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## A History of an Identity, an Identity of a History: The Idea and Practice of 'Malayness' in Malaysia Reconsidered

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*This article is a critique of ethnicity theories based on essentialism – the idea that ethnic traits are innate (essences) both in the individual and the 'ethnie' as a social group – which have been adopted, wittingly or unwittingly, by historians in mainstream Malaysian historiography in their effort to explain the formation of 'Malay-Malayness' as a social identity. It proposes instead that Malay ethnicity is not innate but rather learned or constructed, and Malay-Malayness has been created as a result of intersecting historical, cultural and social factors at a particular moment in a culture's life and history. Indeed, Malay-Malayness has been constructed by a colonial historiography and subsequently adopted uncritically by most historians in postcolonial Malaysia, both Malays and non-Malays.*

### Introduction

At the outset it may be useful to elucidate my interest in the study of identity in general, and of identity formation in Malaysia in particular, a project that emerged literally 'from the field' about two decades ago, when I was conducting anthropological fieldwork (1979-81) for my doctoral thesis. The findings from that research helped me to gain a better understanding of politics, culture and economic development at the grassroots level in Malaysia.<sup>1</sup> My research also made me realise that a number of fundamental issues relating to Malaysian state and society as well as to Malaysian studies needed to be addressed; the most critical of these were questions of identity contestation and identity formation, in their individual as well as their collective forms.

My earliest response to this question took the form of an attempt to answer a deceptively simple question, namely, 'is a Malay anthropologist's knowledge of her/his own people superior to a foreigner's?'<sup>2</sup> In a rejoinder to an article by Judith Nagata on the *dakwah* movement in Malaysia and in my subsequent essays on the same topic, I elaborated on the religious aspect of Malay identity, that is, on the question of how the experience of Islam, since the colonial period an 'ethnic identifier'

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1 Shamsul A. B., *From British to Bumiputera Rule: Local Politics and Rural Development in Peninsular Malaysia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1986).

2 Shamsul A. B., 'The Superiority of Indigenous Scholars? Some Facts and Fallacies with Special Reference to Malay Anthropologists and Sociologists in Fieldwork', *Manusia dan Masyarakat* (New Series), 3 (1983): 23-33.

for the Malays, intensified with *dakwahism*.<sup>3</sup>

My first attempt to examine the theme of 'identity formation in Malaysia', particularly amongst the Malays, in a concrete, if not material way, commenced with a systematic analysis of the concept of *kampung* ('village'), a term that has long been taken for granted by Malaysianists who have too easily treated *kampung* as synonymous with 'Malay' and 'Malayness'.<sup>4</sup>

*Kampung* has many meanings, and sooner or later we all will come to realise that these meanings are the result of a never-ending contestation between numerous interest groups within 'authority-defined' and 'authority-defining' collectives in Malaysia, both in the past and in the present. I decided to cast my analytical net wider to deal with popular and modern Malay sociopolitical concepts, categories and classifications on a macro level. *Bangsa* ('nation'), for instance, and *negara* ('state'), *ketuanan Melayu* ('Malay dominance'), *gerakan kebangsaan* ('nationalist movement' or 'nationalism'), *jatidiri bangsa* ('national identity') and *bangsa idaman* ('nation-of-intent'); each has many meanings that ask for further exploration. In a series of essays published between 1996 and 1999 I focused on the 'authority-defined' rather than on the 'authority-defining' perspective.<sup>5</sup>

In analysing these concepts, categories and classifications, I quickly learnt that it was impossible to avoid sensitive issues such as the role of Islam, *dakwah*, the Malay language and Malay royalty. In the most general terms I realised that most knowledge about the Malays has been constructed and elaborated in an Orientalist mould by colonial administrator-scholars and that anthropologists and other specialists in Malay studies subsequently used this knowledge, usually without problematising many of the key terms. These very same concepts, categories and classifications subsequently instituted a host of ideas which politicians, bureaucrats and administrators have been all too happy to use and perpetuate in the form of governmental and official policies up to the present day; references to 'Chinese-ness', 'Indian-ness', 'Kadazan-ness', 'Iban-ness' or 'Asli-ness' have been as difficult to avoid as 'Malayness'.<sup>6</sup> Some Malay and Chinese scholars have tried to distance themselves from these basic Orientalist notions by employing Marxist, functionalist, or post-modernist notions and terms. However, many scholars seem to make use of these novelties in academic journals and publications only to hide their chauvinistic political agenda, while rarely questioning the applicability of these novelties in concrete policies. The old 'addiction' to ethnicised knowledge, a prominent manifestation of Orientalism, is still very strong, so it seems.<sup>7</sup>

