The meeting of the British and Malay civilizational traditions: a brief history

Carolina López, Ph.D.
Escuela de Negocios y Humanidades
ITESM Campus Chihuahua
H. Colegio Militar No. 4700 Col. Nombre de Dios
C.P. 31300 Chihuahua, Chih., México
carolina.lopez@itesm.mx

Introduction

Civil society in Malaysia consists of a complex mosaic of peoples, having different cultural, religious and historical backgrounds. This diversity often leads to differences in interests, values, priorities and worldviews among the cultural communities comprising the national populace. Any attempt to analyze the dynamics of governance and civil society today should thus take into account the historical roots and the diverse worldviews found in Malaysia’s plural demographic makeup. This paper proposes to examine salient, or critical junctures where actors from different civilizational traditions have come into contact with each other throughout Malaysia’s long and rich history, in an attempt to assess how these encounters may impact on relations, politics and day-to-day interactions in the present. For this purpose, the Ideological-Structural Analysis (I-SA) will be applied. The I-SA is a set of theoretical constructions which invites analysts to go beyond the typical starting point for political analysis—the meeting of actors in the political arena—and probe into what the diverse actors bring to the critical juncture within themselves, in terms of implicit understandings, modes of interpretation and culturally-bound systems for assessing and assigning values to given situations.

Instead of being a political or historical analysis, the present paper is an invitation to students of history and politics to probe beyond the usual starting points of analysis in the effort to ultimately increase understanding among diverse groups in the political arena.

Analytical Framework: Ideological-Structural Analysis

In the context of historical and present-day encounters among diverse cultures in the Malay Archipelago, the Ideological-Structural Analysis (I-SA), (López, 1997), begins by examining the nature and the dynamics of the major cultural communities present within the region.

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The focal point for I-S Analysis is known as the critical juncture, where the two or more agents (human or non-human) meet and interact in a communicative situation. Thus, any point of contact among diverse actors becomes a point of critical juncture and therefore, may be analyzed using the I-SA lenses. In the present study, the agents are the diverse cultural systems found within the Malay region. The I-SA aims to detect what these actors bring to the critical juncture inherent within them—in terms of values, understandings, sociolinguistic codes, world knowledge, etc. to see how inherent differences among them might impact on national life and politics in the present. To understand how the analysis is to be applied, it would serve to explain some of the major constructs and assumptions upon which this analytical framework rests.

Terms, Assumptions and Constructs.

A basic proposition of the Ideological-Structural Analysis is that actors from diverse cultural communities, or civilization traditions, bring different internal filters within themselves to the critical junctures—the space where encounters occur among members of diverse communities. These interpretive mechanisms, held largely below the level of conscious awareness, to a large degree structure the way in which actors will value, assess and respond to given situations. Implicit differences in these invisible structuring mechanisms are often a source of tension and misunderstanding among groups from diverse traditions. The I-SA proposes that researchers of historical and political phenomena might do well to systematically examine the nature of the internalized ideologies/belief systems which actors bring to the actual point of encounter, or critical juncture.

. Civilizational Paradigms

The term «civilizational paradigm» refers to the historical belief system to which a cultural community traces its roots. These paradigms are often tied to a particular religious or spiritual heritage, which may form the foundation for the collective ways of knowing, interpreting and valuing which are shared within a community. In the case of Malaysia, general reference may be made to the traditions commonly found within the national populace, which are the Muslim, the Buddhist-Confucianist, the Hindu, the Sikh and the Christian civilizational paradigms.

. Worldview

The term `worldview` refers to an overarching conception of how the things of life are understood. Worldviews vary from culture to culture, nation to nation, tradition to tradition. Our worldviews are structured on socially-constructed systems of values, meaning interpretation and understanding, which find common threads within the cultural community in which the person is formed. In the Malaysian context, we find a diverse range of worldviews due partially to the ethno-demographic makeup of the populace, as well as to the Western paradigm permeating today’s globalized world system.

. Ideology

What constitutes the power of the idea? Ideas, or ideologies, are not tangible structures; yet they have the power to set parameters around people’s understanding and interpretation of phenomena encountered in day to day experiences.
Only when we’ve attempted to understand how the sharing of ideas/ideology within cultural communities has the enormous power to hold people together within human groupings, may we begin to address the question of how the incursion of ideas, reality constructions, notions of the sacred, etc. from outside—through contact with members of other civilizational paradigms—has the power to promote identity consolidation and/or bring about changes within existing cultural, societal, national and world paradigms.

