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CONSENSUS AND CONTESTATION IN THE FORMATION OF MALAYSIAN STUDIES: A PARADIGMATIC COMPARISON

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to question the proposition put forth by Abdul Rahman (2014) regarding the "rakyat" paradigm in Malaysia as an analytical tool for Malaysian society. The rakyat paradigm was introduced by Abdul Rahman Embong in response to Shamsul (1998)'s paper on "Ethnicity, class, culture or identity? Competing paradigms in Malaysian Studies". While Shamsul (1996a) conceptualised these dimensions as parallel, if competing paradigms, Abdul Rahman claimed that rakyat, a term roughly indicating "folk" or "the people" (whose etymology we will interrogate), is yet another parallel paradigm. However, we wish to question if this is truly so, given that folk suggests an entire collective or lumpenproletariat. The rakyat paradigm, we argue, would fall short of representing a significant social category as it ignores the existence of stratification, inequality, and yet assumes a utopian collectivity. Abdul Rahman also appears to be both wary of, and supportive of, a British-based epistemological understanding of the concept of folk. Thus, in this article, we chronicle the evolution of Malaysian studies to assess the suitability of a folk-based paradigm. Using a timeline-based approach, we chart the development of Malaysian studies alongside significant milestones in Malaysian history, intertwining content and context. We argue that the development of Malaysian society and its associated studies remain too complex to be consolidated into a "one-size-fits-all" paradigm, which the rakyat paradigm would be, if applied at all.

Keywords: British colonial epistemology, everyday-defined identity, Malaysian studies, rakyat paradigm, lumpenproletariat

INTRODUCTION

This article aims to critically examine Abdul Rahman's (2014) proposition of the *rakyat* paradigm as an analytical framework for understanding Malaysian society. Introduced by Abdul Rahman Embong in response to Shamsul's (1998) discussion on "Ethnicity, class, culture, or identity? Competing paradigms in Malaysian studies", the *rakyat* paradigm positions *rakyat*—a term roughly meaning "folk" or "the people"—as an additional parallel paradigm. While Shamsul (1996a) viewed these dimensions as parallel yet competing frameworks, Abdul Rahman proposed rakyat as another viable paradigm. However, we question whether this interpretation is valid, as the notion of folk suggests an undifferentiated collective or lumpenproletariat. We argue that the *rakyat* paradigm inadequately captures a significant social category by overlooking stratification and inequality, instead assuming an idealistic sense of unity.

Building on Shamsul's (1996a) conceptualisation of identity in Malaysia as a balance between static and fluid elements, Abdul Rahman introduces the rakyat paradigm as an inclusive framework with the potential to transcend Malaysia's dominant race-based societal structure. Abdul Rahman demonstrates both caution towards and acceptance of a British-influenced epistemological interpretation of "folk." In this article, we explore the progression of Malaysian studies to evaluate the relevance of a folk-centered paradigm. Employing a timeline-based method, we trace the development of Malaysian studies alongside key historical events in Malaysian history, blending content with context. We assert that the complexity of Malaysian society and its scholarly exploration cannot be simplified into a universal framework, as the *rakyat* paradigm would risk doing if implemented. Additionally, we delve into the etymology of the term *rakyat* to examine its origins as a broad representation of folk and its evolving usage over time.

This article is thus divided into several sections, beginning with a brief profile of Malaysian history, followed by research questions, a timeline of significant events in the formation of Malaysia as a nation-state, the evolution of Malaysian studies as a field, the etymology and evolution of the term *rakyat*, and ends with a discussion of the *rakyat* paradigm in comparison to the ethnicity, class, culture and/or identity paradigm.

PROFILING MALAYSIA

Malaysia is a free nation with a parliamentary constitutional monarchy and a federal government system. It is a Southeast Asian country, consisting of 13 states, and 3 Federal Territories (Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya and Labuan), which covers the two pieces of land divided by the South China Sea, namely Peninsular Malaysia also known as West Malaysia, as well as Borneo, or East Malaysia (Shamsul and Anis Yusal 2011).

The demographics of Malaysia are as follows. During independence, Malaysian society comprised three major ethnic communities, namely the indigenous community or *bumiputera* (literally sons of the soil), who accounted for 50% of the population, and two significantly large immigrant communities, one Chinese (37%) and the other (11%). Since then, the censuses of 1970, 1980 and 1990 have demonstrated, in spite of the general increase in the population, from about 10 to 18 million, the ethnic composition has not veered significantly (Shamsul 1996a). Population growth rates for the main ethnic groups have been markedly different since 1970. The main ethnic groups are *bumiputera* (includes Malay, Orang Asli [the Aboriginal people] and the indigenous communities in Sabah and Sarawak), Chinese and Indian. The growth rate of the *bumiputera* population has more than doubled that of the Chinese throughout 1980–2010. The proportion of *bumiputera* within Malaysians increased from 56% (1970) to 66.1% (2010). After that, the proportion of Chinese and Indians decreased, with the Chinese population reduced from 34% to 25%, and the Indians from 9% to 7% (Shamsul and Anis Yusal 2011, 15). During Malaysia's Independence, there were three main ethnic groups, which were the indigenous *bumiputera* totalling 50% of the population, the Chinese totalling 37%, and the Indians at 11%. Subsequently, the 1970, 1980 and 1990 censuses showed that, despite overall population growth from 10 million to 18 million, the ethnic composition pattern remained the same (Shamsul 1996a). However, Malaysia's population for the third quarter of 2020 was estimated to be at 32.69 million, with an ethnic composition of *bumiputera* (20 million), followed by Chinese (6.7 million), Indian (2 million), others (22,713,169), and non-Malaysian citizens (2.9 million); and 16.82 million male and 15.88 million female citizens (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2020 in Chan 2022).

