

Lat's Comics and the Articulation of the Malaysian Cultural Landscape

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ABSTRACT

Over the past few years, there has been some renewed serious interest in comics in terms of the humour and narrative aspect. However not much can be said of comics as a representation of the cultural mores of the community. This study looks at how a local comic writer frames his subjective viewpoints, and how he stages them graphically and visually in his comics. Using Rodriguez and Dimitrova's (2011) four-tiered model, this paper sets out to analyse how Lat frames culture in his comics in 5 selected comic strips culled from online sources. The findings indicated that Lat has a tendency to frame his cartoons in terms of a Malaysianised landscape. Of interest is the way in which he portrays the Malaysian as a melting pot of multi-cultural community through a sharp and yet seemingly tongue-in-cheek portrayal of their values and behaviours.

Keywords: comics; culture; framing; visual language; representations

INTRODUCTION

The importance of culture lies in the fact that it is a link between people and their value systems. A community gains a character and a personality of its own, an identity so to speak through its cultural values. Hence, the bond which brings the people of a community together are the customs and traditions that the people of a community follow, the festivals they celebrate, the kind of clothing they wear, the food they eat, and most importantly, the cultural values they adhere to, bind them together. In a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural community like Malaysia, the practice has been that of “cultural borrowing” (Shamsul 2004, p. 13) where each ethnic group borrows certain elements from each other's culture such as food and style of cooking as well as way of dressing. Thus, it is this scenario of constant integration that resulted in the emergence of the Malaysian form of multicultural synergies, and this uniqueness is often depicted by local cartoonists in their comics, notably Lat and C.W. Kee (resident cartoonist of *Kee's World* in *The Star* newspaper).

In Malaysia, the emergence of locally-drawn comics in English first gained acceptance with Datuk Mohammad Nor Khalid's works. Better known as Lat, his comic strips were first published in *The New Straits Times*, a local newspaper. His work is garnered from his personal experiences of his life, where he narrates facts of rural life and sometimes compares them to the life in the cities. His trademark is his ability to inject a humorous perspective into whatever he draws – often in the exaggerated form found in cartoonist

impressions. From newspaper he branched into books; one of his well-known narrative cartoon is his stories of *Kampung Boy* (Countryside boy). His comics are rather well-known and perhaps memorable for their funny, charming and witty characterisations. However, what makes his work of significance is that his comics provide an interesting window unto itself as a site of sociocultural contestations in many pluralistic societies. The visual constructions of Malaysian people in his works are multidimensional. Stock or stereotypical characters or caricatures can be gleaned quite easily in his works and it is important, as far as visual representation and communication are concerned, Hence, what made Lat's comics significant is his ability to paint a realistic cultural landscape of Malaysia that is an amalgamation of diverse ethnicity.

Much of scholastic works on comics dealt with subjective narration (Driest 2005), (Badman 2010). Only recently, was comics studied in terms of relationship between language and culture (Elmes 2013). Visual framing has not been well-explored in terms of content. Abella and Reyes (2014) dealt with Lat's from the point of political humour. Neil Cohn (2005, 2011, 2012, 2014) has done much research on the cognitive process of framing, but not from a socio-cultural perspective. Although there have been studies of Lat's cartoons in Malaysia, none has been looked at the way Lat framed his cartoons. Raihanah (2009) looks at multiculturalism, whereas Chang (2014) analyses Lat's cartoons using Reception Theory and Reader Response Theory. Chang's findings revealed "that Lat's cartoon had successfully traced the transformation of the cultural landscape in Malaysia" (2014, p. 51). This paper however, looks at the way the socio-cultural contestations are reflected and represented in selected Lat's cartoons. It explores the manner in which Lat stages the cultural landscape that articulates the Malaysian ideologies as seen through his eyes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

