Desire Bound: formation of a Malay minority agency in Singapore

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Contents

Abbreviations [1]

CMIO	Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Others
DPMS	Dewan Perniagaan dan Perusahaan Melayu Singapura Singapore Malay Chamber of Commerce and Industry
Jamiyah	Muslim Missionary Society, Singapore
KGMS	Kesatuan Guru-Guru Melayu Singapura Singapore Malay Teachers' Union
LBKM	Lembaga Biasiswa Kenangan Maulud Prophet Muhammad's Birthday Memorial Scholarship Fund Board
Majlis Pusat	Majlis Pusat Pertubuhan-Pertubuhan Budaya Melayu Singapura Central Council of Malay Cultural Organizations, Singapore
MENDAKI (Mendaki)	Majlis Pendidikan Anak-Anak Islam Council on Education for Muslim Children[2]
(Persatuan) Muhammadiyah	Muhammadiyah Association
MUIS	Islamic Religious Council of Singapore Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura
4PM	Persatuan Persuratan Pemuda-Pemudi Melayu Malay Youth Literary Association
PAP	People's Action Party
PERTAPIS	Persatuan Taman Pengajian Islam Singapura Islamic Theological Association of Singapore
PERGAS	Persatuan Guru-Guru Agama Singapura Singapore Religious Teachers Association
PKMS	Pertubuhan Kebangsaan Melayu Singapura Singapore Malay National Organization

[1] Nearly all abbreviations in this table are from the source Hussin Mutalib, Hashimah Johari, Rokiah Mentol, Zaleha Othman, Zaleha Tamby, compliers & eds., *Singapore Malay/Muslim Community 1819-1994: a bibliography*, Singapore: Centre for Advanced Studies, National University of Singapore, 1995.
[2] This was the name in 1982 when Mendaki was founded. See, Mendaki, *Making the Difference: 10 years of MENDAKI,* Singapore: Yayasan Mendaki, 1992, p8

PPIS	Persatuan Pemudi Islam Singapura Young Women Muslim Association
Taman Bacaan	Singapore Malay Youth Library Association
UMNO	United Malays National Organization

Introduction

This thesis is a history of Malays in Singapore. It will show how Malays have attempted to locate themselves in Singapore society since Singapore's independence, by tracing the formation of a certain Malay psychological agency. The chief source of data is the Malay language newspaper *Berita Harian / Berita Minggu*, while the last part of the thesis mainly uses fieldwork participation and observation. As a theoretical framework the study uses Lacan's notion of psychological agency as further developed by Slavoj Žižek and Ghassan Hage.

The study shows how Malays are motivated by a desire to be accepted as part of mainstream Singapore society. This drives them to perform a patterned set of conducts: examining themselves critically, detecting flaws and setting those problems as targets for improvement. They do this by their own initiative and for their own good, without necessarily being aware that their discourses and conducts are reconfirming the mainstream ideologies. This casts a new light on the notion of minority agency. It is commonly presumed that minorities are a seed of conflict and therefore tend to displace the centrality of the majority. This thesis shows that a certain type of ethnic minority agency does not do so but is in fact complicit with the goals of the majority or power-holders while acting for itself to attain its own goals.

Chapter 1 firstly explains a personal connection between the writer and the research topic, and outlines the position of Malays in Singapore. It discusses how useful theories on nationalism and ethnicity are for examining these Malays, and explains the choice of theoretical framework for this study and choice of data sources.

Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 both focus on the period from 1965 to 1970. Chapter 2 examines how the majority or the power-holders tried to control the Malays in Singapore during this time, and where the Malays were located in independent Singapore under the new government. Chapter 3 examines a Malay response to the state's challenge to choose between the state-approved ideology of meritocracy, and the ideology of *Bumiputra* or

affirmative action for Malays. It shows how firstly Malay MPs accepted the ideology of meritocracy as the path for Malays, and then other politically engaged Malays came to work together with the MPs, based on a common desire to be respected by the majority as equal Singaporeans. This led to a landmark seminar in 1970 at which it was declared that Malays in Singapore would transform themselves into an agency fit to perform meritocracy and thus to participate in nation-building.

Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 both examine Malay discourses and conduct in the 1970s. In Chapter 4, we see how Malay MPs decided to lead Malays to make themselves fit to perform by the logic of meritocracy like the other ethnic groups in Singapore. This gave rise to a set of Malay conducts for self-improvement under the slogan "Change Attitudes". Politically engaged Malays began to participate in this "Change Attitudes" campaign through a series of public seminars and through forums and discussions conducted in newspapers, while this campaign was also consumed by a broader audience of Malay newspaper readers.

Chapter 5 examines "Change Attitudes" in the 1970s with respect to two issues, Malay education and attitudes of Malay women. Malay MPs, journalists, and leaders and members of organisations participated in this exemplary set of conducts, as a road to achieving their desire to become part of the Singapore mainstream. During this decade this campaign of self-improvement also became a way for Malays to obtain temporary satisfaction, by demonstrating measurable achievements that brought them closer to acceptance as decent Singaporeans.

In Chapter 6 we see how the same Malay agency was a powerful force in the 1980s. By now the relevant Malay conducts of finding problems within oneself and setting them as targets for fixing seems largely reflexive, and is performed even without the impetus of the explicit slogan of "Change Attitudes". At the start of this decade the government pinpointed Malays as (still) lagging behind the other ethnic groups in the field of education, and politically engaged Malays responded to this with the massive self-help project of conceiving and forming the Educational Council *Mendaki*.

Chapter 7, in a departure from the historical approach and focus on newspaper data in earlier chapters, demonstrates how the Malay agency of "Change Attitudes" is still active in the 21st century. It examines a small and newly created volunteer organization, *An-Nisaa*, which provides classes for Indonesian domestic workers. The origins and practices of *An-Nisaa* reveal how its Malay members sense the gaze of the non-Malay communities and take action to detect and remove any threat to their reputation as decent Singaporeans. It thus illustrates how the desire to be accepted as equal Singaporeans influences the conduct of some ordinary Malays in their everyday lives far beyond the realm of political mobilization.

Chapter 1 Background

1.1 Junction between the Malays in Singapore and myself

When I was in Singapore, I was often asked by Singaporeans why I was working on Singapore. Or instead of this direct question, some people asked me in a sophisticated way why I am working on Singapore history, instead of Japanese history. And while I was conducting my field work, Malay Singaporeans often asked me if my husband was a Malay Singaporean. These questions reveal how our society has become polarized between the people who come to move more globally and the people who stay in their domestic sphere physically and psychologically, as a social effect of globalization well illustrated by Zygmunt Bauman.[1]

To those who stay in their domestic sphere, what I was doing was rather peculiar. Why on earth does a non-Singaporean work on Singapore? If we push this notion a little further in a rather critical direction, their question can be this: can you really understand Singapore despite the fact that you are not Singaporean? In fact, this question was raised in various forms by Singaporeans at conferences when I presented papers, in terms of "You do not know anything about Singapore, because you are not Singaporean."[2]

These were actually good questions. They require me to show what is the relation between myself and Singapore, or in the case of this thesis, Malays in Singapore. The connection point between myself and Malays in Singapore is our similar location in our own society: as an included yet differentiated minority within it. I have long considered myself as belonging to such a minority in Japanese society. This was because of transnational movement of the global elites which began in the 1970s. My father happened to be one of these people who moved globally to seek jobs.

I was born in Japan to Japanese parents. My father had already started his life as a young academic. His speciality was plant DNA – a new fringe area of research which

[1] Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: the human consequences*, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1988.
[2] Most strikingly, it was at the conference titled "Handing over the rei(g)ns: Civil society under Lee Hsien Loong" held at University of Wollongong on 21st October 2004.

was not even given a proper department in the university. Those who took the risk of researching in it were dumped into one room as a group of geeks who dared to do something inter-disciplinary.

When he finished his PhD, predictably, it was not easy to find a job. This was when he began to think of living overseas to continue his research and feed his family. After living in several countries in continental Europe, we eventually settled in (then) West Berlin.

West Berlin in the late 1970s and early 1980s was a peculiar place even in the eyes of an 8 year old child. I attended a local school. Perhaps because of its geo-political location as an island in a sea of socialism, with the Wall as a constant reminder of the border, my German classmates were intensely conscious of their identity as West Berliners and West Germans. I sometimes came across them talking about how proud they were of West Berlin.

My own identity was inevitably constructed against theirs. My yellow skin, black eyes and hair, and foreign accent made me aware that I was different from them. And instead of trying to be one of them, I adopted the strategy of claiming my authenticity as a "native" Japanese. I needed to present myself as "Japanese" to my classmates. My parents took a strong role in this, admonishing me often to remember I am not a Berliner, or a German, but Japanese.

Once a week in Berlin I went to a supplementary Japanese school run by volunteer teachers, and I liked it very much because it had a lot of books written in Japanese about Japan. In particular, I loved the history books on Japan. And I was happy when I came across some lines which mentioned how aesthetically sensitive Japanese culture is, or how wonderful Japanese tradition is. I wanted to be as proud of Japan and being Japanese as my classmates were of Berlin and being West Berliners. And indeed, I was one of the proudest Japanese about Japan, even though the information and knowledge I had managed to obtain about it was often inaccurate or else distorted by me.

When I got back to Japan, my delusions were wretchedly torn apart. I, who was very proud of everything about Japan and Japanese, was seen as "different." I failed to conform, every day, in a million details of my behaviour and speech, and my classmates at junior high school ostracised me. My confidence and sense of my own core were smashed. Wasn't I Japanese? In a sense, yes. But I was quickly made to realise I was a little different.

"A *little* different" is important in this context. I am not allowed to become a totally different entity, an Other, like foreigners in Japanese who are non-Japanese by both ancestry and culture (or like me in Berlin). If I had been such an Other, then the majority around me would have lacked authority to critically pinpoint my differences, because Others are outside the border or the structure of the society, not within. I was included within the concept of Japanese because of my ancestry, my legal status, and my comprehensible (although strange) command of the language. In other words, I was included, yet differentiated.

I did not have a concept of "minority" at that time. The only thing I palpably knew was that this difference of mine was perceived as something negative, and so it came to feel, and so it has remained through my life.

As I grew up in Japan, this feeling created a desire in my mind. I wanted to be recognized as an equal part of the ideal majority (who I could not always see). This desire led me to achieve things which were considered decent, or symbols of status, such as gaining degrees from the 'right' universities or prestigious jobs.

While attempting to be acknowledged as a part of decent Japanese, I did not see that I was helping to consolidate the centrality of the values of the majority and to maintain its definition of what 'Japanese' is like. I truly believed that in trying to locate myself within decent Japanese people and gain recognition, I was acting for my own good, for my own sake, and not for the good as defined by the majority of Japanese people. However from a wider perspective, my conduct can be seen as a way of reinforcing the norms, ideologies and values of the majority. This is one of the roles that a minority – included and yet differentiated – performs in a society.

While doing my fieldwork in Singapore, I gradually began to associate myself with Malays in Singapore. Increasingly, through my conversations with Malays that I met and through my reading of their discourses in newspapers, I came to realise how much alike we were. In their case, discourses of the majority or of the powerful (in their case the government) constantly differentiate them as underachievers in that society. They are defined as different from the rest of the Singapore society in the sense that they are always less successful than other ethnic groups. As a response to these constant comparisons between themselves and other ethnic groups, the Malays continually try to prove themselves to the government and the rest of Singapore society, in order to come to be accepted as an equal part of it. This location of theirs as a minority which is included and yet differentiated, connects them with me within my society in Japan. In other words, I see myself in them across the borders of the nation-states.

1.2 An included yet differentiated community

Statistically, the Malays are not the only minority in Singapore the Chinese are the largest ethnic group (76.3%), and the rest of the Singapore population consists of Malays (13.8%), Indians (8.2%), and Others (1.7%).[3] However, it is Malays who are constantly demarcated as the minority community in Singapore, in the sense that they are performing a little differently from the rest of the Singapore society.

In order to understand the minority-ness of the Malays in the context of the Singapore society, we must consider the national ideology deployed by the government. The government provides a set of 'should-do' values and norms to maximise national productivity. If a Singaporean can pursue and succeed in achieving these presented targets or goals, then that person is proving his or her capability and worth. Each individual is valued based on his/her achievement of these targets and goals, and the winners who are capable of achieving them become the mainstream of the Singapore society. This majority is located in contrast to the Malays in Singapore who, because

[3] This is according to 2003 figures by the Ministry of Community Development and Sports. Ministry of Community Development and Sports, "*Social Statistics in Brief: Resident Population by Ethnicity*," http://www.mcys.gov.sg/MCDSFiles/download/social%20stats%202004.pdf (accessed on 1st May 2006).

of their underachievement, are almost but not exactly a part of it. The Malays are the stigmatized minority in this sense – as later chapters will demonstrate.

A key criterion for locating Malays within their society in Singapore, then, is their underachievement. They have been regarded as backward compared to other ethnic groups in the society ever since Singapore became independent. Terms such as "lagging behind," "backward" and "underachieving" have been frequently used to describe them. This status of theirs is affirmed by the government and has been widely recognized by the wider society since the 1970s. In this sense, they are pinpointed by the media, academics and government ministers as "the" minority in Singapore.

It has often been observed how a powerful majority creates elements of difference within a given society, in order to assert the unity of the nation,[4] however, my attention is rather on how the minority in this case, Singapore Malays, respond to the government and the majority. How do they create their own agency? Are they angry about the powerful or the majority and is the agency of minority therefore created as a counter to the power-holder? In this case, the Malays would be constantly constructed by a binary clear border between the government and the Malays. Or are they happily assimilated by the powerful and merged into the majority? In the case of the Malays in Singapore, it seems that both contentions might be true. These may not be simple alternatives.

Homi K. Bhabha's notion of minority agency is helpful for understanding this. According to Bhabha, the agency of a minority is aroused in the space where two elements, power/colonizer/ dominant majority and powered/colonized/minority, meet each other. The minority agency is constructed and defines itself in relation to the powerful majority. In this process, the minority neither stays precisely what it was before it encountered the majority, nor does it comprehensively internalize the majority into itself. Its agency is aroused in between minority and majority, as a hybridized agency. Singapore Malays are indeed constructed in a space between the majority and the minority, as by Bhabha's model. However in another respect, Bhabha's model does not seem fully to capture the nature of the Malay minority

[4] Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: a derivative discourse?*, London: Zed Books for the United Nations University, 1986.

agency examined in this thesis. Acording to Bhabha, a function of such an agency of the subordinate/colonized/minority is to displace the dominant discourses of the power/colonizer/dominant majority. However this particular Malay agency is best understood as not displacing those discourses.

A conversation I had with a Malay woman exemplifies how the Malays tend in their everyday life to enact the values and goals set by the government. It was around the time of the *Hari Raya* holiday in 2002 when I was attached to the National University of Singapore. I exchanged greetings with a cleaning lady who is a Malay Singaporean. She asked me if I was planning to go somewhere or to visit family during *Hari Raya* holidays. I said I wasn't, as I had no family here. Then she kindly invited me to her place to celebrate *Hari Raya*. Though I did appreciate her kind invitation, my research work was behind schedule, so I politely declined. Sharply, she looked at me and said, "Not *teroris*. *Moderat*. Understand or not?" (I am not a terrorist. I am a moderate Muslim. Do you understand or not?).[5]

This woman's comment makes sense in the light of a National Day speech by (then) Prime Minister Goh Chock Tong.[6] Speaking about Muslims in Singapore (the overwhelming majority of whom are Malays), and as reported in the national newspaper *The Straits Times*, the Prime Minister had said that Muslims could be classified as either moderates or extremists, and asked moderate Muslims in Singapore to speak up against extremist Muslims.[7]

On the day after that article appeared in the Strait Times, a Muslim man dedicated a letter to a readers' forum in the same newspaper:

> "I was listening to the Prime Minister's National Day Rally speech and was very moved by his sincerity and care for the people. I would like Mr Goh Chok Tong to know this: I am a Muslim and I will give up everything I have for Singapore willingly, including my life if need be ... I also wish to assure PM

[5] Conversation dated 2nd December 2002 in both Malay and English.
[6] "Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, yesterday urged Singapore's Malay/Muslim community to speak up against extremism and build a model Muslim community that is progressive." *The Straits Times*, 19th August 2002.
[7] *Ibid.*

> Goh that Muslims here are as Singaporean as other Singaporeans, and we are prepared to play our part just like the others.[8]

This interesting "dialogue" between the Prime Minister and a reader can provide a background to understanding why the cleaning lady responded to me in such a manner. The minority, under the pressure of suspicion of terrorism, is determined to show itself to be on the side of moderate Muslims as the government expects them to be. In this context, Islam and how to be Muslim became an important issue for Malays. This is not because Islam is considered as one of the essential elements to define Malays as in Malaysia, but because how to be Muslim is now problematised and criticized by the state power.[9] A question of how to be Muslim locates Malays in a split between ideal Singapore image/ideology and an undesirable marginalized ethnic group, to articulate their agency in response to it.

The embodiment of the state discourse had penetrated to the lower levels of the society without much antagonism or much questioning why the government gazes at the Malays with scepticism, and whether the scepticism is justified. Moreover, what is also important here is that their discourses show that Malays tend not to feel forced to follow the instructions of the government. When Malay Singaporeans perform to prove they can behave as the government instructs, they also tend not to feel this as something imposed or forced. They generally think that they are following the state ideologies, norms, and values by their own rational choice, for their own good. The agency of this ethnic minority therefore does not function in the same way as minority agency does in Bhabha's model (mentioned above).

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[8] *The Straits Times*, 20th August 2002. The author of this article is Mohamed Taufiq Abdullah.

[9] In Malaysia, Islam is considered as one of the essential elements to define Malays, and subsequently Islam tends to be considered as an inevitable dimension of Malay identity (See Timothy P. Barnard, *Contesting Malayness : Malay identity across boundaries*, Singapore : Singapore University Press, National University of Singapore, 2004.). This thesis shows the significance of Islam and being Muslim to be conceived in importantly different ways by the Malays of Singapore compared with the situation in Malaysia. It is the aim of this study to grasp a particular agency of Malays seen in a particular Singapore context, namely, in the dynamic between national ideology and a marginalized ethnic group. Regarding Islam and how to be Muslim, the state began to problematise them as negative elements after 1986 when the Israeli president paid an official visit to Singapore. Islam and how to be Muslim then began to have significance in articulating Malay agency after 1986. Chapter 7 deals with such formulations of Islam and how to be Muslim which might be considered as negative elements and therefore need to be developed in ways compatible with the ideal images of Singaporeans.

The Malays in Singapore, then, are an included yet differentiated ethnic minority. And the agency of this minority is a hybridized agency created between Singapore as nation and the Malays as ethnicity. However, in the case of the Malays in Singapore, unlike in Bhabha's model, this agency seems to consolidate the power in the scope of the Singapore society, by their very own performances or discourses. This is so despite the fact that Malays often claim that the Malays make efforts for their own sakes and not for the government. Every time I came across this claim in my conversations with Malays, it made me wonder what sort of logic enables such an agency to arise and persist. This question also came back to my own question about myself. Why did I try to be approved of as a decent Japanese, without realising the meanings of my conduct in the scope of the Japanese society? What sort of logic did I have at that time to construct myself or be constructed as an agency of endeavour to obtain approval as a decent Japanese?

The central question of this thesis therefore is as follows. How have the Malays in Singapore come to perform as they do, namely, to strive constantly to prove themselves a part of mainstream Singapore society? In order to answer this question, this study attempts to analyse psychological perceptions current among Malays in Singapore when interacting with the power-holder/the majority. It does so by examining the discourses and actual conduct by which they have attempted to locate themselves in Singapore society.

1.3 Theoretical framework

This thesis argues that Singapore Malays constitute neither a nation nor an ethnic group, but rather experience an agency that is activated behind these two. If so, theories that deal with nationalism or with ethnicity are unlikely to produce fully satisfactory accounts of their hybridized agency. But then where can we turn? This section examines the potential and limitations of theories of nationalism and ethnicity for this purpose, and then considers alternative approaches to the psychology of hybridized agency.

1.3.1 Nationalism

As for theories on Nationalism, the point that needs to be made here is in fact simple. Theories on nationalism share one fundamental characteristic: their interest in the one-ness of the nation. From the viewpoint of the 21st century, this preoccupation is no longer self-explanatory. Why did scholarly interest focus so much on the one-ness of nation? This can be explained as the reflection of the epistemology in which theories on nationalism were conceptualized.

Interest in the one-ness of nation is constructed in the epistemology of celebrating the nation as a declaration of self-determination of national peoples. The nation-state appeared to promise the release of individuals from feudalism, colonial control, and justified the submission of minority to the majority. Hence nation is celebrated by all its members as "a special priority over other collective identities in the construction of personal identity."[10]

In such an era, the one-ness of the nation-state is first and foremost presupposed and in real politics it can function as a discursive norm, in particular in "late-comer" nation states. If this integrated oneness is not formed in the case of a certain nation state, then the question asked is why it cannot achieve nation-building. Such lack of integrity is regarded as an indicator of underdevelopment. The nation has become an ideology.[11]

Theories on nationalism based on this epistemology centre on the question of why the one-ness of nation is formed, instead of considering diversities of people within the nation. This way of questioning drives theories to search for the physical systems and institutions which can frame people into one nation. If there is a physical system, institution, or mechanism to frame people into one, then there is a nation. Subsequently, the realm framed by the physical systems or institutions is considered as synonymous with the cognitive scope of the nation conceived in the minds of the people. The presence of physical systems and institutions is conceived as equivalent to what can be imagined through them. To put it differently, these theories have not considered human agency aroused through the psychological perception they imply,

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[10] Craig Calhoun, *Nationalism*, Buckingham: Open University Press, 1997, p125.
[11] James G. Kellas, *The Politics of Nationalism and Ethnicity*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991, p20. "Nationalism is both an ideology and a form of behavior."

and how such human agency might be able to displace the strong one-ness of nation. What this section attempts to demonstrate is this feature of theories of nationalism (modernism, and ethno-symbolism).

1.3.1.1 Modernism

Modernist theories appeared on the scene of nationalism-theorizing as a reaction to the primordialist paradigm. Unlike the primordialists, modernists have reached the consensus that the nation is modern. Nations are considered wholly modern – modern in the sense of being recent.[12] The advent of the nation and its development have walked hand in hand with the rise of modernity. To put it strongly, no modernity generates no nation.[13]

Gellner, as a modernist, studied nationalism in its socio-cultural aspect. He pays attention to what makes people into one homogenized society: in his terms, high culture. He seeks the system which functions to provide a cultural realm universally communicable to members of nation. This system is the national educational system accompanied by industrialization through which high culture was distributed equally to the members of a certain nation.

Before industralization, culture was polarized between high culture and low culture. Low culture means "most ordinary members' stock of ideas and symbols in the course of the very process of living, as a part of the daily interchange between kinsmen, neighbours, masters, and disciples." High culture means "a culture transmitted by formal education, enshrined in texts, and setting up socially transcendent norms."[14] The ruling class never tried to bridge this gap, because it facilitates their policies of 'divide and rule.' This maintained cultural gap helps "allocate people to their social and geographical niche, inhibits the emergence of far-flung and possibly dangerous

[12] "Nations were wholly modern – modern in a sense of being recent, i.e. since the French Revolution..." Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism: a critical survey of recent theories of nations and nationalism*, London: Routledge, 1998, p21.

[13] However, apart from this shared basic belief, each modernist nationalism theorist analyses nationalism from different aspects. Umut Özkirimli, *Theories of Nationalism: a critical introduction,* London: Macmillan, 2000, p86.

[14] Ernest Gellner, 'The Coming of Nationalism and Its Interpretation: the myths of nation and class,' in Gopal Balakrishnan ed. *Mapping the Nation*, London, New York: Verso, 1996, pp.98-145, at p102.

identities and loyalties."[15] This situation also inhibits universal communication to the masses. In such a society, what is important for a person is to be high up on the social hierarchy. The rank system is stabilized by controlling access of members in the community to knowledge.

However, this "agro-literate society" was changed with Industrialization. Industrialization merges high culture and low culture through a homogeneous system of education. Knowledge is now not a privilege of the elite, but also accessible to the mass. This homogenization of society through education generates nationalism. In such circumstances, high culture becomes the pervasive, operational culture of an entire society. Then a modern man as an educated person "is not loyal to a monarch or a land or a faith, whatever he may say, but to a culture."[16]

Many criticisms of Gellner's model have been made from various viewpoints,[17] of which one is particularly relevant to this study. Gellner considers Industralization and national education to be the system that forms a homogenous high culture and, subsequently, nation. However, he does not acknowledge that this system can itself be variously interpreted by different human agency.[18]

Hobsbawm shares with Gellner the notion that nation is modern. However, while Gellner tries to clarify the social structure which brings people to see themselves as a nation, Hobsbawm tries to bring back human beings as subjects of nationalism.[19] His starting point is an attempt to understand how nationalism includes the masses. However, he does not analyse how the mass comprising the majority of the nation conceives the nation in their minds, but how the mass is controlled and driven by the ruling elite to see the same nation.[20] From this perspective, Hobsbowm's nationalism theory falls into the same pattern as Gellner's: both propose that the system

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[15] Gellner, 1996, p104.
[16] Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1983, p36.
[17] Ozkirimli, 2000, pp.137-143. In this section, a well summarized critique about Gellner is provided. Also see Stein Tønnesson and Hans Antlov, 'Asia in Theories of Nationalism and National Identity,' in Stein Tønnesson and Hans Antlov eds. *Asian Forms of the Nation*, Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 1996, pp.1-40. The significant point made is that that in the non-west, Gellner's claimed chronological order (premodern - industrialization- nation/modern) did not apply.
[18] Ozkirimli, 2000, pp.140-41.
[19] Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: programme, myth, reality*, Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990, pp.9-10.
[20] Hobsbawm, 1990, p11.

manipulated by the elite is equivalent to what is conceived in the minds of the mass, and assume that the mass is impressionable and this kind of engineering is possible.

