
Cultural Inspirations towards Malaysian Animation Character Design

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ABSTRACT

Culture is part of human development which evolves with civilization from ancient times to today's digital era. Animation contributes to the cultural industry through signs and symbols and is captured from people's different lifestyle and various grounds including religion, belief systems, politics, tradition, language, tools, costumes, buildings and arts. *Wayang Kulit* or 'Shadow Play' was once a famed traditional culture in the 1960s for entertainment purposes in Malaysia which fundamentally led to the continuation of the 2D and 3D animation studies. Nevertheless, students these days seem lack the sense of local identity as shown in their final animation project, as if the culture sentiment is getting faded. Since culture is also emerging with an identity where both fundamentals are strongly connected, this research aims to identify the influence of culture towards artwork, produced by art and design students who study animation. Content analysis was used to analyze the complete final artwork from selected university in Sarawak which offers this subject as a requirement. Besides a good storyline, animation must have a strong character design with a good personality, appropriate costumes and accessories. Results found that there are cultural influences where the character's costume design is similar to the Sarawak traditional clothing. Thus, it proves that Malaysian culture is still sturdily inspiring students in creating their artwork.

Keywords: *Tradition, culture, identity, cartoon, character.*

INTRODUCTION

Culture is a social construct where people live, learn, experience, interact and tolerate with another person, thus influencing a person in creating and growing their identity among society (Paul Du Gay, 1997). The process involves an individual and a group of people with an identity who start to define themselves and how they are groomed and inspired by the cultural traits. The culture embraces everything hence contributing to the expansion of identity towards an individual for them to understand who they are and become flexible to being a part of the society (T.S. Eliot, 1962). When humans are communicating with different background and culture, they actually attempt to accept and adapt the differences which proves that culture is learned and influenced (Stuart Hall, 1996).

Elements of culture can be divided into four categories which are symbols, rituals, values and heroes. Symbols are verbal and non-verbal language. Rituals are daily activities in social groups within the culture. Values are quality whether it is good or bad, pretty or ugly and heroes are real or imaginary people who become a role model in a culture. They are usually the subject of the novel or literature forms (Geert Hofstede, 1994). According to Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952), culture is known as an explicit and implicit polar of attitude which requires transmission by symbols organized by a community of people. It is built from various grounds including

religion and belief systems, politics, tradition, language, tools, costumes, buildings, entertainment and arts (refer to the table 1 below). Furthermore, art also known as part of descriptive approach of culture definition beside knowledge, believe, law, moral, tradition, ability and other usual stuff that is accepted by the society.

About 161 definitions of culture was collected by Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) which have been categorized into 5 varied approaches as stated in the table below:

Table 1 Definitions of culture from different approaches

No	Approach	Definition
1.	Descriptive	Knowledge, believe, arts , law, moral, tradition, ability and other usual stuff that is accepted by the society.
2.	Historical	Social and tradition heritage.
3.	Normative	Rules, regulations, lifestyle, idea and value from a person.
4.	Psychology	Adapting from all learning processes in a society.
5.	Structural	Polar aspects and cultural organization.

“Animation is a creative way of preserving culture through the use of computer generated”, as stated by Grzegorz Godlewski (2008), is one of the solutions to keep the culture memorable and evergreen through animation (Mohd Amir, 2011). As classified in descriptive approach, arts have strong relations to culture (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952). Arts become tools to visualize culture in so many ways. Moreover, visual culture in some ways influence student’s knowledge, affects their identity construction and shape their aesthetic sensibilities. As explained by Normah Mustaffa, Faridah Ibrahim & Mus Cairil Samani (2009), individuals will choose to respond or ignore what they see based on their perceptions, experiences and their interest. In art and design studies, students learn the theory, elements and principles of design. Hence, they should understand the role of arts in culture that contribute to design processes including animations, crafts, costumes, accessories, equipment and tools.

