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The Making of Race in Colonial Malaya: Political Economy and Racial Ideology

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The conventional interpretation of the "race problem" in Peninsular Malaysia (Malaya) is founded upon the supposedly inevitable frictions between ethnic communities with sharply divergent cultural traditions. In this view, assimilation between the indigenous Malay population and the descendants of immigrants from China and India was always a remote possibility. In this paper I argue that modern "race relations" in Peninsular Malaysia, in the sense of impenetrable group boundaries, were a byproduct of British colonialism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Prior to 1850, inter-ethnic relations among Asian populations were marked by cultural stereotypes and occasional hostility, but there were also possibilities for inter-ethnic alliances and acculturation. Direct colonial rule brought European racial theory and constructed a social and economic order structured by "race." A review of the writing of observers of colonial society provides a crude test of this hypothesis.[•]

"The idea of race is a situational imperative; if it is not there to begin with, it tends to develop in a plantation society because it is a useful, maybe even necessary, principle of control. In Virginia, the plantation took two peoples originally differentiated as Christian and heathen, and before the first century was over it had made two races."

—Thompson, 1975:117

Ethnic inequality and conflict appear to be widespread, if not ubiquitous phenomena in plural societies around the globe (Heisler, 1977; Horowitz, 1985; van den Berghe, 1981). Ethnic frictions and antagonism are recurrent problems in developing societies in Asia, Africa, and Latin America as well as in the industrialized countries of Europe and North

[•] A revised version of a paper presented at the Malaysia Society Colloquium on "Malaysian Social and Economic History" at the Australian National University, Canberra, Australia, June 8–10, 1985. I am grateful to Milton Esman, William Lambert, Victor Nee, Norman Parmer, Frank Young, and especially to John Butcher for critical comments on an earlier draft of this paper. I also thank Adriene Dawkins for help in tracking down key sources.

America. Nor are modern socialist societies free of the strains of the “national question” (Connor, 1984). Given this seemingly universal pattern, the thesis of ethnicity as a primordial force—waiting just beneath the surface of social relations—has a strong appeal in popular thinking as well as in social science theory.

Yet at best, the hypothesis of ethnicity as a universal primordial bond or extended kinship feeling among a people can not be more than a partial explanation for the state of ethnic relations across societies. The problem is that there is tremendous variation in the patterns of ethnic antagonism, segregation, intermarriage, and even of ethnic identity across societies. This variation is even evident for a single ethnic-origin population, e.g., the differential status and assimilation of Afro-Americans in South and North America (Harris, 1964; van den Berghe, 1976), and the wide variety in the cultural and socioeconomic adaption of Chinese populations in the new nations of Southeast Asia (Skinner, 1960; Somers-Heidhues, 1974). A constant—the primordial bond of ethnicity—can not serve to explain a variable.

An alternative approach to the ethnic question is to begin with sociological theories of stratification, conflict, and social change. The dynamics of class formation and conflict, imperialism, and long distance labor migration are often linked with ethnic and racial boundaries (Bonacich, 1980; Hechter, 1975; Lieberman, 1961). When these processes are examined, especially within an historical perspective, it is often possible to discover how ethnic divisions are socially created, institutionalized, and modified (Bonacich and Modell, 1980; Lieberman, 1980; van den Berghe, 1967). From this perspective, I begin my study of the social bases of the origins of ethnicity in Malaysia. In this article—a preliminary version of a larger work—I propose and evaluate the hypothesis that the twentieth century structure of “race-relations” of Peninsular Malaysia is largely a product of social forces engendered by the expansion of British colonialism of the late nineteenth century.

Almost every writer who addresses the “race problem” or the “plural society” of Peninsular Malaysia¹ suggests that roots of contemporary ethnic divisions and antagonisms were formed during the colonial era. Beyond the point that the past has an important influence upon the present there is, however, little agreement on what it was about the colonial era that contributed to the troubled relations between Malays, Chinese

¹ Although Peninsular Malaysia is the presently appropriate name for the area under study, historical references can become confusing. Malaya, Colonial Malaya, British Malaya are used interchangeably as historical references to the area, even though political boundaries varied considerably over time. At present, Peninsular Malaysia consists of the eleven states of Malaysia on the mainland of Southeast Asia. The other states of contemporary Malaysia are Sabah and Sarawak on the island of Borneo, more than five hundred miles across the South China Sea from the peninsula.

and Indians in the post-independence period. Was it that British colonialism created an unstable demographic balance among widely divergent cultural populations by an unrestricted immigration policy (Comber, 1983; Freedman, 1960)? Or did the British practice “divide and rule” policies that sowed fear and mistrust among the Malays, Chinese and Indian populations (Abraham, 1977, 1983; Cham, 1977; Loh, 1975; Stenson, 1980)? My analysis acknowledges both these elements and links them to broader interpretation of the spread of racial theory from Europe and the development of the colonial political economy.

In a nutshell, I argue that there was a qualitative shift in ethnic relations and ideology in late nineteenth century Malaya. Beyond question there were ethnic divisions and widespread ethnic stereotypes prior to this time—both between Europeans and Asians and within the many Asian populations of the region. On the other hand, there is also considerable evidence in these earlier times of patterns of acculturation, shifting ethnic coalitions, and the possibility of ethnic boundaries being bridged or shifted as opportunities arose. But from the middle of the nineteenth century, these possibilities were diminished as European “racism” was imported and as direct colonial dominance was widened geographically and deepened institutionally. It is important to note at the outset that I do not claim that every instance of inter-ethnic hostility is of European origin. But I do argue that the problematic inter-ethnic relationships of the pre-1850 era, which contained the potential of acculturation and even assimilation, were transformed into “racial relations” by the colonial experience.

Although the empirical content of this article is confined to one relatively small Southeast Asian society, I believe the theoretical implications are far broader. In part, my effort is inspired by the work of Edgar Thompson (1975) who suggests that racial categories (and racial ideology) in the United States were a cultural byproduct of the coercive labor system of early American plantations. This interpretation, which is linked to a broader body of scholarship on the development of slavery in the United States (Fredrickson, 1981; Cox, 1948), presents a reversal of much conventional thinking about “race relations” in the United States and elsewhere. The point is that differences in skin pigmentation, initial cultural differences, and existing belief structures were of lesser importance than the exploitative institutional framework which required ideological justification. Slavery as it developed in the Americas was one of the most dehumanizing institutions ever created and required a powerful form of racist ideology to justify it. The development of multiethnic societies in Southeast Asia and accompanying social construction of “race relations” followed, of course, quite a different historical trajectory from the settler and slave societies of the New World. But the basic idea that the institutional framework—particularly political and eco-

conomic structures—may be the central influence on the definition and character of “racial” ideology and ethnic relationships guides my inquiry.

HISTORICAL SETTING

By the time European powers arrived in Southeast Asia in the sixteenth century, the ebb and flow of regional empires and extensive trading networks had already created multiethnic communities. Port cities in Sumatra and the Malay peninsula contained not only peoples from throughout the Indonesian archipelago, but also from China and India (Lamb, 1964; Reid, 1980; Wheatley, 1961). Over the course of the next four centuries, patterns of regional migration accelerated, as Western powers disrupted local economies but also stimulated the expansion of other areas by setting up new trading centers and increasing the demand for local products. After several centuries of oscillation, the Southeast Asian world was transformed in the nineteenth century as the industrial revolution in Europe took hold and as its reverberations shook the world. The demand for raw materials outpaced the capacity of traditional systems to produce them. Competition for control of the supply of raw materials (or potential raw materials) stimulated a burst of European imperialist expansion in Southeast Asia (and elsewhere). Responding to the growth of world markets, capital, labor, and new organizational forms were mobilized and deployed in a variety of ways throughout Southeast Asia. Nowhere were these events more spectacular than on the Malay peninsula.

