

Sports as an Agent of Integration in Malaysia Society

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Introduction

Malaysia is a multicultural country consisting of many different races. The three major races are the Malays, Chinese and Indians. Each of these races practices different religion, custom, rituals, language and belief system. Their choices of sporting activity by these different races were much influenced by what was practiced by their forefathers. During the colonial occupation and even immediately after Malaysia gained its independence in 1957, there was segregation of the 3 main races with each race dominating only certain areas of Malaysia; the Chinese congregated around the town areas specifically controlling the tin-mines industry, the Malays were seen mostly in the paddy plantation industry while the Indians dominating the rubber plantation industry. This paper will firstly outline some history of Malaysians sport and highlight how the choices of the sporting activities were much influenced by the belief system of the different races in Malaysia.

The Portuguese, the Dutch, the Japanese and the British colonized Malaysia before it eventually gained its independence from the British in 1957. The British colonization had the greatest impact on Malaysia especially in terms of the total strata of the country. During its occupation, the British brought in with them the Chinese into the country to man the mining industry and Indians into the country. These new residents in the country brought along with them their luggage, customs, belief system, religion and rituals and even their preferences for different sporting activities.

To highlight the history of Malaysian sports, I would like to divide my discussion into 3 different eras, namely, before colonization, during colonization and after independence.

Before Colonization

Before the colonial occupation in Malaya, the Malay's sports culture was mainly influence by animism, which is a belief that a vital force existed in both human and animate objects. Some examples of the influence of animism in sporting activities during the era are "*silat*"; a form of self defense which involves meditation and spiritual powers, "*kite-flying*"; it was believed that originally kites were flown as a magical rite in association with the harvesting of the rice fields, "*top-spinning*"; which was practiced by the aborigines who believed that lightning is the flashing of top cords in heaven and thunder is the murmuring of the tops as they spin, "*cock-fighting*"; involved the shaman specialist who were seen to recite and blow incantation to the birds for blessing and 'charmed water' sprinkled over them. Such practices were closely related to animistic tradition (Clifford cited Gullick, 1991). Among the Indians however, the control of the Sri Vijay an Empire in the Malaya Archipelago led to the influence of Hinduism in sports. Sporting activities were performed mainly as a display of skill for public entertainment purposes only especially on special occasions such as wedding ceremonies. In short, before the colonial occupation, the sporting activities were much influenced by Animism and Hinduism.

During Colonization

During the British occupation in Malaya, the Chinese were brought in by the British to work in tin mines and the Indians to work in rubber plantation. They each brought with them their culture and rituals, indirectly influencing the locals. However, the establishment of the colonial education by the British has the most pervasive influence on the development of sports and sports culture in Malaya and thus on the contemporary elite sports (Gullick, 1991). Colonial education also altered certain traditional values and also influenced the mindset of the younger generation who practiced western values. (Wagner, 1989). The introduction to colonial sports such as soccer, cricket, and rugby spread like a wild fire among the local community. Under the colonial rule, secular education was created that led to certain changes in the culture of the Malay society (Winstedt, 1988:178). The colonial government's approach to the education was elitist and it led to the creation of a new elite group in the Malay society whose work was associated with the colonial bureaucracy. Individuals became western orientated in "taste and manners", conversant with the western administrative – political values and institutions. These groups provided political leadership and their existence changed the social structure of the Malays from a traditional society to one based on achievements. And it was the establishment of the colonial education that had the most pervasive influence on the development of sports and sports culture in the Malaya and thus on contemporary sport (Gullick, 1991). The Chinese and Indians who came with the different beliefs and practices did not assimilate much into the Malay society. Instead they were segregated into their own community with the Chinese living within the tin mining community and the Indians with their rubber plantation community. The mining areas were mainly in town centers while the rubber plantations were in the rural areas whereas the Malays remain in the traditional village. The Chinese were involved in basketball, the Indians in soccer and the Malays in "sepakraga". (A game where players stood in a circle kicking and controlling the rotan ball – ball made from a kind of plant found in Malaysian jungles – using their skill so that it would not touch the ground (Hofer, 1990)).

After Independence

Malaysia achieved its independence from the British in 1957. The segregation of the different races during the colonization period, resulted in each race practicing its own sporting activity lacking in integration of any of these races. Sports in Malaysia after independence, was seen as a means directly to develop the spirit of nationalism and national integration among the multi-racial group. In sports, nationalism formed the natural framework into which people continued to group themselves and it provided consolidation (Bedecki, 1980) in the Malaysia multi racial society. As such, the Malaysia government, through the National Sports Policy implemented various projects which have developed the spirit of nationalism among existing racial groups. Nationalism and sports appeared to work in the same direction with one promoting the other. For example, sports became more closely linked to national symbols such as the national anthem, national flag and national colors in all sporting events. At the same time the concept of national sports in reference to indigenous sports were given more emphasis in the effort to establish a national identity. Sports programs and cultural activities were planned to create deeply rooted national feeling of unity among multi racial groups that seem to be an extension of feeling of togetherness and nationality on a large scale (Abu Bakar, 1986). In most competitive sports, when Malaysians represented their nation, they were considered to be contributing to nationalism. In many cases they were sponsored by the government to represent the country and they compete for national

