

# ABSENTEEISM OF MALAYSIAN IDENTITY IN ART IN THE EARLY YEARS OF INDEPENDENCE

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## **Abstract**

This paper discusses the shaping of modern art identity in Malaysia during the 1950s and 1960s. It frames or investigates the development of modern art in terms of Malaysia's plural society. While writings by Malaysian art historians such as Redza Piyadasa highlights that Malaysian modern art only in terms of its linear development, this paper attempts to discuss the early development of modern art in Malaysia as being influenced either directly or indirectly by the political and social conditions of Malaysia, therefore shifting ways of investigating Malaysia art in a wider context of Malaysia's cultural and plural studies. Focusing on Malaysian fine arts in the 1950s and 1960s, this paper suggests the ways that Malaysia's early form of plural society had influenced the early modern art development among artists in groups such as the Nanyang, Wednesday Art Group (WAG) and Angkatan Pelukis Semenanjung (APS).

*Keywords: modern art, plural society, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Wednesday Art Group (WAG) and Angkatan Pelukis Semenanjung (APS)*

## **Introduction**

Research shows that since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Malaysia, then Malaya, had already been depicted by European travellers and colonials and Chinese traders.<sup>1</sup> A few writings have suggested that modern art in Malaysia started circa 1920 with 'pioneers' such as Yong Mun Sen, Abdullah Ariff, Lee Kah Yeow, Khaw Sia, Tai Hooi Keat, and Kuo Ju Ping, to name a few.<sup>2</sup> There were several pre-war art associations in urban centers which were formed mostly by Chinese immigrants along with certain British expatriates, for example, the Penang Impressionists (formed in 1920 in Penang),<sup>3</sup> United Artists Malaysia (formed in 1929 in Kuala Lumpur),<sup>4</sup> Salon Art Studies Society (formed in 1935 in Singapore), and the Penang Chinese Art Club (formed in 1936 in Penang).<sup>5</sup> Only after the 1950s however, did the development of modern art in Malaysia gained momentum. Not only were more people involved with modern arts, artistic development and tendencies as this paper will argue, began to be shaped indirectly by the political and social reality of the country's plural society as will be discussed especially among three major groups<sup>6</sup> such as the Nanyang, Wednesday Art Group (WAG) and Angkatan Pelukis Semenanjung (APS). This paper will discuss the ways that Malaysia's early form of plural society had directly or indirectly influenced the artistic practice among artists in these groups.

## Plural Society

The political entity today known as Malaysia,<sup>7</sup> was in historical times, a constituent unit in the wider Malay world, or Nusantara, consisting of the region of Malaysia, Indonesia and Philippines. The geographical entity known as West Malaysia was referred to as the Malay Peninsula, or *Tanah Melayu*, meaning the land that belonged to the people of Malay stock. Even though the Chinese and Indians had been visiting the region before 1400,<sup>8</sup> it was only after the establishment of the British control in the region, and the exploitation of the rich natural resources of Malaya of rubber, tin and palm oil, which immigrants from China and India began to settle in large numbers.<sup>9</sup> One of the important changes that resulted from British colonial rule was that the demand for labour to serve the colonial economy resulted in an influx of Chinese and Indian immigrants from the middle of the nineteenth century until the 1930s. With the opening of tin mines and rubber estates in the nineteenth century, the British policy in Malaya served to maintain the cultural and economic gaps between these immigrant communities from the Malays. This influx of immigrants radically transformed the mono-ethnic indigenous society into a plural society comprised of indigenous people, who were mainly Malay, and the immigrants, who were Chinese and Indian.

Chinese immigration increased rapidly in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. The rapid growth of Penang and Singapore as trade centres, followed by the expansion of tin mining in the Malay states in Perak and Selangor,<sup>10</sup> and the opening of large gambier and pepper plantation in Johore,<sup>11</sup> created a demand for labour and opportunities for employment and trade. This early migration in its early stages was unrestricted,<sup>12</sup> the Chinese, for example, numbered 391,810 in Malaya and Singapore in 1891; in 1911 their numbers had risen to 874,200, and by 1947 they were 2,614,667 in number.<sup>13</sup>

The British, however, followed a conscious policy of encouraging Indian labour to offset the Chinese by establishing an Indian Immigration fund under the *kangani* system (the indenture system).<sup>14</sup> As the development of modern plantations in Malaya gained momentum, the influx of Indian labour increased. In the 1870s, for example, the Indian population working in the sugar estates in Province Wellesley, now Seberang Prai, was 30,000. Thereafter it grew to about 120,000 in 1901 and 625,000 in 1931.<sup>15</sup>

England's policy in Malaya has always served to maintain the cultural and economic gaps between the three major ethnic groups in Malaya. Kiran Kapur Datar in discussing the formation of plural society in Malaya, discusses, how these colonial policies and distinct occupational structures strengthened ethnic identities.<sup>16</sup> He argues that the people who lived in Malaya at that time were not only racially different, but they also spoke different languages and practiced different religions.

Even the colonial policies further maintained the cultural and economic gaps through distinct occupational structures for example, the British seemed to be 'protecting' the Malays by giving them pre-eminent positions in the Malayan Civil Service,<sup>17</sup> the Chinese worked in mines, or as traders, and the Indians worked as 'coolies' in the estates. This segregation is further manifested through the education system. There was no national education system for all races provided by the British and the *Windstedt Report on Vernacular Education*, laid the foundation for further

isolation and retention of Malays in their rural communities, the Chinese attended Chinese schools patterned after schools in China and the Indians received their education in estate schools. Even though there was a pattern of education with English as the medium of instruction, it was only available in urban areas and was patronized by the urban non-Malays. Datar points out that even though there were various groups and associations formed during the British administration, they were still established on a communal basis.<sup>18</sup> Even the geographical pattern of settlements also separated these major races from each other. The non-Malays, particularly the Chinese, settled primarily in the urban areas of the West Coast of the peninsula in the states of Johore, Malacca, Negeri Sembilan, Penang, Perak and Selangor.<sup>19</sup>

