

## Tropical Forest Resources in the Development of Malay Culture

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### ABSTRACT

*This contribution succeeds in emphasizing the linkages between Malay culture and technology with the tropical forest. This connection is both material and spiritual because traditional Malay society made use of the forest as a source of building and handicraft materials as well as a source of inspiration for its art and literature. However, in the modern era this linkage is more and more tenuous due to urbanisation and industrialisation. The authors present various suggestions towards reorganising national Malaysian culture based on the concept of forest.*

### ABSTRAK

*Rencana ini berhasil menekankan hubungan kait antara budaya dan teknologi Melayu dengan hutan tropika. Hubungan ini bersifat material tetapi juga rohani kerana masyarakat Melayu tradisional memanfaatkan hutan sebagai sumber bahan binaan dan alat, sekali gus sebagai sumber ilham seni dan sastera. Namun, pada zaman moden ini hubungan ini semakin longgar akibat urbanisasi dan industrialisasi. Penulis menampilkan beberapa cadangan untuk menyusun semula budaya nasional Malaysia dengan berlandaskan konsep hutan.*

### INTRODUCTION

Any attempt to examine Malaysian forestry and culture conjointly is likely to be frustrated by a near absence of background literature which can offer an integrated perspective on these two important components of the Malaysian society. While the volume of publication on each component is certainly immense, and growing profusely, both corpora continue to grow quite independently of one another. This happens despite the mutual appreciation that the two components are in reality inextricably interrelated. At the general level, the forest has always been an important contextual ingredient of culture, and its economic and aesthetic values are, without doubt, culturally determined.

The forest envelops their homes and their lives; but, as with the fisherfolk and the sea, the more they explore it the more they know that it is a world apart. That it is so near and extends so far adds to its majesty and terror.

To this it might be added the distinct character of the tropical forest: unlike the vegetation cover in other parts of the world, the tropical forest offers the most diverse range of fauna and flora, containing some 45 percent of the estimated 8-10 million species on earth (Aiken and Leigh 1985: 15). This made it possible for the Malays to draw a wide variety of resource materials for a multitude of uses and cultural applications. Such selective use, while in places detrimental to the stability of the natural ecosystem, left a clear imprint on the character of the traditional culture.

### CATEGORIES OF FOREST USE.

It is convenient to describe the use of forests within a classificatory schema based on the satisfaction of wants since, as Leslie White asserts, "culture is essentially an adaptive mechanism, making possible the satisfaction of human needs, both biological and social". Of human needs, Maslow's (1954) concept of a "hierarchy of needs" offers a quick pathfinder towards ordering a complex range of uses which arise out of culturally determined needs. Maslow's idea of a hierarchy of five categories of needs, from physiological needs to the need for self-actualisation, which now seems rather commonplace, is that certain needs and values must come first and be satisfied before other "higher needs" can be entertained. To the extent that human needs, especially those categories beyond the bare necessities are culturally determined, the resources, including materials from the forest, drawn to satisfy them, are therefore culture-bound.

### STAPLE FOOD RESOURCES

The tropical rain forest in Malaysia provides refuge for some 14,000 species of plants of which about 160 species bear edible fruits, in addition to other important food crops, such as rice, vegetables, bamboo, yam and taro (Hashim 1986:154, 167). Some of the wild edible fruit species are still unexploited while others have long been domesticated (Jong et al. 1973). A number of researchers have also identified a group of tree species which have considerable potential for multipurpose use, including soil conservation, fruit, vegetable and fodder production as well as for the production of phytochemicals and dyes (Kamis 1988). In view of the horticultural research efforts undertaken by various agencies (Universiti Pertanian Malaysia, Forest Research Institute, Malaysian Agricultural

Research and Development Institute), more food-yielding species are expected to be uncovered in the near future.

