

**A Clash of Cultures:  
The Malaysian Experience**

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David Widdicombe is an eminent Queen's Counsel who is also qualified to practice at the Californian Bar. He has worked and travelled widely in South East Asia and the Far East where he has been able to examine the racial position from a distinctive viewpoint. He is now (2006) retired.

## **NOTE**

This text is an edited version of a lecture delivered to the Institute for Cultural Research on 20 March, 1987.

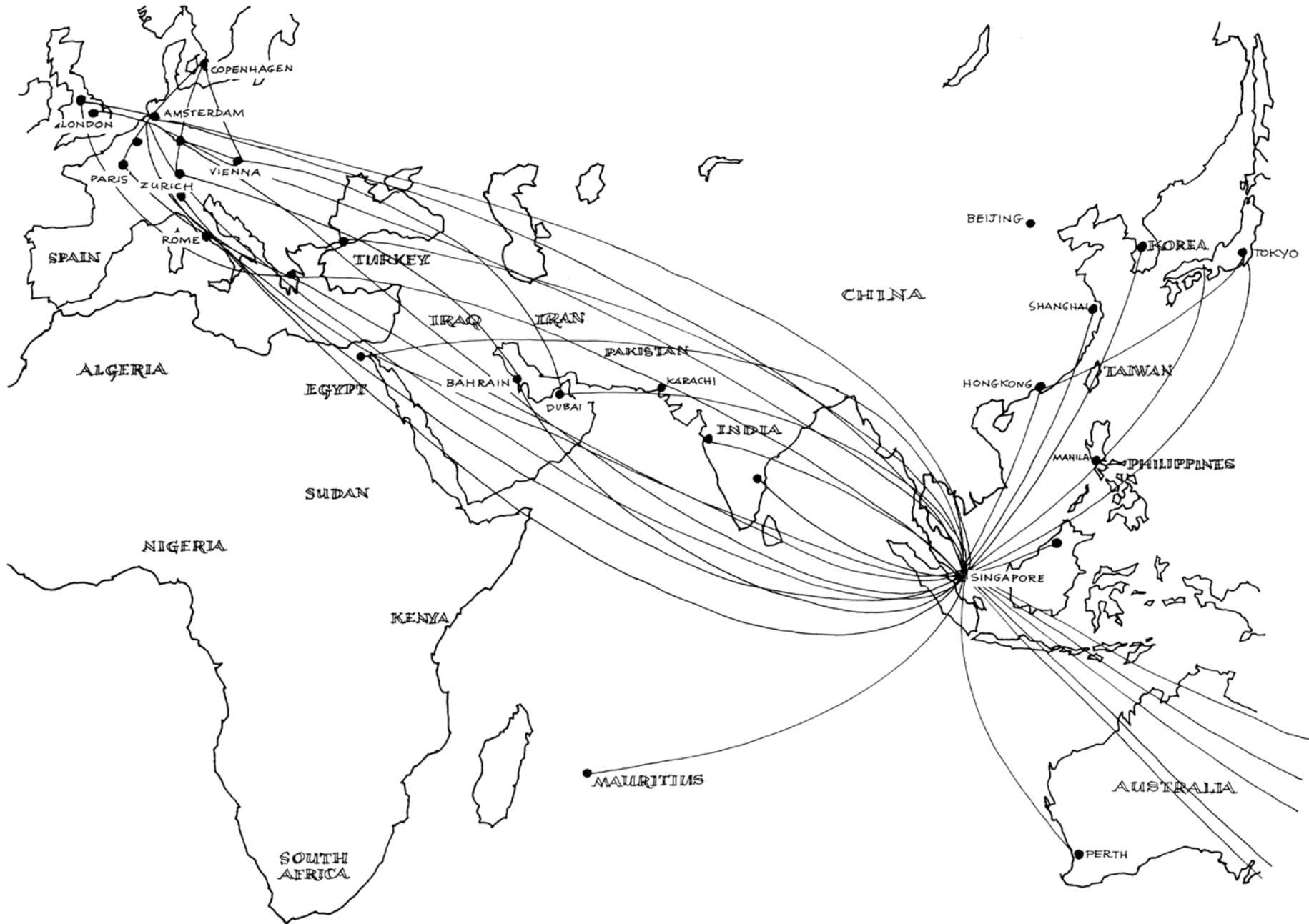
# **A Clash of Cultures**

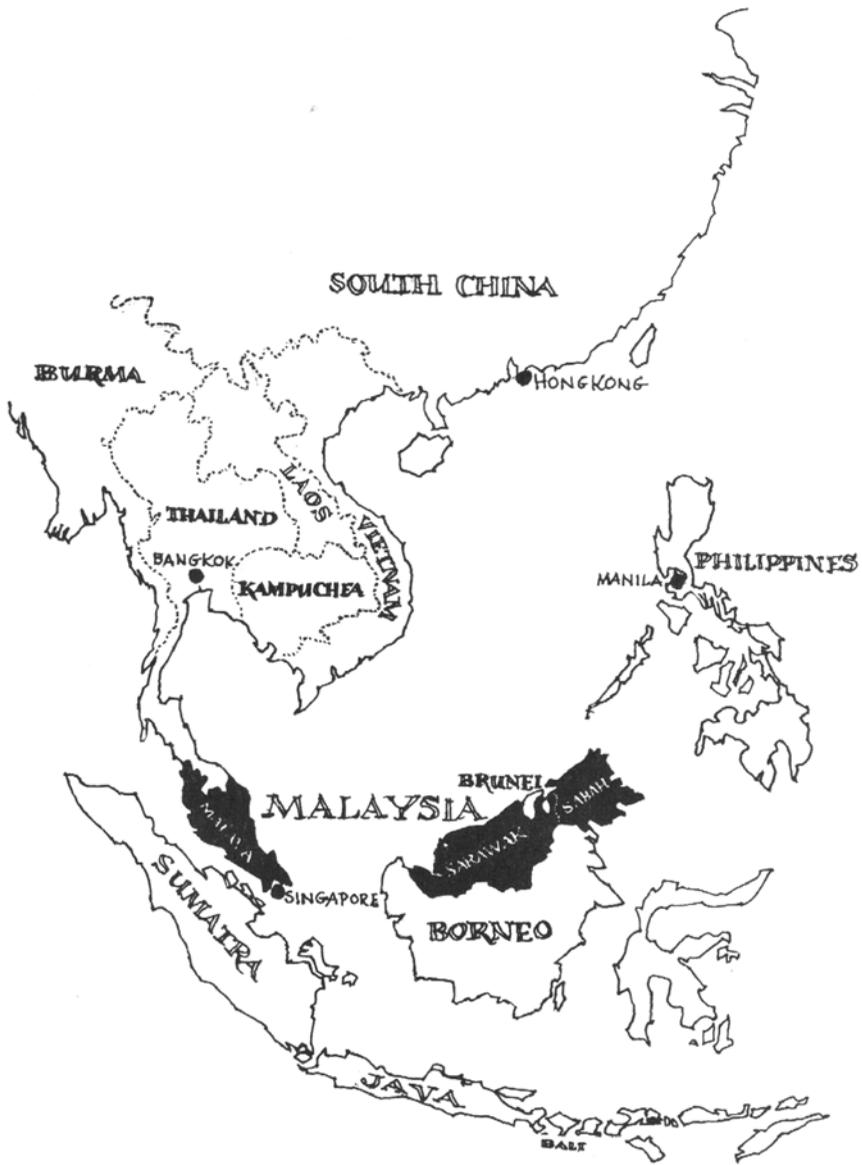
## **The Malaysian Experience**

The subject of this lecture is a distant part of the world. There is an eight hour time gap from here to Malaysia and it takes 16 hours to fly there on a scheduled airline – that is one third of the way round the world. It is a country close to the equator, a tropical land of great beauty. It is prosperous by third world standards, indeed it is really moving out of the third world into the category of “emerging countries”. It is well situated geographically on world communication routes and it lies in a growth area of the world, namely the eastern side of the Pacific rim. At the same time it has an acute, perhaps uniquely acute, racial and community problem. The Malays, who are Muslims, constitute about 53% of the population, the Chinese constitute about 35%, the Indians about 11% and there are some indigenous people and a handful of Europeans. The Malays, from their numbers, have political control but the Chinese and Indians have substantial control of the business economy and the country’s wealth.

Before looking at those groups more closely, I would like to remind you of Professor Deikman’s definition of culture which he gave in an earlier lecture in this series. He said that culture is the ‘customs, ideas and attitudes shared by a group, transmitted from generation to generation by learning processes rather than biological inheritance; adherence to these customs and attitudes is regulated by a system of rewards and punishments peculiar to each culture’.<sup>1</sup> You notice that he describes culture as transmitted by environment rather than heredity. As I shall tell you later this is a very live subject in South East Asia where they discuss whether their problems are genetic or can be solved by environmental remedies. Professor Deikman’s definition is simple but its application can be complicated. There are many, many gradations of groups constituting a culture and many degrees of differentiation within what might be considered one cultural group. Are the Scots and the English one cultural group or two? But in the example we are going to look at tonight, Malaysia, we shall find groups which are probably as firmly and clearly differentiated as can be found anywhere in the world. So it is a very good example of the problem of cultural groups in conflict elsewhere.

The map on pages 5–6 is based on an ordinary airline map showing the Far East and South East Asia, India, China, Japan and also Malaysia, with Singapore identified as a central point for airline communications. You can see what I said about the good location of the Malay Peninsula. It is on the