Initially, Chinese and Indian immigrant communities came only to work, but as time passed many of them stayed longer, leading to a situation in which the immigrant, non-Malays became as numerous as the Malays. Due to this historical and political inheritance from the British colonial policy, the people who lived in Malaya at the time of independence lacked a common cultural establishment and identity and according to the Western political theory from the 1930s and 1940s, British Malaya was regarded as the example of the newly coined concept of 'plural society.'<sup>20</sup> The British administrator and political writer, J.S. Furnivall had coined the term 'plural society' to refer to a society in which many races or ethnic groups live side by side in separate geographical and socio cultural enclaves, meeting only in the marketplace. According to him,

"Each group holds by its own religion, its own culture and language, its own ideas and ways. As individuals they meet, but only in the market place, in buying and selling. There is a plural society, with different sections of the community living side by side, but separately within the same political unit. Even in the economic sphere there is a division of labour along racial lines."<sup>21</sup>

Plural society in Malaysia features the presence of different ethnic groups brought together only for commercial ends and there is no real social mixing and cross-cultural contact, only economic specialization and ethnic division based on labour obtainment. The society lacks shared values and a 'common will' and is held together by dint of colonial power. These are the conditions in the society which was left by the British in Malaya in 1957 and had indirectly influence the inclination of art groups that had been established in the 1950s.

Even one of the conditions to be met before the British would relinquish its colonial rule was that there should be cooperation and unity among the various races and this inter-ethnic compromise was manifested by the formation of three political parties in Malaysia – United Malays National Organization (UMNO) representing the Malays, Malayan Chinese Associations (MCA) representing the Chinese, and Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) representing the Indians. These three parties formed the Alliance party, now known as the Barisan Nasional or National Front party, and have consecutively won the country's elections until today. The Alliances presented a unique consensus between the leaders of the Malays, Chinese, and Indians through a compromise known as the 'historic bargain'<sup>22</sup> in the Merdeka (Independence) Constitution of 1957.

So, what are the general perceptions of identity among the people of these three major races especially in the early years of Independence? Cheah Boon Kheng argues that even though the 'historic bargain' is an early attempt to consolidate race relations in Malaysia, the concept or form of Malaya's nationality in the early years of Malaya's nation building was vague. He argues that the terms 'bangsa,' 'nation,' and 'race' in the context of the new nation itself were unclear due to the fact that the first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, seems to be reluctant in defining the concept of Malaya's nationality in the early years of Malaya's nation-building.<sup>23</sup>

According to Cheah,

"Malay political primacy has always been a matter of perception. The 1957-63 period, it seemed like an illusion. As peninsular Malaya's population was slightly still predominantly non-Malaya, the UMNO led Alliance leaders attempted to project the image of Malaya as one belonging to all citizens. *They had put little emphasis on the creation of an integrated society.* They could not decide what to call it. Every effort was made to avoid endangering communal harmony and straining constitutional democracy. These were the fragile years of a newly independent state."<sup>24</sup> (My emphasis)

He further reiterates that even though,

"The main features of a 'Malay nation-state' were framed, legally and constitutionally, just before the Independence of Malaya. However, in the next 12 years, after Independence the Tunku Abdul Rahman's administration moved away from this framework. He delayed the *full* implementation of the 'Malay nation-state' project by building a more 'pluralistic' and 'multi-cultural Malaya' in order to fulfill the immediate priority – national unity. He paid less attention to national identity or nationality and used citizenship instead as the basis of nation-building. ... Only after the formation of Malaysia in 1963 did he attempt to define and develop a 'Malaysian' nationality. To him, it seemed logical that a strong citizenship could be laid and strengthened before developing a nationality. The nation-state that he strove to establish during this early period was based on pluralism, particularly 'multi-lingualism' and 'multi-culturalism.'"<sup>25</sup>

### **The (Lack of) Malaysian Art Identity**

This lack of emphasis on what is Malaysian identity especially in the early formation of Malaysia can be seen in the field of Malaysian modern<sup>26</sup> arts. As I will discuss in this paper artworks produced by a certain group of artists can be seen to be defined by their racial interests, and if there are artists who are not preoccupied with any racial issues, they seem to be more concerned with the 'modern' manifestation of art and stylistic issues, not any notion of national identity.

The first direction can be seen from the artistic proclivities of Angkatan Pelukis Semenanjung (APS) and the Nanyang artists. APS was formed on the 24<sup>th</sup> of March, 1956 as Majlis Kesenian Melayu but it was changed to Angkatan Pelukis Semenanjung on the 15<sup>th</sup> of April, 1958, and later on to Angkatan Pelukis SeMalaysia in 1968. Even though the group later opened its membership to non-Malay members, Abdullah Kassim claims that the initial proponent of the APS was based on a resurgence of Malay nationalism in the 1950s, as the early members of the group were Malays. Besides the fact that the group was initially formed at the UMNO House, on Batu Road in Kuala Lumpur, APS had also been associated with the Angkatan Sasterawan 50 (ASAS 50 – Generation of Literati of the 1950s), a group of writers who attempted to combine purely artistic and social-political expression in *sajak* (poems) and *cerpen* (short stories) as vehicles to disseminate political messages.<sup>27</sup>

Zainol Abidin Ahmad Shariff suggests another reason for the formation of APS was to compete with the preexisting cultural groups, especially the Arts Council. The Arts Council, formed on April 15, 1952, as the first public body that dealt with fine arts in Malaya and as the main body responsible in addressing the need for a National Art Gallery and National Art Collection. It can be suggested here that due to fact that the Arts Council members were of various races and supported by both British expatriates and the Malaysian government, the formation of the APS can be seen as pertinent for many Malay artists who had only attained Malay education.<sup>28</sup>

Abdullah Kassim had also argued that the APS was formed on a basis similar to Angkatan Senirupa Indonesia or commonly known as ASRI. ASRI promoted the idea that local painters should produce 'national' and indigenous artwork, stemming mainly from their emotional and dogmatic identification with Indonesia and its people.<sup>29</sup> It was also formed by Mohamed Hoessein Enas who was previously the co-founder and first president of ASRI in 1944.<sup>30</sup>

Based on academic realism, impressionism, and even the assimilation of both styles, the subjects undertaken by the members of these groups were the Malay people and Malaya in general. Hoessein Enas and Mazli Mat Som, known for their portraits, other members such as Zakariah Noor, Yusof Abdullah, Mohd Sallehudin, Ahmad Hassan, Idris Salam and Sabtu Mohd Yusoff, produced genre scenes, landscapes, historical events, myths, nature scenes, and still lifes.

