

Images of Shifting Identities in the Multi-Ethnic State: The Indian Muslims in Malaysia

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Malaysia's multi-ethnic society has inherited colonial categorizations of race in which Malay, Chinese and Indian communities have been construed as homogeneous blocs. This paper traces the shifting identities of Indian Muslims in an attempt to de-construct these racial categories. It argues that Indian Muslims have always moved between resistance and adaptation to these policies, particularly so after the Malaysian state has introduced its Malay-centered Bumiputera policies. As race and religion denote racial identity, Indian Muslims have been pressed to side with either Muslim Malays or Hindu Indians for political representation and resource allocation - nevertheless they have managed to retain certain levels of autonomy: Some of them have explored possibilities of economic autonomy or have joined the emerging networks of Islam and civil society. Despite Malaysia's efforts to create a "Malaysian race" (*bangsa Malaysia*), the case of the Indian Muslims demonstrates the long and difficult path ahead towards racial consolidation.

Introduction

The opening line of Dru Gladney's investigation of the intricate relations between ethnic majorities and minorities "Majorities are made, not born" captures the essence of Malaysia's often problematic relationship between the Malays and the other races, mostly Chinese and Indians, in this multi-ethnic country.¹ "Constructing" and defining a majority identity has not only been one of the main preoccupations of all Malaysian governments since independence, it has also deepened an already existing perception dating from British colonial rule - among local politicians as well as among western observers - that has construed homogenous blocs of ethnic groups. The Malay *Bumiputera* ("Sons of the Soil"), the Chinese and Indian labour immigrants as given entities in the academic chess game of inquiry into the Malaysian phenomenon of multi-ethnicity interestingly have much in common with the perception of the role and forms of political Islam. In both cases, rather artificially defined groups have been seen as clashing with each other, be it "the Malays" and "the Chinese", be it "resurgent Islam" and the state or Islamically imbued Malay ethnicity and the non-Muslims.

No ethnic "group" fits into both these well-aligned categories less than the Indian Muslims who are trapped in between the two dominant identity-markers of Malaysian

society: ethnicity and Islam: Neither being part of the Malay-Muslim automatism that governs all official discourses on *Bumiputraisim* in the political and more importantly economic domain, nor belonging to the Hindu Indian minority, they have sought shifting alliances both in trying to secure “majority status” by becoming Malay or securing Indian Muslim identity for various reasons depending on social and educational background, economic standing or political affiliation.

If “majorities are made, not born”, the ambivalent attitudes of majority Malays towards the Indian Muslims deserve similar attention: from adoption into the ethnic-religious mainstream up to the pejorative labelling as “*Mamak*”, Malay nationalism represented by government and state has had an equally mixed perception of its minority “brethren” sharing either *bangsa*, *agama* (race, religion) or even both with the majority Malays without ever attaining the much sought-after *Bumiputera* status.²

This paper attempts to look at the multi-faceted ways in which Indian Muslim identity has been shaped by the interaction with the Malay majority and the state, how the Islamic “resurgence” has reshaped and altered the way in which Indian Muslims look at themselves and are being perceived by others and how this is reflected in the arena of Malaysian politics. Starting with the assumption that Malay and Indian identity has been constructed in rather artificial ways that say nothing or very little about the actual intertwinings of race, identity and religion, it will be attempted to follow the different multi-coloured “threads” that represent the intricate and complex mosaic of the multi-identical society of Malaysia.

The Colonial Period and the Creation of Racial Identity

The way ethnic groups think of themselves as “imagined communities” has shaped nation-states as well as the boundaries that arise between their various identities³: In the Malaysian context the racial divide has emerged only in the 19th century under British colonial rule. Before that, Southeast Asian societies were rather characterized by close inter-ethnic ties necessitated by the need to foster trade relations in a multi-cultural setting as well as by the possibility to create kinship alliances to support intermarriage policies as a tool of political conquest. The adherence to a local *raja*, to Buginese,

Javanese or Achenese kinship affiliation superseded the rather narrow categories of “race and religion” that have become so characteristic for the political discourses of pre- and post-colonial Malay society.⁴

The purpose of the British colonial administration to impose racial categories has been the subject of numerous hypotheses none of which is entirely convincing: neither the “divide-and-rule argument” nor the theory of “unrestricted immigration” explains why the strict ethnic divide has survived until today as a most influential identity marker requiring both Malays and Indians to fit into racial categories that determine their social and economic standing.

The overpowering apparatus of state bureaucracy administering the “Malay-based” New Economic Policies in the 1970s and 80s and the British colonial administration have one important thing in common: both have successfully attempted to create an institutional framework for certain ideological ends that needed to be justified in racial terms.

Let us look at both the emerging Malay and Indian institutionalized racial categories to understand why it has become so difficult for the Indian Muslims to fit into one of these two stereotyped “imagined communities”.

The initial goal of the British administration to create cheap wage labour has not only resulted in the massive influx of foreign, mainly Chinese and Indian, workers, it has also been the initial step in identifying race with economic performance. By retaining the traditional Malay structure of society, the British not only maintained the nominal position of the Malay aristocracy as the “protectors” of the Malays, they consequently also secured the continuous support of the rulers for the colonial system. Both the preservation of the Malay aristocracy as a distinctive class of administrators as the division of labour between a mainly rural Malay peasant society and a non-Malay urban merchant and workers community contributed to the institutionalization of racial images that portrayed the Malays as being in constant need of both political protection as economic support to be able to compete against the more enterprising Chinese and Indians.⁵

