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THE CONSTRUCTION OF MALAY IDENTITY IN THE MEDIA:
A LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract

What is the identity of the Malay and what Malay identity is being constructed by the media? This paper aimed at reviewing the construction of the Malay identity in the media from the literature as the foundation of a future research. The paper aimed at looking into history and past studies pertaining to the Malay identity in the media as a way to discuss the two questions asked. The study argues that the Malay identity constructed during the pre-colonial time by, is being constructed and reconstructed overtime by various elements and for various reasons. The researcher is particularly interested in explaining how the media, particularly the newspapers, construct and reconstruct the Malay identity. The review found out that the Malays identity were constructed by the British and were gradually constructed and reconstructed again by changes in political leadership and as well as to emphasis nation building among the Malaysian citizen. A more comprehensive studies is needed to look at the contemporary 'Malay media identity' projected by the media and the factors influencing the identity.

Keywords: Malay identity, agenda setting, media portrayal.

1. Introduction

The Malays have been said to have the crisis of identity (Karim Raslan, 2011; Shamsul Akmar, 2000), not to mentioned that the Malays to have long been associated with laziness, incapable and underdeveloped as noted by Syed Hussein Alatas (1997) and Zanas (Zanas, n.d.). The Malays too were said numerous other problems, having 'temperamental behavior' (Rizal Abd Rahman, 2012) and Rizal too noted Profesor Diraja Ungku Aziz comments on the Malays as 'unwilling to change, prefer not to investigate or think deeply and have a limited perspective'. Shamsul Akmar (2000) said the roots of the identity crisis were the Malay political divide, a clash of identity has been going on since the the late 1960s and early 1970s. This literature review therefore wish to look at the identity of the Malay and understand the Malay identity constructed by the media.

2. Agenda setting

The Agenda Setting Theory has long been use to explain media portrayal. According to the agenda-setting theory**,** the mass-news media have a large influence on audiences by their choice of what stories to consider newsworthy and how much prominence and space to give them. Agenda-setting theory's main postulate is salience transfer. Salience transfer is the ability of the mass media to transfer issues of importance from their mass media agendas to public agendas. The Agenda-Setting Theory says the media (mainly the news media) aren't always successful at telling us what to think, but they are quite successful at telling us what to think about. However, the theory can be proven false, as if people do not exposed to the same media, they won't feel the issues are important (McCombs, M., & Shaw, D.L, 1972).

Two basis assumptions underlie most research on agenda-setting: (1) the press and the media do not reflect reality; they filter and shape it; (2) media concentration on a few issues and subjects leads the public to perceive those issues as more important than other issues. One of the most critical aspects in the concept of an agenda-setting role of mass communication is the time frame for this phenomenon. In addition, different media have different agenda-setting potential. Agenda-setting theory seems quite appropriate to help us understand the pervasive role of the media.

3. Construction of Identity

How are identity constructed? (Jenkins, 2008) sees identity as socially contructed, in which it inter-related how interest are defined and with what interest the identity are being defined. In Social Identity Theory, people tend to classify them-selves and others into various social categories, such as organizational membership, religious affiliation, gender, and age cohort (Tajfel & Turner, 1985).

While (Carter, 2010) emphasised that identity is when "the self as a multifaceted entity which includes a complex structure of multiple identities" (pg25), while (Stryker, 1980) sees self-categorization as equally relevant to the formation of one's identity, in which categorization depends upon a named and classified world identity. Jenkins futher added that the notion of identity involves two criteria of comparison between persons or things: *similarity* and *differene and it could begins with how* things or persons are classify, and how to associate oneself with, or attach oneself to, something or someone else (such as a friend, a sports team or an ideology).

Meanwhile, identity is an everchanging phenomenon, as noted by (Shamsul, 2001; Shamsul A.B, 1996) as it is constantly changes or to be more precise, 'redefined, reconstructed, reconstitited and altered' (Shamsul, 2001, pg 8) as he put it. Shamsul too are being particular about how we study social text, and in his discourse of identity, and he mentioned on how one could read the newspapers and would be presented with 'authority-defined voices of all types' (pg 11) instead of the 'everyday defined ones' except in the letter to editor, individual columnist or entertainment section. Shamsul AB (2006) suggested that in the study of identity, one should adopt the two social reality approach – the authority defined and the everyday defined, or studying it separately as both has it advantages when it comes to understanding the 'micro-macro levels' of the social reality. This shows that authority (and political party as well) also play a role in molding the identity via the media they control.

According to Huffman (2008) identity crisis is when adolescents attempt to discover who there are, what their skills are, and what kind of roles they are best suited to play for the rest of ther lifes. Failure to resolt the identity crisis may be related to a lack of stable identity, delinquency or difficulty in maintaining close personal relationships in later life.

4. The Malay Identity

The Malay identity has been discussed dating back from even from before the British era (Syed Hussein Al-Attas, 1977) and then the identity was then reconstructed, pre and post-colonial era. Often being asked were : what defines the Malay, and what is known as the Malay Identity?. There is no one defination of 'the Malays' as noted by Mauzy (2005). Fellow scholar has been attempting to define the Malays from various framework, origin of language, geographycally and from claims from other parts of the worlds, such as the Siak state from western Sumatra, western Borneo and the Bugis.

Nothofer (2006) had define Malay as a "member of the Malay group of languages, which belongs to the subfamily of the western Malayo-Polynesian languages of the Austronesian language family". Adding on to what seems to be already complex quest, according to the constitution (Nazri Muslim, 2011), the Malays are not necessary a 'Malay' by etnicity, but they are individuals which fit into three categories, 1) practise the Malay customs, 2) speaks Malays, and 3) practise Islam as a religion.

