

## **Globalization and the Malaysian Experience: Upsides and Downsides<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract:** *In this short article I wish to show how Malaysia and Malaysians respond to the globalization process, especially in issues related education, culture and identity. Using this experience several important theoretical issues about the nature of the globalization process is addressed. The Malaysian case may shed some new lights on whether globalisation is a one centre and one directional process; or a multi-central and multi-directional process.*

**Keywords:** *Malaysia; Globalization; Glocalization; Modernization; Movement of People; Economy; Media; Education; Culture; Religion.*

### **Introduction**

Globalization is a buzzword today. Much has been written about it and much has been confused. It is often regarded as if it is a natural process by the popular media.

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Even sociologist like Giddens thinks that we are inevitably propelled into a global order. It is as if we have no choice but to accept this inevitable fact of modern life. However, this article will argue that it is not a natural process but rather economically, “the process is mainly driven and enabled by policy choice at the global and national level that in recent years led to the rapid liberalization of finance, trade and investment” (Khor, 2000, p. ii) and culturally, the host culture often filters what is allowed to seep in. Nation states and local culture may choose their response to the process. Liberalizations of economy also often eventually have an effect culturally.

While there are government and people that welcome globalization warmly, Malaysia and Malaysians have received it with a lot of cautions.

In this short article I wish to show how Malaysia and Malaysians respond to the process, especially in issues related to movement of people, information flows, economic policies, education, religion and culture. However, this is not an empirical study; rather it is a theoretical article which uses the Malaysian experience to shed some light on the nature of the globalization process.

## **Globalization in Theory**

Robertson (1992, p.8) one of the most influential exponents of globalization defines it as: “Globalization as a concept refers to the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole”. While Giddens (1990, p.64) states that “Globalization can thus be defined as the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa”.

According to Bradley et al. (2000, p.15):

For Giddens, a key aspect of modernity has been the significance of what he calls ‘time-space instantiation’. By this Giddens is referring to the way in which, during the modern period, developments in transportation and communications technologies have

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meant that local events and institutions have come to be increasingly influenced by distant developments.

For Tan (2002, p.82) globalization is predominantly an economic concept. Camilleri (1998, pp.5-18) and Khor (2000) certainly will agree with Tan. Camilleri (1998, p.7) especially sees the accelerating trade, investment, and finance and technology flow across national boundaries as the engine of globalization. Lodge (1995, p.xi) summarizes it in the following passage:

Globalization is a fact and a process. The fact is that the world's people and nations are more interdependent than ever before and becoming more so. The measures of interdependence are global flows of such things as trade, investment, and capital, and the related degradation that constantly reminds us that we are passengers on a spaceship, or, more ominously, a lifeboat.

The process of globalization is both technological and human. Technologically, new systems of global information and communication foster and link the agents of globalization-multinational corporations, sometime with governments as their partners. On the human side, globalization is pulled by exploding consumer desires, especially in the rapidly growing countries of Asia, and pushed by ingenious corporate managers, who themselves are driven by variety of urges- to serve their communities or their shareholders, to gain wealth and power, or simply to exercise their skills and talents.

Globalization is a promise of efficiency in spreading the good things of life to those who lack them. It is also a menace to those who are left behind, excluding from its benefits.

Scholte (qtd. in Smith, 2002) argues that there are at least five broad definitions of globalization: globalization as internationalization; globalization as liberalization; globalization as universalization; globalization as westernization or modernization; and globalization as deterritorilization. According to Scholte only the globalization as deterritorilization can offer a clear definition of globalization (qtd. in Smith, 2002). In my opinion,

globalization involves all the five processes, but it is more than any one of them. From the definitions and passage above we can summarize that Globalization involve a few important concepts, i.e. compression of the world or time/space (in Giddens' term); consciousness of the world as a whole; interdependence of people and nations and most important of all is the intense consciousness of this interdependence; and the evidences of the process is the global flow of such things as trade, investment, capital, people and popular culture. Eventually the world will become like a borderless village. Waters (2001, p.5) states that globalization is "a social process in which the constraints of geography on economic, social, and cultural arrangements recede, in which people become increasingly aware that they are receding and in which people act accordingly".

At this point it is appropriate to point out the mistake of some writers to equate colonialism with globalization; and argue that globalization has in fact begun many centuries ago. This view basically confuses internationalization and globalization. The differences between colonialism and internationalization with globalization lay in a few things. First, in the globalization concept the intensity of the interchange and compression of time-space is very important. It is the pace that makes things different. While for example there might be migration of people during the colonial period but it was basically very slow as compare to what is happening now. The speed of the process changes its nature. It is the speed that causes the compression of time/space. Secondly, the term interdependent is very important in globalization theory. Going international may not mean that we are interdependent. For example we have long exporting our products but we were never as dependent and as affected by global market. Thirdly, the consciousness of interdependent and the consciousness of being in one world also change the nature of the process. I dare claim that this consciousness is entirely new to us. Never in the human history have the people of the world felt so interdependent.

