

# Belonging across the Bay of Bengal

Religious Rites, Colonial Migrations,  
National Rights

Edited by Michael Laffan

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## Hybridity and Indigeneity in Malaya, 1900–70

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Malaysia is known internationally as a country that has sought to address pressing problems of interethnic tension and inequality—with some success, by most accounts—using policies of explicit ethnic discrimination.<sup>1</sup> Since 1970, members of its (historically) underprivileged Malay ethnic majority, whose default status as Muslims is recorded on their identity cards and other official documents, have enjoyed systematically preferential treatment in economic life, as well as in public education and employment. Members of the large ethnic Chinese and Indian minority groups, meanwhile, have been correspondingly disadvantaged.

Yet Malaysia's strident modern discourse of indigenous Malay entitlement and its practice of reinforcing and institutionalizing boundaries between Malay and non-Malay groups stand in ironic tension with the hybrid character and cosmopolitan origins of the Malay people, both historically and in recent times. Munshi Abdullah (1796–1854), the nineteenth-century “father of modern Malay literature” whose account of the death of Shaykh Yasin opens the chapter of Teren Sevea, was of Tamil and Arab ancestry. Tunku Abdul Rahman (1903–90), the first prime minister of independent Malaya, was Thai on his mother's side. Mahathir Mohamad (b. 1925), Malaysia's most influential leader and one of the principal architects of its entrenched system of Malay privilege, is himself partly of South Asian descent.

The hardening of divisions between Malay, Indian, and Chinese “races” which took place in the twentieth century is often ascribed to the influence of ideas and stereotypes that were propagated by the British colonial state. This chapter attempts to give nuance to that picture by taking a closer look at the continuities between British ideas about Malay racial identity, particularly as these were actually transmitted to Malays in the colonial context, and the ideologies and politics of race propagated in the period after independence. In doing so it will plumb some decidedly murky depths of intellectual history, both colonial and postcolonial, and show that the ideological continuities, while real, are not entirely those which existing literature would lead us to expect.

## Malaysia's plural society and its discontents

In 1969, in the wake of riots that left hundreds dead, multiracial Malaysia put its national experiment in equal rights on hold and initiated a system of institutionalized racial discrimination that is still in force today. In his landmark 1970 book *The Malay Dilemma*, outspoken radical and future prime minister Mahathir (served 1981–2003) reasserted the status of the ethnic Malays as the “definitive people” of Malaysia—the *bumiputera*, or “sons of the soil”—and announced their right to the support of the state in their endeavor to reduce the long-standing economic disparity between themselves and the non-Malay population.

Under British rule, liberal immigration policies and an expanding commercial economy had made the population of Malaya and Singapore one of the most mixed, by any definition, in the world. Attracted by burgeoning employment opportunities and propelled by poverty in their lands of origin, between 1880 and 1940 some 10 million Chinese, 3 million Indians casually labeled as “Tamils” (see Figure 9.1), and an unknown but large number of migrants from the Dutch Indies arrived in the colony. In the 1920s, more than 40 percent of Malaya’s population, and more than 70 percent of Singapore’s, was not just of foreign descent, but actually foreign-born.<sup>2</sup> The fact that many of the Chinese immigrants were (or became) involved in commercial professions, and achieved considerably higher incomes than the average Malay, contributed to the resentment that would turn violent in 1969.

It has often been argued that the authors of the New Economic Policy (NEP), as Malaysia’s system of positive discrimination or “affirmative action” was called, were influenced, directly and indirectly, by colonial ideas, stereotypes, and prejudices concerning race and racial differences.<sup>3</sup> The British had differentiated systematically between the races in their censuses and other administrative procedures, besides creating racially specific institutions such as the Chinese Protectorate (1877) and the Malay Reservations (1913)—the latter a belated attempt to restrict the purchase of land by non-Malays and prevent Malays from becoming dispossessed, as well as outnumbered, in their own country. They had also encouraged the development of a system of stereotypes according to which the Malays were affable but lazy, and the Chinese industrious but greedy. These prejudices generated self-fulfilling expectations in economic behavior, and perpetuated both inequality and antipathy between populations.

