The Understanding of Meaning and Cultural Significance of Leisure, Recreation and Sport in Malaysia towards Capitalizing Human Resources

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ABSTRACT

This paper is concerned with examining the impact towards capitalizing human resource (i) the meaning of leisure, recreation and sport in the context of Malay language and (ii) the cultural significance of leisure, recreation and sport in Malaysia. There is no single word in Malay that could be translated as leisure and recreation. Most Malaysians understand leisure as “kegiatan masa lapang” (free time activity) or “waktu senggang” and recreation as” riadah” (active recreation) or “santai” (passive recreation). The direct translation for sport is “sukan”. The availability of the term “sukan” has helped sport to be more familiar among Malaysians than leisure and recreation. Leisure, recreation and sport in Malaysia are manifested in the patterns of the Malay language and culture. Culture is commonly used to describe a way of life. The symbols and rituals of some Malaysians indicate the strength of their adherence to certain behavioural norms related to good health and well-being. Attitude wise, Malaysians seem to enjoy ‘time after work’, holidays and out door activities during their leisure time. In Malaysia, sport persons are not as popular as a hero / role model as compared to a politician. Furthermore, Malaysians, being Eastern-oriented, are more inclined to incorporate their religious values into leisure, recreation and sport, although Islam allows one to proceed towards excellence in sport but the emphasis is on healthy bodies, family recreation and social harmony. Since sport is generally based on Western interpretations, many regulations such as dress codes, do not in accordance to Islamic principles, and this may make it difficult for some Malaysians, especially Muslim women, to participate.

Keywords: Leisure and culture; the meaning of leisure, recreation and sport in the Malay Language; sport, culture and Islam in Malaysia.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is concerned with examining the impact towards capitalizing human resource (i) the meaning of leisure, recreation and sport in the context of Malay language and (ii) the cultural significance of leisure, recreation and sport in Malaysia. Culture can be defined as a shared and commonly held body of general beliefs and values, which define the ‘should’, and ‘ought’ of the life. Culture is commonly used to describe a way of life of members of a society. This way of life includes the way members of a group understand and interpret the world around them, their ideas and beliefs, how they relate to other people and organise their daily activities, including leisure, recreation and sport.

Culture manifests itself in patterns of language and thought and forms of activity and behaviour. Examining the way linguistic terms are defined, the symbols people identify themselves with, the rituals they observe, the heroes or roles personifying their values and the attitudes and beliefs can describe culture, both explicit and implicit. Before this could be discussed further, first, I shall provide the historical background of leisure, recreation and sport in the early Malay society.

Historical background

One of the major activities of the early Malay society was rice-cultivation. Malay farmers worked in the padi fields all year round. In a twelve month period, their life activities were influenced and patterned by the padi planting seasons. Padi planting starts with the sowing of the seeds, ploughing using the buffalo, planting, weeding and fertilizing
and finally harvesting. The completion of harvesting gave a resting time for the farmers, the land (soil) and the buffalo. The community could look forward to their harvest festival – filled by various pastimes including kite flying on the spacious *padi* fields, top spinning and *takraw* in the village and feasting - while waiting for the next planting season. This period is known as ‘*kesenggangan*’ (from the original word *senggang* (‘a gap’ or ‘time in between’) which means to have a pastime activity, to relax or do nothing. Malaysian traditional games have a long history. *Sepak takraw*, for example, is recorded as being played in Melaka in 1477 (Adam, 1991). It is easily observed that the concept of activities enjoyed by contemporary Malaysian originates similarly as the above-mentioned, *takraw*.

**The meaning of leisure, recreation and sport in Malay Language**

Leisure is an ordinary word with no in-depth concept among most Malaysians. When one asks, ‘what do you understand by the word leisure’ one will get a spontaneous list of activities such as reading, swimming, jogging, playing games, window-shopping, cooking, *jalan-jalan* (site-seeing), *makan-makan* (eating-out), which refers to what they do in their free time (Aman & Basaruddin, 2006).