The influence of forest resources to the Malay dietary habits can be seen in the "typical" meals *a la kampong* in which plant-based ingredients predominate. Whereas the staple dish is always rice, the dishes are always spiced with plant-based condiments, and always carry a measure of accompaniments in various mixtures and forms consisting of fruits, shoots and vegetables. Often the salad (*ulam*), which goes with the appetizer (*sambal*), is gathered from the jungle. Since climate in the tropics is not conducive to food storage, ingenious ways of curing food have also evolved and this appears in fermented forms such as *tempoyak*, *tapai*, *jeruk*; dried items such as tamarind, *asam glugor* and several spices; and smoked items such as bananas.

Traditionally the seasonal cycle of food production meant that there would be a post-harvest period of abundance, usually reserved for feasts and ceremonial occasions. It is our contention that this cycle created predictable demands for, and the capacity to hold, community feasts which could also provide the occasion for staging and watching cultural performances. In the areas which produced rice such occasions took place after the harvest season (*musim menuai*) when peasants could stay outdoors and have ample spare time to indulge in leisure pursuits.

The nature of forest clearance and swidden agricultural practices of the past made collective efforts necessary, and, consequently, reciprocity sanctions in the form of mutual aid arrangements (such as *berderau*) became a salient feature of the society. The necessity of collective efforts is clearly depicted in Shahnnon Ahmad's novel, *No Harvest But a Thorn*, where the author vividly presents the plight of farmers whose plots are subject to the endless threats and vagaries of nature which hemmed in their gardens. By the same token, the level of productivity was always low, forcing members of the community into a general situation of shared poverty. If the notion of the culture of poverty is to be accepted, it is but a product of the Malay's unproductive struggle to imitate (as Clifford Geertz suggests) the natural ecosystem. This is especially so in the case of *huma* or swidden agriculture, where tillers try to replace a diversity of wild plants with a diversity of domesticated species.

Clearly, the basic need for food impells the Malays to interact closely with the environment. In so doing, their cultural patterns (food habits, belief system and social organisation), are directly or indirectly dictated by the natural environment whose margins have been rapidly pushed back.

## PROTECTION FROM THE TROPICAL SUN, RAIN AND OTHER HAZARDS

In Maslow's conceptual schema, shelter, next to food, is a physiological need of the individual. It allows him to seek refuge in a quarter with "room" condition so that the body can maintain its biological equilibrium. The home also fulfills the need to feel safe, especially during sleeping hours. It is a place where one feels belonged and beyond this the home can be a source of self-esteem and an outlet for creative expressions.

The traditional Malay house is constructed mostly from wood, bamboo and thatch, which can be obtained from the local forest (Vaughan 1857; Noone 1948; Hilton 1956). The typical home consists of the house which is raised on posts several feet above the ground. Adjacent to the house would be a wooden hut for storing rice, and a simply constructed corral for the water buffalo. Material for the corral, as well as the fence which encircles the typical half-acre compound, could be of bamboo, wood or any assortment of leftover materials which are often supported by certain fencing species (e.g. kapok, *rukam* or *dedap*). A number of endemic species of fruit trees, palms, vegetables, herbs, tubers and creepers will also be seen, each grown with a specific purpose in mind. It is not uncommon to spot a stand of cacti or *memali* at the corner of the compound; its function is to avert the encroachment of evil spirits.

The supply of water comes either from a well or a river located on the lower ground, usually a stone's throw from the house. Close to the water source can be found certain species which survive in water-logged soil such as *rumbia*, *nipah*, *mengkuang*, *pandan*, *bemban*, all of which, again, are sources for household use. Coconut, areca, *sireh* and *serai* are plucked for daily use. More recent additions include ornamental species such as *melor*, orchids, *jeliti* and various palms.

The typical dwelling conjures up a scene of the luxuriant tropical landscape where a diverse range of domesticated species were introduced to replace an equally diverse number of wild species which had occupied the site prior to human occupation. The whole structure of the house (including roof, wall, post, floor, mat) is built from materials obtained from the forest. Each section of the house can be built from a number of substitutable sources. Thatch for the roof for instance, may be made from either *rumbia*, *nipah*, *bertam*, coconut or *pucuk*; while material for the floor can be either wood (plank or poles), bamboo (whole or split), palms (usually split *pinang*, *nibong* or *bayas*) or palm fronds. In former times, these materials were lashed together by the use of either split rattan, *bemban*, or creepers, so that it was still possible to build a house without the use of nails.