On the other hand, while agreeing that economic globalization is the most important aspect of globalization both Robertson (1992) and Ritzer (2004) stress the

importance of cultural globalization. Together with Giddens (1990, pp.63-65), Ritzer (2004, p.160) coin modernization (modernity or McDonaldization for Ritzer) as the engine of Globalization. As a matter of fact the whole world is modernizing. It is believed that there is going to be convergence everyway in the world. As with Giddens, Ritzer agrees that “modernity is inherently globalizing” (Bradley et al., 2000, p.15)

Here we can sense that globalization is often a one way process, the more powerful nations or Multinational Corporation influencing or forcing the weaker nations or people to change or to react. It is seldom the other way round. It is very difficult to speak about “interdependent” here. That is why many third world leaders equate globalization with colonialism in disguise. It is this aspect of the globalization process that this article is more interested in the Malaysian experience.

Is there really a convergence of things? While emphasizing the McDonaldization, Americanization and Globalization process, Ritzer (2004, pp.159-184) also speaks about what he calls Glocalization process. What he basically meant by glocalization is a process where the local culture react to the global influences, in his case McDonaldization, and force the McDonaldized system to adapt to the local culture, e.g. local flavor. He also differentiates between what he calls McDonaldization of “Nothing” and “Something”. “Nothing can be defined as a ‘social form that is generally centrally conceived, controlled and comparatively devoid of **distinctive content**<sup>1</sup>” (Ritzer, 2004, p.167). “Something” can be defined as “a social form that is generally indigenously conceived, controlled, and comparatively **rich in distinctive substantive content**<sup>2</sup>” (Ritzer, 2004, p.169). The difference between the two is in the people’s comparative perceptions. Ritzer gives some example to explain the difference. For example “if the fast-foot restaurant is an example of nothing, than a meal cooked at home from scratch would be an example of something” (Ritzer, 2004, p.169). It is the something that is more resistant to change

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<sup>1</sup> Emphasis added by present writer.

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or McDonaldization. Using these concepts Ritzer is able to explain the lack convergence of certain things. I would like to submit that the perception of nothing and something is not as clear cut as Ritzer would think. McDonald, which Ritzer regards as nothing, is everywhere regarded as something in Asia. It is regarded as something loaded with distinctive western substantive contents by most Asians. It is certainly so in the controversy of setting up a McDonald branch within University of Malaya some years ago.

### **Malaysian Society: A Brief Overview**

Malaysia is one of the most successful Southeast Asian countries. The Malaysian society is complex and interesting. It is multi-racial, Multi-religious, multi-lingual and multi-cultural, however the past years there is no sign of cultural assimilation as in other Southeast Asian countries. All the races in Malaysia although, live and work harmoniously together for years, but protect and develop their respective custom, religion, education and culture separately. However, all of them face the challenges of modernization in preserving their traditions.

Malaysia was a British colony, thus inherited the British political, legal, education and administrative system. These systems have been enshrined in the Constitution and are significant in the National building process. Currently, Malaysian Federation is still following the constitutional monarchy system. The highest monarch is called the *Yang Dipertuan Agung*. Every state has its own sultan or other rulers. Certain matters such as land and religion are placed under state control.

The major races in Malaysia are the Malays, Chinese, Indians and the indigenous people (such as Kadazan, Iban and Dusuns). Both the Malays and the indigenous people are considered *Bumiputra* (Literally, sons of the soil). According to the Census of Population and Housing Malaysia 2000, produced by the Department of Statistics, Malaysia, the population breakdown is roughly as follows: *Bumiputra* 65%, Chinese 26%, Indian 8% and others 1%.

In 1957, during independence, Malaysians' average income was only about USD 200. In year 2000, Malaysians' average was USD 3884. This is an impressive achievement if

it is compared to country such as Ghana, which is also former British colony that was granted independence at about the same time. Now, Malaysia is a highly industrialize country where agriculture only contribute to about 14% of the GDP. (Benjamin Asare & Alan Wong, 2004, p.1). In the 1980s, Malaysia begins to develop light and heavy industries; in 1990s the government adopted the privatization policies and ventured into hi-tech industries, especially information communication technologies industry. Now, the service industries and tourism are also valued.

In 1991, the then prime minister of Malaysia, Tun Mahathir Mohamad formulated the Vision 2020, in order to make Malaysia a developed nation by year 2020. Motivated by the Vision 2020, Malaysians make economic wonder in the 1990s, achieving about 8% growth yearly until the 1997 financial crisis (Puteh, 2006, p.105). However, Malaysia soon recovered from the crisis without adopting IMF's scheme, to achieve 4% to 5% growth yearly, until the 2008 global financial crisis breakout.

One of the key objectives in Vision 2020 is the development of the Information Communication Technology Industry so that Malaysia can take a quantum leap and become a developed nation. One of the biggest projects to achieve Vision 2020 is to develop the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), a development area bounded from Kuala Lumpur city centre, Putra jaya, Kuala Lumpur International Airport and Cyber Jaya, a 15 KM by 50 KM area. Under this project there are seven flagship projects: E-Government, Smart School, E-Medicine, Smart Card, Research and Development area, borderless marketing and world manufacturing network (蔡崇正, 2002, pp.35-64 ; 賴昭光 & 周忠信, 2002, pp.82-105)

Although, these projects are not entirely successful, but they definitely help accelerated the Malaysian social and economic growth. Now, Internet access and other information access is very common in Malaysia. Malaysia is definitely in a global and knowledge economy era (《馬哈迪 - 22 年叱吒風云》, 2004, pp.75-96)

Malaysia's and Malaysian communities' responds to globalization should be read in the light of the above developments.