Malaysia's development is expressed most succinctly in a three-level historical-structural conceptual framework, which is the pre-colonial (pre-16th century), colonial (16th to mid-20th century), and postcolonial (post-1957). Although Malaysia is socio-politically defined by an ongoing system of administration, known as a *kerajaan* (a kingdom or a *raja*/royalty-based polity), the sociological foundations of these *kerajaan* in the three separate eras vary significantly. In the pre-

colonial era, prior to the formation of the modern nation-state, there was no concept of Malaysia in the present sense. The "Malay world" existed, which physically consisted of the Malay-speaking archipelago, which comprised numerous small feudal polities, or *kerajaan*. A few were scattered around mainland Southeast Asia, in countries known today as Burma, Siam and Cambodia, but mostly in island Southeast Asia, where Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Indonesia and Philippines are today. Each *kerajaan* was run by a king with a governance system based on the combination of "church and state", regardless of whether they were indigenous, Hindu or/and Buddhist kingdoms. It was during this period, between the 11th and 13th centuries, that Islam entered the Malay world, including Malaysia (Shamsul and Anis Yusal 2011). A definition of the Malay world could be taken from either an authority-defined or an everyday-defined approach. Tham (1992), for example, stated in his thesis that a Malay identity organically emerged out of the Nusantara region in Southeast Asia, with an expanding ethnic admixture comprising Malay and others of the same racial stock, such as Minangkabau, Acheh, Bugis, Banjar, Mandailing, Orang Selat, Boyan and Java. Tham (1992) also mentioned that the definition contains political and academic connotations. Tham (1992) thus states that the Malay world concept is an identity concept based on race, also used in geographical contexts, but one that has yet to be clearly defined.

The onset of the European imperial-colonial era in the Malay world began in the 16th century after the discovery of the New World and the major improvement of navigational and ship-making technologies in the Iberian Peninsula. The European imperial/colonial actors came one after another over 500 years, from the 16th to 20th century led by Portuguese (16th century), Spanish (16th century), Dutch (17th century), British (early 19th century), French (late 19th century), and the USA (late 19th century) (Shamsul and Anis Yusal 2011).

Malaysia is well-known as a plural society (Furnivall 1939). The two influential concepts that have been used often to describe Southeast Asia are plurality and plural society. In historical terms, plurality describes Southeast Asia prior to the Europeans' arrival and who, consequently, carved up the region into a collection of plural society (Shamsul 2005). From prior epochs, plural society had meant force as well as difference, and indicated the introduction of social facts such as knowledge, social constructs, glossary, metaphors and organisations previously undiscovered to the native population (including such devices as maps, museums, ethnic categories and population censuses), a free market-based economic system, and an organised polity. But, after colonial rule was founded and plural society was created in the area, succeeded by the development of nation-states, the conceptual model too diverged. As a result of the long period of colonial conquest, both in physical and epistemological terms, we commence the focus of our conceptual

model towards the nation-state, ethnic communities, international affairs, as well as nationalism, among others (Shamsul 2005).

The concept of unity in Malaysia, known as *perpaduan* in Malay, has evolved from a basic unidimensional understanding to a nuanced and multidimensional one. Initially, in the 1970s, the sole concept of *perpaduan* (unity) was simplistic, mechanical, and literal, while since the formation of the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC) in 2013, the task force comprising the author (Shamsul) has refined the concept to include three major dimensions, namely *perpaduan*, *kesepaduan* (social cohesion), and *penyatupaduan* (reconciliation). At present, Malaysian society has achieved *kesepaduan*, idealise *perpaduan* and have transcended *penyatupaduan* since the events of 13 May 1969.

It has been noted that in the colonial and post-colonial periods defining and categorising ethnic and racial groups (as well as other social categories) at the administrative level and their application on the ground can be a challenging task. Similar to many sociological problems, identity formation occurs within a duality of social realities, which are the authority-defined and the everyday-defined ones. The former is constructed by those in authority positions, while the latter is the daily lived experience of the common person. These realities coexist in parallel (Shamsul and Athi, 2014).

