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# Malaysia as a Multicultural Society

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# **MALAYSIAN PERSPECTIVES**

# Malaysia as a Multicivilizational Society

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Abdul Rahman Embong

## I. Introduction

Let me begin by drawing attention to a rather widespread assumption regarding multiethnic or multicivilizational societies in underdeveloped and developing countries. It holds that a society with cultural diversity has built-in fragility, and that it faces problems of survival because it is riddled with irreconcilable tensions and conflicts that inevitably tear the social fabric apart. Looking at the experience of Sri Lanka, Fiji, and a number of African countries, this assumption appears to be quite valid. Nevertheless, to assume that all cases of cultural diversity necessarily lead to violence and break-up is reductionist and deterministic and does not correspond with reality.

As history has shown, there are cases in which peace and tolerance prevail over long periods despite the cultural diversity found in many developing societies. This state of affairs is due to certain appropriate policies. In addition, the sociocultural resources for civility and participation embedded in each civilization or culture have been productively tapped in these societies for meaningful participation in building a new citizenry.

However, having successfully galvanized cultural diversity into a relatively united national political community does not necessarily mean that it will remain united forever. "Unity" is something fluid and cannot be taken for granted. The ground rules are questioned and redefined time and again, especially in the era of globalization. The ethnic and separatist clashes undermining the national polity in Indonesia following the 1997 – 98 economic and political crises are a case in point.

To synthesize the argument, it is important to maintain a nuanced understanding of the dynamics of group social interaction because such interaction may either propel the society forward or push it backward. While the role of natural evolution is very important, intervention in a positive manner at various levels—state, market, and society—certainly plays a critical role in shaping the trajectory of the development of the diverse society. This means that civilizations alone, however rich and advanced, though very necessary, are not sufficient conditions for civility and participation. Extremely important is *political will* as well as economic and psychosocial transformations arising directly or indirectly from the implementation of well-thought-out policies and plans. This is the case of post-independence, multiethnic Malaysia, which is regarded as an example of a relatively successful multicivilizational society in Southeast Asia.

In the academic literature and general discourse, Malaysia is popularly referred to as a multiethnic rather than a multicivilizational society, as the title of this essay would suggest. In fact, in Southeast Asian studies, one of the most popular and important terminologies is *plural society*, a term used by Furnivall over seven decades ago. Furnivall's use of the term is very specific. A plural society is one in which many races or ethnic groups live side by side in separate geographical and sociocultural enclaves, meeting only in the marketplace.<sup>1</sup> There was no integration or assimilation to constitute a viable society. Malaysia under colonialism was considered such a plural society. When it attained independence in 1957, these enclaves (with their attendant tensions) persisted, leading to serious doubts among observers about the ability of the new political set-up to remain intact and allow Malaysia to evolve into a relatively united nation of diverse ethnic groups.<sup>2</sup>

Admittedly, pluralism has a variety of meanings, and as understood today is quite different from that used by Furnivall. While in the field of political science, pluralism refers to the plurality of power centers, in the context of this essay it is used to mean "the public acceptance or at least tolerance of others, particularly of ethnic minorities by majority populations in a country or territory."<sup>3</sup> This public acceptance sets the conditions for majority and minority groups to live together with some degree of peace and understanding; to work out accepted rules and mechanisms for conflict management and resolution that will enable them to carry out production and other economic activities; to engage in social interaction; and to share power over the polity. This accep-

tance is part and parcel of the public culture, embedded in a society's civilization, institutionalized through certain policies and practices, and propagated and handed down over the generations.

## **II. Historical Background**

Southeast Asia, and particularly Malaysia, is not only a region where monsoons meet but also where major civilizations converge. The political entity known as Malaysia today, in historical times was a constituent unit in the wider Malay world, or Nusantara, whose core countries are Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. The main component of Malaysia was referred to as the Malay Peninsula, implying that this was originally the land of the people of Malay stock. However, with the march of history and especially with the coming of Western colonialism from the 16th century onward (and more so since the onslaught of British colonialism from the second half of the 19th century), the Malay Peninsula was drastically transformed from a homogenous society to a heterogeneous one, with far-reaching consequences well beyond the imagination of those colonial administrators or planners who initiated the changes.

I have argued elsewhere that modern Malaysian pluralism has been shaped by migration, and has impacted post-independence nation-building and society-making in many ways. Malaysian contemporary ethnic diversity is not only characterized by the existence of the various ethnic groups—Malay, Chinese, Indian, Iban, Kadazan, and ethnic minorities such as the Orang Asli and the Siamese—but also of recent migrants (mostly Indonesians) who play an important role in shaping Malaysian history and social participation in citizen-making. Reflecting the contradictory processes of convergence and divergence, Malaysian diversity has been a source of tension and conflict in the society, as manifested by the May 1969 ethnic riots in Kuala Lumpur and other parts of the country. More than three decades down the road, however, Malaysian society has changed, and ethnic relations have improved tremendously, with reasonably strong tendencies toward convergence and new solidarities. Nevertheless, the constant contestation and even tension are also present and their implications for ethno-religious relations cannot be overlooked.<sup>4</sup>