Most of the successful animation stories are developed from myths, fantasies, lifestyles and superheroes from story books or comics that are being visualized through the art of digital animation (Lent, 2004; Micheal Q Ceballos, 2012). These kinds of stories are legendary and parallel to traditional culture which is unforgettable from our earlier generation until today. Storyline is the most important part to consider before producing the animation. It will either attract the animation followers consistently or be ignored by them (Toby Gard, 2000).

Besides the storyline, character design has also become an animation backbone. Character design developed complete with costume, accessories or weapon where all the characteristics are usually inspired by culture for example local traditional clothing and sword used by warrior represent the character’s stature. This

research will focus on costume design to identify whether culture influences the animation character produced by the art and design student.

BACKGROUND

Culture Developments

Clifford (1988) clarifies that culture is a combination of many cultural identities that are selected and interpreted on a constant foundation including age, gender, socioeconomic class, exceptionality, geographic location, language, ethnicity, race, religion and political status. Culture is a developed and owned lifestyle by people and is inherited to the next generation. It becomes a part of the human development which evolves with civilization from ancient times to today's digital era. Internationally, culture is beneficial to the country for many reasons especially for diplomatic connections. A country also portrays their national looks through cultural dimensions for example sports and arts (Liana Eka, 2011).

On the other hand, culture is also complex, difficult to define, something unplanned and happens without purpose. It is like an everyday routine that people get used to, live in and go through daily for every generation to survive, but improved, appropriate with the world's evolvement (Stuart Hall, 1996). Culture is slowly made by the involvement of an individual to build the development of the society. It cannot be seen in a single person or individual, but it can be seen in a group of people with the same characteristic and it becomes obvious or clearer in a society (refer to the visual in Figure 1 below). They need to tolerate in communication to show respect for the sake of living in harmony and a peaceful life based on these three senses of culture detected as i) an individual; ii) a group; iii) a whole society (T.S. Eliot, 1962).

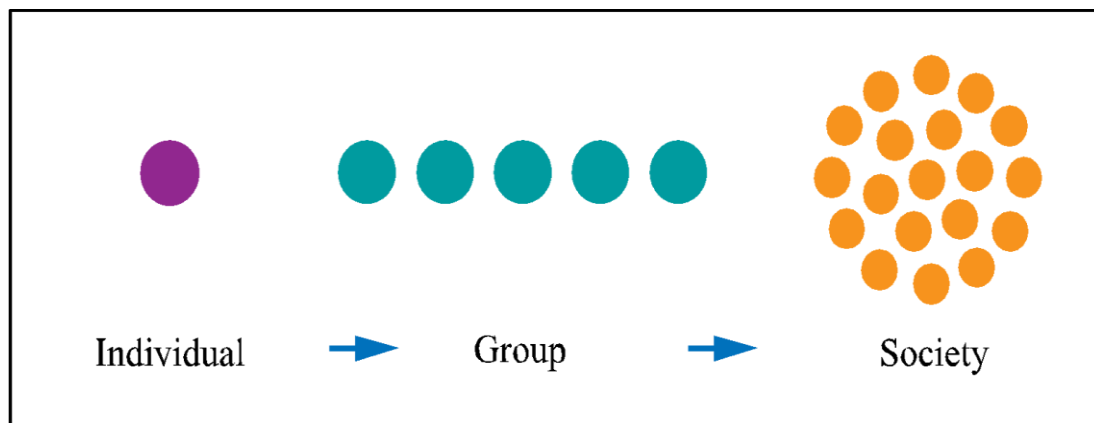


Figure 1 Three senses of culture

Cultural Implication towards Animation

Culture defines a specific way of life which represents meaning and values in art learning, institution and usual behavior (William, 1961). One of the famous traditional culture in Malaysia is *Wayang Kulit*. It is believed that Walt Disney learnt the 'shadow play' before coming out with his own animation (Khor Kheng Kia, 2009). 'Shadow play', a classical animation, started in early 1960's. It was a culture in Kelantan to entertain the local community (Dahlan Abdul Ghani, 2011). It is a

traditional Malaysian theater staged opera which is a combination of verbal narratives and performing arts (Hassan Muthalib, 2003).

