

THE ROLE OF CULTURAL ARTEFACTS AS A TOOLS TO MEDIATE COMMON CULTURAL PRACTICES IN A MULTI- ETHNIC SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

The concept of sustainability is not only associated with the environment, but includes cultural aspects. Whereby cultural artefacts help in the sustainability of any culture or cultural practice. Thus, cultural artefacts are believed to be the identity of a culture. On the other hand, cultural artefacts have become a mediator in developing common practices in diverse cultures. However, in a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural country like Malaysia, the plural and the autonomous cultural systems are seen as an obstacle in various common forms. As such this study aims to identify the commonly used cultural artefacts and the reasons for their preferences. The nominal group technique (NGT) was used in this study to identify the commonly used cultural artefacts. NGT is a qualitative data collection technique based on discussions among various categories of stakeholders and multi-ethnic group members. The study has justified the existence of common elements in multi-cultural practices which could reduce ethnocentrism and promote social integrity and unity among Malaysia's multiethnic society.

Keywords: : Culture, Cultural Artefact, Cultural Practices

1. INTRODUCTION

The daily practices and interactions of human being are sustained by culture; perhaps helps in forming new cultural practices. Grazuleviciute (2006) has highlighted that the concept of sustainable development is not only associated with the environment, but includes cultural aspects. Thus, it has proven that human interactions, daily routines and norms influence their behavior and transform them into a culture (Hsu et al., 2012). Therefore Schein (2004) has expressed that culture undergoes adaptations and also merges with other cultures. On the other hand, Zivanovic (2014) and Bennett (2013) have claimed that culture is in form of fluid that keeps transforming. The daily practices of human beings are essential in determining the strong bound and integrations in a multiethnic society like Malaysia. Malaysians have been exposed to various cultures and practices but have maintained certain common cultural values since the colonial period (Rahman, 2010).

Scholars have classified cultural artefacts as instruments especially those that can be handled or carried by a person (Md Ishak, 2016; Kasim, 2004). The British colonials in Malaya clustered the cultural artefacts into nineteen types. However, currently the Malay Ethnography Museum and Department of Museums of Malaysia have divided these cultural artefacts into eight types (Ahmad, 2015; JMM, 2014). Cultural artefacts are believed to be a part of heritage and the identity of culture itself. It enhances the understanding of human behavior and preserves humanity (Ismail et al., 2014). The uses of cultural artefacts are similar within the various cultures in Malaysia. However, images of artefacts differ mainly due to materials and fabrication methods

(Md Ishak et al., 2015). This is because all the artefacts or instruments are designed and fabricated based on certain levels of cultural influences (Moalosi et al., 2007). Thus, researchers have commented that cultural artefacts are dynamic, fluid and active (Zivanovic, 2014; Bennett, 2013).

According to Schein (1999) the use and impact of cultural artefacts in a society are easy to explain but it is difficult to understand the logic and reasons behind their behavior. Thus, to understand a culture, one should understand the values behind these artefacts that caused the behavioural changes (Schein, 1999). According to Hamat et al., (2014) cultural artefacts were analysed and interpreted to indicate the culture, system of economy, lifestyle and patterns of settlement of the people of Malaya. Hence, the Malaysian culture and living pattern have proved the remarkable adaptation and acceptance of multi-cultural values (Ismail et al., 2014). However, in Malaysia, due to the diversity of cultures, it is difficult to recognize the commonly preferred cultural artefacts in a multi-ethnic society (Zainal et al., 2015). In addition, ethnocentrism's attitude widens racial polarization gaps among people who feel that their culture or ethnicity is far superior to other groups (Gill et al., 2012; Baharuddin, 2007). This leads to the question of whether it is possible for the existence of common cultural practices among the multi-ethnic groups.

2. METHOD

This study attempts to identify the role of cultural artefacts as a mediator for common cultural practices among Malays, Chinese and Indians in Peninsular Malaysia. Literatures reported that Delphi techniques and Nominal Group Technique (NGT) are suitable methods in idea generation, determining priorities or solving problems. However, Van de Van and Delbecq (1971) stressed that NGT can be used to explore the consumer and stakeholder views while the Delphi technique is used to develop guidelines. Thus, although the NGT and Delphi techniques are suitable for cultural related study, it has been concluded that the NGT is most appropriate techniques to identify the role of cultural artefacts in generating common cultural practices. Besides, Hofstede (2011) and Prabowo (2014) recognized NGT as a tool for a valid data collection process especially by putting forward a single research question in reasonably short time.

