PATRICK PILLAI

YEARNING TO BELONG

Malaysia's Indian Muslims, Chitties, Portuguese Eurasians, Peranakan Chinese and Baweanese

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YEARNING TO BELONG

Advance Praise for Yearning to Belong

This book presents — for the first time in a single volume — fascinating historical and ethnographic details of five hybrid ethnic minorities in Peninsula Malaysia. Written with sensitivity and insight towards both minorities and the larger communities, this book is an outstanding contribution to inter-ethnic understanding, to ethnic studies in general, and minority studies in particular. For Malaysian Studies enthusiasts this is a must read.

Professor Shamsul A.B.
Founding Director, Institute of Ethnic Studies,
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, and
Member, International Advisory Board,
ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore

Once I started reading this book I didn't want to stop! It's a lovely book. Pillai's skills of story-telling and clarity of expression make the book accessible to a broad popular audience, while the facts and insights from interviews and local documents are an original contribution to scholarship. The five case-studies also make this publication distinctive.

Charles Hirschman
Boeing International Professor of Sociology, University of Washington, and
Fulbright Visiting Professor, University of Malaya, 2012–13

For decades — beginning long before Independence in 1957 — governments and academic analysts have tended to configure Malaya/Malaysia in terms of a simplistic race paradigm: Malay/Chinese/Indian. This very readable book reaches beyond that paradigm, demonstrating how it has distorted reality. In one perceptive and sensitive chapter after another Pillai discloses the ethnic complexity of Malaysia, and in doing so makes the country all the more interesting to the general reader as well as the professional sociologist.

Anthony Milner
Tun Hussein Onn Chair, ISIS Malaysia (2014–15);
Co-editor, Transforming Malaysia: Dominant and
Competing Paradigms (ISEAS, 2014);
Basham Professor of Asian History, The Australian National University

This is a work that came from the heart and that is why it carries the colour and warmth of its birth place. Relying on history and narratives, Patrick Pillai paints a beautiful picture of the many cultural streams that contributed to Malaysia's dazzling diversity. But his work is not just a nostalgic yearning for a more harmonious society as in the past. There is a powerful message for greater understanding of our unacknowledged commonalities and more tolerance and acceptance of our differences.

Professor Dr Shad Saleem Faruqi
Emeritus Professor of Law, UiTM (Malaysia)

The **ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute** (formerly Institute of Southeast Asian Studies) was established as an autonomous organization in 1968. It is a regional centre dedicated to the study of socio-political, security and economic trends and developments in Southeast Asia and its wider geostrategic and economic environment. The Institute's research programmes are the Regional Economic Studies (RES, including ASEAN and APEC), Regional Strategic and Political Studies (RSPS), and Regional Social and Cultural Studies (RSCS).

ISEAS Publishing, an established academic press, has issued more than 2,000 books and journals. It is the largest scholarly publisher of research about Southeast Asia from within the region. ISEAS Publishing works with many other academic and trade publishers and distributors to disseminate important research and analyses from and about Southeast Asia to the rest of the world.

For K K

FOREWORD

This book presents — for the first time in a single volume — fascinating historical and ethnographic details of five hybrid ethnic minorities in Peninsula Malaysia. They comprise Penang's Indian Muslims, Malacca's Chitties and Portuguese Eurasians, Trengganu's Peranakan Chinese, and the Baweanese, who are of Indonesian origin. The Baweanese chapter, in particular, stands out as a significant contribution to the literature on Peranakan-types in the Malay world.

Combining the acuity of a scholar with the skills of a journalist, Patrick Pillai leads us on an intriguing journey, tracing how migration histories, occupations and residential locations facilitated interaction and acculturation.

His aim is to highlight Malaysia's rich diversity, and to discover how the experiences of these Peranakan-type communities can provide useful lessons in cultural intermingling, sharing and ethnic harmony. He finds that working, living and schooling together are essential prerequisites, as is proficiency in Malay, which bridges and bonds diverse ethnic groups.

However his fieldwork indicates that acculturation is a necessary but insufficient prerequisite to fostering inter-ethnic harmony; a sense of belonging is equally vital. Such inclusiveness, he argues, is best achieved through multi-ethnic politics and policies consonant with affirmative action. He concludes with a plea for inter-cultural dialogue to cultivate greater understanding, empathy and trust between diverse ethnic and religious groups.

