

the Malays

Anthony Milner

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THE MALAYS

Anthony Milner

There is something mercurial about being labeled a 'Malay'. Connotations run the gamut – from Joseph Conrad's mysterious and dangerous pirates to the 'lazy natives' of colonial-era economies. Another early stereotype tagged them as the 'best-mannered' gentlemen of the East. More modern portraits point to the 'New Malays' as entrepreneurs of a modern, triumphant Malaysia, skillful region-builders of ASEAN, and a people divided over the proper role of Islam. Their geographical boundaries aren't much clearer. Often, the Malays are said to consist of groups clustered on the Malay Peninsula and along coasts and rivers of Sumatra and Borneo. Sometimes they are described as a vast race reaching across Indonesia and the Philippines and on to Madagascar.

So just who are the Malays? This provocative study poses the question and considers how and why the answers have changed over time, and from one region to another. Anthony Milner develops a sustained argument about ethnicity and identity in an historical, 'Malay' context. *The Malays* is a comprehensive examination of the origins and development of Malay identity, ethnicity, and consciousness over the past five centuries.



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To Claire, two esteemed professors, and six
fine children



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Preface and Acknowledgements

‘The Malays’: the phrase throws up many images. One might recall Joseph Conrad’s mysterious, dangerous pirates; the best-mannered gentlemen of the East; the ‘lazy natives’ of the colonial economies; the ‘New Malay’ entrepreneurs of modern, triumphant Malaysia; the skilful region-builders of ASEAN; the supporters of a multitude of monarchies and royal courts unimaginable in Europe or elsewhere in the Asian region; a people divided over the proper role of Islam; a Southeast Asian front in the struggle against terrorism. There is something mercurial about the signifier ‘Malay’. Thinking about these images, we can rightly wonder – just who are these people? What is the essence of ‘Malayness’?

The task of writing a book on ‘the Malays’ is daunting. A question from the outset is, exactly who ought to be called ‘Malay’? According to one type of classification, used by some ideologues today and rejected by most scholars, ‘the Malays’ number 350 millions, and live across a vast territory from Papua in the East through Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand to Madagascar in the West, and up through the Philippines to Taiwan. And then we have to consider the ‘Malay’ communities in Sri Lanka and South Africa.

The scholarly literature about ‘the Malays’ is enormous. The Dutch and British officials who administered ‘Malay’ territories were pioneers in their description and analysis; North American, Japanese and Australian researchers have been active especially over the last half-century, and all this in addition to the major research that has been undertaken in Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Brunei, the Philippines, Thailand and Sri Lanka. Historians, language and literature specialists, anthropologists, political scientists, geographers, economists – these, and more, have been developing ‘Malay studies’ for decades, supplementing the investigations of the scholar-officials of the colonial period. ‘Malay studies’ has become an exciting field.



and the research conversation in which scholars tend to be engaged is remarkable for the spirit of collaboration as well as debate.

Even if one could master this great body of literature, I do not think a book written today on 'the Malays' would ever seek to convey the type of authority assumed by the colonial specialists. We do not write now about 'the Real Malay' (as governor Sir Frank Swettenham did a century ago); we do not employ confident brush strokes to portray 'the character' of a people and what might once have been called social and cultural facts. Questions of perspective are today nearly always present: how 'the Malays' saw and see their own situation, and just what categories the outside observer has (or might have) employed, have thus become matters of compelling interest.

Inevitably, this book reflects my own research experience and focuses on the particular issues and debates which have caught my interest, and often puzzled me. I try to give the study breadth – in considering social change over many centuries and in the range of 'Malay' communities which I cover – but my preoccupations will be evident. In particular I ponder the issue of who are 'the Malays', and ask how they became 'Malay' and what it means to be a 'Malay'. One thing that has intrigued me in particular is the often-stated 'Malay' anxiety about a lack of permanence – a fear sometimes expressed in terms of an emphatic denial that 'the Malays will disappear from this world'.

This book focuses on how the idea of 'being Malay' developed among the people themselves. I am interested in the history of ideas, and think this has been a relatively neglected area in 'Malay studies'. After discussing the early historical development of the people who were eventually to call themselves 'Malay', and then the particular Muslim civilization they forged, I examine the emergence and the 'localization' of the concept of the 'Malay race' or 'Malay ethnicity'. This process began in the colonial period and has then been influenced in varying fashions in the several nation states into which 'Malays' have been incorporated, sometimes happily, sometimes not. Being 'Malay', it seems to me, means different things in different places, and at different times. In certain contexts, I would suggest, it has entailed a fusion between Western notions of ethnicity and older, local 'Malay' concepts of community.

Reflecting on 'concepts of community' in the modern and certainly the pre-colonial era, I have in fact become increasingly convinced that speaking of 'race' and 'ethnicity' – categories that have had a vital impact on the manner in which we have organized and represented the world around us over the last two centuries – has often caused misunderstanding. As I worked on this book in Japan and Germany,

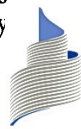
reading about developments in these and other countries, I found it more helpful to think about 'Malayness' rather than 'the Malays' – and in general about 'civilization' rather than 'ethnicity'.

