

THE STORY OF THE KERIS AS AN INTERCULTURAL MISCOMMUNICATION ISSUE

ABDUL MUATI AHMAD

Universiti Putra Malaysia, Associate Professor, Department of Communication, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia
Tel: +6019-2294644 Fax:+603-89439914 E-mail: abmuati@putra.upm.edu.my

HAMISAH HASAN

Universiti Putra Malaysia, Senior Lecturer, Department of Communication, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia.
Tel: +6012-3717054 Fax:+603-89439914 E-mail: hamisah@fbmk.upm.edu.my

ABSTRACT

During the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) General Assembly in 2005, its youth wing leader Hishammuddin Tun Hussein Onn was shown by the media waving a keris (a traditional Malay dagger) as a symbol to defend the Malay supremacy and to threaten those who opposed the Malay special rights. There were mixed reactions from the public to such a notorious act. While his party comrades commended such heroic action, the act has also drawn uproar from other races especially the Chinese. A year later, in the following assembly Hishammuddin defended his usage of the keris, which to him was meant "to motivate the Malays". However, the Chinese politicians declared themselves unconvinced by Hishammuddin's explanations. Even the youth chief of the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), an allied party to UMNO, affirmed that Hishammuddin's act was inappropriate and insensitive to multiracial setup of the country. Nonetheless, another analyst stated that "A keris does not make people uncomfortable. It is the gesture and brandishing that makes people uncomfortable". The unsettling feelings by all parties may have occurred as a result of misinterpretation or miscommunication amongst the communicators from different cultural background.

Keywords: communication, culture, intercultural communication, nonverbal communication; symbolic interactionism

INTRODUCTION

Story describes an event that occurred or something that happened to someone, it is either explained in writing or oral. Generally the function of a story is to entertain and as Kleiner (Kleiner, 2001) explained that stories are powerful because the information passed by a story is better retained. Through stories, communication process occurred and information obtained. Such effort

will keep society informed. Story can in fact persuade and create behavioral change. Clearly, stories are an important cultural expression.

When actress Cameron Diaz visited Peru she was seen toting around a green bag with the words, "Serve the people," written in Chinese. The slogan was made famous by the then Chinese Communist leader, Mao Zedong. The slogan evokes memories of the Maoist Shining Path insurgency of that had fought the government in the 1980s and early 1990s in a bloody conflict that left nearly 70,000 people dead. While the bag was marketed as fashion accessories, but to the Peruvian it was perceived as insensitive act and also offending (The Star online, June 25, 2007).

The same thing happened involving the keris issue in Malaysia. The incident of the *keris* brandishing took place in 2005 some six years ago, yet today the particular incident is still being used to ridicule the then UMNO's youth leader. For instance Tony Pua from the opposition party has referred to Hishamuddin Tun Hussein Onn as *Kerismuddin* with reference to the particular incident. While the incident may have happened quite some time ago yet its impact may be long lasting. This anecdote shows that as important as verbal communication is in social interaction, nonverbal communication is also as important if not more important than verbal communication. Nonverbal communication plays a central role in human behavior and it is important to recognize that communication frequently involves more than a verbal message. Apparently a significant amount of communication interaction that goes on between people is non-verbal. Briefly, nonverbal communication is a process of sending and receiving messages without words. Such messages can be communicated through bodily movement or gestures, posture, facial expression and eye gaze, object communication such as clothing, hairstyles or even architecture, symbols and info graphics, features of speech such as intonation and other paralinguistic features of speech such as voice quality, emotion and speaking style.

As clarified by Ebesu and Burgoon (Ebesu, Burgoon, 2009), nonverbal communication mean behaviors that are typically sent with intend, are used with regularity among members of a social community, are typically and have consensually recognizable interpretations. Nonverbal communication can occur through any sensory channel such as through sight, sound, smell, touch or taste, and at times through the combination of several of these channels. Nonverbal communication can be conscious and purposeful or unconscious. Additionally, nonverbal communication comes in many forms at the same time. For example, a person's dress, tone of voice, facial expressions, and movements all contribute to the communication going on in a certain situation. Thus, the nonverbal communication is culture bound. Communicators from different cultural make-up use different nonverbal communication cues to send and receive messages.

