

OTHER COSMOPOLITANS? ISLAM VS CULTURE IN THE MALAY WORLD*

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“My dad is a racist; so is my mom. Similarly racists are my brother, sister and relatives. All the friends I have, I had, are/were racists too. Well, thanks to all these people, I am, too, a racist. We are the members of a much larger community: Malaysia – the racist nation!

”The term community is somewhat misleading. We are not united as such (as the term seems to imply), as a true nation should be. We are only united by the fact that all of us - at one time or the other - have been racists, are racists, will be racists...”¹.

Some time in the early 1990s – it is always difficult to date such things precisely – the relativising tide turned, at least among left leaning intellectuals in the West. I am referring here not so much to the holdouts – those who were never seduced by the new relativising epistemologies. Instead I am talking about those who were sympathetic to critiques of the exclusionary tendencies of Western thought but at the same time unhappy with what they took to be the political bankruptcy of the postmodern, poststructuralist, postcolonial and multicultural alternatives that had been proposed as alternatives.

This turning away from relativism has involved a renewed commitment to the universal, although one that at the same time acknowledges the exclusions that were an effect of classical universalist thought. The political theorist Linda Zerelli writes that this “return of the universal” is a movement underpinned by “a growing consensus that

¹ Phytamil Kumaran, “Welcome to Malaysia, where racism is a way of life!” (<http://www.geocities.com/tamiliam/article2.html>, p.1, accessed 24/6/05).

poststructuralist political theories are incapable of generating a viable alternative to the collective fragmentation that characterizes late modernity". Informed by a sense that the poststructural turn was "critically valuable but politically bankrupt", a consequence in part of its pursuit of "a pure politics of difference", the new universalism is supposedly – in contrast to the older Enlightenment version – genuinely inclusive of all people "regardless of race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, and whatever else attaches to that ... [which] inevitably accompanies such gestures of acknowledging human diversity" (Zerelli, 1998: 3). The renewed commitment to universalism is manifest in, among other things, the revival of a discourse on universal human rights, the attempt by social theorists to formulate a concept of multiple modernities, the interest in new universalist "language games" generated by the work of critical theorists like Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek, and the renewal of interest in the concept of cosmopolitanism.

In this conclusion to a study of identity formation and narratives of nationhood in the Malaysian context I want to pose the question of whether the new universalism might help overcome the social and political fragmentation and conflict that characterises early 21st century Malaysia as much as it does the West. If postmodernism is supposed to have led to political paralysis and fragmentation, if the postmodern age is meant to have been a time of conflict and violence arising from the pursuit of a pure politics of difference, then should we celebrate the return of universal epistemologies, goals, and political strategies for their inclusionary potential?

The extract above, drawn from a flood of weblogs posted since the late 1990s, indicates the presence of universalist sentiments in Malaysia, particularly among critics of the current regime. Here too we have a picture of a society indelibly stamped by discourses of racial difference and a political system infected with a divisive communitarianism inherited from the colonial past. Large numbers of Malaysian artists, intellectuals and NGO activists in particular – many of whom mobilised behind the banner of *reformasi* (reform) after the arrest, trial and detention of popular Deputy Prime Minister in 1998 – have chosen a universalistic language of human rights, civil society, antiracism and gender equity to speak and agitate against socio-political fragmentation.

Kantian universalism and its discontents

Much of the renewed interest in the possibility of universalism arises from something like Immanuel Kant's concern to discover the basis for a mode of global integration beyond the Westphalian state system, a concern now most often understood in the terms of a problematic of 'good governance'.² As for Kant, those concerned with good governance begin with the perception of a world in conflict as a consequence of the clash of particularistic loyalties, along with an aversion to any solution that would posit the need for a global state, generating a search for new forms and practices of global, and local, political integration beyond empires and nation-states.

However, Kant's solutions, both practical and philosophical, to the conflicts involving (European) nations at the end of the 18th century would need considerable modification before we could begin to assert their usefulness in the current climate. Even

² The argument that the problematic of global governance represents a resurrection of the central themes of Kantian cosmopolitanism is made most elegantly by Anthony Pagden (see Pagden, 1998).

his more ardent defenders admit that Kant failed to appreciate the depths of influence exerted by cultural identities in producing conflict, although he did take national (and at times even local) affiliations into account.³

Some neo-Kantians have sought to rectify this shortcoming by building on Kant's insights to examine the implications of the presence within the global system or within constituent nations of what they call competing "doctrines of the good" embedded in more or less irreducibly different cultures.⁴ Such a solution, however, does not take us very far from the relativism that the (re)turn to Kant was supposed to redress. If different doctrines of the good are irreducible, one to the other, than no cosmopolitan resolution seems possible, and we are back to a politics of pure difference.⁵

Another solution might be to accept that universalistic ideas and projects are themselves inevitably inflected by the particular cultural and historical circumstances that give rise to them. It is certainly possible to argue that Kant's notion of a cosmopolitan imperative was also inevitably Eurocentric, androcentric and middle class and hence not universal at all.⁶ Consequently, if at one level we may speak of a global acceptance of "the necessity of universalism", at another we need to recognise that this global intellectual/cultural movement has been and remains internally fragmented. In other words, we should speak not of universalism, but of universalisms. If there are many universalisms, we may expect that they may, at least in certain circumstances, actually be in conflict with each other.

Failure to recognise the possibility of a plurality of universalisms also implies a failure to understand the extent to which the turn to universalism is a genuinely global movement. This is illustrated in the case of Islam. Many new universalists seem to assume that only the West is capable of generating universalistic thought and values. Hence they portray the so-called clash between Islam and the West as arising out of an inevitable contradiction between universalistic Western values, on the one hand, and particularistic, traditionalist, even fundamentalist Islamic ones, on the other. Such a stance is expressed, for example, by members of the political elite in the United States. This also applies to elites in Europe and Australia, which may be prepared to concede the existence of liberal, progressive or democratic forms of Islamic thought and practice, but

³ Hill, for example, argues that Kant's views need to be modified, but without any essential refutation, by acknowledging that respect for someone as a human being includes respecting that what they value is partly a product of their embeddedness in "intertwining networks of cultures and subcultures" as well as "cross-currents of contrary social influences". Kant's views clearly manifest the overemphasis on individual autonomy that was characteristic of his times. Hill goes on to argue that, however, that modern Kantians "should not overestimate the irresistibility of these cultural bonds by assuming that reflective persons can never see good reason to set aside a part of their heritage" (Hill, 2000: 73).

⁴ I am thinking here particularly of the debate over the possibility of intercultural communication joined most notably by Rawls, Rorty, and Habermas and others (see for example various contributions in Kearney and Dooley eds, 1999).

⁵ A useful critique of this approach is offered by Apel (1999).

⁶ For examples of such critiques of Kant see Mendes (1992), Waters (1994), Hermann (1997), Harvey (2000) and Melville (2002). Such criticisms cannot be dismissed as mere anachronisms. An important new study of Kant shows that at least a version of the feminist critique was made by contemporaries of Kant and hence would have been familiar to him (see Zamitto, 2002). For the argument that universalism is always informed at the same time by particular cultural assumptions about human nature, see Kahn (2001a).

who at the same time brand as unacceptable forms of Islamic practice portrayed as particularistic and archaic. Apparently, therefore, Islam must take on board universal Western values before it can become acceptable. Similar assumptions underpin current anti-racist discourses in Europe, in which Muslims are also represented as communalistic and backward looking when they do not accept supposedly universal principles of democracy and gender equality. Even in the multiple modernities paradigm the West tends to be seen to be the original source of modernity. Developed by social theorists to offset the Eurocentrism of so-called modernisation theory, this concept nonetheless also implies that non-Western modernities originally derived from the West, only subsequently to be indigenised.⁷

Yet certain developments within Muslim thought can be seen to be just as universalising in aspiration as Western movements for human rights or democracy. These include the most radically anti-western among them. As Olivier Roy, among others, demonstrates, much of the appeal of the new globalised Islam lies in its hostility to all forms of cultural, ethnic and national particularism (Roy, 2004). The current so-called clash between Islam and the West may be an example of a clash of universalisms rather than of a conflict between distinctively universalistic and particularistic value systems. The history of so-called Islamic modernism in the Malay World is a case in point.