Generally, APS accentuated technical aspects and the mastering of materials such as oil, water color, and acrylic and the skills necessary in order to depict realism. The emphasis on skill, and not on discourse or philosophy, does not come as a surprise as Malay traditional arts, such as wood carving, metal work, *songket* weaving, and batik canting rely on great skill and practice. In traditional arts, artisans only use preexisting symbols passed on through generations, thus, creativity through the new arrangement of symbols and elements were not highly stressed. Similarly, in APS we can see that the attainment of skill through practice and training in mastering the techniques of modern media are seen as more important.

On the other hand, the employment of academic realism could be seen as most suitable and also legible to give a direct message to the audience, as the figurative images and beautiful landscapes can easily be understood by the Malays in general. Khoo Kay Kim argues that the artists of APS in the 1950s and 1960s, like the members

of ASAS 50, focused on Malay rural life and hardship and attempted to contribute to the regeneration of Malay society.<sup>31</sup> This could be seen for example in Hoessein Enas' "Admonition" (1959) (Figure 1). This work exemplifies the artist's close observations of and sensitivities to the Malay society. It depicts a moment of conflict between two sitting figures, a young maiden and, presumably, her father, intertwined with rage, emotion, and sadness, denoted by a crumpled letter that lay between them. The tense atmosphere between the young beautiful maiden and the elder male figure is heightened through the facial expressions of both figures and the tears that stream down the maiden's cheeks. The painting otherwise is devoid of any background or surrounding details.

**Figure 1: Mohd Hossein Enas, "Admonition," (1959),  
Oil on canvas, 110 x 88cm**



Source: *Wawasan dan Idea: Melihat Semula Seni Lukis Moden Malaysia*, Kuala Lumpur: BSLN, 1994. Collection: Tenaga Nasional Berhad.

It must be noted that modernization and urbanization in the country had brought in many modern values, which challenged the values upheld by the elderly in a traditional Malay society. For example, themes of forbidden love recurrently appeared in Malay movies such as "Penarik Beca" (Trishaw Peddler) and "Antara Dua Darjat" (Between Two Classes). What used to be arranged marriage, for example, had now to be a love marriage, what used to be obedience and piety had to be independence of mind and thoughts, and making one's own decision. The changing Malay experience, lifestyle and reality can be suggested as the theme in this work.

Zainol Abidin Ahmad Shariff claims that Hoessein Enas played a distinct role in introducing 'modern Malay' to modernity through his European academic figurative drawings. He argues, however, that the form of modernity embraced in art or in life by the members of APS was not totally Western, as the group mixed modern elements with Malay experience and Malay lifestyle. Extreme individualism that contradicted with the Malay society values were deemed unsuitable, but self-

expression was not rejected.<sup>32</sup> Although APS did not have a definite stylistic approach, except for the fact that the group is mainly denoted by the academic realism undertaken by its first two presidents, this group, in the 1950s and the 1960s, was bound by their commitment to uplift the Malays. Supported by their own nationalist spirit, Zainol Abidin Ahmad Shariff claims that APS is the only national art group that managed to give a sense of identity to Malaysian artists (read Malay) that needed a form of identity especially in their art.<sup>33</sup>

The APS is not the only art group that was formed for a specific race for its early formation. Despite the claim that an art academy “would certainly benefit all by bringing about an artistic and cultural atmosphere”<sup>34</sup> in a multi-racial society living in Singapore, the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in Singapore had a predominantly Chinese outlook in terms of staff and students until the late 1950s. The academy was founded in 1938 by Lim Hak Tai, who graduated from Amoy Art Teacher’s Training College in China, financially supported by a group of Chinese businessmen and guilds of Singapore. The committee, the teaching staff, and the students were Chinese and most students who graduated took up teaching posts in Chinese schools in Singapore and Malaya.<sup>35</sup>

The importance of this art academy is the fact that it was the first art college in British Malaya to offer fulltime courses in painting and sculpture and was responsible for the emergence of a group of artists who were featured prominently in the local cultural scene in the years after the Second World War.<sup>36</sup> Among the prominent and influential artists who became the teaching staff and the first generation of Nanyang artists were: Cheong Soo Pieng, who joined the academy in 1946, Georgette Chen Li Ying, 1953; Chen Wen Hsi, 1951; and Chen Chong Swee, 1951. Undeniably, the arrival of immigrants with formal Chinese arts education to the Malay region contributed to the burgeoning artistic activities in British Malaya. These artists not only have been exposed to traditional Chinese painting but they had been trained in *beaux-arts* type of art academies in Shanghai, Canton, and Amoy in the 1930s, and were exposed to modernist influences such as the School of Paris, as modernizing reforms took place in China.

Since China was plunged into an ideological conflict between the nationalist forces and the communist forces, political instability and extreme hardship had resulted in many Chinese choosing to leave China for the ‘Southern Seas’ (Southeast Asia), or what they describe as Nanyang. Singapore, in particular, seemed to attract these Chinese émigré for several reasons: Singapore’s reputation as a thriving international port, the predominantly Chinese population on the island, the lax immigration laws in British Malaya, and the prevalence of Chinese high schools in Singapore and Malaya at that time.<sup>37</sup>

According to Piyadasa, it was during the ‘golden period’ of the academy, spanning from 1947-1960, that there emerged the first conscious attempt to address the issue of identity. However, identity was more than a stylistic problem. In discussing the group, Piyadasa emphasizes that there were three distinct modes of treatment by these artists. First, a straightforward ‘western’ approach in oils which reveal the influence of the School of Paris (reflecting Post-Impressionism, Fauvism and even a Cubism influence); second, a straightforward ‘Chinese’ approach using Chinese inks and rice paper exploiting calligraphic qualities; and the third and most

importantly, a synthesis of 'western' and 'Chinese' influences through the use of oils on canvas which subsequently came to be known as the Nanyang style.<sup>38</sup>

The form of stylistic identity, however, should be seen in a new light of a regional, if not national, identity. This is because what is described to be the Nanyang style is not unique to the work of these Nanyang artists since the same attitude towards western art and aesthetics had already taken shape in Shanghai during the 1930s. Piyadasa himself asserts that the significance of the Nanyang artists should be attributed to the fact that "they were responsible for bringing to British Malaya a sophistication and a cosmopolitanism that had hitherto been absent within the local art scene," and these artist are "products of an artistic revolution which was already in progress in China."<sup>39</sup> Hence, we must look further than the stylistic solutions offered by this group and consider that these works should also be read in regards to their new identity as a part of the 'Southern Seas.'

