**Making Sense of Malaysia**

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Cheah Boon Kheng

Malaysia: The Making of a Nation

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The Other Malaysia: Writings on Malaysia’s Subaltern History

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Two recently published and very different books by Malaysian academics preview what may become a season of assessments of the “nation-state” enterprise. The fifty-year anniversary of Malaysia’s independence, four years hence, will likely stimulate the commemorative and interpretive impulse of historians. New accounts of the pivotal late colonial period have appeared, based on newly available sources (Harper 1999; Kratoska 1998) and exploring popular memory (Lim and Wong 2000). Historians are also beginning to shift their attention from the “origins” and “making” to the history and socio-political landscape of the nation-state itself. Regional collaborations within the expanding membership of ASEAN and with its East Asian neighbors play a role as well. Cheah Boon Kheng’s Malaysia: The Making of a Nation is the first of a “history of nation-building” series resulting from workshops led by historian Wang Gungwu. Cheah, retired professor of history at Universiti Sains Malaysia and prominent scholar of Malaysian social and political history, has lived through the process of which he gives a very dispassionate account. (Volumes on the other original members of ASEAN are being written by Taufik Abdullah, Charnvit Kasetsiri, Reynaldo Ileto, and Edwin Lee.)

Malaysia’s recent past also encourages reflection about the foundations, definition, and resilience of the nation-state. The 1997 economic crisis, 1998 dismissal and subsequent trial of Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, dramatic erosion of legitimacy of the long-ruling United Malays National Organization (UMNO), and rise of an Islamist challenge to the secular, developmentalist state have coincided with and stimulated the growth of new public media (Khoo 2002). Farish A. Noor’s The Other Malaysia: Writings on Malaysia’s Subaltern History is a collection of essays written in the midst of these developments for the news website Malaysiakini.com. Not only is this a new kind of writing, but one that has found a public through the availability of new and independent venues on the internet. Farish is a political scientist and human rights activist who has emerged as both a “liberal Muslim” and critic of the “demonization of Islam.” Writing about politics in several publications, he took advantage of “a state of radical dislocation” to focus these essays on “the reactivation of the memory of the past and to bring to light aspects of Malaysia’s marginalized and subaltern histories and narratives that had been buried for so long” (v).

At this juncture, too, some of those marginalized voices are being recorded in individual, national, and regional “political memories” projects. The memoir of journalist and 17-year political detainee Said Zahari was published in Malay, Chinese, and English in 2001. (See Features in this issue.) The memoir of the late Khatijah Sidek, who challenged the patriarchy of Malay nationalism in the 1940s and 1950s, appeared in Malay in 1995 and English in 2001. The stories of these and others – especially those who were detained without trial, who were exiled, and whose participation in public life was cut short – are currently being recovered to challenge conventional truths of national history (Tan and Jomo 2001; Zakiah 2000).

Such productive “dislocation” in the national narrative allows us to read the two books under review as a glimpse into an emerging “history of Malaysia.” The authors are of different generations – in age, experience, and intellectual proclivity – and their discursive strategies reflect it. Although both professional academics, they seek somewhat different audiences and draw different parameters around their subject. Yet in taking their measure of the nation-state both books display and engage the powerful socio-political discourse that has constructed “Malaysia” through state practice and academic writing.

**Contests for Malaya**

With its strict focus on electoral politics, national policy, and the administrations of the country’s four prime ministers, Cheah Boon Kheng’s Malaysia offers an explanation of how the nation has evolved in practice. He begins by asking who: “Who would inherit power from the British? Who would receive independence?” Very pertinent questions indeed, and the way they are asked and answered reveals paradigms that originated in colonial rule and have been naturalized in the first half-century of Malaysia’s life as an nation. Among these are communalism as the organizing principle of the nation-state, elite-centered narratives of the nation, and other fundamental continuities from the colonial era.

