

Malaysia: ASEAN's cultural gold mine

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Introduction

Malaysia with a population of 21.7 million is arguably the most racially and culturally diverse nation in the Asia-Pacific region. This rich heritage of diversity comprises of several cultural groups, such as the Malays, the Chinese and Indians, as well as important subcultural groups, such as the Ibans, Bidayuhs and Kadazans to name a few. The oldest indigenous peoples are referred to as *bumiputera*, which translates as *sons or princes of the soil*. Despite the diversity, ties between people have and continue to develop through education, sport and commerce. This reality, added to Malaysia's natural wealth and strong economic growth, has paved the way for a very favourable investment climate as reflected in the soaring international trade and increased interest shown by foreign companies vying to gain entry and investment opportunities.

This case study attempts to draw important links between the condition of Malaysia as a multicultural, rich society and the opportunities this presents to foreign business interests. The significant condition of cultural differentiation and its consequences is reflected in the significant works undertaken by Hofstede (1991) and other noteworthy cross-cultural authorities. The opportunities to foreign business interests in Asia's 'tiger with a vision' arising from this condition have also been discussed widely (Rafferty, 1990; Aliah Hanin Mohamed et al, 1998).

Malaysia's linguistic twists

The main languages in Malaysia are Malay, Chinese, English, Tamil and native languages (Kaur & Melcalfe, 1998). However, in an effort to promote national unity, the government initiated a program to establish Malay as the exclusive official means of communication (i.e. Bahasa Malaysia), for all administrative purposes and as the medium of instruction in the state education system

(Abdullah, 1992). However, from the late 1980s, there was growing concern in regard to the lack of sufficient competence in the English language and how this was hindering the educational performance of young Malaysians and ultimately the nation's potential to deal effectively in an international setting. This concern led to the introduction of a 'language policy' whereby greater emphasis was placed on promoting English as the second official (but in reality the first) international business language (Abdullah, 1992a). This bilingual stance implies that in order to successfully negotiate one's way in Malaysia's business world, a working knowledge of both Bahasa Malaysia and the English language is necessary.

The religious dimensions

The Malays

In terms of religion, Islam is the predominant religion in Malaysia and exerts great influence not only on the workings of business entities, but on the Malays' lifestyles generally (Abdullah, 1992). It goes without saying therefore that any foreign business representative hoping to function effectively amongst Muslim business leaders and in an Islamic environment should have some understanding of Islamic ways. Muslims are fatalistic, believing that successes and failures, opportunities and misfortunes result from fate or the will of God (Abdullah, 1992). Muslims believe in providing charity, helping the needy, fasting during the month of Ramadan and making trips to Mecca annually. They also have rigid eating customs (three meals a day) that involve refraining from eating pork or drinking alcoholic beverages. In the main portion of the Mosque, the Muslim place of worship, Malay women sit apart from the men and are not allowed at any time to mix casually or to eat with them (Harris & Moran, 1991). The Chinese on the other hand tend to believe in Buddha and the teachings of Confucius, and

Indians in the Hindu religion. The understanding of these two latter religions is not as critical when attempting to conduct business in Malaysia.

The interested foreign investor will note, however, that the practice of Islam in Malaysia is less *fundamentalist* compared with that in the Middle East and that most villagers are more conservative than city dwellers. Since foreign business interest may be based in rural areas, an understanding of the existence of this pluralistic Islamic setting should be factored in the business-planning phase (Harris & Moran, 1991). Figure 1 provides a list of values and attitudes for ethnic Malays.

The Chinese

The Chinese, on the other hand, traded with Malaysia for centuries, then settled in number during the 19th century when word of riches in the *Nanyang* or South Seas, spread across China (Kaur & Metcalfe, 1998). Though perhaps somewhat stereotypic, the Chinese are regarded as Malaysia's business stalwarts, having succeeded in many industries. Most Chinese are Tao Buddhist and retain strong ties to their ancestral homeland. The Chinese form about 35% of the population and are regarded as the business community of Malaysia (Kaur & Metcalfe, 1998). Figure 2 provides a list of values and attitudes for ethnic Chinese, which tend to be more businesslike in their approaches.

