Colonial "Others" and Nationalist Politics in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Recent debates on nationalism suggest that we should revisit the connection between ethnic identity and the nation, and the difficulties confronting post-colonial societies like Malaysia's in their efforts to construct a unifying nationalist project. How and why has official Malaysian nationalism reinforced ethnic identity even as it seeks a programmatic alternative to colonial strategies in inscribing the body of the nation? Arguing that the social construction of ethnicity under colonial rule has significant implications for the nation, the article explores how colonial rule shapes not only the consciousness of a European 'self' distinct from a colonized 'other', but also difference in the other which plays out in nationalist politics. Recent shifts in nationalist discourse reflect changes in the Malaysian social structure and suggest the possibility of a more unifying political discourse centered around the nation although it is too early to tell if it will decenter ethnic identity.

Key words: Colonialism, nationalism, ethnicity, Malaysia, politics

ABSTRAK

Perdebatan kebelakangan ini mengenai nasionalisme menunjukkan bahawa kita perlu mengkaji semula hubungan antara identiti etnik dengan nasion, dan kesukaran-kesukaran yang dihadapi masyarakat pasca-kolonial seperti Malaysia dalam usaha mereka untuk membina suatu projek nasionalis yang menyatukan. Bagaimana dan kenapa nasionalisme rasmi Malaysia mengukuhkan identiti etnik sekalipun ia berusaha mewujudkan satu alternatif programatik kepada strategi kolonial dalam memaktubkan jasad nasion? Bertolak daripada hujah bahawa konstruksi sosial etnisiti di bawah pemerintahan penjajah mempunyai implikasi penting bagi nasion, artikel ini menelusuri bagaimana pemerintahan penjajah membentuk bukan sahaja kesedaran 'diri' sebagai orang Eropah yang berbeza daripada orang lain, yakni yang terjajah, akan tetapi juga menelusuri perbezaan di pihak orang lain, yang menjelma dalam politik nasionalis. Perubahan dalam wacana nasionalis kebelakangan ini mencerminkan perubahan dalam struktur masyarakat Malaysia dan menunjukkan kemungkinan munculnya satu wacana politik yang lebih menyatukan yang berpusatkan idea nasion. Walau bagaimanapun, ia masih terlalu awal untuk menyatakan sama ada

perubahan ini akan menyahpusatkan identiti etnik.

Kata kunci: Penjajahan, nasionalisme, etnisiti, Malaysia, politik

INTRODUCTION

An important contribution of the post-colonial literature to the current debate on nationalism is the awareness that anti-colonial, nationalist struggles were not only political emancipatory movements, but involved also the *cultural* resistance of colonized groups to white racism and European imperialism. In Southeast Asia, Indonesians, Malaysians, Burmese, Vietnamese and Filipinos among others waged their separate struggles along the cultural fault lines of the colonial project in the first half of the twentieth century. Depending on the social, political and economic conditions obtaining at the time, these movements were more or less successful in overcoming colonial constructions of ethnic and religious difference among the colonized peoples. The outcomes varied from ethnically inclusive nationalist discourses to those which privileged a dominant ethnic identity over others in the cultural production of the post-colonial state. The reasons for these differences are no doubt historical and rooted in the experiences of the different colonized peoples, but the political identities shaped out of nationalist struggles reflect the profoundly ambiguous and contradictory tendencies in nationalist discourses.

The renewed debate on nationalism's origins, its cultural modalities and implications, has been triggered in part by those writing on post-colonial politics (e.g. Bhabha 1990; Chatterjee 1986, 1993). This debate is critical to an understanding of culture and politics in the Malaysian state, where a nationalist movement was first constructed around officially-sanctioned organizations under colonial and later post-colonial rule. While the problem/question of nationalism and its object, the nation, remain central to our self-understandings and political discourses and practices at the end of the millennium in Malaysia, there are remarkably fewer critical academic analyses of nationalism in Malaysia than there are of political institutions, the state and ruling elites. A few exceptions particularly William Roff's landmark study of the origins of Malay nationalism, first published in 1967, stand out. I would suggest that one important reason for the relative lack of attention to the political implications of nationalism and its social and cultural dimensions is that for many scholars an analysis of Malayan, and later, Malaysian nationalism, has meant an engagement with Malay politics. Roff's analysis, although an invaluable contribution, is principally an examination of Malay nationalist politics.

While it is important to recognize the historical disjuncture captured in the rise of Malay nationalism and its indisputable significance, one is left wondering

about the nationalist dimensions of a Malayan (and later Malaysian) political configuration which emerged as an alternative to colonial rule. Apart from the recognition that the rise of this coalition was rooted in the conflict between the Malays and other ethnic groups, little has actually been written about the peculiarities of this variant of nationalism. The formation of the Alliance was a critical moment in the development of an official nationalism centered around constructions of 'race' and ethnicity. These constructions, however, were also implicated in the formation of an inter-ethnic coalition in the shape of the Alliance. A variant of Malay nationalism was an integral element in the creation of the coalition, but it was not the only ideology underpinning it, and has to be understood in relation to other ideas and cultural forces evident in the late colonial era. Recent analyses of both Malay and Malaysian nationalism have taken as their point of departure the ideology and polemics of ruling elites, particularly those of Mahathir Mohamad. In engaging more systematically with the thinking behind new concepts such as Melayu Baru (New Malay) and Bangsa Malaysia (Malaysian nation), these works help fill a void in the literature on contemporary Malay(sian) nationalism (Khoo 1995; Abdul Rahman 1998; Rustam 1991, 1994).

However, much scholarship remains to be done on the emergence of a dominant, albeit ethnically divided, nationalist project in Malaysia and its broad contradictions. There is also a need for more sustained inquiry into the origins of this dominant variant of Malaysian nationalism, one that is shaped by a consciousness of ethnic difference. This article moves in that direction by inquiring into the significance of colonial discourses and practices for a nationalist politics centered around ethnic identity. The central concern here is with how the construction of self and other in colonial discourses and material practices (understood here as a process of 'othering') shapes certain nationalist possibilities and configurations of the 'nation', and subsequently applies these insights to the case of Malaysia. In other words, how and why has official Malaysian nationalism reinforced ethnic identity even as it seeks a programmatic alternative to colonial divide and rule strategies in inscribing the body of the nation? The answer to this question is complex but I argue that post-colonial efforts to reclaim, produce or position the nation are confounded by the 'problem' of ethnic difference in Malaysia, which is rooted in constructions of self and other produced under colonial rule. It is difficult to separate the 'ethnic' from broader nationalist aims and objectives as these are expressed by state officials, leading intellectuals, the media and the understandings of ordinary people because ethnicity is also bound up in constructions of those who rightfully belong to the nation. That is not to say that there are no significant differences among various nationalist pronouncements and projects, particularly between that which is officially sanctioned and alternatives to state-sponsored nationalism. However, the argument does require us to concede that ethnic identity far from being a 'natural' cultural affinity among members of

a group is socially constructed and a product of history. In order to make sense of the difficulties confronting an all-embracing nationalist project we need to grapple with the social construction of ethnic identity.

