

Who are the Diasporas in Malaysia? The Discourse of Ethnicity and Malay(sian) Identity

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to offer a new understanding of the “constructed” nature of ethnic identity and ethnic-relations in Southeast Asia. Using Malaysia as a case, I first sketch the history of Indian and Indonesian diasporic cultural flows into and influences on the peninsula Malay identity from pre to post-European colonisation. Second, I point out how state-led mediated essentialising of the peninsula “Malay” as territorial and indigenous (bumiputra) appears to have led to the inclusion and exclusion of the pre and post-colonial Indonesian migrant at various moments in the process of negotiating Malay identity, making of an urban Malay-Muslim and the re-making of a capitalist Muslim-Malay. Third, I argue and maintain that the process of “othering” in multicultural Malaysia seems triggered by “ontological insecurity” and “de-traditionalisation” – as pointed out by Anthony Giddens (1990) – and the hegemonic construction of Malay(sian) identity. Finally, the national culture and identity has been described as a form of imaginative identification as an idea that is simultaneously one of inclusion (e.g. “Bangsa Malaysia” or Malay plus Indonesian) that provides a boundary around “us” and one of exclusion (e.g. “bumiputra/bukan bumiputra” or Malay minus Indonesian) that distinguishes “us” from “them”, where race (the Malay) is symbolically expressed as national and territorial, constructed differently and distinctively.

Key Words: *Diaspora, media, culture, identity, ethnicity, Islam, Indian, Indonesia, and Malay(sia).*

INTRODUCTION

Research on diaspora communities – their ideological construction and representation, their media forms and reception – has been relatively Western in location and in perspective. In an increasingly mediated world, diasporas, from a media and cultural studies perspective, seem to have been examined primarily in their situated-ness in the developed world, in old nation-states. Studies on the “rest in the West” (Hall, 1990) in Australia (Jakubowicz, 2000; Ang, 2001; Sinclair & Cunningham, 2001; and Kolar-Panov, 2003); in Britain (Gillespie, 1995; Husband, 2000; Sreberny, 2000; Ross, 2001; and Downing & Husband 2005); in Israel, America and Japan (Liebes & Katz, 1993); and in

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North America (Jhally & Lewis, 1992) have effectively challenged the cultural imperialism perspective and invited global, cultural, interdisciplinary debates on the creative and inventive engagement of ethnic minorities with media forms in neatly carved out third spaces. Studies have also included the Caribbean, such as Trinidad (Miller & Slater, 2000). In the context of the Muslim diasporas and the rise of the *ummah* in the era of new media technology (cf. Naficy, 1993; Sardar, 1993; Sreberny-Mohammadi & Mohammadi, 1997; and Mandaville, 2001), focus has been in the Middle East and on the Middle-Eastern (Arab-Muslim) diasporas in Western Europe and the USA.

While Benedict R.O'G. Anderson (1991) paid particular attention to the consequences of European colonialism and print capitalism on Southeast Asian modernity and ethnicity and local Southeast Asian thinkers such as Munshi Abdullah and Eunos Abdullah, among others, romanticised the “Malay”, a lacunae seems to prevail in the historicising and the problematising of the “rest in the East”, as though diasporas are “Western”. As Massey (in J. Storey, 2003) explains much of the discussion on globalisation tends to be relatively elitist. “*To see the penetration of ‘local’ boundaries as something of recent origin is to read history from the perspective of a colonising First World*” (Massey in J. Storey, 2003:160). For example, in explaining the notion of diaspora, J. Sinclair and S. Cunningham (2001) note the “*mass migration of people from the developing world to the developed world such as from Latin America to the United States of America, Caribbean and South Asia to Britain, Turkey and North Africa to Europe [...]*” and in their book pay particular attention to the diasporas from the developing world in Australia.

Generally, diasporas and their media use and representation within Southeast Asia and within the periphery has been a neglected field of study. In fact, the notion “diaspora” has hardly been deployed by local researchers to describe the three major ethnic communities such as Indians, Chinese, and Malays in peninsula Malaysia. It is commonly assumed that peninsula Indians and Chinese, unlike the Malays, are the colonial migrants and this appears a banalised discourse. Despite almost four generations after, and with little or no knowledge of their ancestral Indian and Chinese history and culture, these ethnic minorities seem to be labelled *pendatang* (immigrants), *keturunan pendatang* (descendants of immigrants), and *orang asing* (foreigners) in everyday talk.

It has been contended by historians that Indian and Indonesian empires have had the greatest impact on the culture of the peninsula Malay. Hence, P. Gilroy (1993:127), in the context of Euro-American modernity, argues that “modernity is inevitably a trans-cultural, international, diasporic, and hybrid formation”. Clifford (in J. Sinclair and S. Cunningham, 2001:14) notes that the concept of diaspora should be historicised to affirm the distinctiveness of particular diasporas. H.K. Bhabha contends further as follows:

[...] the creation and use of culture as a means of survival is both transnational as a result of contemporary post-colonial discourses being rooted in specific histories of cultural displacement [...] and translational due to such spatial histories of displacement rendering the issue of how culture signifies – or what is signified by culture – a complex one (Bhabha, 1993:191).