pride. Even with all these efforts, it seemed that they were not enough to integrate the different races which had with them different practices and believes, feeling of nationalism associated with their own races and the like. When they compete they compete for the pride of their own race instead of competing for one nation. Over the period of time this led to racial imbalance that eventually led to the eruption of the May 13th racial riot incident in 1969. As a result of the racial friction, the government felt that the different races needed to integrate so that a more harmonious society can be created. Amongst the things in the agenda was the role that could be played by the National Sports Council of Malaysia to integrate the different races to compete in a more common sport enjoyed by all races. Through the National Sports Policy the government was able to assimilate the different races making them aware of the pluralism of its society. A common sports culture may reflect the Malaysian identify should be implemented and accepted by the different races in line with the values and norms of this plural society. As such this study aims to report on the insight if the respondents regarding the issue of racial integration through sports, representative of the three main races of this plural society.

Methods

The objectives of the research are to investigate the elements of sport that led to social integration in Malaysian society and to report on the steps taken to achieve social integration through sports.

In the above context, the study aims to explore Malaysian athletes' cultural behavior and to see if the implementation of the National Sports Policy is effective in contributing towards the integration of the different races in Malaysia. The researchers employed an ethnographic approach to data collection for the study. Different methods of data collection were employed for the different data collected. The methods employed include:

1. Interviews
2. Observation
3. Document Analysis
4. Triangulation Technique

Ethnographic approach was selected in order to assist the development of the case study and to provide an understanding of the athletes' cultural behaviors while taking into account of the athletes' cultural diversity. In this approach, 30 athletes' were selected as sample, 10 from each of the 3 main races in Malaysia. The case study on the 30 selected was carried out focusing on sports beliefs and practices towards social integration.

Interviews were carried out on these athletes focusing mainly on how sports are able to inject the following elements within them.

- a) Sense of nationalism
- b) Racial cooperativeness
- c) Team spirit
- d) Racial unity
- e) Racial tolerance
- f) Sacrifice

Data on the athletes' own experiences, understanding about their sport culture and their belief systems were collected through this method.

Observation was also employed to identify the norms and values practiced by the respondents with regard to the above elements.

Document analysis was also employed to further strengthen claims made through the other methods of data collection. In this method, researchers looked through records, video, diaries, journals kept by the athletes throughout the duration of the study.

Triangulation techniques were employed to triangulate all the data collected from the above data collection techniques for validity and reliability of the research.

The outcome of this study provides several recommendations that highlight how sport is able to integrate people of different races in nation-building.

Results

The findings of the study showed some very interesting results which further strengthen the claims that sports can be an agent that can integrate people of different races to compete with one goal in mind, which is to strive for the nation rather than for one's glory and victory.

Based on the different elements looked into in the study that contribute towards racial integration, the data showed that team building and cooperativeness are ranked the highest that led to social integration amongst the athletes. This is closely followed by elements of respect and selflessness (unselfish attitude). Ranked third in the ranking of the elements is sense of tolerance regardless the races among the athletes. This is followed by, "having a common goal". That is. Winning the race leads to a collective decisions among the athletes. To have a common language amongst the athletes is not one of the main requirements in striving for the common goal of winning.

Discussions/ Conclusions

Being a multi-racial, multilingual society like Malaysia, the government needs to be proactive in integrating the different races to guarantee racial harmony. Having a common goal of winning for the nation has helped the government to bring together at least 3 different races of different belief system, language, rituals, religion, and custom to work as a team. The athletes believe that team building and cooperativeness among themselves are very important in ensuring the success of the team. Believing that victory is the result of team work, they put aside elements of selfishness. When athletes have a common goal, they forego their differences and make various sacrifices in order to achieve the goal, having room for flexibility for their common beliefs, value systems. Athletes also reported that they have to put aside their fanatical beliefs to achieve the goal. The results also show that language, due to geographical location and differences in mother tongue are not barriers that can stop them from achieving the common goal of winning. They are still able to play together under one-system or rule. This is done by their non-verbal cues and inner values and understanding of friendship through body language and gestures. Based on this results obtained in this study, it shows that the elements incorporated and practiced by the National Sports Council of Malaysia among the athletes had been fully utilized and practiced by fellow Malaysian athletes and they have been fruitful in producing athletes who believe in the common goal of winning for the nation rather than winning for individual glory.

The study concluded that through sports, athletes come together and work as a team regardless of their different races, belief system and language. In this context, sports act as a vehicle for social integration.

Recommendations

Sports should be given priority, given bigger budget, be well-planned, and there should be a committee representative of all races running the show. Sports should not be specific to a particular race only. So far, the Malaysian government has been able to integrate athletes of different races in the different field of sports. For example in the game of badminton, it is no longer dominated by a particular race, so is soccer. The government is now looking into ways of integrating athletes of different races into games such a basketball that was formerly dominated by the Chinese, and the game of "sepak takraw" which was dominated by the Malays.

The elements of sports should be emphasized both in theory and practice in the school curriculum so that the elements of racial tolerance, racial unity, cooperativeness, respect and others could be integrated within the curriculum for continuous racial harmony in the country.

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