

The contestation of cultural claims in online media between Malaysia and Indonesia

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Abstract The dynamics of Indonesia-Malaysia relations are influenced by the political growth of the two countries. Since the beginning of the Independence Era, there have been many ups and downs between the two countries. The recent 'conflict' centred on cultural issues, more specifically on the claims of certain cultural features such as songs, dances, batik, and cuisine. This study explained the reality of online media development in both countries, especially those related to Indonesian culture in Malaysia. This research used qualitative methods with a case study approach. Data were collected through interview, observation, and study of literature techniques. The results revealed that the construction of reality presented by the media was generally only seen from an Indonesian perspective, not much from a Malaysian perspective. Although the social reality of Malaysia's 'cultural claims' did not reflect the thinking of all Indonesians, this conflict was actually driven more by a small group of Indonesians whose loyalty is unclear. Unlike the Indonesian media, Malaysian media did not consider art and culture originating from Indonesia as an important issue. So, the problem was not widely reported. Malaysian media believed that Indonesian media was exaggerating the fact and that it was only in the interest of the mass media to find exciting news to publish.

Keywords: conflict; construction of reality; cultural claim; ethnic identity

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout their history, Indonesia and Malaysia have gone through countless political and cultural ups and downs (Boonstra, 2016; Clark & Pietsch, 2019; Nur, 2018; Zakharov, 2019). Most contemporary conflicts between Indonesia and Malaysia have been centred on the construction of Indonesian culture in Malaysia. Some cultural performances have been claimed by Malaysia as their own in mass media and social media. Moreover, in the past, Indonesia and Malaysia were involved in several conflicts regarding territorial borders, for example, the shifting of border monument several meters from its original position in Temajuk Village, Tanjung Datu, Paloh, Sambas, West Kalimantan Province. Now, a 43-meter lighthouse is erected in the protected forest of Mt. Datu hillside as a border marker of the Republic Indonesia.

Cultural claim conflicts between Indonesia and Malaysia have been widely documented in Indonesian and Malaysian mass media (Budiawan, 2017). The media in each country apparently had different approaches in their ways of communicating news. These differences were reflected in the news provided by Indonesian mass media. One of the largest mass media group in Indonesia, Kompas (2012), delivered the news with a somewhat mild headline, "*Pengakuan Malaysia Atas Tor-tor Tak Usah Dipermasalahkan*" (Malaysia's Claims on 'Tor-Tor' Dance Should Not Be An Issue). The news article was published on Kompas.com on 19 June 2012. On the other hand, the Malaysian mass media, Malaysiakini.com (2017), printed "*Octoberfest 'halal', tapi reog pula haram*" (Octoberfest 'halal', but "reog" haram) as the headline published on 9 October 2017. Contradictory news published in Indonesian and Malaysian media is an indication that the cultural conflicts between Indonesia and Malaysia have become the main news of mass media in both countries (Druce & Baikoeni, 2016; Oishi, 2016; Surajaya, 2018). Instead of becoming the harbinger of peace and unity, mass media are one of the culprits that often escalate conflicts (Karim, 2019). This situation is caused by the news in the media that clearly defend their respective countries. Seemingly, the mass media are more interested in the intercultural conflict of the claims than the truth from each country (Boonstra, 2016).

In other words, an event cannot be considered as news if it is not interesting, as an old saying says: "When a dog bites a man, that is not news, but if a man bites a dog, that is news." The news regarding the conflict was even more exaggerated in social media. It was an entirely different matter, as our informant, Medo, the representative of Indonesian mass media stated, "*Social media have different contexts. Everybody can express their opinions without clarification. In other words, they express conjectures.*"

Those facts illustrated that conventional and Internet-based mass media mostly presents the news writers' construction of reality. What is presented by the media is not always the proper and precise depiction of actual events. As mentioned previously, they have their interests, be

it their own economic interests (for instance, to gain revenues from advertisers that put their commercials in interesting news programmes), or ideological interests influenced by the policies of their respective countries. Claims over Indonesian cultural performances in Malaysia were one example of Indonesian media's constructions of reality endorsed by Malaysians of Indonesian descent or Indonesian people who have lived for quite a while in Malaysia (Good, 2004; Hew, 2018b). Reality constructions presented by conventional and convergence media had generated responses from both sides, particularly from some Indonesians who have expressed displeasure regarding the issue (Heryanto & Mandal, 2003).

