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How does one learn from the unfamiliar? Unfamiliar connotes alien, foreign, strange, new, novel. Depending upon the circumstances and on one's personality, a reaction to the unfamiliar can run along the spectrum from a negative and suspicious response to one that is more positive and energizing. As I contemplated traveling to Malaysia, I wondered how I would react. Would the unfamiliar stimulate me to learn or would it intimidate me into paralysis? Of course, the response to something unfamiliar is never so simple as to be captured in a single emotion, and I knew enough to expect a range of responses. But what would I do with these reactions? How would I learn from this experience? What, in particular, might I learn about multicultural relations, especially as they pertain to the educational experience of university students?

The entity known as Malaysia was not entirely unfamiliar to me. Years ago, I had trained future teachers of English as a Second Language in the Linguistics Department at Macalester College. In the 1970s, the Malaysian government changed the medium of instruction in Malaysian schools from English to the native language, Bahasa Malayu. From then on, English was to be taught as a second language, and the schools needed a cadre of teachers trained to teach English. Macalester College became a destination institution for around twenty Malaysian men and women who were to become these English teachers, and I taught them in my classes. I can still conjure up images of these students, and I can remember the complicated names that their American peers quickly pared down into nicknames (Madzuki became Mike, and apparently all these years later he is still called Mike). I also

recall their confusion over having this English-teacher profession thrust upon them.

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We had been on an airplane for longer than any human being should have to endure. We were on the final leg of the journey, from Singapore to Penang. It was early in the morning, and the flight attendants were serving breakfast. Breakfast is my favorite meal. I know what to expect from breakfast. Or maybe I don't. The meal presented to me was spicy rice and squid. Squid, mind you, has never appeared on any breakfast menu I have ever seen. My first encounter with the unfamiliar. I was hungry enough and excited enough (and didn't want to appear squeamish in front of my colleagues) so I ate it with gusto. As the plane descended to the tropical island of Penang, the loudspeaker played "Jingle Bell Rock." I had to ask myself: Where was I?

This juxtaposition of different cultural representations continued throughout the trip and came to symbolize for me what was most challenging and intellectually stimulating about Malaysia: old next to new, conspicuous poverty alongside stunning riches, and dangerously polluted waterways next to lush gardens. There was the sharp contrast of the Chinese Malaysian students in jeans and t-shirts, speaking American slang they had learned from the TV program *Friends*, alongside the demure Malay female students in Islamic headscarves speaking Bahasa in quiet tones. Indeed, the juxtaposition of progressive cultural influences against the traditional Islamic ways was often jarring and sometimes unnerving. It was difficult, for example, to reconcile what seemed a contradiction in the urbane professor espousing the punishment of stoning for someone who had committed adultery. These cultural contrasts became the backdrop for a question that emerged as the guide to my trip. In this land of sharp contrasts, especially those having to do with race, ethnicity, and religion, what could I learn from the Malaysian example? America struggles with racial tensions and inequalities. America must confront the same sharp contrasts within its everyday existence. But perhaps by moving away from the closeness of the familiar, I could look at the unfamiliar and gain some insights. Perhaps these cultural juxtapositions would prove illuminating, especially as they pertain to the education of college students moving into positions of leadership in a world of contradictions.

In her article in this volume, Dr. Maznah provides valuable insights into the complexity of racial and ethnic relations in Malaysia.[1] Maznah traces the path of the race consciousness that now seems to impede any attempts at community building. She describes how the process of nation building that followed independence from the British and then the subsequent phases of economic and political development have been advanced by the promotion of distinct allegiances along racial/ethnic lines. The ethnic tensions that led to the 1969 riots in Kuala Lumpur forced the government to address the socioeconomic inequalities that existed between the three ethnic groups, the Chinese, Malays, and Indians. The resultant New Economic Policy (NEP), with its affirmative action policy favoring the dominant Malays or "*Bumiputera*," brought economic growth to the Malays and to the country as a whole, but at certain costs. According to Maznah, "With the NEP's implementation, virtually all aspects of Malaysia's political, social and cultural lives became ethnically-reduced, or hyperethnicized."[2] Despite the economic and political stability that Malaysia has experienced, it is this condition of hyperethnicity that seems to have emerged as a primary challenge to democratic ideals. She contends that "Malaysia's basis for ethnicization did not originate from the politics of multiculturalism or positive diversity. State development policies as exemplified by the NEP have explicitly set apart the status and interests of one ethnic community from another leading to the hyperethnicization of political, cultural and social life."[3] Alongside the discussion of this ethnic polarization, I place Dr. Embong's statement (also included in this volume), "However, the experience of the last four decades or so after independence has shown that there was no 'clash of civilizations' in Malaysia. The country, in fact, has not only survived but has also succeeded in many ways in developing a relatively peaceful and prosperous society made up of different ethnic groups, cultures and religions."[4]

