

# Thinking about ‘the Malays’ and ‘Malayness’

Today – even employing a relatively narrow definition of ‘Malay’ – ‘the Malays’ are settled across a wide area. Figures are often difficult to determine with accuracy, but apart from the 12 million ‘Malays’ in Peninsular Malaysia (with more than 300,000 in Sabah and some 500,000 in Sarawak) (Saw 2007: Ch. 5), the year 2000 census in Indonesia put the total there at 7 million (located mainly in the Riau Archipelago, the coastal areas of Sumatra and Kalimantan); in Singapore there are more than half a million; and in Brunei a quarter of a million. There are 1.3 million in southern Thailand (according to an *International Herald Tribune* report of 26 February 2007); and then further afield some 70,000 in Sri Lanka and perhaps 180,000 in the ‘Cape Malay’ community of South Africa. Only in Malaysia and Brunei are ‘the Malays’ the majority community.

## Who are ‘the Malays’?

In the very act of attempting a survey such as this from public documents, the question begins to emerge of just who should be described as ‘Malay’. It is a question that in one form or another will concern us throughout this book, and puzzling about it has eventually led me to write about ‘Malayness’ rather than ‘the Malays’. By one classification – proposed by certain ‘Malay’ activists and not accepted by the majority of scholars – virtually the whole population of Indonesia (at least to the western part of Papua) and most of the people of the Philippines can be defined as ‘Malay’: that would give a total of some 350 million in all. The Marinos of Madagascar are also occasionally added; and there are the Chams of Cambodia and Vietnam. Confronted with this list, the scholarly response tends to urge that

we think not of 'Malays' but of 'Austronesian-speaking peoples', and note that the Malay language is only one of some 1,000 languages in the entire Austronesian language family (Bellwood 2004: 25).

On what basis, however, should we enlarge or reduce the category 'Malay'? Do we simply cite the scholarly consensus view? Or ought we to include all those people who claim to be 'Malay'? One problem with this is that people sometimes change their minds. In certain periods, for instance, the idea of being 'Malay' has had currency in the Philippines: in the early 1960s, President Macapagal urged the concept of Maphilindo – an association of three states (the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaya) that would be a "confederation of nations of Malay origin", bound together "by ties of race and culture" (Ismail Hussein 1990: 69). Today these nations are joined in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), but the grouping has no explicit 'Malay' basis, and even in Indonesia the vast majority of people would not consider being 'Malay' to be a primary focus of identity and association. We will see that at the local level – even in Malaysia – certain people claim 'Malay' identity in one situation and Javanese, Indian or Arab identity in another.

Then there are people who appear to possess very 'Malay-like' characteristics but do not call themselves 'Malay'. In Cambodia one group of Muslims traces its origins to Patani (now South Thailand), Trengganu and Kelantan (both now in Peninsular Malaysia) and Sumatra (Indonesia) – all widely acknowledged to be 'Malay' centres – and are familiar with Malay writings in the Jawi (Arabic-based) script. These people, however, generally seem to refer to themselves as (and are called) 'Chvea', not 'Malay' (Collins n.d.: 56; Mohamad Zain 2001: 2). In Sabah in northern Borneo, people who would have called themselves 'Malay' over many years if they had lived in Sarawak (to the west) identify themselves as 'Bajau', 'Brunei' or 'Suluk'.

In Malaysia, where 'Malays' have achieved political dominance, 'Malay' is defined in the Constitution. A 'Malay' is said to be someone who (in addition to fulfilling certain residential requirements) "professes the Muslim religion, habitually speaks the Malay language, (and) conforms to Malay custom" (Siddique 1981: 77). Consider first the Islamic requirement: this certainly removes the vast majority of Filipinos – some of whom continue to express a strong 'Malay' consciousness (Salazar 1998) – who are of course Christian. But it is also true that certain Singapore 'Malays' – including Christian Batak from Sumatra – are not Muslim. Adherence to Islam has not been a criterion for being 'Malay' in the Singapore census process (Rahim 1998: 81). Furthermore, even in Malaysia the term 'Malay' has been used by 'Malay' leaders over the last few decades in ways that

suggest the possibility of non-Muslims being included. In the years leading up to independence (1957), one proposal was to allow Chinese and Indians to join the *bangsa Melayu* (the 'Malay race' or 'community') even without conversion to Islam (Ariffin 1993: 195–196, 202). In 1991 a former Malaysian foreign minister from the governing party (UMNO, the United Malays National Organization) proposed that wedding the definition of 'Malay' to Islam made it too narrow (Rahim 1998: 19). In some areas in eastern Indonesia the phrase 'masuk Melayu' (or 'enter Malaydom') can actually mean to become Christian (Reid 2001: 306).

