Ethnicity and identity formation
Colonial knowledge, colonial structures and transition

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The evolution of a social group into an ethnic group in a national context is largely the result of a modernist project of nation-state formation, and closely related to power relations; however, competing power relations functioning at different levels, in different periods, produce a plurality of understandings. Hence, ethnic identity is always subject to contestation and renegotiation – evidence of its versatile and adaptive nature. Even so, certain fundamental notions regarding racial and ethnic construction tend to persist, given the habituation of epistemological space.

In Malaysia, the origins of ethnic groups lie in the construction of colonial knowledge about Malaysia. This knowledge became applied, institutionalised and embedded into official use, bureaucratic tools and public policy formulations, such as through censuses, land enactments, birth certificates, identity cards, vernacular school systems, and so on. These functions continued largely uninterrupted in the post-colonial period, extending the notion of defining ethnic and racial categories according to physical and cultural markers.

Under colonial and post-colonial rule alike, defining and classifying ethnic and racial categories at the administrative level and applying these on the ground can be a difficult task. As a way out, ‘popular perceptions are usually [accepted as] sufficient to sort most of the population into standard classifications’ (Hirschman 1987: 557). This compromise suggests the existence of multilayered notions of ethnicity. It is thus vital to probe the origins of ethnic and racial classifications and key terms regarding race, nationality, dialect group, community and ethnicity.

On the other hand, the complexity of ethnic identity can be observed in the fact that the study of ethnicity and identity may yield different results when pitched at a different level of analysis. For instance, at the individual level of self-identification, a person is ‘Hakka’ or ‘Cantonese’, ‘Tamil’ or ‘Telugu’, or ‘Javanese’ or ‘Bugis’, but at the communal level, he will be ‘Chinese’, ‘Indian’ or ‘Malay’. If religion is used as a primary marker, then self-identification will shift once again. This is not merely a problem of conflating categories with groups or confusion in distinguishing among idiosyncratic complexities arising at the individual or group levels. Rather, this complexity suggests that the focus should be on the social and political formation of ethnic identity.

We employ the term ‘ethnicity’ instead of other value-loaded referents in the Malaysian context. Ethnicity permeates all aspects of the complexities exhibited in Malaysian social
life, both seen and unseen. Ethnicity has a dominant influence in defining and shaping the identity of Malaysians, consciously as well as unconsciously. To unpack this complexity in identity formation among Malaysians we need an analytical tool that is simple enough to be understood and applied across the board in the humanities and social sciences.

We therefore use the ‘two social realities’ framework of ‘authority-defined’ and ‘everyday-defined’ reality introduced by Shamsul (1996a). This framework provides, perhaps for the first time, the following conceptual and empirical tools: first, an alternative analytical device to examine the internal dynamics of ethnicity and identity formation in Malaysia; second, a demonstration of the defining role of colonial knowledge in shaping the landscape of modern knowledge production, particularly in Malaysia; and, third, an understanding of the significance of the phenomenon of social mobility and its material base in the reshaping of ethnicity and identity formation, so as to highlight not only the inter-ethnic, but also intra-ethnic dimensions that complicate post-1969 discourse.

The ‘two social realities’ approach

We contend that, like most social phenomena, identity formation takes place within what we would call a ‘two social realities’ context: the ‘authority-defined’ social reality as laid out by members of the dominant power structure and the ‘everyday-defined’ social reality experienced in the course of normal life. These two social realities exist side by side at any given time. Although intricately linked and mutually constitutive, these social realities are rarely identical. Both are mediated through the social class position of those who observe and interpret social reality and those who experience it.

Woven into 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, social power involves social collectives such as religious or environmental or nationalist movements, political parties, NGOs, professional groups, trade unions, charity associations, literary groups, the intelligentsia, academia and the like. Its discourse takes both oral and written forms, some literary and others simply statistical, informed usually by various dimensions of ideas about ‘social justice’ and reflecting wider, inherent social inequality.