Hirschman shows that as a result of those policies of social imobility, Malay entrepreneurs indeed had considerable problems to recruit cheap Malay labour from the countryside that was readily available among the incoming migrant workers: The

flourishing Malay merchant communities that had contributed to the rise of Southeast Asian trading empires such as Srivijaya and Melaka had been reduced to the “lazy natives” being in constant need to reaffirm their standing in both racial and religious terms, the UMNO-slogan *bangsa, agama dan negara* (race, religion and state) being the logical extension of the ruler-ruled relationship based on loyalty, kinship affiliation and a narrow definition of ethnicity.⁶

Indians were viewed by the British as a docile, passive and cheap source of labour: The picture of the “Indian coolie” fitted into this perception even more than the one of the more independent Chinese labourer. However, the institutionalization of the Indian community as a whole as dependent workforce did not proceed as smoothly as the inculcation of the Malays into the colonial system. Despite the fact of not having a “protector” to defend their interests, the Indians emerged from a much greater variety of social and ethnic backgrounds, as the mostly homogeneous group of rural peasantry-oriented Malays.⁷ The interlinkages between Indian and Malay identity had already manifested itself from the eighteenth century onwards in the *Jawi Peranakan*: speaking Malay and adhering to Islam, the ethnic boundaries between the two remained far less pointed than between the Malay and Chinese. Nevertheless, the degree of ethnic identification of the *Jawi Peranakan* produced rather ambiguous results: on the one hand, Indian Muslims had been far more successful than the Malays to establish themselves together with the Chinese as the merchant class of the urban settlements under British rule, Penang and Melaka being two outstanding examples.

On the other hand it might have exactly been this “emancipation” from the traditional Malay *kerajaan* that prompted the *Jawi Peranakan* to question its perceptions of *bangsa* (race) and kinship that were being overhauled simultaneously by the British. Neither being part of the well-preserved traditional Malay community, nor belonging to the Indian wage labour migrants, the Indian Muslims emerged at the forefront of newly developing debates on Malay nationalism, Malay ethnicity and Islam.

Munshi Abdullah (1797-1854) tried to grasp the meaning of Malayness beyond the narrowly defined boundaries of the *kerajaan*. Being of Arab-Indian Muslim descent, he was part of a wider debate on Malay nationalism and Islam that culminated in the antagonism of the *kaum muda* (religious “reformers”) and *kaum tua* (“old guard”) over

the position of the *raja* (king) and the need to free Islam from its local Hindu-Buddhist heritage. The reformist newspaper *Al-Imam* that had been launched in 1907, further accentuated the discussion of terms such as *bangsa* to incorporate a wider array of ethnic backgrounds, such as Minangkabau, Acehnese or Malay-Indian into a future independent Malaysian nation. *Bangsa* and *agama* became the new buzzwords of an openly anti-establishment debate that intended to replace the main pillars of traditional Malay society.⁸ Would this concept have succeeded, the question of ethnic identity being classified by either adhering to the *Bumiputera* or Indian camp would probably not have arisen as such for the Indian Muslims.

The Malay Union debate of 1946/47 brought this debate on race and citizenship to a culminating point, even though there was much support from left wing Malay nationalists for the British plans to make multi-ethnicity the basis of a Malaysian "nation of intent", this concept could not stand up against the pressures of the conservative Malay elites that had found its political home in the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), pressing for a narrow definition of the Malay *bangsa* as it had been retained under the Malay royalty.

The continuation of the British racial segregation not only resulted in the shaping of a national identity according to ethnic grouping – which became already apparent in the name *Tanah Melayu*, the land of the Malays, being used by the Malays instead of the more multi-racial "Malaya – the focussing on Malay customs, language, religion and values as the cornerstone of the newly emerging nation prompted a similar orientation by the other ethnic groups. The formation of the Alliance government after independence in 1957 deepened these frictions. Frequently described as a system of elite accommodation, the three major ethnic groups represented by UMNO, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) were never able to come to the clear-cut bargain that the formal division into three ethnic pools suggested.⁹ Frictions within these groups and the emergence of inner-ethnic opposition parties seriously hampered the ability of the Alliance partners to ensure compliance from their ethnic constituencies.

Furthermore, the emergence of locally educated elites, no longer being obliged to adhere to the British value and education system, furthered the deepening ethnic division in which the accommodative bargaining policies were increasingly undermined by ethnic

appeals to secure political power. In such an atmosphere, ethnic generalizations putting “the Malays” against “the Chinese” were the slogan of the day, posing serious obstacles for the Indian community: being socially, culturally and religiously divided between Pakistani Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus and Christian converts, traders and rubber tappers, the need of racial affiliation overstretched the accommodative capacities of the Indian alliance partner, the MIC.

Being the smallest ethnic group representing a mere 9 percent of the Malaysian population, the Indians had been traditionally overshadowed by the other two large ethnic communities. The need to carve out a niche for political and economic survival and maintaining a patchwork of contrasting Indian identities once again resulted in the Indian Muslims being exposed to conflicting questions of adaptation, accommodation and emancipation that had characterized their position since the colonial period.

Bumiputeras, Indians and the New Economic Policy

Despite its questionable outcome, the New Economic Policy (NEP) introduced in 1971 in order to overcome the economic and educational backlog of the Malays, has frequently been cited as major point of departure for a heavily state-driven policy of regulative measures to increase the share of the *Bumiputeras* in the wealth of the country.¹⁰ Its two major objectives, to “alleviate poverty” and to “restructure Malaysian society” pointed to a slightly modified version of the traditional “bargaining policies” between the ethnic groups, being replaced by proportionally allocated benefits in the public and private sector, in education and administration.

The emergence of Bumiputeraism as an instrument of state patronage and reflection of the middle class-ambitions of a tiny segment of politically well-connected, business-minded Malays again revealed the weaknesses of a system of ethnic generalization. This system had worked in colonial times to create an imagined “Malay race” for political ends to be continuously used in order to create the perception of the underprivileged Malay, an image which again supposedly left the Indian Muslim community with the choice of ethnic identification: either joining the upward-mobile fold of the entrepreneurial

Bumiputeras to become part of the preferential quota system or to retain Indian identity in a rather underprivileged minority position.