3 Judith Nagata, 'Islamic Revival and the Problem of Legitimacy among Rural Religious Elites in Malaysia', *Man: The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (N.S.), 17, 1 (1982): 42-57; Shamsul A.B., 'A Revival in the Study of Islam in Malaysia', *Man* (N.S.), 18, 2 (1983): 399-404; Shamsul A. B., 'Religion and Ethnic Politics in Malaysia: The Significance of the Islamic Resurgence Phenomenon', in *Asian Visions of Authority: Religion and the Modern States of East and Southeast Asia*, ed. Charles F. Keyes *et al.* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), pp. 99-116; Shamsul A. B., 'Inventing Certainties: The Dakwah Persona in Malaysia', in *The Pursuit of Certainty: Religious and Cultural Reformulations*, ed. Wendy James (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 112-33; Shamsul A. B., 'A Question of Identity: A Case Study of Islamic Revivalism and the Non-Muslim Response', in *Nation-State, Identity and Religion in Southeast Asia*, ed. Tsueno Ayabe (Singapore: Singapore Society for Asian Studies, 1998), pp. 55-80.

4 See, *inter alia*, Shamsul A. B., *Formal Organisations in a 'Malay Administrative Village': An Ethnographic Portrait* (Kent: Occasional Paper No. 15, Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, University of Kent at Canterbury, 1990).

5 See, *inter alia*, Shamsul A. B., 'Debating about Identity in Malaysia: A Discourse Analysis', *Tonon Ajia Kenkyu*, 34, 3 (1996): 566-600; Shamsul A. B., 'The Making of a Plural Society in Malaysia: A Brief Survey', in *Emerging Pluralism in Asia and the Pacific*, ed. David Wu, H. McQueen and Y. Yamamoto (Hong Kong: Institute of Pacific Studies, 1997), pp. 67-83; and Shamsul A. B., 'Nationalism: Nationsbyggande och kolonial kunskap: Fallet Malaysia', *Orientaliska Studier*, 96-7 (1998): 25-35.

6 Shamsul, 'Debating about Identity in Malaysia' and 'Nationalism: Nationsbyggande och kolonial kunskap'.

7 *Ibid.*

This very brief summary of my journey in search of identity at a conceptual level as well as a practical level should serve as the background of this essay. In the first part I will suggest an interpretation of British–Malay relations that is different from other recent interpretations, such as that developed by Cheah Boon Kheng.<sup>8</sup> Based on an interdisciplinary approach, usually avoided by historians of Malaysia, I will contend that the British colonial conquest was not only a matter of superior weapons, political and diplomatic shrewdness, and economic energy; it was also a cultural invasion in the form of a conquest of the native 'epistemological space'. To formulate this in very simple terms: the British interfered with the local thought system, and by doing this they increasingly disempowered the natives by limiting their ability to define their world; subsequently, the local order of things was replaced by a foreign one, a slow but steady process that has effectively been conducted through a systemic application of a number of so-called 'investigative modalities'.<sup>9</sup> The echoes of these modalities can still be heard. I will then argue that the history of hotly debated concepts such as 'Malay identity' and 'Malayness' is largely based on an Orientalist-colonial construction as reflected in the identity of the history of Malaya and, later, Malaysia. Economically and culturally speaking, the history of what is now Malaysia has been dominated, shaped and 'factualised' by colonial knowledge, and vice versa: the history of colonial knowledge has dominated the economic and cultural history of Malaysia. Hence the title of this essay: 'A history of an identity, an identity of a history'. Colonial knowledge was produced in the brutal modes of conquest that established colonial authority in the Straits Settlements, later in the Malay States and later still in Sarawak and Sabah; it made possible the effective conquest of British Malaya and the Malays and other natives.

The second part of this article takes a brief look at how the three pillars of 'Malayness' - *bahasa, raja dan agama* ('language, ruler and religion') - were instituted during the colonial period within the framework of colonial knowledge, informed by colonial investigative modalities, and inspired by Social Darwinism. Colonial knowledge gave rise to modern ideas of the 'Malay race' and the 'Malay nation' (*bangsa*) as expressed and reflected in the nationalist and anti-colonial movements.<sup>10</sup>

The third and final part of this essay will describe the attempts and struggles of the Malay elite in the post-colonial Malaysian state to redefine the colonial-constructed 'Malayness', first by introducing the term of *bumiputera*, which widened the scope and meaning of 'Malayness' in the framework of the socioeconomic engineering program called the New Economic Policy (NEP) (1971-90), and, second, by dealing with the dilemma that emerged once the NEP threatened to erode the three pillars of 'Malayness'.

Will the emergence of the *Bangsa Malaysia*, or the united Malaysian nation, undermine the three pillars of 'Malayness'? That is the question that will be briefly discussed in the final part of this article.

8 Cheah Boon Kheng, 'Writing Indigenous History in Malaysia: A Survey on Approaches and Problems', *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 10, 2 (1997): 33-81.

9 Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British Rule in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 4.