In the authority-defined context, we would include debate and discourse, both in the past and at present, within the government and between government and non-government collectives, amongst members of the intelligentsia and within the sphere of realpolitik. The discourse in an authority-defined context is not homogenous. 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 particular interests. For instance, discourse on ecological issues between the government and opposition political parties or NGOs may be viewed as a majority–minority discourse, but conducted in the confines of an authority-defined context. Generally, discourse in an authority-defined context is textualised, both in published and unpublished forms, some of which are woven into official policies and others, written up as academic publications. In short, the text of such a discourse is usually recorded, either in printed form (official reports, policy documents, newspaper reports, books, magazines, academic journals, photographs, etc.) or in audio–visual electronic and digital forms (tape and video cassette recordings, diskettes, CD-ROMs, films, YouTube clips, etc.).

Discourse in an everyday-defined context is usually disparate, fragmented, intensely personal and 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 not textualised for future reference, except occasionally by researchers, such as anthropologists or historians who record or write down, as ethnographic notes, ‘personal narratives’. These narratives are often captured, too, in what is generally categorised as ‘popular forms of expression’ or popular culture, such as cartoons, songs, poems, short-stories, rumours and gossip, poison-pen letters, and the like. Irrespective of what each narrative has to tell, how widely it has been accepted across society, and whether or not it represents contemporary public concerns, it is usually considered as an individual or personal contribution from the ‘author’ (cartoonist, singer, poet, short-story writer, etc.) (Shamsul 1982). As such, it remains a subjective ‘text’, often considered as unrepresentative of empirical reality or ‘truth’, and not dissimilar in status from legally unacceptable hearsay evidence.

Until recently, some social scientists have rejected such texts outright as a source or form of research data because they are deemed not objective; those social scientists would prefer instead ‘scientific’ statistics, even if concocted or manipulated. The subjective nature of texts of everyday-defined social reality has never been in doubt, but consistent rejection of these as valid sources of information and data is tantamount to the political suppression, or exclusion from mainstream consideration and concern, of ‘voices from below’ or subaltern voices. While reminiscent of the ‘orality–literacy’ contest (Sweeney 1987), this rejection – often subtle and taken for granted – is not simply that, but has been ‘normalised’ into our daily life. One has only to read the newspapers, which invariably represent authority-defined voices of all types and rarely everyday-defined ones, except perhaps in the ‘letters to editor’, editorial, or entertainment sections.

This juxtaposition reflects the inter-connectedness and dialectical nature of the relationship between authority-defined and everyday-defined social reality, which, of course, has a material basis. Often the politics and poetics of this relationship are 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 ‘social theory’, on the one hand, from public intellectual life and the moral concerns of real people, on the other hand, with the former assumed the authority. Many of us perceive the status of and relationship between authority-defined and everyday-defined discourse in much the same way, and tend to favour the former.

**Colonial origins: define and rule**

Colonial knowledge defined and created ethnic and other social categories, thus enabling the colonial administration to govern in a divide-and-rule-manner (Shamsul 2001). This phenomenon has recently been well captured and elucidated by Mamdani in his book *Define and Rule* (2012), drawing on African experience. Relevant here are the methods of accumulating facts that resulted in the formation and organisation of the corpus of colonial knowledge. The approach that anthropologist Bernard Cohn developed to make British rule in India more understandable is extremely useful. The British managed to classify, categorise and connect the vast social world that was India so it could be controlled by way of so-called ‘investigative modalities’, or devices to collect and organise ‘facts’ which, together with translation works, enabled the British to conquer ‘epistemological space’.

An investigative modality includes the definition of a body of information that is needed and the procedures by which appropriate knowledge is gathered, ordered and classified, and then transformed into useable forms such as published reports, statistical returns, histories, gazettes, legal codes and encyclopaedias. Some of these investigative modalities, such as historiography and museology, are of a general nature, whereas the survey and census
modalities are more precisely defined and closely related to administrative needs. Some of these modalities have been transformed into ‘sciences’ or ‘disciplines’, such as economics, ethnology, tropical medicine, comparative law and cartography. Their practitioners became professionals. Each modality was tailored to specific elements and needs on the administrative agenda of British rule; each became institutionalised and routinised in the day-to-day practice of colonial bureaucracy.