Islamic Reformism in the Malay World

In Islamic narratives of Malay peoplehood, if the Malay World has an imagined homeland, it is not located, as it might be for diasporics, in either the various home 'countries' from which migrants come or the region in southern China to which the linguistic/cultural/ ethnic origins of modern Malays are generally traced. Instead if they do think of something like a cultural centre, many Malays in the region are inclined to think of the Middle East, the birthplace of Islam, as their spiritual - rather than ethnic - 'sourceland'. Malay identification with a global Islamic *umma* was not been formed in a social vacuum. Malays have long traveled to the Arabian Peninsula in search of religious knowledge, to perform the pilgrimage and to trade. Conversely Arabs from different parts of the Middle East, notably Hadramis from what is now Yemen, have been involved in trade between the Middle East and Southeast Asia, many settling in Southeast Asia itself. At the same time there are long-established communities of Southeast Asian Muslims in the Middle East, particularly in the centres of Islamic learning in Arabia and Egypt.

The numbers of such Malay travelers to and from the Middle East, and of Arab migrants to Southeast Asia rose substantially beginning in the late 19th/early 20th centuries and increasingly took on the form of 'circular' or 'trans' migration. At the same time movement by these 'Malay' merchants, pilgrims and religious scholars between the Middle East and Southeast Asia also increased greatly from that time. As a consequence, therefore, although Malay-speaking Muslims across Southeast Asia have long considered themselves to be part of a world wide community of Muslims, I shall be concerned here with the particular version of Islam, and the correspondingly "deterritorialised" vision of the Islamic *umma* that took root across large parts of the Malay World beginning at the turn of the twentieth century. I am referring here to what is most commonly called Islamic modernism, which refers to the interpretations of Islam that were being

⁷ A clear example of this tendency is the work of Eisenstadt (2000). For a critique of the idea of modernity in Asia as derivative, see Kahn (2001b).

formulated mainly by Muhamad Abduh and his followers in Cairo. Modernist *ulama* in Southeast Asia and their followers, taking their cue from Cairo where many of them studied, engaged in the movement for the reform of Southeast Asian Islam styling themselves *Kaum Muda* (Young Family/Generation) to distinguish themselves from the so-called *Kaum Tua* (Old Family/Generation) adherents of traditionalist and orthodox Islam in the region.

In general Malay “modernists” advocated: *ijtihad* (‘independent’ ‘rational investigation’ of the sources of Islam, individual interpretation based on personal knowledge of the Quran and the Sunna) over *taqlid* (‘emulation of the decisions of the founding *imams*, hence accepting authority and interpretation of the teacher’)⁸; openness to Western knowledge to the extent that it was not adjudged ‘hostile to Islam’ (this generally taken to mean openness to western science and technology, but often hostility even amounting to a demonisation of a ‘western’ culture deemed secularist, materialist, nationalist and racist)⁹; and the need to return to the original Islamic texts, and to treat them as the literal word of God.

This latter accounts for the generalized hostility of these Muslim reformers to local culture/local tradition which, to the extent that it was viewed as corrupting of the tenets of (originary) Islam, was seen as needing to be purged. And to the extent that they followed the advice of Cairene modernists, the new generation of Southeast Asian Muslims also strongly opposed all expressions of what they took to be tribalism and nationalism, advocating instead the reconstitution of a global Muslim cosmopolitan ecumene (*watan*).¹⁰ In Malaya, these modernists frequently came into conflict with the official religious authorities, personified in the Sultans whose powers to regulate Islamic belief and practice in their states was bolstered by the colonial authorities. Self-styled *Kaum Muda* intellectuals also played a role in struggle against British colonialism as members of the nationalist movement. But they did so not as secularists interested in taking control of an independent, European-style state but rather as radical

⁸ It is sometimes suggested that Islamic reformism is opposed to all forms of religious authority, it being up to the individual believer to decide on his/her own the meaning of the original texts. This, interestingly, was often a view expressed to me by Minangkabau villagers in the early 1970s. However, as is perhaps the case with all self-consciously ‘rationalist’ ideologies, reformism certainly does not do away with textual authority, since it is generally recognized that linguistic and religious expertise is required before one can produce *ijtihad*. Hence the important role of religious education/certification in the production of modernist authority. Nonetheless, as Eickelman points out, the new importance of the printing industry (embraced by modernists from early on), and hence the process of ‘textualising’ Islam associated with Islamic reformism, did make it possible for the first time for people to have direct access to Islamic arguments without any intervening religious authority – making it at least potentially possible for the reader to exercise “authoritative immediacy” (see Eickelman 2000). For a somewhat different, far more critical (more Foucauldian) view of the changes in Islam wrought by print capitalism see Schulze (1987).

⁹ It is very important to stress the frequent presence of this occidentalising/ demonizing vision of the West within the discourse of so-called Islamic ‘modernism’ in Southeast Asia, something that in part accounts for its radical anticolonial tendencies. However it also renders problematic simplistic characterizations of Islamic reformism as straightforwardly ‘progressive’, even ‘democratic’, since frequently democracy is rejected by reformers precisely because it is considered to be part of a western culture of secular materialism.

¹⁰ A very important recent study of the longstanding connections between Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian Islam is the one by Michael Laffan, *Islamic Nationhood and Colonial Indonesia: The umma below the winds*. London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003.

anticolonialists struggling for *Darul Islam* which was conceived as global or transnational rather than based in or incorporating the territories inhabited by Southeast Asian Muslims. Muslim radicals in British Malaya before the War were not particularly interested in state and nation building, their local agenda being more economic than political.

Terms such as protonationalist, progressivist, liberal or even modernist – the main ways in which scholars have labeled this wave of Islamic reform in Southeast Asia – do not adequately describe this movement. Instead Islamic modernism in the Malay world of the early 20th century is better understood as a version of what the French philosopher and Islamicist Olivier Roy has labeled, perhaps problematically, the “neofundamentalist” interpretation of Islam.¹¹ In Roy’s important study (Roy, 2004) the term describes a particular Islamic doctrine or “intellectual matrix” that in his view characterises the beliefs of an increasing number (but by no means all) Muslims today, an interpretation shared by Muslims who may otherwise have quite different political attitudes” (Roy 2004: 233). Roy labels this doctrine fundamentalist because its adherents advocate a return to the original tenets and texts of Islam, involving among other things a rejection of sectarianism, and of all the different schools of law, theology and philosophy that emerged in the post-classical age (p. 233). A key feature of such “fundamentalist” interpretations of Islam, as Roy points out, is the stress placed on *ijtihad* (individual interpretation of the fundamental texts). *Ijtihad*, Roy suggests, enables the believer to bypass the traditions of differing religious schools that emerged after the classical age. Neofundamentalists accordingly reject theology, philosophy, literature and history. *Ijtihad* is not, however, presented “as a way of adapting to new situations” (pp. 243f). On the contrary neofundamentalists are “obsessed” with *bid’a* or innovation, which is seen inevitably as heresy (p. 244). And they ignore the concept of modernity altogether (since it is to do with *bid’a*).