As I observed and studied the tensions between the diverse ethnic groups, I came to realize that proclamations about the positive multicultural mixture of Malaysian society are part of this juxtaposition of images and realities. My own observations and conversations lead me to wonder, however, if the balance is truly tilted in the direction of deep tension. Statements about racial harmony perhaps avoid an examination of some deep-seated resentments that have the potential to create serious difficulties in the years ahead. These ethnic tensions seem to be further exacerbated by the rise in interest in the creation of

an Islamic state. The question of what will happen to the rights of non-Muslims is being added to the frustrations among the non-Malay population about the unfairness of the affirmative action quota system.

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In the context of these multicultural challenges being played out in the Malaysian society as a whole, I sought to learn how these concerns were represented in the microcosm of the Malaysian universities. In order to investigate the multicultural experience from the perspective of the student, I arranged to meet students from the different ethnic groups at a variety of universities (including one in Singapore to provide a contrast to the Malaysian experience). My method of learning about the students' experience was to ask students to give me a tour of their campus and show me the places where they spend the most time — where they study, where they socialize with friends, where they live, etc. I told the students to choose for themselves where they wanted to take me. I said that part of what I was interested in was the choices they made.

With the assistance of a faculty member at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), I began my interviews with a pair of very outgoing, talkative female students, one of whom was Chinese Malaysian and the other Indian Malaysian. Their English was quite good, and indeed was peppered with somewhat "blue" American slang that they had picked up from American television. My intention of walking around campus with these two young women, listening to their stories, was thwarted when they showed up in a car, completely uninterested in walking anywhere. They drove me past a canteen where the Chinese students go to eat, and thus started the conversation about ethnic separation. Separation from Malay students seemed to dominate the experience of these two women. We quickly left the campus and drove to a shopping mall where they said students socialize. We sat in a small restaurant frequented only by Chinese students and, as they relaxed, they talked animatedly about their frustrations with what they perceive as unfair bias in favor of the Malay students. For example, they talked about how hard it is to get a room in the hostel (dormitory) because preference is given to Malays. They said all student groups are focused along ethnic and/or religious lines. They claimed that higher standards for entrance into the universities apply to Chinese and Indian students than to Malay students. Repeatedly, they attempted to soften these cri-

tiques by saying that, "We all get along fine." However, my overall impression was that they harbor a great deal of resentment about government policies that give preference to Malays. This same frustration was echoed many times in conversations with Chinese professors. The students' resentment, however, bordered on disrespect. They voiced serious ethnic and religious prejudice without seeming to recognize that they were doing so.

My second interview was with two Malay women from USM. Both were 23-year-old students in the School of Pharmacy. These students were eager to take me on a tour of their campus and voiced a great deal of pride in their school and, even more so, in their program of study. They showed me around several buildings such as the library and several classrooms and laboratories. I was struck by the absence of common space for students to gather and socialize. There were open air, covered walkways connecting the buildings, and occasionally students were gathered at tables and chairs there, but the complex described as the Student Center was simply a collection of service-related offices and stores. I saw no lounge space or any other spaces designed to enable students to interact and socialize. When I saw groups of students studying or just talking, they were always separated into groups of similar ethnic identity. The two women took me to their hostel, which has its own small cafeteria attached to it, and mentioned that to apply for a room students have to show how they have been active in various co-curricular activities. This comment contrasted with that made by the Chinese/Indian pair who stated that gaining space in the hostels was purely based on one's ethnicity. As third-year students, these two were required to do an internship in a hospital pharmacy two days a week. Once they graduate, they are obligated to work for six years in a hospital pharmacy as compensation for the scholarships they received from the government to enable them to attend the university.

