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CULTURE IN THE NEW REALITY AND VALUES FOR THE FUTURE: A MALAYSIAN VIEW**Shamsul Amri Baharuddin**

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(E.B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, 1958 [orig. 1871], p. 1)

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by

Shamsul Amri Baharuddin

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INTRODUCTION

It is useful to look back briefly before we leap to the future, at least to be sure where we came from because the future remains a historical conjecture. The best futurist in the trade could only provide us “a scenario”, at best “a general futuristic scenario”, regarding our future and nothing more. The scenario may be, or may be not even, relevant to us. We have to figure out the specific details about the scenario, fill up the empty spaces, so to speak, and go through the future ourselves, collectively and individually. In order to do so we have to anchor our understanding of our possible future to our own history. This is especially necessary if the matter at hand that we are interested in is ‘culture’, very much an historically-bounded entity.

In this brief paper I would first deal with the history of the concept ‘culture’ as we have come to define, accept and understand it in the Malaysian context, both during the colonial and post-colonial period. The main aim is to show how our understanding of ‘our culture’, both in terms of idea and practice, came to be constructed for analytical and applied purposes and, at the same time, informs and shapes the way we live in the everyday sense. I would highlight the critical role of colonial knowledge in constructing, defining and elaborating our culture and sub-cultures, which became highly plural at the eve of the independence. The situation became more complicated later, when the efforts at nation-building by the post-colonial state led to the introduction of a state-sponsored notion of ‘culture’.

The second part of the paper deals with culture in Malaysia in the context of globalization. When we decided to shift our economic orientation from that of an agriculture-based to a manufacturing industrial-based, since the early 1980s, we therefore entered a self-globalization mode. Culture in

Malaysia since then is not only about 'culture and sub-cultures' or 'sponsored or unsponsored ones' but also about 'consumer culture' constructed and originating from somewhere else but practised everywhere else.

The final part of the paper deals with the future of culture in Malaysia, and the discussion shall be framed within, what I would call, the "culture pendulum" thesis.

'CULTURE' IN MALAYSIA: ONE CONCEPT, MANY MEANINGS

Culture, in its simplest understanding, refers to the ways of life of the members of a society, or of groups within a society. Other cultural items, for example, are how people dress, their customs, their patterns of work and religious ceremonies. Some say culture developed in an evolutionary manner but others argue that it is a constructed entity. Perhaps it is a bit of both. However, no understanding of culture is possible without an understanding of a society's or a group's history, for culture is its history and has always been history-bound.

In the Malaysian context, for more than a century, we have inherited and internalized a concept and an understanding of 'culture' that has been derived mainly from 'colonial knowledge', within which anthropological knowledge was an integral part.

WHAT IS 'COLONIAL KNOWLEDGE'?

It is that knowledge, accumulated and systematized during the colonial rule, that had almost replaced totally indigenous knowledge through the introduction of 'officializing procedures' that finally conquered the local 'epistemological space', or the mental space. This space could be described as the site of intellectual, mental, and cultural wealth of the indigenous people that are rooted in their tradition and civilization and the contents became the basis of the way they define their social existence and order. The colonial 'officializing procedures' involved a number of elements and implemented in a number of steps, almost in an evolutionary manner.

The *first* step was evidently to learn the local languages, produced dictionaries and grammar texts. This was often done with the great help of religious missionaries. The knowledge of languages was necessary not only to issue commands, collect taxes, maintain law and order but also to create other forms of knowledge about the people they are ruling, such as to classify,