In *The Malay Dilemma* and related publications, Mahathir and other Malay radicals not only called for protective and discriminatory measures reminiscent of the colonial period, they also called for a “mental revolution” (*Revolusi Mental*) on the part of the Malays, who allegedly needed to discard their traditional indolence and lack of initiative in favor of individualistic, entrepreneurial values that would one day enable them to compete with Chinese economic power on equal terms, without further need of protection. The ideological roots of this prescription, as the Malaysian sociologist Hussein Alatas pointed out in *The Myth of the Lazy Native* (1977), were unmistakable.



TAMILS.

Figure 9.1 “Tamils,” from Ambrose B. Rathborne, *Camping and Tramping in Malaya* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1898), p. 85.

The formulators of the ideology are still under the spell of the colonial image of the Malays.... Owing to the absence of a long and profound political struggle for independence in Malaysia and the continuity of the ruling class, there was no sharp break in the ideological consciousness of the Malay elites. Hence the resemblance between the *Revolusi Mental* and the colonial ideology.... The degradation of the Malay character is an attempt by the ruling party to absolve itself from blame for real or expected failures to ensure the progress of the Malay community.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, there is also another, less well known and perhaps more surprising, aspect of the continuity between colonial and postcolonial attitudes to race and ethnicity in Malaysia. Whereas existing writings on the topic tend to blame British influence explicitly for the hardening of racial boundaries in Malaya, and implicitly for helping to create an ideology of Malay homogeneity and indigeneity, in what follows I will show that key British officials and educators in Malaya actually promoted an ideology of benevolent miscegenation, rejected any idea of Malay racial purity, celebrated the partly foreign origins of the Malays themselves, and yet deplored barriers to intermarriage between them and other peoples.

This does not mean, however, that British ideas about the nature of the "Malay race" had no influence on postcolonial developments. On the contrary, Mahathir's *bumiputera* revolution can be interpreted not only as a turning point in Malay-Chinese relations, but also as a key moment in a contest between a British-inspired view of the Malays as a mixed race by definition—a view which Mahathir, ironically, underwrote—and an alternative view which sought to define Malayness more narrowly and exclusively.

### The origins of the "Malay Race": British views

While the British in Malaya often referred to the Malays as a "race" distinct from the other peoples of the peninsula—Chinese, Indian, European—they never thought of the Malays either as homogeneous, or as wholly indigenous. As Soda Naoki has observed, the textbooks encountered by pupils at government schools in early twentieth-century British Malaya "did not seek to posit 'pure' Malays."<sup>5</sup> Instead, they consistently portrayed the Malays as a *mixed* race, the product of centuries of interbreeding between local and foreign stocks. This characterization had a long pedigree in colonial Malaya, albeit in the context of considerable disagreement regarding the specific ingredients of the Malay ethnic blend. Thomas Stamford Raffles (1781–1826), who founded modern Singapore in 1819, believed that the Malay "nation" had developed primarily through the intermarriage of Middle Easterners with indigenous Southeast Asian peoples and cultures:

The most obvious and natural theory on the origin of the *Malays* is, that they did not exist as a separate and distinct nation until the arrival of the *Arabians* in the Eastern Seas .... [T]hey seem ... to have been gradually ... separated from their original stock by the admixture of *Arabian* blood, and by the introduction of the *Arabic* language and *Moslem* religion.<sup>6</sup>

By contrast, nearly a century later, Frank Swettenham (1850–1946), the main architect of British rule on the Malay Peninsula, favored the theory that the origins of the Malays lay partly on the Indian subcontinent.