Written with sensitivity and insight towards both minorities and the larger communities, this book is an outstanding contribution to inter-ethnic understanding, to ethnic studies in general, and minority studies in particular. For Malaysian Studies enthusiasts this is a must read.

Shamsul A.B.
Distinguished Professor and Founding Director,
Institute of Ethnic Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
and
Member, International Advisory Board,
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PREFACE

WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK

This book is inspired by my childhood experiences in the diverse cultural milieu of old Malacca. I grew up in Bandar Hilir, near the seaside fronting the Straits which gave birth to its great cosmopolitan port. My neighbours and playmates included Peranakan Chinese, Portuguese and Dutch Eurasians. We spoke Malay, and our playground was the breezy seaside *padang* (field) near the town centre. A tourist would have had a hard time figuring us out; there were Malay-looking boys with *vibhuti* on their foreheads, Indians buying Malay-style cakes from a Chinese, and Portuguese Eurasian, Peranakan Chinese and Peranakan Indian mothers in Malay-style *kebaya* and *kerongsang*. Yet we were doing just what Malaccans had done for centuries in this multi-ethnic port-city — revelling in its rich hybrid culture which had seeped through porous ethnic borders.

I had multiple identities. I was Malayan, Malay-speaking, Malaccan, Ceylonese Tamil and Catholic. When firecrackers exploded non-stop one night in 1963 I realized I had also became Malaysian. But there were no contradictions between the many worlds I inhabited. My religious values were universal and perennial, but my cultural boundaries were permeable. For me this was so natural that I simply never thought about it.

However I soon came to realize that my Malacca childhood had insulated me from the harsh realities of my own country. During two careers spanning thirty years, first as a journalist and later as a migration researcher, I travelled to various parts of the country and met Malaysians of many ethnic backgrounds. While I was impressed by high economic growth, I was distressed by the way ethnic ideology and politics was engendering a hardening of cultural boundaries, particularly between Malays, Chinese and Indians. Worse, there was a lack of creative and concerted attempts to counter these divisive trends by highlighting our shared histories and cultures, common universal spiritual values and our interlinked future.

The gap between economic growth and ethnic harmony is particularly high in Malaysia. This is despite the fact that affirmative action via the New Economic Policy (NEP), the main thrust of Malaysian nation-building since 1970, has in many ways made Malaysia a model multi-ethnic developing society. Professor Donald Snodgrass, a development economist who helped formulate the NEP, once told me that "we (at Harvard) have not come across a single developing multi-ethnic society on the entire planet which has survived and thrived after independence as Malaysia has done" (Personal communication). Even today Malaysia remains the only post-colonial multi-ethnic country which has successfully transformed a wide swathe of its once poverty-stricken indigenous majority from rural-agricultural to urban-industrial and created a broad middle class within one generation.

However in multi-ethnic societies, growth and inter-ethnic wealth redistribution alone are no guarantees of ethnic harmony; people can still be driven apart by ethnic and religious-based politics. As a bulwark against such divisive forces, Malaysia needs to build strong bridges of understanding, appreciation and empathy between people of varied cultures and faiths. Knowledge of our shared histories, rich diversity and overlapping identities can imbue a sense of solidarity to counter the primal pull of ethnic politics. This book is a modest contribution to that goal.

My main motivation in writing this book was to trace the process through which long-settled ethnic minorities acculturated without being assimilated. I was curious about how and why the so-called "hard" cultural boundaries we see today were "soft" in the past, at least among the ethnic minorities of my Malacca childhood. I learnt that this was related to their heterogeneity, mixed ancestry, and cultural sharing — features shared by the three main ethnic groups — but also to their smaller numbers and longer periods of interaction and intermingling. In the process of researching this book however, I also discovered something unexpected — that some among these minorities are deeply anxious about their identity and their future, and pine for a State-recognized indigenous *bumiputera* identity. The implications of this trend for ethnic relations are also discussed in this book.

METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

This work is based on both primary and secondary research. In addition to consulting academic publications and local history accounts, I conducted fieldwork over three years (2008–11), covering five communities selected on the basis of their long settlement, culturally hybrid character and

geographical spread. This encompassed Penang (Indian Muslims), Malacca (Chitties/Peranakan Indians and Portuguese Eurasians), Terengganu (Peranakan Chinese) and Selangor (Baweanese). For the Baweanese chapter, the historical background and life histories are based on my PhD (Pillai 2005), updated with fieldwork for this book in 2010 and 2011.

