

A History of Race Relations in Malaysia

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Introduction

From its unpretentious start as an improvised tin mining camp of palm leaf and timber huts, the Malaysian capital city of Kuala Lumpur stands today as a model modern city. The muddy river mouth on which the city is situated and from which it took its name has long been obscured by sleek skyscrapers and other buildings whose architecture successfully blends elements of traditional Malayan style and modern structural technique. On a quiet morning, Chinese towkays can be seen opening up shops which face out right onto the sidewalk and are stocked with merchandise ranging from rubber thongs to mosquito coils to batteries. The smell of roti chapati sold by Indian hawkers wafts through the streets, and everyone from Malay schoolgirls wearing head covers to Malay businessmen sporting Chinese-tailored suits can be seen eating these layered pancakes for breakfast, sitting on stools on the sidewalk, waiting for a bus or a taxi. In the evening, the best view of the sunset is widely held to be seen over masjid jamek, a historic mosque set on the river. Around this time, Chinese shopkeepers, Indian restaurateurs, and Malaysian office workers head home to their historically segregated housing areas.

With this picture of tranquility, it is hard to imagine that just over two decades ago the streets of Kuala Lumpur ran red with blood. Agonized cries of "Malai si!" (Death to the Malays!) and "Hutang darah dibayar darah!" (Blood debts will be repaid with blood!) shouted by Chinese paraders were only the prelude to the violence that erupted four days later following the release of the 1969 general election results (Comber. pp 66-67. For full citations throughout, please refer to the biblio). On the evening of May 13th, thousands of Malays who had purportedly assembled for a victory rally began attacking passing Chinese on motor scooters and in cars, and before long, patches of the city were engulfed in flames. Using any available weapons, the initial attacks escalated into widespread rioting, looting, and killing. In the ensuing confusion, rumors of heroic figures who were skilled in the Malay martial art of silat and were possessed of magic powers such as the ability to fly and invulnerability to bullets and knives spread wildly and encouraged continued violence. Mosque loudspeakers which normally would broadcast the call to prayer were exhorting the faithful to continue the struggle (Reid.p 269-70). It is miraculous that when the fires died out, only about 200 people were reported dead with another couple hundred serious injuries. Other unofficial estimates were as high as six or

seven hundred dead, which could still be considered fortunate in light of the carnage which might have ensued had the violence continued unabated.

In the aftermath of the riots, the government imposed emergency powers, suspended the press and the parliament, and established a National Operations Council which ultimately functioned as a de facto government for nearly two years. When the parliament finally reconvened in February of 1971, it announced that certain racially sensitive issues, now known as isu-isu sensitif, were henceforth not to be openly discussed under any circumstances. This amounted to a decree which forbade any further questioning of the special privileges of the Malays. A contemporary European analyst commented that "perhaps the most serious consequence of May 13...is the apparent decision of the Malaysian rulers to render Malay status inviolable by thought, word, or deed." (Short.p 1089)

For over twenty years now, these "sensitive issues" have been tightly bottled up with no hint of release. On the surface, in the official media, Malaysia is a harmonious country characterized by three diverse ethnic groups, each with its own religious and cultural traditions. RTM (Radio Television Malaysia) regularly broadcasts cheerful children from all three races, usually wearing their own traditional dress, singing the national anthem, Negaraku (My Country), or another similarly patriotic song. Underneath this thin veneer of harmony, however, lurks a tension which can be seen in the people's eyes, if not heard in their voices. The collective memory of 13 May 1969 is strong enough among those who lived through it that this tension is bearable if it prevents chaos. Yet it is imperative that this volatile tension be addressed, not suppressed.

This paper will examine some of these "sensitive issues" as well as the ethnic tensions in general by tracing their colonial origins. It will sketch historical immigration to the Malayan peninsula, foreign involvement in Malaya, British intervention in internal affairs, British colonialism, and the birth of an independent Malaya which continues along conservative lines. The paper will focus on those policies and practices of the British colonial government which have led to the current ethnic tensions, namely the policy of importation and recruitment of Chinese and Indian labour and the official policy of "Malaya for the Malays" which privileged Malays in the accumulation of political power while encouraging Chinese entrepreneurial activities which would generate revenue for British coffers.

Historical Overview

The anthropological history of what is today known as peninsular Malaysia is characterized by the inward migration of diverse peoples. The Malays, who are officially regarded as among the original inhabitants of the peninsula, were by no means its original denizens. The origin of the orang asli (aboriginals) is unknown, but they certainly predated the Malays by several centuries. The Malay race is the result of the evolution of people who had migrated south from western China and what is now Burma and Thailand and also people who had come from the Indonesian Archipelago and beyond (Allen.p 17).

Together, the Malays and the orang asli are called the bumiputera, or sons of the soil. While the orang asli were "driven back into the dark jungles," (Emerson, Rupert. as quoted in Allen. p 17) and largely continue tribal ways to this day, the Malays evolved a patrimonial social and political system which derived largely from contact with outside culture.