Unlike the APS members who tried to uplift the Malay people's experience through art, the Nanyang artists' perception of their new identity was more complex. First, they are Chinese people migrated from China, burdened with deep cultural withholding. Second, due to the modernizing reforms in China, these artists were engaged in Western art at that time, especially the School of Paris. Third, as these artists moved to Singapore, it can be suggested that there is a void in terms of embracing regional identity as it can be argued that these artists loyalty can be put to question – they should either retain their loyalty and memory of China by focussing on the subjects reminding them of China, or if they should embrace their new identity as a part of the regional Southeast Asia community generally, and Singapore and Malaya specifically.

It must be suggested that these artists might not have the same level of deep affinity for the land as the Malays in Malaya at that time. This is because seventy-five percent of Singapore's population at that time consisted of Chinese immigrants. Even though Singapore was still under the British Crown Colony in the 1950s, the idea of a merger never lacked support among Singaporean leaders as Singapore's leaders wished to be merged with the peninsula due to economic and political reasons, and not because of any historical factor associated with Malaya.<sup>40</sup> Situating the Nanyang artists in this political background, it may be suggested that in the 1950s and 1960s, their identity was still ambiguous and may only be reflected in their role as 'observants,' not forming any basis of national or even regional identity, due to the fact that no one is certain of the form of state lies in the future for Singapore at that time.

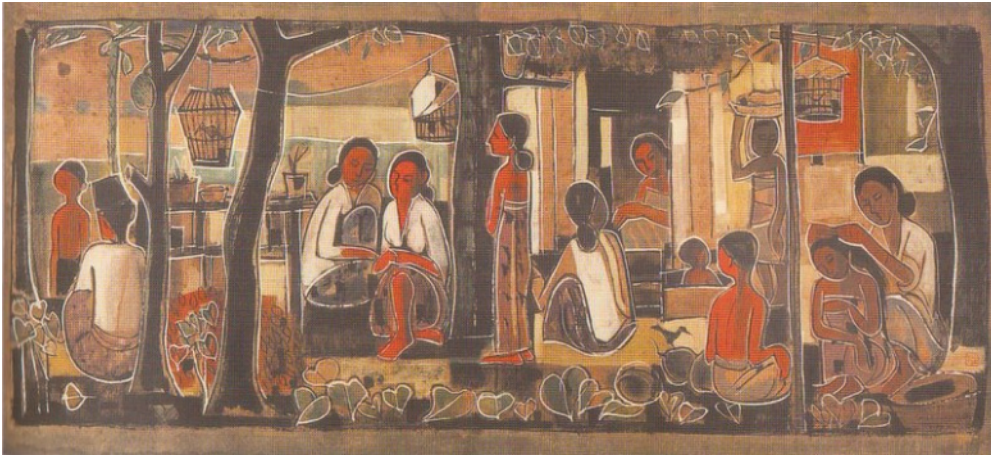
It must be noted, however, that these artists have begun to base their work on local reality. According to Chung Chen Sun, Lim Hak Tai "always suggested to the staff and students that the subject matter of their works should reflect the reality of the 'Southern Seas'" and emphasized that works produced by them should depict the localness of the place where they lived."<sup>41</sup> It is within the 'reality of the Southern Seas' that the identity of these artists should be discussed.

Cheong Soo Pieng's "Tropical Life" (1959) (Figure 2) for example, not only clearly exemplifies the synthesis of Western and Eastern art traditions known as the Nanyang style, but also the artist's cultural sensitivity reflected in his detailed observation of the people and the life in Singapore and Malaya. In this work, the Malay environment and life were sensitively depicted through the portrayal of events



that usually took place in the Malays villages or kampong. The events shown are divided into four areas by tree trunks. Reading from right to left, we find in the first section, the elder female depicted to be *mencari kutu*, or searching for lice on the head of the younger female figure. The second section depicts a part of the kitchen entrance of the Malay kampong house in which the events are happening; a woman sitting on the raised floor of the kitchen partially concealed by the wall is chatting with another woman sitting on the ground outside, a Malay man who is only wearing the *sarong* and glancing to the left, probably at another group across the three trunk, another woman with a basket on her head is entering the back of the kitchen and there is a toddler, probably waiting to be bathed outside the kitchen's entrance. In the third section, two women are depicted, perhaps at a break in their evening conversation. They are being observed by another female figure that is standing in front of the middle tree trunk. The fourth section depicts the back of an elderly man, wearing a white 'singlet' and sarong, confronting a faceless boy, probably asking the boy about his mischievous deeds.

**Figure 2: Cheong Soo Peng, "Tropical Life" (1959), Chinese ink and gouache on Chinese rice paper, 43.6 x 92cm**



Source: *Masterpieces from the National Art Gallery of Malaysia*, Kuala Lumpur: BSLN, 2002.  
Collection: BSLN

It must be noted that this well-observed scene happens usually in the evening – between *Asar* and *Maghrib*. Women chatting among themselves, searching for *kutu* among family members, especially girls, children running or playing and ending up being scolded by elders, and taking baths, were reminiscent of an idyllic kampong life. The scene itself is divided and defined through the means of nature that comes in the form of tree trunks. Tropical nature is dominant, as leaves cling from the branches and *daun keladi* (yam plant leaves) commonly used as a sort of borderline from the forest at the back of the house, is depicted in the foreground as if the observer were looking on or peeping at the social life from the forest. On the left, a *nangka*, or

a jackfruit, and a few bird-cages hang from the trees. In the third section, a garden table with pots of plants is depicted behind the figures.

