

## ULASAN BUKU/BOOK REVIEW

Mohd Aris Hj. Othman, *The dynamics of Malay identity*, Monograf No. 7 Fakulti Sains Kemasyarakatan dan Kemanusiaan, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, 1983.

The problem of analysing the different levels of ethnic identity and the conditions that influence the adoption of a particular form of identity is an important problem precisely because group boundaries are continually redefined by particular exigencies as well as by structural relations that govern a group's existence. Mohd Aris' monograph addresses itself to this problem quite typically by merely emphasizing the particular meanings that are attached to the identity "Malay" as well as the situations when these particular meanings were invoked. This was the empirical problem; its analysis however did not go beyond describing the different meanings and situations when they were observed to have occurred. In this sense, *The dynamics of Malay identity* is an apt description of the phenomenon rather than the conceptual framework that is proposed.

The recognition that a group's identity is the product of a dynamic process by itself does not promise that its analysis is likewise dynamic in capturing a good part of the process. Mohd Aris' analysis is, for lack of a better word, static because it merely contrasts the different meanings that is attached to the identity "Malay" by reporting the observed situations when each of the different meanings were articulated. Thus the regional image of one's "Malayness" (as in "Melayu Kelantan" or "Melayu Johor") were found in situations when these like-individuals gather among themselves in such events like the feast. Alternatively, "Malay" may refer merely to those "Malays" of the various regions of Malaysia. The conditions which seem to have facilitated such a xenophobic distinction (i.e., between local versus foreign Malays) include such varied factors as unequal participation in the "realm of business enterprise", "discrimination" as well as cultural differences such as language and customs. Finally, the local expression of "Malay" may also refer to both "local" and "foreign" Malays. But this time cultural similarity becomes prominent; *Islam* and *bahasa Melayu* thus eclipse regional identities in the spirit of promoting social cohesion (p. 30). At a more general, supra-local level,

the identity "Malay" derives its meaning from its opposition (read antagonistic relations) with the Chinese and Indians in the political (as in the struggle for *bahasa Melayu* to be the national language, Malay culture as the basis of the national culture) and economic (such as Malay backwardness) arena. And finally, as a gesture to history, this supra-local meaning of the "Malay" identity was also crystallized by their (unexplained) animosities during the Japanese Occupation and in the years of the Malayan Emergency.

There is therefore a long list of "situations" that invoked one of the many levels of "Malayness". There is, of course, some value to providing a catalogue of "situations" that invoked one of the other identities. Its value is limited however. This is so because the academic task is not merely to observe but to also analyse. The author did not even present a specific hypothesis on the conditions that would influence the invocation of a particular identity. This is why the monograph is a narration instead of an explanation of boundary maintenance. It is for this reason that the problem was purely an empirical one: "to examine the meanings attached to being a Malay in various kinds of situations and at various levels of ethnic interrelationship" (p. 11). There was therefore no suggestion of the theoretical relevance and significance of the problem. Neither was there any attempt to generalize the many situations into some common denominators that may facilitate a typology of situations which, in turn, could provide useful hypotheses toward a better understanding of the dynamics of boundary maintenance.

By posing the problem as a purely empirical one, the author leaves some basic conceptual and theoretical problems untouched. The problem of Malay identity, for instance, was not posed within a broader concern for an understanding of what is an ethnic group; boundaries move continually, but what precisely are the elements that are contained within it? This lack of concern has a telling effect; the author inappropriately, everywhere, refers to the 'Malaysian Malays' and the 'Indonesian Malays' as "ethnic groups" in ways no different from the Chinese and the Indians, as if the Minangkabau or the Javanese in Malaysia are ethnic groups in the same sense as Chinese and Indians are. "Bangsa Melayu" was also inappropriately and insensitively translated as "Malay stock" instead of "the Malay nation". The conceptual and political consequences of this error are too wide-ranging as to constitute as part of a review. A short trip around history would have greatly clarified the author's apparent puzzlement over the Javanese being easily regarded as Malays

although some of their culture may be unIslamic (I should add that there are also some traits in Malay culture that do not conform to the tenets of Islam. A good part of this is because the Malay nation predates Islamic influence in this region).

Because there was no attempt to converge these different situations toward a theoretical point, the movement from one identity to the other was left unexplained, except in an *ad hoc* manner. Thus "Malay" in Kampung Baharu includes all Malaysian and Indonesian Malays as well as the D.K.K. and the Malaysian Arabs because of the desire to "promote local cohesion", or because "religion becomes a license for inter-ethnic visiting, exchange of food during the fasting month and the feeling of mutual trust" (p. 30).