In approaching the question of nationalism and its meaning(s) for Malaysian politics, one is entering somewhat uncharted territory in attempting an approach which examines the disjuncture, ambiguities and contradictions, instead of the rhetorical certainties, which shape nationalist thought. A simultaneous effort to trace the construction of official nationalism in the context of colonial relations of power and post-coloniality exacts a cost in terms of seeking out not only the nuances, but also the differences among nationalist projects, which made some versions of nationalism more palatable to colonial authority in Malaya. However, this article makes a modest attempt at uncovering the reasons why the dominant Malaysian nationalist project remains a limited one, and provides a preliminary analysis for its historical inability to transcend ethnic difference even as it seeks the broader unity of an integrated national identity. It also speculates on the prospects for a more inclusive Malaysian nationalist discourse and suggests that in light of the socially constructed nature of ethnic identity and nation, the cultural and political project of a Bangsa Malaysia may indeed appear less utopian, although by no means easily realized.

DISASSEMBLING NATIONALIST DISCOURSE: NATION, ETHNICITY, IDENTITY

One of the major contributions to the on-going debate on the nation and nationalism is by Partha Chatterjee, whose analysis of nationalism as a deriva-tive   discourse and also as resistance within the spiritual or 'inner' domain of sovereignty, challenges Eurocentric constructions of the nation and national-ism evident in much of the literature (Chatterjee 1993; 1986). Chatterjee's critique unsettles the narrative of nationalism, and its representation in Western bourgeois and intellectual circles. Elsewhere, from the early contributions of nationalists like Albert Memmi (1991) and Frantz Fanon (1968a, 1968b) to the latter-day post-structuralists writing on nationalism like Homi Bhabha (1990), we are reminded of the diasporic displacements and contradictions evident in na-tionalist projects. For example, Bhabha suggests that "The locality of national culture is neither unified nor unitary in relation to itself, nor must it be seen simply as `other' in relation to what is outside or beyond it. The boundary is Janus-faced and the problem of outside/inside must always itself be a process of hybridity..." (1990: 4). Both post-colonial theorists and post-structuralists stress that it is a mistake to view nationalism as a "natural" expression of the cultural essence of a people and their desire for sovereignty. Such a view produces a more linear explanation of nationalism, which often fails to capture nationalism's contradictions, particularly in contexts of cultural and political domination by a colonizer.

The development of nationalism as a political project, rather than as an affirmation and reclamation of a pre-colonial community centered around a common ancestry and ethnic identity, necessarily implicates a range of social actors and the state. The production of a national identity implicates state functionaries, intellectuals and other groups who are integral to the framing of the nationalist project and its boundaries. In late colonialism, the ethnic dimension of nationalism may be temporarily subverted as a political consciousness emerges in response to colonial domination, revealing the common interests of the colonized. The history-making struggle to reclaim political space is also complemented by a simultaneous effort to overcome internal difference or the often obvious claims to ethnic and racial identity. This difference can be understood as socially constructed through the encounters and inter-subjective understandings of individuals and groups as bearers of particular identities such as Malay, Arab, Chinese, Kadazan, Iban, Dayak or Tamil.

The use of an approach broadly defined as social constructionism in this article suggests an effort to go beyond theories which essentialize or view as 'natural', instead of constructed, ethnic identity. There is an explicit move in social construction theory to explore how human agency shapes culture and community and take seriously questions of representation, which are critical to understanding race and ethnic relations (Jackson and Penrose 1993: 1-23). With regard to nationalism, social construction theory would suggest, perhaps intuitively to some, that the 'nation' is a social construct and one which we can hardly assume to be a given in any socio-political context. There is no 'homogenous' national community outside of the social construction of that community as a 'nation'. This same argument can be applied to the 'ethnic' group and individuals as bearers of certain cultural or 'ethnic' traits. This is a valuable insight which problematizes the often conventional interpretation, found particularly in assumptions of proponents of the modernization school, of this or that ethnic group as somehow 'naturally' constituted and of ethnic identity as 'primordial'.

The need to reject the 'primordialist' theory of ethnicity among historians has been made forcefully by Hobsbawm (1992), but in some areas of social science like the study of politics where the modernization paradigm and its variants continue to exert influence, we still find a tendency to view ethnic identity as a given in the Third World, and one of the principal obstacles to the development of a more modern, bureaucratically rational state. If we either dismiss ethnic identity as "primordial" and therefore in some sense backward, or as something which needs to be transcended to make way for a more authentic political community built not on 'emotional' attachments to the group, but on 'modern' values of participation and citizenship in a plural community, we assume its given-ness and immutability. In either case, we do not problematize

ethnicity as a social construct serving certain societal and political ends, or as an inescapable part of our social and political consciousness.

Further, the conflation of nation and ethnic group has led to some terminological imprecision. There are obviously clear differences today between the nation, as this is understood around the world in the emergence of an international system comprised of nation-states, and the *ethnos* or ethnic group. The nation is understood as a political project by practitioners of different theoretical persuasions, while ethnicity is viewed as a more specific cultural marker of identity. However, ethno-nationalist struggles suggest a paradoxical late twentieth century collapsing of the nation into ethnic group and its demands for self-determination (Hobsbawm 1992). Hobsbawm suggests that the "general European mutation of ethnic into nationalist politics" accounts for xenophobic and separatist tendencies in that part of the world. He further argues that the nationalist impulses we see today have less to do with either 19th century classical liberal formulations or mid-twentieth century programmes of anti-colonial nationalists. Both sought to "extend the scale of human social, political and cultural units: to unify and expand rather than to restrict and sepa-rate" (Hobsbawm 1992:13):

Anti-colonial nationalists dismissed, or at least subordinated, "tribalism", "communalism" or other sectional and regional identities as anti-national, and serving the well-known imperialist interests of "divide and rule". Gandhi and Nehru, Mandela and Mugabe, or for that matter the late Zulfikhar Bhutto, who complained about the absence of Pakistani nationhood, are or were not nationalists in the sense of Landsbergis or Tudjman. They were exactly on the same wavelength as Massim d'Azeglio who said after Italy had been politically unified: "We have made Italy, now we have to make Italians".

