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Debating about Identity in Malaysia: A Discourse Analysis

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Introduction

The study of identity that I have come to know and understand, both in breadth and depth, poses four critical challenges.¹⁾ The first and basic one involves what I would call the “conceptual” challenge of how to perceive identity, either in a “static” manner, meaning identity is perceived as something “given,” “ready-made” hence “taken-for-granted,” or in a “dynamic” manner, meaning “identity” is viewed as an ever-changing phenomenon, that is, being redefined, reconstructed, reconstituted and altered hence problematised. The second challenge is about the enormously complicated and demanding task of “describing and explaining” the emergence, consolidation and change of identity or identities over time. The third one is the “analytical” challenge posed by the continuous re-thinking in “social theory” within which academic analysis and intellectual discourse on themes such as “identity” are located thus engendering a kind of “theoretical identity” problem — functionalist, structuralist, post-structuralist? The fourth is the “authorial” challenge, one that the author-scholar or author-politician’s “writing” or “talking identity” has to confront usually in the form of “objectivity vs. subjectivity” struggle, particularly if she/he is part of the object of study or is in sympathy with any party involved politically in an “identity struggle.”

Responding to these challenges is no easy task for it demands a depth and breadth of knowledge based on thorough research or else one risks falling into the all-too-familiar “stereotype” trap, be it in the form of “Orientalism,” “ethnicised knowledge,” or the various kinds of “knowledge fundamentalism.” Fully aware of these dangers, I still wish to offer what I consider as a useful approach for us to begin to grasp both the problems of studying the process of identity-making as well as the construction of knowledge within that context. Empirically, I wish to present the Malaysian experience as a case study. Through such an exercise I hope to elaborate the approach I mentioned above and at the same time to capture some aspects of Malaysia’s struggle in its attempt to come to grips with the never-ending story of identity formation and contestation that seems to have become a permanent feature of the society’s

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1) There is now a huge collection of literature within the study of identity encompassing almost all the disciplines in the social sciences and humanities. A few recent titles that I find interesting reading are Anthony P. Cohen, *Self Consciousness: An Alternative Anthropology of Identity* [1994] Mike Michael, *Constructing Identity* [1996]; Jonathan Friedman, *A Cultural Identity and Global Process* [1994] and the contributions in the new journal called *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* with its inaugural volume published in 1994.

“culturescape” for the past century or so. I shall now briefly outline my proposed approach below.

The “Two Social Reality” Approach and the Study of Identity: “Authority-defined” versus “Everyday-defined” Social Reality

I contend that, like most social phenomenon, identity formation takes place within what I would call a “two social reality” context: first, the “authority-defined” social reality, one which is authoritatively defined by people who are part of the dominant power structure; and, second, the “everyday-defined” social reality, one which is experienced by the people in the course of their everyday life. These two social realities exist side by side at any given time.²⁾ Although

2) The “Two Social Reality Approach” has a humble origin. It could be traced to a number of sources which I came across and gathered through direct reading and discussions with colleagues around the world since I embarked, in 1988, on a long-term study on identity construction in Malaysia. It began with a working paper entitled “Village. The Contested Terrain: The Malaysian Experience” which problematised the Malay concept *kampung* (conveniently translated into English as “village,” although “compound” is more appropriate because the word itself, according to *Hobson-Jobson The Anglo-Indian Dictionary* 1886, pp.240-243 is an anglicised version of the Malay word “kampung”) and the way it has been utilised as something given by most Malaysianists. However, I first registered a “protest” regarding this matter in an article “The Superiority of Indigenous Scholars? Some Facts and Fallacies with Special Reference to Malay Anthropologists in Fieldwork,” *Manusia dan Masyarakat* (N.S.), 3, 1982, pp.23-33. The “Village” paper was presented at conference on “Village Revisited: Communities in Southeast Asia” organised by the Centre of Asian Studies Amsterdam (CASA), held at Amsterdam from 6 to 8 April 1988; led by Professor Jan Breman and Dr. Jeremy Kemp both of whom have, by then, published their devastating critique of the concept “village” [see, Breman 1988; Kemp 1988], a concept and analytical tool which has been taken-for-granted by many anthropologists and others who have conducted field research in so-called “villages.” Various versions of the paper, some simplified or only part of and others expanded, have appeared since and they are: “Kampung: Antara Kenyataan dan Nostalgia,” *Dewan Masyarakat*, December 1988: 4; “Development and Change in Rural Malaysia: The Role of the Village Development Committee,” *Tonan Ajia Kenkyu* (Kyoto, Japan), 26 (2), 1988: 218-228; *Village: The Imposed Social Construct in Malaysian Development Initiative*, Working Paper no. 115, Faculty of Sociology, Bielefeld University, Germany, 1989; *Formal Organisations in a Malay “Administrative Village”: An Ethnographic Portrait*, Occasional Paper No.15, Center of Southeast Asian Studies, University of Kent at Canterbury, UK, 1990; “Das Konzept ‘Dor’ in Unterbsuchungen uber Malaysia: Zur problematic Analytischer Konzepte in der Konstruktion of Alteritat,” *Soziale Welt*, 8, 1992: 393-403; and “Promise versus Performance: Formal Organisations in Rural Malaysia” in Mason Hoadly & Christer Gunnarsson (eds.), *Village Concept in the Transformation of Rural Southeast Asia*, pp.140-161. London: Curzon Press, 1996. It was not until I read Amin Sweeney’s brilliant book, *A Full Hearing: Orality and Literacy in the Malay World*, (University of California, Berkeley, 1987), subsequently, that of Walter J. Ong’s *Interfaces of the Word*, (Cornell, 1977) followed by a re-reading of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (Pantheon, 1978) and, most importantly, the articles on the construction of racism and racial categories in Malaysia by Charles Hirschman [1985; 1986] that the idea about the “two social reality” began to take shape. It became consolidated when I re-examined and reflected on the process of the construction of social scientific knowledge in Malaysia [Shamsul 1995]. I first utilised and applied, in a non-peasant context, the “Two Social Reality Approach” in a working paper, entitled “Australia in Malaysia’s Worldview,” for a Conference on Australia-Malaysia Relations held by the Centre for Malaysian Studies, Monash University, Melbourne on 20 April 1995 (now published in the conference proceedings [Shamsul 1996]). I have used it quite frequently in my papers and essays subsequent to this. However, this is my first attempt to explain what this approach is all about.

intricately-linked and constantly influencing and shaping each other, they may or may not be identical. They are in fact rarely identical because the “everyday-defined” social reality is experienced and the “authority-defined” social reality is only observed and interpreted. Both, then, are mediated through the social class position of those who observe and interpret social reality and those who experience it.

Woven and embedded in the relationship between these two social realities is social power, articulated in various forms such as a majority-minority discourse and state-society contestation. In concrete familiar terms, it involves social collectives such as religious or environmental or nationalist movements, political parties, NGOs, professional group, trade union, charity association, the literary group, the intellectuals, the intelligentsia, the academics and the like. The discourse takes both oral and written forms, some literary and others simply statistical, informed usually by various dimensions of the idea about “social justice” reflecting the wider, inherent social inequality, hence unequal social power, embedded in the “two social reality” context.

