

TOPICS IN ASIAN HISTORY

The Development of a Plural Society in Malaya

Graham Saunders



TOPICS IN ASIAN HISTORY

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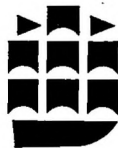
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The Development of a
Plural Society in Malaya

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M. A., Dip.Ed. (Adelaide)



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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this series, TOPICS IN ASIAN HISTORY, is to include in one booklet all the relevant information about each subject. The topics themselves are those which are generally considered the most important in any course dealing with the modern history of Asia, and in fact provide the frame-work around which any such course would be built.

In this series particular attention has been given to the major regional powers China, Japan and India and to selected countries of Southeast Asia, such as Indonesia and Malaysia/Singapore. We believe that students who read through the topics, country by country, will have sufficient detailed knowledge to enable them to achieve success in the A level General Certificate of Education, the Higher School Certificate or in similar examinations.

The series is geared to the needs of the student, who is taking this level of examination. The booklets do not attempt to give brief, concise histories of individual countries; rather they examine in depth the most important, significant and sometimes controversial, problems and events affecting each country in the period under review, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The booklets are serious contributions to the study of the period, they are based on the latest sources and give to the busy student a digest of current thinking on each topic.

It is virtually impossible to include in one source book a complete coverage of nineteenth and twentieth century Asian history unless that book be prohibitively expensive; and few writers would be bold enough to attempt this task. All the topics in the series have been written by experienced, practising teachers who know the requirements of students at this level and understand the amount of information required. Every student has to be selective and a student who possess the booklets in

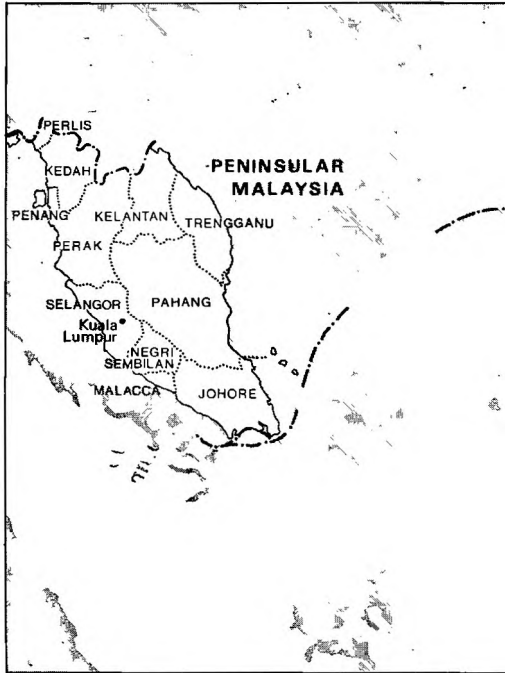
this series will have available, relatively cheaply, material which will enable him to follow successfully a course in modern Asian history; and which would otherwise only be available in an expensive reference book or books. Each booklet suggests reference material for further reading for readers who may wish to specialise in a particular area.

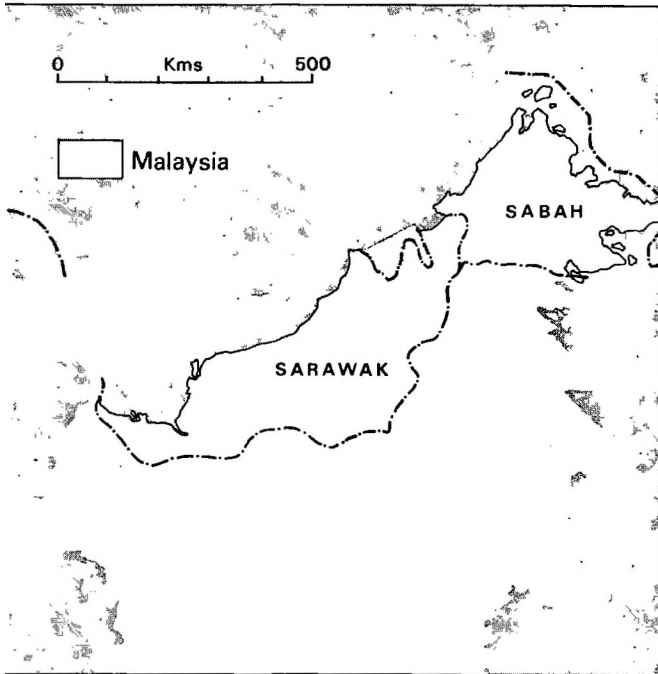
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Malaysia

1. WHAT IS MEANT BY MALAYSIA'S PLURAL SOCIETY?

A plural society is one in which the different races which comprise a population live as separate communities. In Peninsular Malaysia the three major races are the Malays, the Chinese and the Indians (for the purpose of this essay we will classify as 'Indians' all whose ancestors came from or who have themselves migrated from the sub-continent of India and the island of Sri Lanka). They have been divided not only by race, but by religion, language, culture, customs, food and dress. They have been divided, too, by occupation and living area. In Sarawak and Sabah, the Malaysian Borneo states, a similar communal society exists. Indians are a small proportion of their populations but indigenous Dayak peoples are an important element.