As time flies, the process has changed with technology transitioning from manually hand-drawn art to digitalized version in 2-dimensional (2D) with the first CGI-animation series titled Reboot in 1994. This was followed by 3-dimensional (3D) animation for the Toy Story movie in 1998 (Mohd Amir, 2011). Animation is basically the development of a storyline, character design, background and sound. Upin Ipin is one of the latest Malaysian animation that reflects local culture in terms of lifestyle and background environment (Dahlan Ghani, 2011). Unfortunately, according to Hassan Muthalib (2004) as an animation pioneer in Malaysia, students lack the sense of local identity through their final animation project. Thus, it makes Malaysian animation industry cloudy with the local character identity, plus can't even be compared with a successful Western and Japan animations.

Costume in Animation

Liang Hui-e & et.al (2006) stated that traditional costume depicts an important role in developing modern costume culture which combine usefulness with aesthetic value through his research on Chinese folklore costume design. While referring to Toby Gard (2000), the visual design for developing character is divided into two categories which are physical form and costume. Physical forms are body, skin tone, size, hair, weight, gender and age while costumes usually play with many colors, shapes, purposes and meaningful designs that represent the identity and personality of the character. The key to consider while designing a character is it must be attractive, loveable, admirable thus to get a positive respond by the animation followers.

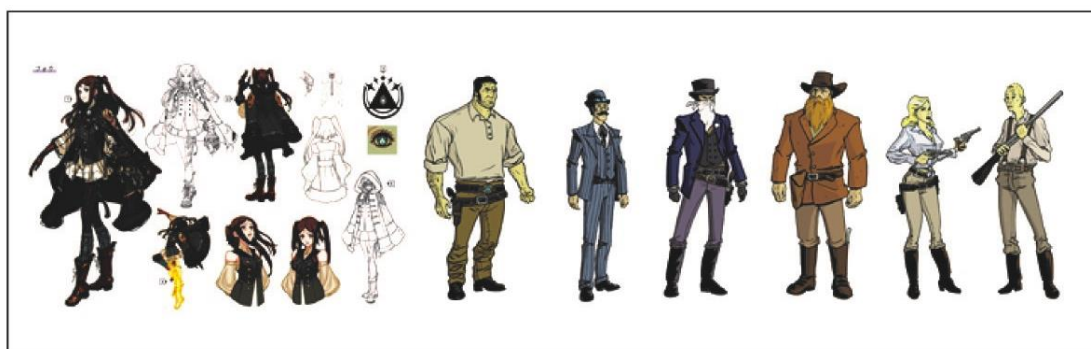


Figure 2 Example of Japan and Western Costume Design
Source: Janitra Nanda & Audrey Cazenave from Pinterest (2016)

Costumes carry the character's personality and attitude so fans can differentiate the role of hero and villain, bad and kind. Costumes help the character become more identifiable with their strong characteristic (refer figure 2). Japan is famous with cosplay events where anime fans wear the costume of their chosen character and share their interest with others during the event. According to Monks (2010), the word cosplay, taken from the words costume and play, is a term used to describe the costume fandom where individuals dress up as their favorite fictional character. What is more exciting is when character designers from the west came up with symbols as a representation of heroes on their costumes; Superman using the

alphabet 'S' and Batman's bat silhouette (Toby Gard, 2000). The symbols then become a logo that fans associate with especially when purchasing merchandise for their collection.

