse on identity by theorists in the West points out that identity cannot belong to one person and no one belongs to a single identity (Ibid). Furthermore, "there are no 'natural' and 'original' identities, since every identity is the result of a constituting process of both permanent hybridization and nomadization" (Sarup, 1994, p.110). It has been suggested that social identity based on policy or constitution is a social identity born of an act of power. This statement suggests particularization of the issue of the 'Other' and 'difference' in relation to the mainstream and the 'Other.' In the same context, the existence of 'difference' in cultural elements in Malaysian multi-racial society was never seriously addressed. Hindu-Buddhist influences on ideology, etiquette and teachings were introduced to Malaysia in the 1st Century AD, continuing until the 12th Century. Islamic influence began late in the 12th Century⁶. The Malay people had accepted both cultural values and ideologies on the grounds that they were productive and beneficial to the people. This appears to have marked the embarkation on the changing of the people's identity, adapting foreign cultural traditions and beliefs and negating

the claim of the existence of the purebred Malay. This, however, has a political implication and is considered a sensitive issue in questioning the rights of the Malay.

Principle 3 of the National Culture policy stated that Islam would be an important element in the cultural identity. Currently, sociologists in Malaysia believe that the modernization of the Malay culture started after the conversion of the Malay people to Islam dated as early as the 12th century. The process of Islamising the Malays changed the view of the Malays on life into “the world of rationalization, intellectualization and the whole character of humankind, physically and spiritually” (Deraman, 1994, p.114). Moreover, a marked contrast was evident with their lives as animists and practitioners of superstitions. On the other hand, the coming of the Western influences contributed to the desire to cling to a cultural identity and the sense of belonging. Since the National Culture policy is based on the culture of the Malay/*Bumiputera*, Islam becomes an important element in Malaysia’s cultural identity. Malaysia’s cultural identity has already designated the Malay/*Bumiputera* as the mainstream, a racial identity rather than a national identity. As identity is dynamic, a fixed policy in the National Culture complicates the racial balance. Moreover, cultural identity should not be based solely on historical factors. Goethe suggested that “nations could not return to their settled and independent life again without notions that they had learned many foreign ideas and ways which they had unconsciously adopted and come to feel here and there previously unrecognised, spiritual and intellectual needs” (Spigarn, 1994, p.11).

Until the recent Asian and world financial crises, Southeast Asia had experienced vast economic and social growth. The economic boom and social changes were deeply embedded within the framework of capitalism and economic globalization. The economic situation was seen by the government as an opportunity to close the gap of economic power-holders in Malaysia, especially between the Chinese and the Malay mainstream. The implementation of the New Economic Policy in 1971 in the wake of the 1969 racial riots was enforced to assist the Malay to achieve 30%⁷ of the country’s commercial power and to be competitive with the Chinese (Mohamad, 1980, p. 119). It is a continuation of the struggle over economic power controlled by the Chinese and political power controlled by the Malay. However, the early 1990’s situation saw a calmer and more even distribution of political and commercial advantages between the two power-holders. This is possible under a controlled coalition government⁸ that is comprised of Chinese, Indian and other small ethnic groups

The researcher realizes that the Malaysian government fixed policy on cultural identity clearly indicates limitations on having a dynamic culture. He also understands that the Malaysian government imposes the National Culture policy to prioritize privileges for the Malay people, an essentialized cultural

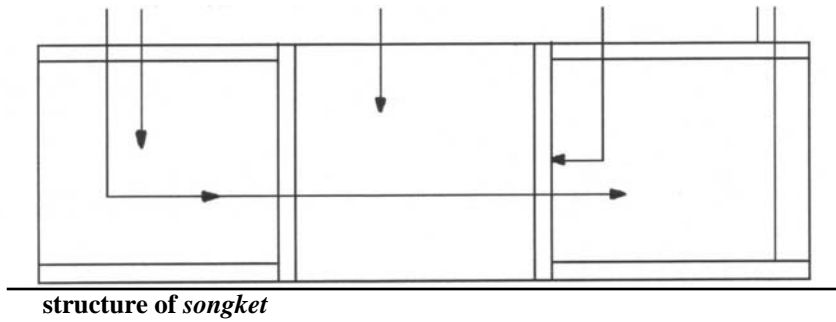
identity. However, as suggested by Stuart Hall, “identifications belong to the imaginary; they are phantasmatic efforts of alignment, loyalty, ambiguous and cross-corporeal cohabitations, they unsettle the I; they are the sedimentation of the ‘we’ in the constitution of any I, the structuring present of alterity in the very formulation of the I. Identifications are never fully and finally made; they are incessantly reconstituted, and as such are subject to the volatile logic of iterability. They are that which is constantly marshaled, consolidated, retrenched, contested and on occasion compelled to give way” (Hall, 1993, p.12). If Malaysia’s cultural identity is to recognize the ‘Other’ and acknowledge the ‘difference,’ the National Culture has to shift to one appropriate to the current condition. The government’s National Culture policy has always tended to be protective of the Malay people. In order to recognize the importance of the Chinese and Indian people, the Malays have to “position and reposition themselves in a society that is ever-changing” (Hall, 1990, p.226). A dynamic culture has to accept reformation and reposition itself in order to be identified and accepted locally and internationally.