Hobsbawm highlights how the elite controls and includes the mass by manipulating nationalism. The elite consciously invents incentives to control the masses by enshrining particular meanings, to signify nation. What is signified by this tradition differs over times in response to the demands of the masses. The point is, facing the necessity of receiving input from the masses, the elite managed to reshape an ideology as nationalism to make it sensible and convincing in the eyes of the masses. In short, social engineering of nationalism by the elite (by inventing new traditions, manipulating and filtering them as symbols of nation, or national ideology) creates the nation.

Hobsbawm identifies two different types of nationalism based on how the nation is invented. From 1830 to 1870, there was a democratic nationalism created by the French Revolution. Patriotism was felt toward the state which could realize democratic politics through its citizens.[21] From 1870-1914 was ethno-linguistic nationalism. In this period, the masses gradually came to participate in politics through elections. In order to establish a citizenry of the state which included the masses, despite the historical novelty of the nation for them, the elite used invented traditions, or history, as key incentives to legitimate action or cultivate group cohesion.[22] Social engineering by such means as the development of primary education, the invention of public ceremonies, and mass production of public monuments were major innovations in the project of creating the nation. Nationalism became a substitute for social cohesion through a national church, a royal family or other cohesive traditions; or become collective group self-presentation, a new secular religion.[23]

Hobsbawm clearly stated his intention of looking at the masses as the subject of nationalism, nevertheless, as we saw above, what he has examined is the response of the elite to the masses, gauged to unify them into one-nation. In his narratives, he

[21] Hobsbawm, 1990, p10.
[22] Hobsbawm, 1990, p12.
[23] Hobsbawm, 1990, p270.

depicts the elite as capable of leading and manipulating the masses. What the elite created by manipulating nationalism is equated to the unitary nation including the masses.

Hobsbawn thus makes the same assumption as Gellner: that the scope of the nation invented by the elite is coterminous with the scope of what is conceived and interpreted by the mass. As a result he is much closer to Gellner than he might suppose.

Like Gelner and Hobsbawm, Anderson is interested in what makes the nation possible. As he himself says, he and Gellner are on common ground in asserting that nation is an artefact.[24] In Anderson's view, nationality and nation-ness are cultural artefacts of a particular kind. He defines the nation as an imagined political community. It is imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. These imagined political communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but solely by the style in which they are imagined.[25]

Though Anderson focuses on the style in which nations are conceived, he also investigates the systems which drive people to conceive this new kind of community, such as printing capitalism, educational systems, and bureaucratic pilgrimages. The scope of the community as framed by these systems is again synonymous with the scope of what people imagine nation to be.

Deploying the concept of imagined communities, Anderson distinguishes four different modules of nationalism: Creole, Vernacular, Official, and Colonial. Creole nationalism is imagined through printing capitalism and administrative pilgrimages in both North and South America. A horizontally-imagined shared frame was created by the circulation of newspapers across regional and social boundaries. A vertically-imagined frame was created by the bounds of administrative pilgrimages, enabling people to see the line drawn between the suzerain and colony (as well as the horizontal ties among fellow administrative pilgrims). Creole functionaries met their

[24] Benedict O Anderson, *Imagined Communities : reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, London; New York: Verso (2nd ed), 1991, p4.
[25] Anderson, 1991, p6.

colleagues as fellow pilgrims. In coming across people coming from different areas within the administrative pilgrimage (such as within Brazil), they posed a question: why are we here together? Vertically, Creoles never dreamed of being invited to Madrid to hold official positions. Closed administrative pilgrimages help people to image the possible size of the circle, or nation.

In vernacular nationalism, the leading actors were "persons whose profession largely consisted of the handling of language: writers, teachers, pastors, and lawyers"[26]. The publications they produced, such as dictionaries and grammars, helped their own language standardize to form the basis of a printed language. Community was gradually activated by the coalition of the local bourgeoisie as customers of printing capitalism, language professionals as producers, and local capitalists as financial investors, whose publications circulated through the market. Also, importantly, by this stage of history, through each printing language, people could obtain a manual of how to build nationalism as it had already been done in France, through the French Revolution, and in the American continent.

Official nationalism is, in Anderson's words, "an anticipatory strategy adopted by dominant groups which are threatened with marginalization or exclusion from an emerging nationally-imagined community"[27]. Needless to say, this is carried out by an aristocratic ruling class. This module of nationalism is a "conjuring-trick"[28]. The two opposing political orders, one ancient (dynastic empire), and one quite new (nation), are willed to merge by stretching "the short, tight, skin of the nation over the gigantic body of the empire."[29] How was this possible? The artificial correspondence between the two political orders is realized by employing devices such as national education, propaganda organized by the state, and militarism. These provided a common realm of imaginable community. This type of nationalism overlaps an existing political realm with imagined communities and makes this look natural.[30]

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[26] Anderson, 1991, p74.
[27] Anderson, 1991, p101.
[28] Anderson, 1991, p111.
[29] Anderson, 1991, p86.
[30] As an important point, this naturalization does not mean the empire becomes available or accessible to all people within it as in popular nationalism. Hierarchical devices necessary to preserve or justify the existing imperial power were fully used on one hand, but on the other hand skillfully hidden. This hierarchical difference finds expression in different conditions in each empire. 小熊英二 [Oguma Eiji],

As the last wave, Anderson mentions colonial nationalism which copies, adopts, or combines the various existing models. The key spokespersons for colonial nationalism are lonely, bilingual intelligentsia unattached to either colonial masters or local society. For them, the scope of nation was created by administrative pilgrimages and education systems. The expansion of the colonial state invited 'natives' into schools and offices, and into colonial capitalism, yet excluded them from boardrooms.[31] They became aware that the empire would never let them reach the top of the administrative spiral staircase. The horizontal tie among different 'natives' is created by the local education system. Encounters with fellow natives through textbooks in school without any physical encounters nonetheless enable them to envisage a blueprint of future nation. Thus, the interlocking of particular educational and administrative pilgrimages provided the territorial base for new 'imagined communities' in which natives could come to see themselves as 'nationals.'

Anderson is much more concerned with the psychological dimension of nationalism than the other two modernist theorists are. Even if the nation is unfounded, he asserts, it is imagined and given a life as if it were real. However, the point for Anderson is a combination of the systems in which nation is conceived. When he explains the formation of this psychological scope of the nation, he nevertheless still attributes it to physical systems. Each different pattern of nationalism has its own set of systems which makes a particular scope of the idea of nation possible in each historical context. The scope framed by such a set of physical systems equates to what Anderson calls an 'imagined community.' So, in Anderson's theory, we see the usual assumption of equivalence between the scope of identity created by systems and that in people's minds. Again, there does not seem to be a consideration of possible diverse readings of the nation that might be created by these sets of systems.

The point shared by these three modernist theorists, then, is a transparency between the realm of nation as framed by physical systems and as conceived/perceived by human agency. All three theories therefore view the nation as one or as ideally one.

『単一民族神話の起源：<日 本人>の自画像の系譜』[*The Origin of the Myth of Homogeneous Japanese*], 新曜社 [Tokyo: Shinyosha], 1995.

[31] Anderson, 1991, p140.

This perception privileges questions of why and how the one-ness of the nation is formed, at the expense of asking why this is a more worthwhile enquiry than also exploring the limits of this one-ness.

1.3.1.2 Ethno-symbolism

This circumscribed approach to nation is not quite avoided by a second type of theory of nationalism either; namely, ethno-symbolism. Ethno-symbolism is a critical reaction to the modernist approach, with its key words of "modern", "created", "elite-constructed", and "social engineering" indicating that nationalism is another side of modernity. By contrast, the ethno-symbolist approach formulated by Anthony Smith emphasises the cultural continuity of the *ethnie*.

Smith defines *ethnie* in the pre-modern era as a group of people that is constituted, not by lines of physical descent, but by the sense of continuity, shared memory and collective destiny; that is, by lines of cultural affinity embodied in myths, memories, symbols, and values retained by a given cultural unit of population.[32] *Ethnie* as the origin of a nation is defined as "a named human population which shares myths and memories, a mass public culture, a designated homeland, economic unity and equal rights and duties for all members."[33]

Ethno-symbolists closely examine the journey from *ethnie* in premodern times to nation in modern. In this way they attempt to disclose why and how nation comes about from *ethnie*. They claim not to reduce national identity to physical changes and conditions (e.g. industrialization), as modernists do, but rather to examine it from a viewpoint of "how far these changes reflect on and disrupt the sense of cultural continuity that binds successive generations together."[34] So they do not deny the significance of the modernist's view. While modernists see the nation as a discontinuity from the premodern and as distinctively modern, ethno-symbolists see the nation as a compound between psycho-cultural elements such as myth (premodern) and drastic physical impacts such as industrialization.

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[32] Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity*, London: Penguin, 1991, p29.
[33] Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism: a critical survey of recent theories of nations and nationalism*, London: Routledge, 1998, p191.
[34] Smith, 1991, p26.

These *ethnies* began to become nations in the modern era. Smith proposed two routes for this journey. One is lateral (aristocratic), and the other is vertical (vernacular). While the major European countries, Thailand, and Japan are listed as concrete examples of the lateral pattern, listed examples of the vertical pattern are Burma, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

In the case of the lateral route, an aristocratic *ethnie* (i.e. the aristocratic group of one *ethnie*) politicizes a national culture, diffuses it among people and gradually makes it penetrate to outlying regions from the ethnic core and down the social scale. The result is a 'civic type' of national identity, fuelled by a largely territorial nationalism, but also with the assimilation of ethnic and cultural elements even in the most ardent examples of civic nationalism such as the republican nationalism in France.[35] The second route is vertical. This means an *ethnie* is transformed largely under the aegis of an indigenous intelligentsia into one ethnic nation. Native intelligensia and professionals rediscover and re-appropriate a selective ethno-history out of the pre-existing myths, symbols, and traditions to be found in the historical records and in the living memories of 'the people', the mainly rural lower strata. This latter day return to an 'ethnic past' (or pasts) is a corollary of the nationalist quest for 'authenticity.' Only that which can be shown to be 'genuine' and 'ours' can form the basis for a national identity, and that in turn requires a cultivation of indigenous history and vernacular languages and cultures, and the vernacular mobilization of 'the people' in and through their own history and culture. This type of nation is founded on 'ethnic' conceptions, and fuelled by nationalism based on ancestral ties.[36]

The significance of Smith's perspective is that he questions the extent to which physical changes like Industrialization affect the scope of national identity. He recognizes the gap between the scope of the nation as people perceive or conceptualize it and the scope of the nation supposedly framed by the systems. However, Smith does not explore a major implication of this gap: the possibility for interpretations of nation by different individual or groups within it. Instead, he still seeks to source a single nation from its premodern *ethnie*. He asserts that in both

[35] Smith, 1998, p194.
[36] Smith, 1998, p194.

ethnie and nation, the elements of shared myths, shared memories and shared cultures have a significant function to make people feel one *ethnie* or, in its extended line, one nation. Just as for the modernists systems like high culture energised by industrialization form the frame for people to see themselves as nation, so for Smith, other symbols such as myth, memories, cultures provide this frame. Rather than postulating such frames for the forming of nation it seems important to consider the potential of human agency to distort the one-ness of the nation by providing varied readings of nationhood. History, myths, and memories are read and mis/represented by people. Reading of symbols is relentless and peculiar rather than static and patterned. [37]

In conclusion, it might be worth restating the basic argument of this section. Both modernists and ethno-symbolists are concerned with what drives people to conceive one nation. They presume the one-ness of nation as their starting point, and subsequently its one-ness becomes the first thing to explain. Their approach is to identify the systems, conditions or symbols that set the scope of national identity. In this way, the interaction between human agency and these social structures/conditions/symbols is given little attention.

1.3.2 Ethnicity

Some theories of nationalism locate ethnicity in contrast to nation/nationalism. For example, Hobsbawm says:

> "Neither language nor ethnicity is essential to the original revolutionary nationalism, of which the USA is the major surviving version ... Classical nineteenth-century liberal nationalism was the opposite of the current search for a definition of group identity by separatism. It aims to extend the scale of human social, and political

[37] In addition, the sum of each item of symbols does not create the whole realm of identity. As Craig Calhoun pointed out, "Nations cannot be defined effectively by empirical measures of whether they are actually able to achieve sovereignty, to maintain integrity by defending themselves against internal splits, or to enforce sharp boundaries, by whether their culture is perfectly unified or particularly ancient." Calhoun, 1997, p5.

> and cultural units: to unify and expand rather than to restrict and separate." [38]

Hobsbawm goes on in a similar vein:

> "Nationalism belongs with political theory, ethnicity with sociology or social anthropology. It [ethnicity] can take the state or any other form of political organization or it can leave it alone..."[39]

A binary contrast between ethnicity and nation is evident here. Theories of ethnicity themselves also conceive of ethnicity in contrast to nation. This enables such theories – further attempts to explain how collective identity is formed – [40] to focus on non-majority groups rather than the majority, and in particular to focus on minorities such as ethnic minorities, or migrants.[41] Theories of ethnicity can be divided into the two broad camps: primordialist and instrumentalist.

This reflects Bell's division between two kinds of social movements: "symbolic and expressive movements whose ties are primarily affective; and instrumental groups whose actions are bound by a set of common, usually material, interests." [42] Primordialists identify ethnicity with cultural characteristics, whereas instrumentalists characterise ethnicity as socially/politically constructed through rational choice by individuals. Among instrumentalists, Abner Cohen regards ethnicity as a resource of achieving the social/political goals of members.[43] Paul. L. Brass finds ethnicity to be a political resource for the elite to mobilize people.[44] Hetcher attempts to explain it by

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[38] Eric J. Hobsbawm, 'Ethnicity and Nationalism in Europe Today,' in Gopal Balakrishnan ed. *Mapping the Nation*, London, New York: Verso, 1996, pp.255-266, at p257.
[39] Hobsbawm, 1996, p258.
[40] Though studies on ethnicity have also considered diversification within an ethnic group, the goal of theories on ethnicity is to attempt to explain how ethnicity is formed. John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith eds., *Ethnicity*, Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1996, pp.3-14.
[41] Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, London; Sterling, Va.: Pluto Press (2nd ed), 2002, p121.
[42] Daniel Bell, 'Ethnicity and Social Change,' in John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, *Ethnicity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, pp.138-45, at p144.
[43] Abner Cohen, *The Politics of Elite Culture: explorations in the dramaturgy of power in a modern African society,* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981.
[44] Paul L. Brass, *The Politics of India since Independence*, Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990, pp.129-34.

rational choice theories.[45] What is shared by instrumentalists is not only their ascription of ethnicity to 'common, usually material, interests,' but also their presumption that these interests are universally shared by members of the group.

Primordialist approaches can be regarded as attempts to analyse the minds of people (such as affective feelings towards one's own cultural characteristics). However, they actually represent the scope of ethnic identity as simply equivalent to the scope of shared cultural characteristics. Instrumentalist approaches make less attempt to analyse the minds of people, and moreover they equate the scope of ethnic identity with universally shared, usually material interests. This ensures that both sets of approaches have one feature in common with theories of nationalism: they disregard the role of psychological perception in forming agency.

1.3.3 Ways to grasp the complexity of agency/subject

Let us sum up the characteristics of the way in which collective human agency has been explained, either in terms of nation or ethnicity. Firstly, one-ness of the nation or of ethnicity is assumed. Secondly, agency has been seen as a collective attribute of either the nation or the ethnic group, so the cases have been considered separately. Thirdly, the scope of the nation or of ethnicity conceived in people's mind is equated with the scope of either nation or ethnicity framed by cultural, physical and material systems.

Two points can be made to clarify the limits of this type of approach. Firstly, the intellectual division of labour between nation and ethnicity does not allow us to grasp the hybridized agency that may be constructed between ethnicity and nation. Yet the history of the non-west has often educated us that creating space for one nation inevitably requires a whole set of new arrangements for ethnicity, territoriality, citizenship and so forth in the residuum created by the colonial masters.[46] Ethnicity,

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[45] Michael Hechter, 'A Rational Choice Approach to Race and Ethnic Relations,' in John Rex & David Mason eds. *Theories of Race and Ethnic Relations*, Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986, pp.268-77.

[46] Studies by postcolonialists have pointed out that ethnicity and nation-state in India have been constructed alongside colonial control. See for example, Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Governmental Roots of Modern Ethnicity,' in Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity: essays in the wake of subaltern studies*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002, pp.80-100. For a well-analysed and demonstrated

nation-state, and colonialism are at stake simultaneously, projected on each other, and inscribed on people through their interpretation or understanding of ethnicity and nation.[47] Hence to fully understand these phenomena of ethnicity and nation, we must discern how those elements are woven together.

Secondly, our psychological being is not framed only by physical and material systems, but also by our interpretations/misinterpretations. Unless we human beings were blank slates to be imprinted with representations, it is illogical to assume that what is expected to become a unitary national representation of nation or ethnicity is precisely 'copied' by every mind. Through the minds' filters, different imaginations, voices, and notions will emerge. To the extent that this is so, we may begin to question how far the nation is "the many as one,"[48] and rather pay attention to the 'many and not exactly one.' This is what we intend to do by considering the perceptions and attitudes of Malays in Singapore.

From the above, it becomes clear what is required of the theoretical framework in order to understand the case of agency in this study: firstly, it needs to be able to analyse human psychology; and secondly, it needs to be able to disentangle various inscriptions of nation, and ethnicity on agency in a given context. The type of theory which enables us to analyse such hybridized agencies using psycho-analysis has been actively developed by post-colonial studies. It rests on a different perspective that enables us to focus on rather complicated entities such as hybridized agency.[49] Homih K. Bhabha provides the concept of 'double-writing' to take up this complexity of simultaneous inscription of various elements to form hybridized agency.[50]

1.3.3.1 "Double Writing"

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case study of formation of ethnicity in India, see also Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India*, Delhi, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.

[47] Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: coloniality, subaltern knowledges, and border thinking*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000.

[48] Homi K. Bhahba, 'DissemiNation: time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation,' in Homi K. Bhabha ed., *Nation and Narration*, London; New York : Routledge, 1990, pp.291-322, at p294.

[49] Bhahba, 1990.

[50] Bhabha, in his essay entitled 'DissemiNation: time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation,' clearly stated that "what I am attempting to formulation this essay are the complex strategies of cultural identification and discursive address that function in the name of 'the people' or 'the nation' and the immanent subjects and objects of a range of social and literary narratives." Bhahba, 1990, p293.

This concept of Bhabha's concerns simultaneous inscription of various elements to form identities.[51] This approach is firstly a deconstruction reading of the formation of agency, and secondly an analysis of psychological consciousness. In relation to the previous theories on nation or ethnicity, the key characteristic of Bhabha's analysis of agency is its focus on how the physical presence of the real world can be interpreted through the screen of the mind and relocated in maps of the mind.

Bhabha aims to elucidate a hybridized agency, such that of Anglo-Indians, by investigating colonial discourses. He shows that the stereotypical binary divide between the west (colonizer) and the non-west (colonized) is constantly re-read by both the west itself and the non-west, and displaced through psychological consciousness and perception. There are two demonstrations about how minds work in encounters with other, from the colonizer to the colonized, and from the colonized to the colonizer. The mental function of the colonizer is called mimicry, while that of the colonized is called mockery. Mockery implies imitation. This imitation is performed by the colonized to become something like the colonial master as the model.

The colonizer tries to penetrate the colonized with his values and norms not only because he feels himself as superior to the colonized, but also because the colonizer feels fear or even adoration toward the colonized when encountering what the latter has and the colonial master does not, such as the masculinity of colonial natives presented by dark shiny skin, and tight chest muscles. While looking at their masculine strength of physical beauty a little contemptuously as the characteristics of barbaric natives, the civilized white master could also feel fear or adoration of it.

This complicated self-consciousness, fear or adoration toward an unknown presence, drives the colonizer to feel that something needs to be done, to maintain the hierarchy between the colonizer and the colonized despite their ambivalent feeling toward the unknown natives, or even to hide their shameful adoration of them. The master locates himself as a model for the colonized and educates them to be like him, the colonial master. However, the master will not accept that the barbaric natives can ever become exactly like him. There is always a gap between the master and the colonized. The

[51] Bhahba, 1990, p293.

colonized is at best added to the colonizer, but can never be counted with the colonizer. The colonized remains as the tamed different element to affirm the superior presence of the colonial master. The agency of performing this strategy is called "mimicry,"[52] which means creating (out of the colonized) something almost the same as the colonial master yet not exactly. The colonizer (in Bhabha's term, "the Pedagogical"[53]) needs to create a secretly uneven relation, due to his fear or adoration.

When the dominant colonizer as the Pedagogical tried to educate people, the subordinate is not simply tamed by the dominant, but also displaces that pedagogical sets of norms and values in exercising them as "the perfomative."[54] In the encounter of the colonized as "the performative" with the colonizer as "the pedagogical," the performative constantly displaces what the pedagogic teaches. It repeats or is obliged to repeat the pedagogic by way of imitating it to become like the pedagogic (e.g. a colonial bureaucrat who is a native Indian in British Malaya trained to become almost same to the colonizer yet not exactly). In the course of this imitation, repetition becomes parodied or caricatured. Through parody, the imitated pedagogic is even made fun of as the lordly authority, an act that displaces the centrality of the idealized model. Subsequently, counter-discourses against the dominant (i.e. the colonizer) are continually evoked, which displaces its totality, and blurs the line between imitation and parody.

This process, called "mockery" by Bhabha,[55] constructs a hybridized agency in the space between dominant and subordinate. For Bhabha this articulation of agency is an active process of struggling by the power and the subordinate and subsequently to create a new site in between the power and the subordinate (the third space). This idea has been developed not only by postcolonial studies but also by anthropology. Raymond Williams has arrived at a similar position to that of Bhabha by deploying Gramsci's notion of hegemony. By deploying Gramsci's insight that hegemony is an active reproductive process of struggling to capture hegemony by both the power and the subordinate, Williams defines culture (cultural identity) as a site of battle among

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[52] Homi K. Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Man' in Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London; New York: Routledge, 1994, pp.85-92, at p86.
[53] Bhahba, 1990, p299.
[54] Bhahba, 1990, p299.
[55] Homi K. Bhabha, 1994, p86.

dominant power, counter power, and alternative power to gain cultural hegemony.[56] This idea thus converges on Bhabha's idea of the third space between the power and the subordinate.

Bhabha's notion the creation of a third space by a hybrid minority agency promises to be very useful for the present study of Singapore Malays. However, the precise function which Bhabha proposes for minority agency above may not apply in the present study. Specifically, the function of "mockery" in Bhabha's illustrations is somewhat different from that of the "mockery" performed by Malays in Singapore.

In Bhabha's view, the articulation of minority agency seems to be a counter-force to the dominant, a source for decentralization of the position of the dominant, and subsequently a seed for democratization by displacing the dominant discourse. Bhabha's illustration needs to be understood in its political context. In postcolonial studies, to notice and acknowledge different agency by the third world is an important political stance. However, despite the presence of the different agencies of the non-West, the world is in a way still dominated by the first world or the West and this situation is continued also by the complicity of the non-West. To take one small example, why do we from the non-West go to the West and write in English? Why cannot we just do our academic work where we are and in our non-Western language? All of us participate in this complicity, including myself. This complicity seen in the relation between the majority (the West) and the minority (non-West) is comparable to that of the Malays in Singapore.

Such complicity affects the function of minority agency. Does minority agency always relativize, displace the centrality of the dominant – as in Bhabha's illustrations? Might it not be that minority agency itself also participates in consolidating the centrality of the dominant? As well as the playful minority agency to democratize the world, there may be a devious minority agency that consolidates the logic of the dominant. And that is the case in this study. In Singapore, the Malay minority

[56] See Raymond Williams, "The Analysis of Culture," in Raymond Williams, *The long revolution*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1961. Also see Antonio Gramsci, *Prison notebooks*, New York : Columbia University Press, 1992.

consolidates the norms and the ideologies presented by the majority or the power, in the course of embodying a certain agency.[57]

This agency of Malays in Singapore is not simply an internalization of the majority or the powerful, yet it too contributes to consolidate the nation. This agency of the minority is the central focus of this study. And as Bhabha's model does not explain the behaviour of this particular agency, it is helpful to borrow insights from a more comprehensive model of human psychological agency as well; one that can also account for agencies that behave differently from Bhaba's. This framework is provided by Slavoj Žižek.

1.3.3.2 Žižek's subject

Slavoj Žižek builds on Lacan's notion of "false consciousness." According to Lacan, our "reality" is always a fantasized view of the Real, as ideology.[58] This fantasized view of the Real creates an object of desire. In order to attain this object, our agency is aroused. Without a fantasized object of desire, our agency does not even exist.[59]

As Žižek reminds us, our fantasized view of the Real not only constructs a certain image of fulfilment, but also "endeavours to regulate a certain distance from it."[60] If we lose our object of desire, for example by attaining it, our agency can no longer be aroused. So by a trick of ideology, we create constant objects to be desired, at a distance from us, in order to sustain ourselves (our subject, our agency). And by another trick to help keep our fantasized objects at a distance, we create an Other in society, which functions as an obstacle to prevent us grasping our desired object.[61]

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[57] This point is made by Yoichi Komori. Komori cites the example of the trajectory of Japanese Imperial power. When it attempted to be a superpower after modernization, Japan imitated and copied the western superpowers to catch up. This mocking caused Japan to colonize neighbouring Asian countries. In reference to this example, Komori pointed out that mockery does not always seem to function as a counter-attack against the dominant discursive formation. This significantly shows another type of mocking in addition to Bhabha's – the latter being able to release the voice of the less powerful (colonized people, minority) and consequently displace the logic of dominant discourse by the power. 小森陽一[Komori Yoichi], 『ポストコロニアル』 [*Postcolonial*], 岩波書店[Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten], 2001, p31.

[58] Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief*, London; New York: Routledge, 2001, pp.82-3.