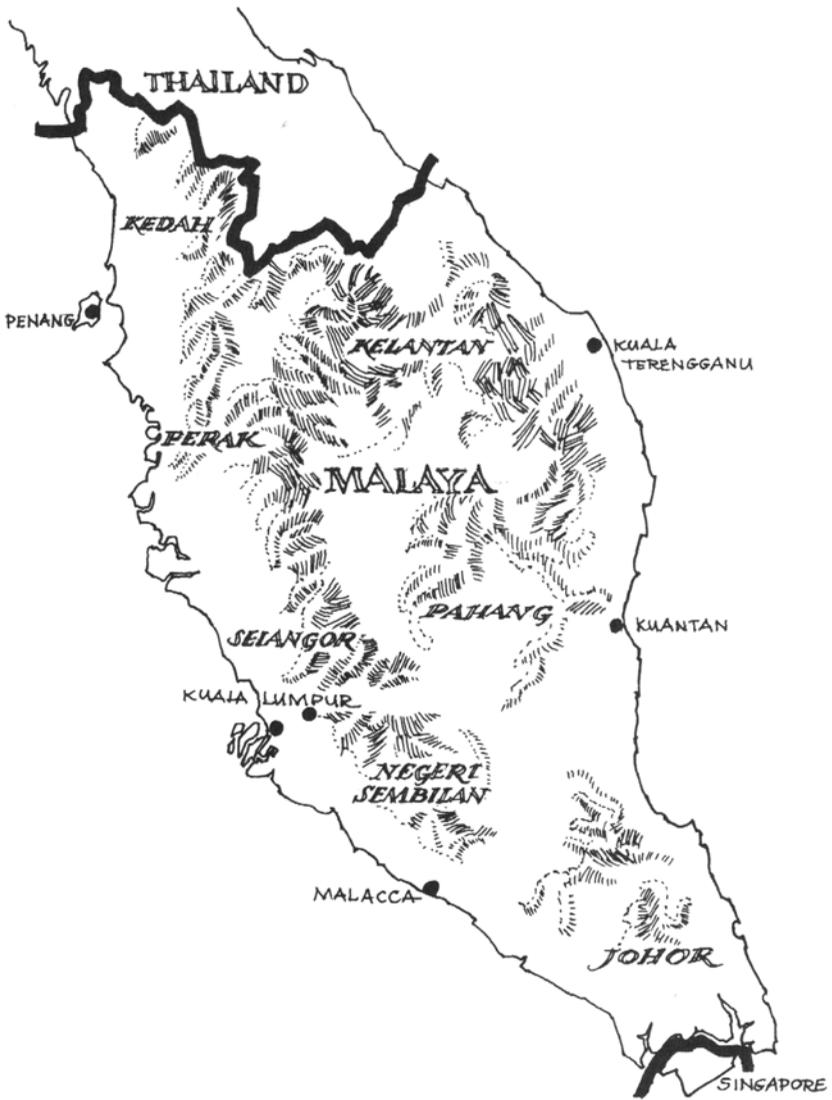


route down to Australia and it is on the routes up the east side of the Pacific rim – Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, Japan – all important centres of growth: In South East Asia you find about one sixth of the world's population, some 750 million people. The Malay race covers not only Malaysia but also Indonesia and the Philippines. So it is extensive apart from the Malay Peninsula. The Thais, however, are not Malays.

The map on page 7 is a political map. After the British left in 1957, a federation was formed of the Malay Peninsula, together with Singapore which is at its southern tip, and the old British colonies of Sarawak and North Borneo. The common element of the federation was that they had all been under British rule. Sarawak and Sabah, as North Borneo is now called, are very different indeed from Peninsular Malaysia; the racial mix is different and the economies are different. For that reason this lecture is confined to Peninsular Malaysia. Nor is it concerned very much with Singapore. Singapore is a city of two and a half million people at the tip of the Peninsula. It is 75% Chinese so it is different in racial composition from the rest of Malaysia. It was part of the federation at first, but separated in 1963 because the racial mix was so different. It is very much a Chinese city.

The Malay Peninsula (see map p.9) is about 350 miles long, and 250 miles at its widest point. The seaward areas are flat land, and down the middle there is a ridge of highlands and some mountains. There is a lot of jungle, rain forest and magnificent beaches, some of which are being developed for tourism. It has in Kuala Lumpur, the capital, a modern city with the usual high rise offices, highways, traffic congestion, hotels and everything you associate with a busy city. The main industries in Malaysia produce 40% of the world's supply of tin, 13% of the world's hardwoods and a large amount of natural rubber, which is exported. Other agricultural products are rice, which is not exported but consumed at home, coconuts, palm oil, pineapples which are canned and exported, sugar cane, tea, coffee and pepper. There is also fishing along the coast.

I am going to look first at the history and origins of the present cultural mixture, and then give some account of the three races, their cultures and the conflict between them, as well as the policies which are being attempted to cope with the clash of the races. Finally I shall say a few inevitably inconclusive words about the lessons we might be able to draw from this. But before I embark on the descriptive part, there are two comments by way of warning which ought to be made in approaching this subject. First of all, it is necessary to be on guard against the attitudes and prejudices which we bring to this subject from our own culture. For instance, we have a certain attitude to the use of time and to work; I remember my own reaction the first time I went to Singapore to do a case, how irritated I was that people



did not seem to think it important to keep appointments on time. Here is something to test your own reactions. See if your prejudices are aroused by the description of a group of people given in this passage:

Our neighbours were relaxed, they never appeared to fret or hurry, they never seemed anxious, they never ran for buses or got flustered. But then there was never any need to rush; not much was attempted beyond the basics of life; our neighbours never went to cinemas, dances, exhibitions, they never had evening classes to attend and seldom gave parties beyond those dictated by the calendar of celebrations. They rarely travelled unnecessarily or read books. The men, in the evening, most often attended the mosque. For many the highlight of the evening was a Malay drama on TV. They had, in fact, a remarkable ability to do nothing; they were totally idle for hours, a state which would drive even the most easy going Westerner to activity of some sort. Young men, waiting months or even years to be given a government job, knew nothing of the frustrations of unemployment, they simply waited patiently and unhurriedly for fate to play its next card. Their lives by Western standards were horrifically dull, their demeanour enviably relaxed.<sup>2</sup>