As to the Malay-language qualification: this would necessarily exclude most of the 'Cape Malay' community of South Africa (who tend to use Afrikaans or English); and the Sri Lanka 'Malays' generally speak Sinhala. In Thailand, there are thousands of Muslims who consider themselves to be 'Malay' but speak Central Thai (Collins 2001: 395). On the Peninsula, according to the definitions of 'Malay' in some of the land legislation introduced in the colonial period, there was also no need to speak Malay (Wong 1975: 512–515). A new issue regarding language which has arisen in Malaysia in recent years arises from the growth in importance of English. The warning has been issued that an increasing number of 'Malays' are "losing their ability to speak the Malay language (as English becomes their working language)" (Hooker 2004: 158–159).

On the other hand, speaking Malay definitely does not imply in itself that a person identifies as a 'Malay'. Some people of Javanese background on the Peninsula who now habitually speak the Malay language call themselves 'Javanese'; others call themselves 'Malay'. The 'Javanese' of the Medan region in northeast Sumatra – people who certainly speak Malay in the form of Bahasa Indonesia (the Malay-based Indonesian national language) – by no means see themselves as 'Malay', and are viewed by the 'Malays' of that region as having been formidable rivals. On the Malay Peninsula, Temuan and Jakun aboriginal groups speak Malay as their home language but do not claim a 'Malay' identity (Collins 2001: 395).

The lack of fit between language use and self-description needs particular emphasis for the three or four centuries before colonial rule. In the Archipelago world of sultanates – what Europeans were to call the 'Indian Archipelago' or 'Malay Archipelago' – the Malay language was described by Europeans as a *lingua franca* and a "language of the learned" comparable with Latin or French in Europe. One writer of the late seventeenth century insisted that it was also used beyond the Archipelago "from the flow of the Indus, up to China and Japan" (Sweeney 1987: 47). According to the early eighteenth-century Dutch scholar Valentijn, however, the language was called not 'Malay' but 'Jawi', in its elite form, and 'Kacukan'

(mixed language) or 'Pasara' (market language) when describing the day-to-day communication among commoners (48). Another descriptive term was 'the language of below the wind' (that is, the language of the countries which one could sail to from the west when the monsoon was blowing eastwards) (50; O'Kane 1972: 4). Amin Sweeney, who has analysed carefully these European commentaries, has criticized modern scholars who take for granted that 'Malays' held a "monopoly on the Malay language", any more than Romans did so over Latin. "Malay literature", he insists, should not be seen as the "exclusive domain" of "ethnic Malays" (46, 51–52; Roolvink 1975: 13–14).

With respect to the Malaysia constitution's mention of 'Malay custom', this is frequently portrayed as integral to 'being Malay'. Custom or *adat* has been described, for instance, as "the collective mind of the Malay peoples" (Zainal Kling 1989/1990: 115; 1990: 46). But there seem to be different levels of custom, and different contents. A village has sometimes been described as being "united by a 'secret code', that of *adat* or custom" (Wilder 1982: 115), and it is said that every village "has its own' accent, custom, personality and history" (117). The content of *adat* may also change over time (Sharifah Zaleha 2000).

The issue of descent is not raised in the Malaysian constitution, but in other documentation from Malaysia there is confusion here as well. According to legislation in the state of Kedah, for instance, a person of Arab descent can be considered a 'Malay', but this is not the case in Johor (Wong 1975: 512–513). In the Cocos-Keeling Islands (now part of Australia), the majority of the members of the 'Malay' community appear to originate from Java, as seems to be the case with the Sri Lanka 'Malays'. In the case of South Africa, one account suggests that there are more people in the 'Cape Malay' community with an Indian than an Archipelago background (Muhammad Haron 2001: 2–3).

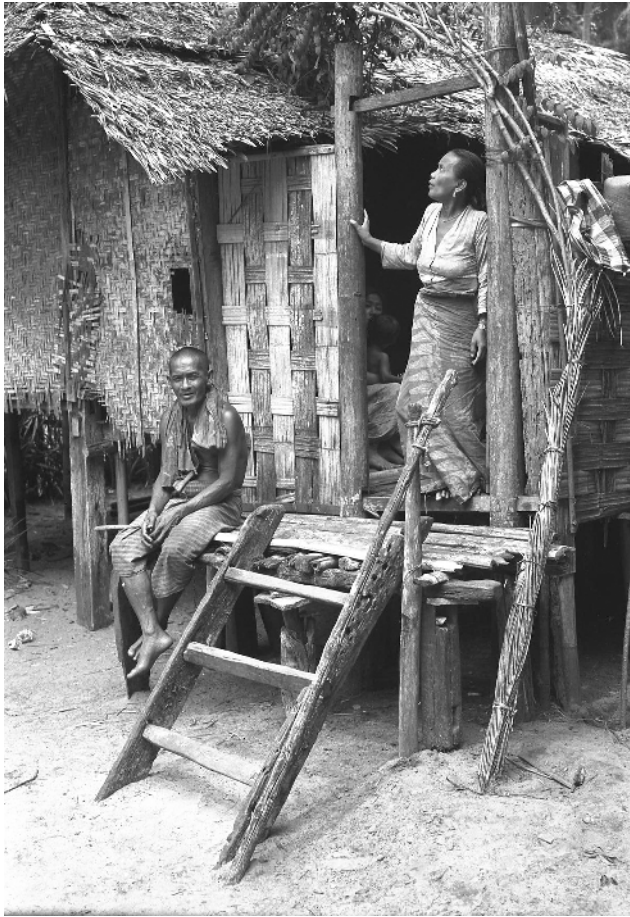
Deciding just what is entailed in being 'Malay', and determining who should be included in that category, are questions of special concern for those people who have in recent decades been fostering an international 'Malay' movement. Prominent among these has been Ismail Hussein (the President of the Federation of the Association of National Writers in Malaysia), who regrets that the rise of nation states has led to what he sees as the "disintegration of the unity of an earlier era" (1990: 73). The promotion of a 'Malay World' ('Dunia Melayu') ethos, supported particularly by the nation state of Malaysia, has involved holding international cultural and networking conferences, and the establishing of an 'International Malay Secretariat'. But the scope of the 'Malay World' has remained somewhat vague. For instance, although Ismail Hussein writes powerfully of the