10 William R. Roff, *Origins of Malay Nationalism* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1967); Ariffin Omar, *Bangsa Melayu: Malay Concepts of Democracy and Community 1945-1950* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1993); Anthony Milner, *Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

### Colonial knowledge and the construction of a modern identity

In Malaysia most historians and other scholars in the humanities accept 'colonial knowledge' as the basis of Malaysian and Malay history. Moreover, they do so in what seems like an almost unproblematised manner, even though politico-academic attempts are being made to 'indigenise' Malaysian history and the 'Malay' viewpoint has been privileged. Such attempts are admirable, and yet it is good to realise that this emphasis on the Malay perspective has been primarily motivated by a 'nationalistic' need to reinterpret history, and not by the urge to question the ways historical knowledge *per se* has been constructed. In Malaysia historical knowledge, a crucial element in every identity formation, is still based on colonial knowledge; in this connection the question of the good and bad sides of the paternalism which informed this knowledge is not a very relevant one.<sup>11</sup>

This silence about the basis of colonial knowledge and its power in shaping Malay and Malaysian historiography is a cause for intellectual and ideological concern, especially in the context of present - day developments of Malaysian studies.<sup>12</sup> Of course there have been numerous discussions among historians about 'Western elements' and 'colonial influence' in the writing of 'local history', but these discussions generally adopt either a 'foreigner vs. local' or a 'Malay vs. non-Malay' stance rather than problematising the construction and definition of historical knowledge itself. The 'foreigner vs. local' debate is informed, so it seems, by the conflict between 'Eurocentredness' and 'indigenouslyness'.<sup>13</sup> In the 'Malay vs. non-Malay' debates, the arguments revolve around 'ethnic histories', such as the need to emphasise 'Malay history' as the basis of 'national history' on the one hand, and the contribution of the 'Chinese' and 'Indians' on the other.<sup>14</sup> Both, in short, have strong 'ethnicised' tendencies.

In short, Malaysian historiography is an ideological struggle involving different interest groups (ethnic, foreign, academic, political and so on), an articulation of the 'unfinished' cultural/ethnic nationalist project in Malaysia. The situation is reminiscent of Ernest Renan's famous essay 'What is a Nation?' in which history is placed at the centre of the 'nationalist project': the past requires a careful and selective interpretation, and in this process, Renan argues, 'getting history wrong' is the precondition of nationalist history since it requires not only a collective remembering but also a collective forgetting. This forgetting 'is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation, which is why progress in historical studies often constitutes a danger for [the principle of] nationality'.<sup>15</sup>

Renan's essay points not only to contradictions in the creation of the historical substance of a 'nation' but also to the need to take note of the 'identity' of a particular form of historical knowledge

11 Cheah, 'Writing Indigenous History in Malaysia'; Charles Hirschman, 'The Making of Race in Colonial Malaya: Political Economy and Racial Category', *Sociological Forum*, 1 (Spring 1986): 330-61.

12 A. J. Stockwell, 'The Historiography of Malaysia: Recent Writings in English on the History of the Area since 1874', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 5 (1986): 82-110; Khoo Kay Kim, 'Local Historians and the Writing of Malaysian History in the Twentieth Century', in *Perceptions of the Past in Southeast Asia*, ed. Anthony Reid and David Marr (Singapore: Heinemann, 1979), pp. 299-311; Khoo Kay Kim, 'Recent Malaysian Historiography', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 13, 2 (1979): 28-39; Khoo Kay Kim, 'Malaysian Historiography: A Further Look', *Kajian Malaysia*, 19, 1 (1992): 37-62.

13 D. P. Singhal, 'Some Comments on the Western Element in Modern Southeast Asian History', *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, 2, 2 (1960): 72-102; Khoo, 'Local Historians and the Writing of Malaysian History'; Anthony Milner, 'Colonial Records History: British Malaya', *Kajian Malaysia*, 4, 2 (1986): 1-18; Yeoh Kim Wah, 'The Milner Version of British Malayan History: A Rejoinder', *Kajian Malaysia*, 5, 1 (1987): 1-28.

14 Kassim Ahmad, 'Satu Konsep Sejarah Kebangsaan Malaysia', *Dewan Masyarakat*, 19 (Nov. 1981): 47-54; Lim Say Hup, 'The Need for a Reinterpretation of Malayan History', *Malaya in History*, 5, 2 (1990): 41-3; Malik Munip, *Tuntutan Melayu* (Kuala Lumpur: Sarjana Enterprise, 1975); Kua Kia Soong, *Malaysian Cultural Policy and Democracy* (Kuala Lumpur: The Resource and Research Center, Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall, 1990).

15 Ernest Renan, 'What is a Nation?', in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 11.

and its construction – the very issues covered in this sketchy essay about the identity of Malaysian historical knowledge. These issues have escaped many scholars and analysts involved in the study of social and ethnic identity in Malaysia.