Thus, when discussing a collective social category, we must remember that complexity exists within it, and it may even possess a mercurial quality. For this reason, we intend to discuss the suitability of introducing a collective paradigm whose ontology is based on the assumption of similarity, as a social analytical tool.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL CONCERNS

This article discusses the following epistemological issues using a timeline-based approach to provide evidence for or against the following assumptions:

1. Is Abdul Rahman Embong's proposition suggesting that *rakyat* is a social category equivalent to social class, race/ethnicity, gender, and urban-rural divide?

2. Because in doing so, it is a valiant effort at overcoming such social stratification, but also possesses some ontological doubt, since it would imply that *rakyat* is one whole collective by itself, without any sub-divisions like social class, race/ethnicity, and gender.

3. What about embedded relationships of power within the lump sum category of *rakyat*?

This article employs a method that is gaining growing interest in the qualitative field, namely visual timeline methods (Kolar et al. 2015). The creation of visual timelines has been used by scholars such as Kolar et al. (2015) to inform their semi-structured interviewing. However, we are not using deeply technical automated software, but rather the concept of a timeline to represent the historical trajectory we wish to discuss and provide as evidence. Running parallel to each other would be three variables, namely Malaysian history throughout the pre-colonial (before the 16th century), colonial (16th to mid-20th century) and post-colonial (after 1957) periods; as well as the evolution of Malaysian studies as a field; and the development of the concept of *rakyat* or folk universally. Thus, we aim to analyse whether the use of the term folk or *rakyat* matches the other two variables as a contemporary paradigm.

Shamsul (2010) presents a general, concise development of Malaysia's social and political trajectory, and in particular, its inter-ethnic relations post-World War II (post-1945) to showcase Malaysia's example of unity in diversity.

The Conflict-Ridden Epoch in Malaysia (1948–1960)

Examining Malaysia from the conflict perspective cannot be avoided. The first decade after the Second World War was a turbulent period. This point in time was coloured by divergent patterns, which, on one hand, was an almost anarchic situation because of the war and its negative effects. On the other hand, the British colonial state made efforts to rebuild the socioeconomic framework through forceful methods. It was a challenge to seek a middle ground between anarchy and harmony. Some of the institutional structures that were founded to solve the major challenges during this period still survive (Shamsul 2010; 2020).

Malaysia, a Nation in Stable Tension (1969–2008)

On 13th May 1969, an open and violent ethnic conflict emerged in Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia. Ethnic violence also occurred in a few other locations but away from Kuala Lumpur. Although the conflict was localised and successfully controlled, the aftermath was felt throughout the country. This was the trial by fire for ethnic relations in a post-independent Malaysia, becoming a landmark event in analyses of politics and sociology of Malaysian society, as well as the individual consciousness of Malaysians, due to its traumatic nature. It raised people's awareness and repackaged the image of Malaysia's ethnic relations, altering its mechanics (Shamsul 2010; 2020).

The average Malaysian was jolted awake to the reality that they could no longer bask in the earlier ethnic harmony that existed right after independence. The government swiftly took action to utilise all resources to come up with short-term and long-term solutions in the economic and political spheres. A national emergency was declared, suspending democracy. A National Consultative Council was formed to solve problems in a way that was acceptable to all the ethnic communities, especially the Malays. Malaysia was administered by a National Operations Council or Majlis Gerakan Negara (MAGERAN). A Department of National Unity was established in 1969 as an administrative tool to monitor the state of ethnic relations in Malaysia, evolving into the Ministry of National Unity in 1972 (Shamsul 2010; 2020).

The New Economic Policy was then created as a short-run and long-run solution to intra-ethnic and inter-ethnic socioeconomic disparities stemming from the melange of diversities in Malaysia, covering ethnic, cultural, regional, political orientation, and economic activity. The Rukun Negara, or National Principle, was devised as an ideology to be practiced by all manner of Malaysians. However, the ongoing fact is that ethnic diversity is affected by other types of diversities, such as those outlined above. Malaysia had since been in a state of stable tension, which means that we have been living in a society dominated by many contradictions but we have managed to tentatively mitigate most of them through an ongoing cycle of consensus-seeking negotiations, occasionally the process itself became a solution (Shamsul 2010; 2020).

Social Cohesion: The Ideal Option for Malaysia and Malaysians (2008 Onwards)

Malaysian society, by and large, has enjoyed cross-cutting social ties and existed in a condition of social cohesion, including sharing norms and values over the decades. However, logical-minded Malaysians also noticed that despite experiencing a particular stage of social cohesion, not everything flows smoothly, but is coloured by dilemmas, contradictions, and many types of conflict, though it is glued together by a readiness to consistently bargain on the terms of consensus, peace, and stability. It is known that Malaysians have many complaints, be it ethnic, class, religious, or others, and are not shy of expressing them. This reflects an impression of constant conflict with outsiders. But when we circulate throughout the country at any given time, day and year in the past 40 years, we cannot avoid noticing that conflict is absent, because everyone proceeds to conduct their daily affairs, even in times of heated competition, in a socially-cohesive manner, without being challenged by open ethnic conflict. Malaysians hence "talk conflict, walk cohesion" (Shamsul 2010; 2020).

