

THE QUESTION OF CULTURE, IDENTITY AND GLOBALISATION: AN UNENDING DEBATE¹

Abdul Rahman Embong

Institute of Malaysian and International Studies (IKMAS),
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, Selangor

E-mail: rahmanhe@ukm.my

The question of culture, identity and the media constitutes an intellectually challenging theme given the porosity of borders in the era of globalisation as well as the opposition between the demands for openness and the assertion of state control and media monopoly. In an environment in which the media is under tight control, this theme could certainly become a hot topic, especially if it is examined in relation to the political power play and 'horse trading' that occurs between different contending forces – namely government agencies and other entities etc. – and how the media positions itself under the circumstances. However, when the media is examined in relation to culture and identity, the issue may appear to be much 'softer' and innocuous, but it does not by any means make it any less complex or challenging. Media, culture and identity in the era of globalisation are intricately intertwined, each impacting the other in complex ways, requiring scholars and researchers to engage with the terms and issues with rigour and to systematically map out the intellectual terrain. This paper is only a modest attempt to offer some critical reflections on these questions and make a few observations.

Keywords: globalisation, identity, culture, media, community

CULTURE AND IDENTITY

Let us begin with culture and identity, two inter-related issues of great importance today. Identity, a distinctive quality that differentiates one individual or group from the other, is often both a product and expression of culture. Religion is an important identity marker among people and communities of faith, but it is not necessarily the case in all situations.

Both culture and identity have always fascinated travellers, tourists and researchers alike, and many people—especially anthropologists and media experts—have written numerous books and articles on the subject. Both culture and identity can evoke emotive sentiments, even more so if religion is a significant factor in a given culture. However, conceptually, both terms are difficult to deal with. For example, the term 'culture' defies precise definition due to its complexity, variability and elusiveness. Already in the 1950s, when Kroeber and Kluckhohn published their review of the issue, the word 'culture' had

at least 150 known definitions (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952). Since that time, the term has been redefined many times over, suggesting to us that we are entering an epistemological space, a space of knowledge construction, that is vast and complex. E. B. Tylor's definition of culture published in 1871 must also be contended with here: "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." (quoted in Griswold, 1994: 8). This definition, though, is so broad and diffuse that we have to scope it to several domains. These are as follows: material culture consisting of artefacts created or invented by human beings for their living and work in the form of buildings, implements and tools, vehicles, types of food, architectural and artistic designs, works of art such as painting, ornaments, etc.; non-material creations such as songs, musical scores, dances, literature, plays and the cinema; those pertaining to the thought and belief systems, namely values, norms, ideologies, customs and beliefs; the aspect of everyday lifestyle that reflects one's tastes as well as one's power, socioeconomic position or status in society; and finally, the behaviour and actions of individuals and groups in society as concrete manifestations of their beliefs, values and attitudes, and the meanings they attach to their symbols, actions and behaviour.

In addition to these criteria, we may also approach culture from other perspectives, enabling us, for example, to speak of the culture of consumption and consumerism, political cultures, cultures of peace and violence, cultures of corruption and crime, civic cultures, youth cultures, delinquent subcultures, work cultures and organisational cultures.

The complexity of culture is further compounded by a number of other factors. The expression of culture in material artefacts and non-material creations, including customs and belief-systems as explained above, is related to a group's experience of the past, to their traditions and to their geographic location. Thus, we may speak of a traditional culture that is bound by man-made objects or inventions that emanate from past traditions and practices that still continue into the present or of a culture which is history-bound and tied to or identified with a particular community and locality. Let us take Pulau Pinang, a popular tourist destination in the northern part of Peninsular Malaysia, as an example. When we think of Pulau Pinang, what comes to our mind are not merely the beautiful beaches shown in tourist brochures, but a place inhabited by people of diverse communities and identities—Malays of various origins, Chinese, Indians and Eurasians (among others). For each of these cultures, there are special types of cuisines, such as the *nasi kandar*, *laksa* and *char kuey teow*, for which Pulau Pinang is famous for, and performing arts, such as the *boria*, a kind of group singing and presentation that the Malay community here claims as part of their cultural heritage. All of these cultural expressions have evolved over time and have become part and parcel of life in Pulau Pinang and integral to the identity of

its people. Likewise, different places and different communities will have something specific to offer or share with others. It is this cultural distinctiveness and its connectivity to space, community and history that offers rich diversity and a myriad of cultures reflecting local identities within a particular society, country or region.