Cheah locates Malaysia’s primary cleavage in the ongoing tension between Malay ethno-nationalism and a broader Malaysian nationalism, between ketuanan Melayu (Malay dominance) and communal power-sharing. He finds a pragmatic “give and take” that never resolves what are seen as inherent tensions, but that allows the enterprise to keep moving forward. While this might seem self-evident in even a semi-democratic parliamentary system, “give and take” is also a political position condemned by “exclusivist” Malay nationalists, so-called “ultras” who want to see the full realization of a “Malay nation.” Cheah’s main argument is that each of the country’s prime ministers “started off… as an exclusivist Malay nationalist but ended up as an inclusivist Malaysian nationalist” (236). Each of these men was concurrently president of UMNO, the dominant Malay political party. The two roles have different imperatives: the president of UMNO must attend to communal interests, while the prime minister of Malaysia must look after the whole, leading to that balancing of interests so deplored by exclusivists. That this has happened four times in the nation’s history suggests that the nation-state has developed its own logic, an imperative that makes everyone unhappy, but keeps everyone unhappy together.

A strong internal frame of reference structures Cheah’s account. His narrative begins in the postwar, pre-independence period of 1945-57, which established the constitutional, political, social, and economic form of the nation-state. It is followed by a chapter taking the argument through independent Malaya/Malaysia (1957-2001) and individual chapters on the administrations of the four prime ministers. Essentially a biography of the nation-state as self-made man, the childhood (1945-57) is that of an orphan. There are no references to structural or cultural predecessors, no “family history” to speak of. This is especially striking with respect to the components of the nation-state: “the Malays,” “the Chinese,” and “the Indians” appear on these pages without histories, fully-formed “communities” with self-evident interests to be advanced against each other. This will have implications for how the life of the nation is understood.

With knowledge of who the contestants are understood to be, we can return to the question, “who would receive independence?” The immediate post-war years were crucial, and Cheah argues that the Malays were cognizant of and engaged in the struggle to be born as a nation-state unencumbered initially by competition from the other communities. The postwar British plan to “impose direct rule” and replace the various legally sovereign sultanates and crown colonies with a Malayan Union providing equal citizenship to Malays and non-Malays was met solely by a “resurgent Malay nationalism.” Under conservative aristocratic leadership, the Malay community successfully mounted a broad-based and vigorous rejection of the plan, while the peninsula’s non-Malay residents, mostly immigrants and descendants of immigrants from southern China and the Indian subcontinent, responded with indifference. This ensured that negotiations to devise a successor state would take place almost entirely between British authorities and Malay representatives. Thus from 1946, “Malays [could] set the pace and agenda for the creation of a new ‘Malay’ nation-state” (2). Yet the leadership quickly retreated from its victory against equal citizenship to a position of pragmatic compromise in order to move toward self-government and independence. Cheah sees in the 1948 Federation of Malaya agreement “a major shift towards an inclusionary multi-ethnic nationalist perspective” on the part of an “enlightened leadership” (20).

This argument lends new insight to the familiar analytical framework of the “bargain,” one of several terms that have long been used to describe the arrangement that enshrines Malay political primacy in exchange for common citizenship, economic rights, and tolerance of non-Malay cultural and religious practices. Cheah goes on to examine competing ethno-nationalisms in the context of this bargain from independence to the present. He shows how, from the beginning, the prime minister has held the power to decide what concessions to make to the Chinese, whose most zealous articulators of the community’s cultural interests, the “chauvinists,” are always trumped by the enduring threat of extremist Malay violence (as in 1969) that enforces the bargain.

This argument has explanatory power, but also functions as a closed analytical system, limiting “nation building” to the political and defining the political solely in communal terms. In scholarship, as in life, the meta-discourse of communalism in Malaysia determines what questions can be asked (Mandal 2003). Was there really no contest for Malaya in 1945-46? Both communism and Malay anti-“feudalism” (a term explored below) represent long-running critiques of the colonial/national state that were at their strongest in the immediate postwar period, as Cheah’s previous work has discussed (Cheah 1983; 1988). It is likewise clear from this account, as it was at the time, that the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) was fighting for independence – at the Baling talks in 1955, future first prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman “challenged the arguments of the communists that they alone were fighting for nationalism and freedom from British imperialism. The Tunku argued that the Alliance was also doing the same” (31). CPM leader Chin Peng’s offer to lay down arms in fact helped UMNO win “early” independence from Britain (i.e., before the armed insurgency had been militarily defeated). Further, Cheah points out that the communist party was not a “Chinese movement,” despite its predominantly ethnic Chinese membership, because the CPM was in ideological opposition to the colonial government and its supporters, including other Chinese. But after 1957, the CPM figures in this account mainly in relation to communal balancing: “The communists’ armed revolt was a constant reminder that dissatisfied non-Malays, particularly the Chinese, could run to the jungles to swell the ranks of the communist rebels and fight for social justice if the Alliance Government was seen to act unjustly towards Chinese and non-Malay rights” (80). And ultimately, the communist challenge is seen here as the means by which “the national government would justify the continuation of the draconian colonial Emergency laws which infringed fundamental human rights” and because of which “freedom was not fully nurtured” (33).