For the purpose of this paper, ideology is understood as a set of beliefs or reality constructions shared by members of a given group, polity or culture. The dominant ideology found within a given system is often based upon the values, attitudes and beliefs of the group’s holding power. Ideologies and «truths» are internalized by a critical mass of individuals and are considered by the I-SA as being subjective and varying from culture to culture, or group to group. In addition, ideology and truth constructions are dynamic—meaning that they change over time through exposure, for example, to the promoters of the power holders’ belief system—such as mass media, education, religious doctrine and other purveyors of «truth» as defined by the state, the system, the religion, the cultural community or the group in power (López, 1997). Michael Apple (1990) defines ideology as a system of ideas, beliefs, fundamental commitments or values about social reality. Ideology, then, has to do with the legitimization of actions, values and beliefs placed on society, forming a part of the structuring mechanism which holds it together. Collectively-held ideology serves for...
An I-S analysis of any of these critical junctures provides interpretive lenses for assessing historical outcomes of said encounters.

Henry Giroux (1981) views culture as being embedded in the dynamics of class, power and conflict. He argues that the distinction between «power» and «culture» is false. His politicized notion of culture includes the dialectical character of the relationship between ideology and the socio-economic system. Culture, then, is more than an expression of shared experiences forged within the social and economic spheres of a given society; it is a complex realm of contending experiences mediated by power and struggle, and rooted in the structural opposition between the more and the less powerful. In the imposition of culture, power is used unequally to produce different meanings and practices, which reproduces a particular kind of society that functions in the interest of the dominant classes. This concept applies to both national cultures and the culture of the Neo-liberal paradigm in which world communities are presently immersed. This understanding of culture as a structure of power relations might shed light the development of a particularly melayu identity as Malays have encountered different groups throughout their history. An I-S analysis of power relations among the diverse cultural communities in British Malaya should also prove useful for understanding the nature of inter-ethnic relations in the present.

Another critical juncture inviting ideological-structural analysis concerns points of encounter among national culture and globalising forces. Concern is sometimes voiced at the national and subnational levels pertaining to cultural shifts encouraged by implicit messages entering the country through the global consumer culture. Power holders at the national level—wishing to shape the values and norms of local culture—might find their control threatened by outside forces which could encourage change away from the way of life which has sustained stability and power relations within the polity. The globalization process, which already may compromise national economic and political autonomy, might also threaten to change national ways of life and upset the existing balance among communities and interests found within the nation. The local authority then, may wish to resist economic, political and social domination from internal and/or external forces through a reiteration of national or sub-national traditions and values as a means of encouraging community unity and identity. The aim, conscious or unconscious, may be for citizens within the polity to join together to resist the forces perceived to assail cultural traditions, as well as political and economic aspects of national life

This type of reaction appears to have occurred several times throughout Malay history, for example, due to the loss of political and economic control under British rule, as well as in the face of today’s powerful globalising forces.

Values

Shared values are one of the foundational structures around which human societies are built. The existence of «values» within social groupings takes as its point of departure a dichotomized notion of the existence of «good» and «bad». Different phenomena are placed, unconsciously by the historical collective, somewhere along the continuum of «Good and Bad» upon which human values systems are structured (Burleson, 1989).

These value-attached understandings of the world carry a great deal of affective weight with them. From early on, «good» behaviors on the part of children elicit positive feelings and feedback from the caretakers. Children (and adults) thus learn what is «good» and «bad» through the affective responses and feedback which their behavior and other phenomena in the environment elicit from family members, teachers and others within the society in which they live. As children grow older and are increasingly able to understand abstracts, or non-tangible phenomena in the environment, they become very perceptive to the general sentiment or the value-laden tone with which adults respond in given situations. In addition to the outright teaching of values, which parents, religious and educational institutions do, these inherent messages about how the societal collective views, understands and values social phenomena are instilled very deeply within both the individual and the collective psyche and are carried with us on into adulthood.