[59] Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: an essay on Schelling and related matters*, London ; New York: Verso, 1996, pp.189-97.

[60] Slavoj Žižek and Glyn Daly, *Conversations with Žižek*, Cambridge, UK: Polity; Malden, MA : Distributed in the USA by Blackwell Pub., 2004, p11.

[61] Žižek and Daly, 2004, p12.

We can best grasp Žižek's notion of agency/subject when it is applied to a concrete case study. Ghassan Hage uses it to study Australian nationalism.[62] According to Hage, the fantasized object of desire of white Australians, their necessary and meaningful way, is 'Australian nation': an idealised comfortable place for themselves. In this context, non-white Australians are constructed as Other which impede fulfilment of their fantasy. This Other is necessary, in order to maintain the distance of white Australians from their fantasized object of Australian nation. And Hage stresses that this 'way-to-be' is a meaningful goal that creates positive value and feelings for white nationalists. So for example, the public voicing of anti-migrant opinions is not just irrational disgruntled talk, but has an uplifting, celebratory function.[63]

While Hage's study focuses on the agency of an empowered white majority, the present study examines the agency of the Malay minority in Singapore. This group has its own 'false consciousness' of the Real. Their fantasised object of desire is that they will be able to perform the national ideology, meritocracy, as well as the rest of the Singapore society does. They are activated through the agency of their efforts to achieve their dream of becoming model Singaporeans.

In the case of a majority in society, as Ghassan Hage precisely illustrates, the distance between desire and actualization of that desire is created or controlled by the majority itself. Australian White nationalists need to create obstacles, in order to delay fulfilment of their dream of making Australia a White nation. The basic obstacle is migrants. In order to make their dream of creating a white Australia more meaningful, White nationalism can continually create more obstacles to do with migrants. It is the white Australian majority who has the power to create and control the presence of obstacles in its own path.

In the case of a minority, however, they are not in the position of creating the obstacles. They themselves are stigmatized obstacles. By choosing to try to get closer to the majority, as would-be members of the mainstream, they are those who must

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[62] Ghassan Hage, *White Nation: fantasies of white supremacy in a multicultural society*, Sydney: Pluto Press, 1998.
[63] Ghassan Hage, 1998, pp.48-77.

change themselves. Their efforts to achieve their desire to meet the standards of the majority cannot be directed to an outside entity. Malays themselves are the ones who are labelled as an obstacle – to the enhancement of a productive Singapore. So Malays detect the problems within themselves instead.[64] 'Something is wrong with us, therefore we have to find it and fix it by ourselves, to achieve our desire to attain the same level as the majority of the Singapore society.' This is a meaningful decision made willingly by the Malays in order to make their desire or dreams come true. Some day, they can tell themselves, we will stand as high as other ethnic groups. This thesis aims to reveal such a story as if applies to the Malays in Singapore since independence in 1965.

The psychoanalytic notions of Lacan are often used to examine synchronic structures. That is, they are used to understand agencies as they are at a particular point in time. However, as Michiko Shimokawabe points out, there is also a crucial diachronic aspect to development of agency. For a psychological agency in a certain context to reach the point where it has become almost naturalized and so is aroused automatically, requires "the dynamism of time."[65] In line with this insight, the present study employs an historical approach to understand a particular Malay agency in its Singapore context. It traces the history of that agency to reveal how it has been created and constructed. In doing so it depicts that agency more fully than a purely contemporary picture of it can do. It also demonstrates that the notions of Lacan / Žižek can be usefully applied to understanding structures other than synchronic ones.

1.3.3.3 Relevance of examining psychological agency within the context of Singapore society

[64] A comparison between Malays in Malaysia and Malays in Singapore is helpful to understand the setting of this thesis. In order to overcome the negative image of Malays which was created by colonial discourses, Malays in post-independent Malaysia identified the problems which prevent development of Malays in the state system. They exercised their power as the dominant majority and changed the state system so that it was favorable to Malays. A major legitimation of this pro-Bumiputera policy is enunciated in Alatas' book, *The myth of lazy native*. By contrast, Malays in post-independent Singapore as a minority have no such power to approach the state system. Their strategy for overcoming the negative image of Malay has to be to interrogate themselves to find the problems to be fixed. Regarding negative image of Malays in the colonial era, see Syed Hussein Alatas, *The myth of the lazy native : a study of the image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th century and its function in the ideology of colonial capitalism*, London : F. Cass, 1977.

[65] 下川辺美知子 [Shimokawabe Michiko], バタフライナイフは他者の語らいを希求する [A Butterfly Knife Seeks a Narrative of the Others/others], 『現代思想』 [*Revue de la pensée d'aujourd' hui,* Review of Contemporary Thought], pp.164-71, at p165.

This study examines a minority agency aroused in the relation between the majority/the powerful and the minority/ the ruled. It thus seeks to understand how voices from Singapore society are articulated within their relationship to the power-holders. This approach seems particularly apt in the case of Singapore, as we can appreciate by looking at certain developments in literature on Singapore society in recent years.

Studies of Singapore tend to try to understand the society by examining it from one of two angles. Some examine the Singapore state or the government, others examine Singapore from the side of civil society instead. The first group, those that examine the state, broadly seek to answer how the government rules and controls the Singapore society so successfully and with such economic prosperity. For example, Rodan analyses Singapore authoritarian state governance,[66] Chua Beng Huat examines how the government manages to control the society by opening up and closing down spaces for social participation,[67] and Christopher Tremewan explores the harmony between the government and local capitalists by analysing how the government controls socio-economic structures.[68] Regardless of whether such studies criticise the Singapore state or celebrate its success, their essential focus is the same: to examine society from the perspective of the government.

The second type of study examines Singapore from the viewpoint of the civil society. As pointed out by James Gomez and Lenore Lyons[69], several studies in the 1990s that purport to examine civil society in Singapore in fact examine discourses by the state

[66] Rodan does this in these three works: Garry Rodan, 'Preserving the One-Party State in Contemporary Singapore,' in Kevin Hewison, Richard Robison, Garry Rodan eds., *Southeast Asia in the 1990s; Authoritarianism, Democracy, and Capitalism*, Allen and Unwin, 1993; Garry Rodan, 'State-Society Relations and Political Opposition in Singapore,' in Garry Rodan ed., *Political Oppositions in Industrializing Asia*, London: Routledge, 1996, pp.95-127; Garry Rodan, 'Civil Society and Other Political Possibilities in Southeast Asia,' *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, vol.27, no.2, 1997, pp.156-79.
[67] Chua Beng Huat, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore*, London: Routledge, 1995.
[68] Christopher Tremewan, *The Political Economy of Social Control in Singapore*, Basingstoke: Macmillan and St Martins Press, 1994.
[69] Lenore Lyons and James Gomez, 'Moving Beyond the OB Makers; rethinking the space of civil society in Singapore,' in *Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, vol.20, no.2, (October) 2005, pp.119-31.

about civil society instead.[70] This approach reflects a view that civil society in Singapore is a space shaped by the state and always controlled by its intervention. Gomez and Lyons also criticise these works for only focussing on respectable NGOs which are well-known to be funded by the state, which are in a sense cosmetic decoration, and are often cited by the government or by academics in the state university as proof that the government allows a space for civil society.[71]

One group of studies aims to avoid the above limitations by using an ethnographic approach to examine the activities of various NGOs directly. These papers appear in the same volume as Gomez and Lyons' own article: a special focus issue of *Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* in 2005, titled "Democracy and Civil Society; NGO Politics in Singapore."[72] These ethnographic studies set out to explore whether there is a space for civil society in Singapore. The main conclusion that emerges from this collection of papers is that actors in the Singapore society are negotiating a space for civil society by acting on their own accord and not at the behest of the government. For example, in Kersty Hobson's paper on an NGO called Green Volunteer Network, she claims that the members of this NGO are not motivated by the PAP, but have their own motivation:

> "NGO volunteers are motivated by a desire to forge stronger feeling of belonging, of being Singapore in a way that connects them to the land and with each other."[73]

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[70] Chua Beng Huat, 'The Relative Autonomies of the State and Civil Society,' in Gillian Koh & Ooi Giok Ling eds., *State-society Relations in Singapore*, Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies : Oxford University Press, 2000, pp.62-76.
Chua Beng Huat, 'Non-Transformative Politics: civil society in Singapore' in, David C. Schak & Wayne Hudson eds., *Civil society in Asia*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003, pp.20-39.
Gillian Koh & Ooi Giok Ling eds., *State-society Relations in Singapore*, Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies: Oxford University Press, 2000.
Tanaka Yayoi, 'Singapore: subtle NGO control by a developmentalist welfare state,' in Shigetomi Shin'ichi ed., *The State and NGOs: perspectives from Asia*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2002., pp.200-21.
[71] Lyons and Gomez, 2005.
[72] The entire issue is on Singapore. Terence Chong, James Gomez, & Lenore Lyons eds., 'Special Focus - Democracy and Civil Society: NGO politics in Singapore' in *Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, vol.20, no.2, (October) 2005.
[73] Kersty Hobson, 'Considering "Green" Practices: NGOs and Singapore's emergent environmental-political landscape,' in *Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, vol.20, no.2, (October) 2005, pp.155-176, at p157.

The ethnographic detail in these papers is both valuable and interesting. As for the broad conclusion from these studies however, namely that actors in the Singapore society are negotiating a space for civil society, this is perhaps of limited value. We will always be able to find such NGO activities anywhere and to claim on that basis that actors in the society are "negotiating their space". We are always in multiple and shifting relations in our everyday life, and so space is always under negotiation. The question still remains: why is it that Singapore society does follow state ideologies to such a large extent?

The same objection was posed to me in a seminar in Japan years ago when, in much the same spirit as these ethnographic studies, I argued that Singapore society was a more liberated and less controlled society than previous literature acknowledged. One Japanese professor objected: "I know you want to present the idea that Singapore is not as controlled as all that. But you cannot deny there is a lot of evidence that Singapore is highly controlled compared to other places. Do you really expect to convince people that it is not, despite the previous literature and what is clearly going on in Singapore? Or is your work just attempting to "displace" or "go beyond" the previous studies of Singapore as an academic game? If so, what is the value of your work for helping us to understand Singapore society?"

As this sharp comment implies, it is best to try to understand Singapore society from two perspectives simultaneously. We cannot understand it well by just analysing the state and the policies of the government and assuming that the only space in Singapore for other members of the society is as puppets or enlisted partners of the government. Neither is it enough to discover NGO activities in Singapore and conclude that people are negotiating their own space free from the wishes of government. What might be more useful is to explore this question: at what points, and by what logic, are these two parties of Singapore state and Singapore society harmoniously compatible with each other? This transcends the limits of the previous two angles. It firstly avoids reducing everything that happens in Singapore to the well- crafted state technology of governance, and secondly goes further than demonstrating that space in Singapore is under negotiation. It makes us untangle the logic of how people in the society may operate in complicity with the state/government regardless of whether they mean to, while acting by their own choice and for their own sake.

1.4 The location of this study within the literature on ethnic issues in Singapore

A good deal has been written about ethnicity in Singapore. It is useful here to examine briefly two groups of studies: ones on Malays in Singapore specifically, and ones on ethnicity in Singapore more broadly. First we will examine the latter type.

1.4.1 Studies of ethnicity in Singapore

Some works on ethnicity in Singapore are largely uncritical. They accept the view that Singapore enjoys ethnic pluralism as well as high national cohesion, and focus on describing and explaining this fortunate state of affairs. Most do this by focusing on how the state policies manage ethnic groups in Singapore within the context of nation-building. For example, Raj Visil traces the history of changes in ethnic policy by the government in Singapore from independence to the 1990s.[74] Michael Hill and Lian Kwen Fee outline various policies of the government to do with ethnicity (such as education, multiracialism, housing policy, family planning) and explain how these policies maintain the stability of nation-building.[75] Another study that propounds the successful co-existence of ethnicity and nation, by Chew Sock Foon, does so more from the point of view of Singaporeans themselves. Chew presents large amounts of quantitative data from attitudinal surveys demonstrating that Singaporeans tend to identify strongly both with the nation and with an ethnic group.[76] A collection of papers edited by Lai Ah Eng similarly gives a positive evaluation of the situation whereby ethnic pluralism coexists with high national cohesion in Singapore.[77] Papers in the book variously describe how this success was achieved in the past, examine how it is presently achieved, and provide practical policy advice on how to maintain it in the future. Some of the papers take the point of view of examining state policies; others adopt the point of view of Singaporeans, for example by examining how

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[74] Raj Vasil, *Asianising Singapore: the PAP's management of ethnicity*, Singapore: Heinemann Asia, 1995.

[75] Michael Hill and Lian Kwen Fee, *The Politics of Nation Building and Citizenship in Singapore*, London; New York: Routledge, 1995.

[76] Chew Sock Foon, *Ethnicity and Nationality in Singapore*, Ohio: Ohio University Center for International Studies, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1987.

[77] Lai Ah Eng ed., *Beyond Rituals and Riots: ethnic pluralism and social cohesion in Singapore*, Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2004.

ethnicity is experienced and articulated in the scene of school by both students and teachers, [78] or through Singapore TV and films. [79]

Certain other studies take a more critical approach to issues of ethnicity in Singapore. They do so by examining those mechanisms mentioned above. David Brown examines how state-corporatism functions to maintain national-ethnic relations.[80] By his analysis, ethnic groups are depoliticized and redefined as interest groups, under a system of state-corporatism.[81] This is how they function as sub-groups within the national ideology of a Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Others (CMIO) model of multiracialism. That analysis of Brown is thought-provoking, but at the same time, we might suspect that ethnicity is actually something closer to the core of people's identity than this analogy of interest groups seems to allow for. John Clammer also examines how the Singapore state manages ethnicity. He shows how the state policies are designed to accentuate the notion of ethnic categories (often called 'races' in official Singapore statistics) in order to further the purposes of nation-building.[82] Specifically, he explores how the state actualises ethnicity as a real element of the identities of Singaporeans through various strategies and devices, such as identity cards, the education system, allocation of HDB flats and politics of culture. While Clammer mainly analyses the state policies on ethnicity, he also explores how ethnic categorisations are actually perceived in the minds of Singaporeans while they exercise these notions in their everyday life, by also investigating private spheres such as food, leisure preferences, and kin-networks.[83] Clammer thus analyses the state mechanisms for maintaining harmony between ethnicity and nation-building while at the same time revealing, and exploring to some degree, the psychological importance of ethnicity for Singaporeans.

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[78] See these papers in Lai Ah Eng ed., 2004: Christine Lee, Mary Cherian, Rahil Ismail, Maureen Ng, Jasmine Sim & Chee Min Fui, 'Children's Experiences of Multiracial Relationships in Informal Primary School Settings,' pp.114-45; Lana Khong, Joy Chew, & Jonathan Goh, 'How Now, Ne? An Exploratory Study of Ethnic Relations in Three Singapore Schools,' pp.172-96; Angelina Khoo & Lim Kam Ming, 'Trainee Teachers' Strereotypes of Ethnic Groups in Singapore,' pp.197-227.

[79] Kenneth Paul Tan, 'Ethnic Representation on Singapore Film and Television,' in Lai Ah Eng ed., 2004, pp.289-315.

[80] David Brown, *The State and Ethnic Politics in Southeast Asia*, London ; New York : Routledge, 1994.

[81] This analysis of ethnic groups in Singapore was also seen in Koh & Ooi eds., 2000.

[82] John Clammer, *Race and State in Independent Singapore, 1965-1990: the cultural politics of pluralism in a multiethnic society*, Aldershot, Hants,; Brookfield, Vt.: Ashgate, 1998. See also John Clammer, 'The Institutionalization of Ethnicity: the culture of ethnicity in Singapore,' *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 5, no.2, 1982, pp.127-39.

[83] John Clammer, 1998, pp.88-106.

To sum up, previous work provides a wealth of data on state policies regarding ethnicity in Singapore. At least two studies also offer a detailed analysis of the mechanisms by which harmony is maintained between the two potentially conflictive elements of ethnicity and nation. And certain works also examine how ethnicity, or nation, or both are experienced and perceived by Singaporeans in their lives. That concern is directly relevant to the present study which, while employing theoretical perspectives that differ from those of the earlier works, will explore those same questions with regard to Malays in Singapore specifically.

1.4.2 Studies on Malays in Singapore

Clammer pointed out as early as 1981 that there had been few studies of Malays in Singapore, in contrast to the large number of studies of Chinese Singaporeans.[84] Since then the situation has not greatly changed; there are still few published works which focus mainly on Malays in Singapore.[85] The type most relevant to the present study is those that focus on the marginal social position that Malays occupy in Singapore society. As we will see later, the Malays have long been a sensitive presence in Singapore in the eyes of the government. Soon after independence it started to raise the matter of Malays' inadequacy as Singapore citizens. A related line of academic research appeared on an issue called "the Malay problem." Works of this type pose the same question (although with varying answers); namely, why cannot the Malays in Singapore be integrated well into Singapore society?

Three representative works can be listed. Firstly, as early as 1974, the Singapore Malays were studied by Stanley Bedlington.[86] Asking why the Malay community in Singapore could not be integrated into Singapore society, he concluded that cultural traits specific to Malays were the main factor preventing this from happening. A

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[84] Clammer actually points out this contrast between studies about Chinese Singaporeans, or about ethnicity in Singapore more broadly, on the one hand; and about Malay Singaporeans on the other. John Clammer, 'Malay Society in Singapore: a preliminary analysis,' *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science*, vol.9, no.1-2, 1981, pp.19-32.

[85] For a fairly recent list of published works on Malays in Singapore, see Hussin Mutalib, Hashimah Johari, Rokiah Mentol, Zaleha Othman, Zaleha Tamby, compliers & eds., *Singapore Malay/Muslim Community 1819-1994: a bibliography*, Singapore: Centre for Advanced Studies, National University of Singapore, 1995.

[86] Stanley S. Bedlington, *The Singapore Malay Community : the politics of state integration*, Ph.D thesis, Cornell University, Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1974.

second comprehensive work was carried out in the 1980s by Tania Li.[87] As a anthropologist, she employs a strongly ethnographic approach, providing details of the life of the Malay community in Singapore, which well show that Malays are located in a marginalized position in the Singapore society. Her most relevant finding for this study is her claim that Malays political leaders have been passively inculcated with the stereotypical view of themselves as 'lagging behind' – an image which Li believes has been created by the ideology of the non-Malay majority, especially politicians.[88] The third and most recent study, in the 1990s, is by Lily Zubaidah Rahim.[89] She critically investigates the state policies toward the Malays in Singapore, to demonstrate how these policies have not been sufficient to enable Malays to become first class citizens. Her study amply demonstrates that state policies did not consider the structurally disadvantaged position that Malays occupy.

These three above works all usefully analyse social or cultural factors that locate the Malays as a marginalized group in Singapore society. What these works have not done – and what this study will do – is to reveal how a particular psychological agency of Malays actively contributes to building the majority nation. It does so by creating and pursuing meaningful goals for its own sake. This happens in a certain context: when Malays feel compared with other ethnic groups in terms of their achievements. Malays, in this picture are neither a segregated ethnic group, nor passive recipients of state ideology. A Malay psychological agency will be revealed which is lively, positive, and ready to enact the state ideology by its own will and choice. Malays create and pursue a fantasised object of desire – acceptance as equal Singaporeans. It is by their constant efforts to attain this object that their agency is constructed, and their performance consolidates the centrality of the majority or power-holders.

This story about Malays in Singapore is not only a local story about Singapore, but also a more universal story of how minority agency is constructed.[90] When you belong

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[87] Tania Li, *Malays in Singapore: culture, economy, and ideology*, Singapore; New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.
[88] Li, 1989, pp. 179-82.
[89] Lily Zubaidah Rahim, *The Singapore Dilemma: the political and educational marginality of the Malay community*, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; Oxford, U.K.; Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1998.
[90] An earlier study of an included yet differentiated ethnic minority hints at a minority agency similar to the Malay agency identified in this thesis. Ichiro Tomiyama examines Okinawans, who became a part of Japan after modernization and tended to be considered as inferior to those Japanese who lived on the

to an included yet differentiated minority in a society, how do you behave? Should you assume that you will be in conflict with the majority, or conversely assume that you can simply ignore it and go your own way with self-respect? In the rest of the thesis I am going to find answers, by examining discourses and conducts of Malays in Singapore over several decades.

1.5 Data sources and methodology

1.5.1 Use of *Berita Harian/Berita Minggu*

In this study, the main source of data is the Singapore Malay newspaper *Berita Harian,* along with its Sunday edition *Berita Minggu.* Other sources are publications by Malay/Muslim organizations, and fieldwork observation. The choice of *Berita Harian/Berita Minggu* as the main data source for this study needs to be explained.

It is well known that in Singapore the government controls freedom of speech and that censorship is strict. In fact, domestic newspapers in different languages are controlled by the state. By the 1990s, eight domestic newspapers had come to be organised under the government organ Singapore Press Holdings, and these include *Berita Harian/ Berita Minggu.* (The others are *The Straits Times/The Sunday Times, Business Times, The New Paper, Lianhe Zaobao, Lianhe Wanbao,* and *Shin Min Daily News*).[91]

The purpose of the series of Newspaper and Printing Press Acts through Singapore history has been described as follows:

> "...not to stifle the development of vibrant press or to impede the free flow of information, but to ensure that the interest of the state and the society are not sacrificed by the press in its role to inform and educate. The role of the press is to help in nation-building – creating one nation, one people, out of different

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mainland. This ethnic minority attempted to improve themselves by promoting a standard mainland variety of Japanese and banning use of their own Okinawan dialect.
富山一郎 [Tomiyama Ichiro], 『戦場の記憶』 [*Memories at the War Front*], 日本経済評論者 [Tokyo: Nihon keizai hyoronsha], 1995.

[91] Tan Yew Soon & Soh Yew Peng, *The Development of Singapore's Modern Media Industry,* Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1994, p28.

> races, worshipping different gods, by informing and educating Singaporeans of national policies and issues, and inculcating good values in the people."[92]

Consequently, indeed, newspapers and other printed publications in Singapore are loyal to the state ideology, and do tend to sound like state organs compared to most newspapers in many other societies. They tend to support the state ideology and state policies, and play a pedagogic role of delivering messages from the state about what the government wants Singapore nationals to do. Compared to the situation in other societies, the distance between the state and newspapers is quite close, and editors of the main national newspaper *The Straits Times* and government ministers have acknowledged that their relationship to each other is a cosy one.[93] This raises the issue, of course, of whether we can listen to "voices of Malays" or gain insights into Malay agency by examining discourses in the Malay newspapers of Singapore.

I believe we can, so long as we keep in mind the nature of these sources. What needs to be remembered is that *Berita Harian/Berita Minggu* does not only serve a pedagogic role as a government mouthpiece of the Malays; it is at the same time a positive space for the Malays to articulate themselves in the Malay language. The former editor of *Berita Harian/Berita Minggu*, Zainul Abidin bin Rasheed, described *Berita Harian/Berita Minggu* as one of the pillars by which Malays have built their community.[94] He describes *Berita Harian* thus:

> *Berita Harian* is the only Malay daily paper in Singapore but it is more than just a newspaper. It is the embodiment of the Malays' pride in having their own point of view and being able to express it in their own language and imagery. And often it is the only means by which Malays can make sense of the economic and political tides that wash around them ... It represents an enormous – probably unique – body of experience of how a depressed and disorientated community can struggle to its feet and get its bearings.[95]

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[92] Tan and Soh, 1994, p53.
[93] David Birch, *Singapore Media: communication strategies and practices*, Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1993, p18. Also see Derek Davis, 'Press,' in Michael Haas ed., *The Singapore Puzzle*, Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1999, pp.77-106.
[94] Zainul Abidin bin Rasheed, *MUIS and MENDAKI: current and future challenges*, Singapore: Dept. of Malay Studies, National University of Singapore, 1992, p9.
[95] Zainul Abidin bin Rasheed, 1992, p14.

As this naturally positive assessment indicates, *Berita Harian* also provides a forum for Malays to express their own opinions within limits, to cultivate their ideas and to build their own pride. Malays who are prominent to varying degrees as political, educational or social leaders can give direction to other Malays by having their comments and speeches reported in *Berita Harian*, other Malays can write critiques about the Malay community as journalists, often quoting the voices of other Malays who they have interviewed in (e.g.) places of work, places of education or on the street; while other Malays also participate actively by writing letters to columns or to forums for readers' letters. More passively, a significant proportion read the articles, opinions, and critiques provided by *Berita Harian/Berita Minggu* and consume the state ideologies, while also creating their own opinions. All this makes it possible to say that, although *Berita Harian/Berita Minggu* is friendly to state ideology, it has also has played a significant role for the Malays to articulate their opinions, especially in their own eyes.

This leads to a related point. We can observe a trend among some studies of searching for "real" autonomous voices within a given society. These supposedly real voices are often set by scholars against their unreliable counterparts. The real, autonomous voices of local people in Southeast Asia tend to be contrasted to the biased voices of Western scholars writing about the region.[96] Likewise, some scholars seek the voices of the Subaltern: real, local and autonomous Subaltern voices independent of imperial history and distinct from the voice of the colonizer. Voices of an ethnic minority which fail to be satisfactorily rebellious will thus be regarded as false in some way if one is always looking for something neatly opposed to power or the majority. However, this academic trend has been criticised. It has been observed that the freely rebellious and autonomous local voice is a (re)creation of the scholars who seek it, entailing as it does the false assumption that a given group of people possess a free and unchanging essence. Dipesh Chakrabarty criticises the field of Subaltern studies for re-essentialising the Subaltern in this way by its recreation of "Subaltern" as the counterpart of the colonizer.[97]

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[96] For an example of this approach see the book Laurie J. Sears ed., *Autonomous Histories, Particular Truths: essays in honor of John R. W. Smail*, Madison Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1993.