Thus, to understand the construction of ethnicity and the cultural work of Malaysian media today, it is necessary to be informed by the work of history and the prior narratives and mythologies of the peninsula Malay society.

During the historical and colonial process (cf. Shamsul, 2004) of defining Malay identity and territory (who is Malay? Who belongs?), while labour migration of Indians and Chinese in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries seemed to threaten the Malay cultural space and numerical superiority, language (*Bahasa Melayu*), religion (Islam) and kingship (*kerajaan*) became entangled with nationalism and race contributing to the definition of Malayness, and inevitably to the process of “othering”. Not enough has been said about how the “diasporic othering” of Indians and Chinese for over a hundred years and how the conflicting, dialectic process of inclusion and exclusion of arriving Indonesians, tend to contribute to the ideological architecturing and social engineering of the identity of the peninsula Malay race as an indigenous, pure, national, non-diasporic, *bumiputra* community. Not enough has been documented about the role of the media in the ideological manufacturing of the identity of the peninsula Malay as an indigenous group in Malaysia.

In this paper, I endeavour to sketch an historical understanding of the present diasporas in Malaysia from pre to post-European colonialism. Through methodological pluralism, I argue that the process of alterity seems triggered by Malay “ontological insecurity” intensified by “de-traditionalisation” (Giddens, 1990); and fostered by the hegemonic construction of Malay(sian) identity.

DIASPORAS ARE MIGRANTS?

Rapidly intensifying flows of people, not to mention trade, capital and information, between porous borders appears to have diminished the gap between local and global (Ohmae, 1995; and Friedman, 2000) and engendered the formation and spread of diaspora communities, often said to be experiencing *displacement and disjuncture* (Appadurai, 1996); *dislocation and de-territorialisation* (Tomlinson, 1999); *glocalisation and hybridisation* (Neverdeen, 1995; and Robertson, 1995); and *dis-embeddedness* (Giddens, 1990). The discourse on diaspora largely speaks of the painful experience of people trapped between cultures, real and imagined, trying to adjust in real and imagined alien host cultures, having moved from one (or more) location / s as exiles, slaves, refugees, asylum seekers, migrant workers, political victims, traders, imperialist etc. (Sinclair & Cunningham, 2001). Their perceived inferior status, politically, and their difference, culturally, it is argued, tend to isolate them from the mainstream of society.

However, while “displacement” and “disjuncture” may be painful experiences for diasporas who arrive with racial, linguistic and religious differences, like the Indians and Chinese who arrived as indentured labour in Malaysia over a hundred years ago, it may be a contrary experience for several diaspora communities, like Indian-Muslims and Indonesians who seem pleasurably re-territorialised and instantly hybridised in host nations such as Malaysia because of threads of cultural similarity and the fluid nature of the receiving Malay culture, which is itself being re-constructed and re-constituted on a day-to-day basis as it recruits all those who speak *Bahasa Melayu* and embrace Islam into the Malay world. S. Hall (1990:235) notes that diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference. A. Brah (1996:196) expands on this idea by his explanation that diaspora identities are at once local and global. They are networks of trans-national identifications encompassing “imagined” and “encountered” communities.

A.B. Shamsul (2004:137) contends that the construct “Malay” is largely the work of orientalist-colonialist having taken shape during the period of British colonisation of the Straits Settlements, Malay States, Sarawak and Sabah. While “Malayness” was given a new socio-economic definition in the early 1970s under the umbrella of *Bumiputera* as argued by A.B. Shamsul (2004), it has since been de-constructed at various developmental stages in post-colonial Malaysia. In fact, the notions of “Malay identity” and *Bumiputera* have been interrogated under nation-building projects such as *Bangsa Malaysia*, *Islam Hadari*, and *1Malaysia*. The construct “Malay” thus appears fluid and translucent and continues to take new meaning in modernising Malaysia.

M. Nash (1989:25) explains that Malay as it is now constituted is a category built up over time from groups in interaction, and the current definition took its major contours during colonial days and even more so during the political processes of post-independence. Differences within the “Malay” as for example between Kelantanese and Johoreans are deep as within Indian and Chinese communities. Ethnic categories or blocs are used as national references in a framework of contrast (Nash, 1989:24-25) and nationally mediated in a multiracial society. The Malaysian Article 160 constitutional definition of “Malay” offers almost any citizen through conversion to Islam, conversance in *Bahasa Melayu*, and adherence to Malay customs; the status Malay (*masuk Melayu*) and in an Islamic revivalistic atmosphere where Malay-Muslims tend to see themselves as Muslim-Malay, it has become *masuk Islam* (to become Muslim). The Malay community, therefore, appears hybrid and as diasporic as the minority Indian or Chinese colonial migrants. As Edward Said (1993:407) aptly observed, “No one today is purely one thing”.