The early influences of Hindu culture can be traced back to the pre-Christian era through contact with Indian traders. Later, the Sumatran maritime Srivijaya empire shaped the development of Malayan political and commercial activities from the eighth to the thirteenth centuries, at which point first Thai Buddhism then finally Arabic Islam came to prominence, with their respective concomitant social and political orders. By converting the rulers to the faith, Islam commanded such a strong position by the time of the first European contact that even Portuguese Christian evangelism could not shake it. The Portuguese, who conquered Malacca in 1511 to control the spice trade which had developed there "operated with a fanaticism and ruthlessness...which was stubbornly contested by the surrounding Malay states." (Allen.p 20). The Portuguese were so despised that Dutch arrival on the scene was initially welcomed by the sultan of Johore, who supported Dutch attacks on Portuguese Malacca in 1641. The Dutch maintained control of Malacca until 1824, even as Britain was gaining territory in Penang and Singapore.

Initial British involvement in the region was peaceful, but characterized by deceit. Penang was ceded to the British (In this case, the East India Company) by the Sultan of Kedah in 1785 with the understanding that the British would defend him against a possible Thai attack. When the British reneged on this promise, the Sultan staged an attempt to retake Penang, and upon its failure was forced to pay annuities to the British. In 1819, Sir Thomas Raffles established himself in Singapore by installing the elder brother of the Sultan of Riau there, recognizing him as the legitimate Sultan, and then having him grant Britain trading rights (Allen.p 30). The ethics and legality of this maneuver were questioned by the Dutch who threatened an armed assault on Singapore which was never waged.

Concurrent with European adventurism and settlement in the region, Chinese merchants were becoming active in the spice trade. Chinese merchant activity is well documented as early as 1349, but the date of the first Chinese settlement in Malacca is uncertain (Purcell.p 16). It is possible but unlikely that such settlements date back to 1400, and since the Portuguese only made the distinction between Christians and infidels, it is only possible to date the first Chinese settlements sometime near the end of the Portuguese hold on Malacca. It is also possible that the Dutch actually brought the first Chinese settlers as trade agents (Ibid. p 29). The Dutch Governor Bort presaged attitudes toward the Chinese which would be echoed by the British later: "This country must have a larger population, especially of industrious Chinese...for the black Christians are all very inert, too idle and lazy to have any inclination [to work]." (Bort as quoted in Purcell. p 31).

By the turn of the eighteenth century, the Chinese had well established themselves in Malacca, intermarrying with local Malays and becoming what are called the babas or

the Straits Chinese. Soon after the British had taken Penang, a sizable number of Chinese immigrants who wished to take advantage of new opportunities were beginning to settle both on the island and on the mainland, setting up shop in retail trade. By the 1840s and 1850s, large numbers of Chinese became involved in gold and tin mining, a pursuit which had been the domain of the Sultans for centuries, but on a very limited scale. "With the establishment of the Straits Settlements, the coming of large numbers of Chinese, growth in world demand for tin and the discovery of ever greater ore deposits, this control now slipped from their grasp." (Snodgrass.p 16). As the Chinese, now organized into secret societies, consolidated their hold in the mining industry, the stage and the pretext for British intervention on the mainland were set.

British Intervention

Up until 1871, the British had followed the lead of the other European powers before them: they had confined their activities to coastal or island settlements and decidedly not interfered in the economy or politics of the mainland. When in 1867 the Colonial Office in London assumed responsibility for the Straits Settlements, the political possibility of greater influence in the mainland was born. Technical innovation such as the development of the steamship as a freight carrier and the extension of the telegraph from India to Singapore provided the infrastructure for such expansion. At the same time, with fears of German encroachment, the Colonial Office was faced with the choice of getting involved or getting shut out (Bastin. p 37). Not only did the British merchants in Penang want to expand their trading posts, the prospect of capitalizing on the growing tin industry on the mainland was looking increasingly attractive to them.

The Chinese, too, were not blind to the fortunes to be had from tin. Beginning in 1862, rival Chinese secret society factions had been battling for control of the Larut district, and the Raja of Larut was clearly unable to keep order (Purcell p104-106). When Sultan Ali of Perak died in 1871, the Chinese factional fighting became complicated by a succession dispute, with one candidate, Raja Abdullah, allying with one faction, and Rajah Ismail with the other. In this context of confusion and political opportunity, the British were more than willing to step in and settle the dispute. Initially supporting Raja Ismail, the British became involved in a series of battles which culminated in the Treaty of Pangkor of 1874 (Purcell. pp 108-110), in which Raja Abdullah was installed on the condition that he accept the advice of a British Resident, whose advice "must be asked and acted upon on all questions other than those touching upon Malay religion and custom." (records of the Colonial Office, as quoted in Heussler.p 55)

Of course, Abdullah, the weaker raja, was in no position to decline this sinecure, and this Residential System set the basis for British political hegemony by indirect rule first in Perak, and by 1895, throughout the entirety of the Federated Malay States (FMS). The appointment of the first Resident, J. W. W. Birch, however, was by no means accepted uncontested. Barely a year past after his installment in 1874 before he was murdered. The British had committed themselves to their engagement in the

peninsula, however, and after a decisive campaign to avenge Birch's assassination, a second Resident, Sir Hugh Low, took control of Perak (Purcell.p 111).

