

Journey for Higher Education: Experience in Scholarship and Culture in Malaysia

By

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to give a narrative of experiences in getting a higher degree from one of the Malaysian public universities, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). International students have many experiences to share once they leave their home countries. Each and every student hardly shares the same experience, everybody has his tale and tells in the journey for higher degree, especially a doctorate degree. The research methodology adopted in this work was a qualitative one. Primary data was drawn from personal/participants' observations, seasonal calendar of events, visitations to areas of interest in cities, towns and villages for rapid participatory appraisals. Secondary data was sourced from published and unpublished literature, documentary videos on Malaysia and the internet. Findings suggest that any educational pursuit is bound to be having lots of experiences that will mold the scholar/student to gather more experiences in life that will enable him to have a very broad understanding to any issue that come his way. The paper concludes by encouraging students that travel out of their countries to persevere and dedicate themselves to the ideals they believe in and recommends that for any student to succeed in whatever level of education he or she is pursuing, good human relations, patience and dedication to your field of study matters a lot.

Keywords: *Journey, education, experiences, culture, language*

Introduction

From the cultural orientation and upbringing that I received from my parents, we were told, and always remembered that the seeking and acquiring of knowledge is an enterprise that one has to engage from the cradle to the grave. The journey of any child in the education industry has many phases, stages and experiences that differ over space and time (Maigida, 2017). In fact any endeavour that is lifelong will be coloured with all shades of experiences, encounters and expectations from childhood, adolescence to adulthood. In life, change is one certainty that you have to contain with. No matter your state of being, changes keep on happening to your life and personality, society and all those that you relate with them at lower, peer and higher social levels.

In most African societies it is culturally accepted to encourage young ones to start thinking from tender age on ways and means of financing all levels of education, which is generally seen as a journey with a bitter beginning and a honey-sweet ending, in that education as always in all cultures has been a springboard to success (Clark, 1991). Once the recipient becomes educated, he is already liberated from the clutches of ignorance and that makes him a refined individual that can fit into any society that he finds himself. With this understanding in mind our parents toiled very hard with their meagre income to invest in us over two decades and a half (Littrel and Hobbs, 1989).

The primary school that I attended, established and founded in the sixties by my grandfather of blessed memory was my first formal school (Ibrahim and Ibrahim, 2014), upon completion I proceeded to a secondary school in my hometown and thereafter proceeded to High school in Bauchi our then state capital for a prelude certification before joining the Bayero University Kano, Nigeria in the mid-80s for a bachelor degree. Upon completing university first degree, I started teaching in a tertiary institution, that has a mandate of training middle cadre manpower of federal public service, lasting for slightly above two decades and later on, left the small educational training outfit to a bigger one called the University of Maiduguri, in the North East corner of Nigeria, West Africa (Mohammed, 2008). A university, as the saying goes, gives universal knowledge that fits well in any knock and cranny of the world and as such one needs a good grounding in the field he is expected to handle, as an academic staff in any university. This urge for trying to get the ideal knowledge to make me a bit comfortable as a teacher in the university, makes me to venture for further studies in the region most people refer to as South East Asia, precisely in a small and modest country in all respect, with a Malaysian slogan: as “truly Asia”.

Quest for Knowledge in Malaysia

From the privacy of my residence in Federal Low-cost Estate in Maiduguri Borno State Nigeria (Cohen, 1987), thanks to the information and communication technology (ICT) via the internet, I made two online applications for a PhD to Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) and Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), this took place in the last quarter of 2011. Worldwide universities are central in giving foundations to professions’ credentialing and ‘as the institutional home of the newly organised academic profession’ (Schrecker, 2010). I later received positive responses from the duo in early 2012. One, with a condition of bringing a higher score in English Language proficiency/aptitude test for foreign students (TOEFL) and the other offered a English language condition-free admission, that allowed me to enroll straight ahead and commence graduate studies, in Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). It might interest readers to note that, Nigerians had, for a very long time been using the English language as a medium of instruction in the three tiers of education, a fact that I was quick to realized, is not the norm in most of the countries of S.E. Asia.