This study was based on Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's social construction theory (1966) and Fredrik Barth's theory of ethnic boundaries or situational ethnicity (1969). Those two theories complement each other. Social reality, according to Berger and Luckmann (1966), is a dialectic process happening in simultaneous processes: (1) externalisation with a sociocultural sphere as a human product; (2) objectification, a social interaction happening in an intersubjective sphere, which is institutionalised or undergoing institutionalisation; (3) internalisation, a process where individuals identify themselves with social institution or organisation of which they are members.

Berger and Luckmann believed that a culture or a set of norms, values or rules constitute a social construction cultivated in a human mind. However, it lacks human freedom and a particular claim of objectivity, as is indicated by the intercultural conflict between Indonesia and Malaysia about what is meant by 'Indonesian culture.' This social construction also applies to any mass media (printed or electronic) and even online media.

In delineating the contested claim of culture between Indonesia and Malaysia, some scholars argue that ethnic identity is fluid. Barth (1969) contended, for instance:

"the cultural features that signal the boundary may change, and the cultural characteristics of the members may likewise be transformed, indeed even the organisational form of the group may change---yet the fact of continuing dichotomisation between members and outsiders allows us to specify the nature of continuity, and investigate the changing cultural form and content."

Barth (1969) argued that markers function to distinguish one's own ethnic group from the others, despite interaction and contact among groups. These markers do not necessarily have to be unique, for example, cuisine or language; but, they have to be seen as having originated from the cultural heritage, whatever cultural element the marker may take. It is in this context, mass media, as explained by McQuail (2012) and with the spirit of 21st century, not only function to disseminate information and ideology, but also as a medium that

conveys messages to people, a supporter of and bridge for formal education, a public library, and a place from which education about information and popular education is obtained. In today's world, McQuail's mass media also incorporates online media. In the context of this research, this approach is also related to cultural education in a broad sense. Neuman (2003) stated that the expectation of today's media is higher than ever, especially in the current Internet-based information technology that enables everyone to have access to information. Media convergence happening in today's information technology era erodes the line between public and media institution, as well as the dispersive individual networks. With this technology, everyone can be a source of information and express public opinions. Based on the theoretical perspective above, the researchers aimed to address the research question, "How do the online media in Malaysia and Indonesia construct the reality related to the Indonesian culture in Malaysia?"

METHODOLOGY

In this study, the researchers employed the qualitative method with a case study approach. This method is the most appropriate method to study the problem in Cross-Cultural Communication between Indonesia – Malaysia. Geertz (1973) asserted that the description of complex processes and their significance must be given in a context. The ability to provide a rich portrait is the main benefit of a case study approach. The readers should feel that they are involved in the research, see what the researchers have seen, and conclude what the researchers have concluded (Daymon & Holloway, 2008).

Qualitative research requires naturalistic data. Researchers go to the real world to understand people's subjective experiences without the subjects' interference. The subjects' verbal and nonverbal expressions are imperative for the complete analysis of the data. In other words, as Mulyana (2018) contended, qualitative research methodology does not rely on mathematical logic; instead, it relies on the actual utterances, gestures and other social actions where the subjects are engaged. In the context of this research, a case study method enabled the researchers to describe the cultural dispute between Indonesia and Malaysia. Raco (2010) contended that a case study could help researchers to conduct a profound study on individuals, groups, programmes, organisations, cultures, religions, regions or even countries. An exceptional understanding of past cases help individuals, societies and communities to understand and resolve present and future problems at hand.

Yin (2014) provided more technical limitations emphasised on characteristics of a case study. He argued that generally, a case study is best used if the main question is related with how and why, when the researcher has little control over the events, and when the research focuses on contemporary events in a real-world context. According to

Yin (2014), a case study adds a unique value to the knowledge related to individuals, organisations, social, and politics. From those limitations, the limitations of a case study include: (1) its research targets could be humans, events, backgrounds, and documents; (2) the targets have been thoroughly examined as a totality based on their relevant backgrounds or contexts to understand any relation between the variables. Thereby, through a case study, this research aimed to understand the construction of conflict in Malaysian and Indonesian online media reporting on Indonesian cultural claim dispute with Malaysia.

