

**ERIC Olmedo**

Université de Toulouse 2 Le Mirail

**MANSOR Mohd Noor**

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

## **MICRO SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS IN MANAGING CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION: THE FLUIDITY OF ETHNIC IDENTITY IN THE WORKPLACE, MALAYSIA**

*Managing conflict transformation should be given due importance in multi-ethnic societies. In global organizations, ethnicity is often regarded as static cultural container; and ethnic conflict as traditional but unusually stubborn impediment to modernization. Our main initial assumption in this research states that experienced acculturation is one of the main forces to shape identity formation at workplace. Being concurrently a cultural marker and an identity catalyser, taste is powerful vessel for identity shaping in our studied workplace. The findings of this study were based on empirical data collected between 2008 and 2010, via qualitative methods, from a specific empirical field: 5 star international-brand hotels in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. There are two departments within these luxury international hotels where transfer of knowledge and skills take a particularly direct and tangible form: food and beverage and kitchen. Empirical evidence presented here may qualify “the Hotel” as an “advanced social laboratory” for the study of ethnic relations. Focussing on social actors, this micro-sociological study shows that ethnic identity, belief and behaviour are not static but fluid. A specific organisational model such as “the Hotel” can help us redefine how we see ethnic differences, not as divisive, but as inclusive, when contingent forces at work trigger “cross-cutting ties” along group boundaries. Transforming these inter-ethnic differences in “the Hotel” may lead to the discovery of peace in the service industry.*

**Keywords:** *acculturation, anthro-technological archipelago, micro-diffusion of techniques, ethnicity, identity, conflict transformation*

### **Introduction**

Peace is not a static phenomenon. The discovery of peace demands the nurturing of a continuous process of developing structures and relationships to fulfil human needs and well-being (Lederach 1995). Taking such a stance on managing conflict resolution in a multi-ethnic society, a micro sociological study of the hotel industry will be embarked to show that beliefs held and

behaviours by ethnic groups that could be divisive to their relationships could be moved toward creating new relationships. New relationships among the ethnic groups involved that show greater social differentiation, convergence and sharing rather than social disintegration should be identified. Thus, studying the groups involved in the potential conflict, understanding their beliefs and behaviour should be continuously carried out in order to monitor the health of their social relations. (Maill 2004) This study will, micro-sociologically, analyse individuals from the Malay, Chinese and Indian ethnic groups in the workplace of the 5 star international hotels to highlight, as well as to challenge, the conventionally accepted interpretation that ethnic differences are divisive and may lead to conflict.

### **Locating the study**

The Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mohd Najib Abdul Razak, says in the forward to the Tenth Malaysia Plan 2011-2015, that this Plan "...sets another historical milestone as our nation embarks on an important mission towards a progressive and high income nation, as envisioned in Vision 2020.<sup>1</sup> In a more pragmatic manner, the government decided to promote tourism industry, the service sector being the second national revenue income after manufacturing goods. The national ambition is also clearly stated: *Tourism efforts will focus on enhancing Malaysia's attractiveness as a destination for natural and eco-tourism; for culture, entertainment and the arts; for meetings, incentives, conventions and exhibitions (MICE); for international sporting events; as well as for shopping and recreational activities.*"

Luxury hotels are part of this attractiveness and local investors know it very well when they deal with international chains. Malaysian market is quite open to foreign investment, thus accommodating requests of implementation of multinational hotels' corporations. This study focuses on a specific service industry sector, with specific market segment, contained in a geographically defined area: 5 star- hotels in Kuala Lumpur and the state of Selangor, Malaysia. It is noticed that most of the five-star hotels in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor carry foreign hotel brands, most of which are western brands. The business model usually favoured by these brands for overseas expansion is the one of "management contract": properties (assets) are locally owned and the management of these properties is contracted to the said international company. As of commercial value, the company will chip-in the brand reputation as well as the systems and processes of the company in order to attain the targeted international standards. One of the biggest challenges to these expansionist companies is the transfer of technology. Conceptually speaking, the modalities of the transfer are simple and universalistic in nature: total transfer to local human resources. This process of food-related technological transfer of human expertise will be discussed within the model of the "Anthropo-technological

Island” (Wisner 1997) which is designed to deny any form of particularism, in order to optimize short-term profitability.

The overall research objective of this paper lies on the initial assumption that these anthropo-technological islands are indeed permeable to the host society. Conceptually, culturally conditioned technology transferred to another culture area (Kroeber 1948) may encounter local antagonism or resistance; this cultural contact shall lead to various forms of reactions, such as rejection, accommodative, integration, acculturation or even assimilation. Practically, social reality is more complex; therefore essentializing the cultural area of origin and omitting the adaptative capacities of learning organizations would over-simplify our heuristic path into a misleading straight line. Nonetheless, social actors working in these so-called islands are themselves products of different socialization paths; hence they are not—culturally speaking—empty vessels when receiving new cultural capital in the form of technology transfer. We shall then examine in this paper the possibility that food-related technology transfer taking place within “Anthropo-technological Islands” foster *specific* impacts on identity formation at workplace.

## **Research methodology**

Findings presented in this paper infer from selected data collected during two distinct participant observations performed by one of the co-authors of this paper: one month as a kitchen helper in a five-star international hotel in Kuala Lumpur between July and August 2008. The second data collection was carried out July-August 2009 in another five-star international hotel: this time within the Food and Beverage Department in the capacity as a wine trainer. The data collection was conducted using interpretative method, largely inspired by the work of Clifford Geertz (1973) on the matter.