“unique individuality” and underlying unity of this “world”, he himself is frank in puzzling over what precisely are its constituent elements. At times he would appear to consider the Malay language the fundamental element of unity; at other points he refers expansively not just to the Philippines but also to Hawai’i, where in 1879 the Parliament discussed the prospects of uniting the ‘Malay-Polynesian’ peoples – a proposal Ismail presents as illustrative of “a cognizance of roots and primordial foundations” that transcends both national and religious boundaries (1990: 57). Such a vision of the ‘Malay’ – and it is only one of many visions developed by proponents of the ‘Dunia Melayu’ movement – clearly goes far beyond the definition in the Malaysian constitution.

## A Mainstream?

Despite this plurality of understandings, it is probably correct to say that at least among scholars a degree of consensus has emerged. Most academic discussion of ‘the Malays’ today would conform with the sociologist Geoffrey Benjamin’s description of the ‘Malay World’ as encompassing at least “Isthmian Thailand, Peninsular Malaysia, Singapore, the central east-coast parts of Sumatra, and much of coastal northern, western and southern Borneo, Brunei, parts of Malaysian Sarawak, and parts of Indonesian Kalimantan” (Benjamin 2006: 1). People in other places would certainly be considered for admission, and there would also be questions about some of the ‘Malays’ in Benjamin’s list of regions. But members of this particular ‘Malay World’ – speaking Malay as a first language and professing Islam – would be widely accepted as ‘Malay’ and, more critically, would probably today think of themselves as being ‘Malay’.

Considering just the ‘consensus’ viewpoint, therefore, how close have we come to defining this narrower grouping of ‘Malays’? It is clear from our discussion so far that this is a difficult issue. During the colonial period, race-minded, Peninsula-based colonial administrators invested effort in formulating a specific ‘Malay’ character. Early in the nineteenth century, Governor Raffles noted that ‘Malays’ led a “generally wandering and predatory life” that induced them “to follow the fortunes of a favourite chief” (1992/1830: 235). The ‘Malay’, he said, was also “indolent” and “feelingly alive to insult” (236). Later in the century, Sir Frank Swettenham described what he sometimes called “the Real Malay” as “a brown man, rather short of stature, thick set and strong, capable of great endurance”. The “leading characteristic of the Malay of every class”, he said, was “a disinclination to work”. He was in addition very “loyal”, guided more by the head than



**Figure 1** The domestic doorstep in a 1960s Kelantan village, from Rosemary Firth, *Housekeeping among the Malay Peasants* (London: Athlone Press, 1966). Courtesy of London School of Economics Library.

the heart, and “extraordinarily sensitive in regard to any real or fancied insult” (1907: 134–143; 1901). Few write today with such analytic certainty. But there is nevertheless a post-colonial, as well as a colonial, body of ‘Malay studies’ knowledge which helps to give substance to the ‘Malay World’ or ‘Malay people’.

Let us examine first a formulation of ‘Malay studies’ designed for a general audience, rather than an academic one – a so-called “culture pack” published in Singapore. With the title ‘Gateway to Malay Culture’, and an

introduction written by the President of the Central Council of Malay Cultural Organizations of Singapore, this book includes information about the history, language, personal names, religion, customs (especially those related to weddings and other life-cycle rituals, including circumcision), crafts, music, social etiquette (never touch a 'Malay' child on the head!) and living conditions of 'the Malays'. "Most Malays" – note 'most', not 'all': recall it is a Singapore publication – are said to be Muslim, and they are especially concerned about courtesy and sincerity. In greeting another person, these 'Malays' draw the palm of their hand "to the heart as a gesture of sincerity". 'Malays', according to the culture pack, characteristically live in villages (or "*kampung*"), in wooden houses "built on stilts", arranged in an "open and informal" manner to encourage "friendly social relations" – and surrounded by "coconut trees swaying in the wind". Malay women wear a "sarong kebaya" – a blouse and a pleated sheath of material ("sarong"); and men wear a "baju" (a "loose, long sleeved shirt") over a sarong or trousers. The wavy-bladed dagger – the "keris" – is "the most famous of all ancient Malay weapons". The aspect of a 'Malay' wedding that is highlighted in the book is the "bersanding", where the couple sit together on a dais, dressed in royal attire, seemingly enthroned (Asiapac 2004).