While there are Malay words or combinations of words that can be interpreted as leisure (for example ‘*kesenggangan*’; ‘*keasyikan diri*’, ‘*masa terluang*’), there is no single word in the Malay language that can be translated directly as leisure. According to Malaysia’s official dictionary, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, (DBP, 1991: 859), the meaning of leisure is free time (*masa [time] lapang [free]*). The word *masa lapang* always goes with *kegiatan* (activity), becoming *kegiatan masa lapang* (free time activity). *Masa lapang* sometimes has been used interchangeably with the old terms *‘masa senggang’* or *‘kesenggangan’*.

There is also no single word in the Malay Language that could be translated as recreation (Aman, 2004). This word has been adapted into the Malay Language as ‘*rekreasi*’. *Rekreasi* can be categorised as *riadah* (active recreation) and *santai* (passive recreation). *Riadah* means ‘doing exercise’, ‘to get away from home’ or ‘doing outdoor activity’. These activities are normally referred to as resource-based recreation (green areas; beach, sea and island; river and waterfall; lakes; jungle and mountain). *Santai* means ‘to relax’, ‘to have an entertainment’ or ‘amusement’ including watching TV, *makan-makan* (eating-out), *jalan-jalan* (site-seeing / travelling) and window-shopping. This also includes ‘take five’ or ‘have a break’ within work time. Most Malaysians understand recreation as ‘outdoor recreation’ or ‘resource-based recreation’. This concept, however, is slowly changing, especially since urbanisation processes introduced urban and community recreational activities such as frequenting shopping malls, the night market and arts festivals.

The direct translation for sport in the Malay Language is *sukan*. *Sukan* requires physical movement, a competition element, rules and regulations and a result. It also includes the element of play (*main*) and game (*permainan*). *Sukan* is more organised and institutionalised and is depicted in many national and international events such as the Commonwealth Games and South East Asian Games (SEA Games). Malaysia’s National Sport Policy (1988) placed leisure and recreation as part of the sport objective and promotion:

C. Objective. 10. iii)… to develop and improve the knowledge and practice of sport in the interest of social welfare of the individual and the enjoyment of leisuramong the public at large (pg. 11), and
D. Strategy and implementation. 13 ii) b. The Ministry of Youth and Sports will promote mass sport and recreational activities based on the ‘*Malaysia Cergas*’ concept (pg. 15).

It is argued that the availability of the terms *sukan, main* and *permainan* (sport, play and game) in the Malay language has helped sports to be more familiar among Malaysians than ‘leisure’ and ‘recreation’ (Aman, 2005). Sports occupy an important place in physical education in Malaysian schools. This subject consists of an introduction to selected sports skills and training. Students are also involved in sport as extra-curricular activities including sports competition between houses, inter-schools, inter-district competitions and so forth. While there has been thorough exposure to sport, there are no academic programmes in leisure and recreation in Malaysian schools (Cousineau, 1995). Camping, hiking and mountaineering, for examples, are known as outdoor sports or outdoor activities. Culturally, most of the pastime activities enjoyed in Malaysia such as card games, kite flying, top spinning, dance drama, self defence and bull fighting are not referred to as leisure but as play or games. Only in the past 15-20 years, has there appeared
linguistic awareness of the significance of leisure and recreation in the lives of individuals, the family and community including schools and universities.

In Malaysia, the vast majority of people don’t understand the meanings and concepts of leisure and recreation (Aman, 2005). To a certain extent they don’t even realise for what purpose they are participating in leisure and recreational activities. Aman explained:

Recreation is the individual participation in activities other than their daily routines – activities that they undertake during their free time. But unfortunately even this is not fully realised. People in this country do not know, especially the youth, the concept of worthy use of free time. There is no realisation that free time should be utilised positively and actively. The concept of leisure in this country is perhaps the worse!

Without having a proper concept of leisure, people would not be able to define their own leisure time and their choices for leisure activity (Aman, 2005; Aman & Basaruddin, 2006). Jegathesan (2004) observed other attitudes:

A lot of people here (in Malaysia) are not good time organisers. Instead of dictating life they let events around them dictate their time and life. People are not good at time management. Either they don’t know how to do it or they’re so driven by other ambitions that they don’t want to take a holistic balanced approach.