## **Some Globalizing Phenomena in Malaysia**

During the passed 30 years, the Malaysian economy has changed from an agrarian based economy to an industrialised economy; and now it is trying to develop into a K (Knowledge) Economy. All these mega projects have made Malaysia go global in one way or another (Phua and Soo, 2004, pp.151-182).

In order to achieve the above objectives Malaysia has to adopt a more open policy, not only economically but also socially and culturally. Now, Malaysian youth have more access to the alternative media, and are open to more influences from around the world (Phua and Soo, 2004, pp.151-182).

In 1990, the NEP was replaced by the more liberal National Development Plan (1990-2010). In 1991, in order for Malaysia to become a developed nation by the year 2020, the then Prime Minister, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, announced Vision 2020. Consequently, there has been an opening up of the Malaysian market, migration of people in and out of Malaysia, opening up of education policies, etc.; all this marks a globalised era for Malaysia. This is in fact ambitious social engineering, and a deliberate policy choice in order to transform Malaysia. However, after the Asian economic crisis in 1997, Malaysia is now much more cautious about opening up its economy and other policies. However, in order to achieve the above objective the Malaysian government still has to adopt a more open policy in a few key areas as compared to before, thus resulting in some globalizing experience.

Some of the globalizing phenomena in Malaysia are:

### **Movement of People**

In order for Malaysia to be more competitive in agriculture, manufacturing and construction by lowering production cost, especially human resources cost, Malaysia had deliberately attract a large group of foreign workers since the 1980s. First the Indonesians to work in the agricultural sectors and construction sectors, later also other people, e.g.



Pakistani and Bangladeshi in the manufacturing industries. “By 1997, one out of every four workers in Malaysia was foreign. The plantation industry depends on foreign workers for over 60 per cent of their work force, while the figure for the construction industry is 70 per cent. Large numbers are entering the manufacturing industry as well” (Phua & Soo, 2004, p.156). Now the total number of foreign workers in Malaysia is over two millions. Besides, foreign workers Malaysia has also open door to many other foreigners, including foreign student, businessmen, refugees, etc. A large number of foreigners are now populated some parts of the capital city, Kuala Lumpur.

## **The Economy**

The Malaysian economy has been relying on foreign direct investment, international trade and foreign capital to grow for many years. From an agrarian economy, Malaysia has become industrialized in about 30 year, where many multinational corporations have their operation here. “Seventy-five per cent of our manufacturing was produced by foreign multinational corporations which also employed 45 per cent of the work force” (Phua & Soo, 2004, p.158).

Table 1 shows the direction of Malaysia trade with various selected countries. It shows the volume and percentage of Malaysia total export and import from 1995 to 2005. It shows that the Malaysian economy is increasing global in nature.

### **Table 1 Direction of Malaysian Global Business in the World Economy from 1990 to 2005**

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Direction	RM million*						% of Total					
	Exports			Imports			Exports			Imports		
	1990	2000	2005	1990	2000	2005	1990	2000	2005	1990	2000	2005
ASEAN	23065.5	99028	139208	15085.0	74940	110823	29.0	26.5	26.1	19.1	24.1	25.5
Singapore	18052.1	68574	83333	11800.0	44696	50828	22.7	18.4	15.6	14.9	14.4	11.7
Indonesia	920.7	6484	12580	850.8	8623	16566	1.2	1.7	2.4	1.1	2.8	3.8
Thailand	2788.0	13485	28723	1881.2	11987	22889	3.5	3.6	5.4	2.4	3.8	5.3
Philippines	1054.6	6558	7476	427.3	7562	12192	1.3	1.8	1.4	0.5	2.4	2.8
European Union	12204.5	51019	62629	12494.4	33527	50512	15.5	13.7	11.7	15.8	10.8	11.6
United Kingdom	3136.0	11566	9470	4312.3	6080	6522	3.9	3.1	1.8	5.5	2.0	1.5
Germany	3096.8	9336	11259	3389.2	9282	19265	3.9	2.5	2.1	4.3	3.0	4.4
USA	13487.0	76579	105033	13232.5	51744	55918	16.9	20.5	19.7	16.7	16.6	12.9
Canada	-	3043	2847	-	1445	2133	-	0.8	0.5	-	0.5	0.5
Australia	-	9210	18042	-	6052	8171	-	2.5	3.4	-	1.9	1.9
Selected NEA*	-	103784	149105	-	117828	169236	-	27.8	27.9	-	37.8	39.0
Japan	12588.9	48770	49918	23584.5	65513	62982	15.8	13.1	9.4	16.7	21.0	14.5
China	-	11507	35221	-	12321	49880	-	3.1	6.6	-	4.0	11.5
Hong Kong	2523.1	16854	31205	1497.5	8557	10797	3.2	4.5	5.8	1.9	2.7	2.5
Korea Rep.	3677.0	12464	17945	2033.6	13926	21604	4.6	3.3	3.4	2.6	4.5	5.0
Taiwan	1728.1	14189	14813	4323.0	17511	23974	2.2	3.8	2.8	3.5	5.6	5.5
South Asia	-	10529	21245	-	3030	4504	-	2.8	4.0	-	1.0	1.0
India	-	7312	14972	-	2748	4164	-	2.0	2.8	-	0.9	1.0
CSA	-	5633	6169	-	2587	6786	-	1.5	1.2	-	0.8	1.6
Africa	-	2996	7649	-	1421	2511	-	0.8	1.4	-	0.5	0.6
Others	-	11449	21866	-	18886	23415	-	3.1	4.1	-	6.1	5.4
Rest of the World	10372.3	-	-	11478.8	-	-	13.0	-	-	14.5	-	-