In this work, unlike the works by British representatives in the eighteenth century,<sup>42</sup> who function as external observers, the relationship of the artist and the subject appears to be more intimate and personal. The artist did not seem to observe the subjects from a far distance with a colonizing eye or observe the locals as another object of discovery. He simply situates himself not far, but at a close distance, not as a participant, but only as a curious social observer, and, to a certain extent, embraces and envelops the social differences between himself, as the observer, and his subject.

Through the product of the artist's own cultural and artistic construct, it can be strongly suggested that the artist had situated himself at the border of the Southeast Asian society, cautiously calculating whether or not to redefine his political, social and cultural loyalty. The need to feel at home in a new geographical location also made the Nanyang artists realize that they needed to redefine or come to terms with the reality of their diaspora.

With this in mind, it may be suggested that the aesthetic solution, through the incorporation of Chinese traditional arts and Western art styles, must not be seen solely without the context of the local realities. Trained as modern artists, they adopted modern solutions of pictorial compositions deriving from the strength of both traditional and modern elements, creating their own style and identity, and returning to natural surroundings as subjects. It is certain that the Malayan landscape and the Malayan way of life are substantial sources of motifs that could fulfil artists' pictorial needs, but it cannot be denied that the depiction of the Malayan scenes consequently had to be done in order to come to terms with their new identity as being apart of the Malayan life, people, climate and landscape. Consequently, they have to understand and embrace the land and its people, and this was done through the idyllic representation of the *kampongs*, lifestyles, and local subjects. Thus, it can be suggested that this group found their new identity, not only through the fusion of the conflicting and contradictory stylistic and aesthetic discourse of both the Chinese and the West, but also through attempts to build a new sense of self-identification and sense of belonging with Southeast Asia, the diverse and the multicultural land, and the future that they beheld.

If the works produced by the APS and the Nanyang artists are defined by their racial and cultural interest and experience; the Wednesday Art Group (WAG) however, was more concerned with the 'modern' manifestation of art by developing a niche for self-expression and interest in a Western stylistic outlook. This inclination further reiterates the vagueness of any form of national identity during those years.

In Kuala Lumpur, almost simultaneously during the 1950s, the arts scene started to gain momentum when Peter Harris, an artist and art educator from Britain, came to Malaya in 1951. He was the first Superintendent of the Arts for the Federation of Malaya, and the first education officer to engage seriously in arts education in the Federation of Malaya at that time. His contribution to art development in Malaysia is significant not only because of his efforts in educating local teachers about art education, but also his contribution in conducting his evening drawing classes, known as the Wednesday Art Group (WAG), which had produced several acclaimed Malaysian artists.

He emphasized freedom of expression and the investigation of new ideas in his evening painting and drawing classes, which were mostly attended by teachers and even some students in a small studio in the Education Department compound. The group also held various outdoor activities including figure drawing, figure painting, and sketching at various places including Templer Park, Pansoon, Klang Port, and Malacca.<sup>43</sup> Some of the members that were associated with the group were Cheong Laitong, Patrick Ng Kah Onn, Dzulkifli Buyong, Jolly Koh, Ismail Mustam, Ho Kai Peng, Hajeedar Abdul Majid, Sivam Selvaratnam, Ahmad Hassan, Janet Ng, Lui Siat Moi, Long Thien Shik, Anthony Lau and Renee Kraal.

Most of the WAG members were self-taught. According to Piyadasa, for Harris, there should be no definite aesthetic position and he encouraged every artist to develop his or her own individual self-expression and growth in order to find his or her own style or artistic expression.<sup>44</sup> In the "Preface" of the group's first exhibition catalogue in 1956, it was written that,

*"Memang tidak wujud apa-apa aliran Kebangsaan atau gaya melukis yang dipupuk, tetapi dari perbincangan, minat dan semangat, para pelukis ini menunjukkan gaya tersendiri dan dari kepelbagaian ini ternyata masa hadapan adalah cerah"* (There is no national style or certain developed style, but from discussions, interests and spirits, these artists showed their own various distinct styles and from these variations their futures are definitely bright).<sup>45</sup>

Since there was no hard and fast rule concerning a definite aesthetic position, works by the artists during that period were not only stylistically varied, but the theme and subjects varied as well. The youngest member of the group, Dzulkifli Buyong, for example, depicted his childhood experience and artists such as Cheong Laitong, Patrick Ng, and Jolly Koh's displayed works that has an Abstract Expressionism outlook. Ismail Mustam, on the other hand, produced several different styles of work during that period. Piyadasa asserts that although the outlook encouraged in the group was 'expressive,' the expressiveness of the works produced by these artists was not linked to Expressionism movement linked to Western art.<sup>46</sup> It may be suggested that this is due to the fact that neither theoretical or philosophical approaches, nor a general understanding of Western art history had been emphasized in the teachings of Peter Harris, as this group only gathered to concentrate their drawing and painting exercises. Thus Western styles, such as Expressionism, Abstract Expressionism, Cubism and Impressionism, were employed without any theoretical, intellectual or philosophical background except for the sake of self-exploration and experimentation with various styles, media and technique.

It could also be suggested that this is the first art group that attracted a fair number of Malay, Chinese and Indian members. Perhaps due to this mixed racial composition, the group took an apolitical stance in their approach towards art. It was highlighted in their first exhibition catalogue that, *"Kami tidak mengundang mereka yang datang sekali sekala hanya untuk menggunakan model dan keluar meninggalkan kami dan juga mereka yang menyoal tentang hal politik."* (We do not invite those who come once a while only to use models and later leave us and those who question (talk) about political matters.)<sup>47</sup> Thus, not only does there persist a variety

of artistic styles and approaches in this group, but different subjects and preoccupations persist as well, according to each artist's interest, cultural and social experiences.