The NEP as a tool of state-imposed racial categorization has however disguised a much more complex development of deep social frictions both within the Malay, Indian as Indian-Malay communities that has only come clearly into view after the Asia crisis of 1997 and its political tremors - signalling the deep dissatisfaction of large segments of society over uneven economic development, patronage and political favoritism: For the Malays, the restructuring efforts of the NEP had been relatively successful from the point of view of its intended target group, the emerging classes. Malay corporate ownership was rising from a mere 2 per cent in 1969 to over 20 per cent in 1990.¹¹ Under its successor, the National Development Policy (NDP), state-intervention was increasingly replaced by privatization policies, leaving the economy to the “free forces of the market”. With growing affluence particularly in the urban areas, the project of nation-building spelt out in the Vision 2020, for the first time seemed to reach beyond the ethnic appeals that had been characteristic for Malaysian politics for so long. On the other hand, social upward-mobility was hampered or even reversed for the lower middle and working classes by sharpened income inequalities and a resulting uneven economic development. During the late 1980s and early 1990s the widening gap between the wealthy *Melayu Baru* and the large numbers of *Bumiputeras* who so far had been employed in the government sector and now became the victims of the privatizations policies also accentuated the need for Indian Muslims in the lower income groups to identify themselves as Bumiputeras in order to gain access to the preferential status that had been maintained under the NDP as one of the major concessions to UMNO’s Malay centered policies.¹²

One of the wake-up calls for the possible ramifications of the inter-ethnic Malay-Indian bargaining over declining job opportunities, shrinking government handouts and deteriorating living conditions were the riots in Kampong Medan, one of Kuala Lumpur’s squatter areas in March 2001. The clashes that killed six and left 48 seriously wounded once revealed again that “years of economic growth had brought sky-scrapers and Starbucks – but also produced a large resentful class of have-nots”.¹³

If poverty has worked to trigger a shifting of identity from "Indian" to "Malay" among the working classes, the same is also true in the higher echelons of Malaysia's corporate society. From the Indian point of view, the economic restructuring under both NEP and NDP has provided far less opportunities, both in terms of ameliorating living standards as of political participation. This can be attributed partly to the lukewarm response of the government towards efforts to include Indians in poverty eradication programs¹⁴ – as the refusal of the then Prime minister, Tun Abdul Razak, to consider recommendations by the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), but also to various other reasons, the marginalized position of the Indians in general, insufficient backing from Indian politicians and the weak-bargaining position of the MIC within the National Front coalition being some of them.

At the same time, business opportunities have arisen for the tiny minority of well-connected politicians and entrepreneurs both within UMNO and the MIC after the privatization programme of the government came into effect since 1990. First attempts were made by the MIC in 1983 under its new president Samy Velly, to follow the Malay example of wealth distribution by setting up Maika Holdings, an investment company in clear imitation of the *Amanah Saham Nasional*, the National Trusteeship Agency. The initial intention to enable Indian workers to buy company shares and thus to participate in Maika's acquisition of equity from major Malaysian companies failed due to lacking government support and the tendency of the MIC leadership, notably Samy Vellu, to take advantage of the transaction by securing the majority of shares allocated by the government.¹⁵

Maika's involvement in major corporate companies such as TV3, Syarikat Telekom Malaysia Berhad or Edaran Otomobil Nasional Berhad further alienated the working classes and resulted in increasing factionalism between the Tamil-dominated MIC with its Hindu-based identity and other Indian communities such as the Indian Muslims. However, factors such as the degree of assimilation with the Malay community, mostly through intermarriage or the retained linkages with the Indian homeland have provided mixed reactions from the Indian Muslims facing the prominent political position of the MIC. A number of Indian Muslims have successfully ventured into Malay corporate

politics, such as the former Governor of the national bank, Bank Negara, Ali Abu Hassan, or the Minister for women and family development, Shahrizat Abu Jalil.

In other cases, a specific non-Malay Muslim identity has been retained. Prominent Indian Muslims businesses that had not to rely on the support of *Bumiputera* policy quotas have mostly succeeded because of the continued connection with Indian Muslims corporate networks abroad. The Penang based Kumpulan Barkath Berhad has successfully ventured into the import-export business, mainly in food supplies, and maintains strong linkages with the markets in India and China. Habib Jewels, a well-known family-owned jeweller, has been listed on the Kuala Lumpur stock exchange and is actively involved in the ASEAN markets apart from having an extensive network of outlets all over Malaysia.¹⁶ It is mostly in these small and middle scale private owned businesses that form a large part of the Malaysian private sector, where Indian Muslim identity has been maintained without any outside political or economic pressures. Not surprisingly, opposition towards the policies of the MIC has been strongest among the Mamak merchant classes of Kuala Lumpur and Penang that has resulted in frequent calls for political representation of the Indian Muslim community.

Darah Keturunan Keling: Political Bonds Reconsidered

Darah Keturunan Keling, denoting the descendants of Indian blood, has been a racial categorization dating back to the times of British colonialism. Its negative connotation in marking boundaries of ethnic identity have re-emerged in the Malaysian political debate, mostly over issues where Indians, “Tamil speaking Malays” or *Melayu jati* (“pure Malays”) have been competing over the allocation of economic benefits, land (the *wakaf* issue discussed below) or over the control of the political domain. With the creation of “imagined communities” in order to justify claims of resource allocation that have been carried out with much fervour both by UMNO as by the MIC over the past three decades, inter- and intra-ethnic tensions have been channeled into more institutionalized forms, which has resulted in both the formation of “off-spring parties” such as the Kongres Indian Muslim Malaysia (KIMMA) in 1979 or the Semangat 46 after the UMNO-split in 1988.¹⁷ The fervour that these smaller parties have shown in order to be admitted into the

fold of the big ethnic parties (Semangat 46 re-joined UMNO in 1995) is another reminder of Gladney's caption: The creation of majorities in Malaysia has been institutionalized to such an extent that both ethnically, but also politically diverging groups at the margins have hardly a chance to position themselves successfully in opposition to the dominating majority discourses.