DEFINING COMICS

Comics are easily recognisable. Often found in newspaper, comic strips provide light reading and entertainment. However, they are more difficult to define. First of all, their characters can be drawn in the form of cartoons, i.e., exaggerated forms, or even and lifelike and truthful to real-life. Basically, comics contain panels, gutters, balloons and captions; and they are often in some form of narrative, that is, they often have a story to tell. Will Eisner describe comics as "sequential art" (Eisner 1985) i.e., images which are organized accordingly and sequentially in order to produce meaning out of them. Scott McCloud later modified the definition as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (McCloud 1993, p. 9). Comics may or may include text, but, what is significant is the information and how it is narrated. Mario Saraceni added to the definition, as containing "both words and pictures, texts organised into sequential units, graphically separated from each other" (2003, p. 5). These definitions focus on one aspect: *sequence* – meaning a string of images that are read one after another to produce meaning. The uniqueness of comics lies in the way the "linguistic and picture elements interact with each other" (Ibid). Saraceni also points out 2 aspects in comics: the 'functional' and 'content' components. The functional component connects different parts of the story together, for example as indicators of space and time; while the content is seen in the panels where in each panel single instants of actions are frozen moments containing certain pieces of dialogue that represents a whole event (Saraceni 2003). Hence, as a presentation in both words and pictures they have the capacity to create

representations of concrete entities images in our minds through what is read or visualized. As social realism, meanings are constructed through how the pictures and events are framed.

There are some key elements in understanding comics. First, we have to decide where the comics are posted/printed. That will determine the nature of the narrations/stories and the messages. The characters in the comic strips may be drawn in the form of realism or in an exaggerated manner, i.e. as caricatures. Another element in contemporary comics is humour. In its simplest sense, humour is “something that makes a person laugh or smile” (Ross, 1998: 1). Humour in comics usually comes through exaggerated drawings, in terms of physical actions, gestures, or even features and expressions of faces. to make a point. It may be in the form of representations of values or even deeper connotations meant as subtle or direct comment on the social mores of the time. Often, visual representations are made through humour drawn from caricatures depicting stereotypical types. “There may be a target for the humour – a person, an institution or a set of beliefs – where the underlying purpose is deadly serious” (Ross 1998, p. 2).

This brings us to the next important part of comics and comics reading – the role of the reader. If we follow that comics are narrative pieces of discourse, then it becomes a process of meaning-making between the reader and the comics. Comic reading does not exist in a vacuum (Lim 2010); it is a pictorial form of storytelling, a historical recap; and the reader brings along with him/her a subjective interpretation of the story in the comics, based on the socio-cultural milieu that that he/she belongs to.

There are 3 perspectives in reading comics – character, setting and situation. Thus, the way the characters are drawn, the background or setting for the event, and the event itself. It is through these three that meanings are made. Hence, each piece of comic strip is a frame representing the society he lives in, the values and attitudes that form the cultural backbone of the story the comic writer is telling. In other words, each comic situates the thinking of the people at that time the story is told.

FRAMING

According to Goffman (1974), when one sees an event or occurrence, he tends to put his framework or schemata of interpretation to provide meaning to it. His argument is that humans frame things in order to organize their understanding of an issue or event as a criterion for future action(s). In frame analysis, a picture frame (the structure) is metaphorically used to understand their pictures (the context). Hence, ‘framing’ means how one organizes one’s own social experience. It is defined as “a quality of communication that causes others to accept one meaning over another” (Fairhurst & Sarr 1996, p. 11). When this theory is applied to media, the selection of frames is a deliberate process. Entman points out that in framing “some aspects of a perceived reality” are selected to “make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (Entman 1993, p. 52). Accordint to Entman, analysis of frames conveys the particular way in which a text can influence human thinking. This correlates with Goffman’s description of social framework in which there is an intervention that controls how events are interpreted. It entails attempts to influence social judgments, decisions, and behavior through the way relevant information is presented or questions posed.