The ‘historiographic modality’, the most relevant one for our argument, had three important components. First, the production of settlement reports, on a district-by-district basis; these usually consisted of a description of local customs, histories and land-tenure systems, and a detailed account of how revenues were assessed and collected by local, indigenous regimes. Second, descriptions of indigenous civilisations; these eventually provided the space for the formation of the discourse that legitimised the British civilising mission in the colony. Third, the history of the British presence in the colony, which evoked emblematic ‘heroes and villains’ and led to the erection of memorials and other ‘sacred spaces’ in the colony (and in the motherland, as well).

The ‘survey modality’ encompassed a wide range of practices, from mapping areas to collecting botanical specimens, from the recording of architectural and archaeological sites of historic significance to the minute measuring of peasants’ fields. When the British came to India, and later to the Malay lands, they sought to describe and classify every aspect of life in terms of zoology, geology, botany, ethnography, economic products, history and sociology by way of systematic surveys; they also created a colony-wide grid in which every site could be located for economic, social and political purposes. In short, ‘surveys’ came to cover every systematic and official investigation of the natural and social features of indigenous society; their vast amounts of knowledge were transformed into textual forms such as encyclopaedias and archives.

The ‘enumerative modality’ enabled the British to categorise indigenous society for administrative purposes, particularly by way of censuses that were to reflect basic sociological facts such as race, ethnic groups, culture and language. The various forms of enumeration that were developed objectified and classified social, cultural and linguistic differences among indigenous peoples and migrants. These differences were of great use for the colonial bureaucracy and its army, to explain and control conflicts and tensions.

Control was primarily implemented by way of the ‘surveillance modality’: detailed information was collected on ‘peripheral’ or ‘minority’ groups and categories of people whose activities were perceived as a threat to social order. Methods such as anthropometry and fingerprinting systems were developed for surveillance, and in order to be able to describe, classify and identify individuals rather accurately for ‘security’ and other general purposes.

The ‘museological modality’ started out from the idea that a colony was a vast museum; its countryside, filled with ruins, was a source of collectibles, curiosities and artefacts that could fill local as well as European collections, botanical gardens and zoos. This modality became an exercise in presenting the indigenous culture, history and society to both local and European publics.

The ‘travel modality’ complemented the museological one. If the latter provided the colonial administration with concrete representations of the natives, the former helped to create a repertoire of images and typifications, if not stereotypes, that determined what was significant to European eyes; architecture, costumes, cuisine, ritual performances and historical sites were presented in ‘romantic’, ‘exotic’ and ‘picturesque’ terms. These often aesthetic images and typifications found expression in paintings and prints as well as in novels and short stories, many of them created by colonial scholar-administrators, their wives and their friends.
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These modalities represented, according to Cohn, a set of ‘officialising procedures’ which the British used to establish and extend their authority – a system of control by defining and classifying space, making separations between public and private spheres, by recording transactions such as sale of property, by counting and classifying populations, replacing religious institutions as the registrar of births, marriages, and deaths, and by standardizing languages and scripts.

(Cohn 1996: 1)

The colonial state introduced policies and rules that were organised by way of these investigative modalities, in the process framing locals’ minds and actions in an epistemological and practical grid.

The relevance of Cohn’s approach for analysing developments in the Malay lands is obvious. The Malay Reservation Enactment 1913, to mention just one example, offers a revealing illustration: the Enactment defined, first, who is ‘a Malay’; second, it determined the legal category of people who were allowed to grow rice only or rubber only; and third, it was bound to exert a direct influence on the commercial value of land. This particular enactment was instituted in the state constitution of each of the eleven negeri (states) on the peninsula separately, and in each, offered a slightly different definition of who was a ‘Malay’. For instance, a person of Arab descent was a Malay in Kedah but not in Johor; whereas a person of Siamese descent was a Malay in Kelantan but not in Negeri Sembilan. It could be argued, then, that ‘Malay’ and ‘Malayness’ were created and confirmed by the Malay Reservation Enactment. However, there is more to this than meets the eye: the Enactment also made ‘Malay’ and ‘Malayness’ contested categories.

