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Retracing the Political Construction of Race and Ethnic Identity in Malaysia and Singapore: Career of a Concept

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Retracing the Political Construction of Race and Ethnic Identity in Malaysia and Singapore: Career of a Concept

Lian Kwen Fee

Abstract:

In this paper, I trace the development of my work on race and ethnicity over my academic career, as a reflection in part of my biographical background. My interest in race and ethnic relations originated from my experience of the race riots in Kuala Lumpur on May 13th in 1969, subsequently grounded in graduate school in New Zealand where I conducted research on the Chinese and the Maoris. My early work on returning to Singapore was on Malay identity in the region. It moved on later to writing about the marginalization of Tamils as an underclass in Malaysia and then a broader consideration of race, class, and politics in Peninsular Malaysia precipitated by the General Election of 2008. Since the 1990s the representation of race and politics has pre-occupied many social science discourses, which is reflected in my work on the politics of racialization and Malay identity in Singapore.

Keywords: Malaysia, Singapore, racialization, race, ethnic identity, politics

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Introduction

I want to begin by saying something about my personal/intellectual and research trajectory that began in 1978 and spanned nearly 40 years. My intellectual curiosity was activated 10 years earlier as I tried to make sense of the race riots of May 13th in 1969. I experienced indirectly in Kuala Lumpur the horrors of violence between Malays and Chinese – the memories of which are permanently imprinted in my mind and have influenced my career as a sociologist. The race riots traumatized a whole generation of Malaysians growing up at that time, but has largely been buried within a collective amnesia until recently. It would be an understatement to say that the political consequences of that event have led to the racialization of a new nation - struggling at that time to come to terms with its identity - so deeply embedded and subsequently institutionalized to the point that almost everything in everyday life in Malaysia today has racial undertones. Looking back and after years of writing about racial contestation in Malaysia and Singapore, the underlying thread of my work in my academic career was and still is about the politics of race and ethnic identity, and racial conflict.

Beginnings: New Zealand

Interestingly my first foray into the field and my first serious work was not so much about racial conflict but how an ethnic community, the Chinese adapted and managed their identity in a predominantly white society – in a settler colony, New Zealand. In the late 1970s when I was

working on my M.A. thesis, there was very little written about ethnic identity. Much of the literature was dominated by social psychology which was very influential in American social sciences. What was missing – and I was focusing on the Chinese community in Wellington – was conceptual work on the sociopolitical process of identity-formation which required a diachronic approach. At that time there was little in the way of utilizing historical material to understand the contemporary formation of ethnic identity. Identity was treated in static terms, no less a snap shot. One of the lessons I learnt from the research was that social/ethnic identity is always in formation, should be treated as a process, and always open ended. In benign circumstances, ethnicity is about adaptation to the majority society, and that includes managing group identity and maintaining group boundaries.

The next piece I attempted, my PhD. thesis, brought me back into the heart of race and ethnic relations namely it is confrontational, contested, and competitive. The subject of my thesis was Maori-Pakeha (indigenous-settler) relations in New Zealand in the 19th century. I was stepping into the territory of well-established historians and anthropologists that have long dominated Maori studies in New Zealand. I was neither trained as a historian nor as an anthropologist. I had a lot to learn about Maori historiography. The anthropologists were mainly concerned with Maori culture and the historians of that generation saw New Zealand history mainly from a colonial perspective, drawing on the archives of missionaries, colonial officials, colonists, and settlers.

At the level of metatheory, my thesis could be summed up by Merquior (1979: 62-3). He makes the point that theorists are aware of the basic interpenetration of culture and society and that the two are analytically separate. However the history of social science is full of instances of both culturalism, 'the theoretical swallowing up of sociality by the cultural, and sociologism, 'the dissolution of culturality into the social'. Culturalism, he continues is unconvincing because it tries to explain culture by itself. Sociologism, because it treats culture as an epiphenomenon, explains it away.

