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**Contemporary Art, Craft and Hybridity:
Malaysian Encounters and Responses**

Mohd Zahuri Bin Khairani

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of
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for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

Mohd Zahuri Bin Khairani
PhD. Thesis 2011

CONTEMPORARY ART, CRAFT AND HYBRIDITY: MALAYSIAN ENCOUNTERS AND RESPONSES

This practice-based research examines the importance of expanding the Malaysian visual culture heritage in light of the enormous impact of hybridity on art and craft in Malaysia. The research addresses the question of the impact of hybridity on art and visual culture by focusing on production of artworks from indigenous Malaysian craft - traditional fabrics Pua Kumbu and Batik, and the Sarawakian layer cakes. The main objectives of this research are to understand the problems, consequences and effects of hybridity on art and visual culture and to produce artefacts that explicitly illuminate a new understanding of the dynamic that obtains between hybridity, contemporary art and craft traditions in the Malaysian context. Questions pertaining to the affects of hybridity and globalisation towards Malaysian politics, economy and social aspects were addressed in the artworks as a key aspect of this research. Furthermore, development of the Malaysian art scene in relation with hybridity will be discussed in the light of contemporary art progression historically. Analysis of the theory of hybridity, connections between hybridity in art via the works of international and local artists, will put forward to clarify these areas. This will include exploration of the issue of national identity. This research will engage in the production of artefacts in the context of a varied studio practice, developing and employing throughout the course of the research materials and techniques deemed appropriate in the production of artefacts that embody the quality of 'local' cultural forms in dialogue with, or resistant to, forms associated with an exogenous, 'global' culture. The artwork production opens up the phenomenon of the current process of hybridity and the issue of Malaysia's national identity. This research will adopt descriptive, heuristic and comparative methods within an overarching practice-led methodology. The building, implementation and evaluation of methodology together which include exhibitions and audience are the key components of this research. Critical review of the production of artworks is seen to be an integral part of the research methodology; this process will encourage and sustain multi-disciplinary approaches to the research question. This research has revealed the connection between hybridity and the advancement of the Malaysia contemporary art movement that has been undergoing transformation through the process of modernisation. Above all, as a Malaysian artist working in the United Kingdom, my practice differs from the normal practice of Malaysian artists who translate "Malay" culture into art work in that it offers a critical view on political, economical and social issues in Malaysia.

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INTRODUCTION

Research Background

This research deals with the process of hybridity and its relationship with contemporary art and craft¹ in Malaysia. The importance of hybridisation in political, social and economical contexts will be examined in connection with the development of Malaysian contemporary art. It is appropriate at this stage in this research to describe this correlation before the production of the artwork in my studio practice. My works deal with hybridity in terms of the usage of media and techniques as well as political and social issues. In my practice, I shall raise the question of what constitutes my cultural belonging. The possibilities of hybridising traditional Malay craft and acquired Western approaches have been explored in the studio. In this regard, two main approaches have been used in this investigation: theoretical analysis and studio practice. Traditional media from Malaysian craft are examined in an experimental process of constructing new kinds of artwork. I chose traditional fabrics, namely Pua Kumbu² and Batik, as a medium in my first production of artwork and Sarawakian layer cakes³ for my second phase of studio practice (see Chapter 3 - Researcher's Practice). My research addresses the question of the process of hybridity in Malaysian art and visual culture by focusing on some of the "indigenous Malay" craft traditions in term of techniques, media and motifs. The aim of this study is to enrich my Malaysian national art heritage and expand a new approach to craft production

¹ In relation with my research regarding the discussion about art and craft, refer to Chapter 3.

² Pua Kumbu is a traditional patterned multicoloured ceremonial cotton cloth, woven by Iban women and considered to be sacred objects. These cloths are used for lifecycle rituals and special events including the birth of a child, coming of age celebrations, and to screen a corpse that is being laid out in a longhouse prior to burial.

³ This refers to the process of baking a layer cake, in which each thin layer is made by pouring a small amount of the batter from a small cup, then baked one layer after another in the oven with heat from bottom and top.

through the investigation of hybridity in political, social and economical contexts. This studio practice will illustrate the exploration of traditional Malaysian craft in new artworks, thus verifying the correlation between theory and practice in a heuristic approach that applies “seeing and understanding in different way and com[ing] out with reflective thought, feeling and awareness” (Moustakas, 1990).

My experience as an artist and academician involved with traditional craft as a medium to produce artwork enables me to explore further new techniques. In addition, I use traditional craft as a basis for a critical examination of contemporary art practice in relation to the process of hybridisation in Malaysian art and culture. In order to understand the development of contemporary Malaysian art, the historical background of contemporary Malaysian art has been critically discussed in Chapter 2 - Contemporary Art Practice in Malaysia. At this point, this research will identify the cultural and political context for the production of artwork by Malaysian artists. As Bahauddin (1999) stressed, an exploration of the current cultural situation in Malaysia needs to be undertaken to get a clear picture of government policy on cultural identity.

Identity should be understood as an organic process, which has been constructed and grown.⁴ In this research I attempt to reflect the national identity in my artwork, to look at the possibility of new types of artwork which combine Eastern and Western elements but still pertain to the Malaysian cultural context.

Escobar (2002) defines the term of identity as:

A first concept of identity, which we may call “ontological”, sees it as built around some essential elements: a community is specifically defined by certain given traits which

⁴ Interview with Anthony Key, 8 December 2009.

produce in its members an awareness of uniqueness...Identity is characterized by its language, territorial location, class position in the social fabric, common history and so on. This set of elements, which the group elaborates internally through representations, are the symbolic correlations of its sets of objective positions...The concept of identity is a result of variable positions rather than a basic and definite opposition. Thus, identity is portrayed on many fronts; it is an unstable notion formed (and deformed) through confrontations that simultaneously take place in different settings.

In the Malaysian context, politics plays an important role in the development of contemporary art and the relationship with local identity. The race riot of 13 May, 1969⁵ was a turning point for the Malaysian government to define Malaysian national identity. Jit (1994) has pointed out that the transformation of the social and cultural context of 13 May 1969 might have framed present thinking about art and helped the government to flesh out the linkages between art and society. The process of setting up national identity will be discussed in Chapter 1 - Hybridity in Art and Culture. In relation to this concept of national identity in Malaysia, I shall examine the scenario of how the Malaysian government fixed the idea of "One Malaysia"⁶ in which the process of hybridisation in absorbing various cultures among races in Malaysia was posited. At this point, I shall touch on the Malays as the Bumiputera⁷, the "sons of the earth" and the other races, the Chinese and Indian as non-Bumiputera. Furthermore, the idea of "One Malaysia" is used in my artwork as a symbolic examination of unity among races in Malaysia. It is important at this juncture to describe the connection between the theoretical part, my practice and my position in discussing the effect of globalisation and the hybrid process on

⁵ Ethnic riots between Malays and Chinese took place in Kuala Lumpur.

⁶ Najib Razak, Prime Minister of Malaysia states that, One Malaysia concept is the guideline on how to achieve *Bangsa Malaysia* (Malaysian Race)

⁷ This refers to the people of the Malay Archipelago. It recognizes the "special position" of the "Malay" and "aborigine" in West Malaysia, "natives" in Sarawak and "natives" in Sabah.

Malaysian art and visual culture. The rapid changing of world economic development affected by the influence of globalisation has been examined in my production of artwork. In cultural politics issues such as capitalism and consumerism have changed the social context of the Malaysian community in terms of visual culture. Thus, the process of hybridisation from these global trends leads to a change in Malaysian national identity.

The development of Malaysia's national identity was affected by the May 1969 racial riots and the implementation of the National Cultural Policy in 1971.⁸ Through my artwork production, the process of hybridising traditional Malaysian art and Western approaches will be examined. Discourse on hybridity and identity leading to the application of the prints on traditional fabrics and layer cakes as artworks will be the main vehicle in this research. The process of producing the artworks differs from other contemporary Malaysian art because my practice is that of a reflective practitioner who is dealing with Malaysian art culture working from outside Malaysia. By using traditional media, my practice exemplifies the changes of approaches demonstrating critical issues of local and global values in contemporary art development. In these practices, the use of indigenous craft artefacts in conjunction with modern approaches will raise the questions of how might it be possible to deconstruct Malaysian traditional crafts and modern approaches to develop new hybrid artefacts? To what extent does the indigenous Malaysian cultural heritage meld with Western cultural artefacts, attitudes and processes? What is the result of the impact of hybridity in art and culture on Malaysian art development?

⁸ In 1971, the National Cultural Congress (Malaysia) met to reconstruct the *Dasar Kebudayaan* or Foundations of Culture, stating the necessity for the predominance of the indigenous cultures of the region, the possibility of incorporating other cultures where appropriate, and the importance of Islam.

The new approaches in my artwork engage with various methods in terms of conception and medium. These new ideas can be seen as provocative and analytical within the complexities of hybridity in art and culture in a Malaysian context, influenced by the objectives of this research. As an artist and academician, I strongly feel that the process of hybridisation has a positive impact on contemporary Malaysian art practice, such as in the exploration of media and techniques in artwork production. Furthermore, hybridity is an ongoing process in which the idea of global and local culture also helps to construct Malaysian political, economical and social arenas. Since this hybrid process started in the second century with the early Hindu Kingdom, followed by the arrival of Islam and, in the sixteenth century, by Western colonialism, Malaysia has developed through multicultural assimilation.

Research Objectives

At this juncture, I am using theoretical analysis and a practice-based approach to set up the research objectives, which are:

1. To understand the effects of hybridity on art, craft and visual culture in a Malaysian context.
2. To examine the appropriate use of media for the production of images that explores hybridity in art, craft and visual culture in a Malaysian context.
3. To produce artefacts that explicitly refer to objects and motifs found in indigenous Malay craft traditions.
4. To test, through the production of and critical reflection on, artefacts that explore a new understanding of the dynamic

that exists between hybridity, contemporary art and craft traditions in the Malaysian context.

Through this amalgamation, an array of issues relating to the hybridity of Malaysian political and social life will be presented through these artworks. In my second project, I utilise Sarawakian layer cakes as artworks which represent Malaysian identity and portray the complexity of hybridity. In this practice, the hybrid process of using traditional methods and modern techniques will be implemented and re-contextualised as new processes to investigate the issue of hybridity and Malaysia's national identity (Chapter 3 - Researcher's Practice).

As politics play an important role in Malaysia, I shall elucidate on Malaysia's political background since Independence Day in 1957. The symbolic meaning of unity among Malaysian races will be explored in my studio practice based on an idea of political parties that represent Malaysian communities. Through exploration in my studio practice, these works will break new ground in experimenting with a new type of artwork in contemporary Malaysian art. The methods of this new exploration will be discussed in the 'Context for the Research' section and in Chapter 3 - Researcher's Practice; with regard to this practice, the question of a hybrid process in Malaysian craft will be examined. What are the elements that compose contemporary Malaysian art? How to portray and identify contemporary Malaysian art through my artistic production? Therefore, an in-depth exploration of my studio works will be undertaken to bring together the process of hybridisation and ideas about Malaysia's cultural identity. In addition, I shall explore the possibilities of new transformations and appropriations in my artwork from my current position. As an artist who is examining my own cultural context from outside my normal environment, I have

the advantage of seeing the Malaysian cultural context from a distance as well as from first hand experience of Western culture. Consequently, other work from Malaysian local artists and Western artists that deal with the issue of hybridity and identity in their artwork will be discussed (see Chapter 3 - Researcher's Practice).

Through the process of combining Malaysian craft and Western approaches in my practice, I shall explore the idea of "recreating" and "appropriating" within the context of the medium, modern techniques, and local and global images, and transform the artworks into contemporary Malaysian artworks. In the section 'Context for the Research', various methods will be developed to support and facilitate the discussion on contemporary art practice in Malaysia in Chapter 2. Moreover, from these methods, I shall also examine hybridity in art and culture and the process of Malaysia's national identity in Chapter 1.

Context for the Research

In this Chapter, I will show that the various methods that have been used in this research are appropriate with the artwork production within the context of the Malaysian contemporary art development. Since 1990s, the theme of hybridisation, globalisation and modernisation has been used by local artists in relation with the globalisation. Through my own work I wanted to continue to investigate and research this theme and I began by undertaking a systematic enquiry which is the discussions carried out with the audiences through "Nusantara...Aram Kitai Bejalai" (Let's Travel) and "Lapis" (Layers) exhibitions. The artworks portrayed the local craft from Malaysia, political and economic icons, incorporated language in the form of written Iban proverbs and used

'crafted' items as 'canvas'. Through this diverse mixture of sources, it sought to explore a new discourse towards the impact of hybridity and globalisation in local contemporary art production. Through the "Lapis" (Layers) exhibition, I have used food as a media to elevate the issue of national identity and the process of hybridisation in Malaysian political and cultural context. As Kay Kim (2000) stressed: The importance of the Malaysian national identity and the local cultural context are essential in contemporary art development and the recent debates with globalisation. Thus, the idea, media and technique has been tested on layer cakes as my new artwork production and this artistic practice has developed my thinking process as part of the heuristic aspect to explore my "mind journey" - development of idea in Malaysian political and cultural context.

In order to fuse the theoretical analysis and studio practice in this investigation, I have to understand the significance of this practice-based research. Gray and Malins (2004) stated that practice-based research is uniquely placed to respond to criticism, asking questions, articulation of paradigm in order to make 'new culture' encouraging in terms of intellectual social dialogue, clear and critical thinking. The expressions highlighted in this type of research are an appropriate mechanism to raise awareness on critical and contextual issues of practices applied in the artwork produced. Furthermore, they added, practice-based research can "analyse and interpret ideas, and to develop new creative and cultural strategies based on rigorous evidence and research experience." Thus, in my practice, discussing my own cultural context from outside Malaysia is a new experience where I have an opportunity to obtain critical responses from the audiences, discuss hybridity in my artwork production and to share the idea

of the process of hybridisation and the Malaysian political and cultural development. While Jones (2009) has pointed out:

We need to clarify what is not yet known but necessary to the further development of art and design research. In my view, could usefully include the following: a full literature review; a review of examples of inquiry through artistic endeavour in modern history; a sociology of artists; a theoretical basis for institution; an advanced theorization of how knowledge may be embodied in or represented by a work of art; an aesthetics of artistic method as distinct from one of artistic style; a comparative methodology of artistic production across cultures; and an international consensus in the definitions and boundaries of those subjects loosely bunched as art and design, so that debate of specialization and interdisciplinarity might be better facilitated.

In addition, Jones described, the practice-based research is a project of “a self-reflective supervised program of inquiry leading to new knowledge.” Jones also claimed that it may be possible to explain how an artefact embodies new knowledge of the “knowledge-of” kind, it is less clear how the artefact can be said in itself to embody a thesis or argument. Elkins (2009) stressed that, the practice-based research creates the possibility for wholly new kinds of “interdisciplinary, trans-disciplinary, and other unnamed configurations, because it does not add kinds of scholarship to one another: it mingles scholarship with expressive works.” While Sullivan (2005) has pointed out: “The practice-based doctorate advances knowledge partly by means of practice and must include a substantial contextualization of the creative work” where the characteristics of originality, mastery and contribution to the field are held to be demonstrated through the original creative work. Sullivan also argues that the status of knowledge production in the visual arts remains a question whether knowledge

is found in the art object, or whether it is made in the mind of the audience. This ongoing debate was clarified by Brown (2003) where the artworks as institutional artefacts are seen to exhibit properties that are “primarily objective, theory dependent and knowable, which gives access to insights that can be intuitive, mindful and discoverable.” In this regard, Awoniyi (2002) has stated:

It is the polymorphism, or multiplicity of knowledge construction and the many forms of representation that it can take that reflects the integrated nature of theory and practice in art and design. A good example of the interdependent among the artwork, the viewer, and the setting can be seen in conceptualising studio-based visual arts research within higher education, as all these forms interact within an interpretive community.

Awoniyi also stressed that, “knowledge embedded in practice, knowledge argued in a thesis, and knowledge constructed as a discourse within the institutional setting all contribute to new understanding.” From these perspectives, the implications of these debates have affected my practice. Based on Jones idea in regard of how an artefact embodies new knowledge, critical reflection on my own artwork has been made to reflect the importance of the new techniques and media in my artwork production and not just about the conceptual part or comment in political and cultural context. In relation with “substantial contextualization of the creative work” from Sullivan, in my artwork production, the artefacts can be seen to comprise a critical coalition between the artwork and context where each part has a role to play in understanding the effect of hybridity within the Malaysian context. In addition, I have constructed an artwork that can be operated as texts and events that embody cultural meanings.

Based on my studio practices, questions that are associated with issues on globalisation, modernisation and hybridity has been highlighted according to the Malaysian political and social context (Fig. 0.1, Fig. 0.2 and Fig. 0.3).

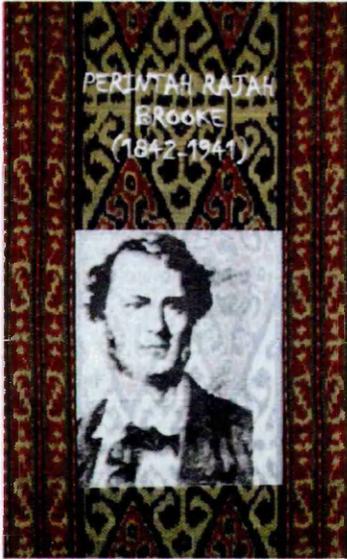


Figure 0.1
Pua 3, 2008. Silk screen
on cloth,
107cm X 53cm.

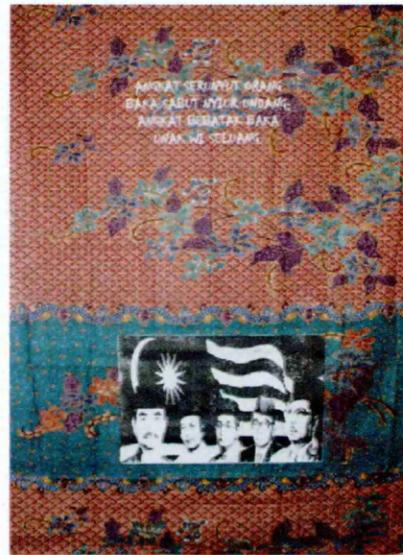


Figure 0.2
Batik 9, 2008. Silk screen
on cloth,
140cm x 94cm.

In these artworks, the process of globalisation, modernisation and hybridity has been illustrated from the colonisation era, the Malaysian political, economical and social plan from prime ministers of Malaysia and the symbolic colour of political parties. I have chosen the historical background of Malaysian political development to portray how the national policies have been the created by the government. Furthermore, I have raised the question on how the Malaysian and



Figure 0.3
Cake 10, 2009. 20cm X 10cm X 6cm.

political context has been affected by these issues. What types of artwork can be produced to relate my views on the impact of hybridity with the Malaysian political and social context? How the process of colonisation created an impact on Malaysia's national identity? I shall clarify these questions by referring at the Malaysian contemporary art development and the relation between theoretical analysis in hybridity, globalisation and modernisation and my artwork production. Further discussions related to these issues will be examined in Chapter 3 (Researcher's Practice). As Biggs (2000) stressed, the integral part in practice-based study is the relationship of a systematic enquiry to creativity and how the role of artefacts can present arguments and produce results for reporting purposes. In accordance to the impact of hybridisation in political and social context, new techniques and media have been experimented by assimilating traditional and modern approaches in my artefact production. This heuristic aspect is a key part of my methodology both in terms of developing and exploring imagery in my two successive exhibitions. I strongly believe that the artworks that I have researched and produced through my studio practices will support the development of new ideas and enhance the level of comprehension in this field. The Malay traditional fabric, Pua Kumbu and Batik as well as the traditional Sarawakian layer cake were my key media to

illuminate the idea of hybridity within the visual context. Moreover the effect of globalisation, modernisation and hybridity in Malaysia's political and cultural context has also been explored in my studio practice by a comparative methodology across Western and Eastern cultures. Through the process of my artwork production, I have questioned, criticised, analysed and interpreted ideas on Malaysian crafts and a self reflective supervised program on my artworks has been accomplished in my practice based research.

The discourse from the Western and Malaysian audiences leads to a new stage of understanding towards the Malaysian crafts and issues related to the hybridisation theories which has been discussed in Chapter 1. The discussions carried out with the audiences have been recorded during the exhibition and I have included the information in my analysis in Chapter 3 (Researcher's Practice) and Chapter 4 (Conclusion). The amalgamation of the local craft and modern techniques in an artwork production represent the process of hybridisation in my studio practice. The main discussion with the viewers is in my second exhibition, "Lapis" (Layer) where traditional food has been used as an artwork to portray the political and social issues in Malaysia. Representations of food appear throughout the art history, from the beginning of the depictions which portrays the mythological scenes to those found in religious arts across different cultures. Food has appealed to artist's imaginations for religious and symbolic reasons as well as for more formal concerns. Early 20th century, a number of avant-garde art movements, such as Futurism, Surrealism, Fluxus and Pop Art, sought to break down the separation between art and life.⁹ Through "Lapis" (Layers) exhibition, food became the

⁹ Exhibition Guide, Pot Luck: Food and Art. 23 October 2009 - 2 January 2010.

material of art itself and a means to playfully comment on social and cultural matters in Malaysia. For some artists, it is the organic and ephemeral quality of food that interests them where artworks that are based on food should be a communal experience to be enjoyed and shared with everyone.¹⁰

I have chosen the main method - critical review of my own artefacts, to portray and explore the impact of hybridisation towards local craft together with the Malaysian contemporary art development. Also through my experimentation with the media and techniques in my print works and layer cakes, I have created my own justification of actions in relation to the process and product of the artwork.

- The appropriate media and techniques on the artwork production
- The new form of artwork that has never been applied before in the Malaysian contemporary art practice
- To illustrate the idea of Malaysia's national identity based on the arrangement of patterns and colours of the layer cakes.
- To portray Malaysia's political and social scene within the visual context

The exploration of the artwork production in this research has started from my first exhibition, "Nusantara...Aram Kitai Bejalai" (Let's Travel) and artworks that deals with issues on Malaysia's contemporary art, craft and hybridity that were then explored in "Lapis" (Layers) exhibition. Furthermore, in this research, the production and exhibition of the artworks can function as a mode of inquiry by setting up several dialogues with the viewers such as the art students, artists and academicians. Furthermore, through this practice, it has opened up an intellectual social dialogue and arguments as an integral part in this practice-based study. As an artist, I have raised questions on;

¹⁰ Interview with Anthony Key, 8 December 2009.

- How to explore issues on hybridity, globalisation and modernisation in the Malaysian context by using traditional fabric as a media?
- How the process of juxtaposing the images and text on this fabric will affect the local craft identity?
- How to develop new techniques on Sarawakian layer cakes and transform this traditional food to a new form of artwork?
- How to arrange the colours and patterns to symbolise Malaysia's political scene and national identity?
- As layer cake is perishable, what method should I use to document this artwork to make it permanent?
- How to relate the process of Malaysia's national identity in the development of this artwork?
- As a Malay artist producing artworks in a foreign country, how far has my artwork affected the way I consider my own perspectives with the Malaysian craft traditions?

Apart from that, I also have set up questions specifically for audiences consisting of Malaysian and English viewers. The main questions are;

- How the viewers will accept the process of re-contextualisation on traditional craft to a new form of artwork?
- To what extent has the colonisation era affected the process of modernisation in Malaysia?

In relation to answering the above questions, I have come out with an investigative methodology in the process of exploring and developing the artwork. The bibliographic research, critical reflection on artistic practices and interviews has been developed to get a clearer picture on how this research will relate with the process of hybridisation in the Malaysian context. The idea of hybridity in this research is based on the investigation on the Malaysian political and cultural context. I have explored this concept within the Malaysian craft and contemporary art development in my artwork production. I shall look at the essential ideas of hybridity by looking back to the history of Malaysia's contemporary art in Chapter 2 (Contemporary Art Practice in Malaysia).

Moreover, I intend to investigate the significance of Malaysia's government policy towards the process of nation building based on the National Cultural Policy, 1971. At this stage, I will explore the possible media and techniques used in the artwork production in order to relate it with the current issues on hybridity in my practice. This investigation will be further highlighted in Chapter 1 (Hybridity in Art and Culture) and Chapter 3 (Researcher's Practice).

The traditional fabric and local layer cakes have been re-contextualised to discuss the relationship between hybridity within the political and social context in Malaysia. In this regard, the new artefacts which have been constructed from the fabric and layer cakes have functioned as experimental artworks and I have used them to analyse and interpret the changes in Malaysian political and social context from the effect of process of hybridisation. Moreover, the new techniques that have been discovered in the artwork production have opened up a new way to explore the usage of craft in Malaysian contemporary art development. The images captured on the artworks from "Nusantara...Aram Kitai Bejalai" (Let's Travel) and "Lapis" (Layers) exhibitions have been transferred in a form of a catalogue and DVD as a method of documentation and communication in a permanent form.

My practice of constructing the artworks and framing a critical review of my own artefacts is itself a research method. Critical reflection on my own artwork production is a process of how I reflect on myself and my artwork. I shall elaborate on this method in conjunction with the concept of "mind journey"¹¹

¹¹ The concept of "mind journey" is my understanding of Malaysian cultures from my experience as an academician, artist and performer. Through this concept, I have explored and produced artworks from this cultural involvement. The production of artwork outside Malaysia gives me an opportunity to touch on political issues, which are often unexpressed by Malaysian artists.

from the point of view of myself as an artist working outside Malaysia. As part of a Malaysian Diaspora in the United Kingdom, I use this concept as an autobiographical approach to express my view of the Malaysian political and cultural context.

This research also adopts descriptive methods within an overarching practice-based methodology. The methodological approaches that are employed in this research, including bibliographic research and critical reflection on artistic practices, are appropriate for practice-based research projects. These various research methods were developed for setting up the two exhibitions - the "Nusantara...Aram Kitai Bajalai" (Let's Travel) which is prints on traditional Malaysian fabrics and the "Lapis" (Layers) which is the construction of layer cakes as artwork. At the first stage of artwork production, the research involved the formation of a database on visual culture (particularly the development of an image bank drawn from Malaysian subject matter) from which I drew the images subjected to digital and other types of transformation. As the Director of a Cultural Centre in my university back in Malaysia, I have a vast collection of images related to traditional costume and other aspects of visual culture. Collecting cultural-specific imagery is seen to be an integral part of the research methodology and this process encouraged and sustained a multi-disciplinary approach, including using digitally altered images from computers, printing techniques and photography to address the research questions. Also, there is another collection of Western art images that have been used in my prints project together with the images from Malaysia.

The construction of artwork developed from an autobiographical, experimental and heuristic approach is appropriate to a practice-based research. As Moustakas (1990) stressed, the heuristic process is “autobiographic and a way of engaging in research process through methods and processes aimed at finding the underlying meanings of important human experiences.” A combination of experimental process and experience-based techniques in producing prints on “traditional” fabric and layer cake as an artwork takes this research seriously as a model for a new type of (Malaysian) contemporary art practice. I shall come out with a resolution and new approach to transform Sarawakian layer cakes into my new artwork by altering the techniques and the cooking directions for the layer cake. Through this artwork, there is a discussion of the conceptual development of the Malaysian political and social context, with the idea of nation-building in multiracial societies.

Critical reflection on my own work remains a key component of my research methodology. These critical reflections are connected with the production of artworks and the study of the process of hybridisation in Malaysian culture, especially in contemporary art. Through the above mentioned concept of “mind journey”, I shall connect this concept with my artwork production. The “mind journey” is a philosophical idea of my own experiences, spending more than thirteen years in Sarawak, and how the impact of globalisation, hybridity and the modern way of life affects local values, particularly in visual culture. The diversity of different cultures within Malaysian society can be seen in local Sarawakian tribes such as the Iban¹² and Orang Ulu.¹³ As Sarawak is one of

¹² The Iban are a branch of the Dayak peoples of Borneo. They were renowned for practising headhunting and tribal or territorial expansion.

the states in Malaysia which is located in East Malaysia, the cultural aspect differs from that of the other states in West Malaysia. In this research, I explore the local craft and transpose it to a new artwork. Based on my experience and my capability to speak the local language, Iban, I explore Iban proverbs as a text print and juxtapose them with computer generated images on local fabric. Discussion of these juxtapositions in the artwork is in Chapter 3 - Researcher's Practice.

During the initial stage of research into the prints on Malaysian fabric, prototypes of works of art were constructed from photographic images. These used a combination of multiple image-generating techniques such as silkscreen printing and digital collage as well as the techniques of montage, collage and pastiche to support my studio works. Besides that, the experimental process of making Sarawakian layer cakes as an artwork is a new form of artefact in the context of artistic production which has never before been done in Malaysia.

Regarding one of the aims of this study, to enrich my Malaysian national art heritage, the experimentation on traditional fabrics and Sarawakian layer cakes as an artwork was essential in my studio practice. The production of the artwork in this research is my contribution to Malaysian contemporary art development. It is uncommon for traditional fabric and food to be used in art practice in Malaysia. Traditional fabric such as Pua Kumbu is a symbol of Sarawak tradition for Iban tribes. I shall discuss this traditional fabric and the relationship with my studio practice in Chapter 3.

¹³ The Orang Ulu are made up of a few tribes, namely the Kenyah, Kayan, Kalimantan, Kelabit, the Lun Bawang, Penan, as well as a few minor tribes in the interior. Orang Ulu means the "up-river dwellers" mainly living in Central Borneo.

Initial production explored the use of indigenous craft artefacts in conjunction with images of Western art drawn from the modernist canon (ca. late-19th century through ca. 1970). Furthermore, through this research, I intend to obtain clear answers to the questions of how might it be possible to shift perceptions from the purely exotic view of these respective reservoirs of visual cultural material (i.e., the Western 'imaginary' museum of art and the products of Malaysian tribal societies)? How susceptible is the indigenous Malaysian cultural heritage to the incursion of/displacement by Western cultural artefacts, attitudes and processes? Does hybridity represent an avenue for progressive and positive cultural development in art in a Malaysian context? Is this simply a recipe for the destruction of a raft of indigenous cultural expressions?

These questions arose from the historical background of contemporary art in Malaysia which was influenced by Western art and culture and the effect of globalisation. Discussion regarding these questions will be explored in my artwork production in Chapter 3.

The literature review in this research focuses on sources dealing with major issues of globalisation, modernisation and hybridity in Malaysian contemporary art concerned with Malaysian culture and discourse on identity. The background and development of contemporary Malaysian art since 1990 have been touched upon. These details provide a clear understanding of the modern art developments in Chapter 2 - 'Contemporary Art Practice in Malaysia'. The details of contemporary art practice in Malaysia have been reviewed from Malaysia National Art Gallery publications, the exclusive publisher of contemporary Malaysian art practice. Apart from the information about contemporary art in Malaysia, descriptive discussion of other artists' work as a

comparison to my practice is contained in Chapter 3 - 'Researcher's Practice'. In addition, information on hybridity in art and culture and cultural identity in the production of artwork came from interviews with Malaysian artists and a British artist.

Critical discussions of identity in a Malaysian context are only available through conference proceedings published in the 1990s by the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism of Malaysia. Thus, the historical background of Malaysian contemporary art has been analysed to review the elements of local identity in artworks by Malaysian artists. The discussion about hybridity in art and culture is employed in Chapter 1 - 'Hybridity in Art and Culture'. The process of Malaysia's national identity has been reviewed by looking at political viewpoints which play an important role in a social context.

The research undertaken and the data collected in this research are of a qualitative nature and required me to explore the importance of context, setting and the artworks' production. In this research, I have chosen a practice-based method because the important process of "producing" the artwork is an essential component in this research. I used this practice-based method because it is the most appropriate means by which to answer the research questions. As Biggs (2000) stressed, "Practice-based projects are those which include as an integral part of the production of an original artefact in addition to, or perhaps instead of, the production of written thesis." My own practice as an artist and academician are used as a basis for critical reflection on a theoretical understanding of hybridisation within Malay traditional and contemporary cultural identity. My position in this research study as a researcher,

academician, and “displaced artist” establishes the symbiotic connection between theory and practice. This is from the position of an artist dislocated from his indigenous environment to a new location, yet who still deals with Malaysian political, social and economic issues.

In this research, the investigation is involved with established and new representations of Malay culture. It involves an analysis of discourse on hybrid process in Malaysia’s cultural identity and cultural politics. Central to the investigation are the research methods such as interviews which were carried out before and after the production of artworks. The methodology that is applied will also answer the research question about how the process of hybridisation has affected Malaysian art and visual culture by emphasising the local “Malay” craft tradition in terms of techniques, media, motifs and meanings.

I have conducted interviews and telephone interviews to obtain details and information from primary sources in this research. The participants fall in two categories. They are Malaysian and British artists, a British anthropologist and a Sarawakian cake maker. The interviews were focused on artists who deal with the issue of hybridity and identity in their artwork. The interviews were controlled in a formal way with prepared questions and the discussion of the process of hybridisation and identity concentrated on the process of how the artist constructs the artwork.

The telephone interview took place with a cake maker living in Malaysia. The state of Sarawak was chosen for specific reasons. Both cake makers came from Sarawak where the traditional Sarawakian layer cakes are found.

Furthermore, one of the participants is the founder of Sarawakian layer cakes and the very first person who evolved the pattern in layer cakes. The cake makers from Sarawak were interviewed because of their wide knowledge of the technical aspects of the production of the cakes. Moreover, this information regarding the layer cakes cannot be found in any written texts or in any manuscripts except a cake recipe book written by one of the cake makers.

The exhibitions have been set up outside Malaysia which gives me freedom as an artist to be more critical towards Malaysian political, social and economic issues. At this point, I regard myself as a “displaced artist”, who currently produces my artwork in the United Kingdom yet deals with the Malaysian cultural context. The creative process of experimenting with techniques and media is discussed in Chapter 3 - Researcher’s Practice. In this chapter, my practice exemplifies my theoretical examination, and in turn will reflect back on the theory. Through this investigation, my own experimentation has been in exploring the techniques and media especially in layer cake production, which I explore both conceptually and physically.

At this juncture, it is pertinent to point out that this research functions in a symbiotic way between theoretical investigation and my practice. Both theory and practice were connected (and created) in exploring and experimenting as action research. O’Brien (1998) has pointed out that the process of “learning by doing” in action research is used in real situations and experimental studies, and the primary focus is on solving real problems. The research is concerned with the exploration of a new approach to construct and to transform the new layer cake as an artwork. The process of layer cake production is recorded on

DVD as a database as well as in photographic prints. The installation of artworks for exhibition has also been recorded on DVD as documentation of the early stage of the exhibition.

The heuristic process of producing the artworks is used in my practice to explore the relationship to discourse on Malaysia's national identity. Through this method, I have the ability to produce artwork (especially the layer cakes) that reflects a political context where race and politics are often unspoken and protest to government is not permitted in contemporary art practice in Malaysia. Moreover, from my studio practice, it also deals with developing the symbolic significance of the pattern inside the layer cakes.