Yet even in the absence of an armed communist movement, we cannot seriously doubt that the national government would have retained these laws. (The formal end of the CPM’s struggle in 1989 did not result in their repeal. At present, more than eighty people are being held under the Internal Security Act without charges and beyond the reach of habeas corpus.) Apart from the regional grip of the Cold War which legitimized the repression of the non-militant left, certain socio-political fault lines presented fundamental, though less publicized, threats to the state as constituted and the nation as imagined by that state. One was manifest in the explosion of popular anger against the Malay rulers’ initial acquiescence in the Malayan Union plan. The “taming” of the Malay royalty by Dato’ Onn bin Jaafar, first president of UMNO, during the 1946 anti-Union, pro-Malay sovereignty campaign is cited here as “the best example of the full flowering of Malay nationalism.” Cheah feels the aristocrat Onn “best exemplified these aspirations of the Malay struggle, when he coined the cry, ‘Hidup Melayu!’ (Long Live the Malays) … instead of ‘Hidup Raja-raja Melayu!’ (Long Live the Rajas)” (17). Onn’s was a skillful maneuver in which long-mounting, repressed public anger against complicit and ineffectual leadership – both royal and aristocratic – was boldly channeled against the rulers in order to mobilize and modernize Malay politics within the party framework necessary to gain independence. But once the British government had agreed to negotiations that would lead to the Federation of Malaya, further democratic pressure threatened only aristocratic control of the nationalist movement. Onn then just as adeptly tamped down popular Malay participation in politics, a policy subsequently institutionalized by UMNO-led governments (Amoroso 1998). Emergency legislation soon drafted to contain communism had a chilling effect on all dissent, and not for the last time.

**Communalism Enshrined**

As indicated here, several political contests led to the independence of Malaya and the later formation of Malaysia. As these contests were interconnected through ethno-nationalist perception and mobilization, perhaps the most basic was the effort to uphold communalism as the organizing principle of politics and society. This is apparent in the debates surrounding the question of “Malayan” nationality that the British hoped to foster through the Malayan Union. Cheah quotes Tunku Abdul Rahman’s famous 1951 jibe, “who are these ‘Malayans’?” to introduce a useful recapitulation of the term’s history (5-15), which I will summarize even more briefly here. Perceived in opposition to Melayu (Malay), which provided the root for Persekutuan Tanah Melayu (Federation of Malaya, lit. federation of Malay lands), “Malayan” functioned as a rival root word, symbolizing the Union’s erasure of Malay sovereignty and elevation of non-Malays at Malay expense. This was largely agreed on by all sectors of Malay opinion. The radical nationalist and future PAS leader Dr. Burhanuddin Al-Helmy saw “Malayan” as a “colonial mold” that was narrower than, and destructive of, “Melayu.” On the conservative side, the Tunku always made a distinction between bangsa Melayu (Malay race or nation) as the nationality at the core of the Federation, and citizenship in that Federation. For this reason, as early as 1956, UMNO favored “Malaysia” as an inclusive yet Malay-centered name for the nation-state.

These words allow us to gain some understanding of the ongoing process of identity formation and the persistence of communalism. Cheah indicates the lack of a common political discourse between the Malay and English languages: Malay leaders might have used “Malayan” in addressing mixed audiences in English to describe “the country’s way of life and culture inclusive of both Malays and non-Malays” – this is, in fact, how non-Malays themselves used it – but:

“when speaking to only Malay audiences, the Malay leaders would use the Malay terms for the country, ‘Persekutuan Tanah Melayu.’ They would also use the term ‘bangsa’ which means both ‘nation’ and ‘race’. Delivered to Malay audiences, it would literally mean bangsa Melayu, the Malay race” (8).

