

# Globalisation: The Experience of Malay Adolescents with Conduct Problems

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## Abstract

This paper attempts to explore the experiences of Malay adolescents with conduct problems within the Malaysian context of globalisation. It is undeniable that to some extent globalisation offers opportunities for a country to progress to be a greater and more competitive nation. In fact, the Malaysian government is highly inspired by the concept of globalisation in progressing towards the vision of becoming a developed nation by the year 2020. Nevertheless, globalisation as a process is very demanding requiring a lot of changes in the Malaysian political, cultural, economic, educational and social landscape. In addition, many of the changes require inculcating foreign cultural values that tend to be inconsistent with local practices. Without adequate preparation, such inconsistency potentially affects the locally defined well-being among vulnerable groups, especially adolescents. There is consistent evidence that shows a significant relationship between changes with respect to globalisation and conduct problems among adolescents. However, how far the affected adolescents understand and adapt with the globalisation process, particularly in the Malaysian context remains elusive. Therefore, it is essential to explore their understandings and experiences on different aspects of globalisation that significantly affect their lives.

**Keywords:** Globalisation, Conduct problems, Adolescents, Experience

## Introduction

Globalisation as a process has become the main issue underlying the discussion on how the contemporary world works (Rondinelli & Heffron, 2007). Globalisation was found to contribute significantly to the progress and transformation of most countries in the world in almost all areas of human lives, namely economic, political, social, educational and cultural (Harun & Hasan, 2008; Peow, 2011; Rondinelli & Heffron, 2007). Malaysia, known as the fastest

growing developing country in the South East Asia region, is experiencing the transformation rapidly. This transformation is an important agenda for Malaysia to accomplish its targeted 'Vision 2020'. The vision aims for the country to become a developed nation by the year 2020. The vision was announced by Tun Mahathir Mohamad (1991) the former Prime Minister of Malaysia. He then proposed nine Malaysian central strategic challenges that Malaysia must overcome in order to become a developed nation. They are: 1) to establish a united Malaysian nation with a sense of common and shared destiny, 2) to create a psychologically liberated, secure, and developed Malaysian society, 3) to foster and develop a mature demographic society, 4) to establish a fully moral and ethical society, 5) to establish a matured, liberal and tolerant society, 6) to establish a scientific and progressive society, 7) to maintain a fully caring society and a caring culture, 8) to ensure an economically just society and 9) to establish a prosperous society (Tun Mahathir Mohamad, 1991). In addition, the use of science and technology has become a key development indicator (Samsudin, 2001). One of the important measures taken in order to achieve the vision and to overcome the associated challenges is through participation in the globalisation process.

However, according to Tun Mahathir Mohamad (as cited in Samirul Arif, 2011), "there is no doubt that globalisation is an idea whose time has come...(but) the fact that (it) has come... does not mean we should sit by and watch as the predators destroy us" (p. 1). This suggests that the government and the people do need to be aware of the detrimental effects of adopting and adapting to the process of globalisation. Hence, in order to ensure that Malaysia will continue to progress economically, politically and socially, protecting local cultures, values and practices is necessary as new practices are adopted, adapted, assimilated and integrated (Mohd Abbas, 2011). Nevertheless,

some people are having difficulty adapting to the changes. In Malaysia, the increasing number of conduct problems among adolescents is one of the leading issues that are being seriously discussed during this globalisation process (Kamal Hassan, 2005).

Media reports indicate that, in 2010, the authorities of Malaysia placed 3,862 young people in institutions for offences such as property-related crimes, cross-dressing, violence, breaking court-ordered supervision, drug use, gambling, dealing in weapons and firearms, and running away from assigned schools. As of April 2010, 1,058 young people, were referred to *Sekolah Tunas Bakti* and *Asrama Akhlak*, rehabilitation centres for young offenders in Malaysia (News Strait Time, 2009). Nonetheless, in normal practice, the statistical figure is arguable because the actual number of juvenile cases is usually estimated to be much higher than that reported (Abd Wahab, 2006).

According to the Malaysian laws, young offenders, who are also known as juveniles, are those under the age of 21 and who have criminal responsibility at the age of ten (Abd Wahab, 2006). The emerging conduct problem is also defined based on various social institutions such as the school in which young people are located, therefore can refer to both the violation of the Penal Code and the schools norms (Maznah, Sa'odah, & Juliana Rosmidar, 2008). From a psychological perspective, conduct problems can be referred to as 'antisocial behavior'. But, when the behaviours are repetitive and persistent and potentially violating the basic rights of others or major appropriate societal norms or rules, they will be classified as conduct disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2004). In Malay society, where Islam is the main guide of conduct, the violation of Islamic rules also can be classified as conduct problems.