Generally, Malaysians refer to leisure as free time activity. Leisure could be listening to music, reading or lying under the tree. Some people think leisure is going for a walk, swimming and shopping. Leisure sometimes incorporates a physical and exercise component. It can be argued that Malaysian society realises the importance of leisure but the people tend to prioritise work, academic achievement and other ambitions compared to leisure pursuit. For example, most Malaysian going fishing is not for leisure but for economic purposes and for the prize in the fishing competition.

**The cultural significance of leisure, recreation and sport in Malaysia**

**Symbols and rituals**

Symbols are seen as words, objects, hand gestures, forms of dress, ways of addressing people – all of which are used to enhance commitment and compliance among insiders. In Malaysia, especially in the city area like Kuala Lumpur, people are happy to associate themselves with sport and active lifestyles – ‘I’m sweating’, ‘I love jogging’, ‘I work in the gym’ and ‘this is my new racket’. After 5pm in the weekdays, I observed many individuals and families doing physical activities, occupying open spaces around Kuala Lumpur such as at Perdana and Titiwangsa Lake Gardens. A Sunday morning in this city would see most people ‘jogging with a stick’ (because they are scared of dogs). All these express the values of some Malaysians (urban dwellers) and indicate the strengths of their adherence to a certain behavioural norms related to good health and well-being.

However, Malaysia is not immune to the trend of people becoming less active. The National Health and Morbidity Survey indicated that nearly 70% of Malaysians did not exercise. The group consisted of people from the rural stratum, older people, the socio-economically disadvantaged, women, private employees and those in agriculture and production sector, and those who are obese and underweight (Ministry of Health, Malaysia, 1997:26). To some extent, the people’s leisure lifestyle – the growth of passive leisure and the consequent lack of physical activity – in this country can be considered as a factor of the change of behavioural norms related to good health, which generates problems of obesity and lack of fitness even among children. According to the National Health and Morbidity Survey (Ministry of Health, Malaysia, 1997: Vol. 3), the prevalence of obesity has increased over the past decade, and now some 8 – 12% of children and 5 – 8% of adults are obese.

The President of the Malaysian Association for the Study on Obesity, Prof. Dr. Mohd Ismail Noor said, “…the major contributing factor to weight gain is the increasing proportion of fat intake throughout the diet, together with a reduction in the level of physical activity” (Sunday Star, 2000: 8). Dr. Mohd Ismail Noor explained more about the Malaysian lifestyle-related passive leisure:

We eat out more, sit by the computer most of the day, and become couch potatoes, watching satellite TV and are less active in physical activities. In the office, we sit at our desks and when we come home, we sit in front of the TV. Moreover, with a rise in car ownership, many people opt to drive to nearby destinations rather than walk or cycle. Mechanisation, robotics, computerisation and control systems have also reduced the need for moderate activity and
movement… Many children spend less time outdoors, as they prefer to watch TV or play computer games. They not only sit 7 to 8 hours in school but also do the same thing at home.

The dynamics of many passive leisure symbols and rituals among Malaysian demonstrate that these phenomena need to be concerned. Participation in recreation and sport for improved health needed to be encouraged.

Heroes and values

The most popular role model among Malaysian adolescents is a politician (38% support), compared to a sports person (2% support) (Rahim, 1994). It is common for politicians to lead reviews of sport, not the sport people. The Minister of Youth and Sport, Dato’ Najib Tun Razak led the taskforce committee as a chairperson in the formulation of Malaysian Sport Policy 1988. According to Khoo (1996), “… in Malaysia we believe that the politicians and civil servants are the best decision makers in every field, in education, in sport… they are top people. That is not true. So, it is bureaucracy that controls sport”. These examples emphasize that politicians and civil servant leaders are powerful members of Malaysian society in leisure, recreation and sport development.

Over time, Malaysian sports heroes such as M. Jegathesan (Olympic runners), Sidek’s family: Misbun, Razif, Jailani and Rashid (Badminton), Nor Saiful Zaini (Field Hockey) and Shalin Zulkifli (bowling) have influenced only Malaysians sports enthusiasts, not the society as a whole, even at the peak of their involvement. Many Malaysian former national athletes are being forgotten; they are not really accepted as ‘successful persons’ and role models for society. (The exception is possibly M. Jegathesan, who was successful in both sport and as a medical doctor).

