



VALUE TRANSMISSION IN
TWO CULTURAL TRADITIONS:
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF AN ISLAMIC SCHOOL
AND A CHINESE SCHOOL IN KUALA LUMPUR

BY

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ABSTRACT

This thesis presents a comparative analysis of a private Islamic school and an independent Chinese school in Malaysia and examines the significance of tradition in the education process. It studies the transmission of traditional worldviews and values in the school setting at three levels, namely, the philosophy of education, curriculum and textbooks. It further explores whether the schools emphasize the contemporary thought of their traditions, and highlight the multi-cultural nature of Malaysian society as well as the importance of mutual respect and understanding between cultures. The thesis reveals that although both schools lay claim to tradition in their educational systems, they differ in the extent to which they rely on their traditions. While the Islamic school single-mindedly builds its education on the foundation of the Islamic faith, the Chinese school implements Confucian and Western thought on education as well as the national concern for economic development. The findings show that both schools rely on traditional values to nurture moral human beings and cultivate the love for learning. It is spirituality that distinguishes the two schools most. While the Islamic school adheres faithfully to the Islamic worldview, the Chinese school appears to have shifted from the traditional Heaven-consciousness of Confucianism to the modern, atheist outlook. With regard to Malaysian society, it is found that the Chinese school has attempted to highlight the country's multiculturalism and promote the idea of mutual respect and understanding among cultures, whereas the Islamic school does not appear to have cultivated such consciousness in their students. The thesis recommends that the two schools devise programs which will enable their students to have cross-cultural experiences. The thesis also recommends that the Islamic school improve its History textbooks so as to equip its students with a comprehensive understanding of Islamic History and Malaysian society.

ملخص البحث

تجري هذه الدراسة مقارنة بين مدرستين ماليزيتين إحداهما إسلامية خاصة و الأخرى صينية مستقلة. تعالج الدراسة أهمية التقاليد في العملية التعليمية من خلال ثلاثة محاور تعليمية هي: فلسفة التعليم، المناهج المدرسية، والكتب الدراسية. وبالإضافة إلى ذلك تحاول الدراسة الاستكشاف ما إذا كانت المدرستان تقومان بتضمين الفكر المعاصر لتقاليدهما الخاصة مع الأخذ في الاعتبار طبيعة المجتمع الماليزي المتعدد الثقافات ووجود التفاهم والاحترام المتبادل. تكشف الدراسة أنه على الرغم من إدعاء المدرستين بتضمين التقاليد في العملية التربوية إلا أنهما تختلفان في درجة الاعتماد عليها. فبينما نجد أن المدرسة الإسلامية تبني نظام تعليمها على أساس العقيدة الإسلامية، نجد - في المقابل - المدرسة الصينية تبني نظامها التعليمي على أسس الفكر الكونفوشيوسي والغربي، كما تضع اهتماما أكبر لتنمية الاقتصاد القومي. تكشف الدراسة أن المدرستين تركزان على القيم التقليدية في تنشئة البشر مما ينتج عنه حب التعلم. لكن الروحانيات هي التي تميز بين المدرستين. كشفت الدراسة أنه بينما تلتزم المدرسة الإسلامية برؤية الإسلام للوجود، تتبنى المدرسة الصينية وجهة النظر الإلحادية المعاصرة. و فيما يخص المجتمع الماليزي توصلت الدراسة إلى أن المدرسة الصينية حاولت التركيز على تعدد الثقافية في ماليزيا كما اهتمت بقضية التفاهم و الاحترام المتبادل بين الثقافات. وفي المقابل ترى الباحثة أن المدرسة الإسلامية لم تزرع مثل هذا الوعي لدى طلابها. توصي الدراسة المدرستين بوضع البرامج التي من شأنها تمكين الطلاب من اكتساب خبرات بين الثقافات المختلفة. كذلك توصي الدراسة بأن تحسن المدرسة الإسلامية كتبها الدراسية في علم التاريخ حتى تزود الطلاب بفهم شامل لتاريخ الإسلام وللمجتمع الماليزي.

APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation of the degree of Master of Arts (Islamic and Other Civilizations).

