

ULASAN BUKU/BOOK REVIEW

Multiethnic Malaysia: Past, present and future by Lim Teck Ghee, Alberto Gomes and Azly Rahman (eds.), Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre (SIRD) and Malaysia Institute of Development and Asian Studies (MiDAS), 2009, 530 pp.

Aimed at producing a "counter-hegemonic", or alternative, corpus of writing "that can provide different insights and perspectives on the country's history and development" compared to the official or government-sanctioned literature on Malaysian history and society, *Multiethnic Malaysia: Past, present and future* is indeed a volume that makes a compelling read not only for university students but also other interested and concerned Malaysians and scholars as well.

To be sure, this collection was published as a direct response, nay challenge, to the ethnic studies module that was commissioned by the government for compulsory use in local universities.

The intellectual dynamism that is embedded in this volume stems from the conscious effort of the editors in providing space for the contributing writers to exercise their intellectual freedom when doing analyses of the social, political, economic and cultural aspects of Malaysian society from their diverse intellectual, ideological and political backgrounds.

In the book's introduction, the editors declare that owing to their expressed commitment to diversity and independence in scholarship, they choose not to stifle or hide differences of approach or views among the contributors of the volume. In a sense, the book intends to engage readers in a way that challenges conventional wisdom, officially sanctioned views and the politically sensitive.

There are 25 chapters in this volume, which are then divided into five sections: Part I on *Historical roots of identity in Malaysia*; Part II on *Politics, economics, culture and identity*; Part III on *Education, culture and identity*; Part IV on *Marginalised communities, marginalised identities*; and Part V on *Future prospects*.

If what has happened in the past is vital to our deeper understanding of what is taking place today and what the future has in store for us, then the country's history, some aspects of which have not been highlighted or emphasised by the official history books, must be prioritised as manifested in the book in terms of it being placed in the very beginning of the volume.

Here, in keeping with the expressed spirit of the book, the historians concerned present their findings and viewpoints that are at variance with each other over a particular issue or aspect of Malaysian life. For instance, in Part I, seasoned historian Khoo Kay Kim traces the origins of immigrant communities and a cosmopolitan population in Melaka, Terengganu and Kelantan as well as large-scale migration of Chinese and non-Muslim Indians; he also observes the arrival of Javanese, Bugis and other migrants from the Indonesian archipelago, beginning from the second half of the 19th century until today.

Khoo contends that occupational specialisation and physical separation (due to cultural factors such as ethnic schools, clubs and associations, ethnic nationalism and religious institutions) contributed to the emergence of a plural society (p. 5). He further argues that the colonial British administration did not consciously divide the local populace as a matter of policy at the time: "Ethnic separation wasn't deliberately designed by the British administration which, in fact, did not know how to overcome the cultural wall which prevented one group from integrating with another. The British made a serious attempt after the end of Second World War, to find ways and means of integrating the various ethnic groups" (p. 29).

In contrast, fellow historian Cheah Boon Kheng maintains that political expediency prevented the British from pursuing the objective of national integration as they tried to "pander and appease" Malay nationalists so as to avoid the hastening of the end of their own colonialist project. As a consequence, there was no united Malayan nationalist movement. Cheah adds that the British administration, via its policy and actions, was instrumental in promoting a "divide-and-rule" policy that was clearly disruptive for the plural Malayan society.

Ariffin Omar, also a historian in his own right, explores the period after the Japanese occupation where there were possibilities for interethnic integration and unity. After the aborted Malayan Union proposal, there emerged the Federation of Malaya agreement of 1948, which benefited the British, the Malay rulers and the Malay elites within United Malays National Organization (UMNO). Then came the initiative by the *Pusat Tenaga Rakyat* – All Malayan Council of Joint Action (PUTERA-AMCJA) who proposed a single nationality for all citizens under the proposed People's Constitution. But this proposal failed because of opposition from the British and the animosity and distrust that prevailed between the Malays and non-Malay communities.

Politics and economics obviously shape society in a dominant way, particularly in terms of the democratic process and ethnic relations in Malaysia. Hence in Part II of the book, there are chapters that critically examine, for instance, the implications of ethnicity and patronage in UMNO; the impact of the politicisation of the New Economic Policy (NEP) on ethnic relations in Malaysia; and the role of the middle class in modern and developing Malaysia. These pieces lay bare the problems that emerged in society arising from the politics of ethnicity and the questionable manner by which the NEP was implemented over the years, among other things.