Today the Chinese and Indians in Peninsular Malaysia together make up over 45 percent of the population and in some areas are a large majority. Of these two immigrant groups, the Chinese are the larger, being some 35 percent of the total population. Indians comprise about 11 percent. Malays are about 53 per cent of the total and there are other small minorities of no significance for this essay. In Sabah and Sarawak the racial mix is more complex. In Sabah, Chinese are some 22 percent of the total population of 655 000, the Dusun/Kadazan group 29 percent, Muruts 5 percent, Malays 3 percent, Bajaus, who are Muslim, 15 percent and other indigenous, not separately classified but including Muslim and non-Muslim groups, some 27 percent. In addition about 6 percent are Indonesian. In Sarawak, with a total population almost 1 million, Chinese make up 30 percent, Malays nearly 19 percent, Ibans 31 percent and Land Dayaks, Melanaus and other indigenous the rest. Indians and others make up only one percent.¹

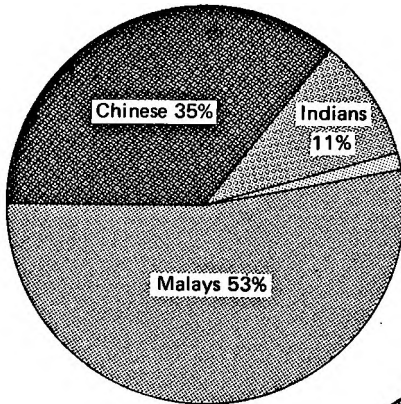
The differences between the races are clear even to a casual observer. The Malays are Muslims, abstaining from alcohol and pork and are mostly rural dwellers — rice farmers, small-holders and fishermen in the main. By historical circumstance they hold political power and are prominent in the civil service, which attracts a large proportion of educated Malays. An increasing number may be found in business and the professions but most urban Malays are labourers, small business-men and wage-earners at the lower end of the socio-economic scale.

The Chinese are basically urban dwellers and are concentrated in the port cities of Penang and Malacca and in the urban centres of the west coast states. They occupy all positions in an urban society from labourers to business and professional men. Ignoring for our purpose the role of European capital and management in the economy, the Chinese dominate the economic life of the country. There are large populations of rural Chinese, particularly in the west coast states and Johore, mainly involved in market gardening and cash-cropping. The Chinese are Buddhists or Christians and consume pork and alcohol.

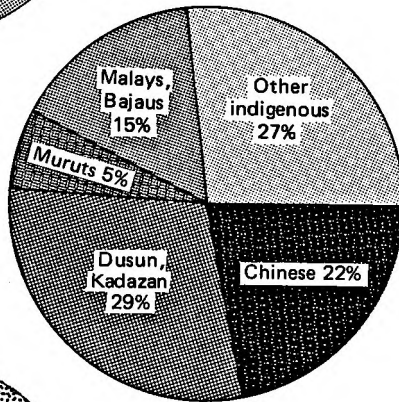
Indian estate labourers are found in the rubber growing areas of the west coast and Indians are found as labourers, businessmen and professional men in the towns, again particularly on the west coast. Penang has a large Indian population, many of them in business. The Malayan railways are still very much an Indian preserve, again the product of historical development. The majority of Indians are Hindus, though there are Christians amongst them and those from the area of modern Pakistan and Bangladesh are Muslims.

In the Borneo states, the Malays and other Muslim peoples are coastal dwellers, the Chinese are urban dwellers or cultivators near the towns and the indigenous peoples, many of whom are pagan, though many others are Christians, live in the interior or 'up-river'.

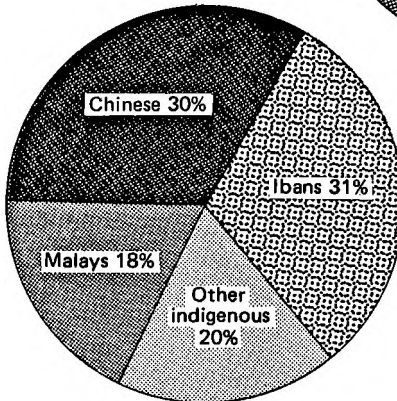
Obviously there are many exceptions to these generalisations, especially in urban areas. Social mobility has increased especially since independence, but certain barriers still remain, particularly with regard to religion and the various taboos associated with it. Inter-marriage between races is infrequent,



Peninsular Malaysia



Sabah



Sarawak

The population of the constituent parts of Malaysia according to the 1970 census.

largely because of religious differences. Language remains a barrier to communication and understanding, though the use of Malay as the medium of instruction in schools should improve communication between members of the younger generation. Cultural and racial pride remain strong, however. Certain pre-conceptions are held by each race about the other races, and, on the whole, the racial communities remain separate and distinct.