This is juxtaposed against a timeline on Malaysian nationalism provided by Ting (2013) and a timeline on nation-state formation conflicts by Loh (2009), as depicted in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1: Malayan nationalist movements (Ting 2013)

Year	Malayan Nationalist Movements
1874	Direct British intervention begins in sultanates on Malayan Peninsula.
1895	Britain establishes Federated Malay States.
1928	Formation of Nanyang Communist Party, renamed Malayan Communist Party (MCP) in 1930.
1945	Formation of Malayan Nationalist Party (MNP).
1946	March: Formation of United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). April: Malayan Union formed. July: Tripartite (sultans, UMNO representatives and British officials) secret negotiation begins on alternative to Malayan Union. December: Pan-Malayan Council of Joint Action (PMCJA) formed.
1947	January: MNP resigns from PMCJA and forms PUTERA, before rejoining PMCJA to form AMCJA-PUTERA. May: Publication of draft Anglo-Malay Federation Agreement. July/August: AMCJA-PUTERA finalises the People's Constitutional Proposals for Malaya. October: All-Malaya strike against the Federation of Malaya Agreement.
1948	February: Federation of Malaya formed. June: Declaration of state of Emergency throughout Malaya.
1955	Federal Legislative Council elected.
1957	Independence of Federation of Malaya.
1963	Formation of Federation of Malaysia.
1989	Peace treaty signed between Malaysian government and MCP.

To clarify, the concept of Malaysian studies is a field of studies as well as a form of knowledge, instead of a form of reality. It may or may not capture the total reality as total reality is always in flux. In the following section, we elaborate on its longitudinal development. This table is thus provided as a timeline in which important watershed events occurred, which have directly significant effects upon Malaysia's history and development of Malaysian studies. It serves as an anchor to the ensuing discussion.

Table 2: Nation-state formation conflicts (Loh 2009)

Year	Nation-state Formation Conflicts
1945	The Bintang Tiga Malay-Chinese clashes lasting a month in 1945 during the interregnum after the surrender of the Japanese and before the arrival of the British.
1948–1960	The Emergency (1948–1960), during which the CPM was engaged in an anti-colonial guerrilla war against the British.
1960/1961	November 1960 to February 1961: The use of violence and coercive laws including the Internal Security Act (ISA) to break up the activities and to detain leaders of the Socialist Front (SF was made up of the Labour Party and the Parti Rakyat) who were suspected of ties with the banned Communist Party of Malaya (CPM).
1962	An armed uprising began in 1962, led by the North Kalimantan Communist Party, which opposed the formation of Malaysia.
1969	May 1969: The most severe of these Sino-Malay clashes was the 13 May 1969 racial riots.
1969–1980	Transition: Significantly, no major horizontal Sino-Malay clash resulting in large numbers of deaths has occurred since 1969.
1987	October: A mass crackdown on dissent codenamed "*Operation Lalang*". In one fell swoop, 106 Malaysians – representatives of NGOs, unionists, opposition party leaders, educationists, church social activists, and even ordinary villagers – were detained under the ISA.
1997/1998	The regional financial crisis of 1997 and the sacking of Anwar Ibrahim as Deputy Prime Minister in 1998 – struck. This was followed by a second round of political ferment.
2008	Financial scandals, abuses of power, manipulations of racial and religious sentiments, came to the fore, and coincided with yet another financial crisis in the run-up to the 2008 polls.

THE EVOLUTION OF MALAYSIAN STUDIES AS A FIELD

Using the above timelines as a contextual reference, we now chart the development of Malaysian studies as a field. Longitudinally, academic observers from Southeast Asia did not learn directly about the region from each other but through a proxy, namely experts from Centers of Southeast Asian Studies in the United States of America, United Kingdom and Australia. The reason for this is that due to historicity, the region was controlled by separate influences from different European colonial powers, such as the British, Dutch, Americans and French. All these separated colonised partitions became modern nation-states post-independence. These

nations continue to maintain strong economic ties with their former colonisers, particularly in the educational sphere (Shamsul 2001b).

Therefore, various educational frameworks exist in Southeast Asia, and even more significantly, differing systems or traditions of knowledge acquisition and production, which are influenced by the unique demands of nation-building in each of these recently independent nation-states. This led to the creation of what Shamsul (2001b) calls methodological nationalism, a process of knowledge-making fostered mostly by the territoriality of the nation-state instead of the assumption that social life is generalisable and transcendental. Hence, the formation of Indonesian studies, Philippine studies, Malaysian studies, and its ilk (Shamsul 2001a).

This affected the creation of knowledge in each new nation-state in Southeast Asia. It was formed by the colonial epistemology, or knowledge frame. This influences the way citizens of these nation-states consider and choose what constitutes "good education", "who the experts are", and "where to go" to pursue further education at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels (Shamsul 2001a).