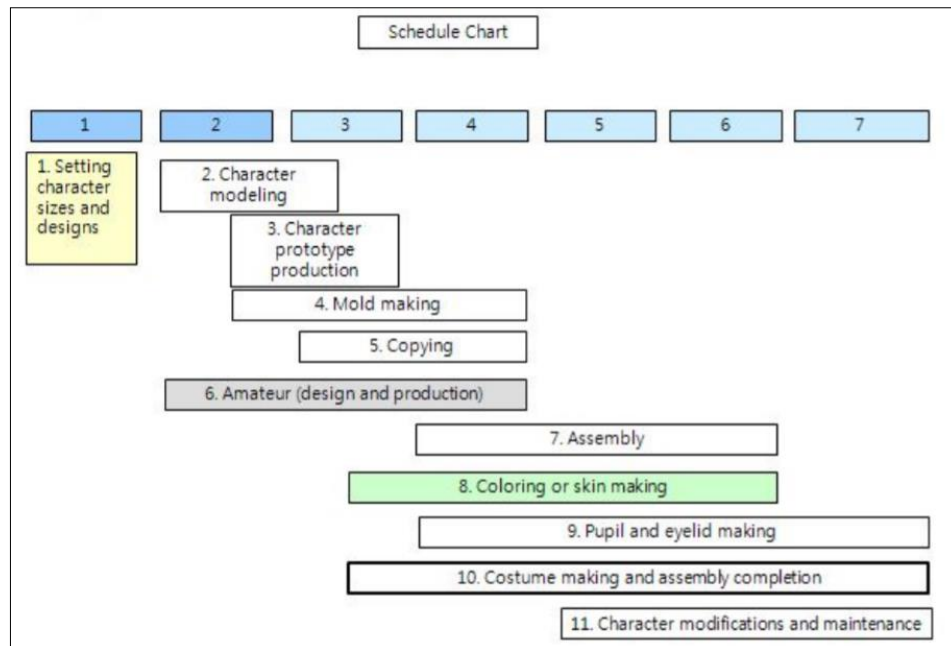


Figure 3: Cheburashka Character Production
Source: Ki Hoon Kim & Ji Sung Suh (2012)

Referring to figure 3, there are a few stages to consider as a production method in making the costume design. According to the planning chart for Cheburashka character production, the process include 11 steps:- 1. The setting character sizes and design 2. Character modelling 3. Character prototype production 4. Mold making 5. Copying 6. Amateur (design and production) 7. Assembly 8. Coloring or skin making 9. Pupil and eyelid making 10. Costume making and assembly completion 11. Character modifications and maintenance.

Ki Hoon Kim & Ji Sung Suh (2012) specified that costume making process for animation character's appearance is not the same with the costume making process for regular wear in stop motion animation character's design. The Character costume making process includes:-

- Confirming image sketches
- Checking sizes of each part
- Analyses on join movements and body types
- Colour chart check
- Selecting Material (Fabric)
- Material screen check (Tint and texture)
- Rough pattern making
- Fitting
- Modified pattern making
- Wearing

Malaysian Costume Design

Malaysia is a multiracial country consisting of various ethnics such as Malay, Chinese, Indian, Kadazan, Iban and Baba Nyonya. The Malaysian traditional costumes have many different styles depending on the ethnic group's culture and beliefs, consequently contributing to the fashion heritage of Malaysia. The Malays are famous for their Baju Melayu and Baju Kurung, the Chinese for their Cheongsam, the Indians for their Sari, the Kadazans for their Kadazan Papar, the Ibans for their Baju Burung and Kebaya for the Baba Nyonya (Kementerian Pelancongan dan Kebudayaan Malaysia, 2012). Since costume is also a part of cultural characteristics, this research will investigate cultural influences on costumes designed for animation characters amongst art and design students.

THEORY: CULTURAL AND MASS COMMUNICATION FROM SEMIOTICS PERSPECTIVE

Theory was taken from a Greek word *theoria* meaning to see, observe or reflections (David Crow, 2010). As well as semiotics comes from Greek word 'semeion' meaning sign. Semiotics becomes a basic theory for all cultural development processes which replaces anthropology culture. Every process must be based on a significant system for example code. The source may not necessary come from human but must have a recognizable sign.