However, we also find cultural expressions and symbols that are not specific to any particular place or community. It may not be an identity marker of any particular community, as it is widespread across different societies and regions. Many forms of modern culture belong to this category. Modern culture emerged and spread with the rise and expansion of the modern world and capitalism. With that came the commodification, whereby human inventions and creations such as music, fashion, food, instruments and various types of gadgets, are mass-produced and have become commodities for sale on the world market. Shopping malls and consumer products are ubiquitous and are near carbon copies of each other, providing the same kind of cultural experience no matter their location in the world. What matters here is not so much about the products being an identity marker of a place or community, but about the relationship between culture and the market or the capitalist economy. Although one may have reservations about the Marxist conception of the economy as the base and culture the superstructure, with the base impacting or determining the superstructure, empirical reality tends to show that there is a close relationship between the two and that the base-superstructure relationship exists in a dialectical, mutual fashion.

As the capitalist economy is dominated by large corporations, we can speak of modern capitalist culture as a corporate-sensate culture. In this type of culture, products are designed, manufactured and distributed by corporations who are then supported by the media who give them space or time for the advertisement of their product. The products are designed and marketed in such a way to not simply meet existing demand but to create demand by manipulating consumers into a false sense of 'need' for the product and thus creating the impulse to purchase it. Market studies in this regard are indispensable tools for both gauging current demand and creating new desires for a product.

With the advent of market-driven globalisation dominating the world since the last several decades, newer cultural inventions related to consumption and lifestyles have spread across the globe. The most obvious here is the revolution in fast food chain represented namely by McDonald's and mega theme parks like Disneyland. With the spread of this post-modern and post-industrial culture, the culture of fast food as new forms of cultural experience of tastes and ambience and theme parks as new sites of recreation and leisure, although originating in developed countries, namely the United States, has become deterritorialised, liberated from space as it cuts across geography. There is no locality or home so

to speak since it is found almost everywhere around the globe. This adds to the homogeneity in lifestyle experience, particularly of culinary tastes, recreation and leisure, and the meanings attached to them.

If at all we have to identify these commodified cultural products with a particular group of people, the latter consist of no less than the shareholders of the companies that hold their copyright and patents, as well as those who hold their franchise in different countries. In other words, these commodified cultural products are not related to pastness, to tradition or to history. It is a new market invention to provide a new kind of cultural experience and frame of meaning that has caught the imagination of consumers worldwide – a captive consumer market – consumers who are ready to part with their cash for such consumption.

While these processes have been taking place, a new phenomenon has simultaneously emerged – the rise of high-growth economies in the non-Western world, namely East and Southeast Asia and the petroleum-rich Gulf States. Together with the success of these economies, their iconic material expressions have been thrust to the fore as new cultural symbols like the proverbial show-off new kids on the block. With the obsession of the national elites of these countries to assert their place in the world in the race to catch up with the developed West, and driven by the ideology of 'can-do-ism' (read: what the developed West can do, we can do, and do even better), the world began to witness the emergence of a series of monuments as cultural symbols of economic success literally dotting the skyline in the form of tall buildings, if not the tallest, in the world. This is best exemplified by the presence of the Petronas Twin Towers in Kuala Lumpur, completed in 1998, which rise 452 metres into the sky and contain some 88 stories; the Taipei 101 Tower in Taiwan, completed in 2004, that stands at 508 metres and contains 101 floors above ground level and 5 floors underground; the Shanghai World Financial Centre, completed in 2008,¹ that rises 494 metres and contains 97 stories following its latest addition; and finally, the Burj Khalifa or Burj Dubai, completed in 2010, which, at 828 metres and 160 stories, is the tallest of all the world's skyscrapers and a symbolic monument set to rewrite the script for a new version of the Arabian nights or Arabian dream.² It is clear this overdrive to high modernity by the state elites is motivated no less than by their desire to have their legacy inscribed for posterity, and legitimated as a symbol of the country's success in being on the world map and in history. These icons are an expression of a new kind of cultural identity which is not tied to tradition-bound cultures of the countries concerned, but a new identity to symbolise that the nation 'has arrived' in the world of developed modern nations, to mark their success in material prosperity and modernity.