In exploring the repercussions of hybridity, various methods are being drawn in theoretical and practical work in this research. As an artist from a Southeast Asian country, I have the freedom to experiment with and explore traditional media to construct new artworks and elucidate critical thought about Malaysian cultural identity. As an artist who looks at my own cultural context from outside Malaysia, the artistic expression provides a view which sits outside my normal location. By looking at the historical background of contemporary art practice in Malaysia, I shall examine the process of hybridisation, starting from the independence era and the development of local modern art in 1990s. The interviews lead me to recognise and identify:

1. The hybrid process in a cultural context within West and East
2. Traditional Malaysian craft as a medium to a new form of artwork

This is a new incorporation of local craft into artworks becoming established in my practice, eventually leading to an exhibition. Through the exhibition, the artworks can be seen as an exploration and will present part of my conclusion and response to the discourse of hybridity. Firstly through the production of artworks and secondly through the thesis, the process of hybridity will be discussed regarding whether it produces positive or negative effects in the context of Malaysian contemporary art and culture (Chapter 3). Overall, audience feedback will demonstrate understanding of the artwork from two different basic groups, Western and Eastern audiences. However, these groups are not necessarily homogenous in their responses and understanding.

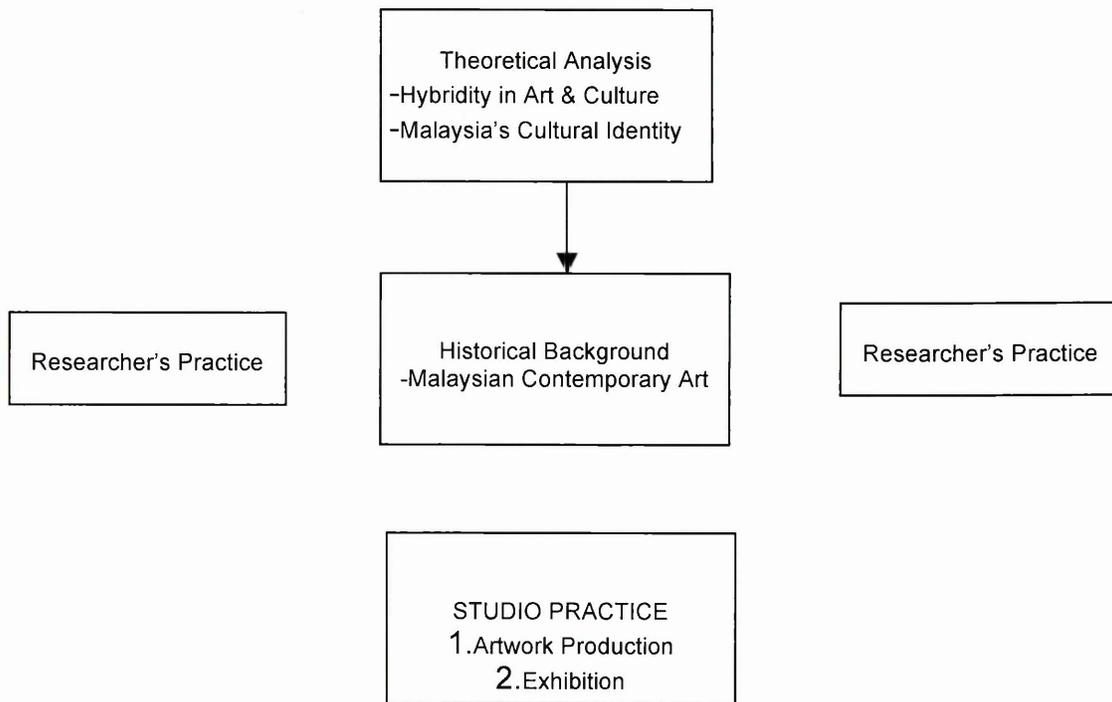


Figure 0.4: Correlations Between Theory and Practice

Figure 0.4 demonstrates the relationship between the theory and practice in this research. Hence, it also illustrates my thinking process, theoretical examination and studio practice indicated by the two-way arrows. Through this relationship, I

am able to analyse Malaysian cultural identity by looking at the historical background of Malaysian contemporary art. The investigation of this national identity is based on the work of Malaysian artists that has been produced since the 1930s and the development of contemporary Malaysian art after 1990. The purpose of my artwork is to experiment with symbols arising from the interpretation of Malaysian political, social and economic issues combined with the impact of globalisation. Two types of artwork were made exploring the same issue of hybridity in Malaysian contemporary art and craft, employing a mixture of Eastern and Western values. The method of exhibiting artworks from traditional fabrics and traditional layer cakes has been shifted from a conventional meaning and used in a contemporary art context. Therefore, the “Nusantara...Aram Kitai Bajalai” (Let’s Travel) and the “Lapis” (Layers) exhibitions provide a new interpretation of how traditional media can be viewed through a hybrid process and in relation to the organic process of Malaysian cultural identity.

Chapter Plan

Through this research, the thesis plan is as follows:

Introduction - This section establishes the research objectives, the context for the research, and a chapter plan. In the context for the research, I shall emphasise various methods undertaken in conducting the research. This research will be carried out in two distinct parts: a contextual review within the fields of diasporic studies and hybridity to elaborate a clear definition of the local cultural field; and the appropriate use of materials to construct artwork that exemplifies both a local and global view. Critical reflection on my studio work

and comparative study of other artists will be key components of my research methodology. Apart from that, I shall conduct a series of interviews involving cake makers and artists practising within the same issues of hybridity and cultural identity.

Chapter 1 is a study of hybridity in art and culture. The process of hybridity in a developing country such as Malaysia is interesting because this multiracial country has developed as a centre of international trade and ethnic, cultural and religious exchange. This area of research embraces the effects and consequences on Malaysian contemporary art as well as craft and the process of hybridisation in a Malaysian context. This chapter also looks at the process of Malaysia's cultural identity, whereby the exploration of these issues is closely related with my artwork production. It will examine the importance of the National Cultural Policy, which attempts to establish the same cultural context among all Malaysians. The colonial era will be discussed as an important turning point in how Malaysian art was shaped as well as the increased influence of globalisation. Therefore, I indicate how the whole process of hybridity in a Malaysian political, social and economical context impacts on my practice, and leads to extensive experimentation in the production of artwork in Chapter 3 - Researcher's Practice.

Chapter 2 describes the historical background of contemporary Malaysian art in the context of how national identity is understood in Malaysia. This chapter includes the development of contemporary Malaysian art after 1990. Political, cultural and social issues and the influence of globalisation began to be progressively pointed out by the young artists in Malaysia. The 1990s art

phenomenon of “new wave” in Malaysian contemporary art inspired me to investigate the consequences of hybridity from the viewpoint of artwork production.

In Chapter 3, I shall conduct a study of the experimentation I undertook in the production of artwork. This is divided into two solo exhibitions: “Nusantara...Aram Kitai Bejalai” (Let’s Travel) - prints on Malaysian fabrics and “Lapis” (Layers) - the exploration of Sarawakian layer cakes as artwork. These two local crafts are examined as new media to produce artwork that explores the impact of hybridity in the Malaysian cultural context. In this practice, I develop a new approach in my studio project that illuminates a new understanding of the dynamic between the question of Malaysian contemporary art, craft and hybridity. Investigation of Malaysian and Western artists who have similar issues of hybridity in their production will provide further exploration of hybridity and Malaysia’s cultural identity. Transformation of the Sarawakian layer cakes into artwork will integrate references to the political, economical and social contexts in Malaysian culture. The main focus of this exploration is to express my critical point of view towards the discussion of hybridity in Malaysia.

The thesis concludes with an analysis of research findings and my contribution to new knowledge in Chapter 4. Suggestions are made for future publications and artwork production which require further discussion of hybridity in art and culture.

1.0 Introduction

This chapter considers notions of hybridity and the process of hybridisation in relation to Malay art and culture. I shall look into the background of art and culture that identifies the idea of hybridity in contemporary Malaysian art practice. The discussion of hybridity is pertinent as Malaysia has always been a centre of international trade and ethnic, cultural and religious exchange. As an art practitioner working with various media, techniques and types of handicrafts, I would like to construct contemporary Malaysian images that portray these dynamic aspects of cultural change. Kraidy (2005) writes, hybridity is a mixing of “cultural difference and fusion”, and it resonates with the globalisation mantra of unrestrained economic exchanges and apparently inevitable “transformation of all cultures.” In this chapter I shall discuss how colonisation from the West has had an impact on Malaysia’s cultural identity. In considering the relation between hybridity and colonisation, Ashcroft (2000) refers to hybridity as “the creation of new trans-cultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonisation”, and states that “most postcolonial writing has focused on the hybridised nature of postcolonial culture as a strength rather than weakness.” In addition, Burke (2009, p. 66) has pointed out that examples of cultural hybridity can be found everywhere, not only all over the globe but in most domains of culture - syncretised religions, eclectic philosophies, mixed languages and cuisines, and hybrid styles in architecture, literature or music. In this context, it would be unwise to assume that the term ‘hybridity’ has exactly the same meaning in all these cases. Thus, I shall explore the connection and the consequences between hybridity and contemporary art practice to ask what

insight this provides for gaining a better understanding of Malaysia's national identity. Furthermore, through this exploration, I have constructed a series of exhibitions that illuminate the new form of artworks which reflect the process of hybridisation in Malaysian contemporary art practice.

1.1 Hybridity in Art and Culture

Hybridity in art and culture is central to this investigation into the question of Malaysian contemporary art development. With regard to craft and visual art movements in Malaysia, the process of hybridisation existed before modern globalisation. Previous hybrid influences such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam, and Asian migration and trade occurred in Southeast Asia. Hybridity has been a prominent theme in cultural studies. As such, hybridisation, as Pieterse (1994, pg. 180) points out:

...is a factor in the reorganisation of social spaces. Structural hybridisation, or the emergence of new practices of social cooperation and competition, and cultural hybridisation, or new translocal cultural expressions, are interdependent: new forms of cooperation require and evoke new cultural imaginaries. Hybridisation is a contribution to a sociology of the in-between, a sociology from the interstices. This involves merging endogenous / exogenous understandings of culture.

Furthermore, Pieterse (2001) points out, it follows older themes of syncretism in anthropology and creolized linguistics, while in cultural studies, hybridity denotes a wide register of "multiple identity, cross-over, pick-'n'-mix, boundary-crossing experiences and styles", matching a world of growing migration and diasporic lives, intensive intercultural communication, everyday multiculturalism and erosion of boundaries. Hybridity involves different meanings, not only

across time but also across cultural contexts. Furthermore, as Pieterse has suggested, in 'high' and classical cultural settings, the gatekeepers of 'standards' easily repudiate hybridity as an infringement of the classical principle, without an awareness or acknowledgement of the 'mixed' character of the principle itself, and in popular culture mixing of elements and styles may pass unnoticed. In the Malaysian context, Malay culture itself is a mixture of local elements and values from Arabian influences, Hinduism, Buddhism and Animism. At the present time, contemporary Malaysian culture is a mixing process of local and modern values especially in the task of nation building. In my artwork, the utilisation of traditional craft and food will produce series of hybrid artefacts with the amalgamation of local and modern techniques as well as discussion regarding race, politics, religion and social context.

Burke (2009) argues that, "every culture is hybrid and the process of hybridisation takes place all the time and some cultures are surely more hybrid than others", and that there are also moments of "particularly intense hybridisation, the consequence of cultural encounters." Since the second to the fourteenth century, ancient Hindu Kingdoms such as Langkasuka, Pan Pan and Srivijaya have influenced Southeast Asia. Malaysia, during the era of colonisation from 1511 to 1957, accepted and assimilated foreign influences into its culture as part of the process of cultural hybridity. The Malay people were aware of the change of and changing influences on their set of traditional values and customs. As Frow (1995) indicates, "the existence of a social group will depend upon its formation, its maintenance as coherent entity, its definition against other groups and the constant process of its hybridisation".

Papastergiadis (1997) optimistically takes on hybridity as though “hybrid processes were conceived as lubricants in the clashes of culture”. Hence, hybridity carries different meanings in different cultures, among different strata within cultures, and at different times. From the perspective of Malaysia as a developing country with strong Eastern values, the mixture of local and global ideas has had an impact on the cultural context, especially in contemporary art practice. Radhakrishnan (1996) distinguishes between metropolitan and peripheral hybridity; but the meaning of hybridity is not the same in all peripheries because the meaning of hybridity or in-between space differs according to the way it has come about. In my exhibitions, which referred to hybridity in art, national identity and political contexts, the artworks are based on Malaysian national identity. It has come from the historical environment of how the Malays, the Chinese and the Indians as well as the other tribes live together and conserve unity especially since the independence of the country in 1957.

In Malaysian contemporary art practice, a common theme is Western and Japanese technologies and how they combine with local values in the production of craft and other types of artwork. The process of mixing these two elements can be seen in the art movement after the 1990s. With the notion of implementing new technologies such as computer generated images and video in visual arts, the new type of artwork explored the hybrid process amongst “the local” and “the global” themes. Most of the issues dealt with hybridity in art and culture in Malaysia with the influences of globalisation. In an increasingly globalized world, Brah et al. (2000) defined the term hybridity as:

Reflecting upon the relationship between “the local” and “the global” and the multiple ways in which globality, region and locality feature in economic, political, and cultural forms and practices. The concept of “hybridity” as it informs the analysis of the links between the local and the global operates polysemantically, bringing together disparate themes ranging from imperialism to subject formation, and different theoretical traditions covering a variety of disciplines including psychoanalysis, literary criticism, philosophy, sociology, anthropology and history.

In my practice, “the local” and “the global” are fused in the process and techniques to create artwork. The images are digitally altered by computers which have been used on traditional fabrics and deal with the issue in a Malaysian political and social context. With the effect of globalisation, the issue of modernisation in Malaysian traditional values was explored in my exhibitions. Furthermore, I also questioned how this amalgamation of “the local” and “the global” affected the Malaysian political, economic and social context.

In cultural studies, hybridity describes conditions in contact zones where different cultures connect, intersect, merge and eventually transform. Bhabha (1994, pg. 38) writes, authorised power in hybrid culture is not based on “the persistence of tradition”, but it is “re-inscribed through conditions of contingency and contradictoriness” that attend upon those who are “in minority.” Hence Bhabha also claims that hybridity defines the borderline of cultural differences. Furthermore, the term ‘hybridity’ deals with the construction of all cultural statements and systems in space that Bhabha claims as “Third Space of enunciation”:

It is significant that the productive capacities of this Third Space have a colonial or postcolonial provenance. For a willingness to descend into that alien territory - where I have

led you - may reveal that the theoretical recognition of the split space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualising an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity.

In this regard, my artwork deals with the exploration of several cultural ethnic groups within Malaysian society. The essence of indigenous "Malay" craft traditions were conceptualised through hybrid processes in term of techniques, media and motifs. Moreover, through political issues in my artwork, it suggests the idea of nation building, where society can embrace a more all-embracing national identity.

However, Krady (2005) focuses on hybridity as a catalyst for cultural transformation that is in itself a symptom of global economic power; this hybridity is understood by the "cultural logic" of globalisation as it "entails that traces of other cultures exist in every culture, thus offering foreign media and marketers trans-cultural wedges for forging affective links between their commodities and local communities." These can be seen in Malaysia as a developing country with evidence of globalisation which has had an impact on the development of contemporary Malaysia.

As Beynon (2000) stresses that, in cultural hybridisation, globalisation is seen to be setting up dialectics between the local and global, out of which are born increased cultural options. At this level, I intend to suggest that modernisation in cultural development can be achieved through the process of re-contextualizing the local culture and the acceptance of appropriate elements from global culture. This is the possibility of exploring a new approach towards national

identity amongst societies through contemporary art practice. Thus, art nowadays can be seen as an agent to spark the process of nation building in Malaysia. Papastergiadis (2002, 2005) claims that hybridity is a scale to reflect social development, used as a "methodological concept" to measure the changes in society. Through this statement, it is shown that hybridity is an important process to look at how social development has changed in the Malaysian context with the interconnection between local and global. Consequently, the idea of hybridity is selected to explore a new form of artwork drawing upon craft and reflecting on contemporary art in a Malaysian perspective. The development of a Malaysian social aspect has been produced in my artwork representing issues from the era of colonisation until now. It shows how the amalgamation of external and internal elements in local culture has been established.

In this research, I intend to question how the process of hybridity in art asserts itself and if it is something other than mere pastiche or montage. My investigation on hybridity in Malaysian contemporary art shows that it has started since the development of modern art in Malaysia. The multiple elements especially from Chinese-born artists and Western influences can be seen in the production of artwork since the 1930s. Discussion regarding this issue will be examined in Chapter 2 - Contemporary Art Practice in Malaysia. As for the production of artwork, it purposely blends local elements and modern technology as well as Western culture to construct new perceptions of visual art in Malaysian culture. This is my response towards the process of modernisation in Malaysia which affects our contemporary visual arts and has directly affected my own art practice. The cultural hybridisation process occurs in the images that have been printed on both Pua Kumbu and Batik in my first solo exhibition,

and the production of layer cakes in my second solo exhibition. I shall discuss the extensive experience that I had with the Iban native group in Sarawak, Malaysia in the production of artworks in the exhibition, “Nusantara...Aram kitai bejalai” (Let’s Travel) and the artworks from traditional Sarawakian layer cakes in the exhibition, “Lapis” (Layers) in Chapter 3.

At this juncture, the process of hybridisation in political, economic and social contexts is the main aspect for me to explore the impact of hybridity on art and craft in Malaysia. In this research, I shall construct the production of artwork which explicitly illuminates a new understanding of the dynamic that obtains between hybridity, contemporary art and craft traditions in the Malaysian context.

1.2 Globalisation: The Relation with Malaysian Contemporary Arts

The point of departure for this research is the importance of the assessing of, and responding to, the effects of globalisation and modernisation on Malaysian visual culture. The interpenetration of global and local cultural influences, products and processes is now a fact of life in Malaysia. What will ultimately emerge from this confluence of cultures has yet to be seen; it is not assumed that the mere fact of globalisation means that Malaysian visual culture is necessarily subject to such forces asymmetrically. However, as Featherstone (1995) has recognised, globalisation is already viewed as a platform that enables new species of exogenous culture now considered as ‘common culture’ to penetrate and alter local cultures. It is no longer an option to deny globalisation as a part of our life. Yet, part of our response to the effects of

globalisation must be to make the concept and process of cultural interpenetration explicit in terms of a proposed practice of contemporary art.

Steger (2003) points out that globalisation refers to a multidimensional set of social processes that creates flexibility in the cultural elements - with greater tolerance and acceptance towards external changes and more open to adaptations that are relevant with the local needs. I have decided to produce artwork which is derived from the understanding of the ways that modern material nowadays has been used to create traditional craft. Furthermore, the production of these intermediary artworks will expand on any tendency of looking at the local craft as just a traditional craft.

As Giddens (1999) points out, globalisation plays an integral part in shaping the future of all culture, and contemporary art is no exception. In this regard, Malaysian contemporary art development has been transformed from a modernist to a postmodernist paradigm. The practice of modern art in Malaysia and the Asia region must be understood in terms of the general intrusion of modernity in the 20th century. Modernism in Malaysia was just another modernisation employed to cope with the rapid urbanisation, industrialisation and secularisation which characterised the sudden colonisation of Malaysian societies. The arts and crafts of pre-colonial South and Southeast Asian society were inseparable from other forms of manufacture and use. The individualistic 'art for art's sake' of Western modernism is at odds with the communal ethos of our traditional art. Nevertheless, with the advent of modernism in the colonial period our understanding of art has been transformed. As Rajah (1998) has pointed out, modern art was thrust upon us and although we have embraced

and reconstructed it 'in our own mould', it is important to come to terms with its origins.

The developments of modern art lack the neatly structured linear development based on a reactive artistic tradition and, given the multi racial complexion of our nation, lack natural homogenous cultural identity. Indeed, the fragmentation, hybridity and multiculturalism of Malaysian post colonial modernism makes 'postmodernism' appear to be a very familiar phenomenon. As Rajah (1998) claimed:

The art movement in Malaysia has been immersed in the so-called 'postmodern condition' from the onset of our 'modernisation' - bricolage, parody, pastiche and plagiarism; hybridity and displacement, all these have formed and continue to form the 'patois' of our modernity. We need not to distinguish modernism from postmodernism. Indeed, this latest 'ism' seems to us to be just another Western hegemonic discourse.

Hence, globalisation provides a more pertinent context to postmodern encounters in Malaysia. With the lingering crisis of values and 'alleged' clashes of civilisation, globalisation imparts a new playing field that may challenge, if not expand and diversify the concept of nation-state itself. Political, cultural and social issues within and beyond the national framework began to be increasingly commented by local artists that appeared in the late 1980s and early 1990s. As an artist, the effect of globalisation has transformed my view towards Malaysia's cultural context. In this research, I have constructed the artwork that illustrates and explores the relationship between globalisation and local cultural development. Artwork from "Nusantara...Aram Kitai Bejalai" (Let's Travel) dealt with this situation and this is my critical comment on the engagement of our local tradition and values with this 'outside influences'. In

this research, I shall discuss the significant issue of hybridity towards Malaysian political, social and economical context. As politics is a main driver of the government policies, it plays a major influence in the process of nation-building. The government policy whether in local or international relations has been set up to ensure it is appropriate with these multi-racial societies. As the concept of unity needs to be achieved among societies, the government has delegated the political power where it is important to have a representative from each race in Malaysia. Since the era of independence, the political power has been controlled by the Malays in Malaysia, based on the 'special position' for the 'bumiputera'. The term 'special position' and 'bumiputera' will be discussed further in this chapter. Indeed, the process of hybridisation also affected Malaysia's social context.

Along with the process of developing the national culture through the National Culture Policy, the effect of globalisation has affected our cultural development. The modern technology such as the internet has changed the Malaysian social development. As an artist, in the past, I have used internet in my practice to examine the process of hybridisation which is related to the Malaysian context through virtual and online art galleries such as Malaysia Art Gallery (www.artgallery.org.com).¹⁴ Consequently, The Malaysian government has tried to control local newspapers and communication with the intention to ensure the integration among societies. With the internet, it is impossible for the government to filter information and this is the reason why the young generation has turned to this communication channel. Moreover, it has been suggested that partially through the internet, the previous government lost five states to the

¹⁴ Malaysia Art Gallery is an online Malaysian portal catering for the development of art of Malaysia. This is the venue for local artists to showcase their body of artwork of any artistry to be appreciated by everyone from within and outside Malaysia.

opposition during the 2008 election in Malaysia when the opposition party used internet in their campaign.¹⁵ Thus, the Malaysian economical context is shaped by these political affairs as well as the effects from the previous British colonisation. The ideology of 'divide and rule'¹⁶ from the British was implemented to ensure there is no unity amongst the multi-racial societies. The major impact of this ideology can be seen today where the Chinese controls many Malaysian economic activities (Ahmad, 1999) and the Malays largely control the government, civil service and administration of the country. Since the political, social and economical context has interconnected in Malaysian history, I have made my critical visual statement in "Nusantara...Aram Kitai Bejalai" (Let's Travel) and "Lapis" (Layers) exhibitions.

The internationalisation of contemporary Malaysian art is closely related with Westernization. As Jit (1994) claimed, contemporary art in Malaysia was dependent on the western standards and values. The origins of a modernist art tradition and approaches were set in motion by British colonial rule and the resultant Westernisation processes. In this regard, our frames of reference illuminating the formal grounds of modern art are borrowed from the West such as abstract expressionism, conceptual art, performance art and installation art. At this stage, local artists have transformed the Western terminology and the corresponding forms of art to our personality, value systems and cosmologies, which are concretely and coherently evoked in the making of artworks (Fig. 1.1, Fig. 1.2 and Fig. 1.3).

¹⁵ Malaysia 12th General Elections Resource Page - Election 2008.

www.mycen.com.my/malaysia/election2008.html. Last accessed: 2 October 2010.

¹⁶ The British policy during colonial rule in the Malay Peninsular until 1957. The British implemented economic developmental policies based on ethnicities. The Chinese carried out business and mining, the Malays stayed in the villages to perform farming activities and the Indians were kept grounded on the rubber estates. The "divide and rule" policies initiated by the British resulted in a multi-racial society that is characterised by a wide social gap between races.



Figure 1.1
Syed Ahmad Jamal, *The Bait*,
1959.
Oil on board, 152.4cm x 122cm.



Figure 1.2
Abdul Latiff Mohidin, *Pago-
Pago*, 1964.
Oil on canvas, 98cm x 98cm.



Figure 1.3
Syed Ahmad Jamal, *Nipah
Palms*, 1957.
Oil on canvas, 89cm x
58cm.

The development of contemporary Malaysian art has arisen out of multi-cultural engagements. Attempts at explicating the story of modern Malaysian art can therefore require approaches that consider social, political and cultural implications which are unique to Malaysia which are:

- The artwork that came from Malaysia's heterogeneous population of about twenty eight million inhabitants include the Malays, the Dayaks, the Kadazans, the Chinese, the Indians, the Bajaus, the Murut, the Orang Asli, the Eurasians, and other minority ethnic groups.
- The modern Malaysian art came from modern Malaysian nation state which is a multi-cultural entity and also a post colonial nation where traditional religious beliefs and values constantly overlap with modern, secularist influences.
- The excitement of modern Malaysian art lies in the fact that this relatively young artistic tradition has continued to mirror aspects of the diverse cultural realities and also the inevitable societal tensions that might be expected from this progressive, dynamic Southeast Asian nation.

As Mackay (2000) claims that cultural imperialism is an important way of understanding the globalisation of culture. This notion relates to the practice of promoting, distinguishing, separating, or artificially injecting the culture or language of one culture into another. Furthermore, Mackay stressed, new technologies are key components of cultural globalisation. In this regard, the contemporary art movement in Malaysia now has been influenced from the West and beside the colonisation era, the artworks produced in part examine the practice of modern technology. Video and digital technologies were used by young Malaysian artists such as Liew Kungyu (Fig. 1.4), Hasnul Jamal Saidon (Fig. 1.5) and Wong Hoy Cheong (Fig. 1.6).



Figure 1.4
Liew Kungyu, *Sing a Song for Ah Kong and Ah Ma*, 1994.
Electronic installation.

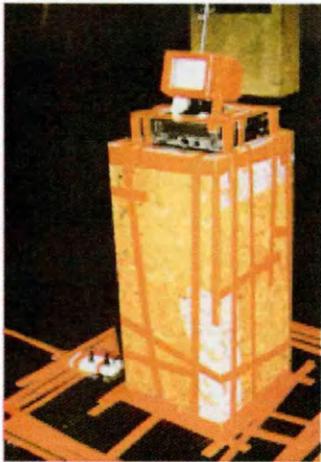


Figure 1.5
Hasnul Jamal Saidon, *Kdek, Kdek, Ong!*, 1994.
Electronic installation.



Figure 1.6
Wong Hoy Cheong, *Sook Ching*, 1990.
Multi-media video presentation.

As Piyadasa (2001) has pointed out, the artist's ability to combine this 'high-tech' media has created 'an unforced lesson' to construct cultural artwork in Malaysian context. In my artwork production which is consider as a new media, I have decided not to use this 'high-tech' media which is related with the usage of video technologies, however, the process of cake making has been recorded through video. Moreover, I needed to experiment with modern methods such as computer generated images as well as traditional methods such as silk screen

printing to construct the artworks in the “Nusantara...Aram Kitai Bejalai” (Let’s Travel) and “Lapis” (Layers) exhibitions.

In Malaysian context, globalisation is defined as a process of fabricating ideas of the global and the local and this idea of “glocalization” is needed to retain elements of local values. As Cvetkovich (2000) points out:

The intersection of the global and the local is producing new matrixes to legitimize the production of hybrid identities, thus expanding the realm of self-definition. And so although global forces can be oppressive and erode cultural traditions and identities, they can also provide new material to rework one’s identity and can empower people to revolt against traditional forms and styles to create new, more emancipatory ones.

As Beynon (2000) states, cultural globalisation is not just a top-down process, but involves a process of localisation. In Malaysian context, it is important to understand that “glocalization” is not merely about combining global and local images; the process requires a sound understanding of social, political, cultural and economic interactions (Fig. 1.7, Fig. 1.8 and Fig. 1.9).



Figure 1.7
Ibrahim Hussein, *My Father and The Astronaut*, 1969.
Oil and print, 186cm x 127cm.



Figure 1.8
Nirmala Shanmughalingam,
Vietnam, 1981.
Acrylic on canvas, 201cm x 102cm.



Figure 1.9
Ismail Zain, *Al Kisah (The Story)*, 1988.
Computer print, 24cm x 19cm.

It may be the case that globalisation is not, so to speak, a 'global' phenomenon within a particular local culture or national-state; rather, globalisation will have an uneven impact on aspects of cultural, economic, political and social life. We need to determine how, for example, visual culture in general is transformed under the sign of the global. In relation to this point, I constructed the artworks from "Nusantara...Aram Kitai Bejalai" (Let's Travel) that reflected these issues (Fig. 1.10 and Fig. 1.11).



Figure 1.10
Batik 11, 2008. Silkscreen
on cloth, 140cm X 94cm.



Figure 1.11
Batik 12, 2008. Silkscreen
on cloth, 140cm X 94cm.

The images of these artworks have been constructed as symbols of global and local phenomenon in Malaysian context. Thus, the other series of my print works from the “Nusantara...Aram Kitai Bejalai (Let’s Travel) exhibition also juxtaposed the hybrid process of modernisation in local culture, affected from the globalisation. We also need to identify those elements of cultural life that may be vulnerable to extinction, and will not be able to be folded into a greater, globalized culture. Thus, the process of re-contextualization of craft as media in my artwork production is dealing with this issue. Both crafts were used to construct a new form of artefact that illuminate the process of hybridisation in terms of media and techniques in my practice.

Globalisation is international integration which can be described as a process by which the people of the world are unified into a single society. This process is a combination of economic, technological, socio-cultural and political forces. In this research, I am interested in the impact of globalisation towards traditional craft – Pua Kumbu and Batik and the Sarawakian layer cake leading to the production of new artworks from these crafts. In my artwork production, the artworks from local crafts combined with modern technology have given a new idea of how this hybrid process can open a new understanding towards contemporary Malaysian visual art. I have achieved this understanding of hybridity through my own experimentation on the techniques in my artwork production. Furthermore, this exploration has been recognised as a new form of experimentation when it was exhibited to the audience in “Nusantara...Aram Kitai Bejalai” (Let’s Travel) and “Lapis” (Layers) exhibitions. In one way, I envisage this research as a means to help Malaysian artists consider how to

understand the opportunities and challenges that are emerging alongside the cultural shift we call globalisation. As a researcher, I have discovered that the Malaysian political, social and economical context has been shaped by this ongoing process of globalisation. Discussion of globalisation is interesting as Malaysia has always been a hub of international trade and ethnic, cultural and religious exchange. As an art practitioner working with various media, techniques and types of handicrafts, I have constructed contemporary Malaysian images that embody, if not celebrate, these dynamic aspects of cultural change. In this regard, this practice can be seen in my print works where the arrangement of images and texts has been re-contextualised to portray this cultural change. Moreover, the composition of these print works has been superimposed to juxtapose the images and texts to relate it with the issue of globalisation and local culture. (Chapter 3 - Researcher's Practice, Studio Project: Prints on Pua Kumbu and Batik). Through this practice-based research, I have discovered that globalisation and Malaysian art and visual culture was not only a field of great intrinsic interest, but also an essential element for the understanding of the production of artwork since the end of colonial rule in Malaysia. In Malaysia, indigenous art production bears witness to the impact of globalisation in many ways, both direct and indirect. The contemporary use of materials and modern techniques to produce this indigenous artwork marks it as an artefact that is determined by a combination of global and local elements, resources, and values. These techniques can be seen in my artwork production where I have used the combination of traditional Malay and Western ingredients to prepare the layer cakes. It is also present in the digital processing and preparation of screen-printed imagery in the first exhibition. Moreover the equipment that I used to bake the cake has been amalgamated from Malay

traditional tools and modern electric oven, which is of significance as an experimenting process of media and techniques in my research methodology (Chapter 3 - Researcher's Practice, Studio Project: Layer Cakes and Photographic Prints).

As globalisation and the process of 'glocalization' has an impact on Malaysian contemporary art, the process of hybridisation on some of the 'indigenous Malay' crafts have been emphasized in this research. Hence the artwork productions are based on these discussion and investigation, and this is my focal point to explore new approach in my artwork production in term of techniques, media and motifs.

1.3 Malaysia's History of Colonisation

Malaysia has been colonised by Europeans, as well as by the Japanese who invaded Malaya during World War 2 (1941-1945). European influence can be divided into three periods: Portuguese (1511-1641 AD); Dutch (1641-1824 AD); and British (1786-1957 AD). From the Malayan colonial era, the Portuguese legacy and influences are minimal and can only be seen in their traditional dances, costumes and folk songs, inherited by a generation descended from the Portuguese in Malacca, one of the states in Malaysia, while the Dutch legacy is evident architecturally in Malacca, in the famous City Hall or Stadthuys building which was built in 1753 (De Witt, 2007).

Whilst colonisation is seen as a "forced" action, globalisation has a more subtle way of moulding the local culture to accept changes, thus having a bigger

chance to act as a mechanism to “fuse” local and global cultures. This area of research supports my exploration into the effect and consequences of contemporary art, craft and hybridity in the Malaysian context.

I feel that colonisation has directly influenced how Malaysian visual art has evolved. The legacy of colonisation is evident in the production of artwork as well as in the politic, economic and social spheres. As Deraman (1994) argues, the European colonisers divided the Malay people during the era of colonisation and changed the Malay political, social and administrative system by the imposition of their own governing system. Ashcroft (2000) states hybridity is the creation of colonisation as a medium for acculturation. It is also frequently used in post-colonial studies to denote simply cross-cultural “exchange.” In addition, Ashcroft further suggests that:

The idea of hybridity also underlies other attempts to stress the mutuality of cultures in the colonial and post-colonial process in expressions of syncretistic, cultural synergy and transculturation. The criticism of the term referred to above stems from the perception that theories that stress mutuality necessarily downplay oppositionality, and increase continuing post-colonial dependence. There is, however, nothing in the idea of hybridity as such that suggests that mutuality negates the hierarchical nature of the imperial process or that it involves the idea of an equal exchange.

In my first exhibition, “Nusantara... Aram Kitai Bejalai” (Let’s Travel), the artwork started from the era of colonisation in Sarawak, the state located in East Malaysia. It shows how the colonial process has reshaped the local political landscape and Malaysia as a whole. In the post-colonial era, the influences of Western countries are dominant in the Malaysian economic area as well as the Japanese and Korean. These countries were involved in economic activities

and play an important role in Malaysian economic development. As a result, new technologies were transferred to local application of scientific knowledge especially in the areas of industry and engineering. Besides that, this type of 'new colonisation' of the economic area in the post independence era has altered the development of the Malaysian political and cultural context. As Said (1993) described, colonialism is a consequence of imperialism, the implementation of settlements on distant territory. Additionally, he quotes Michael Doyle, saying that empire is a relationship, formal or informal, in which one state controls the effective political sovereignty of another political society. It can be achieved by force, by "political collaboration, by economic, social or cultural dependence."