Code is a significant system to read statement from an invisible unit. Cultural definitions by semiotics is a competence reaction which belongs to individuals in society to identify symbols, interpret and produce something (Galih Yudho Laksono, 2010). Audience using symbols to label, respond, share idea and feelings (Wood 2004). All the interactions involved creates the construction of meaning making via a symbolic process (Shahizan 2013; Wood 2004). This is a significant system even though it does not involve a two way of communication between sender and receiver. However, it can still be considered as a sign where humans start to create culture. This culture then builds the identity of a small group of people unintentionally through equipment, costume and accessories for daily use.

Panuti Sudjiman and Art Van Zoest (1992) clarified, culture starts from three conditions based on the semiotics process:-

- a. Have the ability to think of the function of something
- b. Have the knowledge of how to use things
- c. Have an introduction to the function and name of something.

Through semiotics, sign can be described as type of languages in words, images or visuals, sounds, movements and objects. Visual language can be identified immediately and understood compared to verbal language, writing, audio and voices. Furthermore, visual language is more effective from voice language and has a strong symbolic interpretation compared to verbal communication (Faridah Ibrahim et.al 2012).

Physical attributes, languages, environment and costumes are the main factors that give sign and significance for character design and overall animation. The character's identity is the best method to represent the culture of the country. For example, *Kampung Boy* by Datuk Lat is one of the local animations which reflects the culture and lifestyle of Malaysians, specifically in rural areas (Amir & Md Sidin, 2014).

METHODOLOGY

Content analysis was used to analyze art and design student’s artwork from University Technology MARA (UiTM) in Sarawak. Undergraduates are the next generation to inherit the animation industry. They are still fresh from school with minimal exposure and only learn basic elements and principles of design. Accordingly, the students will develop their skills and decide which influence or reference suits their capability. Therefore, undergraduates are the perfect sampling in comparison to degree students who more matured and exposed.

The artwork must be finished, completed in color and approved by the lecturer as required by the subject. The subject Digital Illustration has been chosen because this subject has the tools to develop character design for animation. Sarawak was chosen for its unique culture and well-known districts consisting of more than 40 ethnics (Sarawak Tourism Federation, 2016).

Table 2 Sampling details

No.	Items	Details of Sampling
1.	University	University of Technology MARA, Malaysia
2.	Institute Category	Institusi Pengajian Tinggi Awam (IPTA)
2.	Faculty	Faculty of Art and Design
3.	Level	Diploma (undergraduate)
4.	Branch	Sarawak
5.	Course	Graphic and Media Digital
6.	Subject / Task	Digital Illustration (Character Design)

It is also noted that Sarawak has been chosen by many researchers for tourism studies because of their cultural strength. Sarawak’s attraction is the most visited in Malaysia by tourists from all over the world. Sarawak also known as ‘Borneo’ region famous with beautiful forest and wildlife park, where now become as one of the eldest forest in the world (Berita Harian 2015).

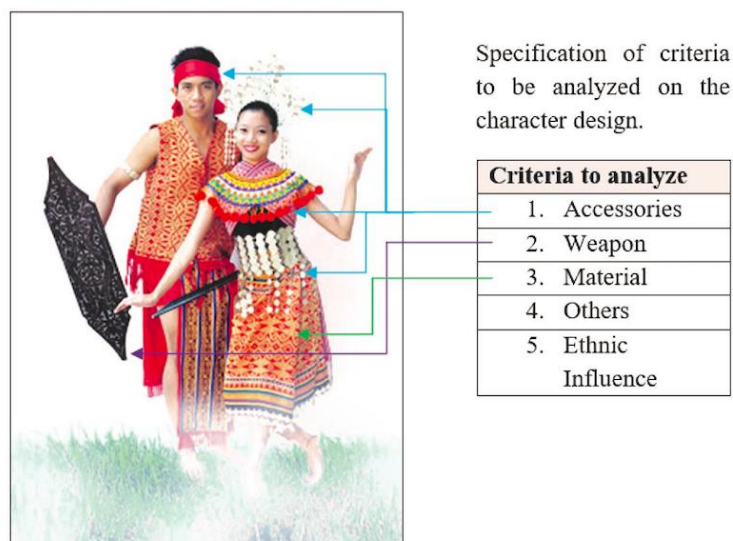


Figure 4 Sarawak Traditional Dance

Criteria Details to Analyze on character costume design according to figure 4:

1. Accessories (e.g. crown, bangle, silver coins)
2. Weapon (e.g. shield, sword)
3. Material (e.g. beads, *songket*)
4. Others (other than visual references)
5. Ethnic (the most similar with the 5 ethnics listed)

The analysis will focus on costume design with the details criteria mentions above, to be compared with the original traditional clothing of Sarawak ethnics, to see whether there is culture influence towards student's artwork. The researcher will seek the prove whether those elements of culture has strength in influencing or inspiring art and design students when producing animation character design or vice versa.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

According to Lamerichs (2014) costumes are inspired by the most popular character from fictional television series, movies and games which mostly participated by Japan, Western, Brazil and even Malaysian fans as a global hobby. All the costume player or 'cosplayer' will wear unique, unusual and creative costume which similar to the existing animation characters. Additionally, the studies of costumes in academic line is growing in numerous perspectives for the past twod decades, which contributes to the culture, fashions, and arts (Hansen 2004 & Monks 2010). Body of the cosplayer made by a history of visual codes that developed fashion and conventions as by Victorian or Roman costume characteristics was from what they worn practicality (Monks 2010).

Characteristic	Sarawak Traditional Costume				
Sample of Costume					
Ethnic	Orang Iban	Orang Ulu	Orang Bidayuh	Orang Melanau	Orang Melayu
Clothes Name	Baju burung	-	-	-	Baju melayu & Baju kurung
Material	Metal & beads	Velvet & goat leather	Satin	<i>Songket</i>	<i>songket</i>
Accessories	Hornbill, silver	Hornbill & Copper earring	Tree bark, silver coins & bear teeth neclace	Sengkulon & hair bun	Songkok & shawl
Weapon	Shield & sword	Shield & spear	-	-	-

Figure 5 Sarawak Traditional Costume Characteristics

Source: Unit Promosi Inovasi dan Media, Bahagian Teknologi Pendidikan Negeri Sarawak

Culture can be identified by the set of national characteristics, whereby the nation signifies the socio-historical context which culture rooted by the process of produced, transmitted and received (Guibernau 1996 & Tim Edensor 2002). Sarawak

as a largest state in Malaysia (Chng H. Ywih et.al 2009) has a strong cultural characteristic with more than 40 ethnic groups, languages, cultures and lifestyle which is predominantly populated by Malays, Melanau, Chinese, Iban and Bidayuh. Sarawak is not only famous for its beautiful flora and fauna in their forest, parks, caves and long houses, but also their costume design that is rich with ethnic motifs and accessories from metal and beads that represent status and wealth of the person who wears it (Sarawak Tourism Federation, 2016).

Crang (1998) on his book titled 'Cultural Geography' also clarified that the development of culture through costume design came from extensive process of living, daily activities in the jungle, the discovery of any stuff or objects that became a symbolic material to be applied in daily life. Thus, aligned with the Sarawak culture characteristics findings in terms of clothes, accessories and weapons.

As exposed by Teknologi Pendidikan Negeri Sarawak, the most outstanding outfits and cultures originate from the Iban, Ulu, Bidayuh, Melanau and Melayu ethnics. The Iban traditional costume for women is purposely for the queen of festivals called 'Pesta Menuai Sarawak'. The men wear Baju Burung or bird clothes. The Ulu velvet costume is made of beads with dragon motifs and this ethnic is famous for their culture of wearing heavy copper earrings to stretch the earlobes. The men usually wear clothes made from goat leather. The Bidayuh costume is made from satin for both women and men and have some decoration from wood. The Melanau costume is also made from satin and is mixed with the *songket* for both genders. The Melayu traditional costume is similar to the usual clothes worn by the Malays in Peninsular Malaysia called Baju Melayu Cekak Musang for men and Kurung Teluk Belanga for women together with *songket* (refer to The Sarawak Traditional Costume Characteristics figure 5 on the previous page).

