

## **The Malay Identity in Brunei Darussalam and Sri Lanka**

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### **Abstract**

This paper discusses the status of Malays in Brunei and also in Sri Lanka, to provide an insight into what it means to be a Malay. Although there are substantial differences between the two communities, the comparison adds to our understanding of the status of the Malay ethnicity and thereby adds another dimension to the growing interest in issues defining the 'Malay' identity globally.

### **Introduction**

Who is a Malay? How can the Malay identity be defined? These questions have been raised with increasing frequency in academic circles and also by political observers.

In Southeast Asian literature, the term 'Malay' has been used in such broad terms that it is hard to determine exactly what it means. Is it based on a religious identification of being a Muslim, a claim emphasised by many Malay purists? Does it confer a legal status, such as in Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam (Maxwell, 2002)? Or should being Malay instead denote a linguistic and cultural grouping as in Sri Lanka and South Africa? Alternatively, maybe there is a specific physical morphological type that can be applied universally to people of Malay stock. At times it appears that one or more features are combined as identity markers in the categorization of Malays.

Like much other ethnic nomenclature, the concept of being Malay is fluid, with its meanings changing according to times, circumstances, and the perceptions of the people themselves (Matheson, 1979). Malay pundits in the late 19th and early 20th centuries engaged in zealous debates about the characteristics of Malayness at a time when many other ethnic groups claimed Malay descent. Especially noteworthy were controversies about accepting Arabs and Arab-Indians, popularly known as *Jawi Peranakan* (at times pejoratively dubbed by Malays as *DK*, *Darah Keturunan*, 'High Blood', literally 'ancestral blood'). These people sometimes referred to themselves as 'we Malays' and contributed in stimulating intellectual, literary and political consciousness among the indigenous Malays (Roff, 1967; Milner, 1994).

According to Shamsul Amri, the issue of Malayness 'is redefined, reconstructed, reconstituted and hence problematised' (1996, p. 476). In the words of Anthony Milner (1992), the defining characteristic of the Malay race 'was an active process which consumed considerable amounts of intellectual energy and creativity' (see also Milner, 1982; Hirschmann, 1985; Ariffin Omar, 1993; Vickers, 1997; Hitchcock & King, 1998).

In September 2001, the Malaysian National Writers Association, popularly known as *Gapena*, sponsored an international Malay Conference in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, to discuss aspects of Malayness not only in the context of Malaysia, but also regarding people of Malay descent living in what can be termed the larger Malay world. Delegates who claimed to have Malay connections from places such as Madagascar, South Africa, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka were present during the proceedings, and they asserted their Malayness based on various criteria. In fact, a number of speakers during the conference were bold enough to ignore Islam as an inalienable feature in defining Malay identity, and instead proposed a range of other features of culture and common descent as crucial identity markers.

Efforts to conceptualise the Malay identity in theoretical terms have to take into account both its static and dynamic dimensions. For example, a static aspect of Malay identity can be established in constitutional documents such as the Malaysia constitution, or the Brunei Nationality Act of

1961. This is an authority-defined situation. But more often than not, the concept of being Malay has a dynamic aspect, as the Malay identity is viewed as an ever-changing phenomenon. In other words the term Malay is not to be defined objectively but in broader, more subjective terms, so that elements of pragmatics or self-defined characteristics have equal validity.

This paper will deal with two contrasting examples of Malayness, namely the authority-defined identity that is found in Brunei Darussalam, and the pragmatically-defined nature of the Sri Lankan Malay identity. In the first case the national and political considerations determine the fundamentals of the identity, while in Sri Lanka a need for cultural survival affects the nature of Malayness in the community.

First, however, it is useful to review the long historical process in which the Malay consciousness has emerged through centuries of use.

## Historical origins

Etymologically the word *malayu* occurred in the 7th century referring to a political power centred in the area of Hari river of eastern Sumatra (Wheatley, 1961). The Malayu of the region nearby found mention in the Chinese sources of the same period. And in 1365 the Majapahit court poet Mpu Prapanca in his *Desawarnana* (also known as *Nagarakrtagama*) listed the names of the 'lands of Melayu' which were spread out along the entire east coast of Sumatra, as well as around the west coast to Barus and the interior areas of Minangkabau (Robson, 1995).

After the downfall in the 11th century of the famous Sri Vijaya kingdom (a proto-Malay kingdom), the axis of regional power shifted to Melaka, and then the term 'Malay' seems to have been applied to the followers of the Raja of Melaka in the 16th century (Matheson, 1979). At that time, the imperial Melaka court set the standard for things Malay in language and customs as well as statecraft.

After the fall of Melaka, those traditions continued with equal enthusiasm in the grand court of Aceh during 16th and 17th centuries (Andaya, 2001). Subsequently, during the centuries immediately preceding colonial rule, the Malay court texts began to broaden the definition to Trengganu, Pahang, Palembang, Siak and a host of other places in the Archipelago.