“Malayan” was a slippery word then, having positive, inclusive connotations when used in English conversation, but evoking exclusion and destruction in a Malay-language context. In contrast, bangsa seems to be a sticky word and bangsa Melayu stickier still, agglomerating meanings that should have been distinguished, but for the fact that UMNO thrived by keeping them stuck together. Bangsa triumphed over the Malayan Union in the guise of “race” – the Malay lands belong to the Malay race – and once UMNO had established itself and the Federation on this point, bangsa Melayu acquired the status of core “nation” of the emergent nation-state. This nation-state had a negotiated and gradually more inclusive citizenship, but in Malay discourse, citizenship was distinct from and secondary to nationality, which was based on a putatively primordial and native “race,” rather than on a commonly-held political identity or values vested in the modern nation-state (which do not preclude separately-held ethnic identities). This was a precarious basis for a nation-state that eventually featured full citizenship for its non-Malay members. The notion was challenged conceptually as well when Malaya expanded to include Sabah and Sarawak. These places had their own natives, but they were not Malay. Hence the importance of the ur-native category, bumiputera (sons of the soil). By that time it was too late for bangsa to expand its own sense as “nation,” as became apparent in 1991, when Prime Minister Mahathir introduced his vision of Bangsa Malaysia, leaving his Malay constituents underwhelmed and uneasy.

Actually, it was Melayu that had a chance of acquiring an expansive meaning, not as a bangsa but as a “nationality.” In 1948 a coalition of Malay and non-Malay oppositional parties presented the “People’s Constitutional Proposals” as an alternative to the communally-based polity negotiated by the government, UMNO, and the Malay rulers. Cheah writes that the Malay PUTERA with “its coalition partner AMCJA represented the first inter-racial alliance of any consequence in this post-war period” (20). But this left-leaning alliance had a different purpose – to explore the process, not of balancing communal interests, but of creating a new political community in a place with strong historical and cultural identity that had been reshaped and populated by colonial rule. Their constitutional proposals, characterized by democratic features and immediate self-government, included a “Melayu nationality” to be voluntarily acquired and equated with citizenship, Malay as the national language, and Malay rulers as constitutional sovereigns. This was an ambitious proposal that would have required careful nurturing – Malays along with Chinese and Indians would have to trust a new nationality not to destroy their existing bangsa – but it was immediately dismissed by the government and UMNO. And the first attempt by a mainstream politician to move in this direction proved the danger of straying too openly from communalism. Dato’ Onn, after proposing to open up UMNO membership to non-Malays, had to leave the party he founded; his new non-communal Independence of Malaya Party lost early elections to the UMNO-led Alliance with the Malayan Chinese Association. The lesson learned, as Cheah sums it up: “The various communities seemed to prefer communal representation to look after their own communal interests” (28).

Despite his focus on electoral politics, election results, and political parties, Cheah does not allow his narrative to be overwhelmed by details. The historian’s long view shows how Malaysian politics has been ordered by Malay dominance within communalism, and his tight focus includes an integrated treatment of Sabah and Sarawak’s incorporation into the social contract through their leaders’ interactions with UMNO. Such communal ordering, of course, displaces the bloody fighting to internal arenas as groups struggle to articulate unified communal interests. This is the stuff of Malay politics and the crux of the dynamic Cheah explores in depth, such as factionalism within UMNO and rivalry between UMNO and the Islamic party PAS. But except for a few hints – as during the short-lived merger with Singapore, when the Tunku branded Malays there “traitors” for failing to elect UMNO candidates in the 1963 elections (100) – there is little attention to the process of creating and maintaining the borders of ethno-political identity. This account takes ethnic categories for granted, and by so doing, privileges the communal framework.

Cheah Boon Kheng’s linear narrative, focused on the balancing of tensions, asserts the existence of a multicultural, tolerant Malaysia, one in which ketuanan Melayu is here to stay but contained by the political logic of the nation-state. Farish A. Noor subjects that view of Malaysia and its paradigmatic underpinnings to cultural and historical interrogation. Although he acknowledges the nation’s success in achieving stability, he deplores its failure, which few would dispute, to create “a truly inclusive and all-encompassing national political arena and public space” (165), a logical outcome of the naturalization of communalism in the history and historiography of the nation. Farish seeks to deconstruct that historical narrative – along with its aura of inevitability – through three interconnected strategies. First, he recovers “forgotten aspects” of the past “that have been relegated to the margins or footnotes of political history” in order to remind his readers of historical contingency and affirm “the potential for change that remains with us still” (2). Second, he restores ideological motivation to the narrative, showing how and why certain erasures occurred and offering an alternative vocabulary to discuss Malaysian politics. Third, he examines the crippling consequences of a “flat and static historical narrative premised upon … simple essentialist notions of identity and difference” (vi).