I had course to be involved in a telephone interview on Wednesday the 4th of January, 2012, precisely 6.04 am Nigerian time, 1.04pm Malaysian time, with my would be supervisor, a seasoned Professor of repute in his chosen field, with academic trainings from Australia and the United States of America. Actually, this interview was my first experience of speaking English with a Malay, the pronunciations and ascents was in polished English, if you like Queens’ English, he gave positive response to my quest for knowledge.

With my admission to UPM handy, looking forward to start the programme in February of 2012, I started making moves on how to actualize the journey. All hands were on deck and as days come by, with social and economic challenges at play and decisive on the whole endeavour, lastly it became certain that I cannot make it in February and had to deferred the admission, till September of the same year, allowing me more time to prepare and hold the bull by the horn in wrestling the challenges to enable me pursuit the gigantic task of seeking knowledge in faraway SE Asia. By August of 2012 with my meager income, I started the process of applying for visa with all its attending requirements and protocols. The Malaysian High Commission in Abuja, the capital of Nigeria, was very forthcoming in processing my

application, with the whole process taking a week due to public holiday that disjointed the process, my cousin brother, Abdulkadir Usman, facilitated the submission of all the required papers at the Malaysian High Commission in Abuja. With my visa for entry to Malaysia now handy, the next step was to book a round trip flight, by contacting a travel agent in Abuja, upon a recommendation of a friend, Professor Sulaiman Karwai, of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, who visited Malaysia of recent, for academic conference, the booking all through was signed, sealed and delivered. Upon successfully buying the air ticket, our flight was scheduled on Thursday 6th September, 2012 and was to leave Nnamdi Azikiwe International Airport Abuja by 2.40pm local time. I arrived the airport in good time and went through all the routine clearances and checks for international passengers, waited so long to be called for boarding, after duly checked in, then a staff of Egypt Air, my chosen flight, announced that the flight was cancelled and we will be taken to a hotel, before they scheduled another flight. It was really challenging on some of us that had no spare clothing handy, all our luggage bags were checked-in the Boeing 747.

My brother Engineer Abubakar, then working at NEPA (defunct) headquarters Abuja, came to my aid with two set of dresses, making me comfortable through the additional unplanned two days. We were in the Abuja Sheraton Hotel for two days, then relief came, when we were summoned to hurry ourselves and go to an awaiting bus that will take us to the Airport. The flight to Kuala Lumpur will be via Cairo, then Bangkok. Abuja to Cairo was a four-hour flight. The flight arrived Cairo a bit late to their timing/schedule and we were rushed into our connecting flight to Malaysia, a Boeing 777 aircraft. Once airborne we arrived Bangkok, the capital of Thailand, after more than 9hrs flight and lots of people disembarked at Bangkok, the magnet business hub of S.E Asia, thereafter, we were off again to our final destination Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) Malaysia, arriving slightly after midnight local time, past 5pm Nigeria time, indicating 7hrs difference ahead. We went through all the immigration and customs routine checks, only to realize that at luggage section, our bags, for reasons associated to lapses on officials of luggage transfers, to the awaiting EgyptAir, were left at Cairo, and we had to file in written complaints to the KLIA authorities.

I met my two Nigerian friends, who were in the same university I was admitted, tirelessly waiting at KLIA Arrivals lounge and they gave me a very brotherly welcome, we drove from the Airport, covering 42.4km to the International *Kolej* Muhamad Rashid (KMR Blok P2) Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) slightly after 2am, Monday 10th September, exhaustively tired of a journey spanning over 17hrs with transits in Cairo and Bangkok.