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Abdullah al-Ahsan
Supervisor

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Mahmood Zuhdi Ab. Majid
Dean, ISTAC

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

INTRODUCTION

Samuel P. Huntington, in his famous book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, highlighted the importance of civilizations and advocated multiculturalism. “The crucial distinctions among human groups concern their values, beliefs, institutions, and social structures, not their physical size, head shapes, and skin colors.”¹ Civilization or culture is the crucial marker of identity to individuals. It is so important that he warned in the post-Cold War world “the most pervasive, important, and dangerous conflicts will not be between social classes, rich and poor, or other economically defined groups, but between peoples belonging to different cultural entities.”² Obviously today’s world is multi-civilizational. He urged, “In a multi-civilizational world, the constructive course is to renounce universalism, accept diversity, and seek commonalities.”³ Further, he said, “The security of the world requires acceptance of global multiculturalism.”⁴ As a conclusion, for the future of humanity, he called for mutual understanding and cooperation between civilizations. “The futures of both peace and Civilization depend upon understanding and cooperation among the political, spiritual, and intellectual leaders of the world’s major civilizations.”⁵

¹ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations And The Remaking of World Order*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 42.

² Ibid., 28.

³ Ibid., 318.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 321.

Mutual understanding and cooperation, in a genuine sense, could not be achieved except with the recognition of human dignity and equality. Yet, civilizations are not equals. For two hundred years or so, Western global dominance has been haunting the world. Nevertheless, the West cannot defy the rule that civilizations rise and fall. It has been commonly acknowledged that the West is declining in power while other civilizations are coming up. Hard power and soft power go hand in hand. Huntington affirms, “These shifts in power among civilizations are leading and will lead to the revival and increased cultural assertiveness of non-Western societies and to their increasing rejection of Western culture.”⁶ “Indigenization has been the order of the day throughout the non-Western world in the 1980s and 1990s.”⁷

In the globalized world of the 21st century, Western dominance takes a more sophisticated form. With satellite TV and the Internet, the youth of today in the non-Western world are more susceptible than ever before to the onslaught of Western ideas, attitudes, practices and lifestyle. It is a great challenge for parents, of any cultures, to impart their children with the same traditional values and outlook on life which had guided them in their own youth.

Among the peoples who have become more assertive of their cultural identities are Muslims and Chinese. Disillusioned by alien ideologies and thoughts, Muslims, once again, resort to their faith for guidance in their different spheres of life. Encouraged by the economic achievements of China and other East Asian societies like Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, which are either predominantly Chinese or heavily influenced by Confucianism, Chinese become more confident of their own culture. Indeed both Muslims and Chinese stress the superiority of their cultures to Western culture.

⁶ Ibid., 83.

⁷ Ibid., 94.

Interestingly, the Islamic and Chinese civilizations meet in Malaysia. These two great civilizations are represented by the country's majority ethnic group, the Malays, and its largest ethnic minority, the Chinese. Noteworthy is that the two civilizations are more balanced in power in Malaysia than they are in China: Malay-Muslims are politically dominant while Malaysian Chinese are economically stronger. Culturally confident and economically capable, Chinese display exceptional cultural resilience in Malaysia despite their political allegiance to the adopted country. This is in stark contrast to neighboring Southeast Asian countries like Thailand, Indonesia where the immigrant Chinese have been much more assimilated into the indigenous culture. Malaysian Chinese have been vocal in asserting their cultural identity and cultural rights in a pluralistic country. Perhaps their cultural resilience could best be seen in the cause of Chinese education. Uniquely, they have been able to develop a complete system of Chinese-language education from primary to tertiary levels despite state marginalization. The Chinese education system in Malaysia is the most comprehensive of its kind in Southeast Asia.⁸

Since Independence in 1957, the Malaysian government has been keen in strengthening the social fabric. The current Prime Minister, Najib bin Abdul Razak, has devised the One Malaysia slogan to promote national unity. Over the years, education has been the most important instrument for forging ethnic integration.⁹ The national education system seeks to integrate children and youth of diverse races through a common curriculum with Malay, the official language, as the common medium of instruction – despite the government's accommodation of minority

⁸ Tan Liok Ee, "Chinese Schools in Malaysia: A Case of Cultural Resilience" in *The Chinese in Malaysia*, edited by Lee Ham Hing and Tan Chee-Beng (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 228.