Characteristic details on the character costume design according to figure 6:-

- Design 1: Wear hornbill fur on head; use shield as a weapon; long jacket for clothes.
- Design 2: Wear mask; shield and sword as weapons; *songket* motif as clothes material.
- Design 3: Wear hornbill fur and tattoo; shield, sword and spear as weapons; shoes.
- Design 4: Wear crown, bangle and anklet; beads as clothes material.
- Design 5: Wear headband and Bear Teeth Necklace; spear as a weapon; boots.
- Design 6: Wear *tanjak*; robotic hands; shoes.
- Design 7: Wear hornbill fur; spear as a weapon; boots.
- Design 8: Wear crown; *songket* material for clothes; long hair.
- Design 9: Wear shawl; sword as a weapon; *batik* motif for skirt; boots.
- Design 10: Wear headband and gloves; sword as a weapon; *batik* motif for clothes; boots.
- Design 11: Wear clothes with silver coins; shield and spear as weapons; boots.
- Design 12: Wear hornbill fur on head; shield and spear as weapons, *songket* material on clothes; boots

Criteria	Character Design					
Character Visual						
Characteristics	Design 1	Design 2	Design 3	Design 4	Design 5	Design 6
Accessories	Hornbill Fur	Mask	Hornbill Fur & Tattoo	Crown, Bangle & Anklet	Headband & Bear Teeth Necklace	<i>Taniak</i>
Weapon	Shield	Shield & Sword	Shield, Sword & Spear	-	Spear	Powerful Hand
Material	-	<i>Songket</i>	-	Beads	-	-
Others	Jacket (Modern)	-	Shoes	-	Boots	Robotic Hand
Ethnic Influence	Ulu	Iban	Ulu	Ulu	Ulu	Kadazan

Criteria	Character Design					
Character Visual						
Characteristic	Design 7	Design 8	Design 9	Design 10	Design 11	Design 12
Accessories	Hornbill Fur	Crown	Shawl	Headband & Gloves	Silver Coins	Hornbill Fur
Weapon	Spear	-	Sword	Sword	Shield & Spear	Shield & Spear
Material	-	<i>Songket</i>	<i>Batik</i>	<i>Batik</i>	-	<i>Songket</i>
Others	Boots	Too Long Hair	Boots	Boots	Boots	Boots
Ethnic Influence	Ulu	Melanau	Melanau	Melanau	Kadazan&Ulu	Ulu

Figure 6 Content Analysis of Student's Artwork

All 12 characters apply accessories like hornbill fur, bear teeth necklace, bangles, anklets and tattoos. Only characters 4 and 8 do not use weapons while the rest have shields, swords and spears. As for the design, characters 2, 8 and 12 use *songket* as material, characters 9 and 10 use *batik* while character 4 uses beads as material for clothes. Boots are used by characters 5, 7, 9, 10, 11 and 12 while character 3 applies shoes. Character 1 seems to apply something modern which is a jacket, character 6 applies robotic hands and character 8 has long hair, which might be designed as a weapon for the character (refer figure 6). Ethnics Iban, Ulu and Melanau from Sarawak has 11 similarity, while another two artworks were similar with ethnic Kadazan from Sabah (refer table 3).