KIMMA initially emerged over dissatisfaction within the Penang based Muslim league that acts as a representative of the large Indian Muslim community on the island over the disposition of funds. As a reflection of contradicting ethnic and religious loyalties, Indian Muslims had joined UMNO as early as 1957, resulting in the formation of several local party branches, the UMNO Tanjung that conducted their meetings in Tamil. The formation of KIMMA was intended to provide true political representation to the Indian Muslims, who, despite their close ties with the Malays, had continuously been denied access to both the favorable *Bumiputera* quota and political representation by UMNO. Due to the dominating position of the ruling *Barisan Nasional* (National Front), KIMMA had rather suffered a similar fate as other smaller parties that were quickly sidelined if they were not able to form – often short-lived- coalitions.¹⁸ Apart from the deep divisions within the Indian community over questions of representation, the new party had hardly any manoeuvring space politically unless it succeeded to push for a greater share of Indian Muslim participation within the government coalition.

After several futile attempts to join the BN, KIMMA became part of the Gagasan Rakyat Malaysia-coalition that had been established by several opposition parties as PAS, the UMNO-break away Semangat 46, Hamim and Berjasa in early 1989 trying to take advantage of the weakened and equally fractioned UMNO after its inner-party power contestations in 1987/88. This coalition as well as the parallelly launched Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah (Movement of the Unity of the Ummah) mainly failed because of PAS' dominating position within the coalition. Its insistence on a Malay-centered Islamic state would have only further aggravated the dilemma of the Indian Muslims to position themselves both in terms of religious and ethnic affiliation. As inner-Malay feuds over the role of Islam increased between S46 and PAS, the Chinese DAP left the opposition front, shortly afterwards followed by KIMMA but unlike S46 the party was not allowed back into the Malay fold by joining the BN.¹⁹

Also the second opportunity to challenge the government coalition passed in 1997-98, despite the Asia economic crisis, the Anwar affair and rising dissatisfaction reflected in the outcome of the November 1999 general elections that seemed to put the opposition in a favorable position as never before. Even before the sacking of Anwar in September 1998 precluded the violent street protests of the popular “reform-movement”, *reformasi*, in October 1998, the opposition seemed to be stuck in a self-paralyzing stupour, PAS being not able to challenge BN outside the Malay heartlands of the northern and east coast states, DAP continuously unable to explain to its Chinese electorate its tactical support for an Islamic state being advocated by PAS and KIMMA being deeply divided over a leadership struggle.

In March 1998 the party assembly had set up a committee in order to get rid of the party’s president, A. Sikandar Batcha and his vice-president over allegations of misuse of power – obviously the party faced the same problems of lacking accountability of its high ranking leaders that had been so symptomatic for the MIC under Samy Vellu. One year later, in February 1999, the party frictions reached a new climax with the submission to the Registrar of Societies to set up a new party, the *Angkatan Perpaduan Insan Malaysia* (Movement of Human Unity Malaysia, Apim) by KIMMA-incumbent Amir Amsaa Alla Pitchay.²⁰

At the same time, tensions were raising between PAS and KIMMA over allegations that during a PAS-*ceramah* (talk) in Khota Baru, Kelantan, Indian Muslims had been referred to as “*ular Mamak*” (“Mamak-snake”), prompting KIMMA to take legal action in filing a defamation suit against PAS.²¹ With the atmosphere poisoned between the two and with its previous experiences in APU, KIMMA did not make another attempt to join the emerging *Barisan Alternatif* (Alternative Front) coalition in late 1999. Instead KIMMA put forward another application to join the National Front, its president Sikandar Batcha submissively pledging that KIMMA would support the BN in the upcoming general elections, followed by another thrust of loyalty in late November stating that all 200 000 Indian Muslim voters would vote for the ruling coalition.²²

Despite KIMMA’s continued overtures the BN remained hesitant, the inclusion of four new parties into the coalition was considered by its executive council but later rejected.²³ In times where PAS had managed to make deep inroads into the Malay electorate by

campaigning for more accountability and Islamically inspired justice in governance during and after the 1999 elections, Mahathir had put Malay unity on the forefront of UMNO's political strategy since its general assembly in 2000. Adding another ethnically ill-defined party to the coalition could certainly not have served the purpose of enhancing the closing of Malay ranks vis-a-vis an ambitious and strong opposition.

Even the MIC has remained hesitant to overcome its traditional Hindu leanings, even though the debate over the representation of non-Tamil Indians has flared up again recently, particularly during the party's 56th General Assembly in May 2002.²⁴ The MIC's remaining but limited bargaining power within the BN rests on the pillars of a perceived and continued ethnic dividedness. Thus MIC's announcement that it would allow other Indian parties into its fold but that it would decline to merge with them confirmed the long-tested but increasingly contested arrangement in which only the construction of intra-ethnic unity enables the component parties within the BN coalition to lobby for their respective communities.²⁵

KIMMA plays it safe for the meantime, the support that it has displayed on numerous occasions both for the MIC and UMNO in the recent months suggests that if it cannot join the bigger fold of the BN coalition, it might at least hope for some bones thrown at it by its two "big brothers", UMNO and MIC, in the hope of receiving some benevolent attention in the future.