The *Gateway to Malay Culture* is deliberate in conveying stereotypes. The language of modern social science is very different – and yet even here there are gestures to the 'Malay' essences presented in the culture pack. A classic study of 'the Malays' of Singapore – a study which admits the extremely heterodox character of that community and the mix of urban and rural life styles – reports that "ideally they liked to live in a wooden house built on stilts, with a verandah, a front room for receiving guests, one or two bedrooms and a kitchen" (Djamour 1959: 7). "The Malay", observed Rosemary Firth in a book written at the end of the colonial period (and one still rewarding to read), "is on the whole a friendly and talkative person, and he is proud" (1966: 6). William Wilder recorded that Kampong Kuala Bera in the state of Pahang (on the Peninsula) had "retained many customs and other features of the classical Malay village" (1982: 24). Thomas Fraser described Rusembilan, his research site in southern Thailand, as "culturally, linguistically, and racially a Malay village" (1960: 7). David Banks gave his book about Sik, in a hill district in Kedah, the title *Malay Kinship* (1983). Such expressions as 'Malay proper', 'authentic Malay culture', 'authentic Malays', 'ordinary Malays' and 'pure Malay' are also often used in the accounts of researchers in a way that can seem to allude to some core or typical 'Malay' community. In a study of a community in Kelantan in the 1970s, Manning Nash described the people of his district as not only "Malay in population" but also "Malay in culture and

social organization" (Nash 1974: 7). I have myself written about "Malay political culture", historically as well as in contemporary times (Milner 1982, 2002). Even in a reflective, recent book by Joel Kahn (*Other Malays*, 2006) – a book intended, as the title suggests, to draw attention to 'Malays' who do not fit the culture-pack stereotypes – there is reference to "mainstream Malays" (xx) and to people being "identifiably Malay" (119). It is understandable that he deploys these phrases: Kahn is concerned to delineate a group in Malaysia that tends not to speak Malay as a first language, is made up largely of immigrants to the Peninsula, is often engaged in urban, commercial pursuits (rather than rural ones), is attracted to reformist Islam and is likely to be highly mobile rather than attached to a particular place and ruler. In portraying such 'others', there would certainly seem to be explanatory – but not necessarily accurate – advantage in juxtaposing them with a mainstream core.

Social scientists' descriptions of these 'Malays proper' often refer to the type of cultural elements singled out in the Singapore culture pack. Apart from the *kampung* lifestyle, references are made to 'shadow plays', *makyong* (traditional theatre), *joget* dancing, séances and the whole shaman (*bomoh*) culture that is said to relate to a cultural substratum – a body of knowledge underlying the Islamic religious practices and beliefs which 'Malays' are said to have gradually adopted over five or six centuries. Certain structural features tend to be identified as characterizing 'Malay' society. The accounts of Japanese scholars are often all the sharper here because of the way they explicitly or implicitly draw contrasts with so-called 'traditional' Japanese society. Descent among 'the Malays', it is pointed out, is reckoned bilaterally – through both mother and father; unlike the Japan case, 'the Malays' "lack the concept of tracing ancestry through a selected line" (Kuchiba 1974: xiii), and seldom remember the names of great-grandfathers. Apart from the potential for such a bilateral system to enhance female roles, there is no basis for establishing ancestral graves, and less sense of "duty and obligation" among 'Malays' than, for instance, Japanese. 'Malays' are less "restrained in fixed relationships" (xviii; Maeda 1975).

Scholars have made warnings, however, about overstressing the 'looseness' of 'Malay' society. Certain forces operated to promote unity, especially when 'Malays' confront outsiders. For all the diversity of the 'Malays' of Singapore, even in the immediate post-World War II period the community was said to feel "considerable in-group solidarity" as one "discrete section" of the island's multi-ethnic assemblage (Djamour 1959: 22). In the state of Selangor in Peninsular Malaysia, antagonism and ridicule have been vividly described as reinforcing 'Malay' solidarity – as 'Malays' have contrasted their own 'refinement' with what they perceive to be physically unclean



Chinese and “black” and “hairy” Indians (Wilson 1967: 25, 30). In Kelantan too, Chinese immigration has been seen as a key factor stimulating “the bloc notion of ethnicity” (Nash 1974: 143).