My intellectual development – activated earlier by contemporary issues of racial contestation and conflict – took a critical turn here. For one thing, I was dealing with historical sources and data and pushing the limits of interpretive understanding, in the way Max Weber advocated. I became aware of intentionality and meaning in social behavior. I read in between the

lines, informed by as far as possible the evidence available, took liberties, and hope that my explanations would at least be acknowledged. I developed an expansive view of social phenomenon. I tried to understand how two societies between the 1800s and the 1870s – tribal versus settler colonial – coming from diametrically opposed cultural and political premises, confronted each other and responded. In Bailey's words (cf Staniland, 1970: 624-5), this was an encounter between two structures: one was a small-scale, face-to-face, political community with a small supply of political resources confronting a large-scale, highly specialized political structure supported by overwhelming resources. I learnt that indigenous society had much agency and autonomy going for it than previously recognized by historians. And I learnt that tribal society is not a unitary concept, that intra-tribal relations are just as important as inter-tribal relations. I realized that tribe, like race and ethnicity, is an open-ended process; that it will manifest itself in various forms. I also learnt that the agency of actors is tempered by the contingency of historical circumstances and by the structural constraints of colonial and capitalist society, and the state.

Return: Singapore

In 1993, three years after I left New Zealand and joined the National University of Singapore, a colleague who was an anthropologist and I were invited to contribute a chapter on ethnicity in a book on an anthropological introduction to Asia (Lian & Ananda Rajah, 1993). It was my first work on Southeast Asia and gave me the opportunity to become familiar with some of the literature on ethnicity and how anthropologists (who have worked on Southeast Asia long before the sociologists came in) made sense of diversity in the region. Adopting a culturalist perspective, they pursued two lines of inquiry. One adopted a model of waves of migration: diversity was brought about as more advanced communities displaced the less advanced people. This was later supplanted by a model of evolutionary adaptation, in the sense that differentiation evolved out of adaptation to environmental conditions broadly defined. Within this model cultural ecology gained much currency. The other influential line of inquiry was Frederik Barth (1969) - who radically shifted thinking on ethnicity to more dynamic and processual terms – by arguing that it is the boundary that the group establishes and maintains, rather than its 'cultural content', which defines its identity. So it began to make more sense to talk about 'ethnicization' (or ethnogenesis) to

capture identity in formation. We argued in the chapter that ethnicity is not simply benign, but it is also about conflict, suppression and violence. Hence we called for more consideration of the power of the state in ethnic relations in colonial and post-colonial conditions: as the modern state and its institutions embedded itself in society and exercised influence and control.

My first publication on ethnic identity in Southeast Asia was in 1997, Between Kingdom and Nation: The Metamorphosis of Malay Identity in Malaysia. If anyone is interested in writing on ethnic identity, the obvious starting point is to examine how a group articulates its identity and to uncover the meanings behind such articulations - very much in the spirit of Weberian sociology. Clifford Geertz (1973) in The Interpretation of Cultures distinguishes between traditional and rationalized religious concepts: traditional concepts are grounded in everyday life, make sense of everyday existence, and may only have implicit reference to the meaning of life. Rationalized concepts – of which Malay identity is an example – are removed from the routine and mundane, are inclusive formulations which deal with the problems of existence, and evoke comprehensive attitudes. I attempted to uncover the cultural meanings and symbols of Malay identity from the colonial period onward. Such symbols are obviously polysemic, as Ohnuki-Tierney (1990: 17) points out, and are subject to interpretations and contestations by actors.

Malay identity has been articulated in the concept *bangsa Melayu*. The early expressions of a pan-Malay consciousness in the early colonial period in the 20th century were dominated by Indian and Arab Muslim leaders in the Straits Settlements, who claimed to represent the so-called 'Malay community' but defined it broadly as the Muslim community (*umat*). As local-born 'Malays' established themselves and became the recipients of a Malay language education sponsored by the British, they interpreted *bangsa Melayu* to refer only to those of patriarchal Malay descent, as a means of distinguishing Malay Muslims from non-Malay (Arab and Indian) Muslims. Later the more radically inclined leaders (in Malaya and Indonesia) attempted to promote a more liberal interpretation to include those who accepted and practised Malay language and culture. After the Second World War, in response to the increasing presence of the Chinese and Indian population and to the British proposal to recognize a common Malayan nationality, the conservative Malay elite (UMNO) championed an exclusive Malay identity based on *bangsa* (descent), religion (Islam), and royalty (*kerajaan)* (Milner 1995). The politics of Malay identity since the colonial years may be examined in the interplay of these three constitutive elements.

Bangsa Melayu became even more exclusive after 1969 when the status of *bumiputera* was gradually institutionalized to prevent the Chinese and Indians from full economic participation in the new nation. Dr. Mahathir's attempt to promote *Melayu baru* (new Malay) in 1991 - at a time when the Malays had made significant economic progress since the introduction of the New Economic Policy - as a signal that the Malays were ready to stand on their own feet alongside the other races only met with limited success. How Malay identity will be re-constructed after 2018 in the post-UMNO era is a question that I asked with much anticipation.