[T]here are good reasons for believing that Malays are the descendants of people who crossed from the south of India to Sumatra, mixed with a people already

inhabiting that island, and gradually spread themselves over the central and most fertile States—Palembang, Jambi, Indragiri, Menangkabau, and Kampar. From Sumatra they gradually worked their way to Java, to Singapore and the Malay Peninsula... The word Malay is said to be derived from a river of that name, the Sungei Malayu ... in the State of Palembang, in Sumatra, but it is equally likely that it was carried by the first emigrants from the Mallia or Malaya country in southern India.<sup>7</sup>

A key figure in the transmission of British views on the hybridity of the Malays to Malay people themselves was Richard Olof Winstedt (1878–1966), director of education in the Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States from 1924 to 1931, and a prolific author on the history and culture of the Malays. In his writings, Winstedt particularly emphasized the diverse origins of the Malay aristocracy, which, like aristocracies everywhere, had always sought to form alliances by marriage with distant foreign powers.

Royalty has always been cosmopolitan in its mistresses. Sultan Muhammad Shah of Malacca (1424–45) married a Tamil, who bore him Sultan Muzaffar Shah: his grandson, Mansur Shah, married a Javanese, a Chinese and a Siamese, the last the mother of two Sultans of Pahang. Everywhere Sayids from the Hadramaut have married with Malay nobility.<sup>8</sup>

Cosmopolitanism and miscegenation, however, were not limited to the Malay upper classes. Ordinary Malays, too, were of very mixed stock due to centuries of immigration and intermarriage:

For 2000 years there has been continuous traffic between the Coromandel coast and Kedah, while old Malacca was full of Gujeratis and Tamils. In the north there has been intermarriage with Thais. Achinese dominated Perak for a century, Bugis colonized Selangor and traded and fought from Riau to Kedah. In Patani and Kelantan traces of Javanese culture date back to the Majapahit period of the fourteenth century, while during the British period there were Javanese, Bugis, Banjarese and Sumatran immigrants into Malaya. There is no one type of civilized Malay.<sup>9</sup>

One early twentieth-century Straits Settlements school textbook further relativizes the issue by declaring that "the Malays are no longer considered a distinct race in the division of mankind but only a branch of the Mongolian race"—that is, of the race that also includes the Chinese and other Northeast Asian peoples.<sup>10</sup>

### The merits of miscegenation; or, a very British kind of racism

In his own 1918 school textbook *Kitab tawarikh Melayu* (A Malay history)—the first of its kind ever produced in Malay for a Malay readership, and one that went

through multiple reprints—Winstedt makes it clear that hybridity is not only an old and intrinsic characteristic of the Malay people, but also a positive and desirable one. Miscegenation has given the Malays—much like, significantly, the British—hybrid vigor, protecting them from the deleterious consequences of inbreeding. Winstedt drew an uncharitable contrast in this respect between the Malays and the Semang, one of the small “aboriginal” peoples (Orang Asli, see Figure 9.2) of the interior of the Malay Peninsula, whose blood had remained unmixed with that of foreigners, and whose mental and physical capacities he alleged had suffered as a result:

It was in Sumatra that the Malay race, as we know it today, first emerged in close association with other peoples: the Hindus, together with the earlier inhabitants of Sumatra, Borneo, and other islands. For the Malay race has since ancient times been a mixed race [*bangsa champoran*], just as the British have; and among human races it is universally the case that if they do not mix with other races, then their bodies, developing in isolation, become less vigorous, and their intellects less sharp—as we see, for example, in the case of the Semang!<sup>11</sup>

The parallel between Malay and British hybridity was, of course, intended to be a flattering one for the Malays. As the child of an English mother and a Swedish-born



*Proto-Malays from Johor.*

**Figure 9.2** “Proto-Malays from Johor,” from R. O. Winstedt, *A History of Malaya* (London: Luzac, 1935), after p. 40.

father, Winstedt may have had personal reasons to stress the hybrid character of the British nation and the benefits that this hybridity supposedly entailed. Nevertheless, it is clear that he, and no doubt other British officials in Malaya, saw a real parallel between the cosmopolitan origins of the Malays and the waves of immigration, conquest, and miscegenation that had constituted the British people as an amalgam of Celtic, Roman, Saxon, and Norman elements. The British or English analogue also made colonial observers reluctant to deny the Malays, notwithstanding the acknowledged historical precedence of the Orang Asli, indigenous status in Malaya. “The Malays,” Winstedt declared, “have at least as much right to be regarded as the aboriginal people of Malaya as the English have to be called the aborigines of England.”<sup>12</sup>