Sources: Department of Statistics.

\* 1 \$US = 3.5 RM

(From Al-Amin, Abul Quasem, Siwar, Chamhuri, Jaafar, Abdul Hamid and Mazumder, Mohammad Nurul Huda , Globalization, Environment and Policy: Malaysia Toward a Developed Nation (August 29, 2007). Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1010565>)

Malaysia enjoyed tremendous economic growth until the Asian economic crisis in 1997. In 1997 the other side of globalization, the ugly side was shown. In a short period of time all the past achievement was almost wipe away when there is a sudden outflow of foreign capital, triggered by speculation against a number of Asian currencies (Phua & Soo, 2004, p.159). However, it is also after this economic crisis that the Mahathir administration show globalization can be dealt with differently.

In recent years even the rural sectors are affected by the globalization. Take for example the padi formers were faced tumbling prices and lower demand of their rice, due mainly to larger quantity of imported rice. Now even the farmers have to compete in the global market (Khor, 2001).

Right after the economic crisis, Malaysia is facing another political crisis between Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the former Prime Minister and Dato Sri Anwar Ibrahim, the former Deputy Prime Minister. One of the biggest differences between them is over the issue of how to manage the Malaysian economy after the economic crisis. Answar is

more in favour of following the IMF's (International Monetary Fund) strategies thus, for globalization, while Mahathir is very critical of them.

The visionary Mahathir is indeed one of the biggest critics of globalization after the economic crisis. For him globalization means westernization, and there is a continuity between the globalists and past colonialists. As such globalization is seen as a form of (neo) colonialism (Wong, 2004). On this, as we have discussed, Mahathir's perception of globalization may not be totally accurate. However, his reaction to globalization is understandable because globalization often means certain degree of lost of national sovereignty and national identity. Although, IMF denies that globalization is a threat to nation states (IMF, 2002), in reality the IMF package does come with conditions that are at odd with Malaysian political reality. Adopting the IMF package does means surrendering some national sovereignty in managing the economy and other social/cultural policies. "As such, for Mahathir, globalization is not benign but an ever-present threat and needed to critically interrogated and 'interpreted correctly if it is going to bring about a better world'" (Wong, 2004)

## **The Media**

In order to achieve vision 2020 Malaysia need a generation of IT savvy youths to provide the human resource for a Knowledge economy. In order to encourage the use of IT and the Internet, the Malaysian government has time and again guaranteed the freedom of expression online. To this point, in my opinion this promise has been rather well kept. Although, the government has passed a few legislations to regulate online activities, but these regulations are mostly in order to safeguard online security to encourage E-commerce. Only until in the "heat" of the pre 2008 general election, when the government feel the threat that the internet as an alternative media may affect the Barisan National's (National Fronts) dominant that some actions have been taken against certain bloggers (Shanmuga, 2007, pp.59-60).

On the other hand, many families in Malaysia have Astro satellite TV service. Foreign news, programmes and pop culture are common in Malaysia. According to Wong (2004):

In the case of Malaysia, there is a broad consensus that globalization is not a uniform concept. For some, it is the presence of foreign multinationals, brands and lifestyles; for others it is the internet, Astro (Satellite television), the ties of the Malays and its greater Islamic ummah (the family of Muslims), the rising significance of international non-governmental organizations and Malaysia's exposure and vulnerability to global flows and vectors of capital and labour, amongst other possible developments. Clearly, globalization has far-reaching effects and is embedded in Malaysians' daily lives.

Previously Malaysia is only consumer of entertainment, but now many Malaysian artists have also gone international.

## **Education**

In order to make Malaysia a centre of education excellence in the region and to supply the industry with the relevant human resources, the Malaysian government passed five revolutionary pieces of legislations in 1995-6, i.e., the Private Higher Educational Institutions Act 1996, The National Accreditation Board Act 1996, The National Council of Higher Education Act 1996, and the Amendment to the Education Act 1960 and the Universities and University Colleges Act 1965 (Tan, 2002, p.81). The total effect of these legislative changes is a more liberal education policy, especially at the higher education level. Many of the policies that the government guarded zealously for many years are now relaxed. The height of it is to allow the private educational institutions to offer 3+0 foreign degrees totally in Malaysia. According to Tan (2002, p.82) "global force exerts a major influence on nation states to change policy to open up access in higher education to produce human capital, to advance national competitiveness and to catch up with the reality of globalization".