The NGT provides an opportunity to achieve a substantial amount of data in a relatively short period of time (Potter et al., 2004; Prabowo, 2014). The NGT is recognized as a useful research method and valid data collection process in identifying the role of cultural artefacts as a tool to mediate common

cultural practices and their attributes. However, to generate reliable findings the NGT respondent should have some basic criteria such as knowledge on the subject matter, atleast five years of experience or exposure in Malaysian culture (Perumal, 2017; Prabowo, 2014; Lloyd-Jones et al., 2012). The NGT procedure has flexibility in choosing the sample size. As suggested by Lennon et al., (2012) and Harton (1980), the number of respondent can be between five and ten individuals. Whereby Hervey and Halmas (2012) suggested six to twelve participants.

This study was conducted with six respondent who were selected using the snowball sampling method, based on their experience in cultural and social as proposed by Merriam (2016). Two respondents were selected to represent each major ethnic group of Peninsular Malaysia namely Malays, Chinese and Indians. They have more than five years of using cultural artefacts, working or conducting research in the field of culture. However, the selection of respondents were not based on their experience in using specific artefacts to avoid bias in research findings. There were two main activities conducted with the participants in the research, as recommended by Potter et al., (2004).

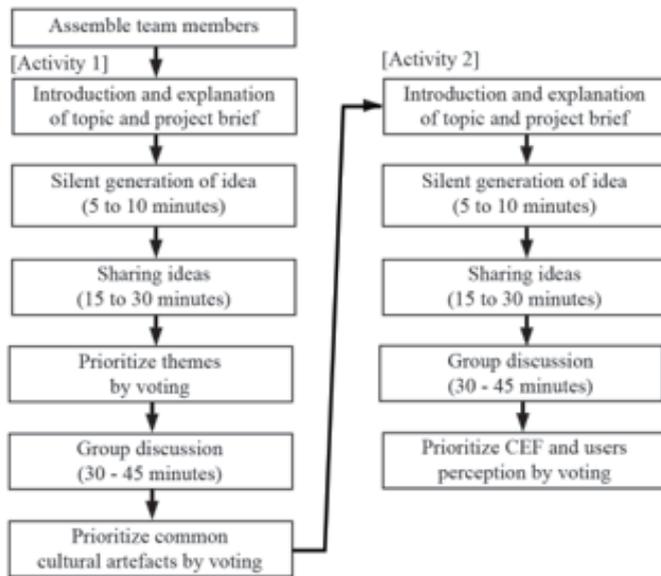
Activity 1:

The first activity was to select and list the cultural artefacts. The participants were asked regarding the cultural artefacts that were used commonly by the major ethnic groups in Peninsular Malaysia. Participants were also requested to answer the questions based on their experiences.

Activity 2:

The participants were asked for their opinions on the common activities or practices performed with the selected common artefacts. Activities 1 and 2 were guided by open ended questions and were conducted by following the instructions shown in Figure 1.

The information derived from Activity1 and 2 were based on the ideas of experts in their area of interests (Arokiasamy et al., 2014). Thus, the participants were equipped with a clear understanding of the artefacts and multi-cultural life style and practices (Prabowo 2014; Potter et al., 2004). At the beginning of this activity, the researcher projected the image of the mortar set on the LCD screen. It was to ensure the respondent had similar understanding and imagination about the mortar set. 15 flip cards were distributed to each participant and the participants were asked to write a common cultural practices of the mortar set. The common practices were finalized by following the steps shown in the Figure 1.



Source: Adapted from Potter (2004)
 Figure 1: Flow of Nominal Group Technique

3. RESULTS

3.1 ACTIVITY 1

The respondent in this study had listed the names of 40 cultural artefacts. The mean rankings that was shown in Table 1 represent the total votes (total sum of individual assessment in each cultural artefact) divided by the number of NGT participants. The lowest mean indicated the most important attributes in this study, while the highest mean indicated the least important attributes of the commonly used cultural artefacts among Malays, Chinese and Indians.

Through filtering, names of repeated artefacts were omitted, leaving only 23 artefacts that were commonly used by the three major ethnic groups; Malays, Chinese and Indians. The mortar set was accepted as the most common artefact with the mean score was 1.50, as shown in Table 1. It was universally used by human beings, and was also used among Malaysians without the boundary of ethnicity.