In the official version of the story, the British heroically intervened in the Chinese dispute at the request of Sultan Abdullah: The rich tin mines of the district of Larut had attracted large numbers of Chinese, whose rival factions were carrying on war to the knife amongst one another, and piratical craft, hiding in the network of tidal mangrove creeks, issued from them to prey on our trade. The Malay Government was paralysed, and anarchy prevailed. We acknowledged the Sultan Abdullah, and he asked for a Resident." (Weld, Sir Fredrick A. in a speech given on 10 June 1884, reproduced in Kratos)

In this version, "the purpose of expansion was to protect and advance the sovereign Malay rulers and their peoples." (Stenson.p 14). This, then, was the official myth which was to legitimate British intervention, expansion, and rule right up until merdeka (independence) in 1957. "The dominant reality...was the development of large-scale mining and plantation agriculture, with the assistance of foreign capital and imported foreign labor." (Ibid)

The British and the Malays

Since the British derived their legitimacy from the Malay rulers from the very start, the British and the Malays had a special relationship which both parties had a primary interest in maintaining. It should be borne in mind, however, that the alliance was between the British colonists and the royal aristocracy, and not between the British and the peasantry. Traditionally, Malays pledged a great deal of loyalty to the Sultan, and this subordination was emphasized in the writings of the colonists, such as Sir Frank A. Swettenham, who wrote that Malay peasants were "willing to obey [a Raja or chief] blindly." (Swettenham in Birch, p 198) In fact, the tightly forged alliance between the colonists and the rajas served to strengthen "the formal hierarchy of political power, with the Ruler at its apex." (Snodgrass.p 29) In coopting with the British, "the Sultans achieved a measure of security which they had not enjoyed in the turbulent years before British rule...Moreover the British helped to preserve the position of the aristocracy as a class in relation to the rakyat." (Butcher.p9)

In reinforcing this hierarchy, the flip side of supporting the upper echelons of Malay society was maintaining a social order which kept the Malay masses in a subordinate position and involved in their traditional role in subsistence agriculture. For this reason, the British "were not kindly disposed toward, and in some ways actively impeded, social mobility among Malays." (Snodgrass. p 34) Clearly, this approach follows the pattern of what occurred in other colonial settings: the masses were, as a matter of policy, disarticulated from the development process. Even as production moved away from mere subsistence, Malays were needed to remain in agriculture to provide a surplus of rice for the consumption of the increasing tide of Chinese and Indian immigrant labor as well as the colonists themselves. In addition, a considerable amount of revenue was derived from a land tax on Malay land.

(Heussler. p 34)

Colonial officials were actively involved in promoting rice production among the Malays and discouraging other pursuits.

Captain Hubert Berkeley, working in northern Perak, "undertook irrigation projects, being much interested in the cultivation of wet padi and convinced that sound agriculture was the principal, if not the only fit basis of Malay life." (Ibid. p 124). The British were not merely concerned with keeping the Malays committed to agriculture generally, but to rice production specifically. When some Malays took an interest in becoming rubber smallholders and taking padi out of production during the rubber boom years, they were met with considerable opposition. "Not only were efforts made to keep the Malays in padi production, but Malay (and other) smallholders were discriminated against under the output restriction scheme of the 1930s." (Snodgrass. p 31) In 1924, of the total acreage of rubber, Europeans owned 55 percent, while Malays owned only 27 percent, almost all of which was in small holdings of less than 25 acres. In 1932, of 308 rubber estates of one thousand acres or more, 296 were owned by Europeans, 12 by Chinese, and none by Malays (Butcher. p 14).

Even supposing there had not been policies firmly in place which discouraged Malay involvement in rubber production, most colonists probably would not have been surprised at Malay absence from the industry. Ernest W. Birch summed up conventional British attitudes toward Malays when he said: The Malay is clever with a knife...and to sit in the shade and tap rubber-trees will surely appeal to his temperament as an attractive way of earning a wage. The one drawback is that the Malay will not work for longer periods or with greater regularity than his inclination moves him." (Birch, Ernest. in Kratoska. p 349).

Malays were universally seen as indolent and slothful and of no productive use whatsoever. Sir Frank A. Swettenham, a self-professed expert on "the Malay" went so far as to say "the leading characteristic of the Malay of every class is a disinclination to work...the Malay has no stomach for really hard and continuous work, either of the brain or the hands..." (Swettenham in Birch, pp 195-196).