The British, who had staked their colonial claim to this part of the region, had occupied three port cities (with a bit of hinterland), known collectively as the Straits Settlements. Penang and Singapore were acquired through concessions by local rulers in 1786 and 1819, respectively, as trading stations. Malacca was added permanently in 1824 (having been temporarily occupied earlier), with the Dutch-British division of spheres of influence in Southeast Asia. Although the Straits Settlements administration intervened occasionally in the adjacent Malay states during the first half of the nineteenth century, the primary imperial interest was in the maintenance of their trading position, both regionally and on the route to China.² The relative independence of the Malay

² In spite of the general policy of noninterference in the Malay states during this period, this does not mean that British actions were without significant consequences. As Emerson observes “the conflicts within the Malay courts were utilized by the Europeans for their own purposes, with the result that the natural development of the Malay polity was checked and perverted. The history of Malaya since the 16th century is the confused chronicle of petty potentates, more or less closely linked with the intrigues of the European invaders” (Emerson, 1964:15).

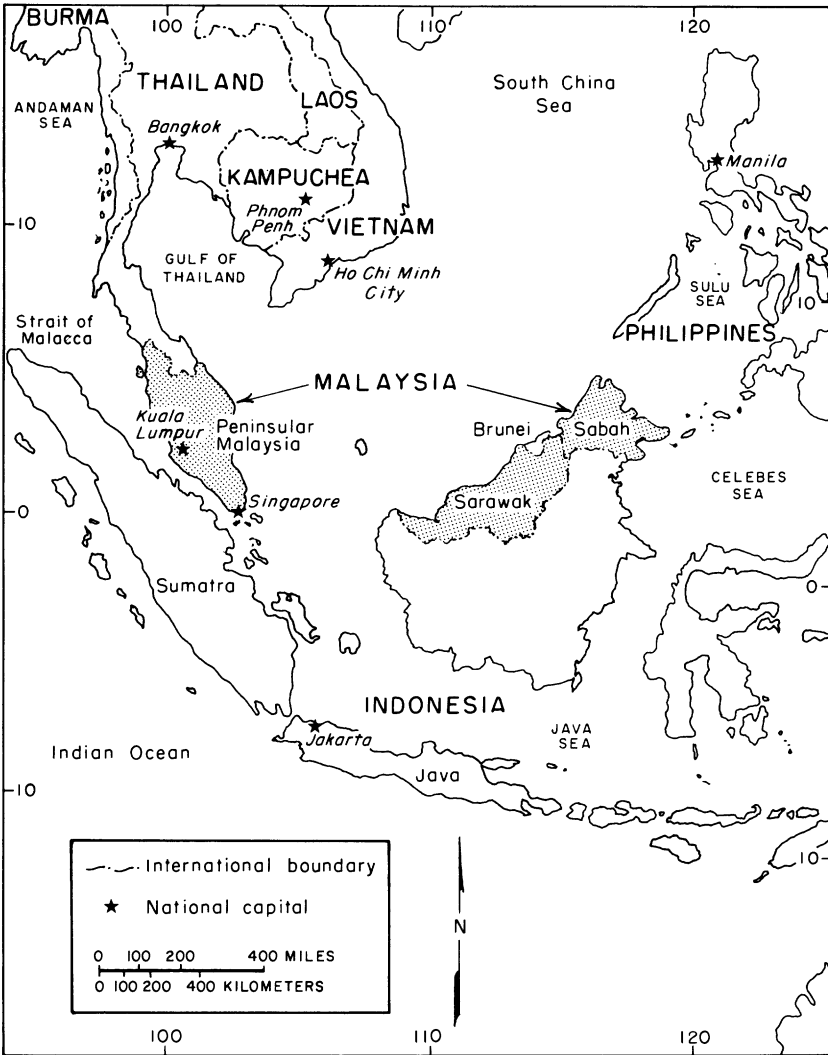


FIGURE 1. Map of Contemporary Malaysia and Peninsular Malaysia

Source: Bunge, Frederica M., ed. *Malaysia: A Country Study*. Area Handbook Series. Foreign Area Studies, The American University. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984:xxii,34.



FIGURE 2. Map of Malaya (Peninsular Malaysia) under British Colonialism

states was finally ended by the British "forward movement," beginning in the 1870s (Khoo, 1966).

By the middle of the nineteenth century, there was clear evidence of enormous wealth to be made with the expansion of the tin mining industry in the west coast states of the peninsula, and there was also a strong belief in the potential for agricultural development. Malay rulers, often working with commercial interests in the Straits Settlements, had begun to develop this potential by bringing in Chinese labor to expand tin production. Traditional rivalries among Malay chiefs and disputes among the various Chinese groups were exacerbated by competition for the immense economic gains to be had by control of tin production (Khoo, 1972). Sporadic fighting, usually between one Malay-Chinese coalition against another Malay-Chinese faction, led to frequent disruptions in tin production. With heavy investments in the Malay states, merchants in the Straits Settlements continually pressed for British intervention to provide "stable government." Finally, in a complex series of political and military moves, beginning with the Pangkor Agreement in 1874, the British took effective control of three west coast states in the mid-1870s (Cowan, 1961; Parkinson, 1960). Under the fiction of assigning British advisors to the Malay Sultans, the colonial government established direct administration over virtually all aspects of government. The process was not as smooth as retrospective accounts make it appear. There was armed Malay resistance in Perak, Selangor, and Sungei Ujong in 1875, and later in Pahang (Gullick, 1954; Parkinson, 1960:Chs. 10-11; Clifford, 1929:3-75). But with a disunited Malay aristocracy and the force of superior arms, the British were able to consolidate their colonial administration in a fairly brief time. Subsequently, pensions for the Malay aristocracy (made possible by taxes on the Chinese expansion of the tin industry; see Butcher, 1979a) and conciliatory diplomacy by some of the early colonial administrators established a generally harmonious relationship with the Malay rulers (who continued in their symbolic roles, but without any real power).

As the British colonial system expanded its grip over the entire peninsula, Chinese and European capitalists directed the creation of an export economy built on tin and later on rubber (Wong, 1965; J. Jackson, 1968). Chinese, Indian, and Indonesian laborers were imported in such large numbers as to soon outnumber the Malay population in the west coast states (J. Jackson, 1964). The years following 1874 were not only a period of total political and economic transformation of the Malay states, but also a watershed era of change in the development of Malaysian ethnic relations (Khoo, 1981).

The plural society of contemporary Peninsular Malaysia (Malaya) is largely a product of this period of colonial expansion and the waves of immigration that accompanied it (Saw, 1963). Certainly, the balance

of numbers—with the twentieth century Malay population only slightly larger than the combined total of Chinese, Indians, and others—is a result of immigration from 1850 to 1930. But the significance of the colonial period was more far-reaching than just the effects of the search for cheap Asian labor. If Thompson's insight is to be taken seriously, we must look to the institutional framework of colonial society—in the economy, the polity, and social structure—and in the construction of a colonial vision of "race." These features will allow a more adequate basis for assessing the effects of the legacy of the colonial experience on ethnic relations. I begin with some general observations on ethnic relations for the period prior to the late nineteenth century.