A variety of plants provide fuel material for cooking, and for “smoking out” mosquitoes, and insects which inevitably attack the construction materials. There are also species which are used for medicinal purposes, and for purposes of warding off evil spirits. At the same time the Malays, who were originally animists, strongly believed in guardian spirits and for this reason certain species associated with certain spirits or ghosts were avoided, both in forest clearance, and in domestic cultivation. Although there is no strict adherence to geomantic principles in the construction of a house (as compared to Chinese practises), site clearance or entry into the forest for foraging usually begin with certain rituals which are meant to appease the guardian spirits. It is a strategy to overcome fear of the unknown.

In the face of external threats, from hostile enemies – spirits, men and animals – it is important that Malays stick together. Unlike the Chinese, the Malays do not practice filial affinity beyond the immediate family. But the rule of endogamous marriage allows for putative relationships and loyalties. The individual’s overdependence on others (by modern urban standards) means that he has to subscribe to a myriad of collective rules and sanctions. As mentioned earlier, the need for collective efforts in economic activities such as forest clearance, swidden agriculture, hunting expeditions and the like, gave rise to reciprocal morality as is well illustrated in the equivalent concept of *gotong-royong* and *berderau*. This happens in an environment of low technological capability, and in an environment fraught with so many uncertainties, natural hazards and unknowns. In this respect the tropical forest provides the essential ingredients (not necessarily determinate) for the formation of the Malay culture, as evident in the food-shelter patterns. It also imposes conditions which shape the mode of social organisation in the community.

### SENSE OF BELONGING VS SELF-ACTUALISATION

One positive aspect of this environmentally coerced social cohesion is that cultural identity is clearly defined and this clear identity delivers a strong sense of belonging among members, especially in times of crisis, and in the face of external threats. Such a situation stands in stark contrast to the social situation of modern middle class Malays whose need for a sense of belonging to the local community is greatly deprived, making them, and the succeeding generations, gradually more alienated from their cultural roots as well as from the immediate neighbourhood. The sense of belonging is not achieved without cost, however.

While the traditional society offers a strong sense of “usness” in the face of the outsiders, it demands a high degree of conformity to an

essentially feudal and gerontocratic system of social values. This certainly is not a conducive situation for self-actualization which, incidentally, is the higher order need of the individual. Scholars on Malay entrepreneurship are generally in agreement with the argument that Malays cannot perform competitively in the economy partly because of the inhibitive effects of their cultural values. This additive stifling effect is passed on from generation to generation, resulting in a cumulative impediment to Malay entrepreneurship. It has often been said that the pressure to conform socially is further reinforced by the laxity with which the Malays eke out a relatively easy livelihood in an environment of abundance. While such observation can be dismissed as purely speculative, one may still appreciate the logic by comparing the contrast in the different situations from which the Malays and the Chinese originate.

To be sure, Malay folk literature and art, is certainly replete with creative expressions. But they tend to lack sophistication and seldom carry worthwhile messages to the audience. The lack of self assertion is clearly evident before Munshi Abdullah, when authors and scribes always chose to remain anonymous, in subservience to, and in praise of, the aristocracy. Fortunately, this introverted tendency in expression gives rise to indirect modes of address in the forms of idioms, analogies and figures of speech (in *bidalan*, *kiasan*, *peribahasa* and *pantun*). Herein lies a wealth of folk knowledge in the Malay language and consequently Malay literature.

A lengthy etymological discussion of the input of the forest to the Malay language is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say with some examples that the tropical forest provides a fertile bed for the production of moral metaphors which reflects the profundity of Malay understanding of their environment.

#### THE FOREST AS THE CONTEXT OF LINGUISTIC DEVELOPMENT

Images in fiction writing and ideas for metaphoric coinages draw heavily on the forest. The following are some examples of such expressions.

1. *Seperti enau dalam belukar* (Like palm trees amongst the undergrowth).