Like in many other cases of ethnicity formation, the genesis of the term Malay must be viewed in the context of its own historical forces. An alternative generic term Jawa/Jawi was once in vogue to refer to people of the Archipelago by the Arabs and Cambodians, and it certainly included the Malay people. Certainly, the Chinese writings in the eighteenth century employed the term 'Melayu' to refer to people of this region. The European writings too used the term profusely to refer to the eastern people who were bound by a common culture, language and religion. For example Sir Stamford Raffles, the British founder of Singapore, said "I cannot but consider the Melayu nation as one people, though spread over so wide a space and preserving their character and customs." (Raffles, 1816, p. 103, cited in Barnard, 2004, p. 10). European visitors to the region in the 18th and 19th centuries were indeed struck by this uniformity of language, culture and mannerisms, characterising the Malay people.

The concept of *bangsa* ('race') and the sense of belonging to one nation as developed in Western Europe in the post-feudalist era was rarely evident during classical times when the Malays were subject to the rule of Sultans (Milner, 1982). They belonged under the authority of this Sultan or that one, and their identity rested on their claim to the status of *rakyat* ('subject') of a ruler.

To a great extent, the colonial rule helped to break down barriers among the subjects of the various Sultans, and over a period of time it also helped to infuse the feeling of belonging to one Malay Bangsa (Milner, 1994). For example, the apparently harmless bureaucratic practice of census-taking actually helped to create and consolidate distinct racial categories such as Malay, Chinese and Indian in Malaysia (Shamsul, 1996), and a number of other factors assisted in this evolution of race-based notions among the Malays who were concerned about safeguarding their

national and economic interests. Not least of these was the influx of other races such as the Chinese and Indians into the Peninsula during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Evidence of political 'conscientisation' among the Malays to separate themselves from other recent immigrants began to grow in times of insecurity, and it reached a peak particularly after the British efforts to homogenise the Malaya State under the infamous Malayan Union Scheme launched in 1946 at the end of the 2nd World War (Lau, 1991). The Malays resented the fact that they would lose their special status as *bumiputera* ('sons of the soil') in their own homeland, and hence they rushed to take direct political action by forming the UMNO party.

In the context of neo-capitalist debates followed by the prosperity enjoyed by Malaysia as a newly industrialised country after the 1970s and its emergent status as a core Malay nation, the need to define 'Malayness' has taken on a new urgency. From colonial times and even before, the Peninsula has acted as a melting pot of diverse eastern nationalities such as Minangkabau, Achenese, Boyanese, Javanese, Bataks, Mandailing, and others from the neighbouring East Indies. Despite the fact that geographical national boundaries have been created in the physical and conceptual sense in the post-colonial era, the movement of eastern nationalities into Peninsular Malaysia continued unabated. The Malay numerical superiority had already been threatened by the large scale immigration of Chinese and Indians under colonial rulers, and this caused concern among Malay activists.

During the political debates preceding the formation of Malaysia, this numerical weakness of the Malay population became an important issue. Hence, Tunku Abdul Rahman, the first Prime Minister of Malaysia, proposed a counter-balance to the absorption of the Chinese-dominated Singapore into the Malay Federation by actively courting Brunei to join his scheme and thereby help to provide a balance with its dominant Malay population. In addition, within the national politics of Malaysia, especially in the East Malaysian states of Sarawak and Sabah, there have been claims that illegal means were adopted to naturalise many recent immigrants from the neighbouring states as Malays. At any rate the Malay intellectuals would like to see a numerically stronger Malay population who are spread all over the 'Malay world', the boundaries of which extend from Madagascar in the West to the Cocos islands in the East.

## Brunei vs Sri Lanka

Brunei Darussalam and Sri Lanka present us with an interesting yet a contrasting case study as we search for the meaning of Malayness. Brunei may be considered a core Malay State, but in Sri Lanka the Malays are only a marginal community. Malays form the majority of the Brunei population, while in Sri Lanka they are a microscopic minority constituting just 0.3% of the population. Brunei's official religion is Islam, the religion of the majority, while in Sri Lanka nearly 70% of the population are Buddhist, and Muslims (including the Malays) practise their religion without any hindrance. In Brunei, the Malay identity is an essential component of national life, but in Sri Lanka, the Malay identity exists for a minority group battling to survive culturally.

Brunei and Sri Lanka thus present a stark contrast in the definition of ethnicity. The former adheres to the authority-defined identity and the latter is based largely on a self-identity or, as Shamsul (1996) termed it, as 'everyday-defined' identity. We will now consider the two communities in more detail.

## Malays in Brunei

The term 'Malay' defines a fundamental component of the essence of Brunei Darussalam along with two other related components, namely Islam and Monarchy. Indeed, this is reflected in the country's official political ethos, known as MIB (*Melayu Islam Beraja* or 'Malay Islamic Monarchy') (Hussainmiya, 1994). Thus the concept of being Malay has a unique significance in

Brunei Darussalam. In view of controversies about what is 'Malay', Maxwell (2002) observes that linguistic, cultural and historical data illustrate why it is a hard question for anyone who attempts to comprehend the modern history of Brunei.

One can ask when the Malays in Brunei started to perceive themselves as scions of a Malay race. I posed this question to several Bruneian academics but found no satisfactory answer. It is widely believed that the Brunei Kingdom was founded in 14th century by the first Sultan, Alak Batatar (Buyers, 2001), and some of my academic respondents asserted that the MIB concept was present right from the beginning. However, such an assertion proves nothing but Benedetto Croce's dictum that 'All history is contemporary history'. The response of the academics seems to be transposing a current perception to the past, and it remains hard to substantiate their claims.