According to the Malaysian Ministry of Tourism, 16 five-star hotels are located in the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur. Of these 16 hotels, six are Malaysian and Asian-owned. Thus, ten hotels were left for our appreciation. Most of the time, as evidence shows in a later part of this paper, expatriates hold top-key positions, entrusted by the headquarters to transfer particularistic skills and knowledge to local staff, in order to successfully implement the universalistic standardization of products and services.

## **Malaysia as situational canvas for actors’ strategic actions**

Literature often coins Malaysia as a “multicultural country” or “multi-ethnic society”, or even “plural society”: these rather loosely used terms do not shed any theoretical light on the complex nature of the Malaysian society, neither do they explain the “superstructure” in which our social actors act or interact. As we believe that the studied of micro-organisation, namely “Anthropo-

technological Island” is permeable to the host society, conceptualizing the macro-organization enables us to identify a supplemental infra-cultural set of resources immediately available for various strategies to social actors. As mentioned above, the “plural society” idiom is often used as a safe escapism from having to explain the nature of the so-called plurality. Sociologically speaking, “plural society” bears a very specific meaning if referred to the concept originally devised by J. S. Furnivall (1948). Offspring from the colonization era, “[...], a plural society is a deeply divided culturally society cohabiting under a single political and institutional system of authority” (*cited in*: Malesevic 2004: p. 51). M. G. Smith, arguably the most influential of the pluralists in the post-colonial societies, defines plural societies as “[...] units of disparate parts which owe their existence to external factors and lack a common social will” (*cited in* Malesevic 2004:52). There are two crucial tenets in Smith’s theorisation: a) “ethnic segments are held together [...] only by the monopolisation of the segments through political power.” b) these ethnic segments are differentially integrated into a common society and as such they remain deeply unstable” (*cited in* Malesevic 2004:53).

With an ethnic-Malay political dominance and one Article 153 of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia that grants special rights and privileges to *Bumiputera*<sup>2</sup>, Malaysia seems to fit the plural society bill, notwithstanding that no ethnic riots have been recorded since 1969. A closer scrutiny at an elaborated version of Smith’s theory reveals three levels of pluralism: cultural, social and structural (Smith 1971). Malaysia would probably qualify for “structural pluralism”, the “highest form that pluralism can take”, being expressed “through different modes of group incorporation in a particular society: equivalent, differential and a combination of these two [...]: complex pluralities” (*cited in* Malesevic 2004:52-53). The ambivalent complexity of Malaysian societal model (i.e. the co-existence of article 153 and freedom of cult, among others) parks, in our opinion, Malaysia as being in the category of “complex pluralities.”

Having acknowledged the variability of integration across ethnic communities into the “common society”, it is of utmost importance to further understand the respective forms of integration, to make full sense of the superstructure. We account three forms of societal integration: political, economic and mythical. The Malay ethnic group, representing by far the most significant ethnic minority group in Malaysian demographics, holds political power through its ethnicized political party.<sup>3</sup> Being a “host society” (Shamsul AB 2009), Malay community manages power relations by granting “equity rights” in opposition to “equality rights” (Shamsul AB 2009), to maintain concurrently its dominance as well as sustainable social cohesion, as it is formally stated in the almost all the five-year plans of Malaysia. However, in spite of their relatively strong political and numerical hold in the country, Malays seem to feel vulnerable still, as pointed out by Anthony Milner: “The

anxiety [...] is made time and time again in Malay writing; is that the ‘Malays’ might ‘disappear from this world.’” (Milner 2008:16).

Economic integration goes to Malaysian-Chinese (a reverse form of hyphenated citizenship in comparison with the Northern-American model),<sup>4</sup> thus allocating the community higher leverage for collective bargaining. The position of Malaysian-Chinese ethnic group is often perceived to be ambiguous, though in social reality it may prove to be otherwise. It is argued by some political scientists, but also by members of the community itself<sup>5</sup>, that it is the very mechanism of affirmative action that devised the conditions for Malaysian-Chinese prosperity.

Table 1: *Wealth Distribution By Ethnic Groups in Malaysia, 2004*

Ethnic categories	Ownership of share capital at per value of limited companies		Average annual growth rate (2000-2004)	Mean monthly gross household income	Average annual growth rate (2000-2004)
	RM Million	% Total	%	RM	%
O	100037.20	18.9	12.3	2 522	4.9
Chinese	206 682. 90	39.0	12.4	4 127	3.6
Indians	6 392.60	1.2	5.6	3 215	3.5
Others	216 656.00	40.9	13.9	2 150	9.4

N.B.: the “Others” categories include ethnic minorities – As far as ownership of share capital is concerned, it also includes nominee companies & foreigners. Figures are given in constant prices for households’ incomes; the mode of calculation for ownership of share capital (current of constant figures) is not clearly established in the original document.

Source: Adapted from *Ninth Malaysia Plan (2006-2010)* – chapter 16, pp. 333 & 336.