News related to Indonesian cultural claims by Malaysia came from the year 2007 up to 2018. News.detik.com published most of the news. For example, google search of "Rasa Sayange" resulted in 83,600 links, while the "Reog Ponorogo" keyword produced even higher numbers, 150,000 links. Furthermore, the keyword "budaya Indonesia yang diklaim Malaysia" (Indonesian culture claimed by Malaysia) resulted in 147,000 links. The media hugely varied, from Internet-based mass media, blogs to scientific, such as theses and scientific journals. However, the keyword "budaya Indonesia yang diklaim Malaysia" (Indonesian culture claimed by Malaysia) only produces 9,300 links with the news category filter; and they are mixed with other news that has the word 'Malaysia' in its headline.

The media contents analysed in this paper were mainly online media commentary and news. Due to the vast amount of related internet items, it was hard to do the sampling. So, the only reasonable way was to take the sample purposively to highlight the dispute over the cultural claims between Malaysia and Indonesia. In addition to monitoring the online media contents, interviews were conducted with 16 informants, 10 from Indonesia and 6 from Malaysia. These informants represented government agencies, academia, media, and society. This study was conducted from January to August 2018.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Publications on Indonesian cultural claims by Malaysia have existed since 2009. However, one of the articles published by Kompas.com revealed that news on Indonesian cultural claims by Malaysia had been published for five years since 2007 (Akuntono, 2012). That publication included statements from Vice Minister of Education and Culture, Department of Culture, Windu Nuryanti, who made the following statement: "From 2007 to 2012, Malaysia claimed Indonesian culture as their own at least seven times. We have a long history of claim disputes, seven times, according to my record." This statement was made in the Ministry of Education and Culture building, Jakarta, on Tuesday (19/6/2012) (Yudono, 2012). According to Windu, the dispute started in November 2007 when Malaysia claimed Reog Ponorogo dance. In December 2008, Malaysia claimed "Rasa Sayange" song, followed by batik which was claimed in January 2009. They also claimed "Tari

Pendet” from Bali and *angklung*, a musical instrument. The news was written by Indra Akuntono, a Kompas.com journalist who clearly stated that the Indonesian government believed that there have been several claims over Indonesian culture by Malaysia.

On 23 August 2009, three years before the dispute, liputan6.com, through liputan6.com reported a ‘clarification’ from Malaysia that there was no intent of cultural claim, as implied in an article titled “Setelah *Pendet*, *Kuda Lumping* pun Diklaim” (After *Pendet*, *Kuda Lumping* Is Claimed). The article stated:

“Until today, no statement is made by Malaysian government officers or private institution that broadcasts the tourism advertisement that they have claimed “Tari Pendet.” Malaysia seems to ‘blame’ it on Discovery Channel, that broadcast the advertisement without consent from the Malaysian government.” (Fibri, 2009)

The same article stated that *Tari Pendet* was used in a Malaysian tourism advertisement with “Malaysia Truly Asia” tagline made by the Indonesian production house in Bali. The use of an iconic Balinese dance enraged people because it was displayed after *Reog Ponorogo* which was re-named “*Tari Barongan*” by Malaysia. However, there was a written agreement between the Indonesian and the Malaysian government that the use of culture with no official status for commercial use must include written consent from a related party.

Generally, there has been no new news about the claims of some Indonesian cultural items by Malaysians. The new articles only repeat the news that has been published in previous years because of a trigger by recurring events. News quoted from *rmol.co* reported that the *Rasa Sayange* folk song was performed by Malaysian dancers for “Pekan Kerjasama Pendidikan Tiongkok-ASEAN Ke-8” (The 8th China-ASEAN Educational Cooperation Week) in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. In fact, the performance received different responses from the authorities of the Indonesian government. A representative from the Ministry of Youth and Sports, Arbi Eko Nurjanto, hoped that the media would not exaggerate it. Meanwhile, the representative of the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy, Anang Sutanto, responded to the performance of the song with disappointment and anger. However, he also acknowledged that the Indonesian government was timid in protecting the cultural property rights owned by Indonesia.