Values are stored in the mind as cognitive and affective attachments to symbols and events, often placed on continua of «good — bad,» «virtuous – evil,» and other opposites which denote positive and negative valuing of phenomena and experiences encountered in the external environment (Burleson, 1989). These value constructions provide powerful guidelines for how things should be done, what should or should not be done, etc. Values, then, serve as a set of prescriptive guidelines (structures of weighing and understanding) which inform the manner in which people interpret, classify and respond to the socially-constructed «shoulds» and «shouldn’ts» of human behavior. Value attachments vary widely across cultures; however, the I-SA posits that cultures arising from major religious and philosophical traditions hold a series of core values in common.

Memory Stores of Knowledge and World View

The nature of memory store in the human mind lends itself to simplistic, overgeneralized interpretations of that for which we lack detailed first hand knowledge. The shaping of human understanding quite literally leaves a complex network of imprints in the brain. How? From the time we are born and possibly before, we take input from the external environment into ourselves through the five senses, i.e. the child imprints and recognizes the mother’s face from a very early age through visual input; Mother’s voice through auditory input, touch through tactile, etc. In a very short space of time the child has come to recognize different aspects of «Mother»—and endless other phenomena in the environment through a process of imprinting this input within memory schema in the brain (Garnham, 1985). Early learning occurs as the mental representation of those things tangible in the environment increase within memory schema, giving the child ever greater identification and «understandings» of the world within which it is immersed.

The meanings and value judgments assigned in the interpretation of events are strongly influenced by the social milieu. Constructs through which values and affective responses are assigned in the interpretation of events are based on continua within dichotomous poles (blacks-whites). These are organized into interpretive schemes which place phenomena into a category for judging events in a larger context of meanings, largely shared within one’s cultural community (López, 1990). The values assigned to these constructs are rooted in social origins of interaction with other people. One’s construct system is a direct result of their history of interaction in social groups; it is embedded in social life.
Culture, therefore, is very important in assigning meaning to events since our interpretive schema come primarily from social interaction (Burleson, 1989).

One of the ways in which these understandings are stored in memory is through schema and scripts which, when activated by exposure to external stimuli, bring these mental representations to the fore in order to provide parameters of understanding of the phenomena currently faced by the person or group. The content of information held within schema and scripts, mental representations, activated by the external situation creates lenses (structures of interpretation) which lend themselves to a particular interpretation of events as filtered through the mind’s activated semantic networks (López, 1990). The structuring of these networks in terms of how they tend to filter interpretive and affective responses to external stimuli, depends largely on collective understandings held in the community where the perceiver has been immersed. When expectations delimited by semantic and affective schema are violated, the person experiences what is known as an «alarm» response, calling conscious attention to the act which crossed the boundaries of expectation. The range of interpretations arising depends largely on the affective and values links held by the perceiver in world knowledge store. The alarm response is not necessarily negative. It may be interpreted in a positive manner; it may cause confusion or ambiguity in the perceiver, or it may give rise to feelings of offense, anger, etc., particularly if taboos or norms of some type are felt to have been violated (Rokeach, 1969). Collective alarm response by one cultural community in contact with another, has often lead to wars, conflicts and political disputes. Conversely, those messages and images brought about through contact with outside groups which can be accommodated within the community’s schema without causing an alarm response may be internalized below the level of consciousness, thus expanding the store of information attached to that particular schema. It is in these cases where contact outside of the local collective provokes gradual shift and modification within the culture.

Taboo

Taboo constitutes a category of behaviors (including communicative acts) which are considered out of bounds, not to be done, nor discussed. Common areas where taboo abound pertain, for example to religion, superstition, and sexual behavior. Violation of taboo provokes powerful negative affective reactions toward actors believed to have caused the violation. Responses to the violation of taboo range from rejection of the outside community itself, to outright violent acts or armed revolt against the parties having transgressed the sacred boundary in question. Here again, in spite of stereotypical constructions which group characteristics individual and collective others, we tend to find projections of the negative aspects of human beings cast on ‘other.’ How much do cultural communities tend to define themselves in a positive manner, by casting negative human characteristics on ‘other’ and juxtaposing the collective self to the collective other, thus facilitating a positive casting of self? This tendency often leads to tensions and misunderstandings among the diverse groups.