GLOBAL, NATIONAL AND LOCAL

These monuments, regarded as national icons, are not projected solely as national symbols but also as global symbols of change. Here, we may ask the question, what is the relationship between the global, the national and the local? Should the global on one hand and the national as well as the local on the other be seen as being situated as polar opposites, diametrically opposed to one another in an asymmetrical hierarchy, one of domination and the dominated? Or are they linked in a kind of mutually benefiting relationship that enables transformation such that the national and the local is enriched by the contact, while the global finds a locale to 'nestle' so to speak?

It can be argued that, the global, the national and the local – situated at different extremes and representing different interests and forces – exist continually in an uneasy, asymmetrical relationship with on-going tension, contestations and resistance, but also with accommodation, adaptation and adjustments. In general, because of the unequal power relations, there exists some kind of hegemony and domination upon the national and the local by the global. But the national and the local are also active human agencies; they are conscious agents who may contest and resist global domination, or who may decide to negotiate, accommodate, adapt and appropriate aspects of the global, resulting in some kind of cultural hybridisation as its means of engaging or negotiating with globalisation.

This paper purposely mentions the national and the local in the same breath to underline the fact that the two are not one and the same thing. Of course, since the world is made up of nation-states, one may be tempted to take the state-centric view that the local refers to the nation itself, but this understanding is fraught with problems as some nations are so huge, thereby rendering the notion of the nation-state as the local absolutely meaningless. Besides, the nation-state itself represents a set of hierarchical power relations whereby the state acts upon its citizens distributed in various localities under its jurisdiction, and that the state also is an active agency to engage with the global.

The local exists below the national, and may either be supported or promoted by the state, or may even be marginalised or suppressed by the latter. The local consists of smaller units of people, existing as communities that have roots in a certain locality, related to one another as family or kin members, as neighbours, as people working in the same trade, in the same locality, and so on. They generally share some common experience of history of living together, of sharing certain symbols, and differentiated from others with an identity or a set of identities which they relate themselves to (for an interesting Malaysian study on this subject, see Zawawi, 2008).

Positing the local and juxtaposing it with the national and the global directs us to examine at the micro level the local dynamics as they are being enacted under the impact of forces from within the nation such as urbanisation, industrialisation and modernisation, as well as those from outside such as cross-border flows of migrants, capital, tourists, and as well as cultures, ideologies and ideas that know no borders. But while the local may refer to small communities and small events in small places, it does not mean that the issues involved are small. Indeed, large issues, some of which maybe universal in nature, may play out in small communities. For example, the struggle by a small indigenous community in one particular area of the country to defend their right to customary land and cultural traditions may resonate with a similar kind of struggle by a small local community elsewhere in the world.

As argued above, local and national identity and culture are not the same. While their interests and aspirations may converge some of the time, at other times they may be in clear opposition. It is true that national identity and local identity may often overlap, or, in some cases, the state may adapt or appropriate local identity and make it part of the greater national identity. National identity, it should be emphasised, is state-sponsored—it is official. At the national level, identity is expressed in the form of national symbols like the national flag, anthem, language, monuments, costume or a credo (for example, the *Rukunegara* in Malaysia, or *Pancasila* in Indonesia)—all of which are created and sanctioned by the state.

Local identity is different. It is neither defined by the state nor backed by state authority. It emerged naturally through the evolution of the history and cultural experience of the people; it is accepted as a signifier of a given community by that community. Local identity maybe oppositional to national identity projected by the state elite, and the latter may disapprove and even suppress certain forms or expressions of local identity.