Despite the perception of them as lazy, the British found the Malays to be very endearing and quaint. In British eyes, the Malay court was elegant and characterized by a refined etiquette, while the common Malay was a kind and hospitable--if not an ingratiating-host. As an illustration of a typical Malay pastime, Swettenham said that "even in his most regenerate days, the Malay dearly loved a picnic." (Swettenham. p 203). No doubt, Malays were regarded as rather effete, especially with their propensity to wear sarongs, a skirt-like garment worn by Malay men and women alike. Further feminine qualities attributed to Malay males were their extreme sensitivity, irrationality and impulsiveness: "the ordinary Malay man is extraordinarily sensitive in regard to any real or fancied affront. When the Malay [feels he has been insulted] he broods over his trouble till, in a fit of madness, he suddenly seizes a weapon and strikes out blindly at everyone he sees..." (Ibid. p 199).

With this caricature of Malays as feminine and feckless ingrained in the paternalistic colonists' minds, it is no wonder that they were not taken seriously as a dynamic force capable of shaping their own destiny, or at least contributing productively to the progress of Malaya.

The British and the Chinese

The Chinese, in the British mind, were everything that the Malays weren't: they were industrious and ingenious, but also unruly and untenable. In the words of Sir Hugh Low, "they are of all men the most rude, conceited and ignorant, with no confidence in Europeans..." (Low, Sir Hugh. as quoted in Purcell, p 114) Even on the Chinese mainland, the Chinese were notorious for being sinocentric and xenophobic, but the British were surprised that even the overseas Chinese were equally as selfassured and unapproachable. Swettenham asserted that "it is almost hopeless to expect to make friends with a Chinaman, and it is, for a Government officer, an object that is not very desirable to obtain." (Swettenham, F. A., in Kratoska, p 180)

One fact which contributed to this characterization was that the Chinese who chose to settle in Malaysia were, as merchants, at the bottom rung of the Confucian social hierarchy, and were as such not exactly versed in social graces--they were outcasts either by volition or circumstance.

British scorn for the Chinese was balanced by their admiration for them. The Chinese whom the British encountered in Malaya were endowed with a capitalist sense and a profit instinct which was startling unmatched outside of the protestant world. As evidenced by their early involvement in the tin industry, the Chinese always seemed to be one step ahead of the British, never waiting for the them to arrive on the scene. The fact that the Chinese always seemed just outside of British political control frustrated the British, and for lack of an alternative, the resultant initial policy was one of laissez faire.

Purely for economic reasons, however, the British found it to their advantage to leave the Chinese to their own devices. Not a decade after the establishment of British control of Penang, for example, Sir Francis Light said: "The Chinese constitute the most valuable part of our inhabitants ...They are the only people of the east from whom a revenue may be raised without expense and extraordinary efforts of government. They are a valuable acquisition..." (Light, Sir Francis. 25 January 1794. as quoted in Purcell. p 40). If taxing merchant trade was valuable to the British, taxing tin was a windfall. The export duty on tin, which was as high as twelve percent, was the primary source of revenue for the colony in 1896 (Kratoska. p 183). Chinese tin mining and commercial activity, together accounting for over four fifths of total revenue, were such important sources of funds for the government that "the main object of British policy towards the Chinese in the years after the Pangkor Engagement was to encourage tin mining and other commercial activities." (Butcher. p 9).

With the British giving the Chinese carte blanche to pursue their economic ventures,

the flood of Chinese immigrants looking to make their fortune in Malaya intensified. Yet for every Chinese entrepreneur wishing to mine tin or grow plantation sugar, hundreds of laborers were required to work it. In order to meet the great demand for labor, Chinese capitalists primarily recruited people from southern China. Mass recruitment proceeded on such a scale after British intervention on the peninsula, that within two decades, the Chinese population had more than doubled in the Straits Settlements alone, increasing from 87 thousand in 1871 to 183 thousand in 1891 (Snodgrass. p 24).

As one might expect, the conditions of these Chinese coolies were far from noble. Crimping agents operating in China were paid up front upon delivering coolies to the receiving depot, and often stood to make far more than the standard fee depending on the labor market. Since these agents were disavowed of their responsibility upon delivery, they often resorted to unethical or illegal schemes such as kidnapping villagers or fishermen, or gambling for a person's servitude. Once inside the ships, the coolies were kept for the 30 or 40 day voyage in a space as little as eight square feet per man (Purcell. p 194-195). After landing in Malaya, the newcomers were met by a collection agent, and delivered as indentured labor to a tin mine or a plantation. If they were not exposed to cholera on the transportation vessel, they were likely to be exposed to malaria on the plantation. Needless to say, living conditions were wretched and mortality was high (Snodgrass. p 36).