From Colony to Nation-State

In 2001, I attempted rather ambitiously a comparative analysis of The Construction of Malay Identity across Nations, including Malaysia, Singapore and the Riau Islands in Indonesia. I will make very brief comments on this, to highlight the contingency of political circumstances and the different trajectories Malayness has taken in the three nations. In Malaya, later Malaysia, I argued that the ethnogenesis of the Malays is rooted in the nascent class structure of Malay feudal society, namely commoners versus the ties of royalty associated with the Sultanates. I suggested, which will be discussed later, that the increasing presence of the Chinese and Indians derailed the process of class-formation in the states that were more ethnically diverse than Kelantan, Terengganu and Kedah, and where the non-Malays were regarded as the other in the political construction of Malayness.

The separation of Singapore from Malaysia in 1965 steered the island toward a secular society committed to the ideology of multiculturalism, the consequence of which was to racialize the population deeply. While there are no apparent racial structures/institutions established as in Malaysia, it nevertheless conditioned Singaporeans to think and behave racially. The state's policy of promoting and practicing a 'strong' multiculturalism puts pressure on Singaporeans to adopt an hyphenated identity which required them to adopt a racial/ethnic affiliation based on patriarchal descent. Multiculturalism facilitated racialization. In Indonesia the reluctance of the Malay traditional rulers to support the socialist-inspired Revolution against Dutch colonial rule ushered in a prolonged period of Malay political acquiescence. Only after the fall of Suharto do we see signs of recovery of Malay political consciousness, one example of which is the revitalization of

Malayness in the Riau archipelago after decades of political and economic marginalization suffered by the local community.

It was a matter of time before I turned my attention to looking at a minority community in Malaysia. My own biography had something to do with this. Growing up in a small town in Pahang and going to one of the elitist English-medium schools that was named after the British resident, Sir Hugh Clifford, I boarded with an Indian family for a year. They were originally from Ceylon and the head of the household was employed as a Public Works Department supervisor of Tamil municipal labourers, who lived in labour lines nearby. Later when a brother of mine managed rubber, oil palm and coconut plantations in Perak, Selangor and Johore I visited and stayed with him in many of these estates. My exposure to the Tamil working class in the 1960s and 70s, although from a distance, must have left an impression that I did not realize at that time. My intellectual interest in their situation was to grow later in my academic career as I majored in Sociology and developed close associations with colleagues of Indian origin in the university.

I remember that one of the important lessons I learnt in my undergraduate years – my teachers never failed to remind me that the distinction between race and ethnicity is not merely academic – was that ethnicity (ethnicization) is self-identification, voluntaristic, and positive whereas race (racialization) was usually a category imposed by the group in power to assert its dominance over a minority and is negative. In 2002, I published The Political and Economic Marginalisation of Tamils in Malaysia. I focused on one of the most neglected communities in Malaysian society. It was clear from the outset that the story of Tamil migrants in Malaya must begin with the institutions that were established to facilitate Tamil migration, for which the colonial economy had become so dependent. The outright exploitation of Tamil migrants was sustained by ensuring that the wages paid to them by the plantations were below market value and those of Chinese workers. The racial division of labour maintained by the colonial government ensured the racialization of the Tamils for generations to come. As the subject of domination and the object of racialization, I identified several consequences – ideological and political – for the Tamil population:

1. First, during the period of the Emergency and the Communist uprising in Malaya – a historical juncture which had the potential to give rise to a labour movement transcending

racial affiliations – the British nurtured a race-based labour movement and fostered an Indian leadership of the movement, which was regarded as both moderate and pro-British.

2. Secondly, isolated in the plantation sector and locked into a vernacular education in Tamil-medium primary schools located in the estates by colonial policy, the Tamil population was side-lined from mainstream political and economic participation. Racial segregation inadvertently continued after independence under the ruling party and UMNO (United Malays National Organisation) patronage of racialized elites in a racially based coalition government.
3. As a continuing effect of racialization, the MIC (Malayan Indian Congress) – the main Indian political party in the ruling coalition government – purged non-Tamil elements in the party in the 1950s and facilitated the entry of caste politics. The Tamilization (read intra-racialization) of local Indian politics had become complete by the 1970s. The community turned inward and became preoccupied with the politics of culture and religion of the Tamil working class (Willford 1998; Collins 1997), which dominated the expression of Tamil identity. The racialization of the Tamil community under the colonial administration was consolidated by the ruling coalition government after independence.