Trust and «Good Faith»

Trust is an essential ingredient for successful interaction among individuals and human communities (Rokeach, 1969). Trust in the ‘other,’ and the belief that both are acting out of good faith go a long way in helping all sides tolerate cultural and communicative differences among them which may violate their sociolinguistic norms and provoke a sense of discomfort on one, both, or all sides. When trust is not there— which is so often the case after breakdown has occurred—to continue interacting becomes extremely delicate matter. Take the case of the Palestinians and Israelis. There is such a long history of dispute, armed conflict, abuse and mistrust, that successful negotiation between the sides is highly problematic. In this case, history may tell one or both sides that the other is «definitely not trustworthy.» How can day-to-day political and social life proceed peacefully when interlocutors assume the ‘bad’ or ‘evil’ intent of the other?

Having summarized the theoretical suppositions underlying the present analysis, the ensuing section of the paper aims to highlight certain critical historical junctures where the Melayu have met with actors from different civilizational traditions. It will pay special attention to the encounter of the Melakan state system and the Melayu persona with the British colonial system.
Historical Overview

Due to its favorable location on the trade route between India and China, Peninsular Malaysia has long been a place where peoples of different civilizations and belief systems have met. Since the times of Srivijaya— from the 7th to 13th Century, the region has served as an entrepot, or an international trade center where peoples from diverse civilizational paradigms have met. The presence of Muslim traders in the region and the embracing of Islam by Melaka’s first sultan during the 14th century consolidated the teachings, values and way of life of Islam into the region. This, in conjunction with the Malay royal state, has provided the basis for a particularly melayu worldview.

Pre-Melakan Malaysia

Although difficult to reconstruct its history, pre-Melaccan Malaysia is thought to have been populated by a gradual movement of peoples into the archipelago over a vast period of time, combined with ongoing movement back and forth between islands and along coasts and rivers. For East Malaysia, it is believed that man may have inhabited the area as long as 40,000 years ago (Harrison, 1970); while evidence of the human presence in peninsular Malaysia dates back around 10,000 years. Among the diverse groups found early on in the region, a common thread was the worldview embracing animism and ancestor worship intertwined with veneration of the forces of fertility (Andaya & Andaya, 1989).

Trade played an important role in shaping the region’s history. For centuries prior to the founding of Melaka, the archipelago had been a key location in a vast trade network stretching from Africa to China. Due to its location, Malaysia came to link the markets of India and China in a time span thought to range from the third to the 5th centuries. «The ... development of an international exchange trade, its changing patterns and its effects on local society provide the key to understanding early Malaysian history» (Andaya & Andaya, 1982, p. 14).

Somewhere around 300 AD, Indian merchants began trade voyages into the area. This contact exposed the Malay people to Buddhism and Hinduism. Contact was to the point that 7th Century writings in old Malay are found to be heavily Sanskritized, and the model of Malay kingship reflects a strong Indian influence. Indian vessels coming with the monsoon season were forced to remain in the area until they could sail back during the season of the northeast winds. This created a demand for a place to discharge cargo, repair ships and purchase goods for the return trip home. Furthermore, with the establishment of trade links with China from the 5th Century AD, many small settlements became sprang along the main maritime routes. Between the 7th and 10th Centuries the region was a thriving entrepot for trade from the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea (Andaya & Andaya, 1982).

It is believed that the maritime kingdom of Srivijaya arose sometime in the 7th Century and flourished until the end of the 13th. It became a distribution center for «products from India, western Asia and China, as well as those from its own empire. Mahayana Buddhism was the prevalent belief system found in the Srivijayan kingdom (Dr. Arasaratnam, 1970). One of the major functions of Srivijaya’s power was to keep sea passage safe for merchants from the piracy of some of the orang laut.

Melaka:

System of Governance

Both the Sejarah Melayu and the Portuguese account written by Tomé Pire attribute the establishment of Melaka to Prince Parameswara, who left Palembang after the invasion of the kingdom by Javanese around 1397. Upon embracing Islam, the Prince took the name of Megat Iskandar Shah (Harris, 1990).

Throughout the 15th Century, Melaka enjoyed great importance as a trade center; its system of governance served as a model for «subsequent Malay kingdoms and became the basis of what was later termed ‘traditional Malay culture and statecraft’» (Andaya & Andaya, p.37).

One of the most impressive achievements of the Melaka court was the formulation of a concept regarding the nature of the state and how it should ideally function. This concept, clearly expressed in the Sejarah Melayu, became an integral part of the Malay world view and remained basically unchallenged until the 19th Century. Even today, elements of earlier statecraft can be discerned in modern Malay political relationships and in the functioning of Malay society itself (Andaya & Andaya, 1982, p. 45).