Alongside the development of postcolonial and cultural approaches to hybridity, the field of new media studies has also elaborated a hybrid reading of the digital image. Couchot (2002) suggests that hybridity is the juxtaposition of real and virtual elements, that the combination of "logically incompatible situations," has become technically possible with the introduction of "digital technologies". This reading, which is closely related to the digital technologies, is strongly supported by Bolter (2006), who argues that hybridity is not only a feature of contemporary digital art, it is also accepted in the production and consumption of popular media forms and technologies. Apart from that, digital technology itself is becoming increasingly hybrid, with features such as e-mail access, web surfing and multimedia display. Consequently, contemporary Malaysian art since the 1990s has been changed rapidly by the emergence of these new technologies. In my first exhibition "Nusantara...Aram Kitai Bejalai" (Let's Travel), digitally altered images were used to portray the issue of colonisation,

current political development and social context in the relationship with hybrid culture. In Malaysian art, the production of digital art will be discussed in Chapter 2.

1.4 The Process of Malaysia's National Identity

In this discussion, I intend to explore questions of Malaysia's national identity which result from the process of hybridisation. As Sarup (1996) points out, identity is "fabricated, constructed, in process, and that we have to consider both psychological and sociological factors." The notion of identity in a Malaysian context is based on the historical background of Malaysia. The period of colonisation established the policy of "divide and rule" to ensure there was no process of unity amongst communities. It affected the process of nation building after the independence of the Malay Peninsula and this crucial situation was added to other "racial policies" - special priority to the Malays - and these "racial policies" are perceived differently by the "others" - the Chinese and the Indians. These policies were implemented by bureaucratically controlled government departments which have acted in favour of the Malays. In relation to this point, I try to relate these issues to form a critical comment of political views from different political parties in Malaysia in my studio work.

The notion about national identity is a complex concept. It refers to a dynamic process in nation building. Sarup (1996) has pointed out:

...national identity is a construct, fashioned by particular reasons at a certain time. In different historical periods, powerful groups have constructed a different national identity for their purposes. Certain elements are valued, others

devalued. I think the term “national identity” has several meanings. It can refer to the identity of individuals within a nation; the views of individuals towards the nation in which they live; the identity of the nation itself.

This view about Malaysia’s national identity is closely related to the exploration in my artwork. All the elements such as images, symbols, colours, and texts in the production of the artwork refer to Malaysian symbols and identity after the era of colonisation, the independence of Malay Peninsula on 31 August 1957, and the birth of Malaysia on 16 September 1963, when Sabah and Sarawak from Borneo became part of Malaysia. In general, Malaysian culture was formed from a combination of inheritance from Malay, Chinese, Indian and various indigenous groups in Peninsular and East Malaysia. Furthermore, the legacy of the British government can be seen in Malaysian politics, economics and social development in the post-independent era. In the production of artwork, I attempt to illustrate how this national identity can be portrayed in contemporary Malaysian art (from the prints and layer cakes); my studio practice explores a critical understanding of identity, reflecting my view on Malaysia’s national identity. In order to analyse the national identity of Malaysia, I feel that identity should be understood as a dynamic process, ever changing, unfixed and open to negotiations. In this argument, Hall (1990) suggested that:

Cultural identity is a shared culture, a sort of collective “one true self”, hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed “selves” which people with shared history and ancestry hold in common. Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as “one people” with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history.

Hall (1996) also argues that identity “is not an essence but a positioning”, while Greely (2000) indicates cultural identity refers to the important process of narration of one’s self, where “their necessarily fictional status is placed under scrutiny.” Greely adds, it is also argued that identity is always relational, where identities are not exclusive entities but are always understood in terms of what they are not. Thus, they have always been constructed around binary oppositions thereby privileging one over another, “relegating the other to a derivative, inferior status”. Gilroy (1994) has pointed out:

Identities are constituted within representation, not outside representation in which they relate to the invention of tradition as to tradition itself. The identities oblige people to read not as an endless reiteration but as the “changing same” not so-called return to roots but a “coming-to-terms-with the routes.”

The suggestion from Gilroy of “coming-to-terms-with the routes” should be understood as creating a new Malaysia as a modern country with its own identity. In the Malaysian context, discussion about national identity is related to “Malays”. As Vickers (2004) stated:

The ruling class of the nation state of Malaysia maintains a hegemonic Malay identity based on the difference between supposedly indigenous Islamic Malays and “outsiders”, namely Chinese and Indians. This identity is regarded as a natural ethnic base of the state...Malay is meant to be coterminous with bumiputera, which in its literal meaning of “sons of the soil” denotes the indigenous status of the Malays, making others non-indigenous. In colonial times, the term was “native.”

In relation with Contemporary art practice in Malaysia, the main focus on local identity naturally will be on Malaysian culture. These are considered major issues of unity in Malaysian community, where the elements of national cultural identity should come from every ethnic group in Malaysia. Through this concept, the desired Malaysian national culture can be shared amongst societies.

In Malaysia, the term modernisation has always been misinterpreted. Modernisation has become synonymous with the term Westernisation which is inappropriate for the Malaysian way of life. I believe the process of modernisation does contribute to Malaysian development and cultural heritage, and in the education system and economic activities, modern technology should be implemented, whilst conserving local values. As Gever (1992) claims, "world culture does not only proceed via language but also via ideological and medialogical channels". The development of politics, economics and society in Malaysia should move with the rapid changes of modern technologies but also should be in tune with local tradition. This is the issue that I want to express in my practice, with the combination of modern technologies and local images trying to describe the local national identity. Such specific circumstances raise questions regarding national identity in Malaysia; Should the Malaysian government play a major role in the formation of national identity? Should national identity be imposed and fostered? What are the important elements required for such national cultural identity? Should the government implement certain rules for national identity?

Malaysia's identity is indeed a process based in history. Over the centuries, it has evolved to include many attributes and characteristics in response to

political, social and economic changes. Malaysia is a multiracial country with different cultural backgrounds, therefore the formation of a national culture needs attentive planning to produce a way of life that can show unity among Malay, Chinese, Indian and other indigenous groups. Thus, in my capacity as an art student, an artist and an academician with twenty years of experience, I can see the endless search and discussions over the definition and the understanding of Malaysian art and the diverse views on how Malaysian artists should cope with and contribute to art development. The discussions and dialogues were often in vain, ending with no conclusive findings or definite resolutions. To look at the process of Malaysia's national identity, Malaysian culture policy has been set up by the government in the 1971 National Cultural Congress. Ministry of Information, Communication and Culture, Malaysia (2009) has stated that, the resolutions of the National Cultural Policy underline three principles in guiding us towards a definite Malaysian national identity;

- The national culture must be based on the indigenous Malay culture, where Malay culture as the way of life, symbol of identity and personality.
- Accepted and welcomed other cultures such as Indians and Chinese as long as these did not contradict with Malaysia's constitution and National Oath.
- Based on Islamic teaching and recognising Islam as the major and important component in realising the national and culture identities and moulding of the national culture.

As Pyadasa (2002) has pointed out, among the pioneer artists in Malaysia that profess definite Malaysian Art and Identity Cultural Congress were Patrick Ng Kah Onn, Chuah Thean Teng, Dzulkifli Buyong, Hoessein Enas and Nik Zainal Abidin. Other artists who also supported the cultural congress include, among others, Ismail Zain, Khalid Ibrahim, Latiff Mohidin, Syed Ahmad Jamal, Ahmad

Khalid Yusoff and Sulaiman Esa. The main resolution from these artists is that Malaysia's national identity should portray the importance of Malay traditions and local values based on their local setting in Southeast Asia, especially in the Malay Archipelago. However, these resolutions were set up more than thirty-nine years ago and these principles are just a guideline, as the process of national identity in Malaysia is ongoing. Since 1971, the national identity policy has been constructed by the Malaysian government in the Malaysia Plan.¹⁷ This is to ensure that other races beside the Malays can share their traditions in Malaysia's identity policy. The Malay traditions in Southeast Asia itself has been internationally recognised as a meeting point for western and eastern trades since the fifteenth century, a time during which Malacca formed a hybrid culture with elements of external influences and values such as Arabic, Chinese and Indian. Other cultural items such as traditional costume, food and language from the Chinese, Indians and other indigenous groups have also been found in society. The National Cultural Policy, by setting up the concept of unity among society through art and cultural development, can be seen as a turning point. Through the objectives outlined by the congress, integration in Malaysian society can be seen as a significant point:

1. Strengthen unity among Malaysians through arts and cultures.
2. Embody and enliven national identity.
3. Enrich Malaysians' quality of life materially and spiritually.

In establishing the success of the above mentioned objectives, the quality of life, both material and spiritual, needs to be considered. It refers to the cultural

¹⁷ Malaysia Plan, is the economic development plan implemented after the formation of Malaysia. It is economic plan for every five years which has started since 1971 until today. The main objective is, the economic development throughout the country for the welfare of the people and strengthening the national identity.

values which need to be practised as well as the process of modernisation in society. Besides, the Ministry of Information and Culture Malaysia (2009) suggests that the implementation strategies and policy objectives can be achieved through the following strategies with the involvement of the other parties such as Malaysian Central Government Departments, state governments, statutory bodies, and cultural organisations as well as artists and academicians who are involved in cultural and arts practice:

1. Recover and preserve cultural development to strengthen the foundations of National Culture through joint ventures, research development, education, cultural development and communication;
2. Increase and strengthen leadership through cultural efforts to guide and train enthusiasts and cultural support;
3. Establish effective communication on the national consciousness, nationhood and nationalism;
4. Meet the requirements of local socio-cultural;
5. Raise the standard and quality of art development.

The implementation and formation of a National Cultural Policy is important in ensuring that Malaysia, with its multiplicity of peoples who practise different values, has its own identity. This policy can be a guideline to create unity in Malaysian society and maintain national identity in the international world, especially in the age of globalisation. Art in Malaysia should have its own identity, thus the production of contemporary artworks should show awareness of national values and identity, while the process of hybridisation in Malaysian cultural identity will enhance creativity and generate new ideas, especially for artists who generate works with the theme of hybridity, multiculturalism, and globalisation.

The process of cultural hybridisation in Malaysia's cultural identity is based on its strategic geographical location: as Arney (1987) said, it contributes to the world as "cross-roads of humanity" from the interaction and communication with outside regions that influenced local tradition. Arney also defined the cultural developments, which consist of local identity as well as "traditional" cultural values, are being replaced by modern thinking. Traditional motifs and symbols in craft and artwork, once closely associated with the families or communities spiritual values, are now losing their links and their significance, particularly among the young generations. As Dawa (2008) stressed, these processes occurred because of the effects of globalisation all over the region, making the possibility of losing of traditional value and heritage a reality.

A new approach towards Malaysia's national identity has been undertaken by Bahaudin (1999); from his point of view:

The society that chose not to know the past (traditions, heritage) actually constructed present day Malaysia. There was a reluctance to examine the historical consequences of assimilation. Instead, the society's wish to erase the journey taken could be interpreted as nostalgia and clinging to the glorious past. Thus, the "new" or "modern" Malaysia in such cultural figuration was seen as having new beginnings, new births, new origins which effectively concealed the truths of its formations and the means of its acceptance into contemporary society.

When discussing cultural identity associated with my practice, the production of artwork is based on traditional craft and media with the implementation of modernisation. In this practice, my artwork suggests traditional values whilst embracing modernisation without leaving the local customs. The discussion over the issue of Malaysia's national identity started since the era of British

colonisation of the Malay Peninsula and before independence in 1957. Therefore, just as globalisation plays a significant role in modern economic trade, it affects social aspects such as local cultural identity and how it is shaped in relation to local and global developments.

In the region of Southeast Asia, the question of contemporary art is always an issue of identity. As Noor (2002) stressed, it is difficult to determine what exactly contemporary Southeast Asian art is these days and, more than four decades after the formation of ASEAN¹⁸, the discourse of art identity is always a major issue. In the context of Malaysia's national identity in relation to contemporary Malaysian art, the most favoured theme explored by artists is Malaysian traditional culture. There are no overt guidelines for artists interested in voicing "sensitive" issues, such as a critique of government policy, or willingness to comment on the unbalanced economic activities among the Malay, Chinese and Indian people; artists seem to be aware of this "hidden or unspoken regulation". As Noor (2002) commented about Malaysian art (and the ASEAN region at large):

The clammy hands of politics and politicians have hammered the last nail in the coffin of good taste as well, as local artists have been compelled to produce works that can only be described as propaganda - be it in the service of the ruling elite (who love buying portraits of Presidents and Generals bedecked with medals and ribbons) or the urban-based arriviste statist-bourgeoisie (who seem to be able to consume the idealised scenes of idyllic settings with relish). The bottom line of it all is this: ASEAN art, like Asian art in general, has to be first and foremost the art of its own people. Art is only true if it comes from the subject that it purposes to speak of, mirror, depict or critique. Pictures of Prime Ministers, Kings and Presidents are not art. Neither

¹⁸ The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) which was formed on 8 August 1967 by Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines, Singapore, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam is a geo-political and economic organization located in Southeast Asia.

are mass produced pieces of handicraft junk for the tourist market. The former are simply propaganda while the latter are clichés.

Nowadays, the reproduction of Pua Kumbu is made for the tourist market. It was accepted as Malaysian 'traditional' craft and still represents the Iban traditional artefact. The exploration of this reproduction Pua Kumbu has developed a new approach where the fabric has been used as a 'canvas' to juxtapose images and text in my artwork. Furthermore, the use of this 'traditional' fabric retains the traditional craft as part of Malaysian identity in contemporary art practice. Malaysia's national identity, in the age of hybridisation in contemporary art, should demonstrate or indicate some aspects of reality as seen through the eyes of the artist. This is the issue that I have explored in my artwork production in the United Kingdom. As a "displaced artist" away from my home environment, I have used this opportunity to express my ideas. Hence, this is the enormous dilemma for the Malaysian artist, where freedom of speech is very limited and opposition to the government position is not tolerated.

1.5 Summary

There is no doubt that the process of hybridisation in art and culture became transformative in Malaysian contemporary art and Malaysia's national identity. In Southeast Asia, the process of hybridity started during the Hindu Kingdom in the second century and continued during the colonial era in the sixteenth century. I believe the development of Malaysian contemporary art was

influenced by colonisation. Since the era of colonisation, the 'culture of control' by the government has been introduced to ensure all the government policies can be implemented in society. In this regard, the British introduced the Internal Security Act¹⁹ (ISA) to fight the armed insurgency of the communists during the Malayan Emergency.²⁰ Even though the Malayan Emergency ended in 1960, ISA was retained and remains a feature of Malaysian law today. Colonisation in the new era is no more a forced action, but globalisation is a device to blend the elements of local and global culture to accept changes, especially in a developing country.

The hybrid process not only occurred in cultural development, but in other disciplines including psychoanalysis, literature, philosophy, anthropology and history. Hybridity in art and culture is a process of exploration of Malaysian contemporary art development, as a developing country that carries strong and unique Eastern values. Furthermore, this assimilation is also demonstrated not only in art movements but by the traditional establishment of the Malaysian political, economic and social systems which became the main concerns of contemporary Malaysia.

The effects of globalisation and modernisation can be seen in Malaysian contemporary art development in the process of international integration. It is related with the combination of economic, technological, socio-cultural and political forces, as a major impact which is constructing a new form of artwork in Malaysian visual arts. In this research, a new understanding of the process of

¹⁹ The Internal Security Act 1960 (ISA) is a preventive detention law in force in Malaysia. The ISA allows for detention without trial or criminal charges under limited, legally defined circumstances.

²⁰ The Malayan Emergency was a guerrilla war between Commonwealth armed force and the military arm of the Malayan Communists, from 1948 to 1960.

hybridisation has been explored in my discussion and my artwork production. The process of modernisation in Malaysian visual culture such as video and digital technologies have opened up a new form of 'high-tech' artwork to construct new cultural artwork by the local artists. In this research, I have explored the computer technologies in my artwork production especially in constructing the images in my first exhibition and using the editing software in photographic prints in my second exhibition. Nevertheless, the relationship between globalisation, modernisation and Malaysian contemporary art is an essential element for the understanding of artwork since the end of colonisation era in Malaysia as the development of Malaysian visual arts are the resultant of Westernisation process.

Malaysia's national identity is based in history with roots in Malay culture. It was also inherited from pre-Malay Hindu culture before Islam came to Southeast Asia and the Malay Peninsula. During the British colonisation of the Malay Peninsula, large numbers of people from India and China were brought in by the British as indentured labour. The main migration began in the early 20th century when Chinese and Indians became involved in economic activities such as working in tin mines and rubber plantations. This totally changed the social landscape of the Malay Peninsula because of the numerous cultural characteristics from different groups of ethnicities. The Malaysian government was concerned about having its own Malaysian national identity that could be shared by all Malaysians and until today, it is still a work in progress. In 1971, the National Cultural Policy was introduced to create unity among Malay, Chinese, Indians and all the other ethnicities. Three major resolutions were pointed out from this policy which were: firstly, a culture based on people's

origins in this region; secondly, elements of other cultures which are suitable and proper should be accepted; and finally Islam should be an important element in the formation of national culture.

Regarding the development of Malaysia's national identity, the Ministry of Information, Communications and Culture Malaysia²¹(MICCM) plays an important role in setting up plans and policies concerning cultural activities. As a multiracial country, the elements of national identity should come from every group of Malaysian society. At this point, MICCM should establish the national identity policy with appropriate elements from other cultures. As for the development of art, the National Art Gallery was formed on 28 August 1958 as an established community under the Ministry of Information, Communications and Culture. The main objective, besides being a centre of arts and cultural heritage, was to hold performances and exhibitions from within or outside Malaysia, classes, seminars, competitions and other arts and cultural activities (National Art Gallery, 2009).

My practice is the exploration and the experimentation of new artwork production, based on the idea of hybridity and Malaysia's national identity in Malaysian contemporary art practice. Therefore, the production of prints on 'traditional' Malaysian fabrics, namely Batik and Pua Kumbu, and the experimentation with layer cakes which represent symbols of Malaysian culture is a manifestation of Malaysia's national identity. Moreover, from the production

²¹ The Ministry of Information, Communications and Culture Malaysia (MICCM) is responsible in planning, implementation and coordination on all policies related to information, communications and culture. The Ministry's main aspiration is to enhance Malaysia as a global information, communication and technology hub in the region, to ensure information from all sources of media is accurate and precise and to preserve thus promotes Malaysia's heritage and culture to the world.

of these works, the artwork itself as my practice, associated with the notion of hybridity in Malaysian culture, will be examined in Chapter 3. These resolutions should not be seen as a barrier to artists expressing their ideas and comments, especially when they are connected with political issues. Art should be fully developed in order to educate society, enrich Malaysian art heritage and expand a new approach to craft production.

CHAPTER 2 - CONTEMPORARY ART PRACTICE IN MALAYSIA

2.0 Introduction

This chapter documents the background of contemporary art practice in Malaysia. At this juncture, I shall look into the development of contemporary art from the historical background of Peninsular Malaysia and contemporary Malaysian Art after 1990. To look at modern Malaysian Art, the historical background of Malaysia needs to be given. Azizi Bahauddin,²² an academician and artist from University of Science Malaysia has pointed out that, to look at the hybrid process in Malaysian culture, we need to refer to how the nation has developed since the colonisation of the British in Malaysia. Bahauddin added, since the era of the British in Malay Peninsula, it is essential to look at national identity within a social context, which affected the development of modern art in Malaysia. In the early period of contemporary art development, there were guidelines circulated from the National Culture Policy which was put into practice in 1971. Shariff (2008) points out that Malaysian modern art has been created from the influences of Western art, colonisation and current global activities. Thus, to justify this historical background of art in Malaysia, it is important to look at the dynamic development and the understanding of the art movement (Chart 2.0). Peninsular Malaysia has a remarkable history of multiple ethnicities, which started from Malacca, one of Malaysia's first major cities, founded in the sixteenth century, perhaps the most famous multicultural state in fifteenth-century South East Asia. The city of Penang is another state with dramatic landscapes and diverse cultural life which have influenced generations

²² Interview with Azizi Bahauddin, 6 January 2010.

of artists and artisans. Kuala Lumpur, the artistic and modern political capital, plays a major role as a centre of art and cultural activities in Malaysia.

The presence of non-indigenous peoples, namely the Chinese and Indians, in this country during British colonisation in the nineteenth century brought with them their own languages, customs and cultural forms. Hence, they added a new, complex social dimension to the previously indigenous Malay-Islamic consensus of the country. Furthermore, the British had also introduced a new Western-oriented educational model through the newly-founded English language schools. The result of this development was the introduction of new modes of cultural perception that slowly but systematically changed the country and the society. The new Western-derived educational model, founded on pragmatic, scientific and individualistic principles, resulted in the introduction of Western influences.

By the early twentieth century, Malaysia had been transformed by the growth of the new, urban town centres. There was a new urban environment and culture, quite separate from that of the earlier, unhurried, rural settings of the Malays and other indigenous peoples. In this modern environment, a new cosmopolitan cultural atmosphere emerged and affected the development of art in Malaysia. Visual artists experimented with the idea of Naturalism, new ideas of artistic individualism, and an experimental mode of self-expression, derived from the West. This fusion is different from the local art tradition that functioned within strictly religious, symbolic and culturally-restricted systems and contexts. The art movement was changed into a hybrid, secularist and modern artistic activity, unrestricted by religious or ethnic delimitation. The process of hybridisation in

art and culture can be seen in the early production of craft and art by the pioneer artists who reflected on the question of how artwork can portray local identity, as discussed in Chapter 1.

2.1 Contemporary Malaysian Art

In order to understand Malaysia as a nation, it is essential to get a clear picture of this multiracial country. Malaysia is located in Southeast Asia in the geographical coordinates of latitude 2° 30' north of the equator and longitude 112° 30' east of Greenwich (Map 2.0). The country is divided into two regions, Peninsular Malaysia (West Malaysia) and East Malaysia, with a total landmass of 329,845 square kilometres. Malaysia has thirteen states and three Federal Territories, with a population over 28 million.²³ The Malay people are the biggest ethnic group followed by the Chinese and the Indian. The other, smaller, group consists of the indigenous tribes who live in Sabah and Sarawak in East Malaysia.

²³ Department of Statistics Malaysia. <http://www.statistics.gov.my>. Last accessed on 20 January 2010.



Map 2.0 Malaysia

The contemporary Malaysian art scene is still young compared to the other countries in Southeast Asia (Chart 2.0). The development of modern art underwent a period of major expansion after the first Malaysian Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, announced the establishment of a National Museum in 1956 and a National Art Gallery in 1958. Both institutions were intended not only to preserve the nation's heritage but also to enhance art dialogues for the Malaysian public and the international scene. However, the growth of contemporary Malaysian art started earlier in the twentieth century, resulting in a number of significant events and art movements that contributed to the development of modern art in Malaysia.

YEAR	EVENTS
1920	Yong Mun Seng launches his studio at Penang.
1922	Sultan Idris Teachers Training College (SITC), the very first teacher training college, introduces art curriculum in the syllabus.
1927	
1935	First art exhibition in Penang by Ooi Hwa.
1936	Salon Art Society established in Singapore. Yong Mun Sen launches Penang Painting Club (Western Realism and Post Impressionism).
1937	
1938	Penang Impressionist established.
1941	Nanyang Academy of Fine Art in Singapore.
1942	The Imperial Japanese Army invades Malaya.
1945	Singapore Art Society in Singapore.
1950	The British return after the end of World War II. The generation of local born artists to be trained overseas (United Kingdom and United States).
1951	
1956	Wednesday Art Group launched in Kuala Lumpur.
1957	National Museum launched.
1957	Independence of The Federation of Malaya.
1958	Thursday Art Group launched.
1960	National Art Gallery launched.
1963	The wave of Abstract Expressionism.
1965	Malaysia formed (Malaya, Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak).
1967	First Malaysian Art Exhibition at Commonwealth Institute, London.
1969	MARA Institute of Technology offers art courses for <i>Bumiputera</i> students.
1971	Ethnic riots between Malays and Chinese take place in Kuala Lumpur.
1971	
1980	New Economic Policy launched.
1982	National Cultural Policy launched.
1988	Islamic Art in Malaysian contemporary art. Islamization programme launched.
1990	Digital Collage exhibition by Ismail Zain. The first computer generated images in Malaysian artwork.
1997	Electronic arts movement in Malaysia. First Electronic Art show in Kuala Lumpur.

Chart 2.0 Timeline of Malaysian History and Art Development

There is a very limited amount of writing which deals with art movements in Malaysia. Jit (1994) stressed this statement:

We know that very little of writing on modern Malaysian art creates narratives on the meanings of art, its operations and social presence. On the contrary, the most epiphanous of the anecdotal writings on art have a propensity to evoke the mythic, in the sense that they tend to create and deify heroes and heroic moments in art. The mythic quest for a national identity following Independence inspired art critics to ferret individuals and individual achievements in art empathetic with the purpose of creating a new nation. Furthermore, the overriding consciousness of traversing in a relentlessly 'developmental' phase in modern art since Independence has induced the birth of heroes poised to act as role-models for future generations of artists.

In support of this argument, Khoo (2003) said, it is a regrettable situation when a very limited and "serious lack of space for critical evaluation" in Malaysian art history and even within such, "there is really little attempt at locating the making, production and staging of Malaysian artworks in a critical and historical perspective."

Modern Malaysian art must be reviewed from a historical background. Malaysia is a post-colonial nation where traditional religious beliefs and values constantly vie with modern and secularist influences which have been inherited from the colonial era. As Piyadasa (2002) quoted:

Malaysia is a complex nation made up of multiple, overlapping cultural realities. Malaysia's heterogenous population includes Malays, the Dayaks, the Kadazans, the Chinese, the Indians, the Bajaus, the Murut, the Orang Asli, the Eurasians and other minority ethnic groups. The official religion of the country is Islam but freedom of religious worship is guaranteed by the nation's constitution. The arrival of the non-indigenous

peoples, namely the Chinese and Indians in large numbers, took place during the 19th and 20th centuries. The story of a modern Malaysian art tradition has, as such, been characterised by multi-ethnic artistic engagements and endeavours. Its origins are traceable to the early decades of the 20th century.

Piyadasa furthermore claimed that “the excitement of modern Malaysian art lies in the fact that this relatively young artistic tradition has continued to mirror aspects of the diverse cultural realities.”

The production of artworks from artists who studied in Malaysia have a unique local flavour which will be easily identified, inspired by the nature, flora and fauna of the peninsula. Houdin (1972) stated that modern art is connected with a tradition of its own choice, “of universal significance, breaking with the chronological traditions generally acknowledged in art history”; contemporary Malaysian art goes back to the 1930s when the artists had no national tradition with which to relate. As such, Syed (1988) points out:

Their tradition was created then and there. Instead of looking back, they could only look around them at the works of their fellow artists for the experience of confronting actual art works. This was no period of subtlety; many works were crude and unsophisticated, but they were pioneering efforts that broke new ground. There certainly was the feel of new era. The emphasis was on the present. The by-word was “Malaysian art starts now.”

By the time of Merdeka (Independence) of Malaysia from the British government in 1957, the arts movement had developed within multiracial societies with different values and cultures. Thus, Piyadasa (2002) said, “art

symbolised Malaysia's arrival in the contemporary age and arena, shifting from low-key provincialism to high profile internationalism."

Malaysian art development, started within the last fifty years, has produced a tradition which in other cultures has taken a long time. Syed (1988) stated that, by the beginning of the fifties, Malaysia already had a few established and committed artists such as Abdullah Arif, Yong Mun Seng, Cheong Soo Pieng, Chuah Thean Teng, and Khaw Sia, among others, but they were almost unknown in the context of the national art circles compared to Malay writers such as Tun Seri Lanang, Abdullah Munshi, Zaa'ba and Syed Syekh Al-Hady. Hence, in contemporary Malaysian art during this era, "there was a vacuum: there were no national figures, exhibitions were rare, and hardly anyone bought works of art."

The pioneers who started the movement of modern art in Malaysia are Yong Mun Sen, a Sarawak-born Chinese, (Fig. 2.1), O. Don Peris, an immigrant artist from Sri Lanka, who had studied in Paris and come to Singapore (Fig. 2.2), and Abdullah Ariff, from Penang (Fig. 2.3). These three artists are important for demonstrating multi-ethnic themes in their artworks. Their earliest artworks were made to record the important characteristics of the place and its peoples. Landscape painting, portraiture and still-life were the genres explored in the early days, painted with oils or watercolours and executed in a naturalist style.



Figure 2.1
Yong Mun Sen, *Self
Portrait*, 1941. Oil on
canvas,
56cm x 475cm.



Figure 2.2
O Don Peris, *Portrait of My
Wife in Wedding Dress*, 1933.
Oil on canvas, 74cm x 38cm.



Figure 2.3
Abdullah Ariff, *This Rich
Land*, 1960.
Watercolour on parchment
paper, 36.5cm x 54cm.

The Chinese immigrant played an important role in the early movement of modern art in Peninsular Malaysia. As Piyadasa (2002) stated:

...by the late 1930s, influences from the School of Paris, such as Impressionism, post-impressionism and fauvism were gradually introduced. The role played by the Chinese immigrant artists during this time was especially significant....The introduction of Western-type art colleges in China, during the 1930s, started by Chinese artists who had studied in Paris during the 1920s, had been the training ground for the new Chinese artists arriving in Malaya from mainland China.

Piyadasa added that these artists had come to Peninsular Malaysia in the very first place to work in the newly-expanded Chinese language secondary schools as art teachers. Lim Hak Tai, an immigrant from mainland China, was the founder of the first institute of art in Singapore, the Nanyang Academy of Fine Art in 1938. At that time, the Nanyang Academy was the first established fine art college in Singapore. In relation to this, Naziree (2007) stressed that:

The academy was clearly modelled on the Beaux Art tradition. The teachers at the academy had an overwhelming influence over their students, nurturing their talents, exposing them to European academic styles and importantly realizing their artistic vocabulary within the richly cultural Malayan landscapes was among the most considered - even to the extent of it being incorporated into traditional Chinese painting styles. Nanyang artists of post war Malaya were increasingly open to a wider variety of stylistic approaches; many had the opportunity to present their work in group exhibitions where the range of expression from Impressionism to Modernism could be seen. In essence, the ingenuity in the artworks of the Nanyang artists crystallized sophistication into Malayan modern art and it could be said that this was the birth of modern contemporary art of Malaya.

This is another turning point within the modern art movement in Malaysia when Singapore was one of the states in Malaysia. As it was started by a Chinese artist, the medium of instruction at the Nanyang Academy was Mandarin. This encouraged Chinese Mandarin-educated school leavers from Peninsular Malaysia, Sarawak and British North Borneo to study in the college after the Second World War. During the 1950s, the Nanyang art movement observed the rise of many important artists such as Cheong Soo Pieng, Georgette Chen, Chia Yu-Chian, Chung Chen Sun, Lai Foong Moi, Cheah Yew Saik, Tan Choon

Ghee, Tew Naitong, Kho Sui-Hoe and others. Additionally, several graduates of the college continued their studies in Paris and London.

The illustration of Chinese traditional techniques with Malay, Indian and Dayak subject matter fused in the artwork of painting. These multicultural themes and artistic forms are also reflected in the use of symbols, values and art forms in Southeast Asian contexts. Their wide ranging multicultural hybrid approach can be seen in the artworks they produced. Artwork by Cheong Soo Pieng in the 1950s derived from the region's tribal sculptures and stylised Balinese wood carvings with the strong influence of Chinese-stem pictorial formats and stylised figures (Fig. 2.4). At this stage, the Nanyang artists had done the preliminary work of questioning more serious issues regarding artistic forms and cultural identity.



Figure 2.4
Cheong Soo Pieng,
Tropical Life, 1959.
Chinese ink and gouache
on rice paper, 43.6cm x
92cm.

Jit (1994) suggested a “good way to understand cultural issues in Malaysia would be to adopt an approach that demarcates the post-colonial history into the pre-May 13, 1969 period and a post-May 13, 1969 period.” He stressed that the May 13 1969 tragedy was a turning point in the history of post-independence Malaysia. It was a shocking time when people lost their innocence and began to struggle with the more complicated issues of race and national cultural identity. As a result, the Malaysian government tried to

establish a national culture that could be shared together among peoples in the post-independence era. Therefore, Anuar (2004) has stated:

The tenet was made obvious in the late 60s. Malaysian artists were consequently forced to rethink their identities post-1969. The consequence of riots on 13 May 1969, provided for a significant shift in focus. The government in the attempt to balance the scales of disparity evaluated the conditions which led to the incident and gathered cultural thinkers, planners, activists and artist to the fore in a National Culture Congress held in 1971. Here it was established that the Malay culture should be the foundation of national culture, to be supported by the various cultures which make up our pluralist society and that Islam become the guiding principle in the development of culture and society.

Historically, the formation of artists' groups in Peninsular Malaysia played an important role towards modern art. Several art groups, such as Penang Art Teachers' Circle (1952), Wednesday Art Group (1954), Selangor Art Society (1954) and Angkatan Pelukis Semenanjung or The Peninsular Artists Movement, were formed. As Anuar (2004) indicates, "the famous Angkatan Pelukis Semenanjung headed by Mohammed Hoessein Enas had employed naturalism in picturing the true and natural beauty of the Malay peoples."

Sabapathy (1994) has pointed out that Syed Ahmad Jamal and Yeoh Jin Leng are pioneering artists in contemporary Malaysian art, who constructed artwork that made visual the local scenery (Fig. 2.5 and Fig. 2.6): "the land was celebrated as it witnessed in the accomplished earlier landscapes." The emphasis was still largely on the picturesque and village scenery even though new formal approaches were being explored, and the nation's landscape, with its luxuriant plants, became an authentic symbol of nationhood and "the

humanity portrayed then was one that existed within an idyllic, happy world of daily chores, happy children's games, joyous festival and seasonal fruit seasons.”



Figure 2.5
Syed Ahmad Jamal, *Nipah Palms*,
1957.
Oil on canvas, 89cm x 58cm.



Figure 2.6
Yeoh Jin Leng, *Rice
Fields*, 1963.
Oil on canvas, 82.8cm x
102cm.

This was reflected in the artworks of other pioneer artists in figure painting such as Mohamad Hoessein Enas, Dzulkifli Buyong and Chuah Thean Teng (Fig. 2.7 and Fig. 2.8). In contemporary art practice in Malaysia, the main issue of art and craft production is a question of artistic and cultural identity in a cultural context.



Figure 2.7
Mohd Hoessein Enas, *Woman Pounding Padi*, 1959.
Charcoal and pastel on paper,
58.7cm x 47.9cm.