ETHNIC RELATIONS AMONG ASIANS PRIOR TO THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The development and protection of trade, both regional and long-distance, were the economic bases of political expansion in the pre-colonial Malay world (Meilink-Roelofs, 1962; Wolters, 1970). In these conditions, the desirability of maintaining amicable relationships among the culturally diverse peoples involved in distant trading networks was certainly obvious. Military conquest by ascendant powers was a frequent mechanism for regional dominance, but long term inter-regional hostility was probably not conducive to the maintenance of trade. With an enormous land frontier and easy mobility by sea and river, it was difficult to maintain exploitative economic structures. Conquered areas were frequently brought into formal or informal federations that shared some of the economic rewards of trade. Dependencies could most easily be made allies by creating kinship ties through marriage alliances. In such an environment, it seems that bridging the ethnic diversity of Southeast Asia (and the Malay world within it) was a common interest. *Ethnocentrism*, the belief in the superiority of one's own people and culture, was probably ubiquitous, but a *racial ideology of inherent differences* seems less likely. The former permits the absorption of subject peoples; the latter creates caste lines.

This general picture gains some support from the history of political alliances in the Malay world after European intervention. With the move of the Malacca sultanate to Johor in the early sixteenth century, there was a series of military campaigns against the Portuguese, against the Dutch, and against rival Malay powers (L. Andaya, 1975; Hall, 1981:366–379; Lewis, 1982). Shifting coalitions between Southeast Asian peoples and European forces seem to be based not upon cultural background or even religion, but on political expediency. Another example was the absorption of the Bugis population into the Malay aristocracy (in spite of the wars between Malays and Bugis; see Andaya and Andaya,

1982:Ch. 2). Barbara Andaya (1979:273) notes that Bugis rulers in Selangor were aware of their *parvenu* status in the Malay world and sought to increase their standing by marriages into prestigious families and by the adoption of royal symbols which had meaning in Malay society.

It was into this complex and diverse Southeast Asian world that early visitors, missionaries, and merchants from India and China also arrived. From South Asia came religious traditions, forms of state organization, and a wide variety of cultural expressions (Sandhu, 1969:Ch. 1). Trade links to China were important for traditional Southeast Asian polities in the Malay world. Malacca's dominant position in the fifteenth century was recognized, in part, through the acceptance of its offer of tribute to China (Sandhu, 1961; Wang, 1981:81–96). Although there already were Chinese populations in Malacca and other towns along the Malay peninsula, it seems that the opening of British settlements in Penang in 1786 and in Singapore in 1819 triggered a significant increase of Chinese migration to the Malay peninsula (Purcell, 1948:Ch. 1–3).

The record indicates that early contacts between Chinese, Indians, and Malays may not have been entirely harmonious and free of mutual suspicion, but it does not seem that racial divisions (in the sense of impenetrable barriers) were present. One measure of the relative openness of ethnic relations is the evidence of intermarriage. The Baba or Straits Chinese communities of Penang and Malacca retained their Chinese identity, but they adopted many aspects of Malay culture (Clammer, 1980; Gosling, 1964; Tan, 1983).³ On the nearby island of Java in the early years of the seventeenth century, prior to Dutch control, "Resident Chinese were free to adopt the Indonesian cultural attributes or marry into the local indigenous society and become 'Indonesian'" (Kemasang, 1982:61).

The assimilation of many Indian Muslims with Malays seems to have progressed even further. The Jawi Peranakan (identified as Jawi Pekans in the nineteenth century censuses of the Straits Settlements) community is a product of Indian-Malay intermarriages in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Often speaking Malay as their mother tongue, Jawi Peranakans were employed by the British as clerks and interpreters (Roff, 1967:48–49). An early British administrator in the Malay states, describing his experiences in his journal, observes "a dark girl of about eighteen, certainly not a pure Malay" (Sadka, 1954:97). Even at present, there are fairly loose boundaries between Indian Muslims and Malays (Nagata, 1974) and few barriers to intermarriage.

³ Clammer (1983:157) questions Purcell's statement (1951:132) that the Baba Chinese community is a product of Malay-Chinese intermarriage. Even if there was little Malay-Chinese intermarriage, the Baba Chinese community is clearly a long resident population with a high degree of acculturation to the Malay world.

In terms of economic relationships, it seems that in spite of wide cultural and linguistic differences, traditional Malay elites and Chinese interests worked together for mutual gain. The problem faced by Malay rulers interested in responding to the growth of demand for primary products was the shortage of labor. Chinese laborers first worked for Malays on gambier plantations in the Riau islands in the late eighteenth century (Trocki, 1976; Begbie, 1967:315). Quite apart from any European influence, the rulers of Johor successfully encouraged Chinese entrepreneurship and settlement in the mid-nineteenth century (Trocki, 1979:Ch. 4). In fact, in the 1860s, the Johor government appointed Chinese members to the advisory council of the state and also employed a Malay administrator who spoke and wrote Chinese (Andaya and Andaya, 1982:139–143). The same model did not work so well in the tin mining areas of the west coast states, but when disputes and fighting broke out over control of the wealth, the parties did not always split along ethnic lines. More often it was coalitions of Malays and Chinese fighting other Malay-Chinese groupings (Khoo, 1972).

A claim frequently heard is that racism was indigenous in the attitudes and behavior of Malays toward the Orang Asli—the aboriginal peoples of the interior of the peninsula. It is difficult to sort out changes in attitudes over the past century, but recent studies (Dodge, 1981; Couillard, 1984) suggest a complex set of economic and social relationships between Malays and the Orang Asli in the period prior to British interventions. Malays were involved as middlemen in the economic exchange of forest products gathered by the Orang Asli. With the disappearance of this trade, the functional ties between Malays and the Orang Asli were broken. As the Malay population was increasingly seen as the “backward people” of colonial society, the image of an even more backward population in the jungle may have filled an ideological niche in Malay culture.

CHANGES IN EUROPEAN THINKING ABOUT RACE AND ETHNIC DIVERSITY

European images of Asian peoples during the nineteenth century had significant consequences for the practice of colonialism and for subsequent inter-ethnic relationships among Asians. To begin the study of this question, we first must examine the conceptions of race and ethnicity which Europeans brought with them to Asia.

With the European expansion of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Europeans encountered a world of Asian, African, and Amerindian peoples of immense physical, cultural and technological diversity. There was no universally accepted explanation to give conceptual order to such diversity. Perhaps the dominant paradigm in Europe to explain dif-

ferences between groups of people was provided by the Old Testament (Banton, 1983:39). While the biblical explanation of descent via genealogies suggested different origins, there was no divine interpretation of inherent capacities of different peoples. Beliefs about the relative influences of geography, climate, and moral development could all coexist without any standards to evaluate them, save for personal experience and the position of the person expressing the statement. One reading of European intellectual history suggests that, "A substantial, perhaps dominant, body of scientific opinion in the eighteenth century was . . . committed to the belief that racial differences were rather evanescent and subject to the control of both natural and cultural aspects of the environment" (Harris, 1968:265).

The lack of orthodoxy of belief about racial differences did not prevent the capture and enslavement of millions of Africans nor a wide variety of "inhuman" practices against nonEuropean peoples by the European powers (Curtin, 1964). Rationalizations based upon religious or cultural superiority initially may have been sufficient. There appears to have been a flexible and pragmatic exercise of white superiority. For example, Dutch colonial behavior in Indonesia is said to have revealed "that innate conviction of white superiority" (Boxer, 1965:233), but the Dutch were much more respectful in their dealings with China and Japan. It seems that the relative degree of power was the key determinant of inter-group relations, and race was a frequent correlate in the equation.