Malaysian official nationalist discourse implicates an internal 'other', typically an ethnic other, although ethnic and class identity may overlap. The cultural boundaries produced by such a nationalist politics are also grounded in material relations of power, suggesting that these boundaries are both fluid and fixed in Malaysia where the source of much of the historical antagonism between the Malays and Chinese can be found in the realm of economic relations. The Chinese are generally perceived to constitute an important segment of the local bourgeoisie, but more marginal in a nationalist project which emphasizes Malay ethnicity and religion as the cultural framework for a nationalist identity. The project of official Malaysian nationalism assumes the ambiguous cultural and political status of minority groups, whose simultaneous inclusion in other areas shapes a contradictory and contested nationalist politics.

The national possibilities shaped in and through colonial constructions of self and other are often and not surprisingly reproduced in official pronouncements by state officials which demarcate boundaries within the 'nation'. In Malaysia, this is consistent with the construction of *bumiputera* and

non-*bumiputera* categories, as well as more precisely in the case of peninsular Malaysia, Malay and Chinese identities. Elsewhere in the region, as in Indonesia, the word *bangsa* has generally been understood to refer to 'nation'. Mandal (1997) suggests that the introduction of *suku bangsa* by the nationalist leader, Soekarno, in 1963 to describe the complex ethnic composition of the nation was meant to be inclusive of all groups including the Indonesian Chinese. Instead, it confounded the distinction between nation and ethnic group, and reduced the former to a narrow anthropological kinship or 'familial' notion. However, in the later New Order-rule of Soeharto, the Chinese and others regarded as not native to the archipelago were excluded from the *suku bangsa*, as were Arabs and Indians (Mandal 1997: 6).

References to the nation may not be explicitly formulated in Malaysia in exclusionary terms, but the historic emphasis on *bangsa*, typically understood as 'race', and less commonly expressed as ethnic group, claims an important distinction between nationality and ethnicity. The privileged status of the *bumiputera*, and the demographically dominant Malay, rests on claims to indigenous, as opposed to non-indigenous status, the latter being accorded to Malaysians of mainly ethnic Chinese and South Asian descent. Recently, a new discourse on *Bangsa Malaysia* suggests some ambiguity in the conventional use of *bangsa*. The *Bangsa Malaysia* notion may generally be understood to refer to Malaysian nation and not Malaysian race, although different interpretations of its underlying cultural or ethnic dimensions are evident in the literature (e.g. Abdul Rahman 1998; Khoo 1995: 331-36; Rustam 1991). The contradictions emerging from the evocation of a Malaysian nation contained in *Wawasan 2020* and the speech, "The Way Forward", by Mahathir Mohamad (1991) speaks to the historical bifurcation in nationalist thought between those who belonged and those who could not rightfully claim indigenous status, but thought of themselves as Malaysian anyway. I will take up a little later in this article a discussion of Mahathir's contribution to the discourse on ethnicity and nationalism.

I turn first to a discussion of some of the literature addressing the impact of colonial discourse and practices on nationalist thought. This discussion provides the conceptual backdrop against which I examine the impact of British colonialism on the colonized in Malaya and its implications for the framing of a unifying nationalist project. I resist providing a framework for analysis and instead suggest ways in which the ideas or themes in the literature may be critically and fruitfully applied to an analysis of official nationalism in Malaysia.

COLONIALISM AND CONSTRUCTION OF THE OTHER(S)

The colonial state's coercion, surveillance and division of the colonized have important implications for inter-ethnic and cultural politics, and nationalism in

the post-colonial state. The oppression of colonial rule is not always at the level of the material, although it is the space constituted by the colonial economy which provides the opportunity for a radical restructuring of society. For example, Balibar (1991:42) suggests that the:

exteriority of the 'native' populations in colonization...is by no means a given state of affairs. It was in fact produced and reproduced within the very space constituted by conquest and colonization with its concrete structures of administration, forced labour and sexual oppression, and therefore on the basis of a certain *interiority*.

Consequently, colonial rule not only drew boundaries between self (European colonizer) and other (non-European colonized), but the contradictions manifested by its policies simultaneously created a distinction among selves and others. Even as the "colonial castes of the various nationalities (British, French, Dutch, Portuguese and so on) *worked together* to forge the idea of 'White' superiority," it was also the case that

the same castes were perpetually involved in what Kipling called the 'Great Game' - playing off, in other words, 'their' natives rebellions against one another and, above and beyond this, all priding themselves, in *competition with one another*, on their particular humaneness, by projecting the image of racism on to the colonial practices of their rivals.(Balibar 1991: 43)

Balibar's use of a related concept 'interior frontier' is employed by Stoler in her treatment of the colonial construction of the 'dangers' of *metissage,* or inter-racial unions, in French Indochina and the Netherlands East Indies. A 'frontier' locates a "site of both enclosure and of contact, of surveilled passage and exchange", and when coupled with the concept 'interior', it "marks the moral predicates by which a subject retains her/his national identity despite location (outside the national frontier) and despite heterogeneity within the nation-state". The 'interior frontier' thus constitutes the essence of the 'nation', which is to be preserved and kept safe from contamination (Stoler 1995:130). In Stoler's analysis of *metissage*, the cultural bases of European colonialism appeared, from the perspective of the colonizer, to be threatened or subverted by inter-racial mixing. The 'purity' of the race was to be maintained not only by keeping the natives physically in their place, but by ensuring that the psychology and ideology of colonial rule were also simultaneously preserved. *Metissage*, according to Stoler, emerges as "a powerful trope for internal contamination and challenge, morally, politically, and sexually conceived" (Stoler 1995: 130).

Anti-colonial nationalists writing in the early to mid-twentieth century were well aware that colonial power constituted a violent transgression of the colonized's own cultures and demonstrated an almost pathological fear of contamination. Analysis of the cultural and psychological implications of

colonial rule is powerfully rendered in the work of Fanon (1968a, 1968b), Memmi (1991) and Nandy (1988). From these works we obtain insights into how colonialism impacts the development of nationalism not only in the realm of the material, but also at the level of the individual's psychology and culture, enabling the colonizer-colonized relation to be reproduced over time. A common conclusion evident in these works is that along with the material and structural power of the colonial state, the discursive boundaries constructed by colonial rule objectify and lead to a loss of identity, or the denial of self among the colonized peoples.