This analogy is an apt description of a competitive struggle to jostle and outpace one another, whether it is in the market or in an organisational situation. The ones who overshoot the rest are likely to overshadow them although there are still others (parasites, creepers) who may progress through the help of others but may eventually threaten the position of their very sponsors. The above expression also indicates the

Malay's deep understanding of the natural environment, as well as the proverbial rule of the jungle as applied to competitive situations which are common among members of the community.

2. *Menyusu kera di hutan anak sendiri ditinggalkan* (Suckling monkeys in the jungle while one's own infant is neglected).

This is a moral injunction against actions amounting to misplaced sympathy given at the expense of one's more immediate responsibilities. The expression again reflects a good grasp of ecology (monkeys can feed on human milk!). It is a sophisticated censure of deeds, however well-intentioned, seen within the order of priorities in the responsibility of an individual.

3. *Seperti kaduk naik junjung* (Like a creeper blooming on a trellis).

This analogy is a sanction against false and unjust claims of success. It disapproves of "show-off" or exhibitionist and narcissistic tendencies, especially with regard to those who rise up through the efforts of others.

4. *Seperti aur dengan tebing* (Like a bamboo cluster and a river bank).

This is a clear elucidation of the symbiotic relationship between dependent parties. The bamboo clump protects the bank which in turn provides a fertile and essential base for the bamboo to grow. This adage is somewhat similar to the motto: "United we stand; divided we fall". The group morality involved is consonant with the need for organic solidarity in the traditional Malay society.

Other examples of proverbial expressions include the following.

*Membujur lalu melintang patah.* (Bulldoze come what may)

*Diam-diam ubi.* (Silence does not mean inferior)

*Berkerat rotan berpatah arang.* (Irreconcilable breakdown in relationship).

*Miang-miang keladi.* (A personality of lusty disposition)

*Timun dan durian.* (The relationship between the weak and the strong tends to hurt the weak)

*Bidok lalu kiambang bertaut.* (Intrusion and intervention by outsiders can lead to temporary societal disharmony, but once outsiders leave, the community settles into peace again)

*Ikut resmi padi, semakin berisi semakin menunduk.* (Prudence and humility are the qualities of real wisdom)

Another popular form of the traditional Malay literary expression is the *pantun* which is a quatrain consisting of lines of alternate rhymes. The first two lines of the standard stanza phonically foreshadow the second pair but the first pair is usually unrelated to the intended message which is conveyed in the second. As in the category of proverbial expressions, the *pantun* draws its images mostly from the forest environment, as exemplified by the following:

Pergi ke hutan menebang kayu  
 Kayu ditebang sipokok sena  
 Saya umpama terompah kayu  
 Di masa becak baru berguna

Pokok dermaga tanahnya rosak  
 Pucuk pakis perencah ikan  
 Sudah berjumpa rambutan masak  
 Rambai yang manis tuan tinggalkan

Pohon penak pohon meranti  
 Sudah ditebang lalu diikat  
 Kusangka jinak burung merpati  
 Rupanya terbang bila dipikat

Ensemble, the Malay vocabulary and idiomatic expressions, like their food and shelter, are heavily conditioned by the forest. Indeed, if we were to exclude words whose origin can be traced to the forest, it would be difficult to see how the Malay language could possibly reach its present level of sophistication. In some instances, the Malay vocabulary contain words of greater precision even when compared to English. The term "carry" in English for example can mean so many things; it lacks precision and this can be a source of problems in court proceedings. There are several Malay terms which refer precisely to particular forms of carrying. This include words such as *junjung*, *kandar*, *tanggung*, *usung*, *jinjing*, *muat*, *bawa*, *kendung*, all of which were conceivably introduced to describe that act of transferring items from the natural environment.