During the nineteenth century, European thought about race underwent a radical shift, partly as a response to developments in "scientific" theories of human diversity and to the widening gap in technological progress between European and nonEuropean societies (Banton, 1983:Ch. 3; Harris, 1968; Jones, 1980:Ch. 8). European intellectuals were attempting to extend the Linnean classificatory system of zoological types of the phenotypical variation of humankind. The meaning of "race" began to shift from a relatively general term that distinguished peoples on almost any criteria to a more narrow classification of biologically defined subspecies, with specific assumptions about the inheritability of cultural predispositions and the potential for progress. These ideas were given a significant scientific standing (later discredited) with the application of evolutionary theory to the origins of the different races. As opposed to the earlier era of multiple explanations of human diversity, the racial theory of innate differences encountered little dissent in the Western world: "Darwin, Wallace, Huxley, Haeckel, Spencer, and every other evolutionist of the late nineteenth century, as well as almost every major social scientist from Marx to Morgan, regarded racial differences as essential to the understanding of human behavior" (Harris, 1968:265; also see Gould, 1981).

Not only did science give racial theory the aura of legitimacy in the late nineteenth century, but such beliefs also fitted well with the larger body of social Darwinist thought in the wake of the rapid technological and economic advances of European societies. Conquest and dominance of the world by European peoples could be given a moral purpose—it was natural, inevitable, ordered by differential endowments granted by a Creator, and beneficial to the progress of all mankind. It was this shift in European thinking about racial differences that accompanied the last burst of imperialist enthusiasm of the nineteenth century and rationalized colonial empires until racist ideology was finally exposed by its logical extension in the gas chambers of the Third Reich.

EUROPEAN CONCEPTIONS OF RACE AND ETHNICITY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Based upon the summary of accounts in the two preceding sections, I suggest that the late nineteenth century witnessed a significant change in the ideology of Europeans about themselves and their relations with Asian communities in Malaya. The expectation of attitudinal change is based upon two factors: (1) the increasing legitimacy of racial theory with the maturation of social Darwinist thought in Europe and the unquestioned worldwide political, economic and technological dominance of white (especially British) societies, and (2) the need for a justification for the spread and maintenance of direct colonial rule in the Malay states.

The idea of change in colonial ideology in the late nineteenth century is a hypothesis that can be tested, at least in an approximate fashion, by an examination of the writings of Europeans in Malaya during this period.⁴ Several problems arise in the course of such a “test,” not the least of which is that I have only surveyed a small fraction of the vast body of literature for this time period (for a model of a comprehensive survey, see Curtin’s (1964) account of the European image of Africa from 1780 to 1850).

A fundamental methodological problem in this inquiry is that most authors rarely give an unambiguous expression of their views—they often mix environmental, cultural, and genetic interpretations of ethnic differences. Moreover, it is difficult to evaluate the statements of a few individual writers as representing a larger climate of opinion. Drawing upon their own experiences and insights, individuals can and do differ from the prevailing ideology of an era. Some individuals may be ahead or behind their times in expressing their views. And many writers find

⁴ In another paper, I test this hypothesis with an examination of changes in the ethnic classification used in the censuses of colonial Malaya (Hirschman, 1985).

it unnecessary to spill much ink on "common opinion" or widely shared assumptions. What is left unsaid is often as important as what is said. Even with these qualifications, I think it is possible to present some empirical support for the thesis of change in colonial ideology, although I must admit that much more evidence will be necessary to convince the skeptic.

The first priority is to provide some conceptual order of topics under the rubric of "racial and ethnic ideology." As a preliminary guide, I separately review Europeans' attitudes toward Malays and nonMalays, and then consider Europeans' attitudes about themselves. Under the section on European attitudes toward Malays, three somewhat separate, though obviously interrelated, dimensions are considered: paternalism, Malay capacities, and Malay "laziness."

European Attitude Toward Malays

Paternalism. Paternalism is the belief that the management of the affairs of the country or of individuals should be done in the manner of a father dealing with his children. The social base of such attitudes must be the relative powerlessness of the subject population. This base was not always present prior to the late nineteenth century. Although the Portuguese and Dutch had achieved military supremacy in overall terms in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, they were constantly facing problems in exercising their influence. Non-cooperation is evident by the frequent European expressions concerning native treachery and disloyalty—to say nothing of piracy. An eighteenth century Dutch Governor of Malacca expressed this attitude: "The people of Rombouw must also be well watched for they are of a murderous and rapacious disposition, deceitful and treacherous" (Harrison, 1954:33). In a fine study of eighteenth century Perak, Barbara Andaya notes that the Malay kingdom always "dealt [with the Dutch in Malacca] from a position of strength; [Sultan Iskandar] did not beg, he demanded . . . the Dutch were always on the defensive" (1979:250).

It seems that the independence of the Malay states (in spite of European intervention) and their willingness to defend their interests created some fear, and perhaps a bit of respect, in European hearts. The frequent paternalistic vision of Malay docility, loyalty, and dependence that was the staple of later British colonial attitudes is conspicuously absent from these earlier writings. Begbie, a British military officer who served in Malacca in the 1830s, provides a detailed account of the Nanning War, in which the British eventually attained military dominance in the hinterland of Malacca, but only after considerable Malay resistance (1967:Ch. 4–6). Begbie shows few signs of European paternalism for Asian peoples, in fact, one of his major concerns is that unwise colo-

nial land policies have made the Malay peasantry restless and hostile (1967:384–386).

In the years after 1874, the Malays were literally and figuratively disarmed.⁵ Malay dependence (especially of the elite class) was bought by pensions and recognition as the nominal rulers of the country. In the early twentieth century a glowing account of imperial progress reports that earlier European commentators' references to Malay laziness and treachery were, in light of recent history, shown to be unjust—indeed the Malays were “nature's gentlemen” (Wright and Reid, 1912:313–315). This vision of Malays as happy underlings is also reflected in Swettenham's comment that: “you will wish for no better servant, no more pleasant or cheery companion” (1955:139).

Malay Capacities. The evidence on changes in European conceptions of Malay inherent potential is mixed. There are several examples of quite racist judgments prior to the late nineteenth century (noted below), but other writings raise doubts as to whether this was the dominant ideology among Europeans at the time. After the turn of the century, there are again contradictory expressions, but there seem to be many signs that most Europeans doubted that Malays were as able as other “races.”

The earlier critical expressions of Malay capacities can be found in some of the major “scholarly” writings of the early and mid-nineteenth century. John Crawfurd, a colonial administrator who worked with Raffles in Java and was one of the early governors of Singapore, was one of the most prolific of scholarly writers on Southeast Asia in the early to mid-nineteenth century. His two-volume *History of the Indian Archipelago* (published in 1820) gives an ethnographic account of the region. On one hand he defends the “natives” against charges of indolence: “The islanders are found to be industrious like other peoples . . . they have no constitutional listlessness nor apathy, and whenever there exists a reasonable prospect of advantage, they are found to labour with vigour and perseverance” (pp. 42–43). However, in other respects, Crawfurd finds Southeast Asians wanting: “With respect to their intellectual faculties, the Indian islanders may be pronounced slow of comprehension, but of sound, though narrow judgment . . . it must be confessed that an Indian islander of the best capacity is unequal, in most respects, to an individual not above mediocrity in a civilized community” (pp. 45–46).