Culture is both important and contentious particularly in a multicultural society like Malaysia that has witnessed over the years political subordination and domination in the realm of culture. And the political, social and economic significance of culture has earned its place in this volume.

The chapter in Part III by Lim Teck Ghee and Alberto Gomes on *Culture and development in Malaysia* is a republication of a piece that was written 21 years ago; nonetheless it still has resonance given the current cultural politics in the country. It interrogates the notion of national culture and the formulation of the controversial National Cultural Policy (NCP) of 1971 in the aftermath of the bloody May 13th riots of 1969, the implications of which are still being felt to some degree until today.

If culture is politically significant and controversial in Malaysia, so is religion. The chapter by Zainah Anwar, a founding member of Sisters in Islam, on *State intervention in personal faith: The case of Malaysia* is a much needed piece that reminds the reader of the increasing Islamisation in the country that has given rise to a host of problems, particularly in terms of Muslim-non-Muslim relations, such as religious conversions that led to complications of child custody, child conversion, "body snatches" etc. Indeed, the politicisation of Islam has also emerged as one of the challenges that Malaysians, both Muslim and followers of other faiths, have to encounter and deal with.

As implied by the editors, the volume does not shy away from controversies and so-called sensitive issues. A chapter written by Azly Rahman, which is also located in Part III of the book, critically unpacks the contentious notion of *Ketuanan Melayu* in relation to the role played by the equally controversial *Biro Tata Negara*, a government outfit that was supposedly established to instil patriotic sentiments among students, civil servants etc.

What is equally interesting and intriguing is the piece written by Alberto Gomes on *Superlative syndrome, cultural politics and neoliberalism in Malaysia*. It begins by looking at the so-called outstanding feats achieved by certain Malaysians who aspired to etch their names in the Guinness Book of Records or Malaysian Book of Records. Gomes argues that these are part of a nation-building process, as well as attempts aimed at breaking free from the "West" via the rallying cry of *Malaysia Boleh*. In other words, these are endeavours symptomatic of Malaysians, who, although politically independent, still carry in many ways a colonised mindset that has been made to feel small, backward, indolent and lacking in determination (p. 186).

Gomes adds that this is also a part of the process of creating a bangsa Malaysia, an attempt that was, however, scuttled by divisive policies and politics, such as the NEP and the NCP, which were perceived to be overtly and overly preferential towards the Malays. As a result, the non-Malays became defensive, and subsequently engaged in cultural activities that only enhanced differences and, at times, also triggered off conflicts between the Malays and non-Malays. This includes activities such as the conscious effort of Chinese parents to send their children to Mandarin classes, and participate more actively in Taoist and Buddhist

functions. Many Chinese joined fundamentalist Christian religious groups. Similarly, the Indians became more Hindu in their orientation. For example, the Thaipusam celebration at Batu Caves near Kuala Lumpur has drawn bigger crowd of devotees and spectators over the years (p. 192). This goes to show that the dominant and domineering culture has not gone uncontested.

Such contestation in the cultural domain has become bigger in scale, more intense, obvious and ostentatious. For instance, the spectacular Shah Alam mosque that was built in the 1980s was somewhat "matched" by the impressive Thien Hou temple that perches on a hill near Kuala Lumpur city.

The "cultural" nature of this chapter leads me to suggest that it should have been put in its rightful place along with Lim Teck Ghee, Alberto Gomes, Zainah Anwar, Azly Rahman etc. in Part III of this volume where issues of culture, identity, language and education are examined.

In a society that is afflicted by injustice and inequality, there is bound to be communities and social groups that are pushed to the periphery of society. To be sure, these are stakeholders who have, or should have, equal rights like any others in a democratic society. Part IV of this book on *Marginalised communities, marginalised identities* delves into an important issue of the marginalisation of certain segments of the Malaysian society, namely the *Orang Asal*, Indian Malaysians as well as the migrant workers. The economic policies and politics of ethnicity that exist in the society have further alienated these minority groups, a phenomenon that indeed requires attention, unearthing and analyses by concerned scholars.

The final part of the volume rightly assesses the challenges and prospects of building a multicultural, multiethnic and multireligious Malaysia.

If there's a gap in the intellectual contribution made by this collection, it would be the role of women and women's movement in politics as well as the economy in Malaysia – although they were mentioned in passing.

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Having said that, this volume indeed provides the essential fodder for those who crave for intellectually challenging literature on Malaysia, ethnicity and ethnic relations. This collection deserves its place in the local universities, which it originally is intended for.

Mustafa Kamal Anuar
School of Communication
Universiti Sains Malaysia
Penang