[97] Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Radical Histories and Question of Enlightenment Rationalism: some recent critiques of subaltern studies,' in Vinayak Chaturvedi ed., *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the*

Another reason I do not regard Malay voices in *Berita Harian/Berita Minggu* as merely gagged voices and therefore as 'unreal' is that they so often sound like Malay voices I heard outside *Berita Harian/Berita Minggu*. The pattern of attitudes and conducts that emerges from the Malay discourses in *Berita Harian/Berita Minggu* was often reflected in remarks that Malays made to me during casual conversations while I was living in Singapore. In fact Chapter 7 relies largely on data from conversations with Malays during my fieldwork to demonstrate this affinity specifically.

A final practical reason for using *Berita Harian/Berita Minggu* is that it yields far more detailed information about Malay activities and related attitudes in Singapore over the course of time than any other source. As a first step in my research I examined old issues of the main Singapore national newspaper, *The Straits Times*. This left me briefly wondering about the feasibility of my project since it had so little information about the Malay community, especially during the 1970s. By contrast, *Berita Harian/Berita Minggu* yields a great deal of data from the relevant decades on the activities and conducts of the Malay community, and on the attitudes of some Malays, especially politically engaged Malays. Many of the facts and events underlying the discourses in *Berita Harian/Berita Minggu* examined in this thesis have apparently not been mentioned in print outside *Berita Harian/Berita Minggu* itself and were only knowable from that source.

This study then will examine Malay voices expressed in the sole Malay language newspaper of Singapore, to find out what discourses and conducts are articulated and performed by the Malays, and try to discover the logic and motivations behind them.

1.5.2 Additional information about quoted sources

All excerpts from *Berita Harian/Berita Minggu* quoted in this thesis were originally in Malay, and have been translated by me into English. I take responsibility for the accuracy of these and all other translations from Malay that appear in this thesis. All

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Postcolonial, London: Verso, 2000, pp.256-80. See also Tessa Morris-Suzuki, 'Anti-Area Studies,' *Communal/Plural*, vol.8, no.1, 2000, pp.9-23., and also see Tessa Morris-Suzuki, 『批判的想像力のために: グローバル化時代の日本』 [For critical imaginations: Japan in an era of globalization], 東京: 平凡社 [Tokyo: Heibonsha], 2002.

excerpts from *The Straits Times* and *The Sunday Times* have been quoted in the original English. Regarding quotations from other sources, it will be specified in the relevant footnotes where necessary whether they were originally in Malay or in English. Most remarks quoted from conversations I had with people are taken are from field notes in which those remarks were recorded shortly after the conversation took place. Occasionally field notes were taken during the conversations instead with permission of the informants.

Chapter 2 Fundamental Choice: Meritocracy or Special Rights

The agency of minority is constructed in relation to the majority. Therefore, in this chapter, the story starts with how the majority dealt with the Malays in Singapore, from 1965 to 1970. Section 1 examines one of the "founding myths"[1] of the Republic of Singapore, namely, the ideology of meritocracy. It outlines the relation between governance by meritocracy and the agency it creates, as well as briefly foreshadowing the type of agency it might create for Malays as 'underachievers', specifically. Section 2 shows the evolving notion of which ideology should apply to Malays in Singapore. Meritocracy was contradictory to another possible notion that gave Malays in Singapore *bumiputra* status – under which Malays would be entitled to affirmative action based on their special indigenous status. Through parliamentary discourse, faithfully reported in Malay newspapers, meritocracy triumphed over bumiputra status as the model that should prevail for Malays. Section 3 shows how, with the notion of meritocracy now accepted by Malay leaders as the relevant ideology for Malays, the government duly began to create a suitable agency for Malays as a 'backward' group to control them. And at this point, the government challenged the Malays to answer the ultimate question: whether they would openly declare their allegiance to the meritocracy ideology, or rather continue to angle for special treatment based on their indigenous status.

2.1 Governance of meritocracy in Singapore

Several significant ideologies were formulated by the PAP government and inculcated into Singapore society after independence. Meritocracy accompanied by equal opportunity in free and open competition, is one of these. It has remained a fundamental ideology for Singapore, as articulated by the Senior minister, Goh Chock Tong in 2005.

> "There are several core principles which underpin our economic transformation through human capacity enhancement. First is the philosophy

[1] Michael Hill & Lian Kwan Fee, *The politics of nation building and citizenship in Singapore,* London, New York: Routledge, 1995, p31.

and practice of meritocracy. Every person – regardless of race, religion, gender and family background – has equal opportunity to realise his or her potential."[2]

Meritocracy was also located as the core of Singapore in the 1970s by the then prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew. Here is a statement by him in 1971:

> "Outstanding men in civil service, the police, the armed forces, chairmen of statutory boards and their top administrators – they have worked the details of policies set by the government and seen to its implementation. These people come from poor and middle-class homes. They come from different language schools. Singapore is a meritocracy. And these men have risen to the top by their own merit, hard work, and high performance. Together they are a closely-knit and co-ordinated hard core."[3]

This vision of meritocracy promises to evaluate each individual based on his/her achievement, not by "race, religion, gender and family background," while guaranteeing equal opportunity in a free open competition.

As R. Quinn Moore points out, meritocracy in Singapore was coupled with multi-racialism soon after independence. He observes that "Each racial group was cast as an equally important, distinct part of a nation that would strive to ensure that success came on the basis of merit, rather than racial, ethnic, religious, or cultural favouritism."[4] An important function of meritocracy has thus been to enhance and nurture Singapore's integrity as a nation, overcoming ethnic divisions by applying universal appeals.[5]

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[2] Goh Chok Tong, "*Keynote address by Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong Of the Republic of Singapore at The Jeddah Economic Forum On Monday, 21 February 2005, at Hilton Hall, Jeddah,*" Press release, Asian-Middle Eastern Dialogue, Hihttp://app.amed.sg/internet/amed/read_content.asp?View,176, (accessed 26th April 2006).

[3] Lee Kuan Yew, "*Address by the Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew at a seminar on Communism and Democracy, Wednesday, 28th April 1971,*" Speech Text Archival and Retrieval System, National Archive of Singapore, http://stars.nhb.gov.sg/public/index.html (accessed 26th April 2006).

[4] R. Quinn Moore, 'Multiracialism and Meritocracy: Singapore's approach to race and inequality,' *Review of Social Economy*, vol. 58, no. 3, September 2000, pp.339-60, at p344.

[5] Hill and Lian, 1995, p31.

2.1.1 The mechanisms of government by meritocracy

This notion of meritocracy, combined with equal opportunity and free open competition, is often considered and even celebrated by Singaporeans as a basis of a fair system of social promotion. The main concern of the present section is: How does this ideology of meritocracy govern people? What sort of technologies of governance does it create?

Firstly, this ideology of meritocracy creates a certain type of agency. This is a self-motivated, active agency seeking to achieve success as it is designated by the state, not for the sake of the state, but for the sake of oneself. How this agency arises is as follows. As members of the society are assumed to have equal opportunity and be in free and open competition, a person's perceived value is based on what s/he has achieved through such competition. And under these conditions, that achievement is the primary criterion for success. If one wishes to achieve success, the only thing to do is to strive to demonstrate one's achievement. One's success is thus liable (rather simplistically) to be equated to one's capability, which, in turn will be equated with the amount of effort and hard work done to obtain that capability. If we put this the other way round, the pattern becomes clear: an individual works hard → obtains capability → demonstrates achievement → brings success to him or herself.

In everyday life in Singapore, the phrases "hard-working" and "work hard" are frequently used to convey positive emotion. For instance, when I had a chat with a Malay businessman, I asked, "What makes you achieve success in business? What do you think?" His answer was "hard working lah. If you work a little bit harder than other people, then it will do."[6] The way he attributes his success to hard work alone, without mentioning any other factors, can be understood in the framework of Singapore meritocratic logic above.

[6] Conversation in English with a Malay business man in his halal foodshop, on 20th September 2002.

Se condly, this self-motivatreated by meritocracy makes it po**overnment by meritocra**ssible to "govern withoutociety is an 'ethical' community co: mprising self-motivated r entering this community is to sh:y, combined with equow that one is motivatedto contribute to the state's well-be:ered and even celebrateding out of motivation tos of one's own preferences and de:ion. The main concern ofsires. Here a seemingly irporated within the ambit of the so govern people? What soiety. Being self-motivathing for oneself through this m: otivation tends to be pesomething within the individual sp here. Yet, since this selfmeritocracy is also the national id:ritocracy creates a certairology for forming the sormance is inevitably connected to eking to achieve successthe public and political sp

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Th is self-promoting subject to surmount almost any obstacle society are assumed to h to achieve new targets or g:e, to achieve success. Even 180- a person's perceived v: de gree turns in state policiegets or goals to be achieved, the petition. And under these ris ky nature of policies beinstmodern society.[8] Once the new cess. If one wishes to achi po licy becomes reality peop even remembering how the past one's achievement. One wa is different, because it is otivated subjects to work hard to l to one's capability, whi ac hieve new goals, instead rd work done to obtain t tivated agencies are activated by th ir inner desire to prove the face of new changes. In this rn becomes clear: an in wa y one makes sure of chievement → brings suc iety. High-flown terms such as 'n ation', 'the government', en necessary to activate people; thi s is "to govern without gc ore, the phrases "hard-w

positive emotion. For inst

Fo r instance, in line with this on the importance of Chinese , "What makes you achie lar guage, one Singaporeant who I met has begun to study s "hard working lah. If y Ch iinese language. She is niversity, because her officially ."[6] The way he attributes

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[7] Nther factors, can be un ikolas Rose, 'Governing "Ad in Andrew Barry, Thomas Osborne, & Nil colas Rose eds., *Foucault am, neo-liberalism and rationalities of* go vernment, Chicago: University'-64, at p61. above.

[8] P aul Higgs, 'Risk, Governmenton of Citizenship,' in Graham Scambler an d Paul Higgs eds. *Modernity, sociology towards 2000*, London; New Yo rk: Routledge, 1998, pp. 176-f such a switch in Singapore has been fro m a two child policy to a polvomen to have more children, an issue kn own as 'The Great Marriage DMarriage Debate," see, Stella R. Quah, 'Th e Social Significance of Marapore: policy and trends,' in Stella R. Qu ah ed., *The Family as an Ass e on marriage, parenthood and social po licy*, Singapore : Times Acader

[9] Malay business man in his halalose, 1996, p60.

designated second language is Tamil, in line with her ethnicity. Yet, she is willing to try learning Chinese and expresses her feelings to me by saying, "if you work hard, you can do."[10] She clearly feels good about her positivism and self-motivation. Perhaps she can even dream of appearing in the national newspaper, *The Straits Times*, as a success story; a role-model of a non-Chinese Singaporean managing to master Chinese through self-motivation. And then she will gain recognition and celebration from the society. This choice to learn Chinese is ostensibly her most personal choice but it is inevitably oriented to the national ideology, meritocracy.

This type of nexus of the society and individuals is well-described by Nikolas Rose in the case of British society and is called "advanced liberalism."[11] According to Rose, advanced liberalism controls and governs people by motivating their positive feelings of participation and making them responsible self-motivated agencies, without imposing or forcing. The agency here is "active individuals" who are "seeking to "enterprise themselves, to maximize their quality of life through acts of choice, according to their life a meaning and value to the extent that it can be rationalized as the outcome of choices made or choices to be made." [12] These active individuals' own choices and their performance based on those choices are in complicity with state goals without their knowing. Rose says

> "Within this new regime of the actively responsible self, individuals are to fulfil their national obligations not through their relations of dependency and obligation to one another, but through seeking to fulfil themselves within a variety of micro-moral domains or "communities" – families, workplaces, schools, leisure associations, neighbourhoods."[13]

For our Singaporean Tamil student above, studying Chinese is a way of seeking fulfilment in one such micro-moral domain. The goal set by the state overlaps with her own goal set as a willing choice by herself as an autonomous individual. To govern without governing is "to govern through the regulated and accountable choices of

[10] Casual conversation in English on NUS campus on 5th March 2003.
[11] Nikolas Rose, *Powers of Freedom: reframing political thought*, Cambridge; New York : Cambridge University Press, 1999, p84.
[12] Rose, 1996, p57.
[13] Rose, 1996, p57.

autonomous agents – citizens, consumers, parents, employees, managers, investors – and so govern through intensifying and acting upon their allegiance to a particular 'community'."[14] Meritocracy in Singapore is successful in creating such agencies that make it possible to "govern without governing".

2.1.2 Managing 'losers' within meritocracy

The above provides a broad picture of the mechanism by which the state can stimulate or drive people to achieve the state plan without governing. And in the case of the winners in the society, it succeeds. The Singapore Tamil university student above, for instance, is clearly a winner – she has already gained a coveted place at the National University of Singapore. But how about the 'losers' or those who are 'a burden to society'? How does governance control those who are not successful in performing under meritocracy? Such a person under meritocracy tends to be seen as one who does not work hard enough to gain success. And in a system where human beings are perceived as inorganic pieces on a chessboard, such problems can only be seen as faults of individuals, not as a problem of the social structure. Witness this comment by Sinnathamby Rajaratnam, the Minister of Foreign Affairs (emphasis added): "*good citizens* either from the majority or the minority, achieve success based on their ability and hard work."[15] Those who do *not* succeed are then, by clear implication, bad citizens. And they are targeted as objects in need of improvement, or fixing.

Rose discusses the improvement of 'bad citizens' in the case of advanced liberalism in Britain. The relevant group in that case is an underclass which is

> "...excluded from the benefit of a life of choice and self-fulfilment ... whose efforts as self-advancement have been frustrated for so long that they suffer from "learned helplessness" whose self-esteem has been destroyed."[16]

These citizens, as Rose tells us, are shown the path of active self-advancement and stimulated to motivate themselves:

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[14] Rose, 1996, p61.
[15] *Berita Minggu*, 22nd March 1970.
[16] Rose, 1996, p59.

> "They are to be assisted not through the ministrations of solicitous experts proffering support and benefit cheques, but through their engagement in a whole array of programmes for their ethical reconstruction as active citizens – training to equip them with the skills of self-promotion, counselling to restore their sense of self-worth and self-esteem, programmes of empowerment to enable them to assume their rightful place as the self-actualizing and demanding subjects of an "advanced" liberal democracy."[17]

Under the meritocracy ideology of Singapore, while Malays are identified as negative elements and similarly targeted for improvement, the remedy of the state is more hands-off, less interventionist than in the case of Britain described above. The strategy in Singapore is constantly to demarcate Malays as inferior to the rest of the society, and thus to pose a clear and humiliating question to them: 'Why cannot you do as well as other people, here where everyone has equal opportunity and competes freely and openly?' That question, by the prevailing logic of meritocracy, entails others, such as: 'Aren't you capable of working hard and disciplining yourself to succeed?' 'Can you really do it?'

We might ask how this strategy for improving Malays – that is, pinpointing them as a negative presence in the society, highlighting their inferiorities and humiliating them by casting doubt on their abilities – could succeed. How could it provoke these would-be members of mainstream Singapore society to become active self-promoting agencies? This becomes understandable in the light of Slavoj Žižek's explanation about the psychological subject, and specifically, about the distance between us and our object of desire (see Chapter 1). By constantly demarcating Malays as inferior, the state holds up in front of them the goal to be achieved: to escape from will-be status and become respected citizens. They are stimulated by the picture of achieving this goal, aroused by their distance from it. Their humiliation, and the doubt and scepticism by others about their ability, maintain an invigorating distance between what they want to achieve and what they have managed so far. This distance provokes their desire to prove that they can achieve it.

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[17] Rose, 1996, p60.

Let us summarize what meritocracy accompanied by equal opportunity and free open competition does in Singapore society. Theoretically, it entails strong elements of advanced liberalism as conceived by Nikolas Rose, and manipulation of desire as conceived by Žižek. Firstly, meritocracy enables the Singapore state to govern or control people without governing, by creating a new type of agency. This agency is a self-motivated active agency which is willing to enact the state ideology to prove itself, for its own sake but not for the state. Secondly, meritocracy governance motivates people by utilizing their desires. Those detected as a negative presence in the society are designated as objects for improvement. In the case of Malays, by stigmatizing them and casting doubt on their ability, the state creates a desired goal for them and keeps them at a healthy distance from that goal, provoking their constant desire to prove themselves. We will see the beginnings of that process later in this chapter.

2.2 Emerging ideology for Malays: bumiputra or meritocracy?

The issue for Malays was: what will be their position within the Singapore meritocracy? Will they, and should they, have special rights and treatment?

After independence, two broad different notions about their own position existed among the Malays in Singapore. One was the state's notion that Malays were on the same footing as members of any other ethnic group. According to this notion, the state should take no particular steps of affirmative action for Malays, but rather Malays should improve their own position by making effort and working harder. This notion means for them to adopt meritocracy ideology. The other was the notion of *bumiputra*, or indigenous people. It insists on the special position of the Malays and asserted that affirmative action should be taken on behalf of Malays as necessary, to help them improve their position. This was based on a premise that the structural disadvantages faced by Malays were far bigger than they could be expected to overcome with existing resources.

2.2.1 Origin of bumiputra rights

The notion of bumiputra rights has its origins before the independence of Singapore, when that state was still a part of the Malaysian federation. In Malaysia, there was an understanding about the special status of Malays. They were referred to as *bumiputra* (literally 'sons of the soil'), namely, the indigenous population. This status of bumiputra was accompanied by special (*istimewa*) treatment for them; that is, affirmative action for them as distinct from the other ethnic groups in Malaysia. This notion became central to public affairs in 1971 in Malaysia, and known as bumiputra policies.[18] Significantly, Malays were the majority group in Malaysia – unlike the case in Singapore.

2.2.2 The Singapore government's stance on Malays: pre-independence

At that time, the PAP state government of Singapore, led by Lee Kwan Yew, took a different stance on Malays to that of Malaysia. It did not entirely accept the idea of affirmative action for Malays. It had already conceived its fundamental ideology, meritocracy, and promised equal opportunity to all Singapore citizens in key fields, regardless of ethnicity. Based on this idea, the PAP government refused to provide affirmative action for Malays with regard to employment.

This stance of the Singapore state government aroused criticism. The secretary of the Malaysian central branch of *UMNO* (United Malaysia National Front), Jefaar Albert, declared that its ideology of meritocracy was a frock coat to justify domination by the Chinese in Singapore.[19] This criticism naturally reached and influenced Malays in Singapore and, concerned about possible ethnic conflict, the PAP government arranged a meeting with Malay organizations in Singapore.[20] Its purpose was to allay the concerns of Malays over their problems in fields such as education, employment, and housing.

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[18] Harold Crouch, *Government and Society in Malaysia*, Ithaca, NY : Cornell University Press, 1996.
[19] 竹下秀邦 [Takeshita Hidekuni], シンガポール：リー・クワン・ユーの時代 , [Singapore: the era of Lee Kuan Yew], アジア経済研究所 [The Institute of Developing Economies, Japan Extra Trade Organization], 1995, p230.
[20]竹下 [Takeshita], 1995, p230.

Before that meeting could take place, the Singapore branch of UMNO organized another conference, at which Jafaar Albert criticized the Singapore state government in front of delegations from 150 Malay organizations, and resolved to boycott the coming meeting with Lee Kuan Yew.[21] However, the PAP government retaliated by urging Malay organizations to participate at the planned meeting, and managed to obtain the presence of delegations from 101 groups. [22]

At this meeting, Lee emphasized to Malays the significant issues of education, employment, and housing. He reminded them that the government already provided free education for Malays at secondary and tertiary level, as it had done since 1960, in recognition of their special position.[23] And at this point, he also indicated that the government would also provide Malays with vocational training to help them to be competitive in the workforce (support which does not seem to have been realised and is not mentioned later based on the available documentation). However, he said no further special treatment could be provided, such as introducing a quota system for jobs, on the grounds that it would violate the state constitution.[24]

2.2.3 The government's stance on Malays: post-independence

After Singapore became independent, the basic attitude of the government towards the question of status and rights for Malays did not change. Two days after Singapore became independent from the Malaysia federation, Lee Kuan Yew held a press conference with Malay journalists at the studio of TV Singapore, on 11th August 1965. A journalist asked this question about the Malays:

> "Inche Lee, I would like to ask – and it is fair that you should explain it a little – it cannot be denied that the people of Singapore in general and the Malays in particular, were shocked by Singapore's separation from Malaysia.

[21]竹下 [Takeshita], 1995, p231.
[22]竹下 [Takeshita], 1995, p231.
[23] Wan Hussin Zoohri, *The Singapore Malays: the dilemma of development*, Singapore: Kesatuan Guru-guru Melayu Singapura, 1990, p74.
[24]竹下 [Takeshita], 1995, pp.231-2.

So, some of them felt anxious when this separation happened. I ask you to give an assurance in order to allay such anxiety among the Malays."[25]

Lee Kuan Yew was careful in his responses on this issue, in the light of a possible repeat of the ethnic riots which had happened just a year previously:

> "I make this promise: this is not a Chinese country. Singapore is not a Chinese country nor a Malay country nor an Indian country. That is why we said before that a Malaysian Malaysia is not a Malay country; that was why I was not satisfied [with the Malaysian policy of giving special treatment to Malays]. This is not a Chinese country."[26]

Lee assured listeners that Singapore was not going to be dominated by any single ethnic group. And he declared to Malays among his listeners:

> "...regarding Singapore citizenship I made this promise: you will be equal status with me. And I promise you your special position."[27]

Lee's promises were not confined to that answer. When a journalist asked about the conduct of elections in Singapore,[28] Lee repeatedly mentioned the Malays in his reply. He claimed that his government had had no wish to separate from Malaysia in the first place:

> "... I appeal to the Malays in Singapore: don't worry. Don't be anxious. The PAP Government will not alter its stand. I was the one who worked hard to get Singapore into Malaysia. And I did not want to get out of Malaysia. We were forced. Tengku [Abdul Rahman] informed me that if Singapore did not want

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[25] Lee Kuan Yew, "*Press conference of the Singapore Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, with Malay journalists at the studio of TV Singapore on Wednesday, 11th August, 1965*" (Full script of the press conference), Speech Text Archival and Retrieval System, National Archive of Singapore, http://stars.nhb.gov.sg/public/index.html (accessed 26th April 2006). [quotation is in the original English]

[26] *Ibid.* [original English]

[27] *Ibid.* [original English]

[28] *Ibid.* [original English] The question was this: "With regard to new elections in Singapore: if I am not mistaken, UMNO yesterday urged that the Singapore Government should hold fresh elections in Singapore. What is your opinion?" [original English]

> to get out of Malaysia, there would be trouble. What can I do? But don't worry. I look after the interest of all the various communities in *Malaysia*...I am sorry...I am not used to it yet: I have always said "Malaysia"; now, it is difficult to say "Singapore"." [29]

After that engaging pitch, Lee stressed the rights of Malays in Singapore and mentioned the specific forms of special support which they would receive:

> "I say: have confidence. Anyone who is unjust – be it Government officers or people who think they can suppress the minority – report to me. I shall take action. The Singapore government is impartial to all citizens: it does not discriminate on the grounds of race, religion, language or culture. And the special position of the Malays who are backward in the field of education will be the same as before. We will improve their lot. What I have promised with regard to housing – the subsidy of 20 % for rent – we will carry out... So I say: don't worry. We all unite, uphold our rights and the integrity of our country, Singapore." [30]

In this landmark speech, then, Lee recognised allegiance to the notion of special status for Malays, and promised to preserve it, but only in a limited way. Those two forms of support, free access to higher level of education and subsided rent, are frequently quoted as evidence of fulfilment of that promise.[31] The government's position was that no further affirmative action would be taken. So in fact, the deeper message is that meritocracy would prevail for Malays. Armed with their two concessions, they were to compete in free and open competition with members of other ethnic groups in Singapore.

2.2.4 Continuing debate on the position of Malays

Was this newly announced official stance on the status of Malays in Singapore accepted by the Malays themselves? Even today it is possible to see diverse notions

[29] *Ibid.* [original English]
[30] *Ibid.* [original English]
[31] This special support for the education of Malay children was abolished in 1990.

among Malays about the sort of special treatment they are officially entitled to. While I was eating lunch on the beach with a Malay businessman aged in his early 60s, he told me his memories about that historical speech by Lee in 1965. Recalling Lee's speech, he said,

> "He promised us our special status and our rights. He promised it soon after separation. And it is clearly stated in the Singapore constitution. How come it is ignored?"[32]

This man evidently understands Malay status and rights differently from how the state conceives them. And back at the time shortly after Lee's landmark speech, diverse views were apparent. For example, we can witness *ad hoc* appeals to the government in 1966 by various Malay bodies for various forms of support which went beyond the government's official stance. One was by the Malay Chamber of Commerce, which requested the Singapore government to provide special treatment to Malays in the field of business and corporations.[33] They attempted to send a delegation to meet Lee Kuan Yew in order to discuss this proposal, saying:

> "...we will provide full support to and cooperation with the government to achieve success in raising the economic standard of the Malays... This proposal is considered as important by the members of the Malay Chamber of Commerce, because with this treatment, it will be possible to help Malays who are totally lagging behind here in the field of business and corporations."[34]

Similarly, the Singapore Malay Teachers' Union (KGMS: *Kesatuan Guru-guru Melayu Singapura*) appealed to the government to take action to overcome the shortage of qualified teachers for the Malay-language-medium stream in schools:

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[32] Casual conversation in English on 29th June 2002.
[33] *Berita Harian*, 9th September 1966.
[34] *Berita Harian*, 20th April 1966. This article stated that at the time of writing, the Malay Chamber of Commerce had received no reply from the government.

> "KGMS simply begs the government to take positive action to make this problem disappear or at least to reduce the present shortage of teachers, for the sake of creating a fairer society in the field of education." [35]

As Malays at this time did not share a common understanding of their position and rights, it is not surprising that the issue was also still being debated in relation to the formulation of the new constitution for the newly independent country, the Republic of Singapore. A meeting of the Constitutional Commission highlighted the gap between broadly two different understandings about Malays and their special rights: bumiputra and meritocracy.