G. Spivak (1999) maintains that the processes of globalisation problematise the dialectic of self by preventing the distinction of an “essentialising moralism”. Culture and cultural identities seem no longer possible to be constructed through

unquestioned theoretical assumptions of difference, rather a new politics of cultural identity, one of continual conjunctures and disjunctures that defy essentialised categories and descriptions need to be considered (Appadurai, 1996). According to H.K. Bhabha (1993), to suggest a world of increasingly hybrid identities living in spaces between cultures is not to suggest that identity as category is disappearing. Despite notions of hybridity and fluidity individuals still organise themselves around a sentiment that their identity has an essence. Identity becomes a site of contestation; of how it is forged, articulated, and rearticulated. For A. Appadurai (1996), increased migratory flows create multiple points of connection between media images and actual immigrant lives which result in new patterns of collective imagination.

While Indian-Muslims at large seem to have un-problematically assimilated into local Malay-Muslim culture, many remain opportunist diasporas or *chameleon* diasporas delighted to *masuk Melayu* shedding Indian skin, whenever necessary, to celebrate the privileges of being *Melayu* and, therefore, *Bumiputera*. Mahathir Mohamed, Malaysia's former Prime Minister, politically essentialised as Malay, is believed to be the son of an Indian-Muslim migrant from Kerala, India, and an exemplary of a hybrid diaspora in Malaysia. On the contrary, the Anglicised Indian British subject described by Benedict R.O'G. Anderson (1991) as English in thought and worldview, but not in colour and blood, no matter how hard she/he tries, is unable to be essentialised as English let alone *masuk British*. Likewise, in the case of the European Union, P. Van der Veer (1995) argues race and culture have displaced language as identity markers. German immigrants in England, he maintains, are easily absorbed into mainstream English culture as opposed to English-speaking Indian British subjects. P. Van der Veer (1995:7) thus maintains that processes of globalisation tend to create new bounded entities, celebrating relations with older constructions of territoriality.

Significant numbers of Indian-Muslims, though, have refused to assimilate with peninsula Malays culturally (e.g. first names continue with "son of" or "daughter of" instead of *bin* or *binti* or neither) and politically (e.g. abstaining from participation in the ruling Malay elite political party UMNO [United Malay National Organisation] and forming Indian-Muslim associations instead) and thus do not seem to identify themselves with official icons and images of "Muslim" and "Malay". In endeavouring to preserve the perceived purity of their Indian heritage and identity, they maintain close nostalgic ties with and longing for an older imagined motherland – India. They are, along with other Indians and Chinese, and indigenous communities, constantly negotiating and re-negotiating their identities in conjunction with and in opposition to nationally manufactured media images and as such continue to seem displaced and disoriented in a modernising Muslim home.

For J. Clifford (1997), diaspora is a social and cultural form of "travelling cultures" that is in an "entangled tension" with the nation-state and indigenous

claims by “tribal” peoples [...] diaspora discourse articulates, or bends together, both roots and routes to construct [...] forms of community consciousness and solidarity that maintain identifications outside the national time/space in order to live inside, with a difference (Clifford, 1997:250-251). Diasporic communities undergo a continual process of negotiation between symbolic resources, experiences of cultural identities, and cultural proficiencies – all of which are in a constant state of change. As such the notion of diaspora celebrates the hybrid potential of the self in transcending essentialist notions of national or cultural identity and subjectivity.

Hybridity is described as “cultural mixture where the diasporised meets the host in the scene of migration” (Hutnyk, 2005:79). For J. Hutnyk, hybridity is a productive process that conceptualises the emergent forms of cultural identity from the process of cultural interaction between migrants and the majority culture of the hostland. I. Ang (2001:3) stresses the importance of hybridity as a basis for cultural politics in a world in which we no longer have the secure capacity to draw the line between “us” and “them”, between the different and the same, here and there. However, the notion of hybridity constructs the hegemony of a commercialised diversity. As J. Hutnyk (2005:99) notes, “*pluralism is the ideology that conscripts various political movements as mere social interests into an alliance that serves the status quo*”. To recognise cultural differences and minoritarian rights within the borders of a nation such as Malaysia, where the majority seem “ontologically insecure” is complex. Thus, multiculturalism becomes mere tokenism to be showcased for tourism. The ideologically constructed and hybrid nature of the Malay (Milne & Mauzy, 1986) is evident, as explained in the following sections of this paper, by the extent to which pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial migration from neighbouring Indonesia, India, China, and the Middle East, and distant Europe, helped to genealogically mutate the peninsula Malay (*bangsa Melayu*).

PRE-EUROPEAN DIASPORA: MIGRANTS ARE “US”

History tells us that travelling culture is an old phenomenon. The history of the human travelling species is a process of *longue duree* globalisation. It is suggested by K.A. Appiah (2003:192) who contends that “[...] in our historical myopia, we more normally use the term to speak of recent events”. R.S. Milne and D.K. Mauzy (1986) contend that Southeast Asia was settled over thousands of years ago by a wave of Negrito migration from Melanesia and Polynesia whose descendants in Malaysia are called *Orang Asli*, followed by migrants from Mongolia and China. The Proto-Malays, descendants of tribal communities in Sabah and Sarawak, migrated to the Malaysian region between 2500 and 1500 BC – making them the earliest to arrive, followed by the ancestors of the present day coastal peninsula Malays – the Deutero-Malays – who had early contacts with both Chinese and Indians (Milne & Mauzy, 1986:9). M. Nash (1989) notes that Malays belong to a melange of cultures and languages such as Bugis, Minangkabau, and Javanese among others.