**Lineages of Leadership**

In these essays, Farish systematically recovers past alternatives to present realities. He does this to counterbalance current trends in public morality (“Porn and the Sheik”) and student quietism (“Fine Young Calibans: Remembering the Kesatuan Melayu Muda [Malay Youth Union]”) and to complicate simplistic notions of the past (“How the Penghulu Shaitan [Chief of the Devils] Brought Islam to the Malay World”). He also draws attention to patterns in Malaysian history (“‘Holy Terror’ All Over Again?”) and to colonial and pre-colonial precedents (“Sultan Iskandar Dzulkarnain’s Mega-projek’ [Mega-project]”). He reaches into the past most often, however, to illuminate exemplary leaders or discredit those whose failures seem prescient. The overpriced tower built by Sultan Iskandar Dzulkarnain against the advice of his ministers, for instance, wittily reminds us of “the lack of accountability and transparency … in the feudal courts of the past” (13).

A bigger target is Sultan Idrus Shah of Perak, who was elevated to the throne in 1887, after Britain’s violent early years of rule in that state. He is perhaps best remembered today for the eponymous school that produced the first generation of secular Malay nationalists, the Sultan Idrus Training College (SITC). His reputation as a progressive leader was cultivated during the long years of his reign that saw the development of tin mining in his state, the profits and control of which moved from Malay to Chinese and hence to British hands. He is also known for voicing protest against Kuala Lumpur’s overweening administrative centralization, but he did not change his accommodating stance toward the colonial regime. Sultan Idrus, in short, can serve either a colonialist or nationalist reading of history. In 1913 he was awarded the Knight Grand Cross of the Victorian Order, an occasion recounted here to highlight the Malay inertia that lay at the center of the colonial order. Farish explains how the investiture “incorporated the native while disabling him… by reducing him to the status of passive recipient” of an award “he could neither match nor resist” (17-18).

In contrast to the Anglophile Sultan Idrus stands the Anglicized Sultan Abu Bakar of Johor, who was certainly not accommodating to the British and who managed to keep his state out of the colonial grasp for many years. Farish shows how his choices were historically determined by the relentless critique of “Oriental despotism” issuing from Singapore and the construction of racialized economies and administrations around him. But Abu Bakar, who mixed English habits with Muslim observances, outmaneuvered his opponents for quite some time by keeping on the move in ways both “discursive” and “geographical.” Refusing to “stay put” within the “epistemic and socio-political boundaries” of the colonial order of knowledge and power, he took his game to the enemy, hiring advisors in London, traveling to foreign capitals, and bolstering his international status as a sovereign ruler. At home, he effected the administrative and economic reforms the colonial power would itself have carried out, including bringing Chinese immigrants into his kingdom and its economy (as did King Chulalongkorn in Thailand). This tale of Malay ability and resistance to colonial power is not uncritical, however; Farish notes that the Sultan never altered his autocratic style, a foreshadowing of authoritarianism to come (“The Sultan Who Could Not Stay Put,” 33-55).

More recent historical figures fill some awkward silences in official Malaysian history which, following colonial precedent, begins with the birth of UMNO in 1946. But Malaya, with its massive immigration and crucial commodity exports, surely existed in the same colonial world as, say, Indonesia or Vietnam. Although the numbers of those experiencing the wrenching changes of modernization and urbanization were smaller, they did indeed exist. Ibrahim Yaacob was a student at the SITC in the late 1920s, one of many Malay-speaking newcomers to the colonial capital in the 1930s (“freed from the shackles of court and tradition of the Kerajaans and in an environment where they, too, were foreigners”), a journalist, and a founder of the Kesatuan Melayu Muda in 1938. His was the crucial generation of Malay radicals who proved the failure of the colonial “strategy of containment and policing” through education (80). They went on to articulate both the anti-colonialism and the social critique of their own society that would be necessary for nationalism to take root. Working with the Japanese during the war, Ibrahim and his colleagues tried to pursue independence in conjunction with Indonesia. Although Farish allows this effort to seem closer to realization than it was, more important is his observation that “it was the radical Leftists and nationalists who… introduced the politics of nationalism and anti-Colonialism into the country.” Exiled in Indonesia, Ibrahim, like others who did the intellectual work of imagining an independent Malaya, was relegated to the footnotes by the conservative intellectuals and aristocrats who usurped the nationalist movement (“Ibrahim Yaacob and the Rise of the Malay Left,” 75-110). The lesson for today: there was “a time when Malaysian youth were able and willing to question the circumstances around them even when it seemed as if all hope was lost” (69).