Capitalist Politics and Development: the Wakaf Issue

The administration and ownership of *wakaf* land in Malaysia – but also in the Islamic world in general - has always been an issue of clashing political and economic interests. Its initial goal of a welfare-oriented development of lands has been thwarted by competing interests between UMNO and PAS and the often inefficient administration of the Religious Councils of the states. Since the privatization policies of the 1990s, additional intra-ethnic rivalries have emerged over the definition of *Bumiputera* status to gain access to the profitable urban development projects of the new Malay *korporat* networks. To this extent, the original intention of *wakaf* as an historically institutionalized form of Islamic welfare has shown a remarkable continuity in its emerging shapes and

concepts that have often strayed far from the idea to set aside material possessions for the common good of the Muslim *ummah*. Not only has this concept been adjusted to market needs, as the appropriation of *wakaf* lands by guild associations and the business-ventures between mosques and markets particularly in the Middle East shows, but *wakaf* itself has acquired several contradicting meanings within the Muslim world.²⁶

Its basic tenets stating that *wakaf* donations cannot be reappropriated by the donor or his heirs or its initial purpose changed in any way, have been frequently challenged and the Malaysian case is no exemption to similar examples in Egypt, Lebanon, Pakistan and Indonesia where piety has been overruled by articulate particularistic interests.

In the case of Penang island, where Indian Muslims have been actively involved in the donation of *wakaf*, there have been specifications as to its use: *wakaf am* or public *wakaf* has permitted a much wider range of usage as the more restricted *wakaf khas* with special provisions for the heirs in terms of future rent collection, change of land titles and so on²⁷ and it is in this field, where Indian Muslims have managed to carve out a niche of relative economic autonomy.

Traditionally, *wakaf* in Malaysia has been closely related to the wealthy Indian Muslim merchant community. Already in the late 1770er, the Merican, Mohideen and Mydin business clans had arrived in Penang from India and donated 40 hectares of *wakaf* lands around the Kapitan Keling mosque in 1834.²⁸ The terms laid down in the donation to restrict the usage to purely religious purposes has been continuously questioned since then, the latest argument erupting between the heirs and the Religious Council of Penang state, Majlis Agama Islam Pulau Pinang, MAIPP, in 1999. The families claimed 60 hectares of land as being inherited (*tanah pusaka*), a claim which was later rebuffed by the religious council with evidence proving that it had acquired the land title in 1967.²⁹

As one of the dominating wholesalers not only in Penang, but on the whole peninsular with retail shops such as Mydin and Kamdar, the Indian Muslim merchant class did not have to rely on the state in order to acquire and develop *wakaf* lands. In other cases, the ill-defined *shariah* laws dealing with *wakaf* have been instrumental for the state to gain a foothold into land acquisition through the state religious councils: Traditionally, *wakaf* came under the jurisdiction of the British Lands Office but was turned over to the Religious councils of the states after independence. Even though these councils act as

trustees for land administration, their power has been gradually eroded by a shift from municipal to state government enforcement: the Penang state government has effectively taken over urban development since the late 1960s but officially maintains the trusteeship position of the councils under Section 92(1) of the State Religious Enactment.³⁰

Also in other parts of Malaysia, this general trend of “Bumiputrisation” of *wakaf* lands has further marginalized claims of non-Malay Muslim minorities. The building boom of the 1990s has not stopped short of *wakaf* lands that – often located in prime locations in city centers – have attracted the attention of developers. Instances where Muslim cemeteries coming under the *wakaf* have been turned into housing estates, oilpalm plantations or recreation sites have reflected the increasingly close interlinkages between the corporate sector and politics³¹: The networks of local religious councils, the Malay Chambers of Commerce, UMNO and Bumiputera companies have secured a firm hold over the claims of politically and economically less well-connected outsiders. Nagata cites a recent case in Penang where local hawkers have been told to join UMNO or to go through the proper political channels in order to get their market spruced up.³² This has further re-enforced the trend of lower class Indian Muslims to seek closer affiliation with *Bumiputera* identity to gain access to resources.

In order to avoid these categorizations of ethnic hierarchy, the Institute of Islamic Understanding (IKIM), itself being a government think tank, had proposed the creation of a supervisory body in close cooperation with Bank Islam, the State Religious Councils and the Malay Corporate Sector, which would effectively cement the dominating role of the government bodies involved and will lead to a further alienation of the lower middle and working classes.³³ A first step into this direction has already been taken by the introduction of the new *wakaf* development laws (*Akta Tanah Wakaf*) of the federal territory of Kuala Lumpur, which had been proposed as a nation-wide guideline by the federal Islamic development agency *Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia* in its recommendation to the cabinet in October 2001.³⁴

With Malaysia again on track towards Vision 2020, the leadership shift from Mahathir to Abdulllah Badawi and the need to instil local and foreign investors confidence, *wakaf* will continue to attract the kind of attention that was already spelled out in Anwar Ibrahim’s *Islam maju* (modern Islam)-philosophy in 1995: Currently valued at 100

Million Ringgit, *wakaf* symbolizes the mainstreaming of *Bumiputera* identity in one crucial sector of the economic domain, resulting in further intra-ethnic tensions within the Hindu-Muslim Indian community over questions of representation and allocation.

The Consequences of Marginalization: From Kampong Rawa to Kampong Medan

The consequences of continued marginalization of both the Hindu and Muslim Indian communities cannot be only attributed to the internal factors discussed above. In many instances the massive influx of foreign workers, many of them being Bangladeshi and Southern Indian Muslims, have not only contributed to a tightening in the competition for jobs, education and so on, but have certainly also rised the awareness among these groups for the frequent eruptions of Hindu-Muslim violence in India itself. The demolition of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, India in 1992 linked to supporters of the radical Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which was elected to lead the federal government shortly afterwards, had received much coverage in the local Indian press. The unsolved citizenship problems of imigrant working class Indians to Malaysia, who in many instances had remained Indian nationals or were denied Malaysian passports and had thus retained family linkages with India, had made a full integration into the Malaysian labour market even more difficult.