For instance, in the authority-defined context I would include debate and discourse — mostly designed, systematised and recorded — that have taken place, in the past and at present, within the government and between government and non-government collectives, amongst the members of the intelligentsia and within the sphere of *realpolitik*. In other words, the discourse in an authority-defined context is not a homogenous one. In fact, it has always been characterised by vigorous and tense discussions on a broad range of themes and issues, both minor and major in nature, usually involving a number of social groups, each representing a particular form of interest. For instance, the discourse on ecological issues between the government and the opposition political parties or the NGOs may be viewed as a majority-minority discourse but it remains one which is conducted in the confines of an authority-defined context. Generally, the discourse in an authority-defined context is textualised, both in published and unpublished forms, some of which have been weaved into “official policies” and others written up as “academic publications.” In short, the text of such a discourse, even the oral form, is usually recorded, either in printed form (official reports, policy documents, newspaper reports, books, magazines, academic journals, photographs, etc.) or, more recently, in audio-visual electronic form (tape and video cassette recordings, cd-rom, diskettes, films, etc.).

In an everyday-defined context the discourse is usually disparate, fragmented and intensely personal conducted mostly orally. Since it is overwhelmingly an articulation of personal experience, not meant to be systemised or positioned for a particular pre-determined macro objective, it is therefore not textualised for “future reference,” except occasionally by researchers, such as anthropologists or historians who would have tape-recorded or written down, as ethnographic notes, these “personal narratives.” More interestingly, these narratives are often captured in what is generally categorised as “popular forms of expression” or “popular culture,” such as cartoons, songs, poems, short-stories, rumour and gossips, poison letters and the like. Irrespective of what each “narrative” has to tell, how popular it has been accepted across the society and whether or not it represents contemporary public concern, it is usually

considered as an individual or personal contribution from the "author" (cartoonist, singer, poet, short-story writer, etc.). As such it remains a subjective "text" often considered as "unrepresentative" of the empirical reality or "truth," not dissimilar in status with the legally unacceptable "hearsay" evidence.

Until recently, such "texts" have been rejected outright as a source or form of research data by some social scientists because they are categorised as being "unscientific" or "not objective," and would prefer instead the "scientific statistics," even if they are concocted or manipulated ones. The "subjective" nature of the "text" of the everyday-defined social reality is never in doubt but the consistent rejection of it as a valid source of information and data is tantamount to the political suppression, even exclusion, of the "voices from below" or the "subaltern voices" from mainstream consideration and concern. This reminds us the old "orality-literacy" contest all over again, but it is not simply that. This rejection, often subtle and taken-for-granted, has been "normalised" into our daily life. One has only to read the newspapers which without fail always represent the authority-defined voices of all types and rarely the everyday-defined ones, except perhaps in the "letter to editor," "individual columnist" or "entertainment" section.

This indeed reflects the inter-connectedness and dialectical nature of the relationship between the authority-defined and everyday-defined social reality, which, of course, has its material basis. Often the politics and poetics of this relationship is ignored or its material basis unexamined. This is most obvious in the intellectual realm of society, in which there has been a tendency to disconnect, on the one side, "social theory," and, on the one other, "public intellectual life" and the "moral concerns of real people"; the former has been assumed as the "authority" and not the latter hence its arbitrary separation. This is not dissimilar to the way many of us perceive the status of and relationship between authority-defined and everyday-defined discourse in which we tend to favour the former.

I suggest that the study of identity would be enriched tremendously by adopting this "two social reality" approach, giving both types of "reality" as balanced an attention as possible. Analytically, it is also useful to examine each of this reality separately. In fact, this has been the case in most studies on identity, in which the major focus has been on the debate and discourse within the authority-defined context. There are those which have concentrated on what happened within the everyday-defined realm. Many have done both rather successfully without using or being aware of the "two social reality" approach. Nonetheless, the great utility of this approach is that one would be in a position to capture the macro picture and the detailed internal micro dynamics in a more balanced manner. This in turn should help to inform the construction of arguments and narratives at both the macro and micro levels, even though eventually one might want to highlight only one part of the "social reality." Another useful contribution of this approach is that it encourages the analyst to allow the voices of the social actors to speak openly about their experience in contrast to the authority-defined one which is based on observation and interpretation.

Thus by adopting this approach I hope the essay opens the way for us to capture the uncertainties, ruptures and tensions, which emerge from the debate on identity in Malaysia

conducted thus far. We are also in a better position to highlight the alternatives, their attendant differences, however slight, the distances between them and, most significantly, the dialogue between them, fruitful or futile, eventful or mundane. As such this attempt shall also allow us to make sense both the status-quo and dissenting voices in the Malaysian present-day social milieu with regard to the single most important question in Malaysia, that is, the national identity.

However, in the present contribution, I wish to focus mainly on the identity debate within the authority-defined context in Malaysia, in particular, amongst the Malays and, to a certain extent, the larger *bumiputera* (lit. son of soil) group. There are a number of reasons that could be offered here to justify this choice but suffices to say that the social category “Malay” (for that matter Chinese, Indian, Kadazan and Iban, too) has always been used as something given and taken-for-granted. Secondly, in analytical terms, it has also been used as tool for analysis, rather automatically, in pair or cluster with other social categories, such as “Malay-nonMalay,” “Malay-Chinese” or “Malay-Indian.” This in turn has resulted in “essentialising” the Malays (and simultaneously the Chinese, Indian and Others, too) giving it a set of ideal-typical attributes for the sake of analysis thus encouraging the obviously simplistic perception that Malays as a social group is a homogenous one. What seems to be an analytical convenience, in fact “orientalist” in spirit, has developed into a “scientific approach” thus “Malay” or “Malayness” as a social category has never been problematised or perceived as something constructed, invented, artificial despite the fact that “what it means” and “what it is” have always been altered, redefined, reconstituted and the boundaries expanded according to specific social-historical circumstances, especially after the introduction of colonial “racism” and “racial category” into the realm of authority-defined and everyday-defined social reality in British Malaya.³⁾

In this essay I also wish to capture the continuous, intense, often lively and fiery, internal discussions on the subject of identity within the Malays, and to a lesser extent amongst the larger *bumiputera* context, especially amongst the various fractions of its elites, in particular during the postwar period, during which the British was in command for the first decisive decade. Subsequently Malaysia came under the so-called *bumiputera* rule.⁴⁾ I would argue

3) Harper [1996: 240] claims that “many analysts [read Malaysianists] now insist that these [ethnic] loyalties are continually under construction, being redefined and contested.” What these “analysts” have failed to note is the fact that this phenomenon of “construction, redefinition and contestation” within Malaysia’s communalism is nothing new. What is new is the rather recent discovery of a new set of analytical tools (perhaps postmodernist/poststructuralist in nature?) by Malaysianists to examine the same subject matter which they have been looking at for decades using, previously, other sets of analytical tools. To the social actors themselves, particularly the Malays, they have been involved in the “construction of Malayness” or “constituting the Malay” discourse since early this century. Reading original Malay texts, such as the early editions of *Utusan Melayu*, particularly the editorials, would have helped Harper and his company of analysts. Harper should have read Milner’s recent book (published in 1994, not 1995 as Harper indicated) more carefully, especially the “Introduction” chapter.