Some news published by internet-based media in Indonesia about some cultural elements from Indonesia, which were claimed by several parties in Malaysia were presented in provocative packaging. However, not of the content of the article stated that those cultural elements had been claimed by Malaysia. For example, the news reported by liputan6.com stated that Malaysia has never claimed that the culture as theirs.

As for Indonesian media itself, the news of conflict was more focused on crisis events, such as violence by migrant workers or political cases and other strategic cases, as long as the news was considered important. Even if there was news about cultural claims, its purpose was solely for warming the situation. In general, the media themselves did not feel that there were any significant conflicts. The news of cultural disputes was mainly published due to the proximity, Malaysian culture, language and geographical factors. These factors make it interesting to be raised as news, as opposed to reporting something happening in Laos, which definitely feel more unrelated and distant in terms of distance, culture, and language. This closeness makes people who consume media feel closer to the events being reported.

Representing the Indonesian media in Malaysia, one informant named Agus from Antara Kuala Lumpur argued that reports regarding the claim of some Indonesian traditional arts by Malaysia were not prevalent Malaysia because, for Malaysians, the event was unimportant. When the Indonesian press picked up the news about the upside-down Indonesian flag, the Malaysian side regarded the mistake only as a human error. The press in Malaysia is not as free as their Indonesian counterpart because they are still primarily controlled by the government. Thus, any adverse reports would bring the press into the realm of law.

A similar argument was also stated by another informant named Hakimi from Bernama Malaysia. He argued that for the Malaysian press, the issues of cultural claims did not exist because the culture was performed by Indonesians who have long lived in Malaysia. The batik occurred under similar circumstances. Several countries such as Malaysia, Samoa, Fiji, or even Australia has their own batik with a different pattern and design are different. In other words, what the Indonesian cultural community was concerned about, was not considered important by the Malaysian press because what was alleged by some of the Indonesian people was simply not true.

We observed that among the Internet-based Malaysian mass media, only *Malaysiakini.com* published the news about why Indonesians are outraged over the "Malaysia Truly Asia" which featured Pendet Dance as one of the Malaysian cultural elements. On 29 October 2009, there was an article that the perception of the term 'Malay' was what angered Indonesian people:

"In Malaysia, the definition of 'Malay' is a political construct which is spelt out categorically in the constitution. A Malay is 'a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language (and) conforms to Malay custom'. Given the vagueness of the definition, it is easy to see why Malaysians tend to think that almost anything Indonesian is automatically 'Malay'. All Indonesians speak Malay/Indonesian, the vast majority of them are Muslim, and therefore, 'Indonesian' equals 'Malay', except

some items which are explicitly not Muslim, like the Balinese 'Pendet' dance.'" (Opah, 2009)

The statement clearly illustrated that there was indeed a cultural difference between Indonesia and Malaysia. This cultural difference caused different interpretations of the word 'Malay.' For Malaysians, people who meet the criteria of 'Melayu' in the Malaysian constitution are considered as 'Melayu,' including those living in Indonesia (Clark & Pietsch, 2019; Zainal, 2019). While for Indonesians, Malay has a narrower meaning and tends to refer to one of the hundreds of tribes in Indonesia. Thus Barth (1969) is right in contending that cultural markers signalling the boundary may change as they are fluid. Based on the theory of social construction (Light et al., 1967), the cultural markers between Indonesia and Malaysia that signal the boundary is constructed differently by each country.

Referring to the Malaysiakini article, it is not surprising that Malaysian news does not present claims of elements of Indonesian culture as mistakes, not even considering them as cultural claims. In their view, elements of Indonesian culture that developed in Malaysia and brought by Indonesians automatically became part of Malaysian culture and thus became part of Malaysia. In other words, there is no need for cultural claims because the culture already exists in their country.

This situation is further supported by another article published in the daily newspaper when one of the Miss Grand Malaysia 2017 participants wore a costume inspired by *Kuda Kepang*. Malaysiakini.com published an article written by Mohd Hazmi Rusli, PhD, a senior lecturer from Faculty of Sharia and Law, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia and a visiting professor at the School of Law, Far Eastern Federal University, Vladivostok, Russia. Rusli reminded us that the costumes are valid for use by Malaysian participants as they are a cultural heritage derived from the reign of Sriwijaya, Majapahit and Malacca, Kingdom, the time when Indonesia and Malaysia were united under one political power. The article also argued that the protest by a small part of Indonesian society was inappropriate because Indonesia and Malaysia come from the same ancestors belonging to the Malay ethnic group. Furthermore, the article also compared Indonesia with other countries whose ethnic groups also thrive in Malaysia, such as the Chinese, whose culture is well developed in Malaysia and has enriched the Malay culture in Malaysia (Hew, 2018a).