The denial of self (of the colonized) is raised by Fanon who writes passionately of the dehumanizing effects of imperialism and racism on the colonized. He writes: "All round me the white man, above the sky tears at its navel, the earth rasps under my feet, and there is a white song, a white song. All this whiteness that burns me..." (quoted in Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin 1995: 324). His disquisition on the denial of self produced by colonial racism is again powerfully conveyed in these sentences:

Having adjusted their microtomes, they objectively cut away slices of my reality. I am laid bare. I feel, I see in those white faces that it is not a new man who has come in, but a new kind of man, a new genus. Why, it's a Negro! (Ashcroft et al. 1995: 325)

Memmi's work, *The colonizer and the colonized*, originally published in 1965, also evokes the psychological effects on the colonized which shape the latter's ability to confront the colonizer:

The first attempt of the colonized is to change his condition by changing his skin. There is a tempting model very close at hand—the colonizer. The latter suffers from none of his deficiencies, has all rights, enjoys every possession and benefits from every prestige. He is, moreover, the other part of the comparison, the one that crushes the colonized and keeps him in servitude. The first ambition of the colonized is to become equal to that splendid model and to resemble him to the point of disappearing in him. (Memmi 1991: 120)

However, this self-loathing and simultaneous 'love' of the colonizer sustains other contradictions, especially the failure of assimilation into the colonizer's culture (Memmi 1991: 121-126). Memmi writes that it is with the realization of the price of assimilation, the denial of self, that the colonized's liberation comes about, and through the 'recovery of self' (1991: 128). Both of these observers and participants in the anti-colonial struggles of Algeria and Tunisia remind us of the deeper psychological, cultural and, as Nandy (1988) suggests, spiritual loss experienced by those under colonial rule. The devastating impact of colonialism on one's sense of self-worth and dignity plays itself out in other ways including an affirmation of one's ethnic identity, in part produced by colonial policies denying the colonized's subjectivity which trigger

a sense of community that may not have previously existed, at least not in the form that expresses itself after colonialism.

These observations suggest that colonial domination and racism, which produce denial, acceptance, and eventually struggle to reclaim an authentic self among the colonized, shapes nationalist ideology and cultural possibilities. Its implications for the transformative political project of nationalism are clear, even as the ambiguous positioning of the colonial subject within a larger cultural discourse of modernity becomes apparent. For example, this ambiguous positioning is evident in early 19th century Malay nationalist writings of Munshi Abdullah Kadir who criticized the traditional rulers and called on Malays to shed their 'foolish' deference to this authority, while holding European ways in high esteem. Abdullah invokes Western reason, science and progress as emblems of a new Malay cultural modernity. However, his harsh criticisms of the depravations of traditional authority are interestingly situated in the context of an expansionary British colonialism in the Malay peninsula. Although Abdullah often comes across as an Anglophile, Milner (1995) nevertheless treats his writings as a 'revolutionary' text because Abdullah "was radically opposed, or disloyal, to one group of Malays — the traditional elite..." The writings of Abdullah also reflect an important shift toward a preoccupation with a new concept, *bangsa* (race), a concern which is elaborated and developed in twentieth century Malay nationalist writings in colonial Malaya (Milner 1995: 89-113).

Abdul Rahman (1997) takes up this point in his analysis of the 'New Malay' or *Melayu Baru* concept in the political discourse of the 1990s in Malaysia and suggests that it has historical roots. He traces to Abdullah the "germ of the project of transformation and modernity of Malay society". Rahman argues that the *Melayu Baru* concept must be situated within the "larger, and all-encompassing idea of Malay reformation and the emergence of a new kind of society - a modern society which would emancipate the Malays from the shackles of feudalism, servitude, blind religious faith (*taqlid buta*) and moral degradation." This is a significant insight and provokes one to ask how such a Malay modernist project might also have been shaped by European colonialism's ideological mission during Abdullah's time. Moreover, why is the formulation of the new Malay concept in the nineties also couched in the larger historical context of the development of European modernity and its ideological structures which provide the basic parameters for our understanding of what constitutes progress, development and enlightenment?

This question is posed in a different way by Syed Hussein Alatas in *The myth of the lazy native*. His study anticipates elements of the critique Edward Said (1979) lays out in *Orientalism* and we may interpret Alatas's analysis of the "myth of the lazy native" in Southeast Asia as highly revealing of the colonial project of internal othering. However, as Said notes in his praise for the work of this Malaysian scholar:

The myth of the lazy native is synonymous with domination, and domination is at bottom power. Many scholars have become so accustomed to regard power only as a discursive effect that Alatas' description of how the colonialists systematically destroyed the commercial coastal states on Sumatra and along the Malay coast, how territorial conquest led to the elimination of native classes like fishermen and weapons craftsmen, and how above all, foreign overlords did things that no indigenous class ever would, is likely to shock us with its plainness... (Said 1994: 255)

Alatas's critique explicitly situates the social, political and cultural oppression suffered by the colonized in the context of the colonial economy and 'colonial capitalism'. At the same time, he draws our attention to the inability of the colonized to resist and to develop a subjectivity distinct from their production in colonial ideology. He thus notes that the production of colonialist thinking, indeed even an extension of its negative portrayal of the colonized, are evident in post-colonial representations of the Malay 'character'. The ideas in the book, *Revolusi Mental,* put out by the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) in 1971, bear, in Alatas's view, a striking resemblance to the colonial ideology (Alatas 1977: 166). To a lesser extent Mahathir's *The Malay dilemma* was also responsible for the distortion of Malay character (Alatas 1977: 155-163). The inferiority of the colonized self(ves) stemming from colonial rule is no doubt a reflection of the discursive power of the colonizer, and the racial and ethnic division of labor which sustained this representation of the colonized people as not only lesser than the European, but also different among themselves in terms of their capabilities and national character traits. The latter would interfere significantly with the development of a sense of common oppression among the colonized groups in Malaya, and with the framing of a nationalist, as opposed to an ethnically-divided, political project.

Interestingly, it is at the elite level in colonial Malaya as elsewhere that ethnic differences were muted in furtherance of the immediate political goal of independence, which was accomplished through the emergence of an Alliance among different ethnically-based political parties. Anderson suggests that colonial rule produced a particular sensibility among the elites of the colonized and a new political consciousness. Anderson's analysis of nationalism in four acts: the Creole, linguistic, official, and the last Third World wave, which is modeled on the ones which preceded it (1991). The 'looping flight' of the colonized functionaries (young brown or black Englishman) through the administrative centers of the periphery create an awareness of the smallness of their points of origin, and a sense of the largeness of the colonial enterprise and its possibilities (1991: 114). It is experienced in space and time through the circuitous journeys of people from metropoles to peripheries; from margins to the center. Bilingualism, print literacy, the expansiveness of imperial bureaucracies and infrastructure all shape the colonized's consciousness. Anderson writes,

In a world in which the national state is the overwhelming norm, all of this means that nations can now be imagined without linguistic community — not in the naive spirit of *nostros los Americanos*, but out of a general awareness of what modern history has demonstrated to be possible. (Anderson 1991: 135)

And if, as Anderson suggests, Third World nationalism is modeled on others which preceded it, there lies the central difficulty with his argument according to Chatterjee (1986). He faults Anderson's argument for its sociological determinism, alleging that it obscures the "workings of the imagination, the intellectual process of creation". It fails to reveal the "twists and turns, the suppressed possibilities, the contradictions still unresolved" (Chatterjee 1986: 21-22). Elsewhere, Chatterjee argues that such a reading of history centers Europe and the Americas as "the only true subjects of history" and reduces anti-colonial nationalism to its modular form (Chatterjee 1993: 5). The limits of this modular Third World nationalism are framed by the modern European experience whether in its creolized version in Latin America or in its linguistic and official variants in Europe.