In writings on literature and history as well, ‘Malay studies’ have helped to convey the image of a ‘Malay’ community possessing some real coherence. There are histories of ‘Malay literature’, survey studies on the ‘Malay novel’, collections of ‘Malay poetry’ – books written or compiled by foreign specialists or by scholars in Malaysia, Singapore, East Sumatra, Brunei and numerous other centres in the ‘Malay World’. A key text in ‘Malay studies’ is Sir Richard Winstedt’s *A History of Classical Malay Literature* which, as Amin Sweeney has pointed out, portrays ‘Malay literature’ as a “product of a particular ethnic group, a perception of literatures which had become the custom in Romanticist Europe with the ascendancy of the vernaculars and the rise of nationalism”, 1987: 52, 57). By the time Winstedt wrote, Europeans were no longer familiar with the idea of a learned language in which peoples possessing many different mother tongues might communicate. In the field of history, academic and school texts have presented what is conceptualized as the history of the ‘Malay race’ – reaching back many centuries to the empire of Srivijaya (which arose in the 600s, and was led from Palembang, south Sumatra) and the fifteenth-century sultanate of Melaka (on the Peninsula), and claiming the achievements of these kingdoms on behalf of ‘the Malays’ (Milner 2005). The first ‘Malay’-authored history of the ‘Malay World’ was published in 1929 (Abdul Hadi).

These writings themselves – even their mere repetition of the phrases ‘Malay literature’, ‘Malay history’, ‘Malay culture’ and so forth – have strengthened the case for speaking of ‘the Malays’. The closer one looks, it is my impression that this corpus is not merely to be understood in scholarly terms. It is not limited to description and analysis, but plays what might be perceived as an ideological role. Sometimes intentionally, sometimes not, it is as much about constituting as studying ‘the Malays’. This observation – which I will develop in later chapters – does not, it should be said, make ‘Malay studies’ any less interesting.

## The Fact of Diversity

Despite the impression communicated by much of the work in ‘Malay studies’, coherence is not in fact a hallmark of ‘Malay’ communities and historical heritage, even when one focuses only on the narrower Benjamin formulation of a ‘Malay’ sphere. There are problems with taking for granted

the phrase 'the Malays' – even in this more limited sense – and then projecting a 'Malay' race or ethnicity back into the past, allowing the narration of a long communal history. Some have suggested the existence of a 'Malay homeland'. Borneo and south Sumatra have both been identified (Collins 2001: 385; Andaya 2001: 318). But people who call themselves 'Malay' often deny any sense of being a biological grouping, and there is plenty of evidence that their communities tend to be open to new recruits from widely varying backgrounds. The category 'Malay' brings together many peoples, many histories. The "majority of Malays", so Geoffrey Benjamin has observed, "see themselves or their ancestors as having once been something else" (2002: 50). It is clear that previously non-Muslim peoples in Borneo (today often referred to collectively as 'Dayak') and Bataks in Sumatra have 'become Malay', as have Orang Asli (Aborigines) on the Peninsula – but so have Muslim Bugis (from Sulawesi in eastern Indonesia), Arabs, Indians and Chinese. What began to be called 'Malayization' is a theme we will examine in this book – a theme that helps us to get a better understanding of what 'being Malay' might entail.

Given these varied origins, it is not surprising that the character of 'Malay' communities can differ substantially from one place to another – even among the 'Malays proper'. The 'Malays' of Sarawak or Kelantan, for instance, are likely themselves to point to the way they differ from those of Johor (at the south of the Peninsula). Some reports note that the 'Malays' of the western Peninsula see those in the east as more 'traditional'. Accents can vary dramatically – many 'Malays' find it difficult to understand the people of Patani (South Thailand); and there is a distinct form of Malay in East Sumatra. Although the phrase 'Malay custom' (*adat*) is often mentioned, even between villages located in one region, there are different customs, and the people comment on these differences. The special sense of a Kelantan *adat* is often referred to in Kelantan – and indeed one finds an insider/outsider distinction in attitudes to customs in many other regions of the 'Malay World'. To quote Mohamed Aris Othman (1977: 230), "the region one comes from with its customs and cultural paraphernalia can serve as a basis of identity" – with the possibility of great diversity.

Although the word 'Malay' is used across a wide geographical region, it is clear then that we cannot assume it conveys the same meaning. An important further example of this – one to which we will give attention – is the contrast between the idea of 'Malay' in Indonesia (for instance, in the north-east Sumatran or Riau regions) and on the Peninsula. The topic is difficult, but in Indonesia 'Malay' is categorized in a way that makes it a less significant form of community than it is in Malaysia. 'Malays' form a *suku* or *suku bangsa* (terms for ethnicity) in Indonesia, but the more potent term *bangsa*

(usually 'race' or 'people') is used in Malaysia. In Indonesia the whole 'Indonesian people' are referred to as a *bangsa* (the 'Bangsa Indonesia') (Kipp 1996: 65). What is more, to demonstrate loyalty to the *suku* has been seen as divisive in Indonesia. It is an expression of *sukuisme* or tribalism – something perceived as disloyalty, though perhaps less so in the period since the fall of President Suharto in 1998. In other ways too, 'Malay' tends to convey different things in Indonesia. For instance, in northeast Sumatra – a region characterized in the past by a cluster of small sultanates, a situation not unlike that on the Peninsula – 'Malay' developed as an identity and a consciousness far less strongly in the colonial period than it did on the Peninsula; it was also far less inclusive, and has remained so in the decades since the region was incorporated in the modern Indonesian state.