The researcher goes further, using the songket motifs to analyze his cultural identity by “challenging cultural stereotypes, exploring, interrogating and critiquing notions of national and cultural identity” (Higa, 1996, p.6). He also examines the “contours of ethnicity to engage in a nuanced interpretation of national and cultural identity both as primary project and the by-product of other” (Ibid). He questions the Malaysian government’s fixed policy on identity and proposes that the cultural identity be based on recognizing the ‘Other’ in locating the culture in a contemporary context. Malaysian contemporary art stresses the importance of context and the ability of the art to harmonize and to educate people about their identity in a pluralistic society (Rahim, 1994, p.27). Current political, economic and social conditions in Malaysia raise questions about Malaysia’s cultural identity and the need for it to shift to justify its representation of a population both of the Malay mainstream and the ‘Other,’ mainly the Chinese and the Indian. Since identity is dynamic, reformation of the cultural identity is essential in order to accommodate a contemporary Malaysia. “Identity is a construction, a consequence of a process of interaction between people, institution and practices” (Sarup, 1994, p.47).

The Songket

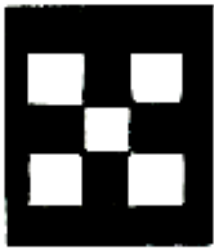
The *songket* motifs are portrayed in a Malay textile art called the *songket*. *Songket*⁹ is a Malay word that means to bring out or to pull a thread from a background cloth or to weave using gold and silver thread (Nawawi, 1989, p. 5). The art of *songket* plays an important role in Malay society, for it represents a tradition that Malay people appreciate and which is by far the most admired form of Malay art. It can be put

badan kain (body) *kepala kain* (head) *kendik* (support) *kaki kain* (foot)



forth that the *songket* motifs are associated with a group of people from a privileged socio-economic background and having political powers, a symbol of Malay supremacy that is still evident in a contemporary Malaysia. It is also important to note that the motifs also represent the shift in the Malay culture of having integrated elements of many foreign influences.

The *songket* motifs are divided into seven categories. They are motifs derived from flora and fauna, which have been stylized because of Islamic religious restrictions, foods, nature and significant court objects. In order to comprehend the symbolism that exists in the motifs, the location of the motifs or structure in *songket* has to be considered. The hierarchies of locations in the structure are the *kepala* (head) followed by *badan* (body) and *kaki* (foot) and *kendik* (supporting the head). The head plays the role of carrying the hidden meaning behind the portrayed motifs.



Top left is **Clove**

Top right is **Mangosteen**

Bottom left is **Lotus**



Cidda Acida



Clouds



Sea horse

Various Motifs

Plants are portrayed repeatedly in Malay art because they are believed to have the power of healing those who own the art pieces. Moreover, plants like bamboo are seen to have worked for the good of humankind. The motifs derived from plants were embedded with animist beliefs, which were later appropriated with the coming of Hindu-Buddhist and Islamic ideologies. Spices are other sources for motifs. Cloves and star anise, renowned for their fragrance, are principal motifs supporting the bamboo shoot. These particular spices were the main source of wealth and power that contributed to the conflicts between European powers and the Malays. Motifs of the flowers that are portrayed in the *songket* have sweet fragrance, are small to medium in size, white and cream in color and possess some medicinal properties. The flowers were used in the custom of *mandi bunga* or scented bath. Traditionally, the Malays used seven types of traditional flowers that were believed to have special effect on revitalizing and rejuvenating the bather.