Anderson's interpretation, according to critics like Chatterjee, denies not only the subjectivity but also the imagination of the post-colonial world. In his own work, Chatterjee (1993:5-6) attempts to show how a distinctively different nationalism is made possible through the specific conditions obtaining under colonial domination, and the resistance by the colonized in the "inner" or spiritual domain of sovereignty, as opposed to the material or outer domain of the state, economy and science. He suggests that by keeping the colonial power out of this inner domain which bears the 'essential' marks of its 'cultural identity', the nation so constructed is already 'sovereign'. However, an elite-led nationalist movement had to contend with the ambivalence and contradictions of its own transformative politics:

That contested field over which nationalism had proclaimed its sovereignty and where it had imagined its true community was neither coextensive with nor coincidental to the field constituted by the public/private distinction. In the former field, the hegemonic project of nationalism could hardly make the distinctions of language, religion, caste, or class a matter of indifference to itself. The project was that of cultural "normalization" like, as Anderson suggests, bourgeois hegemonic projects everywhere, but with the all important difference that it had to choose from a position of subordination to a colonial regime that had on its side the most universalist justificatory resources produced by post-Enlightenment social thought. (Chatterjee 1993: 10-11)

Chatterjee's critique provides a useful corrective to Anderson's interpretation because it more fully implicates ideological and cultural intervention in the anti-colonial struggle and post-colonial politics. In addition, it suggests that nationalist movements have to not only negotiate the boundary between 'tradition' and European modernity, but also the division between elite

and subaltern cultures and cultural difference within the newly imagined nation. In order for the dominant nationalist ideology to become hegemonic, it has to successfully construct an idea of the nation out of difference, that is out of the dynamics of ethnic, religion, class, and gender relations, and without denying difference.

The incomplete nature of nationalism's hegemony is evident in the "numerous fragmented resistances to that normalizing project" (Chatterjee 1993: 13). This project, although maintaining its difference from the colonizer in the "spiritual domain of culture", has to also eventually confront the "rival conceptions of collective identity" and agency in its midst (Chatterjee 1993: 26). Consequently, such a critique of nationalism suggests that these contestations far from being tangential, are actually quite critical to an understanding of nationalist politics after colonial rule formally ends. This appears to be particularly true in Malaysia where resistance to the nationalist project appears to be waged on a number of fronts including religion and ethnic identity. The last is especially significant as post-colonial politics in Malaysia reflects a struggle over the very terms and meaning of nationalist discourse. Who belongs, under what conditions, and on whose terms are among the questions which continue to divide Malaysians. However, the struggles over the framing of this discourse cannot be understood without situating official nationalism and its critics within a larger historical context.

CONSTRUCTIONS OF ETHNIC DIFFERENCE AND NATIONALIST POLITICS IN MALAYSIA

Malaysia's complex ethnic make-up is reflected in the presence of indigenous Malays, Chinese and Indians and a category of 'Others' in the peninsula. Several other indigenous non-Malay communities such as the Dayak and Iban in Sarawak and the Kadazan in Sabah reside together with Malay and other non-indigenous communities in the region commonly referred to as East Malaysia. Indigenous East Malaysians enjoy a similar status as the Malays and both are classified for official purposes as *bumiputera*. Reference to *peribumi*, also meaning 'indigenous', was used in the 1980 Malaysian Census to describe all indigenous groups in Sabah, and included Malay immigrants from the Philippines, Brunei, and Indonesia (Means 1991: 155, 189). The number of *bumiputera* in the Malay peninsula, the more densely populated part of the country, is roughly 57.7 per cent with the non-bumiputera portion of the population making up the rest with the breakdown as follows: 29.1 per cent Chinese, 9.4 per cent Indian, and 3.6 per cent Others (Malaysia 1995). The expression, 'ethnic politics' has been most commonly employed to describe the historical divisions between *bumiputera* and non-*bumiputera*, and in the peninsula specifically 'Malay' and 'non-Malay' communities.

The ethnically diverse population has lent itself to a fragmented and ethnicist nationalist project, the product of colonial policies which shaped perceptions of self and other in Malaysia. For example, the British pursued policies of ethnic exclusion and segregation even as they encouraged large-scale immigration from China and India. This raises the question of how the colonial power addressed obvious cultural differences among groups despite proceeding from the assumption that European, and more specifically English, civilization would modernize the 'primitive'. The British attitude toward the Malayan people was similar to that expressed by the Dutch in Indonesia. This resemblance between colonial policies is hardly surprising if one considers again the arguments reviewed earlier on the ideo-cultural dimensions of the colonial project.

In Indonesia, Anderson (1991:122) writes, the Dutch were quite clear on how they viewed the local population. "...whatever mother tongue they spoke, they were irremediably *inlanders,* a word which like the English 'natives' and the French 'indigenes,' always carried an intentionally paradoxical semantic load" (1991: 122). Anderson continues that the inlander concept meant that those referred to in this manner were 'equally contemptible', 'inferior', '*and belonged there*'. '*Inlanders*', writes Anderson, "stopped at the colored colony's drawn edge. Beyond that were variously, 'natives', *indigenes* and *indios*". Significantly, the placement in this hierarchy of the "foreign Orientals" in "a politico-legal status superior to that of the `native natives`" (Anderson 1991: 123) suggests not simply the othering, but also the formalization of internal distinctions among the colonized.

Likewise in Malaya[1], the British pursued a quasi-legalistic distinction between the various groups which was expressed in the policies related to the hiring of indentured labour, the employment of native lower-level administrators, and the presence of foreign, including Chinese, capital. The nationalist construction of Native\Malay and Other\Immigrant races is rooted in such policies which created an ethnic division of labor and deployed cultural constructions which were consistent with those practices. On one hand, British policy emphasized the 'protection' of the Malay peasant against Chinese labour, and to a lesser extent Indian workers from the sub-continent, who arrived in large numbers with British encouragement to work the tin mines and rubber plantations of the colonial economy. On the other hand, the state promoted the presence of immigrant communities in the colonial economy whose labor was expended on extracting vast profits from Malaya.