I talked directly to people on the ground. I met and spoke to community leaders, local historians and ordinary people using structured and unstructured interviews and informal conversations, some of which led to the writing of concise life histories. Pseudonyms were used in cases where informants and respondents requested privacy. I also drew from "participant observation" in major cultural and religious events and visits to homes.

No quantitative surveys were carried out. The views in this book represent those of the people I spoke to and are an indication of the experiences and perceptions of a cross-section in each community, often the less skilled and less mobile segments still living in traditional ethnic spaces. In any case conceptions of ethnicity and identity are fluid and flexible, and vary over time, place and situations, especially in a society where "race" is the dominating discourse.

There are other limitations. Each community is so rich and complex that it is impossible to fully cover all issues thoroughly in a single chapter; there are many PhD's waiting to be written on each group. Chapter contents also vary according to information access. The Peranakan Chinese of Malacca and Penang were left out because there are several publications on them. The same applies to the Peninsular Malaysia's Orang Asli. It must also be emphasized that this book covers five groups in Peninsular Malaysia only. Regretfully, Sabah and Sarawak, which have a large number of highly diverse ethnic minorities, have been excluded; the groups there are far more diverse and complex and demand specialist knowledge which is beyond the scope of this book.

SOME TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

An "ethnic group" shares a collective history and identity, with their own culture, beliefs and language; membership is acquired through birth, marriage or other socially sanctioned routes. "Race" is a socially constructed category, a scientifically discredited term once used to describe biologically distinct groups with unchangeable natures. "Ethnic group" is thus not synonymous with "race". (David and Julia Jary 1995, pp. 205, 540).

The term "Malay" is constitutionally defined as a person who is Muslim, speaks Malay, and practises Malay customs.[1] *Bumiputera*, a political term of Sanskrit origin meaning "sons of the soil", was introduced after the formation of Malaysia in 1963 to encompass Malays and other indigenous communities in the Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak. Thus all Malay-Muslims are *bumiputera* but not all *bumiputera* are Malay-Muslims, especially in Sabah and Sarawak, where many are Christians. Three of the five ethnic minorities discussed in this book — Indian Muslims, Baweanese and Portuguese Eurasians — have acquired full or partial *bumiputera* status from the government. The Peranakan Indians have begun articulating requests for similar recognition, but not the Peranakan Chinese of Terengganu.

"Acculturation" and "assimilation" demand clarification since both terms are often poorly defined and used loosely and interchangeably. In fact they are specific terms with particular meanings. Acculturation refers to cultural change in the direction of another ethnic group, while assimilation is the adoption of the ethnic identity of another group, thus losing one's original identity. Acculturation can be mutual while assimilation is a one way process (Tan 1984, p. 190). In acculturation contact may have distinct results such as the borrowing of certain traits by one culture from another, or the relative fusion of separate cultures (*The Columbia Electronic Encyclopaedia*, 6th ed. 2007).

Assimilation has also been defined as the process whereby individuals or groups of differing ethnic heritage are absorbed into the dominant culture of a society. The process of assimilating involves taking on the traits of the dominant culture to such a degree that the assimilating group becomes socially indistinguishable from other members of the society. As such, assimilation is the most extreme form of acculturation (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2011).

The term "Peranakan" is a Malay word which means "local-born people" and often refers to an ethnic minority living in a Malay environment (Tan 2002, p. 148). The Peranakan Chinese for example, may be loosely defined as Malay-speaking Chinese who show a significantly high level of acculturation but no sign of eventual assimilation.[2] Fieldwork for this book indicates that the degree of acculturation also varies with the length of stay in Malaysia, occupation, residential location, education and class. Long stays, common occupations and shared residential locations and

schools tend to increase the degree of interethnic interaction and are a prerequisite — though not a cause — of acculturation.

Hybridity refers to "dynamic mixed cultures" (Cohen and Kennedy 2000, p. 377), a common feature of archipelagic Southeast Asia and the Caribbean, where maritime cultures have long fostered inter-ethnic interaction, and where mixed ancestry and heterogeneity is the norm rather than the exception. In contrast to colonial racial ideology, hybridity in Southeast Asia is not therefore seen in negative terms. In fact hybridity is also defined by some scholars as a form of liminal or in-between space which is an antidote to colonial essentialism; the hybrid has the ability to transverse several cultures and to "translate, negotiate and mediate affinity and difference" (Meredith 1998, p. 3, in discussing Bhabha 1994, 1996).