The author did however try to reconcile these varied situations by utilizing a more general concept — that of "structural opposition", as is organized around the "segmentary principle" \* where "the shifting of the frame of reference depends on the group one finds oneself in and who the opposed groups are" (p. 24). This concept however is merely a descriptive rather than an analytical one, i.e. the concept merely refers to the idea that the "we" is defined by the particular "they". It does not refer to anything further than this. It does not, for instance, contain suggestions as to who these "they" might be under certain conditions. It is not to be denied however that this descriptive concept was fluid (but not analytical) enough as to suggest that the problem of identity should not be constructively seen as identity transformation or oscillation since it may well involve "variation in meanings of the same identity" (p. 56). But that is as far as it could go. The idea of opposition seems to suggest antagonistic relations. *These antagonistic relations were hardly specified except in the most general way. What were the fissures that separate the Johor from the Kedah or Kelantan Malay? What were the more immediate and more important sources of conflict that eclipsed the feelings of regionalism for some broader identity?*

In essence then, Mohd Aris accomplished little except to document the fact that the identity "Malay" inheres different meanings under different situations. The first of these has a regional connotation as in "Melayu Selangor" or "Melayu Kelantan", thereby invoking a particular image that corresponds to the culture of the region. The other reference is a more general one, encompassing "all Malays" as a homogenous entity. Precisely who may be included in this category has varied however. This broader meaning has assumed two different

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\*Evens-Pritchard, E.E. (1940), *The Nuer*, Oxford.

meanings. The first refers to "Malaysian Malays" while the second refers to a yet wider group to include both the Indonesian and the Malaysian Malays as well as the D.K.K. and the Malaysian Arabs.

At the supra-local level, the meaning shifts to be more administrative than social in character:

"While Malay as an ethnic category is manifested in various situations and levels of ethnic interrelationships, Malay as a category defined by the Federal Constitution does not emerge in daily interaction. It only exists in the context of the Constitution. It is not a category conceived mentally by the various ethnic groups in real life situation" (p. 50).

The narrowest frame of reference of what constitutes the Malay has a tinge of regionalism. That this is characteristic of the Malay social reality is beyond doubt. What is more contentious however is the author's claim that this feeling is "still strong". There is of course a problem of measurement. That aside, even the author himself does not furnish sufficient evidence to prove this point. On the contrary, it was admitted that "it is only after engaging an informant in a reasonably long period of time of conversation that his regional identity is revealed" (p. 27).

The contention that the supra-local definition of the Malays, as is embodied in the Federal Constitution, is different and must be kept separate from the "ethnic" (or more correctly, social definition at the local level is a false argument. I would argue that the supra-local definition of what the Malay is no different from its usage at the local level.

The process of being recognised as assuming a particular identity is the product of a continual evaluation of the community. This is a social process, where the monitoring and assessment of one's "Malayness" is done continually at all levels (local and supra-local), on account of one's cultural-ideological make-up. The most important elements are already included in the Federal Constitution (language, religion, customs). Similarly, who qualifies to be a Malay, at the local level depends on whether one lives "like a Malay"; which includes such things as to whether one speaks Bahasa Malaysia habitually, professes Islam and conforms to the Malay *adat*, regardless of whether one is by ancestry a "Melayu Semenanjung", "Melayu Seberang", "Bugis", "Jawa", Chinese, Indian or an Arab.\*\* As

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\*\*This has been clearly documented by Lim Hin Fui in a recently completed research which has been submitted as partial fulfilment for the Master Social Science degree, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, 1983.

we very well know, all the elements in the constitutional definition of the Malays are therefore included in the local definition of who is a Malay.