The eruption of the Kampong Rawa riots in Penang between Hindu and Muslim Indians in March 1998 again brought the various ailments of the Indian community into focus: initially the conflict had emerged over disputes between a Hindu temple and a neighboring Indian Muslim mosque over alleged disturbances during Friday prayers that coincided with the ringing of temple bells on the temple compound. The ensuing confrontation between Hindu und Muslim Indian youths was quickly curtailed by troops of the Malaysian Federal Reserve Unit-riot police troops, rumours however persisted over a large-scale intra-ethnic riot and were quickly spread over the Internet.³⁵

At this point, the state government, the MIC and the temple and mosque committees had reached an agreement to relocate the temple to a majority Hindu-neighborhood in the vicinity. The deities were moved the following day, witnessed by large Hindu crowds who questioned the rationale released by state officials, that the temple had been

constructed illegally and had to move because the Chinese proprietor claimed the lot back. With increasing intrusion of private developers into *wakaf* lands, disputes over the relocation of land titles and unjustified claims being made by the private sector had so far been a problem that mostly affected the Indian Muslim community – things took an ironic turn on the next day, March 29, 1998. Through word of mouth, pamphlets and electronic media, Muslims were called to show up in force to assist the state authorities in preventing further Hindu disturbances – a typical example for the frequently offered Indian Muslim allegiance to the state which has been disappointed so often.

After the Friday prayers on that day, a crowd of around five to seven thousand people gathered outside the Kampong Rawa mosque grounds, at ten-fold increase compared to the usual numbers, but this time, Muslim Indians were largely outnumbered by Malays, again a telling sign of the symbolisms of ethno-religious structures of power and mobilization, the whole issue had become mainstream business in which the claims, problems and heartaches of the sidelined *mamak* were quickly forgotten. Economic marginalization after all is also a growing problem of the Malay working classes.

The arrival of the then deputy Prime minister Anwar Ibrahim as peace-broker enhanced these images. Anwar, himself actively involved in the development of Penang *wakaf* lands at that time in close collaboration with the local religious council (MAIPP) and his family company, Shahadah Holdings, had no interest in upsetting a well-established system of elite profiteering despite his frequent appeals to a more human approach in capitalis development.³⁶ Thus, the alarming signals of social and economic marginalization that only less than three years later re-emerged in the Kampong Medan riots, Kuala Lumpur, in a much more violent form, were downplayed as a “local affair”. As Anwar lobbied for support, also the Penang Chief minister, Khoo Tsu Koon, joined in urging the parties involved for a restoration of calm. Both messages were circulated in the television and press – being the only exception from a virtual self-imposed news-clackout of the local press during the incident.

Before the riots died down on March 29, some attacks of local Indian Muslim restaurants, Hindu temples and a mosque were recorded on Penang island, followed by rumours of a curfew. Until early April 185 arrests were made, mostly local youths, most of whom were released shortly afterwards.³⁷ The announcement of the federal government during the

same month to submit a proposal to the cabinet to give priority to crisis management in the training of police officers, betrayed the impression given earlier, that the Kampong Rawa incident had made a purely local impact.³⁸ The wider ranging even international dimensions of the incident were confirmed, when the police started to investigate possible links between the arrests of four Penang men, who had supposedly been involved in bomb attacks in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, in February 1998, and the Penang riots. Allegations of their membership in the radical Islamist Al-Ummah group were made but the results of these investigations were never published.³⁹

Tensions continued to simmer in Penang's Indian quarter "Little India" and elsewhere in Indian neighborhoods on the island, as parts of Jelutong and Gelugor. Apart from a beautification programme in Little India launched in early 2003, turning parts of it into a pedestrian mall, the root causes of violence, unemployment, education, inadequate housing etc. have hardly been addressed on either state or federal level. In many instances, it is thus religion, Islam, playing an increasingly important part in the discourses of empowerment for these marginalized groups.

Kebangkitan Islam and its Indian Dimensions

The linkages existing between Malaysian Islam and India are numerous and can be traced to various levels. Both Mahathir and Anwar Ibrahim, the main-propagators of the Malaysian Islamic resurgence, *kebangkitan Islam*, have an Indian Muslim background. Nik Aziz Nik Mat, chief minister of the east coast state of Kelantan, has been educated in Northern India as his party, the Islamist Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) retains strong linkages with the Deobandi School of Northern India which has substantially influenced its policies, mostly in the cultural domain. These discourses have to such an extent entered mainstream Islam in the last decades that they become the prevalent topics of both the government's and the opposition's Islamizations slogans as on the Islamic state, Islamization of society, Islam and civil society and so on.

However, the Indian influence can still be traced in many instances despite all efforts to create a pure, even "arabized" Islam: PAS' efforts to establish an Islamic state based on *shariah* legislation stressing an almost ritualized set of rules for daily life (*Hudud-*

legislation, separation of the sexes, ban on alcohol and “un-Islamic” cultural practices) is a direct reflection of the Deobandi perception of the relation between Islam and the state. Similar to their Wahhabi counterparts in Saudi Arabia, the Deobandis believe in a precise set of rules issued in a permanent flow of *fatwas* and have constantly pressured the state to let their concepts of Islam become a part of national legislation.⁴⁰ PAS’ efforts to Islamize the jurisdiction have only been hampered because of the unwillingness of the Mahathir administration to compromise the secular nature of the federal constitution.

In contrast to the Deobandis, the India-based Jemaat Tabligh has kept out of politics and has concentrated on missionary work and education to transform society into an Islamic one. Since Jemaat Tabligh had been founded in 1925 by Maulana Ilyas in New Delhi, it had vowed to pursue the spreading of Islam through missionary work and education, leading to a gradual Islamization of society.⁴¹ This concept, being characterized as *shariah haraki* by the Pakistani scholar Maulana Maududi and operating independently from the heavy-handed intervention of the state and the *ulama*, has also been adopted by parts of the Malaysian *dakwah*-movement in the early 1970s.