Table 3 Summary of character design influenced by Sarawak culture

No	Ethnics	State	Total of Similarity
1.	Iban	Sarawak	1
2.	Ulu	Sarawak	7
3.	Bidayuh	Sarawak	-
4.	Melanau	Sarawak	3
5.	Melayu	Sarawak	-
6.	Others: Kadazan	Sabah	2

			
1. Ulu (Sarawak)	2. Iggg (Sarawak)	3. Ulu (Sarawak)	4. Ulu (Sarawak)
			
5. Ulu (Sarawak)	6. Kadazan (Sabah)	7. Ulu (Sarawak)	8. Melanau (Sarawak)
			
9. Melanau (Sarawak)	10. Melanau (Sarawak)	11. Kadazan (Sabah) & Ulu (Sarawak)	12. Ulu (Sarawak)

Figure 7: Student's Artwork

- a. Sarawak influence: Designs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12
- b. Sabah Influence: Designs 6 and 11

11 out of 12 student's artworks detected strong culture influence in the costume design where the Sarawak traditional characteristic are applied in the character design. The ethnics are Iban, Ulu and Melanau. These ethnic are spotted to have Sarawak's cultural influence and only two artworks have the Kadazan influence, a culture from Sabah. Besides costume, weapons and accessories are also noted in the Sarawak design. Weapons like the shield, spear and sword are used on the character's design while accessories made from hornbill fur, bear teeth necklace, bangles, anklets and tattoos on a man's body. *Songket* and *batik* motifs are also used for the designing of the clothes beside beads as a material to make the costume look luxurious and stunning (refer to figure 7 on the previous page).

Sarawak characteristics as a traditional culture of Malaysia, especially on costume design inspires on so many ways including the students in art learning process when producing design. All elements, motifs, tools, and materials found on Sarawak traditional costumes can be claimed as an evidence for future cultural heritage. It will be categorized in conversant and symbolic object creations to establish cultural, not only to identify by gender, ethnicity, class and region but also to suggest the epistemologically and ontologically where things are known belongs to the nations. Moreover, proved by the physical traits, in specific periods and locations, that emerging identity by interpersonal cultural elements with practices, depictions and spaces as an answer for any possible inquiries, references or research by the scholars (Claessen 1993; Dant 1999; Tim Edensor 2002).

CONCLUSION

Arts is an artist's expression of the society they come from. As a Sarawakian, Tan Wei Kheng visualizes his unique lifestyle and cultural elements through artwork (Mary Anne Vaz, 2007). This example is rational enough to justify the cultural magnetisms in creating artwork. A local artist gets their inspiration from the Sarawak culture in portraying their beautiful life on canvas. Same goes to the art and design students who studied in Sarawak. They are obviously influenced by all the unique cultural elements of Sarawak from various ethnics including their traditional clothing, equipment, craft and accessories.

Table 4 Characteristic summary

Category	Characteristic (Details)
Accessories	Hornbill Fur, bear teeth necklace, bangle, anklet, tattoo
Weapon	Shield, Sword and Spear
Material	<i>Songket</i> and <i>batik</i> motifs
Others	Jacket, boots, shoes, longest hair, robotic hand
Ethnic Influenced	Iban, Ulu, Melanau and Kadazan

Students managed to come out with a character costume design inspired by the locals, as per the task given by the lecturer. Referring to their findings, the students applied hornbill fur as the accessory, bear teeth necklace, bangles, anklets and tattoos. Shields, swords and spears were used as the weapon, *songket* and *batik* motifs as clothing materials or fabrics, while jacket, boots, shoes, longest hair and robotic hand were applied as others to enhance the character appearance. Apart from that, 11 character designs were inspired from Sarawak ethnics Iban, Ulu and

Melanau while 2 characters were inspired by the Kadazan ethnic, a Sabah cultural characteristic (refer to table 4).

Findings proved that culture matters in inspiring the students to produce an animation character design that carries the local identity. Even though many students of the younger generation are easily influenced by Japan and Western character designs (Khalid, 2010), this can change depending on how it is controlled by the institution or monitored by educators in developing the design process so that the local touch can be applied. This is an important note for the Malaysian animation industry in order to improve and achieve a better look so that our local animation can be portrayed well and is recognized by other countries as a Malaysian character.

BIODATA

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