It has been noted too that as a result of the movement of South Indians since pre-Christian times, the Indic civilisation has had a great impact on the Malay people and culture of Southeast Asia (Van der Veer, 1995:4). If not for Hindu exiles, led by Prince Sri Parameswara Dewa Shah, the Melaka sultanate would not have emerged. It has been alleged that following a coup against Sri Parameswara Dewa Shah, who was slain, in 1445, and the succession of his Muslim half-brother, Sultan Mudzaffar Shah, Islam became firmly entrenched (Milne & Mauzy, 1986:11). Islam is believed to have been introduced primarily by Indian traders and missionaries and had become the dominant religion of Aceh and Melaka.

Contact with seafaring traders from India and influence from the powerful Indianised empires of Java and Sumatra (Indonesia) led to a considerable infusion of Hindu socio-political culture into indigenous Malay culture (Sandhu, 1993). Malaya was believed to be under the dominance of powerful Indonesia prior to the arrival of Europeans in the 16th century. In the days before Portugal, Holland, and Britain, migration from the Indonesian islands to the Malay peninsula was common. The rise of the Melaka sultanate, the epicentre of Malay cultural hybridity, Ongkili notes (in Khattab & Nilawati, 2004), escalated migration from neighbouring Indonesian islands. Indonesian migrants were easily absorbed or assimilated into the existing Malay population of the peninsula. Their linguistic and religious affinities in particular fostered cultural adaptation and the process was accentuated from the 19th century onwards as their common rural pattern of life contrasted more and more with that of the Indian and Chinese British colonial labour migrants.

EUROPEAN COLONIAL DIASPORA: MIGRANTS ARE “THEM”

The first wave of Indians, as pointed out earlier, who arrived via the Indianised Indonesian empire and sea trade routes, were the powerful bourgeois, who mingled among the Malay aristocrats and reportedly were the best teachers of Islam (Milne & Mauzy, 1986; and Sandhu, 1993). However, in sharp contrast, the second wave, arriving as British capitalist slaves, were powerless proletariats and petty traders. Most proletariats were Tamil Hindus. Substantial numbers of English educated Indians arrived on their own accord and prominent among them were the Hindu and Muslim traders from the Coromandel and Malabar coasts. Their emigration numbers increased in the late 1930s and again after the partition of the Indian subcontinent.

K.K. Khoo (1993), a renown Malaysian historian, notes that Indian-Muslims arriving in the second wave, assimilated with the locals especially in the Straits Settlements (Penang, Singapore, and Melaka) and became known as *Jawi Peranakan* and emerged as important leaders of the Malay-Muslim community by the early decades of the 20th century. They produced the first Malay newspaper – *Jawi Peranakan*, first published in Singapore in 1878 contributing to Malay literary development (Khoo, 1993). However, during this juncture, with increasing demands from the Indians for greater privileges including

citizenship rights, Malay attitudes towards Indians changed, contends Khoo (1993) who maintains that it was in Singapore, the birth centre of Malay political identity struggle, that Malay distrust and suspicion of the Indian-Muslims was first observed.

In 1926, the Malays of Singapore founded the Singapore Malay Union, admitting only persons considered Malay, excluding local Arab-Muslims and Indian-Muslims. K.K. Khoo (1993) notes how Malays in the early 20th century had vehemently objected to claims made by historians such as that by R.O. Winstedt in 1919 that Malay culture had its origin in India and that Islam came to the peninsula via India. K.K. Khoo (1993) explains in a letter to *Pengasuh* (organ of the religious council, Kelantan) that Mohammad al-Johori denied the claim by R.O. Winstedt and alleged instead that it was more likely that the Arabs from Hadramaut brought Islam to peninsula Malaya. “*This was the beginning of conscious attempts by peninsula Malays to deny that Malay culture had borrowed heavily from Indian culture*” (Khoo, 1993:271).

Together with R.O. Winstedt, R.S. Milne and D.K. Mauzy (1986) and K.S. Sandhu (1993) maintain that the first culture to have an impact on the Malays came from India. Assimilation took place steadily in Melaka. One of the products of this union was Munshi Abdullah whose close association with important officials of the English East India Company helped to perpetuate his reputation as the leading literati of his time. However, Munshi Abdullah’s views, as an Arab/Indian diaspora, perceived to be influenced by the ruling British, were criticised by Malay-nationalists such as Yunus Abdullah via the *Utusan Melayu* – first published in Singapore in 1939 and remains to date the mouthpiece of peninsula Malay nationalism. Since the late 1930s, *Jawi Peranakan* (Indian Muslims) and *Arab Peranakan* (Arab Muslims) have been pejoratively referred to by Malays as DKK (*Darah Keturunan Kling*) or of Kling descent and DKA (*Darah Keturunan Arab*) or of Arab descent (Khoo, 1993:285). Indian-Muslims are also commonly referred to as *Mamak* quite often levelled at Mahathir Mohamed whenever his bluntness offends the Malay.

