Malays and Modernization

Tham Seong Chee

MALAYS AND MODERNIZATION

A Sociological Interpretation

THAM SEONG CHEE

Singapore University Press

Printed by Khai Wah Press Co. Pte. Ltd.

To Oi, Meng, Choon and Yue

Negeri ini sungguhpun negeri Melayu dan bumiputeranya yang jati orang Melayu, tetapi didiami oleh berjenis-jenis bangsa yang telah menolong benar pada membukanya dan menjadikan kemakmurannya, dan segala hasil-hasil yang dipungut padanya itu bukanlah sekali-kali daripada titik peluh orang Melayu sahaja, tetapi bersama-samalah juga daripada titik peluh orang-orang bangsa lain yang telah meramaikan negeri ini dan mengeluarkan kekayaanya.

ZAINAL ABIDIN B. AHMAD
dlm. Al-Ikhwan
16 Mei 1927.

The awareness of the Malays of their relatively poorer economic status *vis-à-vis* the non-Malay communities in both mainland Malaysia and Singapore is not a recent fact. As early as 1849, Abdullah b. Abdul Kadir Munshi in his autobiography called *Hikayat Abdullah* had intimated on Malay economic backwardness in particular. The 1920s and 1930s saw other writers such as Syed Sheikh al-Hadi and Zainal Abidin b. Ahmad going over much the same ground as their predecessor. In short, ever since the issue of economic development among the Malays was broached, there had been an uninterrupted flow of writings, speeches, journalistic articles, seminars, and debates, all of which had as their central concern, the issue of Malay involvement in the modern sector of the economy, viz. in trade, commerce, entrepreneurship, industry, banking, manufacturing, and professional services.

While academics and non-academics alike have suggested or attributed certain causes to Malay economic under-development, yet no study up till now has been made that takes cognizance of the Malay social system – its institutions and values – as the framework to understand the strivings and motivations associated with Malay efforts at securing economic modernization. Similarly, studies made of the Malays in the realm of economic modernization in particular have tended to treat the problem in isolation, divorced of consideration of the non-Malay communities, their historical experience, and their institutional values and practices as they relate to the pursuit of economic betterment. The neglect or relative lack of attention to these concerns is unfortunate, for much of the Malay strivings to modernize economically have as their motivational bases comparisons made with the non-Malay, specifically Chinese, community. Thus there is both a methodological inadequacy as well as an inadequacy in the treatment of the issues and problems that relate to economic modernization among the Malay and non-Malay communities. This study is an attempt to close these two gaps.

In making a study of this nature, it is inevitable that value interpretations will be recurrent. No effort has been made to disguise

issues or side-track problems. The value direction assumed in this study is based on the belief that the economic interests of both the Malay and non-Malay communities are legitimate, and that the most efficacious manner in securing them is to work in co-operation and honesty within a framework of trust and understanding, particularly of each other's motives and cultural values, including hopes, aspirations and beliefs. If the aim is to bring about communal integration and harmony, then it is imperative that the previously mentioned points be made the foundation of all activities directed at modernizing the economic activities associated with the various communities, Malay and non-Malay alike.

The context of this study is the Malay community in mainland Malaysia, but some of the conclusions formed of the issues and problems relating to Malay economic modernization are relevant to an explanation of Malays in Singapore as well, because of the fact of historical and cultural bonds shared. The Malay community in mainland Malaysia however, has maintained its traditional social system, including its basic institutional symbols and values, and these constitute the starting points of this study. More than that, as the study will show, they constitute the framework of ideas and beliefs underlying much of the activities, programmes, and plans hitherto initiated to engage Malays in the modern sector of the economy.

The striving of the Malays to attain at least a similar measure of progress in the economic realm is thus given ideological validation by the continuous maintenance of the traditional social, political, and cultural framework of ideas. Hence the strive to attain economic modernization entails the preservation of the traditional social order because it is on this basis that the aspirations of the Malays may be given validation. Such an assumption and approach to modernization has important implications for both national unity as well as the degree of success that Malays may gain in economic pursuits.