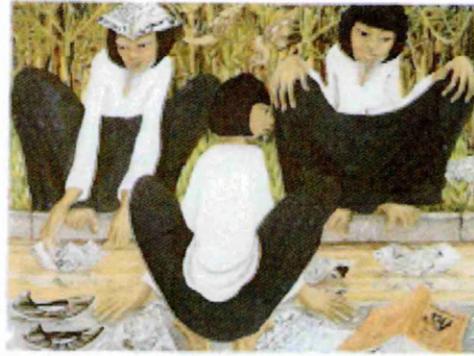


Figure 2.8
Dzul kifli Buyong, *Paper Boats*, 1964.
Pastel on paper, 74cm x 53cm

By looking at the artworks, it can be seen that the combination of multicultural elements from the Southeast Asia region occurred in visual art production, especially in painting.

Some interesting attempts which I feel epitomise the hybrid technique and idea were indeed made by the artist Chuah Thean Teng. He produced batik painting, which was deemed a move in the right direction and was hailed as a significant formal breakthrough (Fig. 2.9).



Figure 2.9
Chuah Thean Teng,
Fishing Village, 1956.
Batik on cloth, 76.9cm x
106.1cm.

Batik painting had certainly allowed for a sense of artistic continuity with the craft traditions of the Malay and the regional past. Similarly, another prominent artist in Malaysian modern art, Nik Zainal Abidin, has transferred images of Wayang Kulit (Shadow Play) stories on a two-dimensional surface, an attempt to engage iconography obtained from a wider Malay and regional source (Fig. 2.10).



Figure 2.10
Nik Zainal Abidin, *Wayang Kulit Kelantan*, 1961.
Oil on canvas, 116cm x 56cm.

Patrick Ng's complex conceptual work 'Spirits of the Earth, Water and Air' marked an ambitious attempt to absorb Malay subject-matter, stylised Thai and Balinese dance movements and Balinese decorative effects (Fig. 2.11).

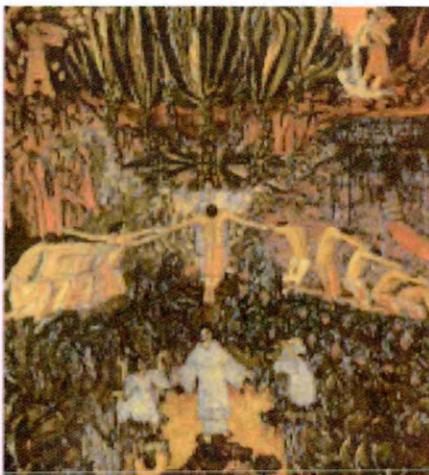


Figure 2.11
Patrick Ng Kah Onn, *Spirits of the Earth, Water and Air*, 1958.
Oil on board, 137cm x 122cm.

Syed Ahmad Jamal's initial introduction of abstract expressionist influences into the local art scene in 1959 was marked by the interesting hybrid attempts to combine Chinese and Western effects, as can be seen in his highly calligraphic work, *The Bait* (Fig. 2.12).



Figure 2.12
Syed Ahmad Jamal, *The Bait*,
1959.
Oil on board, 152.4cm x 122cm.

Another prominent expressionist artist, Latiff Mohidin, produced a notion of artistic identity, as reflected in his expressionistic Pago-Pago series. Mohidin created tropical decorative imagery by juxtaposing different plant shapes obtained from the tropical flora as well as utilizing iconic built forms derived from the region (Fig. 2.13).



Figure 2.13
Abdul Latiff Mohidin, *Pago-Pago*, 1964.
Oil on canvas, 98cm x 98cm.

Meanwhile Ibrahim Hussein's pop-art inspired figurative work, 'Why Are You Like That?' tended to reflect a more cosmopolitan, mass-culture frame of reference, unique in the modernisation of Malaysian art development (Fig. 2.14).

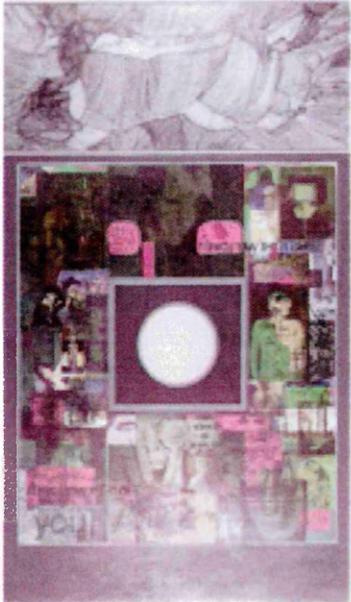


Figure 2.14
Ibrahim Hussein, *Why Are You Like That?* 1969.
Mixed media, 195.6cm x 121.9cm.

As Piyadasa (2002) has pointed out, what can be recognised from these artworks was “the new degree of technical sophistication that had emerged within the art scene” and the new position of “international artistic frames of reference in the works of some of the new abstract artists.” Hence, the Malaysian modern art scene had become more developed and advanced with the participation of well-trained artists coming back from Europe and the United States.

The process of becoming a modern country in the post-independence era and the aim of becoming a fully industrialised country by the year 2020 has affected the new urbanised, consumerist, hypermarket culture. These new cultural developments have affected the nation and altered the cultural environment for

Malay cultural identity. For Malay society, it is a drastic shift compared to the previous way of life. Hashim (2000) has touched on the conflicts and tensions in Malay society in Ibrahim Hussein's painting, 'My Father and the Astronaut', 1970 (Fig. 2.15). Hashim declared that the artist has chosen the expression of figurative and representational art in the artwork which shows "the old, shirtless Malay peasant (his father) is juxtaposed standing against the ultimate symbol of the modern machine culture, an American lunar astronaut."



Figure 2.15
Ibrahim Hussein, *My Father and
The Astronaut*, 1969.
Oil and print, 186cm x 127cm.

Compared to these artworks produced before the 1980s, with new issues raised all over the globe Malaysian artists project another view of the Malay socio-cultural dilemma. As Hashim (2001, pp. 36-37) stated:

Malay cultural identity is obviously not monolithic. Like the other ethnic cultures in Malaysia, it is undergoing radical changes because of rapid movement. The issue of defining cultural identity is obviously getting even more complex for all Malaysians, including the visual artists, as they all arrive at the new portals of the wired-up and computerised, post-modernist, globalised cultural paradigm, ironically enough, is that it is founded on the new, more challenging notion and recognition of multi-ethnic and multi-cultural realities. What is becoming clear about the Malaysian art scene today is that it is a very much more complex and sophisticated scene.

What seems interesting is the emergence, since the early 1990s, of a new generation of younger Malaysian fine artists. These younger artists have been exposed to the new, more radical methods of art teaching that have been introduced to the art colleges. Their perception clearly differs from that of the older generation of artists, educated during the sixties and seventies. These new artists reflect new creative approaches. Rajah (1998) stressed that, at the end of the last century, the new nuclear, electronic and digital technologies are powerful elements. With the expansion of multi-national capitalism and mass media, the world culture is shifting from “international modernism” to “global post-modernism.” In addition, Rajah added in the context of painting, which used to be concerned with “purist aesthetics, radical manifestation, other movements or revolutionist ideas have been transferred to parody, pastiche, appropriation and hybridisation in the production of artworks.”

In Malaysian art colleges and higher institutions that offered art, cultural and liberal studies, the art syllabus has been dramatically overhauled. The very notion of artistic activity has as a consequence shifted to incorporate new meanings. As Hassan (2008) stressed, artists must have knowledge in local cultural discourse, express concepts, and have problem solving skills in visual art, and this can be achieved with deep knowledge in art education. Artists now must intervene in the value-making process and in the re-defining of socio-cultural contexts. I shall discuss this idea in Chapter 3 in relation to the critical review of the researcher’s own practice.

In Malaysian culture, the development of contemporary Malaysian art is closely related to political policy from the government. There is a boundary within which

artists produce artwork and this kind of limitation has set up a blockade for the artist expressing ideas about certain issues. May 13, 1969 was indeed a wake-up call for Malaysian artists. The controversial work from Ibrahim Hussein's work titled May 13, 1969, featuring a blacked-out Malaysian flag and the tragic number "13" inscribed below it addressed the riot (Fig. 2.16).

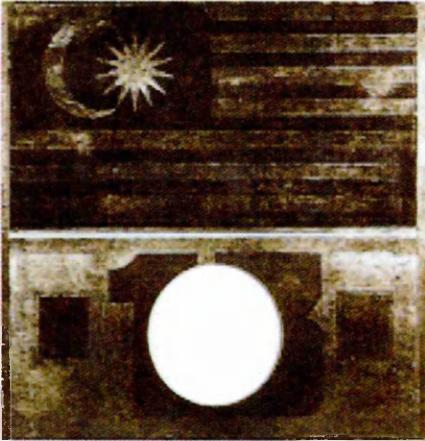


Figure 2.16
Ibrahim Hussein, *May 13 1969*,
1969.
Acrylic on canvas, 183cm x 183cm.

At this stage, I feel, the artist portrayed his idea in a very careful manner to suggest a critique of the tragedy, because to paint on the Malaysian flag is an unusual act in Malaysian culture. This issue can be seen in my first solo exhibition, in which my prints on traditional Malay fabric represent another uncommon style from a Malaysian artist. Detailed discussion will be in Chapter 3.

By looking at the Malaysian art tradition since the 1930s and after independence in 1957, it can be seen the Malaysian government played an important role in establishing art at this earlier stage. The National Culture Congress in 1971 set up a policy to ensure there was a process of national cultural identity to unite the society. The previous policy from the government did not really affect the young artists and, since the 1990s, artwork of the

younger generation is slowly addressing different themes. They have evolved a different discourse as well as using new media in the production of artwork.

By looking at the exhibitions, art discourse, art seminars and workshops, art development in Malaysia nowadays has a more conceptual approach. This is a deconstruction of entrenched cultural systems to evolve discourse and challenge previous definitions of what artists and art should be about. A more socially-committed artist has clearly emerged in Malaysia since the 1990s, employing provocative, confrontational and questioning approaches in the creative process. The emergence of a new, younger generation of artists during the 1990s has also signalled a new, healthy, regenerative return to figurative art concerns and to realism. Abstract art impulses, which had dominated the art scene for so long, are now on the decline. Younger Malaysian artists are now looking at the real world, dealing with it realistically and re-questioning it. Given the nature of multi-ethnic reality of the contemporary Malaysian situation, it is only to be expected that alternative artistic perceptions and re-definitions of the issue of national cultural identity will emerge.

2.2 Contemporary Malaysian Art After 1990

Political, cultural and social issues within and beyond the national framework began to be increasingly pointed out in works by several artists who emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s, artists such as Raja Shahrizan Raja Azidin (Fig. 2.17), Bayu Utomo Radjikin (Fig. 2.18), Wong Hoy Cheong (Fig. 2.19), Leong Chee Siong (Fig. 2.20), Zulkifli Yusuf (Fig. 2.21), Fatimah Chik (Fig. 2.22) and Nirmala Shanmughalingham (Fig. 2.23).



Figure 2.17
Raja Shariman Raja Azidin, *The Duel*, 1996.
Metal, 82cm x 51cm x 51cm.



Figure 2.18
Bayu Utomo Radjikin, *The Abuse Victim*, 1994.
Acrylic on board, 111cm x 97cm.



Figure 2.19
Wong Hoy Cheong, *Aspirations of The Working Class*, 1994.
Charcoal and photostat collage on hanging paper scrolls, 190cm x 150cm.



Figure 2.20
Leong Chee Siong, *Who Are You, Where Are You From, Where Are You Going To?*, 1998.
Oil on canvas, 201cm x 156cm.

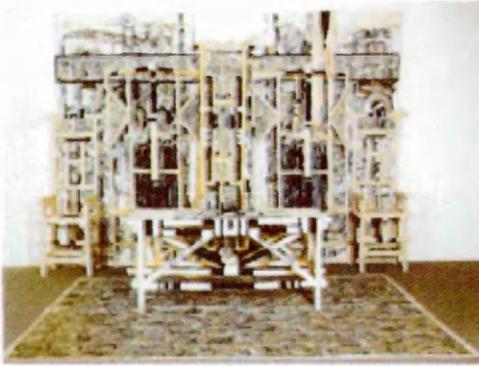


Figure 2.21
Zulkifli Yusoff, *Immunity 1*, 1993.
Mixed media installation, 340cm x
380cm x 820cm.



Figure 2.22
Fatimah Chik, *Unity in Harmony*,
1996.
Batik collage 140.2cm x 170cm.



Figure 2.23
Nirmala Shanmughalingam,
Vietnam, 1981.
Acrylic on canvas, 201cm x
102cm.

Malaysian art development is closely related to the impact of hybridisation in the local and global spheres. Saidon (2002) stressed:

The dichotomy between local and global, as well as the growing interest in regionalism, has created a climate marked by ironies, paradoxes and contradictions and much as probabilities, possibilities and potentials, the impinging notion of neo-imperialism caused by globalisation for example has been answered by an

adoption of a post-colonial-reflex or awareness. The borderless mantra of globalisation and deconstructive nature of postmodernism have lead to a growing pressure for local artists to adopt a more trans-national and regional stance in engaging with contemporary art.

Initially, artworks with a social context and strong political position (in both local and global contexts) began to gain popularity in the early 1990s. A definitive and prescriptive definition of cultural identity began to be contested, if not redefined, with the larger regional and global contexts. Several young Malaysian artists began to set up their position within the cultural challenges of “new order” globalisation.

Besides relying on Euro-American art centres, more local artists and curators began to gravitate towards regional galleries and museums in cities such as Brisbane, Sydney, Fukuoka, Osaka, Tokyo, Shanghai, Beijing, Singapore, Bangkok, Jakarta, Bandung and Jogjakarta. Moreover, since the 1990s, the transition to a process of hybridisation in Malaysian culture (from Western) as well as the production of artworks with new technologies such as video and computer generated, sparked the emergence of new art groups with a local perspective. As such, Anuar (2004) stressed:

The 1990s heralded an era of greater hybridity in art production which was nurtured by a more committed audienceship and a thriving art economy. Several art cooperatives surfaced and developed strong initiatives, namely the Matahati (1989) and the Rumah Air Panas (1997). The founders of the two groups, Bayu Utomo Radjikin for Matahati and Kungyu Liew for Rumah Air Panas themselves place high priority in accessibility and diversity in art. It is in the wake of the contemporary artists compulsion to be more mindful of a local-regional perspective in the strive to understand Malaysia’s post-colonial identity.

Coercions of free market capitalism should also be considered in interpreting contemporary art in Malaysia. This growth is further fuelled by the shift from national to multi-national capital. As Tzu Ann (2008) points out, the “ecosystem of the global and regional economy cannot be simply brushed aside.” As Zain (1995) stressed, the economic setting from the eighties until the late nineties in Malaysia had created a competitive contemporary art market in Malaysia – “aggressive, progressive, innovative, thriving, heated and never short of ironies and polemics.” From being a marginal initiative that depended on government funding, the Malaysian contemporary art scene cautiously increased into a flourishing business enterprise before the recession in the late 1990s.

Despite their sometimes postmodern, alternative and critical stance, many local artists have begun to turn into full-time professionals, making them highly susceptible to the forces of the market inside and outside Malaysia. Sia (2008) pointed out that speculators are investing in Malaysian art as they would in stocks and shares; moreover, artworks from professional Malaysian artists are fetching record prices overseas. This momentum encourages Malaysian artists to be more optimistic about marketing their work abroad. The act of creating the artworks is no longer contained within the context of idea, concept, form, aesthetic, emotion and personal sentiment, but must also include perceptiveness of the market, and the ability to network or “get connected” with the “right cluster of people.” Even the notion of success itself is no longer dependent on the quality of the artworks, but also the ability to gain rapport with major players and movers in the art market.

Consequently, several artists and curators have fostered a close rapport with commercial galleries and individual collectors, creating a matrix of players and movers that have intertwined or overlapped. Thus, Harun (1995) points out:

Clusters of players and movers were formed, most of the time by shared sentiment. Other than artists, the players and movers include gallery owners and promoters, curators-writers, buyers or collectors and individuals in the media. Initially the clusters were distinctively demarcated by institutional, commercial and alternative fronts.

Galleries in Malaysia such as Petronas Gallery, Valentine Willie Fine Art, Art Salon, Wei Ling Gallery, Taksu Gallery, RA Fine Art, Artcase, 12 Artspace and Pelita Hati House of Art have been active in exposing and promoting contemporary Malaysian art and artists. In addition, private collectors have begun to build their own substantial collections of contemporary Malaysian art, further influencing the market.

The prevalence of information and communication technology and the emergence of new media have provided another important context for contemporary art practice in Malaysia. This technology has come up with programs for global networking, allowing the artists to set up a web of non-hierarchical relationships or multi-directional links with other artists and contacts all over the world. Several artists in Malaysia have responded by using new media technology to produce new forms of artwork. Art establishments, institutions and commercial galleries have also responded by organising exhibitions, projects, developing websites, online tours and databases. Rajah (1997) said, Ismail Zain's "Digital Collage" 1988, a solo exhibition consisting of "his experimentation with computer image editing, can be taken as the early

trailblazer of electronic art (e-art)” (Fig. 2.24). It has also been acknowledged for “introducing new theoretical frameworks for contemporary art practice.” Rajah added, other artists who have started to engage with the use of computer and media technology since 1990 have opened a new dimension in the modern Malaysian art scene.



Figure 2.24
Ismail Zain, *An So It Happened*, 1988.
Computer print, 24cm x 19cm.

Artists such as Liew Kungyu (Fig. 2.25), Hasnul Jamal Saidon (Fig. 2.26) and Wong Hoy Cheong (Fig. 2.27), due to their multidisciplinary stance, have also applied video and digital technology in their works.



Figure 2.25
Liew Kungyu, *Sing a Song for Ah Kong and Ah Ma*, 1994.
Electronic installation

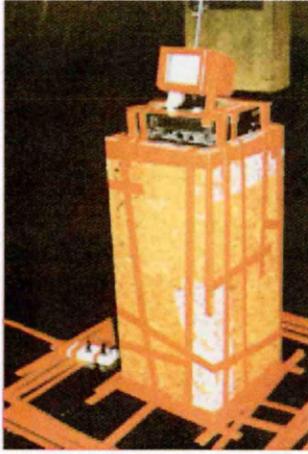


Figure 2.26
Hasnul Jamal Saidon,
Kdek, Kdek, Ong!, 1994.
Electronic installation.



Figure 2.27
Wong Hoy Cheong, *Sook Ching*,
1990.
Multi-media video presentation.

Saidon (2008) claims, “video art [has] been quite a regular feature” of many contemporary exhibitions in Malaysia since 1990. In the past few years, video has also become a tool for art collectives, cultural activists and groups, alternative spaces as well as small scale exhibitions, private screenings and community projects, with “collaborative engagements and networking that often reach[es] beyond the national border towards regional collaboration.” From my point of view, works by this new generation of Malaysian artists that emerged during the late 1980s and 1990s have reflected an emergence of various intertwining and multi-disciplinary trajectories for contemporary art practice in

Malaysia, thus making the process of identifying, demarcating or classifying contemporary artwork more difficult to handle. Amongst the most distinguishable key trajectories are:

1. Formalist expressionism – Expressionist impulse driven by loud and dark existentialist rage, angst, boldness, immediacy and urgency, mostly employing international neo-expressionist style and using the human figure as central subject matter.
2. Neo-dada – inclination towards a mixed bag of comedic absurdity, ponderous literalism, indiscriminate appropriation, random deconstruction and a riot of mockery, satire, parody and cynicism, mostly through installation, performance and site-specific experimental works.
3. Conceptual – a more cerebral, investigative, research-based methodical, inter-textual, deconstructive and semiotic approach, with a touch of humour, parody, satire and even mockery.
4. Post-formalist concerns – continuation of experiments and explorations with new materials and techniques of painting, sculpture, drawing and printmaking.

The outcome of globalisation, media imperialism, sustainability of the environment, the impact of new media, and even the historical and stylistic concepts of modern art itself have been used as issues of concern. Generally, artworks since the 1990s in Malaysia feature multiple engagements of several key issues or themes. In expressing their thoughts and feelings on these issues, they have become the epitome of modern and postmodern encounters that reverberate with clashing voices, hybrid processes in art, contradictions, scepticism, paradoxes, cynicism, ironies and the typical markings of a rapidly changing post-industrial, media and market-driven society. Towards the rapid changes in the usage of technologies in the process of producing the artworks mostly from the young artists, Kam Kow (2004) has pointed out:

The rapid modernisation and industrialisation during the last decade have contributed to the birth of new artistic consciousness for Malaysian artists who have responded actively to the changing social climate of the time. Coupled with the arrival of the information age and the impact of ongoing globalisation, many artists have engaged themselves to re-examine their creative approaches and attempts to explore new directions.

Contemporary Malaysian artists have also displayed an interest in exploring new and multi-dimensional ways of producing artworks, including alternative use of video and industrial materials, as well as installation, site-specific and new media technology such as computer and internet. The following is a list of several non-conventional forms that have been employed by contemporary Malaysian artists since the 1990s:

- Installation art including site-specific
- Video art and video installation
- Web or internet art
- Interactive CD/DVD
- Sound art and sound installation
- Light art
- Performance and situational art
- Digital photography and alternative prints
- Artist's book
- Graffiti
- Ready-mades, ephemeral, intervention art
- Expanded painting
- Quilting

The above-mentioned forms of new art can be seen in new young artists after the 1990s such as Hasnul Jamal Saidon, Wong Hoy Cheong, Nur Hanim Khairuddin, Kungyu Liew and Niranjan Rajah. The messages in their artwork reflect local values with a connection to the local and the global situation. Hence, their artistic vision in this new approach opens a new discourse in local art scenery, a new perspective to appreciate art in Malaysia. Despite the

emergence of these non-conventional, experimental, multi-disciplinary and alternative new forms, traditional forms such as craft and painting still remain. In fact, painting such as figure painting, still the artists' favoured subject matter, has continued to play a central role as an important form of contemporary expression in the Malaysian art scene. Soon (2008) indicates, in Malaysian contemporary art, after almost a decade and a half, figuration became the dominant form of painting - "serving a particular critical discourse on Malaysian subjectivity, a particular shift in recent times have seen Malaysian artists approach painting from more complex trajectories."

2.3 Summary

Historically, multiracial society in Malaysia has gone through various cultural expansions. The process of hybridisation and assimilation took place within the political, economic and social contexts. The Malaysian contemporary art scene is still young, but it has experienced major developments in setting up local cultural identity. National identity is an important theme in modern Malaysian art; rethinking cultural identity is essential to accommodate a contemporary art practice. As Sarup (1994) has pointed out, "identity is a construction, a consequence of a process of interaction between people, institution and practices." At the close of Britain's hegemony, Malaysian artistic creativity was towards the context of the spirit of Merdeka (Independence). Thus, contemporary art practice in Malaysia has developed as an important aspect of the Malaysian cultural landscape, with the artists being recognised as among the most articulate of the region.

Malaysia is divided into West Malaysia and East Malaysia; therefore there are multicultural elements especially in art practice. The rich local traditions and values in indigenous artefacts from these diverse racial groups prompted the government to establish a National Museum and National Art Gallery. At this stage, it has contributed to the development of modern art in Malaysia. Moreover, Malaysian art has been influenced by local artists who graduated from Western countries. The production of artwork is based on local scenery, landscape painting, portraiture and still life in the media of oils and watercolour. The early pioneer artists also graduated from Nanyang Academy of Fine Art in Singapore, an important movement in Malaysian contemporary art when Singapore was part of the state in Malaysia. The historical background of art development in Malaysia has also been affected by the riots on 13 May 1969. This was another turning point in post-independence Malaysian history. The idea of nation-building through art practice was introduced by the government. At this juncture, the Malaysian art scene is a very much more complex and sophisticated scene with the arrival of new technology such as computer, in a post-modernist and globalised cultural paradigm.

Since the early 1990s, the younger artists have introduced more radical methods, compared to the older generation of the 1960s and 1970s. The artwork that has been produced by these young artists has changed to more hybrid elements. Furthermore, the art syllabus in art colleges has been revised, and the new generation of art students has been exposed to new media and variation of creative thinking skills to construct new artworks which reflect local identity. As the government's political policy restricted the early generation of artists in producing their artwork, this new generation of artists is slowly

constructing artwork with different themes. The issue is more global and a different discourse has evolved, even though it is still bounded with government restrictions.

New technologies such as video and computer generation are the new media used in artwork since the 1990s. The opportunity was given to the artists to explore new media and pioneer artists such as Hasnul Jamal Saidon, Liew Kungyu and Wong Hoy Cheong opened a new dimension and perspective towards this new “electronic art.” Thus, art syllabuses based on computer, video, websites and other links through the internet have been introduced in art colleges. I intend to draw parallels with this new development of contemporary Malaysian art and the engagement with the process of hybridisation in art and culture with the discussion of Malaysia’s cultural identity. Furthermore, the impact of globalisation on Malaysian political, economic, social, and especially cultural contexts affected the development of contemporary art in Malaysia.

The process of hybridisation in art has developed since the colonial era and influences from mainland China, Western countries and those throughout the Southeast Asian region have shaped the local art scene. Lifestyles and issues related to the social context have recently been altered with the impact of globalisation, new media and the development of communication through internet. Hence, besides the artistic activity in the artwork production, the art discourse has become significant for artists to connect their practice in a socio-cultural context.

3.0 Introduction

This chapter documents my own practice which was undertaken to facilitate this research. My practice demonstrates how the process of hybridisation transforms new kinds of artwork in my project for two solo exhibitions - the “Nusantara...Aram Kitai Bejalai” (Let’s Travel) exhibition and the “Lapis” (Layers) exhibition. Through this practice, I connect the theoretical aspect of hybridity in art and culture from the scholars which has been discussed in Chapter 1. In this practice I explore new approaches which have never been attempted by artists from Malaysia. Apart from that, my intention is to enrich my Malaysian national art heritage by producing artwork that deals with an argument in a political context. As Malaysia is a multiracial country, the characteristic of national identity is portrayed as well as the concept of nation building. Moreover, my artwork production delineates my position towards the impact of hybridity in Malaysian contemporary art.

This is also the continuation of my “mind journey” where the production of artwork is engaged in my practice to test through experimentation and critical reflection how artwork illuminates a new understanding of the dynamic that obtains between contemporary art, craft and hybridity in a Malaysian context. In this regard, the term ‘craft’ is used to refer to local artefacts, the traditional fabrics, Pua Kumbu and Batik, in my first studio project. The other craft is Sarawakian layer cakes which are known as a traditional product and are considered to be one of the famous products of Sarawak. Hence, from my practice, I try to shift perceptions from the purely exotic view of these crafts

which are part of the valuable collection of Malaysian visual cultural material. In my investigation, the relationship between craft and art in this research is intertwined and I have used these crafts as a “medium of transformation” in my exploration. In addition, my own practice serves as a continuation of the investigation. In my first artwork production, print works are readable with the juxtaposition of digitally altered images and text (Iban proverbs). A handout giving a translation of the Iban proverbs was supplied for viewers to give the meaning about its context. In my next artwork, the layer cakes were made as an ornamental, tempting and beautiful artwork. The artwork symbolically dealt with political and social issues in Malaysia. I feel that, through gallery practice, the exhibitions are able to illuminate and communicate my idea of “mind journey” in a Malaysian cultural context. As part of a Malaysian Diaspora and in my position as “displaced artist”, my works which have been produced in the United Kingdom are totally different from my former practice in Malaysia. I shall elaborate upon this later in this chapter.

This chapter also gives a critical reflection on my current artwork and that of other artists, which remains a key component of the research methodology. The first part of this chapter will discuss my studio project, prints on traditional Malaysian fabric (Pua Kumbu and Batik) and the second section will discuss the artwork made from traditional Malay layer cakes and the associated photographic prints. In the “Lapis” (Layers) exhibition, I have proposed a resolution on the issue of unity amongst societies and a critical view on the Malaysian political context.

3.1 Hybridity in Practice

Comparative study in the early stage of my studio project has been used as one of the methods employed to facilitate this study. Artists from different backgrounds and a cake maker from Malaysia were chosen in my investigation. Although my studio practice is split into two solo exhibitions with different types of artwork, the concept of hybridity still endures as an argument in my artwork production. Therefore, various elements have been used in my work such as fabric, text and food to manifest a new approach in Malaysian contemporary art and to signal a critical view of Malaysia's cultural identity. As an artist and academician, I use these elements to illustrate the idea of hybridity in my artwork by looking the concepts and media of other artists' work.

The chosen media for this exhibition are Pua Kumbu and Batik textile. In my first solo exhibition, I presented my artworks by combining the selected textiles with Iban texts and related images. Themes from nature, society and spirituality in relation to hybridity were expressed in textiles. Artists such as Yinka Shonibare fused textiles with a diverse range of media, creating unexpected forms as a result. His artworks, like those of his contemporaries, reveal how textiles bridge diverse narratives more easily than most other media, and spark interpretations that are both literal and metaphorical.

Yinka Shonibare (2004), who likes to refer himself as a "post-colonial hybrid", from the exhibition *Double Dutch* comments that his artwork is an artistic contribution to the current and contemporary issue of hybridity. The fabric in his artwork seems to symbolise the rich complexity of postcolonial culture in that,

while the patterns and colours are thought to be authentically African, they actually originate from Indonesian Batik work, a technique which was industrialised by Dutch traders historically active in Africa. This type of batik became a symbol of nationalist revival, of pride and of difference in sub-Saharan Africa. The irony of this fabric (as signifier of African identity and black authenticity) is that it is in fact a “colonial construction”. This type of batik was first printed in Holland at the end of the nineteenth century as a copy of Indonesian batiks, with the intention of selling it to an Indonesian market. When this was not commercially successful in Indonesia, the Dutch tried the West African market, where it was very popular. Part of the success of this batik was due to the fact that many African countries gained independence from colonial rule in the 1950s and 60s, and Africans were returning to wearing non-Western clothing as a gesture against European colonial rule. Paradoxically, these batiks were made in Hyde, near Manchester and sold to Africa. For Westerners, including Africans living in Diaspora, the obvious appeal of the fabric lay in its “authenticity”, but interestingly this is only a fictional authenticity.

The artworks from Yinka Shonibare (Fig. 3.1), are the collision of the postmodern and postcolonial with ideas of clothing, history and ethnicity. In my work, there is a combination of traditional textiles and images from western art. This is part of Malaysian culture after the colonial era and the use of these fabrics basically emulates the importance of cultural elements in giving a unique identity to the different races in Malaysia. Hence, this is a platform to explore and introduce new aspects of visual culture and interpret a new wave of contemporary art in Malaysia especially for young artists engaged in the hybrid process. The integration of the new media in Shonibare’s artwork has

influenced my choice in selecting the types of media used in my first exhibition. The use of the traditional fabric Pua Kumbu and Batik is intended to create an impact on the main issue discussed. Based on the type of fabric used in Shonibare's artwork, it is possible for me to explain the effect of the Western concept and philosophy towards Malaysian art development based on the suitability of the media selected which is acceptable by the local elements.



Figure 3.1
Yinka Shonibare, *Mr and Mrs Andrews Without Their Heads*, 1998.
Wax-print cotton costumes on mannequins,
dog mannequin, painted metal bench and rifle,
165 X 635 X 254 cm.

Another international artist, David Medalla, was born in Manila in the Phillipines and lived in Britain but has Spanish, Malaysian, Chinese and English origins. Medalla sees himself as a “citizen of the world”, feeling at home everywhere and, unlike artists who might exhibit around the world but make art from a singular cultural perspective, Medalla’s artwork is always informed by the place in which he creates it and the people he meets there.²⁴ In his artwork, he claims “home is the world for me”, and being a so-called Third World citizen inspired

²⁴ See <http://www.iniva.org/dare/themes/space/medalla.html>.

me to construct the same idea of identity in my artwork that has been produced outside my country, Malaysia.

David Medalla makes work which has frequently defied categorisation, concentrating on 'bio-kinetics', 'participation-production', performance and painting. Medalla's artwork deals with the issue of the interaction of nature and culture, history and identity (Brett, 1995). For Medalla, identity is layer and shifting. In several of his impromptu pieces, 'Impromptus with torn-paper masks', Madison Square Park, New York, (1991) he made masks for himself, often from the torn pages of magazines (Fig. 3.2).



Figure 3.2

David Medalla, *Impromptus with torn-paper masks*, 1991

The mask both covers his identity and, for a moment, transforms it into something new. In my work, the transformation of local identity in relation to the modern world can be seen from the images and texts that portray 'traditional' values in the "Nusantara...Aram Kitai Bejalai" (Let's Travel) exhibition. The Eastern identity in the fabric used in my artwork has gone through several modification processes, which have been transformed into another form of media to further clarify the major theme on hybridity in the cultural movement context. In Medalla's artwork, he pointed out that identities are changeable. This

idea has inspired me to focus on changes in of the local identity, specifically the development of the visual artwork in Malaysia.

Modern art's experimental tendencies have allowed for cross-cultural involvements in Malaysia. Malaysian artists have utilised international and localised influences in their attempts to define notions of form (Piyadasa, 2002). Malaysian artist Hasnul Jamal Saidon with his artwork *Smiling Van Gogh and Smiling Gauguin* (Fig. 3.3) portrays a post-modernist production.



Figure 3.3
Hasnul Jamal Saidon
Smiling Van Gogh and Smiling Gauguin, 1995.
Mixed media on canvas, 242cm x 450cm.

The design and pattern on these dresses have been taken from modern Western artistic styles. The artist has appropriated aspects of Van Gogh's and Gauguin's art into his painting in order to make a satirical comment on them as well as on the more orthodox Western art historical tradition. The work is made up of several of Gauguin's "exotic" Tahitian women standing in poses which have been taken from the painter's famous paintings. These women are

standing under Van Gogh's famous painting, *Starry Night*. A closer inspection of the Tahitian women reveals that they are dressed in Asian costumes, including Malay costume and the Japanese kimono. Moreover, the designs and patterns on these dresses have been taken out of modern Western artistic styles, the gestural imagery of Jackson Pollock's Abstract Expressionism. The appropriation concept and the convergence of the Western and Eastern world in Saidon's artwork have motivated me to investigate the development of the Malaysian culture especially in the visual artwork. The concept of the cultural mixture has created a new form of identity within the multicultural society in Malaysia. This can be seen in my print works, where I have appropriated Western images and juxtaposed them with local images. This hybrid process has re-contextualised new forms of understanding of the Malaysian cultural context with the element of multiculturalism which is related to the acceptance of multiple ethnic cultures and elements from outside.

Another prominent Malaysian artist, Redza Piyadasa, uses silk screen to portray the richness of Malaysian culture through his series, *The Baba Family* (Fig. 3.4) This mixed media work produced by the artist belongs to the series of images that have come to be collectively known as the *Malaysian Series*. This is closely related with my prints that discuss the hybridity process in Malaysian culture. Redza's artwork shows the historical background of present-day Malaysian social make-up; of multicultural realities; of migration and cultural assimilation; of traditions and heritages; of political and social history (Sabapathy, 2001).



Figure 3.4
Redza Piyadasa, *Baba Family*, 1987.
Mixed media and collage on board, 126.5cm x 74cm.