Some scholars are highly inclined to associate conduct problems experienced by Malaysian adolescents with the globalisation process. This is based on their analysis of the impacts of the process on the socio-cultural, political and economic development of Malaysia (e.g. Harun & Hasan, 2008; Kamal Hassan, 2005). Their arguments are mostly centred on the inadequacy of preparation of the adolescents to face the impacts. Thus, without denying the huge contribution of globalisation towards the continuous development of Malaysia,

the rise of conduct problems among adolescents also needs to be closely analysed.

Nevertheless, the fact that Malaysia is made up of multicultural societies has led to the difficulty in addressing conduct problems among adolescents in Malaysia from a single definition and perspective. This is because each social group is practicing their own unique cultures, values and beliefs. Therefore, against a background of globalisation and the effects of a changing world, this paper locates the emergence of conduct problems among adolescents within a history that is specific to Malay. Consistent with the argument, the objectives of this paper are to explore the tensions faced by Malay adolescents with conduct problems and discuss their contingent responses towards globalisation.

### Malay Cultural Values

Malaysia's Population and Housing Census 2010 estimated the population of Malaysia to be around 28.9 million people, with Malays making up the largest population at about 14.7 million. Culturally, traditional Malay cultural values are regarded as essential in the socialisation process within Malay society. For the purpose of this paper, culture is defined as a framework of behavioural patterns, values, assumptions and experiences shared by a social group (Mohamed Aslam, Selamah, Ruzita, & Hazizan, 2001). Values can be defined as a multifaceted set of standards of any particular society that guide one's conduct, presentation of self to others, judgement, evaluation and rationalisation (Mohamed Aslam et al., 2001; Selamah & Ruzita, 1999). Referring to this definition, Malays are believed to uphold diverse cultural and values, that guide all areas of life, including family codes that include marriage, family structure and functions, roles of family members and the relationships within the family unit (Yaacob, 2009). Research suggests that this diversity is influenced by many factors, particularly through the teaching of Islam and the diverse cultural influences encompassing Siamese, Javanese, Sumatran, and Indian (Krisnan, 2004; Yaacob, 2009).

According to Andaya (2001), Malays have a cultural origin where "proper behaviour, customary laws and standards of government, language and literature derived from the oral and written traditions of Melaka became 'primordial' values associated with being Malay" (p. 316).

The manifestations of Malay cultural values are typically expressed through traditional Malay sayings, poems, proverbs and verses (Hashim, Normahdiah, Rozita, & Siti Sarah, 2012). Based on these different forms of expression, Hashim Hj. Musa (as cited in Hashim et al., 2012) has established 26 core Malay psyches or social character traits, including abiding by Islamic teaching, cooperation, respect, moderation, and caring. According to him, those Malays who possess these traits were considered to have high moral and ethical values and were highly respected by Malay society. They were regarded as have acquired three noble traits, namely: (1) good-natured, well-mannered and urbane, (2) polite, sensible and insightful in speech and (3) wise and knowledgeable.

On the other hand, the socialisation process within the Malay family involves the teaching of basic practical skills to prepare the children to take over adult male and female roles. For example, a father will train his son to tap rubber trees from childhood. Some of the traditional Malay parents also feel that sons should be better educated than daughters. In addition, in the socialisation process of their children, Malays always use proverbs and maxims as a guide. For example “*melentur buluh biarlah semasa masih rebung*” (to bend a bamboo, while it is still a shoot) means if you want to teach your child, it is better to do so when he is still young. Furthermore, the cooperation among family members is also one of the most cherished values in Malay society (Yaacob, 2009). On the contrary, any behavior that diverges from these culturally and socially maintained Malay values can be characterised as social problem within the Malay society (Mohamed Aslam et al., 2001). Therefore, the Malays believe that they must protect their traditional cultures and values to ensure the continuous development of socially healthy society (Mohamed Aslam et al., 2001).

Nonetheless, as Malaysia undergoes transformation, the ability to sustain those elements of cultural and values has become questionable. This is because values usually have been transferred from one generation to another by using traditional methods such as through oral means and being kept in the heart of the society rather than being officially documented. The vulnerability in sustaining the values may potentially lead to changes in the values as an effect of transformation in many areas, including

economic policy, educational systems and communication technology. Hence, the changes are believed to have detrimental effect on the moral development particularly of young generations (Selamah & Ruzita, 1999).