2.2.5 Argument at the meetings of the Constitutional Commission

2.2.5.1 First meeting of the Constitutional Commission

A commission was appointed in early 1966, to formulate the new constitution. It comprised the Chief Justice, prominent lawyers, and representative of the minority groups. As a central purpose of the new constitution was to "enshrine the multiracial ideal ... with the aim of dispelling the fears of the minorities," [36] the issue of special position and treatment for Malays emerged at the meeting as a major one. This issue was obviously a vital one for Malays themselves in Singapore. Lee regarded them as a "lagging-behind" community before independence. At stake now was how the new government saw their rights and status after independence. Malays themselves had to participate now in obtaining a suitable deal for themselves.

Support for the bumiputra ideology was voiced by one Malay group at the meeting in forthright terms. The Singapore Malay National Organization (original initials *PKMS*, hereafter, SMNO) presented a memorandum stating:[37]

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[35] *Berita Minggu*, 23rd October 1966.
[36] Chang Heng Chee, 'Political Developments, 1965-1979,' in Ernest C.T Chew and Edwin Lee eds., *A History of Singapore*, Oxford University Press, 1991, pp.157-81, at p159.
[37] Before independence the Singapore Malay National Organisation had been the Singapore branch of UMNO Malaysia.

> "...it is appropriate for the PAP government, as a strong state with the support of Singapore nationals from various groups, to understand fully and be sympathetic with all efforts to give support to Malays who are the Singapore indigenous people, so that they will be compatible with other groups of people who came to this country."[38]

Along with their petition for a bumiputra policy of affirmative action, the SMNO presented a definition of a 'Malay' for Singapore purposes. This definition was identical to that which appeared in the constitution of Malaysia, where a bumiputra policy prevails. This definition came under attack from other committee members, both Malay and non-Malay. While this opposition to SMNO's definition at first glance seems peripheral to the central issue of competing ideologies, it is actually tied up with it. By rejecting the definition of a 'Malay' proposed by advocates of bumiputra, committee members were implicitly calling into question the very relevance of the bumiputra policy in the Singapore context. SMNO was advocating the same status and treatment for Malays in Singapore as in Malaysia, and so were engaged in defining who were to be 'objects of support'. And participants in the debate over the SMNO's definition show this understanding. The debate over definition of a Malay at the meeting was couched in terms of debate over who was eligible for special treatment. And in rejecting that definition of a Malay for Singapore (and failing to come up with another one, or even try hard to do so), the committee implicitly stated that this very notion of a Malay derived from Malaysia as an 'object of support' was unsuitable for the Singapore context – and that the Singapore notion of a Malay would be different.

The SMNO's definition of Malays was as follows: people who "practice Islam, speak Malay and practise Malay special customs." And additionally Malays are "bumiputra", literally 'sons of the soil', in the legal sense of having at least one parent who was born within the federation of Malaysia before Malaysian independence.[39] This definition proposed by the SMNO was opposed on several grounds. Firstly, it was not compatible with the concept of citizenship within a modern independent nation-state. While Singapore citizenship was given only to those born in Singapore, a 'Malay' by

[38] *Berita Harian*, 4th March 1966.
[39] *Ibid.*

that definition could include those outside Singapore. This was pointed out by a non-Malay member of the committee, who asked:

Question: "if an English person believes in Islam and is fluent in speaking Malay and follows Malay special customs, and was a resident in either Malaya or Singapore in the Malaya era, can this person be a Malay?"[40]

Answer: "Yes, he is a Malay."[41]

Question: "According to the definition of Malay presented by you, a person who practises Islam, speaks Malay and follows Malay customs is Malay, no matter where that person is born?" [42]

Answer: "I agree with that conclusion." [43]

One of the Malay committee members, Rahim Ishak, a member of parliament from the People's Action Party (PAP), criticised this definition in similar terms. By his presence on the committee he was speaking for all Malay members of parliament.[44] He observed "That definition of Malay is very wide and can include people living in Malaya, Singapore, Sabah, Sarawak, Burnei and Indonesia."[45]

Rahim Ishak also raised a second objection to the definition: that anyone in Singapore could potentially meet the 'Malay' criteria of practising Islam, speaking Malay, and practicing Malay customs. And this created the problem that eligibility for special treatment as a Malay was widened possibly endlessly. As Rahim Ishak put it:

> "Citizens who are not Malay or not born in Singapore will be given the conditions of Malay special treatment only by believing in Islam, following Malay official customs and speaking Malay."[46]

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[40] *Berita Harian*, 4th March 1966.
[41] *Ibid.*
[42] *Ibid.*
[43] *Ibid.*
[44] All Malay MPs of that time were members of the PAP.
[45] *Berita Harian*, 17th March 1967.
[46] *Berita Harian*, 17th March 1967.

Thirdly, the definition was exposed as too narrow to encompass all of 'Malay-ness' in Singapore. This was revealed by the voice of a Malay Christian, another delegate of the Malay community at the meeting. He objected to one of the criteria for a 'Malay', namely, practicing Islam. He pointed out that it should be "the right of each person, including Malays, to obey their own choice of religion", and asserted that "if the constitution does not permit the Malays to change from their religion to another religion or vice-versa, that means infringement on the rights of non-Muslims [i.e. non-Muslim Malays]." [47] He proposed a different criterion for a 'Malay': a person who practices the Malay customs. And when asked by another committee member, C.C. Tan, whether it was really possible for non-Muslims to practice Malay customs,[48] he answered: "I think that it is possible because we follow the Malay customs without following even a single element of religion. For instance, I accompany my family to celebrate *Hari Raya*." [49]

This Christian Malay delegate, Paderi Adam Ibrahim, also makes a revealing comment in remarking on why he cared about the details of the definition:

> "If a Malay is defined as such by believing Islam, then the special rights usually given to Malays will not be obtained by those who are not Muslim although they are Malay by origin."[50]

2.2.5.2 Second meeting of the Constitutional Commission

A further meeting of the constitutional commission was held in 1967. The SMNO expressed the same basic stance as it had at the last meeting. It repeated its forthright request to the government for support for the Malays:

> "If Malays are not in the same situation as the other ethnic groups, then steps which can clearly help the Malays must be taken from this point."[51]

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[47] *Berita Harian*, 9th March 1966.
[48] *Ibid.*
[49] *Ibid.*
[50] *Ibid.*
[51] *Berita Minggu*, 4th September 1967.

The members at this second meeting again criticised the inadequacy of the earlier definition of Malay presented by SMNO. And this time, the SMNO also met a more open challenge to their appeal for further affirmative action for Malays – by Rahim Ishak, the Malay committee member and a member of parliament from the PAP. Rahim Ishak instead expressed his satisfaction with the current attitude towards Malays held both by the PAP government and non-Malays in Singapore broadly:

> "The government agrees that the above policy [special treatment and special rights for the Malays] should be applied all the time. This will not harm the basic rights of other ethnic groups in Singapore. Non-Malays are also aware that the Malays as indigenous population (*bumiputra*) need help. And Malays themselves are also aware that they must try to catch up with the development of other groups."[52]

This amounted to an official endorsement of the existing policy of the government on Malays. By saying that the government agrees to a policy of a special Malay treatment and rights, he openly accepts the government's own interpretation of what this treatment and rights should consist of. And Rahim Ishak clarified this point again by expressing the opinion that Malays in Singapore should be grateful for the special treatment they already receive:

> "The Malays in Singapore will make use of this situation in which the Malays are treated specially, in order to make a contribution to the society and make the most out of what can be given by Singapore to them."[53]

He also declared what type of support Malays should get from the government in the future. And those comments clearly imply they should not receive further forms of material support. He says:

> "As for the state, the government will continue to plant the spirit of self-improvement and competitiveness among the Malays so that in the future, as

[52] *Berita Harian*, 17th March 1967.
[53] *Ibid.*

> the Prime minister Lee Kuan Yew said, the Malays as a numerically small group will no longer feel that they hold a minority position in this country." [54]

Here Rahim Ishak suggests that help for Malays should be restricted to helping to improve their way of thinking. And he expresses that more clearly when he adds that "In order to overcome underdevelopment of the Malays, state support must be directed to raising the mind set of the Malays, not to providing wealth to a single group."[55]

That phrase 'not to providing wealth to a single group,' seems to refer to the argument by some Malays that Malay business people should be provided with capital by the government, in order to create business opportunities for the Malays. [56] That interpretation is consistent with Rahim Ishak's further remark:

> "I do not believe that support must be given to construct a new class, the Malay business expert, company director or share market expert."[57]

The logic propounded by Rahim Ishak here is the logic of meritocracy, based on the notion of "to govern without governing". The government will turn the Malays into self-improving agencies by planting a spirit of self-improvement and competitiveness. The Malays are located as potential members of the mainstream who currently lack enough of that spirit. Rahim Ishak's speech then, to sum up, declares that the state already recognises the special position of Malays, that the state is already giving Malays all the special treatment they need and were ever promised, and that hereafter, a meritocracy ideology should be applied to Malays, over that of bumiputra special rights.

The key function of the constitutional meetings, then, was to put two different notions, bumiputra and meritocracy, face to face at the official and public space, and debate them to determine which ideology the Malays should choose in order to live in the Singapore society. Supporters of bumiputra failed to gain strong support at the

[54] *Berita Harian*, 17th March 1967.
[55] *Ibid.*
[56] *Berita Harian*, 12th May 1970.
[57] *Berita Harian*, 17th March 1967.

meetings, and the delegate of the Malay members of parliament, the most powerful voices in the Malay community, supported the government's stance and its fundamental ideology of meritocracy. This gesture declared the future direction to be taken from the viewpoint of the Malay leaders. The ritual of this meeting was thus fulfilled.

The curious course of the debate at the meetings on the definition of a 'Malay', is also important. Even by the end of those meetings, no precise constitutional definition of a Malay had been made.[58] This lack of a definition was still being pointed out years later, in 1970.

> "Because of the absence of an accepted definition of a Malay, unnecessary problems have cropped up. One such problem pertains to the granting of free tuition fees at the secondary school level."[59]

And due to this lack of official consensus on what a Malay in Singapore was, myriad definitions and criteria were produced for administrative purposes.[60]

While Malaysia, with its bumiputra policy, has a firm constitutional definition of Malay, the situation in Singapore was now different. The familiar terms of the Malaysian definition – Islamic religion, Malay customs, and Malay language – seemed less salient under meritocracy. The new ideology required a new definition of what it was to be Malay in Singapore. This new notion of Malay under that ideology was still unresolved and would gradually be constructed during the following decade (see Chapter 3).

2.2.5.3 The position of Malays under the constitution

[58] Rily Zubaidah Rahim, *The Singapore Dilemma: the political and educational marginality of the Malay community*, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; Oxford, U.K.; Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1998, p18. "Other than a recognition of Malays as the indigenous people as Singapore, the absence of a constitutional definition of a Malay in Singapore has contributed to the salience of indignity criteria in the understanding of Melayu by the Malay community."
[59] Sharom Ahmat and James Wong, *Malay Participation in the National Development of Singapore*, Singapore: Eurasia Press, 1971, p11.
[60] Rahim, 1998, p18.

Now that the government had obtained the endorsement of the Malay leaders for its stance of dealing with Malays under meritocracy, it was able comfortably to register Article 89 of the Constitution, which refers to the special position of Malays (in the current amended constitution, Article no.152):

> Article 89 Minorities and Special Position of Malays
>
> (1) It shall be the responsibility of the Government constantly to care for the interests of the racial and religious minorities in Singapore.
>
> (2) The Government shall exercise its functions in such manner as to recognize the special position of the Malays, who are the indigenous people of Singapore, and accordingly it shall be the responsibility of the Government to protect, safeguard, support, foster and promote their political, educational, religious, economic, social and cultural interests and the Malay language.

This official assent by the Malay parliamentary leaders to the government's stance on their position and treatment opened up the new stage for the Malays. It meant that they were tentatively relocated in the Singapore society based on meritocracy ideology. And now the notion of a 'Malay' under that ideology needed to be constructed and given shape. Malays began to be transformed into active self-promoting agencies to perform the state policies as if they were meaningful to their own life, supported not by affirmative action but by steps to foster "the spirit of self-improvement and competitiveness."[61]

2.3 Controlling Malays under meritocracy: early steps

The government now began to create a suitable agency for Malays as a 'will-be' group under such a meritocratic system. And it challenged Malays to declare openly their acceptance of meritocracy ideology (as we will see shortly).

[61] *Berita Harian*, 17th March 1967.

At the start of the 1970s, the government began to represent the Malays as a problematic element in society. The person who was in charge of this work was the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Labour, Sinnathamby Rajaratnam. Since the late 1960s, he had appeared on the scene of Malay issues and mentioned Malays in his speeches. The ethnic background of S. Rajaratnam as an Indian means he also belongs to what is considered as one of the minorities in Singapore. Perhaps his minority background enabled him to be involved in the Malay issue with less appearance of ethnic conflict of interests than Chinese ministers.

At this time the gap between the Malays and the rest of the Singapore society became a concern of the Malay members of parliament, and how to resolve this situation was a vital issue among the Malays.[62] As shown in the previous section, from the government's viewpoint, the approach was clear. Malays was already provided with free education and subsidised housing. Providing them with further affirmative action was not an option under meritocracy ideology. The only possible approach was to provoke the Malays to become more active responsible agencies who would improve themselves. The way the state began to do this was by depicting the Malays as a negative presence, not only in the sense of underachievement but also in the sense of ethics, due to their lack of understanding of and enactment of the morality presented by meritocracy.

The image of Malays as a negative presence was visualized in comparison with other ethnic groups in Singapore. Meritocracy ideology implies the ranking of individuals or groups in competitive order, in terms of their achievement and success. In the context of the Singapore society, the unit for ranking that appeared most often in the public discourse of both Malays and non-Malays was that of ethnic groups. The Malays in Singapore were constantly compared with other ethnic groups such as Chinese or Indians and in this process their underachievement was constantly shown up to prove how they were lagging behind. These comparisons posed a humiliating question of why the Malays could not achieve as well as other ethnic groups, despite living in such a fair society and being guaranteed equal opportunity under free competition. The existing structural disadvantage of the Malays compared to other ethnic groups

[62] Sha'ari Tadin, 'Opening address by Inche Sha'ari Tadin, Parliamentary Secretary Minister of Culture,' in Sharom & Wong eds., 1971, pp.3-5, at p4.

was given no space of consideration. The gap between the Malays and other ethnic groups was simply reduced to the familiar pattern: Malays' failure ← lack of ability ← lack of effort or hard work. One can rise to attain the status of decent citizen from the current status of will-be only by working harder and making effort. 'Why can't you do it?'

2.3.1 Problematizing Malays: the speeches of S. Rajaratnam

The above logic was constructed and utilized by the Malay members of parliament themselves in the late 1960s (demonstrated in Chapter 3). And at the start of the 1970s, the Minister of the Foreign Affairs, S. Rajaratnam, began to participate in this type of discourse and so publicly to represent the Malays as a negative element. One of his speeches directed to Malay issues, and published in the Malay newspaper *Berita Harian*, was titled "The Malays can develop in the future."[63] This speech was about how the Malays could improve themselves in Singapore society. Rajaratnam problematized the Malays by using the familiar ranking comparisons between the Malays and the other ethnic groups. Other ethnic groups were following the state goals and improving their communities in Singapore. However, the Malays were not doing well:

> "The Malays are affected by several historical factors and have been left behind other groups. Today Singapore is taking a fast step to industrial development. In such a situation, the gap between the Malays and other ethnic groups can widen drastically, and therefore if no steps are taken, perhaps it will become impossible for the Malays to be connected [with the rest of the society] again." [64]

At the time of this speech, the main focus of economic policy in Singapore was industrialization. Rajaratnam emphasises here how non-Malay Singaporeans were keeping up with the pace and direction taken by the state, by contributing to the high demand for skilled and ready labour to maintain Singapore's role in the international market. However, the Malays were left behind without participating in it. Rajaratnam

[63] *Berita Harian*, 12th May 1970.
[64] *Ibid.*

does mention here that the disadvantageous situation of the Malays was historically constructed. But predictably, he does not call for affirmative action. Rather, his appeal for "steps to be taken" is directed at the Malays themselves. He explicitly rejects the idea of affirmative action on their behalf, saying:

> "...I do not think the way to sort this problem is to give privilege to the Malays in economic fields. This system only looks good as a plan, while in practice it will produce wealth only for a small group of Malays ... those who deeply understand the dynamic system of capitalist economy know that such a way will fail." [65]

As mentioned above, a state priority was to supply booming industries with a strong labour force. And Rajaratnam sets this goal as one for Malays to participate in, as a possible way to resolve the problem of their backwardness. The Malays are to be responsible, self-motivated agents who perform this goal for their own improvement:

> "The Malays in Singapore as a minority can improve and develop themselves in the future by concentrating not only on educational issues but also business and industrial sectors." [66]

Having set a definite goal for the Malays to participate in, again, Rajaratnam again reminded the Malays of their weakness by using the patterned comparison. He began to compare the Malays and other ethnic groups regarding the necessary qualities to achieve success in these fields:

> "...they should be capable of facing competition and running a race. They also should be ready to experience failure like other Indians and Chinese who started business recently...The narrow path is indeed difficult and tortuous. The Malay businessmen, like Indian and Chinese, have to face difficulties in business and industrial sectors." [67]

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[65] *Berita Harian*, 12th May 1970.
[66] *Ibid.*
[67] *Ibid.*

Having pointed out the hard path ahead of Malays, Rajaratnam encourages them, adding, "However ... the Malays stand a chance to develop in certain fields of business. They are suitable to enter such fields."[68] This suitability, according to Rajaratnam, can be exercised under certain conditions. By participating in businesses in which non-Malays are relatively weak, the Malays have a chance of success:

> "In business and industrial sectors in Singapore today, in order to succeed, fundamental capital and highest efficiency is required... I would like to propose that Malays should not participate in businesses in which non-Malays are fully strong. They should try to enter new business sectors which are still open to achievement attained through new activities to modernize the economy and [business] corporations in Singapore."[69]

The Malays are presumed here to be neither highly efficient workers nor rich in capital, and so are advised to enter new fields where they are not outclassed by Chinese or Indians. These 'new fields' Rajaratnam refers to include: "working as hotel staff, bank clerks, or insurance employees, or factory workers."[70] Working in factories will help meet the demands of industrialisation, and working in hotels will meet the demand of a new sector being promoted by the government, tourism. Rajaratnam added that "The Malays will have a good chance to achieve success in these fields, like other ethnic groups.[71]

Rajaratnam closed this speech with encouraging remarks. He reiterated that Malays can improve themselves.

> "The Malays as a minority can think not only about their education but also about other activities to increase their ability to a maximum, to help build a modern economy and create steps in industrialization in Singapore. Then they can fill in areas of work which are inadequately filled by the population to achieve success."[72]

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[68] *Ibid.*
[69] *Ibid.*
[70] *Ibid.*
[71] *Berita Harian*, 12th May 1970.
[72] *Ibid.*

Rajaratnam did not forget to locate this goal as positive, meaningful, and useful for the Malays to perform. He told them the ethical meaning of participating in these business sectors: self-achievement, not reliance on others. "The Malays will achieve some result from their own efficiency and diligence and not from help given by other parties." [73] And once more he spells out the message that they, like other ethnic groups, are subject to the 'law' of meritocracy in Singapore:

> "The principle of the multi-ethnic society is that its citizens, either from the majority or a minority, can achieve success only based on their own ability and hard work." [74]

He stresses that this ideology leaves only one way forward for this backward group, namely, to stretch themselves to the maximum.

> "Malays have to work much harder than the majority, to achieve equality with other ethnic groups in Singapore..... They can only achieve their goal if they work harder than now... If Malays cannot make more enthusiastic efforts to develop at a faster pace, the problem of the current gap [between them and other ethnic groups] certainly cannot be overcome."[75]

This speech of Rajaratnan illustrates the emerging strategy of the government for managing Malays. The Malays MPs had publicly accepted the state's idea of their position and special treatment, and the ideology to be chosen. This put Malays in the status of the potential members of mainstream Singapore society. Subsequently, the government is set to provoke them into becoming a more useful agency for the state to govern. It does so by constantly representing Malays as negative elements, who need to improve. It is a relatively hands-off approach by the state: a way of 'governing without governing.'

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[73] *Ibid.*
[74] *Ibid.*
[75] *Ibid.*

These outspoken comments on the Malays by the ministerial figure of Rajaratnam carry other significance too. The forceful remarks seem intended to give the message that meritocracy for Malays is now a given; that it is already accepted broadly by Malays as the founding ideology for their status and treatment. However, the uncompromising stance in this speech might itself reflect a need for more official and solid confirmation by Malays about where they stand themselves on the question of their special status and treatment.

Only a few days after that speech, Rajaratnam did press Malays to commit themselves more openly to the state's ideology for them. He did so in a speech at a meeting of the social democratic club held at the National University of Singapore. Touching on the topic of Malay issues, he called on Malays "to stop what is called a 'silent conspiracy' (*patakan yang senyap*)."[76] While the meaning of "silent conspiracy" was not spelt out in the newspaper report of his speech, it becomes clearer when we see the response to his remarks from the Central Council of Malay Cultural Organizations of Singapore.

The Council said that it welcomed Rajaratnam's comments, and that it wished to voice its own opinion "because in the multi- racial society of Singapore, this issue is important and need to be explained properly, honestly, and sincerely."[77] 'This issue' evidently refers to Malays' special position and treatment:

> "The issue of Malays' special treatment, the meaning of it, has been wrongly represented by a certain group of people. In fact, in the constitution of Singapore, there is no direct record of special rights of the Malays in Singapore." [78]

By "a certain group of people", here, the Council refers to those who present bumiputra as the ideology for the Malays. Thanks to them, Malays, are accused of wrongly representing their own rights in Singapore. Then the Council presented its own understanding about special treatment for Malays.

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[76] *Berita Harian*, 16th May 1970.
[77] *Berita Harian*, 16th May 1970.
[78] *Ibid.*

> "In fact the Malays in Singapore seem neither to be a specially positioned group of people, nor privileged to receive special treatment. In the context of this multi-racial society, the Malays are not reserved as special. The Central Council thinks that a wrong notion has been perpetuated and therefore a gap [in understanding] between the Malays and the other non-Malays has certainly arisen." [79]

By reading Rajaratnam's initial complaint about a "silent conspiracy" in conjunction with this response above, we can see that Rajaratnam was alluding to how Malays conceived their special position and special treatment. He was suggesting that Malays actually felt entitled to be taken care of by the state, and that by refraining from openly expressing their allegiance to meritocracy and self-help for Malays, and covertly supporting special rights instead, they deliberately allow their own ideology to retain some currency (a 'silent conspiracy').

Rajaratnam's remark was a challenge to Malays to clearly and openly declare which ideology they were going to follow, meritocracy or bumiputra special rights. And in its reply, the Central Council goes on to meet that challenge. It openly states its allegiance to the state ideology of meritocracy for Malays: to a path of self-improvement by self-effort:

> "The Central Council accepts the fact that under the constitution, in order to achieve success, the Malays in Singapore need to make self-effort and improve ourselves in every respect. This is perhaps the primary factor if the Malays want to be competitive with non-Malays. It is solely by their own ability that Malays can achieve their goals." [80]

And in what looks like another response to Rajaratnam's challenge, a landmark seminar was held in the same year, entitled "Malay participation in the national development of Singapore"[81] (see Chapter 3).

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[79] *Ibid.*
[80] *Berita Harian*, 16th May 1970.
[81] Papers from this seminar were collected and published in Sharom & Wong eds., 1971.

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter has shown how the state ideology of meritocracy came to be accepted by Malay leaders as the ideology for Malays in Singapore, and how a corresponding new notion of Malay began to emerge in the Singapore context: an agency depicted as backward and provoked constantly to prove itself.

When they look at bumiputra policy in Malaysia, Singaporeans often regard their state ideology, meritocracy, as race-free, class-free, democratic and fair. When I began to mix with Singaporeans and told them I had only recently arrived in Singapore, their kind lectures about Singapore rarely omitted to mention this founding myth of meritocracy ideology, and to say how fairly Singapore society works. However, the origins of meritocracy in Singapore belie this understanding. The meritocracy ideology was created by the winners in the Singapore society; namely, the ethnic Chinese who had English-language-medium education. Even among the ethnic Chinese, those with Chinese language education were not quite a part of this elite. Meritocracy was an ideology for the winners in Singapore. And given who those winners were, meritocracy was serving race and class interests.

In Malaysia, Malays are a majority, and the prevailing national ideology of bumiputra is pro-Malay. In Singapore, Chinese are a majority, and the national ideology of meritocracy favours the most fortunate Chinese (in the guise of being fair, democratic and race-free.) So in their implementation of ideology, the two countries have not acted very differently.[82]

Meritocracy claims to bring fairness of opportunity, while bumiputra claims fairness of outcome. In reality, however, access to opportunity is very different for each individual depending on where one is born into the society. In the face of such socially-conditioned structural disadvantages, the winners often assert that it is

[82] Two national myths, ethno-cultural (in Malaysia) and civic (in Singapore) in fact interplay, as David Brown precisely points out. He says "Both visions of community, civic and ethnocultural, can emerge either within civic society or can be inculcated and engineered by elite ideologies: similarly, both can emerge either in a liberal form which stresses civil society freedoms and individual self-fulfilment, or in an illiberal form which suppresses individual' freedom and sustains state controls over civil society." David Brown, *Contemporary Nationalism: civic, ethnocultural and multicultural politics*, New York : Routledge, 2000, p37.

possible to succeed by your own efforts, determination or strength. So those who happened to be lucky enough to be the winners in Singapore say to those who are still to-be, "work harder *lah*."