The artist used images of traditional Malaysian communities from old photographs to try to capture and record Malaysian social reality. Traditional and modern elements were combined in this series and, in reviewing this production, Shariff (1994) has pointed out:

They offer us reminders of the historical background of present-day Malaysian social make-up; of multicultural realities, of migration and cultural assimilation; of traditions and heritage; of political and social history. They beckon Malaysians to confront their past. In their frontal photographic depiction, all look the viewer in the eye. Do we cast our eyes away from these stares from the past? Could we completely disregard the past and be overwhelmed by the ideological tidal wave that was overwhelming our society?

These series also tend to see the compositions as depictions of multiculturalism and the process of hybridisation in Malaysia. Furthermore, the print method from Piyadasa is closely related with my images which have been altered using a computer. The silkscreen technique that has been used by Piyadasa in

interpreting the concept of the socio-cultural elements in Malaysia has been used in the production of my artwork. The direct image transfer from the visual image is presented in forms of prints and composition which combines the image, media and text in my first exhibition.

Ismail Zain, a pioneer of electronic art in Malaysia, produced both local and international elements in his computer print artwork which inspired me in my computer-altered images, which can be seen in my “Nusantara...Aram Kitai Bejalai” (Let’s Travel) exhibition. The images have been drawn from several cultural sources, namely, from traditional culture, from art historical context, from popular culture and from the international mass-media. As Piyadasa (1988) said, “they are the outcome of the artist’s countless journeys into his computer and his astute juxtapositioning of composite images drawn from diverse cultural sources.” In this work, Zain has pointed out the impact of the global popular mass-culture and popular culture on the Malay psyche (Fig. 3.5), commenting on the characters of the TV Series Dallas posing in front of a traditional Malay house. The artist has a tendency to draw from diverse cultural sources and from local art historical sources, even from diverse cultural disciplines.

Thus, Zain is the first Malaysian artist to deal with technology in his artwork production. Hence Piyadasa (1988) added:

The wide ranging of cultural references that Ismail Zain alludes to in the Digital Collage is impressive. If anything, these new works of the artist only reaffirm the inevitability of an ever-expanding and highly influential “global culture” that is today epitomised by the prevalence of competing cultural values and diverse cultural forms subsisting incongruously side by side. And this state of affairs has been made possible

by the rapid modernisation processes and the resultant cross-cultural influences at work.



Figure 3.5
Ismail Zain, *Al Kisah (The Story)*, 1988.
Computer print, 24cm x 19cm.

Ismail Zain is always in contact with local elements and global images in his artwork. Jit (1988) has pointed out, “the juxtaposition of images also puts Ismail in the forefront of postmodern thinking.” What fascinates and instructs most of all is Ismail’s sentiment toward his chosen images. Ismail Zain is “the quintessential intermediate man negotiating an autonomous position between the pulls of man and the machine, East and West.”

Simryn Gill is known as an archetypal global citizen who has lived in and works from Singapore, Malaysia, the United Kingdom, India and Australia. For those who wish to promote an expansive and all-inclusive idea of hybridity in Malaysian identity, such as I have produced in my artwork, Gill’s work, colour photographs entitled *A Small Town at the Turn of the Century* (Fig. 3.6), was

shot in her hometown of Port Dickson, a small town in the state of Perak, Malaysia.

These striking and bizarre artworks juxtaposed surprise images in sly and unexpected ways. As Raslan (2002) has pointed out, in this work Gill questions the idea of indigenoussness with fruits such as pineapples, mangoes and watermelons that are considered to be peculiarly Malaysian, but which are in fact, exotic and imported. "Hybridised and in certain cases even genetically modified, they are an ironic comment on our preconceived ideas" of what is and what is not "local". In exploring the issue of identity, racial and religious purity as well as hybridity, Gill encourages a multiplicity of responses, as her work is playful and enjoyable.

The concept used in Gills artwork was also influential in selecting the media for my artwork in my second exhibition. Gill has used fruits to symbolise the local values whereas I have used layer cakes to spread the message of the new meaning on the development of the Malaysian socio-cultural society.

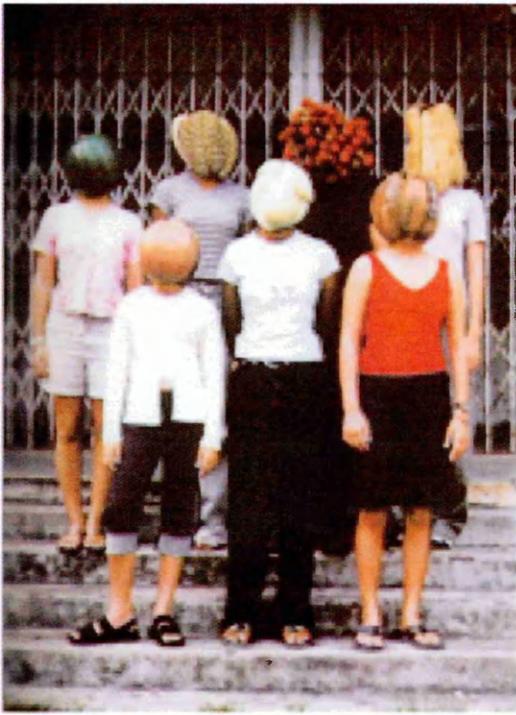


Figure 3.6
Simryn Gill, *A Small Town at the Turn of the Century*, 2001.
Type C photograph, 101.6cm x 101.6cm.

The emergence of Malaysian local tradition and modern ideas is the main critical issue in Kelvin Kok Leong's artwork entitled *Belawing, Keramen, Mamat* (Malaysian Hanging Wall) (Fig. 3.7). Chap is a younger generation Chinese artist who produced a series of paintings that have highlighted the richness and excitement of local tradition.



Figure 3.7
Kelvin Chap Kok Leong, *Belawing, Keramen, Mamat*, 1995.
Mixed media, 188cm x 177cm.

His work exploring local values is being eclipsed by a more contemporary, secularist, popular culture mode of living. As Onians (2008) addresses:

This work is a synthesis of the modern and the traditional in that the media used are western in inspiration, but the themes and images - the Iban culture of Sarawak - are of traditional society, often seen to be in conflict with Western ideology. The field of painting is developing rapidly in Southeast Asia. In contrast to earlier times, the identity of the artist is known, and the subject matter is usually secular rather than religious. Western influence was strong from the start of the century but a return to Asian roots began to manifest itself by the mid 1900s.

Thus, with the technique of silkscreen, Chap allows himself to duplicate and repeat particularised images and create stunning rhythmic effects on the canvas surface. In this piece, he used many other tribal symbols and forms to collocate the elements of nature and roots from the group of Iban in Sarawak. This is closely related to my print-works: the silkscreen technique allowed me to transfer the images as well as the texts on the fabric which juxtaposed the notion of hybridity in Malaysian local tradition. To further elaborate, the display

of the Iban culture in Sarawak is a sign of changes in the Malaysian society through the process of modernisation which is similar to Chap's artwork. Chap's work has inspired me to study in depth the development of the artworks that are related to the political, economic and social issues within the Malaysian society.

Another artist who reflected the new post-modernist tendencies in the creative approach from Malaysia is Wong Hoy Cheong. His Migrant series²⁵ deals with cultural difference, race, ethnicity, migration, hybridity and history. The series is based on the artist's own family history and probes the complexity of cultural allegiances. The series emphasised the Chinese Diaspora and celebrated aspects of the history of the Malaysian Chinese in this country. In this piece, *She Was Married at 14 and She Had 14 Children* (Fig. 3.8) and the other series of drawings, whilst rooted in the personal history of the artist, are in fact a depiction of a people. Raslan (2002) considers:

These drawings are a tableau for and of Nanyang (South Seas) Chinese. The artist's personal family history has acted as a prism for the entire Malaysian Chinese community. Hoy Cheong is drawing and reflecting on all states of migration, transition and transformation, as he has realised some core truth about our nation, that Malaysia is in itself a product of unending migration and that without that migration we will never be able to regenerate.

²⁵ In 1994, the artist produced five large drawings and 20 studies on migrants from the earlier part of his family and Malaysia's history.



Figure 3.8
Wong Hoy Cheong,
She Was Married at 14 and She Had 14 Children, 1994.
Charcoal and photography on paper, 190cm x 150cm.

The inclusion of the British one cent bill and the Japanese ten dollar bill showed the colonisation era in Malaysia. At the bottom of the work is the wrapping from a bar of imported “Yardley” soap, which represents the idea of colonialism. Furthermore, with all these hybrid elements, this artwork has highlighted the indelible Chinese contributions to the building of the modern nation of Malaysia. Wong Hoy Cheong has taken his family history and turned the tale into one that belongs to all Malaysians, which is enriching and universal. It is also a reflection of multiculturalism and Malaysian migrant experiences. On the other hand, my production was an autobiographical account as the concept of my “mind journey” in a Malaysian political and social context. The similarity that can be found from Wong’s artwork and mine is the process of hybridity in the culture of the Malaysian society since the colonisation period that has been highlighted as the major issue. Wong has used the image of the Chinese society to symbolise the changes which have taken place due to the effects of the British

colonisation, while I have reconstructed the images of the Malaysian society in my first solo exhibition.

Anthony Key, a sculptor who was born in South Africa during the era of Apartheid and has been resident in Britain since 1972, claimed himself to be an “invisible man” when it comes to identity²⁶ because of his Chinese background and being a self-proclaimed “British-Chinese” artist. As Yeh (2002) has pointed out, Anthony Key uses consumer items such as food: “to speak the vernacular, Key creates a consistently contradictory visual language where witty compositional simplicity articulates a world of ever graver complexity.” In his artwork, Key takes icons from east and west or “Britishness” and “Chineseness”. In his installation he also uses food and the Chinese takeaway to explore cultural identity, and thinks the Chinese takeaway is one of the major Chinese influences on British eating and street culture. His installation, *Battle of Britain* (Fig. 3.9), deals with a reverse process of “Chinese colonisation”, an accurate document of Chinese immigration settlements in Britain. In this installation, Key arranged a monumental table map of Britain based on the original World War II Operations Room maps. Tall red Chinese flags and military banners, representing and carrying the names of every Chinese takeaway restaurant in the United Kingdom, were placed in all the cities, towns and villages where the restaurants are located.

²⁶interview with Anthony Key, 8 December 2009.

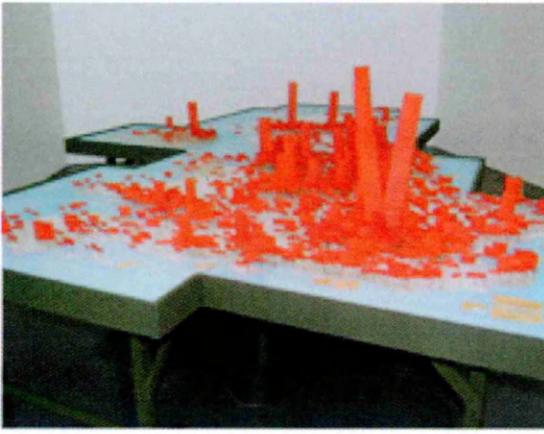


Figure 3.9
Anthony Key, *Battle of Britain*, 2007.

The idea proposed by Key in his artwork has encouraged me to further explore ideas regarding the new colonisation process practiced by foreign countries in Malaysia. The economic domination by the Western countries towards the developing countries has become a phenomenon in this century. I have clarified this issue in my previous exhibition through the theme on cultural changes.

In my second solo exhibition, I re-interpreted the Sarawakian layer cake under the influence of Rabiah Amit²⁷, the founder of this newly-patterned layer cake (Amit, 2003). Amit introduced this beautiful cake to the whole of Malaysia, Brunei and Singapore. As a cake maker, Amit has never admitted to being an artist, but her cakes reflect on traditional Malay “craft” which uses food as a medium. As an artist, I have interpreted a social context which reflected Malaysian culture in this Sarawakian layer cake as a Malay traditional craft. The connection between Malaysia’s national identity and this type of layer cake inspired me to produce a layer cake as my interpretation of local culture and the process of hybridisation. Most of Amit’s cakes are named after popular icons,

²⁷ Founder of Sarawakian Layer Cakes. She started to introduce these modern layer cakes with patterns and colours in 1989. Her own recipe book, *Kek Lapis Sarawak* was first published in the year 2003.

films, artists and songs from Malaysia. Kek Lapis Bollywood (Bollywood layer cake) (Fig. 3.10), with the influence of Bollywood films from India, showed the impact of Hindi films on Malay society and the chosen bright colours in this cake refer to traditional Indian costume.²⁸



Figure 3.10
Rabiah Amit, Sarawakian Layer Cake, 2003.
Cake flour, 20cm x 20cm x 10cm.

The contemporary art practice in Malaysia has been showing a positive development since the emergence of the National Art Gallery in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The gallery was launched in 1958 and is known as the “hot centre” for the local artists to exhibit their artwork. The opening of the Gallery was a self-conscious declaration that the notion of the modern arts had arisen in the national consciousness. The seminal achievements in order to legitimise the modern Malaysian art have been influenced by the Western art. Pioneer artists which have graduated from abroad bring along the idea of modernism in their artwork with the amalgamation of local values.

²⁸ Interview with Rabiah Amit, 19 April 2009.

The process of hybridising the idea of modernism and local themes has been systematically developed into a new investigating process in the artwork production. Visual Art curriculum in Malaysian primary and secondary schools has been revised to implement the idea of modernism and traditional art at foundation level from The Curriculum Development Division, Ministry of Education Malaysia.²⁹ As an academician in Malaysian university, I am aware that the Art syllabus in Malaysian higher institutions has also been revised every five years to fit with the current technology and new media. Consequently, Malaysian artists and curators have established a close rapport with the Ministry of Unity, Culture, Arts and Heritage, the National Art Gallery and the Ministry of Education as an investigation process to enhance the modern development of Malaysian contemporary art. As Saidon (2008) has pointed out, other than artists, the gallery owners and promoters, curators-writers, buyers and collectors, and individuals in the media (editors of magazines, newspapers, websites, etc) are the important group to develop and promote the new contemporary artwork in relation with modernism and local themes.

Since 1990s, the new forms in artwork production such as installation, performance and video art have been produced by the local artist as a direct response towards the process of hybridisation in the local art movement. At this juncture, Malaysian artist, Liew Kungyu has combined the video and mixed media to construct his installation, 'Sing A Song For Ah Kong And Ah Ma'. In

²⁹ This division is responsible for improving the quality and increasing the standard of education through the formulation and development of relevant curriculum for all government and aided schools at the preschool, primary and secondary schools. As a member of The Curriculum Development for Visual Art Education since 1998, I am responsible to revise the Visual Art curriculum for secondary school every five years by implementing new technology such as computer and integrated media.

this artwork, Liew Kungyu has included the Hungry Ghost Festival and the Chengbeng Festival (both Chinese Traditional Festivals) and performed it in a video installation. The main issue in Kungyu's installation is the influence of modern technology on traditional musical instruments in these Chinese traditional performances (Fig. 3.11).



Figure 3.11
Liew Kungyu, *Sing a Song for Ah Kong and Ah Ma*, 1994.
Electronic installation.

Hasnul Jamal Saidon has used local proverbs to criticise 'narrow-minded' attitude in local societies. Saidon has used a Malay proverb '*Seperti Katak di Bawah Tempurung*' (Frog Under The Coconut Shell) to produce his artwork and has been presented in a cynical-funny form to criticise local societies and their awareness of globalisation (Fig. 3.12). In this artwork, the image of a frog in the screen tries to jump from the electronic boundaries to face the world, whereas with the original proverb, the frog just remains seated under the coconut shell and is afraid to go out. I have constructed my artwork in a way similar to both artists where the local proverb and tradition have been re-contextualised in my own practice. In "Nusantara...Aram Kitai Bejalai" (Let's Travel) artwork, the local proverbs have been used as well as local tradition has been illuminated to voice the process of hybridisation and the impact of globalisation in Malaysian culture.

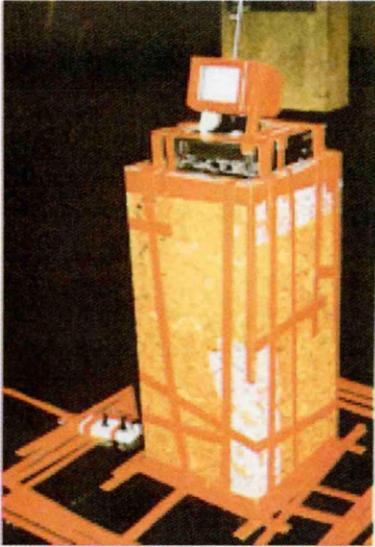


Figure 3.12
Hasnul Jamal Saidon, *Kdek, Kdek, Ong!*, 1994.
Electronic installation.

As Shariff (1994) has pointed out, the new form of artwork production have been related with the issues relating to the historical background of Malaysia's current situation in terms of social make-up, multicultural realities, migration and cultural assimilation, traditions and heritages as well as political and social history. Therefore, my practice in this research deals with issues mentioned above by concentrating on the processes of hybridisation within the Malaysian political and social context. Since the issues on politics have not been explored openly by Malaysian artists due to our government policies, I have constructed my artwork in the United Kingdom to suggest a 'social change' needs to be achieved. I believe the local artists should be able to comment, to voice and criticise our political and social matters from their artwork. The opportunity to see our political affairs from outside Malaysia has made me aware that I need to voice the freedom of artist to construct artwork commenting on Malaysian political context. Additionally, the process of hybridisation in the Malaysian

cultural context is also an essential element when we have received 'outside influences' in the process of our nation building.

From "Nusantara...Aram Kitai Bejalai" (Let's Travel) exhibition, metaphorical visual commentaries of Malaysian's multicultural roots can be seen not only through my artistic reaction towards the social situation, but it can also be seen from my "mind journey" concept by looking at the Malaysian contemporary art historical background. The "mind journey" concept dealt with my awareness as an artist to explore and to construct an artwork from Malaysian political and cultural context. Since 1994, when I was an art student in one of the Malaysian universities, I have used different approaches in my practice such as performing art, 'appropriation art', photography, digital collage and video installation. My experience from West Malaysia to East Malaysia as an artist and academician allowed me to see different cultures and values in our multi racial societies. My critical reviews of my own artworks have enabled me to voice my views upon Malaysian culture, especially in political issues. This is my own 'journey' as an artist to create political artwork, as this is not a common practice in Malaysia. At this juncture, this is my "mind journey" experience of establishing the 'form' and 'content' of political and cultural themes in my artwork production. I have related this concept in my methodological approach to conceptualising my artwork in this research. As part of the heuristic aspect in this investigation, I have combined my experience as an artist to explore new forms of artefacts that relate with the cultural hybridity in Malaysian which is the key issues in this research. Apart from that, through my "mind journey" concept, I try to develop my own understanding towards our national identity and illuminate it in my practice. Personally, the notion of this "mind journey" is my thinking process for

me as an artist and academician and this concept will be the basis for my further practice.

As cultural hybridity is an essential part of this study I have looked at the other artists' works that deal with this issue and their national identity. Many contemporary artists have experienced movement between and among cultures in their lives, and their work often explores issues of personal and cultural identity. Artists such as Huang Yong Ping uses materials appropriated from Western and Eastern cultures in his work, *'The History of Chinese Painting and the History of Modern Western Art in the Washing Machine for Two Minutes'* (Fig. 3.13).



Figure 3.13
Huang Yong Ping
'The History of Chinese Painting and the History of Modern Western Art Washed in the Washing Machine for Two Minutes', 1987/1993.
Chinese Tea Box, Paper Pulp, Glass.

Huang has selected two books to put it into the washing machine, which was *The History of Chinese Art* by Wang Bomin and the other was a Chinese translation of *The Concise History of Modern Painting* by Herbert Read. This is Huang's strategy to transform and create new meanings for both Western and Eastern cultures. This artwork is about the two overlapping and becoming mixed together after their own structures have been crushed and not about replacing one tradition with another. The artwork is a metaphor for creation,

destruction, and transformation, the strategies Huang has used to question what it means to live in a global world and he describes this as “washing the notion of culture”.³⁰

The process of nation building that is closely associated with Malaysia's national identity has been affected by the globalisation influences. In this regard, my practice is engaged with the convergence of East and West in the Malaysian contemporary art practice, in terms of images, symbols and techniques. My practice also reflects on discussions regarding the local hybridism symposium in Manchester, United Kingdom.³¹ As one of the speakers, I have discussed the process of hybridisation in my practice by referring it to the Malaysian contemporary art practice. I have pointed out that the process of the forming the Malaysian national identity has started after the era of colonisation and it has been affected by the globalisation in the economic development. The implementation of 'divide and rule' system (Chapter 1 - The Process of Malaysia's National Identity) that was introduced by the British during the colonial era in local economic development, the major impact towards local societies is, there is no unity or the process of nation building among the Malays, the Chinese and the Indians. After independence of Malaysia in 1957, the British still controlled the local economy as the agricultural product such as rubber and mining products as tin were exported to England. In addition, our judicial system has been inherited from British Law. The Malaysian government has set up the policy of integration among races through 'Dasar

³⁰ <http://www.artsconnected.org/resources/120053/huangyongping-the-history-of-chinese-painting-and-the-history-of-modern-western-art-washed-in-the-washing-machine-for-two-minutes>

³¹ Symposium of the Local - Representing Representation: Local Hybridism and the Politics of Location, Asia Triennial, Manchester Contemporary Art Gallery - Castlefield Gallery, 8-12 April 2008.

Ekonomi Baru' (Malaysian New Economic Policy) (Chapter 1 - The Process of Malaysia's National Identity) to ensure that the process of Malaysia's national identity can be achieved through this policy. Apart from that, the National Cultural Policy (Chapter 1 - The Process of Malaysia's National Identity) which was introduced in 1971 is another government policy to enhance the unity among races in Malaysia. At the symposium, another speaker, Kai Lam, an artist from Singapore has talked about the process of hybridisation in Singapore which is connected with Singapore's national identity. Lam has commented on Southeast Asia's political and socio-cultural context and the issue of traditional art which has been hybridised with Western elements. He looks at this situation as a process of 'modernising' Singaporean contemporary art development as Singapore used to be part of Malaysia in 1963 to 1965. Lam further commented on the importance of the process of nation building after being separated from Malaysia can be accomplished from the development in arts. Another Singaporean artist, Jeremy Chu speaks about the important of traditional elements in Singaporean visual art. With a strong background as an artist and photographer, Chu has pointed out that, proper documentation is needed to preserve traditional craft and this has been done by the government via agencies such as Singapore National Art Gallery. Chu also added, Singaporean artists have more freedom to produce artwork and this is a process of transformation in their modern art development as a new modernised country since 1965. This is slightly different from Malaysia, where the government has a strong control on arts activities and a government body such as the National Art Gallery plays an important role to implement government policies through Arts programmes. At this point, this is the important issue needing to be discussed among Malaysian artists of how far they can explore their creativity on

discussing political issues in their artwork. As Rais (2010) stressed that, the medium of art can be an agent of social change and the local artists should have a freedom to be more creative in their artwork production. Rais added, the art movements in Malaysia must have 'art for revolution' concept, especially for the young artists to voice their ideas towards Malaysian political issues.

Coupled with the hybridism in the Malaysian political and social context, I have constructed my artwork in "Nusantara...Aram Kitai Bejalai" (Let's Travel) and "Lapis" (Layers) exhibitions. Included in this construction was my research which was presented in Venice, Italy³² and information gleaned from a visit to the Venice Biennale 2009 53rd International Art Exhibition, where I was able to attend 24 exhibitions and pavilions, focusing mainly on Asia and Latin America. Moreover, I was able to see the Eastern and the Western artists had explored their media and techniques in various ways in their artworks which is relevant with my practice. Singaporean artist, Ming Wong produced his artwork entitled 'Life of Imitation' exploring the performative veneers of language and identity through a series of video installations based on well-known works and artistes in Asian cinema (Fig. 3.14).

Hence, Wong's artwork dealt with "playful and imperfect acts of mimesis and melodrama, this work attempts to hold the mirror up to the Singaporean condition related to roots, hybridity and change."³³ At this stage, as Birnbaum (2009) had expressed, the artworks represent "worlds in the making" and "a

³² Repositioning Pua Kumbu and Batik Through Artistic Practice. 'Globalising' the Local by Drawing Upon Diverse Malaysian Cultural Forms, 4th International Conference on the Arts in Society, Palazzo Cavalli Franchetti Instituto Veneto Di Sceilze, Lettere Ed Arti, Venice, Italy, 28-31 July 2009.

³³ Venice Biennale 2009 53rd International Art Exhibition Catalogue.

vision of the world”, which is closely related with the hybrid process of artwork production such as explorations of drawing, paintings, videos and installations.



Figure 3.14
Ming Wong, *'Life of Imitation'*, 2009.
Video Installation.

These explorations can be seen in Wong's video installation where the idea is further enhanced by billboards painted by Wong and Singapore's last surviving billboard painter Neo Chon Teck, and movie memorabilia such as photographs of old cinemas in Singapore, paintings, drawings and transcripts.³⁴ The combination of these modern and traditional techniques to voice the global issue, new experimentation in art, appropriation and local culture had an impact on me as an artist whose work has some similarities in its focus.

In Malaysia, SINI 08³⁵ is known as a five year art development program to encourage and develop art activities among the local artists and academicians to produce artworks for publication to be used for research purposes focusing on the arts, culture and heritage area. In this research, as an art practitioner

³⁴ http://www.universe-in-universe.org/eng/bien/venice_biennale/2009/tour/singapore.

³⁵ SINI 08 - Five years arts program, organized by Ministry of Information, Communication and Culture, National Art Gallery and Ministry of Education. The main theme of this project is to develop Malaysian arts and culture as part of the process of modernization for Malaysia to be a fully developed country in 2020.

and academician, my practice in producing the artworks came from the idea of the Malaysian craftsmanship which appears together with the amalgamation of the modern techniques. My artwork production is expected to contribute a new form of understanding in the exploration of traditional Malay craftsmanship. Furthermore, SINI 08 encourages local artists to develop new techniques and ideas in artwork productions as well as carrying out new research in the arts field which is based on the international art development. In addition, besides the five years program to develop Malaysian arts and culture through exhibitions, workshops, seminars and the collaboration from government bodies, SINI 08 will work together with local and international galleries and establish a relationship with international art institutions. As Saidon (2008) has stated, Malaysian artists have participated in residency programs in countries such as in Southeast Asian countries, Japan, United States, Poland, Australia, and the United Kingdom. Saidon added, Malaysian artists such as Wong Hoy Cheong, Zulkifli Yusuf and Susyilawati Sulaiman have been selected to exhibit their works in prestigious international expositions such as Venice Biennale and Documenta. Nevertheless, it has opened up new possibilities for Malaysian artists to enter the world stage and acquire international recognition.

3.2 Studio Project: Layer Cake and Photographic Prints

3.2.1 Introduction

My next studio project dealt with a very different medium to explore the process of hybridity and Malaysia's national identity in art. In this section, I shall discuss

my artwork production which was based on the idea of Sarawakian layer cakes, known in the Malay language as Kek Lapis Sarawak. Originally, these modern Sarawakian layer cakes were officially introduced into Indonesia during the Dutch colonisation and were introduced in Sarawak around 1988.³⁶ In those days the most popular layer cake, made from a mixture of spice-flavoured ingredients, was known as Lapis Legit.³⁷ Later on, the layer cake became a famous delicacy in Sarawak when Rabiah Amit, a well-known baker, started to transform the original traditional layer cakes from Indonesia to a colourfully-designed local layer cake.

The cakes are often baked during festive seasons and celebrations, for instance, Eid, Christmas, birthdays and weddings. On certain occasions, layer cakes are presented as a personal gift. Layer cakes are baked in a traditional Malay oven using charcoal fire on the top of the lid. Even though the traditional way of preparing the layer cakes is time consuming, it is the most essential technique in producing a well-baked layer cake.³⁸ The cakes can also be baked using gas or electric ovens. However, to get a better aroma, normally bakers will opt to use a gas oven. Sharifah Wahani, another Sarawakian layer cake baker, added that another traditional method used to bake the cakes is the steaming technique. With this technique, colours from the cakes will appear brighter compared to cakes baked using a gas or electric oven. According to Jemat³⁹, another Sarawakian cake maker, the process of baking the cake is more practical with modern equipment which can save much time if production

³⁶ Interview with Rabiah Amit, 19 April 2009.

³⁷ Dutch-Indonesian layer cake known as *spekkoek*, or *spiku* in Indonesian language. Clove buds and cardamom seeds were used as an ingredients to give excellent aroma in the mixing process.

³⁸ Interview with Sharifah Wahani Wan Johan, 19 May 2009.

³⁹ Interview with Dayang Nurfaridah Pengiran Jemat, 18 December 2009.

of the cake needs to be commercialised. Jemat used to travel in the Southeast Asia region to teach people who wanted to learn how to bake Sarawakian cakes with traditional or modern methods.

As an artist, I interpret the Sarawakian layer cakes as more than just a cake. When I conceptualised the ideas of my first exhibition as an exploration of hybridity, this was stimulated and inspired by the traditional screen-printed Malaysian fabrics. The idea of producing food as an artwork came to me when I saw the colourful Sarawakian layer cakes. This is related with my “mind journey” concept as I always look at different new media to raise an issue in an art and cultural context. Since the origin of the layer cake itself is not from Malaysia, the process of producing the cake using modern techniques and the use of additional colourings by Rabiah Amit has made the process more creative in terms of the cake presentation. Improvised layer cakes demand a high degree of patience in order to prepare them. Several complicated and extremely time-consuming procedures are involved. Some layer cakes might require a week to bake due to the use of different coloured sponge layers, depending on the complexity of the cake’s design. (Dawes, 2009)

In Malaysian culture, colours are significant in representing certain religious and symbolic meanings. In this artwork, I intend to illustrate a new meaning in the Sarawakian layer cakes. Therefore, I shall explore the experimentation of traditional and modern techniques which represents a different artwork in the Malaysian contemporary art context in term of media process. Based on my work and personal experience, this was my first attempt as an artist to create and introduce a different context of artwork in Malaysian contemporary art

practice by using cakes as an artwork, which were then exhibited in my “Lapis” (Layers) exhibition. As an artist, all the layer cakes were photographed and displayed together, functioning as pieces of artwork from photographic prints.

I have carried out several experiments to transform the Sarawak layer cakes from a unique Malaysian delicacy to a product of artwork which conveys important meanings that represent certain aspects of Malaysian traditional culture and national identity. The support and technical collaboration in this project of my wife, Sharifah Wahani Wan Johan, an expert baker of traditional Sarawakian delicacies, made it possible for me to create and produce two types of artwork: the designed layer cakes and roll cakes.

I chose food as my medium as it is unusual within Malay culture to turn food into artwork. Moreover, during the private view and after the exhibition ended, there was an opportunity to distribute the cakes to the viewers. All the cakes were edible and the viewers could view the show and then have a chance to taste it. The ingredients of the cakes are a combination of Malaysian and English recipes. During the experimental process to create a pattern inside the cakes, I tried various types of colouring, flour, cake stabiliser and selected butter to get a perfect design and taste. I found the exact flour and butter in Western food and I used the colouring that I brought from Malaysia. In the early stage of cake experiments, there were several technical failures when I could not get the perfect ingredients: the mixtures were too watery when mixed up with English colour; the thin layers did not have the correct consistency; and there was a problem with fungus or mould when I baked the cakes during summer. The process of making these layer cakes by using Eastern and

Western ingredients has turned the ordinary Sarawakian layer cake into a new cake with pattern and design and transformed it into a new artwork. The conceptual changes in my artwork are vital as the pattern and design that has been explored provides a new expression around the issue of hybridisation in the development of the Malaysian society. Based on the structural pattern and design that has been made, it symbolises the forms of changes occurring within the social-political setting in Malaysia. This has also been illustrated through the selection of colours that has been used and which is intended to be understood by the Malaysian society to represent every race's, celebrations along with political parties which have represented in the layer cakes.

Traditionally, food can be found in shops or restaurants, but now the food has been placed and exhibited in a gallery. Food has a great meaning in Malay custom, where it should not be "wasted" because it is against religious regulations. In Muslim rule, it is seen as sinful if food is purposely wasted. Thus, all the cakes were distributed amongst friends and viewers after the exhibition. As Bahauddin (1999) has pointed out, "in Malaysia, using foods as material for artworks was unacceptable."

"Lapis" (Layers) is formed from a Malay word which means layers and is closely related to the Malaysian people who share a number of cultural values, practices and beliefs among the community. "Lapis" (Layers) represents the elements of different cultures in Malaysia, presented in the form of an artwork. The production of this artwork is derived from the concept of "One Malaysia" - unity of all Malaysian people. This ideal notion of unity came from Malaysia's current Prime Minister, Najib Razak, as he believes, "It is the goal of national

unity envisioned by past prime ministers of this nation with different approaches and methods according to the current condition of the world” (Baharom, 2009). I shall elaborate further on this idea later in this chapter.

In this project, traditional methods and modern techniques were used in the process of making the layer cakes. Elements of the colours and arrangement of patterns were chosen based on the multiracial culture in Malaysia. In this artwork, layer cakes have been improvised in terms of recipe and technique. The improvisation has been done in the process of creating the patterns and designing the decoration inside and on the outer part of the layer cakes. I have used specific colours and equipment to create a geometrical pattern, while the process of making the cakes still retains traditional values such as colour and taste.

The arrangement of the decorative design and pattern refers to a mixture of Malaysian traditional identities juxtaposed with modern geometrical shapes. It also shows the unique cultural elements in Malaysia taken from a combination of local and modern ways of life. Photographic prints were also produced, documenting the process from the early stage of constructing the artwork through to the final product. The series of photographic prints are significant in the process of documentation of the layer cake as the cakes themselves are perishable. The artwork of the layer cakes with decorative designs and patterns was recorded to illustrate the unique process.

3.2.2 Artworks from “Lapis” (Layers)

(Exhibition at Bank Street Arts Gallery, Sheffield, 15 September - 3 October 2009)

The “Lapis” (Layers) exhibition, based on my personal interpretation as an artist and academician, went one step further than my first solo exhibition, in which the artwork was concerned with representing Malaysian local identity and the hybrid process in local culture. Within my first solo exhibition, I recorded, commented, criticised and discussed my views on my people, my country and my culture, where hybridity is an essential process in today’s cultural development. In my “Lapis” (Layers) exhibition, Sarawakian layer cakes symbolise the characteristics of hybrid culture in Malaysia. The continuing issue of hybridity from my “Nusantara... Aram Kitai Bejalai” (Let’s Travel) exhibition was extended, with a new medium embarked upon to express my critical review of Malaysian contemporary art practice.