Following the discourse on Malay identity in Malaysia one could argue that the colonial methods of accumulating facts and insights and the resultant corpus of knowledge have been critical in providing not only substance but also sustenance to the endeavour of writing about 'Malayness'. The sheer volume of 'facts' that have been accumulated and amassed by the British on, for instance, traditional Malay literature and the modern history of Malaya/Malaysia has established the hegemony of colonial knowledge in Malaysia's intellectual realm, where the discussions about 'Malay identity' are taking place. Anthony Milner has demonstrated in a very convincing manner that even the 'political' discourse (perhaps one might say 'discussions about identity') among pre-war Malay writers-cum-nationalists was mainly informed by or conducted within the framework of colonial knowledge.<sup>16</sup>

Relevant here are the methods of accumulating facts that resulted in the formation and organisation of the corpus of colonial knowledge. The approach anthropologist Bernard Cohn developed to make British rule in India more understandable is extremely useful. The British managed to classify, categorise and connect the vast social world that was India so it could be controlled by way of so-called 'investigative modalities', devices to collect and organise 'facts' which, together with translation works, enabled the British to conquer the 'epistemological space'.<sup>17</sup>

An investigative modality includes the definition of a body of information that is needed and the procedures by which appropriate knowledge is gathered, ordered and classified, and then transformed into usable forms such as published reports, statistical returns, histories, gazetteers, legal codes and encyclopaedias.<sup>18</sup> Some of these investigative modalities, such as historiography and museology, are of a general nature, whereas the survey and census modalities are more precisely defined and closely related to administrative needs. Some of these modalities were transformed into 'sciences' or 'disciplines', such as economics, ethnology, tropical medicine, comparative law and cartography. Their practitioners became professionals. Each modality was tailored to specific elements and needs on the administrative agenda of British rule; each of them became institutionalised and routinised in the day-to-day practice of colonial bureaucracy.

The 'historiographic modality', the most relevant one for my argument, had three important components. First, the production of settlement reports, which were done on a district-by-district basis; they usually consisted of a description of local customs, histories and land tenure systems and a detailed account of how revenues were assessed and collected by local, indigenous regimes. Second, the descriptions of indigenous civilisations; these eventually provided the space for the formation of the discourse that legitimised the British civilising mission in the colony. Third, the history of the British presence in the colony; it evoked 'emblematic heroes and villains' and led to the erection of memorials and other 'sacred spaces' in the colony (and in the motherland as well).

The 'survey modality' encompassed a wide range of practices, from mapping areas to collecting botanical specimens, from the recording of architectural and archaeological sites of historic significance to the minute measuring of peasants' fields. When the British came to India,

16 Milner, *Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya*. Mohd. Taib Osman addressed this same issue in his inaugural lecture on 'Malay Studies', which was published as *Pengajian Melayu Sebagai Bidang Ilmu di Universiti. Inaugural Lecture for the Chair of Malay Studies* (Kuala Lumpur: Universiti of Malaya Press, 1991).

17 Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

and later to the Malay lands, they sought to describe and classify every aspect of life in terms of zoology, geology, botany, ethnography, economic products, history and sociology by way of systematic surveys; they also created a colony-wide grid in which every site could be located for economic, social and political purposes. In short, 'surveys' came to cover every systematic and official investigation of the natural and social features of indigenous society through which vast amounts of knowledge were transformed into textual forms such as encyclopaedias and archives.

The 'enumerative modality' enabled the British to categorise the indigenous society for administrative purposes, particularly by way of censuses that were to reflect basic sociological facts such as race, ethnic groups, culture and language. The various forms of enumeration that were developed objectified and stultified social, cultural and linguistic differences among the indigenous peoples and the migrant population, and these differences were of great use for the colonial bureaucracy and its army to explain and control conflicts and tensions.

Control was primarily implemented by way of the 'surveillance modality': detailed information was collected on 'peripheral' or 'minority' groups and categories of people whose activities were perceived as a threat to social order and therefore should be closely observed. For surveillance reasons, methods such as anthropometry and fingerprinting systems were developed in order to be able to describe, classify and identify individuals rather accurately for 'security' and other general purposes.

The 'museological modality' started out from the idea that a colony was a vast museum; its countryside, filled with ruins, was a source of collectibles, curiosities and artifacts that could fill local as well as European museums, botanical gardens, and zoos. This modality became an exercise in presenting the indigenous culture, history and society to both a local and European public.

The 'travel modality' complemented the museological one. If the latter provided the colonial administration with concrete representations of the natives, the former helped to create a repertoire of images and typifications, if not stereotypes, that determined what was significant to European eyes; architecture, costumes, cuisine, ritual performances and historical sites were presented in 'romantic', 'exotic' and 'picturesque' terms. These often aesthetic images and typifications were frequently expressed in paintings and prints as well as in novels and short stories, many created by the colonial scholar-administrators, their wives and their friends.