Durkel (Durkel, 2008) stressed that object cues are some concrete piece of a routine that is used to represent that routine. For example, a sword may be an object cue for aggression or fight. Certain people use certain objects as symbols in their communication. Symbols are representations of an event, action, object, person, or place that can be used to communicate about the event, action, object, person, or place. He has further added that symbols may start as cues and signals. If a receiver recognizes a cue out of context, that cue may be acting as a symbol. If a receiver uses a signal or an object cue to communicate about an event, action, object, person or place out of context, the receiver may be using that signal or cue as a symbol. The more a symbol resembles what it represents, the more concrete that symbol is. The less a symbol resembles what it represents, the more abstract that symbol is. An example of a concrete symbol would be a sword to represent a fight or conflict. A less concrete (or more abstract) symbol would be a small line drawing of a sword. The spoken phrase "time to fight" would be the most abstract because those sounds do not look, smell, or feel like the action of fighting.

TYPES OF NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

Berger (Berger 2008) discussed some of the most common types of nonverbal communication. They are object communication namely *haptics*, *oculesics*, and *vocalics*. Object communication refers to objects that were worn or used by communicators and served as something that were able to tell receivers about that particular person. The most common form of object communication was attire. The types of attire that people wear were often used to assess, accurately or inaccurately in assessing their personality traits. Social groups often use a common form of clothing to set themselves apart from other, presumably unaligned social groups. Object communication extends beyond clothing to other bodily adornments, such as wedding rings or bind to indicate marital status. Other examples of bodily adornments include tattoos, and piercings, Also included in object communication is anything used as a status symbol. Similarly the dagger called, "keris," in a traditional Malay society served as a status symbol of its bearer besides its function as a combat weapon.

Another aspect of nonverbal communication is haptics which refers to the touching. Touches that can be defined as communication include handshakes, holding hands, kissing (cheek, lips, hand), back tap, "high-five", shoulder pat, brushing arm, etc. Each of these acts produces nonverbal messages as to the touching person's intentions and feelings. Reciprocally, the actions created feelings in the receiver, whether positive or negative.

Oculesics however refers to the role of eyes in nonverbal communication. This includes the study of eye gaze and pupil dilation. Studies have found that people use their eyes to indicate their interest and with more than the frequently recognized actions of winking and slight movement of the eyebrows. Eye contact is an event when two people look at each other's eyes at the same time. It is a form of nonverbal communication that has a significant influence on social behavior. Frequency and interpretation of eye contact vary between cultures and species. On the contrary, eye aversion is the avoidance of eye contact. The two acts namely eye contact and facial expressions provided important social and emotional information. People, perhaps without consciously doing so, probe each other's eyes and faces for positive or negative mood signs. In fact some researchers have been interested in examining such behaviors.

Another micro-level nonverbal behavior that has caused high interest among researchers was the vocalic, a study of nonverbal cues of the voice. Elements of voice such as tone, pitch, loudness, duration, intonation and tempo, voice quality, speaking style and speech clarity, and accent can all give off nonverbal cues. For example one's voice and voice patterns may significantly contributed to explain nonverbal cues about the sender of message. Besides sounds, verbal language or other forms of communication, the body language is also included as nonverbal communication. It is a broad term for forms of communication using body movements or gestures instead of, or in addition to, sounds, verbal language, or other forms of communication. In everyday speech the term is most often applied to body language that is considered involuntary, even though the distinction between voluntary and involuntary body language is often hard to distinguish. Voluntary body language refers to movement, gestures and poses intentionally made by a person (i.e., conscious smiling, hand movements and imitation). It can apply to many types of soundless communication. Generally, movement made with full or partial intention and an understanding of what it communicates can be considered voluntary. Involuntary body language quite often takes the form of facial expression, and has therefore been suggested as a means to identify the emotions of a person with whom one is communicating. Body language is particularly important in group communication, in human courtship, and as a subconscious or subtle method of communication between potential mates, spouses and family members.

Seemingly, nonverbal behavior has become a major field of research in the communications discipline and one consistent theme is that the meaning of nonverbal message depends on its context. Therefore, it is very vital to consider non-verbal communication in a cultural context. Nonverbal behaviors such as body language, eye contact, facial movements, and use of personal space vary from one culture to another. According to Ekman and Friesen (Ekman, Friesen, 1969)

there are five types of body movements or kinesics which have communication functions such as emblems, illustrators, affect displays, regulators, and adaptors.