Alhamdulillah, thanks be to God, going out in search of knowledge is such a grand sacrifice that is been highly revered in the Islamic religion. Knowledge, as opined by most learned scholars is never acquired on a platter of gold, it has its challenges, which all the way, keeps on polishing its seeker, to ultimate success. Upon landing at KLIA I started reading signposts and airport notices in a language I am not familiar with. My friends Abubakar Sadiq Abdullahi (ATBU Bauchi) and (Late) Engr Sani Dahiru Buba (FedPoly Mubi) made me to understand that Malay is now the dominant language of communication and by implication seeing an extensive interpretation of the Islamic teaching, that says human beings are made into nations and tribes simply for identification and knowing one another.

Historical origins of why there are so many different languages has plagued scholars and linguistics for centuries and will continue to puzzle them far beyond our lifetimes. In most

cultures, there exist myths that there was a common language spoken among the people with a Being getting hold of the people or separating them from each other/segmenting the people to create their own language. Prime examples of stories like the “Tower of Babel”, the Hindu cultural belief with the story of the “Knowledge Tree”, and even Native Americans believing in a “Great Deluge (Flood)” and separating people speech (Brinkley & Brewer, 2006; Hiebert, 2007). Hamza Yusuf, an American with good command of Arabic and English language, in one of his writings on FB social media says: “language is the crowning achievement of human beings, and that is something Muslims have always known and revered. We are a literate people whose miracle is in a Book from an unlettered man, peace and blessings be upon him, who was the most articulate and eloquent human being who ever lived”(FaceBook 8.2.14).

Language is like a living organism with characteristics that can be likened with that of family growing over space and time. Mankind, as the sole player, with language medium of communications, can be able to vocalize up to 100 different sounds, using language to inform others around us of what we feel, what we desire, and question / understand the environment or world around. We communicate effectively with our words, gestures, and tone of voice in a multitude of situation, seconded only by birds with similar characteristics in the animal kingdom. Language families are obtainable in all parts of the world, and linguists had taken their time to detailed studies on the different language families obtainable in all continents of the world. Language family are group of languages that are related through descent from a common ancestral language traced by historical linguistics over a very long epoch of time, leading to languages developing dialectics, that may diverge into distinct languages, which over time may affect each other through language contracts and cultural associations.

I am giving this simple background to appreciate the efforts of the authorities in UPM, whereby as a regulation for all international students, irrespective of your program of study, one has to enroll for the Basic *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay Language) for one semester. This effort at least, gives all the international students an introduction to the Malay culture and language. The Malay language is initially and up till now written in Arabic letters and later now dominantly Romanized, becoming the norm especially among the youth. Malay, also known as Bahasa Melayu, is a member of Malayo-Polynesian branch of Austronesian language family. It is spoken by native Malay people on both sides of the Straits of Malacca that separates Sumatra from Malay Peninsula. Malay is the official language of Malaysia. It is also one of the official languages in Singapore. It is also spoken in Indonesia, Brunei and used as a working language in East Timor. Today there is an estimated 19million people native speakers of Malay in both Peninsula and Western Malaysia covering Saba and Sarawak.

Back in my home country Nigeria, which is five times more the population of Malaysia, has over 350 tribes, with each having its own language, in fact it can be seen as a microcosm of Africa as a whole encompassing three major African language families: Niger-Congo, Nilo-Saharan and Afro-asiatic making the country multicultural and multilingual, like Malaysia on a micro level of linguistic pedestal (Blench, 2012). When culture marries geography, one will appreciate the kind of union in terms of interactions, trade and commerce, education and beliefs and above all the sociocultural evolution and mixtures that will emerge, as offspring of the union. In Nigeria that marriage has been there from times immemorial, and one can

fully appreciate this union only if you are physically there as a member of the community tasting the sweet, bitter and sour tastes of the scenarios being constantly experienced in life. And we all know that life is a not always a bed of roses, it can sometimes be a kettle of fish, or an endless tunnel of sort. Nations over the time in history where these types of situations existed/ existing are some of the places that give good lessons in history and panacea for cultural complications and diversity. This fact is well obtainable in Eastern Europe, breakaway Russian Republics, Africa and South East Asia to mention a few.