In contrast to the previous students, these women never ventured into comments about Chinese or Indian students unless I prompted them. I asked several times if they thought there was any ethnic tension on their campus. They admitted that students interact only with other students from their same ethnic group but, in their opinion, there was very little tension between the different groups.

My third interview was less formal in that I seized an opportunity to talk to two students at the International Islamic University. I had gone into a cafeteria area and noticed signs separating the men and

women (Brothers Only, Sisters Only). Right below a "Brothers Only" sign sat a young man and woman, so I asked if I could speak to them a bit. I asked why they were ignoring the sign and the woman said, "We're in the Engineering school. He's smarter than I am. I need his help, so this is the only place we can sit together."[5] We discussed another nearby sign that said "Save our President." Apparently, the student body president had been "sacked" for speaking to a journalist about an opposition party member coming on campus to campaign. I had learned previously that students are prohibited from any kind of political involvement. This was a clear example of enforcement of this rule.

I also traveled to Singapore and visited the National Institute of Education, a teacher training school that had recently moved to a new, architecturally beautiful site. I interviewed three students, all of whom were Chinese, the dominant ethnic group at this institution. Unlike the previous students, these three were all active in several student organizations. They all bemoaned the fact that the original site had a large student center while at this school such a building had been "forgotten." We toured the campus in its entirety and there was again no space other than the cafeteria for students to gather. For these students, the absence of such a student center detracted from their satisfaction with their educational experience. They talked about the importance of such a space for "bonding" — the only time I ever heard that word used. As we walked around campus it was clear that students did not divide themselves so distinctly along ethnic lines. I saw many clusters or pairs of students from different groups, and the students I interviewed each said they had had roommates from a different group. Despite the lack of a gathering place, these students seemed to find ways to mix across ethnic lines.

My final interview was at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) where I was supposed to meet with two students. As it turned out, several of their friends wanted to come along, so we were a group of five in the end: three Malay women, one mixed race Chinese and Malay woman, and one Indian man. This was a lively group, but again we crowded into a car to avoid having to walk around. We ended up at a restaurant so we could talk more easily. This group clearly valued each other's friendship and supported each other in their work. One of the students was about ten years older than the others, and she repeatedly talked about how they should all support each other so they

could "succeed." This was the first time I had heard any discussion about a sense of responsibility for each other's learning and success.

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My overall impression of the educational structure is that the Malaysian universities do little to encourage this cooperative spirit and do next to nothing to help students learn how to interact across ethnic lines. In terms of the campus spaces, few provisions have been made for common gathering places that might facilitate interaction. Dissent is not allowed. Indeed, while we were there, reports appeared in the media about a pledge that students would soon be required to sign to enforce the edict against political participation.[6] Conflicts tend to be hidden or ignored. Students do not seem to be taught skills for relating effectively across differences nor are they taught conflict resolution skills. They are rarely encouraged to learn from each other. One faculty member said that the Malay language is not strong enough to be a motivator to integrate.[7] Many non-Malays feel that they cannot be competitive at the university because of the fact that they are taught in Malay. Therefore, they segregate into their different groups to maintain a sense of identity. He feels that if the university wants students to interact with each other across ethnic lines, the students need to be forced to do so through university programs.

There were, however, signs of recognition of the problem of ethnic separation. While we were in Malaysia, several news items appeared in the media about the problem of ethnic conflict and separation. One article reported on a study at USM "to determine if racial segregation among its 15,000-odd students exists."[8] The Vice Chancellor was quoted as saying: "Actually we have carried out a pilot project on students' polarization last year but it did not find any elements of racial segregation among the students."[9] The word "polarization" was not defined, so it is difficult to know exactly what they were looking for or what their research methods were, but my brief analysis indicates that students seldomly interact across ethnic lines. Such investigations were also taking place at other levels of the school system.