That is an account of life in a Malay kampong by two English school teachers who worked there for three or four years. As you see, it is very easy to call Malays lazy. You may have had that reaction, as I do. But to somebody who can sit and do nothing for hours we seem to be frenetic workaholics and the life we lead looks like a rat race, so which stand-point do you take? It is easy too for westerners to sympathise with the Chinese and Indian elements of the population. The Chinese, like us, are basically a nation of traders and shopkeepers; they are pragmatic, materialistic, hardworking. The Indians are very astute business men and very verbal. We are familiar with both races in the U.K. The Malays are much harder to relate to. There are none of them here and when we make contact with them abroad, as you can see, we bring a lot of prejudices to a life which seems perfectly normal to them.

So the first thing is to watch what we bring from our own culture to a study of theirs and the second comment, by way of warning, is to take care of the way in which history is used. History is to the group or the nation what memory is to the individual. Sometimes, indeed, if you know the history of a region it enables you to predict what is likely to be the future there. But history can be used and abused and this is particularly so in Malaysia. Arguments can be derived from history which sidetrack and divert from an objective consideration of the present. For example, in

Malaysia, who was there first? The Malays, who call themselves Bumiputras, i.e. 'sons of the land', claim that they are the original people of Malaysia. But if you want to use history like this, you can show that they are not. There is an aboriginal population, not very many of them, it's true, but they were there before the Malays. It is also a fact that a great part of the present Malay population in Malaysia came there in the 19th century at the same time as the Chinese and Indians.

The pros and cons of British rule are another example of how can you misuse history. The British brought the Chinese and Indians to Malaysia in the 19th century and so it can be said that they created the present problems; but if you want to argue this way about history, you can say that the British unified the country and, if they did bring the Chinese and Indians in, it is they who have developed Malaysia's industry and business, which the Malays could never have done by themselves. To use history like that is very unprofitable. What history does show is that there have been constant waves of population coming down into South East Asia from the North which, over historical periods of time, have been settled and absorbed into the economy of the area. In the long term, over hundreds of years, that is a hopeful aspect of the situation in Malaysia and other parts of the South East Asia.

Now before I look at the history of the area I must pay tribute to two books. One of them, *The Malay Dilemma*, is by Dr Mahathir Mohamad. He published it in 1970 in the period immediately after some very serious communal riots in Malaysia and it is about the racial conflict there. Dr Mahathir Mohamad is now, and has been for some years, the Prime Minister of Malaysia. It is a courageous, realistic and illuminating book which nobody interested in this subject can do without. The other book that I have found interesting is called *In Malaysia* and I have already quoted from it. Published last year by two British school teachers, who lived and taught in a Malay kampong or village for several years, it is a very detailed, sympathetic and unprejudiced account of what they experienced.

Now for the history of the area, and first one has to choose one's calendar. I am going to choose the Christian calendar, but the Moslems of course start their calendar from about 600 A.D. and the Chinese, if they were going to talk about this, would do it with reference to dynasties. In the thousand years before the birth of Christ, South East Asia was subject to waves of immigration coming from the North, mainly from the area which is now South China. The earliest people living in the Malay Peninsula probably arrived at that period. All these people were by way of 'religion' animist in their practices.

Then in the first thousand years of the Christian era the main influence in this area came from India. There were a number of Hindu and Buddhist kingdoms set up and physical remains of them exist in Cambodia and in Java – for example, Angkor Wat in Cambodia and Borobudur in Java. The island of Bali in Indonesia (which is not quite what you expect from “South Pacific”; it is in fact a large agricultural, tropical island with tourism in only one section of it) is Hindu, a relic from the time when the whole of this area was Hindu and Buddhist.

From about 1000 A.D. onwards for about three or four hundred years the influence shifted; instead of coming from India it came from China. China has fluctuated from periods when it looked outwards to periods when it looked inwards and kept foreigners out. This was an outward-looking period when the Chinese sailed the whole of the South China seas. They reached India, and they settled especially in Malacca in the Malay Peninsula where the ships that traded from Europe also came. You can see from the maps on pages 7 and 9 how well placed it was. The Chinese got their word ‘junk’ from the Malay word for ship (jong).

Islam was very late in coming to this part of the world. It did not arrive until the 13th century, not by conquest as was the case in other parts, but as a peaceful adjunct of trading. There were a lot of travelling teachers of the Moslem religion who came to this area. Then dynastic alliances were formed based on the establishment of the Moslem religion. Effectively, the Arab Empire came to an end in the year 1258 when the Mongols sacked Baghdad; that cut the land routes across Asia and forced trade onto the sea. In particular it forced Europeans to look to the west and the sea rather than to the east and the land. Venice lost its predominant position, being overtaken by the Atlantic countries, Portugal and Spain and later by France, Holland and England. The Arabs themselves took to the sea; in the 15th century they dominated trade throughout South East Asia.