In a study conducted by Hashim et al. (2012) to discover the degree of conformity or divergence from the core social character of Malays today, it was found that the Malay still retain their religious, ethical and moral values, and basic knowledge but have deficits in upbringing, nurturing and putting the values into practice in their daily lives. Consequently, this has resulted in negative and defective social behaviour in Malay society. They added that, this is the main factor that gives rise to social ills and decadence in the Malay society of the past and present. Hashim et al. (2012) attributed the issue to the inherited socio-cultural hindrances as proposed by Mohd Kamal Hassan (1996), also known as the ‘ill-heart’ of the Malay. The hindrances include a liberal-secular mindset, conspicuous and ostentatious lifestyle, ‘weak moral fibre syndrome’ and short-term gain of prosperity. To some extent, these weaknesses become obstacles for the Malays to retain the uniqueness of their cultural values, particularly during the current rapid transformation of the country as an impact of the globalisation process (Kamal Hassan, 2005).

### Globalisation

Globalisation is defined as “the movement towards greater interaction, integration and interdependence among people and organizations across national borders” (Rondinelli & Heffron, 2007, p. 1). Globalisation has often been associated with the process of internationalisation, liberalisation, universalisation and Westernisation or modernisation and deterritorialisation (Mohd Abbas, 2011; Peow, 2011). More specifically, internationalisation refers to international exchange and interdependence, liberalisation refers to open policy with no restrictions on the movement of capital from one country to another, universalisation is sharing or spreading various objects and experience with/to people worldwide, Westernisation or modernisation is a concept whereby the local host culture is replaced by Western culture and finally deterritorialisation suggests the loss of what is unique to a particular country but it is shared by others from other parts of the world (Mohd Abbas, 2011).

Globalisation as a process (Harvey, 2000), has impacted almost all areas of life. The positive impacts of the process are believed to contribute significantly to the progress of the world and manifest through the perceived opportunities for international travel, trade, migration, social interaction, cultural integration and dissemination of knowledge and understanding (Rondinelli & Heffron, 2007). Because of these opportunities, people all over the world have been experiencing the compression of the world, reduction in cost and time of moving commodities and people, an increase of multinational capital flows and immigrant populations, consciousness of the world as a whole, interdependence of people and nations, and intense consciousness of this interdependency (Harvey, 2000; Peow, 2011).

In this paper, globalisation is referred to as a process that involves greater interaction, integration, and interdependence among people and organisations across national borders that has led to the significant changes in many different areas. This definition is generated by taking into account all elements underlying the process of globalisation especially in the Malaysian context.

### **Globalisation in the Malaysian Context and its Relation to the Emergence of Conduct Problems among Adolescents**

Asian countries (including Malaysia) have been adjusting to globalisation since the late 1970s through innovation, change and adaptation (Rondinelli & Heffron, 2007). Several significant sectors are identified that have dominated the globalisation process, particularly in Malaysia, that includes economic, technological, cultural, social and educational sectors (Harun & Hasan, 2008; Kamal Hassan, 2005; Mohd Abbas, 2011). In responding to the globalisation process, the Malaysian government together with relevant organisations and individuals has taken necessary measures in order to adapt to the changes that have been brought about by the process. As a result, Malaysia is currently experiencing rapid changes and development in all the different areas.

Nevertheless, issues related to the real gains and losses of the globalisation process have captured the attention of many people worldwide. In Malaysia, this issue has also been closely analysed and discussed. Adolescents aged between 10 and 19 years old make up the largest population in

Malaysia at around 5.5 million people (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2012), and have been among the groups that are much affected by the changes (Kamal Hassan, 2005). The process has exposed adolescents to many new environments that require them to adapt. Failure to adapt renders them vulnerable to the changing context. Parallel to this argument, the rise of conduct problems among adolescents in Malaysia has often been attributed to the failure of the adolescents to make reasonable adjustments to the globalisation process.

Many researchers have agreed that economic growth is one of the important keys in the globalisation process (Abd Wahab, 2006; Peow, 2011). The trend toward global economic integration helped many developing countries to progress, particularly those in Asian countries. The ability of governments and private sectors to adapt to the so-called “global economic trend” brought about social and political benefits to Malaysia. This is evident through poverty reduction, job creation and improvements in health and social well-being (Rondinelli & Heffron, 2007). In the Malaysian context, several measures have been adopted and adapted from the global trend in order to improve Malaysians economic development. Among the measures that have been taken are the introduction of a free trade system and open market policy. Through these measures, the economic sector has become more competitive and efficient as privatisation policies, deregulation of the market system, as well as control of the market by free-trade regulation, are adopted (Harun & Hasan, 2008). The focus of the Malaysian economy has also changed from an agrarian based economy to an industrialized economy (Peow, 2011).