That a plural society still exists can be seen by any casual visitor to Malaysia. The Malay *kampung* or village, the street of Chinese shop-houses, the Indian labourers' lines (living quarters) on a rubber estate, an Iban longhouse, a Kadazan village are worlds of their own. How did this diversity occur?

2. THE PRE-NINETEENTH CENTURY BACKGROUND

Indians and Chinese are no strangers to the Malay Peninsula. In the days of the Malacca Sultanate in the fifteenth century merchant communities resided in the port city of Malacca. Each community had its own residential area and each was under the authority of a headman responsible for the behaviour of its members. The Malacca royal house acquired Tamil and Chinese blood. When the Portuguese captured Malacca and the empire broke up, Malacca itself and the various port cities in Malay hands maintained small foreign communities. In Sarawak there is evidence of Chinese trading settlements, which may have been seasonal rather than permanent and legend tells of a Chinese community on the Kinabatangan in Sabah. But these early communities were small and posed no threat to the indigenous inhabitants. They remained as small merchant enclaves in the ports like the Baba Chinese of Malacca, or were absorbed into the local community by marriage, as happened with Chinese settlers in Trengganu in the eighteenth century and perhaps with the Chinese of the Kinabatangan.

The Malay population of the peninsula before the nineteenth century was scattered in concentrations where trade or rice farming were possible. It has been estimated that the population of the peninsula in 1835-6, excluding Penang Island and Singapore, was about 375 000, 'consisting in the states bordering upon Siam, of Malays, Sam-sams and Siamese; and in the more southerly states, of Malays interspersed with small colonies of Chinese, Chuliahs, and Klings.'²

A feature of the population that must be remembered is that it was largely migratory. The Strait of Malacca was no barrier to the sea-faring Malay as the entry of Minangkabaus into Negri Sembilan indicates, while the Bugis of Selangor came

from even further afield, from Macassar, at the end of the eighteenth century. The peninsula, protruding south as it does, has always been a meeting place for ships from India, carried eastwards on the south-west monsoon, and Chinese junks travelling before the north-east monsoon. Islam (and, before that, Hinduism) came to the peninsula from India. China established a benevolent suzerainty over the states of the region and Chinese trade goods found their way into the bazaars of the port towns.

The towns, except for Malacca under the Dutch since 1641, were Malay governed and formed the nucleus of small kingdoms confined to the coast and lower river reaches. The interior was sparsely populated by *orang asli* (aborigines).

This was to change in the nineteenth century, and conditions were created that were to bring an influx of population - Malays, Chinese and Indians. The Malay immigrants could be assimilated into the existing political and social structure of the Malay States: but the new waves of Chinese and Indian immigration were too large to be absorbed or conveniently disposed of in port ghettos. Instead the foundations of a plural society were laid.

3. ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL CHANGES IN THE NINETEENTH AND EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURIES

Until the nineteenth century, European interest in Asia was commercial. The Europeans wanted to trade; they sought the exotic products of the orient — spices, scented woods, precious stones and metals, craftwork, silks, satins, brocades, the feathers of strange and beautiful birds, tea, porcelain and a variety of other goods. These were all items of great value in Europe so that the relatively small cargoes which ships of the day could carry were nevertheless highly profitable.

There was little from Europe that Asians wanted, though items of European manufacture had a novelty value at oriental courts. Most of Europe's trade with Asia had to be financed with silver, and mercantilist economic theory deplored the drain on Europe's silver that this implied. The answer was for the Europeans to engage in intra-Asian trade and to finance their purchases of goods for the European market with the profits of their trade in Asia. Thus the Portuguese depended largely on their monopoly of trade between China and Japan, just as, later, the British financed their purchases from China, particularly of tea, with the sale of opium grown in India.

Before the mid-nineteenth century, the Europeans did not seek territorial empires in Asia. True, the British acquired territory in India and the Dutch did so in Java, but these were exceptions and arose out of particular circumstances rather than from premeditated design. The typical European approach was to acquire trading rights by agreement with a native ruler. If a settlement was established it was essentially a trading post protected by fortifications. European power was sea power, and control of the sea gave access to the trade of the region. Thus the British acquisition of Penang (1786), Singapore (1819),



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