⁹ Rosnani Hashim, "Education in Fostering a United and Caring Citizenship in Malaysia" in *Critical Perspectives on Values Education in Asia* (Singapore: Prentice Hall, 2007), 84.

interests by supporting Chinese and Tamil vernacular primary schools. Yet, Malay Muslims and Malaysian Chinese who are assertive of their cultural identities are dissatisfied with the national education. Respectively they see Islamic education and Chinese education – not national education – as an important vehicle for transmitting the values, norms, practices of their traditions to their young. Accordingly the two groups have established their own private schools so that they are in a better position to educate their youth based on their traditions.

Challenges to tradition are many in contemporary times. They abound especially at the juncture of profound social change. Since independence Malaysia has achieved impressive socio-economic progress. With Vision 2020, it is thrusting towards the goal of becoming a developed nation. At present, it is seen as at a historical crossroads. It will be able to make the great leap forward if it can address the challenges it is facing. The prospect of Malaysia is described as follows:

For Malaysia to move beyond the crossroads, it needs to address several major challenges so that it can turn into a developed, democratic, socially just, ethnically united, accountable and globally competitive nation. It cannot afford to remain saddled with the problems of mediocrity, corruption, cronyism, ethno-religious divisiveness, suppression of dissent and of economic waste and inefficiency that would ultimately affect economic growth and stability.¹⁰

Malaysians are awaiting their country's crucial transition to join the rank of developed nations. Expectations are high. It would be a critical transition, involving "significant and even fundamental changes and transformation in the social structure and relations, politics, economy, culture and mindset of the society."¹¹ Tradition and modernity always wrestle with each other. This time they meet in Malaysia.

¹⁰ Abdul Rahman Embong & Tham Siew Yean, "The Question of Crossroads and Critical Transition" in *Malaysia at A Crossroads – Can We Make the Transition?*, edited by Abdul Rahman Embong & Tham Siew Yean (Bangi, Selangor: UKM Press, 2011), 17.

¹¹ Ibid.

THESIS OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

In Malaysia, various communities seem to have addressed the challenges of modernity differently. A central issue is the relationship between continuity and change. How far does tradition – the heritage left by the forefathers of a community – buttress the younger generation in their encounter with the challenges of the contemporary world? As education is considered “the most important means of transmitting the tradition from one generation to another”¹², this thesis studies the education provided by the Muslim and the Chinese communities in Malaysia to their youths. In particular, it examines the transmission of culture, especially that of worldviews and values, in the education process.

A comparative study of a private Islamic school and an independent Chinese school is conducted in this thesis. The Islamic schools and Chinese schools in the private sector are seen to be able to represent the Muslim and Chinese communities in the country as these schools are at a minimum degree of supervision by the government, and thus have more room in making decisions about the kind of education they provide to their students. Both types of schools appeal to tradition in their discourses. This study is to focus on secondary education, the recipients of which are undergoing adolescence, i.e. the transitional period from childhood to adulthood. As it is the most formative period of human development, what the students learn in this stage is likely to impact on their lives the most.

The objectives of the study include:

1. To investigate and compare the philosophies of education of the two schools;
2. To examine and compare the curricula of the two schools;

¹² Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islam and the Plight of Modern Man*, (Kuala Lumpur: Foundation for Traditional Studies, 1987), 19.

3. To investigate and compare the worldviews and values to be imparted to the students in the two schools;
4. To examine if the contemporary thought of the two traditions is reflected in the education of the two schools;
5. To examine if the pluralistic nature of the Malaysian society is given consideration in the education of the two schools.

Information required for the study is collected in the following ways:

1. Semi-structured interviews with the two school principals and any other concerned staff members of the two schools;
2. Collection of relevant information from the two school offices and from their web-pages;
3. Collection of relevant textbooks from the two schools for conducting textbook analyses;
4. Collection of relevant information from websites related to the subject of the study;
5. Library research on the contemporary thought of the two traditions and on the Malaysian society.