While the tug-of-war continued between peninsula Malays and Indian-Muslims, in determining the contours of Malay identity and establishing political power, and following British acquisition of Penang in 1786 (Sandhu, 1993), and as in other British colonies lacking indigenous or local proletariat, South Indian labourers were imported to work for the colonial states and in the British owned capitalist plantation sector (Sundaram, 1993). Indians were the main labour group from the very inception of the rubber and oil palm industries (Muzaffar, 1993; and Sundaram, 1993). The British indentured system of labour and the improvised *kangany* system, “[...] was reminiscent of the caste system, with the lowest group being treated like animals. Few other groups in the country had experienced such a total annihilation of human integrity and social dignity” (Muzaffar, 1993:215).

Low literacy rate and addiction to toddy and temples somewhat characterised the estate Indian. Conditions on the rubber and then oil palm plantations least

improved following independence from British rule as Indian labour continued to be commodified by new masters. S. Orjitham (2001) points out that 54 percent of Malaysia's Indians work on plantations or as suburban labourers on low wages with limited access to social amenities. Conditions appeared to worsen from the 1970s following juggernaut modernisation projects when both legal and illegal Indonesian foreign unskilled labour replaced the local Indian. J. Seabrook (1996:24) notes that as young Indian men were increasingly leaving the estates for factory work in the cities including Singapore, their place was taken over by Indonesians and Bangladeshis willing to work for less wages. Owners of estates, for example, in Jerai, he contends, have been evicting Indian workers to construct golf courses mainly for tourists (Seabrook, 1996).

NEW NATION AND NEW "OTHERS"

A. Kassim (1998 and 2000) contends that throughout the 1970s, the Malaysian government turned a blind eye to the inflow of "illegal" Indonesians enabling them to proliferate in Peninsula and East Malaysia. Many sought accommodation (illegitimately) in government low-cost housing (reserved for low-income, working class Malaysians) and formed settlements in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor in Malay reserve lands and land belonging to the state and semi-government agencies (Kassim, 2000). In 1997, more than 30,000 mostly Indonesian "alien" squatters were identified living in over 5,000 housing units in Selangor and Kuala Lumpur, among Indonesian migrants who had arrived a century or so earlier (Kassim, 2000). Apparently, state authorities did not seem to regulate the early inflow of Indonesian migrants or their illegal squatter settlements because to do so would have disturbed projected Malay population growth and undermined pro-Malay urbanisation policy (Chin, 2002; and Debrah, 2002). Furthermore, it is difficult to imagine breaking the time-honoured migration pattern of Indonesians who have travelled and settled in the Malay Peninsula long before the existence of entities known as Malaysia or Indonesia (Fuller, 2005).

Thus, labour migration in Malaysia seems entangled with the complex relationship between ethnic pluralism and the struggle for Malay-Muslim political hegemony (Vatikiotis in Y.A. Debrah, 2002). Critics point out that the political importance of immigration from Indonesia was perhaps the real reason for encouraging the entry of workers from Indonesia (Vatikiotis in Y.A. Debrah, 2002). Some contend this was part of the 70 million population visionary design of former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed to ensure the Malay population out-number the non-Malay via assimilation with Indonesians as had begun during the pre-European colonial times. To date, there has been no state-led strategic design to encourage assimilation within the multi-racial Malaysian society such as between Malays and Indians or Chinese, what more between Malaysians and foreign-born Indians, Chinese or Bangladeshi. Local films and dramas do not on the whole depict inter-ethnic assimilation with the exception of independent films such as *Spinning Gasing and Sepet* that depict

Malay-Chinese love affair attempting to represent contemporary Malaysian culture as hybrid. Free-to-air television, radio, and print media continue to be segregated along ethnic lines to serve a differentiated and deeply wedged Malay-non-Malay national audience. Private stations such as TV3, NTV7 and channel 9 dedicate primetime belts for mostly Chinese audiences. Advertisers target Malay and Chinese audiences who are seen to have large disposable incomes and through market segmentation influence the cultural landscape of Malaysia's mostly privatised (political party owned) mainstream media.

Significant to this is the New Economic Policy (NEP) designed to economically uplift the Malay and culturally bolster Malay identity and hegemony. It may be instructive to point out that Article 153 of the Constitution of Malaysia specifies the protection of Malay interest and privileges as an indigenous dominant group (*Ketuanan Melayu*) and thus justifies the implementation of affirmative policies such as the NEP. It is crucial to note likewise how the post-election 13 May 1969 inter-ethnic riot contributed to the 20 year development policy, NEP (1971-1990), implemented to eradicate (Malay) rural poverty and restructure society through urbanisation and the dismantling of (Malay) identification with economic function. The emphasis on industrialisation coupled with the expansion of education, with special quotas for Malays, led to a massive population drift to urban areas and the creation of a *Bumiputera* business and educated middle class (Sundaram, 1993; and Embong, 2004).