Chapter 3 Malays Setting Goals for Malays

This chapter is about how Malays responded to the challenge by the state during the next few years (1966-1970). Section 1 examines the discourses of the Malay MPs. As shown in Chapter 2, the Malay MPs already accepted the ideology of meritocracy as the fundamental norm for Malays as well. Their desire to be full participants in Singapore society some day was already created. The broad direction to achieve this desire was set in their mind: to endow the Malays with an agency that performed according to the logic of meritocracy so that the Malays could become part of successful Singapore. And for this to happen, the MPs' desire of fully becoming part of Singapore society needed to be shared by other Malays too. The various forms of discourses of Malay MPs examined in this first section served to lead other Malays to share their desire.

Section 2 seeks to examine the question of what attitude other Malays showed towards the idea of meritocracy. Did they seem to accept meritocracy as well? We can answer that to some extent by examining discourses and activities of members of Malay organizations during the period. These show a lack of explicit commitment to meritocracy, and even some implicit opposition to it. However, at the same time, their discourses and activities show that they shared with Malay MPs a desire to improve the situation of the Malays in Singapore. And that commonality of purpose eventually brought the Malay organisations to align their approach with that of Malay MPs .

Both sets of discourses and activities that we will focus on concern education, reflecting the fact that most Malay/Muslim organizations were educational or cultural in nature. Firstly we will see how the Singapore Malay Teachers' Union resisted a shift in language policy by the government, by trying to preserve Malay-language education in the face of official support for English. Secondly we will examine the efforts of a number of organisations to improve the level of education of Malays by raising funds for scholarships for Malay students.

Section 3 shows how Malay MPs began to work hand in hand with other politically active Malays who shared their desire for Malays to adopt the central ideology of

meritocracy. They worked together to achieve two things. One was to coordinate the resources of the Malays into one channel: self-improvement by the logic of meritocracy. The other was to declare to the rest of Singapore society the determination of Malays to improve themselves in this way in order to become worthy and decent Singaporeans. The first steps were thus taken to transform Malays so that they developed an agency fit to enable them to perform their roles in the Singapore nation-state.

3.1 The way for Malays to follow

This ideology of meritocracy, instead of bumiputra special rights, was accepted, supported, and set as the fundamental ideology by the Malay MPs. As members of the ruling party PAP, which enjoyed a virtual monopoly on political power, it was logical for the Malay MPs to support the state ideology. We can also presume that this state ideology suited the Malay members of the parliament, who were by definition high achievers of the kind validated by meritocracy.

Such assent to and celebration of meritocracy by those Malays who are winners can easily be seen among the Malays today. Some successful Malays accept and admire this ideology since it locates them a little higher than those Malays who cannot be winners. It proves their achievement to the rest of society and makes them feel good about themselves. When I was talking to one of the staff at the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS), a successful Malay who had travelled to the United States to obtain his Bachelor degree education, he told me about how he taught the rules of the world to his daughter.

> "I told her that your brain is no different from that of Chinese children. You can succeed when you work hard. If you work hard, then you can make it happen. The Malays can do anything we want to achieve, as Chinese or other Singaporeans do, you know."[1]

[1]Conversation in English on 29th November 2002.

Therefore, it is not quite surprising if meritocracy nicely chimed with the minds of the Malay MPs, was accepted by them with little problem or conflict, and was located by them as the central ideology for the rest of the Malays, too.

For the Malay MPs to actualize that desire, and to be fully successful themselves, there was one more big step necessary: other Malays had to share the same way of thinking as them. The ideology of meritocracy also needed to be positively received by Malays more broadly. Malays should be brought to view their unsuccessful situation as a lack of effort and hard work in the logic of meritocracy. A longing to be part of Singapore, and a craving to perform well in a meritocracy, must be shared by other Malays as well. The Malay MPs' discourse functioned to lead Malays in various ways to share their desire.

3.1.1 The wonderful PAP post-independent government

In the discourse of Malay MPs, the post-independent government was praised by comparing it with colonial control. In the high spirits of independence, government by the ex-colonized was celebrated rather than examined critically. As often happened in other ex-colonies, the way that new masters with not white but yellow skin continued to utilise the colonial system in order to rule their "own" people, was ignored.[2] Rather, in the glow of independence, the enjoyment of dignity as a sovereign country under their "own" government was highlighted.

In order to convince the Malays that the meritocracy ideology was the way to follow, the Malay MPs called up colonial control, letting it haunt Malays again as nightmare. In this way the current ideology and government were placed in a favourable light. One Malay MP, Othman Wok, introduced this understanding of history in front of approximately 4000 boy scouts and girl scouts.

[2] A notorious regulation, the Internal Security Act (giving the power to detain people at will) was created by the British colonial government to control the Chinese Communist Party in Malaya. This regulation was inherited by decision of the post-independent PAP government and has frequently been used to detain Singaporeans since independence. Regarding the Internal Security Act, see, Garry Rodan, 'The Internet and Political Control in Singapore,' *Political Science Quarterly*, vol.113, no.1, 1998, pp.63-89. Also, how the Internal Security Act was used to control a politician who opposed the government in the 1980s is well documented by Francis T. Seow, *To catch a tartar: a dissident in Lee Kuan Yew's prison*, New Haven, Conn. : Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1994.

> "We blame British colonial control for not giving opportunities to youth in this country to rule their society, and for bringing success to the British themselves. Today, I am pleased to state that this process by the West has successfully been ended."[3]

The structure presented in the above sentence is binary, between colonial control and the current government. Under the colonial control, the Malays were not given adequate education, and that became the main factor that held Malays back from development. This idea was also presented by another Malay MP, Sha'ari Tadin in a speech in 1970. His recall and analysis of the past revealed what colonial control meant to the Malays.

> "Perhaps when the British treated the Malays as they did during colonial times, they were deferring to the wishes of the Malays as they understood them. It must be remembered that they were given a severe drubbing by the Indians during the Munity for interfering in 'native customs'. If it were out of this respect for Malay custom, then History could not blame them for adopting this 'soft attitude'." [4]

What was this soft attitude? (Sha'ari Tadin's term *tidapathy* below is a play on words, combining English *apathy* with the Malay expression *tidak apa-apa*, meaning "It doesn't matter.")

> "Firstly, the Malays were given 'the wrong kind of education' – wrong from our present point of view. It was a cultural education, which made the Malays contented and obedient. The result was that the Malay mind was not an inquiring one.
>
> During colonial times, the Malays were herded into Malay settlements. Here within the four walls of the kampongs, the Malays went their separate ways. Here they lived socially apart from the other races. They lived

[3] *Berita Harian*, 1st March 1967.
[4] Sharom Ahmat and James Wong, *Malay Participation in the National Development of Singapore*, Singapore: Eurasia Press,1971, p3.[quotation in original English]

contented, practising their own religious and cultural values, often with graciousness of living. There they developed 'tidapathy' for material things and were employed as lower postmen, peons, messenger-boys, drivers – and if they were employed as clerks, they already enjoyed high status."[5]

In his analysis, the past source of Malays' backwardness was reduced to the way in which the colonial control treated the Malays, including wrong education, ethnic segregation, and provision of lower status jobs. Sha'ari continued by saying that British colonial control left Malays no way to improve themselves. The Malays even needed help to walk.

"...people have pointed out that special treatment for the Malays is like a walking stick – once you become dependent on the walking stick, you will never be able to walk on your own. In other words, they say that if Malays are proffered assistance, they will become lazy and will not be dynamic. In fact there are people who say that if the Malays had not been pampered by the British during the last 140 years, they would today be as dynamic and forward-looking as the other communities. There is probably some truth in this."[6]

So British colonial control not only held back the material development of Malays but also their psychological development. If there had been no colonial control the Malays would have responded to challenge much sooner, instead of being delayed for so long. The British made the Malays like disabled spoiled creatures. In such conditions, there was no hope for them. But in Sha'ari Tadin's mind, he goes on to say, things were different after 1959:

"Although the other races too had to modernise, the adjustment was a minor one in that they started modernising in 1819, whereas for the Malays this did not start until 1959."[7]

[5] Sharom & Wong eds., 1971, p3.
[6] Sharom & Wong eds., 1971, p3.
[7] Sharom & Wong eds., 1971, p4.

This year, 1959, is the year when the PAP government became the ruling party of the state government of Singapore. In contrast to the colonial government, under the PAP the situation has changed.

> "The prospects of Malay prosperity are brighter today. The Malays no doubt know what they want – they want to be a fully loyal, progressive and prosperous community that can contribute to national development."[8]

Sha'ari Tadin also did not forget to remind Malays how responsible the current government is by mentioning the fact that it has kept its promise in the constitution:

> "The government in its policy of assisting Malay students has helped deserving Malay students and it will continue in the future to be more liberal in giving scholarships, bursaries and assistance to Malay students who show the potential to develop and to make the grade."[9]

A simple binary structure was effectively created here. One set of elements is illustrated quite negatively: British colonial control, the Malays' lack of material and psychological development, a spoiled person depending on a walking stick even if s/he may not need it. By contrast, another set is illustrated very positively: the current government, the Malays with a bright future, standing on their own feet. This contrast is not just blind flattery to the current government or to the society based on meritocracy; it pushes the Malays to believe that they are in a condition where they can make a difference if they wish to.

For the Malays, the current setting is now perfect for them to advance from their backwardness. Under the new circumstances, with this new rightful government, the Malays can change. Sha'ari Tadin shows that they can be like other ethnic groups if they truly want to, saying:

[8] Sharom & Wong eds., 1971, p3.
[9] Sharom & Wong eds., 1971, p5.

> "Within a matter of years we should be able to see an increasing number of Malay doctors, engineers, architects, scientists, lawyers, business managers, etc., occupying top level positions in their respective fields. Until such time, the Malays will not be able to make a very worthwhile contribution to national development, and to contribute to the GNP of the Republic as other communities are already doing even though they are minority groups." [10]

Here the Malays were located in a familiar comparative framework ranking them against the non-Malays. They are put in the situation of would-be members, are encouraged and expected to be able to become like other ethnic groups to make a worthwhile contribution.

Praise of the government was conveyed through another binary contrast too. Singapore, democratic, modern and progressive, was contrasted to other countries which held on to feudalism by maintaining a royal family, such as Malaysia. In 1967, Rahim Ishak made such a speech. Firstly, what the Singapore society is like was defined in his speech.

> "Malays in this republic will surely be Malay but what is more exciting is that they will become one big group of this society: progressive, multi-racial, and multi- religious Singapore." [11]

Here Singapore is presented through a package of modern, fair and democratic images. And Rahim Ishak shows how in such a society, the Malays' future can be wonderful. To become part of such a society is exciting for the Malays:

> "Malays in Singapore will have a wonderful era in the future. In such an era, the same status is given to them as to other members in the society...Malays in Singapore will be able to see themselves in the same situation as in Indonesia where Malays have managed to free themselves from the shackles of feudal

[10] Sharom & Wong eds., 1971, p5.
[11] *Berita Minggu*, 12th February 1967.

notions from the previous generation, and are moving toward a modern and progressive society." [12]

What is promised in Singapore society, in Rahim Ishak's illustration, is modernity, democracy, and a fair deal under the current government. In this society customs like caste have already been discarded:

"They [Malays] will not be esteemed as a lower caste by those who consider themselves to be *Brahma* and to have blue blood." [13]

This wonderful governance in Singapore is reduced by Rahim Ishak to the state leaders. The leaders of Singapore, the PAP leaders, are fair, responsible, and efficient. They do not discriminate against the Malays. They will put the Malays under consideration.

"Malays in Singapore have leaders who are full of talent, and who are efficient at working with other people, to improve their [Malays'] lives to the same standard as other [ethnic] groups in Singapore."[14]

In addition, the government has kept its promise defined in the constitution, too:

"The Singapore state has chosen that Malays here are given special opportunities in education, and this has been exercised since 1960. ... the Malays have already been given encouragement to adapt their lives to the new changeable society."[15]

The more wonderful the government is, the more questions can be posed to the Malays about why they cannot make a difference. The Malays have already been put in better hands and in a better position. Now, the Malays can change. It was not quite possible in feudalistic conditions, but is now possible under the post-independent PAP

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[12] *Ibid.*
[13] *Berita Minggu*, 12th February 1967.
[14] *Ibid.*
[15] *Ibid.*

government which is fair and responsible to all members of the society regardless of ethnicity. It encourages the Malays to change themselves.

> "The Malays here will become Malays who have freed themselves from all the ties and traditions of feudal life, and from obsolete customs, which would force them to call themselves slaves ... Only spineless lackeys who still follow old customs or traditions will obtain inspiration or guidance from people who try to relight the dying embers of feudalism with stories of royal descendants..." [16]

Here is a clear contrast again. Singapore as democratic, modern and progressive is opposed to other countries which are still feudalistic in the sense of retaining a royal family, such as Malaysia. In Singapore, the Malays can free themselves from such obsolete customs under their brilliant leaders, whereas Malays in Malaysia cannot free themselves from the spectre of a feudal system.

Rahim Ishak continued by reminding the Malays not to expect further support, like in Sha'ari Tadin's speech. The responsible government has already provided support to the Malays in its own way. Bumiputra special rights and the pampering of Malays as in the feudal colonial time is not an option for the Malays in modern, democratic and fair Singapore.

> "The Singapore government has decided that Malays are to be given special opportunities in education, and this has been going on since 1960. Malays are already receiving special encouragement to adapt their lives to this new and increasingly prosperous industrial society.[17]

The binary opposition between the current post-independent PAP government and either colonial control or a feudalistic system functions to lead the Malays to do something in their new situation. Through this simplified opposition of elements, Malays are shown two things. One is what a wonderful society they are in since independence. The other is that it is now up to them to change under these

[16] *Berita Minggu*, 12th February 1967.
[17] *Ibid.*

circumstances. The necessary affirmative action has already been put in place by a fair and responsible government. Now it is the Malays themselves who must do something.

3.1.2 'Seize the Day'

This second message, that the Malays must now act to improve themselves, was also expressed in the speeches of the Malay MPs. Having explained the fortunate situation of the Malays in Singapore and shown the positive value of Singapore, the discourses of the Malay MPs urged the Malays to act to improve themselves. Such efforts are the key to improving without any further affirmative action. Another Malay MP, Ghazali Ismail, encouraged the Malay students at the University of Singapore in this way. He pointed out that the Malays should make the most of their chances.

> "The Malays have been left behind for 25 years in education... This government has already provided various facilities and forms of support to enable Malay children to achieve a high standard of education... Every generation, every hour should be used fully to make up for lost time. "[18]

Under the post-independent PAP government, they can improve themselves if they never stop making an effort.

This message of "You must do something" was also delivered by other Malay MPs. To urge the Malays on, the familiar method was used of comparing Malays with other ethnic groups and locating the Malays as potential members of mainstream society. Rahim Ishak urged the Malays to strive to catch up with the development of Singapore, in those terms. He said first:

> "We must make efforts so that in the multi-racial society we will not be left behind in development." [19]

In the multi-racial society of Singapore where there no discrimination such as a caste system, the Malays can succeed like the other groups as long as they try. He told them

[18] *Berita Harian*, 6th June 1968.
[19] *Berita Harian*, 15th May 1967.

one way they can catch up: by understanding their position compared to other groups in order to escape it:

> "It is important for Malay parents to be aware of the problems and challenges as much as possible so that they can reduce the size of the gap [between the Malays and other ethnic groups] in education and employment, by becoming professionals or managers who handle complex situations."[20]

He also appealed to Malays' desire to be a respected part of mainstream Singapore society, saying:

> "The current issue is to make the various gaps closer. People [non-Singaporeans] often say to us that Singaporeans are diligent and strong workers and that the leaders of Singapore possess wisdom, honesty and a soul willing to make sacrifices; that they are leaders who are dedicated and efficient. The Malays in Singapore too truly want to be able to share themselves in this admiration given to Singapore."[21]

Here he encourages Malays to try hard to become like the other ethnic groups so that they can some day be part of the Singapore that enjoys praise from people.

Another Malay MP, Yusof bin Ishak gave a speech greeting *Hari Raya* addressed to the Malays. In this speech, encouragement to Malays is now presented as an urgently necessary task.

> "All of our people, we, in particular we [i.e. Malays], must grab all the opportunities provided by this socio-democratic government, because this is a step-by-step preparation for us to face the future."[22]

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[20] *Berita Harian*, 15th May 1967.
[21] *Ibid.*
[22] *Berita Harian*, 14th January 1967.

The only way for the Malays to improve themselves is through their own achievement, and so not a single opportunity should not be missed in a promptly changing society like Singapore. Yosof bin Ishak explains this further by talking about *Hari Raya.*

> "There is no same *Hari Raya* [every year], because the situation of human beings always changes. Modern society certainly always develops. Only our ability to adapt to the rapidly changing situation can promise us a life and development of our society." [23]

Singapore as a modern society unavoidably changes in order to improve itself. In such a place and era, the Malays in Singapore must make themselves change to make themselves suitable. Only with this ability can the Malays secure a hopeful future.

The 'necessary task' message of Yosof bin Ishak's speech is nicely supplemented by an appeal to the core logic of meritocracy by another Malay MP, Othman Wok. In the meritocratic society of Singapore, success is proportional to the amount of effort achieved through self-reliance. And Othman Wok asked Malays to consider their own backwardness compared to other groups in this light.

> "The backwardness of Malays is not because Malays are from a small group … The number in the group is not a problem. Indians. Ceylonese, Pakistanees, and Bengalis – they are all small groups, smaller than Malays. Why can they develop better than us? They become business experts, engineers, lawyers, judges, or occupy high positions in government … Their success is because they work hard and pursue goals, without causing trouble by asking for support from other people."[24]

The discourses of the Malay MPs thus led the Malays by an elaborate logic. Firstly, by simple binary contrasts they showed that the Malays were in good hands under the current government. Secondly, they said that in such a good situation, the way for Malays to improve was not to ask for affirmative action as in the evil colonial era and

[23] *Berita Harian*, 14th January 1967.
[24] *Berita Minggu*, 9th April 1967.

to go back to being people who used a walking stick. Instead, the discourses urged the Malays to see that it was they who must do something for themselves.

3.1.3 Can you do it?

These discourses by the Malay MPs became quite ritualised, as the same elements kept appearing in speeches by the different MPs. This ritual nature is illustrated in a speech in 1968 by Sha'ari Tadin, which contains nearly all the individual elements we have seen so far. What is extra in Sha'ari Tadin's speech is that it ends by provoking Malays to prove themselves. This provocative function mirrors the state discourses we saw in Chapter 2, especially those of Rajaratnam.

Firstly, Sha'ari Tadin reminded the Malays of how responsible and kind the government was towards Malays.

> "The government gives full support to all the Malays in this republic, as provided for in the constitution – especially in education."[25]

And what the Malays should do is to make the best of these opportunities. In order to become a part of mainstream Singapore, they must improve themselves.

> "The Malays must make use of this infrastructure and these opportunities which make it possible for you to develop yourself. Such efforts will succeed only if the Malays have the spirit to face challenges in work and education, and to discipline themselves to face the future world... The Malays must be aware that we live in a society which keeps changing to become better and to become more urban and industrialized ... The Malays must become a part of this society, by developing as well, in every aspect of socio-political and economic life." [26]

Sha'ari Tadin then makes the point of other Malays MPs, that in order to succeed in the changing society of Singapore, Malays will need to adapt and change:

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[25] *Berita Harian*, 15th May 1968.
[26] *Ibid.*

> "They have to change their attitude and choose a way of thinking that enables them to adapt themselves to the on-going changes around them." [27]

In deploying the familiar framework of comparing Malays with other ethnic groups: Sha'ari Tadin adopts a provocative tone:

> "The Malays must have the spirit to stand themselves on their own feet. So that one day, my dear friends, you yourselves will be able to stand as high as other [ethnic] groups." [28]

Sha'ari Tadin tells the Malays here that they are presently would-be members of the mainstream society, still in need of realization. However, this need not be an endless miserable condition. A possibility in the indefinite future is opened to the Malays. Someday, if they have the spirit, they can be like the other Singaporeans. But the question is whether the Malays can do it or not. Sha'ari seems to challenge them, or almost taunt them: Can you do it, my dear friends?

Another Malay MP, Ghazali Ismail, provokes the Malays in similar terms. He pushes Sha'ari Tadin's question a little further, saying:

> "We think that we are a backward group ...We need to have a strong belief that if other people can improve, then why not us? We are human beings who God has created equal to those other humans who have already developed themselves."[29]

Ghazali Ismail leaves Malays with no excuse to justify their inferior achievements. The challenge is there: the ethnic groups can improve themselves, so why can't you?

The Malay MPs' discourses were not direct and explicit prescriptions of the path that Malays should follow in Singapore. But when these rather clumsy discourses are put

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[27] *Berita Harian*, 15th May 1968.
[28] *Ibid.*
[29] *Barita Harian*, 14th November 1967.

together in one picture, it is possible to see the direction in which the Malay MPs wanted to lead the Malays. That path is to become part of Singapore society by accepting the state ideology of meritocracy, and performing it as well as other groups. Their discourses serve in one way or another to show the Malays that direction, whether by encouraging them to feel good about the government, by urging them to change, or – in the same way as Rajaratnam did – by placing them at the bottom of the ethnic totem pole and challenging them to climb it.

3.2 Malay organizations and meritocracy

3.2.1 Efforts to maintain Malay as a language of education

First we should briefly examine the changing status of the Malay language in Singapore. When Singapore became independent in 1965, Lee Kuan Yew promised that Malay would remain the national language of Singapore. In that speech (delivered in English) he also said that Malay was to become the common language of Singaporeans.

> "It is the easiest language that can be understood by all: the Indians and also the Chinese, Eurasians, Ceylonese and Pakistanis. You enter a shop, go to market, travel by bus, what language do people use? The National Language, isn't it? ... slowly, in 10 years time if we implement our policy, our plans that are ready, I believe our people will be more fluent in Malay than the neighbouring states whose people are not that fluent now."[30]

In line with that policy the government ran a campaign called the "National Language Month" campaign (*Bulan Bahasa Kebangsaan*), in 1966. This campaign had been started in the early 1960s and its purpose was to encourage non-Malay speaking Singaporeans to be familiar with the Malay language.

[30] Lee Kuan Yew, "Press conference of the Singapore Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, with Malay journalists at the studio of TV Singapore on Wednesday, 11th August, 1965" (Full script of the press conference), http://stars.nhb.gov.sg/public/index.html (accessed 26th April 2006). [quotation is in the original English]

In 1967, however, the status of Malay in Singapore took a heavy blow, when Lee Kuan Yew announced that "English will be the language relevant to Singapore's future during the next 15 to 20 years."[31] This remark signalled an official shift to English that had a huge impact on the status of Malay and the viability of Malay-medium education – at a time when many Malay parents already had doubts about the quality of Malay schools in Singapore. And later that year, a new regulation was introduced: science, mathematics and other technical subjects would be taught in English in all schools in Singapore, including Malay schools.

This official shift to English language was predictably supported by Malay government leaders.[32] Especially prominent in defending this policy was the Malay MP, Ghazali Ismail. This is interesting, as it had been he who had organised the "National Language Month" campaign just a year earlier. At that time Ghazali Ismail had praised and promoted the state's aim of making Malay the common language of Singaporeans, and asserted that "Malay has been accepted by us [Singaporeans] as the National language and as our common language."[33] He now adjusted his position to follow the trend of the government, arguing that using English to teach science and maths in Malay primary schools was good for Malays.

The Singapore Malay Teachers' Union and Malay teachers did not adjust to the new state policy so readily. Rather than embracing the switch to English, some of them objected to it. For instance, when Ghazali Ismail declared in a speech to a Malay audience that "teaching science and maths through English will give our children in Malay medium schools brighter hopes for their future,"[34] a Malay teacher in the audience expressed his disagreement, He asked Ghazali Ismail whether teaching those subjects in English in Malay schools did not threaten the viability of Malay-medium education.[35] Ghazali Ismail answered that no, it did not. Using English for practical subjects would actually strengthen Malay medium education, he argued, by giving parents new confidence in the quality of Malay schools at a time when many Malay

[31] *Berita Harian*, 16th October 1967. This remark by Lee Kuan Yue was quoted by the head of the Singapore Malay Teachers' Union (KGMS).
[32] For example, in a 1968 speech by a Malay official of the Ministry of Education, Ahmad bin Dzafir, reported in *Berita Harian*, 9th January 1968; and in a speech the same year by the Minister for Culture, the Malay Sha'ari Tadin, reported in *Berita Harian*, 9th August 1968.
[33] *Berita Harian*, 4th November 1966.
[34] *Berita Harian*, 1st August 1968.
[35] *Ibid.*

parents were deserting those schools and sending their children to English medium schools instead.[36]

Ghazali Ismail went on to argue that choice of language was a purely pragmatic issue. Language is simply "a strategic vehicle or means of transportation,"[37] and any vehicle could be the best way to get your destination, depending on the circumstances. This remark met with opposition as well. The secretary general of the Singapore Malay Teachers' Union, who was also in the audience, expressed doubt about the logic of that analogy of Ghazali Ismail.[38] In reply, Ghazali Ismail reminded him that the policy of using English had only been in force for seven months and urged him to "Just give it a try. We should wait for several years more and then we can draw conclusions [about its merits]."[39]

The next year saw more substantial disagreement by the Singapore Malay Teachers' Union with the government's policy on English in education. This was at a forum titled "Directions for Malay teachers and students in Singapore in the next ten years." Speakers included the Malay MP Ghazali Ismail, the Secretary General of the Singapore Malay Teachers' Union (KGMS), Mamat Samat; and a speaker each from the Malay Studies department at NUS and from Nanyang University.

The Malay MP Ghazali Ismail remarked at the forum that the decline in enrolments at Malay schools was something that should be accepted. He said it simply showed that "Malay parents themselves ... are becoming less certain about Malay schools."[40] From the meritocratic viewpoint, it is understandable for him to face the decline of Malay medium education as a natural trend. Similarly a Malay official of the Ministry of Education in a speech a year earlier had said that deserting Malay schools was a valid response by Malay parents to the changing times, and "if the majority of Malay parents put their children in an English medium school, that is not wrong at all ..."[41]

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[36] *Berita Harian*, 1st August 1968. This also coincides closely with the controversy in Malaysia over the status of Malay as the national language. They National Language Act in 1967 gave rise to mass agitation - led again by Malay teachers - in favour of full replacement of English by Malay.
[37] *Ibid.*
[38] *Ibid.*
[39] *Ibid.*
[40] *Berita Harian*, 3rd February 1969.
[41] Ahmad bin Dzafir, quoted in *Berita Harian*, 9th January 1968.