## Workplace as epitome of interethnic relations in Malaysia

As a host society, Malaysia advocates “unity through diversity” or more recently a “One Malaysia” project as the basis of her nation-building. In a settler society, full integration into the common society is attained through abolition of ethnic borders. In the case of a host society, social cohesion is the aim, not full integration as the indigenous canopy becomes the basis of nation-building. Social cohesion shall be achieved and maintained through fluidity of ethnic borders. A quintessential question remains: how fluids are these ethnic borders? The inferential structures of meaning piled up through history constitute, in our mind, prodigious cultural resources for strategic action. Social actors, using symbolic interaction for optimal leverage, can potentially summon these cultural resources. Workplace is a privileged place for social interaction. Theory of rational choice would tell us that Malaysian social actors may use the depth and breadth of the said cultural resources in

order to maximize their gains at the workplace; even so, it does not necessary contribute to fluidification of the borders, as concern for workplace obligation is interspersed with friendship and in another occasion with ethnic mobilisation as shown in the Table 2 and 3, respectively. These tables show the prevalence of the dominance processes of negotiations that produce accommodation and the instances of some contestations that generate conflict between the two ethnic groups at the level of the everyday-defined social reality in the society.

Table 2: *Assisting a Workmate: The Strength of Workplace Obligation Relative to the Ethnic Preference, 1990-2010 (Percentage)*

	1990	1992	1993	1995	1996	1998	1999	2000	2001	2005	2006	2007	2009	2010
Malay	97	97	89	94	95	89	90	88	91	87	86	91	83	77
Chinese	98	98	91	86	95	91	83	81	84	64	73	86	87	84

Source: Mansor Mohd Noor (2010)

Table 3: *Supporting the Boss: The Strength of Workplace Obligation Relative to the Ethnic Preference, 1990-2010 (Percentage)*

	1990	1992	1993	1995	1996	1998	1999	2000	2001	2005	2006	2007	2009	2010
Malay	61	52	50	58	63	55	57	50	47	48	47	47	51	54
Chinese	50	42	50	43	46	52	54	45	42	41	43	46	63	46

Source: Mansor Mohd Noor (2010)

The complex social stratification of Malaysian society can be a rich terrain for social actors who wish to gain higher (inter)-cultural capital, so their strategic game at workplace may be increased in its efficiency. However, social actors are not solely strategic animals. A sense of self-identity is being shaped through these strategic actions, some of which could be limited by conflicts of values. We believe that certain particular forms of acculturation occurring at workplace may foster creative self-identities. These cultural innovations, in certain conditions, could have an impact on the fluidity of our ethnic borders. The heuristic path leading to this stimulating conclusion starts in a very specific ideal-type of micro-organization: “anthrop-technological islands.”

### **The hearth of identity formation at workplace: Anthrop technological islands**

In a famous book discussing phenomena of transfer of technology within the framework of industrial globalisation,<sup>6</sup> the physiologist Alain Wisner shares

with us the following definition of the term “*ilôts anthropotechnologiques*”:<sup>7</sup>

“Usually, there are companies that – as they sell the same product in the whole world- have to obtain the same quality in all production units, which become therefore interchangeable. To achieve product standardization, these companies transfer similar technical systems: non-only machines, but also work organization as well as training system. [...]These multinational companies select their employees according to severe criteria, provide them accommodation, transportation means, and sometimes even schools and hospitals [...]”

One interesting finding is that employees seem to perform better in those anthropotechnological islands, as the transfer of technology is fully achieved. According to Wisner, this excellent performance achieved all over the world in complex systems supported by local labour, would demonstrate that we may find adequate staff in all countries of the world for the systems to run smoothly. This model of organization portrayed by Wisner seems rather close to perfection. Even though international hotels are quoted in his book, being categorized as “anthropotechnological islands”, we shall allow ourselves to cast some doubt on the perspective of such a well-oiled system with no apparent setback.

### **Initial question: 5-Star international hotels in Kuala Lumpur as anthropotechnological islands?**

The model of management contract of the 5-Star international hotel described earlier does qualify *a priori* our studied of these hotels as “anthropotechnological islands.” These hotels are places of modernity: technology is heavily used to design products and services, to operate them, but as well as to profile customers and assess their satisfaction. Combination production of (ephemeral) goods and services for specific and demanding market segments, international luxury hotels are no doubt complex entities to manage. Consequently, corporations tend to send expatriate senior executive to ensure that transfer of knowledge is smoothly conducted and that quality standards are respected. Food and beverage outlets constitute a sizeable profit centre and are not to be neglected by the management. A successful restaurant can contribute to the success and the branding of a particular hotel.

As the Table 4 below shows, Western-Caucasian personnel tend to fill key management positions. The trend is strong for General Managers: there is no Malaysian General Manager in our sample, and 8 out of 10 are Westerners bearing Caucasian ethnicity. The presence of western Caucasian decision makers may theoretically strengthen the original technology and transfer of norms, at least from the viewpoint of the headquarters. On the local scene, other factors come into play – notably as far as the Caucasian Western Chef is concerned – as his presence is often required by the local

owner for “enhancement of the image of the company”. The allocation of senior management staff tends to confirm so far the ideal-typisation of Kuala Lumpur 5 star international hotel as “anthropo-technological islands”. As for the position of Executive Assistant Managers, only four local incumbents fill up the equivalent position of Director of Food and Beverage; the scenario is often similar and appeals to meritocracy: the former Director of Food & Beverage (usually Western Caucasian) left after the opening period, and a deserving “local” staff took over the position. However there is one particular element that disrupts the very concept of “anthropo-technological island”: the existence of food enclaves with partial anomic.