This division and groupism makes it difficult to speak of a 'Malay history'. When we recall Srivijaya, Melaka and other kingdoms – all claimed today as part of the heritage of 'the Malays' – several further questions need to be asked. First, although such kingdoms of the past experienced triumphs, can these automatically be formulated as achievements on behalf of a race or an ethnicity? Monarchy and race (or ethnicity, or nation) are different phenomena; it might be asked how far the people of these early kingdoms possessed a racial or ethnic consciousness? Did the ancestors of people who think of themselves now as 'Malays' also define themselves in that way, or even in what we might call ethnic terms? Many (as we have noted) were of Bugis, Javanese, Indian, Arab and other (including Dayak, Batak and Orang Asli) backgrounds; but we might also ask the question of natives of Melaka or Johor, places claimed today to be central to the 'Malay' narrative. We need to assess which peoples' pasts can be said to constitute 'Malay history'. How possible is it to project the idea of a 'Malay people' back into the past?

## Could 'Malay' be a Relatively Novel Concept?

Some historical analyses certainly assume the presence of such an ethnic consciousness in these historical situations. A recent and stimulating overview essay by Leonard Andaya, for instance, observes that a "Melayu ethnicity was being developed along the Straits of Melaka beginning perhaps as early as the seventh century" (2001: 316). The concept became so powerful, he suggests, that by the fifteenth century the Melaka sultanate promoted itself "as the new centre of the Melayu" (327). In the seventeenth century, according to Andaya, the sultanates of Johor and Aceh both claimed "Melayu leadership" (328; Andaya 2001a: 86, 102). In this formulation it is therefore being conveyed that 'Melayu' was something worth fighting for;

but I am not sure to what extent it was in fact a powerful concept at the time. Can we be sure that people were driven by allegiance to 'Malay' ethnicity rather than, for instance, loyalty to a particular ruler, or some other local attachment? There is strong evidence that the declaration 'Hidup Melayu' (Long Live the Malays) became a powerful rallying cry on the Malay Peninsula during the late 1940s (Ariffin 1993: 103), but can we read such sentiments back into time?

Similarly, Ismail Hussein, in one of the seminal essays in the field of 'Malay studies', has referred to the period from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries as "the golden age of Malay consciousness" (1990: 72). This period, with its illustrious courts, renowned entrepôts, literary and religious writings, musical performances, lavish textiles and so forth, does have claims to being a golden age. But was it a golden age of 'Malayness'? Ismail himself recognizes that he is making a retrospective claim. He has warned us that in the pre-colonial period, "the term 'Malay' was seldom used", and "Malay awareness" is a feeling that "perhaps never existed" at that time (58). The term 'Malay' was undoubtedly employed in a broad way by European observers after the sixteenth century and some historians have concluded that this reflects the way people identified themselves in those centuries (Reid 2001; Sutherland 2001). It is striking, however, that even in the late eighteenth century, William Marsden – who spent many years at a British post on the west coast of Sumatra and later became the English authority on that island – noted that in all the letters from "Malay" states that he received in his official capacity, the writers "very rarely" referred to themselves as "Malay" (1930: ix).

In so-called 'classical Malay literature', it might be asked just when we do, and when we do not, encounter a specifically 'Malay' consciousness. It will be seen to be significant that even the now emblematic 'Malay' text, the *Malay Annals*, was actually given that name by a British translator; the name the author (or copyist) gave it was the *Genealogy of the Rajas* or *The Rules of All the Rajas* (Hooker and Hooker 2001: 35–36; Reid 2001: 303). The question that might next be posed is to what extent 'Malayness' is a central theme in this or other works from the royal courts of the golden age. The issue is all the more difficult because these classical works tend to exist today only in manuscripts copied over the last two centuries (Proudfoot 2003: 2–3). The fact that copyists are known to have edited or 'updated' texts means we cannot take for granted that these texts provide direct evidence of what concepts were dominant in the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries. With this caution, however, it is still striking that 'Malay' is used to denote a much narrower range of peoples in these Malay-language writings than in contemporary European accounts of the period.

In these comments I am making an historian's observation – calling for caution rather than making assumptions about the past, particularly in projecting back to earlier centuries a modern concept of 'Malay' ethnicity. But if it is true that 'Malay' consciousness is a relatively modern phenomenon, what we have is a topic of enormous interest: just how and why did 'Malays' come to think of themselves as 'Malay'?