Like the Nanyang artists, the subjects chosen by the members of this group were derived from the archipelago environment, situations and activities, even among the non-Malay artists. Scenes such as bathing, drying clothes, fishing scenes, local landscapes, folk games, and local myths comprised the matter of several interesting subjects and recurring themes. "Spirits of the Earth, Sky and Water" (1959) (Figure 3) by the late Patrick Ng Kah Onn has been described by Mohd Ali Abdul Rahman as possessing the influence of both Balinese painting and the fusion of symbolism and metaphysics adopted by the Neolithic people.<sup>48</sup> The work is divided into three sections: the upper part represents the spirit of the air, the middle part represents the spirit of the earth, and the lower part represents the spirit of the water.

**Figure 3: Patrick Ng Kah Onn, "Spirits of the Earth, Sky and Water" (1959), Oil on board, 137 x 122cm**



Source: *Masterpieces from the National Art Gallery of Malaysia*, Kuala Lumpur: BSLN, 2002. Collection: BSLN

In "Spirit of the Earth," the central section of the work, T.K. Sabapathy suggested that the posture of the seven men clad with *kain pelikat*, on the left, and five men on the right, flanking the central male and female figure, is derived from the *kechak*, a type of Balinese dance that retells the Ramayana myth from India. The

myth has a large influence in folk tales and traditional cultural performances in Southeast Asia.<sup>49</sup>

In the upper right of the "Spirit of the Sky" section, a male figure wearing *baju Melayu*, complete with *songket* (like a skirt worn outside the pants), and a woman wearing *baju kurung*, seem to be dancing with a full moon in the background. Another male figure on the upper left, also wearing the complete Malay attire, seems to be dancing, with stars filling the background. The moon and the stars have an attributed meaning significant in the Malay archipelago specifically, and the Muslim culture generally. A full moon or a circle, according to Abdullah Mohamed, represents God's eternal and essential quality or the true nature of all beings, a crescent and a star symbolizes the shape of nature (*simbol bentuk alam*).<sup>50</sup>

The "Spirit of the Water" is represented by the lower section of the work. In this section, there are three central female figures in *baju kurung* standing over the lotus pond. The lotus, according to Abdullah Mohamed, also represents the symbol of nature. There is also a nude/semi-nude couple and a woman, skinny-dipping in the pond. It is paradoxical that these figures were in the nude. The notion of 'spirit' perhaps allows this heaven-like life and permits creatures to do whatever they want to do freely with no cultural and social restrictions.

There is also an extensive embodiment of tropical and natural elements that fill up this work. Tropical trees and shrubs surround the scene, pineapple plants are arrayed on the right, and what looked like banana trees are in the lower left. The upper part is filled with what seems to be palm leaves. There is also a Malay kampong house on stilts on the right. The play with warm and cool colours reflected the *senja* or sunset period, which the Malays believed was the peak time when evil and spirits roamed.

The substantive subjects derived from local or regional culture used in this work reflected the Chinese artist's sensitivities and vast knowledge of the Malays, the archipelago, the local myths, and various cultural signs and symbols. Patrick Ng's familiarity with important symbolism to the Malays reflected his level of cultural understanding and tolerance with other races and culture.

Unlike the Nanyang artists who migrated from China, WAG members, such as Patrick Ng, was born in Malaya. Perhaps this created his deep, secure and unwavering sense of belonging and happiness in this new country, as depicted in his work. Since the work was produced in 1958, one year after the Independence, it can be suggested that a new level of sensitivity, knowledge and assimilation had created a more secured sense of identity among the non-Malay artists, as their nationality through the Federal Citizenship provided by the 1957 Constitution has been guaranteed.

Unlike the APS and the Nanyang artists, the lack of any effort in searching for a common identity, even among the WAG members, is apparent. Even though the artists during that time were at some point or another engaged in local themes generally, there is no common goal in searching for an artistic solution and approach to define Malayan or Malaysian art. The encouragement of individual self-expression and individual growth propagated by Peter Harris succeeded in instilling these budding artists with the notion of 'Art for Art's Sake',<sup>51</sup> art as self and individualistic expression and as a credited individualist achievement pertinent to 'modernist'

thinking. The individual self-expression and 'Art for Art's Sake' attitude became the mainstream of artistic thinking up to the decade of the 1970s.

Throughout this paper, I have discussed that the Nanyang, the WAG, and the APS did not have similar style, artistic tendencies and most importantly, an underscoring common identity among the artworks that its members produced. The Furnivall form of plural society inherited from the British colonial policy can be suggested as why these tendencies happened as mostly the artworks produced from APS and Nanyang reflect the interest and concern of their own members. This could clearly be seen through the Nanyang artists, who only served the interests and the needs of artistic education among Chinese in British Malaya and APS whose members are more concerned with the issues concerned ethnic Malays.

On the other hand, as there emerged inter-ethnic understanding and cooperation among the three major ethnic groups in Malaya at a political level, inter-ethnic cooperation was also formed in the Malaysian art world. The Arts Council, the first public body that dealt with fine arts in Malaya and the Wednesday Art Group, had attracted support and membership from the British, the Malays, the Chinese and the Indians. The APS however, an art group that catered to and supported Malay artists with Malay education seems to have offered the communalist alternative from the multicultural art group that had started to gain the public's and the government's general support.

It is true that some of those who graduated from the Nanyang taught in Malaya and some artists like Zakariah Noor had dual membership in both the WAG and the APS, but in terms of identity these three groups go in three different directions. The Nanyang cultivated the 'Nanyang style,' a synthesis of Western and Eastern artistic influences that were employed to capture their cultural perception of the Southern Seas, whereas the WAG was more concerned with individual self-expression and artistic modernist pursuits, and the APS were more concerned with their Malay nationalistic stance and producing works that uplifted and romanticized the Malay as the beneficiaries of the land.

These different preoccupations are not surprising, as the different directions of these art groups reflected the void of the Malayan/sian identity as the artists were unsure of the form of Malaysian identity in the new nation as reiterated by Cheah Boon Kheng. He claims that during the 1950s and the 1960s, no one was certain about the nature of Malaysian identity since the term *bangsa*, 'nation,' and 'race' were still ambiguous. Even though the Alliance leaders attempted to project the image of Malaya as belonging to all citizens, it was not through the accentuation of an integrated society. As the emphasis at that time was on building a more pluralistic and multi-cultural Malaya, the Malay nation-state which was framed, legally and constitutionally, before the Independence of Malaya was not projected to achieve a national unity.