One of its leading representatives, Anwar Ibrahim’s Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM), the Malaysian Muslim Youth Movement, has however never managed to overcome the ambiguities of a traditionally Malay-centered Islam and the universalist claims of the Islamic resurgence. Despite Anwar’s inclusion into the Mahathir administration in 1982 it has not so much been Islamic universalism, one of the aims of the *dakwah*-groups, but a Malay-centered developmentalism that has characterized the two decades of the Mahathir administration. To that extent the question of integrating Muslim minorities has only posed itself in terms of securing a Malay majority in order to further secure a leading political role for the *Bumiputeras*.

Considering this limited manoeuvring space, ABIM’s and Jemaat Tabligh’s cautious approach towards politics has mostly saved both movements from the often authoritarian government onslaught on “deviationist” Islamic groups and minority discourses that have characterized Mahathir’s attempt to maintain control through the “hegemonic triangle” of moral values, developmentalism and political conformity.⁴²

Nevertheless, both groups have often teetered on the brink of being banned. In ABIM’s case it was the arrest of Anwar Ibrahim in September 1998 that has prompted the

government to “purge” local universities of ABIM-supporters. Consequently ABIM has not only expressively abstained itself from debates as the one on the Islamic state to avoid being ideologically associated with the fundamentalist opposition (PAS), the organization has even returned to its origins, defending and promoting civil society and highlighting human rights abuses – a similarly controversial topic.⁴³

Unlike ABIM that has managed to enter the Islamic mainstream debate in Malaysia, Jemmat Tabligh has remained always an outsider. It has always focused on a more informal way of propagating Islam in private gatherings, through the missionary work of its followers and annual meetings that are organized in Southern India, mostly in Bangladesh and Pakistan. To a certain extent, Jemaat Tabligh has thus succeeded to keep out of the ethnic debate that closely relates Islam to Malayness and has subsequently avoided ABIM’s ambiguous course between Islam and Malay nationalism.

Because of its insistence of pursuing “alternative” Islamic discourses, Jemaat Tabligh has however attracted the kind of attention it initially tried to avoid: its activities on the community level such as organizing *rotong-royong* (mutual help)-programs in local mosques, have prompted the intervention of several state governments.⁴⁴ After some accusations against Jemaat Tabligh had arisen on the state level, Melakas chief minister Abdul Rahim Tamby Chik banned the movement in early 1992.⁴⁵ Other states as Sabah and Johor have considered similar moves, but have not taken further steps since the federal government has so far not banned the movement altogether. Since Jemaat Tabligh poses no direct threat to the set-up of Islamic federal policies and is not a Malaysia-based organization, its *tabligh*-activities have only been closely monitored with occasional warnings in local media not to associate too closely with the group. Lately, Jemaat Tabligh has re-emerged in the headlines because of its perceived linkages with al-Qaeda.⁴⁶ Since Malaysia is cooperating closely with the United States on the “war on terror”, this might also have a future impact on the policies towards Jemaat Tabligh and its *dakwah*-activities in the country as on the involvement of Malaysian citizens abroad.

The Arab Case

The Arab-Malay minority has faced much lesser problems in adjusting itself to the Malay-Muslim majority than the Indian Muslims. Both being rooted in Islam that has been perceived as an “Arab religion” particularly after the emergence of the Islamic resurgence in the late 19th century and again in the 1970s as well as in prestigious marriage alliances with Malay royalty, the Arabs have been well-established in Malay society. Since it is much more profitable to be Malay both economically and politically, Malays of Arab descent have also established alliances with Malay chambers of commerce and have been admitted to UMNO.⁴⁷ Especially since the Islamization of UMNO’s policies after Anwar Ibrahim being co-opted into the Mahathir administration in 1982, Malays of Arab descent as members of the al-Attas family have played an active role in the creation of Islamic discourses.

In the government think-tank, the Institute of Islamic Understanding (*Institut Kefahaman Islam Malaysia*, IKIM), founded in 1991, the then director and leading Malaysian intellectual, Syed Naguib al-Attas helped to formulate a new state ideology that was featured prominently in Mahathir’s Vision 2020 in its attempt to reconcile modernization with Islamic universalism.⁴⁸ With the opening of the International Islamic University (IIU) in 1982, a new influx of Arabs, both as lecturers and students, has revived the old traditions of Arab-Malay trade linkages. Initially sponsored by Saudi-Arabia, IIU has been taken over by the Malaysian government and has played a prominent role in the “Islamization of Knowledge”, both in new discourses of modernization, democratization as on models of Islamic governance. These discourses that often blend local experiences of modernity and social change with its doctrinal “Arab” Islamic roots, have created new opportunities for Malaysia to initiate dialogues on modernization within and beyond the Islamic world, the latest example being its role as a host of the 10th session of the Islamic Summit Conference (OIC) being held in October 2003 under the motto “Knowledge and Morality for the Progress of the Ummah” in the new administrative capital, Putrajaya.⁴⁹

Arab-Malay relations dating back to the early times of inter-Asian trade have always been seen as a rather one-sided affair in which the Islamic periphery has profited from the knowledge, religious “correctness” and cultural impact of the Arab heartlands. It remains

to be seen which impact Arab-Malaysian Islamic discourses are going to have on the Middle East and to which extent they will influence processes of change in this region.