These improvements and changes however have not benefited all groups of people, instead, becoming a risk to those who have been left behind or excluded from its benefits (Peow, 2011). For instance, the shift in the focus from agricultural to industrial-based economy has affected people who are dependent on agricultural revenues to pay for their cost of living. This situation has caused an increasing risk of economic insecurity among them (Rondinelli & Heffron, 2007). The destruction of their livelihood by the new economic policy has led them to change their concentration from agricultural to industrial sectors. Most of them have migrated to the urban area where the job opportunities have been perceived to be better

(Mohd Fadzil & Ishak, 2009). Nevertheless, in reality, the process of getting new job is not as easy as they may anticipate. The increased number of legal and illegal foreign workers have lessened the opportunity for local unskilled labors to get good jobs (Ramesh Kumar Moona, Charles Ramendran, & Yacob, 2012).

Therefore, factors such as the urge for money and the failure to secure good jobs in the labour market have encouraged the affected people to do all that it takes in order to ensure their survival. This, at least in part, has been linked to an increase in crime and it is Malays who are the highest population living in poverty in Malaysia (Economic Planning Unit, 2012) have become vulnerable to the effects of globalisation. This argument is further compounded by statistics of young offenders in Malaysia that have shown that Malay adolescents are the highest population that are placed in institutions for young offenders (Maznah et al., 2008). In addition, in a study on the prevalence of truancy, Shamsul Azhar Shah, Azura, Azimatun, Mohd Rohaizat, Nazarudin, Rozita and Rahmah (2012) found that household incomes of Malay students with truancy problems are lower when compared to non-truant students. It is important to note that, truancy has become one of the significant risks for conduct problems engaged by adolescents in Malaysia. Therefore, it can be argued that, economic insecurity has impacted on involvement of adolescents at risk of developing conduct problems.

Meanwhile, scientific and technological advancements especially in the field of communication have also become the key in the success of the globalisation process. Continuous innovation of modern technologies has been contributing to the improvement of Malaysia. Through technological innovations, the cost and time entailed in the movement of goods and people have been reduced. Hence, it is said that the innovation in the postal system, the telegraph, the radio, telecommunications and the worldwide web have now pushed the cost of information transfer close to zero (Rondinelli & Heffron, 2007). All these communication tools allow people to communicate, to exchange ideas, services and products in more effective and faster ways when compared to the communication tools that were previously used (Harun & Hasan, 2008).

Through international interactions and interdependencies, the spread of cultural

influences and the ability of people in the world to communicate with each other across borders are enhanced. This phenomenon, also known as the process of Westernisation or modernisation (Mohd Abbas, 2011), has encouraged adolescents to be hugely exposed to foreign knowledge, cultures and values. Researchers, such as Mohd Abbas (2011) are very critical of these effects. For him, this process is an effort to re-colonise the East by the West without being present. He uses the term neo-colonialism to explain this re-colonisation attempt. He also argues that this is a new approach on how to impose Western hegemony to the people in the East. Despite that, not all Western cultures and values are necessarily detrimental but the problems emerge when there are inconsistencies between Western and Malay cultures, values and practices leading to unpredictable and ambivalent reactions among adolescents.

The Malay cultural values are mostly seen as contradictory to the values of the West. Certain behaviors might be understood a normal in Western cultures but in the Malaysian culture may meet the criteria for conduct disorder. For example, engaging in sexual activities outside marriage, close proximity between sexes in a closed place, gambling, cross-dressing and drinking alcohol breach behavioural standards for Malay adolescents (Mohamed Aslam et al., 2001; News Strait Time, 2009; Yaacob, 2009). The combination of factors such as taking up a liberal-secularistic mindset, weak moral and religious orientation (Abd Wahab, 2006; Kamal Hassan, 2005), and lack exposure to the Malay cultural and values (Hashim et al., 2012) have contributed to the emergence of locally perceived negative reactions among the Malay adolescents after they have been exposed to modernisation through Western cultural norms. As a consequence, it is possible that Malay have consciously or unconsciously engaged in many behaviors that are illegal and inconsistent with the local believes and practices.