Alatas describes the nature of this revenue extraction in his account of the treatment of Chinese coolies and Indian plantation labor (1977: 83-97). Referring to the credit-ticket system which brought immigrant labour to Malaya in the 19th century, Alatas writes that "The colonial capitalist ideas of development were largely based on unlimited greed for profit and the subordination of all other interests to this." In the process the dehumanization of the imported labourer, who was subject to the harshest conditions even by 19th

century standards and disparagingly referred to as in the case of the Chinese as 'piglets', was complete (see Alatas, 1977: 84-85). The presence of extreme poverty on the estates, among the Chinese coolies and the time it took for immigrant labourers to get themselves out of debt are part of the historical record. Worse, the British exploited the class and caste distinctions among the Chinese and Indians and the avarice of the average middleman or broker to control the mass of labourers. It was not an unusual policy by any measure as colonial administrators elsewhere had shown an adeptness at implementing these strictures. For example, the Dutch were also able to reap considerable profit from Javanese peasants under the culture system. The British practice of appointing contractors and headmen to supervise and manage this underclass in colonial Malaya appeared to impact not only the perception of a common fate among members of the ethnic group, but also kept intact the vertical divisions which characterized Malayan society in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The average Malay was treated with both disdain and paternalism which created a somewhat eponymous 'Native' who was simultaneously and somewhat paradoxically characterized as slow, ingenious, rude, refined, indolent, of great physical dexterity, courageous, weak, not given to hard labor, etc. The Malay was also unwilling, according to Alatas, to become a tool in the colonial capitalist enterprise, and thus the construction of the 'lazy native' in colonial discourse (1977: 72). Indeed, the British obsession with profits and their repatriation to the seat of empire drove them to pursue policies which intentionally segregated the Malays, Chinese and Indians who served different needs in the vast, expanding imperial spaces.

The colonial economy was dominated by three sectors: agriculture, rubber and tin[2]. The corresponding division of the labor force reflected a functional specialization among the three dominant ethnic groups. The identification of ethnicity with economic function emerged first in the colonial economy; producing in effect the 'Malay' peasant, the 'Indian' laborer and 'Chinese' coolie. A few Chinese became traders, entrepreneurs and managers, while the majority laboured on the tin mines. The Indians made up the bulk of the labor force on the plantations. The Malays, apart from the nobility and an elite few who staffed the rungs of the administrative apparatus, remained farmers, peasants and fisher folk.

Put crudely, the European was to govern, and administer, the immigrant Chinese and Indian to labor in the extractive industries and commerce, and the Malays to till the fields." (Andaya and Andaya 1982: 222)

Generally referred to as the buoyant and golden years of British Malaya, the late 19th century colonial economy generated great wealth for Britain. The impact of this division would be felt in the generation and distribution of wealth during the colonial period, but it would also be a principal factor in perceptions of ethnic difference in an independent Malaya.

British colonial policy also seriously precluded any possibility for a nationalist consciousness uniting the three ethnic communities. The economic specialization among these groups created few opportunities for social interaction. Settlements around the mines and plantations housed Chinese and Indian workers who had little contact with the Malay peasant or town dweller. Moreover, British policy emphasized the temporary nature of this migratory work force, although as families followed the 'transients' it became less and less likely that the Chinese and Indians would return to their homelands. However, it was not uncommon for Malay nationalists to accuse Chinese and Indians of displaying a greater affinity for China and India than for Malaya. During the anti-colonial struggle, Malay nationalism would articulate itself in opposition to political rights claimed by these groups.

The British also acknowledged rights of the native Malay community in the areas of land tenure, culture, religion and politics. The sultans were provided with all the outward trappings of sovereignty over the Malay people although in fact they had little control over matters even pertaining to land appropriation for plantation agriculture. At the same time that the British appeared keen to 'protect' Malay interests against the Chinese and Indians, they were also responsible for undermining the rural economy where the bulk of Malays lived and worked. Agriculture entered a state of decline not only through concessions made by local rulers to the British but by the dislocations created by the colonial economy. The wealth generated by a booming plantation and mining-based economy worked by Chinese and Indians and controlled by the British was not shared by the Malay masses.

Malayan, and now Malaysian nationalism, rests uneasily on the social and ideological foundations inherited from colonial rule. Not only did colonial rule create an ethnic division of labor and occupational specialization along ethnic lines, it also stirred cultural antagonisms through the articulation of stereotypes based on 'race'. Under colonial rule, policies on education, the economy and administration shaped ethnic divisions and the construction of an indigenous self in opposition to an alien and immigrant 'internal' other, typically the Chinese.

Conventional analyses of this period by both Western and Malaysian social scientists are more benign in their assessment of the impact of British rule on ethnic relations. An example is the following observation by R.S. Milne (1967: 26):

It would be incorrect to say the British followed a policy of 'divide and rule'. They did not need to divide; the divisions were already there. Nor were they committed to opposition to one of the races in Malaya (as the Japanese were committed to being anti-Chinese during their occupation). They tried to hold a balance between the races, at the same time having a sentimental attachment to the Malays as the 'original' inhabitants. (Milne 1967: 26)

Milne's assessment of the British effort to "hold a balance between the races" is a telling example of the genre which produced a perspective on Malaysia's plural society and its ethnic divisions as originating in pre-colonial, primordial attachments. The British in this view come to represent a modernizing influence over a society riven by ethnic cleavages.

The parallels between these earlier studies on Malaysia and similar work on other formerly colonized areas in Asia and Africa emerge from key assumptions of the modernization school and the tendency in this literature to privilege colonial rule's positive contribution to the advancement of 'tradition-bound' societies beyond Europe's shores. The basic epistomological foundations of this thinking are evident in works like Lucian Pye's *Aspects of Political Development* where he notes matter of factly that it was the desire to persuade Asians and Africans of the superiority and universality of Western rules of law which inspired colonial rule (1966: 6-8). The legalistic and bureaucratic aspects of colonial rule may have had modernizing consequences, but they also facilitated the easier implementation of segregationist, administrative policies which treated each community both differently from one another and kept them collectively distinct from the European. The impact of this scholarship was such that it also influenced the writings of Malaysian scholars like Ratnam (1965) who neglects to address in depth the role of the British in legislating, administering and fostering ethnic divisions, although he explores the politics of communalism in post-colonial Malaysia.

These divisions preoccupied early Malayan nationalists. Organizations such as the Kesatuan Melayu Muda (KMM), which emphasized class struggle not only against colonial rule but in opposition to the entrenched Malay feudal elite and aristocracy preserved by the British, generally failed to obtain the support necessary for their political cause. A number of reasons have been offered for the failure of a Malay class-based nationalist movement. Among them are the hostility of the British toward the formation of such a movement, and the power delegated to local rulers and the associated traditional ruling elite, in areas of Malay custom and religion (Roff 1980: 71-72, 233). Significantly, the emergence of a secularized Malay administrative or bureaucratic class from the ranks of the traditional ruling classes was an important moment in the development of a Malayan nationalist movement which emphasized ethnic over class consciousness, and Malay culture as the framework for a new national identity.