#### OTHER USES

In any society, language acts as a medium for identifying and classifying cultural symbols and messages. Names of countless objects, places and events give a good indication of both the material and non-material aspects of culture. Because the traditional Malay culture is so closely associated with the tropical forest, the corpus of folk literature, both oral and written, most artefacts (implements, armaments, sport and leisure



instruments, medicinal items, ceremonial paraphernalia etc.) originate from the forest. Most traditional household implements and contraptions of all sorts are made of forest-based materials. These include furniture, kitchen utensils, farming tools and traps. A number of implements such as the rice mill, step mortar (*lesong kaki*), traps (*pelompat, bubu*), plough, rake, and granary, are examples of ingenious inventions which are well adapted to the forest surroundings. In the earlier period when the predominant mode of transportation was by water, several types of rafts, dug-out canoes, and bridges, made of forest materials, were in use.

In times of war, part of the defence arsenal included an assortment of weapons drawn from the forest, as were the war boats, stockades, hideouts and refuges (Skinner 1985:10-29). When one speaks of traditional games, the items that immediately come to mind are: the *sepak raga* ball, *congkak*, *gasing*, all forest derivatives. Malay remedies for most forms of sicknesses involve forest products, including several aphrodisiacs (eg. *Tongkat Ali*, *Kacit Fatimah*). Similarly when one thinks of arts and crafts, materials such as rattan, bamboo, pandanus, ferns, *angsana* and *nyatoh* come to the fore. Many towns and places in Malaysia have been named after trees, for examples Ipoh, Pulai, Kulim, Sintok, Petaling, Memali, Setar, and the legendary Melaka (cf. Zaharah and Khoo 1981). Besides their popular use in folk medicine, certain items such as *sireh*, *pinang*, *karas* and camphor are also used on ritual occasions.

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Our central argument is that Malay culture is decisively conditioned and moulded by the tropical forest. Lest this position be interpreted as overly deterministic, we would argue that while the traditional Malay culture is certainly unique and context-specific on its own, its overall configuration is subjected to the dictates of the tropical forest environment. On the global scale, it is the natural environment which makes the Eskimos, the Arabs and the Masai different from the tropical Malays. At the regional levels, however, the Thais, Javanese and Burmese share more general similarities in culture by virtue of their tropical habitats. In these societies the tropical forest constitutes a major ingredient in their cultural formation.

Our emphasis on the traditional Malay culture of the distant past is deliberate. The intention is to draw attention to the problem of cultural adaptation which the Malays, especially the older generation, are facing. In this connection there is some confusion as regards the direction in which the Malays should head. Malay romances as typically depicted in poems, short stories and novels, for example, are still predominantly arcadian. Whereas certain cultural advocates insist on laying stress on

past culture, others see the necessity of introducing cultural “engineering” efforts to modernise Malay culture in preparation for a modern and cosmopolitan society of the future. The situation is now further complicated by the existence of competing claims on what should constitute a truly Malaysian national culture.

It would be a red herring, and even illogical, to question the declared imperative that the concept of national culture should be built around the culture core of the original inhabitants. Nonetheless, it is perhaps instructive to bear in mind that culture is not just what inhabitants do. Culture is a dynamic set which results from, and is sustained by, the interaction of the inhabitants with the habitat. While the number, attitudes and behaviour of the inhabitants are changing rapidly, so does the habitat. This brings us to the message intended here: it is time that policy-makers pay attention to the environment as a key component in the definition and implementation of the national culture concept. As argued earlier, whereas traditional Malay culture is a phenomenon of the past era when the tropical forest was the overriding condition and constraint, the contemporary Malay culture (as defined by living Malays and not armchair ethnologists), has little to do with the past, and even less with the forest.

If the proposition that national culture can be engineered beyond tokenism, then it behooves the engineers to have a clearer goal and a programmatic strategy to achieve that goal. If it is deemed desirable that the forest-based traditional culture be revitalised in accordance with the contemporary situation with respect to the nature of the economy, urban living and technological changes, then careful thought should be directed towards making the “city-directed” young generation more aware and appreciative of their cultural roots. Unless such measures are properly programmed, Malaysians, especially Malays, may run the risk of not being able to identify with, and being ignorant about, their own culture. This is not to suggest that everything from the past should be conserved for the sake of posterity. With proper instruction, the superstitions and fears associated with the forest can be replaced by a truly informed love and appreciation of nature.