In the 1990s not only private universities and colleges are liberalised, many private schools and international schools are also built. Now, foreign capitals are allowed to hold up to 49% of the shares in any private educational company. Branch campuses of foreign universities are allowed, in fact attracted to set up in Malaysia. However, one question remain, is this liberalization, globalization and privatization of education good for Malaysians, especially the poor. Tooley concludes in his recent report *Could Globalization of Education Benefit the Poor?* That:

The argument began, first by showing that there are private schools available to, and patronized by, the poor in “developing” countries. Second, there is evidence showing that these schools are offering poor parents and children a better deal, educationally-speaking, than the state alternative. Teachers in the private schools, in particular, the research has suggested, show a much greater commitment to teaching than in the government schools. These two considerations suggest that private education in itself could be beneficial to the poor.

These arguments also holds true for Malaysia, except there is no private school that patronize the poor in Malaysia yet. But there are certainly private universities and colleges that patronize the poor in Malaysia. One thing for sure, the globalization of higher education has made obtaining a foreign degree a much cheaper affair. On the other hand, global competition also force universities and colleges, especially public institutions to improve on their quality and the government to pomp in more resources, thus benefit all students, especially the poor.

On the other hand, “the impact of the 1990s on the school system is also acute in terms of the invasion of the computer and the information age” (Rahimah, 1998, p.470). According to Chan (2002, p.2) the Ministry of Education has formulated three main policies for information communication technology (ICT) in education:

The **first policy** is that of ICT for all students, meaning that ICT is used as an enabler to reduce the digital gap between the schools. The **second policy** emphasizes the role and function of ICT in education as a teaching and learning tool, as part of a subject, and as a subject by itself...The **third policy** emphasizes using ICT to increase

productivity, efficiency and effectiveness of management system.

The Smart School Project, which is one of the seven MSC flagships projects, was conceptualized in 1997, with the following four objectives:

- i) emphasis on maturity of thought, application of information technology' and assimilation of high-minded values;
- ii) proficiency in science and mathematics;
- iii) enhancement of performance according to individual capabilities; and
- iv) contribution to the development of knowledge (Kamogawa, 2003, p.547).

In this project, technology aided teaching and learning is supposed to be implemented in the primary and secondary schools. This revolution in the pedagogy is supposed to tie-up with a change in the curriculum as well. "There are three pilot projects being implemented under the smart school initiative: Teaching-Learning Materials, Assessment Systems and Management Systems, and Smart School Integrated Solutions (SSIS)" (Kamogawa, 2003, p.547). Initially, the project was piloted in ninety schools in the country (Seventh Malaysia Plan 1996-2000), and supposed to roll out to all schools in 2003. However, it has proven to be too ambitious and thus, the project has been slowed down. Now, the Ministry of Education hopes that all schools will become smart schools by 2010.

### **Language Policy: Teaching Science and Mathematics in English**

One of the most controversial policies in this era of globalisation is to change the medium of instruction for science and mathematics subjects in schools and institution of higher learning to English from 2003 (Kamogawa, 2003: p.547). According to Pillay (2003: p.1), "in the new millennium, the pressures of globalization and the need to have a work force that is competent in English to compete in the era of Science and Technology has given this issue a new urgency and once again brought this issue to the forefront". "The Ministry of Education Circular Number 11/2002...states that it is compulsory to use English as the medium of instruction to teach Science and mathematics in

Standard One and in Form One in 2003 onwards” (Pillay, 2003: pp.1-2). “From 2003 till 2007 public examination in primary and secondary national schools will offer examination papers for Science and Mathematics in both English and Bahasa Melayu (Pillay, 2003: p.2). Like wise examinations papers for the National Type schools will also be bi-lingual. According to Circular 12/2002, the subjects will be taught in both English and Mandarin in the Chinese schools (Pillay, 2003: p.2). 5 billion Ringgits was allocated in the 2003 budget, for implementation of this project between 2002 to 2008 (Pillay, 2003: p.2). “A large portion of the allocation goes towards the training of Mathematics and Science teachers, the design of teaching and educational aids, the provision of basic facilities as well as physical infrastructure” (Kon, Low & Kaliappan, 2005: pp.78-79).

This development can be seen as a compromise against the ultimate objective of the Malaysian education policy to make the Malay language an academic language, and this change is caused to some extent by globalization. The pre-Merdeka (Independence) Alliance Government announced in 1955 that they would introduce a national education system, and a 15-member committee headed by the Minister of Education, Abdul Razak, was set up to make recommendations. The Razak Report (Report of the Education Committee) released in May 1956 declared that:

...the ultimate objective of the educational policy in this country must be to bring together the children of all races under a national education system in which the national language is the main medium of instruction.

...a national system of education acceptable to the people of the Federation as a whole which will satisfy their needs to promote their cultural, social, economic and political development as a nation, having regard to the intention of making Malay the national language of the country whilst preserving and sustaining the growth of the language and culture of other communities living in the country (qtd. in Kua, 1990: p.75).