At the end of 20 years, the NEP continued in the form of the National Development Policy (NDP) underpinned by Mahathir Mohamad's Vision 2020, which has failed to address low waged, low skilled occupations leading to reliance on foreign migrant labour (Sundaram, 1993). Massive construction projects of the Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) and the 88 storey 451.9 m tall Petronas Twin Towers were both completed in the late 1990s primarily by low-wage workers from neighbouring Indonesia. The construction sector expanded with mammoth projects for a knowledge-based economy such as the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) linked to the High-tech Putrajaya government administration centre. These monuments, managed by *Bumiputera* industry captains with close ties to the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) – a dominant party of the ruling *Barisan Nasional* – symbolise Malaysia's vision to be a fully developed country by 2020 translating into national slogans such as "*Malaysia Boleh*" or Malaysia Can Do.

C.B.N. Chin (2002:20) points out that in the midst of the Asian financial crisis of 1997/1998, there were approximately two million mostly Indonesian migrants (1.2 million documented and 800,000 – 1 million undocumented). A major newspaper in Malaysia reports as at July 2004, there were a total of 1.36 million legal workers of which 66.5 percent were from Indonesia; 9.2 percent from Nepal; 8 percent from Bangladesh; 4.5 percent from India; and 4.2 percent from Myanmar (*The New Straits Times*, 11/9/2004). Officials, notes A. Kassim (1998), were reluctant to release information on statistics of migrants and their countries of origin until June 1992. A. Kassim (1998) explains that records in the

Sabah (East Malaysian state in Borneo's half), labour department show that the number of registered foreign workers as of the end of 1995 was 61.3 percent of the total number of registered manpower in the State. An estimated quarter of the workforce out of a working population of 9 million in Malaysia is foreign, notes Malaysian political scientist, P. Ramasamy (in Fuller, 2005).

Despite the high numbers of worker migration utilised in the main for the manufacturing, service, and construction industries, there were no policies pertaining to their regulation. Policies that developed eventually in the 1980s assumed a temporary reliance on migrant workers, again suspicious that the peninsula Malay space may be re-occupied by new waves of immigrants as had happened under British colonial rule. To prevent history repeating itself and to avoid the fate of Western countries such as France, Britain, Australia etc. where migrant workers continue to stay, perceived as a barrier to nation-building, and a threat to Malay hegemony, policies were developed to make it extremely difficult for foreign-migrant workers to settle permanently in Malaysia.

It was in 1991 (Kassim, 1998) that a policy was finally put in place, sustained by an amnesty programme for undocumented workers and security operations, *Operasi Nyah I dan II* (Operation Shoo I and II) continuing with police crackdown called *Operasi Tegas* (Firm Operation) with the backing of an amended and gazetted immigration law which imposes heavy fines, jail sentences, and whipping on those arrested. Thousands of illegal immigrants, including asylum seekers such as Rohingyas and Acehnese have been "rounded up" among them over 18,000 whipped (Fuller, 2005). Foreign workers are also prevented from coming to Malaysia with their families and foreign men, in particular Indian and Bangladeshi, denied marriage to local women. Riots between police and factory workers and other incidents of violence led for a while to the banning of Indonesian foreign worker recruits and to the intake of foreign workers from other countries in the ASEAN (Association of South East Asia Nations) region (*BBC News*, 26/1/2002).

Why, one may ask, has the cultural pendulum shifted from legitimatising to illegitimatising the Indonesian? Do Indonesian migrants not contribute to Malay cultural capital anymore? In the following section, I discuss the role of the news media in the calculated shift towards the construction of Malay middle class identity and hegemony.

MEDIATISATION OF MIGRANTS

Torn between race and nationality, policing the undocumented Indonesian seems paradoxical. On the one hand is the inability to control the inflow, on the other is the alleged intent to assimilate them into the Malay community (Chin, 2002). In response to and hand in hand with institutions such as the Police and Immigration, the media appear to aid the State in regulating the inflow of undocumented immigrant workers. Based on an observation over 140 days between April and August 2002, of *The Star* (an English language daily) and *Utusan Malaysia* (a *Bahasa Melayu* daily), it was found that the Malay daily was

more interested in covering Indonesians with 224 stories as opposed to only 86 stories in the English daily (Khattab & Nilawati, 2004). This reflects the cultural affinity between *Utusan Malaysia* and its readers amongst who are Indonesian immigrants. Clearly both dailies almost half the time had crime and violence as a recurring theme in stories about Indonesians (see table 1).

Table 1:
Story Themes in the *Utusan Malaysia* and *The Star*

Themes	<i>Utusan Malaysia</i>		<i>The Star</i>	
	F	%	F	%
Politics	87	34.5%	25	23.8%
Economy	11	4.4	14	13.3
Social / Cultural	29	11.4	11	10.4
Crime / Violence	114	45.3	46	44.0
Religion	9	3.6	1	0.9
Entertainment	-	-	4	3.8
Sport	2	0.8	4	3.8
Total	252	100%	105	100%

While *The Star* had the tendency to refer to Indonesians merely as workers (50%); the *Utusan Malaysia* often labelled most of them as *pendatang* or immigrants (25%); *pendatang tanpa izin* or unauthorised / illegal immigrants (10%); *pendatang Indonesia* or Indonesian immigrants (10%); *pendatang asing* or foreign immigrants (5%); and *warga asing* or foreign citizen (10%). Only twice was the Indonesian in the Malay daily referred merely as a *pekerja* or worker. See table 2 as follows.