However, in Media studies visuals are also a language. They have their vocabulary, grammar, and syntax. According to Ausburn and Ausburn, visual elements “such as colour, light and shade, line, and placement of individual items serve as the vocabulary which combine to form the entire visual message” when they are placed as a picture (1978, p. 291). When several pictures are arranged in a certain way in order to make sense, they then tell a

visual story. In this respect, through the creations of the artist, the expressive use of the face and body can “transcend race, words, space, and even time to communicate both cultural and personal identities” (Ausburn and Ausburn 1978, p. 292). In this respect, to perform visual framing, certain aspects of a perceived reality is selected and highlighted above others, making them salient, meaningful, and memorable, so that certain attributions, interpretations, or evaluations of the issue or item described are visually promoted. Thus framing in comics, involves deliberate selections in the depiction of the characters, the choice of settings and the staging of situations to influence the readers.

In other words, cultural framing uses a visual language that constitutes a deliberate selection of the aspects or activities while excluding or downplaying others with some form of agenda setting in mind (Lippa 1994). For instance, activities that depict one aspect of village life may be used as a tool to promote integration through knowledge and understanding. The resultant interpretation could be directed towards conforming or aligning with to approved or expected modes of thinking. In other words, language and images do not merely “name” or passively describe reality, but they create and shape it (Fairhurst & Sarr 1996). In doing so, it promotes particular attitudes and behaviors and discourages others.

Although there is a shift towards a more active selection of frames, which dominates media studies in the 21st century, until recently, framing research has centered mostly on the evaluations of media texts, framing of visuals has remained relatively unexplored. Rodriguez and Dimitrova (2011) examined visual news discourse and proposed a system of identifying and analyzing visual frames, either in terms of content or from the perspective of audiences’ perception. Their four-tiered model first, analysed visuals as denotative systems, and then look at visuals as stylistic-semiotic systems. In step 3, the visuals are analysed as connotative systems. Finally, they looked at visuals as ideological representations.

METHODOLOGY

This study is an analysis of how a renown local Malaysian writer, Datuk Mohammad Nor Khalid, better known as Lat, frames cultural norms and behaviours of Malaysians through his comic drawings. As one of the pioneer of Malaysian comics in English, Lat’s works were selected from his books and online. The rationale for such selection for this paper is to showcase how he frames what is typically Malaysian through his personal observations. However, not all aspects can be analysed as he is relatively arbitrary in selecting what he choose to frame in his comics. His subjective viewpoint is of note in this paper because he represents cartoonists who graphically and visually state a realistic case for a multi-ethnic, multicultural scenario that is reflective of the Malaysian community. The study culled comics from various online sources and selected five comic strips for the study. The selection was deliberate, each chosen to portray the elements most prominent in Lat’s depiction of Malaysian cultural landscape: two depicting village life versus town life, and another three are stand-alone pictures representing his views of how women are perceived and framed through their cultural identities. All the comic strips were selected from online images:

- i. Figure 1: Prayer Time. Source: Dato' Lat Digital Library: Kampung Boy
Source: <http://datolatdigitalibrary.blogspot.my/>
- ii. Figure 2: Lunch break. Source: <https://www.pinterest.com/jamxliu/lat/>
- iii. Figure 3: Mothers, a collection of three pictures of mothers of three different ethnic groups. Source: <http://www.etawau.com/HTML/AirAsia/Lat.htm>

FRAMEWORK OF ANALYSIS

In eliciting the subjective interpretation of the comics, this paper draws upon Rodriguez and Dimitrova's (2011) four-tiered model of identifying and analyzing visual framing. Their four-tiered visual framing extends the analytical process from the tangible to the abstract and interpretive.