Ever since then, it has been the policy of the government to make the Malay language or Bahasa Melayu/Malaysia an academic language (Omar, 1993:

pp.120-136). “The 1956 Razak Report was legislated in the Education Ordinance in 1957 and it became the education policy of the newly Independent Federation of Malaya” (Kua, 1990: p.86). One important aspect of the Razak Report is that besides affirming the status of the Malay language as the medium of instruction in school, it also introduced common content syllabi with a Malaysian outlook into schools (Puteh, 2006: p.82). Therefore, “while the separate vernacular schools were allowed to remain at the primary level, the content subject matter, and syllabi in all schools were to be common in order to foster a *Malayan outlook*” (Puteh, 2006: p.83). A committee, headed by the Minister of Education, Abdul Rahman Talib, was set up after the General Elections of 1959 to review the implementation of the education policy. In its report known as the Rahman Talib Report, this committee made a number of recommendations<sup>1</sup>, which were incorporated into the Education Act 1961 that was in force till 1996. This policy basically has shape the country’s education system till today.

What is most significant is a university such as the National University of Malaysia (UKM) which was set up in 1971 to champion to make the Malay language an academic language, is also force to adopt English as a medium of instruction for subjects in sciences and mathematics. According to Abdullah and Yahaya (2006: p.1) “the reversal in policy is of great concern to University Kebangsaan Malaysia, the national university which *raison d'être* is to serve as the pinnacle of the national education at the tertiary level since its establishment on May 18<sup>th</sup> 1970”.

Abdullah and Yahaya (2006: p.2) summarize the reasons for the change of policy as follows:

The 2003 change in the language of instruction in Science and Mathematics from Malay to English have come about for a variety of reasons. The government of the day rationalized that Malaysia must maintain a competitive edge in the face of globalization. Rightly or

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<sup>1</sup> For example, fully-assisted Malay-medium primary schools, i.e. the Standard Schools should be called National Schools; and other fully-assisted primary schools should be called National Type Schools (Kua, 1990: 91; Puteh, 2006: 88).



wrongly, it was thought that having a good command of English would be added advantage for Malaysian. Furthermore, it was felt that using English in science and technology would enhance and facilitate the acquisition and access to science and technology more rapidly. Using English will also be an added advantage in promoting Malaysia as a regional and international education hub. In addition, the use of English in Science and Maths in School will have the added advantage of improving the English proficiency of Malaysians. The Malaysian Economic Action Council (MTEN) has found that graduates employability is partly related to their proficiency and ability to communicate in English.

In short, the change in the policy is to face and take advantage of globalization.

However, the private institutions of higher learning have always been allowed to adopt English as medium of instruction for all subjects, except they are asked to teach three compulsory subjects, i.e. the National Language, Moral Studies/Islamic Studies and Malaysian Studies. Now, Mandarin is also allowed to be adopted as medium of instruction for New Era College's new Counseling degree programme, in collaboration with a Taiwanese university (20 August 2009, China Press) and Chinese Traditional Medicine programme in University Tuanku Abdul Rahman (15 Oct 2010, Nanyang Siang Pau) and Southern College (22 Oct 2010). This mark another liberation due to the increase importance of another globalize language, which is the national language of China, the second superpower of the world now.

Now, the importance of English for science and mathematics is much emphasized because it will equip the human resources to meet IT market needs both locally and globally (Kamogawa, 2003: p.547). However, this policy has attracted much criticism both from the Malay community and the non-Malay communities (especially the Chinese community) (Puteh, 2006: pp.131-134; Lim, Fatimah & Tang, 2007; Merdeka Review, 30 Sept 2008). Various reasons are cited against the policy. On the one hand, "detractors argued that science and technology is not dependent on the language is best acquired and taught

using the mother tongue” (Abdullah and Yahaya, 2006: p.2). This has always been the position of the Chinese education movement, now it is also supported by the Malays who are against the policy of teaching Science and Mathematics in English. “Apart from that, national pride and nation building and integration also dictates that the national language should be the default language of instruction” (Abdullah and Yahaya, 2006: p.2).

However, it is very clear that the government is taking a very pragmatic approach in adopting this policy. English is only implemented as the medium of instruction for Science and Mathematics and not other subjects. So, the government is trying to enjoy the best of both worlds; the globalize and the glocalize. In fact, the policy is welcomed by many parents, especially parents from urban middle class background. Perhaps, the real problem is in the implementation plan, which is too ambitious and too fast, although, a transition period is in fact allowed in the guidelines and directives for the implementation (Abdullah and Yahaya, 2006: p.3). One of the most significant criticisms against this policy is that the schools, teachers and students are not ready for it (Abdullah and Yahaya, 2006; Lim, Fatimah & Tang, 2007). It is interesting to note here that the students of UKM in Abdullah and Yahaya’s (2006: pp.5-8) survey in fact prefer English as the medium of instruction. It is the lecturers that are struggling.

The policy of teaching Science and Mathematic in the English language has finally been decided to be reversed again by 2012, in 2009; the medium of instruction for these subjects will be reverted to the original language (The Star, 8 July 2009). This marks the victory of the local critics in this matter. However, this issue is far from over and dusted. Recently, Rogers (2010) commented recently that “too many people have misconstrued the issue as an either-or situation”. His comments are worth reproduced here:

Rather than usurping an existing identity, content-based language instruction, such as the teaching of maths and science in English, actually invites learners to see their own identities in a new light.