4) A number of Malaysianists have made serious analytical attempts to characterise the “Malaysian state” ↗

that within the authority-defined context the contesting voices amongst the Malays, and *bumiputera*, in postwar Malaysia could be divided, arbitrarily, into two camps, "the dominant" and "the dominated" ones, each representing a different view and articulating dissimilar interests (material and ideological) but by no means internally homogenous even within each of these fractions. In other words, I am interested to examine briefly the politics and poetics of identity amongst the Malay elite and intelligentsia because of late many analyses on the Malays have preferred to emphasise the material success enjoyed particularly by its middle class and bourgeoisie.⁵⁾

We also need to grasp the ideological, and in many ways "abstract," contestation that goes with Malaysia's modernisation project. There is a need to explore what happens in the political space, beyond politics of parties and numbers, particularly in the realm of ideas, symbols and perceptions, especially relating to identity and in particular "national identity."⁶⁾ Therefore, I thought it is also useful to survey briefly the influence of the authority-defined discourse on identity upon the construction of social scientific knowledge in Malaysia for we know very well

as either a "Malay," "Bumiputera" or "Indigenized" one [see, Toh 1982; Ho 1990; Lee 1995]. If we were to use the same approach adopted by these scholars and analyse the "Singapore state" instead, we should come to the conclusion that Singapore is an "Overseas Chinese," "Singkeh" or "Migrant" state. Indeed, if we were to apply Wang Gungwu's "migrant state" concept [1996: 11-12] in a more liberal fashion, Singapore would definitely fit the Wang Gungwu's bill.

- 5) I have, in 1988, contributed to the raging debate amongst the intelligentsia in Malaysia on consumerism and the middle class phenomenon by asking "Adakah anda anggota kelas menengah?" [Are you a member of the middle class?] in my monthly column in *Dewan Masyarakat*, September 1988, p. 4. I also remember being asked, soon after that, by private and government funding agencies in Malaysia, the USA, Japan and Australia, to evaluate a number of research proposals, individual and team-based, on topics related to the theme "Asia's new middle class and the new rich." The preliminary results of some of such research have been published recently. The most recent is the volume edited by Robison and Goodman [1996].
- 6) A useful recent example, if an extremely eclectic one, of what I would categorise as an "authority-defined" discussion on "Malay nationalism" and "national identity" in Malaysia is that of Ikmal Said's [1995], who seemed to have combined the a-historical, a-structural and static "plural society" approach with the more pragmatic "cultural approach" of the Malaysianist brand. Ikmal's, of course, is not alone in applying this "plural society-cum-cultural" approach to the Malaysian context. It was first "proposed" and elaborated in a two-paged essay by Joel Kahn [1988-89]. Kahn's essay hence approach was criticised strongly by Johan Saravanammuttu and Maznah [1989] for its problematic ahistorical-astructural orientation and flawed culturalist arguments. Kahn ignored completely these criticisms and proceeds to expand them in his subsequent publications [see, Kahn 1992; 1994; 1995; 1996]. Francis Loh Kok Wah, in a working paper entitled, "Studying Ethnic Politics in Malaysia: From Plural Society to Political Economy to . . .," a paper read at the Conference on the Role and Orientation of Malaysian Social Science in the 21st Century, Malaysian Social Science Association, Petaling Jaya, 26-27 August 1991, made an unsatisfactory attempt to elaborate on the so-called "cultural approach," one which was not dissimilar in content and argument to that of Kahn's [1988-89]. Together, Kahn and Loh subsequently edited a volume of published and unpublished essays entitled *Fragmented Vision* [1992] which launched the so-called "cultural approach" in Malaysian social studies based on the problematic orientation and flawed argument. Since it has no resemblance to the "cultural studies" approach initiated by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham, I find it more useful, perhaps more appropriate too, to call this approach simply as a "fragmented" approach in Malaysian social studies.

that knowledge is never really “value-free.” I also wish to present the general scenerio of the process that I call the “ethnicisation of knowledge” in the context of Malaysian social scientific studies and highlight the hidden “social justice” agenda that informed much of that construction process. However, it is necessary to first briefly examine the origin of the discourse on “nation,” “national identity” and “nationhood” in Malaysia.

The Question of Identity and “the Nation”: Origin of a Discourse

The question of identity and “the nation” in Malaysia, or “national identity,” remains contested to this day. This contest is of interest to a variety of people, academic and non-academic, local and foreign. While we are always attracted to the contemporariness of this matter and its present-day implications, its history must be clearly understood. It is a fact that social categories such as “race” (both its biological and social component and meanings) and “nation” entered into local cosmology and worldview through colonisation hence the slow dismantling of the traditional thought system in due course and its displacement by the Western-based system. The introduction of such a system often has a humble and unnoticed beginning. For instance, what seemed to be a “harmless” bureaucratic practice of census-taking have actually helped to invent, evolve and consolidate “racial categories” such as Malay, Chinese and Indian in Malaysia [Hirschman 1985; 1986; Milner 1994; Shamsul in press]. The introduction of legislations like the Malay Reservation Act, the setting up of a Department of Chinese Affairs and the special government-approved toddy shops for the Indians during the British rule drove home the point further, at the everyday-defined level, to the people at the grassroots that racial categories such as Malay, Indian and Chinese mattered very much if one is to take advantage what the colonial bureaucracy offered or in order to avoid its wrath. Hence being a “Malay,” a “Chinese” or an “Indian” the colonialist way is critical for everyday existence.

The evolution and consolidation of these racial categories was accompanied by political conscientization through colonial bureaucratic practices and race-specific socialisation particularly through a plural Western-oriented vernacular education system. It was in such a context that the racial categories, once consolidated and became meaningful to the social actors, developed into ideas about racial-based notions about nation hence issues of identity and its economic and political implications. In other words, there was a two-way traffic in the appropriation exercise during the colonial period, not only the colonialists were appropriating what the locals have to offer but the locals too were selecting, appropriating and internalising what the colonialist offered them (both through coercion and other methods). Hence “difference” as a defining mode of everyday existence, as opposed to the top-down “homogenising schemes,” dominated the mind and practical life of the populace.

Therefore, being a “Malay” or “Chinese” or “Indian” and demanding for a “Malay nation” or “Chinese nation” or “Indian nation,” historically, was not the result of a simple diffusionist process or “derivative discourse,” as argued rather simplistically by Ikmal [1995].⁷⁾ This led to the gross error that he made in his analysis and interpretation of Malay nationalism, which

he characterises as a movement that "... does not attempt to carve out a politically autonomous area for itself. Rather, it is a project that seeks to build a Malay political roof over the structures of the modern state" [*ibid.*: 13]. He confuses the political outcome that emerged after the failure of the Malay nationalist project as the objective of the movement. He must have known that, first and foremost, as a movement Malay nationalism is not a homogenous one, it was divided into at least three major streams [Roff 1967], each with its own vision of "a Malay nation" but none finally materialised. As a replacement the British-endorsed "united kingdom of Malay *kerajaan*" (a federal state) was installed instead. This was also meant as an alternative to the aborted British-designed "Malayan Union" (a unitary state). Both, the successful British-endorsed and the failed British-designed political solutions were clearly not the envisaged "Malay nation." Whether the "united kingdom of Malay *kerajaan*" serves as "... a Malay political roof over the structures of the modern state," as argued by Ikmal, is doubtful, but it is analytically convenient to suggest so.

The discourse regarding "the nation" issue however took a new twist after Independence, articulated in rhetorics about "national integration," "national unity" and "national identity." At the "dominant" authority-defined level, which is *bumiputera*-dominated, the identity question is perceived by the government as a non-issue because its basis and content has been spelt out in a number of policy documents within the framework of the Malaysian Constitution. It is a *bumiputera*-defined identity that has privileged many aspects of *bumiputera* culture as the "core" of the Malaysian "national" identity while recognising, if peripherally, the cultural symbols of other ethnic groups [Kementerian Kebudayaan, Belia dan Sukan, Malaysia 1972; Aziz Deraman 1975].