The British were by no means the first, or the only, commentators to applaud the supposedly invigorating effect of foreign influences on the Malay character. At the beginning of the twentieth century, a group of Islamic reformers boasted in their monthly journal *al-Imam* of their Arab connections, looked to the Central Lands of Islam for moral leadership, and were grateful that, centuries earlier, “the arrival of an Arab in Malacca,” had made it possible for the Malays to overcome their chronic laziness, greed, and individualism thanks to “the blessing of the Islamic religion.”<sup>13</sup> Winstedt’s argument, nevertheless, was distinctive both in its biological aspect, of which more below, and in its insistence that hybridity *per se*, rather than interaction with specific and superior peoples and civilizations, was the key to Malay national salvation and survival.

It is worth noting that appreciation for the past contribution of Chinese (among other) blood to Malay racial vitality did not preclude the espousal of caustic prejudices against Malaya’s contemporary Chinese population. Winstedt was particularly given to Sinophobic sentiments, accusing the “clannish” Chinese of deliberately excluding others from their businesses and “draining Malaya of a great proportion of its wealth” through remittances to China.<sup>14</sup> As late as 1948, he even described them as “the locusts of commerce and industry, leaving for local races nothing but manual labour and invading even peasant agriculture if a crop like pineapples happens to attract their hungry notice.”<sup>15</sup>

### Mahathir, urban cosmopolitan chauvinism, and the British legacy

Leafing through *The Malay Dilemma* reveals many passages that are at first sight surprising given the status of the book as the foundational document of Malaysia’s discriminatory, but ultimately optimistic, system of affirmative action in favor of Malays. Not only does Mahathir uncritically reiterate, as Alatas pointed out, colonial stereotypes regarding the character and capabilities of the Malay race, he also implies that, to a large extent, racial characteristics are simply innate:

Races are differentiated not merely by ethnic origin but also by many other characteristics. These characteristics are important ... The Jews, for example, are not merely hook-nosed but understand money instinctively. The Europeans are not only fair-skinned but have an insatiable curiosity. The Malays are not merely



brown, but are also easy-going and tolerant. And the Chinese are not just almond-eyed people, but are also inherently good businessmen. Their progress in the whole of Southeast Asia will testify to this.<sup>16</sup>

Historically speaking, Mahathir argues, one of the most important causes of change and improvement in the otherwise intractable character of races has been interbreeding between them. In this respect, he draws a sharp distinction between urban Malays, who have always been a mixed population open to intermarriage with foreigners, and rural Malays of the villages (*kampung*), who under British rule were isolated from the cosmopolitan world of the port cities, and became increasingly parochial in their marriage patterns.

The character of the town Malays became more diverse and they found no difficulty in changing with the times. Some intermarried ... These intermarriages enriched Malay stock. Of course not all town Malays married non-Malays, but as time went on, town Malays inherited a certain amount of mixed blood as more and more offspring of intermarriage became indistinguishable from the Malays themselves, and married as Malays. The absence of inter-racial marriages in the rural areas resulted in purebred Malays. This was further aggravated by the habit of family inbreeding. Malays, especially rural Malays, prefer to marry relatives.<sup>17</sup>

For Mahathir, it is precisely the *purebred*, rural Malays who most chronically embody the behavioral vices of the Malay race: laziness, lack of initiative and ambition, irrationality, fatalism. While he stops short of prescribing miscegenation as a remedy for these vices in the present, he clearly regrets that more such miscegenation did not occur in the past, and he includes interracial marriage as part of his blueprint for a unified multiethnic Malaysian nation in the future.