In considering how far one can speak of a specifically 'Malay' history, a further issue arises: whether people identifying as 'Malay' today can claim even the historical unity of having once participated in a common state or community, whether called 'Malay' or not. It is true that several polities or empires in the Archipelago achieved an international renown – were admired, for instance, in Chinese or Arab accounts, or in later European reports. Srivijaya and Melaka are two examples – each said by foreign observers to hold sway over communities on both sides of the Straits of Malacca, Srivijaya for some five centuries. But we cannot be sure that either of these – or any other empire – ever dominated what would later be called the 'Malay World' (even by the narrower definition which Benjamin uses). Scholars suggest Srivijaya faced strong challenges in the eleventh century, and may never have been a "genuine empire" but was more a 'Hanseatic-like' league of polities (Kulke 1993; Nik Hassan Shuhaimi 1990). In the fifteenth century there were Patani (today in southern Thailand), Pasai and Aru (in north Sumatra), Brunei (in north Borneo) and numerous other polities – all today likely to be claimed as 'Malay' – operating outside the Melaka sphere. The sultanates of Johor and Perak on the Peninsula assert genealogical links to rulers of Melaka, as would the now defunct sultanate of Lingga (some 150 kilometres south of Singapore). But other sultanates – Kedah, Aru, Deli, Patani – have claimed quite different heritages.

When we seek to focus, therefore, on the history or the society of even just 'mainstream Malays' (or the 'Malays proper'), we find much more diversity or heterogeneity than the Singapore culture pack, or even some of the academic analysis, implies. It seems a formidable challenge to isolate an analytical mainstream. There are many groupings and multiple histories. As I will argue in detail in chapter 7, it could be said that there are 'other Malays' everywhere. Floods of people from southern Thailand, Java, Sumatra and elsewhere in the Archipelago have come to the 'core' Peninsular sultanates over the last century – in certain cases (especially on the west coast) seeming to make up today a majority of the 'local' population. In addition there are the regions where 'Malay' communities are largely made up of pagan converts; and others (for example, in Kalimantan) where the leadership at least seems largely Arab in background.

## How People have been Transformed

Putting aside, if we can, the problem of how to define a 'Malay people' who might be the subject of historical narrative, there is the common historian's problem of establishing historical unities in the face of immense social change. It is not just a matter of how people classified themselves in the past, or where their loyalties lay. The social transformation is such that we cannot take for granted any identifiable, continuing community whose experience might be a proper subject for study. Especially in Malaysia, but in other regions as well, there has in recent decades been a great migration to cities – with an influx into higher educational institutions, an expanding range of urban employment, and a sharp encounter with both Islamic and Western liberal ideas. In this new social context, old values, attachments and manners of thought are challenged in ways that demand the reconstruction of both the individual and the community. Individualizing economic changes and new concepts of freedom are examples of such forces for change – and their impact has been felt well beyond the 'Malay World'. In earlier centuries the Archipelago peoples engaged with Hindu and Buddhist civilization, and (from about the thirteenth century) with that of Islam. We cannot merely assume that an underlying cultural resilience allowed the local to triumph over the novel and the foreign in such encounters.

Allowing for the possibility of radical disjunction in fact offers an analytic advantage – for instance, in encouraging speculation about the difference in 'lifeworld' between 'modernity' and the pre-colonial sultanates. The mental framework of people living in eighteenth- and seventeenth-century sultanates (and of course communities of earlier periods) is difficult to imagine now, even for modern 'Malays'. The literature that people in those periods appreciated, the all-night narrations, the sophistication and symbolism of the textiles, the details of etiquette, the particular logic of what we would today call their political systems – these are matters hard to comprehend in societies where experience is now shaped in one way or another by the encounter with egalitarianism, secularism, the concept of economics, psychological individualism, the novel, Impressionist art . . . and so forth. The French historian Lucien Febvre (1982) once suggested that it would have been impossible in the sixteenth century to conceptualize the secular; we can equally ask about the problem today of being able to comprehend, for instance, the particular forms of religiosity that operated in certain societies (including in Southeast Asia) in earlier eras.

When we look at transformations in detail, some have been intended, some not. Seeking a specific economic or political advantage, for instance, can entail top-down ideological leadership – a frequently encountered theme in 'Malay' societies – that radically and unintentionally transforms the social order. Some strategies employed by Archipelago sultanates and later by colonial regimes turned out to be cases of this, virtually creating or legitimizing new and rival elites. A modern example is the unpredicted rise in 1970s Malaysia of a powerful and radical Islamic movement that followed the implementation of programmes designed to address 'Malay' economic disadvantage. But there are also clear instances of deliberate, top-down implementation of social change – some dating back to the kingdom of Melaka and earlier. Chronicles make clear, for instance, that when the ruler of Melaka converted to Islam, he then “commanded” all the people of Melaka, “whether of high or low degree”, to become Muslims (Winstedt 1938: 84). A recent example of such elite religious and ideological engineering adds to the problems entailed in conceptualizing 'the Malays'. In the 1980s the Malaysian government instituted a policy aimed at “mental revolution and a cultural transformation” in the 'Malay' community, stripping away many “feudal” values involving deference and a tendency to fatalism, and promoting the concept of a confident, frank, highly motivated, entrepreneurial “New Malay” (Khoo 1996; Shamsul 1999). Can the product of so radical a programme, one might enquire, still be referred to as 'Malay'? Similar concerns arise when we consider the efforts of the religious reformers over the last three decades to remove from 'Malay' society a wide range of customary (*adat*) practices and beliefs – often understood to be quintessentially 'Malay'. The reformers consider such practices to be contrary to the teachings of Islam, but their defenders might argue that the condition of being 'Malay' requires some continuing cultural essence. Certain reformers reply again that this itself is no great concern: what matters is that 'we' are members of the community of the Islamic faithful, not our identity as 'Malays'.