It is now believed that the idea of Malayness and the Malay people are not indigenous to Brunei. They originated from outside at one point of history, and they were codified in the Sultanate's historical chronicle *Silsilah Raja-Raja Brunei* (Sweeney, 1968). One needs to look carefully at the way the concept of Malay is used there, as in the mythical Bruneian legend of *Syair Awang Semaun*. This legend is about the Malay warrior brother of Alak Batatar, and it has been transmitted orally through generations (Rozan Yunos, 2008).

Further research is necessary to evaluate how the idea of Malayness evolved in the past in a court-based culture, for example,. Evidence of Brunei Malays becoming conscious of their race in a modern sense of the word can be traced based on developments that took place elsewhere in the region. Nonetheless, such a concept is unlikely to have been prominent in the Malay Peninsula when the Malay identity was based on feelings of loyalty towards the ruler. And this is even more true in the case of Brunei where even today the concept of citizenship is expressed in relation to one's subject status to the Sultan: *rakyat Kebawah Duli yang Maha Mulia Sultan* ('citizen under His Majesty the Sultan').

In present-day Brunei, a member of the Malay community gains many benefits and privileges from the government. Within such a small territory (5,769 sq. km), and with a population reaching the four hundred thousand mark, the need to share their space with other ethnic groups reinforces the vital importance for many Malays of maintaining their Malay identity in its pristine form. This strong emphasis on the concept of *malayu jati* ('Malay race') or *jati diri* ('racial self-reliance') as a frequent subject of seminars run by official organisations. For example, the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka ('Language and Literature Bureau') organized this kind of seminar, *Kongress Melayu Brunei Abad Ke-21*, in the capital, Bandar Seri Begawan, from 4th till 7th May 1997. And Brunei intellectuals such as Hashim (1999) underscore the need to consolidate Malay qualities in their writings, often under the rubric of MIB.

In the official Brunei Government documentation, it is obvious that the term Malay is used in much broader manner than Malay purists would readily admit. In fact in the first two censuses conducted in Brunei in 1906 and 1911, the term Malay did not appear at all, but was represented by the generic term 'Barunay'. Possibly the early census takers took into account the self-perception of the majority population that lived in and around Kampung Ayer (the 'Water Village') which was the nucleus of the Brunei kingdom. Although from the 15th until 19th centuries, Brunei was a sprawling kingdom with hegemony over a wide area in the eastern and northern parts of the island of Borneo and its environs, its final boundaries were drawn with Kampung Ayer at its centre. The seat of Brunei government was in the Kampung Ayer and several Sultans of Brunei in the late 18th and 19th centuries rarely ventured out of their capital.

As in the case of the Malay Peninsula, the colonial period helped to strengthen feelings of Malayness among the Bruneians. Through a unified administration that originated in Malaya, the Residency rule introduced in 1906 further transmitted some aspects of Malayness (Hussainmiya, 2006). Indeed, Brunei's British Resident received his orders from the Governor/High Commissioner based in Malaya until 1948, and Brunei's laws and orders also followed closely the pattern adopted in Malaya.

In official statistics, the use of the term Malay gained permanent currency only after the 1921 census, which indicated a possible shift both in official attitudes and the self-perception by *Barunays* themselves about their Malay identity. In the censuses that followed until the year 1971, the title of Malay appeared as a distinctive category while other indigenous groups of Brunei were enumerated separately and in detail. Among them the indigenous Kadayans featured as a main census category from the first census in 1906 until the 1960 census, while other groups (such as the Dusun and Muruts) were referred to off and on. However, in the censuses of 1971, 1981 and 1986, the other indigenous groups were subsumed under the term 'Malay'. See the details in Table 1.

Table 1. Ethnic categories used in Brunei censuses in the twentieth century.  
( '✓' indicates the category was used.) (source: Maxwell, 2002, p. 179)

	1906	1911	1921	1931	1947	1960	1971	1981	1986
Malay			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Barunay	✓	✓							
Kadayan	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Murut	✓	✓		✓	✓				
Bisaya	✓			✓					
Dusun		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Dali		✓							
Belait		✓		✓	✓	✓			
Tutong		✓	✓	✓	✓				
Melanau					✓	✓			
Iban			✓	✓	✓	✓			
Land Dayak					✓				
Punan					✓				
Residuum		✓	✓		✓	✓			
Chinese	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Indian		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Others	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Javanese				✓	✓				
European		✓		✓	✓				

We must be aware that changes in the census nomenclatures as used by colonial administrators may not necessarily reflect the local self-perceptions about their ethnic consciousness, especially among the Malay population. Nevertheless, the changes suggest shifts in the definitions and meanings of these ethnic categories throughout these nine 20th century Brunei censuses.

In popular parlance, the term *urang malayu* ('Malay people') can be said to have various meanings to the native speakers. Maxwell (2002, pp. 187-189) reports a range of distinct meanings of using *urang malayu* in the Brunei context. For instance, it is synonymous with being a Muslim, so a Malay is to be distinguished from '*urang kapir*' ('unbelievers' or 'infidels'). It also includes the two native Malay-speaking ethnic groups in Brunei, the Barunay and the Kadayan, in contrast with native speakers of the Malay language from outside Brunei. It is also used in purely legal sense when the term Malay is extended to those who do not profess Islam as their way of life.