Sociolinguistics, anthropologists and a great deal of social scientists had been symbiotically benefitting the concern populace on the import in life of multiculturalism and multilingual persuasions. To from developed to developing nations, we find states that had for long subscribed to having more than one language as its official language or what experts called the lingua franca. With languages now moving with flow of migrants to all walks of life for myriads of reasons, we might wake up one day and see languages spoken in styles and context irrespective of the actual place of origin. Very soon perhaps we will have Malaysian English, Nigerian English or American Arabic or French.

Challenges in the PhD journey

My first semester in UPM was a cultural eye opener, in terms of knowing the complexity of South East Asia. In our class of Basic Malay Skill (BBM 1401) we have Africans, Bangladeshi, Chinese, Iranians, Palestinians, Saudi Arabians, Filipinos and Vietnamese. A global mixture indeed. In my department, postgraduate students of same supervisor, normally on specialization basis, were given same study room. In my case, our study room has six Malaysians, three of Chinese descent and three Malays, then two ladies from Iran and my humble self. My first impression on Tan and Kuan was that they were from mainland China and cannot speak any language but Mandarin. It soon becomes known to me that the duos are comfortable in speaking Mandarin, Malay and English. It will later become known that in Peninsular Malaysia and Islands of Sabah and Sarawak, Malay is dominantly spoken, serving as a thread that connects the Malays, Chinese, Tamils / Indians that are by birth bona fide citizens of Malaysia, circumstances that made them so is historical with the coming of colonialism and the drive for exploring cheap sources of labour. While the other tribes speak Malay, hardly will you see Malay speaking Mandarin or Tamil, perhaps for reasons that are beyond the scope of this writing.

One important thing I realized over my interactions with people of SE Asia, particularly the youth, is the general identification of any dark skinned persons as Africans, not minding that Africans from the Saharan divide northwards are all light complexioned, made up of Tuaregs, Berbers, Arabs and the like. Some will not even know that there are 52 countries that made up the African continent. So it is not surprising for someone to tell you that he is hearing the name of your country for the first time, upon having formal introduction and exchanging pleasantries. This experience, contrasts the orientation we had in our secondary education when we were taught and compelled to know, sometimes by heart, the names of countries the world over, their people, languages, sociocultural traits of dressing and foods, all in efforts to exposing the young student to diversities of the globe. Geopolitical knowledge of places to the young ones will make them appreciate the complexities of this world and the people therein; today with various types of social media, it can only be appreciated how people can be virtually connected but physically apart. But if the 'friend' can have an idea of from which

corner of the globe his other friend is showering him with chats then better for them, social media today are persistently gluing youths, tourists, technocrats, businessmen and women.

Taiwan became the first known country to provide a free Wi-Fi service to all and sundry in its capital city irrespective of your status, whether domiciled or a visitor. Educational campuses of public universities in Malaysia are up and doing in the area of ICT and this has promoted a culture of mobile bridging and bonding of all that subscribe the internet revolution. All these advances will have some level of connectivity and relevance to the medium of communication through language. Most languages today have to 'invent' acceptable expressions for the online communities that are increasingly utilizing the net.

Culture, Language and Learning

Formal communications these days are fast been eroded only left to be used within formal and semi-formal settings in institutions and organizations. This certainly will be giving students and authorities in linguistics very big challenges on the consequences of these developments to the teaching of formal speeches in languages the world over. As tourism flourishes within the SE Asian nations with Thailand on the lead, it goes without saying that the tourism industry in that country needs lubricating oil that will facilitate the interaction of visitors with the citizens, perhaps one might suggest that Thais need to put more efforts in learning English to serve as the lubricant in question. With Thais getting to know how to speak the English language, even if it will be a 'customize' English for the sub-region, then the sky will be their limit in terms of going high in issues of tourism and revenue generation through it. Tourism development and promotion goes with language, particularly of the dominant tourists, either from the western world or wherever, because tourism is always blended with adventure and the earlier SE Asian governments improve issues of communication via international languages in the tourism industry, the better and more prosperous to the countries in question. I am not advocating that people should relinquish their local languages in efforts to promote tourism, far from that, but trying to suggest that in a globalized world, an international language will serve as a bonding and linking mechanism towards making the world a global village.

