

BACKGROUND BOOKS

MALAYSIA

From **The Suma Oriental** (Hakluyt Society, London, 1944) of the 16th century, by Portugal's Tomé Pires, to the present day, most studies of Malaysia have been written by Europeans. And, until recently, argues Syed Hussein Alatas of the University of Singapore, most have perpetuated **The Myth of the Lazy Native** (Cass, 1977).

In a colorful tour of earlier historical writings, Alatas cites dozens of examples of this stereotype. In 1927, for example, Hugh Clifford flatly stated that the Malay "never works if he can help it, and often will not suffer himself to be induced or tempted into doing so by offers of the most extravagant wages."

But, as Alatas notes, the Europeans themselves often unwittingly provided contrary evidence. An English missionary reporting on a visit to Malacca households in 1879 wrote that "the women were lounging about the houses, some cleaning fish, others pounding rice; but they do not care for work."

Asks Alatas: "Is cleaning fish and pounding rice not work?"

In fact, he writes, the Malays were successful in many ventures, not only as independent farmers, but as surveyors, prospectors, drivers, and boatmen. They *did* shun poorly paid jobs in the tin mines, on the rubber plantations, and in other corners of the burgeoning colonial economy. And that earned them the scorn of the *tuans* (masters).

The Malays "were considered indolent," Alatas argues, only "because they avoided the type of slave labor which the Chinese and the Indians were compelled to do owing to their immigrant status."

In **Peasants and their Agricultural Economy in Colonial Malaya, 1874-1941** (Oxford, 1977), Lim Teck Ghee, of the University of Malaysia, seconds some of Alatas's views. The British, he argues, often thwarted the Ma-

lays' efforts to enter the modern cash economy on their own terms.

During the turn-of-the-century rubber boom, for example, thousands of enterprising Malay peasant farmers cleared virgin forests to plant the new cash crop. "Instead of encouraging peasant cultivation of the crop . . . the colonial government, persisting in the view that peasants should be subsistence [rice] producers and that cash cropping should be a monopoly of the planters, tried to prevent its growth." In some cases, British officials refused to lease government lands to Malay rubber smallholders.

Even so, many Malays do not subscribe to the "damned colonialists" theory. Among them is Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad, Malaysia's prime minister since 1981.

His diagnosis of **The Malay Dilemma** (Asia Pacific, 1970) includes a few jibes at the British, whom he accuses of creating an informal "partnership" with the Chinese at the expense of the Malays. But, in Dr. Mahathir's idiosyncratic view, the "debilitating" effects of heredity and environment are the chief causes of Malay "backwardness."

In ancient Malaya, he writes, "No great exertion or ingenuity was required to obtain food. There was plenty for everyone throughout the year . . . Even the weakest and the least diligent were able to live in comparative comfort, to marry and procreate. The observation that only the fittest would survive did not apply."

Dr. Mahathir contends that by 1970, political dominance, hiring quotas, and other advantages were making the Malays softer. "Removal of all protection would subject the Malays to the primitive laws that enable only the fittest to survive . . . It would perhaps be possible to breed a hardy and resourceful race capable of competing against all comers.

Unfortunately, we do not have 4,000 years to play around with."

After the Chinese-Malay riots of 1969, other Malay politicians concluded (for reasons of their own) that *more* special privileges for Malays were needed. These were contained in the 1971 New Economic Policy (NEP).

The mystery is why the Chinese, who own and manage so much of Malaysia's economy, have so readily accepted second-class political status.

The short answer is that they have little choice. They make up only about one-third of the population. And, despite the NEP, Malaysia's Chinese are generally more prosperous than overseas Chinese in Thailand and many other nearby lands. **The Chinese in Malaya** (Oxford, 1967), by Victor Purcell, is the classic account of their success.

As John M. Gullick writes in **Malaysia: Economic Expansion and National Unity** (Westview, 1981), the Chinese, traditionally indifferent to local politics, have never been able to unite—which may be fortunate for Malaysia. The Chinese city street vendor and trishaw (combination rickshaw and bicycle) driver, and the poor farmer of the rural New Villages created during the emergency, have little in common with the British-educated businessmen who head the Malaysian Chinese Association.

In **The Consul's File** (Simon & Schuster, 1984), a collection of short stories set in Malaysia involving one family, novelist Paul Theroux portrays some of the schisms that divide the Chinese community.

Woo Boh Swee, the owner of a small-town coffee shop, "was thoroughly Chinese; he was a chain smoker, he played mahjong on a back table of the shop, he observed all the Chinese festivals.... He and his wife were great gamblers, and they had two children. The children

went to different schools. It was as if, this once, the Woos were hedging, making an each-way bet. The girl, Jin Bee, was at the Chinese primary school; the boy, Reggie, had been to the Anglo-Chinese school, then to Raffles Institution and the University of Singapore."

Another fine fictional description of the many hues and anomalies of Malaysian life, set during the 1950s, is Anthony Burgess's **Malayan Trilogy** (Penguin, 1973).

A sultan is described as a sophisticate abroad, but "bounded by his own blood and his own river" at home; a high Malay official regards the British as "haughty, white, fat, ugly, by no means *sympathique*, cold, perhaps avaricious," but feels "a sort of warmth" toward them. English-educated Lim Cheng Po concludes: "When we British finally leave, there's going to be hell."

A more recent visitor to Malaysia found the racial antipathies every bit as strong as they were during the 1950s. "It was said in Malaysia," writes V. S. Naipaul in **Among the Believers** (Random, 1982), "that if the Chinese as a community became Muslims, the Malays would become Buddhists."

As Gordon P. Means observes in **Malaysian Politics** (Hodder & Stoughton, 1976), even the remarkably effective political system that Malaysia's leaders have fashioned to accommodate the nation's racial divisions is potentially explosive. The ban on public discussion of racial issues, a muzzled press, and restrictions on opposition parties leave dissenters few outlets.

Easy as it is for Westerners to criticize Malaysia's stunted democratic institutions and the pro-Malay bias of the NEP, Means concludes, it is difficult to imagine workable alternatives that would make "a more unified and democratic society."