In the Brunei Nationality Enactment of 1961, the 'Malay race' (*Puak Jati*) is interpreted as including a range of indigenous races, specifically the Belait, Bisaya, Brunei, Dusun, Kadayan, Murut and Tutong. To a greater extent, this legal interpretation avoids the common assumption that

being a Malay involves being a Muslim as well, especially as most Dusun and Murut are not Muslims.

As elsewhere, the need in Brunei to define Malay in exclusive terms by confining it to the locally born Malay-Muslims arose due to particular historical circumstances. The Malay awareness that gripped the Peninsular in 1930s had spread in Brunei (Hussainmiya, 1995, ch. 2). Like their counterparts in Malaya, some active Bruneians too formed Malay voluntary associations such as the *Kesatuan Muda Melayu* ('Malay Youth Association') and *Kesatuan Wanita Melayu* ('Malay Womens' Association'). Bruneians also maintained close interactions with Malaya through participation in pen-pal associations and by importing Malay journals. Moreover, the development of vernacular education in early 20th century played a role in tying the bonds between Bruneians and the Peninsular Malays.

A further boost to this consciousness came from the Japanese invaders during their brief occupation of Brunei from 1941 until 1945. Unlike the British, the Japanese elevated the status of vernacular educated Bruneians as their administrative colleagues and helped in the promotion of Malay language and culture (Gunn, 1996). Brunei Malays became bolder after the return of the British and prepared to take on them in winning their demands for educational and cultural advancement.

A controversial change in Brunei's colonial administration further sharpened Malay consciousness. Hitherto, Brunei's administration was the responsibility of the British establishment in Malaya, which managed the little sultanate as one of their Unfederated Malay States. With effect from 1 May 1948, however, Brunei was transferred to the jurisdiction of the British administration in Sarawak. In place of civil servants from Malaya, Sarawak-based officers were seconded to serve in Brunei. The Brunei Resident himself was one of these, and Sarawak's British governor now doubled up as the ex-officio High Commissioner for Brunei. The Brunei ruler, his nobles and the people resented this new arrangement. Not so long previously, Brunei had ruled Sarawak, and now the sultanate had become subservient to the Sarawak administration. More serious was the fact that the Brunei Malays feared being swamped by a horde of immigrants from across the border, especially the Chinese and Ibans. Being numerically weak, and as the scion of once a sprawling kingdom that was now truncated into two disconnected small territories, the indigenous Malays of Brunei had more to fear by uncontrolled immigration into their land. As a result, despite its small size, Brunei refused to accept a plan for closer co-operation with its neighbours, Sarawak and North Borneo (later known as Sabah). Bruneians were not keen on sharing their wealth with the other states, even in exchange for assistance in developing their administrative, judicial and business sectors. In short, the Sarawak administrative connection of 1948 had sharpened their consciousness of themselves as scions of a culture based on a Malay Islamic monarchy.

Similar sentiments were found in Malaya, where Malay ideologues promoted the need to preserve their race as a bulwark against alien domination of Malay society, as migration of Chinese and Indians into Peninsular Malaya created substantial anxiety amongst the Malays and stimulated them to unite through a racial bond (Shamsul, 1996, pp. 19-21).

Increasing antipathy to the alien presence guided Brunei's political developments in the early 1950s. As the struggle to win self-government from British indirect rule intensified prior to the introduction of Brunei's first written Constitution in 1959, the Malay ideologues became a force to be reckoned with, and they supported the ruling monarch in asserting special (Brunei) Malay rights (Hussainmiya, 2000). Apparently, visiting Malayan dignitaries to Brunei during this period cautioned the Sultan, Haji Omar Ali Saifuddin III, and his followers against yielding to the demands of the British administration to broaden the scope of political representation to non-Malays, a demand that had been forced upon Malaya. As a result, the 1954 Malay Constitutional Committee under the Chairmanship of Pengiran Muda Abdul Kahar proposed to draft a Brunei Constitution which meticulously enshrined the rights of Brunei Malays and the supremacy of Malay language in national life. Their report is a classic document that laid the foundation of much

of the subsequent legislation, including the Nationality Enactment of 1961 concerning the principles of Malayness. The group that promoted the cause of Brunei Malays and won the Sultan's patronage was largely drawn from the nobility and the vernacular educated intelligentsia which was in the vanguard of nationalist movement.

In the 1950s, the entry into the Brunei's political scene of the populist leader Shaikh A. M. Azahari, who was of a mixed Arab and Malay ancestry, and with the establishment of the *Parti Rakyat Brunei* (PRB or 'Brunei People's Party'), created a counter-balance to the extreme position of the Malay conservatives. This party, like its counterparts in Singapore and Malaya, promoted a kind of 'Marhaenism,' an eclectic mixture of socialism, democracy and nationalism, which was broader in its scope than narrow communalism. The supremacy of 'malayism' thus was not the prime concern of the party which sought support from all segments of society, including the Chinese and Ibans. Furthermore, Azahari expanded the vision of his leadership not just within the confines of Brunei, but to the larger northern Kalimantan entity, comprising the neighbouring Sarawak and Sabah which was inhabited many other nationalities besides the Malays. When supporters close to the Sultan promoted the idea of recognising only the indigenous population of Brunei as members of Malay race entitled for national rights, Azhari's party opposed the moves vehemently as it would deprive the Ibans and others who provided a voter base for the party. In the end, Azahari's politics failed both in the political and military fronts and the pro-Malay politics of the conservatives won the day.