Although they were never enslaved, the debt bondage of the coolies manifest itself in a variety of ways which were not easily overcome. If the coolie was not tricked by the crimping agent into gambling his person away outright, he would be compelled to pay the crimping agent's fee at the receiving depot. When he was unable to raise this obligatory sum, "he ceased to be a free agent from the moment he entered the doors of the depot." (Purcell. p 195). Even those who managed to arrive at their place of work free from debt were soon to sink into it. Wages, which were absurdly low, were often settled only when the tin-ore was actually smelted, which was as infrequently as once or twice a year. In the meantime, the coolies were given cash advances which would have to be paid back with interest. In addition, the few diversions there were--ainly gambling, prostitution, and opium--were "probably used consciously by the towkays (businessmen) to keep the coolies permanently in debt."

Although officially the British tried to pass several measures to improve the conditions of the Chinese coolie, including the establishment of the Chinese Protectorate in 1877 (which may have been more to keep order within the community than to improve living conditions), the fact remains that at no time until 1914 was indentured labor actually (legally at least) abolished. In 1890, a commission appointed to examine labor conditions recommended that government depots be substituted for private licensed ones (Purcell. p 197). These moves, far from being an attempt to curtail the recruitment of Chinese labor, were made on the assumption that it would be allowed to continue, and that given that assumption, the colonial government should take it upon itself to regulate the trade.

It could be argued that since it was primarily the towkays who were exploiting the

labor of their own people, the British cannot be held responsible for the mass importation of Chinese labor and the consequences of that historical event. This argument fails for several reasons. Firstly, as illustrated above, the British clearly encouraged, and indeed depended on, Chinese commercial activity, and were thus necessarily complicit in the recruitment of coolie labor to fuel those enterprises. Secondly, despite the official position that these laborers would eventually be repatriated to China, the fact that until 1927 the British made no attempt to control the inflow of women and girls (who were used as prostitutes and wives) demonstrates that they were aware of the growing permanent settlement of Chinese. Thirdly, it was not merely Chinese towkays who were utilizing Chinese coolie labor. European capital enterprises, too, depended extensively on it. On this subject, W.E. Maxwell said "Unless it can be proved that Europeans, working with labour-saving machinery of all kinds, can do everything for themselves...it is pretty clear that the Chinese coolie is indispensable..." (Maxwell, W.E. in Kratoska, p 143).

Maxwell prefaced the above statement with the observation that "there is, first of all, the difficulty of managing Chinese labor." As mentioned above, the Chinese were unruly and difficult to control, and did not make an acceptable labor force which would subordinate itself to the will of a foreign employer. The British were compelled to look to other sources for their labor supply.

The British and the Indians

If the ideal laborer was both more industrious and hard-working than the lazy Malay and more docile and tenable than the indomitable Chinese, the Indian laborer was that ideal worker. This sentiment was echoed by many prominent colonists, such as Sir Hugh Low and Sir Frederick Weld who agreed that "labor from the outside was vital, that Indians were preferable to the unruly Chinese, and that over the years, they would be a useful counterweight to that troublesome race." (Heussler. p 174). Weld strongly advocated the importation of Indians as a labor force, "because the Indians are a peaceable and easily governed race."

A further advantage of utilizing Indians, as Weld hinted at, was that the British had a good deal of experience in governing them. Planters in particular were familiar with South Indian Tamils from previous planting experience in Ceylon. (Snodgrass.p18). Part of the reason for the servility of the South Indian labor force, other than their origins in the untouchable class, was their previous experience with British imperialism. According to Michael Stenson's analysis, British imperialism had so impoverished Madras that the people living there were willing to endure any hardship in the hopes of realizing a better situation.

Unlike in the case of the Chinese, the presence of Indians in Malaya was virtually non-existent before British involvement in the region. Small pockets of "Klings," who were largely merchants, and "Chetties," who were involved in finance and moneylending, survived in Malacca. Only after Penang came under British control did the flow of immigrants to the Straits Settlements increase. Still, by 1833, there were no more than fifteen thousand Indians (Snodgrass. p24), and many of these had

been recruited by the colonial government to fulfill roles in the administration such as clerks and policemen, who were generally Punjabi. A proportionately small number of these northern and higher caste Indians continued to be solicited as the colonial apparatus expanded.

The vast majority of the Indian population continued to be, and became increasingly, comprised of South Indian coolie labor. The first boom in demand for Indian coolies came after the establishment of sugar and coffee plantations. British estate owners often employed or directly contracted crimping agents (kangani), and Indian coolies were subject to similar conditions as the Chinese. By the mid 1860's the system was so abused that the Indian government attempted to abolish the practice. Cheap labor was so desperately needed, however, that the planters openly violated this ban, and appealed to the Indian government to revoke it. Even after a compromise was reached that the Straits government would more tightly monitor the situation if India would permit the practice, planters complained to the colonial office about the severity of controls. A commission in 1896, after reviewing conditions of the Indian indentured laborers, "recognized that long indentures and bad conditions on estates were self-defeating" and recommended free labor, a proposal which the planters adopted in "enlightened selfinterest." Reassured by this move, the Indian government allowed the free emigration of coolie labor from that point forward.