Losing continuity with the past – ceasing to see old ways, rituals and entertainments as relevant – can have a profound impact on identity. In the Riau region of western Indonesia – where, as in other regions, there has been a decline of narrative performances that express “traditional *adat* values” – one 'Malay' leader has declared that the very survival of the “alam Melayu” (Malay World) depends on the survival of “Malay moral, social and cultural values” (Turner 1997; 657–658). In Malaysia the fear has been expressed that there may soon arise a generation that is not only poorly acquainted with traditional literature, “but will continue to reject these works as products of a benighted past that has become useless for them” (Muhammad

Haji Salleh and Harun Mat Piah, quoted in Maier 1988: 155). The anxiety that underlies this statement is made explicit time and again in Malay writing; it is that 'the Malays' might 'disappear from this world'.

At least over the last couple of centuries, this fear, ironically perhaps, has been one of the great themes in 'Malay' society.

## **Focusing on 'Malayness', not 'the Malays'**

The point should by now be clear: when we try to talk of 'the Malays' as a people, we seek to get a grip on subject matter of bewildering diversity and contradiction. Which of the many constituent 'Malays' should be given prominence, how do we disentangle one narrative from another, how can we convey lines of continuity where there appears only rupture? But if such concerns frustrate the task of giving an account of 'the Malays', it is this diversity and contention that makes 'Malay studies' so interesting, and ought properly to be our central concern.

To examine this multiplicity and its implications, it is more effective – so I argue in this book – to focus on 'Malayness' rather than on 'the Malays'. It makes best sense to examine the development of an idea (or more accurately several ideas, and the contest around them) than to speak of the evolution of a people. To investigate these ideas, of course, I start with the earliest people who have been claimed as 'Malay', and communicated in a language we call 'Old Malay'. Even where the term 'Malay' was actually used in stone inscriptions, or texts on paper that are assumed to have been composed at an early date, we cannot take its meaning for granted. Can it be seen, for instance, to carry notions about a social formation that are enunciated in manuscripts dated with certainty from the eighteenth or nineteenth century? It is a difficult business to speculate about the types of identification, allegiance or solidarity that operated in what some today would call the period of 'early Malay history', and then in the 'golden age' before colonial domination.

In making the development of the idea of 'Malay' our central concern, it is vital to examine the period of European colonial involvement in 'the Malay World'. Formulations imported and imposed from Europe – particularly related to the classification of humankind by 'race' – were critical, but we also see 'Malay' ideologues, often with much skill, engaged in the fashioning of a new form of community. In different parts of the Archipelago the historical experience has varied widely, and the 'ideological work' has been pursued in divergent ways – and this helps to explain why today there are great contrasts between 'Malay' communities. It is not just



a matter of their varying social and economic situations, and their differing degrees of political influence, but the whole concept of what it means to be 'Malay' can vary from one region to another. What is more, it seems to me that wherever we look, it has proved impossible to find a notion of being 'Malay' that has achieved stability – that has become secure. It is an idea in motion – something which can present danger as well as opportunities. Malayness is often a matter of anxiety: it is always open to contest – and the most pressing contest today is the Islamist insistence on the dominance of 'Islamic' over 'Malay' identity and community.

Focusing on 'Malayness' (at least as much as on 'the Malays') provides a perspective on the nation state as well as religion. 'Malayness' is shaped in one way or another by experience in different territorial states – Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Indonesia, Thailand and numerous others – just as it has been by contrasting experiences of colonial rule. As I have suggested, however, it is also to some extent an active agent. In practical ways a transnational 'Malay' consciousness continues to foster ambiguities and sometimes tension in border areas. The fate of southern Thailand – in the opening years of the twenty-first century perceived to be one of the most serious terrorist fronts in Southeast Asia – is at least partly bound up with such a consciousness. There is also the possibility – depending on the long-term resilience of the Archipelago nation states – that 'Malay' aspirations will make a contribution to some future reconfiguring of Southeast Asia.

As we move from one situation in the 'Malay World' to another, identifying contrasts in the development of 'Malayness', we inevitably raise one further issue. What type of concept are we talking about here? Where does this project fit in the categories social scientists use today to classify human association? In this sense a book about 'the Malays', or 'Malayness', necessarily confronts questions about what we mean by 'ethnicity', 'race', 'culture' and 'civilization' – and when it is appropriate to use such concepts, and when not. Considering what it can mean to be 'Malay', I suggest, offers the opportunity of hearing a 'Malay' view on the profound issue of how best to classify humankind.

In the next chapter we examine early references to 'Malay', and also historical developments among peoples who were eventually to assume a 'Malay' consciousness – or at least were to be swept in modern times into a grand 'Malay' narrative.