As the mantle of power passed from the British hands to the Sultan under the 1959 Constitution, the Malay lobby emerged stronger in its influence over State policies designed for the preservation of indigenous Malay rights. Their point of view received further endorsement on the eve of the full independence for Brunei in 1984 which launched the MIB as a national ideology.

## **Brunei since Independence, 1984**

Since the attainment of full sovereignty in 1984, Brunei Darussalam has pursued policies to emphasise a Malay identity in keeping with the aspirations of the country's monarchic institution and its social needs. The enshrinement of the philosophy of MIB in the preamble of the 1984 declaration of independence was a direct result of the need of the nation to hold the Malay values supreme along with the institution of the monarchy and the religion of Islam.

In the constitution of Malaysia, a Malay is defined as someone who speaks Malay, professes the religion of Islam, and follows Malay customs in their daily life. However, in Brunei such a definition would be problematic, as some of the non-Malay races are also indigenous to Brunei and could not be overlooked in any formal definition of Malay. Consequently, according to the Brunei constitution, the term Malay covers seven indigenous races or *puak jati* ('original tribes') namely Belait, Bisaya, Dusun, Kedayan, Murut and Tutong in addition to the Brunei Malays. They are all treated on the basis of their status as the Sultan's subjects. Apart from the fact that the term used within Brunei reflects the inescapable diversity of a poly-ethnic society with the national culture being that of the Brunei Malay, there has been a long-standing acceptance, by all groups, of Brunei Malay culture as the dominant feature of national culture.

This is no place to go into the background of the national MIB ideology or discuss its merits and demerits in a state which is also home to multi-ethnic communities, especially the Chinese, most of whom were immigrants to Brunei only since after export of oil since 1930s. The role of the Malay educated literati in particular is quite striking in collaborating with the monarch to reestablish the supremacy of Malay values in the Constitution and events leading to the declaration of full independence in 1984 and thereafter. Aside from Constitutional safeguards to perpetuate Malay interests, they prevailed upon the state to establish institutions to promote Malay language and culture following the Malaysian model. The founding of the Brunei Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (Malay Language and Culture Bureau) is a case in point. The introduction of *Dwi-Bahasa* or

bilingualism since 1984 is another attempt to perpetuate the use of the Malay language in education, and this bilingualism was also pursued in the Universiti Brunei Darussalam which was established in the year after independence. In fact, MIB is still taught as a compulsory course in the undergraduate curriculum of the university. The supreme council of MIB is a secretariat that is managed by the Academy of Brunei Studies set up within the University. They hold periodic symposia to inculcate the values among the students, public servants and the public. Sometimes the Sultan himself, together with his royal retinue, attends some of these proceedings.

No doubt MIB, especially its Malay values, help to homogenise Brunei society. Moreover, mass conversions to Islam have been taking place in the State, and according to one estimate, by 2005 almost 10,000 people had embraced Islam in Brunei within one decade (Azlan, 2005). In Brunei Malay, embracing Islam is also termed *masuk Melayu*, which literally means to enter Malayhood, and this reflects the further homogenisation of society. To be a Malay in post-independent Brunei gives one access to privileges as subjects of the Sultan, and this encourages people to join the main stream of the society.

## Malays in Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, Malays popularly called 'Java People' by the local residents (reflecting the Javanese origins of many of them) first settled in the island in the 17th century during the Dutch occupation from 1656 until 1796 (Hussainmiya, 1991). In fact, when the Dutch colonial government introduced the Eastern nationalities to Ceylon, almost all major Indonesian ethnic groups were represented among them, including Javanese, Bandanese, Bugis, Amboinese, Minangkabaus, Balinese, Tidorese, Madurese, Sundanese, and of course Malays themselves.

Most early arrivals hailed from the city of Batavia (present-day Jakarta), which was founded under Dutch colonial administration in 1619. All these ethnic groups had moved into the city and formed their own kampongs outside the Dutch fort (de Haan, 1922, p. 474), sharing the benefits of trade and subsidiary economic activities of the Dutch colonial establishment. During wars and emergencies faced by the Dutch in other parts of Asia, chiefly in Sri Lanka, the native settlers of Batavia were recruited in large numbers to fight or to garrison Dutch coastal cities. It appears, however, that the early Indonesian migrants, drawn from such varied eastern races, had shed their different identities even before they arrived in Sri Lanka, and they had evolved into a single identity through the use of the Malay language.

In Sri Lanka, during nearly one and a half centuries of Dutch rule, the Malay identity gradually evolved. In an alien place, confronted by strange religious and communal surroundings, the early settlers from the east forged a close unity not only because of the ties of their common lingua franca, Malay, but also by their firm adherence to the religion of Islam. In this respect, they had the good fortune to live side by side with the Tamil-speaking community of Islamic Moors, whose history predates the era when Islam became an official religion in the Malay/Indonesian region. However, though they received cultural nourishment from this community of Moors, many of the Malays resisted erosion of their separate identity.