The boom in demand for Indian labor was so intense after the introduction of rubber to Malaya in 1905 that the colonial government itself became directly involved in the recruitment process with the establishment of the Tamil Immigration Fund in 1907 (Stenson. p 18). The system was made possible by the close links between two colonial officials, one serving as emigration agent in India, the other serving as superintendent of Indian immigration in Penang.

Government involvement in this process had been suggested as early as 1891, as in this statement by Sir Hugh Low: "It would only be fair, I maintain, that the Government should annually import a number of coolies equivalent to a fair proportion of those who are attracted from the States--that is to say, the Government should bring over a certain number of men from India, and proportionately share the risks attendant on making them useful labourers." (Low, Sir Hugh. in Kratoska. p 164)

In fact, the Tamil Immigration fund did more than share the risks; it financially subsidized and systematically organized the mass recruitment of Indian coolie labor. The procedure, as described by a Commissioner of Labour, was very specific and bureaucratic, involving forms and licences signed by the estate owner, medical examinations, regular ships, quarantine stations, and tin tickets given to the coolie to match his destination. The system functioned so efficiently, and demand for labor was so high, that in 1909, there were 21,963 assisted migrants per annum, and by 1913, the number had reached 91,236. Despite colonial pretenses that conditions and wages of these laborers were better than in India, evidence suggests otherwise. Mortality rates were as high as 195.6 (per thousand) in Negri Sembilan, and 62.9 throughout the entire Federated Malay states in 1911 (Stenson.p 21). Wages were

kept purposely just above subsistence levels, as they were calculated based on the estimated costs of basic necessities (itemized under the headings provisions, clothes, and miscellaneous) plus a small margin. The idea behind this scheme was to provide the worker with just enough saving to return to India once he had outlived his use as a laborer. In reality, much as the Chinese coolies frittered away their wages on opium and gambling, Indian coolies tended to spend theirs on toddy, a cheap addictive alcoholic beverage. Partially because of a lack of resources to pay for their return passage, most of the Indian immigrants were in Malaya to stay. Even laborers not debt-bound had few opportunities for socioeconomic mobility, with career options being largely limited to municipal occupations.

The flow of Indian coolies continued unabated throughout the rubber boom and well into the 1920s. Until 1929, when an Immigration Restriction Ordinance was promulgated, immigration into Malaya was completely open. By that time, the depression era was beginning, the demand for labor was sharply dropping, and the need for such restrictions had become largely redundant.

British Policy and Malay "Special Privilege" The results of the 1931 census came as a shock to the Malays: they were for the first time outnumbered in their own country. Chinese and Indians combined totaled 53.2% of the population of all of Malaya, and the number was even more unsettling in the FMS alone, where the non-Malay population was 63.7%, and in the Straits settlements where it was an astounding 71.5% (Comber determined from a table titled "Abstract from 1931 Census." p 90). Even before this statistical revelation, when the prospect of a Malay minority was becoming increasingly clear, British officials, speaking from their assumed role as trustees, were reiterating their commitment to the special status of the Malays. This sentiment was articulated by W.G.A. Ormsby Gore when he declared: "To me the maintenance of the position and authority of the Malay rulers is a cardinal point of policy." Sir Hugh Clifford, High Commissioner of the FMS, emphasized in a speech delivered to the Federal Council in 1927 that to deny this special status in favor of a more democratic approach would "entail the complete submersion of the indigenous population, who would find themselves hopelessly outnumbered by the folk of other races; and this would produce a situation which would amount to a betrayal of trust which the Malays of these States, from the highest to the lowest, have been taught to repose in his Majesty's Government."

In fact, whatever the official sentiment on the matter, the Malays were soon to be outnumbered by the "folk of other races," despite midnight hour attempts to bandage the situation by the passage of such acts as the Aliens Ordinance of 1933 which set quotas on immigrants. Furthermore, what the colonial officials were really saying was not that they were interested in welfare of the indigenous population per se, but rather that they were committed to the perpetuation of the social system which legitimated their rule. British policies which favored the Malays in terms of land, citizenship, education, language, and political opportunities in the civil service were designed with this goal in mind.

Although Malay tradition held that all land belonged to the ruler and peasants were

free to settle on any available land, the advent of the British and the development of commerce and plantation agriculture meant the introduction of private systems of land ownership. In 1913, amidst concern that land was being consumed by Chinese and Indian landlords, the British introduced a new land alienation system called the Malay Reservation Enactment.