The concept of “mind journey” as mentioned in the previous chapter, based on my Malaysian cultural experiences, will be discussed further in this chapter in the context of my artwork. This artwork included twelve layer cakes and eleven roll cakes, which were used to portray the process of hybridisation and symbolise the Malaysian art tradition. In this study, I have planned, explored and selected a new media to discuss the issue of hybridity. Leading from the themes of my first exhibition, I have chosen a media that is closely connected to the identity of the Malaysian society. Therefore, the layer cakes have been used as the new media in my second exhibition. The exploration and the selection of

fabric and food are very important to enable me to study the structure and culture of the multiracial society in Malaysia. The media that is used explains the various languages, celebration and values of the Malaysians. In addition, the use of the traditional fabric and food is also an important element to portray the concept of unity in the Malaysian society through the aspects of national culture that has been shared all this while. In this research, I intend to investigate the concept of unity from a different point of view through the political aspect and further illustrate my ideas in a form of visual arts. Besides that, there were forty-nine photographic prints of all the layer cakes including the processes involved in creating the patterns within the cake. These major processes have gone through several experiments; it took me about five months to produce all the pieces for my second solo exhibition. Besides producing the layer cakes using different techniques, I also tried to compress Malaysian symbols and heritages that refer to our national flag, political party, traditional Malay costume and flora, by using geometrical arrangements for presentation purposes. Further discussion on this area can be found on page 134 of this chapter.

I started the process of cake making with the first layer cake representing the national flag of Malaysia, *Jalur Gemilang*⁴⁰ (Flag of Malaysia) (Fig. 3.15). The red and white section of Malaysia's flag exemplifies the integration of fourteen states in Malaysia, while the blue colour refers to the multiracial people of Malaysia.

⁴⁰ Flag of Malaysia or *Jalur Gemilang* means luminous, light and excellent, contains red and white stripes represent 14 states in Malaysia.



Figure 3.15
Cake 1, 2009.
20cm X 10cm X6cm.

In Malay tradition, the yellow colour represents Royal Majesty and Kings, especially in the feudal era. Yellow is a symbol of royalty, and during that period, only the royal family could use this colour. The process of making this piece was considered as a very basic step in preparing a layer cake. The layers were placed layer by layer on one another inside an electric oven. The layering process is important as it symbolises the multiracial society in Malaysia that carries different traditions and values. The different cultures have existed in Malaysia since the sixteenth century. After British colonisation, the Malaysian government set up the National Cultural Policy to ensure unity among Malaysian people. However, as the layers are just attached within each other, the ideal notion of the National Culture seems to be impossible to achieve. The Chinese and Indians in Malaysia still use their native languages at primary school level. The young generation, regardless of race, should study under one national school system because if children are separated by race and tradition at a young age it will be difficult to achieve unity among Malaysian people. Thus, the very basic layer of the layer cake symbolises these circumstances, the fact that attempting to “merge” different values from dissimilar ethnicities is not easy. The different values refer to different colours based on ethnicities in Malaysia (Fig. 3.16).

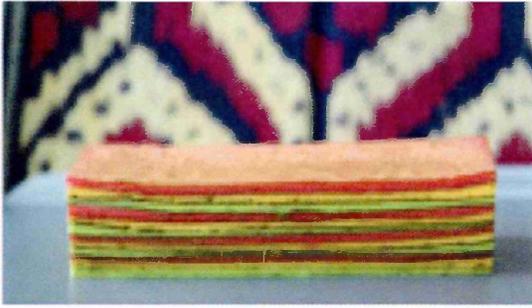


Figure 3.16
Cake 2, 2009.
20cm X 10cm X6cm.

In this piece, I used green to refer the Malay community, as green is also the Islamic colour; red to refer the Chinese, as red is the symbol of prosperity; and yellow to refer to Indians, as yellow is worn by their priests. I chose these based on the common use of these colours in their respective traditions in religious celebrations, such as Eid for Malays, Chinese New Year for Chinese and Diwali for Indians.

The new Sarawak layer cake project portrays various symbols and metaphors that reflect on local values (Fig. 3.17). The bright and vivid colours as created in this layer cake refer to the large tracts of tropical rain forest which are home to an abundance of flora and fauna in Sarawak, which features vast areas of both lowland and highland forest. The blue and red represent the flora and fauna and the green refers to Sarawak's rainforest.



Figure 3.17
Cake 3, 2009.
20cm X 10cm X6cm.

In reality, Sarawak's rainforest has been decreased by the logging industry and the way of life of the local people in the rural area has been affected. The Penan⁴¹ community have been hit hard by the extensive logging activities that have encroached on their traditional territories. The logging activities have caused major pollution as well as affected the natural environment. At this point, I feel that the involvement of the government in the logging activities has reshaped the traditional practice of the Penan tribe. The logging activity has also tarnished the beauty of Sarawak's rainforest.

Artwork that reflects the colourful Malaysian tradition can be found in my next production of layer cakes (Fig. 3.18 and Fig. 3.19).

⁴¹ The Penan are nomadic aboriginal people living in remote area in Sarawak. Bruno Manser, an environmental activist, brought the Penan to national and international awareness when he helped the Penan people to activate and resist logging activities in Sarawak.



Figure 3.18
Cake 4, 2009.
20cm X 10cm X6cm.



Figure 3.19
Cake 8, 2009.
20cm X 10cm X6cm.

The colours were arranged in a triangle shape, comprising the multiethnic peoples of Malaysia. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the colours represent different ethnicities in Malaysia. I took brown for other ethnic groups from Sabah and Sarawak, which is located in the Eastern part of Malaysia. The other blue colour reflected the symbol of unity from Malaysia's national flag. Both artworks also depict the concept of "One Malaysia" announced by Malaysian Prime Minister, Najib Razak (2009), as he stressed that:

I had introduced the One Malaysia concept as the key thrust of my administration...the ultimate goal of One Malaysia, which is national unity, has been the main vision of our country's leaders before me, and has been interpreted in various shapes and forms over the span of five decades of Independence. One Malaysia is a concept to foster unity amongst the multi-ethnic peoples of Malaysia, substantiated

by key values that every Malaysian should observe. The approach is not independent of the government's policies thus far, instead its complements them to further reinforce our solidarity in order to guarantee stability towards achieving higher growth and development for Malaysia and her people. This means that One Malaysia formula is conceptualized as a precondition in ensuring the aspirations of the country to secure a developed status by 2020 are met...This definition is built upon the argument that in order to achieve the status of developed nation in the predetermined time frame, the key requisite is a strong and stable country, which can only be achieved when its people stand united.

The idea of "One Malaysia" which is based on the unity of the Malaysian people is not a new concept. The Prime Minister claims that the "One Malaysia" concept is the most crucial factor in how to attain Bangsa Malaysia (Malaysian Race). Therefore, it is my goal to transfer this ideal aspiration of unity in my artwork (Fig. 3.20, Fig. 3.21) as the layers represent the multiethnic society in Malaysia.



Figure 3.20
Cake 5, 2009. 20cm X 10cm X6cm.



Figure 3.21
Cake 6, 2009.
20cm X 10cm X6cm.

However, a racial gap does exist in Malaysia when certain Malaysians isolate themselves according to their races. The different school systems, geographical factors and races divide Malay, Chinese and Indian people into different areas. Furthermore, the economic sector, which has been dominated by the Chinese since the era of colonisation, has meant Malaysia became divided and not entirely united. After fifty-two years of independence from the British, could Malaysian citizens achieve this aspiration of unity? Where is the turning point for this ambitious aim? With this “One Malaysia” concept, it is the Malaysian hope to disprove the racial gap and reunite the human race. The definition of solidarity is to unite all Malaysians to become a single race, called Malaysian. The question is, whether the Malays, Chinese, Indians and other ethnic groups are willing to become Bangsa Malaysia (Malaysian Race)?

The scenario of becoming “One Malaysia” is a hybrid process of assimilating various cultures among races in Malaysia. Every culture from different races such as in Malaysia is a mixture of local and global elements. In the Malaysian context, this is a process to construct national identity. There still a gap between Malay, Chinese and Indian, when Malays are the Bumiputera (sons of the soil) and the Chinese and Indian are non-Bumiputera. Malays, as Bumiputera, are privileged in having a “special position”⁴² such as in the granting of scholarships for education and other subsidies from the government. As Adam (2004) stated, the “special position” was drafted on the basis of a report from the Reid Commission, which stated that “provision should be made in the Constitution for the safeguarding of the special position of the Malays and the legitimate

⁴² As stated in the Federal Constitution of Malaysia, in particular Article 153. The article specifies how the Malaysian government may protect the Malay and other native peoples by establishing quotas for entry into the civil services, public scholarships and public education.

interests of the other communities.” In addition, as Jawan (2003) said, the Reid Commission was an independent commission responsible for drafting the Constitution of the Federation of Malaya prior to Malayan independence from the British on 31 August 1957. There has been a significant debate from the other races regarding this “special position” (Fig. 3.20). The separated colours between Bumiputera and non-Bumiputera are divided into triangular and rectangular shapes. This separation is a reality in Malaysian society when the issue of the “special position” for the Malays and natives has been argued against by the non-Bumiputera. Although the Malaysian government encourages unity among races in the Federal Constitution of Malaysia, the concept of Bumiputera and non-Bumiputera is still practised. Through artwork (Fig. 3.20), I intend to show the process of hybridisation of all the races in Malaysia is still current, but the strategy to implement it in Malaysian cultural identity seems to be disorganised and capable of upsetting the orderly system in the Federal Constitution of Malaysia (Fig. 3.21).

The arrangement of the pattern which represents the Malaysian community was designed in disorganised way, but when examined carefully, the arrangement was made with a very cautious technique. Every part of the cake was repeatedly made from triangle shapes in harmonic arrangement, yet when it was integrated; it looked like a chaotic design. Hence, I feel that the contradiction of unity among races and the “special position” for Bumiputera in “One Malaysia” in the years since the formulation of the National Cultural Policy has become an important point of vigorous debate and political conflict. The Malaysian government has been concerned to implement its basic principles in this policy by intervening directly in the cultural field. Perhaps the notion of the

National Cultural Policy and the concept of “One Malaysia” has not been altogether clear and efficient in its task, and has produced a response from the non-Bumiputera, who feel that their cultural freedom has been threatened (Fig. 3.21).

My next exploration of the political scene in Malaysia was constructed in the works (Fig. 3.22, Fig. 3.23, Fig. 3.24). These three artworks represent the unity of the two most influential opposition political parties in Malaysia, Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS)⁴³ or Islamic Party of Malaysia, and Democratic Action Party (DAP).⁴⁴

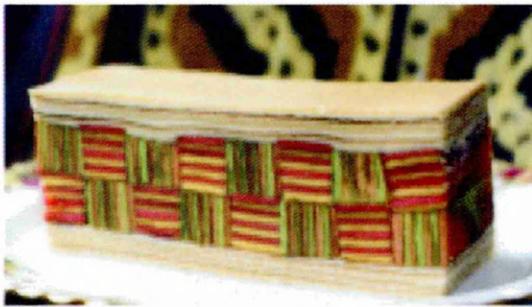


Figure 3.22
Cake 11, 2009.
20cm X 10cm X6cm.

⁴³ PAS was formed in March 1947 and has been known by several names such as, *Majlis Agama Tertinggi* (MATA), Hizbul Muslimin and Pan-Malayan Islamic Association. The aim of PAS is to establish Malaysia as a country based on Islamic legal theory derived from the primary source of Islam.

⁴⁴ DAP was formed in October 1965. DAP is a secular, multiracial and social democratic Malaysian political party. The majority of members of DAP are Chinese but it also receives support from Malays and Indians. The DAP gained prominence for its advocacy of the “Malaysian Malaysia” concept.



Figure 3.23
Roll 1, 2009. 20cm X 4cm X 4cm.



Figure 3.24
Roll 3, 2009. 20cm X 4cm X 4cm.

Another opposition party that joined PAS and DAP is Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR)⁴⁵ or People's Justice Party, who used light blue in their trademark logo (Noor, 2004). Moreover, as Noor added, all these three political parties later formed Pakatan Rakyat (PR)⁴⁶ or People's Alliance. The hybrid process of this coalition between PAS and DAP was portrayed in my artwork as mentioned above. By looking at the colour as a symbol for both political parties, green for PAS and Red for DAP. Even though there is no such idea as "One Malaysia", the truth that different races can work with each other to carry out another "unity" in society can be realised in practical way. The artworks symbolise the

⁴⁵ PKR was formed in 2003 and promotes a strong social justice and anti-corruption emphasis. The PKR also emphasizes a non-ethnic approach in poverty eradication and correcting economic imbalances.

⁴⁶ PR is an informal Malaysian political coalition formed in April 1, 2008. The PAS, DAP and PKR who collectively worked together during the 12th Malaysian general election in 2008.

possibility of different ideologies uniting together to uphold the rights and interests of all Malaysians.

The final one of my artworks that illustrates the Malaysian political scene can be seen in Figure 3.25. In this piece, I attempted to portray the idea of unity in Malaysian political scenery, where the entire nation can engage under the same alliance. The arrangement of colours in this layer cake represents all the prominent political parties such as PAS, DAP and PKR under the Pakatan Rakyat or People's Alliance linked with the current government which is Barisan Nasional (BN)⁴⁷ or National Front. As Rachagan (1993) claims, the Barisan Nasional defines itself as "a confederation of political parties which subscribe to the objects of the Barisan Nasional." Rachagan added that during elections each individual constituent party also issues its own manifesto despite using the BN manifesto.

Conventionally, every political party in Malaysia has its own manifesto throughout the election campaign, and these "invisible manifestos" were presented in the cake (Fig. 3.25), where unity is the main principle in multiracial Malaysia.

⁴⁷ *Barisan Nasional* (BN) was formed in 1973 is a major political coalition and ruled Malaysia since independence. The three largest race-based parties under the BN is the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC).



Figure 3.25
Cake 10, 2009. 20cm X 10cm X6cm.

BN is in dark blue, placed together with the light blue, green and red colours that represent PR or People's Alliance. The artwork symbolises the idea of "Unity Government" or the Government of National Unity between Barisan Nasional and Pakatan Rakyat. As an artist, I try to illustrate this idea as the most "ideal" solution for Malaysia in which political conflict can be avoided. The idea of unity hopefully will overcome the problems that are against the economic crisis, which to me is the main objective for Malaysian political leaders. Racial politics has always been an unavoidable fact of life in Malaysia because the communities have deep-rooted cultural links to the past, and races in Malaysia are predominantly defined by religions. In general, Malays are associated with Islam, Chinese with Buddhism and Indians with Hinduism. Christianity is also widely practised by the Indians, Chinese and other races, especially in Sabah and Sarawak, and there are also many other religions of importance such as Sikhism. Thus, this artwork symbolised the hope for unity, where racial egos and chauvinism bow down to humanism.

Apart from political issues, the social context of hybrid culture in Malaysia has been touched on in the production of my artwork, such as Malay traditional costume. As an artist who consistently uses images from Malaysian traditional

culture, I was truly amazed with Malays Baju Kurung⁴⁸, also better known as Baju Kurung Teluk Belanga or Baju Kurung Johor, which was made from cotton fabric, either plain in colour or with a printed design. This costume was not only famous for the Malays of Johor; it expanded to other states in Malaysia and is now recognised as the national dress. As an academician, I used to hold a post as the Director of Cultural Centre in Sultan Idris University of Education, Malaysia, and most of the Cultural Centre's collection of Baju Kurung designs came from Johor. Nowadays, the characteristics of this costume have been changed with modern touches and appearance, but it still retains the original shape. Therefore, I used the idea of Baju Kurung in my artwork (Fig. 3.26).



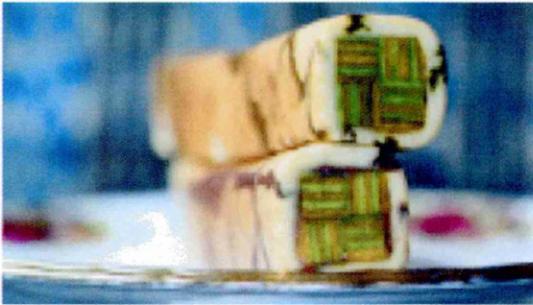
Figure 3.26
Cake 7, 2009. 20cm X 10cm X6cm.

Baju Kurung, with its very colourful pattern and design, was worn mostly by Malays during the festival. As mentioned earlier, the costume has been modernised with a new appearance such as type of fabric and variety of printed design. The process of improvisation of this traditional costume has been made due to vast changes in the fashion industry. Many local fashion designers came out with a new type of Baju Kurung and named it Baju Kurung Moden or

⁴⁸ This costume was popular in Johor, one of the state in South West Malaysia and for the men dress, it was worn during the reign of Sultan of Johor, the late Sultan Abu Bakar who lived in Teluk Belanga, Singapore in 1886. It was worn by men and women with the special characteristic for each gender. See: SARI, 1987. Malay Culture, Literature and Language. Kuala Lumpur: National University of Malaysia, 1987, p. 106.

Modern Baju Kurung. Moreover, the fabric used to make this costume is no longer cotton; it can also be made from nylon, satin or silk, and to add further elegance, colour and charm to the dress, embroidery is added. Thus, in this piece, I tried to merge the traditional and modern in the traditional Malay female costume Baju Kurung which can be seen from the shape of the costume. While maintaining the loose cut, a wide open cut in the neck area was made, to show the combination of traditional and modern elements in this traditional attire.

Another artwork that reflects images from Malaysia is traditional Malay food. The traditional food ketupat⁴⁹, food famous during the Eid festival, has been transferred to roll cakes (Figs. 3.27, 3.28, 3.329, 3.30).



3.27
Roll 4, 2009. 20cm X 4cm X 4cm.

⁴⁹ *Ketupat* is a type of dumpling, made from rice and wrapped in a woven palm leaf pouch then boiled. When the rice cooks, the grains will expand to fill the pouch and the rice becomes compressed.

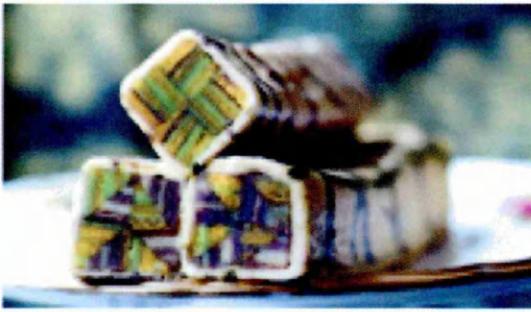


Figure 3.28
Roll 5, 2009. 20cm X 4cm X 4cm.

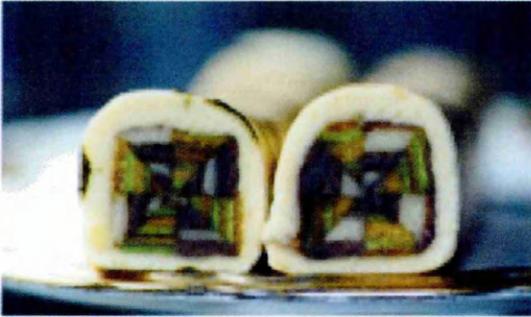


Figure 3.29
Roll 6, 2009. 20cm X 4cm X 4cm.

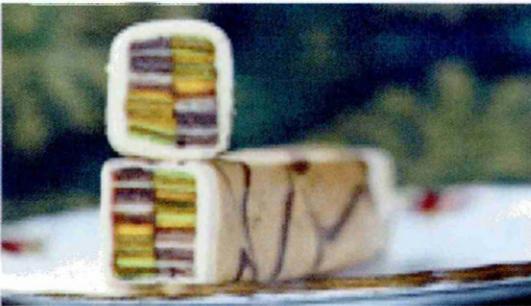


Figure 3.30
Roll 7, 2009. 20cm X 4cm X 4cm.

Besides Malaysia, this traditional food can also be found in Indonesia, Brunei, Singapore and the Philippines, where there are Malays rooted in the Southeast Asian region. The ketupat designs on roll cakes represent the significant unity among Malay communities. This traditional food portrays the hybrid process of traditional and modern elements. The grain is wrapped in a square shape either with palm or coconut leaves with traditional wrapping technique, in an “origami

like” bundle, and needs to be cooked with modern technology such as a gas cooker, perfectly served after cooking for eight hours. Hence, in my artwork the colourful design of ketupat can be seen inside the roll as a symbol of “wrapping” the pattern which performs the same metaphor of unity in society.

The exploration of making the roll cakes can be enhanced to another complex design such as in my artwork in Figure 3.31.



Figure 3.31
Roll 2, 2009. 20cm X 4cm X 4cm.

As such, the artwork (Fig. 3.32) refers to the symbol of Bunga Raya⁵⁰ or Hibiscus Rosa.



Figure 3.32
Roll 8, 2009. 8cm X 10cm X 8m.

⁵⁰Bunga Raya is the national flower of Malaysia. It was declared by Malaysian Ministry of Agriculture in 1960.

The geometrical shape of Bunga Raya in Malaysian tradition symbolises the courage, life and rapid growth of Malaysia, and it can even be found imprinted on the notes and coins of the Malaysian currency. In my artwork (Fig. 3.33), I try to present the symbol of colonisation from Western country in Malaya in the era of Dutch in Malacca.



Figure 3.33
Roll 9, 2009. 20cm X 4cm X 8m.

The production of all the artwork was exhibited in two forms: the actual production of layer and roll cakes; and photographic prints of all the artworks. At this point, the photographic prints transformed the actual layer cakes into documentation of the artwork as well as acting as a record of the process of making the cakes. The layer cakes have a limited existence because no preservative was used. In this regard, photography was needed in order to preserve an otherwise perishable artwork. The display of some of these photographs at the entrance to the exhibition was also to amplify the visual designs of the cake and to highlight the aesthetic qualities. To achieve this I borrowed photographic techniques used by cookery books to best illustrate prepared food dishes. Apart from documenting the layer cakes in this way, the photographic prints were also done to connect the layer cake images with the decorative patterns of the Malaysian Pua Kumbu fabric behind them. As

mentioned, the idea of geometrical shape which was arranged inside the layer cake was taken from the decorative pattern of the Pua Kumbu.

The process of making the cakes was a merging of both traditional and modern techniques as a new approach to transform the cake into artwork. Besides, all evidence of these processes and artwork documentation has been transferred to DVD. In the exhibition, the actual layer and roll cakes were presented on Royal Albert "Old Country Roses" bone china dinnerware. This very English dinnerware was placed together with the artworks during the exhibition and can be seen clearly in the group of artworks (Fig. 3.34 - Figs. 3.40). For these artworks, the famous Old Country Roses pattern was juxtaposed with Sarawakian layer cakes as a symbol of Western and Eastern cultures. It has been re-contextualised to a new form of hybrid expression in Malaysian culture.



Figure 3.34
Roll 10, 2009. 4cm X 4cm X 7 pieces



Figure 3.35
Roll 11, 2009. 12cm X 16cm.



Figure 3.36
Roll 12, 2009. 12cm X 16cm.



Figure 3.37
Roll 13, 2009. 12cm X 16cm.



Figure 3.38
Roll 14, 2009. 12cm X 16cm.



Figure 3.39
Roll 15, 2009. 12cm X 16cm.



Figure 3.40
Roll 16, 2009.
12cm X 12cm X 2 plates, 12cm X 16cm X 3 plates.

In the “Lapis” (Layers) exhibition, the medium of food was used to convey symbolically the ideas of nourishing, celebrating and sharing. In addition, the labour-intensive nature of carefully crafting the layer cakes therefore conceptually became an important part of my artwork, signifying the task of nation building. Therefore, it is important to elucidate the concept of unity in a multiracial country such as Malaysia with the influences of global culture. Using the medium of food to produce an artwork is an uncommon practice in Malaysia, especially by a Malay artist. I chose Sarawakian layer cakes to express my idea on hybridity because with this cuisine, I was able to construct the geometrical pattern with selected colours to create a symbol of unity, political issues and a critical view on Malaysian social aspects. Moreover, with the layer cake as a well known Malaysian cuisine, I found this hybrid process of improvising the pattern could change the cake into a very meaningful artwork compared to other traditional Malaysian cuisines. Another reason why I chose Sarawakian layer cakes rather than other food is that the process of arranging the different patterns, colours and shapes in the layer cake can be done more easily. In the exhibition, the layer cakes were wrapped to preserve the cakes, so that the food was not wasted (see the note above about Islamic principles

and wasting food) and the wrapping also highlighted this as a perishable, temporary and changing medium.

3.3 Studio Project: Prints on Pua Kumbu and Batik

3.3.1 Introduction

Traditional Malaysian fabric (Pua Kumbu) and Batik were used in my first exploration of hybridity in my practical studio work. This is where the process of hybridisation can be seen in my practice, in the process of production of media and images that portray Malaysia as a multiracial country. These artworks were constructed in the United Kingdom, so this was an opportunity for me to voice my ideas on themes of globalisation, modernisation and hybridisation in contemporary Malaysian art. Apart from that, political issues were touched upon, as well as the juxtaposition of images, text and medium.

The fabric Pua Kumbu comes from the Iban tribe in Sarawak, which is one of the two Malaysian states on the island of Borneo. Known as Bumi Kenyalang (Land of the Hornbills) it is situated in the north-west of the island. The Iban are a branch of the Dayak people of Borneo. They were formerly known by the British during the colonial period as Sea Dayak (Strouthes, 1993). In the process of modernisation the Iban today are generally becoming increasingly heavily urbanised but still retain most of their traditional heritage and culture (Kedit, 1997).

The uses of Pua Kumbu are closely related in the traditional life of the Iban. These textiles are used in ceremonies and rituals surrounding birth, marriage, death and mourning, healing and harvest festivals. Sarawak Museum (2005) has stated that, technically excellent in comparison to any ikat weaving of other cultures, powerful in its allegorical symbols which relate to flora and fauna in Iban ritual, the warp-ikat pua kumbu is an outstanding material culture of Sarawak (Sarawak Museum, 2005). The technique of ikat, the Malay word for “to tie” or bind, and the textiles, which are woven on back-strap looms with indigenous techniques of warp-faced weaving and resist-bound dyeing, are an important part of the rich culture of craft of Sarawak (Ong,1997). Furthermore, Pua Kumbu is also used to veil structures containing charms and offerings in farming rituals. As Ong (2006) indicates, they are not merely cloths for garments, but have a special and religious significance. This might well instil a curiosity towards the cultural heritage of the people and the largely anonymous weavers. All the images were considered mystic in the Iban tribe’s ceremonies until the design was fully commercialised as nowadays.

Batik is a wax-resist dyeing technique used on textiles. Batik is both an art and a craft, which is becoming more popular and well known in the West as a creative medium. Artists from Malaysia use Batik to create artworks especially in Batik painting. Regarding the relation between craft and art, Piyadasa (2002) asserts Batik painting has certainly allowed for a sense of artistic continuity with the craft traditions of the “Malay” and the regional past. Batik patterns have been improvised in many different ways to cater for the specific needs of the people. This is due to market demand and, as well as flora and fauna which

have been used as prominent patterns, geometrical and abstract patterns can be found in the production of batik craft nowadays.

Malaysian Batik typically includes symbols of flora and fauna and some pieces may have mystic influences. The contemporary Batik, while owing much to the past, is markedly different from the more traditional and formal styles. In Sarawak, Batik was printed with the pattern of Pua Kumbu or colourful geometrical designs. The use of these fabrics emulates important cultural elements that impart a unique identity to the different ethnic groups that constitute contemporary Malaysia. Pua Kumbu and Batik have been chosen as a platform to explore and introduce new aspects of visual culture in dialogue with the current practices of contemporary art in Malaysia.

Although the process of hybridisation and modernisation is rapid in Sarawak, traditional values are well-treasured. However, a unique cultural fusion is happening and it can be seen from the perspective of visual arts. Traditional ways of producing Pua Kumbu and Batik are modernised, to cater to the escalating demand to make them as souvenirs. Modern machinery has helped those in the industry to experiment with different materials and to cut the processing time whilst enabling them to maintain the pattern of the fabrics.

Digitally altered imagery and texts derived from Iban proverbs were combined on Pua Kumbu and Batik textiles to suggest a re-contextualisation of these various cultural streams. In my artwork, the proverbs are meant to invoke a tension between traditional local life and the rapid changes in lifestyle caused by Malaysia's increasing participation in global political and economic

developments. Each proverb is meant to resonate with and re-contextualise the image that it accompanies.

The Iban proverbs were taken from the book *Jaku' Dalam* by Janang Ensering, published by The Tun Jugah Foundation, Malaysia, 2006. There are more than 9,457 proverbs in the book and only forty-six were selected at the final stage. The proverbs were translated into Malay prior to English translation. Translation from Malay to English was done as I found that the Malay words are easier to translate into English. It was quite difficult to retain the “essence” of the proverbs. This is mainly due to the limitation of appropriate vocabulary to really fit the context of the proverb. Apart from that, there is currently no Iban to English translation of Iban proverbs.

In order to ensure the meaning of each proverb was retained, I decided to use simple English to highlight the main issue addressed in each proverb. The text was then silk-screened together with constructed images on the fabrics. The proverbs were selected based on their relationship or reference to attitudes towards local life and the modern way of life style. The size of Pua Kumbu is approximately 107cm X 53cm (24 pieces) and 180cm X 44cm (4 pieces). The size of batik is approximately 140cm X 94cm (18 pieces). This project comes from a response to the hybridity in culture and technology for the Malaysian peoples, especially the Iban. The Iban today are becoming heavily urbanised but they still retain most of their traditional heritage and culture.

The Iban texts were chosen as the Pua Kumbu is a fabric work by that tribe. The combination of selected texts and Pua Kumbu is a new experimental

process of producing artwork from the fabric of Pua Kumbu. If the exhibition were held in Malaysia, people would perceive it differently because of the printing work on the fabrics. Furthermore, I am not from the Iban tribe, therefore there might be a furore and these artworks might be considered as being disrespectful towards the tribe by exploiting a version of 'sacred fabrics'. Holding the exhibition outside Malaysia gives me the chance to experiment with this concept. As with other visual artists in Malaysia, it is almost impossible to display so-called controversial artworks in local art galleries or open exhibitions, even in the name of artistic experimentation. Artists are bound by certain restrictive regulations; this issue will be discussed further later in this chapter.

However, I have my own reason to attempt such experimentation. I strongly feel that by adding a textual element the process of re-contextualisation of Pua Kumbu and Batik would add more value to the existing functions of the selected materials. Even now, Pua Kumbu and Batik no longer serve their typical function in Malaysian society, such as decorative wall items or as a part of traditional clothing. Crafts such as shoes, handbags and accessories based on these materials flooded the markets, showing that the process of cultural commercialisation is widespread in Malaysia. Nonetheless, it is almost impossible to stop the process of hybridisation and modernisation. For example, printed Pua Kumbu and Batik, although the printed form is not considered as authentic, nevertheless is accepted as representative of the real thing. Coupled with the arrival of the information age and the impact of ongoing globalisation, the production of Pua Kumbu attempts to explore new directions. Technological advancement also plays its role, as the original hand-woven Pua Kumbu, once considered a sacred cloth, can now be bought online via the internet. Ancient

artefacts are traded daily and replicas are accepted as representations that retain the intricacies and the beauty of the originals. As the production of these artworks retain the original designs of the Pua Kumbu and Batik, the cultural values that are embedded in the materials are not ruined by my process of re-contextualisation and hybridisation.

One of the methods of this research is image selection. I have a collection of Malaysian images ranging from the field of politics, economics and society from a database on visual culture with Malaysian subject matter. As well as these images, visual images of western arts were combined. Images from western reference points were chosen as there are visual similarities between the religious elements, cultural performance and the way of life in that work and the Iban culture. In addition to images related to the impact of colonialism, significant events from pre and post-Independence Day were also selected. I feel that these had an important impact on Malaysian visual culture and are also an important element needing to be enhanced in the production of the artefacts.

As Anuar (2004) claimed, politics has a dominant role in Malaysian culture: the economy and the social field are very much shaped by the aspiration to achieve political stability, and the local contemporary art scene is very much affected by these too. In Malaysia, contemporary visual arts have their roots in the 1930s. I feel that local cultures should be introduced and presented in a way that is appropriate to the process of hybridisation. Therefore, selected images in this project also act as a symbol of the “mind journey” of my experiences, based on my knowledge and interpretation, which could well shape the Malaysian arts scene. The concept of “mind journey” (as mentioned in the Introduction) is the

understanding of a process of a journey through Malaysian cultures from my experience as an academician, artist and performer to explore and to produce artworks from this cultural involvement.

3.3.2 Artworks from "Nusantara" Aram Kitai Bejalai... ("Nusantara" Let's Travel...)

(Exhibition at Sheffield Institute of Art and Design Gallery, Sheffield Hallam University, 15-26 October 2008 and University of Wales Gregynog, Powys, Wales, 26-28 November 2008)

An array of issues related to the process of hybridisation on Malaysian social, political and economical life was presented in the printed artwork on Pua Kumbu and Batik. The selected texts and images narrow down the sociological aspects which relate to traditional and modern values of Malaysia in dealing with changes on the global scene. The combination of texts and images opens up a space for dialogue, as an opportunity for me to explore the possibilities of such media. I have chosen the colonial era as a turning point for the "Nusantara...Aram Kitai Bejalai" (Let's Travel) exhibition, and the choice of the aforementioned fabrics as a symbol of local values. Starting from the colonial era of Sarawak, and the pre and post- independence of the Malay Peninsula, the social, economical and political development was very much influenced by the Portuguese, Dutch, Japanese, and English. These influences shaped the formation of Malaysia. The administrative system in Malaysia was inherited from the British government during the colonial era. Malaysia, which consists of the Malay Peninsula, Sabah and Sarawak, was formed on 16 September 1963. The effect of this merger is the Dasar Kebudayaan Kebangsaan, known as the

National Cultural Policy, where the way of local life and value creates an identity of Malaysian society. I have tried to construct images and text in response to the impact of colonisation. Thus, it is important to reveal these post-colonial influences and the impact they have on the current development of the country.

Silkscreen printing was experimented with as a way to convey the intended meanings. During the solo exhibition, the artworks were placed in the tradition of Malay peoples welcoming their guests. The use of *Tepak Sirih*⁵¹ as a symbol of respect to guests started in the feudal era in the Malay Archipelago. Nowadays, it is still used in Malay weddings; hence, in my first work (Fig. 3.41), the use of the word "Welcome" metaphorically signifies a cordial invitation for the audience to experience the exhibition. In Malay culture, guests are respected and should be addressed in a proper manner.

⁵¹ Betel container (*tepak sirih*) contains seven uniquely selected items: betel nut, lime (*kapur*), extract from the leaves of gambier plant (*gambir*), tobacco, betel leaves and nutcracker (*kacip*). The offering of *sirih* indicates the value placed upon respect for others and upon refined behaviour.

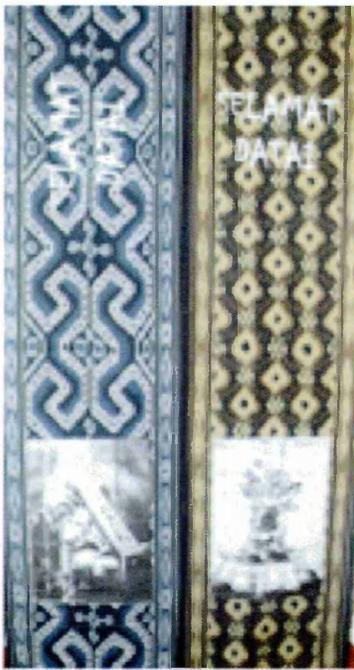


Figure 3.41
Pua 1, Pua 2, 2008.
Silkscreen on cloth, 180cm X 88cm.