Certain sports, such as badminton, which achieves at a higher level, however, change people’s attitudes towards sports. Badminton is the most popular game in Malaysia, and quite successful internationally. Malaysia was the world champion in the Thomas Cup Series five times from 1949-2000. According to Khoo (1996), if a particular sport achieves high ranking, it will change society’s sports attitudes and behaviour. He described this as follows:

The national team will draw the entire nation. The entire nation will be watching. Every time the team performs well, the entire nation becomes jubilant. And if it keeps on winning then they become fully involved in that emotionally. As in the case of Latin American countries, they are so involved in football. Football is so much a part of their culture. So, the whole nation is totally involved. Similarly, in 1949 when we became a world champion in badminton winning the Thomas Cup, all the school children, even adults…you know, started playing badminton. And that was the time when they started to build badminton halls. Previously they never did. They just used school halls, mostly the school hall or whatever – halls which were not specifically built for badminton. So, you can see that sport can be used to mobilise the entire nation into being actively involved in sport.

In Malaysia, sports figures are not dominant in society. Malaysians appreciate politicians and the royal family more and honour them by making them patrons and leaders of sport and recreation associations. Rarely are former national players expected to be leaders in these associations. The most influence that they can expect to gain will be as a coach, such as in the case of Misbun Sidek in badminton.

Attitudes and beliefs

Cultures tend to prescribe the ways members perceive, believe, think and evaluate the world, self and others. The following three basic orientations will be used to examine Malaysians’ attitude and beliefs, and their relation to leisure, sport and recreation: a) attitudes towards environment, b) attitudes towards people, and c) belief systems.

Attitudes towards the environment

A people’s culture has a strong relationship with their environment, whether it is in natural or man-made settings. Obviously, Malaysians are concerned with this relationship, in which they maximise their environmental setting for their leisure activities.

With regard to nature, Malaysia experiences a tropical climate with a long coastline, jungle and cool mountains, and these offer many opportunities for nature-oriented activities. This country has thousands of kilometres of beaches and islands, which naturally attract local residents and tourists for aesthetic and relaxing pleasures. The jungle and
mountain areas are gaining in popularity with hikers and adventurers. A vacation near a coastal beach is part of the outdoor recreation scene in Malaysia.

In cities such as Kuala Lumpur, however, sport and leisure activities are affected by the quality of the urban environment. Increasing traffic gridlocks and air pollution discourage participation in outdoor activities. Besides pollution, natural phenomena such as humidity, high temperature, heavy rain during the monsoon seasons, and early darkness, are significant obstacles to participation and choice of sport and leisure activities. To be involved in leisure activities, especially outdoors, people need to adjust their schedules around these climatic conditions (Aman & Basaruddin, 2006).

Attitudes towards people

The Malaysian – Eastern traditions, view a person as a member of a family, dependent on others and as a result deriving his or her identity as members of his in-group. Group or communal feelings supersede the incentive to excel over and above others. The basis of establishing contacts with other people is initially to cultivate good and friendly relationships. In terms of time, Malaysians are less hurried and as a result ‘doing’ is not emphasised as much as ‘being’ (Jegathesan, 2004). What is most noticeable in Malaysia is the enjoyment of ‘time after work’, which many people seem to have as they gather outside, around the neighbourhood restaurants or stalls, for their long evening meal. It is expected that one take things as they are because of the importance of harmonious living place.

Since Independence in 1957, the Malaysian government has controlled its people’s activities and always prioritised the development of spiritual values based on Islamic principles and the promotion of ethnic harmony. The Malaysian political systems practise a ‘democracy without consensus’ (Vory, 1975) – with little tolerance of opposition. The 1969 race riot prompted the Malaysian government to take more control and prevent discussions on race relations. Interest groups were distrusted and participation in politics was not welcomed. Public policies were established on the basis of government authorities’ wisdom. In the New Economic Policy (1971 – 1990), for example, the government emphasised three objectives: the promotion of national unity and integration, the creation of employment opportunities and the promotion of overall economic growth (Wong, 1994). The first objective was considered the most salient and the movement towards it required restructuring the economy and society. Besides achieving racial economic equality, the government also strived to reduce communal tension (e.g. interracial relationships at work) and to promote a deeper, common, national identity. The country has gone a long way towards fulfilling the above objectives, and these are significant in forming Malaysian values.