The *songket* motifs depict the traditional establishment of the Malay political system (associating spirituality with Divine Kingship), largely agrarian economy and social system expressing communal activities. These motifs also indicate the process of reshaping cultural values through assimilation with the Hindu-Buddhist and Islamic cultural influences combined with the animist traditions. However, the concepts of 'growth,' 'sense of unity,' and 'human spirituality' will remain a part of the Malay cultural identity portrayed in the *songket* motifs.

The traditions that the *songket* motifs embraced are still being observed by the Malay people today. This demonstrates their clinging to Malay supremacy, having the power to control the nation without regard for ethnic diversity. In return, the researcher is able to problematize these concepts of cultural context in

order to transform the *songket* motifs. He is questioning the feasibility of the Malay culture in relation to the National Culture policy of representing a multicultural society. It has been demonstrated that the *songket* motifs had been influenced by the Hindu-Buddhist and Islamic ideologies, complying with the concept of assimilation where “tradition is always being made and remade. Tradition is fluid; it is always being reconstituted. Tradition is about change - change that is not being acknowledged” (Sarup, 1994, p.97). This will further suggest that shift in the contemporary Malaysian cultural identity can be based on the reshaping that took place almost twenty centuries ago. The transformations of *songket* motifs into art objects will change the function of the motifs from flat images into installations. The metaphors and the symbolic meanings of the motifs act “as means of reference not to objects of the external world as generally perceived but to some other reality or planes” (Forge, 1973, p.xix).

Artwork

The researcher’s practice demonstrates the transformation of the flat *songket* images into artworks. The artworks are engaged in the process in order to demonstrate the change of functions of the motifs in a gallery context. These motifs’ transformations exemplify the examination of the shifting Malaysian cultural identity in relation to the *songket* motifs. The findings in the study of Malaysia’s cultural identity demonstrated the essentialized cultural identity asserted by the government’s policy. The researcher expresses concern for recognizing and acknowledging the ‘Other’ and the existence of ‘difference’ in the society. This is applicable by engaging the context found in the *songket* motifs to question the validity of the Malay culture as a base for Malaysia’s cultural identity. The findings through the examination of the *songket* motifs entail the concept of ‘growth,’ the ‘sense of unity,’ and ‘human spirituality’. The researcher, on the contrary, explores a different approach to his practice. He engages foods for the smell and texture, chanting from rituals for sound installation, light and shadow for images, to demonstrate a change from the Malaysian artists’ practices. The application of the artworks in the researcher’s practice explores the shift in cultural identity and change of the *songket* motifs by appropriating the context of the *songket* motifs in a gallery. The symbolic meaning found in the *songket* motifs strengthens the metaphor for the artworks and it opens many avenues of interpretation by the audience.

Traditionally, the *songket* motifs function as the beautifying elements in transmitting messages on items of clothing. The combination of these motifs in different spaces of structure relays a message that was not written in any textbook but is alive in the practice of oral traditions among the Malays. The motifs express symbolism and hidden meaning and yet are only available in flat images. These symbols and messages are displayed with the human body to

convey the message and fulfill their role as part of textile design and functional art. The researcher is more concerned with examining the traditional customs, rituals and oral traditions associated with the motifs. The artworks represent different dimensions of installations through the process of transformation and re-construction of flat images of the motifs in the installations' method of expressing ideas. It allows the researcher to practice the notion of 'hybridity' in qualities such as concentrating on diversity and contradicting the traditional ideas within their boundaries. Overall, the transformations of these motifs contradict the traditional application of the motifs, which appear on clothing. The artworks transform the motifs into realization and physical embodiment. They also create new symbolism in artistic metaphors, detached from Malay cultural understanding and accessible to a wider audience. The artworks enhance a space (a gallery) with smells, images and sound. The transformations of the *songket* motifs also break the barriers of culture by emerging in a different context as opposed to the traditional ways of appearing on costumes. The artworks are moving away from the traditional environment in which the *songket* motifs exist to visual art of different qualities that encourage an interactive experience revolving around five fields of interest that include symbolic meaning, contemplative setting, human senses, interior spatial arrangement and identity in artworks.