Within the "dominated" authority-defined context, the *bumiputera*-based authority-defined national identity pushed by the government has been challenged by at least three groups. The first is the non-*bumiputera* group, led by the Chinese [Kua Kia Soong 1985; Lim Kit Siang 1986; Ling Leong Sik 1995], who reject the *bumiputera*-based and *bumiputera*-defined national identity in preference for a more "pluralised" national identity, in which the culture of each ethnic group in Malaysia is accorded a position equal to that of the *bumiputera*. For instance, the Chinese suggest that Chinese language and rituals should be considered as an integral part of the national identity. The second and third groups are *bumiputera* ones, namely, the non-Muslim *bumiputera* group and the radical Islamic *bumiputera* group, each offering its own notion of identity and "the nation" based on their version of nation-of-intent, i.e., its own vision of what the national identity should be, based on a particular ideological framework [Shamsul 1996a].

7) Perhaps Ikmal should not have accepted uncritically arguments by Partha Chatterjee in his, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* [1984]. I suggest we should take seriously the question mark (?) in the subtitle of Chatterjee's book. Most of the unanswered issues in this book were elaborated, with new arguments offered, in a later book of Chatterjee's, *Nations and Its Fragments* [1993]. Ikmal should have also considered arguments by Arvind N. Das, *India Invented: A Nation in the Making* [1994], which provide us an alternative perspective on "Indian nationalism" to that of Chatterjee.

Although both the *bumiputera* groups accept the authority-defined *bumiputera*-based national identity, the non-Muslim *bumiputera* suggest that Christianity and “native religions” be accorded equal status to that of Islam, as components within it. The Muslim *bumiputera*, on the contrary, rejects what it sees as the secular, modernist Islamic component of the identity in preference for a “truer and purer” Islam. The Kadazan of Sabah argue forcefully for the non-Muslim *bumiputera* case [Kitingan 1987; Loh Kok Wah 1992] and the Parti Islam of Kelantan for the radical Islamic *bumiputera* group [Alias Mohamed 1991].

Even though the open and peaceful debate on the question of national identity is recent in origin it has deep social roots in Malaysian colonial experience.⁸⁾ However, the single most important event which encouraged this open debate was the now famous proclamation regarding *Wawasan 2020*, or Vision 2020, made by Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, the prime minister, in early 1991, which was motivated by a number of reasons, one of which is the concern over the one-sided nature of Malaysia’s achievement thus far, which has been heavily economic in nature, and not matched by a similar achievement in the political sphere. In other words, Malaysian political difficulties are perceived as more serious than the economic ones hence to Mahathir the political challenge of creating “a united Malaysian nation,” or a *Bangsa Malaysia*, is the greater and critical one compared to the economic challenge of sustaining the current level of economic growth in Malaysia’s effort to become modern. This implies that Malaysia is still “one state with several nations,” meaning that in the broad economic sense it is a coherent variant of a capitalist entity, but in the political and ideological sense it is still searching for a parallel coherence because there exist strong competing nations-of-intent, or a “second generation nationalism,” hence the debate on identity, especially national identity, is still widely open.

Thus, one could argue that Malaysia is a “nationless” state, one which is still in search of the elusive “united Malaysian notion” and in which various notions of nation-of-intent are still entertained hence the question of national identity. Many analysts have failed to recognise or highlight the fact that dissenting voices are present and heard, within and without government, in Malaysia and a healthy competing discourse on “nation-of-intent” and “national identity” is taking place amongst the Malaysians, particularly the Malays. The government may be controlling the mass media but this does not mean, as many foreign observers claim, that these voices are muted or silenced. The lack of lively intellectual discussions in the main English-language press, which have been the main source of information for the foreign observers,

8) Harper [1996: 239] suggested that “although British imperial rule did not create Malaysian politics, it contributed much to the manner in which they would be conducted in the future.” I find this statement conceptually misinformed and empirically incorrect. It is perplexing how he could have arrived at such a conclusion after reading Milner [1994] who argued just the opposite. But then Harper cannot be blamed entirely here because what Milner [1994] has presented in his narrative and argument regarding “the invention of politics” amongst the Malay elites early this century could be totally be misread owing to his failure to recognise conceptually the fact that the “invention of politics” was preceded by “the invention of identity” (racial-ethnic categories as understood in the Social Darwinistic sense) through British colonialism which, in turn, informed the whole process of “the invention of politics” that he talked about.

perhaps has made them arrive at this conclusion. However, dissenting voices in Malaysia are articulated in minor vernacular dailies, such as in the Malay, Mandarin, Tamil, Kadazan or Iban language; yet others can be found in the form of cassette and video tapes, pamphlets, "poison letters," political party manifestos, and the like, hence inaccessible to most of these observers, whose dependence on English-speaking, Kuala Lumpur-based, middle-class *bumiputera* and non-*bumiputera* for information is a well-known fact.

Before proceeding further I wish to briefly outline what I mean by the concept "nation-of-intent," a concept first introduced by Rotburg [1966] in his study of "African nationalism" and applied to the Malaysian context by Rustam A. Sani [1975] in his study of the "Malay Left." By nation-of-intent I mean a more or less precisely defined idea of the form of a nation, i.e. its territory, population, language, culture, symbols and institutions. The idea must be shared by a number of people who perceive themselves as members of that nation, and who feel that it unites them, but it does not necessarily imply an aspiration for political self-rule on the part of the group of people who are advancing their nation-of-intent. It depicts an idea of a nation that still needs to be constructed or reconstructed. It promises the citizens (or some of them) an opportunity to participate in a "grand project" which they can claim is theirs. It may be an inclusive construct, open to others, and which is employed as the basis for a political platform voicing dissent or a challenge to the established notion of nation. In the Malaysian context, the nation-of-intent concept therefore bridges the authority-defined and the everyday-defined idea of a nation. As admitted by Mahathir, the "united Malaysian nation" is yet to be born. Hence various social groups in Malaysia can still voice their different nations-of-intent.

Unlike Anderson's concept of "imagined political community" [Anderson 1991: 11], nation-of-intent is a more open-ended concept. One could call it "a second generation nationalism." It is more positive, proactive and forward-looking. It has a programmatic plan of action articulated in *realpolitik* which has, in the Malaysian case, emerged not only from a historical context of anti-colonialism but also in the post-colonial era. In the post-colonial era it serves as an alternative way of formulating political intentions even though, mostly, it remains at the discourse level. However, in a number of cases, especially in particular localities, the idea of advancing alternative nations-of-intent has found concrete expression, hence political space. This is what has happened in the local states of Kelantan and Sabah. In both states, the local ruling party, which opposes the Malaysian UMNO-dominated government, has made serious attempts not only to continue to articulate its own nation-of-intent but also to implement some aspects of it locally. Even though these attempts have met with limited success, they have demonstrated that it is possible to have and hold on to one's nation-of-intent, or concept of national identity, and implement it within the so-called "authoritarian" political context in Malaysia.

Malay and *Bumiputera* Notions of Nation and National Identity

One may ask: what are the origin and social roots of these debates? How, for instance, has it

influenced the shaping of official policies, distribution of development projects and even the construction of social scientific knowledge about Malaysia? It is therefore useful for us to examine the historical origin and social roots of the debates on identities in Malaysia, both within the *bumiputera* and the non-*bumiputera* groups, in the past and at present.⁹⁾ The best approach to adopt in this effort is through the study of the evolution of the political parties and other ethnic-based social organisations, from an authority-defined perspective. In the present case, the specific focus is amongst the Malays and also other *bumiputera*.¹⁰⁾ The former is mostly in Peninsular Malaysia and the latter in Sabah and Sarawak.