These modalities represented, according to Cohn, a set of 'officialising procedures' which the British used to establish and extend their authority in numerous areas:

control by defining and classifying space, making separations between public and private spheres, by recording transactions such as sale of property, by counting and classifying populations, replacing religious institutions as the registrar of births, marriages, and deaths, and by standardizing languages and scripts.<sup>19</sup>

The colonial state introduced policies and rules that were organised by way of these investigative modalities; thus, the locals' minds and actions were framed in an epistemological and practical grid.

It should be obvious that Cohn's approach could very well be relevant in analysing developments in the Malay lands. The Malay Reservation Enactment 1913, to mention just one example, could serve as a very revealing illustration for this relevance: the Enactment defined, first, who is 'a Malay'; second, it determined the legal category of people who were allowed to grow rice only or rubber only; and third, it was bound to exert a direct influence on the commercial value of the land. This particular Enactment was instituted separately in the state constitutions of each of the

19 Ibid., p. 1.

eleven *negeri* on the Peninsula, and in each constitution it offered a slightly different definition of who was a 'Malay'. For instance, a person of Arab descent was a Malay in Kedah but not in Johor; a person of Siamese descent was a Malay in Kelantan but not in Negeri Sembilan. It could be argued, then, that 'Malay' and 'Malayness' were created and confirmed by the Malay Reservation Enactment. However, there is more to this: the Act also made 'Malay' and 'Malayness' contested categories.

In different ways, the growth of public education and its rituals fostered beliefs in how things were and how they ought to be: schools were (and still are) crucial 'civilising' institutions, seeking to produce good and productive citizens. By way of schools many 'facts' amassed through investigative modalities, and resultant officialising procedures were channelled to the younger population; in this process governments directed the people's perception of how social reality was organised. What is more, with the creation of Chinese, Malay, Tamil and English schools, ethnic boundaries became real, and ethnic identities became stultified and essentialised by way of language and cultural practices.

The most powerful and most pervasive by-product of colonial knowledge on the colonised has been the idea that the modern 'nation-state' is the natural embodiment of history, territory and society. In other words, the 'nation-state' has become dependent on colonial knowledge and its ways of determining, codifying, controlling and representing the past as well as documenting and standardising the information that has formed the basis of government. Modern Malaysians have become familiar with 'facts' that appear in reports and statistical data on commerce and trade, health, demography, crime, transportation, industry and so on; these facts and their accumulation, conducted in the modalities that were designed to shape colonial knowledge, lie at the foundation of the modern, post-colonial nation-state of Malaysia. The citizens of Malaysia rarely question these facts, fine and often invisible manifestations of the process of Westernisation.

What I have briefly sketched here is the 'identity of a history' since these 'facts', rooted in European social theories, philosophical ideas and classificatory schemes, form the basis of Malaysian historiography. It is within this history that modern identities in Malaysia, such as 'Malay' and 'Malayness' and 'Chinese' and 'Chineseness', have been described and consolidated.

#### **From *Melayu* to *Bumiputera*: officialising plurality or accommodating 'difference'?**

In an important essay, loosely framed within Anthony D. Smith's concept of *ethnie*, Anthony Reid has sketched the different meanings and applications of the terms 'Malay' and 'Malayness' in the history of the Malay Archipelago.<sup>20</sup> Initially, he argues, the terms represented self-referent categories among the peoples inhabiting the archipelago; then, they became social labels that were used by the peoples of South Asia and China, who were mainly traders; and finally, they became social labels that were used by Europeans, namely, Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch and British, who were travellers, traders and, eventually, colonisers.

In the first and second instances, in non-European contexts that is, by the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, 'Malay' and 'Malayness' were associated with two major elements, namely: (i) a line of kingship acknowledging descent from Srivijaya and Melaka; and (ii) a commercial diaspora retaining the customs, language and trade practices of Melaka.<sup>21</sup> Kingship (read: *kerajaan* and the royal family) was a prominent pillar of 'Malayness' in the area around the Straits of Melaka; Islam

20 See Anthony Reid's contribution to this issue.

21 See Leonard Andaya's contribution to this issue.

was another pillar because it provided kingship with some of its core values.<sup>22</sup> The commercial diaspora constituted a group of people outside the Straits of Melaka area – Borneo, Makassar and Java – who defined their ‘Malayness’ primarily in terms of language and customs, two other pillars of ‘Malayness’.

Sociologically speaking, the inhabitants of the archipelago in the pre-European era used the term ‘Malay’ in both objective and subjective ways. Kingship was used as an objective measure, Islam as both objective and subjective: it was an objective criterion to define the King and his subjects (Muslim and non-Muslims) whereas, subjectively speaking, anyone who claimed to embrace Islam could be counted as ‘Malay’. Non-Muslims and non-Malays could be labelled as ‘Malays’, as long as they spoke and wrote ‘Malay’ and lived a ‘Malay way of life’ – meaning that they wore certain clothes, followed certain culinary practices, and became an integral part of the Malay-speaking trading network.