Although A. R. Wallace, the great nineteenth century naturalist and contributor to evolutionary theory, would later disavow any biological

⁵ Swettenham (1955:135) reports, “In 1874 every Malay had as many weapons as he could carry . . . two daggers in his belt, two spears in his hand, a gun over his shoulder, and a long sword under his arm.”

basis of racial differences, his *The Malay Archipelago* (first published in 1869) gave a quite different account: "The intellect of the Malay race seems rather deficient. They are incapable of anything beyond the simplest combinations of ideas and have little taste or energy for the acquirement of knowledge" (Wallace, 1983:448–449).

These expressions of belief in racial differences confirm the tendency in some nineteenth century European thinking about non-European peoples. Yet it would be premature to suggest that this was the dominant component of European attitudes toward Malays.

Another nineteenth century observer of British rule in the Straits Settlements, Cameron (1965, original publication in 1865) gives a generally positive account of the Malay population, although he refers to their lack of industriousness (pp. 133–134). In fact, Cameron pays Malays the highest possible compliment by comparing them with the English; he says the Malays are "adventurous, and, in many respects, [a] noble race, that like English colonists in more modern instances, have laid the foundation of a great empire on but a very small beginning" (pp. 8–9).

The journals (written in the 1870s) of Swettenham (Burns and Cowan, 1975) and Low (Sadka, 1954), two of the earliest pioneers of the British forward movement, are notable for the absence of any broad claims about Malay capacities or abilities. Low brought a good opinion of Malay abilities with him from his prior years in Borneo: "He [Low] describes Malays as 'a people so naturally sagacious and clever [and] whose abilities are probably not inferior to any of the nations of Europe'" (quoted in Loh, 1969:4). However, J. W. W. Birch, the first Resident appointed to Perak and who was murdered by Malay leaders who resented both British intervention and Birch's arrogant manner, was full of disdain for Asian capacities for self-government (Burns, 1976).

After the "watershed" period when British control was complete, new ideological justifications were given for the British running the country on behalf of the Malay population, or at least on behalf of the Malay sultans. Since the British did not claim to be administering as conquerors or even to further their own financial interests, their paternalistic attitudes must rest upon a judgment that Malays do not have the ability to run their own country. For example, in addresses to the Royal Colonial Institute in London, Hugh Clifford, a sensitive colonial administrator observes, "unless a people is possessed of considerable intellectual energy, such as the Malays can lay no claim to" (Kratoska, 1983:241) and later, "anyone who is acquainted with the two races will at once acknowledge that the Siamese are the intellectual superiors of the Malays" (Kratoska, 1983:279).

It is interesting to note that Swettenham, who was one of the most outspoken imperialists of his age (Allen, 1964), was at pains to state

that Malays have no lack of intellectual capacities (Swettenham, 1900:207, and 1955:284). I suspect that his defense of Malay intelligence was partially a reaction against the growing body of colonial opinion to the contrary. Perhaps the level of general European opinion is illustrated by Emerson's perception in the 1930s of the "common European and Chinese complaint that the Malays are a lazy and shiftless people who are wantonly refusing to accept the benefits which are offered to them" (Emerson, 1964:18). Or as Stockwell put it: "Dismissive generalizations about the Oriental were part of the mental furniture of even the most experienced Europeans" (Stockwell, 1982:54).

Malay Laziness. One of the most frequent stereotypes of Southeast Asians, especially of Malays, was of indolence or laziness. In his excellent book, *The Myth of the Lazy Native*, Hussein Alatas (1977) finds such expressions about Malays, Javanese, and Filipinos throughout the colonial period. Hussein Alatas concludes that this stereotype was founded on the unwillingness of Southeast Asians to work for Europeans. Given the terms of employment—in wages and working conditions—offered by Europeans relative to traditional fishing and agriculture, Malays made the economically rational choice.

As opposed to subsequent twentieth century colonial officials who compared the lack of Malay interest in working in the rubber plantations and tin mines with the hard working Chinese and Indians, many of the early European writers explain Malay characteristics as a consequence of environmental or social factors. The environmental explanation is that Malays find it unnecessary to work hard because nature is so bountiful. With abundant fresh fish and productive padi fields, the environment has not disciplined Malays to work hard or plan for the long term. The social explanation says that any economic gains will simply be confiscated by local elites: "It is no advantage to a man to cultivate a goodly piece of land, and raise crops that were not for his own eating, to grow fruits that were absorbed by the Sultan or chief and their numerous followings; or to become the possessor of buffaloes that might be seized any day to draw the properties of his lord" (McNair, 1972:293–294). Both of these arguments were offered by Swettenham in his description of Malay character (1955:137).

Butcher (1971:Ch. 7) observes that early British Residents saw Malay lack of economic activity as a problem for colonial administration. If the proper motivation could be instilled by government policy or supervision, Malays might then respond accordingly. To a greater extent than would be true later, government projects (irrigation, etc.) were dependent on Malay participation. After the rubber boom began and Indian immigrants were available for the plantation sector and for public works projects, British officials no longer had to worry about the problem of getting Malay labor or cooperation (Butcher, 1971:62–63). In

this context, Malay laziness could become a permanent piece in the “mental furniture” of the colonial mind. Disdain for manual labor was perhaps a bit quaint—and a not wholly unattractive feature for “nature’s gentlemen”—and also served as a ready-made excuse for the plight of the poor Malays in the richest of all British colonies. As late as 1969, an old Malaya hand could still write, “Depending on one’s point of view, the Malays could be described as carefree or indolent, contented or unambitious, pleasure-loving or idle. To some extent all of this would be true” (Slimming, 1969:7).

European Attitudes towards Chinese and Indians

Europeans were decidedly ambivalent in their attitudes toward the Chinese in Malaya. On one hand, the British colonial establishment, both in the Straits Settlements and for the early decades of their rule in the Malay states, was almost completely dependent upon Chinese entrepreneurial activity for their economic base. Taxes on opium and gambling—the pastimes of the Chinese working class—and on tin—a field dominated by Chinese interests until the first decade of the twentieth century—were the chief sources of revenue for the colonial administration. Nor could any observer deny the extraordinary determination and perseverance shown by most Chinese—workers and entrepreneurs alike.

Most Europeans felt a grudging admiration for the Chinese. For example, a Singapore merchant commented that, “[the Chinese] are, as a race, capable of civilization of the highest kind. They are at once laborers and statesmen. They can work in any climate, hot or cold, and they have great mercantile capacity . . . we are pleased to see them flocking [to Malaya] as they do in thousands” (Walter Adamson, quoted in Kratoska, 1983:76–77). Yet these same qualities were also the source of European derisive comment: “In short, whenever there is money to be made, you can be sure that the Chinaman is not far away” (Wright and Reid, 1912:323). An earlier statement shows the strength of this European resentment of Chinese economic gain: “Whenever money is to be acquired by the peaceful exercise of agriculture, by handicrafts, by the opening of mines of tin, iron ore or gold, amidst savage hordes and wild forests, there will be found the greedy Chinese” (Newbold, 1839:Vol. 1:10).