While encouraging learners to identify with a foreign culture, it also raises their awareness of their own culture.

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...The use of information and communication technology to study these two subjects also clearly underscores the critical need for the use of English. It gives Malaysian students access to a huge repository of technical knowledge written in the world's lingua franca and will, of course, enhance their international career prospects, putting them on at least an equal footing with their foreign counterparts, be they in nearby India or Singapore or further afield in the US or in Europe (Roger, 2010).

He has rightly pointed out that the use of information technology in teaching learning in school demand the use of English as medium of instruction. Thus, this policy is very much in line with the other policies, which includes the smart school project, which envision that learning should be borderless, through the internet, Malaysian students should gain access to a wide variety of materials; and teaching and learning should be student centred, as the teacher plays the function of a facilitator. However, if the students are not proficient in English or more specifically Scientific English, all the above dreams will remain dream; simply because English is the language of Science and Technology as well as the internet.

He also demonstrates that countries such as Japan, South Korea, France and Germany, which as often cited against the use of English in technical field, are in fact placing high priority on English but at the same time preserve their own languages in other fields (Roger, 2010: p.3).

The present author concur with Roger that this is not an either-or situation. In fact, some Chinese Independent schools, such as Chung Hua High School, Seremban and Chung Ling High School, Penang, have long adopted English textbook for Maths and Science as second textbook; and English as second medium of instruction for these subjects. This system has successfully produced generation of high achieving students. As mention earlier, the government is in fact taking a very pragmatic approach by only changing the medium of instruction for two subjects only. In fact, it is a mater of implementation. Should the government was not too ambitious and implement this policy in selected schools

only at the initial stage, such as in the Smart Schools, and give parents the choice of whether to send their children to these schools, the debate will probably take a different course. The debate will probably be whether the government should allow elite schools to exist, and the complaints will come from parents of students that fail to get into those schools and eventually more schools will adopt English as medium of instruction for maths and science due to popular demand.

All the above mentioned developments are also very significant to understand the impact of globalization on Malaysia culturally.

## **Culture**

At the social and cultural level, Lee (2006, pp.230-259) claims that globalization has an adverse effect on ethnic relations in Malaysia. This adverse effect is manifested in the increasing enrolment in Chinese primary schools and the Muslim religious schools<sup>1</sup>. According to Lee (2006, p.247):

A paradoxical development of globalization is that, while it is increasingly welding the world into a single global village, it has also led ethnic and religious communities in different parts of the world to revive their cultural heritage and identity. In Malaysia, the ethnic and religious resurgence has had a negative impact on ethnic integration in the development of Malaysian education.

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<sup>1</sup> The school system in Malaysia is very complex. For example, at the primary level there are a few types of primary schools in Malaysia, namely the National Schools (SRK, *Sekolah Rendah Kebangsaan*), Vision schools, Islamic Religious Schools (SRA, *Sekolah Rendah Agama*), Private Schools, International Schools, and the SRJKs. There are two types of SRJK, i.e., the SRJK (C) and the SRJK (T or Tamil). Mandarin and Tamil are used as medium of instruction in the respective type of SRJK. All the other types of school use the Malay language as medium of instruction (except for International Schools). At the secondary level, a few more type of schools, including the Chinese Independent Schools, can be added to the list.

What Lee is trying to explain is a “glocalising” process in Ritzer’s term. What Ritzer (2004, pp.159-184) basically means by glocalisation is a process where the local culture resists and reacts to the global influences. Lee (2006, p.250) further explains that:

The increasing trend of Chinese student enrolment in Chinese primary schools could be attributed to several factors: economic and educational advantages in learning Mandarin especially with the rise of China as a major economic player, declining quality of education in the national primary schools, ethnic discrimination, failure of multicultural education in the national primary schools, and lastly, to learn Mandarin as an identity marker and preserve their Chineseness.

By this, he implies that preserving Chineseness is the most important reason for the increasing enrolment in the National Type Chinese Primary Schools. However, the current trend of increasing enrolment in these Schools has to be read together with other facts. At present not only are the Chinese enrolling their children in the National Type Chinese Primary Schools, other races, especially the Malays, are also more likely to enroll their children in them. As compared to the 1980s and before, the Malaysian government’s present policy on Chinese schools (in fact, to education in general) is comparatively more liberal. Since 2006, even the National Primary Schools teach Mandarin as a subject, although this has not materialised in many schools that are suppose to do so (Chok, 2008). On the other hand, the increasing emphasis on the learning of Mandarin is accompanied by a corresponding emphasis on the learning of English. Therefore, besides being a manifestation of what Ritzer calls “Glocalisation” process, the increase in the enrolment in the National Type Chinese Primary Schools is also a case of convergence, but not to the West; rather it is to another rising power in the East, that is, China. Today, as a result of globalization English and Mandarin<sup>1</sup> can arguably claim to be the two most important languages in the world. This argument is supported strongly by referring to the statements made by some Chinese education movement leaders to emphasize the importance of the Chinese language

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<sup>1</sup> About 1/4 of the world’s population speak Mandarin.

due to the rise of China as world economic and political power in the local Chinese newspapers.