The symbolic meanings of the *songket* motifs are considered vital to transform the *songket* motifs into installative artworks. Context plays an important role relating to the meaning of the motifs. Malay traditional context relates the motifs with customs and rituals while contemporary context of an art gallery sees and frees them from a specific cultural reading. The 'flat image' state of the motifs merely transcribes the meaning whereas a three-dimensional state transforms the meaning. The *songket* motifs as portrayed in Malay traditional costumes possess some meditative values for the viewer as well as the wearer. The motifs in a costume read like an unwritten text, an embodiment of visual representation as well as a manifestation of Malay culture, strongly characterized by the oral traditions of being attached to the folkloristic beliefs, myths and legends. The values of these motifs support the "two main Eastern traditions of providing aesthetic vision and meditative absorption," which can be summed up as having the mode of "contemplative nature" (Janson, 1991, p.556). The artworks can also provide the audience with the opportunity to contemplate the way they are exhibited. "Contemplation, the aesthetic vision and meditative attention, is not cognitive, non-discursive, nonverbal, holistic and non affective as they exclude self-interest" (Macquet, 1986, p.55). Tapping into human senses such as sight, sound, touch and smell can create an experience, which can be memorable and distinctive. Architectural sensation - such as the feel of texture in relation to application of materials and the manipulation of colors and light and shade - can contribute to a much deeper artistic experience. Use of the

senses gives the audience the opportunity to interact with the artworks. The “artist’s experience, feelings and vision in creating artworks labeled the personalized emotions as the most important things” next to the artworks themselves (Ibid, p.56). From an aesthetic point of view, the search for meaning through art becomes a part of “an artist profile in believing that life without sensory harmony is meaningless” (Getzels, 1976, p.49).

In transforming the motifs into artworks, the issue of ‘location’ is vital. The art objects have to have a setting and a gallery will fit the purpose ideally. In addition, the space itself has physical properties that embrace the artworks, where the space “can be transformed as a part of the installations embodiment, a form that is a legacy in contemporary installation” (Installation Art, 1993, p.7). Focal points are established to direct the audience through the space. The artworks will create a ‘footpath,’ a sequence of experiences. The location of the artworks not only encourages the audience to interact but also directs them to contemplate the artworks. The proper setting in an interior space supports the breaking of the tradition of ‘hands off’ the artworks while viewing. This will also encourage interactions between the audience and the artworks as “a sculpture is essentially occupation of space, construction of an object with hollows and solid part, mass and void, their variations and reciprocal tensions and finally their equilibrium” (Trier, 1986, p.10).

Having the role of a reflective practitioner, the researcher is entitled to be a part of this study. The self-reflective element in this research could be seen as exploring from within the conditions influencing art. He has the advantage of producing artworks disassociated from traditional Malay art as commonly practiced by Malaysian artists. Ultimately, the researcher has changed his identity through the examination of Malaysia’s cultural identity exemplified in the transformations of the *songket* motifs. Further shift in the cultural identity is appropriate as identity is always “in the process of formation, dependent on and in symbiosis with constantly changing external forces” (Gevers, 1992, p.12). The artwork used a context of the *songket* motifs that included using smell and foods as art materials and simultaneously challenging traditions, taboo and rituals to enhance the transformations of the motifs. “It is invariably exploratory and seeks to investigate existing conventions, evolve new concepts, and engage with an experimental practice. It draws freely on the widest range of references, influences and disciplines....work that broadly embraces ephemeral, time-based visual and performing art events that include a human presence and broaden, challenge or question views of the arts” (What is Live Art, 1998, accessed on 08/06/1998).