- i. The first level looks at visuals as denotative systems, i.e., who and what was being depicted, including any textual descriptions that goes with the visuals
- ii. The second level analyses visuals as stylistic-semiotic systems, where and what type of stylistic conventions were used, the semiotic settings, actions and poses.
- iii. At the third level visuals are analysed as connotative systems, assuming that there are ideas or concepts attached to each person thing, or place. Frames evolved from examining culture-bound interpretations of these.
- iv. The fourth level analyses visuals as ideological representations, the “whys” behind the representations. Analysing frames at this level looks for answers to questions like “What interests are being served by these representations? Whose voices are being heard? What ideas dominate?”

ROLE OF RESEARCHER

Since the focus of this paper is Lat's comics, and his drawings are culled from the cultural perspectives of a Malaysian. The researcher has to rely on his/her subjective knowledge as an insider, i.e., as a Malaysian to interpret his frames. However, this interpretation has to be counter verified by another insider who is of the same ethnic background, especially when it relates to cultural mores of say, one of a Malay or a Chinese background.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

THE PRAYER SESSION

Prayers forms part of the necessary part of an ethnic muslim Malay's life, and the children are not exempted from it. In the Malay community in the village, parents would send their children to religious class as part of their obligatory practice under a religious teacher. In the following comic, Lat draws upon his childhood experiences as a village boy with his fellow friends when they go to these classes. The following depicts a typical scene where the children are praying at the teacher's house.



Source: Dato' Lat Digital Library: Kampung Boy

FIGURE 1. Prayer Time

The comic strips in Figure 1 portrays the life in village where children around 4 to 12 years old are sent to the religious class. This class is usually held in the afternoon after school time, mostly at 3pm and ended at 5pm. The children will learn how to read Arabic and recite the Koran. As seen in Figure 1, for these classes, these children, the boys will wear clothings appropriate to the event - *kain pelikat* (a piece of cloth that is wrapped around the waist), t-shirt, and *songkok* (a black cylindrical hat). This particular comic strip is made up of 2-tiered frames.

Frame 1: Getting Ready



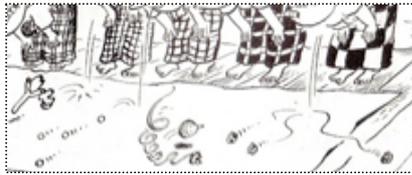
In Frame 1, one's focus is drawn to the caption on the top left of the frame, which says "On this day the ustaz was teaching us the "rukuk" – bowing during prayer". Two words are used that are cultural: *rukuk* and *ustaz*. *Rukuk* is an Arabic word which carries the meaning of bowing down. In performing the *rukuk*, first, one bows down with back is bent over and hands on knees. It is followed by a short *Qur'an* (a Muslim's holy book) recital. The second word is *ustaz*. A *ustaz* in the Malay community is someone who is knowledgeable in Islam. Such a person is depicted as a religious individual who has the credibility to teach *Qur'an* and religious rituals deemed to be mandatory for their day-to-day practice. In the village community, the role of a *ustaz* is that of a religious teacher for both children and adults including *Qur'an* recital classes for adults who want to read the *Qur'an*.

In terms of dressing, five boys are seen wearing *kain pelikats*, t-shirts, and *songkoks* which are deemed the appropriate attire for a boy when they pray. The boys are shown standing side by side, in one line with a mat on the floor in front of them. It is also a part of the prayer ritual when there is more than one man praying, they should place themselves in a line facing the mat, with a leader in front of them to lead their prayer. In the first frame, the boys are drawn with their arms raised to their ear level, signaling the start of the praying ritual.

Frame 2: The Bowing



In Frame 2, a series of toys and playing paraphernalia were shown dropping onto the mat as the boys bowed low – marbles, spinning tops, and sling-shots. These items were graphically shown falling from a variety of places as they bowed – from shirt pockets, under their *songkoks*. The graphic description is shown in the use of 'lines' to depict movements from where the items originate (i.e., shirt pockets) to where they fell, and the way the items move as they fell onto the mat. This comic sense is further emphasized by the horrified expressions drawn on the faces of the boys – big round eyes directed towards the face of the *ustaz* as their toys emerge from their hidden places, and the accompanying surprised look depicted by frown lines and an open mouth drawn on the *ustaz's* face.