Cheah Boon Kheng further states that only after the formation of Malaysia in 1963 was there an attempt to define and develop a 'Malaysian' nationality. This concurrently occurred in the Malaysian art world. The diversified artistic directions in the 1950s had led several attempts to arrive at a distinct Malaysian identity. This was especially among the newly-returned Western-trained artists, who brought with them formal artistic experiments to be enmeshed with past cultural references. Artists such as Chuah Thean Teng, Tay Mo Leong, and Khalil Ibrahim are synonymous in

the adoption of Malay craft traditions through their *batik* painting and Nik Zainal Abidin was the proponent of *wayang kulit* themes and subjects, portrayed in paintings. Syed Ahmad Jamal and Latif Mohiddin, however, adopted the Abstract Expressionist style in depicting the local and regional landscapes while Ibrahim Hussein came back with a Pop Art influence in some of his work, and the New Scene artists, Redza Piyadasa, Choong Kam Kow, Sulaiman Esa, Tan Teong Eng, Tang Tuck Kan and Tan Teong Kooi, provided alternatives to the Abstract Expressionist pursuit that was dominant at that time.

However, the racial riots of May 13, 1969 had stunted the burgeoning creations, inventions and explorations that had begun in the 1960s. Thus, the search for a Malaysian artistic identity through the natural process of interaction among artists from various races and even with the international art world had to undergo the phase of the government generated national identity of the 1970s.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> See John Bastin & Pauline Rohatgi, *Prints of Southeast Asia in the India Office Library*, (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1979); Sophia McAlpin, *The Landscape Palimpsest: Reading Early 19th Century British Representations of Malaya*, (Australia: Monash Asia Institute, 1997); and Lim Chong Keat, *Penang Views 1770-1860*, (Penang: Penang Museum and Summer Times Publishing, 1986).

<sup>2</sup> For discussions on some of the early artists in Malaya, see Tan Chee Khuan, *Perintis-Perintis Seni Lukis Malaysia*, (Penang: The Art Gallery, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> Tan Chee Khuan, "Development of Art in Malaysia and Singapore," in *Perintis-Perintis Seni Lukis Malaysia*, (Penang: The Art Gallery, 1994), p. 30.

<sup>4</sup> Yeoh Jin Leng, *Semangat Pelopor Seni 1950an-1960an*, (Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara, 1997), p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> Tan Chee Khuan, "Development of Art in Malaysia and Singapore," pp. 29-31.

<sup>6</sup> The term 'group' here actually refers to Wednesday Art Group (WAG) and Angkatan Pelukis Semenanjung (APS), the Nanyang on the other hand, actually refers to a group of artists working with Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in Singapore and in this paper, I am referring to the first generation of Nanyang artists such as Cheong Soo Pieng, Georgette Chen Li Ying, Chen Wen Hsi, and Chen Chong Swee.

<sup>7</sup> It must be noted that the name Malaysia, Malaya and Malay Peninsula is used interchangeably especially in discussing the political situation in the country. Malaysia is the name of the country after the merger of Malay Peninsula with Sabah and Sarawak after 1963. Malaya, Federation of Malaya or Malay Peninsula will be used to refer to the peninsula as these are the names of this geographical entity before the formation of Malaysia. From 1948 to 1963 the states of Perak, Pahang, Negeri Sembilan, Selangor, Johore, Kedah, Kelantan, Terengganu, Perlis and Penang comprised the Federation of Malaya. In 1963 with the inclusion of Sarawak, Sabah and Singapore, the Federation came to be known as Malaysia. However, in 1965 Singapore drew out from Malaysia.

<sup>8</sup> According to Horace Stone, the Chinese and Indians had been visiting the region even before 1400 as some sources of the history of Malaya were derived from the writings of Chinese travelers such as Fa-Hsien and I-Tsing. Culturally, the Chinese had little or no influence on the Malay peninsula and the Malay civilization but the Indian missionaries, on the other hand, were more influential. This is especially among the ruling group, as the ideas of god-king, government structures, and crowning ceremonies of the Malay society could be traced from the Indian influence. Abdul Rahman Embong however, highlights that the coming of Islam is the decisive turning point of the Malay civilization process. “Unlike Hinduism and Buddhism, Islam was not only accepted by the court but also by the people, as evidenced by the fact that not all philosophical treatises were written solely for the pleasure of kings.” See Horace Stone, *From Malacca to Malaysia 1400-1965*, (London: George G. Harrap & Co., 1966), pp. 14-16; and Abdul Rahman Embong, “Malaysia as a Multicivilizational Society,” *Macalester International-Malaysia: Crossroads of Diversity in Southeast Asia*, 12, ( Autumn (2002), pp. 39-44.

<sup>9</sup> The British colonized Malaya for almost two hundred years: from the takeover of Penang by the English East India Company in 1786 until Malaya’s independence in 1957.

<sup>10</sup> John Gullick, *Malaysia: Economic Expansion and National Unity*, (London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1981), p. 52.

<sup>11</sup> James P. Ongkili, *Nation-Building in Malaysia 1946-1974*, (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> Kiran Kapur Datar, *Malaysia: Quest for a Politics of Consensus*, (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1983), p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> M.V. Del Tufo, *Malaya: A Report on the 1947 Census of Population*, (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1948), pp. 548-88, cited in Datar, *Malaysia: Quest for a Politics of Consensus*.

<sup>14</sup> Datar, *Malaysia: Quest for a Politics of Consensus*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>15</sup> Barbara Watson Andaya & Leonard Y. Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1994), p. 65.

<sup>16</sup> For further discussion see Datar, *Malaysia: Quest for a Politics of Consensus*, pp. 5-8.

<sup>17</sup> The majority of the Malays however, were predominantly farmers and fishermen.

<sup>18</sup> For example, Malay associations such as *Kaum Muda* and *Kaum Tua* were formed to address issues such as Islamic reform and modernism. The Indians came together in associations such as *Sanathan Dharma Sabha*, The Young Men’s Indian Association and the Indian Coastal Association. The Chinese organized themselves on the basis of secret societies and several associations of employers and workers, on the basis of their surnames, the territory that they came from in China, or the dialect they spoke.

