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Studies in identity-making

Reviewed by Chong Seck Chim

CULTURAL CONTESTATIONS

Mediating Identities in a Changing Malaysian Society

Edited by Zawawi Ibrahim

(ASEAN Academic Press, 204 pages)

MANY leading universities in the world have set up centres to study changing events in Southeast Asia. That in Kyoto University recently issued a special Malaysian edition for its journal. This collection of essays is now published in hardback, introduced by Professor Zawawi Ibrahim of Universiti Malaysia Sarawak.

The recurrent themes are culture and identity, interlinked and central to "the challenge of creating a 'united Malaysian nation' or a Bangsa Malaysia" emphasised by Dr Mahathir in his Vision 2020.

The themes are much ramified; so are the essays themselves. The more so as, like mathematicians with their symbols and formulae, sociologists have developed their own writing style, packed with deconstructed words and loaded with subliminal meaning. So it is a hard grind for the ordinary reader to get the drift, as one might say.

This is particularly true of Prof Shamsul's 'Debating about Identity in Malaysia'. Chock-full of unfamiliar words and phrases, it is a piece that takes effort to make reason of.

As he sees it, there is an "authority-defined" vs an "everyday-defined" version of identity. This contestation calls for a mediation, in effect a compromise. Instead of "taking the Malay-Bumiputera 'authority-defined' notion of 'national identity' or 'nationhood' (Bangsa Malaysia) as given ... the 'everyday' dynamics of the 'nation(s) of intent' articulations amongst the various Bumiputera and non-Bumiputera components of the Malaysian populace" should also be considered.

These everyday dynamics are the "voices from below" (or "subaltern voices"), and Zawawi's own essay ably puts their case. Its title may be obfuscating - 'The Making of a Subaltern Discourse in the Malaysian Nation-State: New Subjectivities and the Poetics of Orang Asli Dispossession and Identity' - but the contents are not. The "peoplespeak" that is much quoted, especially, would be quite delightful if it were not so pathetic sometimes. Here is one example:

We're always being shifted about (asyik ke pindah saja) ... Before the government said these Orang Asli always shift, shift, shift and shift, from hill to hill, from hill to hill (Orang Asli ni selalu pindah pindah ke pindah pindah ke pindah bukit ke bukit bukit ke bukit.) Now it's the government that wants to shift the Orang Asli ... Just as we're about to tap the rubber, we have to move (Baru nak menoreh, dah pindah).

Identity-wise, they are "denied belonging or being disappropriated from indigenesness" - they suffer from an "othering" crisis.

The Chinese have adapted better to the changing pressures. In discussing 'Chinese Responses to Malay Hegemony in Peninsular Malaysia (1957-1996)', Heng Pek Koon concludes that far from "the foreign image of Malaysia as a country hobbled by internal ethnic divisions, the Chinese and Malays have demonstrably been drawn closer by a productive and dynamic symbiosis". But there are still the subaltern voices.

Abdul Rahman Embong in his essay on 'Social Transformation, the State and the Middle Classes in Post-Independence Malaysia' takes pains, though, to point out that even if the NEP and NDP have created many successful

Malay entrepreneurs, the Chinese have also prospered. And Shamsul adds that not recognising this would be a form of academic dishonesty, and helps to perpetuate divisive, ethnicised knowledge.

So the dichotomy of Malay-Chinese rivalry is always to the fore in this discussion of identity and contestation. Apart from the Orang Asli, no other Malaysian community is mentioned, because "it is impossible to do justice to the empirical totality of the Malaysian situation".

Even so, the essays offer new perspectives on many outstanding issues. In a way, the writers are saying that it is time to pause from our preoccupation with economic development to take stock of where we are going as a nation. The didactic flavour of the essays, though, will be a distraction.

Not all the essays are so learned, however. Maier's 'A Chew of Sugar Cane: Ahmad Kotot's "Hikayat Percintaan Kasih Kemudaan"' is in praise of a master story-teller who, writing in an earlier age, only received 50 free copies of his work as honorarium.

The story is simple: a restless youth falls madly in love with a widow, older than he. His inapt suit is resented by both families. After bumbling through a series of assignations, told with verve and much ribald humour, true love finally triumphs and the couple lived happily ever after.

Maier excerpts from the story with loving care, as a lapidary might, polishing a gemstone to bring out its brilliance. His own style also sparkles, helped by the Jawi original of the author, as this extract shows:

Oh Lady Zamrud, so beautiful, so noble, verily I say unto you that I came here with the intention and the will of coming to know one another and love one another ... I realise that I have been hit by a serious heart disease (it is not cured by eating those peppermints of 30 cents a bottle) really only you, Lady Zamrud, could give an antidote and could cure me so that I feel good ... that is how the tricks sound that a man applies to a woman, he tries to please her, he tries to rip her heart apart and puts the key of his lust in the secret coffin of her womanhood.

You might ask, as I did, what place this rollicking tale could have in the scheme of things, amidst all the brainy dialectics that went on before.

Well, Maier thinks it is possible "to read Kotot's tale primarily as a sociological or ethnographic treatise on Malay village life in the 1920s". Linguistically, too, the story is a masterpiece, "playing with what must have been oral forms of telling a tale and perpetuating the tradition of manuscript writing in a sophisticated manner by constantly mixing them with the sounds and scenes of Malay village life".

This is how the story begins:

Alkish tersebutlah suatu cerita pada zaman yang telah lalu sanya adalah seorang perempuan janda yang bernama Zamrud di sebuah desa di dalam sebuah negeri yang besar sedang berumur dua puluh tahun. Maka rupanya Zamrud itu terlalulah molek serta dengan comelnya dan tabiat janda muda ini sangat peramah dan budi bahasanya pun elok. Dari karena itulah menark asyik dan berahi segala laki-laki muda berkehendakkan dia.

Later Malay writing tended to be too serious, weighed by the burden of creating a bahasa kebangsaan. The editor sums it all up:

Maier's piece underscores the pathos of such identity-making; it laments the inability of modern Malay writers to 'laugh' and to indulge in Ahmad Kotot's light-hearted humour and fun. Closer to home, and more recently, it reminds us of the aggressive corporate monsters we have created in our midst in the name of Malay development!

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