#### REPOSITIONING THE FOREST IN MALAYSIAN CULTURE: SOME SUGGESTIONS

Granted that the forest is a key ingredient in the Malay culture and that the Malay culture, as presently conceived, is the most important component of the culture of the “original inhabitants” of the country, it is imperative that the central position of the tropical forest, within the ambit of the Malaysian national culture, be properly recognised and

activated. It appears that thus far the concept of national culture has been heavily built and promoted around symbolic aspects, and especially the aspects of traditional stage performances, with little attention given to the latent and manifest roles of forestry. This is clearly evident in reports on departmental programmes, as is indicative in the research and publications undertaken by the relevant authorities (Anon. 1986; Aziz 1977). Similarly, the conduct of research and publication in forestry, have proceeded with little attention given to the social and symbolic roles of the forest in the Malaysian society (Kamis 1982).

There are at least two strong reasons to believe that the forest can offer a potentially strong anchor-point for the promotion of national culture. First, as argued earlier, the forest is indeed the environmental root of the local culture. Any attempt to resuscitate and sustain the major elements of the traditional culture must begin by promoting a fuller appreciation of the forest, especially as it relates to the traditional culture. Second, *the forest is a neutral ground* which allows cultural planners considerable scope to explore without having to enter into polemics surrounding ethnic legitimacy on the definition of what constitutes a national culture.

Any program of a public nature obviously needs public support. The forest, more than any other aspects of the Malaysian plural society, is appealing to all, including the environmental movement groups. More importantly, its neutrality appeals to all ethnic groups and therefore it has a greater chance of being fully internalised by every citizen of the country. To ensure a popular base for the national culture, greater efforts must be made towards promoting a clear understanding of certain superordinate goals which a plural society needs, particularly those that transcend ethnic politics. In this respect if the present generation can instill a strong sense of care and love for the natural environment among its younger generation, then it may still be possible for generations of the future to get back to know the tropical forest for its own sake. When this happens Malaysian society may still be able to retain, even if in altered forms, some of the basic features of the traditional Malay culture. Indeed a Malaysian culture which is built on the scientific understanding of the natural environment would conceivably have a better chance of survival, as compared to the previous cultural formation which, in some measure, had evolved out of ignorance, superstition, and fear of the unknown.

With the Malaysian language making rapid progress into full acceptance, and with the recent shift in emphasis in the school curriculum in favour of environmental appreciation, there is room for optimism. At this juncture prudence calls for more joint efforts from all sections of the community, to map out a more programmatic approach towards cultural development which should be planned in concert with, and to be dove-tailed into, the various programmes undertaken by the

authorities in charge of the development of the national language and education. For this purpose there are five possible thrust areas:

1. *Tighter implementation of the existing National Forest Policy* The National Forest Policy which was declared in 1978, defines three major roles for forest resources: protective, productive and amenity-based. Specific areas have been delineated for these three functions. Whereas protective forests include those tracts which are designated as capable of ensuring environmental stability for the community, productive forest would serve as a sustainable provider of forest products to meet community needs, especially for timber, income and employment. The third category, amenity forest, which is a recent addition, is meant to provide more opportunities for greater interaction between man and nature. Thus, in principle, efforts towards stricter adherence to the above general precepts are consistent with the need to preserve the environmental foundation of the Malay culture. In this respect the notion of cultural literacy is not restricted to the narrow confines of "culture" as understood by the urban literati. It includes, as it should, the propagation of new values which place a premium on both the scientific and aesthetic aspects of the natural environment. In its ideals, the spirit underlying the licensing provisions of the National Forestry Act (1984), upholds the concept of a stable balance between man and nature – the tropical forest is not to be treated as merely a source of commercial gains.