A language revolution of sort has taken place, in a subtle way, within the Malaysian educational sector. Multiculturalism as the driving force, made speaking and communication changes inevitable in the Malaysian state. It might interest the reader to note that in Peninsular and Eastern Malaysia, the dominant language families are the Malayic, Bornean, Aslian and Land-Dayak with smaller families of Sama Bajaw, Phillipine and Creole in patches, making the country to contain speakers of over 100 living languages with varying proportion of speakers (Khader, 2012).

With Malay been the language of instruction in all public schools, bona fide citizens of Chinese and Indian descent open their schools and taught in English coupled with allowing the students learn their mother tongue in a formal way that will later be advantageous to the students in terms of speaking many languages, a polyglot of sort. The Multicultural society of Malaysia and by extension all other similar societies, will have issues to resolve in terms of language(s) to be used in schools. So, it was from 2003 onwards that teaching science and mathematics were taught in English, trying to ensure that Malaysia would not be left behind in the moving train of Globalisation. Public policy changes in 2005, demand by all national schools to start teaching Mandarin and Tamil as an elective subject to attract more students

and give a 'we' feeling to non-Malay speaking citizens, who are economically and culturally providing the lubricant of making Malaysia truly Asia, a slogan that has been attracting swarms of tourists to the country due to online and satellite TV broadcasts (Khader, 2012).

In the last quarter of 2012, my first semester at UPM, the Basic Malay Skill course handled then by one gentleman, who attaches great importance to the language, as if there is no any language on earth than Malay, I was surprised to realized that Malay language is very comfortable in loaning words from Arabic, a language that I can speak a little of it, then loaning also from any other language that the people came in contact with, giving people that speak Malay the opportunity of been conversant with many English words, Tamil, Mandarin and others. To my personal observation, Malaysians want to move with time in most of the things they do covering the broad spheres of socio-cultural, educational and economic issues making them have a feeling that at the sub-regional basis, they will be piloting advances in globalization and general community development (Stevens, 2012).

In my campus sometimes as a student, it becomes a bit difficult to differentiate between a he and a she due to uniformity of dressing and similarity of body sizes between males and females within those in the youthful age bracket. In the educational campuses, one needs no any research to come to the conclusion, leading one to vividly see students, male and female imbibing a T-shirt and jeans trouser culture. The adults and the elderly will always see reason in adorning themselves in the traditional attires of their cultural persuasions, particularly the dominant Malay people. In all fairness to the youth, they do dress in traditional Malay attire in attending the Friday (*Juma'ah*) services (*solat*) and most of the prayer rooms (*Surau*) and administratively sanctioned mosques (*Masjid*) do have sufficient provision for male praying attire (*Pelikat*) and the female praying attire (*Hijab*). This provision gives lots of liberty and leverage to the youths to feel at home once in the identified places of worship. Before the 20th century, as recorded in history, Malay women still wore *kemban* (wrappers), just *sarongs* tied above the chest, for public outings. As Islam became more widely embraced, they started wearing the more modest yet elegant *baju kurung*. The *baju kurung* is a knee-length loose-fitting blouse that is usually worn over a long skirt with pleats at the side, to date textile materials of appealing colors filled the markets. It can also be matched with traditional fabrics such as *songket* or *batik*. Typically, these traditional outfits are completed with a *selendang* or shawl or *tudung* or headscarf (Aris, Nawawi, & Ibrahim, 2018).