The Alliance, comprising the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) and Malayan Indian Congress (MIC), which was looked upon favorably by the British, directed much of its energy toward the marking and fixing of ethnic boundaries and cultural difference. These binary representations of self and other were encouraged by the British who feared the emergence of a strong, class-based nationalist movement led by the Malayan Communist Party (MCP). Consequently, the end of colonial rule and

independence for Malaya, instead of triggering a radically reconfiguring nationalist project, produced much fear and anxiety among Malayans about the socio-economic, cultural and political implications of independence. Nationalist rhetoric was both condemnatory of the British and fearful of the colonizer's departure. The latter being fed by concerns about which group's rights would be privileged in the creation of the national state.

Malayan nationalism was ultimately unable to reconcile the contradictions involved in securing the 'spiritual domain' against Western culture, although Malay nationalists claimed this space as inviolable, because of the often sharp distinctions made between and among the constituent ethnic elements of the nation. The Alliance's critique of British rule was early on reduced to securing what ethnic political parties claimed to be the legitimate interests of their ethnic constituencies. In the 1960s and 1970s, nationalist thought simultaneously identified a 'threat' associated not only with the left, but also with 'extremist' communal politics. The Alliance proclaimed itself as the only capable mediator of competing communal claims having constituted itself as a voice of reason and compromise in an ethnically-divided society. By the end of the Alliance's first decade of rule, the principal 'threat' to internal security was no longer the communists, but communalists outside the Alliance. Consequently, the ruling coalition tried to undermine support for opposition groups such as the Democratic Action Party, Gerakan and Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) by calling them chauvinist Chinese and Islamic fundamentalist parties.

In the first decade of independence, social and economic reforms were secondary to settling the cultural and political dimensions of the nation. Class divisions although salient were initially obscured by Malay nationalists' demands for preserving cultural and political privileges. The lower economic status of the Malay majority did not generate a compelling movement to address these inequalities. Instead, the UMNO together with its Alliance partners propagated an ethnicist politics, and an ultimately divisive political strategy. Consequently, the integrity of self-understandings about ethnicity nurtured during colonial rule and its relationship to economic exploitation were preserved intact. Although, as Kahn and Loh (1992: 11-12) argue, the culture issue cannot be dismissed or ignored as false consciousness, official nationalism assumed as natural the conflict between ethnic groups, and it invented its critique and solution explicitly in those terms.

Recalling Chatterjee's argument that the nationalist project glosses over differences between elites and subordinate classes, Malaysian nationalism emphasized the creation of an 'inter-ethnic bargain'. The so-called inter-ethnic contract initially served reasonably well to defuse criticisms and enhance the Alliance's credibility. On one hand, civil society throughout the 1960s was basically organized along ethnic lines with major political parties, clan, religious and village associations representing the interests of the different groups. On the other hand, nationalist elites generally had more in common with one another

than they did with the bulk of the Malay or Chinese masses. Intra-ethnic solidarities and an inter-ethnic compromise were supported by a coalition whose class interests generally converged (Lim and Canak 1981; Jomo 1988; S. Husin Ali 1984). The curious thing about the bargain is that it preserved existing disparities in socio-economic status and political power by trading-off Chinese dominance in the economy with Malay political power. This trade-off, engineered by the Alliance, and which shaped post-colonial Malaysian nationalist discourse, revealed its weaknesses by 1969. The communalism of official nationalism, and as expressed by the Alliance, would also prove to be explosive in 1969. However, until the general elections that year the Alliance displayed little concern for the possibility of any significant challenges to the bargain and its 'breakdown' came as something of a shock to the political system as a whole. The breakdown also revealed the unstable and incomplete nature of the nationalist project in Malaysia.

Post-1969 representations of ethnic identity and interests suggest a highly problematic construction of the nation in political discourse, one which is simultaneously inclusionary and exclusionary. For example, ethnic Chinese and other minority groups are recognized as constituent elements of the nation, and efforts were made in the 1970s to formulate a 'national culture' which would reflect ethnic diversity (Kua 1985). In 1971 the Malaysian government convened a National Culture Congress. The Malaysian prime minister, the late Abdul Razak, noted: "This is the first time the Government is sponsoring such a congress and I am confident that our cultural experts and intellectuals will make full use of it to discuss in depth problems relating to our national culture" (in Kua 1985: 8). The move to establish a national culture was in direct response to the events of May 1969 when the capital city and other major towns were sites of riots and violence. An officially sanctioned and formalistic cultural project was destined to fail in the absence of a meaningful analysis among the 'experts' as to why Malaysia had no 'national' culture.

The events of May 1969 revealed many Malaysians' identification first as members of an ethnic group, and only secondarily as members of a larger national grouping. Mahathir Mohamad, echoing the sentiments of a new generation of Malay nationalists in the 1970s, referred to the state of ethnic relations and the position of the Malays in Malaysia in his framing of the 'Malay dilemma'. *Race* had everything to do with social difference in Malaysia and the inferior economic status of the Malays[3].

Even as independence brought the Malays increased opportunities, it has brought the Chinese even greater opportunities which have propelled them so far ahead as to make the entry of the Malays into business almost ridiculously insignificant. The Malay economic dilemma is still unsolved and seems likely to remain so. The Malays feeling of frustration continues to deepen (Mahathir 1981: 51).

Mahathir argued that the cultural, environmental and racial differences had all contributed to differences among the groups. Mahathir's conclusions although controversial at the time for reasons probably having less to do with his assessment of the problem, than with his prescriptions or the manner in which they had been presented, captured at least partially the dynamics of ethnic (race) relations in the country. To wit:

In Malaysia we have three major races which have practically nothing in common. Their physiognomy, language, culture and religion differ. Besides, how is any one race going to forget race when each is in fact physically separated from the other? For the vast majority of people in Malaysia there is no dialogue. Many of them are not even neighbours. They live apart in different worlds - the Chinese in the towns, the Malays in the *kampongs* and the Indians on the estates. Nothing makes anyone forget the fact of race. So those who say "forget race" are either naive or knaves. (Mahathir 1981: 175)

Set in its context, which was the aftermath of inter-ethnic riots in 1969, these words from a leading figure in the postcolonial Malay nationalist movement positions 'race' as an important element in the nationalist consciousness of the Malays. Significantly, although Mahathir traces the divisions among these groups to the colonial era, he generally ignores the socially constructed nature of this racial or ethnic identity, attributing it instead to a 'biological' given, or racial essence. And although he acknowledges and is critical of colonial rule's fostering of these divisions, his main argument rests on an assumption of *fact* or self-evident truth regarding the 'natural' ethnic difference and conflict between Malay and non-Malay (mainly Chinese). These understandings, which were not only Mahathir's, but also subscribed to by many in his generation of nationalists, inscribes Malay culture and ethnic identity as constitutive of the nation, in contradistinction to other disseminations of a more politically inclusive nationalism. These obvious tensions in Malayan nationalism emerge out of the cultural contradictions engendered in a colonial economy organized around an ethnic division of labor and administrative policies of divide and rule.