In addition, the process of globalisation is very demanding. More expertise in all the different areas, especially in science and technology, are urgently needed by the country to move along with the pace of globalisation. This issue has been well emphasised in the Malaysian plan to achieve Vision 2020 (Samsudin, 2001). In order for Malaysia to take up this challenge and to fulfill the demand, the Malaysian educational policy has been revised and formulated in such a way

that provides more opportunity for students in the area of science and technology to progress. Accordingly, subjects related to science and technology have been prioritised at the expense of humanity and morality related subjects (Kamal Hassan, 2005). On the other hand, the democratisation of education is also adopted in the Malaysian education system. One of the essential elements in this approach is the opportunity for the open examination certificates at primary and secondary school level that is intended to allow all students to progress to higher education even though they may have failed their national examinations (Sua, 2012). There are however, problems with the democratisation of education. Malay students have historically not performed well in subjects that are attributed to successful outcomes (Kamal Hassan, 2005) and the forward progression to higher education is more likely to benefit those who have academic ability. Sua (2012) has argued that less attention is paid to values that are specific to Malay, suggesting that the new approach is limited in addressing moral development and educational outcomes for Malay adolescents and as a result, affected students are more likely to engage in truancy and behavioural problems in and outside of school (Sua, 2012).

Within the context of globalisation, conduct problems for Malay adolescents emerge as a form contingent responses or reactions to rapid change. Kamal Hassan (2005) argues that the process of globalisation is a new challenge to people who are inadequately prepared for them. His argument is specifically directed towards Malay Muslim adolescents in Malaysia who he believes might be most affected by the process. Therefore, efforts need to be made to find solutions on how to prepare these adolescents to face the challenges so that they can avoid suffering from any psychological or behavioural issues.

### **Future Direction**

By understanding all the measures that have been taken in order for Malaysia to keep pace with the accelerating process of globalisation as discussed in this paper, it shows that Malaysia's commitment to becoming a developed country by 2020 is focused on economic rather than moral development. The government has prioritised the development of scientific competence with less emphasis on establishing a moral and ethical society. Steps have also been taken by the Malaysian government to curb conduct problems

among adolescents, such as the introduction of the Child Act 2001, the establishment of various rehabilitation centres for young offenders, the development of National Youth Development Policy (NYPD), the creation of full time counsellors in school and the introduction of parenting courses (Maznah et al., 2008). However, it seems that all these measures have had little effect as the number of adolescents involved in conduct problems in Malaysia remains high. Without intending to undermine the existing efforts, it would seem as though there maybe something lacking in the steps taken especially when dealing with ongoing globalisation processes. Hence, a series of studies from all dimensions needs to be done in order to address the issue comprehensively.

As the issues related to physical and tangible aspects such as economic development, the educational system, and technological development have been addressed and discussed extensively by the government and other relevant parties and individuals, it is time that the focus is also directed towards the psychological preparation of adolescents as they face this new globalised era. To achieve this aim, it is important to contextualise the specifically Malay experience rather than assume that the theories of knowledge of the West are the best. Efforts should be put in place so that the unique explanations, conceptualisations and theorisations about the specific experience of Malaysian adolescents can be formulated. Thus, it will lead to the development of holistic and effective measures in dealing with conduct problems among adolescents in Malaysia. Therefore, one of the initial efforts that can be carried out is exploring the experiences of affected adolescents to understand how they perceive, understand and respond to the process of globalisation from their own perspectives. This step will provide valuable information in dealing with the issue.

On the other hand, there is a suggestion to inculcate good values in the society in order to improve social well-being (Selamah & Ruzita, 1999). The problem is knowledge of what features constitute good values. Traditionalists may argue that their traditional cultural values and practices should be privileged. However, the context of Malaysia has changed and the 'modern' world has emerged, so I argue that the emergence of new global cultures also needs to be considered. Therefore, the challenge is to produce a definition

of good values particularly for Malay society that are culturally (Islamic) meaningful and account for the changing society.

### Conclusion

There is no doubt that the process of globalisation plays an essential role in the development of Malaysia. However, it is my contention that all changes that happen due to globalisation are often accompanied by advantages and disadvantages. Without adequate preparation in dealing with the effects of globalisation, it may harm social and individual well-being in the country. By analysing the factors related to globalisation that lead to the emergence of conduct problems among adolescents, it shows that there is a space for understanding how these affected adolescents could be lacking in terms of mental preparation that cause them to react or to respond to the changes in an unfavourable ways. However, this argument will remain elusive unless efforts are made to explore and to unveil the experiences of these affected adolescents.

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