<sup>19</sup> Barbara W. Andaya and Leonard Y. Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, pp. 176-181.

<sup>20</sup> Robert W. Hefner, “Introduction: Multiculturalism and Citizenship in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia,” in Robert W. Hefner (ed.), *The Politics of Multiculturalism: Pluralism and Citizenship in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2001), p. 4.

<sup>21</sup> J.S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice*, (New York: New York University Press, 1956), p. 304.

<sup>22</sup> In this ‘bargain,’ UMNO accepted an easier access to Malayan citizenship and federal public service in which all people in Malaya could qualify as citizens either by birth or by fulfilling requirements of residence, language and oath of loyalty, in return for the guarantee of Malay special rights and the recognition as the *bumiputeras* or the ‘sons/daughters of the soil,’ in the Constitution.



- <sup>23</sup> Cheah Boon Kheng, *Malaysia: The Making of a Nation*, (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2002), p. 8.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 76-77.
- <sup>26</sup> The term 'modern art' is used loosely in Malaysian art writings to differentiate art produced for contemplation for example, works in watercolour or works that are rooted in the easel tradition basically embedded in the fine arts practice, from art which is rooted in the utilitarian based Malay tradition (*seni tradisi*).
- <sup>27</sup> Abdullah Kassim, "Angkatan Pelukis Malaysia Sepintas Lalu," in *Menemui Moderniti: 40 Tahun Angkatan Pelukis Se Malaysia*, (Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara, 1998), p. 19.
- <sup>28</sup> Zainol Abidin Ahmad Shariff, *Menemui Moderniti*, p. 16.
- <sup>29</sup> Abdullah Kassim, "Angkatan Pelukis Malaysia Sepintas Lalu," p. 19.
- <sup>30</sup> Ooi Kok Chuen, "Hoessein - Flamboyant Artist with Colourful Life," *New Sunday Times*, July 23, 1995.
- <sup>31</sup> Khoo Kay Kim, "Art and Nationalism in Malaysia: A Historical Perspective," in *Seni Dan Nasionalisme*, (Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara, 1998), 18.
- <sup>32</sup> Zainol Abidin Ahmad Shariff, *Menemui Moderniti*, pp. 15-16.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- <sup>34</sup> Tan Tee Chie, "Historical Sketch of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts," *40th Anniversary Souvenir Magazine of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts.*, p. 19, cited in Redza Piyadasa, "The Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts," in *Pameran Restropektif Pelukis-Pelukis Nanyang* (Kuala Lumpur: Muzium Seni Negara Malaysia, 1979), p. 25.
- <sup>35</sup> For further details of the early development of this art group see Piyadasa, "The Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts.", 24-26 and Tan Chee Khuan, "Development of Art in Malaysia and Singapore", pp. 29-31.
- <sup>36</sup> Redza Piyadasa, "Introduction," in *Pameran Restropektif Pelukis-Pelukis Nanyang*, p. 6.
- <sup>37</sup> Piyadasa, "The Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts," p. 26.
- <sup>38</sup> Redza Piyadasa, *Pengolahan Lanskap Tempatan Dalam Seni Moden Malaysia, 1930-1981*, (Kuala Lumpur: Muzium Seni Negara, 1981), pp. 31-32.
- <sup>39</sup> Piyadasa, "The Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts," p. 28.
- <sup>40</sup> Ongkili, *Nation-Building in Malaysia 1946-1974*, pp. 151-161.
- <sup>41</sup> Interview with Chung Chen Sun, cited in Piyadasa, "The Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts," p. 32.
- <sup>42</sup> For example in the works of Captain Robert Smith, William Westall and James Wathen. See Lim Chong Keat, *Penang Views 1770-1860*, (Penang: Penang Museum, Summer Times Publishing, 1986).
- <sup>43</sup> Yeoh Jin Leng, *Semangat Pelopor Seni 1950an-1960an*, p. 20.
- <sup>44</sup> Piyadasa, *Pengolahan Lanskap Tempatan Dalam Seni Moden Malaysia, 1930-1981*, p. 34.
- <sup>45</sup> Yeoh Jin Leng, *Semangat Pelopor Seni 1950an-1960an*, p. 20; my translation.
- <sup>46</sup> Piyadasa, *Pengolahan Lanskap Tempatan Dalam Seni Moden Malaysia, 1930-1981*, p. 34.
- <sup>47</sup> Yeoh Jin Leng, *Semangat Pelopor Seni 1950an-1960an*, p. 21; my translation.

<sup>48</sup> Mohamed Ali Abdul Rahman, *Modern Malaysian Art: Manifestation of Malay Form and Content*, (Shah Alam: Biroteks Universiti Teknologi Mara, 2000), p. 38.

<sup>49</sup> T.K. Sabapathy, "Patrick Ng Kah Onn," in *Modern Artists of Malaysia*, (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1983), p. 56.

<sup>50</sup> For details see Abdullah Mohamed, *Falsafah Dan Pemikiran Orang-Orang Melayu: Hubungannya Dengan Islam Dan Kesenian*, vol. 23, Siri Kebudayaan Kebangsaan (Kuala Lumpur: Kementerian Kebudayaan Belia dan Sukan Malaysia, 1984).

<sup>51</sup> It must be noted that the manifestation of the slogans 'Seni untuk Masyarakat' (Art for Society) and 'Seni untuk Seni' (Art for Art's Sake) were significant especially among literary scholars ASAS 50 (The Generation of the Literati Scholars of the 1950s). Some of the Malay literati believed in the concept of 'Seni untuk Masyarakat' in which they claim would create a more focused artistic work by uplifting the readers 'consciousness.' Thus, the success of any artistic work should be measured by its social consciousness and didactic function. The group that propagated 'Seni untuk Seni' on the other hand, argue that literary works must also be seen a form of pleasure and highlights the importance of aesthetic quality. They claimed that by accentuating the social function of the work, literary works will be reduce to a form of propaganda. This polemic however, did not prevail as more members of ASAS 50 defended the concept of 'Seni untuk Masyarakat' due to significant and convincing arguments made by the proponents of this concept.