One cannot separate the growth and creation of social scientific information of Southeast Asia from knowledge within Southeast Asia. The British pioneered the formation of Malay studies, Chinese studies, Indian studies, and Islamic studies departments in Malaysia as well as in Singapore. This was done in the orientalist mould, fashioned after the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. Hence, one can make the case that the domestication of social science is a piece of colonial inheritance and its orientalist projects, as much as it is driven by more contemporary ethnicised national interests (Shamsul 2001b).

In the colonial period, social science primarily addressed the needs of colonial administrative science. Malaysian colonial administrator-scholars greatly helped to form the path in which we view, comprehend, and analyse our societies. Social science scholars such as Firth (1948), Leach (1951), and Freeman (1950) were crucial in completing a collection of reports for the British colonial government in its post-war second advance movement. The formation of tertiary educational institutions, and thus the way social science was taught in Malaysia, could be viewed as having reached colonial goals. For instance, the Universiti Malaya was founded to stream the local Chinese populace into the English-medium education system with the goal of thinning the influence of the Chinese-medium education system in Malaya, which was viewed as a facilitator of communist ideology (Ong 1982). The building of academic departments such as Malay studies, Indian studies and Chinese studies was very much in tune with the needs of colonial science fashioned by a set of heuristic devices that begets the colonial knowledge (Shamsul 2001b).

The writings that rose out of social scientific research on Malaysia during the colonial period centred on the relationship between three popular themes: culture, economics and political action. Another popular area of social science inquiry is about multi-ethnic Malaysia, which continues to attract the attention of social scientists, locally and abroad. Its main focus has been on the study of the notion of identity, particularly ethnic identity and ethnic group relations. Yet another mountingly important topic that has piqued Malaysianists from outside and within these countries is related to religion, particularly religious revivalism. Later, many remarkable works on Malaysia, mainly by anthropologists, have posed the questioning of persisting theories about gender identity (Shamsul 2001b).

For context, regarding the development of Malaysian studies as a subset of social science in Malaysia, it is worth mentioning that social science in Malaysia was viewed with suspicion by the government, especially in the 1960s to mid-1970s for a litany of reasons. This was because social science students at that time were the most active lobbyists against the government's local and foreign policies. Social science students were often student leaders, and were supported strongly by their lecturers. Both social science lecturers and students doubled up as social activists. The government responded by imposing the Universities and the University Colleges Act 1974, a law intended to reduce the university students and lecturers to subordinate citizens in Malaysia, banning them from becoming committee members of associations, societies and trade unions beyond the university grounds. The act also required that every academic paper written by academic faculty had to be reviewed by their department heads, which thankfully has not been implemented (Shamsul 2001b).

In December 1974, when the biggest student demonstration in Malaysian history happened, about 1,500 students were temporarily detained and a further 100 student leaders and lecturers were detained without trial, some for up to six years. Since then, there has been a concerted effort by the government to purify university social science. However, this effort has had limited success (Shamsul 2001b).

Malaysian social sciences have an institutional history spanning approximately five decades in this country, dating back to the 1970s with the establishment of several new universities and the introduction of new faculties and departments offering various social science disciplines (Abdul Rahman 2007). The 1970s was the significant turning point for the development of Malaysian social sciences, with the establishment of several new universities, including Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) (Rahimah 2005), and also the Malaysian Economic Association based at the Faculty of Economics and Administration, Universiti Malaya (Shamsul 2001b). Other universities included Universiti Sains Malaysia in 1969, Universiti

Putra Malaysia (formerly Universiti Pertanian Malaysia) in 1971, and Universiti Utara Malaysia, which also contributed to the development of new disciplines in social sciences (Hairi 1995; Zainal 1995).

In 1977, as a result of the effort of a collective of concerned university lecturers, a collective committee was set up to organise the establishment of a Malaysian Social Science Association (MSSA). This was the direct outcome of the first-ever conference on the state of social science in Malaysia organised by the Department of Anthropology and Sociology, UKM, in 1974. MSSA managed to attract some 300 members, academics and non-academics (Shamsul 2001b).

THE ETYMOLOGY AND EVOLUTION OF THE TERM *RAKYAT*

Thus, to compare and contrast the differing dominant perspectives in Malaysian Studies, we need to provide an explanation of Abdul Rahman Embong's discourse on the concept of *rakyat*. For Abdul Rahman (2018), who has written extensively and longitudinally on this topic, the gist of *rakyat* is an idea that has the potential to replace the overarchingly used concepts of ethnicity and social class, which he terms as social constructs. For him, *rakyat* is a "non-ethnic, inclusive, and class-based paradigm that is sensitive to the complexity of the mediation between ethnic consciousness and cross-ethnic class solidarity" (Abdul Rahman 2018). He derives this *rakyat* ontologically from a historical and retrospective based analysis, which he notes consist of four main events:

1. Post-war agenda of crafting the state and envisioning the nation, 1946–1948;
2. Social engineering under the New Economic Policy and nation building, 1969–1971;
3. Envisioning a multiethnic developed nation through Vision 2020 and *Bangsa Malaysia*; and
4. Post-2008 transition trap: reining in ethno-nationalist resurgence and moving towards a new Malaysia (Abdul Rahman 2018).

