

DEFINING "MALAY"

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FOREWORD

I am pleased to write this short foreword to introduce the Department's Seminar and Occasional Papers Series. The series provides the opportunity for staff members of the Department as well as scholars of Malay Studies in general to have their research findings on Malay subjects made known to a wider audience. It is also hoped that this initiative will provide the avenue for a beneficial exchange of ideas and viewpoints on Malay issues between town and gown.

The Department would like to thank Hotel Properties Pte Ltd for sponsoring the publication of the series.

Finally, it should be mentioned that the views expressed in the seminar and occasional papers series are those of the respective authors.

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Introduction

The origin of the term "Melayu" is still clouded in uncertainty. The first mention of "Melayu/Melayur"/"Malayu" occurred in Chinese chronicles in AD 644 when it was recounted that an emissary from "Malayu" in the vicinity of the Jambi or Batang Hari river in Central Sumatra was present in the Chinese imperial court. However, the term was never used as a term of ethnic identity until fairly recent times when European travellers, merchants, missionaries (and later) colonial officials began to categorize the indigenous people living along the coastal estuaries and surrounding islands of peninsular Malaysia as Malays. It can be surmised that though the Malays themselves did not for a long time refer to themselves as Malays (a fact attested to by the lack of mention of the term in Malay chronicles and court writings) yet this does not mean that they were not aware of their distinctiveness as a group.

What can be surmised is that with the passage of time, a Malay identity emerged. This identity grew in tandem with an expanding ethnic admixture comprising Malay and others of the same racial stock (bangsa-bangsa serumpun) such as for example the Minangkabauese, Achehese, Bugis, Banjarese, Mandailings and later in Singapore the Orang Selat, Boyanese and Javanese. However, at the same time ethnic identity based on locality and region preserved the distinctiveness of culture and practice associated with each of the sub-groups mentioned creating in the process different

"world perceptions".

Defining Characteristics

It will be seen that there are two observable perspectives in defining 'Malay' viz, the political and the academic. The former tends to stress race and territoriality and in the process tends to gloss over underlying and emerging differences. The latter perspective while recognising certain binding characteristics of race and culture nonetheless stresses growing variation. It follows that for Singapore, what constitutes "Malay" could be guided by two considerations. One is the internal dimension and the other, the regional.

According to the 1990 Census, the number of persons classified as "Malay" was 342,389 persons. Of this, 351,004 declared themselves as Malays, 436 as Javanese, 322 as Boyanese, 18 as Bugis, 12 as Banjarese and 597 as other Malays. It would appear that from the population figures provided, there is a gradual merging of the various sub or ethnic groups toward a common ethnic identity that is, Malay. Official policy in regarding Malay as the politically salient category alongside Chinese and Indian, has also influenced the process. This, no doubt, is integral to the special historical relationships that Singapore had with the Malay states since pre-colonial times. It was a relationship that etched more clearly both the ethnic and territorial boundaries associated with the term "Malay" so much so the term "Malay world" has come to attain some saliency among sections of the Malaysian academic community.

Be that as it may, for Singapore there is justification for a broader, less inclusive definition of the term "Malay".

It can be seen that in matters of practical politics, Singapore will continue to relate to its immediate neighbours in terms of a Javanese dominated Indonesia and a Malay dominated Malaysia. We do know for a fact, that despite the process of ethnic homogenization occurring among the Malays, Javanese, Boyanese etc in Singapore, social and cultural ties with their respective places of origin continue to have a bearing.

What is equally pertinent is that at different stages of the history of Singapore these groups of people made important contributions to shaping the character and texture of Singapore Malay society. Javanese relationship with Singapore or Temasek dates back to the 12th century. When Singapore was founded as a modern port, Bugis traders helped to extend its regional links. Indeed, between the 17th and 19th centuries Bugis adventurers played pivotal roles in the Riau-Lingga sultanate which at its zenith included Johor, Selangor and Pahang in peninsular Malaysia; Siak; Kampar and Indragiri in Sumatra; and Singapore. The Minangkabau connection of Singapore dates back to the days of Raja Kechil in the early 18th century. It was during the colonial period that Javanese, Boyanese and Minangkabauese came in large numbers to work and settled in Singapore. In this regard, it is probably the Minangkabauese who had the least difficulty accepting "Malay" as their ethnic identity over the years resulting in an almost complete merging of Minangkabau ethnic identity with Malay identity in Singapore. In this connection, though the

Achehese component is not significant despite the attempt at exercising political hegemony in the Malay peninsular through Sultan Mahkota Alam in the 17th century, yet the Achehese like the Minangkabauese are more likely to merge easily into the category "Malay" than it is case with say the Javanese. Malays, Minangkabauese and Achehese share a closer affinity in language and history. Last but not least are the "orang selat". Their historical role in the Malay sultanates of Johor-Riau-Lingga should not be dismissed despite their present day cultural and economic inconsequentiality. They should be granted a respected place in the history of Singapore Malay society as it evolves toward achieving its own distinctiveness.