However, in his own speech, the secretary general of the Singapore Malay Teachers' Union, Mamat Samat, disagreed with Ghazali Ismail. He declared that the drop in enrolments at Malay schools was alarming. He also criticised the state policy of teaching science and maths through English in all schools in Singapore including Malay schools – and blamed that policy of the government for the decline in enrolments at Malay schools. He said:

> "Malay medium education cannot be compatible with English medium education, as regards the teaching of science and maths in English. Why are the same facilities (*layanan*) not given to Malay students in Malay medium schools? Unless some radical changes are made by the government, the future of Malay medium schools in the coming 10 years will be increasingly bleak."[42]

He expresses himself rather vaguely here, but he evidently means: why are Malay pupils not also given equal 'facilities' in the form of instruction in science and maths in a language which the teachers and pupils are fully proficient in (i.e. Malay)? Ghazali Ismail on the next day of the forum responded to these criticisms by Mamat, saying

> "It seems to me that Mr Mamat Samad is still sceptical about the effect which can be achieved by teaching science and maths in English at primary school level. I am willing to debate this issue in public with him." [43]

And in fact several Malay organisations responded to that challenge by promptly organising a working committee to arrange for that debate between Samad and Ghaizalie to take place[44] – although the debate apparently never eventuated.

In fact, a year earlier, the Singapore Malay Teachers' Union had sent a letter to the Ministry of Education about the government's new directive for English to be used in

[42] *Berita Harian*, 3rd February 1969.
[43] *Berita Harian*, 4th February 1969.
[44] *Ibid.*

teaching science and maths. [45] In that letter they stated that they would accept this expansion of usage of English to teach science and maths, but with a proviso:

> "The government should guarantee that no further subjects will be taught in English, apart from science and mathematics."[46]

This mild initial resistance had grown, and now a year later, the Singapore Malay Teachers' Union was challenging government ministers over an education policy inaugurated by the meritocratic government.

To sum up, the Singapore Malay Teachers' Union disagreed with the Malay MPs over the state's shift in language policy. Instead of making a prompt and easy shift from Malay language in line with state policy, they attempted to maintain the integrity and viability of Malay-medium education against the trend of the government. This amounted to implicitly opposing meritocracy as the path for Malays. That is, instead of embracing the challenge of competing with other ethnic groups in terms of English, they were seeking to protect the Malay language in the face of the threat of English, and thus a separate Malay identity in preference to the meritocratic commonality. Now, when the status of Malay was being eroded to a purely symbolic status as national language, to resist that trend was tantamount to resisting progress and holding on to special rights for Malays.

3.2.2 Efforts by Malay/Muslim organisations to set up scholarships.

While attempting to preserve the importance of Malay language in education, Malays also took steps to improve the community's educational achievement. As it became clear to Malay organisations that in statistical terms Malay children were not performing well in education, [47] they founded scholarship funds to help Malay children.

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[45] *Berita Harian*, 5th October 1968.
[46] *Ibid.*
[47] *Berita Minggu*, 3rd April 1966. The article is titled "Why do many Malay students fail in examinations?"

One Malay organisation that provided scholarships was the Prophet Muhammad's Birthday Memorial Scholarship Fund Board (*Lembaga Biasiswa Kenangan Maulud* or LBKM). The LBKM was founded in 1963 and set up a board to administer scholarships in 1965. By identifying itself as non-political, non-ethnic and even non-religious, [48] and by providing scholarships for both Malay and (a smaller number of) non-Malay students, it won the participation of a range of organisations, both Malay and non-Malay. Donations to LBKM increased yearly and by 1969 had reached 23,000 dollars, which funded 84 students.[49]

Other Malay organizations implemented scholarship projects as well. The Singapore Malay Teachers' Union (KGMS) began from 1970 to provide scholarships for the children of its members. It also provided them for its own members who wished to obtain higher education, in order to combat the shortage of well-qualified teachers in Malay schools. [50] The Malay Youth Literary Association (4PM) also provided scholarships. It gave them to both Malays and non-Malays,[51] but at times targeted Malays only, in order to meet specific needs of the Malay community. For instance, in 1969 4PM offered scholarship for five students, Malays only, to take a 6-9 month course at the Industrial Training Centre – in order to improve Malay expertise in science – and engineering- related subjects."[52] In addition to scholarships, 4PM also conducted series of seminars to raise the awareness of Malays about the importance of education.[53]

Do these efforts by the Malays show an acceptance of the government's central ideology of meritocracy? After all, these schemes are efforts by Malays to help themselves. They are initiatives by Malays to improve their own lives in Singapore without asking for help from other groups. And the LBKM scheme was praised by a Malay MP as "the first collective effort by the Muslim community to raise funds at the

[48] *Berita Harian*, 8th June 1968. LBKM sometimes expresses gratitude toward the Islamic community or asks support by mentioning the Islamic community. However, in the article cited here, it asserts its neutrality from politics and ethnicity, as well as religion.
[49] *Berita Harian*, 20th May 1969.
[50] *Berita Harian*, 27th December 1969.
[51] *Berita Harian*, 28th April 1966.
[52] *Berita Harian*, 12th February 1969.
[53] *Berita Minggu*, 5th October 1969. In this article, the seminars were recommended by a Malay MP.

national level for the educational benefit of Muslim children."[54] It is noteworthy that the organisations do not explicitly align themselves with the government, for example by participating in pro-government discourses such as mentioning the PAP's special treatment of Malays in the field of education or the wonderful opportunities that Malays have in Singapore. And as we saw above, the biggest scholarship organisation explicitly called itself "non-political", which is quite a strong statement in the Singapore context, declaring lack of affiliation with either the government or the opposition. On the whole, then, these scholarship schemes must have been approved by the state but not instigated by it, and do not seem to be motivated by a wish to perform its ideology or to be seen doing it.

Our conclusion is that Malay organisations at this time did not seem to share the commitment of Malay MPs to meritocracy as the path for Malays in Singapore. Nevertheless to improve the educational achievements of Malays waw wholly compatible with the sprit of the meritocracy, and in this respect found common ground with the Malay MPs. The difference at this time between the positions of the MPs and the Malay organizations was not so much over some of the concrete steps that were appropriate, or over the need to mobilise self-help within the Malay community, but over whether this was to be done with wholehearted commitment to meritocracy. How this difference began to be resolved is the theme of the next section.

3.3 Setting the targets to be achieved

In Section 1, we saw how Malays during this period (1965-70) were being exposed to discourses by Malay MPs urging them to embrace meritocracy ideology, and work to improve themselves. In Section 2 we saw how, in the meantime, two different types of discourses and conducts prevailed among politically conscious Malays: one implicitly opposing meritocracy, the other endorsing self-improvement by Malays. This section will show how some Malay opinion-leaders began to work with the MPs to make meritocracy the accepted context for Malay-self-improvement.

[54] Wan Hussin Zoohri, *The Singapore Malays: the dilemma of development*, Singapore: Kesatuan Guru-Guru Melayu Singapura, 1990, p27.

An early contribution was by a Malay academic, Dr Ahmad bin Muhamad Ibrahim, in a 1966 talk at a seminar organized by the youth wing of Muhammadiyah (an Islamic religious organization), titled "The Situation of Muslims in Singapore."[55] Dr Ahmad bin Muhamad Ibrahim harshly criticised the idea of a Bumiputra policy for Malays in Singapore.

> "The existence of Malay special rights perhaps will cause the Malays to think that they are over-protected and they do not need to compete with other ethnic groups in order to improve their life." [56]

And Dr Ahmad bin Muhamad Ibrahim praised the idea of meritocracy for Malays:

> "How long have the Malays had to be a backward and dominated group who must be led like small children? I think it is better for the Malays to compete openly and equally with other [ethnic] groups in this country" [57]

This humiliating image of Malays as small children being led by others, mirrors the image by Sha'ari Tadin examined earlier. Sha'ari Tadin depicted Malays under the Bumiputra policy as people with a walking stick.

In the late 1960s, non-MP members of the Malay elite like Dr Ahmad bin Muhamad Ibrahim, who came to share a vision of what the Malays should become, began to work together with Malay MPs to make meritocracy the accepted path for Malays to follow in Singapore.

The Malay elite had two aims. The first aim was to combine the resources of Malay/Muslim organizations, in order to improve the commitment of Malays to accepting the logic of meritocracy as the guiding principle of their efforts and to channel their energies and efforts in its service in a more efficient way. The second was to show the rest of the Singapore society that Malays had accepted meritocracy. To pursue the first aim, they worked with MPs to form a Malay Cultural Council that

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[55] *Berita Harain*, 8th November 1966.
[56] *Ibid.*
[57] *Ibid.*

would integrate the Malay/Muslim organizations and coordinate their activities into the same direction. The second aim was served by a landmark seminar in 1970.

3.3.1 The formation of the Central Council of Malay Cultural Organizations, Singapore

The idea of a Malay Cultural Council had first been proposed by the Malay opposition party in 1966 as a way to develop Malay culture in post-independent Singapore society. But when this idea was picked up by Malay MPs in 1968, its goals changed. In 1968, the PAP Malay MP Sha'ari Tadin showed Malay cultural organizations a proposal for a Malay Cultural Council with these functions:[58]

1. To organize projects to improve Malays in educational, social, and cultural aspects.

2. To form a research body to help the Central Council plan suitable projects of this type.

3. To cooperate with efforts of the government to improve Malays in the above-mentioned fields.

4. To direct projects organized by Malay organizations and experts such as the *Gerakan Obor* 'Torch Movement' [a movement established before independence to improve the education level of Malays]. [59]

The Council would therefore function as an intermediary between government and Malays, coordinating efforts by both sides to improve the Malays, and also channelling the efforts of the various Malay groups into one direction.

These functions of the Council were clarified at a symposium held in June that year attended by 150 delegates from 43 organizations and opened by the Minister of

[58] *Berita Harian*, 13th June 1968.
[59] *Ibid.*

Domestic affairs, the Malay Othman Wok.[60] At the symposium Sha'ari Tadin presented a working paper titled "The Central Council of Malay Cultural Organizations, Singapore." He stated proposed functions for the Council virtually identical in form to the above, and added:

> "The Central Cultural Council will be designed as a solid and impressive body. It needs to coordinate and foster connections among Malay cultural organizations, to suit the situation and ideology in this republic."[61]

In short, the function of the Council is to mould the Malays into one unified group to implement the state ideology effectively and efficiently.

The Central Cultural Council was inaugurated in November that year in front of 100 delegates from 38 organizations. Sha'ari Tadin made a speech saying:

> "If we do not work hard to change the style of our struggle (*perjuangan*) then we will soon be left far behind."[62]

Just as Sha'ari Tadin proposed that Malays must change the "style of their struggle", that new style was publicly declared to Singaporeans two years later in 1970, at a landmark seminar, "Malay participation in the national development of Singapore."

3.3.2 Towards the 1970 seminar

The 1970 seminar served to declare to the rest of Singapore society what path Malays would follow. That was the second aim of the Malay elite opinion-leaders. They wished to show the nation that Malays would work to improve themselves and become decent Singaporeans – in other words, that they had accepted meritocracy.

To place the landmark seminar in its context, we should recall that in May 1970 the Minister of Foreign Affairs, S. Rajaratnam, challenged the Malays to declare their

[60] *Berita Harian*, 16th September 1968. The Muslim Missionary Society, Singapore (Jamiyah) provided its new meeting hall for this symposium.
[61] *Berita Harian*, 1st October 1968.
[62] *Berita Harian*, 18th November 1968.

allegiance to meritocracy. At that time, as a representation of the Malays' voice, the Central Cultural Council had responded with a statement of support for the state's position on Malays (see 2.3.1). The seminar held in December 1970 was to be another response to that challenge. The Council would organise a large official event to show Singaporeans the clear attitude of the Malays. One of the key figures in leading the seminar was Dr. Sharom Ahmat, a lecturer working at the history department at National University of Singapore. He was also a member of the Central Cultural Council.

Both Malays and non-Malays were to participate in the seminar together. Several non-Malays were on the committee of six in charge of organising the seminar, and in an announcement in the Malay newspaper Sharom Ahmat stressed the inclusive nature of the seminar:

> "This issue [of the problems of the Malays] cannot be solved solely by looking through the lens of the Malays or of any single group. Therefore the seminar will be organized on a large scale to include participants from various [ethnic] groups, who can search together for appropriate, radical, and well defined resolutions. This seminar also hopes to produce the result of uniting the Malays to participate in national development in a serious and determined way ..."[63]

This is an interesting way to conduct the seminar on the problems of the Malays. In the past, the problems of the Malays had usually been discussed within the Malay community, but now, by contrast, other ethnic groups were also involved. This was perhaps an effective way of making some non-Malay Singaporeans more understanding of the Malays' situation as well as of demonstrating their determination to impact it. A Chinese Singaporean, James Wong, was quoted in *Berita Harian* as commenting approvingly on this inclusive style of running the seminar, saying it was good "because the non-Malay communities only know the problems faced by the Malays as something outside our skin."[64]

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[63] *Ibid.*
[64] *Ibid.*

3.3.2.1. Preliminary forum

The scene was set in October 1970 at a small all-Malay forum titled "the Malay Community in the Era of Meritocracy." This forum can be seen as preparation step for the coming seminar about participation of the Malays in nation-building. The leading figures in this preliminary forum were also involved in the larger coming seminar, such as the secretary of the Singapore Malay Teachers' Union, Wan Husain Haji Zoohri, and Dr Sharom Ahmat. The forum's verdict on the future direction of Malays was clear: Malays should accept meritocracy and make efforts to improve themselves.

One participant at the forum described the situation of Malays as follows:

> "The gap between the Malay community and the non-Malay community is growing. This situation does not make us happy ... we [Malays] must accelerate efforts to reduce this gap."[65]

This statement is telling. The notion that Malays, predictably, are not "happy" to be left behind the other ethnic groups, reflects a desire to become like those other groups. To achieve this, they are not asking for any support to the government, but declaring their determination to make the gap small by their own efforts. In order to become happier, they must work hard by themselves to actualize what they want to become.

The forum also called upon Malays to ponder their own readiness to accept the challenges of a meritocratic society. During the discussion participants presented such challenges and questions as this:

> "We have to ask ourselves these things. What are the features of a meritocracy?... Does the Malay community possess the traits needed for a meritocracy?
>
> Does the entire Malay community stand still? For instance, is the Malay society unable to take change — can it not take the process of urbanization...

[65] *Berita Harian*, 30th October 1970.

Are we Malays now ready for open competition on equal terms?"[66]

The forum did not debate whether Malays should choose the ideology of meritocracy over that of *Bumiputra* special rights. Instead it presented meritocracy as the unquestionable path for Malays and posed them the challenge: Can you do it? Are you good enough?

Interestingly, also present at this forum was the Minister of Foreign Affairs, S. Rajaratnam. He was the figure who had challenged Malays to end their 'silent conspiracy' of tacit support for the *Bumiputra* policy, and openly declare their support for the state ideology of meritocracy instead. So he surely witnessed the discussion at the forum with satisfaction. He also encouraged the participants in their conclusions by saying to them:

> "The Malay community faces the challenge of open competition... One basis for encouraging the concept of meritocracy is to end the legacy of past notions ... the idea that we [minorities] cannot have the same living standard as other ethnic groups. What is very important here is to abandon the belief that Malays are being deprived of something and to abandon the old notion of asking for help easily. This must become the direction for the Malay community."[67]

By now, it appears, meritocracy had clearly been accepted by the Malay elite as well as Malay MPs, as the path for Malays to follow. What had to be done now was to set clear targets for the Malays to achieve, and to announce to the rest of the Singapore society, the path that Malays had chosen for themselves.

3.4 The 1970 seminar: 'Malay participation in the national development of Singapore'

From 11th to 13th December, the seminar "Malay participation in national development of Singapore" was attended by many delegates from various Malay organizations as

[66] *Berita Harian*, 30th October 1970.
[67] *Ibid.*

well as by non-Malays. As both non-Malays and Malays were present, the language used for the entire seminar was English. This choice of English exclusively disappointed some Malay organizations,[68] but made sense in light of the aims of the seminar. The seminar was an official declaration by the Malays that they regarded themselves as part of Singapore society and would follow the ideology of this state. Using English instead of Malays' own language reinforced that message. The actual content of the seminar was reported in Malay translation by *Berita Harian*.[69]

Speakers at the seminar presented concrete aims for Malays to pursue in order to perform well in Singapore under meritocratic principles. The papers focused on three issues: education, employment, and housing and family. The opening speech was given by Sha'ari Tadin. Following this opening speech, a key note address by Sharom Ahmat from the Malay Cultural Council was given on Malay problems in education. The first point of his speech displayed the ritualized elements of discourse already familiar from the presentations of other leaders dealing with the problems of Malays. This discourse firstly blamed the colonial control for the backwardness of the Malays.

> "... part of the reason for Malays' educational backwardness is British policy towards the Malays... Malay education was meant purely for the preservation and stability of the Malay traditional way of life. This indeed was the policy followed through the period of British rule." [70]

As a historian himself, Sharom Ahmat carefully followed the history of Malay education. And he also created the usual chronological divide before and after 1959 when the PAP government gained power.

> "We have the benefit of a government who understand the problems...The PAP government had shown sensitive awareness of Malay problems in their entirety. One fundamental philosophy of the government is the belief in the equality of citizens of all races, between educational and language groups.

[68] *Berita Harian*, 11th December 1970.
[69] *Berita Harian*, 11th, 12th, 14th, 15th, and 20th December 1970, and *Berita Minggu*, 13th December 1970.
[70] Sharom & Wong eds., 1971, p6. [quote in original English]

> Hence also the belief in equality of opportunity for education and employment." [71]

Sharom Ahmat does not mention here another type of possible equality for Malays, equality of *outcomes*, through affirmative action. Instead the government's commitment to free competition under meritocracy is presented as the evidence of a caring state and its concern to maintain "equality."

Despite this philosophy of the government, Sharom Ahmat declared that it does give special treatment to the Malays. This state support for Malay education gives them wonderful prospects for the future.

> "In February 1960, the Government announced a scheme whereby all Malay students who were born in Singapore, or whose parents were Singapore citizens, and who were attending Government or Government aided secondary schools would be given free education. In addition, Malay students in the University of Malaya (now University of Singapore), or who would in future obtain admission to the Polytechnic and the University would get free higher education." [72]

This is the evidence of special treatment. It was now possible for Sharom Ahmat to declare that the special position of the Malays is honoured in Singapore. He reminds them that the government introduced Article 89 of the constitution, to enshrine the special position and treatment of the Malays based on their indigenous status, and stressed that it keeps its promises under that article:

> "It is in accordance with the declared intention of this constitutional provision, that the government ... decided to expand the opportunities open to Malays for secondary and tertiary education."[73]

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[71] Sharom & Wong eds., 1971, p10.
[72] Sharom & Wong eds., 1971, p10.
[73] Sharom & Wong eds., 1971, p10.

After talking at length about how much the government supports Malays, Sharom Ahmat comes to the heart of the matter: the problem that the Malays are still not doing well in Singapore.

> "The Malays, however, are far from being equal, and it is undesirable for one community to be more backward than others. The peace and well-being of the country demands that citizens of the various communities enjoy equally the amenities of life."[74]

So, what is needed is for Malays to be equal to other ethnic groups. Not only is Malay backwardness painful to them, it threatens the stability and happiness of the whole country. Sharom Ahmat gives a concrete example of how Malays are backward in education:

> "Despite what the Government has done, the benefits to Singapore Malays as measured by the number of Malays who have gained admission to, and graduated from university and technical institutes, remain negligible."[75]

This sets a concrete target for Malays to aim for: to raise their figures of admission and graduation. And to achieve this, what they should do is not to hope for state affirmative action, but make their own efforts to overcome the current problems.

Sharom Ahmat also sets out five concrete steps that Malay organizations should take to help Malays catch up in education. Firstly, they should increase the number of scholarships they give to Malay students. Secondly, they should provide accommodation for Malay school students to take them away from their home environment. This would make it possible to monitor their health, diet, work habits, and general environment related to success in education. Thirdly, they should provide extra tuition classes for Malay students to help them with their lessons. Fourthly, they should provide Malay students with extra nutrition to help them develop their IQ. Lastly, they should set up a counselling service to help Malay children struggling with problems.

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[74] Sharom & Wong eds., 1971, p10.
[75] Sharom & Wong eds., 1971, p11.

This list of steps by Sharom Ahmat carries a clear message – that it is up to Malays to help themselves. And Sharom Ahmat expresses this more explicitly too, saying "The Malays themselves must show they are willing to sweat and toil for improvement..."[76] To sum up his speech, it declares a strong commitment on behalf of Malays to a path of meritocracy and a rejection of *Bumiputra* and further affirmative action.

Another paper from the seminar was also reported in *Berita Harian.* This paper was created to detect the problem of Malays in the economic sphere, and was titled "Singapore Malays and Employment Opportunities."[77] The Malay presenters, Athsani Karni and Ridzwan Dzafir, offered detailed statistics to show that Malays had a low employment rate compared to other ethnic groups and were concentrated in lower income jobs compared to those other groups. Athsani Karni and Ridzwan Dzafir offered three main reasons for Malay backwardness in these respects. Firstly, Malays lacked the academic qualifications and technical skills normally demanded by employers. [78] Secondly, Malay-medium education at schools provided inferior education for Malays in subjects such as mathematics and science. Therefore students tended to fail examinations in these subjects, excluding them from many opportunities for good jobs. Thirdly, the use of Malay as the medium of instruction in Malay schools disadvantaged students since a command of English was a key to higher education and good employment in Singapore.

As these presenters regarded Malays' poor education as the cause of their employment problems, they predictably concluded that the only remedy was for Malays to become more highly educated:

> "...for these employment problems to improve, Malays must acquire the required academic and technical qualifications, to equip themselves for better employment opportunities and have at least a fighting chance of entering higher types of occupations."[79]

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[76] Sharom & Wong eds., 1971, p11.
[77] Sharom & Wong eds., 1971, pp.14-19.
[78] Sharom & Wong eds., 1971, p17.
[79] Sharom & Wong eds., 1971, p18.

The key question in terms of the competing ideologies is: how are Malays to do this? Is it the government's job to help them become better educated? On this question the authors declared:

> "It is recognized that while there can be some form of assistance to the Malays, it is up to the Malays to help themselves to improve their position. Undoubtedly, this can only be achieved through sheer hard work and perseverance." [80]

The authors accept that Malays can receive "some form of assistance", alluding to the fact that Malays already received free education, and perhaps also implying that some degree of further help from the government would be acceptable as well. However, the point they make most strongly is that Malays must live by the logic of meritocracy. They are responsible for helping themselves – by hard work.

The authors close their paper by a remark that reinforces this idea:

> In the final analysis, we would venture to say, without fear of being contradicted, that the Singapore Malays would wish not only to survive, but also to live in this highly competitive society of ours. [81]

By calling Singapore "this highly competitive society *of ours*", the authors are subtly but forcefully locating Malays as a part of Singapore. Malays too live under the Singapore system of free and open competition, and will not be content to achieve less than a decent life for themselves.

3.5 Conclusion

The story of this chapter is about steps by the Malays in finding their direction. Their direction became clearer as Malay leaders and members of organizations of various kinds gradually began to grope for a common way to realize their desire, and hopes for the future. By the end of this process, the Malays in Singapore were firmly on the

[80] Sharom & Wong eds., 1971, p18.
[81] Sharom & Wong eds., 1971, p18.

path of meritocracy. The goal set by Malay opinion-leaders for themselves and for the rest of the Malay society was to improve themselves and show they are decent Singaporeans. They have now reached the stage of identifying concrete targets and goals to pursue in order to improve themselves. The spelling out of those targets and goals in this landmark seminar of 1970 made it truly a turning point for Malays as a group in Singapore.

An understanding of the significance of this turning point was also expressed to me in a conversation with a Malay who had led an educational organisation in the 1970s.[82] He told me:

> "Before this seminar, we often said "*habis lah.*" It means in English, "we are finished". After this seminar, we stopped being grumpy and decided to live in Singapore."[83]

Gradually we can see Malays, no longer only Malay MPs but increasingly other Malays as well coming to share an idea of their place in Singapore. Although this idea fits superbly well with the discourse directed at them by non-Malay state leaders, that does not mean that it is best understood as something imposed on them. They are choosing to embrace it out of their own desire to be accepted as the equal of other groups in Singapore – in other words, out of their own desire for happiness.

[82] He led the Malay educational organization, 4PM (Malay Youth Literary Association) in the 1970s, and also worked for various other Malay/Muslim organizations.
[83] Casual conversation in English on 18th July 2002 at a mosque.

Chapter 4 Implanting "Change Attitudes"

"The issue at stake, however, is not whether we have changed enough or not. Changing attitudes can never end."[1] [Malay MP Rahim Ishak, 1973]

In the previous chapter, we saw how a decision was made by Malay political and social leaders to comply with the ideology of meritocracy and to become able to make a contribution to the development of Singapore society under its logic, as other ethnic groups were already doing. This decision required the Malays to model themselves on those other ethnic groups who had already proved they were suitable and relevant to Singapore society.