Limited articles on Indonesian protests against Malaysia that display Indonesian cultural features such as songs, dances, batik and cuisine was caused by the fact that Malaysian media did not seem to consider the dispute as an essential issue to report (Kerkvliet & Benedict, 2009). Two articles found on Malaysiakini.com's webpage revealed that from the Malaysia perspective, Indonesians do not fully understand and remember the history of relations between the two countries. On the

other hand, they also assumed that protests by a small group of people in Indonesia were not based on complete information and were expressed without confirming the truth or facts that underlie news broadcasts. In other words, the aim was *news value*, not the truth of the news.

Other than as a source of information and ideas, today's mass media are also expected to be a means of education and knowledge resources. However, in reality, the media is not free from various interests. The reality conveyed by the media is not necessarily the actual reality; the media are loaded with representations of reality.

The media coverage of 'cultural claim' incident by small groups of Indonesians could not be separated from various interests. It was evident in the construction of the news published by several Internet-based mass media. News coverage on *liputan6*, on 23 August 2009, for example, conveyed news with a provocative headline, "Setelah Pendet, Kuda Lumping pun Diklaim" (After "Pendet," "Kuda Lumping" Is Claimed) (Fibri, 2009). The title clearly accused the other country of committing an offence against Indonesian culture. In fact, the contents of the article explain the classification from Malaysia about the use of the *Pendet* dance without Malaysian government approval.

The claim and the use of Indonesian culture by Malaysia and for Malaysian tourism commercial purpose was seen by Indonesian media, especially Internet-based mass media, as taking or stealing that culture. When, in fact, this conflict has characteristics of ambiguity in terms of the origin of the culture (shared by Malaysia and Indonesia) and the ethnicity of the cultural performers. Based on the social construction theory by Berger & Luckmann (1966), the Indonesian culture thought to be stolen by Malaysia has been constructed differently by Indonesians compared to the way it has been socially constructed by the Malaysians. In other words, based on Fredrik Barth's theory of ethnic boundaries (1969), although the ethnic boundaries between Indonesia and Malaysia have blurred, at times, they are separable.

News headlines presented samples in this research tended to employ adverse language to illustrate the social reality that happens in Malaysia when Indonesian traditional cultural elements were performed there. A more provocative title came from *Tribun Pontianak*, on 21 August 2017, "*Berikut Daftar dosa-dosa Malaysia ke Indonesia*" (Here Is The List of Malaysian's Sins to Indonesia) (Nasaruddin, 2017). By using the word '*dosa*' (sin), an unforgivable action was. According to KBBI (Indonesian Dictionary), a sin is an act of violating God's law or simply wrong actions. The *Tribun Pontianak* article presented detailed categories of false cultural claims Malaysia has made, from songs, territories, rivers, cultural arts, and cuisines. It constructed the reality of the use of Indonesian culture as the kick starter to dig up more actions that were considered wrongful by Indonesians.

The everyday reality, based on the social construction theory by Berger & Luckmann (1966), represents the results of social construction

formed by societies. In this case, these Indonesia mass media attempted to construct a conflict between the two countries through one-sided reporting without confirming with the Malaysians' side of the story. Similar news was also published by Brillo.net, an online news site. They reviewed several books that addressed the disputes between Indonesia and Malaysia. One of the books reviewed was written by Genuk Ch. Lazuardi, entitled "*Maumu apa, Malaysia?: Konflik Indo-Malay dari kacamata seorang WNI di Malaysia*" (What do you want, Malaysia? Indo-Malay Conflict from The Perspective of an Indonesian Living in Malaysia) (2009). The book presented a view from an Indonesian person who has long lived in Malaysia and has introduced many Indonesian culture and arts in Malaysia. This artists of Indonesian origin insisted that the arts they introduced are theirs and belonged to the Indonesian people, not the Malaysian government. In his book, Lazuardi stated that the dispute over cultural claims only appeared among government officials, and did not represent the people of Malaysia.