Neofundamentalism, according to Roy, marks the end of the idea of *Dar-ul-Islam* as a geographical entity, and sets neofundamentalism off from the phenomenon of Islamism or political Islam in the narrow sense. Unlike Islamists, neofundamentalists do not aspire to capture political power in a given country. The typical neofundamentalist vision of *ummah* (the community of believers) is instead an uprooted, deterritorialised one. Neo-fundamentalists may seek the establishment of a Caliphate, but have no interest in resurrecting the territorially-based Ottoman Caliphate. Instead a “global and abstract conception of the ummah is typical of neofundamentalism” (2004: 238).

Neo-fundamentalists accordingly reject *hizbiyya* (joining a political party, including an Islamic one); in fact they reject the notion of an Islamic party altogether (p. 245). The main divide between Islamists and neo-fundamentalists, therefore, is over the desirability of engaging in statist politics (p. 247). Neofundamentalists “insist that Muslims remain

¹¹ The term is, of course, a controversial one, a fact brought home forcefully to me when a British student of Egyptian origin objected very forcefully and persuasively to my use of Roy’s term since he took offence at being tarred with the neofundamentalist brush. For critiques of the use of the term ‘fundamentalist’ to describe Islamic movements in Malaysia or more broadly see Denoueux (2002), Muzaffar (1987), Nagata (2001). Against the critics, Al-Azmeh has argued that using a term derived from developments within evangelical Protestantism is, in fact, defensible (see Al-Azmeh, nd), and following Roy and Al-Azmeh I will retain the term here.

deterritorialised and not identify with the countries in which they are living ...” (p. 274). The main ‘political’ divide within neofundamentalism is between the mainstream and radicals - the latter advocating *jihad* and violence as an individual act (p. 254). The only really significant difference between mainstream and radical then is whether one should practice *dakwah* or *jihad*. (p. 257) “The usual fault-lines (Left/Right, nationalist/universalist, secularist/religious) are”, argues Roy, “irrelevant in explaining current alignments among Muslims, or between Muslims and non-Muslims (p. 327).

Neofundamentalism as Roy uses the term refers, therefore, primarily to a form of Muslim religiosity rather than to the theological or intellectual underpinnings of religious belief. It is characterized by an insistence on salvation, faith and the individual, and the view that actions are more important than results (p.246). Neofundamentalists insist on the centrality of *sharia*, *fiqh*, *Hadith* and *ibadat* (rituals); religion being mainly “a strict code of explicit and objective norms of conduct” (p. 265). For this reason neofundamentalist religiosity can be described as a kind of ‘exhibitionism’ of ‘staging the self’ (p. 267).

Neofundamentalism according to Roy also has implications for economic attitudes and behaviour. He suggests for example that neofundamentalist businessmen are more likely than Islamists to favour free enterprise and free markets, and to view the state as a liability rather than an asset (p. 73). In fact neofundamentalism “brings Muslims a kind of ethic of capitalism that features individualism, rejection of conspicuous consumption and an apologetic attitude towards wealth, which it says is a sign of God’s blessing” (p. 17). Neofundamentalists are strong supporters of charitable Muslim NGOs rather than of charity administered through the classical mechanism of *waqf* (p. 174).

Roy’s scattered references to the deculturalising impulse of neofundamentalism suggest a close connection between a particular interpretation of religion and the attack on culture and tradition. Neofundamentalists, he argues, strongly reject *assabiyya* (literally tribal loyalty, but used more broadly to refer to nationalism, racism) (p. 245). They vehemently oppose the concepts of both “national cultures” and “local Islam” (p.244). More generally neofundamentalism is associated with a process of “deculturation”. It therefore involves a rejection of cultural particularism in all its forms: local, national, Islamic and Western (p. 259), attacking both tradition and existing systems of social stratification (p.261).

For Roy, then, a key plank in the neofundamentalist platform is the attack on ‘cultural Islam.’ It is at the same time frequently explicitly antiracist. “[T]he search to bypass the ethnic and racial divide is common among radicals” (p. 319). It emerges as a reaction against, or solution to, problems caused by cultural and racial divisions. Not surprisingly, then, many neofundamentalists are converts; some seeing in it the only genuinely non-racist alternative (p. 318). Many others are immigrants to the West from Muslim countries who subsequently marry western women who convert to Islam.

This is not the place for a discussion of identity formation, transnationalisation and cosmopolitan possibilities across the whole of the modern Malay World. Among other things I do not have the empirical knowledge to do so given that my own research has so far focused largely on a particular corner of that world (the west coast states of peninsular Malaya), and on historical rather than current developments. I have only recently begun working on more recent forms of travelling, commerce, religious reform and identity politics in the broader region, with interviewing of Muslim Cham about to commence in

Ho Chi Minh City and the border region between Vietnam and Cambodia in the Mekong Delta, and next year in Indonesia and, conditions permitting, southern Thailand and Mindanao in the Philippines.

Nonetheless, I have I think said enough to indicate why I think it is possible to characterize neofundamentalism as a universalistic discourse with links to other movements and projects that can be described as deculturalising and socially disembedding. Roy even uses the term cosmopolitan to describe it. This may at first sight appear to be a perverse claim, given that particularly in the West this form of Islamic belief and practice is generally characterized precisely as anti- cosmopolitan.¹² Yet I would argue that there are very strong parallels between what Roy calls neo-fundamentalism as it expressed in the ‘modernist’ movement for Islamic reform that spread across the Malay World in the early decades of the last century and other modern, universalizing discourses and practices. Both Roy and Appiah explicitly point out the parallels with late 20th century Protestant ‘fundamentalisms, and Roy also remarks on the similarities between Islamic neo-fundamentalism and the early ‘puritanical’ and asceticising currents in Protestantism, particularly in regard to their shared hostility towards ‘traditional’ culture and forms of socio-religious authority as well as their rejection of political activities shaped by the territorial state. Intriguingly, both have also been marked by negative attitudes towards personal expressions of human sexuality, the ‘embodied’ dimensions of human existence, and female autonomy – an association between economic, political and personal asceticisms that is unlikely to be accidental

It is also useful to compare so-called Islamic neofundamentalism with modern Protestantism with respect to attitudes among believers towards work, wealth and consumption, both seemingly entirely compatible with what Weber most famously called the “spirit of capitalism”. Roy’s description of the orientations of Muslim businessmen in the late 20th century might also apply to ‘modernist’ Muslim merchants, entrepreneurs and cash croppers in the Malay World at the beginning of the century, at the same time resonating with Weber’s discussion of the links between Calvinism and capitalist rationality.

More significantly, there are at least parallels between this particular interpretation of Islam and classical/Enlightenment cosmopolitanism. Both may be described as universalizing (deculturalising or anti-cultural) discourses that aspire to inclusiveness; both are grounded in a set of *a priori* assumptions about what it is that all human beings share. It does not seem possible to defend the position that there is a radical difference between western and Islamic cosmopolitanisms because the former is somehow (potentially) more inclusive than the latter, as Appiah has done. Such an argument strikes me as problematic given the extent to which Kant’s own presuppositions were inflected by (‘fundamentalist’) Protestant values.

¹² Most recently, and rather surprisingly given that he recognizes, with Roy, that the majority of contemporary so-called ‘neo-fundamentalists’ oppose violence and the individualistic interpretation of *jihād* that goes with it (instead advocating *dakwah* as the appropriate way to fulfill the obligation of *jihād*), Appiah has labeled this version of reformist Islam “counter-cosmopolitan” (see Kwame Anthony Appiah, 2006, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. New York, London: W.W. Norton, especially pp.138-40).