Malays, Bugis, Javanese, Boyanese, Minangkabauese, Banjarese, Mandailings and Achehese and other sub-groups belong to the Malayo-Austronesian group located in the area known as Hesperonesia - an area spanning the southern part of Taiwan through the Philippines, Borneo, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and westwards to Madagascar. However, over the centuries differing modes of contact, political evolution and the demands of local adaptation have created distinct communities among the Malayo-Austronesian people. No doubt, a unifying proto-language and belief system may have existed in the remote past (as studies in historical linguistics and ethnography seem to suggest) yet they show little salience in the developing languages and belief systems of current day Malayo-Austronesian peoples and societies.

In the Singapore context, the distinctiveness of each of the main ethnic sub-groups under the rubric "Malay" should be recognized. Such groups (eg Malay, Javanese,

Bugis, Achehese) continue to have social, cultural and even political significance in the region. It can be expected that Singapore's growing economic integration with the countries of the region will facilitate more sub-group contacts, some evidence of which is already discernible.

The Arab, Indian, Chinese etc Perspective

Two facets need to be kept in mind up to this point.

The first is that Malays do not (as it is also the case of the Arabs, Indians, Chinese etc) represent a pure race. There is, among the Malays an on-going melting pot phenomena involving both peoples of Malayo-Austronesian background as well as peoples not indigenous to Southeast Asia. This admixture of ethnic and racial groups can be expected to grow in Singapore.

This, therefore, raises the question of definition vis-a-vis individuals of mix ethnic background viz Malay and Arab, Malay and Indian, Malay and Chinese in their order of importance. It is obvious that for such individuals race as an objective criterion cannot be the sole basis of identification. Whether an individual regards himself/herself a Malay, Arab, Indian or Chinese as the case may be would depend on subjective factors in other words on his/her self-definition or formal declaration - this despite the fact that the individual in question may be outwardly a practitioner of Malay culture.

Secondly, being Malay and being Muslim has come to be synonymous. Though, Islam is a powerful and pervasive influence on the Malay sense of identity (a fact attested to for example by the rules governing marriage between Muslims and non-Muslims) yet the cultural life-style of the Malays is not necessarily synonymous with the cultural lifestyle of other Muslims.

This means that in a mixed Malay-Arab family for example whether the lifestyle is more clearly Malay or Arab can vary a great deal in terms of a variety of objective and subjective factors. It may be that because of longer years of contact between Malays and Arabs, the cultural lines separating Malay and Arab are blurred or one could say that Arab life style has become more assimilated to the Malay lifestyle. Yet at the same time, it is well-known that there are Arab families who staunchly defend their Arab identity this despite inter-marriage with Malays, Chinese and others of non-Arab origins.

The situation is perhaps more clearly discernible among Muslims of Indian and Chinese origins. Their contact with the Malays are of a more recent genesis and only in recent years has there been efforts made to relate to each other as fellow Muslims. Among both Indian and Chinese Muslims there is also the race differential that draws them away from being categorized as Malay.

In the case of Chinese Muslims, for example they have retained the norms of Chinese family life which stresses patrilineality as against bilaterality, the kinship structure of the Malays.

Hence below the superstructure of Islamic beliefs and practices shared by all Muslims in common there is a multiplicity of cultural life styles - each the consequence of certain unique historical, geographical and socio-political factors. In some cases, these differing cultural life-styles are actively maintained, while in others they have merged into each other to produce equally unique adaptations and variations.

While, it is convenient to speak about a Malay cultural life style - a life-style that incorporates the Adat of the Malays and the religion of Islam, yet in certain existential milieu where Malay institutions are inchoate and where the need for adaptation is so powerful and sustained, communities of Malay ethnic origin have emerged that are only remotely Malay in the cultural sense. No doubt, in general such communities continue to retain Islamic beliefs and practices to some extent yet the local milieu in which each of those communities have to adapt to over many years have resulted in Malay culture being assimilated to the host culture.

In this respect, there are possibly four variations or ideal-typical examples. Modern day Chams in Cambodia are of Malay ethnic stock. As an ethnic minority practising the Islamic faith, they are having to adjust to the mainstream Hindu-Buddhistic culture of the country. This, coupled with the war and destruction in Cambodia since the 1960s have further weakened the fabric of Cham culture and society.