When the British replaced the Dutch rule in 1796, the local Malay community had already to a certain extent become indigenised. However, the new masters recognised the presence of a well-formed Malay community. For example, Robert Percival, an early British writer who wrote an account of Ceylon at the start of the nineteenth century, devoted several valuable pages of his book to the Ceylon Malays alongside his description of the other major Sri Lankan native communities, such as the Sinhalese, Tamils, and Moors (Percival, 1803).

With the establishment of British rule, a further contingent of Malays from abroad joined the already well-established Malay community in Sri Lanka. This time they originated from the Malay Peninsula itself. As the British continued the services of the Ceylon Malay Regiment that had originally been established by the Dutch, there was a need for further recruitment of Malay military



personnel, and the local Malay population was not considered sufficient to fulfill this need. Furthermore, Frederick North, the British Governor in Sri Lanka from 1798 till 1805, formulated a deliberate colonial policy to increase the Malay population in the island so that it could serve as a nursery for future prospective recruits to the military, and he sent special recruiting missions to the East, especially to the British Straits Settlements in Singapore, Malacca and Penang (then known as Prince of Wales Island) to bring not only Malay men but also women and children to accompany them for permanent settlement in the island. He encouraged their arrival by offering cash and remuneration for each Malay who was willing to make Sri Lanka their new home. It is said that the Sultan of Kedah also sent a number of his subjects to be settled in Sri Lanka in deference to the British wishes.

By the 1850s Malays from all over the Malay Peninsula, though not in large numbers, had settled in Sri Lanka through the special recruiting depots set up first in Penang and later in Singapore in 1840. The Sri Lankan Malay community thus constitute an interesting conglomeration of people of Malay descent who came from right across the Indonesian Archipelago and the Malay Peninsula.

During the greater part of the 19th century, the Malay identity remained strong in the island thanks to their ability to maintain ties with the other parts of the Malay world, especially with the British Straits Settlements. New Malay recruits from Peninsular Malaya joined the community, while Sri Lanka-born Malay officers on recruitment drives enjoyed the opportunity of visiting Penang, Malacca and Singapore. Thus there was continuous interaction between the local Malays and their compatriots in the core Malay world. In fact, some members of these recruiting missions stayed long enough in the Peninsula, at times more than two to three years at a stretch, to bring back not only new developments in Malay culture, but also Malay literary texts and manuscripts to be distributed among their fellows in Sri Lanka. Such cultural contacts with their homeland ensured the continuity of the Malay identity. Even after the disbandment of the Ceylon Rifle Regiment in 1873, which severed these kinds of direct links with the Peninsula, some enterprising individuals like Baba Ounus Saldin (1838-1906) continued to maintain the cultural links with the Malayan archipelago until the late 19th century. His newspaper called *Wajah Selong* was published in Colombo in 1895-99 and was in circulation in Batavia, Malacca, and Singapore, while he imported Malay books, journals and newspapers for Malay readership into Sri Lanka.

During the period dominated by the traditional Malay elites, that is until the end of the 19th century when a vigorous Malay classical literary tradition was still alive, the Malays in Sri Lanka can be said to have been very much conscious of their places of immediate origin. Thus, for example, Baba Ounus Saldin took pride in emphasising that his family had originated from Sumenap in the island of Madura in the East. Similarly, obituary notices inserted in the local press always mentioned the country of origin of the dead persons. For instance, a notice which appeared in the local newspaper, the Ceylon Independent of 18th August 1910, referred to the late Subedar Tuan Assen as a native of Trengganu. Also the same newspaper of 11th August 1911 gave the origin of the late Jemidar (lieutenant) Tuan Rahim Cuttilan as Minangkabau. Thus, although the local Malays had long become naturalised in Sri Lanka, the country of their adoption, the memory of their birthplaces exercised a strong influence over their continued identity with the motherland, at least for the first and second generation of Malays in Sri Lanka.

The situation began to change with the emergence of a new generation of Malays, educated and nurtured in the local and western traditions. Their memory began to fade fast, so despite an awareness of their Malay ethnicity, they could not really focus on the real areas of their origin as their predecessors had done. In addition, not only the community, but also their political, social and cultural environment in their adopted country had begun to change drastically, which required continuous adjustment with the Sri Lankan socio-political reality..

Under changing socio-political circumstances in Sri Lanka during the 20th century, in order to maintain an aura of ethnicity, the cultural survival of the local Malay people depended substantially

on their consciousness of a common origin. One needs to understand similar issues of ethnic consciousness among people of Indian origin in Guyana and Fiji. The former, having been totally cut off from their Indian homeland, have lost their separate ethnic identity, whereas the Fijian Indians, through their continuous interaction with the Indian sub-continent, managed to retain their own identity in a multi-racial environment. Thus in the case of the Fijian Indians, their Indian identity is said to be a routine feature of their daily lives. They still adhere to their Indian marriage patterns, some distinctive forms of religious worship, and the retention of Tamil and Telugu as domestic languages, though it must be admitted that this use of Indian languages in Fiji is somewhat tenuous now. In contrast, the Guyanese Indian community has lost all but the most rudimentary aspects of traditional Indian culture. The Sri Lankan Malays are in this respect to be compared more with the Guyanese Indians and can be said to have evolved an ethnicity in a multi-racial country while also managing to maintain some aspects of their ethnic identity.