2. *Promotion of Forest Recreation* At the executive level the Forestry Department has, since the early 1970s, initiated development programmes for forest recreation. The idea of amenity forests was meant to encourage greater awareness and appreciation of the natural environment among the lay public. Many areas throughout the country have been earmarked for this purpose. Facilities for resource-based outdoor recreation (for orienteering, picnicking, camping and trekking) have been built within accessible distances from major population concentrations. While the Filipinos have long started urban tree-planting projects and have even experimented with animating trees with poetry, we have only begun to put tags to trees. Nonetheless, Malaysians should be aware of and take pride in the fact that we have within our borders the largest tropical forest park in the world (Taman Negara). Unfortunately, very few Malaysians ever venture into it, and whenever facilities are built they tend to attract outsiders more than the locals. Income from tourism is unquestionably good, but perpetual excess capacity is surely a profligate waste of natural resources, bearing in mind that more Malaysians spend their holidays overseas than in their very own forests. Hopefully, the future generations will be more appreciative of their own environment. In

short, more effort should be made to divert Malaysian holiday-makers to the jungle – both for economic reasons and for cultural enrichment.

3. *Public Education* A beginning has been made towards reintroducing nature appreciation in primary school (through KBSR and KBSM). This should be pursued further through more efforts to expose students to the natural environment, either through bringing them into the forests or bringing the forests to them. Introducing forest science into school can be a reasonable proposition for the immediate future. Similarly, a number of government agencies such as the TDC, RTM, Forestry and other relevant bodies, can be directed to include the promotion culture-nature appreciation as part of their responsibility.

4. *Research* Some of the ideas teased out in this article are clearly conjectural. The interface between culture and the tropical forest itself is hardly studied. More interdisciplinary efforts to study and document facets of this interface should be encouraged. Similarly, more inter-departmental efforts in the planning and implementation of programmes and projects, especially those under the direct purview of the Department of Forestry and the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, should be explored. In particular concepts such as social forestry, forest-based tourism, and the meaning of the forest in the Malaysian subcultures need to be examined. Insights into the constraints and feasibilities of collaborative efforts among administrative and development agents are certainly needed at the outset before embarking on such propositions.

At this stage it is not mere muddling to suggest that the forest is just as relevant to tourism, as the motel. The traditional compartments of duties require some juggling in order to avoid artificial barriers to efficient management of both the forests and other cultural resources of the community. In any case some deliberate promotional programs akin to “marketing” are necessary to ensure that the natural environment is brought back to its proper place in the context of the national culture. Part of this task should properly be given to the private sector, especially those that have prospered from endowments of the tropical forest.

5. *Inter-agency Representation* To facilitate communication it is important that agencies whose jurisdictions cover the culture-nature interface exchange representation with one another. Together, the councils overseeing each body must try to define and explore the higher goals of particular parties or agencies in national terms. Such councils may mean very little, unless explicit directives are given towards making a serious endeavour to contribute towards the development of

the national culture. The goals enshrined in the concept of national culture are too important and all-encompassing to be left to the discretion of particular groups of administrators and ethnic decision-makers. When the environmental context is fully explored and understood, there does not seem to be any further need for ethnic spokesmen to champion sectional interests in debates on cultural issues.

## CONCLUSION

Our argument departs from the premise that the cultural traits of the original inhabitants in Malaysia (taking the Malays as an example of the majority) arose within the context of the tropical forest. These traits are gradually phasing out, as the Malays become more detached from the forest. In order to restore the richness of the hard-won forest-based culture, it is suggested that the traditional role of the forest be revitalised and this calls for bringing the Malays (and other Malaysians) "back to nature". This approach may bring culture onto a firmer and more lasting ground since the future mode of socialisation is to be based more on objective appreciation rather than on the less-than-scientific understanding of the natural environment.

The need for "cultural engineers" to be fully aware of the environmental context of our culture is critical and long overdue. This calls for more rationalised strategies with greater emphasis given to the neutral position of the environmental context, rather than through perpetuating the counterproductive historical and ethnic legacy of the past. While it is not our intention to ignore the role of history and the plural nature of our society, we submit that, ultimately, the tropical forest is a better reflection of the cultural configurations of the original inhabitants, and that being politically more neutral, the tropical forest is a clearer and far superior rallying point of the Malaysian society compared to other ingredients of the national culture.

## NOTE

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