No Turning Back

270cm diameter circle



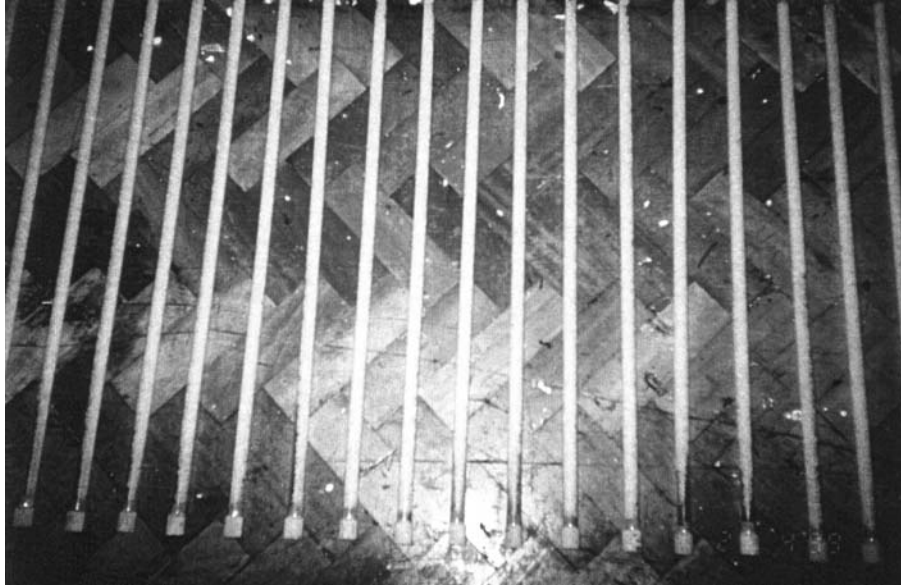
No Turning Back depicts the process of re-forming cultural identity. This artwork used turmeric powder and flour as materials, ingredients of the sources of the motifs from foods. The yellow color of the turmeric is a symbol of royalty for the Malay people. The word 'ish' that is scribbled on this artwork is a word of protest. It is known in the Malay culture as a rude remark if addressed to parents and the elders. On the other hand, it also indicates a cliché of not truly being something that it is intended to be (i.e. Malay - 'Malay-ish'). The question of what is pure and what is not becomes the main concern in this artwork in relation to culture of the Malay as the main feature in Malaysia's cultural identity.

Barrier expresses the fragility of glass tubes in protecting the rice, the staple food for most Asian countries. It indicates the importance of the rice encased in the glass tubes. It also displays my concern in using food as art material by protecting it with glass tubes. *Barrier* demonstrates the boundary enforced on the audience to access this artwork. Stepping over the boundary will involve breaking the glass and spoiling the rice. The examination of the cultural taboo of wasting food questions the researcher's loyalty to his culture and traditions.

In *Pages of History*, (see next page) the researcher used the history of Malaysia that experienced cultural assimilation with foreign influences throughout its cultural development. The handmade paper indicates the non-durability of the material but toughening by the scent of cloves, which enhances its appearance. The banner dominates the space, expressing its function as a page from a book. Smell from cloves creates another dimension of displaying my artwork that might invite the participants into smelling them. Clove motifs in *songket* are used to enhance the patterning of the motifs. In this artwork, the researcher used cloves to enhance the space, making them the main material of this piece.

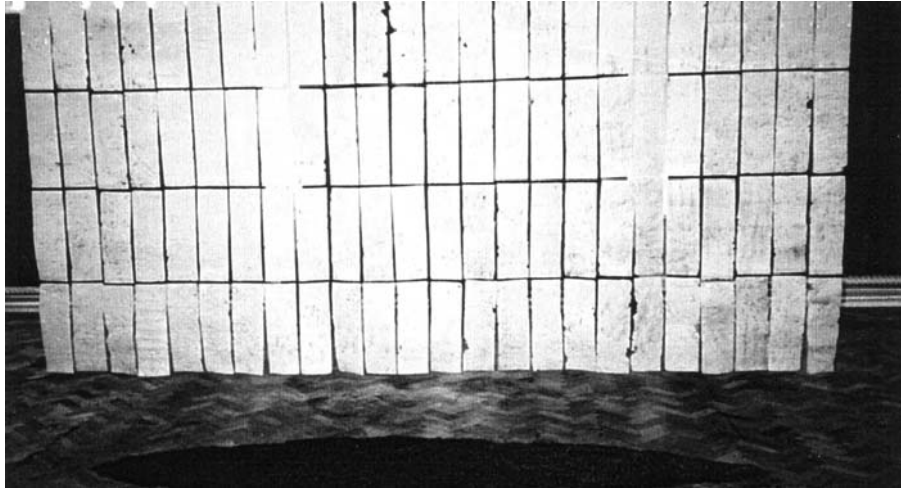
Barrier

30cm long of 100 glass tubes



Pages of History

300cmx360cm



The researcher's image (portrait) is used as the major feature of this artwork. He used his own image to symbolize a protest of his own culture. His eyes are blindfolded, his mouth is gagged and his ears are covered with red ribbons. This action reflects the idea of 'see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil.' It is a form of censure, questioning the Malay customs and traditions, which are a major factor in determining the cultural identity of a contemporary Malaysia. The stainless steel boxes' internal surfaces reflect his images, echoing the struggle to overcome the setbacks of traditions. These traditions are also seen as governing the conception of

'Foreign-ness'/Familiarity, 30cmx30cmx30cm (3 boxes)