In different ways, the growth of public education and its rituals fostered beliefs in how things were and how they ought to be: schools were (and still are) crucial ‘civilising’ institutions, seeking to produce good and productive citizens. By way of schools, many ‘facts’ amassed through investigative modalities, and resultant officialising procedures, were channelled to the younger population; in this process governments directed the people’s perception of how social reality was organised. What is more, with the creation of Chinese, Malay, Tamil and English schools, ethnic boundaries became real, and ethnic identities became solidified and essentialised by way of language and cultural practices.

The most powerful and pervasive by-product of colonial knowledge on the colonised has been the idea that the modern ‘nation-state’ is the natural embodiment of history, territory and society. In other words, the ‘nation-state’ has become dependent on colonial knowledge and its ways of determining, codifying, controlling and representing the past as well as documenting and standardising the information that has formed the basis of government. Modern Malaysians have become familiar with ‘facts’ that appear in reports and statistical data on commerce and trade, health, demography, crime, transportation, industry, and so on; these facts and their accumulation, conducted in the modalities designed to shape colonial knowledge, lie at the foundation of the modern, post-colonial nation-state of Malaysia. The citizens of Malaysia rarely question these facts, and thereby depict the fine and often invisible manifestations of the process of Westernisation.

What we have briefly sketched here is the ‘history of an identity’, since these ‘facts’, rooted in European social theories, philosophical ideas and classificatory schemes, form the basis of Malaysian historiography. It is within this history that modern identities in Malaysia, such as ‘Malay’, ‘Chinese’ and ‘Indian’, have been described and consolidated.
Structural change, ethnic identity and social mobility

The construction of ethnic identity is intricately linked to the material basis of social groups, itself originally the creation of colonial capitalism. Shifts in that material base result in social and economic differentiation through realignment of the inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic status quo and transformations in social position at the individual and collective levels. These critical changes inevitably influence ideas and meanings associated with particular social and economic positions, which in turn shape debates on ethnic identity. We will now outline the processes that shifted the social and economic bases of ethnic groups in Malaysia, and the economic and social polarisation that ensued. Our focus is on the labouring class of each ethnic group.

State-facilitated capitalist development and socio-economic policies since the early 1970s were mainly responsible for this transformation. In exact terms, rapid changes in the social and economic base of ethnic groups was rooted in structural transformation especially of the labour market as well as demographic transformation. The advent of export-led industrialisation in that period created vast employment opportunities for the unskilled and semi-skilled. Employment opportunities created labour mobility in the new sectors, drawing workers mainly from more poorly paid sectors. Sprouting industrial estates along the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia not only created employment opportunities, but also produced rapid urbanisation, with a demographic transition in terms of class and ethnic indicators.

Labour migration highlights these processes. Migration within Malaysia was prompted by differential distribution of income and other opportunities, mediated by network and social ties. For instance, the state with the highest in-migration, Selangor, had the highest acreage of industrial estates – more than half the total in Peninsular Malaysia by 1977. The combination of independent economic migrants as well as state-promoted labour migration, including to federal land schemes, resulted in considerable spatial and occupational mobility among ethnic groups. State and/or market forces function at different levels among the different ethnic groups and within different categories of employment, given state preferential policies. Ethnic identity can be enhanced when it is the state that charts the direction of mobility for many, while also playing a moderating role where market forces are dominant, especially in large industries offering employment for the unskilled and semi-skilled.

The changes caused by labour migration affect both the ‘origin’ and ‘destination’ of migration. In the ‘origin’ – say, the village or the plantation – remittances began to differentiate the economic and social bases of families. Flows of non-agricultural income from a commuting labour force also became a new form of household income in the ‘origin’. One estimate was that, with the opening of a new highway between Kuala Lumpur and outlying towns with industrial estates, workers were willing to commute 100 km to work instead of changing residential locations (Chan 1980: 420). More importantly, development triggers ever more outmigration through the established links of earlier migrants. These subsequent migrations were precipitous because the economic and psychological cost of migration also substantially decreased. Changes also occur in the demography of ‘destination’ areas, with the presence of large numbers of migrants defining the urban social space (or that of ‘land schemes’) along class and ethnic divides.