It is interesting to notice that the whole anthropo-technological island standardization system gets destabilized through the intrusion of food as a “cultural commodity” for international and even domestic tourists. Let’s consider a standard food outlets distribution sketched from our empirical data:

- Chinese outlet (almost systematic)
- Coffee house or equivalent concept with buffet service (local delicacies plus western items)
- Western food dining (Italian, Steakhouse, French, Australian...)
- Other Asian outlet (Japanese)

We propose hereby to categorize these outlets from a binary inclusive-exclusive perspective. Exclusive or inclusive status shall be given inferring to functional interaction with the “host society” (Malaysia), not in the anthropological meaning, but simply from spatial considerations. Concurrently we will attempt to qualify the perceived citizenship of the food production by taking two factors into account: idealization of food origin and characteristics of production staff. For example, “National Food Culture microcosms” are viewed as “inclusive”, because – beside serving international dishes – they offer a sample of all Malaysian ethnic cuisines: Malay, Chinese, and Indian. Consequently, cooks from all ethnic groups are also represented in the production kitchen.

Table 4: *Structural Comparison of the International 5-Star-Hotel Studied Under Western Corporation Management in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia 2010*

Nationality & Ethnicity Top-Management	Hotel 1	Hotel 2	Hotel 3	Hotel 4	Hotel 5	Hotel 6	Hotel 7	Hotel 8	Hotel 9	Hotel 10
<b>General Manager</b>	Singaporean Chinese	British Caucasian	American Arab	British Caucasian	French Caucasian	Austrian Caucasian	German Caucasian	American Caucasian	Australian Caucasian	French Caucasian
<b>Executive Assistant Manager or equivalent</b>	Irish Caucasian	Portuguese Caucasian	Malaysian Chinese	Malaysian Indian	French Caucasian		German Caucasian	Mexican Caucasian	Australian Caucasian	Malaysian Indian



<b>Executive Chef</b>	Swiss Caucasian	Italian Caucasian	Malaysian Malay	French Caucasian	Swiss Caucasian	Austrian Caucasian	Malaysian Indian	Malaysian Malay	Australian Caucasian	Malaysian Chinese
<b>Typology of Food &amp; Beverage Outlets</b>										
<b>Restaurant 1</b>	Chinese Cantonese	Chinese	Chinese Shanghi-nese	Italian	Chinese Cantonese	Chinese Cantonese	Chinese	Chinese Cantonese	Chinese	Asian-Mediterranean
<b>Restaurant 2</b>	Asian-Mediterranean	International & local	Intern'onal & local	Intern'onal & local	Intern'onal & local	Intern'onal & local	Intern'onal & local	Continentl classics	Intern'onal & local	Intern'onal & local
<b>Restaurant 3</b>		Australian cuisine	Spanish cuisine	Steak house	Western Seafood	Italian	Italian	Western Creative	Italian	
<b>Restaurant 4</b>		Asian noodles	Western (French, Australian)		Grill Local Intern'onal	Asian			Latin American	
<b>Restaurant 5</b>		Japanese	Japanese		Japanese	Japanese				

These post-national restaurants are twice exclusive:

- First from the host-society
- Secondly, they are potential ground of social distinction when associated with fine-dining status

Table 5: *Functional role of food outlets for social actors*

<b>Food culture microcosm</b>	<b>Status</b>	<b>Function</b>
Postnational (i.e.: Western, Japanese)	Fine Dining	Exclusive
National (Coffee house)	Casual	Inclusive
Transnational (Chinese)	Casual upscale or Fine Dining, According to perceived authenticity	Exclusive

The term “transnational” is used here in its *diasporic* acceptance (Bonvillain, 2006). For instance, we would label Chinese restaurant outlets as “transnational”, as their perceived quality is often linked to the citizenship of the Chef: i.e. “Best Dim-Sum is from Hong-Kong.” A “Hongkie” Chef will definitely enhance the status of the restaurant. In addition, the vernacular language among the staff would be Cantonese for instance, and could be one of the staff selection criteria. This illustrates partial anomie from Western norms, including production systems, experienced and lived by social actors in situ. Conclusively, we would tend to partially refute the label of “anthropo-technological islands” for such social systems in the Malaysian environment. We would rather employ the term of an “archipelago” metaphor toward such observation, comprising national and transnational atolls in a form of “food

culture microcosms”, the core island remaining anthropo-technological islands and may conceptually include post-national food outlets. This categorization may be also used as an initial analytical framework to better comprehend the identity formation of the social actors at the workplace.

### Conceptualizing food culture microcosm

One can view microcosm as a “small, representative system having analogies to a larger system in constitution, configuration, or development.”<sup>8</sup> From a sociological viewpoint, the task becomes easier as studies on macrocosms will usually possess boundaries; therefore it is a finite notion. Macrocosm may encompass synchronically up to three “cosmos”:

- The organisation
- The host society
- The imagined community of origin

To the eyes of the social actor, rules, regulations and production/service systems or standards embody the *organisation*. For example, a specific greeting standard operating procedure in a transnational Chinese restaurant of a 5 star-hotel like serving ginseng tea with a special long spout teapot differentiates this particular outlet from an average transnational Chinese restaurant. Therefore, such an act partially shaped the imagined community of origin into the organizational mould.