Alberto Gomes writes about the deep-rooted ethnic polarization, noting that, "This is particularly evident on Malaysian university campuses where students segregate on the basis of ethnicity in classes and canteens as well as with participation in student associations. Despite attempts by university authorities to resolve this problem, a recent

media report reveals that ethnic polarization is still very much entrenched in Malaysian university campuses."[10] This "recent" media report was, however, in 1995.

Clearly, any attempts to address the problem of ethnic segregation have not been particularly successful. An editorial in the *Straits Times* on January 15, 2002, further references the problem of ethnic tension. "While the government talks about the need for national integration, no concrete steps have been taken to ensure that non-Malays would not feel alienated in the country."[11] The author espouses an approach to government that recognizes and celebrates cultural differences, and he states, "There should be recognition and tolerance of dissent—not for its own sake, but to lay the preconditions for the emergence of a more balanced and mature society."[12]

One of our guest speakers explained that it is taboo to write about the 1969 race riots that occurred in Kuala Lumpur.[13] The fear is that discussing them might re-create the conditions that brought them forth in the first place. Many of our speakers asserted that the affirmative action policies enacted after these riots were an effective tool in redistributing wealth and power more equitably. However, the identity politics that are now so deeply entrenched seem to have made true integration a fiction. The American civil rights movement, which occurred at roughly the same time as the Malaysian tensions, also demonstrated "how effective a strong sense of cultural identity can be in overcoming status and power inequalities among ethnic- and race-specific groups."[14] Kenneth Brufee argues, however, that our subsequent efforts to affirm cultural identities in the hopes of increasing tolerance have merely resulted in "the establishment of a more cordial form of the status quo in the form of institutionalized tolerance."[15] He believes that we have now reached a point where we should engage students in programs designed to integrate "local communities into a greater awareness of the common interests of human society as a whole."[16] He contends that, "We must help them [students] supplement local solidarity with ways to integrate consciousness of kind into consciousness of their role in human society as a whole."[17] If awareness of a common ground as Malaysians or as global citizens is to be accomplished, then educators, administrators, politicians, and others need to pay conscious attention to how this will occur. I interacted with students who seemed to have either intense frustration with the system that so clearly divides them and treats them differently and students with only a vague awareness that others around them were frustrated.

I came away with a more clear understanding of the value of proactive teaching of the skills needed to engage one another in an awareness of our differences as well as our common interests. Without conscious efforts to promote communication among students from different backgrounds, such interaction appears unlikely to occur.

By going to Malaysia, we demonstrated active internationalism at its best. I personally confronted a society vastly different from my own and returned with a deeper appreciation for the progress Malaysians have made in raising their quality of life. I also saw the challenges they now face in motivating people to accept the idea of a common identity as Malaysians. Witnessing the barriers to progress that may be caused by a lack of institutional recognition of these challenges, my own understanding of the work to be done here in the U.S. in order to achieve successful integration and move towards Brufee's concept of common ground has been renewed and intensified.

I was, in the end, invigorated by this confrontation with the unfamiliar. My notion of breakfast will never be the same. I will never be the same. What a wonderful month! ◉

Notes

1. See the article in this journal by Dr. Maznah Mohamad.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. See the article in this journal by Dr. Abdul Rahman Embong.
5. Interview with female Malay student at International Islamic University of Malaysia, 29 January 2002.
6. "Undergrads to Sign Good-Conduct Pledge," *New Straits Times*, January 2002.
7. Interview with Chinese faculty member at Universiti Sains Malaysia, 8 January 2002.
8. "USM to Conduct Polarization Study," *Nation* (16 January 2002): 16.
9. Ibid.
10. Alberto Gomes, "People and Cultures," in *The Shaping of Malaysia*, edited by Amarjit Kaur and Ian Metcalfe (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1999), p. 86.
11. "Unanswered Questions for Malaysia after Sept. 11," *The Straits Times* (15 January 2002): 16.
12. Ibid.
13. Faculty lecture at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 22 January 2002.
14. Kenneth Brufee, "Taking the Common Ground: Beyond Cultural Literacy," *Change* (January/February 2002): 12.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid., p. 14.