In the case of the Muslims in Southern Thailand, until recently, there was a consistent programme of Thaiization. Muslims in that region of Thailand were not allowed to establish Muslim educational and religious institutions such as madrasahs and

mosques. Furthermore, a deliberate policy to force the use of Thai instead of Malay was put in place to 'pacify and integrate' the south to make it a part of mainstream Thai cultural life. Recent change of official policy with respect to the Muslim south in Thailand will no doubt allow for a resurgence of Malay cultural and religious life, in particular through the use of the Malay language as a medium for both secular and religious instruction. At the same time, it also seems clear that the Malay cultural life-style in Southern Thailand will have to continue to adapt directly and indirectly to the political culture of mainstream Thai society.

Another cultural type found among ethnic Malays in the wider sense of the term is that associated with the Malays of Sri Lanka, South Africa and Dutch Surinam. These Malays are strictly transplanted groups who have over time evolved to assume characteristics of culture and practice identifiable to some extent at least as Malay. The first generation of such communities were mainly young employers of the Dutch colonial army or they were domestic servants and menial workers recruited by Dutch families and the Dutch colonial government respectively. Being essentially cut-off from the Malay world proper they have evolved to become distinct communities, absorbing the life-style and practices of the host community. In some instances, even the use of Malay in daily discourse is either truncated or displaced by the language(s) of the host community - Sri Lankan in the case of Malays in Sri Lanka, Afrikaans or English in the case of Malays in South Africa. Their distinctiveness as Malays is preserved to an extent by their physical features and adherence to Islamic worship and practice. Yet once again, the situation as witnessed is more a case of adaptation to the host culture whether Afrikaans or African.

Finally, there is the Malay community that has evolved over the years in the Muslim Holy Cities of Mecca and Medinah. As in the case of many transplanted communities, these Malays are located in certain enclaves and in that way are able to maintain a cultural life-style that is distinctly Malay. The fact that such communities (unlike those in Sri Lanka, South Africa and Dutch Surinam) are able to preserve a Malay cultural-life style is due mainly to the regular replenishment of people and goods from the Malay world in particular during the Haj season. It is entirely reasonable in this regard, to expect that Malays who have settled for generations in the heartland of Islam are both more Arab and Islamic than are their Malay cousins in Malaysia and Indonesia. This is certainly the case in regard to language and dress.

What has been presented thus far hinges on an understanding of the meaning, scope and problems arising from cultures in contact. In this regard, Malay culture in Singapore presents a special or unique instance in cultural contact.

First of all, unlike the culture contact situations discussed earlier, Malay culture in Singapore enjoys equal status with all the major cultures though it is a culture of about 16% of the total population. At the same time, there is official support for its active propagation.

Secondly, Malay culture in Singapore, unlike the transplanted cultures cited earlier, is located in the Malay cultural heartland of Southeast Asia. This means in effect, that it is a culture that is both unique in view of its broader socio-cultural milieu and

co-extensive in view of its affinity and closeness with the various strands of Malay culture in the region of Southeast Asia.

Finally, there is no monolithic mainstream culture in Singapore toward which Malay culture is required to seek an accommodation. All three major cultural traditions or cultural lifestyles in Singapore - Malay, Chinese and Indian are willy-nilly having to resolve the challenges of cultural development or maintenance as the case may be by addressing the challenges posed by modernization on the one hand and westernization on the other. In other words, the cultural accommodation or adaptation required as the case may be is not internally generated but externally imposed. It is not as though Malay culture is having to accommodate to Chinese culture or vice versa but more so the demands on both Malay and Chinese culture to fulfil the needs for cultural preservation while simultaneously evolving a cultural life style that is in tune with Singapore's existential circumstances.

It can be seen that the designation 'Malay', whether seen as race or culture, has and continues to undergo transformation. There are, in other words, various racial admixtures between Malay and not Malay just as there are cultural life-styles between Malay and not Malay: the complexity or variegated layers of admixture of race or culture being dependent on the location, time and manner of contact between Malay and not Malay.

There is then no single Malay culture, whether past or present that can be regarded as a proto-type - a norm that serves as a measure for what constitutes Malay in the

pure sense. This does not deny the fact that the Malays as a race and Malay culture as a manifestation has a specific geographical location in Southeast Asia. Similarly, there continues to exist certain underlying shared features that collectively depict Malayness such as for example facial and bodily characteristics, modes of social organization, residential patterns and house-types, economic activities and adherence to Islam and Adat values. Yet, at the same time it is reasonable to argue that all these have and continue to undergo transformation in accordance with the current and emerging existential circumstances confronted by those who regard themselves as Malays.