The *host society* permeates the microcosm notably through legal and social norms (i.e. labour law, usage of vehicular rather vernacular language etc.). We can also envisage the local market as a main embodiment of the host society; one empirical evident, among others, would be the market-driven “Halal” labellisation of hotel-based Chinese restaurants. In Malaysian context, market forces dictate micro-macro dialectics, the market itself being structured by ethnic demographics and preferences.

The *imagined community of origin* is substantiated into the microcosm through an array of “tangibles”: these are the interior design, furniture, spoken vehicular language, authenticity of cuisine, staff grooming and presentation, including the staff themselves as to whether they look “ethnic” enough or not. Some hotels go even to the extent of commodifying the staff itself. We are not referring to showcasing Caucasian-looking Chefs or restaurant managers if the concept is supposed to be Western but to staged such an identity: Malaysian waiters working in an American-Italian restaurant concept of a highly renown five-star hotel in the Kuala Lumpur Golden Triangle, are required to wear name-tags bearing Italian first names. None of the clients is fooled, of course, as the gap between written narrative and observed phenotype is quite obvious, but this is not the point. If everyone plays along, customers and colleagues

included, as the latter are instructed to do, it can trigger a progressive and more complex system of identity shifting at the workplace.

The three above-mentioned “cosmos” do not present hermetic features; on the contrary they seemingly weave interdependent ties, thus enabling the macrocosm to be qualified as a system. For instance, the interdependence between host society and community of origin is forged through the notion of Diaspora. Chinese restaurants in Kuala Lumpur are not a mere transnational reflection of China, even though they might aim to be, or at least claim to be. They reflect the representation of the community of Diaspora from the motherland. As an illustration we can cite the remark of a Malaysian-Chinese trainee working as a waiter in a Chinese restaurant of a famous five-star hotel in Kuala Lumpur:<sup>9</sup>

- *“I have communication problems: the staff here they speak only Chinese.”*
- (Interviewer): *“You don’t speak Chinese?”*
- *“No I speak Mandarin only; all these people they speak Cantonese only... and nobody speaks English, except the restaurant manager.”*

This simple sentence is very rich in terms of inferred meanings, if we analyze it using anthropological tools such as “thick description” coined by the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz (Geertz 1973). Cantonese is the major vernacular language within the Chinese community in Kuala Lumpur, as the first migrants originated from the South of China. When he says “no” the question “Do you speak Chinese?”; it also implies the language of reference is Cantonese... the latter being upgraded to the status of THE Chinese language for the community in Kuala Lumpur. This restaurant could be, in a way, the epitome of the Chinese transnational restaurant in Malaysia: one exclusive vernacular language, clientele exclusively composed of Malaysian Chinese-Cantonese speaking customers, corroborating the absence of a need for vehicular language; “authentic” food or perceived as such. This very example showcases one sliver of intra-ethnic social stratification in Malaysia: the trainee being a student of a private hotel school in Malaysia, he comes from an upper-middle class ethnic-Chinese family. As such, they sent their son to a private Chinese school for primary and secondary education, using Mandarin as a medium of instruction. The parents went overseas for their higher education studies; Being from different dialect-based families, as well as personifying social distinction (Bourdieu 1980), English is the vehicular language practised at home.

### **Host society and staged authenticity**

Our object of study is located into a specific service industry sector, with a focus on a specific market segment and contained in a geographically defined area

that the concept of staged authenticity arises. Customers pertaining to the high-end market segment will tend to equate quality with authenticity. Authenticity then, “*is not a given, measurable quality that can be applied to a particular event or product, nor does it provide a simple scale against which a tourist experience may be judged*” (Sharpley 1994: p. 135). According to Theobald, authenticity means “*genuine, unadulterated, or the real thing*” (Theobald 1998:411) as cited in Reisinger & Steiner 2006:68). MacCannell (1976) refers ‘*for the authentic in human experience*’ as probably what the ethnic Chinese customers referred above are looking for in that particular restaurant.

The representation of authenticity depends very much on the systemic interrelationship between the consumer-typification and the so-called authentic product or service. Staged authenticity shall be perceived differently whether the consumer associates himself to the imagined community of origin or not. If the consumer is an outsider to the said imagined community, authenticity then becomes “*the respectable child of old-fashioned exoticism. It demands that sources, forms, styles, language and symbol all derive from a supposedly homogenous and unbroken tradition.* (Rushdie 1991:67, cited in Taylor 2001:7).

On the other side, if the consumer refers himself as an insider, authenticity may tend more towards idealization and nostalgia. It is nonetheless staged, looking for instance at Malaysian-Chinese who may eat their authentic Cantonese food in air-conditioned restaurants looking at a Buddha Head sitting enthroned inside the western-designed open kitchen; such a display being totally inappropriate in a restaurant based in Canton province for instance. We may argue that it is the market forces, embedded into our specific market segment, that demand for authenticity, in particular contextualized staged forms, therefore nurturing, sustaining and consistently reshaping food culture microcosms with a slow but inescapable pace of social change.

## **Research findings**

Findings presented here below draw from participant observation occurred in what we called earlier “postnational restaurants” or “postnational microcosms” (the latter including production unit – kitchen – and service unit – restaurant – of a same food and beverage outlet).