The book entitled "*Indonesia-Malaysia Relations: Cultural Heritage, Politics and Labor Migration*" written by Marshall Clark and Juliet Pietsch (2014) contained views of Malaysians who were generally unconcerned about the frequent 'conflict.' The Malaysians' views presented in Clark and Pietsch's book were in line with some of our informants' views that the conflict did not exist and that the disputed culture was not the property of one country. The book also presented the opinions of Malaysian media, which considered that the 'conflict' between Indonesia and Malaysia was only a media game and Malaysians were not concerned with the issues fussed by the Indonesian media. They regarded the news from Indonesian media as a form of entertainment.

This view is in line with the representatives of Indonesian mass media's argument that media news is made for commercial benefit, rather than describing the actual reality. This condition is in line with the concept of reality construction by the media based on the theory of social construction (Light et al., 1967) and the social construction of mass media (Bungin, 2008), where the construction of reality by the media is formed based on or intertwined with: a) The alignment of mass media toward capitalism. In the context of the relations between Indonesia and Malaysia, the Indonesian mass media is in favour of the system of capitalism. The construction of news about arts and cultural elements by certain parties in Malaysia was for commercial purposes, with the underlying assumption being the more sensational the news was, the more interested the public to consume it; b) A media report of the performance of Indonesian art and culture by small groups of Indonesian citizens who have lived in Malaysia for a long time. However, the report is a partial bias towards the general public, as done by several online news sites that reported the reaction of the Indonesian people to the event; c) In the end, the news was inseparable from the economic interests of the mass media. This could be seen from the amount of

media that took part in disseminating the news. Not all mass media in Indonesia were interested in reporting Indonesian cultural art shows in Malaysia as an overly crucial issue. Coverage of conventional media generally conveyed a brief reporting without repeating the same news.

Referring to the concept of ethnic boundaries by Barth (1969), ethnic identity or ethnic culture, whether Indonesian or Malaysian, as claimed by both countries, is dynamic and may change over time. To reiterate, Barth contended that the cultural elements of an ethnic group do not necessarily have to be distinctive, such as cuisine or language, but they must be having originated from their cultural heritage. The self-conception, as part of ethnic identification, does not automatically fit the identification given by outsiders. In this context, Malaysia and Indonesia are considered logical and appropriate to make cultural claims about songs, dances, cultural arts or cuisine which have been contested between the two countries to some extent, as long as cultural features originate in the same culture. Media construction made by Malaysia and Indonesia respectively is in accordance with social construction theory that reality is fluid, temporary, and dynamic. The two countries cannot be blamed because, to some extent, they share history, ethnic origin, and culture.

CONCLUSION

The researchers have indicated the usefulness of the social construction theory (Light et al., 1967) and the theory of ethnic boundaries (Barth, 1969). Based on the two theories, the researchers argued that neither Malaysia nor Indonesia was right in making an absolute claim over the cultural performances in Malaysia discussed in this paper.

Based on our in-depth examination on the media coverage concerning the contestation of cultural claims between Malaysia and Indonesia, we found that the construction of reality presented by the media generally was only seen from one side (the Indonesian viewpoint), and not much from the Malaysian side. It is expected that the media of the 21st-century function as a source of information and ideas, education and the source of cultural exchange between Indonesia and Malaysia. The social reality of Malaysia's 'cultural claim' also does not fully reflect the thoughts of the whole Indonesian population; the conflict was triggered by small groups of Indonesians whose allegiances were unclear. We believed that they were more driven by economic interests.

Unlike Indonesia media, the Malaysian media did not consider the art and cultural performances originating from Indonesia as an important issue. Therefore, it did not need to be widely reported. In contrast, they thought that the Indonesian mass media were exaggerating reality. The '*serumpun*,' concept has made Malaysians to embrace the culture that comes from Indonesia. However, they also thought that the news about Indonesia could not be separated from the

Indonesian press system, which tended to uphold freedom of opinion and was influenced by capitalist interests. The 'serumpun' concept was firmly embedded in the Malaysian government and society as culture is fluid and can be adapted and transformed according to its environment. Therefore, the cultural claim allegations are not necessary and should not have happened.

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