The impact of labour migration among the poorest groups cannot be overstated. Categories such as farmers and agricultural labourers were recorded to be among Malaysia’s poorest in the early 1970s; by the late 1970s, the agricultural sector was suffering a labour shortage. For example, an acute labour shortage was announced for the plantation industry as early as 1978, both in private and state-promoted land schemes (Athi 2014b). Most migrants moved to urban areas for employment, mainly in the industrial sector. The exodus has permanently
changed the labour composition in plantations and eventually paved the way for increased reliance on foreign labour. Thus, social mobility through spatial and occupational mobility became a possibility.

**Transition: spatial and occupation mobility of ethnic groups**

Notions of ethnicity, as discussed above, are rooted in the colonial power’s authority, worldview and needs. One of the factors that sustained these notions in the post-colonial period has been the social and economic reality of productive activities linked with ethnic groups. The original economic function of the various ethnic groups invented during British rule and the spatial distribution of these groups did not change much with independence. This persistence partly legitimised the construction of ethnic identity by the colonial power – a trend that has persisted to the present day.

We witness meaningful transformation in the occupational structure when spatial resettlement is accompanied by economic expansion. The initial mass resettlement of ethnic groups, however, occurred at different periods, under different conditions, and not necessarily under economic expansion. The mass movement of Chinese from rural and fringe areas to ‘new villages’ was engineered by the British to curb Communist insurgency. More than one million people are estimated to have been resettled from 1948 to 1960 (Sandhu 1964). This movement was followed by two waves among Indians, first following the sub-division of plantation lands from 1950 to 1968, when more than 22,000 labourers alone (excluding their families) were displaced. Next came a second wave of outmigration from the 1970s that depleted the bulk of Indian labour in the plantations. By the time the second wave subsided, Indians had ceased to be the main workforce in an industry in which they once predominated (Athi 2014b). Among Malays, mass rural–urban as well as rural–rural mobility was largely a phenomenon of state rural development programmes of the 1970s. The Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA) scheme alone saw more than 715,000 people resettled between 1956 and 1990 (Sivalingam 1993). The scale of these movements permanently changed the spatial character and occupational patterns of ethnic groups. By 2010, 71.0 percent of the Malaysian population was designated as urban, compared with 26.8 percent in 1970.

At the micro level, this phenomenon also transformed ethnic groups’ social and economic organisation, and to a certain extent, their political organisation. The shift from colonial-inherited economic activities – mainly commercial agriculture and mining – in the 1970s was evident in all ethnic groups in Peninsular Malaysia to varying degrees. The shift from supporting the largest rubber and tin industry in the world to retaining only a meagre status in tin and a declining position in rubber reflects the (re)development of colonial industry and employment patterns, especially in Peninsular Malaysia. The locus of this transformation was the spatial and occupational mobility among members of the respective ethnic groups, or even entire family units, since the kinship system and communal ties played a key role – sustained by rapid economic expansion.

For instance, on the eve of independence, the majority of Malays were subsistence peasants (Shamsul 1979), confined to rural areas and involved in rice cultivation (Purcal 1971) and in growing cash crops, mainly rubber (Swift 1965; Wilson 1967), as well as coastal fishing (Firth 1946). They owned small-sized and often fragmented land to till, which limited their productivity. Many rented the plots that they cultivated – landlordism was a common phenomenon in rural Malay areas. Social and economic stratification took on similar patterns among Malays throughout the Peninsula. After World War II, however, an increasing number of Malays with Malay primary school education joined the salariat as low-ranking members.
of the police and the army and as schoolteachers, or found employment in the government offices (Nordin 1976).