### **Location of Situation No.1: Service kitchen for exclusive postnational outlet**

Description of situation: Taste and Diffusion of western butchery’s techniques

Chef Kumar, “Chef de Partie” of the Butchery department in a five-star international hotel Kuala Lumpur is Malaysian-Indian and

Hindu. He prepares all beef items for a fine dining Steak House. When asked how he assesses the quality of his beef sausages, he answers “I taste them; as a Chef I have to do it; I don’t eat them... I just TASTE them; it is my job as a Chef but I never eat beef at home or outside work. ”When Kumar puts on his Chef hat, he enters into another world: the world of Western professionalism with its kitchen corporatism and accompanying rules and codes. When he is outside of the workplace, he is an ordinary Malaysian Indian – a Tamil one – who goes to temple, practices his faith and lives his life as a family man. Both worlds are real and co-exist without trauma, but are strictly non permeable to each other.

*Interpretation:* Principle of compartmentalization (Bastide 2007 [1955]:147).

### **Location of Situation 2: Post-national food outlet (Italian restaurant)**

Description of situation: Diffusion of western wine tasting techniques and coffee making

Prakash is restaurant manager of the Italian restaurant at a five-star internationalHotel, Kuala Lumpur. He is Malaysian-Indian of Hindu faith. Having worked 15 years in Italian restaurants’ concepts within Westin Hotels in Malaysia and Singapore, he lost proficiency in his mother tongue whereas his elder brother has become a teacher in Tamil language. He now speaks English to his brother. Prakash just bought a house; he designed a cellar for Italian wines, and a western-type piano in the kitchen; he also bought an espresso coffee-machine for himself. His dream is to work in a Western country, U.S.A. in particular.

*Interpretation:* assimilation.

### **Location of Situation 3: working subsequently in two postnational restaurants**

Description of situation: diffusion of wine tasting techniques

Idris<sup>10</sup> is a Malaysian Malay and “Assistant Director in Food and Beverage” in a Five-Star international hotel in Kuala Lumpur. At the age of 42, Idris supervises 210 employees distributed in five food and beverage outlets. As the position of Food and Beverage director is vacant, Idris reports directly to the Executive Assistant Manager. In other words he reports work to the number two (2) of the organization, who bears an Australian citizenship. Idris is also one of the founders

of the association of sommelier in Kuala Lumpur. He learnt oenology on-the-job, and by himself, in his previous position as Restaurant Manager in a very renowned fine-dining restaurant in Kuala Lumpur. Beside a French Chef working there at the time, this fine dining outlet could display the largest wine cellar in Kuala Lumpur. Idris remained 14 years in this organization, having started as a simple waiter. Without any academic qualification or a background in hotel schooling, his career has been built on a succession of internal promotions. One major cause for his exemplary career path has been his mastering of oenology, theoretically and practically. So far, nothing exceptional in this working world's tale, if not a remarkable ambition combined with hard work and tenacity. Nothing exceptional, but one word on Idris' National Identity card: Idris is Muslim; he is a Malaysian citizen, of Malay ethnicity and of Islamic faith. As a Muslim he imported and put Zam Zam<sup>11</sup> water at the disposal of the patrons of the coffee house, for them to break fast during Ramadan month. None other hotel restaurant in Kuala Lumpur has been able to do so until now. On the other hand, the Koran qualifies wine as a prohibited ("*haram*") beverage, which makes sommelier's occupation, at first sight, rather incompatible with Islamic faith. Whatever his personal relation to his religion may be, this particular combination of faith and occupation will undoubtedly trigger personal choices as well as challenges (including questioning of identity). Questioning for himself, but also for his entourage.

*Interpretation: compartmentalization leading to cultural innovation*

### **Discussion: does micro-diffusion tend to foster interethnic conflicts?**

Fredrik Barth argues that social change may come from cultural contact (Barth, 1969); however, vectors for social change are generally what he calls the "new elites". These are individuals who have the most contacts with merchandises or/and organization from industrialized societies. In their desire to participate with the broader social systems in order to gain new values, they may have to choose between the following basic strategies:

1. *"Portraying themselves as members of industrial society and the established cultural group to optimize their integration;*
2. *Accepting a minority status, by trying to reduce their minority handicaps – relatively speaking – thus confining their distinct cultural traits in non-articulation sectors, whilst contributing to the general system in the other activity sectors;*
3. *Stressing on their ethnic identity, using it to set up new statuses or models that lead to organize activities in sectors that did not*

*previously exist, or were not sufficiently developed.”*

Idris belongs clearly to the third category, while Kumar belongs obviously to the second one. Barth's categorization of forms of social change was ground breaking as the concept of ethnicity was explained in sociological and universalist terms, and not from an anthropological and particularistic perspective; hence it is social interaction that counts, and not the static analysis of cultural units, elements, or traits as we try to understand the impact of individuals act of embracing personal choice in maximising the material and social status gains. What is of a peculiar interest is what social actors make of ethnicity, in other words: its social strategy or political utility. Little emphasis has been given to the process of social interaction itself, as Barth's major contribution was the conceptualization of the “ethnic boundary” paradigm through its fluidity and maintenance endowments. Bastide narrows down Barth's collective approach to the individual through social psychology, differentiating material from formal acculturation. This approach thus, explains further phenomena as perceived by Barth's paradigm where social change is top-down, exerted by “new elites”. For Bastide, compartmentalization is the weapon of the humble folks: the poorly educated, economically weak “marginal-ized” men. In Malaysia, access to modernity becomes in a way democratized as interpreted from the “everyday-defined social reality” (Shamsul AB 1996).