## Challenges to Sri Lankan Malay Identity

Inevitably, the retention of a distinct Malay identity in Sri Lanka faced many challenges. A 1921 pamphlet appealing to the Sri Lankan Malays states:

The Malays of the island form a distinct and a separate community, still preserving the ancient habits, customs and their own language. They have separate places of worship preserved for them and their priests and elders are of their own community. They are members of the great Malay community, spread over the far East and counting some fifty million souls. (Lathiff, Mantara & Amit, 1921)

And in an unpublished paper challenging the views of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, the Muslim Political Party, which wanted all Muslims to be identified as one in Sri Lanka, B. D. K. Saldin wrote:

[T]he Moors have sought to absorb us at every turn saying that if you are a Muslim then all other distinctions are immaterial. It is easy for others to talk glibly about Islamic unity and suggest that classifying the Muslims of Sri Lanka into Moors Malays, Borahs and Memons is inimical to the indivisibility of Islam. Islam they say eradicates racism. What does the Holy Quran have to say about this. Let me quote. Sura 5 verse 51 states 'if God had so willed, he would have made you a single people, But (his plan is) to test you in what he has given you'.

These two quotations sum up the concern of the Malay community to survive as a separate entity in the ethnic mosaic of Sri Lanka.

Nowadays it is hard to tell the difference between a Malay and other Sri Lankans by means of any conspicuous physical characteristics. With rare exceptions, the Sri Lankan Malays are all Muslims by religion. They have lived for generations among the dominant Islamic group of Sri Lanka, namely the Moor-Muslims. In total, the Muslims constitute about 7 to 8% of the Sri Lankan population, while the Malays form just 5% of the Muslim population. Through common religious bonds and intermarriages, the Malays interacted more closely with Moors than any other communities. This has resulted in the loss of typical Malay features among the offspring of such marriages, and thus it is particularly difficult to recognise a Malay from a Tamil speaking Moor-Muslim. Even at the start of the 19th century, Robert Percival remarked on how the Malays had started to change in appearance:

Although they (Malays) intermarry with the Moors and other castes particularly in Ceylon and by this means acquire a much darker colour than is natural to a Malay; still their characteristic features are so striking predominant. (Percival, 1803, p. 115)

And nowadays even such 'characteristic features' of the Malays have faded. One might also quote a statement from the late Malaysian Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman who had some close friends among the Malays in Sri Lanka.

[T]his is also the case with Ceylon. The only difference is that their (Malay) features have changed. They look more like Indians (the Kelings) than Malays and their language is strongly influenced by the Indian dialect. What is more they have lost touch with the Malay adat and custom, but still they call themselves Malays... (Tunku Abdul Rahman, 1981)

Despite the perception of others, the Malays are serious in maintaining their separate identity. The alternative is to be submerged within the religious groups of the dominant Moors. Being a minority within a minority, the Malays have been fighting against attempts to merge their identity within the Moorish community, which already has adequate political representation in Sri Lanka. Despite the outward unity on the basis of a common religion, differences between these two communities persists, mostly at subjective level of community consciousness, and it surfaces now and then when their respective ethnic interests collide. For example, this happened in the 1920s in the context of ethnic politics promoted by the British colonial powers in Sri Lanka. The colonial government deliberately aimed to exacerbate the divisive issues of communal politics, particularly between the majority community, the Sinhalese, and the minority Tamils, but they did not expect such tiny minority communities like the Malays to take up their own rights. In fact, they tried to include the Malays with the other Muslim groups in the island as part of a larger Muslim entity. However, the right to send one of their own nominees to the legislative council was conceded to the Malays, and from 1924 to 1952 at least one Malay was chosen to represent the community's interests. In 1952, they lost this Malay representative in the parliament, but until 1965 a Malay member was nominated via one of the six special seats allotted for special interests in accordance under the provisions of the Soulbury constitution of 1948. After 1965, no Malay member was nominated even for a special seat, and the Malays lost the possibility of a nominated member of parliament with the introduction of a new constitution in 1972.

As in other communities, political issues exacerbated the already strained differences between the two fraternal entities. In the process, the Malays endeavoured to define their identity more clearly as the scions of an eastern culture rather than the inheritors of a Muslim civilisation claimed by the Tamil-speaking Moors as descendants of the Arabs and the Indians. To a great extent, Malay ethnic consciousness typically expressed itself as an inevitable outcome of conflict related to a sub-ethnicity. As an ardent Sri Lankan Malay Lawyer, Al-Haj M.S. Ossman, puts it:

As Muslims and with a distinguishable ethnic identity the Malays enjoyed recognition in the Legislature and thus recognition in the Legislature which is a recognition of human right gave the race the prestige and dignity of equality in expression in the most important forum of the country. (Ossman, 1985, 18)

The recent history of Malays in the island supports the argument that a Malay cultural consciousness depends partly on recognition of their ethnicity at the political level. This was confirmed to some extent by the recent decline in the activities as well as the important place held by the All Ceylon Malay Association (ACMA) in the social and cultural life of the Malays as a result of a lack of motivation at the leadership level.