One of the strengths of the Blackwell's 'Peoples' series is that it is not nation-state-based. Dealing with people, such as 'the Malays', who cross numerous state borders, offers an opportunity to adopt new perspectives – particularly with respect to what nation building itself has meant in social and cultural, as well as political, terms. Taking a post- (or pre-) nation-state perspective may also assist in speculating about the future.

One immediate concern is whether the Asian region will continue to be configured on the basis of the colonial entities that were forged largely by Europeans in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Those of us who live in or close to this region are perhaps especially anxious to determine which social or religious forces are likely to be influential over the next half-century and more. The role of Islam is deservedly receiving attention in this light, as is the re-emergence of China as a paramount regional power. In the past decades some proponents of a 'Malay world' consciousness have contemplated a time when what they see as a pre-colonial 'Malay' unity will be restored. Although I think this is unlikely, the angle of vision required in studying 'the Malays' rather than specific nation states does encourage caution – making one wary about discounting altogether the possibility that a specifically 'Malay' vision may have an 'international' potency in the future. Having said this, I will also draw attention to the argument that suggests the opposite might take place: that the idea of a 'Malay people' could become much reduced in significance in the medium future. To make a judgement on this matter (as on many others) requires close consideration of what the phenomenon 'Malay' really is, and in what new ways the meaning may change.

This book was written primarily at the Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa (Tokyo University of Foreign Studies). I should like to thank the current Director, Professor Kazuo Ohtsuka, and previous Directors, Professor Motomitsu Uchibori and Professor Koji Miyazaki, for their support and hospitality. I am also grateful to Professor Vincent Houben who invited me to Humboldt University in Berlin for three months to participate in the German Research Council project on 'Changing Representations of Social Order' – an experience which has helped me to think about a number of central conceptual issues.

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Jane Drakard was generous as a reader and critic, and I am deeply grateful for her many questions and suggestions. Claire Milner read through the entire manuscript, encouraging me to rethink and rewrite – and for this and her many other contributions to my life I give loving thanks.

Anthony Milner
Fuchu City

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Anthony Milner is Basham Professor of Asian History at the Australian National University. He was Visiting Professor at the Research Institute for the Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa (Tokyo) in 2007, and Raffles Visiting Professor at the National University of Singapore in 2002. His writings on 'the Malays' include *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya* (1995, 2002) and *Kerajaan: Malay Political Culture on the Eve of Colonial Rule* (1982).

Thinking about ‘the Malays’ and ‘Malayness’

Today – even employing a relatively narrow definition of ‘Malay’ – ‘the Malays’ are settled across a wide area. Figures are often difficult to determine with accuracy, but apart from the 12 million ‘Malays’ in Peninsular Malaysia (with more than 300,000 in Sabah and some 500,000 in Sarawak) (Saw 2007: Ch. 5), the year 2000 census in Indonesia put the total there at 7 million (located mainly in the Riau Archipelago, the coastal areas of Sumatra and Kalimantan); in Singapore there are more than half a million; and in Brunei a quarter of a million. There are 1.3 million in southern Thailand (according to an *International Herald Tribune* report of 26 February 2007); and then further afield some 70,000 in Sri Lanka and perhaps 180,000 in the ‘Cape Malay’ community of South Africa. Only in Malaysia and Brunei are ‘the Malays’ the majority community.

Who are ‘the Malays’?

In the very act of attempting a survey such as this from public documents, the question begins to emerge of just who should be described as ‘Malay’. It is a question that in one form or another will concern us throughout this book, and puzzling about it has eventually led me to write about ‘Malayness’ rather than ‘the Malays’. By one classification – proposed by certain ‘Malay’ activists and not accepted by the majority of scholars – virtually the whole population of Indonesia (at least to the western part of Papua) and most of the people of the Philippines can be defined as ‘Malay’: that would give a total of some 350 million in all. The Marino of Madagascar are also occasionally added; and there are the Chams of Cambodia and Vietnam. Confronted with this list, the scholarly response tends to urge that

"The Malays is a must read book for those interested not only in the ethnic Malays in Southeast Asia but also in the broader field of identity study in the social sciences."

SHAMSUL A. B., INSTITUTE OF ETHNIC STUDIES, UNIVERSITI KEBANGSAAN MALAYSIA

"The Malays is an important contribution to the literature on the varied and changing meanings of what it is to be Malay by one of the most eminent historians of the peoples on insular and peninsular Southeast Asia. This book provides an interesting case study of the way in which group identities are 'constructed' and reconstructed in particular social and political contexts. Broad ranging in both his temporal and geographical scope and meticulously scholarly in his presentation of evidence, Milner produces fresh insights into the history and possible future of the Malays."

JOEL S. KAHN, LA TROBE UNIVERSITY, AUSTRALIA

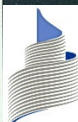
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