Hence, this is also why we use the timeline-based approach in Tables 1 and 2 which aligns with the events mentioned by Abdul Rahman (2018) in his analysis.

Abdul Rahman (2018) further elaborates that in the pre-colonial period in Malaya, "the *rakyat* [were] the people who were subjects of the ruler". He emphasises that historically, during the *kerajaan* period, the *rakyat* was an egalitarian concept,

because "the term *rakyat*—although the latter were relegated as the subject class—did not have racial or communal overtones because the *rakyat*, irrespective of their racial or ethnic origin, were subjects of a ruler" (Abdul Rahman 2014; 2018). He adds, the term then evolved, performing as a class for itself, wherein "at the height of the anticolonial struggle for independence after World War II, the term *rakyat* became a principal organising concept" (Abdul Rahman 2018). For him, this was thus more promising than the bidimensional or multidimensional variant of social stratification analysis, such as the twin constructs of ethnicity and class analysis, which he claims are omnipresent conceptual tools and paradigms in Malaysian studies among Malaysian scholars and Malaysianists (Abdul Rahman 2018), a view not without supporters, such as Hoffstaedter (2011) who observed that in Malaysia, identities retain a foundation of a primordial and essentialist origin.

In discussing the origins of the word here, *rakyat*, we have to digress. The term *rakyat* (تيعر) is defined by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (2017) as "*seluruh penduduk sesebuah negara (sebagai syarat mendirikan sesuatu pemerintahan*)", or "all the citizens of a nation-state (as a requirement to establish a rule)". It is a noun synonymous with citizen (*warganegara*), employee (*pekerja*), public (*orang kebanyakan*), and army (*bala tentera*) (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka 2017).

In the English version of Kamus Dewan, namely Kamus Inggeris-Melayu Dewan, the term *rakyat* is used in the context of (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka 2017):

1. A noun, "government", where the example given is "the act of governing, rule, *Kerajaan*";
2. A noun, "people", where the example given is "the voice of the ~, *suara rakyat*";
3. A noun, "Malaysian", where the example given is "/*orang, rakyat*";
4. A noun, "country", where the example given is "the population of a country, *rakyat/negeri, negara/*";
5. As an adjective, "folk", where the example given is "culture, *kebudayaan rakyat*";
6. As an adjective "public", where the example given is "concerning people in general*, awam, rakyat, (orang) ramai*"; and
7. As an adjective "national", where the example given is "*warganegara, rakyat*".

We can observe from here that the usage of *rakyat* has its roots in a collective of individuals, although this collective could extend from an organic one to an officially-defined one. Organic interpretations would include people, folk and public; while official ones would include government, Malaysian, national and country, though in some circumstances these too could be subjective.

According to Wiktionary.org (2024), the plural of *rakyat* is *rakyat*s. The singular form refers to an ordinary citizen, while the plural form refers to the people or citizens of a country, as a collective. Alternative forms of *rakyat* include *ra'jat* and *rakjat*. The etymology of the term originates from *ra'yat* in classical Malay, meaning people, and from *raʿiyya* (رَعِيَّة) in Arabic. As a noun, the term is used in the following ways: *Rakyat* (first-person possessive *rakyat*ku, second-person possessive *rakyat*mu, third-person possessive *rakyat*nya).

It is used in the following contexts:

1. Citizen, subject
2. People, populace
3. (Archaic) troop (synonym: *pasukan*)
4. (Archaic) subordinate (synonyms: *anak buah, bawahan*)

These examples of usage too, imply the possibility of both individualistic/ subjective usage as well as authority-defined usage, especially in the case of "troop" and "subordinate", and these are in fact its more archaic variants.

Drawing from these, perhaps, Abdul Rahman (2014) has decided to introduce the *rakyat* paradigm from the "bottom-up", as a means of realising Malaysia's dream of social cohesion. He also commits to discussing its viability as a paradigm for the present and the future. In the next section, we outline several of Abdul Rahman's key points, from a critical reading of his book chapter, "Knowledge construction, the rakyat paradigm, and Malaysia's social cohesion", and we debate the suitability of these arguments using our own, especially from the collected and curated works of Shamsul Amri Baharuddin.

COMPARING THE *RAKYAT* PARADIGM TO THE ETHNICITY, CLASS, CULTURE AND/OR IDENTITY PARADIGM

Abdul Rahman (2014) made the following arguments in his book chapter "Knowledge construction, the rakyat paradigm, and Malaysia's social cohesion", in *Transforming Malaysia: Dominant and Competing Paradigms*, edited by Anthony Milner, Abdul Rahman Embong and Tham Siew Yean. We counter these arguments with the following observations in Table 3.