Race, Class, and Politics

There was a hiatus in my work on race and ethnic relations in Malaysia from 2001 to 2011, as far as making conceptual/analytical progress is concerned. During this period much of my attention was drawn to migration research. However, the so called 'political tsunami' generated by the General Elections of 2008 – when the ruling BN coalition lost its two thirds majority in Parliamentary and control of five state governments for the first time – precipitated my next piece. In Race, Class and Politics in Peninsular Malaysia (2011), I asked three key questions:

1. Why is Malaysian society dominated by racial consciousness, racial contestation, and racial conflict? Specifically, I addressed how race had become institutionalized in and structured the political development of Peninsular Malaysia.
2. While we can readily understand how race dictates political behavior (and voting patterns), it is less obvious how class, i.e. economic interests are relevant to political behavior: the

intersectionality of race and class is an issue that has bedevilled scholars and remains a holy grail of the sociology of inequality.

3. The third question is, has Malaysia turned the corner and abandoned racial politics. Is multiculturalism a viable alternative?

Space does not allow me to answer all three important questions but I can highlight a few issues and address the second question specifically. If you want to explain why there is contestation and conflict between ethnic groups, you need to identify the objective, concrete and collective interests of each group (Bonilla-Silva 1996). The Chinese, coming from a migrant background, have always been concerned about economic security and social mobility – hence the premium they place on education. The politics of identity have long dominated the Tamil community, especially language and religion. I am not suggesting that they are not interested in improving their life chances. However being a community that has been marginalized and discriminated against since their arrival in Malaya at the turn of the last century – first in the plantations in which they were isolated and survived only as wage labour, and later as a lumpenproletariat/underclass in the major cities as the large European estates became fragmented or sold to local owners - they are by any measure a neglected and deprived community. For the Malays, their interests are in the politics of retaining political power.

This may be a simplistic representation of racial politics in Peninsular Malaysia but it does give you an idea of what drives each of the communities – the cultural logic of what makes each of these communities tick politically - and it is an observation that I have derived from reading the excellent ethnographies on the Malays, Chinese and Indians, written by both Malaysian and foreign anthropologists (Husin Ali 1975, Kessler 1978, Shamsul 1986, Strauch 1981, Wilford 2006).

What can I say about the relevance of class and economic interests to understanding racial contestation and politics? As far as the Indians are concerned, I have referred to the labour organization of Indian workers in the estates as an incipient class movement in the late 1940s and 50s, which failed to materialize because of the racial division of labour practiced by the colonial state. The political party representing the Indians at that time, the MIC, was initially led by middle

class non-Tamils who were eventually purged in the Tamilization of Indian politics in the 1960s. The Malays are the most class-differentiated of all the communities because of its feudalistic origins, a commoner class of peasants in relations of subordination under a Sultanate polity. In his political ethnography of a Malay community in Kelantan, Kessler (1978: 35) argued that the absence of race consciousness and the non-racialization of polities there have facilitated the uninhibited development of class differences among Kelantanese Malays. Extrapolating from this, I suggest that the relative absence of class politics amongst Malays in the other states is due to the significant presence of the Chinese and Tamil population. However, the only states where class politics manifested itself were in the Malay heartland of Kelantan, Terengganu and Kedah – where PAS (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party) rivals UMNO influence. Race is of no significance in these states because 75 to 95 per cent of the electorate are Malays. Having said that, the urban-based Malay middle class and wage labour – the consequence of the NEP - brings in class dimension into Malay politics that is under-researched and under-appreciated. Finally, I argue that class interests are the least relevant in the Chinese community because, as Judith Strauch (1981) has argued in her political ethnography of a new village, the Chinese universally believe that their economic opportunities are restricted only by their racial origin. Hence, race consciousness dominates the Chinese electorate.

The work that I have just discussed falls squarely within the mainstream concerns of the sociology of race and ethnic relations, namely race, class, and politics. I was very aware that since the 1990s social scientists have increasingly turned their attention to the representation of race and the use of discourse analysis broadly speaking – no doubt a consequence of the emergence of cultural studies, and the work of Stuart Hall. I am particularly interested in how race is constructed and represented by people who have influence in shaping attitudes and understanding about racial differences – state actors, political leaders, scholars, and the mass media.