The structure of government begins with the king, descended from royal lineage. His court would always be loyal to him. In turn, the king must never put any of his subjects to shame, less this lead to the destruction of the kingdom by God. In turn, Malay subjects have the divine duty to never be disloyal to their rulers, even if they behave unfairly or are unjust to them. In this system, the ruler is subject only to God. «The ruling dynasty’s association with its sacred Melayu-Palembang origins formed the basis of its exclusiveness» (Andaya & Andaya, p. 45). Daulat is a cultural and religious concept which places the ruler above reproach and criticism and requires unquestioning loyalty from his subjects (Zainal Abidin, 1970).

The highest minister, was the bendahara, who was expected to carry out the administrative and diplomatic duties of the state with complete loyalty. The next rank was the penghulu bendahara, who controlled all the state’s revenues and was responsible for the ruler’s servants and clerks as well. The temenggung, was in charge of Melaka’s security, police and was the chief magistrate. The laksmana was in charge of the military and commanded the ruler’s bodyguards, as well as being the leader of the naval fleets. Below these four ministers were various titled nobles who were often consulted for making important decisions concerning the people. «A meeting of the nobles constituted a form of council or assembly (mesyuarat bicara—meeting for discussion) in which all views could be heard and then a decision taken by consensus (mujikat). It was this collective decision-making process which normally prevented arbitrary acts by a ruler and guaranteed that a resolution taken would be faithfully implemented» (Andaya & Andaya, p. 47).

In Malay statecraft, «the ruler remained above the mundane affairs of state, leaving his ministers to carry out the practical duties of administration» (Andaya & Andaya, 1982, p. 70). Ministers also functioned as mediators between the ruler and the outside world.
The Role and Importance of Islam

A major factor in the Malay life and world view concerns the Islamic religion. Although it may not be possible to fix a precise date for the arrival of Islam to Malaysia, by the 9th Century it is believed that Arab traders were familiar with the area. In the 10th Century they began to engage in organized trade in the region. Early Muslim tombs have been found in the area bearing dates such as 1082 AD (475 AH) and 1101 AD (495 AH). An account by Marco Polo in 1292 mentions the fact that the town of Perlak in northern Sumatra was Islamic. By the 13th Century, Muslim traders from India came to dominate more than trade of Muslim Arabs in the area. It is to these Indian Muslims that the spread of Islam in the archipelago is credited (Andaya & Andaya, 1982). Specifically, it is estimated that approximately 1,000 Indian Muslims from Gujarat and other areas of the subcontinent resided in Melaka during this time period. In addition there were several thousand others who came in and out of the port during their trade voyages. Such a strong presence surely played an important part in spreading Islamic attitudes, values and ways of life in the area (Andaya & Andaya, 1982). In addition, the Sufism of Aceh, Sumatra may have had an influence on the process of Islamization during the 16th and 17th Century in the Malaysian region at large (Dr. Lukman, 1999). The Trengganu Stone, which enjoins obedience to Allah and His laws, thought to be the oldest Malay text in Arabic script, dates back to the 14th Century. By the 15th Century Melaka had embraced Islam and came to enjoy the favor of Muslim Indian textile traders.

Islam...provided a new ideology which strengthened kinship by depicting a Moslem ruler as ‘the Shadow of God Upon the Earth’ and by making him the head of a religious hierarchy extending to the village level. These advantages, propagated by Moslem preachers, were readily understood in Melaka and may help to explain the decision of one of its earliest rulers, Parameswara, to embrace the new faith...As Melaka expanded territorially, it persuaded or compelled its vassals in the Straits area to accept Islam...Melaka’s main contribution to this ongoing court culture was the incorporation of Islamic ideas. Though Islam had been promoted earlier by Samudra-Pasai, the new religion became so closely identified with Malay society in Melaka that to become Moslem, it was said, was to masuk Melaka (Andaya & Andaya, 1982, p. 53-55).