The central theme of this study is that Malays can attain much that they have set out to modernize in the economic realm. But in doing so there are certain requisites, and these must include the need to see economic modernization as a process, and the need to engage the non-Malay communities with incentives, to enable a smooth and rapid movement of Malays into the modern sector of the economy. The need to see Malay involvement in the modern or urban sector of the economy as a process cannot be treated lightly because

(as the first part of this study will show) the traditional institutional structure of the Malays has within it certain structural inadequacies which exert an influence on the development of a Malay economic or entrepreneurial elite. The need to engage non-Malays with incentives is important, especially in view of the fact that the ideological outlook associated with political and economic development among the Malay leadership has tended to strain toward communal considerations. Communal orientedness is of course not peculiar to the Malay élite structure. It is indeed a prevalent and institutionalized practice in resolving political and economic affairs. However, this study suggests that such an approach to economic and political modernization increases communal strains already in existence and in the end will have various implications and consequences for both the Malay and non-Malay communities alike. It is of course true that past and fairly recent experiences in the political realm have marred to some extent whatever likelihood there was of co-operative efforts at economic development among the various communities, principally in regard to the objective of raising the economic status and welfare of the Malays. But the author refuses to believe that communal co-operation is not possible. The moot question is whether each community considers this feasible and desirable. The contention remains therefore that the economic welfare of the Malays can be attained without jeopardy to the economic welfare of the non-Malays and vice versa. If the eventual objective is to create an integrated nation through economic welfare accruable to all the communities, as is so often claimed or expressed (e.g. the Second Malaysia Plan, 1971-1975), the need to restructure prevalent beliefs and ideas in regard to economic modernization principally as they pertain to the Malays should be effected. This study in substantive proportion emphasizes this need.

THAM SEONG CHEE

Department of Malay Studies,
University of Singapore.

In the preparation of this study I owe much to my former teachers and all the many Malaysians and Singaporeans who wished me well in the study. To all of them I wish to record here my gratitude.

This study in the form it is here was completed when I was Commonwealth Academic Fellow at the University of London from September 1974 to August 1975. In this connection I am indebted to the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission of the United Kingdom, the University of London, and the University of Singapore, for the support, financial and otherwise, granted me.

Tham Seong Chee

CONTENTS

Malays And Modernization

A Sociological Interpretation

Tham Seong Chee

This study seeks to examine and understand the problems of economic development and modernization in Malay society. The author places special emphasis on the analysis of relevant sociological factors; he examines the traditional Malay social system and the ideational system underlying it, and shows how these shape perception and influence economic modernization.

This study also directs itself to an appreciation of non-Malay, particularly Chinese, values and institutions, so as to assess the various permutations of economic modernization in a plural society.

The author, Dr Tham Seong Chee, is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Malay Studies, University of Singapore.

Malays and Modernization

1
THE INSTITUTIONAL BACKGROUND

The traditional Malay social system was structured on customs and practices that defined the whole range of rights and obligations pertaining to interaction between two distinct groups, the aristocracy and the subjects.[1] Though one could accurately say that the subjects had more obligations than rights, these terms must not be understood in the context of modern day usage. Rights as laid down in the traditional context were those that were recognized by custom, not things that were demanded. Similarly, obligations constituted those acts and patterns of behaviour that showed deference and homage to the ruler and his family. Customarily, the subjects looked to the ruler as the fount of power, the source from which one derived succour, the ultimate embodiment of legitimacy, and the apex of the whole social system based on the *Adat*. Thus, that which had become customary was considered to be official and its observance exemplified nobility. The *Adat* encapsulated the qualities of wisdom, character, correctness, and procedure. Social relationships were highly hierarchicized and the resolution of conflict must perforce be affected in accordance with social expectation, that is to say, in accordance with the *Adat*. Only in this way were conflicts resolved and society re-integrated.

Among the aristocracy there were a royal component and a non-royal component. Together they formed an exclusive minority wielding power and influence. As a structural group it was the most distinct and conspicuous, underlined by both outward ceremonial trappings and symbols of power and status. Linguistically, there was also a language of the aristocracy in contrast to the language of the commoners, and this differentiated further the aristocracy from the commoners and emphasized the former's exclusiveness. This exclusiveness was also strengthened by ascriptive norms in status determination as well as unbridgeable marriage rules. Sayings and literary themes further emphasized the essential separateness between the aristocracy and the commoners.