Every barrier which tends to distinguish between racial, ethnic or other origins must be broken. Discrimination in all walks of life must be eliminated. And finally, inter-racial marriages should be encouraged. These are the bases of national unity, the understanding of which is the *sine qua non* of a multiracial society desirous of building a stable and viable nation.<sup>18</sup>

For the Malays themselves, Mahathir's immediate prescription is urbanization. To the extent that the racial character of the purebred Malays is amenable to change, in Mahathir's view it is most likely to do so in an urban context, where the conditions of life are more complex and challenging than in the countryside. Other key Malay political figures of the time, such as Tun Abdul Razak (deputy prime minister, 1957–70; prime minister 1970–76), tended to idealize the life of the *kampung*, and partly for this reason saw rural development as the key to raising Malay living standards.<sup>19</sup> But for Mahathir, "rural development" was almost a contradiction in terms:

In this modern age, it does not take long to discern that the most progressive nations are those with maximum urbanization ... The importance of urbanization in the

progress of a community lies in the more complex organization which the towns and cities provide. This makes urban dwellers sharper and more knowledgeable. The rural dwellers on the other hand are cut off from these experiences and are subjected only to the age-old pattern of life that characterizes the countryside. Their sum total of knowledge is therefore minimal and their capacity for change limited ... Essentially because of environmental and hereditary factors, the Malays have become a rural race with only a minute proportion of them in the towns. Rural people everywhere are less sophisticated and progressive than urban people. Our solution to this problem must be to attempt a reversal of this state of affairs. In other words, we must seek to urbanize the Malays.<sup>20</sup>

Eric Thompson has characterized Mahathir's views not in terms of racial chauvinism, but in terms of an "urban cosmopolitan chauvinism" comparable to that which exists among liberal urban elites in the United States.<sup>21</sup> Just as the Democratic Party in the United States has often had difficulty appealing to "redneck" rural voters, many of whom are conservative Christians, so Mahathir's party, the United Malays National Organization, has faced stiff competition in the least urbanized Malay states from the opposition Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), which appeals precisely to the conservative *kampung* Malays for whom Mahathir makes little attempt to conceal his scorn.

The origins of the contest between a cosmopolitan and an exclusive variant of Malay ethnic politics lie well before Mahathir's time. In 1939 and 1940, the infant Malay nationalist movement had already been torn between a *Melayu jati* (true Malay) faction which preferred to exclude Malays of Indian or Arab descent, and a more cosmopolitan faction which deplored its opponents' insistence on "Malay blood purity."<sup>22</sup> Being an urban Malay of partly South Asian ancestry, Mahathir would no doubt have been inclined to take the cosmopolitan side in this debate regardless of other influences. Nevertheless, it is striking how closely his views mirrored those of British writers who saw the strength of the Malay race as lying precisely in its ability to absorb foreign elements, both cultural and biological. Moreover, we know that he was familiar with the writers in question. In his published memoirs, Mahathir recalls reading at school "books on Malayan history by British administrators such as Sir Richard Winstedt, Sir Frank Swettenham and many academics."<sup>23</sup> Indeed, there was also a more personal connection: on a trip to Britain in 1962, the future Malaysian leader was, as he later recalled, "invited to the house of Sir Richard Winstedt, a highly regarded Malayan Civil Service officer, who had looked after my sister-in-law Saleha when she was studying in England."<sup>24</sup>

### British eugenics: An underestimated ideological influence in Southeast Asia

Although Mahathir was certainly influenced by the major British writers on Malaya, none of their works (other than an English-Malay dictionary by Winstedt) is actually mentioned in *The Malay Dilemma*. Almost the only modern publication which



Mahathir does pay the honor of referring to explicitly in his seminal work—and in the introduction at that—is a book of a quite different kind, and one which throws light on a second important set of ideological influences on Malaysian racial politics.<sup>25</sup>

The book in question is *The Evolution of Man and Society*, a 1969 work by British geneticist Cyril Dean Darlington (1903–81), which attempts to analyze the broad sweep of human history in genetic terms. Its central thesis is that the fate of societies is closely linked to the quality of their members' genetic stock, which can be improved through selective mating. However, homogenous populations successfully bred for particular desirable characteristics are at risk from the effects of inbreeding. Periodic hybridization is therefore essential to the success of classes and nations. In Britain, for example, the interbreeding that followed the Norman conquest produced a "hybrid stock, energetic and fertile," from which "a large part of the medieval aristocracy, as well as the modern population, of the British Isles must be descended."<sup>26</sup>