The Indians

Another subgroup found in Malaysia is the Indians. The Indians have done business with Malays for over 2 000 years, but did not settle en masse until the 19th century (Kaur & Metcalfe, 1998). Most came from South India, fleeing from a poor economic environment. Arriving in Malaysia, many worked as rubber tappers, while others built the infrastructure as bonded labourers or worked as administrators and small businessmen. Today 10% of Malaysians are Indian and their culture is visible throughout the land with conspicuous and exquisite temples, cuisine and colorful garments (Kaur & Metcalfe, 1998). Most of the Indian communities are classified as working class. Clearly, setting up business in the country would require an understanding of the Indian way of life, since this subculture typically represents the major labour force. Figure 3 provides a list of values and attitudes for ethnic Indians, which are not as similar as those of ethnic Malays and Chinese.

Other sub-groups

The oldest inhabitants of Malaysia are its tribal peoples. They account for about 5% of the total population, and represent a majority in Sarawak and Sabah (Kaur & Metcalfe, 1998). Though Malaysia's tribal people prefer to be categorized by their individual tribes, peninsular Malaysia blankets them under the term *Orang Asli* or

FIGURE 1 Ethnic Malays—values and attitudes



- Apologetic
- Cooperative
- Faith in God
- Family oriented
- Food/ceremonies
- Formalities
- Generosity
- Good manners
- Harmony
- Loyalty
- Not aggressive
- Patience
- Relationships
- Respect for elders
- Rituals
- Self-respect
- Sincerity
- Tolerance

Source: Adapted from Dahlan (1991).

FIGURE 2 Ethnic Chinese—values and attitudes



- Diligence
- Education
- Entrepreneurship
- Face
- Food
- Happiness
- Hard work
- Integrity
- Money
- Perseverance
- Position
- Practical
- Prosperity
- Risk taking
- Success
- Wealth

Source: Adapted from Dahlan (1991).

FIGURE 3 Ethnic Indians—values and attitudes

- Brotherhood
- Face
- Family
- Love for God
- Filial piety
- Hard work
- Harmony
- Karma
- Loyalty
- Maintain tradition
- Modesty
- Participation
- Security
- Sense of belonging

Source: Adapted from Dahlan (1991).

Original People. In Sarawak, the dominant tribal groups are the Dayak, Iban and Bidayuh who typically live in long houses, whereas in Sabah the dominant tribe is the Kadazan. All Malaysia's tribal people generally share a strong spiritual tie to the rainforest. The comprehension of the tribal community is vital especially for overseas firms because currently there are a number of business opportunities in Sabah and Sarawak, hence an understanding of the tribal community can ensure better and smoother operations.

The Malays, Chinese and Indians make up 95% of the total population in Malaysia, therefore when dealing with the Malaysians their ethnic values need to be properly understood (Dahlan, 1991), see Figure 1.

Concluding remarks

While Malaysian cultural groupings differ in many symbolic expressions and values, there are significant

commonalities across these groups. These include, the emphasis on harmony, politeness, courtesy, a concern for face saving, loyalty, respect for elders, authority and hierarchy, religious beliefs and the pursuit of success (Abdullah, 1992). It would therefore be useful for foreign entrants to understand these subtle similarities and differences to ensure better communications before attempting to do business with the Malaysians. Table 1 provides a brief comparison between the Malaysian and Western values.

Questions

- 1 Language is one of the key components of a cultural context. What implications do you foresee from this component for foreign companies?
- 2 What considerations may an Australian engineering company have to take into account to ensure that they maintain a

TABLE 1 Comparison between Malaysian and Western values

Malaysian values	Western values
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Difficult to say 'no' to superiors ■ Face saving and keep the other person's feelings in mind ■ Informal relationship ■ Flexible and accommodating ■ Generalities ■ Patient and able to roll deadlines ■ Indirect use of intermediary to convey negative news ■ Relationship and group oriented ■ Respect for hierarchy ■ Non-confrontative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Cannot take 'no' for an answer as anything can be done with adequate resources ■ Assertive, up front and speak one's mind ■ Formal Structure ■ Procedure bound and go by the book ■ Specificity ■ Time bound and deadline driven ■ Direct and to the point when giving feedback ■ Task and individual oriented ■ Equal treatment for all ■ Confrontative

Source: Abdullah (1992b).

harmonious relationship among the various diverse racial groups in Malaysia?

- 3 Discuss a few issues about how foreign companies need to understand issues relating to hierarchies and respect for elders in Malaysia.
- 4 Discuss a few issues about how foreign companies need to understand issues relating to religious concerns in carrying their marketing activities in Malaysia.
- 5 In pursuit of success, what issues do you see as being important to address from a Malaysian cultural perspective?

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