Is this culture of public acceptance of others something decidedly new? Facts have shown that this practice has long historical roots. Malay culture is historically open and accommodative. As argued else-

where by Abdul Rahman, in trying to understand the complexities of modern Malaysian multicivilizational society, it is important to recognize the long history of cosmopolitanism in Malaysia. The culture of public acceptance of others by the majority indigenous population of the Malay peninsula is ancient, predating colonialism.<sup>5</sup> I share the view of the well-known Southeast Asianist scholar and historian Professor Wang Gungwu, who, in reconstructing the history of the continuities in island Southeast Asia, argued that the pluralism of the colonial society predates the colonial phase, and was embedded in the local reality. As argued by Wang, it is important to note that many Southeast Asian coastal and riverine societies (e.g., the Malacca Sultanate of the 15th century) that became plural in character during the colonial period, or saw the degree of pluralism increase, did so with very little social trauma or opposition.<sup>6</sup> Unlike in the colonial period, there had been no invasion or coercion during the early contacts with the major civilizations of the world (namely, Hindu-Buddhism, Islam, and Confucianism) and there was no change in the political entity nor loss of power by the indigenous rulers. The acceptance of the *Other*, who came as traders, travelers, religious preachers, and so on, from Arabia, India, China, and other parts of the Malay archipelago (some of whom came to settle locally), became something rather natural, as part and parcel of the public culture of the indigenous people, reflecting the fact that the Malay society then was already relatively open and accommodative, not exclusivist.

Nevertheless, controversies abound regarding the origins of the Malays and whether they had a “base culture” before the advent of the first major civilizational influence, viz., the Indian or Hindu-Buddhist influence. The mainstream theory that developed in the late 19th century, until it was challenged in the 1960s, was that the Malays were themselves migrants, who came down “wave upon wave” from southern China well over 2,000 years ago and settled down in the Malay peninsula, Indonesia, the Philippines, and other neighboring lands right down to Polynesia and Micronesia to the south and Madagascar to the west. Being migrants during prehistoric times, it was asserted that there was no “indigenous” civilization of the Malays prior to the spread and acceptance of influences from the major world civilizations.

The second theory, which emerged since the 1960s and developed further in the 1990s, attempts to refute the “migration” theory. It argues that the Malays were the original people of the region and there

was a Malay civilization predating “Indianization” in Nusantara, including in the Malay peninsula. Based on archeological excavations in Kota Tampan and other historic sites, the Malays are believed to have inhabited the Malay peninsula at least 35,000 years ago, and already there was a Malay civilization, albeit of a lower order, before the advent of foreign influences.<sup>7</sup> I am in no position to enter the debate about which theory is valid. However, based on the evidence, I am of the view that the Malay world, including the Malay peninsula, was already peopled before the dawn of the first Christian millennium, and that the population was relatively settled on the coastal plains and had developed political units with certain systems of rulership. In other words, the Malay peninsula was not a *tabula rasa* with no history or civilization of its own prior to the coming of the great civilizations.

Nevertheless, I agree with some scholars, particularly Alisjahbana, that Southeast Asia, including Malaysia, did not belong to “the cradle of the high cultures or civilizations” at the axis of history, and that “its high culture is of secondary character.” The axis of history (a term he borrowed from Karl Jaspers) means “the most decisive epoch in the history of man [around the 5th century B.C.], in which the great human potentialities broke through and a common framework of historical self-knowledge for all people of the world became manifest.”<sup>8</sup> The rise of thinkers and religious concepts in the Arabian peninsula, Greece, India, and China, during that epoch, all constitute the basis of the great cultural traditions of our time.

If we accept the “axis of history” thesis, and that the Malay world was outside the orbit of the axis of history before the dawn of the Christian era, it means that the Malay civilization that we see today was “secondary” in character. It was the result of the “grafting” or the adoption of elements from the major world civilizations, namely, the Indian civilization (Hinduism-Buddhism) and later Islam, which the Malays appropriated as part of their worldview and lived experience as well as their sociopolitical systems.

Clear examples of Indian influence are how, in the political system, the Malays upheld the concept of the “god-king” or *raja dewa*, while in Malay social life, Indian forms of marriage, birth rites, and other customs were adopted. It must be admitted that distinguishing the truly indigenous elements of Malay civilization from the Hindu-Buddhist influences that overlay the Malay culture is not easy. However, the important point, from the perspective of cultural pluralism and intercivilizational contact, is that the people were obviously receptive to

what came from India and found that the new ideas and institutions fit well with local needs.<sup>9</sup>