Caption 1: Movement of the toys
 Note the lines that shows mere dropping of the sling shot and those that shows how the top and the marbles rolls on the mat



Caption 2: Facial Expressions – the boys
 Note: Three lines drawn behind the heads indicate downward movement. The emphasis here is in the rounded circles for eyes and the raised eyeballs to indicate the direction of their attention



Caption 3: Facial Expression - the *ustaz*
 Note: The *ustaz* (represented by the skull cap) is drawn as a close-up to focus on the face to highlight surprise (the opened mouth with the tongue halfway out); displeasure (the 2 vertical lines at the forehead) and the ‘v’ lines in between the eyes. The lopsided way in which he wears his spectacles is stereotypical to represent a sense of conformism.

From their looks of fear on their faces, it implies that these items were hidden, and not supposed to be brought into the prayer session. Knowledge of the background of village life will aid an understanding of this situation. First of all, this prayer event happens at about 4 in the afternoon. Children are allowed out for prayers. After that the kids will want to play. However, within this scenario if they were to go home to collect their toys, they will be grounded by their parents. Therefore, in order to evade such a situation, these kids will bring their toys out and hope to extend their hours outside from payer time into playing time. Hence, they will hide their toys on their body to escape the eagle eyes of their elders (and also the *ustaz*) for fear of discovery. Lat has managed to frame the issue of pray versus play via a comic and humorous depiction of a *rukuk* scene.

In Figure 1, the prayer is symbolic of the Malay villagers’ way of life. The setting of this prayer session places importance to the role of religion in their everyday life as this is a daily ritual for the boys. However, by adding the humorous event of the toys falling topsyturvy onto the mat, the juxtaposition of the serious versus comic, Lat makes a subtle statement – the realism of little children’s world. In the eyes of the little boys they want to play, and they are aware of what they should not do during prayer times – bringing frivolous items into what is considered a hallowed occasion. It is this awareness that is captured in the expressions on their faces and also the *ustaz*’s surprise when their hidden toys are exposed. The horror and fear in their expressions are their fear of punishment for their misdemeanors.

LUNCH TIME



Source: <https://www.pinterest.com/jamxliu/lat/>

FIGURE 2. Lunch break

In Figure 2, Lat provides a familiar cultural scenario of everyday life worlds in the urban setting. As a contrast to Figure 1, which is the epitome of village life, Lat's framing of the Malaysian urban culture life is staged at the place where working people go for their mid-day meals. The deliberate staging of a typical restaurant that serves Malay food emphasizes the common routine during lunch hour. However, what was said in the conversational balloons were that which was used to frame the current concern regarding food and health concerns.

The two-tier sequence of frame clusters in Figure 2 is read clockwise, from left to right. Figure 2 shows two working men wearing appropriate attire for work, choosing food for their lunch during their lunch break. In Malaysia colleagues at workplace usually have their lunch together at restaurants in the city. Lat brought in apparently two male colleagues in characteristic white-collared outfit staring at the array of food in a restaurant. The narration of events comically portrayed a taller man telling the shorter man the reasons not to eat certain food. A detailed account of the narrative per frame is presented in Figure 3 below.



Frame 1:

The two working men are seen outside around lunch time which is at 1pm. The frame shows them heading to find a place where they can have their lunch for the break. The clothes are stereotypical of the working people – the usual long-sleeved white shirt and pants matched with a neck-tie over black shiny shoes. Another stereotypical portrayal is the short-haired and almost-bald heads of these 2 working people. This simple staging with a clock tower with the clock hour set 1 in the background both denotes and connotes the mid-day lunch hour of an urban working day.



Frame 2:

Arriving at the restaurant, the shorter man eyes the food in front of him and expresses his wish to eat big chili crab to his taller friend. The taller friend remarked that chili crab has high cholesterol, implying his friend not to eat.