APPROACHES TO STUDYING GLOBALISATION AND CULTURE: BEYOND THE HOMOGENISATION-DIFFERENTIATION DEBATE

Globalisation in its various dimensions and their impacts on nations and communities around the world have been a popular theme of research and discussion in the last two decades or so especially following the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989. However, views and approaches on globalisation differ, sometimes rather sharply. Nevertheless, there seems to be general agreement that "globalization is not a single, unified process but a set of interactions that maybe best approached from different observations points" (Mittleman, 2001: 7). Mittleman, one of the foremost theorists on globalisation, proposes that

globalisation may be seen in three ways: first, as complex historical processes with different trajectories for different regions, "though all are directly or indirectly tied to the central institutions and growth mechanisms of the world economy"; second, as a material process closely related to the accumulation of capital, focused especially on innovations in capitalism and the social pressures typical of hyper-competition; and third, as an ideology in the form of "the neoliberal belief in free markets and faith in the beneficial role of competition" (Mittelman, 2001: 7).

However, we may add a fourth approach: that globalisation may be seen both as a process and a condition expressed in various dimensions. The latter includes the integration of financial markets, the global spread of ICT, especially via the internet and cable TV, the great advancements in transportation and communication, intensified flows of goods as well as capital, including hot money across borders, trans-border migration, and international travel and tourism. International travel and tourism have increased tremendously as of late; it is estimated that there were over 922 million international tourist arrivals in the world in 2008 (much more than in previous years), and that some 500,000 people were on planes at any one time. At the same time, trans-border migration has also dramatically increased. In Malaysia alone, there are more than 2 million foreign workers; in a nation with a population of just 27 million, this represents a fairly large proportion of the workforce. Globally, data on the subject shows that there were at least 200 million migrants (legal and illegal) in 2008. These migrant workers sent large sums of money across state lines, in the region of US\$ 328 billion according to some estimates for the same year. With globalisation, too, there is heightened time-space compression, intensified cultural interpenetration, and a greater sense of the interdependence of human kind around the globe (Robertson, 1992).

Aside from the conflicting viewpoints on globalisation, there is also debate about the impact of globalisation on different countries, especially on culture and identity. There are two schools of thought on this issue: homogenisation and heterogenisation (or differentiation; see, for example, Mittelman, 2000; Bhawuk, 2008). Those critical of globalisation argue that it results in homogenisation, a domination by Western (particularly American) culture, cultural uprootedness and the loss of authenticity in local culture. Indeed the strongest critique from this school of thought maintains that globalisation is cultural imperialism all over again in which a particular society or community is brought into a dominant modern world system of unequal relationship, and the former is pressured to tailor and change their institutions and values to conform to or adopt those of the dominant system. The heterogenisation school of thought, however, maintains that globalisation does not lead to homogenisation but to greater diversity and the differentiation of cultures, something that ultimately leads of greater

understanding of different cultures and institutions. From this viewpoint, it is argued that people respond differently to different cultures depending on their own understanding of globalisation; empirical studies are often cited to prove this point.

Alternatively, a third position has emerged in this debate. This position argues that globalisation produces a kind of cultural hybridisation, a mixing of cultures that result in something new. In this line of thinking, globalisation is regarded as "a process of braiding rather than simply a diffusion from developed to developing countries" (Jan Nederveen, 1996) and that hybridisation is the 'cultural logic' of globalisation, arguing that "traces of other cultures exist in every culture, thus offering foreign media and marketers transcultural wedges for forging affective links between their commodities and local communities" (Kraidy, 2005: 148). Nevertheless, as cautioned by Kraidy, "hybridity is a risky notion" and that the challenge for scholars is "not to come up with all-purpose, final definition of hybridity, but to find a way to integrate different types of hybridity in a framework that makes the connections between these types both intelligible and usable" (Kraidy, 2005: iv).