But was the whole Malay society really “Indianized” or only the Malay ruling court? And how deep was the Indian influence? This has been a serious bone of contention among scholars of various leanings. Refuting the Indianization theory, Syed Naguib Al-Attas argues that Hinduism among the Nusantara Malays was only a “superstructure maintained by a ruling group above an indifferent community.”<sup>10</sup> Hinduism was imposed by the authority of the ruling group with only superficial participation by the Malay masses. Thus, Al-Attas concludes that the Malay society was not a “Hinduized” society, and that the philosophical influence of Hinduism upon the Nusantara worldview has been unduly magnified. The people of Nusantara, he asserts, were more aesthetic than philosophical; they either did not fully grasp or they ignored the subtleties of Hindu metaphysics. Philosophy was transformed into art at the expense of the rational and intellectual elements. To prove the point, Al-Attas shows that in Hindu-Malay translations of Hindu-Indian religious literature, such as the *Mahabharata*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and the *Bharatayuddha*, the philosophical expositions were ignored while the epic, romantic, and mythological aspects of the texts were appropriated to suit the tastes of the Malay ruling court. Similarly, although Sumatra in today’s Indonesia was for many centuries (the 6th to the 11th centuries) a great center of Buddhism in the region, the influence of the Buddhist clergy among the Malays was only felt in the art, and not in the realm of philosophy.<sup>11</sup>

Whether the Indianization thesis has been unduly favored is still inconclusive and it is up to the historians to verify. Be that as it may, it is a historical fact that Indian influence lasted for many centuries in the Malay world, with Hindu-Buddhist artifacts still to be found today and with many Sanskrit words enriching the Malay vocabulary and lexicography.

Compared to the Indian influence, the coming of Islam constituted the most decisive turning point of the Malay civilization process, “the momentous event in the history of Nusantara.”<sup>12</sup> This thesis, with Al-Attas as its most eloquent proponent, points to the spread and acceptance of the Islamic metaphysics of Sufism, which was developed in the Malay world, with noted Sufists, such as Hamzah Fansuri, as examples. Al-Attas maintained that it was through Sufism that “the highly intellectual and rationalistic religious spirit entered the receptive mind of the people, effecting a rise of rationalism and intellectual-



ism not manifested in pre-Islamic times."<sup>13</sup> Unlike Hinduism or Buddhism, Islam was not only accepted by the court but also by the people, as evidenced by the fact that not all philosophical treatises were written solely for the pleasure of kings. It has also been argued that rationality and individualism were nurtured in the Malay world through the acceptance of Sufism, and the Malay language was developed not only as a medium for epic and romantic literature, but also for philosophical discourses, transforming what Al-Attas called the soul and the body of the Nusantara society.<sup>14</sup> Islam easily replaced Hinduism and Buddhism. The concept of the Hindu god-king was replaced by the concept of the ruler, i.e., the Sultan, as God's caliph and the "shadow of God upon the Earth," making him the head of a religious hierarchy extending down to the village level.<sup>15</sup> With the adoption of Islam, the Malays were endowed with a new identity and sense of belonging, having become part and parcel of the wider *ummah* in the rising Muslim world. Indeed, Islam was a politically unifying force in Nusantara, fomenting nationalist consciousness and ideals. As many scholars and historians have noted, the acceptance of Islam was a watershed in Malay history.

Although Islam's impact was revolutionary and more or less total as compared to Hinduism and Buddhism, there were no clashes between the two civilizations. The replacement of Hinduism and Buddhism with Islam took place slowly and peacefully. This shows the accommodative nature of the people and their culture, and also the principles of moderation and tolerance in Islam.

Nevertheless, clashes did occur with the coming of Western colonialism. Coming out of the history of the Christian crusades and the other wars between Christians and Muslims, the clashes in the Malay world between the indigenous Malay-Muslim population and the Western colonialists came as no surprise. However, it was not a clash between Islam and Christianity per se. It was not primarily an issue of religious or civilizational differences. Rather, it was a clash over space and power because the Western colonialists took over the lands and resources of the Malays in Southeast Asia. Western colonialism arrived when Islam was already established in Southeast Asia, with Malacca as its center. It attempted to dislodge an already-established Muslim power while the Muslim Malays fought back to defend their homeland. Conflicts and wars against Western colonial powers also took place in India and China, for example, and they were not civilizational in nature. In the context of the Malay world, of course, appeals to Islam

and the *ummah* were made in the struggle against colonialism, making it appear as though it was a clash of civilizations, but these calls were expedient tools for political mobilization. These historical conflicts do not represent the inherent inability for peaceful co-existence between Muslims and Christians, but rather the rejection of the hegemony of a foreign power upon sovereign indigenous populations.

### III. Impact of Western Colonialism on the Malay Society

Western, and particularly British, colonialism had left a lasting impact on the Malay society and altered its historical trajectory. The first European power that set foot in the Malay peninsula, the Portuguese, colonized Malacca between 1511 and 1641, and left important historical artifacts, notably the fortress “*A Famosa*,” as well as a small Portuguese community. The Dutch, who ousted the Portuguese and ruled Malacca between 1641 and 1824, also left certain historical remnants but did not alter the Malay social structure. Anti-colonial wars against both the Portuguese and the Dutch erupted, but were unable to dislodge the colonialists from the Malay peninsula. Although the Malacca royal household had to flee, independent Malay sultans (some of whom were direct descendants of the Malacca lineage) reigned in other parts of the peninsula.