Table 3: Abdul Rahman Embong's arguments about the *rakyat* paradigm, and our responses

Abdul Rahman (2014)	Our counter-arguments
1. *Rakyat* concept did not have racial/ communal overtones.	1. Was the *rakyat* a whole collective (lumpenproletariat), or just a dimension?
2. During the feudal era, *rakyat* was always the subject class, subservient to the ruler, occupying lowest rung in the hierarchy.	2. So, the *rakya*t was once emancipated?
3. The imagined nation had to be located within a people.	3. Would this class consciousness also be a product of epistemological colonisation?
4. *Daulat* also underwent a transformation from *raja* to *rakyat* (sovereignty of the people).	4. Many nation-states without a monarchy also contain social stratification. What about innate differences within individuals?
5. The issue of *kerajaan* was settled by having a constitutional monarchy.	5. If we are following the British system, then we are epistemologically colonised.
6. Cites the Westminster model of parliamentary democracy.	6. If we are following the British system, then we are epistemologically colonised.
7. Offers the *rakyat* paradigm as a discourse and as an analytical framework.	7. We have now evolved to industrial society, and though the knowledge of feudal social structure through folklore is useful, it may be incompatible today.

Shamsul (1996b) declared that the analysis of identity as he has come to embrace and apply, both in breadth and depth, poses four critical challenges. In his own words, he explains the following:

> 1. The premiere challenge is a conceptual challenge of perceiving identity, either in a static manner, meaning identity is perceived as something given, ready-made, hence taken-for-granted, or in a dynamic manner, meaning identity is viewed as a flexible phenomenon, that is, being redefined, reconstructed, reconstituted and altered, hence problematised (Shamsul 1996b, 476).

2. The second most pressing challenge is about the hugely complex and time-consuming task of describing and explaining the emergence, consolidation and change of identity or identities over time (Shamsul 1996b, 476).

3. Thirdly, is the analytical challenge posed by the continuous re-thinking in social theory within which academic analysis and intellectual discourse on themes such as identity are located, thus engendering a kind of theoretical identity problem—functionalist, structuralist, post-structuralist? (Shamsul 1996b, 476).

4. Lastly, the fourth challenge would be the authorial challenge, one that the author-scholar author-politician's writing or talking identity has to confront usually in the form of objectivity versus subjectivity struggle, especially if she/he is part of the object of study or is in sympathy with any party involved politically in an identity struggle (Shamsul 1996b, 476).

Shamsul (1996b, 477–478) further explains that, like most social phenomenon, identity formation occurs within what he would call a double social reality context:

1. Firstly the authority-defined social reality, one which is authoritatively defined by people who are part of the dominant power structure; and,

2. Secondly the everyday-defined social reality, which is the daily lived experience of the people.

Woven and embedded in the intertwining of these two social phenomena is social power, expressed in many shapes like a majority-minority discourse, and state-society contestation. The conversation in the authority-defined situation is not the same, but has always been coloured by aggressive and aggravating dialogues on a wide spectrum of themes and issues, both large and small including several social groups each indicating a unique hold in the stake. In an everyday-defined situation, the dialogue is usually individualised, disjointed, and strongly personal, held mostly verbally.

From this explanation, there are two levels of categorisation occurring simultaneously. Hence, this is also where we intend to raise some queries regarding Abdul Rahman Embong's suggestion of introducing and implementing a *rakyat* paradigm. For at which level should the concept of *rakyat*, as we have discussed above, fit in? We have clearly articulated the existence of the two levels at which social phenomenon operate, that is, briefly, at the official and unofficial levels, thus, at which of these levels would the *rakyat* paradigm originate to

unite the minds and the actions of the general public? In doing so, are we not running the risk of enforcing assimilation on individuals, and further so, who sets the parameters of what is exemplary? According to Lopez (2001), even then, the British and the Melayu traditions in colonial Malaya had different worldviews, largely unconscious paradigmatic assumptions causing them to view and value the same phenomena in radically different ways.

In addition, it is clear that Abdul Rahman acknowledges the effects of British colonisation upon the Malaysian worldview (on top of its material and human resources). Yet, in introducing an emancipatory outlook on how the *rakyat* was once dominated by authority figures and thus needing to free themselves from this yoke, in tandem with nationalism, Abdul Rahman is essentially hearkening back to an ideology introduced by none other than Western powers such as the British themselves. Once this *rakyat* utopia is achieved (if it does hypothetically), however, who and how will society be organised and administered? Will there not be yet another authority who will arise to dominate, in the interests of the many, and will the same situation not occur (in the way Abdul Rahman views it as an issue)?

To interrogate this particular point, one needs to delve into the definitions of race and ethnicity employed by Abdul Rahman, which he appears to have derived from Milner (1995). In turn, Milner recreates the understanding of concepts of race and ethnicity in the colonial sense, as introduced by the British administrator-scholars who served as officers during the colonial period in Malaya. These would include definitions and categorisations by the British merchant-scholar Stamford Raffles, and administrator-scholars Richard James Wilkinson and Richard Olaf Winstedt. Raffles is well-known for his ontological contribution to developing Malay colonial knowledge, by having introduced the concepts of the Malay race, the Malay world, and the Malay language. Raffles thus set up an epistemology for Malay colonial knowledge (after Cohn 1996) based upon European classificatory schema, as well as Enlightenment and Romanticist social theory.