Moreover, just as those who would deploy a universalistic language of democracy and human rights to counter communitarian trends in Malaysia may fail to appreciate the extent to which the current wave of Islamic reform is itself universalizing in aspiration, so too they do not come to terms with the fact that racialising rhetorics are themselves a product of universalizing programs emanating from the Malaysian state. Former Prime Minister Mahathir's version of the nationalist agenda was always universalist in aspiration, even though he never expressed much concern for particular universal values like democracy and human rights. The difficulty of forming an alliance between secular and Islamist opponents of the regime is less surprising when it is appreciated that Islamic reformers have universal agendas quite different from those of secular activists.

Pluralising universalism, therefore, makes it possible to envisage the possibility of universalisms in conflict, thereby sounding a note of caution for those who too readily assume that the recovery of universalism will reduce the levels of fragmentation and conflict that characterise our own times. However, if we speak of competing doctrines of the good, of multiple modernities, or of the clash of universalisms, to what extent have we escaped the problems of philosophical relativism and the politics of pure difference, the very problems that the turn to universalism was supposed to address in the first place? Pluralising universalism does not seem to provide the answers that the new universalists seek.

Hybridity as Cosmopolitanism

A rather different approach to the problem of pure difference emerges from the recent propensity to celebrate cultural hybridity. The discovery of the cosmopolitan potential of hybridisation stems from the recognition that cultural globalisation has dissolved the links between particular cultures and discrete territories, phenomena that were in Kant's time firmly conjoined, or at least widely assumed to be conjoined, in the system of nation-states. Those who would celebrate cultural hybridity suggest that classical notions of cosmopolitan practice need to be revised to take account of the fact that cultural identities are now deterritorialised, something that a Kantian confederation of territorially-based republics clearly does not address.¹³

This cultural deterritorialisation has resulted in formation of new kinds of identities "beyond culture", identities that are as a consequence no longer fixed but indeterminant, fluid, and hybrid (see Gupta and Ferguson, 1997; also Appadurai, 1991). Moreover, as identity formation shifts from essentialising to fluid and hybridizing practices new, more inclusive and cosmopolitan practices begin to emerge.

The cosmopolitan potential of cultural hybridity has been widely celebrated (see, for example, Ang, 2001; Bhabha, 1994; Vertovec and Cohen, 2002). Does the discovery of the hybrid character of modern identity provide a grounding for a truly cosmopolitan practice? The concept of hybridity and the celebration of its cosmopolitan potential is not without its critics.¹⁴ Something of the problematic nature of the concept in the Malaysian context may be illustrated by the case of Malay culture and identity formation.

¹³ For examples see the chapters by Ulrich Beck, Stuart Hall and Rainer Bauböck in Vertovec and Cohen (2002).

¹⁴ For such a critique, see the excellent collection edited by Phina Werbner and Tariq Modood (1997). See also Friedman (1997).

Malay Culture: Hybrid Culture

In the 1955 Malay-language film *Penarik Beca* (Trishaw Driver), there is an ironic moment early on although it is difficult to tell whether or not the film's star and director, the great P. Ramlee, intended it as such. The moment, nevertheless, serves to frame the apparent contradiction between the essentialising narratives of Malay nationalism and the presence of a plurality of groups in a soon-to-be independent Malaya, providing at the same time a means of assessing the cosmopolitan possibilities of cultural hybridity in Malaysia's racially-divided society.

The moment occurs during the scene that establishes the character of Ghazali, the villain and chief enemy of the film's central character, Amran, played by Ramlee himself. The scene establishes an opposition between a pure, authentic Malay culture on the one hand and a Western or cosmopolitan culture on the other. By linking villainy to Western cultural contamination, it presents an argument in favour of privileging the former over the latter. As a result, the film constitutes a plea for the decolonisation of Malay culture. Ironically, however, the examples of pure Malay culture, uncontaminated by colonial influence, turn out themselves to be hybridised forms.

The scene is set in a cabaret-cum-night club, the *Melati Joget*, where Ghazali and his friends are seen dancing a cha-cha with the hostesses. The music ends and Ghazali returns to his table and calls for another dance, this time a samba. Instead a young man stands up and announces that the next act will be an exhibition of *Inang Baru* to be performed by five male and five female dancers and a female lead singer backed by a small Malay orchestra. Before the exhibition is allowed to proceed, Ghazali shouts out his displeasure, insisting again on a samba. But he is politely rebuffed and the exhibition goes ahead, much to the delight of the rest of the audience, although when the camera pans to Ghazali he is looking angry and disgruntled.

When the *Inang* performance finishes, the band then strikes up the music for a *Joget*, a faster Malay dance which, together with the *Inang*, formed the staple musical fare on the public stages staffed by the dance hostesses who worked in the large entertainment parks of Singapore, Penang and Kuala Lumpur in the postwar period (see Mohd Anis Md Nor, 1993: 2). When patrons get up to dance the *Joget*, Ghazali, still protesting, has had enough and storms out angrily. In the subsequent scene of deserted streets outside the cabaret, Ghazali spots the heroine, Azizah, returning from a night out at the pictures with friends. Ghazali and his friends molest Azizah. She is rescued from their clutches by Amran, the trishaw driver, who appears on the scene and, having seen off Ghazali and his friends, takes Azizah to her home.

This brief scene stages an interesting argument about the nature and value of cultural authenticity. The dispute between Ghazali and the Malay performers can – and was doubtless intended to be – interpreted as evidence of a conflict between Western musical and dance styles and authentically Malay ones. In this sense the Ramlee film can be seen to be an expression of those culturally essentialising and communal sensibilities that, as we have seen, reached something of a high-water mark just when Ramlee, a Penang-born musician and singer of Sumatran descent, arrived on the Singapore scene to work for the Shaw Brothers film studio.

Nevertheless, familiarity with the conditions under which the film was made and the multicultural character of its audience accounts for a first level of irony, one that would have been fairly evident to the film's makers and audience alike. Although the film appears to be making a case for Malay cultural exclusivity, this particular film, and indeed most of the rest of the Ramlee oeuvre, also provides an implicit model for the ordering of interracial relations in a soon to be independent Malaya. The further evolution and decolonisation of Malay culture, to which Ramlee's work contributed, was being pushed along by a film industry controlled by Chinese capital and marketing networks and with Indian directors; influenced by contemporary-film making in Hollywood, Japan and India; under pressure from Malay nationalists to produce suitable Malay language films; and consumed by an enthusiastic audience of Chinese, Indians, Malays and Indonesians. Although on the surface this particular version of the narrative of Malay nationalism appears to have little to do with the diverse society of British Malaya in the late colonial period, at another level it has a great deal to do with inter-racial relations and how these might be ordered after the end of Western domination.

Ramlee's culturally essentialising practice was, therefore, always embedded within a particular structure of intercultural relations. It may even be seen to provide a model for a system of cosmopolitan governance of all citizens of Malaya in the late colonial period. The so-called consociational model carried forward into the postcolonial period was based on rather similar principles of interracial cooperation on the part of the political elites of each of Malaysia's constituent racial communities. Furthermore, it would have been clear to Ramlee himself, those who with him were responsible for the production and distribution of these films, and also to a large proportion of the audience for them, that these Malay cultural productions were being generated by a multiracial alliance of actors, writers, directors and producers. As a way of characterizing such a model, Richard Werbner's term "cosmopolitan ethnicity" seems peculiarly apt:

In Botswana, as in much of Africa, cosmopolitan ethnicity displays a characteristic tension. It is urban yet rural; at once inward- and outward-looking, it builds inter-ethnic alliances from intra-ethnic ones and constructs difference while transcending it. Being a cosmopolitan does not mean turning one's back on the countryside, abandoning rural allies or rejecting urban bonds. Although that may sound paradoxical, put abstractly, it keeps in focus a dynamic of transcendence interacting with difference, and allows, too, for interethnic partnerships. Understanding the postcolonial force of cosmopolitan ethnicity calls for theoretical interest not merely in ethnic differentiation or opposition, conflict and competition, but also in interethnic cooperation and mutuality. Hence, I discuss the postcolonial development of cosmopolitans' interethnic partnerships and the importance of trust within an ethnic group for the powerful extension of trust beyond it (R. Werbner, 2002: 731-2).