Since the condescension and paternalism which the colonial mind applied to the Malays did not fit the Chinese population, Europeans developed a sense of resentment and hostile admiration for most Chinese. This ambivalence is expressed by Swettenham: “The Chinese have, under direction, made the Protected States what they are. They are the bees who suck the honey from every profitable undertaking. A thorough experience of Malays will not qualify an official to deal with Chinese—

a separate education is necessary for that, but it is a lesson more easy to learn. It is almost hopeless to expect to make friends with a Chinaman, and it is, for a Government officer an object that is not very desirable to attain. The Chinese, at least that class of them met with in Malaya, do not understand being treated as equals; they only realize two positions—the giving and receiving of orders; they are the easiest people to govern in the East for a man of determination, but they must know their master, and he must know them” (Swettenham, 1900:38–39).

For most Europeans, the dominant view of Indians was as a source of cheap and docile labor—especially in comparison with Chinese who were thought to be too independent. In an 1885 speech discussing the development of North Borneo, a British official stated, “There are many who prefer the Indian coolie, and consider [them relative to Chinese labor] better suited to the peculiar wants of the locality. . . . They regard the Indian, moreover, as a creature far more amenable to discipline and management than the sturdy and independent Chinese” (Walter H. Medhurst, quoted in Kratoska, 1983:105). In summarizing Swettenham’s attitudes, Allen says that he (Swettenham) expresses physical, but not economic contempt for Indians (Allen, 1964:46).

Europeans’ Attitudes About Themselves

It is impossible to understand colonial ideology and its impact upon development of ethnic relations in Malaya without seeing the vision the British held of themselves. Like Europeans generally, they saw themselves as superior to Asians, not only in economic terms, but also in their unique capabilities to bring progress—politically, economically and ethically—to the world. Looking back with hindsight, it is easy to penetrate the double standards of colonial thinking, but this was not so at the time. The heyday of imperialism around the turn of the century presented an almost unquestioned orthodoxy. In his review of Swettenham and Clifford’s writings, Allen notes that the “missionary impulse of British imperialism . . . had a wide appeal to men of high mental calibre” (1964:46). The intellectual appeal did not rest on material interests, but rather represented a call to bring civilization and leadership to the backward races of the world. The imperial ideology contrasted the incapable “natives” and the capable Englishman. Frederick Weld, an influential colonial administrator at the time of expansion and consolidation of colonial administration of the Malay states observes; “I doubt if Asiatic(s) can ever really be taught to govern themselves” [quoted in Allen, 1964:45], and “I think that capacity for governing a characteristic of our race [British]” (quoted in Kratoska, 1983:46).

An important element of this attitude is that it provides a theory of *entitlement*. In every society rewards, whether in terms of social sta-

tus or material benefits, are legitimated in terms of the dominant ideology. Colonial society has a particular form of ideological justification about the distribution of rewards—individuals are entitled to rewards on the basis of membership in a particular race.

COLONIAL INSTITUTIONS AND THE SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECIES OF RACIAL DISTINCTIONS

“Race” was constructed in colonial Malaya, not only with the ideological baggage brought by Europeans but also by the political and economic framework sponsored by imperialism. This is not to say that the initial differences between Malays, Chinese, and Indians were unimportant or that ethnic frictions would have been absent if European colonialism had not touched Southeast Asia. Rather the question is whether the structure of constraints and opportunities shaped by colonial rule widened the initial differences even further, and then created an ideology to explain ethnic inequality as an inevitable reflection of inherent “racial” differences. In this section, I will only explore several of the potential topics that could be considered, namely: the lack of Malay participation in wage labor, the lack of Malay entrepreneurship, and the question of Malay-Chinese antagonism. The hypothesis is that these features were, in part, byproducts of the institutional framework of the colonial period, and not simply inevitable outcomes of differences in cultural predispositions.

Malays and Wage Labor

Popular thinking suggests that Malays are uninterested in economic gain. This idea has been given academic respectability (in Malaysia and in other colonial societies) by reference to the lack of “the need for achievement” and the “backward bending supply curve for labor.” The evidence given for this attribute is that Malays rarely participated in wage employment, and when they did, employers frequently found them to be unsatisfactory employees. These facts are not in dispute; the question is whether Malays displayed “laziness” or “economic rationality” in their economic endeavors.

The feudal structure of the Malay states prior to British intervention did not appear to have much of a niche for wage labor. The Malay sultans and chiefs were the major entrepreneurs who controlled tin mining production and taxed the traffic on rivers. Peasants were compelled to provide labor (*kerah*) for the chiefs and also to provide for their own sustenance by agriculture and fishing. Collection of forest products, perhaps via exchange relationships with the Orang Asli, was another potential avenue of economic gain. Although the degree of peasant oppres-

sion by the aristocracy was limited by the possibility of flight to the frontier (the Malay peninsula was sparsely settled), peasants probably had few incentives to maximize production. The observation by early colonial administrators that Malay elites frequently confiscated any surplus peasant production is probably true (this was common practice in other feudal societies, including Europe). Given the evident barriers to social mobility in a feudal society and the futility of material acquisition, productive work beyond what was necessary for survival made little sense.

Among the major changes of the late nineteenth century were the end of the traditional means of peasant exploitation by the Malay aristocracy, and the expansion of wage employment in the mining and plantation industries. After some hesitation, the colonial system terminated debt slavery and compulsory labor service for Malay peasants. The Malay aristocracy, who now received pensions far above their traditional levels of income, were no longer economically dependent upon the Malay peasantry. For peasants, especially in the west coast states, the ability to pursue their traditional livelihood without the threat of warfare and confiscation probably offered them, at least by the standards of the day, a fairly positive situation. Again the description by colonial observers of a bountiful environment for fishing, hunting, and rice production should not be entirely discounted. How did this way of life compare with the employment and wages offered for work in the early mines and plantations?

Even if all Malays had opted for wage labor in the early mines and plantations, there would still have been a labor shortage. But most of the early entrepreneurs, largely Chinese, thought in terms of immigrant labor. Although there may have been some cultural preference by employers for Chinese workers, their primary interest was probably in plentiful and cheap labor. Malay peasants were neither.

To draw Malay peasants out of their traditional pursuits, employers would have had to offer a wage that was superior to the "real wage" of peasant agriculture. This was not necessary as immigrant labor was readily available—on terms that were undoubtedly much cheaper. The accounts of Jackson (1961), Blythe (1947), and Sandhu (1969) on the living conditions and compensation of Chinese and Indians on the early estates and mines paints a dreadful picture. Mortality rates were very high, and employers faced a recurring problem of workers running away before completing their contracts. Most workers were tied to their places of employment by cycles of debt. The passage from the home country had to be repaid; then there were a variety of mechanisms used by employers to keep a captive labor force. For Malay villagers to give up their autonomy and relatively positive socioeconomic standards for the conditions of work of wage employment in the late nineteenth century,

they would have to be considered economically irrational (for similar observations, see C. Y. Lim, 1967:115 and 122).

There is other evidence, however, that Malay peasants did respond to economic incentives when it was in their economic interest to do so. In the early decades of the twentieth century, as the economy became synonymous with the rubber plantation industry, Malay villagers were engaged in widespread planting of rubber on their smallholdings. This "peasant innovation" (Rudner, 1970; T. G. Lim, 1977) was undertaken in the face of official disapproval from the colonial government and the Malay aristocracy. Laws were passed to prevent rice lands from being planted with rubber and the "restriction schemes" of the 1920s and 1930s discriminated against smallholders in favor of the estate sector. This peasant innovation is all the more impressive because it required a new technology of production, a wait of six to seven years until rubber trees come into production, and the entry of peasants into the market with a crop that had no local use. But there was no disguising the fact that rubber produced a much higher income than rice or any other rural occupation. Peasants recognized the opportunity and pursued it.