The economic function and spatial character of the community were soon to change. All categories of employment among the Malay labouring class, such as farmers, plantation workers and fishermen, were to experience occupational mobility. Incidentally, these are also the categories of employment identified as ‘poverty groups’ in various Malaysia Plans. These categories’ share of employment in 1970 was 52.2 percent, but dropped to 14 percent in 2008 (Jones 2012: 264), reflecting the magnitude of change in occupational structure. For instance, coastal communities traditionally dependent on the sea as fishermen for generations (Firth 1946; Ishak 1990) moved to shore to seek employment following the creation of new forms of employment in these areas (Nor Hayati 2010). Similar changes in occupational pattern can also be observed among paddy farmers and Malay smallholders. Paddy farmers recorded high rates of outmigration and some even abandoned their land (Courtenay 1988). In fact, this phenomenon also engulfed FELDA settlements, where ageing labourers, absenteeism and outmigration became common occurrences (Sutton and Buang 1995).

Similar changes can also be identified among the Chinese in new villages. Almost 86 percent of the original new village dwellers were Chinese and, for many, their livelihood abruptly halted with resettlement. Soon after the Emergency ended in 1960, some returned to their lands, but the majority remained in the new villages. With the gradual closure of tin mines, changes in employment patterns could be observed. The Chinese working class in new village settlements were heavily involved in agricultural activities, mainly cultivating vegetables, rearing livestock and cultivating cash crops (Loh 1988). The government recognised one-quarter of Chinese households, mostly in the new villages, as living below the poverty line in 1970 (Heng 1997). As economic expansion since the 1970s created new forms of employment, however, outmigration consistently reduced the number of new village residents, especially in settlements in rural areas (Khoo and Voon 1975; Voon 2011). The number of residents in Chinese new villages is now estimated to be about 1.2 million, comprising almost 21 percent of the total Chinese population (Ooi 2009). In settlements close to urban areas, the residents commute to work, mostly in the new economy, benefiting from low-cost urban dwellings.

Indians, on the other hand, were largely confined to plantations, mainly on the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia. The most labour-intensive crop, rubber, was still the primary crop at independence. In the Indian case, disruption in plantation work and life occurred with mass retrenchments and displacement from the early 1950s through the late 1960s, caused by the subdivision of plantation lands into smaller plots for immediate sale, mainly by foreign owners. It also became clear that the plantation as a ‘unit of production’ should not be confused with its function as a ‘unit of settlement’, as retrenchments made workers homeless overnight. In short, the plantation community underwent a turbulent period in the years after independence up until the late 1960s. These changes cast serious doubt on the sustainability and security of plantation work and living (Athi 2014b). In the 1970s, outmigration continued – mainly voluntarily – as employment opportunities increased for younger workers in non-plantation sectors, facilitated through migration networks. Such employment continued to be the magnet for migration in the next two decades (Athi 2014b).

**New predicament: from poverty to inequality**

Developments in the post–1970 era have gradually diluted the ethnic identification with economic activities – as envisioned by state policy-makers, and sustained by market capital.
In 1970, the poverty rate was about 64.8 percent among Malays, 26 percent among Chinese and 39.2 percent among Indians. Those rates had dropped drastically, to 3.3 percent, 0.6 percent and 2.5 percent, respectively, in 2009. Mainstream concern had shifted from poverty to a new problem: inequality. For instance, the gap between urban and rural increased about fifteen times, in absolute terms, and the disparity between rich and poor increased by a factor of almost thirteen, in absolute terms (UNDP 2014). Macro processes resulting from globalisation substantially changed colonial structures of employment and demographic distribution.

The social and economic outcomes of this vast development have varied among and within ethnic groups, reflecting the range of social mobility trajectories experienced by families and communities. Spatial and/or occupational mobility fundamentally defines the outcome of the vast transformation especially among poor and deprived groups. Income mobility and social mobility are evident across ethnic lines. In the same vein, vulnerability persists among certain quarters of the poor in all ethnic groups, including both migrants and non-migrants (Shamsul and Athi 2014).

Malays and Indians are over-represented among the lower-income class, though evidence suggests a small section have become affluent. The majority have experienced income mobility and social mobility, though some remain vulnerable. By no means were these new positions stable; ‘stress’ and ‘shocks’ at the familial level and economic crises at the macro level have caused intermittent interruptions, across the ethnic groups, especially in Peninsular Malaysia (Nor Hayati 2010; Athi 2014b; UNDP 2014).