The analysis and comparison of the two schools are structured in two dimensions: internal and external. For the internal dimension, the study is directed at three levels: first, philosophy of education; second, school curriculum; third, textbooks of those subjects in the curriculum which are directly related to the school's tradition. At the last level, the subjects concerned are the languages and literature which are rooted in the traditions of the two schools. For the Islamic school, it is Arabic; for the Chinese school, it is Chinese. In the case of the Islamic school, there is another concerned subject – Islamic Studies. Besides, History is considered relevant

for two reasons. First, important lessons could be learnt from history in terms of values. Second, it shows which components of human history is considered important and thus selected to be included in the curriculum, and then, how this 'selected' past is portrayed and presented to the younger generation. At the end, it would reveal if the young is equipped with adequate knowledge of history. It is presumed that sound historical knowledge is an essential factor in building up the capacity for formulating effective responses to social realities. In summary, the textbooks examined by this thesis include those of Arabic Language (Islamic school), Islamic Studies (Islamic school), Chinese Language (Chinese school) and History (both schools). The first three subjects are compulsory for all students of the respective schools while History is obligatory for junior secondary students, i.e. Forms 1-3.

As to the external dimension of analysis and comparison, two axes are involved: vertical and horizontal. The vertical axis represents the time factor. As traditions usually undergo a process of cultural renewal in order to sustain themselves in changing times, it is proposed to examine if the latest thought of the two traditions' scholars is reflected in the education of the two schools. The findings would indicate if the schools are sensitive to the needs of the time as identified by the scholars of their traditions. Second, the horizontal axis represents the factor of the local context. It is assumed that both schools are to prepare students to be good citizens of Malaysia – even though some students of the Islamic school are not Malaysian nationals they may still stay in the country for the years to come and thus interact with members of society. In view of the nation's cultural plurality, it is suggested to examine if this aspect of the Malaysian society is taken into consideration in the education of the two schools. This would shed light on the capacity of the students for peaceful co-existence with others and for national integration.

In the two schools under study, their academic curricular are not based on the Malaysian national examination syllabus. In the Islamic school, there are two streams of students, one preparing for the Malaysian Certificate of Education (SPM), and the other for the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE). This thesis examines the latter stream. For the Chinese school, it belongs to a consolidated system of schools led by Chinese educators. All the students of the 60 schools in this network have to sit for a unified examination, which is recognized by local private institutes of higher learning as well as overseas universities despite its lack of endorsement by the Malaysian government.

There is a basic assumption in this thesis. The Confucian tradition is regarded as representative of Chinese culture, and so, the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably in the thesis. Confucianism had been the state orthodoxy in China for about 2,000 years till the beginning of the 20th century. Confucian ideas and ideals were the basics of the way of life for Chinese. Today, though this role may have lessened, “its doctrinal and idealistic values remain inherent in Chinese psychology...”¹³

It is expected that the findings of the study will shed light on how Muslims and Chinese in Malaysia, on the basis of their traditions, prepare their youth for the changing future; in particular, which elements of their traditions they see as the essentials to pass on. This will help to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the two schools, and by extension, of the respective systems of education each represents. It is hoped this study would contribute to mutual understanding and cooperation between civilizations which has lately been seen to be essential for the peace and future of the world.

¹³ Xinzhong Yao, “Confucianism And Its Modern Values: Confucian Moral, Educational and Spiritual Heritages Revisited”, *Journal of Beliefs & Values*, vol.20, no.1 (1999): 31.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Discussions on Islamic education and Chinese education in Malaysia in separate discourses have been plentiful. However the perspectives in the two discourses are very different. Traditional Islamic education in Malaysia is similar to its counterparts in other parts of the Muslim world. It has been saddled with grave problems. There have been extensive discussions, addressing the issue at both philosophical and practical levels. Though, for decades, calls and efforts have been made to solve the problems, due to the complexity of the issue, the current state of affairs is still far from satisfactory.