Belief systems

Malaysians, being Eastern-oriented, are more inclined to bring their religious values into leisure, sport and recreation. Although Islam is an official national religion, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism are widely practised by various groups in Malaysia. As in the West, many religious activities take the form of celebrations or festivals and as such, they provide not only spiritual benefits but also the enjoyment found in many leisure activities. Several religious events are occasions for socialising with friends and relatives, indulging in good food, dressing-up, viewing parades and playing games. Malaysia is known for its many celebrations that are sponsored by its various religious and ethnic groups (Cousineau, 1995).

Islam influences sport in Malaysia in ways unfamiliar to Western’s ‘secularised’ sporting provisions. In the West, apart from reinforcing ideologies associated with notions of honest achievement and teamwork as well as national status and identity, there are elements of competitiveness, materialism, commercialism and nationalism (Horigan, 1988). Although Islam allows one to move towards excellence in sport, in Malaysia these ideas are seen override some Islamic values that emphasize healthy bodies, family recreation, brotherhood and social harmony (Aman, 2005). Islamic communities have their own religious rules, beliefs and tradition and these impacts upon sport:

There are three factors which determine whether sport participation should be encouraged or not by both Muslim men and women. First, the concept of ‘aurah’ must be observed. Second, the ethics of socialisation must be followed. Third, the responsibility as a Muslim must be adhered to (e.g. prayer time). If all these factors can be taken care of, there would not be any problems for Muslims being actively involved in sports.
Since sport is generally based on Western interpretations, many regulations such as dress codes, do not acknowledge Islamic principles, and this may make it difficult for some Malaysians, especially for Muslim women, to participate (Salman, 1998).

The introduction of Western sports by the colonials in Malaysia meant that they brought with them their own set of cultural influences too. In relation to this, Khoo (1996) elaborated upon the historical background of Malaysian sport:

If you want to trace the history of [modern] sports in Malaysia...in that sense we should begin from around the end of 19th Century. At first very few were involved. It was mainly a European activity and gradually spreads to the locals. By about the 1890s, for example, we already had football league matches in many towns. So, more and more locals became involved in sport. And then sport became a passion.

Certain contact sports such as boxing and rugby were associated with aggression; swimming and gymnastics with ‘indecent’ sporting attire; golf and cricket as time consuming games which could affect Muslim athletes’ ability to perform their daily prayer at set hours. All these sports, however, continued to develop in this country and became mixed-up with Islamic as well as Eastern values. According to (Aman, 2005):

In Islam, we [Malaysians] should not specify that you cannot wear this (dress code for example.) We cannot stop people from doing that. What we should do is to provide the alternatives, provide the examples, the practical ways and indirectly they will follow. We educate them. I mean to include non-Muslims. They will realise the rationale behind it. So people I think will start thinking and change. We don’t want to enforce. We cannot enforce. They have the right to wear what they like and in the way they like. By providing an alternative they can change. Banning, for example is an approach which is not good all the time.

Islam has a ‘liberal’ attitude in Malaysia. It would be misleading to assume that Islam [in Malaysia] is a monolithic religion controlling all aspects of its adherents’ lives. It is a religion that has immense strength for the fulfillment of physical needs as well as spiritual, intellectual and emotional.

CONCLUSIONS

As Malaysia is moving towards being a developed nation, understanding the broad concepts of leisure and recreation, not only from the perspective of sport, is important to enhance a better human resource in such areas. There is no in depth understanding of the concepts of leisure and recreation among most Malaysians (Aman & Basaruddin, 2006). Instead, it is commonly understood only as a subset of sporting activities. For now, it is quite obvious that leisure, recreation and sport have not been a major part of the Malaysians’ culture, which needs revolutionary action in a near future to arouse the important of such hobbies. There are many indications that leisure and recreational services in this country have all the greatest potential and will be well developed, which will not only be important culturally but will also contribute to the nation’s health and economic development of human capitals.

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