Unlike the earlier colonial powers, the British colonized Malaya for almost 200 years, beginning with the take-over of Penang in the 1780s until Malaya’s independence in 1957. As the first industrial state and the most powerful nation on earth in the 19th century, Britain ruled the waves, and the Malay peninsula became Britain’s biggest “dollar-earner.” Penang was ceded to Britain in 1786, and the British then proceeded to take over Singapore in 1819 and Malacca in 1824. The three formed what was known as the “Straits Settlements” in 1826. From these trading centers, Britain penetrated the resource-rich Malay states, first by taking over Perak in January 1874 and Selangor later in the same year, while Pahang and Negri Sembilan accepted British residents in 1888 and 1895, respectively. These four states were placed under one administration in 1896, and called the “Federated Malay States.” The rest of the Malay Peninsula—Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan and Terengganu (which were then ruled by Siam), and Johor—came under British rule by 1914 and were known as the “Unfederated Malay States.”

Sabah and Sarawak were also taken over by the British, but through a different route. Sabah was ruled by the British North Borneo (Chartered) Company since the 1880s, while Sarawak, which was previously under the rule of the Sultan of Brunei, came under the domination of the Brooke family, established as the "White Rajah" in the 1840s. These two states became independent only after joining Malaya in forming the Federation of Malaysia in 1963.

Several important changes may be discerned as a result of British colonial rule. First, there was the change of the political system. From independent Malay sultanates, Malaya was turned into a colony under indirect British rule. The sultans were reduced to figureheads with powers only over Islamic religion and Malay customs while British Residents, or advisors, held the reins of power. The loss of the sultanate's power symbolized the loss of independence and sovereignty of the Malay rulers and their people.

Second, the Malay states were transformed from a feudal agricultural and trading economy to a colonial dual economy dependent upon the metropolis and serving as producers of raw materials for Britain. In fact, by the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries, rubber and tin, which were so crucial in sustaining the industrial revolution in Europe and America, became the "twin pillars" of the Malayan economy. However, the dual economy that the British developed resulted in the indigenous people being left in the subsistence rural sector while the migrants, particularly Chinese and Indians, were involved in the modern urban sector of the economy.

Third, in response to the demands for labor of the colonial economy, an influx of Chinese and Indian immigrants took place from the middle of the 19th century until the 1930s. This led to dramatic demographic changes, radically transforming the basically mono-ethnic indigenous society into a plural society comprised of indigenous people and immigrants. But the Chinese and Indian (mainly Tamil) immigrants were not bearers of high culture or civilization. They were essentially peasants arriving as coolies to work in the tin mines and on the rubber estates to serve the needs of the colonial economy. Nevertheless, there was a small group of Chinese and Indian merchants and businessmen operating their business activities from the Straits Settlements alongside the British and other European enterprises.

Fourth, the British instituted a Western colonial bureaucracy known as the Malayan Civil Service (MCS) to replace the feudal administrative framework in order to ensure the effective functioning of the colo-

nial political entity and economy. To gain indigenous support, the British incorporated the local traditional elite as subordinate bureaucrats to serve in the MCS. To serve this end, in 1905, the British set up the Malay College Kuala Kangsar (MCKK) in Perak for children of the royalty and other members of the Malay elite to receive Western education so that they could subsequently join the bureaucracy under what was known as the Malay Administrative Service (MAS).<sup>16</sup>

Fifth, common education is a crucial mechanism through which the values of each other's civilizations can be learned, and constructive intercivilizational interaction can take place. Nevertheless, in colonial Malaya, the British-created ethnic division of labor, with its attendant identification of ethnic group with a particular economic role, affected early colonial policy toward education. This is very clear when we examine vernacular education. From the point of view of the British colonial administrators, Malay vernacular education was established principally to provide basic literacy and make Malay children "better farmers and fishermen than their fathers had been," thus ensuring that Malays remained in the traditional agricultural sector. At the same time, for the Indians, Tamil education (only up to primary level) was basically designed to ensure that they remain on the rubber estates or work as laborers elsewhere.

Chinese education was different in some respects. This was because the Chinese community had managed Chinese education on their own, without British intervention. Traditional Chinese education was based on knowledge of Confucian teachings, but in Malaya this could not develop, partly because of the nature of the migrant society, in which there were hardly any Confucianist scholars.<sup>17</sup> Chinese education in Malaya was China-oriented and became deeply influenced by political and intellectual trends in the homeland, particularly the debates which were critical of Confucianism, between reformers and revolutionaries at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries.<sup>18</sup> Because of these developments, Chinese schools in Malaya became increasingly politicized, especially following the success of the 1911 revolution led by Sun Yat-sen. While the introduction of Mandarin enabled the Chinese to have a common medium of instruction, its content continued to be China-oriented, thus keeping their exclusivity, with minimal impact upon Malay society or culture.

Ironically, only English education provided opportunities for children of the various ethnic groups to attend the same school and interact with each other. Western education was introduced into Malaya

with the construction of English schools, either by the colonial government or by missionaries. However, only children of the rich or those with state financial assistance could afford such education. But their education was basically colonial in nature and the Western civilization they came into contact with was relatively superficial, notably aspects of lifestyle, with little of its philosophy, logic, science, and art. Thus, the educational system during the colonial period did not enhance intercivilizational understanding and inter-ethnic interaction, except through Western education.