Chinese education in Malaysia has attracted academic attention from sociologists, anthropologists rather than educationalists. The subject is often treated as an ethnic issue, or an aspect of overall majority-minority relations. Unlike the case of Islam education, discussion is seldom focused on the education enterprise itself – its philosophy, elements, practices, and so on.

Comparative studies on education in Malaysia are not lacking. The comparison is often between Islamic education and national education. It seems comparison of Islamic education and Chinese education is too strange an idea to be ventured. It is very likely there has not been any previous study in the same line as the one suggested by this thesis.

A brief account of the studies on Islamic education and Chinese education, mainly in Malaysia, is given below. Emphasis is given to more recent studies.

Islamic education has long been a subject of concern for Muslim scholars. Much has been written about it. The dichotomy of education in Muslim societies is seen to be eroding the Islamic values and obstructing social cohesion, thus delaying genuine development, progress and modernization of the Muslim world. The First

World Conference on Muslim Education held in 1977 in Mecca represented the first organized effort of the Muslim *ummah* to diagnose and to try to treat the problem. The principles and methodology of Islamic education in the contemporary context were discussed. The Malaysian scholar, Syed Muhammad Al-Naquib Al-Attas, was one of those scholars who presented papers at the conference. He expounds his view on the concept of education in Islam. His comprehensive ideas on the subject have been widely acknowledged. Subsequent to the conference, Husain and Ashraf (1979) pinpoint the essentials of the problems to be solved and highlight the approaches to solutions. The conference generated several follow-up conferences and inspired a number of initiatives, organizations and specialized professional journals dealing exclusively with the problem of Islamic education.¹⁴ Attempts have been going on to carry forward the educational remedy for the *ummah*. Whatever needs to be done further, there has been a consensus that Islamic education should be reformed to integrate faith with knowledge and skills needed in the contemporary world.

Discussions on the contemporary practices of Islamic education seem to be much less than theoretical deliberations. Rather uniquely, Hensell-Thomas (2002) expounds lengthily on the practice of Islamic education in view of the needs of contemporary societies.

Regarding the discourse on Islamic education in Malaysia, as far as English papers are concerned, Hassan (1989) expounds on the values to be taught to Muslim students and relates the Malaysian government policy on values education in public schools. Hashim and Langgulung (2008) diagnose the problems in the Islamic religious schools and give suggestions about how to improve Islamic education. Abdul Hamid (2010) gives an updated account of Islamic education in Malaysia. As for

¹⁴ Bradley J. Cook, "Islamic Versus Western Conceptions of Education: Reflections on Egypt", *International Review of Education*, vol.45, no.3/4 (1999): 342.

comparative studies, Ali (1987) examines the modern secular education system and the traditional Islamic education system, highlighting the gap between the Islamic educational ideals and the reality of the Malaysian educational scene. In the same vein, Hashim (1996) conducts a comparative study of the two systems and suggests a synthesis of them to become an integrated system.

As mentioned earlier, Chinese education in Malaysia is often discussed with respect to its socio-cultural context. In this light, Tan Liok Ee (2000) explains the resilience of Chinese schools in Malaysia. Tan and Santhiram (2010) investigate the complexities of the education of the Chinese in the context of majority-minority relations. Perhaps it is the most comprehensive study of its kind so far.

Independent Chinese Secondary Schools are very distinct in Malaysia. Yet, they have not attracted much attention from academics. Off from the mainstream scholarly interest, Tan, Ho and Tan (2005) give an overall picture of Independent Chinese Secondary Schools, including their history, evolution, institutions and prospect.

Similarly, it is rare to find researches on the education enterprise itself of Chinese education. Uniquely, See (2009) examines the use of folk literature in Chinese language textbooks used by Chinese-medium primary schools for the purpose of values transmission.