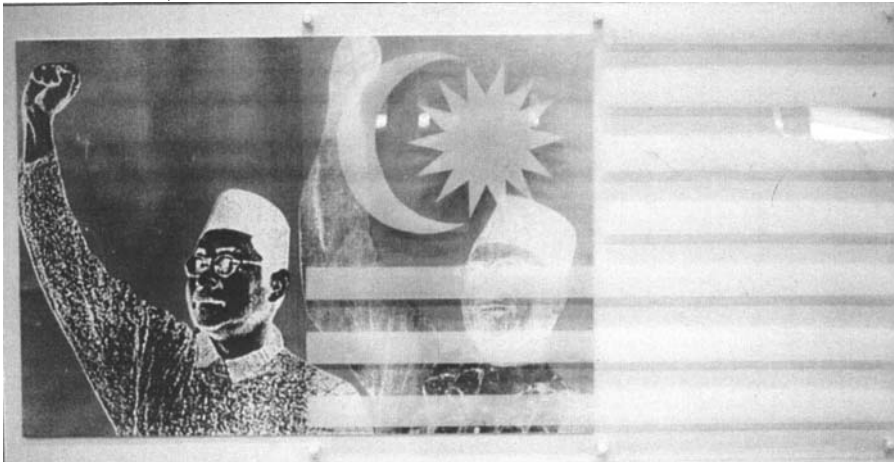


Malaysians of having no freedom of expression or controlled freedom of speech to question the authority of regulations imposed on them. His protest is also

accompanied by the sound of the endless chanting signifying a ritual that was passed on through generations. The chanting is the praises to Prophet Mohammad, associated with the Malay people as Muslims and their devotion to Allah as they follow the religious path commanded by Prophet Mohammad. The concern here is that the Islamic religious belief being practiced in the Malay culture is strongly mixed with the rituals influenced by the animist and Hindu-Buddhist influences. He is baffled by the blind faith demonstrated by many Malays who follow the traditional customs and mix it with Islamic religious beliefs without questioning their validity.

The researcher used his image in *Black/White* to reflect the freedom that Malaysia is experiencing from the British colonization. The researcher's picture was set next to the picture of the first prime minister of Malaysia. His hand gesture remarks on a victory over colonization, and the researcher's gesture illustrates the freedom to express his speech. Both images are portrayed in negative outlook but indicate positive actions. The use of salt in the making of the Malaysian flag reflects the Malay proverb of *siapa makan garam dahulu, or who tastes the salt first signifies the elders dictating to the younger generations with the established customs and traditions. The salt also indicates the normal practice of the young*

Black/White, 120cmx90cm



Malaysians to observe the rules and regulations associated with the traditions without questioning them. The researcher's concern here is the ability of the younger Malaysians to contribute to the changing perception of Malaysia's cultural identity in relation to the current Malaysian economic and political situation. The freedom that Malaysia received from the British might be used to move ahead to indicate that Malaysia is dynamic and able to adapt new ideas

compatible with the nation's multi-racial society. Salt as material for the artwork symbolizes the fragility of the freedom of speech if it is not used properly or addressed seriously.

The artworks portrayed the new interpretation of contemporary Malaysian art in a move away from the 'Malayness' associated with the *songket* motifs. They encountered a 'displacement' in their physicality and an appropriation by the gallery. The 'displacement' itself encourages the artworks to be viewed differently instead of being ethnic, exotic or primitive.

Conclusion

Although Malaysia is a multi-racial society, an essentialized cultural identity has been established, based solely on the culture of the Malay people. The complexity of Malaysia's cultural identity was examined through the historical events that took place in Malaysia and the political, economic and social systems that were intended to protect the Malay people. The National Culture introduced was a rigid and fixed policy on Malaysia's cultural identity, giving the Malays many privileges. The policy indicated a move to fix a one-race, one-culture and one-religion nationhood. To some degree, this policy was divorced from accepting the current social ideology of ethnic diversity, thus acknowledging the existence of the 'Other.' The National Culture created confusion over policies which emphasized loyalty and which disregarded the existence of other races and their contribution towards modernizing the nation. Only the Malay recognized this absolute cultural identity; the 'Other' interpreted it as protecting the mainstream. Malaysia would benefit from recognizing the problem created by the stereotyping of the population, a consequence of the National Culture policy. Identity is dynamic and will always change through the process of interactions with external influences Malaysia has and is experiencing.