For centuries Islam— with its values, precepts and social codes— has been integral to the very notion of being melayu. Furthermore, melayu has inherited a particular type of statecraft also based on Islam, which arose to preeminence with Iskandar Shah in his Melakan sultanate. What light can be shed by Ideological-Structural Analysis on the meeting between the

... raised new and disturbing questions concerning the relationship between ‘civilization’ as it was defined by the West, and what it was to be a Malay. The adoption of much that was foreign to Malay custom [had brought advances to several of the Malay rulers.] But how far could an individual go along this road without jeopardizing his ‘Melayanness’? The clearest articulation of this problem came from Riau, long a centre of Islamic scholarship and still regarded as an arbiter of Malay culture...

In 1636, the Dutch VOC and the Johor Sultanate joined forces. In 1640 they attacked the Portuguese citadel at Melaka and successfully took it over in 1641. During this time period Johor dominated as the major entrepot, and Dutch Melaka became simply a smaller port dedicated to fueling Johor’s bustling trade (Andaya & Andaya, 1982). The peninsula continued under the control of the Malay and Dutch overlords until 1699 when Johor’s Sultan Mahmud was murdered by subjects from the nobility, thus challenging the Malay concept of daulat.

British Presence in the Malay World

As the influence, and the financial and military power of the Dutch waned, Britain was becoming the major European presence in the region. By the mid-18th Century the English had come to dominate trade in India, Southeast Asia and China (Andaya & Andaya, 1982).

Important Historical Moments

In 1768 the British established themselves in Pinang; and in 1819, they created an entrepot in Singapore, whose power and influence were unrivaled by any of the Malay kingdoms.

In 1824 the British and the Dutch accrued the Anglo-Dutch Treaty; by doing so they irrevocably divided the Rio-Johor kingdom and arbitrarily severed the cultural unity of east coastal Sumatra and the peninsula... The Treaty of 1824 provided the rationale for the later colonial division down the Melaka Straits and is thus the basis for the contemporary boundary between Indonesia and Malaysia» (Andaya & Andaya, 1982, p. 122).

In 1826 the ports of Singapore, Pinang, Melaka and Province Wellesley were formed into an administrative unit called the Straits Settlements, which were to form the backbone of British colonial presence. In 1824 The Pangkor Treaty was signed, stipulating that British must be consulted and heeded in all affairs except for those pertaining to Malay custom and religion (adat). For a period of around 50 years thereafter, the British consolidated power and evolved »British Malaya.»

The British System in Colonial Malaya

By 1871, the British, wanting stability in order to ensure ongoing trade and prosperity, began to advise the melayu on how to govern in a ‘civilized’ manner, meaning adopting English law, government and, as much as possible, way of life (Andaya & Andaya, 1982). Due to British power, many melayu rulers saw that it was to their benefit to submit to the British model and implicitly serve British interests. However, this emulation by Malay rulers of the British sparked debate among the Malay community and...
Discussions gained additional stimulus during the second half of the 19th century because everywhere Islam seemed to be retreating before the advance of the Christian West. Debates in the Islamic heartlands assumed a new immediacy for Malays... Malayan newspapers, journals and religious teachers fostered the view that self-strengthening and reform within Islam was [sic] the only solution to the Western challenge. (Andaya & Andaya, p. 152).

Here we find the presence of an outside force, the British, serving as a catalyst for the unification and identity consolidation of the Malay community. Note in this example that, as pointed out by the Ideological-Structural Analysis, what is considered as «cultured» or «civilized» is directly defined and determined by the powerholders (López, 1997). The theory further suggests that cultural communities—in this case, the Malays—may tend to define their collective identities in a sort of juxtaposition to some outside force or presence by which they feel threatened, as may well be the case in the example given above.

In the political arena, different responses to the Western presence were seen by different rulers. While some attempted to develop increasingly more English models, others, such as in the case of Trengganu, aimed to expand a judicial system based on Syariah law. «Yet despite the very real differences between the two approaches to government, the aim was the same: the maintenance of meaningful Malay political control when it was apparent that economic initiatives were passing into alien hands» (Andaya & Andaya, 1982, p. 154).

The British drew distinctions which were meaningless to the Malays and were often at odds with the values system. For example, the British were not to interfere in issues pertaining to religion and custom (adat), yet they were to serve as advisors in matters of political administration. For the Malay, this distinction between politico-administrative questions and adat was not real. «The division between religious and secular so clear-cut to Europeans was simply an alien concept to Malays» (Andaya & Andaya, p. 159). Other examples of contentious issues pertain to revenue collection and slavery.