The European colonial image of a lazy, incapable, treacherous and scheming natives partly reflect a section of naive community. The British identity of the Malays in the 19th century includes the characters (the build of the Malay individuals) and they were also defined by their profession. (Syed Hussein Alatas, 1977) Swettenham early defination of the Malays also suggested that a Malay is a Muslim, and 'fatalist and very superstitous' (pg. 44).

Other traits includes 'loyalty; hositality, generosity and extravagance (pg 44). Swettenham too have a negative disciption of the Malays where the Malays were said to have a tendency to borrow money from someone they know well and have the tendency not to pay back the debt.

The Malays too were noted as to be hardworking, and at the same time were called (a good) 'servant' and a pirate. Raffles, according to him, has said that "the Malays did not achieve a high intelectual stage of development", in which some of this perception was belied by him as a result of the absence of "well defined and generally accepted of system of law..." (pg 38). Another comment which is also interesting is that of Hugh Clifford as noted by Syed Hussin Alatas, Clifford saw the potentioal of the Malays to develop '*latah*', when "sufficiently persecuted, teased and harrassed".

When discussing the 'Malayness' Shamsul too explain these :

> *that 'Malayness' as a social category has never been problematised or perceived as something constructed, invented, artifical, despided te act that 'what it means' and 'what it is' has always been altered, redifined, reconstructed and the boundaries expended accordingg to specific social-historical circumstances, especially after the introduction of colonial 'racis' and racial category ' into the realm of authority-defined and the everyday defined social reality in Britsh Malaya.*

From his perspectives, defining the Malay would also includes social hirarchy, which identified by his as 'the dominant' and 'the dominated ones'. He also included the political seniario as an elemenet which need to be explored, with the emphasis on 'what happens in the political space' beyong politics of parties and numbers , particularly in the realm of ideas, symbols and perceptions (pg 13) when studying or discussing 'identity', especially the 'national reality'.

Ahmad Murad Merican said that "identity and mind are constructed by the Western and imposed by the Other" (pg 152) and the presence of the Malay is the absence of the Malay of non-Occidental thought. "Hence the Malays misunderstand themselves by not knowing it. Worse, they become strangers to their own being (Ahmad Murad Merican, 2009).

Meanwhile C. W. Watson (1996) said the Malays have been been educated to have a certain assumption about themselves, which included suitable for profession in the civil service or agriculture, and not suitable to run business or commercial. Syed Hussein (1997) futher emphasis that the image of backward Malays later changed into that of a dependent one requiring assistance to climb the ladder of progress

While discussing Malay identity, scholar such a too relate it with 'budi' (a set of internal values that shape one's personality and identity) 'adat' (the Malay's social norms) and the religion of Islam as the source of the Malay's cultural and identity constructions (Wan Norhasniah Wan Husin, 2011, Ahmad Murad Merican, 2006, Lim Kim Hui, 2003).

5. Malay identity and the Media

Ahmad Murad (2009) noted that early Malay periodicals were used as an instrument for reform and change, and for cultural and political expression. He said Syed Shaykh al-Hady (1867–1934) and the periodical al-Imam (1906-1908) "demonstrates the dissemination of values similar to the pamphlet journalism in early- modern Europe", in which, the contents of the papers was "in essence apologists for European thought". In his analysis, he said this about the works by al-Hady :

> *"Through journalism, he enabled new ideas and new values to be introduced against the orthodoxy of the ulama and Malay society. By doing so, he gave the Malay Muslim community a sense of identity, unity and new directions to overcome the problems of belief and domination by the colonialists and western civilisation" (pg 161)*

Studying festive season advertisement,   (Zurina Zubir & Zaemah Abdul Kadir, 2012) found out that identity of the Malays were defined through the values potrayed by the characters in the advertisement, in took into account the aspects of religion, politics and traditions.

Meanwhile, (Mohd Azmir Mohd Razli Noordin, 2010) blamed the flooding of television channels available due to the advancement of technology which he believed, majority of the programmes have elements which contradicted to the culture, tradition and the religion as practised by a Malay. This is what he said in relation to the effect of the media to the Malay identity:

> *"Did we lost our identity that we have to copy Western elements in our drama that we could not differenciate which are the Malay identity and which are the copied ones?"*
> *The youth would feel 'cool' when they succesed to emulate their heroes. The Muslim's enemy understood this facts, and very quicly they projected celebrity, sports celebrity and many others which could be their icon to be followed.* ("Belia, Melayu dan Islam," n.d.)

A study by Halim Yahya, Amelia Abdul Aziz, & Zaliffah Abdul Wahab (2005) found out that all mainstream newspapers are supportive to the Malays, and among issues related to Malays includes biasiswa bumiputra scholarship, work ethics and religion.

CONCLUSION

This paper attemped to reviewing the construction of the Malay identity in the media from the literature as the foundation of a future research. While attempting to look into history and past studies pertaining to the Malay identity in the media as a way to discuss the two questions asked, the researcher found out that there are more questions have left unanswered on how identity are actually contructed of what are the identity, in which the problems of the Malays are defined better. Among the variable used to define identity includes values such as 'budi', 'adat' and other moral values emphasis in moral, culture and religion of the Malays. It it is also found out that the Malays identity constructed by the British were reconstructed time and time again by changes in political leadership and as well as to emphasis nation building among the Malaysian citizen. A more conprehensive studies is needed to look at the contemporary 'Malay media identity' projected by the media and the factors influencing the identity from the social texts such as print and electronic media.

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