Frame 3:

In this frame, the shorter man says he wants to eat big prawns for their lunch. Again, the taller man disagrees and tells the shorter man that prawns has high cholesterol content.



Frame 4:

The shorter man tells the taller man in this frame that he'll be having mutton was rejected immediately for the same reason – high cholesterol content.



Frame 5:

After hearing the reason why he could not eat the mutton, the shorter man chooses to have 'kerang' or cockles but the taller man tells him cockles contain mercury.



Frame 6:

The shorter man then is shown moving towards beef rendang but as usual, his taller friend tells him that beef rendang contains fat.



Frame 7:

The final frame of the comic shows the two men back to the point where the taller man asks the shorter man what he wants to eat.

From Frames 3 to 6, the use of close-ups emphasizes the intensity in selecting and rejecting the types of dishes. A point is made through the use of words like ‘cholesterol’, ‘fatty’, and ‘mercury’ highlighting the culture of healthy food and concerns dietary intake – a strong connotation of social anxieties over illnesses related to eating habits and choices. In Frame 7 The irony is articulated in the question *what do you want to eat?* In the first comic frame, the taller man first asks: “What do you want to eat?” After a round of discussions in which he vetoes all the suggestions on grounds of health concerns, the narrative comically comes back to: “Well, what do you want to eat?” Here it is clear that Lat is mocking the contradiction of what to eat versus what not to eat. Looking at the comic narration, one can come to a conclusion that there’s nothing to eat despite the array of selections in front of the two men. This comic strip also frames the paradox of Malaysian attitude towards food. On one hand they love good food. On the other, there is this health paranoia not to eat certain kinds of food on health grounds.

REPRESENTATIONS OF GENDER – MOTHERS

Cartoons provide an interesting window unto itself as a site of sociocultural contestations in many pluralistic societies. A gendered representation of the local ethnic groups is one of the favourite sampling of everyday politics of identity, and this has been featured rather steadily in Lat’s works. The visual constructions of Malaysian women in his works are multidimensional which may point to his sense of awareness of gendered social differences. His comics however, are rather well-known and perhaps memorable for their funny, charming and witty characterisations. Lat appears to be rather fond in framing Malaysian women in certain visualisation which may possibly reflect his own observations, understanding or social literacies towards them. Stock or stereotypical characters or caricatures can be gleaned quite easily in his works and it is important, as far as visual representation and communication are concerned, that their ethnic or sociocultural constructions be closely scrutinised. One should never forget that framing cultural or ethnic identity can also be informed by the artist’s or cartoonist’s own idiosyncrasies and biases towards the subject of, ironically, his inspiration. Motherhood is a popular visual rhetorics among Malaysian cartoonist fraternity and Lat’s comics is quite well known his rather popular construction of the mother-child-in-the-kampung discourse. The following representations of motherhood, 3 frames depict Malaysian mothers/motherhood will be critically analysed denotatively, connotatively and ideologically.



Chinese Mother

A Chinese mother in a modern knee-length dress is depicted as carrying her children’s school bags and water bottle with one hand while holding an umbrella for them with the other. Already sweating under such burden, she walks her son and daughter to their school and frantically tries to shield them from the afternoon sun. This frame depicts the ideological Chinese thinking of the role of a mother; that no matter how harsh the conditions, the children’s welfare are paramount, and worth her sacrifices – seen in the way she lugs their school bags while they walked ahead seemingly unconcerned of their mother’s exertions on their behalf.



Indian mother



Malay mother

Indian Mother

An Indian mother in a bright *saree* Indian outfit – a short blouse worn with a long wrap-around cloth slung over the left shoulder, sling bag and bangles in both hands goes shopping with her toddler. She holds her child in one hand and a shopping bag in the other. From their facial expressions – eyes and mouths – something has apparently caught their interest. Lat has captured the essence of an Indian mother in her expression– either in shopping or visiting; the child is fiercely and strictly guarded.