In the 16th century the Portuguese arrived. Their first visit to Malaysia was in 1509 and in 1511 they seized and held Malacca. The Portuguese had a series of trading posts; they came round the Cape of Good Hope to Goa in India. They possessed Malacca in Malaysia, Macao at the mouth of Pearl River in South China and Nagasaki in Japan which was the end of the voyage. They tried to bring Christianity to the area but it made very little progress.

In 1641 the Dutch, who were now catching up on voyaging, seized Malacca from the Portuguese. They held it for 150 years until at the end of the 18th century the British arrived. Having established themselves firmly in India, they moved into this part of the world. In 1786 the British took Penang and in 1795 they seized Malacca from the Dutch. In 1819 they

founded Singapore and in 1824 there was a treaty which defined spheres of influence. The British were to have Malaya and the northern part of Borneo while the Dutch were given what is Indonesia and that is the way it stayed from then on. Throughout the 19th century there was Chinese and Indian immigration into the Peninsula sponsored by British interests who needed them to work in the mines and on the rubber plantations; and it was in the 19th century that the present pattern of races in Malaysia was established. There was also, as I mentioned before, a good deal of Malay immigration in the 19th century, especially from Sumatra. There has always been a close connection between that island and the Malay Peninsula – the distance is very short. At night time, if you stand on the shore, you can see the lights of one from the other. Malaysia got its name from a kingdom in Sumatra during the period of Indian influence.

Now, throughout this period, although the racial mix was much as it is now, racial conflict was kept down by the strong external ruling force of the British. The conflict only came into the open when these races were, so to speak, left to themselves in the Peninsula. There are three main races. Before looking at them in turn, it must be remembered that each is in itself very diverse and there are many sub-cultures within each of them. The Malays have many diverse groups because quite a lot of Malay groups immigrated from Indonesia. The Chinese are all from the southern part of China, but they come from many different places and their dialects reflect that – they speak Cantonese, Hokien, Hainanese, and others. The Indians come mainly from South India, from the Madras area and from Sri Lanka. There are Indian Tamils, Sinhalese Tamils and then there are Sinhalese proper – so the Indians have a sub-cultural mix as well. More recently there are some Bangladeshis and Pakistanis who are distinguished from the others by being Moslem, not Hindu.

Let us now look at each of these three main races in turn. First of all there are the *Chinese*, about 35% of the population, that is 4.2 million out of a total population in the Peninsula of about 12 million. They mostly came in the 19th century, brought in to work the plantations and the mines; they mainly live in the towns although there are some in the countryside, they run shops and businesses, they are strong in the professions and – this is the important thing – they own 75% to 80% of the wealth of the country. In fact they control the economy. They speak various Chinese dialects but, although they are separated by their spoken language, they all use the same Chinese written language. They have a great respect for education.

Here is an example of how the Chinese have control of the economy – it is called ‘The Tobacco Factory Case’. One of the most prosperous manufacturing firms in Malaysia produces cigarettes bearing the name of a

well known London firm. In order to demonstrate that it was in accord with government wishes, this foreign company appointed a Malay as Chairman of its board of directors and also took in a small number of Malays to work as gardeners, drivers and unskilled factory workers; the majority of the firm's employees, ranging from executive officers to clerks and skilled workers, were non-Malays. Suddenly a rumour was started that the factory had sacked Chinese employees and replaced them with Malays. Without waiting to confirm the truth of this rumour the local retailers of this brand of cigarettes, 95% of whom were Chinese shopkeepers, issued a boycott. Apparently no actual directive was given by any responsible organisation – by word of mouth the boycott spread throughout the length and breadth of Malaysia. Within a week this firm felt the pinch; before a month was out the situation had become so bad that the company was forced to seek the aid of the Chinese Chambers of Commerce. The company was forced to submit to an inspection by group after group of Chinese before it was admitted that there was no truth in the allegation and the boycott was called off. So the Chinese have a grip on the economy.

What of the religion of the Chinese? 'Religion' is a very difficult concept for the Chinese to grasp. One reads that in the 18th century, when Westerners first came in numbers to China, the Chinese were nonplussed by being asked what their religion was. In the end they said, 'We must do something to please these people', so they called themselves Buddhists. In fact the Western concept of religion has no place for the Chinese. Here is an extract from a very interesting book published last year and written by an English Chinese woman, born in China and brought up in England. It is called *China's Sorrow* by Lynn Pan and here she gives an account of a funeral in Xian, the ancient capital of China and home of the famous 'terracotta army', which indicates the attitude of the Chinese towards these matters:

This signalled the end of the rites and everybody trooped out. Only the musicians remained and I asked them 'What happens next?' 'Oh, this is the intermission', one answered, 'the family have adjourned upstairs and should be at their noodles now.' 'By the way', I wanted to know, 'how could you know when to go crescendo?' 'The service follows a formula,' I was told. What formula? The rites I'd just witnessed, I was to understand, were performed for the soul of the dead according to the Confucian – Taoist – Buddhist mode. This, I must admit, was something of a surprise. Not the fact that the creeds of the old society survived after so much deliberate government suppression, for China is notorious for its inability to shake off its past. Nor the fact that Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism were practised side by side, for I

know that the Chinese are little disturbed by the scrambling of the forms of rival persuasions .... What surprised me was the easy way my informant said it, as though it should be quite obvious. 'What could be more natural?' his tone implied when his voice pronounced 'the Confucian – Taoist – Buddhist mode' without a moment's hesitation or doubt. 'What, with all those invocations to the Chinese Communist Party?' I ventured to ask. 'Why not?', he answered, thinking it neither remarkable nor inappropriate that the Party should be called upon in prayers for the soul of the departed along with the deities of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. 'They can't all be right, but one of them might be,' he said, utterly seriously. He couldn't have expressed a more Chinese opinion, declining to be purist in the matter of belief systems.<sup>3</sup>