The Portuguese, Spanish and Dutch used the labels ‘Malay’ and ‘Malayness’ in much this way. Being merchants first and rulers second, their main concerns were materialistic. They were not active propagators of their national values and ideas but, rather, framed their presence as a ‘civilising’ force within a vigorously religious orientation, as summarised, for instance, in Norman Davies’ *Europe: A History*:

Europeans sailed overseas ... for reasons of trade, of loot, of conquest, and increasingly of religion. For many, it provided the first meeting with people of different races. To validate their claim over the inhabitants of the conquered lands, the Spanish monarchs, for instance, had to first establish that non-Europeans were human... and their representatives were ordered to read out to all native peoples: ‘The Lord our God, Living and Eternal, created Heaven and Earth, and one man and woman, of whom you and I, and all the men of the world, were and are descendants’. To confirm the point, Pope Paul III decreed in 1537 that ‘all Indians are truly men, not only capable of understanding the Catholic faith, but... exceedingly desirous to receive it’.<sup>23</sup>

In the tradition of merchants and sailors trading across oceans, the preparation of detailed inventory lists of people and things, including cargoes, was a routine exercise for the Portuguese and Dutch merchants and captains. To be able to do this, they had to devise ways of classifying and categorising not only the contents of their ships, but also their crew and their trading partners. That is how Dutch harbourmasters, for example, recognised ‘Chinese’, ‘Javanese’, ‘Bugis-Makassar’, ‘Balinese’, ‘Madurese’, ‘Arab’ and ‘Malay’ captains, sailors and merchants. They mainly followed local labels, and made no conscious attempt to reconstitute or redefine labels and identities according to some preconceived Western notion. Thus, both the objective and subjective local concepts were embedded in social labels. This pre-colonial process left ‘Malay’ and ‘Malayness’ unchanged and unquestioned.

Anthony Reid argues that the subjective aspect of Malay and Malayness, as observed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, allowed a distinct plurality in the subsequent composition of the category of ‘Malay’ since it was ‘exceptionally open to new recruits from any background’. He concludes that ‘Malayness’ ‘can be seen to have evolved towards the idea of *orang Melayu* as a distinct ethnies’.<sup>24</sup> The evidence of this plurality, however, allows for alternative constructs; witness, for

22 A. C. Milner, *Kerajaan: Malay Political Culture on the Eve of Colonial Rule* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1982); Rita Smith Kipp, *Disassociated Identities: Ethnicity, Religion, and Class in an Indonesian Society* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), pp. 20-38.

23 Norman Davies, *Europe: A History* (London: Pimlico, 1997), pp. 510-11.

24 Anthony Reid, ‘Malayness and the Forging of National Cultures in Southeast Asia’, a paper for an international seminar on ‘External Challenge and Local Response: Modern Southeast Asia in Historical Perspectives’, 20-22 Sept. 1997, Universiti Brunei Darussalam, Brunei, p. 8.

instance, the fact that the British reconstituted the meaning of 'Malay' and 'Malayness' and almost completely ignored its *ethnie* sense.

Rather like the British modes of operation in India described by Cohn, British activities in Singapore and beyond involved a distinct understanding of the local population, in particular of the 'Malays' for whom they fostered special feelings of friendship as early as the days of Raffles. Inspired by the Enlightenment, they operated from the idea that human beings should be classified in a scientific manner. By way of various investigative modalities (such as historiography, surveys, museology, enumeration, travel, surveillance) the British constructed a corpus of knowledge supported by 'facts', and introduced many names, labels and categories that people in Malaysia regard as natural, self-evident, and existing since time immemorial.

The activities of the early administrators are illustrative and prominent. Raffles, for instance, renamed a Malay genealogical description of kings and their rituals and ceremonies, originally titled rather simply by its author as *Peraturan Segala Raja-Raja* (Rules for Rulers), as *Sejarah Melayu*, a name that Malays themselves then began to use as well: he gave that text the English name of 'Malay Annals', a name that is still used in most scholarly discussions.<sup>25</sup> William Marsden, the author of *History of Sumatra*, declared that the Peninsula was the place of origin of the Malays; as a result, it was given the name of 'Malay Peninsula', a name that was subsequently translated into Malay as '*Tanah Melayu*' (lit. Malay land), with far-reaching consequences.<sup>26</sup>

Above all, it was Raffles' path-breaking essay, entitled 'On the Malayu Nation, with a Translation of its Maritime Institution', in the journal *Asiatic Researches* that set the tone for the subsequent discourse on Malay and Malayness amongst the Europeans – and, later, amongst the Malays themselves. Raffles wrote: 'I cannot but consider the Malayu nation as one people, speaking one language, though spread over so wide a space, preserving their character and customs, in all the maritime states lying between Sulu Seas and the Southern Oceans.'<sup>27</sup>