Emblems refer to movements which have a direct verbal translation, generally a word or phrase. These are often culture specific. While Illustrators were nonverbal cues directly linked with words. They reinforce verbal communication and allow us to accent or emphasize words or ideas. People also use illustrators to help describe certain thing. Affect displays are body movements which reveal our affective, or emotional state. Facial cues are the primary way we reveal our feelings nonverbally. Affect displays can be used to influence others. A speaker, for example, displays enthusiasm and hopes it exudes to the audience. Affect displays may also be emotional expressions and not necessarily symbolic. Regulators were the nonverbal cues which regulate interaction. Consider the regulators used in normal conversation which determine turn-taking. Individuals utilize eye behavior, inflection, and head nodding to regulate conversation. Adaptors were movements that satisfy personal needs and help the person adapt to the environment. Adaptors may also be behaviors or objects that are manipulated for purpose. Adaptors include behaviors like yawning, tapping a pen, and moving or adjusting eyeglasses.

THE KERIS SAGA: A SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

The symbolic interactionist approach suggested that the human thought (mind) and social interaction (the self with others) serve to interpret and mediate the society in which we live (Miller, 2005). As noted earlier by Douglas (Douglas, 1970) the interaction that occurred causes meaning and it was not meaning that causes interaction. Clearly, individual responded to the meanings they constructed as they interacted with one another. This was due to the fact that individuals were active agents in the social world that were influenced by culture and social organization. They were also instrumental in producing the culture, society and meaningful conduct that influences them (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). Therefore, it can be concluded that symbolic interactionism is a concept that explained on the ways that people create meaning through their interaction in social groups. When the *keris* waving issue by Hishamuddin Tun Hussein took place, the story has received extensive media coverage. There was a mixture of both positive and negative perspective of the story. While there were some who has portrayed the incident from the positive light yet the occurrence of the incident has also caused the ruling party some negative publicity. As stated by O'guinn et al., (O'guinn et al., 2009) publicity is un-paid media coverage of events related to an organization's activities. Obviously, the incident that took place at the 2005 UMNO General Assembly has received extensive media coverage yet there was mixed reaction from the public of

the incidents. While Hishamuddin was deemed as a hero by some, yet others have perceived it as otherwise.

THE STUDY OF THE KERIS BRANDISHING INCIDENT

A quantitative survey was conducted to examine the nonverbal communication specifically on the use of an object in relating meaning. The object used by the communicator (source) in this study is a keris. A keris is a double edged dagger with an asymmetrical base of the blade and a tang which fits into a hilt. The hilt usually represents the abstract form of something or someone. This dagger was widely used as a weapon by the Malays between the 9th century AD and the 14th century AD. Besides being used as a weapon for self-defense, it was also a symbol of status of its bearer. A commoner would normally possess a keris with hilt and sheath made from wood or horn, however a noble and royalties would bear a keris with hilt and sheath carved out from ivory, silver or even gold and with decorative precious stones. Today, a keris is still used in Malay traditional functions in Malaysia. But with the existence of Malaysians of different origins and ethnics, the use of such weapon in certain manner could lead to misinterpretation and misunderstanding.

The act of brandishing of the keris by the youth wing leader of a leading Malay political party in Malaysia during the 2005 UMNO General Assembly has led to uproar and misinterpretations by many. His action has prompted a pandemonium by the non-Malays especially the leaders of the non-Malay component parties in the ruling coalition as well as the leaders of Malay oppositions. For instance, Datuk Liow Tiong Lai, a youth leader of MCA, an ally to UMNO commented that "If I hold a Chinese sword at a wushu function, it would be different than if I hold one at a political event. This was a political function, so it is seen in a different context. It can create uneasiness."

While a keris may not have made people uncomfortable yet it was the gesture and brandishing that had made people uncomfortable. Some even were of the opinion that the keris was not only a cultural symbol, but it was also a cultural symbol of violence. Clearly the act of brandishing of the keris by Hishamuddin Tun Hussein Onn had drawn uproar nationwide. Therefore, it was deemed as important to examine the views of the public at large regarding the issue. Specifically the study was also conducted to examine the media exposure on the political issues, the relationship between the brandishing of the keris incident and the ethnic background of the respondents.

METHODOLOGY

A survey was conducted using a set of self-administered questionnaire as instrument for data collection on the respondents' perception of the keris incident that was reported in the media. The questionnaires consisted of four pages and were distributed to 143 respondents residing in the Serdang area. Before answering the questionnaire, the respondent was first shown the image of Hishamuddin and the keris.