From that point forward, certain reserved land, which came to include areas as large as the entire state of Kelantan, could not be sold or transferred to non-Malays. In no state could the proportion of land reserved for Malays fall below 60 percent of total cultivatable land. Initially the act contained a loophole which permitted nonMalays to lease the land indefinitely, but that loophole was closed by an amendment in 1933 (Tham. p 239), after which point "non-Malays were completely disbarred from acquiring any form of ownership."

The definition of "Malay" in the Malay Reservation Enactment was the source of considerable indignation among the non-Malays. Under the definition, a "Malay" was anyone who belonged to the Malay race, spoke Malay, and professed Islam, and as such included immigrants from the Dutch East Indies, while excluding Chinese and Indians who had lived on the peninsula for generations (Comber. p 23). Problems with this definition were manifest in later debates about the status of non-Malay citizenship, as the British continued to regard all Chinese and Indians as temporary laborers, regardless of how long they had lived in Malaya.

British policies toward language and education cannot be easily divided, since the question of what language in which to conduct instruction came to prominence. Clearly, the debate was between the use of English and Malay, with access to the other vernacular languages either totally unsupported by the government in the case of Chinese, or designed in such a way as limit the possibility of acquiring a working knowledge of English and the possibility of social mobility away from the estates in the case of Tamil. Since the colonists feared the "disruptive potential of English-speaking Asians," access to English education was strictly limited.

For peasant Malays, vernacular education was used to keep them involved in agriculture. O.T. Dussek, Assistant Director of Malay Schools, felt that "Vernacular Schools are far more important [than English schools], and their curriculum is definitely designed to meet the needs of a rural community, special stress being laid upon gardening and handicrafts...Basketry is general and popular." (Kratoska. p 447) The Malay elites, on the other hand, were encouraged to pursue an English language education at such institutions as the Malay College in Kuala Kangsar for eventual induction into the Malay Administrative Service, whose acronym, MAS, appropriately enough means "gold." Enrollment in the Malay College was a paltry 139 in 1920.

The Malay Administrative Service, established as the "native" version of the European Malayan Civil Service, was generally comprised of Malays. Malays held all the senior posts, although Chinese and Indians could be "appointed to technical posts if there was no Malay candidate available to fill them." During World War I,

Malays gained an even stronger foothold in the administration when they assumed posts vacated by Englishmen returning home for the war effort.

It can be seen then, that the British policies of providing English language instruction to aristocratic Malays in preparation for roles in the civil service and providing Malay language vocational instruction to children of Malay farmers and fishermen effectively perpetuated the social hierarchy which kept Malay elites in a position of power and Malay peasants committed to agriculture.

Largely under the pretense of guarding the "special privileges" of the Malays, the policy of reserving land for the Malays had the same effect. At the same time, the new majority of Chinese and Indian settlers were beginning to call the long-standing policy of "Malaya for the Malays" into question.

Alliance and Compromise

The Japanese invasion of Malaya in 1942 threw the colonial administration so off-balance that it was never to fully recover, even after the British reoccupation of the peninsula. The period from 1945 to merdeka in 1957 was marked by political turmoil so complex that it is beyond the scope of this paper to detail. Suffice it to say that the causes of Indian and Chinese nationalism were taken up by the overseas non-Malay communities, with allegiance being divided in the Chinese case between the Kuomintang and the communists. Tensions from newly awakened political awareness among Chinese, Malays, and Indians alike sparked the formation of several political parties which crossed the political spectrum but were often grouped along racial lines. The most conservative of these, UMNO (United Malays National Organization), MCA (Malayan Chinese Association), and MIC (Malaysian Indian Congress) represented the interests of Malay aristocrats, Chinese towkays, and higher caste Indians, respectively. An Alliance between those parties, formed in 1954, proved to be a powerful political force which remains dominant to this day.

The Bargain of 1957 was basically an agreement between the Malay camp and the non-Malay camp that Malay special status and political privileges would be acknowledged by the Chinese and Indians in return for Malay acknowledgement of the legitimacy of Chinese and Indian business interests and liberal citizenship rights. Other tenants of the bargain as manifest in the Merdeka Constitution included the decision to make Malay the national language while allowing the continued use of other languages, establishing quotas for Malays in certain businesses and the government, and the continuation and expansion of the Malay land reservations. This compromise in itself can be seen as an important achievement in light of the unconciliatory stance of certain extremist members of each party. Only through the efforts of Tunku Abdul Rahman of UMNO and Tan Cheng Lock of MCA, both of whom were English educated, were the extremist positions mollified.

This bargain is the fragile platform on which Malaysian unity rests. It is the basic assumption which must be reiterated in order to pacify Malay extremists who would rather see the Chinese and Indians deported, and non-Malay extremist who resent any

Malay special privileges. As Tunku Abdul Rahman, the first Prime Minister, said in a radio broadcast on May 9, 1969, the day before the riots: "The Malays have gained for themselves political power. The Chinese and Indians have won for themselves economic power. The blending of the two with complete goodwill and understanding has brought about peace and harmony, coupled with prosperity to the country." (Tunku Abdul Rahman as quoted in Comber. p 64). It should be obvious by the events of the following days that this most basic agreement between the races was wrought with bad faith and misunderstanding.