Reviewing the discourse, I would argue that we should move beyond the either-or, homogenisation-heterogenisation debate. My view is that all three schools of thought are useful in helping us to understand and analyse culture, and globalisation. Empirical realities show that all the three theories can exist simultaneously; homogenisation, heterogenisation and hybridisation may each prevail in different historical and cultural conditions. The pertinent point for the analysis of the impact of globalisation on local culture and identity is the importance of circumstance. For instance, in one particular society, we may see homogenisation taking place in some areas, hybridisation in others, and at the same time, tendencies of differentiation may also be found. But in the case of a small indigenous community that has been absorbed into the modern world wholesale, we may find them losing their identity and tradition fairly clearly, a clear result of the homogenisation process.

Keeping too rigidly to the three schools of thoughts and trying to fit our findings into any one of the categories – while it may appear analytically neat – may result in us unwittingly pigeon – holding them into analytical constructs based on our ready-made conclusion, that is, there is a certainty globalisation would produce those three outcomes or consequences. In this regard, I would agree with Tomlinson (2003: 270) that we need "a rather more complex understanding of the globalization process: one, at least, which allows for a degree of unpredictability in its consequences." While maintaining the position that we have to allow for some degree of unpredictability, Tomlinson strongly maintains that "globalization actually proliferates rather than destroys identities." In his critique

of Castells (1997), who argues that the power of identity is the primary force to counter the power of globalisation, Tomlinson (2003: 270, 271) maintains that while identity is "a concept which surely lies at the heart of our contemporary imagination," identity is not the power that opposes globalisation because "globalization is really the globalization of modernity, and modernity is the harbinger of identity."

LOCAL IDENTITY AND MEDIA

Another subtheme that needs to be addressed here is the role of media. In today's world, the media is all pervasive and omnipresent. By media here, we are of course referring to a whole array of the genre – not just local media, but also international media, not just print, but also electronic and the new media – the Internet, cable TV, etc. The media is literally everywhere, affecting everybody; it is important to all aspects of modern life, i.e., in economics, politics, culture, religion, education, health and lifestyle. With the advent of cable TV and the Internet, we can access almost anything 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

The media as an active agency is not only the purveyor of news but also the shaper of opinions, attitudes and beliefs. Whether or not it is the fourth estate that serves as check and balance upon the state and society as often defined in media and communication studies is an empirical question that needs to be investigated and verified, and cannot be taken as gospel truth. Indeed, the media and those running it are not, in most countries, as 'neutral' as one would like them to be; in the end, they are an interested party that must answer to their owners and shareholders. The media is part of a huge industry that is becoming more sophisticated and competitive by the day. Both local and international media organisations are susceptible to economic forces and the influence of their owners and regulators; they do not operate in a vacuum, but in a global environment that has a decisive impact upon them.

Fortunately, the advent of new media, particularly the Internet, has helped to break the monopoly of the conventional media. It helps the local in many ways to break through the dominance of the global, providing avenues for the local to express themselves beyond borders, rendering state control and censorship irrelevant. A product of deep-going revolution in communication, a specific dimension of globalisation, the processes of time-space compression enables the new media while operating in the local to go beyond borders so that the local can have a global reach and a global audience.

On the other hand, while the new media can be empowering and serve as a powerful mobilising force for local communities, the energy of the new media

can also dissipate as fast as it appeared. It can also lend itself to abuse, sinking into the quagmire of gutter journalism, distortion, confusion and even anarchy, ultimately doing disservice to the causes of local communities.

In short, the media can play a constructive role in preserving and promoting local identity, in the same way that it can promote the homogenising trends of globalisation. However, notwithstanding the idealism of media practitioners, the media industry is guided by the logic and financial pressure of the market. In this environment, positive stories about local communities may not have the same 'selling power' as large-scale, global events that will attract both national and international attention. Because of this, new media is the best hope for drawing attention and interest to the aspirations of local communities.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can be said that cultural identity is at the essence of contemporary imagination just as much as globalisation and its consequences. Such being the case, media and communication studies in particular, and social science generally have to contend with a field that is not only vast and fertile, but challenging in many ways – conceptually, methodologically, theoretically and empirically. As a means to move forward, I feel it is necessary for scholars and students to not only be empirically grounded but, most importantly, to have a good grasp of theory and theoretical debates. Media and communication studies cannot confine itself to media and communication theories alone but to also continuously draw on the strength of sociology, history, politics and cultural studies to give breadth and depth to their corpus of knowledge and enhance their ability to analyse and interpret the empirical reality in a more interesting and nuanced way.