The survey instruments comprised of three parts. The first part was designed to gather information related to the respondents' media exposure on political issues. While the second part was constructed to measure their perceptions and views on the media exposure to the keris issue. The third part of the questionnaires consisted of questions related to the demographic profiles of the respondents.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

Table 1 shows that there were 72% of female respondents and 28% of male respondents who had taken part in the study. The majority of the respondents were Malays (70%) followed by Indian (16%), Chinese (12%) and others (2%). With reference to the level of education, the respondents with a Diploma certificates represented the highest percentage with 50%, followed by the group that had completed their bachelor degree with 42%, and there was three percents of the respondents who had completed their masters degree, three percents who had completed their Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia certificates (Malaysian Certificate of Education) and two percents had only completed their primary education.

Among the respondents, 44% reported that they were still studying. As for the respondents who were working, 27% worked in the private sectors, 24% worked in the public sector, three percents were self-employed and two percents were unemployed. Since the largest group of the respondents represented the student category therefore they were mostly between the ages of 21 to 30 years old (85%).

The study also reported that most of the respondents were already earning some income. However, since the majority of the respondents were students therefore they were earning less than RM1000 (USD 300) (48%) and only a small four percents was earning more than RM4000 (USD1200).

Thus, the study shows that the respondents were educated and have some understanding of the issue being discussed. While they may not have clearly understood the gestures yet, their level of education has helped explained that they were able to understand the report in the media. Their views and perception could have been influenced by the news media report.

Table 1: Distribution of the percentages of the respondents' demographic profiles

Item	(N=100)	Percentage
Age		
> 21 years old		30
21 – 30 years old		55
31 – 40 years old		7
41 – 50 years old		7
51 – 60 years old		1
Gender		
Male		28
Female		72
Marital status		
Married		76
Single		26
Race		
Malay		70
Chinese		12
Indian		16
Others		2
Occupation		
Students		44
Government		24
Private		27
Self-employed		3
Unemployed		2
Education		
Primary education		2
Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia		3
Diploma		50
Bachelor		42
Masters		3
Income		

RM 1000<		48
RM1000 – RM 2000	27	
RM2001 – RM 3000	17	
RM 3001- RM 4000	4	
RM 4000 >	4	

The incident that had caused such an uproar amongst both the coalition party within the national alliance particularly the MCA as well as its opponent occurred during the 2005 UMNO General Assembly however the media has played an important role in sending out the images to the public. As UMNO is one of the coalition party in the national alliance that was also the ruling party therefore it received great media coverage for most of its political event that the party organized and the UMNO General Assembly in 2005 was no exception. Due to the coverage, the images of the brandishing of the keris by Hishamuddin was reported in both the electronic and print media. Table 2 shows that TV obtained the highest reach of the incident as compared to the other media and newspaper's report was the second highest reach. As agreed by most of the respondents (84%) they saw the image on TV and it in the newspapers (81%). For those who were exposed to the incident through the media, there was a possibility of them sharing their thoughts on the issues with the others and thus showed that words of mouth have also helped to relay the message to the public and 45% of the respondents reported that they were aware of the image through friends. Interestingly, only a small group of respondents had seen the image on the Internet. While the media had played its role in distributing the image yet, most of the respondents have also expressed their dissatisfaction with the media for playing on with the issues. They were of the opinion that the media had significantly contributed to the public uproar of the issues.

Table 2: Distribution of the percentages of the most used media to obtain the information on the keris issue (N=143)

Media	Percentage
Television	84
Newspaper	81
Radio	21
Magazine	7
Friends	45
Internet	1

There were 21 statements used to measure the perception of the respondents on the political issues especially in relation to the keris brandishing incident. The issue varies from the concerned to

the incident of the keris brandishing during the UMNO General Assembly to their perception on the incident as well as their perception of the party. The data shown in Table 3 reported that the respondents had unanimously agreed that the keris brandishing incident should have been clearly explained by the media to help ease the misconception. They were of the opinion that the media should have clearly explain on the symbolic used of the keris (mean=4.16). The respondents have also stated their agreement that it was a mistake for the private TV station to show a live telecast of the UMNO General Assembly (mean=3.83). It was interesting to realize that the respondents were of the opinion that the media should not have reported on the issues, they agreed that the newspapers should not have reported on the keris issue (mean=3.69) and the TV should not have reported the issue (mean=3.68). However, they were interested in the issue (mean=3.55) and they gathered the information from TV (mean=3.47) while some had actually read in the newspaper (mean=3.48).