These points of disjunction between the rulers and the ruled certainly contributed to the rise in Malay nationalism seen from the time of the Japanese Occupation onward. A profound examination of the effects of the overlaying of the British system on the long-standing Malay traditions of culture and governance would shed light on what underlies many issues found in the political arena today.

British Malaya: A Plural Society

While people of diverse cultural communities have long been present in the Malay world, the migration of Chinese and Indian immigrants to the region increased greatly under colonial rule. The Chinese living in Malaya—along with the British—began to focus on commercial agriculture and tin mining as sources of profitable goods. It was they who came to dominate the tin trade. Due largely to the demand for labor in the tin mines, Chinese migration increased from the Mid-19th Century. They Chinese eventually began bypassing the Malay sultans in their economic affairs and dealing directly with the British, once again contributing to the Malay sense of loss of politico-economic control in the region (Harris, 1990). The drop in tin prices toward the end of the 1800s led to a decrease in Chinese migration which, in turn, lead to a labor shortage. The solution was to turn to the Indian subcontinent to meet the demand for manpower.

Although Indians had been migrating to the Malay world for generations, under British rule the rate accelerated markedly. Most of this new wave of migrants were laborers. In the 1870s and 1880s the Indian population in the area rose by 188%. The majority of these laborers were Tamils who were considered more accepting of discipline than the Chinese, and more willing to work for wages than the Malay. The government employed Indian labor in public works, municipal services and rail construction, while private enterprise employed them on estates. It was largely due to the ongoing supply of cheap Indian labor that Malaysia’s rubber industry became a success.

Unlike Indians who had previously occupied high places in the traditional Malay courts, those arriving during the colonial period did not have access to socio-economic ascent outside the parameters of their position as cheap labor. Collectively, the Indians had very little political power or influence. Their wages were kept low by agreement between private enterprise and the sectors of government service which employed them. Poverty remained high among Indian labor, unlike the few wealthy Indian traders or merchants found in urban centers.

The demographic breakdown found in British Malaya was categorized in three broadly-defined ethnic divisions: Chinese, Indian and Malay, which were actually quite diverse and heterogeneous in their makeup. British administration did not consider Eurasians, nor mixed peoples in their categorization of peoples found in the region. Other factors added to the demarcation of ethnic divisions as well. For example, as the British community grew, the Whites formed exclusive clubs and built their houses in de facto segregated areas. From 1904 to 1911, non-Whites were excluded from civil service. English educated Chinese began to feel the contradiction between the ideals of equality which they had been taught, and the reality of White colonial exclusion of non-Whites. This attitude of exclusion hit the wealthy Chinese hard; as a result they began to form their own clubs. There was a resurgence in interest in Chinese culture. In addition, turn of the century political events in China lead to the forming of the Chinese Revolutionary League. At the same time, the Malay identity, values and way of life were threatened by the disruption caused by colonialism. All of this served to create tensions and deepen divisions between the Chinese and the Malays.

The British tendency to identify each ethnic group with a particular type of economic activity affected their policy toward colonial education. Since rural Indians were mostly laborers, the government left their education primarily in the hands of missionaries and estates. It did not provide curricular guidelines nor requirements for estate schools, where teachers were often untrained. Textbooks were imported from India and provided no education about Malaysia. Since estates employed children as young as ten, there was little incentive for them to continue with their education. Gradually, these conditions began to improve, but Tamil-medium education continued to lag far behind that of other groups.

Chinese education remained mostly in Chinese control. Learning was through rote and did not emphasize conceptual understanding of subject matter. With the triumph of the Chinese Republican Revolution in 1911, Mandarin was implemented as a common language of instruction, thus helping Chinese communities to unify under a common language.

This complex composite of demographic and socio-political components arising from the region’s history must be taken into account in the study of governance and of everyday life in the country.
Independent Malaysia had inherited a largely British form of governance superimposed on a long tradition descending from the Srivijayan-Melakan state traditions. Complicating the equation we have the presence of Chinese and Indians who migrated to the region in large numbers during the times of British rule. The modern Malaysian State must deal in an ongoing fashion with the subtleties and the complexities of both the political system and the ethnic plurality found in the country’s populace.

Further study should address questions concerning the conjunctions and the disjunctions found within the diverse belief systems present in the country and how these impact in the political arena today.

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