Farish’s “other” Malaysia contains much besides political history – literature, art, and religion in particular – but undeniably makes many of its political points through stories of leadership. To this extent it intersects with Cheah Boon Kheng’s Malaysia, in which the nation progresses through the characters and careers of prime ministers Tunku Abdul Rahman, Tun Abdul Razak, Hussein Onn, and Mahathir Mohamad. In leader-centered historiography, individual lives become prisms through which the nation – its successes, failures, possibilities, disappointments – is viewed. What accounts for such leader-centeredness in Malaysia’s political life and historiography and what are the consequences?

As colonial Malaya filled up with immigrants (not just from China and India, but from other parts of the Nusantara), today’s “Chinese,” “Indian,” and “Malay” communities were constructed and naturalized through census, economic recruitment and restriction, land tenure, and cultural elaboration. Socio-politically, the British “kept the different ethnic groupings isolated along vertical cleavages of group-loyalty, while maintaining their patron-client bonds with each ethnic grouping in turn” (Farish, 22). The defense of this social structure in the transition to independence – and its subsequent strengthening by the New Economic Policy of the 1970s and 1980s (Cheah, 144) – reinforced the vertical orientation within each group and empowered “enlightened” leaders who could balance the communally-channeled anger fomented by “ultras” or “chauvinists” with the compromise necessary to achieve viable citizenship, language, and educational policies.

There is no doubt that Malaysian politics has been dominated by the personality and power of such leaders, especially by the first and current prime ministers. But an analytical focus on the successes and failures of individual leaders perpetuates vast erasures in historiography. Among other things, it cannot explain how nationalism has (or has not) become “a state of mind, permeating the large majority of a people and claiming to permeate all its members” (Hans Kohn, quoted in Cheah, 42, n. 24). In focusing on the emotion-driven communal tendencies that pragmatic leaders must hold in check, it gives short shrift to democratizing movements from below. In privileging leaders’ pursuit of intra-communal unity, it colludes in suppressing analyses of gender, labor, the environment, and other “non-communal” concerns. Most importantly, the naturalization of leader-centered narrative effaces ideology from the analysis of politics and history. It is to this problematic that Farish addresses his most sustained argument.

Farish charges that “Malaysia today is ruled according to a neo-feudal political culture” in which “blind deference to authority” has been “re-invigorated and revived in no uncertain terms” (13). How can the words “feudal” and “neo-feudal” be applied to Mahathir’s relentlessly modernizing Malaysia? Is this a case of the political columnist’s aim for maximum reaction overcoming the scholar’s careful choice of terminology? In fact, by using this language Farish is situating himself within a current of Malay social criticism that can be traced back to Munshi Abdullah’s mid-nineteenth century condemnation of royal misrule (1970), through the radical, popular nationalism of the mid-1930s to 1940s, to more recent scholar-activists like Chandra Muzaffar (1979). In this vein, Farish reminds his readers of Malay leaders’ collusion with colonial rule. After European incursions disrupted networks of trade and wealth in the wider Southeast Asian world, ushering in a period of economic stagnation and disorder, colonial intervention on the peninsula was justified by “the notion of the disabled native” (18) whose decaying culture required European protection. But the imposition of central authority was obscured by the cooperation and entrenchment of elites like Idrus Shah of Perak. Native disablement, which also paved the way for the wholesale importation of labor, was then cemented in two ways: through a discourse labeling Malays as “superstitious,” “conservative,” “lazy,” “without method or order,” and having “proper respect for constituted authority” (Swettenham, quoted in Farish, 24); and through legislation that decreased their ability to move about geographically:

“The net effect was two-fold: Colonial ethnographic scholarship reconstructed the Malays as a backward race of agriculturalists and feudal serfs, while the newly-imposed Colonial legislation and regulations ensured that the Malay peasantry would be kept in precisely those areas of economic activity that were deemed compatible with their ‘natural’ Malay character: manual labour, farming and fisheries” (26).