These three observed situations highlight food as a powerful cultural symbol, notably when it interrelates with religious values. Specific diffusion of techniques described above led to various forms of aborted or achieved forms of acculturation (i.e.: defence mechanism, voluntary acculturation, strategic acculturation).

As demonstrated earlier, a five-star international hotel in Kuala Lumpur is not a homogenous cultural entity, if we refer to the concept of “anthropo-technological archipelago”. Last but not least, we have observed during our fieldwork phenomena of acculturation. As Alfred Louis Kroeber pointed out “*Diffusion contributes to acculturation and acculturation necessarily involves diffusion. Diffusion is a matter of what happens to the elements in a culture, whereas acculturation is a process of what happens to a whole culture*” (Kroeber 1948:425). In the present context, our micro-diffusion of techniques can be viewed as a form of “stimulus micro-diffusion by discontinuous contact” as:

- Compression of time and space make culture source and recipient easily identifiable
- Occurs only at workplace
- When confronted, social actors shall use different types of rationality
- May trigger various forms of acculturation

As this form of diffusion operates through stimulus, it takes conscious

engagement for social actors to experience identity shifts. Leontyev (1981) identified this process of remaking culture as being a product of individuals' active engagement in and appropriation of particular cultural practices and values. He proposes that "through activity, human beings change the environment, and through that change they build their own novel psychological functions (Leontyev 1981:195). All this suggests that rather than being wholly subject to change, individuals are actively engaged in remaking cultural practices, such as those required for effective work practice. The change or learning that arises from everyday and novel events is associated with how individuals, as they exercise a preference, direct their intentionalities and agency when engaging with what they experience through these events. Individual experiences in social practices, such as workplaces, will incrementally, and at times, transformationally contribute to changes in their ways of knowing and sense of self (identity).

## Conclusion

The existence of "anthropo-technological archipelagos" (AA) can be viewed as an expression of modernity. Within AA, two sides of the same "modernity" coin are being confronted: homogenization and ethnicity. Relating ethnicity as a by-product of modernity invites to "rejoinder that such a theory is necessarily timebound" (Horowitz 2000:99) unless we consider modernity as a "never ending transitional phase"(Martucelli 1999:14). Likewise, the homogenization effect of the global ecumene, as predicted by certain anthropologists such as Ulf Hannerz (Hannerz 1992, *cited in* Amselle 2000:207) seems to sound the death knell of anthropology itself. These obvious limitations of the theory of modernity have to do, in our view, with the "macro" status itself of the theory of modernity, if portrayed as a sole destination of the process of modernization. This paper can be viewed as a contribution to the multiple modernists' school of thought (Eisenstadt 2005:31), challenging "classic modernity" where concept of nation-state, secularism and equality are the only acceptable ingredients of modernity. If modernity is not one, this multiplicity must be nurtured with empirical evidence. Again we suggest to move down the Desjeux' observation scale, to overcome the flaws of macro theories of modernity. The meso-level of the Desjeux' observation scale (i.e. the organisation) is not entirely satisfying for our purpose, as ethnicity is often mixed with culture in management practices. We do acknowledge however that a meso-level observation might be of interest – if combined with micro-sociological observation – as AA challenge the ethnic-cum-functional structure of Malaysian society through partial anomie from the surrounding social rules. To render ethnicity scientifically operational as an analytical tool, we need to view it as *a resource* to the concept of identity, and more specifically "social identity". The question now lies in the *salience of ethnicity* within the permanent construction-deconstruction-



reconstruction process of identity at the workplace. Identity at the workplace is indeed a very complex notion, especially if situated in global organizations that branch off overseas in multi-ethnic societies, and notwithstanding that the said organization hosts a vast array of trades or professions (cooks, pastry cook, concierges, servers, sommeliers, receptionists, housekeepers etc.).

In our research, empirical evidence shows that “anthropo-technological archipelagos” are forms of organizations that may favour cultural innovation, at least in a multi-ethnic society context such as Malaysia. One may ask the question: is identity formation at the workplace a reflection of social change in the larger society, or do identities constructed within micro-organization nurture the macro social system? (*Adapted from Causer et al., 2005*). Reflexively, may Idris’ cultural innovation be the premise – or the promise – of an upcoming social change? In other words, should the organization be viewed as a societal laboratory, or merely as a microcosm? The size of our qualitative data forces us to caution before drawing any macro-theory conclusions, notwithstanding that the presented data may be only situational or even circumstantial. There is however empirical evidence that a form of “hyper habitus” is taking place within the anthropo-technological archipelagos, to which social actors react differently, either as “subjects” (Touraine 2000) with a life-project or in a more defensive fashion. Paths undertaken within these archipelagos can be either descendant (towards lower social status) or ascendant<sup>12</sup> (higher social status). The ascendant ones are the most interesting as they may create “ethnic innovators” (Barth 1969). From an interactionist viewpoint, these “ethnic innovators” could be the mere result of “alter-casting” by a competitive group. A sociological approach is much more stimulating if we consider that these ethnic innovators are in the process of shaping new forms of social stratification, due to *coordinated interaction* perpetrated by and within organizations.