Awareness of being Malay, I shall argue is inherent to the process of nationalism that engulfed the various peoples who came under Western imperial rule up to the mid-twentieth century. The Malay struggle to outline Malay identity was based on three parameters viz race, language and religion. It was clear to the proponents of Malay nationalism even then that race as a governing criteria was too slippery to handle. Consequently, a cultural definition was adopted to depict Malay as in the case of Malaysia where Malay is defined as 'anyone who speaks the Malay language, dresses as a Malay and practices the Islamic faith'.

Similarly, in Singapore the Report of the Select Committee on the Parliamentary Elections (Amendment) Bill of 1988 has stated inter alia: "A person belonging to the Malay community" means any person, whether of the Malay race or otherwise, who considers himself to be a member of the Malay community and who is generally accepted as a member of the Malay community by that community.

Because of the importance of the Bill of 1988 (its primary objective being to ensure adequate representation by the minority races in Parliament), the term 'accepted' implies that the person concerned should be seen as an active and visible participant of Malay culture, in particular in Malay-based organizations. At the same time, some Malay biological inheritance or Malay connection through marriage would probably be important in deciding acceptance though the definition as it stands does not exclude an Arab, Indian or Chinese from being categorized as a Malay.

The two definitions of Malay given above are worth noting. In the Malaysian case, religion (Islam) as a criterion is formally stated. However, in practice its relevance or applicability as a criterion cannot be decoupled from language (Malay) and dress (Malay life-style). The significance of religion (Islam) requires that a Malay who has forsaken Islam be also stripped off his racial origin. However, at the same time, Chinese Muslims even if they speak the Malay language and adopt the Malay life-style are not recognized as belonging to the Malay race ostensibly for political reasons.

The case of Malaysia is worth further discussion. Of late, a move was made by a section of the UMNO membership to ask the UMNO ^{General} National Assembly of November 1993 to consider the admission of Melaka's Portuguese as full members of the Party. The essential argument given in support is based on the fact that the current day Portuguese of Melaka are the descendants of men who came with Alfonso de Albuquerque, the conqueror of Melaka in 1512, and Malay women. If the proposal is accepted, it would imply that race (albeit not pure) is far more significant

than culture or religion in determining ethnic/racial identity. This at least, seems to be the case in Malaysia.

A useful comparison is seen in the way the Kadazans and other indigenous groups are categorized by the Malaysian polity dominated by UMNO. The Kadazans, Muruts, Bajaus, Penans etc are constitutionally regarded as the 'pribumi' or 'bumiputera' (native peoples) of Malaysia, thus enjoying special rights with the Malays. In this regard, though such native groups are not regarded as Malays yet their indigeneity is recognized. However, the Portuguese descendants of Melaka, the Kadazans and the Muruts are largely Christians and animists.

A related but more problematic aspect is found in the status of the Chinese peranakans - local born Chinese of mixed Chinese-Malay ancestry, in Malaysia. Though, they are like the Portuguese of Melaka of mixed racial origins (Chinese and Malay) they are not considered as Malays or bumiputera. The peranakans are Chinese religionists and in both language and cuisine are closer to Malay culture proper than are the Portuguese, Kadazans and Muruts. This, indeed, was the basis for inclusion as Malay put forward by several peranakan Chinese in Melaka following the proposal made to confer Malay status on the Portuguese of that state in late March, 1993.

In Singapore, probably because of the multi-religious emphasis in nation building, religion (Islam) is not mentioned specifically as a governing criterion for Malay; this despite its obvious importance as perceived by Singapore Malays. At the same time,

it is also becoming quite clear that Malay Singaporeans are becoming cumulatively more accepting of the practical need to widen the meaning and scope of the designation 'Malay'. But it would seem at the same time that acceptance of being Malay is implicitly governed by the criteria of language, life-style and religion. Race in this context and in contrast to Malaysia is less of a hindrance. However, as mentioned earlier in this paper, there remains the problem of religion as a formal governing criterion in that there are Muslim Singaporeans who through self-declaration do not regard themselves as Malays whether it is in terms of race or culture. Seen in this context, the definition of Malay as stipulated in the Parliamentary Elections (Amendment) Bill, 1988 seems to reflect accurately the reality situation.

Identity and Variation

What has been presented suggests that there is both identity and variation vis-a-vis the designation Malay. This must, therefore, serve as the first principle in grappling with what is obviously a highly complex phenomenon.