The Research Journey

In the Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), from lecture halls and classrooms, theatres, food courts and the UPM Masjid (central mosque) elementary knowledge of Malay will definitely be resourceful to all international students willing to intermingle well with other students. As a postgraduate student, and I believed, there are many others like me, I was lost when at an academic seminar a student made his seminar presentation in Malay. With official sanctioning by the University authorities, some lecturers will even give students the option to answer examinations questions in Malay, making the student well-grounded in his vernacular but weak in English, which at a later period in life gives the student, upon graduation a serious challenge once on an international outing, endeavour or networking. English today is gradually becoming or had become a language that is servicing the global educational industry, be it in America, Europe where it is domiciled, or Africa, Asia (Arab and non-Arabs), Latin America and Russia.

The life experiences of anyone will be having different approaches, and in a situation where one is writing on language and cultural experiences, in a sub-region that the writer does know for long, can be very cautiously challenging. The experiences revealed here are restricted to a micro environment of an academic setting with the population of the university slightly above thirty thousand, with the majority been locals and the rest international from thirty-three (33) different countries.

I was given the go-ahead through Faculty of Human Ecology to constitute the PhD supervisory committee, the process took about a fortnight, with Prof Nobaya Bint Ahmad, as the Chair while Profs Asnarulkadi and Ridzuan served as members. The research journey went on with courses and seminars. Fieldwork was done in Nigeria, specifically at Kwadon, Gombe State, where studies centred on peri-urban agriculture and water sustainability. My first thesis draft was vetted by the supervisory committee, making a lot of observations, comments and constructive criticisms. All these feedbacks, interestingly enough, were given electronically and mostly on time, contributed in making the work qualitative and presentable to the knowledge community and academics at large. My first adviser in the PhD program was Prof Zulkifli Hajj Shamsuddin, a professor of soil microbiology and a personality that understood plights of international students, obviously from his personal experiences in his educational pursuits outside Malaysia. Prof Zul as he is popularly referred to in UPM was so caring and on so many occasions he will insist taking me to restaurants for launch and thereafter insisted that I should have a takeaway dish to my room in the hostel. The professor had since retired from the services of UPM and now managing his incorporated company, *Bacto-10*, producing liquid fertilizer for enhancing growth of many crops and vegetables. Upon finishing all what was expected from the PhD students, I submitted my thesis to the graduate school in UPM, I waited for 10 months before a date was fixed for the oral examinations, an experience that lasted for close to 1 ½ hours. It was a successful Viva voce with clearly identified corrections to be made in the thesis, before being finally accepted. We had group photographs with the panel of examiners and some Nigerians who we are in the same Faculty of Human Ecology, UPM (Elias, Ping & Abdullah, 2011).

Conclusion

Language and culture will always go together and this can be seen in the ever-increasing interactions that people have, irrespective of from where they came and what they do to earn a living, an attempt which I tried to relate from the little humble submission that I presented. Experience in life will always serve as a polishing mechanism, at least from the sociological perspective and it will be left to the individual on how he utilizes these experiences to achieve what he want to use it for in life. My experiences in SE Asia as a postgraduate student has taught me the need for cultural interaction and appreciation devoid of being ethnocentric to the extent of considering one culture or people above or below the other in whatever type of ranking. Mankind as a social animal is always bound to realize changes, socially, culturally, politically and economically. These changes can be in the form of globalization or regionalization through cultural hegemony or linguistic bridging and bonding which some languages are naturally endowed than others, a trend that perhaps in the near future, will succeed in fusing people to be united through the medium of speech. On a general note, as an international student, the easiest way to begin to understand the highly complex cultural interactions of Malaysia is to look at the open door policy maintained during cultural

and religious festivals. Although Malaysia's different cultural traditions are frequently maintained by seemingly self-contained ethnic communities, all of Malaysia's communities open their doors to members of other cultures during a religious festival embracing tourists as well as neighbors. Such inclusiveness is more than just a way to break down cultural barriers and foster understanding with most postgraduate students from other countries. It is a positive celebration of a tradition of tolerance that has for a very long time formed the basis of Malaysia's progress and internationally recognized slogan of “truly Asia”, attracting many international students to their public and private universities.

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