The Malays in Peninsular Malaysia

We must recognise the fact that the authority-defined nation-of-intent which is promoted currently in Malaysia is not only a *bumiputera*-based one but also only one of the many found within the *bumiputera* community. It is not Kadazan or Iban but one that emerged amongst the Malay community in Peninsular Malaysia some 50 years ago and was eventually institution-alised and endorsed by the British after the Second World War. This nation-of-intent belongs to the Malay “administocrat” faction, which is one of the three nationalist elite factions within the Malay community in Peninsular Malaysia. This administocrat group organised itself as a political party called the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and eventually became “the definer” within the “authority” context. UMNO’s rise to power had the support of the British. It is useful to trace briefly the general development of UMNO, particularly the content of its nation-of-intent and its implementation [see also Funston 1980]. This should give us an overall idea how Malaysia arrived at its present stage with a contested, or yet to be born, nation. This is relevant because it is UMNO’s version of what Malaysia should be that has now become the object of reconsideration, even reconstruction, especially after Mahathir’s grand Vision 2020 appeared. The latter has, in turn, increased the tempo of the discussion on the various nations-of-intent amongst the populace.

9) Perhaps it is useful for me to remind us of the fact that the concept “nation,” “national identity” and “nationalism” are used interchangeably in this essay as components of the larger ideational umbrella term called “nationhood,” be it in the past (as “imagined community”) or in the future (as “nation-of-intent”). Equally important to bear in mind is the fact that, in the Malaysian context, as a result of history, these concepts are ethnicity-bound, in spite of the claim and promise that the future “united Malaysian nation” shall be more “multicultural.” Perhaps in other circumstances and contexts, they are not ethnicity-bound, instead religion-bound, such as in Israel and Ireland [Weissbrod 1983].

10) I have discussed in some detail the debate within the community of Chinese elites elsewhere [Shamsul 1996a] not only about their perceptions on “national identity” but also how these discussions actually reflect their own view what constitute “Chineseness.” I am quite certain many Malaysianists are also aware of the fact that the Chinese community, numerically, are not really a minority in a traditional demographic sense hence the importance and influence of the Chinese version of the nation-of-intent must not be under-rated. This also implies that the so-called “majority-minority dichotomy” vis-a-vis “bumi and non-bumi” commonly used as analytical tools in Malaysian social studies is always a problematic one. It could in fact be a misleading one. Hence the potentiality of a misrepresentation of reality, or straightfoward distortion, in such a circumstance is very high indeed.

Since the end of the Second World War, we have seen at least four phases of the implementation of the administrators' (read UMNO's) "vague" idea of a nation, made possible initially by British military and material support. The first phase was during the reign of Onn Jaafar, UMNO's first president.¹¹⁾ His preferred "nation" was a "plural society nation." It was hardly an original idea because its content was not dissimilar from the concept of nation proposed by the British in its Malayan Union project of 1946, which had failed because of opposition from a movement in which Onn Jaafar played a leading role. Still Onn Jaafar's attempt to turn UMNO into a multi-ethnic party must be said to have been based on the "plural society nation" idea which he thought suitable for the Malaysian multi-ethnic society. His adoption of such a concept of nation is not surprising in view of the fact that the Malayan Union concept was replaced by a federal concept, hence the Federation of Malaya Agreement in 1948, which, essentially, recognised the primacy of *negeri*-based *kerajaan* (provincial-based traditional Malay polity) and the *sultan* as its symbolic ruler. In effect, UMNO then had no concept of nation in the sense articulated by Mahathir at present. Eventually, Onn Jaafar had to resign as UMNO's president when UMNO members rejected his "plural society nation," which was perceived as abandoning Malay interests. It is interesting to note that Onn Jaafar left UMNO and formed a short-lived multi-ethnic party.

The second phase began when Tunku Abdul Rahman took over the leadership of UMNO from Onn Jaafar. He adopted a similar viewpoint to that of Onn Jaafar, but advocated a "Malay UMNO," retaining it as a communal party and thus emphasising the primacy of Malay ethnic interests while recognising the interests of other ethnic groups. The third phase began when Abdul Razak replaced Tunku Abdul Rahman soon after the Kuala Lumpur May 1969 racial riot. He continued to retain the "plural society nation" framework. He, however, further emphasised the primacy of Malay political hegemony, hence began the third phase. This was written into an amended Constitution and subsequently incorporated as a principle in the formulation of public policies and institutions, particularly in the form of the NEP, popularly known as the *bumiputera* policy. Hussein Onn, who succeeded Razak after his untimely demise in 1976, adopted the same framework.

It was not until 1981, when Dr Mahathir Mohamed took over from Hussein Onn, that the framework was modified to suit global changes and Mahathir's own vision of Malaysia's future as a Newly Industrialised Country (NIC): hence the commencement of the fourth phase, which we are observing now. The pro-Japan "Look East Policy" was born out of this ambition. However, Mahathir's vision of Malaysia's future, which was later operationalised into policy initiatives in the 1980s, did not alter the basics of Razak's version of a Malay-dominated plural society. Therefore, Mahathir's contribution was simply to turn Malaysia, a Malay-dominated plural society, into an NIC.

It is in this historical and ideological context that we should locate Mahathir's Vision 2020.

11) The best up-to-date historical analysis and biography on Dato Onn Jaafar is by Ramlah Adam, *Dato Onn Jaafar: Pengasas Kemerdekaan* [1992].

To my mind it is really a restatement, if an upgrading, of his earlier commitment, made in 1981 soon after he became prime minister, to turn Malaysia into an NIC [Shamsul 1992]. It is also a statement about what is to come after the NEP, which ended in 1990, especially regarding the future of the *bumiputera*'s role in the economy and of inter-ethnic relations and socio-political stability of Malaysia, essentially.

In a historical sense, it could be argued that this is also the first time UMNO is promoting a clear concept of nation, beyond the *negeri*-based *kerajaan* framework nation and the British-initiated "plural society nation." But the fact remains that the present (UMNO) Malay-dominated Malaysian state is articulating only one version amongst the many of the nations-of-intent that exist within the *bumiputera* community. Besides the administrators, the other two factions within the Malay nationalist movement then were the Malay Islamic faction and the Malay left, each with its own political agenda for the "Malay nation" which they proposed to establish if they got into power.

The Islamic faction, represented by the Parti Islam (PI), offers an "Islamic nation" as its nation-of-intent. However, this idea was suspended briefly when in the early 1970s the party joined the UMNO-dominated ruling coalition party, namely, the National Front (NF). PI left NF in 1977 and has since been on its own. It has won back the majority in the State Legislative Assembly of Kelantan in the last two general elections of 1990 and 1995. It has also become more fundamentalist than before in the sense that it has rejected the notion of *assabiyah*, or ethnic group-based nation, and prefers an Islamic-based one, which considers every Muslim as equal in the eyes of Allah irrespective of colour, creed or race. So, PI's concept of "Islamic nation" simply means a nation of Muslims and non-Muslims organised and administered using Quranic principles and Islamic laws. Perhaps the attempt to introduce and implement the strict Islamic *hudud* law in Kelantan recently is part of the strategy towards establishing a local prototype for the Islamic nation it wants to establish throughout Malaysia. However, it has not been able to convince the non-*bumiputera* that it is not a *bumiputera* party using Islam as an ideological platform. Ironically, UMNO, in an effort to show how tolerant its "Islam" is, has joined the non-*bumiputera* to condemn PI for "abusing" Islam.