At this level the film can be read not only as a demand for the recognition of Malay culture and Malay rights, but also for an interethnic, communitarian democracy free of Western domination. It does not advocate a civic, culturally neutral polity and society. Instead, when viewed in context, the film demonstrates that, without giving up their unique identity, Malays could nonetheless work with and accommodate other

communities as long as those communities were prepared to accept their special position. Contrary to the assumptions of many who have criticised Malay nationalism for its racial exclusions, the nationalist discourse on Malay-ness does provide a certain model for multiracial coexistence, being therefore a manifestation of a limited kind of cosmopolitanism.

Some may be sceptical of such a cosmopolitan reading of Ramlee's work and of the cosmopolitan possibilities of Malay nationalism. Indeed, when I first watched his films, which are notable for their almost total silence about the multiracial nature of society, I too was inclined to see these silences as evidence of an exclusionary Malay racism that was anything but cosmopolitan (see Kahn 2001a). The alternative analysis was confirmed in my mind by a Malay playwright, filmmaker and ardent critic of Ramlee, whom I met in Kuala Lumpur in the late 1990s. I had just been to see a performance of one of his plays that had been beautifully staged at Kuala Lumpur's gleaming new National Cultural Centre. The play, itself set in 1950s Singapore, turned out to be a diatribe against Chinese and Indian nightclub owners who were portrayed as exploiters, money grubbers and sexual predators preying on innocent Malay young womanhood. When afterwards I told the playwright that I was interested in Ramlee, he reacted scornfully, dismissing him as a "sellout" to the Chinese film industry and a traitor to what he claimed were large numbers of talented but starving Malay artists and writers in 1950s Singapore. For this ultra-nationalist, Ramlee was in his life and in his cultural practice far too cosmopolitan.

There is, however, a deeper irony in the fact that a model for Malayan multi-racialism based on an alliance among a diversity of culturally distinctive communities was being presented in the directoral debut of P. Ramlee. For in a film so concerned with advocating the decolonisation of Malay culture and celebrating Malay cultural authenticity, no pure or authentic Malay culture can be found. As the cultural practice of P. Ramlee himself clearly demonstrates, Malay musical and dance culture has never been anything but hybrid and continually in flux. If Ramlee's music and Ramlee's choreography is to be considered quintessentially Malay, as many of his admirers, and sometimes Ramlee himself maintained (Ramlee 1971), then notions of Malay musical or choreographic authenticity must be completely abandoned. Malay music and dance have always been marked by borrowing and hybridisation, practices at which Ramlee was himself highly adept and with which he was entirely comfortable. *Inang* and *Joget*, presented in the film as examples of authentic Malay musical and dance tradition, were themselves products of such hybridizing practices, deriving as they did from older traditions of music and dance that were indigenised from Arabian sources, and subjected in turn to further outside influences – Portuguese, Latin, and North American.¹⁵ It seems particularly ironic, then, that *Inang* and *Joget* were being presented as indigenous alternatives to the cha cha and the samba in the scene from *Penarik Beca*.

¹⁵ For an important study of the 'cosmopolitan' history of Malay dance and of Ramlee's own adaptations of Malay dance to the demands of the cinema see Mohd Anis Md Nor (1993). A discussion of the variety of foreign influences on Ramlee's music is found in Lockard (1995). One Malaysian musician and composer with whom I discussed Ramlee's music in the late 1990s informed me that there was absolutely nothing local, indigenous or uniquely Malay about the compositions themselves. Be that as it may, on listening to his music we can have no doubts that it is Malay, which says something important about the differences between Malay *culture*, on the hand, and Malay *identity*, on the other.

Nevertheless, it is problematic to celebrate such practices for their hybridity and cosmopolitan potential. Establishing the hybrid character of Malay culture is not the same as establishing a cosmopolitan sensibility. On the contrary, it is entirely possible to suppress hybrid origins in a narrative based on the presupposition of indigenous origins, and cultural authenticity. This was precisely the case of the concept of Malay-ness that was developed in nationalist discourse from the 1920s when the meanings of *Melayu* were essentialised as they become directly tied to particular ‘national’ territories and spaces within them. Essentialism does not always imply exclusion. Neither does cultural hybridity guarantee genuine cosmopolitanism.

Cosmopolitanism beyond hybridity

In *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, Kant (1724-1804) wrote:

Man was not meant to belong to a herd, like cattle, but to a hive, like bees . . . The simplest, least artificial way of establishing a civil society is to have one sage in this hive (monarchy). But when there are many such hives near one another, they soon attack one another, as robber bees (make war), not, however, as men do, to strengthen their own group by uniting the other with it – here the comparison ends – but only to use the *other's* hard work *themselves* by cunning or force. Each people tries to strengthen itself by subjugating neighboring peoples, whether from a desire for aggrandizement or from fear of being swallowed up by others unless it steals a march on them. . . . The character of the species, as it is indicated by the experience of all ages and all peoples, is this: that, taken collectively (the human race as one whole), it is a multitude of persons, existing successively and side by side, who cannot *do without* associating peacefully and yet cannot *avoid* constantly offending one another. Hence they feel destined by nature to [form], through mutual compulsion under laws that proceed from themselves, a coalition in a *cosmopolitan* society...a coalition that, though constantly threatened by dissension, makes progress on the whole (Kant, 1974: 190–1).

It is possible to read Kant's work as providing a philosophical grounding for forms of governance imposed by nation-states or international institutions to guarantee the rule of law, and the principles of good governance based on republican principles. However, in extracts such as this one, Kant may be seen to be arguing instead that cosmopolitanism, understood as practice towards “coalition in a cosmopolitan society”, may arise as much from culturally and historically embedded human individuals and groups who already “exist successively side by side” who cannot avoid “constantly offending one another” and yet who recognise also that they “cannot do without associating peacefully” (Kant, 1974: 190-1). Is relative peace (certainly a better term than Kant's “perpetual peace”), where it occurs, always the result of the imposition of good governance by nation-states or confederations of states? Hardly. Instead a certain cosmopolitanism governs the practices of localised individuals and institutions, everyday social interaction between individuals and groups, popular cultural activities and forms of religious worship, patterns of economic interaction, and the informal institutions of local governance in many different parts of the world. In other words, at the level of the

popular¹⁶ something like genuine cosmopolitan practice may take place, even though it may be “contaminated” by the particularities of time, place and culture.

This leads to a rather different understanding of the nature of cosmopolitan practice and how we assess that practice in the modern world. There are two implications in particular that need to be more carefully considered, and both lead us to reconfigure our understanding of the nature of what we might want to consider examples of exemplary cosmopolitan practice. First, as anthropologists have argued, narratives and representations of self and otherness are always constructed out of intercultural encounters, whether anthropological or otherwise. If knowledge of the other is not knowledge that could conceivably have pre-dated the intercultural encounter, it is therefore also inevitably cosmopolitan knowledge, because it emerges out of the encounter between representatives of different cultures, a form of communication constructed by people “existing successively and side by side, who cannot *do without* associating peacefully and yet cannot *avoid* constantly offending one another. Hence they feel destined by nature to [form] . . . a coalition in a *cosmopolitan* society . . . a coalition that, though constantly threatened by dissension, makes progress on the whole” (Kant, 1974: 190-1).