Secondly, given the above principle, one needs to differentiate between what constitutes the basis for maintaining identity (the concept Malay as a designated group of people) as against what constitutes the basis for pursuing variation (Singapore Malays as a distinct group as against Malays in Malaysia or elsewhere).

The concept 'Malay World' is an identity driven concept based on 'race'. The question that arises is how should Singapore Malays relate to it and in what form?

Currently, the term 'Malay World' is yet to be clearly defined. Its use is mainly to depict a defined geographical area inhabited by peoples of Malay stock, who share identifiable notions about nature and life and from the 11th century embraced the Islamic faith. Yet, at the same time, there is not one history of the 'Malay World' but many. Indonesia, for instance, is not entirely comfortable with the term because there is also implicitly a 'Javanese World' or 'Balinese World'. Similarly, the people of the Philippines though of the same ethnic or racial stock prefer to call themselves Filipinos, which as in the case of Indonesia regard political evolution as more critical than race as a basis of identification.

There is as much a need to maintain identity as it is to recognise variation: the former for the purposes of history and continuity, the latter for the purposes of adaptation and survival.

Practical Implication

The designation 'Malay' in the Singapore situation is represented by a core and several peripheries whether seen in ethnic or cultural terms.

The core in ethnic/cultural terms is none other than the 97% who declare themselves as Malay among those categorized as 'Malay' in the 1990 Census. It can be surmized that it is also this 97% who have a cultural life-style identifiably Malay. Both the ethnic and cultural foundation of the Malays in Singapore (even allowing for the admixture of Malay-related ethnic groups) are substantially Malay in the strict sense of the word. The ancestors of present day Singapore Malays were most of them from

the Riau-Lingga-Johor region. Available statistics on the Malay population testify to it. However, this core is an evolving one and therefore should be noted accordingly.

The first periphery is represented by the sub-groups making up the Malayo-Austronesian people viz Javanese, Minangkabauese, Banjarese, Acehese, Boyanese and Bugis. These groups are racially Malay but at the same time may be regarded as ethnic minorities within the Malay community in Singapore. Seen from a larger or regional perspective, however, they assume importance and therefore should be appropriately recognized in the historical and cultural senses.

The second periphery is made up of the various admixtures of race between Malay and Malay related ethnic groups and other racial groups such as Arabs, Indians and Chinese. In making the designation 'Malay' the definition proposed by the Parliamentary Election (Amendment) Bill, 1988 should be followed. To be a 'Malay' the individual must declare himself/herself as being a Malay and at the same time be regarded as one by the core community. This approach circumvents the problem of merely relying on 'race' as a classificatory device.

A related perspective is that of culture. It is, of course undeniable that Malay culture in Singapore has over the years absorbed elements of belief and practice traceable to external sources, in particular those of Islamic/Arab origins. In one sense, this is not unusual as the process of cultural assimilation is on-going and occurs in every culture. Malay culture, as is well known, has evolved to assume its present form and character as a result of cultural contact with several other cultural traditions than the

Islamic/Arab-dating back to the early part of the present millennium.

However, such elements or practices should be considered as a part of Malay culture once they have become accepted on a society wide basis. It is appropriate to re-state an observed fact in cultural studies in this regard viz that assimilated elements or practices of culture as the term implies are normally adapted, transformed and even re-interpreted by the receiving culture, making them a logical and meaningful part of the cultural system. In this connection, Islam while it remains a fundamental aspect of the Malay sense of identity, should not be regarded as synonymous with Malay culture but as an integral part of it, being woven inextricably into the fabric of Malay life in Singapore.

Thirdly, there is the periphery of transplanted Malay and Malay related groups in such countries as Sri Lanka, South Africa and Dutch Surinam. While they continue to retain both racial and cultural features identifiable as Malay yet how they will evolve is difficult to ascertain at this point. Partly, the attitudes and policies of those who hold the reins of political power in the countries where they live would be critical. Be that as it may, such Malay and Malay related groups are of interest. They can provide insight on how people lay claim to being or not being as the case may be, members of a particular race.

Finally, the core because of its local genesis and foundational status must serve the basis of ethnic/racial identity among those Singaporeans who regard themselves as Malays. At the same time, the various peripheries must illuminate the core in

appropriate ways. It is worthwhile to state that what constitutes a Malay may not be a priori definable. An understanding of what constitutes 'Malay' may come after all the relevant information are gathered for a defensible formulation. One can usefully use an operational definition and work forwards and backwards to refine it in keeping with the specific circumstances associated with a Malay group.