Race as Representation and Discourse

In 2016 Ganapathy Narayanan and I wrote The Politics of Racialization and Malay Identity in Singapore. We identified five critical turns in how the Malays, as a minority, were represented in various discourses and racialized:

1. Racialization began in the colonial period when the word ‘race’ was used in the 1891 Census of the Straits Settlements and later in the rest of Malaya in the 1921 Census. From its Social Darwinist origins, the racialization of the Malays was premised on a singular judgment: measured by their capacity and contribution to the colonial economy. Relative to the Chinese and Indians, they were regarded by the British colonial administration as a weak race which required protection (Hirschman 1986: 342 – 45). It was an economistic racialization which has influenced attitudes toward the Malays until today.
2. The next critical phase in racial formation came in the 1950s and 1960s, when religion, violence, and security defined how the Malays were to be perceived. The Dutch-Eurasian girl, Maria Hertogh, was left in the care of a Malay woman after her parents were interned following the Japanese invasion of Java in the Second World War. She was brought up as a Muslim girl by her foster mother in the east coast of Malaya. When her Dutch parents located her after the War and successfully applied to the Singapore court in 1950 to be returned to them, the court proceedings inflamed the Muslim population and precipitated the first major race riot involving Muslims and Europeans. A more serious race riot (between Chinese and Malays) occurred in 1964 on the occasion of Prophet Mohammad’s birthday, after years of political contestation between the Chinese-led PAP and UMNO following the political merger of Singapore with the new federation of Malaysia. The political acrimony created by UMNO and the PAP as they sought to mobilize the support of racial electorates in each other’s territory resulted in deadly racial clashes. The racialization of the Malays – originating from the 1964 event and exacerbated by the May 13 riots of 1969 in the Peninsula - took an ominous turn in the association of religion with violence. It led to the deterioration of relations between the Chinese and the Malays, created mutual suspicion and hostility, and framed race relations for the next fifty years.
3. Between 1965 and 1980 the government of an independent Singapore turned its full attention to economic survival and development, instilling in its population the spirit of competition/self-reliance and the values of meritocracy. The economy grew at 10 per cent annually during these years. However alarm bells were raised over the educational and economic performance of the Malays as they fell far behind. In response, government leaders and scholars attributed the failure to ‘cultural deficit’ – based on the simplistic argument that the Malays had been held back by the conservative influence of a rural

lifestyle and Islam, which comprised the 'myth of the lazy native' narrative. It was a belief that became widespread and we argued that racialization took a 'culturalist' turn.

4. From the 1980s until 9/11, the government embarked on constructing Malayness as a national project. Committed to multiculturalism, it challenged the Malays to see themselves not as belonging to Malaysia but as one of the founding communities loyal to a multicultural Singapore. In 2001, 9/11 shifted the discourse to a universal/global narrative as the government challenged the local Malay community to commit themselves to moderate Islam and identify themselves with a global and neo-liberal order to head off political Islam.

I will take a pause here, to reflect on the path I have taken after nearly forty years of working on race and ethnicity. My interest began with racial/ethnic contestation and conflict (May 13), but my first publication was about ethnic identity (the Chinese community in Wellington), then to examining racial conflict in New Zealand (Maori-European relations in the 19th century). It was not until much later that I addressed racial conflict in Peninsular Malaysia, before turning to issues of representation and discourse in the politics of racialization of the Malays in Singapore. In my current work, I have come full circle in returning to ethnic identity. This has been influenced by the emergence of the politics of identity approach in the early 1980s. Identity politics are self-reflexive, it is about the politics of representation and recognition. As Stokes (1997) describes, it is going beyond the contestation of material power to the contestation of symbolic power.

Politics of Identity

My current work draws on Yuval-Davis (2010). I only have time to allude to the significance of her work. Yuval-Davis recommends that identity (as in the politics of belonging) be examined from three perspectives, not necessarily mutually exclusive: narrative, performativity, and dialogical practice. Narratives are stories people tell about themselves and others about who they are. Narratives of identity are renditions drawn from oral history, personal accounts, literature, documents, and archives. For example, competing narratives of *bangsa Melayu* may be drawn from *Sejarah Melayu*, court/genealogical histories, the accounts of Scottish employees of the East

India Company, the British administrators, the left-wing Malay Nationalist Party after the War, UMNO or PAS.