On the subject of globalisation and identity, while scholars and students should be familiar with the various contending schools of thought and theories mentioned above, they need to adopt a critical attitude to interrogate the concepts and theories, and try to see beyond them. In operational terms, it means it is important to look out for and capture not only those processes and conditions that can be readily explained in terms of homogenisation, heterogenisation or even hybridisation, but we need to extend and deepen our imagination to capture the unpredictable and the unexpected consequences of globalisation. In this way, we allow ourselves greater leeway and agility in our research and analysis that will enrich our corpus of knowledge of societies and communities, namely their culture and identity which appear to be the infinite source for the contemporary imagination in this highly globalised world.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper was originally delivered as a keynote address at the International Conference of the Asia Congress for Media and Communication (ACMC) on the theme "Media and Culture: Global Homogeneity and Local Identity", jointly organised by the School of Communication, Universiti Sains Malaysia and the Asia Congress for Media and Communication (ACMC) held at Universiti Sains Malaysia, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia on 28–30 October 2010. It has been revised and edited for publication.

NOTES

1. According to the website, the Shanghai World Financial Center was planned to be the tallest building in the world when it was designed in 1997, to surpass the Malaysian Petronas Twin Towers. While it could beat the Malaysian monument, it did not work as planned because by 2003 when the construction work was restarted, the Taipei 101 Tower in Taiwan, with a height of 508 meters had already surpassed it to become the world's tallest building. Although the Shanghai planners wanted to surpass the Taipei Tower, this could not be done because the foundation which was meant to support its present height had already been laid.
2. We should add to this list another newcomer-to-be, the announcement on October 15, 2010, by the Malaysian Prime Minister that Malaysia would have another tall building by 2015, the tallest in Malaysia, a 100-storey Menara Warisan, or Heritage Tower, next to the Merdeka Stadium and the National Stadium in Kuala Lumpur.

REFERENCES

- Bhawuk, D. P. S. 2008. Globalization and indigenous cultures: Homogenization or differentiation? *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 32(4): 305–317.
- Castells, M. 1997. *The information age: Economy, society and culture. The power of identity*, vol. II. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Griffin, K. 2000. Culture and economic growth: The state and globalization. In *Global futures: Shaping globalization*, ed. P. Jan Nederveen, 189–202. London: Zed Books.
- Griswold, W. 1994. *Cultures and society in a changing world*. London: Pine Forge Press.
- Kraidy, M. M. 2005. *Hybridity, or the cultural logic of globalization*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Kroeber, A. and C. Kluckhohn. 1952. *Culture: A critical review of concepts and definitions*. New York: Meridian Books.
- Mittelman, J. H. 2000. *The globalization syndrome: Transformation and resistance*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- . 2001. Globalization: Captors and captives. In *Capturing globalization*, eds. J. H. Mittelman and N. Othman, 1–16. London: Routledge.

Abdul Rahman Embong

- Jan Nederveen, P. 1996. Globalization and culture: Three paradigms. *Economic and Political Weekly* 31(23): 1389–1393.
- Ramli, M. and H. Adnan. 2006. The media in Malaysia: Aspirations, choices and realities. *Kajian Malaysia* 24(1 & 2): 1–7.
- Robertson, R. 1992. *Globalization, social theory and global culture*. London: Sage Publications.
- Tomlinson, J. 2003. *Globalization and cultural identity*. <http://Politybooks.com/global/pdf/GTReader2eTomlinson> (accessed 10 October 2010).
- Yi, W. 2007. Globalization enhances cultural identity. *Intercultural Communication Studies* 16(1): 83–86.
- Zawawi, I. 2008. *Representation, identity and multiculturalism in Sarawak*. Kajang, Malaysia: Malaysian Social Science Association.