Founded in 1922, the ACMA was originally an impressive force. Three of its presidents, M.K. Saldin, (1931-36), Dr. M.P. Drahman (1956-60), and M. Zahiere Lye (1960-65) were elected to the legislature, and the association was a symbol of Malay ethnicity for more than three decades. It initiated several ambitious projects to revive the ethnic symbols of Malays, so for example special societies were set up to collect oral and written literature, Malay dancing and music were revived, and the Malays were urged to wear Malay dress and cook traditional meals. Above all, the ACMA played host to distinguished foreign Malay visitors, such as Prime Ministers Tunku Abdul Rahman and Tun Abdul Razak from Malaysia, as well as Dr. Ali Sastroamidjojo and Dr Subandrio from Indonesia. Furthermore, in 1961 a youth delegation sponsored by the ACMA visited Malaysia to witness the installation of the Raja of Perlis as the Yang di Pertuan Agong, and in 1962 a six-member delegation from the ACMA attended the Merdeka ('Independence') celebrations in Kuala

Lumpur at the special invitation of Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman. But after the loss of special Malay representation in parliament from 1965, the ACMA seemed to lose its hold over the community, and it declined in importance as the single, vocal representative of community's interests.

However, an upsurge in the ethnic pride among Malays followed the 1983 ethnic riots in Sri Lanka, and communal feelings have become sharper once more. The Malays are particularly affected, and they have a heightened sense of self-identity reinforced by their knowledge that they belong to a larger Malay world. The recent discovery of Malay manuscripts in Sri Lanka has confirmed the high culture which linked their ancestors with other centres of the Malay world. As scions of a vigorous cultural past, their contributions to Malay literature has received attention and admiration from contemporary Malay scholars in the Peninsula and the Archipelago.

As a result of recent research, the previous boundary of the Malay world, which stopped at Singapore, has now been extended to Sri Lanka. In fact, Sri Lankan Malays successfully hosted the Second Malay World Symposium in August 1985, when a large delegation of about 100 Malaysian literary and academic personalities visited the island and observed Malay life there at first hand. The Malays in Sri Lanka were encouraged to believe that they can still reach out for help and understanding from among their Malay compatriots elsewhere to strengthen their own cultural life and revive their traditions. Several important resolutions were passed during the symposium urging the Sri Lankan Government to help preserve the cultural identity of the Malays, while appeals were made to the Malay governments abroad to help in these efforts.

Hitherto, some individuals, especially from the Moor community with partial Malay ancestry, felt ambivalent about identifying themselves fully with the community. The Second Malay World Symposium seems to have dispelled such doubts, and subsequently the Malays have emphasised their Malay roots. To that extent Gapena (The Malaysian Writers' Federation) and its leader, Tan Sri Professor Datuk Ismail Hussein, must take some credit for bringing this new consciousness and pride to the community, which gratefully endowed him the title *Pendita* ('Scholar') during the symposium.

The future appears bright for the Sri Lankan Malays. If they can revive their language, culture and traditions while maintaining links with the Malay world as in the past, their ethnic identity can last for many more years to come. The Sri Lankan Government and people do not grudge them these newly re-established links and identity. In addition, the Malay Government and Malay communities abroad also feel happy that they have rediscovered their long lost cousins in the paradise island of Sri Lanka.

## Conclusion

What is common between the Sri Lankan Malay community and the Malays of Brunei is their ethnic background. But the similarity ends there.

The Sri Lankan Malays are conscious of their ethnicity but at the same time they are struggling hard to avoid becoming extinct as a separate community. They do not derive any special benefits by being Malays in a Buddhist-majority country. In fact they are at a disadvantage by being a minority who are unable to have access to a range of benefits, such as state power.

The situation is entirely different in Brunei Darussalam, where being Malay is not only important in enabling the adherents of the community to reinforce their identity, but it also gives them access to many privileges offered by the state (Maxwell, 2002). This is particularly reflected by the way the national MIB philosophy enshrines the pre-eminent status of Malays in Brunei.

In Sri Lanka, despite their minority status, most Malays are proud of their background as scions of a major eastern race. Although through the passage of time the community has become diluted in terms of language, culture, and customary practices (Lim & Ansaldo, 2007), many Malays in Sri Lanka want to cling on to the last vestige of their racial identity – their self-defined

Malayhood – in order to survive as a separate entity in a multi-racial island nation. They have no sponsored support to reinforce their lifestyle or language, so this is now threatened with disappearing (Ansaldo, 2008), as has already happened in the case of the Malays who migrated to South Africa three centuries ago. However, the community elders are quite aware of this issue and are trying their best to keep the language alive by organising special classes for those who are interested, and by arranging communal gatherings to encourage people to carry on conversations in their own tongue.

Such constraints do not affect the Malay identity in Brunei. For all intents and purposes the Malay language reigns supreme through state support, so for example good performance in the Malay language exams is a requirement for students to gain admission to university.

In Sri Lanka, there is also an erosion of numbers, as many ‘borderline’ Malays, those who have mixed parentage, tend to identify themselves with the dominant nationalities, such as the Muslim-Moors or Sinhalese.

In contrast, in Brunei, despite a smaller population than in Malaysia or in Singapore, the ranks of Brunei Malays are being swelled by continuous admission of new blood through marriage and also through the process of conversion to Islam.

However overall, both in Brunei Darussalam and Sri Lanka, Malays remain confident that that they will never disappear as a distinct race from this earth. A well-known early Malay hero, Hang Tua, is reported to have predicted in the Hikayat Hang Tuah that ‘Ta’akan Melayu hilang di-dunia’ (‘the Malays will never disappear from the earth’), and this prophesy clearly remains true today.

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