After the problem of labor shortage for the export sector had been solved (with Indian workers), the official colonial policy was to preserve traditional Malay society. Most notably, education was seen as a mechanism of social maintenance rather than social mobility (Stevenson, 1975; Loh, 1975). This fitted well with the interest of the Malay aristocracy in preserving a subject population that would respect and be loyal to feudal sovereigns. The British could acknowledge their responsibilities to the Malay population by promoting the welfare of the aristocracy. In turn, the Malay aristocracy would support the colonial administration as being in the interest of the Malays. The British reinforced class distinctions within the Malay community by building an elite school for the children of noble birth (Roff, 1967:Ch.4). For the Malay masses, the English language was thought to be an undesirable ingredient in their education. It might lead to discontent and natives who did not know their rightful place (Roff, 1967:136).

As colonial society matured, there was only a slow growth of opportunities in wage employment for Malays. The estate and mining sectors, where wage levels gradually rose, were linked to a steady supply of immigrant labor. Urban areas were primarily centers of government administration and trade. The former was in the hands of the British with the assistance of a few Malays in the lower ranks (Roff, 1967:98–109). Trade, in both its retail and wholesale components, became the preserve of Chinese and Indian merchants. They tended to hire kinsmen who shared a common language and a feeling of mutual dependence as

a “middleman minority” (Bonacich, 1973). The possibilities for Malay social mobility were minimal.

Malay Entrepreneurship

One of the first casualties of European intervention in Southeast Asia was the local trading class (Hussein Alatas, 1977:Ch. 12). The Dutch, through their control of the sea, eliminated the indigenous trading class in order to achieve a monopoly over trade. This was achieved by the seventeenth century. Chinese merchants, who served to maintain the trade with China—vital for Southeast Asia throughout this period—were able to continue in their positions.

The British fostered an open-system of trade in their freemarket ports of Penang and Singapore. This allowed a fair degree of smaller-scale trade in Malay hands, but nothing similar to the pre-European era. In the pre-colonial Malay world, trade and state power were usually in the same hands. Control over trade, or the tax on trade, was the major source of wealth for Malay chiefs and sultans. Given the looseness of rules of royal succession in Malay courts, wealth might provide a pretext or a means to secure political power (Milner, 1982:Ch.2). It is no surprise that the Malay aristocracy closely guarded access to trade and were likely to confiscate the property of anyone who might be considered a threat.

With the end of the traditional Malay polity in the late nineteenth century, the Malay aristocracy shifted from a trading and warrior class to a dependent rentier class. There was a small segment of independent Malay entrepreneurs who remained active in local and long distance trade (Gullick, 1985), but the political and economic transformation in the late nineteenth century narrowed their scope of social mobility. To get a firm footing in the growing capitalist economy in the late nineteenth century required capital, control over land, and labor. Such resources were generally in the hands of a few European and Chinese capitalists who were aided by the colonial government. As the export economy began to boom and capital costs for production rose, access to participation in the higher levels of the economy became even more remote from the world of most Malays.

Why did not urban Malays take to commerce? In his review of Singapore society in the mid-nineteenth century, Cameron (1965:135) notes the varied occupations of Malays: they worked as sailors, grooms, coachmen, servants, and they hawked poultry, fish, and other products. Cameron expresses surprise that none of the Malays in trade rise from hawkers to merchants. This is not due to lack of education, he says, as most Malays are able to read and write. In a significant comment, Cameron notes that Malays rarely hire labor (pp.163–164). I think this provides a clue to the problem of Malay entrepreneurial success. For any

business to rise above the minimal level, there must be a source of available labor. Moreover, given the very competitive nature of urban commerce, an employer must be able to find cheap labor. Chinese merchants had no problem as there was a ready supply of recent immigrants plus the already sizeable population of urban laborers. With only a small urban Malay population, Malay entrepreneurs would necessarily have to seek workers from the rural peasantry. Here the aspiring Malay merchant encountered the familiar problem—the lack of cheap Malay labor. To offer a wage sufficient to draw labor from the rural sector, the potential Malay employer would have found it difficult to be cost-competitive in the urban economy. Newbold, describing conditions in the 1830s, reports the wages of Malay laborers to be significantly below those of Chinese workers (1839, vol. 1:14–15). Although employers may have believed that lower wages were a product of relative productivity, the lower compensation to Malay labor may have reinforced the difficulties of recruiting Malay labor.

Another structural problem that probably confronted an aspiring Malay entrepreneur was the control over various spheres of the urban economy by Chinese kinship (or clan) networks. Almost every business must depend upon the cooperation of other businesses for sources of supply, credit, transport, and market access. Without a strong base of kinship networks to provide these supporting services, entry into the entrepreneurial world was probably quite precarious. Neither the colonial government nor the Malay aristocracy were motivated to intervene. As the colonial administration developed in the twentieth century, the few educated Malays could find alternative employment in the junior ranks of the civil service or in the teaching profession. These positions offered low pay, but did give job security and high status in the highly status-oriented colonial society.

Malay—Chinese Antagonism

Hostility between Chinese immigrants and Malays certainly predates British colonial intervention. Begbie reports the case of Malay slaughter of Chinese workers in Linggi in 1830 (1967:408) and similar incidents occurred later (Cheah, 1981). However, these events do not mean there was universal distrust or hostility between Malays and Chinese. Recall the earlier description of an effective working relationship between the Johor state and Chinese entrepreneurs in the late nineteenth century. For the present study, the important question is whether colonial rule narrowed or increased the social and cultural distance between Malays and other ethnic communities as the growing tide of immigrants arrived in the Malay states in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The historical record is fairly clear that the colonial admin-

istration provided few meaningful opportunities for inter-ethnic interaction. Moreover, by refusing to recognize Chinese (and Indian) residents as permanent members of the Malayan community with local loyalties, the colonial administration reinforced Malay xenophobic attitudes.

During the colonial era, ethnic communities were physically and socially segregated. Mines and plantations were almost completely populated by Chinese and Indian labour. Land policies tended to discourage Chinese and Indians from entering subsistence agriculture (T. G. Lim, 1984; for an alternative interpretation, see Kratoska, 1982). Malays were encouraged to remain in their rural villages. Even in towns where there was the potential for inter-ethnic contact, residential areas, market places, and recreational space were typically segregated along ethnic lines. Although there may have been traditional preferences for socializing within one's own community, colonial policies did nothing to encourage movement toward an integrated society.

It was only in schools and in some professional occupations that there was a possibility for structured inter-ethnic interaction. Except for the English language schools in urban areas, the overwhelming majority of children attended vernacular schools that were ethnically homogeneous. Schooling was seen as a welfare expenditure in colonial society—and a possible source of social discontent. Education was not meant to be a national institution that fostered common knowledge, a common language, or even acquaintance of the different communities of society. Not until Independence approached would such goals be made policy.

More directly the British fostered the belief that Chinese really did not belong to local society—regardless of length of residence—and only Malay aristocrats and their colonial advisors should be allowed full participation in political or administrative roles. The origin of the British color bar against non-Malay Asians is critically reported by George Maxwell (a former high ranking colonial civil servant): “With thirty-five years service in Malaya, and with intimate friendship with Rulers over two generations, I can say that I never heard one of them say anything that would tend to support such an idea [exclusion of non-Malays from administrative appointments]. From the very earliest days of British protection, the Rulers have welcomed the leaders of the Chinese communities as members of their State Councils, and have paid the greatest deference to their opinions and advice. Other non-Malayans [non-Malays] are now members of the State Councils. The policy of keeping non-Malayans out of the administration owes its inception to British officials, and not to the Rulers” (Maxwell, 1943:118).