Second, as many have suggested, all forms of cosmopolitan practice – those that, following Kant, aspire to treat a diverse humanity for what they have in common – will inevitably begin with culturally inflected presuppositions about what it is that constitutes our common humanity. As we have noted, even supposedly culturally neutral, so-called civic discourses are potentially exclusionary on grounds of culture, race or gender. The will to universalise, in other words, always springs from particularistic assumptions and presuppositions about what it is that constitutes the human condition.

This calls into question the project of distinguishing between cosmopolitan and anti-cosmopolitan sensibilities in terms of the universalism: particularism polarity. While they may disagree on matters of detail, many writers on cosmopolitanism, from Kant to Friedman, argue that the cosmopolitan imperative must be grounded in culturally-neutral terrains (‘beyond culture,’ as Gupta and Ferguson put it). Anything to do with the universal, the transnational, the hybrid, the cosmopolitan or ‘complexity’ presumes the possibility of deculturalised or culturally-neutral spaces which one may enter after having left one’s particular cultural coat at the door as it were. But, as critics have long pointed out, the quest to transcend homogeneity or to build new communities away from the coordinates of bounded entities (whether imagined as national, ethnic, regional, or primordial) can never be genuinely culture-free. From this perspective universalising projects are inevitably also inflected by or captive to particularistic assumptions and tendencies, both because they emerge in particular historical and cultural circumstances, and because when adopted by real people they become embedded, integrated, ‘grounded;’ or ‘indigenised’ in particular cultures. All ‘actually existing’ universalisms are, so the argument goes, particularistic at the same time.

And yet to draw attention only to the particularistic dimensions of universalism fails, in my view, to come to grips with both the culturally-disembedding aspirations of universalizing projects and practices and their culture-transformative potential. To treat

¹⁶ Popular is used here in a distinctive sense to distinguish this kind of practice from both exemplary or high modernism and so-called subaltern consciousness (see Kahn, 2001a).

the will to universalize as just another kind of cultural essentialism is to fail to explain the culturally-disembedding aims of would be universalists. At the same time to insist that universalism is inevitably embedded or indigenized within particular cultures is to fail to recognize the extent to which universalistic projects generate real historical changes in existing cultural values and assumptions. Projects and movements that aspire to the universal are not best thought of as resulting only in a state of temporary cultural liminality or as short-lived 'rituals of rebellion' that will inevitably give way under the re-embedding forces of culture and tradition. If and when universalising tendencies are re-absorbed the result is not necessarily a return to the *status quo ante*. We need in other words to find ways of recognizing that cosmopolitan practices will inevitably be both 'essentialising' and 'disembedding' at the same time.

The case of Islamic reformism in the Malay World can be used again to illustrate these trends. Islamic neo-fundamentalism in the Malay World is or was always genuinely universalistic and inclusive in the sense of being totally free of all cultural particularity. Nor is it to suggest that in their pursuit of reform, its adherents were inevitably working towards a state of 'perpetual peace' in the Malay World. Like all discourses and projects that are universalistic in aspiration, movements for Islamic reform in the Malay World, while transformative of existing cultural practice, were at the same time creative of new systems of cultural meaning and performance and hence also of new social and cultural exclusions.

'Modernist' reform movements in late 19th century Java, for example, were implicated in the formation new religious identities and of new kinds of conflict among Muslims themselves. In the words of Merle Ricklefs:

Islam was now apparently contributing to [a] growing disunity; divisions along religious lines, both within the community of firm believers and between it and those less firm were beginning to appear.... The concept of a 'bad Muslim' probably grew up for the first time in this period. Some probably saw such 'bad Muslims' around them and hoped to reform them. Others probably became aware that they fitted this category and were willing to be instructed. But some also knew that they were 'bad Muslims' and didn't care. And a few learned they were 'bad Muslims' and decided that, if this was so, they would rather not be Muslims at all (Ricklefs, 1979: 117).

Here an ostensibly universalizing- transnational ideology contributed to the formation of socio-cultural divisions that had not previously existed. That reformism occurred under conditions of social modernity on Java, characterised as it was by relatively high rates of social and cultural differentiation, combined with the fact that the idea of reform was premised on the assumption that existing social and religious practices were in some sense corrupted, meant that religious pluralism and conflict were an almost inevitable byproduct of reformist zeal..

Similarly, the experience of racism at the hands of Arab Muslims in the Middle East contributed to the emergence among 'Malay' Muslim travelers and visitors in Arabia and Egypt of a vision of an *umma* internally fragmented along racial or national faultlines, in spite of the explicit rejection of all forms of nationalism in the general doctrine of modernism as articulated by Muhammad Abduh (see Laffan, 2003).

Finally in Malaya the drive for religious reform has involved among other things the development of transformed but nonetheless particular localised social hierarchies and cultural meanings which may be observed in the contradictory processes involved in the formation of the exemplary 'Islamic' communities founded by Malay religious reformers in different parts of peninsular Malaya, or, more recently, in the distinctively 'Malay' (yet also non-traditional) social and cultural characteristics of the new middle class suburbs springing up across the Klang Valley, occupied almost exclusively by new, middle class and pious Malay Muslims.

In none of these cases can we speak of a simple re-absorption or re-embedding of the universalizing currents let loose by modernist reform within pre-existing forms of local community. In these cases reformism contributed to the transformation of pre-existing forms of identity, community and the systems of 'cultural' meanings and practices supported by them. And yet reformers have ultimately had to get on with the business of living - earning a living, reproducing themselves, relating to others, including non-Muslim others - in on-the-ground 'communities' that cannot in any sense be described as free of all cultural particularity.

Universalising projects therefore inevitably generate notions of radical alterity when their presuppositions about the nature of shared humanity come under the challenge of human diversity. Otherwise there is no reason for the aspiring cosmopolitan to revise his or her notion of human essence, and hence no reason not to proceed with the assumption that otherness is proof of perversity in one form or another. The consequences, of course, are exclusionary beliefs and practices that are anything but cosmopolitan.

Yet if all universalising projects are launched from particular circumstances and on the basis of particularistic presuppositions about human essence, they are not in principle immutable. There is no logical reason why they should take the form that they do. Just as a colonial narrative that constituted Malay others as immature forms of humanity, incapable (or not yet capable) of reason, hard work and responsibility was transformed into a more inclusive narrative in which Malays come to be defined as possessors of fully mature human rational powers. So an exclusionary narrative of Malay-ness may be transformed out of actual encounters between Malays, Chinese, Indians and others into a more inclusive one. The question is how and under what circumstances such changes come about, and why in other circumstances they do not. When do exclusionary narratives become inclusionary? The answer does not lie at the level of will but instead, as Kant himself suggests in the above, at the level of social practice. Because even though people may continually offend one another, at the same time they "cannot *do without* associating peacefully" exclusionary practices may be transformed into cosmopolitan ones.¹⁷ Therefore, the resolution of the cosmopolitan dilemma is not a philosophical but an historical one.

This way of conceptualising cosmopolitan practice recalls Ernesto Laclau's critical approach to the universal. Modern societies, he maintains, are characterised by increasing fragmentation and a consequential escalation of communitarian demands, which are at the same time "supplemented by discourses of *rights* ... which are asserted as valid independently of any context". Are "these two movements", asks Laclau

¹⁷ Of course Kant presents this as an inevitable unfolding of a pre-existing human cosmopolitan imperative, a teleological argument that needs no further criticism.