Malay Mother

A gleeful and smiling Malay mother in traditional *baju kurung* (long blouse with a wrap-around long skirt), *sarong* (wrap-around long skirt) and headscarf as she brings out six cups of coffee in a tray. Her very young children are standing in her way looking rather perplexed at (presumably) their guests. Through the staging of the tray of coffee/tea, Lat has visually framed the Malay mother as the epitome of a big-hearted hostess who is often openhanded with her refreshments. It is also not surprising to see young children tagging around her as she goes about her tasks as a mother-housewife-cum-hostess. The wide smile on her face denotes willingness to serve, and captures the compliant nature of a typical village mother.

Source: <http://www.etawau.com/HTML/AirAsia/Lat.htm>

FIGURE 3. Mothers

The frames of ‘motherhood’ above have been culled intentionally from different comic strips. Lat’s comics have come a long way in providing its readers multiple windows into the rich and multilayered facades of our multiethnic society. He translates his experiences gained through years of observing Malaysian social and cultural commonalities and peculiarities through his subtle but deft manipulation of stereotypical sociocultural signifiers. This perspective should not be understood as an attempt to implicate Lat, his cartoons or motherhood as ‘ethnicised’ because it is quite unnecessary and unethical. Historically, Lat’s cartoons have never been labelled nor stigmatised as divisive or racist, to put such notion to rest. Such a perspective is no more necessary than to explore his aesthetic and comic trajectories which he strategically deploys to rhetorically capture the essence of motherhood within a pluralistic social setting. Thus, a close semiotic reading of the sociocultural signifiers involved in each frame has generally informed us rather interestingly connotative and ideological insights on mother and motherhood in Lat’s comics.

Connotatively speaking, the seemingly ‘ethnic’ perspective of Malaysian mothers should not be regarded derogatorily simply because the ethnically, the sociocultural signifiers are congruent with the respective sociocultural context. What this means is that Lat did not rupture the localised sociocultural ‘collocations’ in which one familiar with the visuality of Malaysian realism, would come to expect: a Chinese mother would be wearing a dress, to indicate the epitome of a ‘modern mum’ instead of a *samfoo* (the Chinese version of the blouse and pants). Neither would she be wearing a *baju kurung* (long blouse with a wrap-around long skirt); or, for that matter, a Malay mother would not be wearing *saree* (Indian outfit – a short blouse worn with a long wrap-around cloth slung over the left shoulder) in her kitchen. These doting mothers are framed at the one of the most important phases of their lives, that is, attending to the needs of their dependent children who will eventually follow the path to their own ‘independence’ as set by the nation.

Ideologically speaking, as evident from the frames, a mother’s hands are literally ‘full’ because they are rarely ‘free’ from catering both to the subject and object surrounding their sociocultural practice as ‘Mothers’. This is ideologically speaking, a very refreshing, reassuring and spiritually liberating recognition to the natural agency of women as mothers irrespective of ethnicity, creed and religion. The notion of agency is central in revisionist stances today across ideological approaches and critical paradigms in social sciences and humanities. Lat’s actually speaks highly but cryptically of this as cartoonists do, through their caricatures. His genuine regards for their energy, perseverance, kindness and their central role in nurturing the young in a continuous nation- building process.

REPRESENTATION OF CULTURE IN LAT'S COMICS

STEREOTYPICAL OUTFITS

Firstly, the culture is captured in Lat's comics through the appearance of characters whereby it can be clearly seen through the way they dress. By observing their clothes, it is not hard to recognize which culture they belong to and specifically, which particular type of culture they are from. The data from the findings has demonstrated representation of culture of religion, culture of village life, and culture of town environment in Malaysia through the characters' clothes. The boys from Figure 1 wear appropriate clothes for prayer. Also, their clothes are considered a part of culture of kampong life whereby *kain pelikat*, which is a type of clothing like *sarong* (wrap-around skirt) but usually worn by Malay men in villages and comes in checkered patterns – is a common outfit in a Malay village environment. In Malaysia, Malays are Muslims. Therefore, their cultural dressing combines both aspects – traditional as well as that which is considered appropriate in a religious sense, and hence, are stereotype outfit of a male younger member of the Malay community. On the other hand, the stereotype dressing of the office workers is illustrated in Figure 2 – stripped or dark long pants, light shirts and tie to show stereotypical norms of adult male dressing in towns.