After the establishment of the Straits Settlements in 1824, Raffles' concept of 'Malay nation' gradually became 'Malay race', an identity that was accepted by both the colonial power and the Malays themselves, primarily as the result of the growing presence of others whose 'race' was 'European' or 'Chinese'. As early as the 1840s, the writer Abdullah Munshi used the term *bangsa Melayu* ('Malay race' or 'Malay people'), and that term gradually entered the public sphere. The 1891 colonial census recognised three racial categories, namely, 'Chinese', 'Tamil' and 'Malay'. With the increased immigration of Chinese and Indian labourers to British Malaya in the early 1900s a plural society was created in which the concept of Malay as a race became fixed and indelible.<sup>28</sup> When the founders of the first Malay-language newspaper in the Straits Settlement (in 1907) chose the name *Utusan Melayu* ('Malay messenger'), this followed and confirmed colonial knowledge.

English and Chinese schools established at the turn of the century were soon followed by 'Malay' vernacular schools; teaching was in English, Mandarin and 'Malay', respectively. In the textbooks for 'Malay' schools, the British constructed a distinctly 'Malay' historiography and 'Malay' literature in which 'Malay' *hikayats* were used to create and implant a certain sense of historical identity and literary taste. The introduction of the Malay Reservation Enactment in 1913 provided a legal definition of 'Malay', and helped fix the idea of 'Malayness' in the public mind. These activities, supported and sanctioned by the colonial government, gave life to the term and concept of 'Malay',

25 Ibid., p. 11.

26 William Marsden, *The History of Sumatra* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 40-2.

27 Thomas Stamford Raffles, 'On the Malayu Nation', *Asiatic Researches*, 12 (1816): 103.

28 Charles Hirschman, 'The Making of Race in Colonial Malaya', and 'The Meaning and Measurement of Ethnicity in Malaysia: An Analysis of Census Classification', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 46, 3 (1987): 555-82.

sooner or later accepted by all social actors.

It is not surprising that 'Malay' nationalism, which developed alongside 'Chinese' and 'Indian' nationalism, had a cultural rather than a political character; the discussions that made the 'Malay race' into a 'Malay nation' focused primarily on questions of identity and distinction in terms of customs, religion, and language, rather than politics. The debate and conflicts surrounding the transition centred on the question of who could be called the 'real Malay' (*Melayu asli* or *Melayu jati*), and these frictions inevitably led to the emergence of various factions amongst 'Malay nationalists'. Malay nationalism was most strongly articulated when the British tried to impose their own concept of the 'Malayan nation' by way of the so-called Malayan Union, a unitary state project. Strong protests on the part of Malay nationalists forced the British to accept an alternative federalist order, officially known as 'Persekutuan Tanah Melayu', translated from the English 'Federation of Malaya', incidentally another product of colonial knowledge.

In formulating a Constitution for the independent 'Federation of Malaya', the 'British', the 'Chinese' and the 'Indians' had to bargain hard with the 'Malays'. The 'Chinese' and the 'Indians' effectively became citizens of the independent state but they had to acknowledge *ketuanan Melayu*, or Malay dominance, which implied that they had to accept 'special Malay privileges' in education and government services, and 'Malay' royalty as their rulers, Islam as the official religion, and the 'Malay' language as the official language of the new nation-state.

The formation of the Federation of Malaysia in 1963 introduced a new dimension to the understanding and definition of 'Malay' and 'Malayness', arising from the addition of the Muslim groups in Sarawak and Sabah, such as the 'Dusun' and 'Murut' in Sabah and the 'Melanaus' in Sarawak. Unlike the Malays on the Peninsula, these local groups did not constitute a majority in the states, either demographically or politically, for more than 60 per cent of the population consisted of non-Muslim natives and Chinese; in electoral terms, the Muslims could not capture more than 45 per cent of the seats in the local legislative assemblies of Sarawak and Sabah. This posed a major political problem to the Malay-dominated federal government in Kuala Lumpur, which had to cooperate with, and attempt to co-opt, non-Malay Muslims as their political partners. In Sarawak, after the downfall of an Iban chief minister, Stephen Kalong Ninkan, in 1966 Kuala Lumpur managed to install a government led by Melanau Muslims and supported by local Chinese. In Sabah, the peninsula Malays found a ready partner in Datu Mustapha, who also ruled with the support of the Chinese. The federal government used the term *bumiputera* ('son of the soil') to accommodate the Malays and the native Muslims and non-Muslims of Sarawak and Sabah in a single category.