To elaborate further, there are two social constructs that we are dealing with here, namely the paradigm of colonial knowledge, and the narrative of colonial discourse. Couched within the former is the latter. Colonial knowledge is the epistemological basis of the classificatory schema, introduced by the British and inspired by Enlightenment and Romanticist thought. Nestled within this is the narrative of colonial discourse, which is a form of discourse combining writings literary and academic, and other forms of popular culture. Race and ethnicity categories in Malaysia are hence shaped by the colonial knowledge paradigm mentioned above (think Malay, Chinese, Indian and others); while its corresponding narratives are

seen in mass media such as television programmes, movies, literary and academic books, as well as cultural platforms such as music, which fall under the aegis of colonial discourse. In time, these social constructs, especially their literary component, become naturalised and embedded within decolonised societies. These observations had been made already by Shamsul (1999) in his paper "Colonial knowledge and the construction of Malay and Malayness: Exploring the literary component".

Finally, the application of a concept in its archaic sense, would likely not be compatible with the social changes industrialisation and post-industrialisation have brought us. Given the division of labour and specialisation in society, the shift from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft* (or mechanical solidarity to organic solidarity), could the common public still see themselves as one single unit? Thus, a concept which worked fully well in a pre-industrial era might have well been suitable for its epoch, but not for the present day. In an era where the Internet of Things and the metaverse are integrating human activity and phenomenology in the cloud, can all individuals be expected to aim for the same goals and lead the same lives? As a social experiment, such a project has historically seen failure universally, whenever such attempts to impose regimental behaviour on an entire citizenship has been attempted.

CONCLUSION

The significant finding of this study is that based on our arguments, a more multidimensional paradigm for analysing Malaysian society is needed, rather than a one-size-fits all paradigm, if only to accommodate an understanding of diversity in the context of Malaysian studies.

We reiterate some of the points made by Shamsul in his previous works on "Ethnicity, class, culture, and identity". In charting the forms of social stratification within the corpus of Malaysian Studies, he outlines four major dimensions, namely the titular categories. In his review of the literature, he notes that as a paradigm, social class is framed within an ethnic approach, and often ignores social construction. This paradigm is also ironically made possible by the epistemological colonisation by the British.

Next, the identity paradigm is coloured by an understanding of *Bangsa Malaysia* as

a nation-of-intent. This perspective takes an everyday-defined realities approach, which examined the colonial social construction, particularly of categories like "Malayness" and "Chineseness", and deconstructed these categories.

The cultural paradigm meanwhile, featured a breakaway from ethnic and social class paradigms. Its main debate was over the National Cultural Policy. It revolved around a deconstruction of the ethnicity, culture and politics perspective, as well as the globalisation and culture perspective.

Simultaneously, there were other paradigms co-existing, such as gender, where the pertinent issues included public advocacy on women's rights, and the broader issue of gender identity such as questions of femininity/masculinity. This perspective also elucidated cultural and political processes in the constitution.

This reiteration demonstrates some of the pressing issues capable of dividing people, even if they were to be given the opportunity to embrace a *rakyat* paradigm, which implies greater individual freedom and egalitarianism. However, there is a worry that doing this would be akin to the trust-based sandwich retail model, where an unknown individual leaves sandwiches in a basket in an office/university building, and potential customers are trusted to leave the accurate payment in the basket after consuming the deserving amount he/she has paid for. It also assumes no one else (or nothing else) decides to pickpocket the money left behind, nor would the sandwiches get contaminated (or *tapau*-ed *en masse*). In an office or university near a preserved jungle, there are even more variables to consider, as its community may also consist of wildlife and more ethereal entities. Experience reveals that even vending machines and rental bikes get vandalised but we digress.

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NOTE

1. We note that the use of the term lumpenproletariat has a long and convoluted history from the time of Marx and Engels, and that it was originally taken to refer to the abject precariat who held no political agency nor ambition, including but not limited to societal rejects; however, it has since been redefined to suggest people who may be socially excluded against their will. Barrow (2020) explains

that in their earlier writings, Marx and Engels heralded the proletariat as a revolutionary class in disagreeing with two other writers, Stirnin and Bakunin, who considered the lumpenproletariat as such, too. Marx and Engels, however, doubted the sincerity of the lumpenproletariat's struggle, assigning to them a more self-interested motive than the supposedly utilitarianist morality of the proletariat's struggle. However, the point made by Barrow (2020) is that despite arguments that relegate the lumpenproletariat to the "dustbin of history", they show up again and again as a sociological and political reality that had to be confronted multiple times in the historical timeline, e.g., in France between 1848 and 1871.

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