Such symbolic gestures like the brandishing of the keris can leave different impact on the audience, the respondents agreed that such visual can cause racial unity in the country (mean=3.10) since such act was viewed as an aggression from the UMNO youth (mean=3.30). As such they viewed that it was only appropriate for the MCA youth to seek clarification from the UMNO youth on the issue (mean=3.13). Political party and its leader should take heed from the incident for such act could not only create uproar but also could break the strong alliance of the coalition ruling parties. Such issue were of concerned to the public (mean=3.07) and they may have wrongly interpreted. The visual symbolizes the willingness of UMNO to oppress for its political gain (mean=3.00).

The media as an important information provider should also play its role in trying to curb the cause of unnecessary uneasiness that may occurred amongst members of the public. The media should act more responsibly when face with such issue and if such images may cause unnecessary uneasiness the media should not have shown it repeatedly. The media should also offer a detailed explanation on such sensitive issue and should help the public to understand the issue better. In fact some respondents were of the opinion that the media was wrong in highlighting the issues. Perhaps the media has its own agenda in its reporting of the issues, while the may be able to create a higher interest from the audience yet, such stories may also be negatively perceived by the audience. In such cases the media should practice some element of social responsibility that may perhaps be of assistance to help curb some unwarranted misconception. By reporting on such issues repeatedly without detailed explanation on the issues, the media has thus given some negative publicity to the ruling party. Thus, it can be concluded that while the media should be allowed to report on sensitive issues yet, they should also understand the limit of the freedom allowed.

Table 3: Distribution of the mean and standard deviation scores of the perception of the keris brandishing issue.

Item	Mean	Standard Deviation
Media should explain the symbol of using the keris to help ease confusion	4.15	0.97
In my opinion the private TV station was wrong in showing the live telecast of the UMNO General Assembly	3.83	1.13
In my opinion the newspaper should not report on the issue	3.69	1.18
In my opinion the TV should not have aired the report on the issue	3.68	1.21
I am interested to know more about the issue	3.55	1.12
I came to know about the keris issue from TV	3.47	1.13
I came to know about the keris issue from the newspaper	3.48	1.06
From the visual that was shown, I think the UMNO youth is aggressive	3.30	1.32
It is appropriate for the MCA youth to seek clarification from UMNO regarding the issue	3.13	1.23
The UMNO youth should have used a different symbol instead of the keris in trying to share the aspiration of the party	3.11	1.28
The keris visual may cause the unity of the Malaysian	3.10	1.47
I was concerned of the keris issue during the UMNO General Assembly in November	3.07	1.00
The visual of the keris symbolizes the readiness of UMNO to oppress for its political gain	3.00	1.46
I came to know about the keris issue from friends	2.80	1.11
Looking at the visual of the UMNO youth leader kissing the keris make me feel threatened	2.78	1.40
The newspaper have not offered enough information on the development of the issue	2.57	1.09
The UMNO youth leader should not have brandished the keris during the party general assembly	2.54	1.32
TV has not offered enough information on development of the	2.53	1.09

keris issue

Newspaper does not report on the solution to the issue	2.48	1.12
A political party general assembly should be a closed-session for its members	2.44	1.34
TV does not report on the solution to the issue	2.43	1.10

Correlation coefficients analysis shows that there was no relationship between the media exposure of the keris issue to race (Malay, $r = -0.144$, $p = 0.085$, Chinese, $r = 0.158$, $p = 0.060$, and Indian, $r = 0.081$, $p = 0.333$). Thus, the results suggested that the race of the respondents have no relationship with the media exposure on the keris issue. Probably the race of the respondents does not contribute to their perceptions of the issue. However there is a possibility that other factors may have contributed to their perceptions, whether it was positive or otherwise, on the issue of the keris brandishing by the youth leader of the ruling party in the country.

CONCLUSION

From the study it can be concluded that the media plays an important role in shaping the thinking of the masses. News report whether positive or negative can influence the audience. While some may not totally trust or believe what the read or saw in the media, there were others who may believe the stories reported. Therefore, the media should act more responsibly in their news reporting in ensuring that the news reported may not cause any harm to the masses, especially in the multicultural society.

The study implicated that in such a volatile society, media should play a critical role in bringing people together. Thus media should make a wise decision in deciding what should and what should not be reported, besides how to disseminate the news or stories. Media industry should be sensitive to the actual situation of the society. Even though sometimes events or incidents that occurred if reported may increase the circulation of the newspapers or the ratings of the news on television. However if the events or incidents are capable of creating negative publicity of individual, group, or organization, the media should act wisely and probably should not report the issues. The lack of social responsibility amongst media practitioners can sometimes caused them to simply report anything that they view as news even though such reporting is capable of leading to uneasy feelings amongst the members of the society.

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