Performative identity is non-verbal expression, and is examined on occasions like rituals, national day celebrations, and religious observances. *Thaipusam*, the annual ritual of self-mortification and penitence, is an expression of working class Tamil identity. The Lion Dance for the Chinese is a celebration of success and good fortune, especially for the overseas Chinese, after overcoming hardship and adversity. It is the celebration of an upwardly mobile community and its work ethic. The significance of performance is not in the one-off public celebration but in its repetitions and ritual, which facilitates the construction of a collective identity. Obviously, narratives are embedded in performative identity and it is the task of the social scientist to excavate these.

Both the narrative and performative approaches may be criticized for not giving due recognition to agency i.e. participants do depart from the script. A dialogical perspective treats identity-formation as open-ended which may result in affirmation, contestation, or subversion of the accepted script. It is particularly useful for dealing with the politics of identity from the subaltern point of view. One question I have not resolved is that while Yuval-Davis provides a novel approach to analysing identity - and it is a methodological contribution - a question mark remains over whether or not it is a theoretical advancement.

Looking Back and Forward: In lieu of a conclusion

Looking back over these years, my work on race and ethnicity have been influenced by events that I have directly or indirectly experienced growing up in Malaysia and as an undergraduate in Singapore. The postgraduate years I spent in New Zealand forced me to work in the spirit of Weberian inquiry, drawing on historical and political sociology and making sense of social behavior from a ‘culturalist’ perspective.

Southeast Asian scholarship has been dominated by Western theories and concepts and for years social scientists in the region have called for an ‘indigenous approach’. My work has been and is influenced by western social science. The challenge for me has always been how to use the

theoretical knowledge creatively and expose it to the 'Southeast Asian' experience, without privileging the region. I am not sure how my work on race and ethnic identity in Malaysia and Singapore is of relevance to other Southeast Asian societies – Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand – as I only have peripheral knowledge of these societies.

Theories and concepts are contextual. They are prisoners of history and are constrained by disciplines. The concepts of race and ethnicity have been very influential in how we understand differences in a changing region. I am well aware that these are phenomena associated with the emergence of modern society – colonization, capitalist development, and nation-states. My work is about ethnicity as a modern phenomenon. Increasingly anthropologists working on Borneo (Sillander 2016, King 2001) and historians (Andaya 2010, in his work on trade and ethnicity in the Straits of Malacca), have attempted to address their understanding of group differences as pre-modern phenomena.

Andaya's work makes a bold attempt to apply ethnicity and the process of ethnicization to the pre-colonial Malay world, from the 15th to the 18th centuries when trade dominated intergroup relations in and around the Straits of Malacca. Whether it is pre-colonial or colonial society, the issue is how people make sense of differences over time, and how as social scientists we explain these differences by utilizing concepts and theories. As Andaya argues, the so-called Malayu polity was driven by two elements: the ruler (as in *kerajaan*) and alliance of kinship networks. He implies that these two elements – the political practice of a Sultanate and kinship alliances – distinguished the Malays from others in Southeast Asia. Indeed, using evidence from *Sejarah Melayu* and *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, he suggests that the ethnic term 'Malayu' is only used when confronted by a distinct 'other' such as the Javanese, Siamese or the Portuguese (Andaya 2010: 80). As far as Malayu was concerned – referring to the inhabitants of Melaka or Johor – a unique Malayu culture could be clearly identified.

I find Andaya's argument problematic. In the Malayu polity, political relations were vertical: followers or commoners were subject to the influence of rulers, who derived their positions from a political institution which blended practices of Indic kingship and Islamic sultanate. The concept ethnicity, as used in the social sciences, applies to awareness of social belonging and a common identity shared by members of a modern society and assumes political

relations are egalitarian. Relations are horizontal and such a society is an imagined community. Andaya's use of Malayu as an ethnic group/identity seems to me misconceived. Malayu is not an ethnic identity in the pre-colonial world, as it is now when UMNO politicians refer to *bangsa Melayu* today. Indeed, Munshi Abdullah's writings did much to promote the concept of a common Malay ethnic identity in his use of *bangsa Melayu* (Malay race) in the 18th and 19th centuries, at a time when the colonial administration laid the early foundations of a modern society, and much later on citizenship. In Milner's interpretation (1995: 51-2) the term reflected Abdullah's concern with the condition of the common people (*rakyat*) and may be viewed as competing with *kerajaan*. Concepts developed in the social sciences are contextually limited, in space and in time, and we have to be circumspect about how we apply them across historical circumstances.

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