It might be argued, as Mohd Aris did, that the constitutional definition is different from the Kampung Baharu local constitution in that the latter explicitly specifies that, apart from professing Islam and conforming to Malay *adat*, a Malay need also be one who is from any sub-group of the Malay nation (*daripada sebarang bangsa Melayu*). Because the latter is not a qualification for one's eligibility to be administratively regarded as a Malay (this is obviously the case because it is a bureaucratic process), and hence the material opportunities that follow, Mohd Aris sees the "constitutional definition of Malay is intended to include not only the Malays themselves, the various Indonesian ethnic groups, the Arabs and D.K.K. but also the Chinese, Indians and Others who are citizens of the country (emphasis added) (p. 36). The Chinese, Indians and Others have been included because they could "qualify as a Malay in this category..." by becoming "a Muslim and be able to speak Malay" (p. 8). Conformity to Malay *adat* is therefore inconsequential to one's qualification to be a Malay at the supra-local level, i.e., from the bureaucratic point of view — "in the political context of granting economic and political privilege" (p. 8). Such a situation arises ostensibly because the Malay *adat* is not defined in the constitution. Thus, for all intents and purposes "Malay *adat* (customs) imply those aspects of behaviour which conform to the Muslim religion. In this sense, therefore, Malay customs and Muslim religion, are, in many respects, coterminous" (p. 37). The author has therefore concluded that because a Muslim Chinese or Indian could qualify (through the bureaucratic process) for the privileges of the Malays, he/she is therefore a Malay. Consequently, because he/she is a Malay, conformity to Malay *adat* has, in fact, become irrelevant to be recognised as a Malay. The above argument is a false one because an identity is not to be judged by the success of weaving through some administrative or constitutional definition but by the actual social process. From this point of view, whoever manages to be sieved through as a Malay in the process of according material opportunities need not necessarily be a Malay. The litmus test then is not at one's success in the bureaucratic process but the Malay community's judgement on the gap between the administrative and their own social definition. This crucial point was not emphasized. The author provides us a good instance from which we could use to illustrate this point.

The Kampung Baharu constitutional definition of a Malay explicitly expects its members are from any ethnic component of the Malay nation. This was part of the formal definition. The social definition, in contrast, includes the D.K.K., the Arabs and even an individual of Siamese origin. There is obviously a difference; what should concern us is whether this difference is approved or otherwise. In the Kampung Baharu case, the difference is inconsequential. The definitional difference at the "supra-local level" has shown some cause for concern. The seriousness of this concern has reached a point where Muslim converts now have to register their original surnames together with their newly acquired Muslim (Malay) names (Lin Hin Fui, 1983).

The two examples above uphold our point that what is material is the community's judgement on the administrative-constitutional definition of their identity. The Kampung Baharu example illustrates an instance where the administrative-constitutional definition is unreal while the definition embodied in the Federal Constitution is congruent with the local-level definition. The "supra-local" identity suggested by the author is therefore an imagined one.

It is most unfortunate that the author was content to define the problem before him in a purely empirical manner in spite of the long gestation period taken for the publication of the research undertaken, during which time some serious contemplative effort would have enlightened us much farther than what has been done previously.

Muhammad Ikmal Said  
Universiti Sains Malaysia

**Wan Hashim, *Race Relations in Malaysia*, Heinemann Education Books, Singapore, 1982.**

The availability of Wan Hashim's book should be welcome to those desiring to learn about race relations in contemporary Malaysia. The author does not analyse events in depth, as he seems to lack the necessary theoretical tools to do justice to such a complex topic. Even though some of his arguments are self-contradictory and not well researched, *Race Relations in Malaysia* is a good attempt at giving a partial indication of the reasons for increasing racial tension experienced in recent years.

This is in fact at once the book's weakness and its value. To date, quite a few well-researched papers have already appeared on this

topic<sup>1</sup> though they are found scattered in various academic publications too “erudite” and inaccessible to the common layman. Though a number of the more important contributions are not mentioned by the author, he has made a laudable attempt to present these views in a simplified manner thus making the task of assessing race relations in Malaysia slightly easier. Of course there is no substitute for reading these more academic works but at least the layman will now have some idea of the “tides” and “currents” before delving deeper into the topic.

However, in simplifying the discussions there is also the danger of misrepresenting the complexities of Malaysian social reality. For instance, when working with notions such as “integration” and “assimilation”, racial problems are viewed as a hitch in good race relations exercise.

The general feeling one is left with after reading the book is that the ideological mode employed to make sense of the presence of various races in Malaysia remains in the genre of cultural conflict. Social and economic perspective are included but are discussed only at a very superficial level. Different races are seen as “problems” for integration and assimilation. In spite of having access to a good range of existing works on the problems facing the various races in Malaysia, the author does not appear to have grasped the dialectical relations between political and economic organisation and communalism. If certain deprived groups have been struggling against deprivation and inequality, these struggles are emphatically not struggles for better race relations. They are struggles against economic exploitation, material deprivation, physical repression and ideological obfuscation in this communally-oriented capitalist society.