The Malay left, active since before the war, had *Melayu Raya* (including all of what came to be Indonesia) as its first nation-of-intent, in which it imagined that all Malays in one region should come together and see themselves as "One Race, speaking One Language, and belonging to One Nation" [Firdaus Abdullah 1985; Ikmal Said 1992]. Like the Chinese-dominated Malayan Communist Party (MCP), the Malay left was disfavoured by the British for its Indonesian connections. Wary of the fact that the Dutch were humbled after the war by an army of indigenous freedom fighters, some motivated by socialist ideals, API (Angkatan Pemuda Insaf), the militant-oriented youth section of the Malay left was banned by the British in 1948. Later, in 1950, Parti Kebangsaan Melayu (Malay Nationalist Party), also part of the Malay left, was disbanded. As a result, the Malay left became considerably weakened. However, it reappeared in November 1955 in the form of the Malay-dominated Parti Rakyat Malaysia (PRM). Together with the non-*bumiputera*-controlled Labour Party it formed a loosely

organised Socialist Front (SF) and won a number of seats in the general elections of 1959 and 1964 but split after 1967. PRM continued to soldier on but with little success with its original idea of *Melayu Raya*. The party still exists today but more as "conscience party," fighting for the poor and exploited, against corruption and nepotism in the government. However, it has failed to receive real political support from the *bumiputera* mass and consists of a handful of academics, middle-class and trade union elites, mostly *bumiputera*.

Bumiputera in Sabah and Sarawak

After the formation of Malaysia, in 1963, *bumiputera* communities in the states of Sabah and Sarawak made their entry into Malaysian politics. In Sabah, the Christian Kadazan and the Muslim Dusun have dominated Sabah politics to this day [Loh 1992]. In Sarawak, it is the non-Muslim Iban and the Muslim Melanau who have been dictating politics [Jayum Jawan 1993]. However, in both states, the Chinese community has represented the critical third party whose support is much needed by any of the *bumiputera* groups aiming to control the local state.

Except for the small marginalised group of mainly non-Muslim Orang Asli, or the aborigines, the *bumiputera* community in the Peninsula is dominated by Malays, who are constitutionally-defined Muslims.¹²⁾ However, the majority of *bumiputera* in Sabah and Sarawak are non-Muslim. This situation is further complicated by other forms of cultural difference and, most important of all, economic difference. For instance, most of the Malays were peasants when independence came but the *bumiputera* of Sarawak and Sabah are a mixed lot, some urbanised, some peasants and many, like some of the Orang Asli in the Peninsula, were forest dwellers when Malaysia was formed. These specific material and cultural circumstances shaped the *bumiputera* politics within Sabah and Sarawak, which sometimes put them in opposition to Peninsular Malaysia, the centre. This came quite early after the formation of Malaysia. It happened, first, in the Iban-dominated state of Sarawak. The then state government, under its premier Stephen Kalong Ningkan, tried to assert its autonomy and this was perceived by the federal government as an attempt at separatism resulting in the imposition

12) There exists a large collection of mostly unpublished materials on the Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia. However, it is extremely rare to find anything related to the "politics" or the "economic plight" of this group. Most of these studies have been rather "exotic-cum-cultural" in nature, emphasising, for instance, the "non-violent" nature of this group. Based on Walker's [1995] recent survey of written materials on Orang Asli, I would argue that "Orientalism" still has a strong grip on the study of Orang Asli in Malaysia, mirroring the way the present Malaysian state's treatment of anything to do with the Orang Asli. However, recent contributions by Zawawi Ibrahim [1995; 1996 and his latest in this volume] and Gomes [1994] have made attempts to redress this "analytical problem." The latest interesting development involving the Orang Asli is the attempt made by an NGO, led by a non-Orang Asli and based in Peninsular Malaysia, to construct a "pan-indigenous" social category called "Asal" (lit. origin) linking the non-Muslim and non-Malay *bumiputera* of Peninsular Malaysia, Sarawak and Sabah through the issue of land. After all *bumiputera* means "sons of the soil" hence the creation of "Asal" could be seen as an effort by a section of the indigenous group to reappropriate the "land" that once belonged to them through the invention of an identity or an ethnic category, not dissimilar to the way the social category called "Kadazan" was invented in Sabah in the early 1960s [Loh 1992].

of emergency rule in the state in 1966. Later in Sabah, when its premier Donald Stephens tried to champion the cause of the Kadazan, this was also perceived by the central government as an attempt to seek an unacceptable level of autonomy. In 1967 he was replaced by Datu Mustapha, a Muslim Sulu chief and a leader of the Muslim Dusun.

These events set the tone of subsequent political relations between the states and federal government, not only between the Peninsula-based federal centre and the local states of Sarawak and Sabah but also within the Peninsula. It was because of this contentious relationship that the *bumiputera* of Sarawak and Sabah began to create their own visions of what Malaysia should be, namely their nations-of-intent, which are quite different from those generated by the specific historical circumstances and ethnic configurations in Peninsular Malaysia. As a consequence, the use of *bumiputera* as an ethnic symbol in the attempt to create a kind of joint nationhood in Malaysia seemed to work in the opposite direction. The gap between the nationalist ideology, represented by *bumiputeraism*, and the social practice, the emergence of divergent versions of *bumiputeraism*, reinforces Anderson's point that any community which is based on wider links and not on face-to-face contact is an imagined one, hence constantly open to contestation. The rise of "Kadazan nationalism" and "Iban nationalism" in Malaysia is a testimony to this fact. It is the former which has been articulated most forcefully, especially as Sabah was ruled by PBS, a Kadazan-controlled party, for more than a decade. In order to "win" back Sabah, UMNO set up its own branch and division there and allowed for the first time non-Muslim *bumiputera* to become members, a kind of compromise on the principles of Malayness upon which UMNO has based its existence for the last four decades. Even though UMNO finally got to rule Sabah after the dramatic 1990 state elections, the "fire" of Kadazan nationalism seems to be still burning. This was evidenced by the ability of PBS to win a large number of parliamentary seats in Sabah in the 1995 elections.

Whichever faction within the Malay and/or *bumiputera* group is dominating the National Front, one important fact remains critical, more so now than before, namely, the support of the Chinese. Since the Chinese community are numerically not really a minority in a traditional demographic sense, the importance and influence of the Chinese vision of nation must not be ignored and underrated. Besides, the community has economic clout. Many of its economic elites have successfully helped the rise of Malay corporate entrepreneurs and paved the way for successful Malaysian and Chinese joint ventures in the People's Republic of China (PRC), Taiwan and Hong Kong. A few have even been entrusted with managing important government-funded private companies. Thousands of Chinese Malaysian private students have successfully completed their tertiary education abroad and have come home to make critical contributions to Malaysia's economic success. Therefore, the strength of the Chinese view and voice in the long-run is not going to be diminished, but will rather be reinforced both politically and economically, despite claims of contrary trends.

UMNO, for instance, is becoming more and more dependent on Chinese voters for political support in provincial towns. It is not surprising that, with the emergence of PRC as a potential economic giant in Asia in the next century, the *bumiputera*-dominated Malaysian government has

become more willing to listen to Chinese demands. The recent "Islam and Confucianism" dialogue organised by Malaysia's deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim is but one of the many signs of the "softening" of attitude, if a rhetorical one, towards the Chinese community.

This in turn redefined the Chinese perception of UMNO, not only as a party for the Malays but also as the "broker of wealth" in Malaysia [Shamsul 1996b]. For instance, Chinese businessmen no longer consider it necessary to go through MCA or any other Chinese-dominated party within the ruling National Front coalition to have access to the country's wealth. This, in fact, led the MCA to change its party strategy in the early 1990s, dropping its economic role, and now focusing on educational and cultural matters [Ling Leong Sik 1995]. Thus, although UMNO exists as a party for the Malays, it is also the party that everyone who is interested in the country's wealth wants to be associated with. However, this does not mean that issue of "national identity" is a closed issue, it is still very much an open one as far as the Chinese community is concerned, as MCA is still deeply interested in "cultural" matters.