The dominant organizing norm as well as political ethic that circumscribed the relationship between the rulers and the commoners was loyalty.[2] As recorded in Malay myths, the institution of loyalty had its origin in a social contract formulated between Demang Lebar Daun, who represented the inhabitants of Perlembang (modern Palembang) and Sang Si-Perba, a descendant of Alexander the Great

of Macedonia.[3] Spiritual recognition was granted to Sang Si-Perba when Batala (who had reconstituted himself from the foam brought out by the divine white cow) formally bestowed on him the title of Sang Si-Perba Taramberi Teribuana. Batala, it was said, was a descendant of the first reader of the *chiri,* a magical incantation invoked at the installation of a ruler. The social contract specified that the ruler shall endeavour not to shame or disgrace *('aib)* his subjects. A deviation from this stipulation, it was warned, would result in the country being destroyed. The subjects or commoners on their part would at all times remain loyal to the ruler and at no time commit treason. The quality of being upright to his subjects and the quality of being loyal to their ruler were God bestowed gifts, according to the Malay Annals. Though highly simple in formulation but fundamental in their implication, these two precepts it was conceived would ensure stability, prosperity and harmony in the realm.[4]

The political ethic of undivided loyalty is both rationalized and dramatized in the epic of Hang Tuah *(Hikayat Hang Tuah).* The character Hang Tuah depicted a set of values that gave the ethic of loyalty absolute idealization. Among them were bravery in combat; decorum and respect in the ruler's presence and in his domestic realm; singleness of purpose in fulfilling his ruler's wishes and desires; total subjugation of his own interests and welfare to that of the ruler and his family and the belief in the ruler's infallibility. The identifying characteristic of Hang Tuah is that of moral and political subservience to the ruler. Hang Tuah's rallying cry was: *Melayu tak akan hilang dari dunia* (Malays will not disappear from the world), as a heeding to Malays that so long as they bravely and loyally served their ruler, their future as a community would be assured.[5] In the words of Hang Tuah, 'Malays should never commit treason'.

The ruler on his part was regarded as the 'shadow of Allah on earth' and according to traditional belief no commoner may touch him without contracting disease and death.[6] White blood was believed to course in his veins. His personality could influence plants and crops.[7] These elements of the mystic and supernatural identified in the person of the ruler heightened the sense of deference and fear among the commoners. Thus, the commoners would not only not commit treason but would avoid all manner of action that may lead them to being struck down by the divine power of the ruler and his ancestors.[8]

Though the aristocracy looked to the ruler as the source of legitimacy, their dominant motivation was the maximization of prestige and power. Consciousness of status and the desire for recognition and approval meant that wealth must be flaunted in the form of the number of followers and retainers, in the elaborateness and costliness of attire,

and in the formality of court etiquette. As Burger stressed, kneeling, making obeisance, exemplifying respect and customary courtesy, and the display of pomp and splendour in traditional ceremonies, all cultivated an awareness among the commoners that such acts were natural and necessary.[9] A ruler regarded the number of his followers and retainers as the measure of his power and other rulers would accordingly show him the necessary deference and fear.[10]

The emphasis on status and exclusiveness among the aristocracy directed attention to the utilization of wealth for the enhancement of status rather than the rational accumulation of it. It also deterred direct involvement or participation among the members of the aristocracy in economic activities that required contact with commoners. Traditionally the ruler held a monopoly over all trade within his realm. But he was content to levy a customary tax on goods, the amount of which was determined by the rank and prestige of the ruler.[11]

Within the society, commoners were made to pay a feudal rent of 10 per cent of the produce of the land. In addition to this it was customary for every able-bodied man to provide one quarter of his labour for the performance of tasks required by the ruler or chief.[12] In some instances a head tax was also levied. Customarily, commoners had no proprietary rights to land. The ruler had absolute discretion in the utilization of land in the realm and only granted usufructuary rights. Land that was neglected or devoid of human cultivation automatically reverted to the ruler.[13] Such a system had basic features which may be regarded as feudal. The relationship between the ruler and his subjects was based on land and the rights of usufructure. In order to be given the rights to cultivate, the subjects had certain obligations toward the ruler, among which were pledges of loyalty and service. These obligations were not merely political but economic and religious as well. In times of conflict, the ruler had the right to impose obligation of military service on his subjects. There was a network of obligations linking the subjects to the district chief and the district chiefs to the ruler. Loyalty as perceived was to the individual in the person of the ruler or the district chief. The system therefore did not encourage land conservation or improvement to bolster value, neither did it provide a sense of stability and continuity in one's relationship to the occupation of land. Inducement to accumulate wealth was reduced further, for conspicuous wealth merely attracted the attention of rulers and chiefs, who would forcefully take it away, or oblige those commoners who had it to lend it without prospect of repayment.[14]