The time frame of this book is wide, spanning the colonial period to the 1970s. The opening chapters, primarily historical, are amongst the strongest in the book. In them the author traces the introduction of “economic modernization” with the establishment of colonial rule — the inclusion of Malaya into the world capitalist system — mainly as a major exporter of rubber and tin (p. 15) and a captive market for industrial Europe. Here the author also discusses British policy of separate development for the indigenous peasants and the

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<sup>1</sup>See, for instance, Cham, B.N., *Class and Communal Conflict in Malaysia*, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol. 5, No. 4, 1975. Muhammed Ikmal Said, *The Dialectics of Ethnic and Class Conflicts: Some Illustrations from the Malaysian Case* (Mimeo); and Stenson M., *Class and Race in West Malaysia*, *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 1976.



indentured labour of various races brought in to work the plantations and mines. Chapters Three and Four describe the rise of ethnic nationalisms amongst the Malay, Chinese and Indian communities, each drawing inspiration from external sources — the Malays from the Middle East and Indonesia, the Chinese from China and the Indians from India. The significance of the class basis of these many separate movements can be observed by the discerning reader though they are only cursorily mentioned by the author. For instance, the Kaum Muda Reformist (Islamic) Movement attacked the aristocratic class including the Malay rulers (p. 26) whilst other Malay associations — one of which became the direct predecessor of the United Malay National Organisation — were led by the English educated Malays who at that time came primarily from the traditional ruling class. Other examples would be the KMM and the PKMM. The rich Chinese on the other hand were more affiliated to the local Kumintang group whilst the Chinese workers found more sympathetic treatment by the Communist Party of Malaya. These nascent class polarizations within ethnic organisations were short-lived and were dealt their death blow by the divisive policies practised during the brief Japanese rule between February 1942 and September 1945 (p. 38). Any lingering left-wing tendencies were completely annihilated by the British who, in view of their weakness after the war, had to resort to communal policies to prolong their rule and to ensure perpetuation of their interests. Thus was communal policies institutionalised in Malaya.

Chapters Five and Six describe briefly factors contributing to “bad race relations” — demographic concentration and uneven development among different races; racial and cultural differences and communal politics.

Chapters Seven and Eight describe attempts by the government to “integrate” the three races in Malaysia after the 1969 race riots. It is a shame that the socio-economic perspective in which contemporary Malaysian society is analysed is “unsubstantiated”, insufficient and even at times incoherent and self-contradictory. The author is content with superficialities such as “The government’s attempts to raise the economic position of the Malays will only generate increasing frustrations among the non-Malays” (p. 100). After listing government programs to integrate the various races through the New Economic Policy aimed at decompartmentalisation of various races in Malaysian society, the national educational policy, the five principles of the Rukun Negara /national ideology embracing belief



in God, loyalty to King, upholding the constitution, rule of law, and good behaviour and morality — p. 94/ the author concludes that “with the implementation of all the policies, Malaysia can look forward towards the future with some optimism although it could be postulated that the road to national integration is still far away” (p. 94). These two chapters come near to treating cultural conflict as the motive force of Malaysian history.

The author has not considered that when Malaysians developed certain attitudes about race, it was within the context of specific world power and economic relations that these views took form and perpetuated themselves. There seems to be confusion between racial prejudice genuinely felt with the kind of prejudice that is consciously and willfully manipulated in Malaysian politics. Thus the role of the ruling party — the Alliance and the present Barisan National — and the state which has become masters at the game of racial politics goes unemphasised. The complexity of their roles in Malaysian history are not explained — roles not susceptible to a racial analysis. They have also facilitated the rise and maintenance of our capitalist economy. More generally, the presence of this class raises the question of their relationship to international capital. Such questions go unanswered and are not acknowledged as crucial lines of inquiry. An analysis of this nature (already available in a more academic form) would provide a useful counterpoint to this study.

Whilst Malaysians wait breathlessly for the coming of the next stage of integration (as predicted by the author) where identities are expected to merge (p. 106) how does one conceive of the present government strategy of taking in quick cheap migrant labour from Bangladesh, Indonesia and Micronesia to man our plantations and construction industries? Instead of attempting to reshape our technological, industrial and economic structures, we are resorting to the embarrassing mechanism of exploiting foreign surplus labour and further depriving our own labour of a more proportionate rise in their standard of living. In its detail the new wave of migrant workers are different from that of the indentured labour imported in the 19th century, but structurally it is essentially the same story. However, “sensitive” but important issues such as these are not given adequate consideration in this work.

Hing Ai Yun  
Universiti Malaya



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