Table 2:
Labelling of Indonesians in *Utusan Malaysia* and *The Star*

<i>Utusan Malaysia</i>			<i>The Star</i>		
Label	F	%	Label	F	%
<i>Pendatang</i>	5	25	Workers	4	50
<i>Pendatang Tanpa Izin</i>	2	10	Illegal Immigrants	1	12.5
<i>Pendatang Indonesia</i>	2	10	<i>Indon</i> Illegals	1	12.5
<i>Pendatang Asing</i>	1	5	Migrant Workers	1	12.5
<i>Warga Asing</i>	2	10	<i>Indon</i> Workers	1	12.5
<i>Pekerja</i>	2	10			
<i>Pekerja Asing</i>	1	5			
<i>Pekerja Indonesia</i>	2	10			
<i>Warga Indonesia</i>	3	15			
Total	20	100		8	100

Migration News points out how the foreign migrant is blamed for a range of social ills in Malaysia when in fact “[...] of the 10,623 serious crimes committed in Malaysia in 1995, 628 were committed by foreign workers. Of the 70,798 minor crimes, 2,197 involved foreigners” (*Migration News* in <http://migration.ucdavis.edu/MN/more>, 9/10/2010).

Editors have played *imams* and *muftis* delivering sermons that culturally castrate the bad Indonesian boy. An editorial in the *New Straits Times* of 9 June 2004 following spates of violence within the Indonesian community in Malaysia, reads in the intro, with the headlines “Senseless Savagery”, as follows:

Behind Sunday's brutal hacking of three Indonesians is a sadder tale. Sadder than one of those cruelly slain being a mere child whom her father had tried in vain to save from the murderous mob out on a vicious vendetta. It is sadder than these killers having no qualms about behaving so badly in a host country so kind to allow them to live and work here. Truly, saddest of all is that their savagery may be depriving many of their people the opportunity to genuinely pull their families out of poverty. The livelihoods of these people may be jeopardised by these lowlives who think nothing of carting their tribal trouble to wherever they set home (*New Straits Times*, 9/6/2004).

Clearly, the above editorial frames the Indonesian migrant as socially dangerous and politically disruptive. It does not represent the viewpoint of the Indonesian nor provide a deeper and fairer account of how and why such violence occurred. Instead of exposing flaws in the police and immigration system and questioning irregularities, the editorial appears to be what I. Ward (2002), in the context of the Australian mainstream media's uncritical reportage of the John Howard government's decision to refuse permission to the *Tampa* to enter Australian waters in an election climate, refers to as succumbing to wedge politics via “dog whistle journalism” (drawing from Sreberny, 2000). The *New Straits Times* editorial reference to Indonesian migrant workers as “killers”, “tribal”, “savage”, “lowlives”, seems itself a form of “savage journalism”.

Having invited Indonesians to slave in construction sites, and having strategically deployed them for Malay urbanisation and population expansion as outlined earlier in this paper, the editorial smells of self-centred nationalism. The editorial appears to speak of how the media attempts to represent a normal Malay, middle class culture as civilised, affluent and philanthropic, unable to include bad blood into a refined urban community of Malay(sian) people. The cement of race and religion that once upon a time glued Malays and Indonesians, appears to have eroded. Class appears to have created a division between brothers. When they were both rural and agricultural, they were a happy family. They inter-married and had more children together than one can imagine, and their creolised off springs from romantic unions since the days of Sri Parameswara Dewa Shah are today making claims to cultural purity and are fencing borders to deliberately keep the working class “other” out since she/he is lowlife for a highlife urban Malay of the 21st century.

Malaysian officials have been quoted in the media expressing views towards migrant workers as follows:

Home Ministry Parliamentary Secretary, Datuk Paduka Abdul Rahman Ibrahim, advised local women to be careful and think twice about marrying foreign workers since many might be interested only in gaining Malaysian citizenship through marriage. He explained that foreign workers who get married in Malaysia would not gain citizenship; instead they would have their work permits revoked (<http://www.smc.org.ph/amnews/amn060531/southeast/malaysia060531.htm>, 9/10/2010).

On October 27, 1998, Deputy Home Minister Tajol Rosle Ghazali complained that the 200,000 dependents of foreign workers in Malaysia were a burden. He urged foreign workers to come to Malaysia without their families and not to marry Malaysian women (*Migration News* in <http://migration.ucdavis.edu/MN/more>, 9/10/2010).

According to the government, Bangladeshi workers are subject to criticism because of their social differences and their tendency to marry local women. The government printed pamphlets “to educate women on the consequences they will have to face if they still decide to marry foreigners”. One Malaysian government minister said that marriages of convenience by Bangladeshi and Indian foreign workers would increase social problems in Malaysia (*Migration News* in <http://migration.ucdavis.edu/MN/more>, 9/10/2010).