In this exhibition, I tried to create a different way of exhibiting all the artworks. As in the traditional Malaysian custom, especially for the Malays and the Iban tribes in their longhouse, guests are invited to sit on the floor, which is fully covered, and this is how guests are respected. The artworks were positioned on the floor, as a symbol of a journey through the entire exhibition relating to the title 'Nusantara...Aram Kitai Bejalai' (Let's travel). I intended to show my respect to the artwork by putting it on the floor for the exhibition. This is the same as Muslim peoples performing their prayers using sejadah.⁵² The history of colonialism in Sarawak, a state in Malaysia, was presented with images from the White Rajahs⁵³ family (Fig. 3.42, Fig. 3.43, Fig. 3.44) who ruled Sarawak from 1842 to 1941.

⁵² Prayer mat – a small mat used by Muslim people to do the prayer.

⁵³ The White Rajahs refer to a dynasty that founded and ruled the Kingdom of Sarawak from 1842 to 1941, namely the Brookes, who came originally from England.

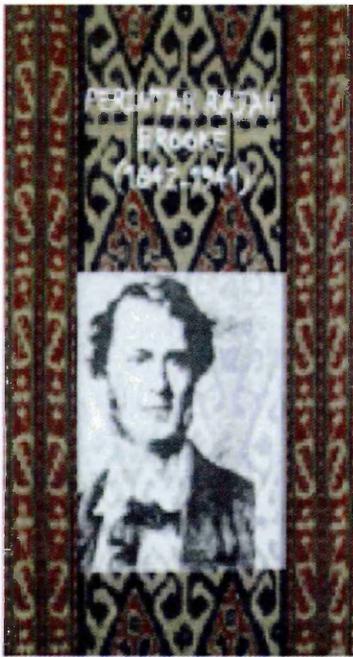


Figure 3.42
Pua 3, 2008.
Silkscreen on cloth, 107cm X 53cm.



Figure 3.43
Pua 4, 2008.
Silkscreen on cloth, 107cm X 53cm.

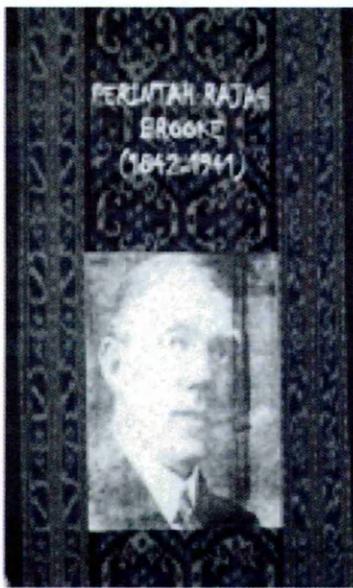


Figure 3.44
Pua 5, 2008.
Silkscreen on cloth, 107cm X 53cm.

My thirteen years' experience of teaching in Sarawak revealed the impact of colonialism on the social strata of the Sarawakian community during British rule. This occurred when Indonesia claimed Sarawak as part of their country and the Philippines claimed Sabah, which was under the rule of the Sulu Kingdom.⁵⁴ When Malaysia was created in 1963, peoples from Sabah and Sarawak decided to be part of Malaysia. In relation to what Ashcroft (2000) has mentioned, "the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone", colonisation has affected the local cultures. Buildings, transportation, religion and the formation of the residential areas were heavily influenced by English culture. Before "Nusantara...Aram Kitai Bejalai", (Let's Travel) my previous artwork dealt with icons related to the Sarawakians. Thus, the selection of "The White Rajahs of Sarawak" - James Brooke, Charles Brooke and Charles Vyner Brooke, who ruled Sarawak for almost hundred years - suits the theme of external influences having an impact on traditional Sarawakian culture.

⁵⁴ Sulu Kingdom is a part of Muslim government who controlled the Sulu Sea in South Philippines. It is part of the Philippines nowadays

In Malaysia, Sarawakians represent a unique multicultural element and I feel that the Sarawakian dances are an important element that should be highlighted. I try to bridge this element with Edgar Degas' images of ballet series as juxtaposition with local dance tradition (Fig. 3.45). The traditional dance from Sarawak, Ngajat⁵⁵ and Datun Julud⁵⁶ is a symbol of local culture yet has become part of Malaysian identity in performance art. The traditional dance from indigenous group in Malaysia has been thought to ensure it will still remain. These traditional dances have also been performed during the harvest festival and other Malaysian Festivals. I aimed to make a statement in the artwork with the production of the ballet series from Edgar Degas and the image of traditional dance – Ngajat and Datun Julud (Fig. 3.46, Fig. 3.47).



Figure 3.45
Pua 6, 2008.
Silkscreen on cloth, 107cm X 53cm.

⁵⁵ This dance is now performed to celebrate the most important harvest festival, called 'Gawai', to welcome important guests to the longhouses, and so on.

⁵⁶ The Datun Julud or "hornbill dance" is a traditional women's dance that is popular among the Kenyah tribe (Orang Ulu) of Sarawak. This dance was performed during a communal celebration to greet the returning warriors of a headhunting raid, or during the annual celebration that marks the end of a rice harvest season.



Figure 3.46
Pua 17, 2008.
Silkscreen on cloth, 107cm X 53cm.



Figure 3.47
Pua 21, 2008.
Silkscreen on cloth, 107cm X 53cm.

A prominent western image, 'La Orana Maria' or 'Hail Mary' (1891) by Paul Gauguin was also selected and appropriated in my artwork (Fig. 3.48) due the similarities of the elements, especially the clothing and ambience.



Figure 3.48
Pua 8, 2008.
Silkscreen on cloth, 107cm X 53cm.

From a religious aspect, the selected hues were tailored according to local values which accentuate the Iban's unique perception of beliefs. It is closely related to the selected Iban proverb - "The satisfaction that one experiences in other countries is no better in one's own country, therefore, whether it is good or bad, one should always be thankful." Iban people are always reminded to cling strongly to their roots in facing the process of modernisation. Emphasis is given to religious and traditional values – areas that are considered as the most important in Malaysian culture. Both factors have been important elements of the National Foundations of Culture since it was implemented in 1971. This is due to Malaysia being a multiracial country where many types of traditional culture are practised by its citizens. Through this National Foundation of Culture, I believe that traditional values should be retained.

Most of the reconstructed images printed on the Pua Kumbu reflect multiculturalism in the Malaysian community, with the cultural elements of the three main races adopted alongside the culturally diverse minorities such as the

Ibans and Orang Ulu of Sarawak, and the Kadazan-Dusuns⁵⁷ of Sabah. Figure 3.49 highlighted the persistence of the local people in retaining traditional costumes in traditional dances throughout the Malay Archipelago – in Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines. The text “*baka ka merau’ , nyau mai’ besilih sangkar, baka ka nyala, besilih nibar, baka ka bejaku, minta’ nimbal*” (adopt and adapt, a continuous process to fit in a new culture) in this artwork also strengthens the overall impact. It shows that the locals are trying to “filter” outside elements that are considered as inappropriate and not in line with the local culture.



Figure 3.49
Batik 18, 2008.
Silkscreen on cloth, 140cm X 94cm.

One of the biggest impacts of colonisation in Malaysia is the presence of Indians and Chinese in the Malay Peninsula. The British brought in the Chinese

⁵⁷ Kadazan-Dusun (also written as Kadazandusun) is the term assigned to the unification of the classification of two indigenous tribes in Sabah, Malaysia - the ethnic groups Kadazan and Dusun. This is the largest ethnic category in Sabah. They are predominantly wet rice and hill rice cultivators. Their language belongs to the Dusunic family and shares a common animistic belief system with various customs and practices.

to work in the mining sector and the Indians in the rubber plantations. The divide-and-rule strategy had been implemented by the British to split the Malay, Indian and Chinese into different areas of the economy. There was no unity among the races and the British government in the Malay Peninsula easily ruled the nation before Independence Day.⁵⁸ When the Chinese and Indian remained in Malay Peninsula, it was important for them to be integrated with the Malay population. Through the spirit of independence for the country, the Malay majority were willing to play a part in the development of the political, economic and social fabric on 31st August 1957, Independence Day of Malay Peninsula. This has shaped the local cultural landscape, leading to these minority groups being granted permanent residency. The Indians brought with them their cultures and freely practised them, and now are already generally accepted as part of the vast identity of Malaysia. Now, the Indians are accepted as a part of the Malaysian family, and this symbiotic relationship blossomed into unique Malaysian cultural hues (Fig. 3.50).

⁵⁸ The independence of Malaysia is different from that of the independence of other countries. It was a peaceful independence attained by holding talks with the British. Thus on 31 August 1957, Malaysia got its independence from the United Kingdom.

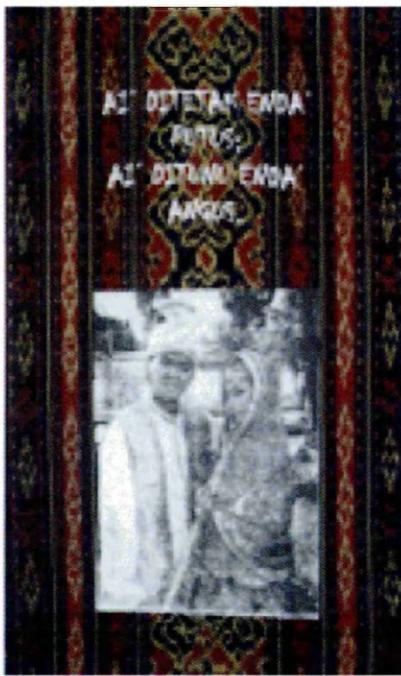


Figure 3.50
Pua 13, 2008.
Silkscreen on cloth, 107cm X 53cm.

This artwork touches the importance of understanding among the society even when there are different elements in their traditional practice and, as the artist put it, "*ai' ditetak enda' putus; ai' ditunu' enda' angus*" (No matter how serious the dispute is among brothers/sisters/family members, they will eventually reconcile/be good as usual/before). The Chinese worked together with the British and the local people to develop the Malaysian economy prior to Independence Day. Even after Independence Day, the concept of unity as preached by the government has helped Malaysians to stay together to face the challenges of globalisation (Fig. 3.51).



Figure 3.51
Pua 14, 2008.
Silkscreen on cloth, 107cm X 53cm.

Traditional Sarawakian images in Figure 3.52 symbolise the high value of cultural elements in this modern time. The dancers' costume designs during the performance nowadays still have the same colours and patterns.



Figure 3.52
Batik 15, 2008.
Silkscreen on cloth, 140cm X 94cm.

For the Sabahan (Fig. 3.53), the Kadazan-Dusun traditional costumes during the Harvest Festival emulate the intricacy of their culture.



Figure 3.53
Batik 14, 2008.
Silkscreen on cloth, 140cm X 94cm.

Figure 3.54 emphasises the sharing of cultural diversities in the Malaysian community with the text, “*anang manjung di pala’ wung; anang ngangau di kaki rantau*” (Don't do something yet if things are unavailable, don't start yet if work still unaccomplished). Understanding amongst the people of Malaysia is not easy to achieve. I endeavour to propose a need for mutual understanding in building this relationship, based on the universal concept of give and take. The main thing needing to be addressed is how the process of integration can be achieved to retain traditional and local values in face of the overwhelming pressures of globalisation and the process of hybridisation on the social context. The Malay, Chinese and Indians should work collectively in every aspect before facing the new challenge that affects the local culture.

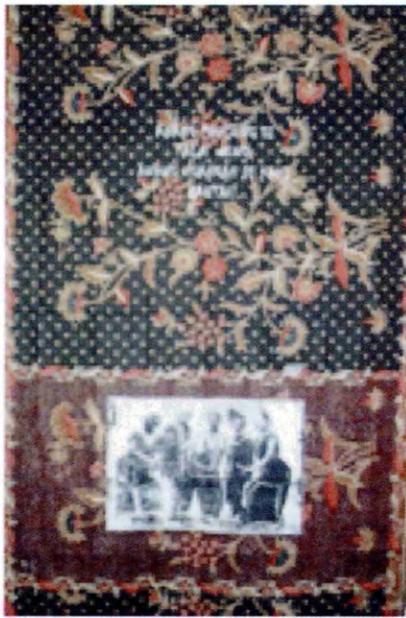


Figure 3.54
Batik 17, 2008.
Silkscreen on cloth, 140cm X 94cm.

The “Nusantara... Aram kitai bejalai” (Let’s Travel) exhibition also touches on Malaysian politics. The images of prominent Malaysian leaders are used not only for their visual impact but for an audience aware of Malaysian politics to look at and interpret according to the current Malaysian political scene. The political factor plays a big role in a developing country such as Malaysia. It can develop the economy, especially for investors starting their business with privileges given by the Malaysian government. As Burke (2009) has pointed out, hybridity can be found everywhere and take place all the time: political issues can be seen in many art productions in Malaysia, but in a very “secure” context. Malay, Chinese and Indian have their own political parties with their own ways of bringing success to their group. In this exhibition, the artworks showed the dominant leaders of political parties in Malaysia. The images of ex-Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed and the leader of the opposition party, Anwar Ibrahim, give a deep meaning, as both of them used to be in the same

party. Furthermore, Mahathir Mohamed is an important figure to Anwar Ibrahim (Fig. 3.55).



Figure 3.55
Batik 7, 2008.
Silkscreen on cloth, 140cm X 94cm.

I purposely positioned the image of the ex-Prime Minister of Malaysia (Fig. 3.56) side-by-side with the leading opposition leader as they once stood together as Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister.



Figure 3.56
Batik 8, 2008.
Silkscreen on cloth, 140cm X 94cm.

However the text chosen does not show any confrontation between them, rather focusing on the effort made by both leaders to bring Malaysia closer to becoming a developed country. All the pictures of the former Malaysian Prime Minister have the national flag in the background (Fig. 3.57) symbolising unity and patriotism, elements that should be focused upon by the current Malaysian leaders to ensure Malaysians understand their role in working together and upholding national aspiration for the betterment of the whole community. Furthermore, the production of the artworks portrays the importance of the leader's role to ensure the process of modernisation of Malaysia, retaining our local values yet accepting the affects of hybridisation.

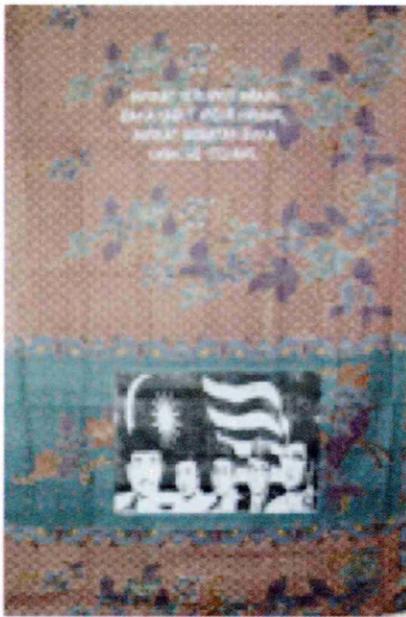


Figure 3.57
Batik 9, 2008.
Silkscreen on cloth, 140cm X 94cm.

The images of the globe and the American flag (Fig. 3.58, Fig. 3.59) symbolise the process of globalisation. Malaysia, as a developing country, perceives globalisation and the process of hybridisation in a positive manner, although there are potential effects on the local cultures. Vision 2020⁵⁹ is a plan to set Malaysia on the path to becoming a developed country in the year 2020, and globalisation and hybridity is seen as a factor that might catalyse this process, especially re-branding Malaysia in the eyes of the world. Hence, the process of cultural hybridisation which I have illuminated in my artwork is related with what Beynon (2000) has mentioned earlier - the strong connection between hybridity in a cultural context and globalisation.

⁵⁹ Vision 2020 is a Malaysian ideal introduced by the former prime minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Bin Mohamad. The vision calls for a self-sufficient industrial, Malaysian-centric developed nation, complete with an economy, in 2020 which will be eightfold stronger than the economy of the early 1990s.



Figure 3.58
Batik 11, 2008.
Silkscreen on cloth, 140cm X 94cm.



Figure 3.59
Batik 12, 2008.
Silkscreen on cloth, 140cm X 94cm.

Malaysia has gained international recognition through the successes of several Malaysians, for example the first Malaysian sailor to complete the around-the-world route (Fig. 3.60) and Malaysia's first astronaut (Fig. 3.61).

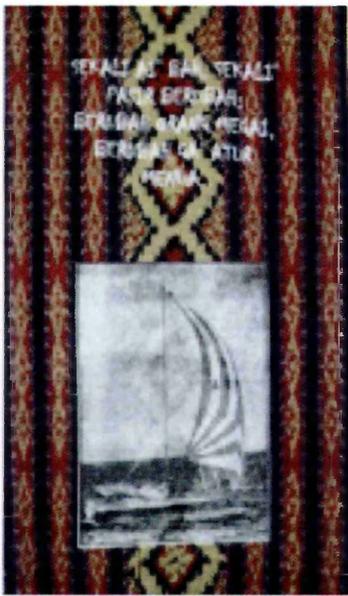


Figure 3.60
Pua 26, 2008.
Silkscreen on cloth, 107cm X 53cm.



Figure 3.61
Batik 13, 2008.
Silkscreen on cloth, 140cm X 94cm.

Through this exhibition, as a “displaced artist”, I have a unique position to construct a new “contemporary Iban visual art” from the usage of their

traditional fabric. John Postill,⁶⁰ an anthropologist who used to live and research in Sarawak, made a comment regarding this new form of art from Pua Kumbu. Postill has experienced how the Iban culture has been enriched by the Tun Jugah Foundation.⁶¹ Moreover, the Iban community in Sarawak nowadays want their culture to be very “holy” and “clean”. This is how the Iban community and the Tun Jugah Foundation try to preserve and to shield their tradition from unacceptable external elements. Postill added, the print work on these traditional fabrics is a process of creating “new art” using the local craft in a very global context which benefited Malaysia as a whole when the exhibition was set up outside Malaysia. Thus, Postill looks at my position as a “postmodern nationalist” which brought a new understanding of “cultural integration” in a process of re-contextualising the local craft in a new hybrid artwork.

The vast development of the Malaysian economy is also an example of how hybridity can shape and benefit a country. However, I understand that the issue of hybridity should be handled carefully as local values should always be preserved as part of a national identity. Local and national elements are closely related to re-interpret a new understanding of contemporary Malaysian visual art as the traditional elements are the main idea in the National Foundation of Culture. Furthermore, I tried to come out with this idea to reconcile local values and national identity with the production of artworks.

⁶⁰ Interview with John Postill, 22 October 2008.

⁶¹ Tun Jugah Foundation (Yayasan Tun Jugah) was registered on 29 January 1985. The main function of this foundation is to carry out research, to collect and preserve various forms of Iban tradition and oral literature.

3.4 The Role of Audiences in this Research

As my own art practice is one of the methods employed in carrying out this research, it is vital to elaborate the relation between the examination of Malaysia's contemporary art and national identity together with my artwork through the process of hybridisation. In order to achieve the goals of this research through my own practice based on the exploration of the Malaysian craft, it is essential for me to participate in exhibitions to develop findings on how the audiences respond to the ways in which the artworks have been constructed. The findings are obtained based on ongoing reflection upon the process of hybridisation within the Malaysian political, social and economic context as well as the investigation on Malaysia's national identity. All interviews were recorded and these reflections have been aided by the ongoing engagements with audience and these were planned as follows:

1. To choose the gallery with an appropriate space to install the artworks in Sheffield and outside Sheffield.
2. Setting up an actual private view with an invitation to artists and art practitioners.
3. Discussion with colleague, tutors and other PhD students from Sheffield Hallam University and other universities.
4. Discussion of the artwork in art conversation, seminar and workshop.
5. Conversation via telephone and electronic mail with artists and academicians outside United Kingdom.

The findings have helped me to explore, through artistic means, the fundamentals of the nation building process through the government's policy.

The fundamental process which is associated with Malaysia's national identity has been investigated in my practice from the analysis of the Malaysian National Cultural Policy 1971 and the ongoing public relation campaign of One Malaysia announced by Malaysia's Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak. The concept of One Malaysia was announced on September 16, 2008, calling for the Malaysian cabinet, government agencies, and civil servants to strengthen the harmony of the multi-racial society, national unity, and efficient governance.⁶² My second exhibition was both a response to this way of thinking about identity in Malaysia and the feedback I had gained from my first exhibition in the United Kingdom, I decided that exhibitions are one of the most effective ways for me as an artist to expose my artwork to an audience and investigate the feedback from the audiences particularly from the Malaysian viewers perspective through the exhibitions. Moreover, the exhibitions have allowed me to develop ideas and specific technical approaches to opening up the new transformation of the traditional craft as an artwork that deals within the Malaysian social and political context.

Through the exhibitions, I have exhibited artwork that portrays the Malaysian social and political context which can be viewed by the audiences with the notion of hybridity such as focusing on diversity and exploring the traditional ideas within Malaysia's cultural context. In this regard, the audiences have an opportunity to view, to criticise, to comment and discuss the new techniques explored by the artist in constructing the artworks which came from the traditional and modern methods within the Malaysian context. In my first

⁶² One Malaysia, Office of the Prime Minister of Malaysia - Dato' Sri Mohd Najib Tun Abdul Razak Official Website. <http://www.pmo.gov.my>. Last accessed 3 September 2010.

exhibition, “Nusantara...Aram Kitai Bejalai” (Let’s Travel) I had the opportunity to discuss my ideas, techniques and the relation of my artwork with globalisation to the audiences which came from different groups of people such as students, academicians and artists. The feedback was recorded by note taking and audio recording. During the “Nusantara...Aram Kitai Bejalai” (Let’s Travel) exhibition at Sheffield Institute of Art and Design Gallery, my print works were viewed and discussed by Sheffield Hallam University’s PhD group discussion.⁶³ In the discussion, Miguel Santos, an artist and a PhD student in Fine Arts from Portugal pointed out the issue of the chosen media in the process of juxtaposition between the texts and images in the discussion on Malaysia’s national identity. Santos suggested that, the text which was printed on the fabric using the Iban language together with the English translation as a handout, can give a clearer meaning to the audiences to understand the issue that has been raised. Santos added, the artwork has a strong relation of the traditional Malay craft and the modern technique of artwork production with the usage of the traditional fabric and the silk screening process which portrays the modernisation within the Malaysian cultures that have drawn the attention of the audience especially among the English viewers.

Another PhD student, Li Hung Li from Taiwan commented on the importance of the traditional craft in terms of the new transformation related with the modern approaches to construct a new form of artwork. Hung Li also questioned the acceptance of the Iban tribe of my use of Pua Kumbu, which is normally used in their traditional and religious ceremonies, but has now been appropriated and

⁶³ Sheffield Hallam University PhD Group Discussion with Rizal Rahman (Malaysia), Miguel Santos (Portugal), Rueben Mariampillai (Ceylon), Seri Rahayu (Malaysia) and Li Hung Li (Taiwan) lead by Dr Jaspar Joseph-Lester. 14 October 2008.

transformed into a modern art form. I have discussed this issue with Peter Nicol Saban, an Iban artist and academician from Sarawak. Saban has pointed out that, the Pua Kumbu has been commercialised nowadays for the local and international market. There are also new items being produced such as clothes, handbags and the other accessories which are made from Pua Kumbu. The transformation of this fabric to a new form of artwork is just another attempt to diversify this craft in the Malaysian contemporary art development.⁶⁴ Based on my first exhibition, I have chosen another traditional Malay craft as a medium to explore and symbolise the issue of hybridity in Malaysian context. This time it is food which is Sarawakian layer cakes. As the audiences have seen the vast collection of images and text from my “Nusantara...Aram Kitai Bejalai” (Let’s Travel) exhibition, the Sarawakian layer cakes were used as a symbol in my discussion of hybridity in Malaysian political and cultural context. The artwork that was produced in my second exhibition, “Lapis” (Layers) is a continuous process of exploring the local craft as a media in my practice.

Traditional Malay, Chinese and Indian food are prepared and served daily in the Malaysian society. Indeed, these traditional cuisines are prepared especially during religious festivals such as Eid, Chinese New Year and Diwali and this concept of sharing has been accepted as part of the Malaysian culture. Food functions as an important element in the Malaysian culture and has never been used a “medium” in the Malaysian art practice. Therefore, I have tried to develop this idea as a medium of communication to the viewers. Indeed, the transformation of food into layer cakes as an artwork in “Lapis” (Layers)

⁶⁴ Personal communication with Peter Nicol Saban. 1 June 2008.

exhibition has contributed to a deeper artistic experience for me as an artist as it took 8 to 10 days for me to prepare a complete designed layer cake. I used as my original visual basis, a new arrangement of colours and patterns inside the layer cake which is taken from the patterns of Pua Kumbu and Batik. In other words, the idea of arranging the pattern to reflect the issue of hybridity was taken from these Malay fabrics and in this respect was a direct progression from the work I did for the first exhibition. At this stage, I moved the selection of artwork production from the two dimensional printed fabric to the three dimensional layer cake while still referring to the pattern of Pua Kumbu as a background of the layer cakes in my photographic prints. In my first exhibition, I have explored the development of the visual look and the relationship with the Iban proverbs which the audience sometimes found hard to decode. The works challenged them to understand the process of hybridisation in the Malaysian context at many different levels. In contrast, in my second exhibition, the concept of the Sarawakian layer cake was constructed with the arrangement of patterns and colours. Coupled with the photographic prints which articulated my intention to draw peoples' attention to the design, symbolism and metaphors about the issue of hybridity, the exhibition continued to the space inside the gallery where the audience could see the real layer cake. The cake was small but also had a larger representation of the visual symbolism which stressed the aesthetic side of it. Therefore, the arrangement of artworks inside the gallery had been set up to focus on the essential relationship between the photographic prints and the actual layer cakes. In this "Lapis" (Layers) exhibition, the audiences would view the photographic prints and then they would be guided to the space where the actual layer cakes were located inside the glass cabinet.

This arrangement was taken from my first solo exhibition where the viewers needed to “travel” inside the gallery starting from the colonial era until the era of modernisation, to view the print works which were placed on the floor.

Sheffield Hallam’s University students from Media Arts (Film and Media Production) carried out a discussion during the exhibition.⁶⁵ The main issue raised from my print works was the focus on the aspects of the visual culture within Malaysia’s contemporary art context. Questions on Malaysian cultures and the process of hybridisation together with the modern way of life were also highlighted in terms of technology and the new media such as the internet. During the discussion, I found that the understanding of non-Malaysian audience regarding hybridity in a Malaysian context is limited. The interpretation about process of modernisation in a Malaysian political, economical and social context is based on the images which were constructed in my print works. The audiences, who were English, only partially understood the historical part of Malaysian development. Yet through the discussion and translated text from the Iban proverbs they were able to interpret the issue of hybridity and the relation with the process of modernisation and globalisation. In this exhibition, I had an opportunity to discuss my artwork with Rusdi Nasir⁶⁶ an interior designer and an academician from Malaysia who is also a postgraduate student from University of Sheffield. Nasir, who has wide knowledge on Pua Kumbu and Batik said, my utilisation of these traditional fabrics can be considered as an innovation in the Malaysian craft, a combination of local and modern approaches. Nasir added,

⁶⁵ Sheffield Hallam University - Undergraduate Study in Media Arts (Film and Media Production) lead by Rose Cooper. 16 October 2008.

⁶⁶ Personal communication with Rusdi Nasir, an artist in interior design and academician from Malaysia and currently a postgraduate student (PhD in Landscape Architecture) from University of Sheffield. 15 October 2008.

despite the usage of Pua Kumbu and Batik as a traditional Malaysian fabric in local ceremonies and rituals, the prints on these traditional fabrics had opened up a new dimension on how the fabrics were developed in the form of new artwork. In this regard, there are no local artists in Malaysia who have produce this type of artwork and exhibit it on the floor, I intend to construct the artwork from Sarawakian layer cakes which also originated from the same place, the state of Sarawak in Malaysia. The choice of layer cake was appropriate given I have experienced Sarawakian cultures in my artwork and especially as it had not been explored as an artwork by the local artists. Thus, in my second exhibition I continued the discourse on Malaysian hybridity by constructing the Sarawakian layer cakes.

The exhibition of these traditional fabrics was also exhibited at University of Wales Gregynog, Powys, Wales. An artist from Kuwait, Dr Musaed Albehairi⁶⁷ has commented on the process of modernisation within the Malaysian craft production which shares several similar issues with his practice. Albehairi has used traditional patterns of Kuwaitis fabric, namely 'Sadu'⁶⁸ and has modernised it to represent the fabric as a monumental art form in his paintings. Albehairi said that, the modern technique has been used to produce 'Sadu' and currently this is a common situation in Pua Kumbu and Batik production. This is another hybrid process when the modern techniques have taken over the traditional method to produce traditional craftwork. During this exhibition, another artist,

⁶⁷ Personal communication with Dr Musaed Albehairi, an artist and academician who does research on traditional fabric from Kuwait - 'Sadu'. 27 November 2008. He has constructed his artwork from 'Sadu' motifs in his solo exhibition at Candid Arts Gallery, London, 2-3 November 2008.

⁶⁸ Sadu weaving, an embroidery form in geometrical patterns hand woven by Bedouin people.

Florence Ayisi,⁶⁹ discussed about Malaysia's development under Mahathir Mohamed, Malaysia's former Prime Minister. Ayisi, who has knowledge of Malaysia's political and social context pointed out that, the process of hybridisation in Malaysia can be seen in the print images. Ayisi further commented, through arts activities, the process of modernising the society within the socio-cultural context can be developed such as the construction of visual artwork which can reflect upon the artist's personal thinking and experiences.⁷⁰



Figure 3.62
Exhibition at University of Wales Gregynog, Powys, Wales,
26-28 November 2008 with Dr Musaed Albehairi and Florence Ayisi.

At this stage, it gave me a clear idea to investigate the effect of hybridity towards contemporary art practices focusing on the Malaysian political, social and economic context in my second exhibition, "Lapis" (Layers). I was interviewed by Martin Dawes, a reporter from The Star Sheffield and Dawes has commented on the complex patterns inside the layer cakes.⁷¹ Dawes also

⁶⁹ Florence Ayisi, a film maker and Reader in Film Practice at the International Film School Wales, University of Wales, Newport.

⁷⁰ Personal communication with Florence Ayisi. 27 November 2008.

⁷¹ Martin Dawes from The Diary: New Art Exhibit Look So Good You Could Eat It. In: The Star Sheffield, Monday, 28 September 2009.

commented on the process of preparing the cake where the layers were constructed to design the symbols and patterns that represent the Malaysian cultural context. At this stage, the documenting process from the photographic prints could be viewed by the audiences and this represented and recorded the experimental process from me as an artist to construct an artwork from food. In addition, the photographic prints of the cake making process are important for me to construct an appropriate pattern to illustrate Malaysia's political scene and social symbols. Moreover, through these photographic prints, it illustrated the techniques of 'cut and paste' of the layer cakes to form a pattern and symbol (Fig. 3.63, Fig. 3.64).

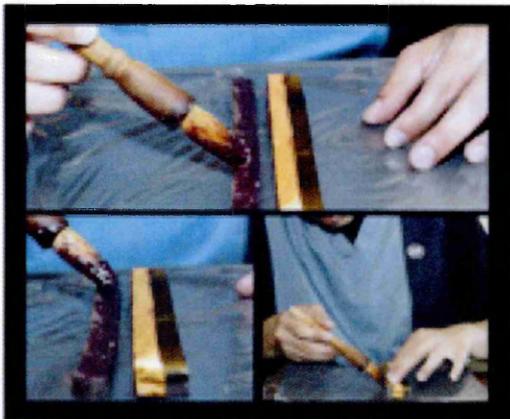


Figure 3.63
Photo Print 2, 2009
Print on PVC
60cm X 42cm

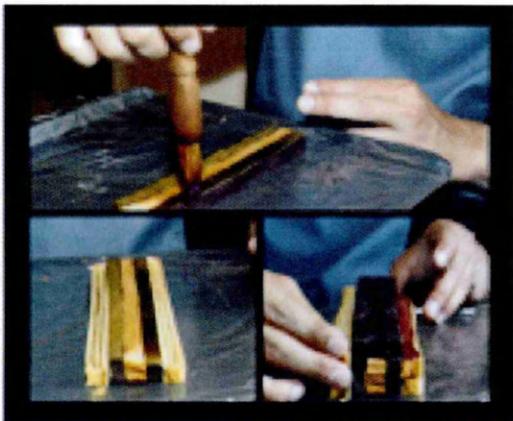


Figure 3.64
Photo Print 3, 2009
Print on PVC
60cm X 42cm

The use of food in my artworks is my second attempt as an artist to voice my ideas towards the issue of hybridity. Food is served to people as a communal activity and is an important part of social cultural practice in Malaysia.

During the “Lapis” (Layers) exhibition, a video journalist, Jonathan Alexander Eaton questioned me about the colours and symbols inside the layer cakes that represent Malaysia’s political and social issues.⁷² Indeed, the artworks of layer cakes in this exhibition were constructed using various colours and patterns to portray the political situation in Malaysia. Moreover, the symbols that represent Malaysia’s national identity such as the traditional costumes and national flower have been created.

In “Lapis” (Layers) exhibition, I took the chance to exhibit and discuss my artwork during the art dialogue session to receive feedback from the audiences

⁷² Personal Correspondence with Jonathan Alexander Eaton, Bank Street Arts Gallery, Sheffield. 18 September 2009.

from the Black British Perspectives⁷³, a series of interactive themed conversations in exploring the notion of a Black British canon. In this dialogue, the participants consist of artists and people who have interest in the creative process and development concerning the new process in art making. The participants wanted to know the complexity of Malaysia's national identity and political scene that has been symbolised in a form of artwork which is made from food. At this stage, the audiences were aware that, besides the traditional and modern methods that have been used in the artwork production, the colours inside the layer cakes represent the political parties in Malaysia as well as the different religious and local culture among the multi racial society.

The engagement of the audiences and the exhibitions are significant in my practice. Through exhibitions, I have the opportunity to express my point of view towards the phenomenon of hybridity especially in the political context in Malaysia. In this regard, as Dernie (2006) has pointed out, "at the heart of any exhibition is the notion of communication" and the main focus of the artist is "to articulate the intended messages". It is vital to select a proper gallery for my exhibition as it will determine how the artwork should be exhibited. Therefore I chose a gallery that has separate spaces to exhibit the work of photographic prints and the real layer cake. Moreover, the gallery also needed to have a space with at least ten meters of height for me to install the hanging mobile (photographic prints of the process of making the layer cake). After visiting more than eight galleries in Sheffield, finally I chose Bank Street Arts Gallery which is

⁷³ Black British Perspectives in Bank Street Arts Gallery, 23 September 2009 hosted by Dr Raimi Gbadamosi. The conversation examines the creative process and the environments needed for creativity to flourish and thrive, ownership and future development, highlighting excellence and innovation.

located in the heart of Sheffield City. They offered me an appropriate space and equipment for me to install my artworks. As Duffin (1994) stressed that, "choice is more likely to be focused on whether the gallery's concerns are in tune with the artist's." The exhibition of my artworks outside from Malaysia has given me an opportunity to share the cultural hybridity in Malaysia's contemporary art development with the viewers. Since my first exhibition, I have shared my ideas and give a clear elucidation towards Malaysian culture and historical background to the audiences during the show. This is part of my strategy of engagement with the audiences as well as the comments from my tutors as they are a key part of my audience. As Poinot (1991) claims the engagement between artists, audiences and exhibitions are important as "contemporary art comes to us through the medium of the exhibition."