Table 1: Mean ranking of commonly used cultural artefacts

Artefacts	Total Vote	Mean Ranking	Artefacts	Total Vote	Mean Ranking	Artefacts	Total Vote	Mean Ranking
Mortar Set	9	1.50	Basket	65	10.8	Chicken Chop	100	16.7
Coconut Grater	10	1.67	Tiffin Carrier	65	10.8	Wooden Bushel	104	17.3
Wok	17	2.83	Earthenware Pitcher	75	12.5	Rice Winnow	107	17.8
Plate	38	6.33	Rice Grinder	79	13.1	Steamer	107	17.8
Food Cover	40	6.67	Coconut Milk Filter	80	13.3	Wooden Tray	115	19.1
Ceramic Bowl	43	7.16	Jug	85	14.1	Betel Leaf Box	115	19.1
Drinking Set	45	7.5	Putu Mold	88	14.6	Spatula	125	20.8
Large Tray (Talam)	47	7.83	Wooden Mortar	95	15.8			

Items rated on a scale of 1 to 23 (1=most common to 23= least common)
 The lower the mean, higher the rank

3.2 ACTIVITY 2

The respondent listed a total of 35 common practices that were classified as a reasons for using the mortar set. However, more than half of the practices were repeated and removed from the list with the respondent consent. In Table 2, it showed that mortar is the common artefact among the 12 cooking practices

In this study, lower mean values indicate higher common practices among Malay, Chinese and Indian ethnic groups. Therefore, cultural artefacts or common cultural practices especially in cooking that are ranked low indicate they have high preference among the multi ethnic groups.

Table 2 showed that the descriptive statistics for all the common practices in the use of the mortar set among Malays, Chinese and Indians. Out of these 12 common practices, 'Pounding Chilli' was identified with the highest mean (M=1.16) and this was followed by 'Pounding Onion' with the M value equivalent with 1.83). The common cultural practice in using mortar set with M=3.16 was 'Blending Ingredients for Cooking' followed by 'Producing Traditional Sauce' (M=4.00), Pounding Dry Fish' (M=4.83) and for the purpose of 'Enhancing food taste traditionally pounding' (M=6.10).

In the latter stage, Preparing Traditional Fast Food' was detected with the mean value equivalent with (M=7.33) followed with 'Pounding Coconut' (M=7.83). Besides that, 'Manual Pounding to Save Energy' was detected with mean value M=8.83, 'Pounding Traditional Herbs' (M=10.3), 'Medicine Preparation' (M=11.0) and 'Decorating Kitchen (M=11.5) All these practices

are considered as the most common cultural practices in a multi ethnic society among Malays, Chinese and Indians.

The findings have shown that the multi ethnic Malaysian society is bonded together by cultural practices. The cultural artefacts functioned as tools to mediate the common cultural practices in a multi ethnic society. The research findings have strongly highlighted that food related artefacts are used in the preparation of cooking ingredients that transcends the boundaries of races and life styles. Radzi et al., (2009) have stressed that cultural artefacts not only mediate the common practices but have helped in good integration and interaction among the ethnic groups namely Malays, Chinese and Indians for centuries.

Table 2: Mean Ranking of Common Practices

Common Cultural Practices	Total Vote	Mean Ranking	Common Cultural Practices	Total Vote	Mean Ranking
Pounding Chilli	7	1.16	Preparing traditional fast food	44	7.33
Pounding Onion	11	1.83	Pounding Coconut	47	7.83
Blending ingredients for Cook	19	3.16	Manual Pounding to Save Energy	53	8.83
Producing Traditional Sauce	24	4.00	Pounding Traditional herbs	62	10.3
Pounding Dry fish	29	4.83	Medicine preparation	66	11.0
Enhancing food taste traditionally by pounding	37	6.10	Decorating Kitchen	69	11.5

Items rated on a scale of 1 to 12 (1=most common to 12= least common)
The lower the mean, higher the rank

4. CONCLUSION

This study has revealed that common practices exist and sustained because of the similar use of cultural artefacts among the major ethnic groups in Malaysia. This is a proof of Malaysian cultural practices that can reduce ethnocentrism and promote social integrity and unity. The author recognizes the importance of studying the common practices through cultural artefacts that can preserve nation's harmony. Thus commonly used cultural artefacts can become mediatory tools of unity among people of a multi ethnic society.

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