It was this society – defined by disability and an ossified class structure – that was the target of nationalist, reformist, religious, and other modernist critiques from the early twentieth century. By the 1930s and 1940s, the ruling class-colonial alliance was coming under increased pressure from Malay urbanization and literacy, demands for new economic and political roles by all groups, penetration of foreign media, Japanese occupation, and postwar communal violence. Reviving the language of the secular left critique goes hand in hand with restoring the contribution of the radical Malay nationalists to the historical record.

How does the charge of neo-feudalism hold up in post-colonial Malaysia, where Farish sees a “combination of modern material development and antiquated cultural values” (119)? This part is more contentious but equally engaging. Farish shows how UMNO leaders have pursued a developmentalist agenda – “Malaysia Boleh” (Malaysia can do it) – while holding onto the very same stereotypes of Malay disability that characterized colonial discourse. Mahathir’s influential Malay Dilemma (1970) and the UMNO-sponsored Revolusi Mental (Mental Revolution; Rahman, 1971) both “presented an image of Malays as an inherently backward, ill-educated and pathetic race that was trapped in a dark world of superstition, blind deference to authority and lack of economic sense.” Although these familiar traits are now deplored, they are still used to justify the supremacy of “a patron-class of rulers” (124). It is not at all far-fetched to see how the government’s patronage policies are bolstered by “the impression that the Malays [are] somehow unable to cope with change and development without the help of the State and the UMNO party in particular” (125). Even Mahathir’s recent, parting lament that his biggest regret is his failure to modernize his people bespeaks the historical agency arrogated by leaders to themselves, even as they banish political speech from university campuses and detain political opponents.

That this argument can be made for the opposition PAS as well tends to support its validity. Farish recounts the career of the independent-minded PAS veteran Ustaz Abu Bakar Hamzah to illustrate it. According to Farish, Ustaz Abu Bakar’s view of Islam was not incompatible with democracy, development, and tolerance. In advancing these views, he ran afoul of his party, especially in the 1980s, when ulama (the religious elite) were elevated to positions of leadership. “He attacked what he regarded as the excessive dogmatism and fanaticism of PAS members” and the ulama’s “emphasis on loyalty and blind obedience.” In response, he was accused of being “a kafir (infidel) and munafik (hypocrite)” and expelled from PAS. In the “use of Islam as a weapon to silence the comments and ideas of others and to label others as ‘bad Muslims’,” we hear echoes of Tunku Abdul Rahman’s Malay traitors (“Remembering the Other Face of Political Islam,” 130-35).

**Essentialism and Multiplicity**

Any attempt to understand Malaysia as a nation-state will ultimately grapple with the problematic of Malay centrality in the body politic. Farish observes that media coverage of politics at times “would give the impression that this country was made up of only Malay-Muslims” (164), and a major focus of Cheah’s analysis is the factionalism within the Malay community that constantly threatens its political primacy. Yet there is something troubling at this center that Farish’s discussion of the colonial past allows us to understand. The story of Sultan Abu Bakar (he who could not stay put) is a sobering reminder that even the most dynamic and privileged individuals could not escape the immobilizing power of colonial categorization for long. Despite its cosmopolitan, trade-centered, diversely-origined history, all of “Malay” society was eventually trapped within the “hierarchy of racial characteristics” that assigned Malays to agriculture and feudal domination, condemned in perpetuity to be Swettenham’s “Real Malay” who “venerates his ancient customs and traditions, fears his Rajas, and has a proper respect for constituted authority” (24). Farish’s most important argument begins – in his more academic essays – with how “the fluid, shifting world of pre-Colonial Malaya was gradually arrested in every sense, epistemically as well as physically,” leaving “the signifier ‘Malay’… eventually reduced to essentialist terms, restricting its play and movement” (25). Combined with their constructed disability – “The Malays will not work,” reported a British travel writer – and consequent need for protection, this diminishment of Malayness was perhaps the deepest, yet least recognized, violence of colonialism.