Perhaps most telling is the comment by one of the most distinguished of the colonial administrator/scholars on the contradiction in

colonial practice towards Chinese: "In race and sympathy they might be Chinese; politically they regard themselves as Malaysians . . . [but] the Malayan Government . . . gave no encouragement at all to the Malayan-born Chinese to regard themselves as citizens of Malaya" (Purcell, 1965:156).

Given the hostility toward Chinese expressed by many colonial officials and the lack of physical and social integration, it is not surprising that most Malays formed the opinion that Chinese were only transients in Malaya with no real attachments to the country.

THE COLONIAL OBSESSION WITH STATUS AND RACE AND ITS LEGACY FOR THE MULTIETHNIC MALAYSIAN SOCIETY

In an age when democratic principles were becoming accepted to some extent in European societies, the social organization of colonial societies moved in the opposite direction. Wertheim's characterization of Southeast Asia as a whole aptly fits the Malayan case: "Nineteenth century colonial society was molded on racial principles: belonging to the dominant white upper caste provided one with prestige and power largely independent of one's personal capabilities. A strict ritual was introduced and maintained, by force when necessary, to preserve the white caste from contacts with Asiatics on the basis of equality and to maintain the former's prestige as the dominant group" (1968:432). This obsession with the maintenance of the symbols as well as the structure of white superiority continued for most of the first half of the twentieth century. An account of the pre-World War II era notes, "The British colonial code . . . draws the most rigid color line of all. . . . The entire social ritual of the colonies symbolizes the separateness of rulers and ruled. Nowhere in the colonial world are the lines of caste drawn more rigidly: in clubs, residential areas, places of public accommodation, and informal cliques" (Kennedy, 1945:320).

These color bars served several purposes. Most basically, they reinforced the role of racial distinctiveness as the ideological basis of colonial society. All the usual criteria for social achievement in the late nineteenth and twentieth century—such as ability, educational attainment, and personal qualities—had to be denied, and skin color was taken as the only acceptable criterion for advancement to the highest realms of the colonial administrative service and the European business world. As the decades passed, there grew to be a larger social base of acculturated, English-speaking Asians whose credentials were no less than those of most Europeans (Butcher, 1979b). The social distance created by exclusive white clubs, informal cliques, and the disdain for Europeans who

married Asians, allowed most Europeans to avoid thinking about the contradictions between modernization and the racial ideology of colonial society.

Racial ideology also legitimated the vast inequality in economic terms between Europeans and Asians. Butcher (1979b:130–131) records the remarkable assumption of a five to one ratio in income needed to maintain European and Asian standards of living in colonial Malaya. The gaps in economic standards between Europeans and Asians in the civil service also served to maintain the social distance that froze relationships in a vertical plane between superiors and inferiors. Racism—the ideology of inherent differences—provided a theory of entitlement for unequal rewards which could not otherwise be justified.

Colonial ideology had a number of consequences for Asians. For many, especially intellectuals, there was deep resentment and hostility toward colonial rule and its economic system (see Roff, 1967: Ch.5 on the origins of the Malay nationalism among vernacular school teachers). For the Malay aristocracy, however, colonialism had a number of beneficial elements. The sultans and their families received fabulous allowances and were given appropriate status deference by colonial officials anxious to maintain the fiction of Malay sovereignty. The children of the Malay aristocracy were allowed to join the junior ranks of the elite colonial service. Even if they were not paid equally with Europeans and encountered cultural snobbery, Malay aristocrats could identify with the Europeans as their allies in the political struggle with the immigrant populations, especially the Chinese. Since the colonial government never accepted the Chinese as permanent residents of the country and frequently questioned their loyalties, it is not surprising that Malay elites (and masses) also believed the Chinese should not be considered as having equal political rights.

For the Chinese elite (and to a lesser extent the Indian community), colonial rule was both a blessing and a curse. On one hand, many Chinese benefitted economically from the freedoms of the private economy (within limits), but they also resented their marginal position in the political life. For the Chinese working class and their representatives, the only solution was a struggle to end colonial rule and its exploitative economic system. For both Chinese elites and workers, relationships with the Malay community were often distant and strained. Since Malay elites possessed no power, Chinese acculturation and intermarriage into the Malay world (even if Islam were not a barrier) was not an attractive path for social mobility (Hirschman, 1984). Rather it was the English speaking world that offered channels for prestige, status, and possible wealth. One of the cultural features of the English speaking world was racial thinking, including the idea of Malay inferiority. Prejudice and snobbery were not marks of ignorance, but could be acquired

with higher education and mixing in the right circles.⁶ These ideas probably reinforced the latent feelings of many Chinese about the potential of the Malay population. Given the close links between the colonial system and the recognition of the traditional Malay aristocracy as the nominal rulers of the country, British colonialism was often seen as a prop for a “backward” and feudal Malay society.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, I offer the interpretation that the “racial divisions” among the multiethnic population of Peninsular Malaysia are largely a product of colonial practices and European ideology in the decades following the “forward movement” in the 1870s. Cultural barriers and hostility between Asian populations in the region predate European imperialism. But there were also mechanisms whereby these differences were bridged or accommodated in pursuit of other goals. Over time, perhaps over the course of generations, there appears to have been a gradual process of inter-marriage or at least acculturation among Asian peoples in the region. This cycle was broken with the quantum leap in colonial intervention and the creation of an export economy built upon immigrant labor in the late nineteenth century.

These changes stimulated a wave of Chinese and Indian immigrants, on an historically unprecedented scale, to the states on the Malay peninsula. This phenomenon alone certainly created a new demographic situation that would have required a long period of ethnic accommodation and adjustment. The new immigrants, however, were not thrown into contact with Malays but were segregated geographically, economically, and socially from the local population. The colonial government “managed” the plural society by trying to maintain the Malay feudal social structure in the countryside and a “temporary” immigrant population working in the mines, plantations, and cities.

On top of this unbalanced structure perched the European elites who ruled and reaped enormous economic gains. By their actions and words, the colonial establishment expressed an ideology of racial differences. Although it might never be said so crudely in official reports, the basic philosophy is well-stated by an early European gold and tin miner in Malaya: “From a labour point of view, there are practically

⁶ The skeptical reader will undoubtedly like to see more evidence to support this assertion. I assume that if most Europeans held racial stereotypes, their ideology was communicated in European dominated institutions such as English language schools. This argument parallels the role of elite schools and universities in the creation and maintenance of a caste ideology in Western societies (Baltzell, 1964). At this point, I can not yet offer the detailed historical evidence that is necessary to confirm my interpretation.

three races, the Malays (including Javanese), the Chinese, and the Tamils (who are generally known as Klings). By nature the Malay is an idler, the Chinaman is a thief, and the Kling is a drunkard, yet each in his own class of work is both cheap and efficient, when properly supervised" (Warnford-Lock, 1907:31–32).

This ideology, spread through acculturation to the English speaking world and by the social organization of colonial society, permeated deeply into the consciousness of most Asians. Even if Asians rejected the colonial assumptions of white superiority and the stereotypes of their own ethnic community, they tended to accept the unfounded generalizations of innate racial differences about other communities. Once established, ideas have a life of their own. Moreover, racial ideologies tended to legitimate actions by Malay and nonMalay leaders in both colonial and postcolonial society. More than rubber and tin, the legacy of colonialism was racial ideology.

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