Discussion of the immigration history of various ethnic groups is done merely for purposes of analysis and understanding, and is not meant to demean them or question their background or loyalty. The forefathers of most minorities originated from immigrant groups, but their descendants were born and have lived in Malaysia; they are full-fledged Malaysians and Malaysia is their home.

Some pre-war names have been retained, especially historical and geographical place-names. To ensure simplicity no honorifics have been used; no disrespect is intended towards anyone.

MALAYSIA'S POPULATION AND ETHNIC COMPOSITION

In 2013 Malaysia had 27 million citizens comprising Malays (55 per cent), Other *bumiputeras* (13 per cent), Chinese (24 per cent), Indians (7 per cent) and Others (1 per cent). In Peninsular Malaysia, Malays are predominant, comprising 66 per cent of citizens. Sabah and Sarawak, each with 2.5 million citizens, are far more diverse, with Kadazan-Dusun being the single largest group in Sabah, and Ibans being the single largest community in Sarawak. Malaysia employs 2.5 million documented non-citizens, a million of whom live in Sabah (Department of Statistics 2014). Islam is the most widely professed religion in Malaysia (61.3 per cent), followed by Buddhism (19.8 per cent), Christianity (9.2 per cent) and Hinduism (6.3 per cent) (Population and Housing Census, Department of Statistics 2010).

Notes

1. A fourth but little-known prerequisite of being Malay is that the person must have local Malaysian/Singapore "roots" or patriality. According to Article 160(2) of the Malaysian Constitution, to be recognized as a Malay the person should also be — before Merdeka Day (31 August 1957) — born in the Federation or Singapore, or have a parent born in the Federation or Singapore, or is on that day domiciled in the Federation or Singapore, or is the issue of such a person. [I am grateful to Emeritus Professor Shad Saleem Faruqi of UiTm for pointing this out (Interview, Monday, 18 May 2015).]
2. According to Tan, the preconditions for the emergence of Peranakans include inter-ethnic interaction, Malay fluency and a "religious barrier" (Tan 1984, pp. 192, 195–99), since conversion to Islam is a legal prerequisite to marrying a Malay-Muslim in Malaysia, and eventually leads to assimilation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I used to wonder why the acknowledgements sections of many books were so long. Now I know why. Researching and writing a book is both an individual and shared effort, involving debts to many people. In my case many wonderful souls helped and nourished me along the journey. During fieldwork for this book many ordinary people whom I met at community events and random home visits were very generous with their time. Community leaders, some of whom requested anonymity, also provided insights and introduced me to a range of useful contacts and informants. Virtually everyone was delighted to help, indicating perhaps how proud Malaysians are about their diversity. Below is a list of just some of the many people who assisted me.

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Tan Teng Hong, Professor Tan Chee Beng, Tan Teng Liang, Madam Wee Kwee Siew, Madam Wee Kim Beng and a number of Kampung Tirok and Kuala Terengganu residents.

My knowledge of the Baweanese community deepened because many Indonesian immigrants willingly shared their life-histories. Accounts from five of them — Alim, Azmi, Baharuddin, Dzulfilki, Hamzah and Lokman — are used in this book. (Pseudonyms have been used for all Indonesian respondents.) Alim has not only been a rich source of information and insights for more than a decade, but also arranged for a group interview/discussion with a group of community leaders in Gombak in late 2011. I would also like to thank the Kampung Sungei Kayu Ara community leaders, survey participants, and other immigrants who were interviewed. My PhD supervisor Professor K.S. Jomo expertly guided me on a multi-disciplinary topic, while my co-supervisors Dr Chan Kok Eng and Richard Dorall provided crucial guidance and encouragement, especially in the early stages. The feedback from examiners Professor Lee Boon Thong, Professor Graeme Hugo and Dr Diana Wong are also gratefully acknowledged. I am also thankful to the University of Malaya for permission to publish parts of my thesis.

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This book is also inspired by the writings of the Malaysian academic Dr Farish Noor who has passionately argued about the need to highlight Malaysia's diversity, and by the work of the prolific Professor Chandra