The Chinese are described by Dr Mahathir as materialistic, aggressive and with an appetite for work. All true. I have worked with Chinese on many occasions. They are unsentimental people, secretive and clannish. Their unbroken 3000 years of culture give them a deep self-confidence. They are also traditionally not active in politics which is interesting because that is why they have not, until recently, taken a very active part in politics in Malaysia. The Chinese have always been very respectful of authority, there is a lot in their education which induces that. They have not in any way challenged the Malays in their hold on the government of Malaysia.

The Chinese in Malaysia are just one element of what are called the 'overseas Chinese'. There are Chinese groups in many countries of the world, but they are particularly strong in South East Asia and the situation you find in Malaysia is repeated, though not on such an intense scale, in the Philippines, in Java, which is the most densely populated part of Indonesia, and in Thailand. There are 30 million overseas Chinese in the areas I have just identified. They are enormously successful everywhere and, although they do not dominate the other places mentioned, that is only because their numbers are smaller. In Malaysia they have such a grip on the economy because they are so numerous. The only place the overseas Chinese are not successful is Japan; apparently they cannot compete with the Japanese in these business qualities we have been talking about. The overseas Chinese send money home to China and there are areas of China which, by all accounts, have paved their roads and built their schools and their hospitals all on money from their overseas relatives. In Malaysia this contact has, to some extent, weakened because after the Communist revolution in 1949 in mainland China, a lot of Chinese in Malaysia felt more detached from their homeland. This is in fact a hopeful development because for the first time the Malaysian Chinese are beginning to consider themselves as Malaysians

as well as Chinese. So to sum up, the Chinese have got all the right attitudes for success in the modern world except perhaps interest in political power.

The *Indians* are 11%, or thereabouts, of the population. They mostly arrived in the 19th century. They are mainly Hindus and have the caste system. They live partly in the towns and partly on the big estates which they run. They speak Tamil and Singalese. They are strong in the professions – a good many lawyers and doctors are Indian – and they have something of a monopoly in running the railways.

Then we come to the 53% *Malays*. The Malays have a higher birth rate than the others so that percentage may grow. They have been there the longest. They are mainly rural in location; they work in agriculture and on the land. They are very strong in the civil service, administration, the police and the armed forces because that is where they were employed by the British. They are not in the professions; I have never met a Malay lawyer, and they are not in business to speak of. Because of their majority in the population the Malays have a majority in the government. It is a coalition government but the Malay element is predominant. They speak Malay and its various dialects. There is said to be no real demand amongst Malays for education, in contrast to the Chinese. By religion they are all Moslems but it is very noticeable that it is Islam combined with, or superimposed, on a strong animist tradition. They have medicine men who are widely consulted and a large part of their life seems to revolve around animist practices as well as the practice of the Moslem faith. Islamic fundamentalism is growing in Malaysia and there is apparently a good deal of veiling for women, just to take one aspect of it, spreading in Malay communities. The Moslem religion, in its formal aspects, is very strong in Malaysia and, if you go there, you feel it is all pervasive. It is the state religion and it and its attitudes officially pervade almost everything. The difference in this area of religion between the Chinese and Indians on the one hand and Malays on the other is well demonstrated by a test on the school children carried out by the two English school teachers I mentioned earlier. They asked them to write essays about the things that they were most afraid of. The Chinese and Indians all wrote about snakes and tigers, the Malays all wrote about God.

Now what are the Malays like? Dr Mahathir says they are spiritually inclined, tolerant and easy going; here is a quotation from his book:

The Malay is courteous and self-effacing, his world is full of nobility and he is never far from his Rajs and chiefs. He gives way and he shows them deference, it is good manners to do so. It is not degrading, it is in fact a mark of breeding. It is typical of a Malay to stand aside and let someone else pass ....

What is good [for the Malay] is not what is pleasant but what is proper. What is proper is laid out in the strict religious code of Islam and of adat (custom). To be well thought of is good for the community and it is also good for the individual; but generally the individual is regarded as secondary to the community.

Formality and ritual rate very high in the Malay concept of values. What is formal is proper .... Hedonism as such has no place in the Malay code of ethics. Pleasure, whether physical or mental, is considered base. Nothing is done for the sake of pleasure alone. To serve one's fellow man may give satisfaction and pleasure but that is not why a Malay should be of service to others. It is only duty and propriety which move him. The moving force is to appear right in the eyes of God and man. In other words a deed is done because it is proper not because it is pleasant or because it gives one the pleasure of achievement. Physical pleasure is regarded as lowly and must be suppressed or at least hidden. Eating good food in excess is frowned upon, and the drinking of intoxicating drinks is forbidden by religion and partly by public disapproval. There is no Malay equivalent to the Epicurean philosophy of 'Eat, drink and be merry' ....