“ultimately compatible”? It would seem that they are not. However, if such competing communitarianisms are not compatible, then can we argue, again with Laclau that this incompatibility might nonetheless be positive in so far “as it opens the terrain for a variety of negotiations and a plurality of language games which are necessary for the constitution of public spaces in the societies in which we live?” (Ernesto Laclau in Butler, Laclau and Žižek, 2000: 7) The development of such “language games” and “public spaces” in a place like Malaysia suggests where we might look for the cosmopolitan possibilities of a social order characterised by competing communitarianisms.

From Peranakan spaces to a Peranakan Malay-ness

In the Southeast Asian context, there has been a fairly long convention of distinguishing between the hybridised/creolised cultures of so-called *peranakan* (literally locally-born) Chinese and Indians from those of recent immigrants, on the one hand, and ‘indigenous’ Malays, on the other. However, speaking metaphorically, all who have resided in Malaysia are at least a little bit *peranakan*. Everyone has to one degree or another had to adapt linguistically and in a myriad of other even quite small ways to life as it is lived in the region. There are in fact no cultural beliefs and practices that are not hybrid. This is most clearly manifest in linguistic practice, where along with multilingualism, linguistic hybridisation of one kind or another affects all the languages spoken on the Peninsula. The questions of language standardisation and the establishment of national languages and mother tongues may exercise members of state educational bureaucracies and intellectual elites. Yet where are the linguistically and culturally pure practices in places like Malaysia and Singapore today? In fact, there are almost as many differentiated modes of language use and combinations of vocabulary and speech patterns of the various dialects of Malay, Chinese, Indian, and even English as there are so-called native speakers of these languages. All are hybridised in one way or another. Even foreign birth is no guarantee of cultural purity. On setting foot in peninsular Malaya, even the foreign born are immediately drawn into what remain distinctly localised modes and patterns of speech, conduct, social interaction, cuisine, leisure and the like.

Far from being an exception to this rule, Malay-ness is a perfect illustration of it. As the example of Malay musical and dance culture suggests, hybridity exists at the heart of Malay culture and the Malay community, not just at its borders. Far from being the product of late twentieth century processes of cultural deterritorialisation, hybridisation actually preceded the rise of a nationalist ideology that sought to unite blood and soil. Malay was, in other words, a ‘transnational’ identity before it was a national one.¹⁸

Although it will doubtless scandalize Malay cultural purists to suggest it, surely Malay culture, at least as it has evolved over the last century, is the ultimate *peranakan* culture. This is literally the case for the descendants born in Peninsular Malaya of the large numbers of other Malays who came to the Peninsula from the late 19th century onwards from insular Southeast Asia. Although they were never called *peranakan*, the term is entirely appropriate to describe them. If, moreover, the meaning of *peranakan* is pushed beyond its literal meaning, to take in connotations of hybridity and cultural flux, then Malay-ness might be described as *peranakan* culture par excellence.

¹⁸ The term ‘transnational’ here is obviously an anachronism in the context of a population that was ‘translocal’ before it was national.

There certainly have been times when Malay-ness did seem to define a broad arena for interaction among a diversity of peoples in Peninsular Malaya and beyond. As I have suggested in the book in these interactions *Melayu* was not so much an identity in the modern nationalist sense as a way of describing the interstitial linguistic, economic, political and cultural spaces within which locally born and immigrant peoples interacted. One did not have to *be* Malay – indeed the very idea of Malay-ness as a permanent, fixed identity made little sense in such circumstances.

In the late 1940s some so-called radical Malay nationalists were making out a case for a national identity based on a similarly fluid and hybridised sense of Malay-ness. Such an identity was particular to local circumstance but sufficiently broad to include all locally-born Malaysians. There were even Malay activists and intellectuals prepared to accept non-Muslims into the Malay fold provided that in other respects they accepted local linguistic and cultural codes. Such a self-conscious hybridity, one can argue, characterised both the practice and convictions of many Singapore-based Malay journalists, writers and artists up to the mid-1950s, a development that was later suppressed through the implanting of the far more exclusive national narrative associated with UMNO hegemony.

Even today, this other, cosmopolitan Malay-ness operates at all levels of society both in Malaysia and in a much broader ‘transnational’ Malay World – a space across which Muslim Malay-speaking merchants and entrepreneurs and Islamic reformers continue to travel, as they have been doing since the late 19th century, in search of commercial opportunity and religious knowledge and/or to pursue the Islamic obligation of *jihad*, whether interpreted as the duty to engage in missionising (*dakwah*) or in a more violent interpretation of the obligation. This combination of economic, political and religious circumstances has generated, and continues to generate, the ‘spontaneous transmigration’ of Malay-speaking Muslim peoples into outlying areas of what is now Indonesia (especially Kalimantan), the Philippines, Cambodia and Vietnam (particularly Saigon and the Mekong Delta), and into border regions between Indonesia and Malaysia, Malaysia and Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines, etc. ‘Malay’ entrepreneurs and traders are now heavily involved in the commercial networks associated with the transborder trade in designer label and other textiles produced in factories in Indochina and marketed across the region from Vietnam to Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia to give just one example of the forms taken by this commercially-inspired transmigration in the present..

This modern Malay World also encompasses spaces for interaction but, more importantly, for shared sentiments and practices across what is at least in Malaysia itself a hardening racial divide. Levels of interaction do not necessarily provide the best measure of the extent of such popular cosmopolitan practice. Interaction can, after all, be governed by exclusionary sensibilities, just as non-interaction may not preclude the recognition of shared attitudes and experiences. But the preservation of the peace quite clearly extends beyond the narrow circle of political, economic and cultural elites. Instead it relies on the presence not of a single, culturally neutral public space but of a myriad of spaces and language games that together may be labeled *peranakan* Malay. In contemporary Malaysia and Singapore such spaces and language games are found in the fields of popular and youth culture; movements for cultural heritage; around academic institutions; in particular shopping centres and, interestingly, Western fast food outlets; in

popular shrines visited by people of diverse formal religious association; in the arts; in the *mamak* (Indian Muslim) foodstalls favoured by working class Malays, Indians and Chinese;¹⁹ in some of the NGOs that have flourished in recent years; even to some extent in the *reformasi* movement. One must not exaggerate the significance of such spaces. It is unlikely that they could constitute the basis for an alternative counter-hegemonic narrative, universalizing in intent, of the sort envisaged by Laclau. At the same time it would be a mistake to assume that only the elite is capable of cosmopolitan practice, an assumption that underpins much of the discussion of consociational politics, and the ideology of state diversity management in general.

Social transformations in Malaysia over the past twenty to thirty years appear to have overtaken events, serving as I have argued to destabilise the nationalist narrative of Malay peoplehood and the system of consociational governance with which it has been associated. Whether these transformations will contribute further to the spread of cosmopolitan spaces and “language games,” or whether such possibilities will be closed off is difficult to say at this point. But it is certain that alternatives to the national narrative are in the making.

Conclusion: Debating Nationalism, Cosmopolitanism and Modernity in (Pen)insular Southeast Asia

The nations of insular and peninsular Southeast Asia – Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore – are frequently distinguished from those of northern and eastern Asia by the linguistic, cultural, religious, and social diversity of their populations. This diversity is, moreover, seen to pose particular problems for the modern states of the region. In the words of one observer, because these are “large and culturally diverse archipelagic states” beset “by regional demands for autonomy or separation”, they all face “in varying forms, the challenge of creating a new sense of nationhood among their previously separated peoples” (Landé, 1999: 89, 110). The successes, and failures, of different governing regimes in the region are therefore often measured against their varying capacities to “manage” their own diverse populations, and the extent to which they have been able to prevent the outbreak of communal conflict and violence. Evaluated in these terms, the Singaporean and Malaysian states may be admired for their cosmopolitan capacities, and included among those that “have resolved their conflicts [relatively] peacefully” (Landé, 1999: 110). One could further point to the way this political stability has contributed to the impressive economic performances of both countries, particularly in the decades after 1970.