As discoverer of the mechanism of "chromosomal crossover" and its importance to heredity, Darlington was a distinguished scientist whose reputation was ultimately stained by his increasingly blatant racism.<sup>27</sup> He belonged to the intellectual tradition known as eugenics, which advocated the improvement of humanity by means of selective breeding. During the second half of the twentieth century, eugenic ideas all but disappeared from intellectual and public life in Western countries due to their association with racism and fascism. But up to the Second World War, their influence was pervasive in liberal and socialist circles as well as on the political right. "In the first half of the century," as a later apologist has pointed out, "virtually all biological scientists and most social scientists supported eugenics, and so also did many of the informed public."<sup>28</sup> This was particularly so in Britain, where influential figures who expressed support for selective human breeding were to be found in all political and occupational domains and included Winston Churchill, Bertrand Russell, and George Bernard Shaw.

That such an apparently authoritative body of thought concerning human diversity should acquire intellectual traction in Britain's colonies, with their racial hierarchies of status and power, was inevitable.<sup>29</sup> Geographical and psychological remoteness from the wartime Nazi atrocities, moreover, meant that during and after decolonization, the intellectual and popular reaction against eugenics was less marked in British Asia than it was in Europe, or perhaps even in Africa. Sunil Amrith and others have noted—albeit without exploring its historical roots—the striking, anachronistic persistence of eugenic thinking during the postwar period both in Malaysia and in Singapore, where as late as the 1980s Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew (1923–2015) appeared "increasingly enamoured of the kind of racist eugenic theories that were popular in Edwardian England."<sup>30</sup> Under the influence of his hereditarian convictions, in 1984 the government of Singapore even launched an official program designed to induce "intelligent" women to bear more children for the sake of the nation's future.<sup>31</sup>

Given the mainstream status of eugenics in prewar British intellectual life, it is likely that its influence in Malaya and Singapore had become entrenched partly by indirect means, via figures like Winstedt whose writings reflect it without referring to it explicitly. But there may also have been more direct connections. Mahathir, for instance, may have learned something rather specific about eugenics during

his training as a medical doctor in Singapore in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The existence of tantalizing evidence for ideological links between Lee's People's Action Party and Oswald Mosley's prewar British Union of Fascists, meanwhile, reinforces the suspicion that there is still an important hidden history here waiting to be uncovered.<sup>32</sup>

## Notes

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## History in and of a Penal Colony in the Bay of Bengal: Two Convict *Mazars* in the Andaman Islands

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### Introduction

Sketching a background history of the association of public celebrations with Muslim tombs across the British Empire, this chapter explores the history of two Muslim graves in the Andaman Islands, known locally as *mazar-baba*, and examines their relationship to the history of nation making in independent India.<sup>1</sup> The Andamans were selected in 1858 as a penal colony for Britain’s Indian empire after the Great Revolt of 1857, and are now a Union Territory of the Republic of India. The *mazars* themselves lie at South Point, between the outskirts of the capital, Port Blair, and the local beauty spot of Corbyn’s Cove.

Indigenous hunter-gatherer peoples inhabited the Islands prior to this decisive moment of settler colonization. Once their home was chosen as the site of British India’s most infamous prison, these islanders were soon overwhelmed as convicts, ex-convicts, and their descendants came to dominate demographically. Whereas *mazars*, sometimes called saints’ tombs, are strongly associated with Muslim, and especially mystical Sufi, teachings and practices, Andaman Islanders of all faiths commonly visit them, seeking blessings and interventions of various kinds, as was once common across Central and Monsoonal Asia. Indeed, historian Nile Green has written of *mazars* not just as religious sites, but as social places, describing them as “stronghold[s] of memory, a treasury of tales brought there by people seeking blessings, gossip, amusement, exorcism or simple respite from the traffic.”<sup>2</sup> Equally, anthropologist Rachana Rao Umashankar has pointed to their broader religious and secular appeal, as they draw pilgrims and visitors: as supplicants, recipients of God’s grace, or simply tourists. Their dynamic social and religious functions render them “microcosms” of the places in which they are situated.<sup>3</sup>

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