There is a fatalism which characterises the Malay attitude to life....<sup>4</sup>

and the author expands on that.

Now these attitudes place a great strain on those that adhere to them and this is why, in Malay communities, people from time to time 'run amok'. They did so in 1969. The Chinese had done rather well, too well, in the elections that year and were holding ceremonial parades in Kuala Lumpur and other towns. The strain was too great for the Malays and they ran amok. Dr Mahathir describes it thus:

Amok is a Malay word. It is a word now universally understood. There is no other single word which can quite describe 'amok'. And the reason is obvious for 'amok' describes yet another facet of the Malay character. 'Amok' represents the external physical expression of the conflict within the Malay which his perpetual observance of the rules and regulations of his life causes in him. It is a spilling over, an overflowing of his inner bitterness. It is a rupture of the bonds that bind him. It is a final and complete escape from reason and training. The strain and the restraint on him is lifted. Responsibility disappears. Nothing matters. He is free. The link with the past is severed, the future holds nothing more. Only the present matters. To use a hackneyed expression he sees red. In a trance, he lashes out indiscriminately. His timid, self-effacing self is displaced. He is now a Mr Hyde, cruel, callous and bent on destruction. But the transition from the self-effacing,

courteous Malay to the Amok is always a slow process. It is so slow that it may never come about at all. He may go to his grave before the turmoil in him explodes ....

[Amongst Malays] the intemperate man is not admired. The impression given is one of continuous restraint which taxes the will. It seems to lead to an inner conflict, and at times the restraining bonds seem to burst and suddenly the polite formality disappears to be replaced by a violent outburst that is frightening in its intensity.<sup>4</sup>

So what conclusion do we reach about the Malays? It is the opposite to the Chinese. Unlike them, the Malays have all the wrong attitudes for life in the modern world and this is the essence of the problem in Malaysia.

So the overall picture we get of these three races is of three uniquely different cultures with practically nothing in common. Let us run down the list: physiognomy – they look different; language – they all speak and write different languages; occupations are different; locations – they live in different places, the Chinese mainly in the towns, the Malays in the country; their religions are different; they eat different food; their clothes are different; they have different holidays and festivals (one of the advantages of a multi-racial community is that you get a lot of holidays – there are 13 national holidays in Malaysia and about the same again at the state level). The architecture of their buildings is different; their customs are different – for instance the Moslem Malays take off their shoes and expect visitors to do likewise when they enter the house, but you do not have to do that in a Chinese house; their superstitions are different – just to give an example, everybody knows that Chinese ghosts and demons travel in straight lines and do not like to see themselves in mirrors. This is why, if you go into a Chinese garden, the bridges and paths are all crooked, zig-zags and curves, never straight lines, and why you sometimes see in Chinese houses and flats a mirror placed outside the window facing outwards so that the demon sees itself as it approaches and goes away. But I never heard anything to suggest that Malay ghosts and demons, of which there are good collection, are in any way inhibited like this; as far as I know, they can go in any direction, in any curves or zig-zags just as they like; and I have seen no mirrors outside Malay houses. So they don't even share the same approach to such an important thing as ghosts and demons.

As I said food and drink are also different. The Malays, being Moslems, are not allowed alcohol or pork and all the meat they eat must be Halal, which is meat slaughtered with a prayer by someone facing Mecca. The Chinese, on the contrary, as one of my Chinese friends assured me, go by the rule that 'if it moves we eat it'. They are particularly fond of pork – you

remember Charles Lamb's essay on the origin of roast pork, which he says was discovered in China by a peasant when his house burnt down. There is no prohibition on alcohol amongst the Chinese. They eat with chop sticks, the Malays and the Indians eat with their hands or with cutlery. So, to quote again the teachers who lived and taught in a Malay kampong, they say that the races remain largely ignorant of, and uninterested in, each other. There is no dialogue between them. For instance there are not many Malay filling stations, but such as there are the Chinese do not use, nor do they employ Malays, except perhaps as drivers or suchlike.

What have the races in Malaysia got in common? I can only think of one thing: they all share the same defined geographical area. What are their attitudes to this situation? Well, the Malays say that they are the original people, they point out that they have got no other country to go to, unlike the Chinese who can go back to China, and the Indians to India. They feel that they are the have-nots in their own land. They resent the Chinese and Indians, and envy their business success and wealth. Inevitably they harbour feelings of violence against them, which at times of social stress can break out openly. It seems that for the Malays, their problem is really to learn the attitudes and abilities required in the modern world. And it must be stated that the Moslem religion as it exists there is not exactly a help in their making that change.

As for the Chinese, they say that they have been in the country a long time, a hundred years or more, and their attitude is that they have got as much right to be there as the Malays. They say that they have developed the country by their business skills, and they resent the protection and privileges which are given to the Malays. They are contemptuous of the Malays, regarding them as dirty, lazy and generally useless. As far as they can, they treat the Malays as if they were not there.

The Indians, whose numbers are much smaller, and who have the same colour of skin as the Malays, prefer to keep a lower profile than the Chinese, but generally speaking share their attitudes. The problem for the Chinese and Indians is to share some of their wealth and success in order to live in harmony with the Malays, because if they do not there will be more violence. It calls for very great self-restraint on their part. In Malaysia, every community feels that it is being discriminated against and that the others are the ones in a more advantageous position.