The consequences of the British policy of divide and rule can be seen clearly in the political domain. As in many other colonized countries, Malaya was a theater for the rise of nationalisms by the 1930s. The early nationalisms were disparate in nature with Chinese nationalism oriented toward China and Indian nationalism toward India. Only Malay nationalism was Malaya oriented with "Malay being their nation-of-intent," but within the larger context of "*Melayu Raya*" (the Greater Malay world).

The three-year-eight-month period of Japanese Occupation in Malaya (December 1941 to August 1945) was a terrifying experience for the people, but it helped puncture the myth of the invincibility of Pax Britannica, fueled anti-British colonial sentiments, and propelled the nationalist struggle for independence. It was the post-war political developments that helped bring together the three diverse ethnic groups to seek an acceptable formula in their quest for Malaya's independence and sovereignty in the family of nations.

#### **IV. An Analytical Model for Post-Independence**

When Malaysia (then Malaya) became independent in August 1957, it inherited a plural society with diverse ethnic groups. The extent of diversity can be gleaned from the ethnic mix of the population. In 1998, the Malaysian population numbered 22.2 million (including 1.6 million noncitizens).<sup>19</sup> Of this total, the majority is made up of the *Bumiputera* (literally, sons of the soil), who constitute 57.8 percent (Malays 49.0% and other *Bumiputera* 8.8%); followed by Chinese with 24.9 percent; Indians with 7.0 percent; "Others" with 3.1 percent; and noncitizens (mostly Indonesian migrant workers) constitute a significant proportion at 7.2 percent. The Malays and other *Bumiputera* groups are considered the indigenous people of the country, while the non-*Bumiputera*, who migrated to Malaysia mostly since the second

half of the 19th century, have become an integral part of Malaysian society and contribute significantly to Malaysia's development. While the fertility rates of all ethnic groups in recent years have generally been on the decline, their annual fertility rates differ quite significantly. The *Bumiputera* register a 3.7 percent growth rate, but the fertility rates for the Chinese and Indians are considerably lower, at 2.5 percent and 2.6 percent, respectively. This trend of the *Bumiputera* population growing faster than the other ethnic groups will most likely alter Malaysia's future ethnic map.<sup>20</sup> As can be seen from the figures, migration, especially transnational migration during the colonial era and in recent decades, has been a major contributory factor in the making of modern pluralism in this country. Recent transnational migration has, in fact, been on the increase. According to official statistics, noncitizens numbered 0.75 million (4.3%) of the total Malaysian population in 1991, but their number increased to 1.61 million (7.2%) in 1998.<sup>21</sup> Other sources estimate the foreign migrant worker population to be much higher, i.e., around two million (including a large number of unregistered or illegal foreign workers).<sup>22</sup>

What is the character of the Malaysian society today, more than four decades after independence? Attempts at characterizing the Malaysian society are certainly problematic. Is Malaysian society a "melting pot," as claimed by some scholars in recent times? Or is it still a "plural society" of the Furnivallian type?

To my mind, neither of these concepts fits the social reality of Malaysia today. It is not a melting pot since that model assumes that the boundaries of the diverse cultures and civilizations existing in the same society tend to give way or "melt" through assimilation into the dominant group. There is no denying that there are some commonalities between the ethnic groups. Subgroups intermingle with each other at the workplace, in the community, and in social spaces. They speak the national language and enjoy each other's festivals and so on. But these commonalities are not a sufficient condition to transform the Malaysian multiethnic society into a melting pot. This is so because the various communities still maintain their identities. They fight for their language and culture, and for education in their mother tongue. They jealously guard their cultures and religions.

Malaysia is not a "plural society" in the Furnivallian sense either. The Furnivallian plural society model is one in which the diverse groups exist side by side without converging or combining, and without shared values or the absorption of aspects of the other. There is no

glue to keep it together save for the existence of the state that maintains law and order.

Thus, for analytical purposes, I would like to draw attention to a model proposed by Amitai Etzioni when analyzing American society, whose population consists of migrants, including very recent ones, with only a very small number of natives, i.e., Native Americans. Etzioni maintains that "the American society is organized as a community of communities in which the member communities are free to follow their own subcultures in numerous matters ranging from religious practices to second languages, from involvement in their countries of origin to tastes in music and cuisine. These particularistic involvements are not viewed as threatening the nation at large."<sup>23</sup> Yet, Etzioni is quick to point out that there is something that keeps the diverse communities together, i.e., "shared values that serve as a sort of framework and glue that keep the rich and colorful mosaic from falling apart ... [T]o sustain unity, the loyalty to the community of communities is expected to take precedence over that to member communities, if and when these two loyalties come into conflict ... . The state helps to sustain the shared part, the frame that keeps communities as members of one overarching community. For instance, the nation-state upholds rights defined in the Constitution that might clash with the particularistic values of some member communities, and helps ensure that differences among communities will not turn violent."<sup>24</sup>

What, then, is an accurate model for Malaysia? To my mind, the model of "community of communities" approximates more closely the Malaysian social reality. What prevails in Malaysia is the existence of various communities with their own identities and their own common historical and cultural memories. Nevertheless, these communities exist and interact within the broader framework of the Malaysian national community whose fundamental principles, or ground rules, are generally accepted by the various communities. In other words, the communities accept the legitimacy of and place their loyalty and commitment in the national community, while at the same time maintaining their own distinct ethnic and local communities. The Constitution, the flag, the King,<sup>25</sup> the national ideology, and other symbols are accepted as binding rules for the various communities, representing their shared values.