"Fragmented Vision" or "Constructed Illusion": Identity Contestation and the Making of Knowledge on Malaysia

The presence of the various nations-of-intent in Malaysia has had its impact on the construction of social scientific knowledge about Malaysia; hence it must not be dismissed out of hand. This is especially evident in the rise of the "new" middle class in Malaysia, whose involvement in the process of "mental production" has become increasingly significant. That they have played the role of "backroom boys" as well as the "main actors" in Malaysian politics and economy is abundantly clear but rarely examined critically. In fact, foreign scholars and analysts have been dragged, directly and indirectly, into this "ethnoscape" and nation-of-intent realm and complicity hence the debate on national identity.

Like the political left in Malaysia, who find that the "ethnic question" is a thorny and unresolvable issue [Ikmal Said 1992], the so-called "radical scholars" (local and foreign) who study Malaysia also have to confront the unresolvable nation-of-intent-related "ethnicity" issue. As a consequence, it could be argued that social science knowledge about Malaysia has become highly ethnicised, even among them. By this I mean that knowledge, irrespective of philosophical and theoretical grounding, has been used directly or indirectly as an instrument to advocate an ethnic cause or to launch purportedly "an objective, scientific critic" of an ethnic group or to justify the interest of an ethnic or sub-ethnic group.¹³⁾ It could also refer to

13) I wish to draw the readers' attention to a debate in Malaysian studies that went largely unnoticed. Though it was supposedly to be on the theme "the construction of Malaysian identity" but it was really on "Malay ethnicity." It was initiated by the article of Joel S. Kahn, an Australian-based American academic, entitled. "Constructing Malaysian Ethnicity: A View from Australia," *Ilmu Masyarakat*, 14, Jan 1988-June 1989, pp.6-8, to which Johan Saravanamuttu and Maznah Mohamad, both from Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, responded and pointed out the problematic approach and flawed argument presented by Kahn in their correspondence entitled "Deconstructing a Construction" ✓

knowledge that is structured according to a perceived ethnic division within which an academic analysis is framed, such as within the various nations-of-intent. For instance, there have been circumstances where Malaysianists, both local and foreign, have adopted a Marxist or Neo-Marxist approach in their critique of the Malay-dominated Malaysian state while at the same time using the occasion to advance an openly chauvinistic argument on the so-called "Malay capital," "Malay" state, "Bumiputera state" and so on [see for example, Cham 1975; Hua Wu Yin 1983; Fatimah Halim 1990].

Academic writings on the NEP and its implementation, both in English and the Malay language the collection of which is enormous, provide us with the best examples to date of how knowledge on Malaysia has been ethnicised because the policy itself has been considered by many as a controversial one. On the one hand, a number of non-*bumiputera* scholars opposed to the NEP have been writing "scholarly" books and articles in international journals on the impact of this discriminatory policy on lower-class Malaysian Chinese and how it has made a few *bumiputera* extremely rich.¹⁴⁾ On the other hand, a group of *bumiputera* scholars has defended the NEP and published "academic" pieces which argue that without the NEP the condition of the poor *bumiputera* would worsen and another racial riot occur as a consequence. They also ask, "what's wrong with having more *bumiputera* millionaires?"

It is significant to note that, with the exception of Peter Searle's recent Ph. D. thesis [1994], no detailed and systematic studies have been carried out to show the role of the Malaysian Chinese in the commercial sector, or to what extent they have benefited from the NEP.¹⁵⁾ For non-*bumiputera* scholars to describe the benefits that Chinese have received from the NEP would only weaken their "academic" argument about the highly discriminatory nature of the policy. The "nationalist" *bumiputera* scholars seem to find it a waste of time to study

↘ on Malay Ethnicity from Australia: A View from Malaysia," *Ilmu Masyarakat*, 15, July-Sept. 1989, pp. 92-93. This perhaps demonstrates the point I raised above regarding "ethnicised knowledge." Another recent article which has the same tone as that of Kahn's is by Yumin Lee [1995] commenting on the relationship between planned change and the rise of *bumiputeraism* at the expense of non-*bumiputera*. Her discussion inevitably was drawn to the formulation and the implementation of the NEP. See also Healy's [1994] discussion on the gender aspect of "Malay ethnicity."

14) Perhaps it is more fashionable nowadays to talk about the rise of the new Malay corporate class and UMNO's central role in it in terms of "rent-seeking" [Jomo 1995], instead of "corporate involvement of political parties" [Gomez 1994], which is indeed a phenomenon that has accompanied the rise of the bourgeoisie class both in Europe and outside Europe, too. Of course, the specific forms it takes are historically-determined. The historical and specific role of the Malaysian Chinese compradors as collaborators of the new Malay corporate class seems to be conveniently neglected in the analyses of the above-mentioned "rent-seeking" paradigm. This raises a pertinent "sociology of knowledge" question. Once, not so long ago, it was argued that "ethnography is a fiction" because the author-anthropologist selects what to include and exclude in his monograph, thus in the end presents a kind of fictionalised narrative of a community that has been studied. Following that line of argument, and knowing very well how statistics can be abused, could the so-called objective "economic analysis" be a fiction too? I think it is more than possible.

15) Before Searle [1994], a number of scholars have made brief attempts to explore the gains and losses that the Malaysian Chinese comprador class have experienced since the implementation of the NEP, see, Lim Lin Lean [1978], Hara [1991], Heng Pek Koon [1992].

ethnic groups other than the *bumiputera*.

In this sense, writings on the NEP have inevitably shown symptoms of this tendency to ethnicised knowledge. Most of the ethnicised writings are about *bumiputera*, their faults and foibles. On the non-*bumiputera*, particularly on the Chinese, the writings tell us how they resist *bumiputera* dominance but not what some have gained in the NEP era. From a Western viewpoint, this is an example of what may be called “academic dishonesty.” In the Malaysian context it could be seen as an “academic articulation,” by Malaysianists (often under the label of “critical analysis”), of the various ethnic groups’ interests and nations-of-intent. The implication of this “academic dishonesty” or “academic articulation” (depending from which angle one chooses to see) has led to what could be called as the “internationalisation of ethnicised knowledge” on Malaysia. It simply means that the “authority-defined knowledge” offered by the so-called authority and experts on Malaysia in the international arena, often couched in “critical analysis” fashion, is shaped and informed by the domestic ethnicised knowledge context in Malaysia.¹⁶⁾

In other words, it is not uncommon in Malaysian social science discourse that even the best of the academic contributions written in the best Western academic tradition with the best of intentions function as an outlet for the discontented Malaysians they describe, most likely a particular ethnic group. This is an unfortunate situation but a reality that many Malaysian social scientists, of all ethnic backgrounds, and foreign scholars specialising on Malaysia, do not dare to admit. Inevitably, since many of these scholars have become “backroom boys” to the various communal organisations and ethnic-based political parties, this ethnicised knowledge would further contribute towards the perpetuation of ethnic division in Malaysia.