While national and international media texts clearly reflect the official position of Malaysians towards legal and illegal migrant workers, Malaysian audiences’ offer (somewhat uncritical) readings of these texts as follows:

Kebanyakan berita tentang warga negara Indonesia yang di baca adalah tenaga kerja (pembantu rumah/Indon “maid”) yang menyebabkan seorang bernama May Lan mati. Apa yang dilaporkan akhbar tentang warga Indonesia yang bekerja di Malaysia membawa negatif. Meskipun ada juga membantu pembangunan. Tetapi kadang-kadang negatif. Banyaknya kes-kes jenayah yang melibatkan orang Indon, tak kira kerja sebagai buruh ataupun “maid” keh (Chinese respondent in Khattab & Nilawati, 2004).

Translation:

Most of the news reported about Indonesian citizens concern the workforce (domestic maids/Indon maids) and how a domestic maid caused the death of someone named May Lan. What is reported in the news about Indonesian citizens working in Malaysia is mostly negative, although some have contributed to the country’s development. But sometimes this is negative too. There are far too many crime cases involving Indonesian labourers and maids reported.

Rakyat Indonesia lebih pada jenayah dan masalah-masalah pergolakan politik yang menyebabkan pemikiran saya tentang warga Indonesia negatif. Jenayah dan pergolakan politik menggambarkan seolah rakyat Indonesia tidak mempunyai matlamat untuk berdamai. Setiap kali dilakukan proses perdamaian selalu muncul kumpulan pemberontak (Malay respondent in Khattab & Nilawati, 2004).

Translation:

Indonesians are more inclined to crime and political conflicts, which has led me to think rather negatively of Indonesians. Crime and political conflict seems to reflect Indonesians as not having peace as an aim to achieve. Each time the peace process is initiated there will always be a group that will act violently against it.

Media discourses tend to blame Indonesian migrants for a myriad of social problems, from motorbike-snatch thefts to murders. Migrants are portrayed by print media reports as *pendatang asing* who pose substantial threats to the welfare of Malaysia. Negative media framing tend to reinforce and amplify the need to *Nyah* (shoo) the migrants, and to police and barbarically whip them. The rise of crime, social and health problems in Malaysia has been constantly blamed on Indonesian foreign workers and illegal immigrants. It appears that media demonising of the Indonesian migrant becomes necessary to keep the spirits of Malay nationalism up and to awaken the middle-class urban Malay to the reality of their rooted-ness to the soil (*bumiputra*) in order to prevent “outsiders” from hacking their privileged roots and cluttering their cultural identity. The first wave of aristocratic Indians and Indonesians until the early 19th century seemed easily assimilated into an agrarian peninsula Malay society. The second wave of proletariat Indians, in particular following British rule, appear denied of cultural association and replaced by the proletariat Indonesians in post-independent times. As the peasant Malay became a de-traditionalised capitalist, there emerged as the headline of the 9 June 2004 editorial reads “Senseless Savagery” – the need to *nyah*, whip and bury the proletariat “other”.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have argued, like most historians, that large numbers of peninsula Malays may themselves be a community of migrants, creolised by a host of cross-cultural encounters. I have attempted to explain why the Malay is being essentialised and differentiated from the Indian in particular and why Indonesian cultural elements were included and or excluded at various historical moments in the essentialising of “*identiti Melayu*” and how “othering” in particular of Indian-ness strengthened Malay-ness. R.S. Milne and D.K. Mauzy in 1986 contended that a dialectical tension existed between the Malay political objective of wanting to be the majority and the need to keep Malay privileges inaccessible to those regarded as outsiders, arguing thus that the definition of “Malay” varied according to political need and the movement of time. The process of “de-traditionalisation” of the Malay via the NEP (New Economic Policy) and NDP (National Development Policy) has apparently created a deep class division within the Peninsula Malay/Indonesian communities and between majority Malays and minority non-Malays. Likewise, state-led national identity and ethnic integration projects like *Bangsa Malaysia* and *1Malaysia*, (re)ignite debates on “who belongs?” and “who is Malay(sian)?”.

D.C. Gladney (1998:1-6) argues that the emphasis on “*majorities/minorities appears based on a series of uncritically accepted notions of purity, numerical supremacy, and social harmony [...]*” and contends that extensive discussions of the various categories and forms of the words “nation” and “ethnicity” have contributed significantly to the ways in which national and cultural identities are constructed and represented in most of Asia today. D. Kellner (1995)

underscoring the role of the media, points out that media increasingly shape [...] our sense of nationality [...] and of “us” and “them”; and J.B. Thompson (1995:34) aptly describes this as “mediated worldliness”.

National culture and identity has been described as a form of “imaginative identification” (Barker, 1999:64) as an idea that is simultaneously one of inclusion (e.g. *Bangsa Malaysia* or *Malay plus Indonesian*) that provides a boundary around “us” and one of exclusion (e.g. *bumiputra/bukan bumiputra* or *Malay minus Indonesian*) that distinguishes “us” from “them”, where race (the Malay) is symbolically expressed as national and territorial, constructed differently and distinctively (Hall, 1991; and Schlesinger, 1991). It is evident that Malay cultural hybridity seems historically challenged, perpetually denied and re-defined within the national sphere by re-born Muslim-Malay elites and this process of “identity purification” appears to have led, from time to time, to “burying the other”.

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