In the 1980s and 1990s political structures and institutional arrangements, including the state bureaucracy and party politics, reflect the continuing relevance of ethnicity in nationalist discourse, and struggles to shape the cultural content of the nation. Malay intellectuals and elites called for the preservation and protection of Malay language and culture in the late nineties expressing dissatisfaction with the status of the national language and Malay culture. The response of the National Writers Association (Gapena), Umno Youth and academics to perceptions of 'cultural loss' reveal much concern over the position of Malay culture at the end of the millennium. Ironically, it is also the National Language policy which provided an initial foundation for the construction of a more integrated Malaysian identity. If language is an integral

part of creating a nation, the government took a significant step in that direction. Increasingly ordinary, particularly lower and middle class Malaysians as well as those in the rural areas, are at least linguistically less alienated from one another than they were in the sixties.

More recently, Mahathir's discursive shift in his espousal of the *Bangsa Malaysia* concept suggests a softening of his earlier views and recognition of changes in inter-ethnic relations in the wake of economic restructuring and overall demographic shifts in Malaysia. The presence of a second, if not third generation Chinese and other non-Malay Malaysians, and an increasingly urbanized and upwardly mobile Malay middle class have shattered some of the barriers to the development of a common nationalist consciousness as people intermingle freely in the marketplace and workforce. Mahathir's views may also indicate, as suggested by Khoo (1995: 329), a maturation of his nationalism emerging out of the belief that Malay and Malaysian nationalism are linked. However, it is also evident that Mahathir is a product of a changing cultural, social and political milieu even if he has tried single-handedly to shape political thought and nationalist ideology in the nineties. His conclusions regarding the main challenges facing Malaysians including the struggle to establish a 'territorially and ethnically integrated' nation are not new if one interprets this to mean not the elimination of ethnic difference but a sort of melting pot thesis. Presumably, the whole purpose of the *Rukunegara* was to secure a 'common value system' for all Malaysians which would "transcend ethnic, cultural, and socio-economic differences within the nation" (*Third Malaysia Plan* 1976: 91). The usage of *Bangsa Malaysia* also conveys a recognition of how Malaysian society has matured under the New Economic Policy (NEP), even if its complicity in preserving the political status quo is granted. Consequently, the re-evaluation of older ideological assumptions is in keeping with these broader structural changes in Malaysian society.

Mahathir's version of a *Bangsa Malaysia* also reinforces how the social construction of identity, ethnicity and its relationship to nationalism in Malaysia can be forcefully deployed in official policies on economic development and political change. The timeliness of the *Bangsa Malaysia* concept underscores its instrumental role in accomplishing the objectives of *Wawasan 2020*. Furthermore, Mahathir's vision of the New Malay or *Melayu Baru* suggests to those like Rahman (1997) the continuation of the Malay modernist project. However, the link between Malay nationalism and Malaysian nationalism evident in Mahathir's speeches relates the development of one ethnic community to that of the larger goal of producing a modern Malaysian nation ready and equipped to meet the challenges of globalisation (Abdul Rahman 1997; Khoo 1995: 329). It is also at this critical juncture in Malaysian history that the discourse surrounding the nation assumes a palpably modernist twist, given further credence by the writings of public intellectuals (e.g. Abdul Rahman 1997; Norani 1994; Rustam 1991, 1994).

It should be clear by now that nationalism, in spite of its detractors and sceptics, is very much with us; witness, for example, the wave of nationalist struggles in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. In many parts of the Third World, the incomplete nature of the nationalist project after colonialism suggests the continuing relevance of nationalist aspirations which when combined with the demands for statehood by ethno-nationalist movements lead to a contested and fragmented polity. The impact of globalization on the politics, society, economy and culture of the post-colonial state has not subverted the basic quest for self-determination and sovereignty, challenging one popular view in international relations of a post-Westphalian era in which nations and states are increasingly less relevant. Despite the power of transnational forces and cultural and capital flows, the continuing relevance of discourses on the nation and national communities make it imperative that Malaysianists continue to engage with the fuller implications of this struggle.

CONCLUSION

This article begins by offering an alternative explanation for the *problematique* of the nation and nationalism in Malaysia. It attempts to address the implications of self-other distinctions for the production of the nation in post-colonial Malaysia by drawing on theoretical insights in both older and more recent literature on the ideo-cultural and psychological dimensions of colonialism. Embedded in the economy of colonial rule, cultural and racial distinctions between colonizer and colonized but also among the latter, made it difficult to forge a common national consciousness even after colonialism. Instead, the project of official nationalism during the sixties, seventies and eighties, involved the recovery and maintenance of ethnic identity and inter-ethnic alliances as the main elements of a dominant ideological and political framework.

Lately, with the economic crisis in full swing we may pause to consider some of the more optimistic forecasts of the early nineties on the imminent making of a modern Malaysian nationalist sensibility. Will the current economic crisis compromise Mahathir's ambitious vision of a modernized, industrialized Malaysian society or will it create new opportunities for an enduring inter-ethnic social contract in the face of the unpredictable and neo-colonial tendencies of a globalized international system? How will globalized capitalism disrupt nationalist tendencies toward reconciling difference? Alternatively, how does it facilitate the creation of a more coherent national community against an external and faceless other? These are questions which do not generate easy answers quite obviously because they seek a more predictive response. However, in light of recent shifts in nationalist discourse, it is evident that some progress has been made in recuperating Malaysians' shared historical experience, what Memmi (1991) and Nandy (1988) would call the 'recovery of self', from a colonial legacy

which had as its ideological core not only the construction of White racial superiority but also the production of ethnic difference among the colonized.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ENDNOTES

1. The analysis in this section addresses colonial policy and nationalist politics in the peninsula. To avoid confusion references to developments before 1963 are situated in Malaya, and after that date, in Malaysia.
2. Some parts of the following analysis are drawn from chapter 2 of Nair (1995).
3. The word 'race' was ubiquitous in colonial era discourse as well as in the early area studies literature on Malaysia, as in the race of Malaysia. 'Race' is also favored in Malaysian official discourse. Government documents, newspapers, politicians and ordinary people continue to employ 'race' in reference to ethnic identity. However, my use of 'ethnicity', except when directly citing the literature, is consistent with the work of other Malaysian scholars (e.g. S. Husin Ali 1984).

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