Traditions and customs found through the examination of the motifs appeared in the guidelines related to the National Culture policy. The traditional culture that had been passed on for over twenty centuries is closely observed today, which raised another question about the practicality of these traditions in a modern Malaysia. The customs were seen as being strictly followed and claimed by many Malays as the purest manifestation of Malay culture, being loyal to the rules set by the leaders. The concept of 'blind faith' in assuming what is preached is right, was apparent. The sense of culture being ever-changing was never addressed, thus leading to the practice of taking these cultural regulations at face value. It was evident that the society was governed by a social construct, a communal activity based on rules created a long time ago. This created a dilemma in choosing between the need to move forward as the nation developed and the passion to adhere to the cultural identity that recognized the Malay as the reigning race of Malaysia. There was a reluctance to examine the historical consequences of assimilation. Instead, the society's wish to erase the journey taken could be interpreted as nostalgia and a clinging

to the glorious past. The 'modern' Malaysia in such cultural figuration was seen as having new beginnings, new births, and new origins, which effectively concealed the truths of its formation and the means of its acceptance into contemporary society.

The *songket* motifs in their flat state conveyed a traditional enigmatic quality rich with cultural traditions. However, as soon as the motifs were transformed, they lost this quality. More importantly, the investigation had demonstrated that the *songket* motifs went through a process of change as the Malay underwent cultural developments involving assimilation of foreign influences. The understanding of the motifs' symbolic meaning facilitated the motifs' transformation. The assimilation of many religious beliefs, from animism to Hindu-Buddhism and Islam, had determined the unfixed nature of the cultural context of the motifs. The researcher's practice challenged the Malay customs, not by literally translating the flat images of the *songket* motifs but by using the motifs in the context of cultural reference.

The contemporary Malaysian art practice became a site for renegotiating the terms of modernity in an 'in-between space.' It carried the burden of defining cultural identity in terms of what it has been and what it will be. Nevertheless, in the slow progress of 'modernizing' contemporary Malaysian art, the practice could be seen to be inconsistent in its political awareness. The researcher's practice had demonstrated the visual realization of the examination of the *songket* motifs and Malaysia's cultural identity. Materials like foods, images, religious chanting, light and shadow were used to challenge the conventional practice present in the contemporary Malaysian art practice. He took the approaches of using foods and sound for art materials. However, in Malaysia, using foods as material for artworks was unacceptable. The researcher utilized culturally specific subject matter but related it to the current Malaysia's social and political environment, in contrast to the practices of many Malaysian artists. The researcher also showed the disengagement with traditional Malay art by transforming *songket* motifs into installative works, which questioned Malay beliefs and traditions. The works are non-site specific, required no cultural reference, and did not impose a specific ethnic belief onto others. The concept of accessibility engaged in the artworks allowed the interpretation of the works to be more universal rather than traditional and specific.

In this study the researcher was not only the author and the artist, but was also the subject. He studied himself as a member of Malaysian society and as a contemporary Malaysian artist, and from this position he was able to suggest changes to Malaysia's cultural identity and contemporary Malaysian art. The images of the practice became part of the visual argument.

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Notes

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- ¹ Statistics are based on 2000 figures. 14.56 million or 66.1% Malay/Bumiputeras, 5.58 million or 25.3% Chinese, 1.63 million or 7.4% Indians and 0.27 million or 1.2% Others. Source: <http://www.statistics.gov.my>. Statistics Department of Malaysia. Access on 10 June 2001.
- 2 The European powers are perceived as the Westerners by Malaysians.
- 3 The Chinese were mainly the Hokkien and Cantonese.
- 4 The Indians were mainly from southern India and Sri Lanka, of Sikh and Malayalee.
- 5 The clash between the Malays and the Chinese was due to political and economic imbalances rooted during the colonization of the British government 12 years after the Union Jack was lowered.
- 6 The first trace of Islamic influence was found in Terengganu in the late 8th century AD.
- 7 30% amounts to the number of companies owned by Malays.
- 8 National Coalition Front is comprised of:
UMNO - United Malay National Organization
MCA - Malaysian Chinese Association
MIC - Malaysian Indian Corporation
- 9 For the verb, songket is also spelled sungkit to describe the action of bringing out or picking a thread from the cloth. The end product of the action is called songket according to the Kamus Dewan, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (a Malay dictionary). (4)