SETTING IN COMICS

The cultural element is framed through the setting of the events; that of a village, as well as that of a religious environment. In Malaysia, lunch break for most offices starts at 1 pm in the afternoon and often, employees go out together to enjoy lunch at restaurants outside of their workplace. The culture of town people are seen in the lunch-break episode whereby people take their lunch outside, and are seen selecting their food and place to eat. This is set with reference to media generated concerns on healthy lifestyles through watching over what you eat.

HOBBY

Cultures are also represented through items that are shown in Lat's comics such as toys and food. The *rukuk* scene in Figure 1 is also another way of framing the village/rural norms and attitudes. Even though Malaysians are exposed to technology, gems like traditional toys can still be seen in the villages. Traditional toys such as spinning tops, marbles, and bottle lids that fell from the boys' clothes are common in the village community signify the culture of village life. They are inexpensive toys that can be bought at a very cheap price in the village. Handmade toys like spinning tops and sling-shots are handmade. They also symbolize the elements of group or collective values especially for boys. These toys are the cultural artifacts of Malay children in a village, illustrating how children in the villages pass their time – with friends. Children in villages often play with their friends in the afternoon by carrying those toys around so they can play together later and also have a match among themselves. They are meant to be played in matches with their friends in the evening – indicating group unity, camaraderie, a sense of playing with friends, not meant as an individualist endeavor.

FOOD

Visual image of food has strong connotations. They can provide “a valuable perspective into different aspects of their personal and cultural identities” Khajeh, Imran Ho and Tan (2014, p. 33). Thus the array of dishes illustrated in Figure 2 represents a Malaysian culinary variety often served at local restaurants. Beef *rending* (a kind of dry curried beef), chilli crab, *kerang*

(cockles) are examples of common local Malaysian dishes. The emphasis on repetitions of the word ‘cholesterol’, and coupled with words like ‘fatty’, and ‘mercury’ represents health fears that are general to the community.

CONCLUSION

Language reflects the value and belief of a society member (Elmes 2013). The articulation of Malaysian social and cultural identities and everyday-defined realities is a creative process informed by the cartoonist’s idiosyncratic framing. Lat’s comics recall and render various nomenclatures of men, women and communities in motions through his keen ethnographic eyes. Thus, his renditions and rhetorics actually bear the rich imprints of Malaysian cultural heritage and social identities. The ‘strokes’ of his pen illustrate that a fair amount of creative and critical thinking are indispensable and that his idea is designed, mapped and deployed in a connotative network of social semiotics. The quotidian landscape of the nation and its people are marked by the cartoonist’s manipulation of signifiers that his readers can almost instantaneously relate to because the works embeds and signify our cultural commonalities and specifics. Lat’s speaks to his countrymen in his iconic visual language where his intellectuality, wit and insight; love and sympathy for the peculiarities, orthodoxies, stereotypes that have long defined his works. And as our analyses have succinctly tried to show, the comics have become the window to understand our own differentiated identities, practices, literacies and discourses as Malaysians.

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ONLINE SOURCES FOR LAT'S CARTOONS

Figure 1: Dato' Lat Digital Library: Kampung Boy

<http://datolatdigitallibrary.blogspot.my/>

Figure 2: <https://www.pinterest.com/jamxliu/lat/>

Figure 3: <http://www.etawau.com/HTML/AirAsia/Lat.html>