## V. Factors Contributing to Malaysia's Relative Success

It is generally agreed that Malaysia today is a relatively successful, prosperous, and harmonious society — perhaps one of the most stable and developed among the developing nations, particularly in the Muslim world. In fact, one writer asserts that Malaysia “is the most industrially advanced Islamic nation in the world.”<sup>26</sup> Although Malaysia's population consists of followers of the diverse world religions and beliefs, these religious adherents generally tolerate each other with no interreligious strife, unlike in India and Northern Ireland.

What contributed to this success? To fit into the frame of this essay, I draw attention to four important constructs, viz., political, economic, social, and civilizational. Politically, since independence, Malaysia has put in place a parliamentary democracy with periodic elections. Although political parties are mainly ethnic based, no one party believes that it can rule by itself without the cooperation and support of other ethnic-based parties. Thus, the dominant ruling party, the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO), which was established in 1946, seeks cooperation within a larger coalition framework based upon the politics of consociationalism with other parties. Thus, in the mid-1950s, UMNO formed the Alliance with the Chinese-based party, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), the Indian-based party. Since the 1970s, the Alliance has expanded to become what is now known as Barisan Nasional (National Front or BN), comprised of over a dozen parties. Although this arrangement is riddled with conflicting interests and tensions, it has served as a stable political framework of cooperation and the management of conflicts behind closed doors. This has enabled the BN's uninterrupted rule of Malaysia since independence. The Malaysian opposition, too, recognizes the importance of establishing a broad multiethnic political framework, hence the formation of the Barisan Alternatif (Alternative Front or BA) of four opposition parties in 1999. It struggles to replace the ruling Barisan Nasional through elections. These parties were the Malay-based Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), the mainly Chinese-based Democratic Action Party (DAP), Parti Keadilan Nasional (National Justice Party), and the Malaysian People's Party (PRM). However, Barisan Alternatif is also riddled with contradictions, resulting in the DAP pulling out of the front in 2001, citing PAS's uncompromising stance in pushing its “Islamic state” agenda.



It should be stressed that this idea of multiethnic cooperation, implemented by both the ruling BN and the opposition BA, is not new. It was already utilized immediately after the Second World War, with the formation of the anti-colonial PUTERA-AMCJA<sup>27</sup> as a vehicle in the independence struggle but which the British mercilessly crushed with the declaration of the Emergency in June 1948. In short, the political arrangements, particularly those of power sharing between ethnic groups, give due recognition to history and the fact of diversity in Malaysia.

Besides the inter-ethnic political compromise, in the last four decades or so, Malaysia's economy has been doing relatively well and has been transformed from an agricultural, primary goods producer to an industrialized, export-oriented manufacturing economy. It enjoyed buoyant growth and prosperity until the regional economic downturn of 1997 – 98. Instrumental in this historic transformation was the export-led industrialization and the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP), 1971 – 1990, with its two-pronged objective of eradicating poverty irrespective of ethnicity, and the restructuring of society to remove ethnic identification with particular economic functions. Malaysia's "growth with distribution" strategy was effective in reducing the socioeconomic imbalances between ethnic groups and the rich-poor gap.

Following the economic changes, there has been a deep transformation of the people's psychology leading to a softening of the mistrust, suspicion, and sense of insecurity that was so evident in the late 1960s. Malaysia has developed a fairly advanced and modern educational system, especially at the tertiary level, that has been responsible for raising the educational and skill levels of the society, and has contributed significantly to this transformation. The emergence of a multi-ethnic and educated middle class, particularly the new Malay middle class — with changed mind-sets, values, and orientations reflecting a new sense of confidence — has enabled the various ethnic groups to live and work together in relative peace. Thus, the 1997–98 economic and political crises that saw ethnic riots in Indonesia did not produce a similar situation in Malaysia.<sup>28</sup>

While all the aforementioned factors are necessary, they are not sufficient conditions to promote inter-ethnic peace without the civilizational resources that promote a public culture of tolerance and accommodation of one another. To begin with, although Islam is the state religion, there is the constitutional guarantee that Malaysia is a