In this regard, as an artist, the discussion and response from the audiences and the tutors are essential for me to extend my artwork in the future. The opportunity to get responses and comments from the viewers outside from the Malaysian perspective has given me new ideas on how to construct a new form of artwork based on the process of hybridisation in the Malaysian cultural context. As there is a limited understanding from the non-Malaysian viewers in the complex Malaysian cultural context which comprises of multiracial societies, the selection of images and form of artwork should provide a clear reflection that can be understood in the international level. I have experienced the feedback and responses from my two exhibitions in the United Kingdom and discussion about the Malaysian cultures are the main issues of interest to the viewers. Therefore, in my future practice, apart from the specific issues on

Malaysian cultural context which can be expanded and promoted at international level or outside from Malaysia, as an artist, I intend to develop a new approach in my practice such as using the other traditional crafts as a chosen media. Consequently, new techniques in the next artwork will be developed.

3.5 Summary

This chapter discussed my own practice as a researcher and artist to crystallise the process of hybridisation and Malaysia's national identity via the production of artworks. In this regard, my work was divided into two distinct solo exhibitions within a year of experimentation in this practice-based research. The exhibitions themselves portray an understanding of the effects of hybridity on art, craft and visual culture in the Malaysian context. The first solo exhibition, "Nusantara...Aram Kitai Bejalai" (Let's Travel), was my first exploration into the research topic. The arrangement of text, images and the local fabrics as a medium enhanced another new concept of how to look at local craft from a different natural environment. The selection of text and digitalised images was related to the visual narrative starting from the period of colonisation in Sarawak, Malaysian national identity, political images, images from Western art history and the development in Malaysia's cultural context. The use of Iban proverbs was chosen because Pua Kumbu came from this indigenous group. Furthermore, as a part of my "mind journey" to explore a new presentation in this heuristic practice, another transformation was undertaken through my next exhibition.

The continuous issue of hybridity and Malaysia's national identity in my second solo exhibition started a new dimension of artwork in contemporary Malaysian art practice. The "Lapis" (Layers) exhibition was a metaphor for a multiracial society in a Malaysian political context. It is important to stress that in this production, the layering dichotomously expresses an ideal as well as a source and conflict towards the process of hybridisation in politics and social life which has been symbolised in a visual language, the layer cake. The colour, design and taste were explored through Malaysian and English ingredients in the process of baking the cakes. The actual layer cakes which were exhibited inside the gallery needed to be stored in a refrigerator at certain times. During the first stage of experimenting with this project, the cakes were affected by fungus or mould due to the hot summer weather. Through these processes, the exact recipe needed to be discovered to ensure the proper mixture to create the layers inside the cake, because I did not use any preservative to bake the cake. Furthermore, the layers had to adhere nicely in the process of arranging different designs inside the cake. The use of food in art practice, which is uncommon in Malaysia, explored the Sarawakian layer cakes as an artwork. The photographic prints of the layer cakes and the process of designing the arrangement was another important part. Through photography, I was able to record and document the whole process of these explorations and transfer it in a form of catalogue and DVD for future reference. They also aesthetically enhanced and highlighted the visual designs of the cakes. At this stage, I explored the appropriate use of media for the production of artwork that illuminates hybridity in Malaysian modern art. Moreover, through the exhibitions, I managed to produce two different sets of artwork which dealt with the issue of hybridity that explicitly refers to indigenous Malaysian craft traditions.

In this research, the ongoing reflection on the process of hybridisation has been added by the engagements with the audience. Discussions and interviews have been set up with the colleague, tutors, artists and academicians to develop findings on how they respond to the ways in which the artworks have been produced. As I have obtained responses from the audiences outside Malaysia, the discussions and responses from the viewers are essential for me to develop my own artwork in the future. Thus, the new understanding of the dynamic process in my practice in the relation to hybridity, contemporary art and craft traditions in a Malaysian context has inspired me to expand to another artwork production in the future. This will be mentioned in Chapter 4 - Conclusion.

4.0 Conclusion

The aim of this practice-based research was to enrich the Malaysian national art heritage which I would like to expand into a new approach to artwork production. I set up two solo exhibitions, to test and illuminate the consequences of hybridity in the art and culture of Malaysia which is influenced by the political, social, historical, cultural and economic contexts. This can be clearly seen with the involvement of the printing arts on the traditional local fabrics 'Pua Kumbu' and Batik in my first exploration in the "Nusantara... Aram Kitai Bejalai" (Let's Travel) exhibition. In my second exhibition, entitled "Lapis" (Layers), I explored and invented new techniques in the use of Sarawakian layer cakes as a form of transformation towards a new artwork. In this research, the concept of 'mind journey' explored a new type of artwork in Malaysian contemporary art. The importance of local crafts such as traditional fabrics and food was examined to construct artwork which refers to issues in the Malaysian political and social context. Through this research, as an artist and academician, the artwork that has been re-contextualised from local craft generates new ideas about Malaysia's national identity in the field of visual art.

In the introduction part of this research, questions were posed to identify the process of hybridity as the main issue in the development of the Malaysian modern art. These questions revolved around the influence of western art and hybridity on the local art development, key elements in modern Malaysian

artworks, new breeds of artworks based on the research, the affects of colonisation on the development of local art and the national identity. Through this research, it clearly shows that the process of hybridity happened long before the colonisation era. Malay culture was fabricated with elements from Arabic, Hinduism, Buddhism and Animism. From the beginning of the 6th Century, the Malay Archipelago – ranging from Southern part of Thailand, the Indonesian islands and southern parts of the Philippines, was recognised as an epicentre of economic activity in the South East Asian region and Malacca became the most popular meeting point for traders from all over the world. Through economic activities, Chinese, Indian and Arabic cultural elements were accepted and slowly integrated into the local culture. Moreover, in the era of globalisation, there are numerous hybrid elements from outside Malaysia that affected the development of local art. From the perspective of art, I strongly believe that the implementation and the hybrid process of new ideas, concepts, techniques, materials and contents create new organic practice in local art production. In other words, the process of hybridisation represents a very progressive sophistication in Malaysian modern art.

In the first chapter, citing researchers of the hybridity theories such as Ashcroft and Burke, I emphasised that hybridisation happens not only on a particular culture but as a form of transformation of all cultures. Furthermore, through colonialism, hybridisation forms new culture that fused together the aspect of religion, philosophy, languages and arts. In this context, it can be seen that Malaysia has gone through hybridisation due to factors such as colonialism that stretched for 446 years and due to its function as the regions once most active economic centre. Until the post independence era in Malaysia, the relationship

between the local and global culture was closely bound together and is reflected by the development of the local art scene, where the elements were explored and reconstructed by the local artists.

From the investigation on hybridity, I found that contemporary art practice in Malaysia was in fact mixed with multicultural elements. My production of prints on local fabrics and the layer cake artwork represent an investigation of Malaysia's cultural identity from my critical comments on Malaysian culture. This exploration was expressed in the juxtaposition of text, fabric and images in my first solo exhibition, and in the new arrangement of patterns in layer cakes to explore the critical hybrid process in Malaysian contemporary art. The artwork production is more concerned with modernising the local craft and transferring it to another new form of artefact that refers more directly to the concept of a multifaceted culture. Hence, my artwork is not the final answer to justify the process of hybridity.

One issue from my exploration was to look at how the process of hybridisation affected local contemporary art. As well as the positive hybrid process in Malaysian contemporary art, it also affected the indigenous craft. Since mixtures of external and local elements were used in my artwork production, modern technologies replaced the traditional procedures in craft production.

Nowadays, the production of Pua Kumbu has been commercialised by the use of modern machinery instead of weaving by hand. Moreover, compared to traditional production, the high amount of production by modern technology was manageable by the manufacturer. The reproduction of this craft can easily be

found in the market and the uniqueness of this traditional Iban fabric has been replaced by commercial souvenirs. The same fact applies to the production of Sarawakian layer cakes. Due to time constraints in traditional methods of baking the cakes, modern gas ovens have been used especially for commercial production. The traditional method using the steam technique produced a different, more flavourful taste. Furthermore, the production of Sarawakian layer cakes in Malaysia today concentrates only on presentation, related to the bright and vivid colours, not the flavour. My experiences with local tribes in Sarawak allowed me to understand the cultural value of the social strata of the Sarawakian people since the era of colonisation. My experience of the unique multicultural elements from Sarawak, the biggest state in Malaysia, allowed me to explore new artwork influenced by local tribes. The ability for me to communicate in the Iban language permitted me to construct a Malay/English version of the Iban proverbs and juxtapose them with digitalised images on my print works. The chosen proverbs were associated with globalisation and a modern way of life as a hybrid process commenting on Iban cultural development. From investigating the materials I have used in these artworks, I have incorporated the hybrid aspect of the traditional crafts such as Pua Kumbu and Batik which have been modernised through modern machinery.

The latest Malaysian artworks have gone through a deconstruction process and I have chosen the traditional Malay fabric and food as media to create hybrid artworks. Modern silkscreen printing and non-conventional ovens were used in this experiment. It was considered as a success, as the traditional craft is no longer seen as an epitome of traditional entity, but is transformed into artworks

that convey the symbolism of political, economic and social aspects of modern Malaysian culture.

There are western elements which have seeped through and contributed to the development of the current Malaysian art scene. This includes the matter of themes, media and techniques that are in line with the current art development. As an example, electronic arts progress can be directly linked to the vast development of the Information Technology (IT). Hybridity paved a new way for Malaysia contemporary art and this process is going to continue as long as there are artists who are willing to accept and embrace the concept of hybridisation.

In this research, elements that have very strong influence on the Malaysian contemporary art are the effects of colonialism, cultures from different countries such as the Portuguese, British, Dutch and Japanese who have moulded the multicultural elements in Malaysia. The question of national identity in Malaysia is very much linked to the need to integrate the Malaysian people who are greatly affected by the British Divide and Rule system. This system separates the three main races in Malaysia, namely the Malays, Chinese and Indians, according to geographical and economical division. Currently, the Malaysian government is taking serious actions to strengthen the national unity and the government has also encouraged and supported those who are in the art industry to promote this agenda.

Another strong influence in the modern art movement in Malaysia is elements of impressionism and expressionism brought in by Malaysian artists who have

studied abroad. A further unique thing about this matter is the assimilation of local ingredients such as the colour schemes and subject matters thus forming a new breed of artworks that are distinctly modern yet understandably localised. The research revealed that the incursion of Western cultural artefacts, attitudes and processes are a common operation in modern art development. The pioneer artists from Malaysia who graduated from the United States and Europe have constructed their artworks under the influence of the contemporary Western modernism. These pioneer artists have sparked a new dimension in the local art scene together with artists from the Nanyang Academy in Singapore. The research also highlights the background of Malaysian contemporary art which has been created and influenced by Western art, colonisation, and globalisation. In the early development of contemporary art in Malaysia, Western art styles and techniques were very popular. These can be seen in landscape painting, portraiture and still-life influenced by impressionism, post-impressionism and Fauvism from the School of Paris. Through the new Western-oriented educational system during British colonisation, the newly-formed English language schools were built up. This phenomenon has split the traditional Malay-Islamic majority and added a new, complex social dimension in Malaysian society with the presence of the predominantly Chinese and Indian non-Bumiputera people. The social landscape of the peninsular part of Malaysia was changed with British rule in the late 19th century, involving a multiracial setting. The reshaping of society's structural affairs during colonial time has become a major issue in Malay society as economic activities had to be shared with the Chinese and Indians.

In chapter 2, the research focuses on the interconnection of the current political affairs and the contemporary art practice in Malaysia. The National Art Museum (Balai Seni Lukis Negara) functions as a means for the government to work together with the local artists to expound the government agenda to the public via the artworks. Thus, hybridity takes its form in line with the political and social context of the artworks. In this research also, the production of the artworks reflects my view towards the political, economic and social aspect of the Malaysian society. Statements in the works of “Nusantara ...Aram Kita Bejalai” (Let’s Travel) were my first exploration in the process of hybridity and the affects of globalisation in Malaysia. Through printing works, elements of hybridity were visible through the integration of multicultural values in them. Leading from this, in the exhibition ‘Lapis’, I have chosen traditional Sarawak layer cake as a medium to experiment with food as art objects. Traditional and modern methods were combined in producing layer cakes that have unique patterns and are permeated with symbolisms relating to current political affairs in Malaysia. In short, fabric-based prints and layer cakes were reconceived to explore the process of hybridity in Malaysia’s political and social scenes.

As an artist, I have raised questions of how to explore issues of hybridity, globalisation and modernisation by using traditional fabrics as media and how the juxtaposition process of images and texts took shape as a part of the local art craft identity. The chosen traditional fabrics act as canvas to join the images and texts, relaying issues related to hybridity, globalisation and modernisation. Images were reconstructed through computer applications before being transferred through silkscreen printing in the “Nusantara...Aram Kita Bejalai” (Let’s Travel) exhibition. A combination of selected images and the fabrics, Pua

Kumbu and Batik, represented a new approach to craft methods. The juxtaposition process suggested new meanings to the local craft identity and through printing works; the original traditional functions of Pua Kumbu and Batik were altered and given new form in order to address contemporary issues, especially in relation to the changes Malaysians are undergoing now.

The next issue is closely related to the new technique in using Sarawak layer cake as a contemporary art object. As an artist who is always trying to use new approaches in producing new and unique artworks, I explored new techniques in inculcating contemporary patterns and designs in Sarawak layer cake. Unusual cutting and arranging process, together with unique baking process ensure exclusive patterns and designs that experiment with political symbolism. The colours are also carefully selected to compliment the Malaysian multicultural background. For example, religious aspects are transformed by the colour coding of green for Malays, red for the Chinese and yellow for the Indians. Besides, colours and patterns chosen also referred to the Malaysian national flag, traditional costumes, the national flower hibiscus and the political parties. As layer cakes are perishable, I have chosen photography and video to document the whole process for easy reference. In fact, the actual artworks were displayed side by side with the photographs.

Another aspect that this research is focusing upon is my own perspective on the Malaysian craft in general. As the exhibitions were organised outside Malaysia, and considering myself as displaced artist, the concept of the mind journey in my works allowed me to explore new dimensions for Malaysian crafts. I used my works as media to discuss and state my viewpoints on issues that are rarely

discussed openly in Malaysia. Artworks on Political issues especially related to the government policies are uncommon practice for Malaysian artists. As the exhibitions were conducted outside Malaysia, the re-contextualisation process of the works received feedback from both British and Malaysian viewers. The studio practice in my research was presented in the form of exhibitions to different, non-Malaysian audiences. For Malaysian audiences who viewed the show, the exhibition exposed a new understanding of Malaysian art practice that differed from that of other Western viewers. Responses from Malaysian viewers were more on critical issues towards the current political scene in Malaysia because of their understanding of the background of their own country. Viewers who had knowledge of the development of contemporary Malaysian art regarded the artwork as overcritical towards the Malaysian political terrain. They have had no experience of seeing artwork that touched on the issues of identity, political parties, and the concept of unity in a Malaysian context. For the Malaysian viewers, it was a new experience for them to view an exhibition with Iban proverbs on print works, as there is a very limited number of Malaysians who can understand the Iban language.

The collection of visual evidence and details about the layer cake artwork was compiled in a DVD. As a “displaced artist” I have been kept apart from my home environment for a number of years. However as an academician at a local university in Malaysia, I managed to experience a deep understanding of the local culture when I communicated using the Iban language.¹ These are all crucial parts of my life that have enabled me to carry out research on transformation that focuses on how hybridity in the Malaysian context affects

¹ My ability to speak in Iban, the language of one of the indigenous groups in Sarawak, gave me an opportunity to gain knowledge about their tradition and values.

Malaysian visual culture. The transformation of local craft as a medium into artwork epitomised the research outcome of my studio artwork exploration in a new setting in the United Kingdom.

Besides answering the questions aroused in the introduction part of this research, the process of artefacts production is very much in focus. Through this research, I reflected on my own visual art culture which showed the importance of the processes of artwork production. Being distant from my own culture enables me to have more space and freedom to illustrate my critical comments using visual language through my studio project. Therefore, I have chosen to carry out this research as practise-based because it will not only answer the aforementioned questions but it also gives me the opportunity to explore new ground and reveals the opportunity for me to learn new things related to contemporary art. Apart from that, my artworks were based on hybridity theory, globalisation and modernity that have huge impact the Malaysian culture. Through practice based research, I managed to explore and found new techniques to transform traditional crafts into new art forms that are more fresh and contemporary in nature. Starting from my first exhibition, I received critiques and feedbacks that helped me to explore the theme of hybridity more in my second exhibition. My focus was not only on the development of the Malaysian cultural identity, but I also ventured into the process and techniques of producing the artworks. The combination of traditional and modern elements in the "Lapis" (Layers) exhibition has blended together issues of politics and cultures in my artworks. From the artwork of layer cakes, I have revealed the process of representing layer cakes on photographic prints which showed the technique of creating the pattern inside the cake.

Through these processes, I discovered the proper tools and ingredients from my own experimentation during my studio practice. The results of this experimentation then allowed the discussion of the Malaysian political context with the audiences which was based on the symbols and colours in the layer cakes.

Based on this research, Malaysian government policies, especially related to strengthening the national unity really influenced the development of contemporary art movements in Malaysia. The National Cultural Policy was conceived in 1971 after a major racial riot in 1969. At this juncture, the government tried to ensure a peaceful and harmonious situation in the multiracial society to ensure that there was a single cultural identity that could be shared between people. In art development, the government used visual culture to establish unity among societies. This complex Malaysian cultural identity was not easy to define, as the National Cultural Policy itself was too rigid and fixed. This confusing policy failed to address critical social concerns, although the government attempted to portray the success of maintaining unity and harmony among ethnic groups in Malaysia. Based on the current political situation, the young generation now vigorously voice their views concerning issues in the political, economic and social situation. In art practice, the young artists have since the 1990s moved out from the traditional cocoon of their artwork production. However it is still within the “hegemony” of certainty that leads to “playing safe”. This kind of “hegemony” has never been written in any particular act or rules from the government, but a clear understanding exists among the artists about what issues they are prohibited from exploring. In this

research, the opportunity for me to criticise Malaysian political, economic and social issues through my art practice in the artwork of layer cakes is a welcome new dimension in contemporary Malaysian art.

Malaysia's cultural policy, set up by the government in 1971, is considered too idealistic and superficial. By looking at artwork from the historical background of the contemporary art practice in Malaysia, Malaysian artists tried to portray unity in society focusing on Malaysia's cultural identity. It was hard to achieve, as identity itself is constantly reshaped by the process of assimilation and interaction with external influences. A discrete example was found in my research into contemporary Malaysian art, in which the identity of a single Malaysian society was not in evidence. This is exhibited by the layer cake artwork that deals with unity among the many races in Malaysia. The pattern of the layers inside the cake itself symbolised the notion that the peoples of Malaysia have remained divided since the colonial era.

The constitution of the National Culture Policy relating to art development in Malaysia seems to be an obstacle to local artists expressing their thoughts through artwork. Through the interviews with Malaysian artists who have the chance to produce the artwork outside Malaysia, the production of contemporary Malaysian art was closely connected with traditional Malay art. It consists of Malay cultural subject matter, traditions and Islamic religious beliefs. The government's regulations, especially towards unity, religious sensitivity and political issues, were clearly understood by the artists. The safest mode was to construct a non-provocative approach, not to challenge any government policy or transgress any boundary.

In this investigation of hybridity, it was not easy to interpret and identify outside elements which were considered inappropriate with local values. The development of the internet and sophisticated communication nowadays has allowed many elements to penetrate local culture. In the process of exploring hybridity in art and culture and the process of Malaysia's cultural identity, I have found a major change in my own practice. As a typical Malaysian artist who worked within the principles of National Culture Policy, my artwork was shifted through my own "mind journey" to another level of critical thinking which varied from my own previous work. Moreover, I have established a different context from contemporary art practice in Malaysia in which the print works and the layer cakes deal with a critical view of the political, economic and social contexts as well as experimenting with new forms in the artworks. Artwork such as political imagery (images of familiar political party leaders) is considered 'taboo' in Malaysia; explorations defacing traditional fabric are frowned upon; and to place food in an exhibition was an unusual practice.

The research also showed an understanding that a single national identity for Malaysians could not be fixed. When Malay culture was set up as a fundamental of Malaysian national culture, this became problematic to other races in Malaysia as there was no clear understanding about a single culture to represent all the races. In addition, the "One Malaysia" idea to foster unity amongst Malaysians was another concept which was unclear and hard to achieve. For the last fifty-two years of independence, the government has tried to develop sameness amongst Malaysians, as Malaya has been building its own nation only since 1957 and, as Malaysia, since 1963. The concept of One

Malaysia can be considered as just the same old political rhetoric from the leader of a new political party. This idea of One Malaysia is not a new concept to the Malaysian community: it is closely related to the concept of unity, which has been discussed since the implementation of National Culture Policy in 1971. Furthermore, to achieve unity, an understandable concept of national identity should be crystallised as Malaysia was founded from a multiracial society. Through this research, the artwork production opens up the phenomenon of the current process of hybridity and the issue of national identity. A multiracial country such as Malaysia took years of effort to generate the sense of equilibrium amongst society, and the concept of One Malaysia might be possible to achieve. These ideas require highly mature understanding by people to establish a situation where a balance can be found between political, economic and social aspects.

The artwork is seen as an instructive and educational process to enhance the understanding on the relation between the hybridisation process and its function as a main contributor towards the development of the Malaysian art practice. Based on my theoretical analysis and studio practice, this research is intended to explore new knowledge on the dynamics that exists between the contemporary arts, crafts and hybridism within the Malaysian context. The effects of hybridism can be seen through arts, crafts and visual cultures from the investigation carried out on the Malaysian contemporary art development since 1930s. In my studio practice, I have discovered a suitable combination of the media and technique usage where traditional and modern methods have been explored through my own experimentation. In “Nusantara...Aram Kitai Bejalai” (Let’s Travel) exhibition, the traditional fabric of Pua Kumbu and Batik

has been used as a 'canvas' to construct a print works by using the technique of silk screen. The patterns on these fabrics still carry the traditional motifs but the production of these craft has been taken over by modern technology. In my practice, the objects and motifs from the Malay indigenous craft traditions have been reworked and adapted to produce artifacts that have never been produced in Malaysia before. In "Lapis" (Layers) exhibition, the process of baking the layer cakes have been explored by combining the traditional method of cooking with the modern oven to construct a new arrangement on the pattern inside the layer cakes. As the exhibitions have taken place in the United Kingdom, the viewers had the opportunity to view and experience the artwork itself which indicates the new understanding of the development of Malaysian contemporary artwork. At this stage, the theoretical analysis is expected to explain further on hybridism as a crucial factor on how the Malaysian national identity has been established. Therefore I intend to enrich my Malaysian national heritage through my artwork production. Thus, through these findings obtained from my research, the theoretical analysis and practice-based approach has successfully discovered a new level of understanding of, and the methods of exploring, the effects of hybridism in contemporary Malaysian Art development, the process of nation building within the social context.

It is essential to stress that my practice will be an ongoing project. From the exploration and findings in this research, I shall investigate different media to explore another new approach to construct artwork in the form of traditional local craft and local performing arts rituals. Malaysia and another South East Asia country such as Indonesia and Thailand will be the region of my next project. This is due to the similar practice in local society, especially in

Indonesia and South Thailand. I shall observe the cultural traditions, value systems and government policy towards traditional culture. Nonetheless, the current issue of hybridity will become the main principle in conceptualising and producing artwork, including the implementation of the relevant media which can re-contextualise other types of artwork.

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Sheffield Hallam University PhD Group Discussion with Rizal Rahman (Malaysia), Miguel Santos (Portugal), Rueben Mariampillai (Ceylon), Seri Rahayu (Malaysia) and Li Hung Li (Taiwan) lead by Dr Jaspar Joseph-Lester. 14 October 2008.

Rusdi Nasir, Malaysian artist, at Sheffield on 15 October 2008.
Sheffield Hallam University - Undergraduate Study in Media Arts (Film and Media Production) lead by Rose Cooper. 16 October 2008.

Dr John Postill, anthropologist, at Sheffield on 22 October 2008.

Florence Ayisi, film maker, at University of Wales, Newport on 27 November 2008.

Dr Musaed Albehiri, artist, at University of Wales, Newport on 27 November 2008.

Rabiah Amit, Sarawakian cake maker, telephone interview on 19 April 2009.

Sharifah Wahani Wan Johan, Sarawakian cake maker, at Sheffield on 19 May 2009.

Jonathan Alexander Eaton, Bank Street Arts Gallery, Sheffield. 18 September 2009.

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Dr Anthony Key, artist, at London on 8 December 2009.

Dayang Nurfaridah Pengiran Jemat, Sarawakian cake maker, telephone interview on 18 December 2009.

Dr Azizi Bahauddin, academician and artist, at Sheffield on 6 January 2010.

TRANSLATION OF IBAN PROVERBS

Translations on Pua Kumbu

- 1,2. Selamat Datai:
Welcome.
- 3,4,5. Perintah Rajah Brooke 1842-1941:
The White Rajah of Sarawak - James Brooke, Charles Brooke and Charles Vyner Brooke.
6. Baka gemian ikan banta' nyambut jerua' ai' kembai, baka pesilar ular sudu' nyambut pupu' pasang lemari:
About to receive good fortune/profit/windfall/godsend.
7. Ragak riang dipansuh enda' bulih seputung munti'; ragak daun rubai disumai enda' bulih seperiuk pendi':
A person who knows how to talk big but delivers nothing/has no direction.
8. Ujan mas di menua orang, ujan batu di menua diri':
The satisfaction/happiness that one experiences in another country is no better than in one's own country, therefore whether it is good or bad, one should always be thankful.
Enda' retai di panas, enda' sebah di ujan:
A decent living often gets praise.
9. Bejalai betungkatka adat; tinduk bepanggalka pengingat:
Never ever do something that breaches the custom/break the law.
10. Ngasingka ketapu bulu bekia', masukka kelambi baju taya':
Go on war raid.
11. Agi' idup agi' ngelaban:
The Malaysian Rangers incitement slogan means fight til the end.
Ai' bah perau' enda' anyut, telah agi' kemarau panjai:
It's useless not to grab an opportunity that's available than complain if there's none at all.
12. Teleba' nuntungka siung nudukka teladuk, nanam peputan, alai Iban ke betekan angkat nempa':
Laurels attained has profound effects on one's own race and will be emulated by others.
13. Ai' ditetak enda' putus; ai' ditunu enda' angus:
No matter how serious the dispute is among brothers/sisters/family members, they will eventually reconcile/be good as usual/before.
14. Baka sungai betemu nanga; baka kajang betemu siba; baka kain betemu puncha:
Both are evenly matched: experts match with expert and together they accomplish their task excellently/brilliantly.

15. Lasit baka kechit atung nyelalang; laju baka peluru leka bangkang; deras ari kebas kesulai tandang:
The word/phrase used to describe the speed of one's work/run/fight.
16. Asal pelaga pulai ke lupung, asal ilang pulai ke sarung:
Refuse/unable to change ones attitude/behaviour, never get fed up/give up in one task just like the Ibans who form continuously throughout their lives or else they have nothing to eat/consume.
17. Banyak ari lemetak di Tinting Kedang; mayuh ari beluh Danau Majang:
An expression to illustrate a situation/condition where there are many people converging/gathering at one place.
18. Ari ni selangking seruran nyumbuk; ari ni terentang balut sampuk; ari ni bidai jarai keranjai uduk:
Describe a person who comes from a family well known for telling/ revealing a story/rumour.
19. Baka tekura pantup bebandir:
Endeavours which reach their objectives after overcoming obstacles.
20. Sehari selemba ubung, lama-kelama' selambar kain:
There must be something worthwhile/profitable if we are persistent, steadfast, enduring in doing our work.
21. Adat periuk bekerak, adat lesung bededak:
Certain task/work that is conducted must be done with diligence and wholeheartedly.
Agi' idup diserayung adat, udah parai dikandung tanah:
One must always be guided by manners/basic values/ culture till end.
22. Abu abis tekebu, amau abis tekebau:
Every matter undertaken throughout life has no ending.
23. Ngererai baka tangkai pinang laka; jurus baka arus numpu ke nanga:
As agreed, though a task has been clearly explained/announced any other task can be carried out.
24. Akal akar bepulas anda' patah:
A smart person is never easily deviated/fooled.
Alah di tanah, menang di gelanggang:
One may be defeated in an event/a way but may win in the other, which could be much easier in one's home/other places.
25. Sesingkat serekat ke siku orang, sesinggang lansau ke bansa mensia:
The first words spoken on the moon from Neil Amstrong, "That's one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind".

26. Sekali ai' bah, sekali' pasir berubah:
The change in leadership, a change in administration.
Berubah orang megai, berubah ga' atur menua:
Current changes in global scenes have diverse influence in local situation.
- 27,28. Selamat Jalai:
Good Bye.

Translations on Batik

1. Ensulai pulai ke lubuk, pinang pulai ke tampuk, enti takut ditimpus umbak, anang berumah di tisi tebing:
Homecoming – a reflection upon the challenges endured during the previous journey.
2. Beralih ke tanah putih, pindah ke tanah mirah:
Escaped, move elsewhere.
Amat tinggi' bangau terebai, ila' iya inggap ba' belakang kerebau:
A person who wanders for so long will return one day to his/her own country.
3. Enda' nemu ngama' utai ke enda' dipeda; enda' nemu nyagam utai ke dalam:
One who is not choosy about whom to mix with, no matter he/she is dead or not.
4. Kami tu' ukai mungkal endang nitihka asal, ukai muntis endang nitihka aris:
A person who admits to doing something/a task according to proper order/ approaches without a muddle/a mess.
5. Baka ke nyala besilih nibar; baka ke merau' besilih sengkar; baka ke bekayuh besilih suar:
Taking turn in discussions/exchanging views such as in wedding ceremony.
6. Di Rajang baka di Lundu'; din baka ditu'; suba' baka diatu':
A person who is suffering (in distress) / lazy will even suffer more in a new place/environment.
7. Ansar enda' betebing, alus enda' bekingking; anyut enda' tepanggih, labuh enda' bepegai:
Life gets tough/in difficulties/suffers with no impositions/no resources.
8. Anchur tubuh diperaka urat, budi manah meruan dikingat:
One's kindness, generosity and gratitude will always be remembered forever.
9. Angkat serunyut orang baka sabut nyiur undang; angkat bebatak baka anak wi seluang:
A group should not leave one place hastily/hurriedly but rather slowly and relaxedly.

10. Baka manuk pulai ke penepan; baka engkechung pulai ke serangan:
A person coming back/returning to his/her origin (such as in faith).
11. Betangkah tengah kerangan, mesti diduju' ai' bah:
Lack of confidence in a task will lead to problem or failure.
Bepangki' diri' sedulang, bepantuk diri' segelanggang:
Quarrelling among relatives, marrying those from the same
longhouse/village/a very close relative.
12. Enda' betuja' baka bila' lambar jerunggang; enda' pimpat baka sipat tali
ripang:
A person who is good, honest and trustworthy in many fields/matters/affairs
(e.g. tradition).
13. Baka ke belumba', enda' tau' enda' datai di adan:
A task/work must be carried out till completed/accomplished.
14. Angkat nyeriat baka singut lalat ninggalka idang; angkat bepipis baka
angkis ninggalka lubang; angkat bejung baka semut lutung niti serambung
jalai petebang:
A proverb/idiom which tells the condition when a group of people returns
home at the same time.
15. Ampang belantan; amfang belulai; amfang mensuga:
Name for Pua Kumbu woven by the Iban.
16. Merau' nebing-nebing, bejalai ngeraming-ngeraming, nitih ka orang, ukai
ke pun:
Following the steps of others to take a turn for the better, yet still hold to the
traditional beliefs.
17. Anang manjung di pala' wung; anang ngangau di kaki rantau:
Don't do something yet if things are unavailable, don't start yet if work still
unaccomplished.
18. Baka ke merau', nyau mai' besilih sangkar, baka ke nyala, besilih nibar,
baka ke bejaku, minta' nimbai:
Adopt and adapt – a continuous process to fit in a new culture.

GLOSSARY

1. **Displaced artist**
I have taken the notion of 'displaced artist' as a way of reflecting on my position as a Malay artist living and working in the United Kingdom, producing the series of artwork that reflects back my own cultural context.
2. **Eastern values**
In Malaysia, the concept of 'eastern values' refers to Islam, the religion of the Malays, together with the Confucianism of the ethnic Chinese, and Hinduism.
3. **Hybridity**
Hybridity is a key term in this thesis. It bridges Malaysian cultural history with approaches to art making. My use of the term is informed by the work of such as Ismail Zain, Hasnul Jamal Saidon and Redza Piyadasa, who have used the term in their discussion of contemporary art, post-colonialism, identity, multiculturalism and globalisation in Malaysia.
4. **Local**
Through this thesis, the term describes the characteristic of the Malaysian way of life, values and norms and has been employed to portray Malaysia's national identity.
5. **National identity**
In a Malaysian context, national identity is based on the National Culture Policy. This was introduced in 1971 to ease the process of unity amongst societies. In the thesis, I use this term to illustrate the relationship between contemporary art practice in Malaysia based on the historical context and my artwork exploration.
6. **Political**
The influence of government cultural policy on Malaysian art practice is key to the thesis. Throughout this research, politics refers to the Malaysian system of government. The multi-party system which is Barisan Nasional currently consists of multiracial party. Almost every aspect of the Malaysian socio-cultural context has been influenced by political circumstances, including Malaysian contemporary art development.
7. **Re-contextualise**
Through the thesis, I use this term to refer to the process of producing a work from Malaysian craft, traditional fabric and food, in order to transform it into another form of artwork with a new meaning from its original context. In my practice, traditional Malaysian fabric has been used as a canvas to juxtapose text and images to illuminate a new form of artwork that deals with the issues of hybridity and national identity in a Malaysian cultural context. The traditional Sarawakian layer cake has been developed into a new form of symbol that deals with current political issues in Malaysia.

8. Symbiotic
The connection or relation between practice and the written element in my research is defined by what I term symbiosis.

9. Transformation
The transformation from traditional Malaysian craft as a medium to generate new artwork has been a key concern throughout my research. The craft itself becoming a new medium to explore critical issues about the local cultural context is a process that I have applied in my practice.