Conclusion

The Indian Muslims in Malaysia have continuously suffered from the overlapping identities that have left them in between the various ethnic identities. Neither being fully recognized as Indian or Malays, their status has been additionally complicated by intra-Indian cultural differences, language and social background. Also Islam as a strong cultural and ethnic identity marker for the Malay majority has not succeeded in leveling these frictions, rather the political setting of Malaysia has resulted in various attempts of the Indian Muslims to enter the Malay fold in order to enjoy the benefits of the *Bumiputera* status. These attempts have often been rejected from both the Malay and Indian political representatives, Indian Muslim bargaining power over the allocation of funds being too limited. Consequently, Indian Muslim identity has been constantly shifting: as “Malays” they have been incorporated into the *Bumiputera* mainstream, as Indians they have been left out by the MIC and its Hindu-oriented representatives – nevertheless Indian Muslim identity has reflowered from the traditions of inter-Asian trade. As Jawi Peranakan or descendants of the *Darah Keturunan Keling* (DKK) Indian Muslims have been marginalized as the under-privileged *Mamak* of the lower cast and working class groups. Islam has not been able to bridge these differences, it has rather accentuated the diverging ethnic and religious loyalties in the multi-cultural setting of Malaysia.

Notes

¹ See Gladney, Dru C. (ed.), *Making Majorities, Constituting The Nation in Japan, Korea, China, Malaysia, Fiji, Turkey and the United States*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998, p. 1.

² The *Bumiputera* status, introduced as part of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1971, gives preferential status to the Malays in all sectors of public life, as in education, the private sector or the government.

³ The term "Imagined Communities" is borrowed from the work of Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities, Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 1983.

⁴ For a discussion of the interlinkages between feudal and nationalist discourses in Malaya and independent Malaysia see the study of Shaharuddin b. Maaruf, *Malay Ideas on Development from Feudal Lord to Capitalist*, Petaling Jaya: Fajar Bakti, 1988.

⁵ The creation of racial images features prominently in the argument of Anthony Milner, *Ideological Work in Constructing the Malay Majority in Gladney, Dru C., op. cit., 1998, pp. 151-172.*

⁶ See Hirschman, Charles, *The Making of Race in Colonial Malaya: Political Economy and Racial Ideology*, in: *Sociological Forum*, 1, No. 2, 1986, pp. 330-361. On merchant communities: Sinnappah Arasaratnam, *Islamic Merchant Communities of the Indian Subcontinent in Southeast Asia*, Kuala Lumpur: Universiti Malaya, 1989.

⁷ Government in its role as the "protector" of the Malays – from the role of the Malay *raja* to its continuations in UMNO see the insightful analysis of Chandra Muzaffar, *Protector? An Analysis of the Concept and Practice of Loyalty in Leader-Led Relationship Within Malay Society*, Penang: Aliran, 1979.

⁸ The clash between the Malay concepts of the traditionalist *kerajaan* and nationalism as well as their overlapping orchestrated for political ends in both Peninsular Malaya and Sumatera are discussed in Ariffin Omar, *Bangsa Melayu, Malay Concepts of Democracy and Community 1945-50*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1993.

⁹ For example in Means, Gordon P., *Malaysian Politics, the Second Generation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991, pp. 2-4.

¹⁰ See for example Jomo, K. S., *A Question of Class, Capital, the State and Uneven Development in Malaysia*, Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1986; Means, Gordon P., *op. cit.* 1991, pp. 23-27; Hilley, John, *Malaysia: Mahathirism, Hegemony and the New Opposition*, London: Zed Books, 2001, pp. 52-60.

¹¹ Khoo Boo Teik, *Beyond Mahathir, Malaysian Politics and Its Discontents*, London: Zed Books, 2003, p. 19.

¹² Uneven development and the widening gap between the different income groups is discussed in Abdul Rahman Embong, *Social Transformation, the State and the Middle Classes in Post-Independent Malaysia*, in: Zawawi Ibrahim (ed.), *Cultural Contestations, Mediating Identities in a Changing Malaysian Society*, London: Asean Academic Press, 1998, pp. 93-116, particularly pp. 99-100.

¹³ Elegant, Simon, *Neighborly Hatred*, in *Time*, vol. 157, no. 12, 26 March 2001, pp. 16-17, quotation: p. 17.

¹⁴ Selvakumaran Ramachandran, *Indian Plantation Labour in Malaysia*, Kuala Lumpur: S. Abdul Majeed & Co, 1994, pp. 306-309.

¹⁵ Jalleh, Martin, *Still Awaiting the "New Sunrise"*, in *Aliran Monthly* 20 (11/12), 2000, pp. 1-8.

¹⁶ On the business ventures of Kumpulan Barkath Sdn. Bhd. see *The Star*, Business News Report, 24 February 1995; on the expansion of Habib Jewels: *Habib Jewels Looks to Listing on KLSE*, in *New Straits Times*, 17 March 1995.

¹⁷ The story of Semangat 46 and the opposition coalition front *Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah (APU)* is told in Stark, Jan, *Kebangkitan Islam, islamische Entwicklungsprozesse in Malaysia*, Hamburg: Abera, 1999, pp. 56-63.

¹⁸ Khoo Boo Teik is discussing the tradition of coalition politics in Malaysia as a stabilizing factor of its multi-ethnic society: Khoo Boo Teik, *op. cit.*, 2003, pp. 159-164.

¹⁹ "Kimma tarik diri daripada Gagasan Rakyat", in: *Berita Harian*, 15 June 1995.

²⁰ "Kimma pecat presiden, timbalan", in: *Berita Harian*, 2 March 1998; "Bekas ahli Kimma tubuh Apim", in: *Berita Harian*, 12 February 1999.

²¹ "Kimma mahu dakwah PAS di mahkamah", in: *Berita Minggu*, 15 August 1999.

²² "Kimma serah permohonan sertai BN", in: *Berita Minggu*, 29 August 1999; "Kimma yakin pengundi India pilih BN", in: *Berita Harian*, 27 November 1999.