Melucci’s deep analytical view on culture as an autonomous and driving force in contemporary societies is close to an interactionist viewpoint on identity construct: “*In societies with high information density, production does not involve economic resources alone; it also concerns social relationships, symbols, identities and individual needs... (...) Nor does the market function simply to circulate material goods; it becomes increasingly a system in which symbols are exchanged.*” (Melucci, cited in Friedland & Mohr 2004:5, cited in Crompton 2008:23). In one sentence, Melucci has summarized the mechanics of our “anthropo-technological archipelagos”: social relationships, often strategic, between social actors; symbols, such as design, uniforms and food; reshaped or shifting identities as an outcome of acculturation forces at work, and individual needs such a social ascension through social distinction. In conjunction, what more powerful symbol than food as epitome of a cultural boundary, as food might stand as the fourth cultural marker that ethnicity draws upon, after religion, language, and descent?<sup>13</sup> Here arises the question of

a possible articulation between micro and macro sociology within our plural society context. We do not wish here to elaborate on the ambiguous borderline between micro and macro sociology, as emphasized by Dave Elder-Vass (Elder-Vass 2010:179), and as epistemologically critical as it may be. Let us say for temporary convenience purpose, that we shall equate *micro* with individual agency and *macro* with social structure. The question, again, is: may social actors such as Idris become social agents of change in the macro perspective of social stratification? Rosemary Crompton's statement may be enlightening if replace "styles of consumption" by "interrelations at workplace" and "consumption practices" by "working patterns": "*Under conditions of advanced affluence, styles of consumption and commitment become socially salient as markers and delimiters*" (Pakulski & Waters 1996:156). Thus they argue, *culture and consumption practices have emerged as significant causal forces in the "multiple mosaic of status communities"* (Waters 1996: 80) that characterize 'status conventional' societies." (Cited in Crompton 2008:84).

The micro-sociologically study above shows that at the individual level, ethnic identity formation may take place ranging from being in alignment to the group behaviors or rejecting some group properties in order to place their own self-interest above the calculation of their collective gains. Ethnic identity is fluid and, thus, no group could main itself. In this light, a conflict transformation approach would be a better alternative in managing potential conflict in multi-ethnic society. Thus, it is crucial that we further study how the shift above from a conscious strategic action by individuals at workplace could be turned into a cultural praxis in daily life that would generate non-conflictual ethnic relations and peace in the macro society.

Conflict transformation involves changing the beliefs held and behaviours by parties involved to move toward creating new relationships. Thus, studying ethnicity and its dynamism are crucial to discovering peace. Peace is not a static phenomenon. The discovery of peace is a continuous process of developing structures and relationships to fulfill human needs and well-being (Galtung 2000). Conflict transformation involves changing the beliefs held and behaviours by parties involved to move toward creating new relationships. It is in the understanding of the fluidity of ethnicity and the creating of new social relationship that transforming conflict into peace is an option.

## Endnotes

1. Tenth Malaysia Plan 2011-2015, Chapter 1, p.14.
2. Literally "*sons of the soil*" – authors' note.
3. U.M.N.O.: United Malays National Organisation – the major component of a political Alliance ("Barisan Nasional"), in power since independence from British rule (1957).

4. It is noticeable that this “reverse form of hyphenated citizenship” applies to the other “small majorities” (Malaysian-Chinese and Malaysian-Indian), and not to the Malays (Malaysian Census’ authority did not create a “Malaysian-Malay” category), which tends to confirm the “host society” hypothesis developed by the Malaysian social anthropologist Shamsul Amri Baharuddin cited as “Shamsul AB”).
5. See the popular-cum-controversial book by Ye Lin Sheng: *The Chinese dilemma*, East West Pub. 2003.
6. Wisner, A. 1997. *Anthropotechnologie: vers un monde pluri-centrique*. Octarès.
7. We have taken the liberty to translate it as “anthropotechnological islands”.
8. In Encyclopaedia Universalis [online]: *Microcosme et macrocosme*, article by Hélène Védrine, University of Paris I: retrieved on 29 August 2010.
9. Interviewed on 24th August 2010.
10. Names have been changed throughout this paper.
11. According to Islamic belief, it is a miraculously-generated source of water from Allah, which began thousands of years ago when Ibrahim’s infant son Ismael was thirsty and kept crying for water ; he was kicking at the sandy ground when water gushed.
12. From a Bourdieusan perspective: in terms of social distinction.
13. To paraphrase Sinisa Malesevic, in *The sociology of ethnicity* (2004:4).

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## **Biographical Notes**

Eric Olmedo-Panal is currently the deputy-director of the Institute for Tourism, Hospitality and Food Studies at the University of Toulouse, France. He is also a PhD candidate in Sociology from the same university, and is affiliated to the research laboratory CERTOP (French acronym standing for Centre for Research on Work, Organizations and Power), a mixed research unit under the tutelage of the French National Scientific Research Centre (CNRS). Eric Olmedo-Panal has an extensive working experience abroad in hospitality line as well as in academia. Apart from Northern and Southern America, he has also worked several years in a private higher learning institution in Malaysia. Among his publications are studies on work processes in hospitality industry and studies of ethnicities and identities at the workplace [email: olmedopanal@yahoo.com].

Mansor Mohd Noor is a Professor in the Sociology of Ethnic Relations. At present is attached as a Principal Research Fellow cum Head of the Cluster of Ethnicity and the Workplace at the Institute of Ethnic Studies (KITA), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. He obtained his bachelor degree from USM, Master degree from University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand and Ph.D. from University of Bristol, United Kingdom [email: mansormohdnoor@yahoo.com].