What policies have been followed to deal with this potentially explosive situation? They are almost entirely ones to strengthen and bolster the Malay element of the racial mix and to try and enable it to achieve some sort of equality, as far as business is concerned, with the non-Malays. It is called 'constructive protection', but another term for it is 'positive discrimination'.

Many of the measures that I am going to mention were started by the British but the policy has been developed further since independence. It is easy for the government to introduce these measures because, as I said, the Malays have the majority in Parliament. The national language is Malay and the national religion is Islam, the religion of the Malays. There are compulsory directorships for Malays in all the larger companies. You remember the tobacco factory had a Malay chairman: that is because the law says there must be at least one director who is a Malay. 70% of all university and college places go the Malays and the Chinese have not been allowed to have a separate university. In the civil service the Malays have four places to every one for non-Malays. There are large areas of Malay land reserves, where only Malays can own land. That is a necessary protection because if there was a free market in land, the Malays would rapidly be bought out. They get priority in the grant of many government licences and for new business lettings in certain areas the first offer of a tenancy must be to a Malay. They get loans at a cheaper rate than anyone else. One measure which was proposed turned out to be too extreme: a few years ago there was a law passed saying that all cheques must be written in Malay. That was dropped because it was unworkable, there being a great many people in Malaysia who can only write cheques in Chinese characters.

The Malay share of the country's wealth has been increasing. In the early 1970s it was very low – a single figure percentage – but it's now about 18%. The aim by 1990, under the national plan, is to give the Malays 30% of the country's wealth or economy, though in practice it may turn out to be more like 22%. In fact that is quite a success story for this policy. The qualification that one has to make is that the Malay share of the economy is concentrated in the hands of a few urban Malays who have become good businessmen and who are the directors of the companies; there is no real spread of this wealth among the Malay population.

One looks at this situation and concludes that it is potentially explosive. If economic growth continues – and at the moment there is a recession because of the decline in world demand for rubber and tin – then all will probably be well, at least on the surface. But if the present economic problems continue, the prospects for racial harmony are not very encouraging. In the recent election there was an increase in support by the Chinese for the opposition parties so there are signs of tension growing up again. The main hope is that the events of 1969, when the Malays ran amok, have impressed themselves so deeply on everybody in Malaysia that they will not let it happen again.

I promised to touch on the interesting question of heredity and environment as a source of cultural characteristics. I would not dare touch

on such a delicate and difficult subject if it were not that it is a live issue in this part of the world. Dr Mahathir considers at some length whether the subsidiary position of the Malays in this racial mix may be due to genetic factors. And he cites, for instance, marriage customs. The Malays in-breed a great deal and apparently it is obligatory in their community to get married even if you are mentally unfit or have some congenital handicap. The Chinese have got a different attitude. Their marriage customs specifically prevent in-breeding because the marriage must not be within the same clan.

In Singapore, the government is concerned because an increasing number of educated men and women seem reluctant to marry and have children. Most of the children are being born to the poorer sections of the community. To encourage the better educated and, one supposes, more intelligent sections of the community to marry and have children, the government has set up a marriage and dating service. It remains to be seen whether the genetic theory on which it is based turns out to be right or not.

On the other hand, environment is obviously a very important factor. The Philipinos are Malays, but two or three centuries of Spanish and American rule have produced a much more active personality there than in Peninsular Malaysia. The Chinese and Japanese have emigrated in large numbers to America and after they have been there, say, three generations it is practically impossible to tell them from other Americans except by their appearance. One wonders whether Malays exposed to these different influences might not also become more businesslike and aggressive.

Dr Mahathir points out one thing about the origins of these races which suggests an important effect of environment. As he says the Malays are the people of lowlands. They have had no problems of survival. They have lived on growing rice and other agricultural crops which gives a lot of time, since they get one, and now two, crops a year and in between they do not need to do much. They live in small villages and this has encouraged them to be the very peaceful people that they are. On the other hand, look at the Chinese. They come from South China. It is an area of disasters. There are epidemics, typhoons, floods, starvation. There have been many invaders, wars and rebellions. They have had to leave and make their lives elsewhere. There are plenty of cities in South China, they are familiar with urban life. The result, it is suggested, is that the Chinese have developed into a very hardy race. They have had to survive and the unfit have been weeded out. So it may be that the stimulus you get from your environment is an important factor. How to increase the amount of stimulus on the Malays is a difficult question but if there were the stimulus it seems likely that they would respond to it. However, the odds must not be too great – look what

happened to the American Indians and the Australian Aborigines. They had stimulus, but it was too great and they were overwhelmed.

Generalising from all this, where does it take us? Well, Malaysia is no more than one perhaps rather extreme example of a problem found almost everywhere in the world. There are the blacks and whites in America, the Jews and the Arabs, Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland. Britain has its ethnic minorities. All these are examples of the clash of cultures. It is not easy to find a country without the problem of conflicting cultures.

It may be that cultural clash is a condition of the human race, at least at its present stage of development. If we are to get away from it we shall have to develop a better understanding of groups and living in groups.

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