THESIS OUTLINE

This thesis is organized into six chapters. Chapter 1 discusses the background of the subject matter of the thesis, outlines the conduct and purpose of the thesis, and summarizes the literature review. Chapter 2 gives a brief historical account of Islam and Islamic education in Malaysia till recent years. Chapter 3 gives the same account

in respect of Chinese migration and Chinese education in Malaysia. Chapter 4 describes and analyses the findings about the Islamic school under study, including its philosophy of education, school curriculum, and textbook analysis. Chapter 5 does the same in respect of the Chinese school under study. Based on the analyses of the findings, Chapter 6 draws a comparison between the two schools at different levels. It subsequently concludes about the whole study.

CHAPTER 2

ISLAM AND ISLAMIC EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA

A GLANCE OF ISLAM IN MALAYSIA

Islam has a history of over 1,000 years in Malaysia. The Malay Archipelago was on the eastern side of the Spice Route which spanned East Africa, Arabia, India and China. Ports in the Archipelago thrived in trade with Arab and Persian traders. The Muslim traders brought along their religion as well. Situated on the west coast of the northern Malay Peninsula, Kedah might be the first among the Malay states to embrace Islam. It is suggested that Islam had arrived in Kedah in the 9th century and some of its local population had already become Muslims.¹ According to *Al-Tarikh Salasilah*, the first King of Kedah embraced Islam in 1136 and then took the title Sultan Muzaffar Shah.² The earliest physical evidence of Islam in the Malay Peninsula is the Terengganu Stone, dated 1303, which shows that Terengganu was ruled by a Muslim king in the 14th century.³ Later on, the Melaka Sultanate (1403-1511), the first powerful Muslim empire in the region, was instrumental in propagating Islam among its subjects as well as in the Malay Archipelago. Melaka became a center of Islamic learning. It “came to be regarded as the fount of Malay-Muslim identity and development which characterized the Malay Archipelago from the 14th to 19th

¹ Ismail Haji Salleh, “A History of The Arrival And The Development of Islam in Kedah” (translated by Haji Hashim bin Samin) <http://www.mykedah2.com/e_10heritage/e102_1_p2.htm#sub9> (accessed 2 February 2013).

² Ismail Haji Salleh, “A History of The Arrival And The Development of Islam in Kedah” (translated by Haji Hashim bin Samin) <http://www.mykedah2.com/e_10heritage/e102_1_p3.htm#sub13> (accessed 2 February 2013).

³ M. Kamal Hassan and Ghazali bin Basri (volume editors), “Religions and Beliefs” in *The Encyclopedia of Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Editions Didier Millet, 2005), 13.

centuries.”⁴ As Malays converted to Islam, their social institutions and cultural practices were Islamized. The *Shariah* became the basis of social order⁵ whereas a profound cultural change took place particularly in Malay letters, art, architecture, dress and marriage customs.⁶

While European imperialism started to encroach upon the Malay Peninsula as early as the 16th century, it was the British which brought serious challenges to the Malay-Muslims on various fronts in the 19th century. On the one hand, the British colonial administration extended further and further into the Malay Peninsula. On the other hand, their interference with local affairs penetrated deeper and deeper into the Malay society. Perhaps more powerful than military might and political domination was the intellectual challenge of modernity and secularism, which, in a sense, still lingers on into the present. As Islam was relegated to a very limited role in the private life, the identity of Malay-Muslims was felt to be under threat.

In addition, there was another significant factor in the transformation of the Malay society triggered by British colonialism. With the influx of Chinese and Indian immigrants under British colonial rule, the Malay society underwent unprecedented, fundamental changes. The most obvious was the shift from an almost homogeneous population (Malays and aborigines) to a heterogeneous one with Malays, Chinese and Indians being the major ethnic groups (excluding the European colonial masters) residing in the Malay Peninsula. This racial multiplicity brought along religious and cultural diversities. Malay Muslims in the modern age started to live alongside with communities of other faiths.

⁴ Hood Salleh (volume editor), “Peoples and Traditions” in *The Encyclopedia of Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Editions Didier Millet, 2006), 10.

⁵ Azmi Aziz and A.B. Shamsul, “The Religious, The Plural, The Secular and The Modern: A Brief Critical Survey on Islam in Malaysia”, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, vol.5, no.3 (2004): 344.

⁶ M. Kamal Hassan and Ghazali bin Basri (volume editors), 12.