When the New Economic Policy was launched in 1971, *bumiputera* became an important ethnic category: it was officialised and became critical in the distribution of development benefits to poor people and also the entrepreneurial middle class. The *bumiputera*, the 'Malays' and their Muslim counterparts in Sarawak and Sabah, achieved political dominance throughout the country with one exception: in the 1980s the Christian Kadazan in Sabah formed their own opposition party (Parti Bersatu Sabah – PBS) that ruled the state successfully for two electoral terms. During that period, the relationship between Sabah and the federal government could be described, at best, as tense. Sarawak remained under the control of Muslim natives, called 'Malay Melanaus', who confirmed Islam as the single most important pillar of their newly acquired 'Malayness'.

In an attempt to win back Sabah, the leading party in the federal government, UMNO (the United Malays Nationalist Organisation), made a historic decision in the late 1980s when it opened itself to non-Muslim *bumiputera* so that eventually the UMNO-led Barisan Nasional ('National

Front') could regain control over Sabah. These developments show that the need to define the borders and margins of a concept can have far-reaching effects on its central content: 'Malayness' as defined by the Malay nationalist movement in the 1920s and 1930s and implemented and redefined by UMNO, had to be reformulated in Sabah once again, illustrating how flexible the concept or category of 'Malay' is. It also shows that the ongoing discussions about 'Malayness' are at once both important and irrelevant: the concept can easily shift meaning, adapting itself time and again to new situations and making clear-cut statements impossible or incredible.

### Conclusion: identity contestation in contemporary Malaysia

What I have tried to demonstrate in a very schematic manner is of how an identity is constituted, in this case 'Malay' and 'Malayness'. The definition of the two terms was (re)created within the framework of colonial knowledge that constructed a 'Malay identity' by way of various investigative modalities. Even the term *bumiputera*, introduced in 1971, does not really refer to something new: it is merely a new term for what in the 1891 census was already officialised as the category of 'Malays and other Natives of the Archipelago'.

Like most societal phenomena, identity formation takes place within two social realities at once: the 'authority-defined' reality – the reality that is authoritatively defined by people who are part of the dominant power structure – and the 'everyday-defined' reality experienced by the people in their daily life. These two realities exist side by side at any given time. Although intricately linked and constantly shaping each other by way of contestation, they are certainly not identical: 'everyday-defined' social reality is experienced whereas 'authority-defined' social reality is primarily observed and interpreted, and possibly imposed. Both are mediated through the social position of those who observe and interpret social reality and those who experience it.

Woven into the ever tense relationship between these two social realities is social power, articulated in various forms such as majority – minority discourse and state – society contestation. In concrete terms, social power involves collectives such as nationalist, literary and professional groups, scholar-administrators, academicians, and so on. Their discourses take both oral and written forms; some may be of a literary character, others are simply statistical or factual, but all are equally inspired by ideas about 'social justice' and 'social equality'.

The discussion of 'Malay' and 'Malayness', particularly in the context of colonial knowledge and its investigative modalities, has been driven by an 'authority-defined' perspective. Obviously, that perspective is not homogeneous in nature; it is expressed in various views and positions, some even in opposition to one another.<sup>29</sup> For instance, some British colonial officials were openly paternalistic or benevolent in their attitudes towards the Malays, something especially prevalent amongst educationalists, while others were simply authoritarian or even racist. In other words, contestations existed within colonial knowledge, the result of different emphases on the various investigative modalities available. Such contestations were also amply reflected in the competing notions of 'the Malay nation', or the 'nation-of-intent', deployed by Malay nationalists. Some preferred *Melayu raya* as their nation-of-intent, some an Islamic state, and others a united Malay *kerajaan*.<sup>30</sup>

In contemporary Malaysia, the recently introduced concept of *Bangsa Malaysia* is by no means an uncontested one either. As a matter of fact, the very notion of one *Bangsa Malaysia* has generated

29 H. R. Cheeseman, *Bibliography of Malaya, being a Classified List of Books Wholly or Partly in English Relating to the Federation of Malaya and Singapore* (London: Longmans Green, 1959); Tan Chee Beng, *Bibliography on Ethnicity and Race Relations in Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Institut Pengajian Tinggi, Universiti Malaya, 1992).

30 Ariffin Omar, *Bangsa Melayu*; Shamsul A. B., *Malaysia in 2020: One State Many Nations? Observing Malaysia from Australia*. The Seventh James Jackson Memorial Lecture, Malaysia Society, Australia (Bangi: Dept. of Anthropology and

a vital and healthy debate in authority-defined circles regarding the various possibilities of forging such an entity. Assimilationists prefer a homogeneous *Bangsa Malaysia*; accommodationists prefer a plural one.

It is very relevant to realise that these discussions reflect not only a contestation about the identity of 'Malayness' or *bumiputera*, but also a contestation of the methods or frameworks through which this 'identity' is examined and elaborated. And these methods and frameworks will continue to interfere with one another in very confusing ways.

Sociology, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 1992); Shamsul A. B., 'Nations-of-Intent in Malaysia', in *Asian Forms of the Nation*, ed. Stein Tønnesson and Hans Antlöv (London: Curzon and Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 1996), pp. 323-47.