secular state, with freedom of religious worship. Thus, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, and other religious beliefs have many followers in Malaysia, and religious institutions such as temples and churches—in addition to mosques—exist in many parts of the country. While much remains to be done to promote intercivilizational or interfaith dialogue and understanding, some efforts have been made through the formation and activities of interfaith councils. On the cultural front, the festivals of various ethnic groups are respected, with national or state holidays declared to celebrate them. In fact, Malaysia is perhaps one of the few countries in the world that enjoys many public holidays, particularly those related to religious or cultural practices. Besides the international New Year holiday, Malaysia observes many other holidays. These include the Muslim *Idilfitri* and *Idiladha* as well as *Awal Muharam* (the Muslim Lunar New Year), the Chinese New Year, the Indian *Deepavali* and *Thaipusam*, the Buddhist *Vesak*, the Christian Christmas and Easter, the Iban “*Hari Gawai*,” the Kadazan-Dusun “*Pesta Keamatan*,” and so on. The cultural practice of “Open House,” an event showing respect and enjoyment of each other’s religious-cum-cultural festivals, has become part of the national event, implanted in the national collective imagination. In fact, the Malaysian government, beginning in December 2001, has gone a step further by officially holding “National Open Houses” to acknowledge all the major cultural celebrations of the Malaysian people.<sup>29</sup> While we should not romanticize the contribution of interfaith tolerance and respect for religious-cum-cultural celebrations to peace and harmony in Malaysia, we should also not belittle or dismiss them as inauthentic events promoted by the state tourism board and the tourist industry to bring in foreign currency.

## VI. Conclusion: Current Concerns

In this era of accelerated globalization, we are witnessing an increased awareness of diversity and the assertion of identity among the various ethno-religious groups. Discourses of civilizations and the conflicts allegedly associated with them have again become strident, particularly in the aftermath of September 11. These developments also reverberate in Malaysia. By way of conclusion, I would like to draw attention to four issues of current concern in Malaysia with regard to intercivilizational relations. I will refer to these as “the culture of accommodation and tolerance;” “the culture of conflict and confronta-

tion;" "the culture of ignorance;" and "the culture of dialogue, understanding, and magnanimous internationalism."

The culture of accommodation and tolerance has been dealt with in detail in the preceding pages. It can be stated with a great degree of certainty that this public culture of harmony, accommodation, and acceptance of the *Other* will continue to prevail in Malaysia, although there might be occasional hiccups.

Of foremost current concern in Malaysia is the culture of conflict and confrontation, which has been inflamed by the developments subsequent to the September 11 incident. The Malaysian government, particularly Prime Minister Mahathir, has taken a judicious stance regarding the issue. While condemning the terrorist attacks as dastardly and criminal, Mahathir has drawn attention to the urgent need to understand and address the root causes of the problem, particularly the fate of the dispossessed Palestinians and the suffering of the Iraqi people as a result of United Nations sanctions. At the same time, he criticized the U.S. bombings of Afghanistan, arguing that such actions would not root out terrorism, but would instead exacerbate the differences and conflicts between the Muslims and the West, and deepen anti-American sentiments in the Muslim world. It is clear that Mahathir and many other Malaysians see the post-Cold War "New World Order" as problematic and riddled with tensions and serious threats to small nations following the U.S. bombings in Afghanistan and its threats to extend its military campaign. Indeed, many Malaysians, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, are nervous and concerned about these developments, particularly the threat to Muslim nations, when the United States takes the law into its own hands, acting as the world policeman in its global anti-terror campaigns, especially when terrorism is identified with Islam.

Within Malaysia, September 11 and the U.S. bombing of Afghanistan resonate differently among different sections of the population, with implications not only for inter-ethnic but also intra-ethnic/intra-religious relations. There are existing mechanisms to handle inter-ethnic issues in Malaysia based on constitutional provisions as well as the consociational political framework that was put into practice after independence. Unfortunately, intra-Malay/Muslim political rivalries, namely the political struggles between UMNO and PAS, have no similar or effective mechanisms. PAS's claim to be "the true defender of Islam" and its advocacy of a theocratic state (Islamic state) have caused nervousness among non-Muslims and Muslims alike,

more so when PAS called for a *jihād* to halt U.S. bombing of the Taliban in Afghanistan. UMNO has advocated a moderate and modernist stance with regard to Islam, and disagreed with the PAS call for an Islamic state. Nevertheless, things are in a state of flux. Mahathir's announcement, on September 28, 2001, that Malaysia is already an "Islamic state" causes some degree of confusion and apprehension, especially among non-Muslims, raising the question of whether UMNO is gravitating away from its moderate stance on Islam. Nevertheless, as later events have shown, the announcement was intended to demonstrate particularly to the Western world that the Malaysian model of an "Islamic state" not only can be modern and cosmopolitan, but can exist peacefully with other nations and be tolerant and friendly towards other religions and cultures.

It is very clear that religion has been transformed into a political "hot potato" for many years in Malaysia, and more so now. Islam, in particular, has been used to consolidate political power in the case of UMNO, while for PAS, it has been used to challenge and capture power. Either way, the UMNO-PAS political battle leads to tensions and sharp divisions among the Malay-Muslim majority in Malaysia, with serious implications for inter-ethnic relations and interreligious peace in the country.

Besides the politicization of religion, the issue of understanding and appreciating each other's faith is also critical. An important precondition for promoting understanding and respect for each other and, hence, inter-ethnic peace and unity, is to overcome the culture or the wall of ignorance. Manifestations of such a culture are found in various forms. At best, they consist of superficial knowledge of the *Other*, while at worst, they are expressed as stereotypes, prejudices, and mistrust. In Malaysia, while tolerance of each other's culture and religion exists, each community overwhelmingly lives in blissful ignorance of the other's culture and faith despite having lived together for decades and even centuries. While attempts have been made to introduce Malaysian studies in schools and colleges to acquaint students with the civilizational issues of the various ethnic groups, this move is relatively recent and its impact has yet to be assessed.