The upshot of the race riots was the tightening of control by Malay factions, and policy changes which instead of addressing differences and attempting compromise, tried to rectify perceived problems from the Malay point of view. The National Operations Council's official analysis of the causes of the riot were that Malays were dissatisfied with the "non- implementation of long-standing policies to make Malay the effective National Language," that Malays were provoked when their special privileges were challenged by non-Malays, and general unemployment. The solutions to these problems consisted of phasing in Malay as the sole medium of instruction in the schools starting immediately, forbidding the questioning of Malay privileges (and the rights of non-Malays to citizenship) as decreed in the Bargain on 1957, and introducing a new economic policy (the Second Malaysia Plan) which pledged to improve the "racial economic balance," which really meant setting specific targets for Malay involvement in commerce and industry. The goal of this plan was ambitious: "Within a period of 20 years, Malays and other indigenous people will manage and own at least 30% of the total commercial and industrial activities in all categories and scales of operation."

Conclusion

Despite what appear to be such bold proposals in favor of the Malays, two decades after these policy changes took effect, the situation remains in many ways the same as it has always been. Granted, the Malaysian language as a medium of instruction has been successfully introduced, but Malay graduates still tend to aspire to positions in the civil service rather than business (which perpetuates their traditional role in politics), while the Chinese hold the overwhelming majority of professional positions. As of 1990, the goals of the Second Malaysia Plan have not nearly been met, with only an estimated 10% of Malays involved in ownership of commercial and industrial enterprises. Thirty percent remains the goal, but the time frame has been abandoned.

Part of the reason for the failure of these goals is the continuation of other government programs which have colonial policies as their origin and can be seen as a disincentive for Malays to become involved in the commercial sector. The Malay Reservation Enactment remains in effect, and that its scope was broadened under the Merdeka Constitution reflects a continued prioritization on Malay involvement in agriculture. The Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA) maintains a program of land alienation which is accessible to Malays only, and encourages them to develop untilled federal land for agriculture and eventually buy it at favorable rates.

These policies can be seen to continue the traditional social order which was so rigidly maintained under British colonial rule.

The effects of British colonialism clearly still linger on. One can only imagine what Malaysia might have been like today without a colonial experience, without the population of Indian and Chinese that colonialism brought to the country. No doubt this is a scenario that some Malay extremists wish had occurred. Whether the overseas Chinese would have settled in Malaysia without British encouragement is a question which can never be answered. In any case, the effect of the British colonial policy of encouraging Chinese commerce and recruiting Indian labor was to drastically alter the demography of the Malayan peninsula.

The resultant tension between the three races remains torrid.

Since power fluctuations have made the open resolution of the key issues which divide the races impossible to discuss in public, this racial friction has only become intensified. Even while children sing "Rakyat hidup bersatu dan maju" ("The people live in unity and success") every morning in the school yard, their parents tell them to not to play with their Chinese or their Malay friend. Perhaps it is the next generation who have grown up since the race riots of 1969 who will be able to resolve their racial differences and to productively discuss the "sensitive issues" which have been hushed up for so long.

Hopefully it will be them who will realize that whatever the effects of British colonialism, they are all in Malaysia to stay, and that the notion of working together in unity must be more than mere government propaganda.

Appendix A: Current Statistics

Crude Rate of Natural Population Increase by Ethnic Group

	1980	1985	1986	1987	1988
Total	24.7	26.1	25.2	23.9	23.9
Malay	28.2	32.2	31.7	30.1	28.6
Chinese	19.7	17.4	15.9	14.2	17.0
Indian	22.8	20.4	21.4	19.7	17.9
Other	19.2	22.1	25.6	25.0	---

Mean & Median Monthly Gross Household Income by Ethnic Group (in 1988 Malaysian Ringgit)

	Malay	Chinese	Indian	Other
1979 mean	492	938	756	1,904
1979 median	327	620	521	550
1984 mean	852	1,502	1,094	2,454
1984 median	581	1,024	770	1,145
1987 mean	868	1,430	1,089	2,886
1987 median	612	1,021	799	1,672

Membership of Selected Registered Professionals by Ethnic Group (percent)

Profession	Malay	Chinese	Indian	Other	
architect	18.4	79.3	1.4	0.9	
accountants	8.1	83.8	7.0	1.1	
engineers	28.2	64.3	5.4	2.1	
dentists		18.9	55.5	23.1	2.5

doctors	19.2	38.3	36.3	6.2
lawyers	25.1	48.9	24.3	1.7

(All charts are adapted from Malaysian Yearbook of Statistics, 1988, and apply to peninsular Malaysia only.)

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