However, despite the ethnicised tone of these contributions, it is healthy sign for contemporary Malaysian society that brave Malaysian scholars, of all theoretical persuasions and ethnic origins, are able to air their anti-“*bumiputera* establishment” views. For this reason alone the ethnicised contributions were interesting reading. Ironically, this has been the force which has created such a vibrant social scientific discourse amongst Malaysianists, local and

16) Some conspiratorial theorists amongst the Malaysianists have even suggested that the internationalisation of ethnicised knowledge on Malaysia have led to the a particular form of so-called discursive discourse (critical, anti-government, anti-Malay hegemony, ethnicised) being privileged and those who subscribes to it have an easier access to international publications because the anonymous referees and those sitting on the editorial advisory boards are in favour of that particular form of discursive discourse. This group of Malaysianists even harbour the suspicion that the scholars of the so-called “discursive discourse school” of having hidden political agenda. For that matter, no scholar can realistically be a-political. I believe this is an unfounded suspicion based on a cynical (perhaps chauvinistic) viewpoint. However, my personal experience in Australia, the USA, Japan and Europe tells me that I have often been invited to international seminars and conferences not only because of my research on a topic the sponsors are interested in but also because, as put to me by a famous anthropologist from University of Chicago a decade ago, I am the “rare breed of Malays who can criticise the Malays openly.” The statement tells less about myself but more about that particular scholar’s lack of knowledge regarding the history of the Malays, particularly its intelligentsia, and Malay literary works often rich in articulating “self-doubt” and “self-criticism,” see the contribution of Henk Meier in this volume.

foreign, thus far. There are, of course, other power dimensions besides electoral power in contemporary Malaysia. A more balanced focus containing discussion of the attributes of powerful non-*bumiputera* and how the alliance of the elites across ethnic boundaries shapes Malaysian contemporary culture and politics would have mitigated, for example, the ethnicised flavour of much writing on Malaysian politics and culture [Shamsul 1996a]. There have been serious attempts to redress this problem by a number of Malaysianists, however, a recent debate regarding *Melayu Baru*, or the New Malay, within the *bumiputera* community, shows that it is still informed by UMNO's nation-of-intent [Rustam A. Sani 1993]. The on-going debate on "national culture" [Aziz Deraman 1975; Kua Kia Soong 1985] is also highly ethnicised and framed within the various nations-of-intent discussed above.

The "hidden agenda" behind the ethnicised social scientific knowledge about Malaysia has rarely been discussed for the simple reason that most of the scholars involved are themselves trapped in the complex web of this rather unfortunate analytical complicity, in fact abyss, from which they found it impossible to get out of.¹⁷⁾ If observed carefully, one could easily detect for instance the often repeated statement or argument that the NEP, as a policy, is highly discriminatory and against the principles of meritocracy. Some even went as far as to argue that the whole Malay special privilege, perceived as the social root of the NEP, is an "imperial myth" [Kahn 1995: 55-57]. On the other hand, the supporters of the NEP would argue that the policy is an instrument to create some form of social justice in a culturally diversified and economically unequal society characterised by a distinct pattern of ethnic identification to specific economic activities.

In short, what could be surmised from all this is that there is a clear dissatisfaction, on both sides of the fence, over the NEP and its implementation, each articulated in idioms related to a vague concept of social justice, perhaps one which belongs to the "traditional liberal approach" that claims that unity in cultural diversity could be achieved when individuals and groups have freedom of speech and expression, and social inequality should be resolved through meritocracy. Others offer arguments previously advanced by the so-called "communitarian approach" in which it is argued that there cannot be one general concept of the common good and of social justice across all societies and cultures. A number of those who have advanced their arguments along this line ended up in an exercise of cultural relativism claiming the uniqueness of Malaysia as a society, and "its way" of dealing with problems of diversity and difference.

17) In footnote 13, I offered an example to demonstrate an aspect of the ethnicised knowledge within Malaysian social studies. It is interesting to note that Joel Kahn [1988/89] did not respond to Saravanamuttu and Maznah Mohamed's [1990] critique. In fact, he continued to repeat and expand the very same problematic points and flawed arguments found in that article in a number of other articles subsequently published as book chapters or journal articles [see Kahn 1992; 1994; 1995; 1996a; 1996b]. This was made obvious by the fact that in nearly all of these articles he used a particular example which consist a rather elementary translation error that was repeated, namely, the title of a Malay novel by Shahnnon Ahmad which should be *Kemelut* (Crisis) not *Kemulut* (lit. putting something to one's mouth).

To my mind, the issue of “social justice,”¹⁸⁾ raised in various forms and manners, is the most critical but yet-to-be seriously explored aspect in the debate regarding NEP and also on the issue of national identity in Malaysia hence the question why should one community be more privileged than the other and the like. However, the hidden “social justice” debate has often been framed within the problematic “majority-minority contestation,” namely, “Malay majority versus non-Malay minority,” because the perceived “majority-minority” dichotomy is purely based on numerical and demographic factor. When applied to the Malaysian case and we use the Singapore situation as a backdrop, in which the Chinese population is the overwhelming majority with the Indians and Malays as distinct minority groups, the often-claimed minority position of the Chinese in Malaysia looks not only highly contrived but an analytical illusion. Sinologists such as Mary Somers Heidhues (see, her book, *Southeast Asia Chinese Minorities* [1974]) had advanced an historical analysis on the Chinese in Malaysia in this problematic majority-minority thesis. As I have argued elsewhere in this essay, the use of such a dichotomy does not help us instead put us deeper into the ethnicization of knowledge exercise, even if it is informed by some vague notion of “social justice.”

Conclusion

The Malaysian experience is offered here as an empirical example of how the debate on identities has not only been influenced by contexts and circumstances, historical and contemporary, in a particular society but it also has an influential role in the formation of social scientific knowledge about the society. It also shows that the debate is informed by at least two major perspectives, namely, the authority-defined and the everyday-defined, each with its own internal divisions. In this essay I have presented two examples from the authority-defined context, first, in the Malay/*bumiputera* elite context and, second, involving the academic Malaysianists. The social dynamics engendered within these two situations are, of course, constantly being influenced by a wider societal constituency and concern, which in turn sustain the debate on the issue of “national identity” thus keeping it open for public participation despite the attempt by the dominant power structure to mute it.

In the Malaysian case, although the ruling elite has defined that the real challenge for Malaysians is to create a united Malaysian nation, or *Bangsa Malaysia*, the general populace however seems to argue that the challenge is really to seek a middle ground or a compromise between an authority-defined nation, framed within the context of *bumiputera* dominance (as articulated by a particular group within the *bumiputera*, namely, UMNO), and the everyday ideas about nations-of-intent and national identity propagated by both the various *bumiputera* and non-*bumiputera* group. Some of the latter have their social roots deep in the past and

18) See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* [1972]. A brilliant application of Rawls' theses on multicultural Australia has been done by Dr. Andrew Theophanous. See, his books, *Understanding Social Justice: An Australian Perspective* [1994] and *Understanding Multiculturalism and Australian Identity* [1995].

others in the recent post-colonial circumstances.

The intervention by the social scientists, local and foreign, in the form of perpetuating ethnicised social scientific knowledge framed in the nation-of-intent perspective, does not help this attempt to find a middle ground. The fact remains that irrespective of ethnic groups, what is being proposed and actively promoted has been a variety of nations-of-intent that could form Malaysia's future "nationalist ideology" hence "national identity."

I would therefore suggest that perhaps the concept of nation-of-intent is analytically useful to understand the contradictions within the general discourse on "nationalism," "nationalist ideology," "national identity," and "nationhood" in the societies of emerging industrial economies such as in the East Asian region, for example, in Malaysia. It may also assist us to understand that particular discourse in a more positive light, separating analytically the authority-defined nation-of-intent (often imbued with assimilationist tendencies) from the everyday-defined forms (often adopting a more accommodative position) of the people at large, and how these two sets of nations-of-intent are articulated interests and how the state and people come to terms with that of the other.

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