Given this scenario, it is crucial to promote the culture of dialogue and understanding, and of magnanimous internationalism. Substantive and continuing dialogues between different religions and civilizations need to be held. In Malaysia, attempts at such dialogues have been made, but they have not been done in a systematic or sustained

manner. One major attempt to establish such a dialogue, namely, between Islam and Confucianism, was undertaken in the early 1990s, when a conference was held at the University of Malaya. Also, an interfaith council exists in Malaysia and is supported by the government. This council needs to have more “teeth” and play a more proactive role, however.

Since the wall of ignorance contributes to misunderstanding and prejudices, it has to be broken. One important way to penetrate it is through the promotion of good research, publications, knowledge dissemination, and dialogues by scholars and other interested individuals and institutions. Such activities must be encouraged and intensified. The extent, nature, and consequences of the “culture of ignorance” have to be documented and analyzed. The commonalities and differences between cultures and civilizations need to be objectively demonstrated and explained. Dialogues on this critical issue have to be informed and guided by knowledge, not by assumptions and rhetoric. Only in this way will it help promote a deeper understanding and appreciation of the *Other*, thus strengthening the dynamics of multicivilizational relations in such societies as Malaysia. ●

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## Notes

1. According to Furnivall, in such a society, “Each group holds by its own religion, its own culture and language, its own ideas and ways. As individuals they meet, but only in the market place, in buying and selling. There is a plural society, with different sections of the community living side by side, but separately within the same political unit. Even in the economic sphere there is a division of labor along racial lines” (Furnivall 1956: 104).
2. For an interesting early work on the diverse ethnic groups that constitute the peoples of Malaysia, see Wang 1963.
3. Wang 2001.
4. Abdul Rahman 2000a.
5. Ibid.
6. Wang Gungwu 2001.
7. See Nik Hassan Shuhaimi 1999; Wan Hashim Wan Teh 1995, 1997. See also, Abdul Rahman 2000b, chapter 3, for a discussion of these views.
8. Alisjahbana 1965, p. 26. As articulated by Alisjahbana 1965, 1983.
9. Wang 2001.
10. Al-Attas 1965, p. 123; 1972).
11. Al-Attas 1965, pp. 123–125.
12. Ibid., p. 127.
13. Ibid., p. 126.

14. Al-Attas 1965; 1972.
15. Andaya and Andaya 1982, p. 53.
16. MCKK was the Malayan equivalent of Eton, the prestigious public school for children of the English elite.
17. Andaya and Andaya 1983.
18. Ibid.
19. Malaysia 1999, pp. 96–97.
20. Abdul Rahman 2000a.
21. Op. Cit.
22. See Ishak Shari and Abdul Rahman 1998, p. 69.
23. Etzioni 2001, p. 150.
24. Ibid., p. 151.
25. Roff 1967; Khasnor 1984. The institution of the constitutional monarchy is part of Malaysia's parliamentary democratic system. The monarch—the *Yang di-Pertuan Agong* or the Paramount Ruler—is regarded as a unifying symbol for the nation and accepted by all ethnic groups. For example, the recent passing away of the eleventh *Yang di-Pertuan Agong*, Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah, on 21 November 2001, was grieved by the people of all ethnic groups. A quote from a 37-year-old civil servant of Malaysian Chinese origin, Goh Kim Swee, who drove all the way from Slim River, Perak, to the National Palace in Kuala Lumpur, reflects the acceptance by the people of all ethnic groups of the institution and also of the personality of the late King. Says Goh, "He was a very humble and caring ruler . . . I wanted to be here at the *Istana Negara* [National Palace] to pay my respects" (*New Straits Times*, 23 November 2001, p. 4).
26. Ohmae 1995, p. 120.
27. PUTERA stands for *Pusat Tenaga Rakyat* (Centre for People's Forces) of Malay-based anti-colonial organizations. AMCJA stands for All-Malaya Council for Joint Action and consists of non-Malay-based anti-colonial organizations. The amalgamation of these two broad fronts into PUTERA-AMCJA is interpreted by various scholars as representing early attempts at multiethnic cooperation and power sharing. However, PUTERA-AMCJA survived for only about two years as the British imposed a blanket ban on anti-colonial organizations with the declaration of the Emergency in June 1948.
28. For a most recent study of this transformation and the rise of the new middle class in Malaysia, see Abdul Rahman 2002, particularly chapters 1 and 3.
29. The government held the first National *Hari Raya* Open House in Johor Bahru in December 2001, which was attended by more than 100,000 people from all ethnic groups, including thousands of tourists from Singapore and elsewhere. This was followed by the National Christmas Open House held in late December in Kuala Lumpur, and then the National Chinese New Year Open House in February 2002, which were similarly attended by huge crowds. Free food and drinks were served during these events and cultural shows were featured.

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