Income disparities divide ethnic groups internally. This is true in most categories of employment. Those who migrated have fared relatively better than their counterparts at the bottom stratum in place of origin, while certain privileged ones have joined the new affluent class. For instance, the rise of a class of accumulating settlers in FELDA (Pletcher 1991; Ishak 1990) or wealthy boat-owning class among fishermen (Nor Hayati 2010), or a new class of contractor-entrepreneurs in plantations (Athi 2014b) demonstrates rapid social mobility in terms of place of origin. Meanwhile, some urban counterparts employed in the industrial sector, while relatively better off than their downtrodden peers in their ‘origin’, may join the new class of urban poor (Ong 1983). Ironically, urban poverty has increased with each economic crisis, but rural poverty has remained stable in the same periods (Ragayah 2011).

Polarised intra-ethnic patterns among similar income categories have given rise to new forms of discourse, especially at the ‘everyday-defined’ social reality axis. Often, this discourse is reflected in overt reference to the ‘successful’ ones. In fact, we have argued elsewhere that the rise of a new discourse on the identity of the ‘new rich’ among Malays refers to at least two types of ‘new’ middle classes: Orang Kaya Baru and Melayu Baru (literally, ‘The New Rich’ and ‘New Malay’) (Shamsul 1999b).

In short, the country’s development since the early 1970s has had a tremendous transformative impact on the economic, social and political position of the various ethnic groups. The social mobility of the ethnic groups, vertically and horizontally, increased at an incredible pace after that time, and in about two decades, we suddenly saw the emergence of a visible ‘new’ middle class, urban-based and working not only in the expanded public sector, but also in the enlarged private/corporate sector (Abdul Rahman 2002).

The differentiated experience among social groups engaged in comparable economic activities has been the result of the rapid structural changes. These shifts have given rise to new forms of discourse on ethnic identity, including on intra-ethnic notions of materialism; however, crucial agency in generating new forms of discourse and politics can be observed among the novel class – the ‘new’ middle class – that arises from these very processes, from the lowest stratum. Their distinct politics is said to range from promoting liberal ideas to
being communalistic and safeguarding their newly acquired positions (Athi 2014a). Indeed, this range reflects the entire gamut of debate and discourse on the subject of ethnicity and identity construction.

Conclusion

Identity-formation processes in Malaysia have always been tied up with ethnicity (read: race, communal group, nationality, dialect group) and vice versa. The ‘epistemological conquest’ by the British set the ‘define-and-rule’ framework of modern colonial and post-colonial Malaya, and later, Malaysia. The construction, definition and operation of the modern nation-state in Malaysia have been wholly based on colonial knowledge, which many ordinary Malaysians do not recognise or even realise. For instance, what have been considered as ‘facts’ in various official reports that are taken for granted as ‘the truth’ and accepted as something natural and given are indeed accumulated and derived from the colonial investigative modality, a methodology that creates and defines social categories. In other words, colonial knowledge has been and remains to a great extent the foundation and pillar of the modern, post-colonial Malaysia.

Events since the early 1970s, particularly the structural changes triggered by state-facilitated capitalism and new state policies, have transformed the landscape of ethnicity and identity formation built upon colonial knowledge, which emphasised inter-ethnic relations as the primary phenomenon to be observed and understood in order to make sense of what happens in Malaysia. This transformation has made it imperative also to observe and explain the phenomenon of intra-ethnic relations. The complex dynamics of, and interactions between, these dimensions represent the social roots of non-ethnic and issue-based discourse in post–1999 Malaysia. Moreover, the attendant vertical and horizontal social mobility experienced by all ethnic groups suggests that the material basis of ethnicity and identity formation in Malaysia has gone through an irreversible change, and that the identification between ethnicity and economic activity has become blurred. It has been the aim of this chapter to highlight and elucidate the complicated social, political and economic realms within which both understandings of ethnicity and identity-formation are embedded in an ever-changing Malaysia.

Bibliography


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