However, this way of framing a discussion of nationalism, cosmopolitanism and modernity in Southeast Asia is problematic for the way in which it takes nation-states, and the patterns of social pluralism within them as given rather than as phenomena that themselves require explanation. The project of Malay nationalism and the system of communitarian governance to which it gave rise is a case in point. Distinctive to the territories of British Malaya – and relatively successful - it may have been. However, the Malay(si)an state cannot be assessed merely as an exemplification of a generic form of a modern state responding to an already constituted ‘challenge of pluralism’. To treat the

¹⁹ I have relied for some of this on ongoing research by myself, and others. Particularly important have been the findings of researchers like Sumit Mandal and Khoo Geik Cheng, much of it still unpublished.

Malay(si)an state and the divisions within Malay(si)an society as unrelated, generic entities in this way is misleading because, on the one hand, it fails to explain why Malayan pluralism took the form that it did. Why did the diverse peoples of the Peninsula come to be classified into only three main racial groups – Malay, Chinese, and Indian? The example of the formation of what was effectively a new identity, *Bangsa Melayu* (Malay Race-Nation), shows how problematic it is to treat the formation of these categories as natural and inevitable. After all, immigrants from Sumatra and elsewhere in the archipelago could easily have been classified differently, and indeed were differently classified at other times and in other parts of the Malay world. It was not a forgone conclusion that divisions would develop and give rise to conflict between Chinese or Arabs or locally-born Indian Muslims on the one side and Malays on the other. Divisions between immigrants and indigenous Muslim Malay-speaking peoples (on the Peninsula sometimes called *Melayu Jati* or pure Malays) might just as plausibly have been solidified, as indeed they have been in other places in the contemporary Malay world.

On the other hand, to treat the modern Malaysian (and Singaporean) states as though they were independent of these processes of ethnogenesis and community formation is also misleading. The development of the modern Malaysian – and Singaporean – states did not take place independently of processes of identity and community formation. This study has shown, on the contrary, that state formation, nation-building and the pluralisation of Malayan society were and are intimately connected processes. If modern states in the region have been, and continue to be, implicated in the racialising processes described above, how can they then claim to be successfully ‘managing’ the diversity that they have themselves created? This study suggests that, rather than treating the state and social pluralism as abstract and independent entities, it would be more fruitful to treat particular states and patterns of community formation as part of a range of different outcomes of interrelated processes of modernisation - commercial expansion, European colonialism, migration and modern state and nation-building - that were taking place throughout the region at more or less the same time.

These processes did not, moreover, take place in a vacuum and therefore cannot be thought of merely as manifestations of the coming of a fully-formed, European modernity to a pre-modern zone. Instead they took place within a much broader, heterogeneous and already modernising Malay world. This world encompassed Outer Island Indonesia, the Malay Peninsula, the southern parts of what is now Thailand, the southern islands of the Philippines and the Mekong Delta – even extending to iconic religious locations on the Arabian Peninsula, and in centres of Islamic learning elsewhere in the Middle East. This modernizing ‘transnational’ Malay world was developing a distinctive shape because, from the end of the 19th century, it had become the site of greatly increased immigration by Malay-speaking Muslim peoples in search of commercial opportunity and religious knowledge. These migrants were diverse both in culture and origin: Minangkabau, Mandailing, Kerinci, and Achenese from Sumatra; different groups from the Riau archipelago, Java and Madura; Bugis from the Celebes; Banjar from Borneo; ‘pure’ Malays from the port cities and estuarine towns of British Malaya, Sumatra and Borneo; Kelantanese and peoples from the Patani district of southern Siam, to name just some. In the course of their migration, and in the places where they settled, if sometimes only temporarily, these migrants came into contact,

interacted and engaged in commercial transactions with a diversity of peoples, both locally-born and immigrant. These included aboriginal and tribal groups on the Peninsula and Borneo, local Muslim Malay-speakers in southern Thailand, Mindanao and elsewhere in the southern Philippines, and Muslim Cham in the Mekong Delta. They also included other Muslims - Chinese converts, *peranakan* Indians and Hadrami Arabs - as well as non-Muslim Thais, Vietnamese, Chinese, Indians, and Christians, both from Europe and the region.

Many of these migrants remained on the move, crossing back and forth across the region in peripatetic fashion, establishing and maintaining kinship, commercial and religious networks. As I have argued, these networks created Malay spaces, the term understood here to refer not to a fixed identity but to the properties of the interstitial linguistic, social, cultural, religious and political spaces where local peoples and immigrants could meet, interact, intermarry, worship and carry out commercial transactions.

While clearly not culturally homogeneous, this broader Malay world was nonetheless the object of a modernizing, homogenizing, universalizing project that derived not from the imperial ambitions of European powers (or a modernizing Thai state), but from the efforts of a transnational community of Muslim reformers. Together these networks, along with the project to establish a new Islamic *umma* by religious reformers, produced a kind of order – “chaorder” Pnina Werbner calls it - that has characterised such diasporic or transnational communities at other places and in other times.

In this study I have attempted to reframe the debates over nationalism, cosmopolitanism and modernity in Southeast Asia by locating the particular case of the emergence and embedding of a Malay nationalist narrative in British Malaya within the broader context of this modernizing Malay World. This, I have argued, provides new insights into the causes and consequences of Malay(si)an communitarianism and a way of assessing the project of Malay nationalism. It differs from approaches that treat state and society as independent, generic phenomena.

Contextualising the Malay(si)an case in this broader context in turn opens up a broader field of comparative research into identity formation, conflict and the cosmopolitan possibilities in insular and peninsular Southeast Asia both now and in the past. The networks and reforming projects may have made the Malay world of the late 19th and early 20th centuries a zone for a kind of generalised cosmopolitan practice. However, cosmopolitan peace hardly describes the situation in many parts of the Malay world at least in the 20th century and into the 21st. While the levels of communal conflict in Malay(si)a may have been relatively low, elsewhere discord and violence between ethno-religious communities have been intense, in some places even endemic. Nor is it certain that Malaysia and Singapore can avoid such conflict indefinitely into the future. Parts of Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines have been the sites of intense conflict between Malay-speaking Muslims and various other groups - Buddhist Thais, Christian Filipinos, overseas Chinese, tribal Dayaks, Christianised groups in eastern Indonesia among others - throughout the 20th century and into the 21st.

My own study may suggest new ways for investigating these different outcomes, whether peaceful or conflictual, by leading us to investigate the differing effects of projects of organised modernity and the diverse systems of racial, cultural, religious and national

identification that have developed in this region. Shifting the focus away from the nation-state as the basic unit of analysis and from dominant historical periodisations that see the rise of modern colonialism as marking the most significant historical rupture in Southeast Asian history, this study suggests that instead we need to treat the formation of nation-states in the region, along with the emergence of particular kinds of racial-national pluralisation as particular processes of ethnogenesis. Moreover, different outcomes, be they cosmopolitan or conflictual, can be linked to the differential effects of modernizing processes operating across the Malay world as a whole. I have neither the space nor the expertise to trace these processes in all the corners of the modern Malay world. I hope to have contributed, if only in a small way, to recognition that such a project would likely produce fresh insights into the causes and consequences of modernisation, pluralism, and ethno-religious conflict and the possibility of a more cosmopolitan future for the peoples of contemporary Southeast Asia.

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