Not surprisingly, the perpetuation of communalism as the organizing principle of independent Malaya/Malaysia did little to challenge this. In fact, the Federal Constitution of 1957 enshrined a narrow, political definition of “Malay” as one who spoke the Malay language, followed Malay custom, and was a Muslim:

“Rather than accept and celebrate the fact that Malay identity was complex, overdetermined, fluid and evolving, the Federal Constitution’s precise but ultimately impoverishing definition of Malay identity invariably reduced Malayness to a stock definition, reminiscent of the colonial categories of racial identity and difference of the 19th century” (221).

Why have Malay political primacy and the efforts of its strongest leaders – one does not dispute Mahathir’s sincerity on this point – not been able to reverse the diminishment of Malayness? The logic of the nation-state, as identified by Cheah Boon Kheng, may provide an answer. Remembering his opening question, “Who would inherit power from the British?,” we realize that the Malays, as core bangsa (nationality), have literally inherited the position vacated by the British at the apex of the communal-patronage polity. Yet simultaneously, they retain their role as disabled bangsa (race) in need of protection, as reflected in the recurring theme in politics and literature of “Malays in danger.” This frustrated Malay dominance results in unresolved anxiety and the ever-present threat of violence that in turn justifies repressive government. One fears that as long as Malaysia remains trapped in the logic of Malay vs. Malaysian nationalism – and Cheah makes a stong case for its resilience – it will be unable to solve the problem of disabled Malay centrality.

Will the Islamist alternative show a way out? To Cheah, PAS is a non-UMNO variety of Malay ultra: “As most Muslims in Malaysia are Malays, an Islamic state is actually another form of a ‘Malay nation’ except that Islamic principles become the basis of its administration” (240). And from his perspective, Farish condemns the Islamist search for purity that “narrowed the scope of Malay culture and identity and reduced Malay history to a mere few hundred years [since the arrival of Islam]” (42). But although Islam has lately colluded with UMNO in denying the richness and complexity of Malay culture (and added a shallow moralism to boot), Farish also shows that this was not inevitable.

It is in his discussion of Dr. Burhanuddin Al-Helmy, third president of PAS, that the most intriguing possibilities are raised. Detained in 1965, never to reenter politics, Dr. Burhanuddin has largely been written out of history by both official nationalism and his own party which reversed his legacy. As an author of the “People’s Constitutional Proposals” and its Melayu nationality, he “regarded national identity and cultural belonging as historically determined and … evolving categories.” He was a pragmatic intellectual, not least in his Islam, which looked to the future, not the past, and which was centered on human will and struggles in the “here and now.” In the tradition of Muslim modernism that PAS has left behind, Dr. Burhanuddin sought commonalities among nationalism, Islam, and leftism. Most importantly, he recognized that “the universalism of Islam had its limits… [that it] remained a particular universalism that could not be entirely reconciled with other universalist discourses… [and that] negotiation with difference and alterity was the key to political action” (Dr. Burhanuddin Al-Helmy and the Forgotten Legacy of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party,” 56-62).

Unlike UMNO feudalism and PAS medievalism, these are old ideas with current value. As a political activist and a Muslim intellectual, Farish draws from precedents like these when he looks “beneath the façade of a seemingly unitary space [to the] multiplicity of ‘Malaysias’ that are now coming out into the open” (4). Figures and examples from the past can reawaken the possibility of change if historians use them to reclaim traditions of fluidity, flexibility, and negotiation. These are not a different set of tools than those used to construct mainstream Malaysia. If Melayu nationality was a lost opportunity to continue an historical process of identity construction through nationalism, many other semantic constructs remain in play – Malaysia, ethnic harmony, tolerance – that can still be filled with new or expanded meanings and help put the Malay world back in motion.

Cheah Boon Kheng sees Malaysia as the careful containment and balancing of difference, both within and between ethnic communities. Farish Noor looks beneath hard-fought unified façades to multiplicities he seeks to recover and legitimize. Their books are instructive to read together, as Farish articulates and critiques the paradigms underlying Cheah’s biography and explicitly interrogates “the story of a multiracial Malaysia we constantly tell ourselves” (4). Together these authors illuminate the importance of paradigms in writing history and history writing’s discursive power in making and performing the nation.

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