Nurullah (2008, p.1, Abstract) argues that “globalization poses a challenge to Islamic cultural identity for several reasons: (a) globalization promote media to propagates the hegemony of Western culture, (b) it regenerates local culture to replace it with the Americanised secular one, (c) it challenges the collective Islamic ways of life, values, behavioural patterns, and principles.” Essentially, cultural globalization is seen as a one way process from a single centre, i.e. the West or more specifically America. However, the Malaysian case shows that it is hardly so.

The increase in enrolment in the religious school for example, is related to the resurgence of Islam. The resurgence of Islam and other religious consciousness in Malaysia is a complex phenomenon. It started with the influence of the 1979 Iranian Revolution. This phenomenon can in fact be witness across the world and not just Malaysia. The resurgence of Islam, to some extent, has given PAS (Parti Islam SeMalaysia), the conservative Islamist opposition party, a political boost. In order to counter that, UMNO (United Malays National Organization) has to develop their own Islamization projects. Therefore, while the resurgence of Islam may view as a glocalization process that counter the Westernization (especially at the pop culture level) that come with globalization, it is also part of the political parties’ strategy to counter each other. At the international level, while opposing the West, Malaysia is allying with other Muslim nations. In fact, Malaysia has become a representation of a progressive, modern and successful Muslim country, an alternative to the kind of successful model advocated by the West (For full account of the resurgence of Islam in Malaysia, see Muzaffar, 1987). Therefore, the resurgence of Islam can be seen as a glocalizing process as well as a convergence (globalizing) process but the convergence is not with the west but with the other Islamic nations. Ahmad (2005) argues that:

...the religious resurgence has occurred precisely during the decades when globalization has influenced yields two strong implications. First, the religious revival reacts against the appeal of cultural and

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political cosmopolitanism...Second, the religious revival actually owes its strength to worldwide pathways of information exchange that only globalization has instituted.

Nevertheless, both the resurgence of Islam and the global secularizing force have also triggered the non-Muslim to react by forming a clearer religious and ethnic identity (for an interesting account of this interesting phenomena see Ackerman & Lee, 1990). For example, most of the Malaysian Chinese are adherers of what some author call "Chinese Religion", a syncretization of a few religions, i.e. Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism. But they are referred to as Buddhists most of the time. Now, there are more and more Chinese that will clarify whether they are Buddhists, Taoist or adherers of the Chinese religion. There are also many international Buddhist groups such as the SOKA GAKAI, Chi Qi (慈济公德会) and Fu Guang Shan (佛光山) that are active in Malaysia, together with other local Buddhist associations. The Persatuan Ajaran Taoism Malaysia (Taoist Association) was formally registered in 1995, to bring together all the Taoist temples in Malaysia and to clarify some of their doctrines.

Therefore, as Malaysia has become more globalize, it has not become more secularize as predicted by some globalization and modernization theories. Ahmad (2005, p.3) comments that: "various individuals have consciously chosen to evince religious identities in their personal, micro-political struggles in order to make sense of what has occurred in and around their lives."

### **Conclusion: The Impact of Globalization on Malaysia**

There is no doubt that Malaysia is affected by globalization. However, how Malaysia and Malaysians have responded to it is very interesting and it throws some new lights about the globalization process.

First of all, the Malaysian economy is no doubt globally link now. The two major economic crises, in 1997 and 2008, are both not trigged by local problems, although they do expose weaknesses in the Malaysian economic system. However, Malaysia has learn the lesson in 1997, that the 2008 crisis has not hit Malaysia as badly. The post

1997 Mahathir administration's management of the Malaysian economy, though not without its downsides, has shown an example of a more managed globalization process. It shows that globalization is a deliberate policy choice, and the more demaging part of the economic globalization can be reduced by the right policy choices.

The partially liberalized private education industry is a good example of the above argument. The industry has grown tremendously and remain stable so far, in the midst of the gradual and careful globalizing process. It has earned Malaysia millions of rigit in the of tuition fee and living expenses paid by foreign students. It has also benefit Malaysian students by making acquiring a foreign degree much cheaper and save Malaysia millions of riggits of money outflow every year by retaining Malaysian students at home.

In terms of cultural identity, the glocalising process described by Ritzer does not seem to be a good explanation of the recent strong projection of identity by the major races or ethnic groups in Malaysia. As explained, identity conflict in Malaysia has always been a local phenomenon. In fact, globalization may help to ease some tension in the long run, as internal differences may be less significant in the light of westernization at a great speed. Now, that the major ethnic communities in Malaysia are facing the challenges of modernization and foreign influences as separate communities, it is hope that one day all Malaysian will face them as one multi-cultural Malaysian society.

Malaysia has not been "propelled" into the global order helplessly, as predicted by Giddens, although Malaysia is relatively small country in the world community. Instead, Malaysia is very careful in navigating through the global current and response to the challenges posed in the process. Malaysia is also one of the major critics of the unjust factors in the global order. On the other hand, Malaysia may have also deliberately alight with other world powers, e.g. China and other Muslim countries, to counter the western influence. This makes globalization seems like a multi-central and multi-directional process, thus post a challenge to sociological theories such as Giddens' and Ritzer's. However, globalization has made the complex multi-racial,



multi-religious, multi-lingual and multi-cultural society even more complex.

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