A further debilitating factor to the accumulation of wealth among the commoners was the institution of debt-bondage *(orang berhutang).*[15] Not only did this institution allow the debtor to evade

direct settlement, but the relative attraction of being taken into the ruler's fold and the concomitant prestige (albeit as a debt-bondsman) derived from being a member of the ruler's retinue or household helped to instil the idea that indebtedness carried no social disapproval. The result was a curtailment of the development of those attitudes of frugality and rational ordering of economic means and ends in accordance with one's station in life. In short, there did not emerge an intense fear of indebtedness since the social system allowed the debtor to re-integrate though his status was no more that of a 'free man.'[16]

The diffusion of power and control, the vying for power and prestige among the members of the aristocracy, and the submissiveness of the commoners resulted in many excesses being committed by the aristocracy.[17] This situation was further aggravated and intensified when tin mining and trade grew in importance in the emerging capitalistic economy brought in by the colonial power. Among the commoners therefore, there was constant fear of seizure. Groups of armed men were always at hand to enforce the wishes and demands of the chiefs.[18] In short there were no cultural or economic incentives to help shape the profit motive. As suggested by Hoselitz, when discussing the problem of economic modernization, incentive has meaning only if the relationship between labour and reward is perceived.[19]

During the period of colonial and capitalistic expansion, the aristocracy exemplified a poor collective image in that as a group it failed to develop among the people an awareness of the need for modernization and change.[20] Because of the relative smallness of the Malay states, and the jealously guarded autonomy exemplified by each, an elaborate native bureaucracy did not materialize. Instead, the feudal hierarchy of ascending loyalty and descending control served to meet the demands of social organization and ensured some degree of social cohesion. The consequence of this was the absence of a selective process based on the criterion of knowledge and training associated with a bureaucracy which may have allowed for a degree of socio-economic mobility and a differentiation of the rigid status system.[21] The sum total of all this was the absence of development of new incentives for status amelioration, attitudes of economic rationality, and political-ideological awakening based on the unification of the state. No social ascent was possible through education and this further negated the emergence of a competitive society.[22]

As implied earlier the Malay economy was characteristically agrarian. The commoners who tilled the soil and worked the land were largely a subjugated group. There were probably petty traders and shop-keepers, but these were still commoners and had no status.[23] Money and the

use of money was well known to the inhabitants of the trading ports. Other commoners probably included artisans, boat-builders, craftsmen, carpenters, weavers, potterers, court entertainers, musicians, and armed fighting men in the employ of chiefs and rulers.[24] In the magico-religious area such individuals as the religious teacher, the *bomoh* and the *pawang* were well known.

The commoners' world view and value concerns were undoubtedly shaped by their station in life as well as by the existential conditions surrounding them, so that any analysis of their value patterns and attitudinal inclinations would reflect these influences. If these two influences remained dominant, the corresponding values and attitudes would be maintained. A change in existential conditions would accordingly lead to a readjustment of perception and a change in value orientation. At least there would be a shift of emphasis and a realignment of value priority. The latter point suggests a fundamental characteristic of value arrangement in any society and that is that all categories of values are normally present. The key question is how they are structured or organized, and the priority of their arrangement.

The articulation of values among the commoners suggests that much of Malay sayings, proverbs, metaphors, similes, and folk wisdom are deeply rooted in the agrarian character of their society. Generations of cultural socialization within the family, kin-group and village, as well as the social chasm that separated them from the aristocracy, have contributed substantially to the shaping of value perception and value consciousness. Since the typical unit of social life is the kin-group centring around the family, clan, or village, primogeniture is an instrument of status determination. Hence age and generational seniority have traditionally been associated with wisdom, experience and knowledge.[25] Since life is kin-centred, harmony and mutual adjustment must figure prominently in the existential scheme. To ensure that values of respect, mutual adaptation and mutual regard are persistently adhered to, and there are sayings and proverbs that stress the indivisibility of kinship ties and the maintenance of the integrity of family life.[26] Individuals who act otherwise bring shame and disrepute to themselves as well as to their families.[27]

It is not surprising that manners, courtesy, good breeding, and sympathetic tact became the key concerns in the Malay family and social life. It is a characteristic of Malay beliefs that, that which is good and desirable is *budi,* a social conception of the ideal of personality to be aimed at. This personality ideal is structured of such concerns as kindness, character, common-sense, breeding, good disposition, doing good, gratitude, and social sensitivity.[28] One's social standing is measured in terms of the amount of one's *budi.* Where a piece of iron