In the 1970s, based on this desire to become a part of Singapore like other ethnic groups, politically engaged Malays created a campaign "Change Attitudes" (*Ubah Sikap*), and as a part of this campaign various seminars and forums were organized. Through these forums and seminars, a certain type of Malay agency was created. This chapter will examine the process of creating that agency. Firstly, it will clarify the stance of the government towards the Malays in the 1970s. Secondly, it will explain the concept of "Change Attitudes." Thirdly, it will examine the various forums and seminars conducted under that name, to show how they enabled Malay leading figures of various types (including students) to present and perform a certain way-to-be to the rest of the Malay community. This agency created by "Change Attitudes" came to be performed by other Malays too as participants in newspaper forums or discussions, as well as consumed by the broader community of Malay newspaper readers. Performing the set of conducts that went under the name of "Change Attitudes" became a way for Malays to obtain temporary satisfaction by demonstrating tangible achievement that would be recognized by other groups and the government because it could be measured with statistics.

[1] *Berita Harian*, 21th August 1973.

4.1 The stance of the government towards Malays in the 1970s

At the start of the 1970s, the Malays in Singapore had begun to be ingested into the Singapore society, as would-be members of the mainstream. This setting is ideal for the government to govern them by a hands-off approach. All it needs to do is to keep reminding them that they are not yet a part of decent Singapore society. This functions to delay the fulfilment of the Malays' desire, and so keep them striving towards it. The Minister of Foreign Affairs, S. Rajaratnam, played a steady role in this activity. For instance in a speech in April 1971, he urged the Malays to improve their backwardness. This was a speech to delegates from the Malay/Muslim organizations affiliated with the Central Cultural Council, including the Malay opposition party which had given its support to the *Bumiputra* special rights ideology during the constitutional meetings of the 1960s.

Under a large headline in *Berita Harian* "Malays urged to improve their position", Rajaratnam was reported as urging the Malays "to improve their quality in various fields, even thought they are small in numbers compared to other groups in this republic."[2] Rajaratnam here was once again putting the Malays in competition with other ethnic groups, and cajoling them to prove they are decent Singaporeans by becoming as good as those groups. Rajaratnam also warned them against an isolationist attitude whereby they do not think of themselves as a part of the nation, saying:

> "Small ethnic groups in Singapore have vested interests in this country, and that is why they have to think of their position in Singapore from such a point of view and in that context."[3]

In his speech Rajaratnam also played the card of presenting himself as a member of a minority in Singapore too, an Indian, and therefore able "truly to feel all the problems faced by small ethnic groups in Singapore."[4] By talking as someone from a group that is numerically even smaller than the Malays yet more successful than the Malays, he

[2] *Berita Harian*, 26th April 1971.
[3] *Ibid.*
[4] *Ibid.*

claims the right to mention the problems of the Malays rather than other ministers in the government. His presence saves Lee Kuan Yew who is from the most powerful and dominant group, the English-educated Chinese, from touching upon the issue of the Malays, which was considered a sensitive issue.

However, after the public seminar declaration of the Malays in 1970 that they would follow meritocracy ideology, in contrast to Malaysia's path of implementing *Bumiputra* special rights, Lee Kuan Yew himself also made a clear statement about the direction of the Malays in Singapore. In 1972 he said,

> "If the Malays in Singapore show that they want to become Singapore citizens, then I think the government of Singapore can persuade Singapore nationals to give more support to them. But if as a Malay you say, 'I want to enjoy the prosperity and rapidly expanding economy of Singapore, but also want to enjoy special rights such as in Malaya or Malaysia', then that is not rational."[5]

Here the government stance on the ideology of meritocracy and its application to the Malays is clearly shown to be unchanged since independence – and opposed to the ideology in Malaysia. Moreover, the government is putting the old challenge to the Malays again in the context of the 1970s: improve yourself if you want to be recognized as Singaporean. This means to Malays, "make efforts if you want to actualize your desire."

4.2 Change Attitudes

In the case of a majority in society, as Ghassan Hage has argued[6], the distance between desire and actualization of that desire is created or controlled by the majority itself. Australian White nationalists need to create obstacles, in order to delay fulfilment of their dream of making Australia a White nation. The basic obstacle is migrants. In order to make their dream of creating a white Australia more meaningful, White nationalism can continually create more obstacles concerning migrants. The

[5] *Berita Harian*, 1st Sepember 1972.
[6] Ghassan Hage, *White Nation: fantasies of white supremacy in a multicultural society*, Sydney: Pluto Press, 1998.

more difficult their desire is to achieve, the more meaningful it becomes. It is the white Australian majority who have the power to create and control the presence of obstacles in its own path.

What about the case of a minority, which itself is located as an obstacle, such as the Malays in Singapore? They are not in the position of creating the obstacles. They lost that chance when they accepted the state ideology, meritocracy. In other words, by choosing to try to become a part of the majority, they have been deprived of that privilege. In their case, it is power – pre-eminently the Singapore government – which can frustrate the actualization of Malays' desire and hence keep them working hard toward attaining it.

The more Malays' desires are frustrated, the more their craving to realize those desires can mount. Moreover, their efforts to achieve those desires cannot be directed to an outside entity, for it is Malays themselves who are labelled as an obstacle – to the enhancement of the productivity of Singapore. So Malays detect the problems within themselves instead. 'Something is wrong with us, therefore we have to find it and fix it by ourselves.' This decision is made willingly by Malays in order to make their desire or dreams come true. 'Some day, we can stand as high as other ethnic groups.'

The logic of meritocracy wonderfully reinforces this critical gaze of self-diagnosis. By the logic of meritocracy, if one does not succeed it is his or her own fault. If your dream of achieving success like other ethnic groups in the Singapore society does not really come true, then it is due to your lack of effort or hard work. A voice echoes, telling Malays, "this problem is caused by you." Or more provocatively, "if you want to prove yourself, do whatever it takes." To make oneself change flexibly in order to suit the conditions is also a virtue under the doctrine of meritocracy promoted in Singapore. In this setting, nothing can stop Malays from laying themselves on the examination table to diagnose the ailments that prevent them from becoming healthy adults who can stand tall like people from the other ethnic groups. In order to become fully-fledged adults, to prove themselves, they are willing to find the problems and obstacles that make them less relevant to Singapore society. At this point, complicity between the powerful and the dominated is quietly and naturally completed. Their own desire – to become like the other ethnic groups who have already achieved

success in the Singapore society by the logic of meritocracy – is also what the state wants from their nationals. The two desires overlap neatly with each other.

"Change attitudes" (*Ubah sikap)* is a slogan created by Malay leaders soon after the landmark seminar of 1970, and this slogan was frequently used by Malays in the 1970s. In Singapore, when the government wants nationals to achieve something, it often creates a slogan and makes a special campaign. An example is its "Speak Mandarin" campaign to encourage Chinese Singaporeans to use Chinese language. However in this case Malays created the slogan "Change Attitudes" for themselves.

As for its definition, "Change Attitudes" is actually quite vague. From where and to where should Malays go, and what attitudes do they need to change? The goal at least is reasonably clear. From being weak, dependent, and backward as they were under either British colonial control or feudalistic governance under the Sultan, the Malays need to change toward becoming independent, modern, and self-supporting, like fully fledged adult human beings. However, regarding the "attitudes" that Malays need to discard or adopt in order to reach that goal there is no clear notion. And this very looseness in fact constitutes a brilliantly prepared setting. It means that any attitude can be put under self-examination and identified as a target of improvement. In short, the campaign of "Change Attitudes" demands total reform for the ultimate purpose of wining acceptance in mainstream Singapore society.

By working to make this desire come true, Malays create a certain type of agency. The agency created by "Change Attitudes" is one that performs this set of conducts: self-examination, detection of negative elements within oneself, and setting targets for self-improvement. The wide scope of this endeavour is reflected in a remark of the Malay MP Sha'ari Tadin:

> "This issue of changing attitudes is not a simple, single issue. We have presently reached an issue of reform like the one experienced in Turkey by Mustafa Atakurk."[7]

[7] *Berita Harian*, 29th November 1971.

Once this willing self-examination is started, it casts a constant curse on Malays by making them pose a perpetual question to themselves about whether they are doing well, as the remark below by a Malay journalist, A. Ghani Nasir, shows.

> "When this phrase [Change Attitudes] echoes once again, we will surely ask this question at once. 'Haven't the Malays changed their attitude yet?' "[8]

Malays examined and criticised themselves repeatedly to find out what they should fix about themselves to become as successful as other ethnic groups who can follow meritocracy and whatever else the government regards as good. While engaging in the propaganda of "Change Attitudes," the Malays themselves felt the purpose not only of actualizing their dreams, but also of proving themselves to the rest of Singapore society. The word "to prove" (*membuktikan*) was often used along with this set of conducts.

4.3 Campaign of "Change Attitudes"

Over the two years of 1971 and 1972, the notion of "Change Attitudes" was repeatedly presented through forums and seminars organized by Malay intellectuals and social leaders. Through these seminars, Malays educated other Malays in the virtue of 'Change attitudes' as a set of conducts to be performed by Malays and as a direction for them to take.

4.3.1 The 1971 forums

One of the main organs of propaganda for performing and presenting "Change Attitudes" to Malays was National University of Singapore (NUS) and the most representative figure was the head of its Malay Studies department, Ma'arof Shalleh. In 1971, the Malay Studies department of NUS conducted three forums to discuss the 'Malay problem.' These were conceived as part of the campaign for "changing attitudes."[9] Through such seminars and forums, the term the "Malay problem"

[8] *Berita Minggu*, 19th August 1973.
[9] *Berita Harian*, 25th July 1973.

(*masalah Melayu*) began to be used and become a standardised term in newspaper discourses.

In July 1971, the Malay Studies department of NUS ran a forum titled "The Malays in Singapore Today". It invited two guest speakers: the president of the Singapore Malay Teachers' Union (KGMS), Sidek Saniff; and a sociologist from Cornell University, Stanley Bedlington. The forum "raised various ideas of participants about the weaknesses and the backwardness of the Malays here [in Singapore]," with a focus on "educational, economical, social, and political issues." [10] Sidek Saniff asserted that "the issue of education seems the important factor for the Malays if they want to overcome their problems in the future." [11] Bedlington put emphasis on Malays' economic problems instead, although he acknowledged that education was also important if Malays were to improve.[12] The seminar reached the conclusion that "Malays must be able to stand by themselves in almost every field, including educational, economic, social and political fields". [13] If Malays can do this, it also concluded, then "soon the new problems faced by the Malays can be overcome." [14]

Although the press did not give a detailed description of this seminar, some points emerge. Firstly, the Malays' goal is depicted as an inevitable destination ("The Malays must be able to stand themselves"), while the very expression of this goal locates Malays as not yet fully fledged adults, still unable to stand by their own strength. It is also striking how loosely comprehensive the problems faced by Malays are, as diagnosed by the participants at the seminar. Their problems are perceived as covering all the areas of educational, economic, social and political issues. This loosely defined set of problems enables Malays to posit anything as a "problem" that causes their backwardness, and so postpones fulfilment of their desire. Malays are thus driven to work hard to fix problems detected by the gaze of self-examination in almost every field.

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[10] *Berita Harian*, 31st July 1971.
[11] *Ibid.*
[12] *Ibid.*
[13] *Ibid.*
[14] *Ibid.*

In October 1971, another seminar about the 'Malay problem' was led and chaired by a handful of Malay students at National University of Singapore, with the support of its Malay Studies department. The title of the forum was "Change attitudes towards our success."[15] Here these young Malays presented their own opinions about Malays, in front of 300 university students and high school students attending the forum. As students at the national university, these Malays who led the forum belong to an elite group, expected to lead the Malays in the future. They provided a model of successful Malays, which served to enlighten the audience at this forum by showing other Malays that they too can perform like that.

Behind this seminar was a shared notion that the problems preventing Malays from becoming like other ethnic groups lay inside the Malays themselves. This notion was precisely summed up in the opening speech by a supporter of the forum, the head of the Malay Studies department, Ma'arof H. Salleh:

> "Singapore is now busy carrying out economic development, urbanization and industrialisation, however the Malays are still practicing unhelpful attitudes [to national development], which is the main reason why they continue to be left behind." [16]

Without any debate, it thus became a keystone of the discussion at the forum that the situation of Malays was problematic (they were "left behind") and that this was due to Malay attitudes. It was in order to discuss such problems, such obstacles to fulfilment of their desires, that the forum was organized. Following that opening speech by Ma'arof Salleh, the Malay students at National University of Singapore presented their own views about the problem of the Malay community.

The first speaker, Sa'adon Muhammad Som, started his talk with the remark that "The Malays, who are terribly behind other ethnic groups, need to change their own attitudes." [17] His critical gaze of self-examination leads him to interrogate the attitudes which are "unprofitable" (*tidak menguntungkan*) from the viewpoint of the current

[15] *Berita Harian*, 4th October 1971.
[16] *Ibid.*
[17] *Ibid.*

purpose of raising the Malays to as high a standard as other ethnic groups. The actual problems pointed out by him are as follows:

> "To achieve development, the Malays first of all should stop old traditions, namely, wasting more money than they can afford and buying household goods, clothes, and objects of entertainment ... [Malays make] a big thing out of celebratory feasts. Such things need to be changed... Apart from this, it can be said that in order to improve their standard of living, the Malays need to banish one unhelpful notion, that of satisfying themselves with saying, "no matter what happens, we do not want to tackle problems." And they have practically no attitude of making themselves independent." [18]

Here, a habit of extravagance and an overly relaxed way of leaving problems unsolved without doing anything are detected as problems. But those are not the only ones. The type of wife that a Malay man chooses is also scrutinised and detected as a problem.

> "Some Malays cannot improve their standard of living if they have a wife who did not come from the house of her parents, or a wife whose parents still control her when she has already become a wife and now has her own life." [19]

Sa'adon Muhammad Som warns here that girls who have developed loose moral standards by living outside their parents' house before marrying, and girls who are dominated by their parents, are both useless as modern Singaporean wives. He also offers a more general opinion on what Malays must do to overcome their weaknesses: gain a stronger economic position where they can have high hopes of good employment prospects. And he offers a final piece of advice to Malays in order for them to make their future a dynamic and active one: "Don't engage in useless activities." [20]

This disconnected array of problems detected by Sa'adon Muhammad Som shows how anything can be labelled as a problem by the gaze of self-examination. Malays'

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[18] *Ibid.*
[19] *Ibid.*
[20] *Ibid.*

extravagance, their relaxed way of leaving problems unsolved, their unwise choices of marriage partner, and their way of spending time in futile pursuits are all diagnosed as problems within Malays that need to be fixed.

The second NUS student who spoke at the forum was Juriah Sukaime, a student of accounting. She mentioned her share of unfulfilled desires in her speech, too:

> "We need graduates at a high level, who can raise up the Malays and this country. ... We must not let ourselves be left behind in education, employment, development of the national economy, and standard of living." [21]

What makes the critical gaze of self-examination more effective here is the familiar frame of comparing the Malays with other ethnic groups. Measuring Malays against more successful people makes it easier to visualize how backward the Malays are, which also make it easer to detect the problems with them. She continues:

> "We need to change our attitude of "It doesn't matter" [*Tidak mengapa*], and of leaving our destiny to God without making a single scrap of effort for ourselves. Instead, [we need to] replace that with an attitude of trying and making an effort." [22]

And she adds:

> "One attitude lacking among the Malays is the entrepreneurial spirit, or spirit of initiative to try fields untouched by Malays in the past." [23]

Here the student speaker criticises Malays' passive mentality and inert behaviour based on that mentality. As a winner in society herself, she poses a question to the other Malays: why can't you work hard? And she refuses to let the Malays use their poverty as an excuse for their backwardness, by reminding them that they receive free education, drawing on a theme common in the rhetoric of the Malay MPs:

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[21] *Berita Harian*, 4th October 1971.
[22] *Ibid.*
[23] *Ibid.*

> "Malay students receive free education from the primary to university level. Therefore, poverty should not become a factor in our impediments [in education]."[24]

Based on that analysis, she concludes that "the Malays themselves must demonstrate that they are seriously ready to work hard to improve themselves, by themselves."[25]

A third student speaker, Arshad bin Sehan, touched upon the attitudes of parents as a possible problem for Malays. He said that Malay parents must:

> "... pay attention to their children, not only in a sense that they provide food, but also by being connected with their children, and encouraging them so that they can achieve success... Parents need to create a study time table for their children, so that the children can study in a systematic way."[26]

And the last speaker, Mohamad Amin Sidik, expressed his desire in a straightforward way, saying "Each of us must have attitudes like the other ethnic groups."[27]

At this forum, "Change Attitudes" as a set of conducts was fully expounded. Despite the apparently diverse choice of topics, a fundamental shared notion about the Malay situation prevailed: that Malays must examine the problems within which block them from achieving their desires. The gaze of self-examination can capture anything under its consideration. Living self-indulgently, following old customs, making unwise marriage choices, being passive, not being close enough to one's children, being insufficiently like other ethnic groups, were among the factors detected as the causes of the disease and nominated as targets for the cure.

In December 1971 another forum was held, titled "Adapting the Malays to urbanization and industrialization". It was hosted by the Malay Studies department at National University of Singapore. The three presenters were: the head of the Malay

[24] *Berita Harian*, 4th October 1971.
[25] *Ibid.*
[26] *Ibid.*
[27] *Ibid.*

Studies department itself, Ma'arof Salleh; the president of The Singapore Malay Teachers' Union, Sidek Saniff; and a Malay newspaper journalist, Hussein Jahidin.[28]

This seminar was largely another occasion to parade the set of conducts of "Change Attitudes" – although with one interesting exception, the speech of Hussein Jahidin.

Sidek Saniff exemplified the usual set of conducts by detecting a problem in the attitude of Malay organisations. He claimed that they chose the wrong field of activity, by focusing too exclusively on cultural issues. He urged them to be active not only in the cultural issues but also in social, economic, and educational fields, to enable Malays to develop effectively.

However, the journalist Hussein Jahidin expressed a view that contrasted with the familiar pattern of "Change Attitudes". He emphasised the achievements already made by the Malays up to that point, and asked why it is that Malays cannot acknowledge such changes.

> "It was suggested to Malays that they move from *Kampong* [urban slum] houses into HDB flats. This proposal has been carried out, and the majority of the Malays now live in HDB flats. Then the Malays were advised to work in industrial sectors. It cannot be denied that many Malays now do work in the industrial sectors ... It seems to be untrue that the Malays have not changed their attitudes and that they have not managed to adapt themselves [to the current situation in Singapore]. What has yet to be attained by the Malay society is that degree of change desired by intellectuals and those others who are making appeals, urges, and suggestions."[29]

This comment is significant and insightful. It precisely points out that "Change Attitudes" involves lack of appreciation for how much Malays have achieved. Housing and employment for Malays were both targeted as problems in the goals set by the landmark seminar in 1970. And in both areas, the Malays were already progressing well towards those declared goals. But no matter what is achieved by the

[28] *Berita Harian*, 7th December 1971.
[29] *Ibid.*

Malays, it is never considered satisfactory because Malay academics and other leaders set the standard, and they simply keep urging the Malays to match the achievements of the other ethnic groups.

After criticising the 'ivory tower' approach of intellectuals who were setting the "Change Attitudes" agenda, Hussien Jahidin added, "Let us suggest a different way". His proposal was for Malay academics and other leaders to "meet face to face with [ordinary] Malays and together seek solutions to the problems they face"[30]

Hussein Jahidin's practical and down-to-earth stance was apparently not sufficiently dynamic for Ma'arof Salleh. He returned to the usual pattern of conducts of "Change Attitudes", that is, self-examination by Malays, leading to detection of problems and setting the target of eradicating them. Under Ma'arof Salleh's gaze of self-examination, the first problem detected was Malays' inability to select the attitudes most conducive to achieving success in Singapore.

> "As people living in an urbanized and industrialized society, our people must know the priority of their attitudes, in order to pursue their development. Development is achieved by those who are smart at evaluating suitable attitudes."[31]

In his eyes, the Malays are still left outside of the Singapore society. The cause of their disease is again their mentality; their lack of zest to make themselves as relevant as other ethnic groups. In short, his diagnosis problematises the Malays because they are not working hard enough to improve themselves. He asks: why can't you make it happen more quickly, by throwing away outdated irrelevant attitudes and adopting ones suitable to the modern nation you are in? The target is thus set: what the Malays have to work hard at now is repairing their mentality. They must gain the spirit of making themselves relevant to Singapore.

Ma'arof Salleh also criticised the Malays on the ground that they still had not achieved a standard of living as high as the other ethnic groups. [32] This seems to

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[30] *Berita Harian*, 7th December 1971.
[31] *Ibid.*
[32] *Berita Harian*, 7th December 1971.

illustrate the attitude of Malay intellectuals that Hussein Jahidin had just criticised. It is only within this framework of comparing Malays with the other ethnic groups, that the Malays' achievements can be denied. But this firm ground is not questioned nor should be questioned. By Ma'arof Salleh's gaze of self-examination, it is not important how much has been done by the Malays by their own standards. The issue at stake is how close the Malay can get to their ideal models. Just to improve is not good enough. The gaze of self-examination captures the pace and level of that improvement too, and sets it as a problem that needs fixing.

Ma'arof Salleh concluded his argument by saying, "The Malays will be successful if they truly know the value of change by giving priority to it.[33] Here he once again pinpoints the Malay mentality as a problem. They do not understand yet how vital it is to change their attitudes and behaviour. They must make it a higher priority to change themselves if they are to succeed.

4.3.2 The 1972 forums

The next year, two forums were conducted to expound the set of the conducts of "Change Attitudes", and to expose other Malays to this performance. In January 1972, a forum titled "Participation of the Malays in national development" was organized by the Cultural department of the Central Council of Malay Cultural Organizations, Singapore (Majlis Pusat). Presenters included several Malay academics and social leaders, such as Firdaus binti Haji Akib from the Malay language department of the National University of Singapore. Another presenter was Stanley Bedlington who was now at that university's Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.[34]

The conclusions of the forum are summed up in the headline of an article in *Berita Harian*, reading "There is participation by Malays in Singapore's development, but still slight."[35] This forum was held only about a year after the landmark seminar of December 1970. However the participants were still expressing frustration at the unsatisfactory results achieved by Malays.

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[33] *Ibid.*
[34] *Berita Harian*, 14th January 1972. The Malay newspaper journalist Hussein Jahidin was another organizer.
[35] *Berita Harian*, 14th January 1972.

Some speakers at this forum highlighted the "limited' extent of participation of the Malays in national development. As Ma'arof Shalleh had pointedly observed in the Malay Studies forum, it is not good enough to see that Malays are participating, the issue at stake now becomes whether they do it as much as the other groups. Firdaus binti Haji Akib from the National University of Singapore illustrated this gaze when she remarked:

> "The Malays are working in the industrial sector and in factories, however, they only work as blue-collar workers ..." [36]

Although Malays are now actively participating in industry, her scrutiny still manages to capture a problem, showing how the scope of potential problems to be detected can be expanded as necessary.

Another speaker, Ramli bin Hamid from Singapore Youth Association,[37] also chose to focus on the limits to Malay's participation in development. He acknowledged that their participation could be clearly seen in the fields of culture and social issues, however, he objected that "the more important fields are economy, politics, and education" [38], adding:

> "Lack of the participation by Malays in the economy and in education is the reason why the Malays in Singapore still have not developed on a comprehensive scale. [39]

Like Ma'arof Salleh earlier, Ramli bin Hamid here identifies the flaw in Malays that they are unable to set the right priorities and choose what is most important for them – although the details are quite different in each case.

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[36] *Ibid.*
[37] *Ibid.* The nature of the organization, for example, whether it was affiliated with NUS, is not clear from the article. It refers to it only as Angkatan Belia Singapura.
[38] *Ibid.*
[39] *Ibid.*

Further self-examination by Ramli detects another problem: a tendency amongst Malays to avoid responsibility by making colonial control a convenient scapegoat for their backwardness:

> "We Malays blame British colonial control for causing our backwardness. Since 1959, when our nation first succeeded in building its own government, we have been unable to abolish that basic notion from earlier times, that colonial policy is the cause of our backwardness." [40]

> "We must accept the fact that our weakness and backwardness is our own fault. It is we ourselves who do not want to pursue a direction towards the development which characterises life in this industrial and urbanized society."[41]

Colonial control had sometimes been cited by Malay leaders to explain the backward situation of the Malays, but now that very attitude – of blaming colonial control in order to avoid the naked fact that it is all our own fault – is itself identified as a problem in need of fixing. The focus should not be on any historical circumstances, but on contemporary striving.

> "The Malays must have the attitude of wanting to strive to improve their own destiny, and of wanting to join in [with the other groups] to play an active role in economic, business, political, educational, and social activities." [42]

Malays must wish to match the activity of other groups in virtually every way. After all, few areas of life lie outside the spheres of economy, business, political, educational and social activities mentioned here byRamli bin Hamid.

Another (unnamed) speaker also continued this comparison of Malays with the other ethnic groups, saying that the Malays must work hard to be more like them.

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[40] *Berita Harian*, 14th January 1972.
[41] *Ibid.*
[42] *Ibid.*

> "...we Malays must have a strong spirit, and in every era we must work hard to improve our lives, so that we too can proudly play our role in developing our nation, along with other ethnic groups. Our generation will then be honoured by later generations." [43]

The desire to become like the other ethnic groups is after all the hope, or perhaps ideal imaginary picture, that motivates Malays to perform "Change Attitudes" continually.

Another forum, titled "New values applied by Malays," was held in December 1972 at National University of Singapore. It was organised jointly by the Malay Language Association and the Islamic Association at National University of Singapore and held at the University[44]. In this forum, the Malays were again critically examined. The main problems detected this time concerned the Malay mentality: they had not yet achieved modernization psychologically.

Once again, the priorities of Malays were criticised. *Berita Harian* reports that participants found fault with Malays' tendency to give religious values priority over economic values. This rather old-fashioned tendency made Malays less competitive than the Chinese in business sectors. [45] Secondly, their slowness in adopting new values was identified as a problem. One speaker argued:

> In fact the Malays are only involved in old currents [of thought]. Because of that, whenever they change, they only manage to obtain changes which are not really important for them."[46]

In this analysis, the Malays lack the right state of mind to perform "Change Attitudes" properly, to make themselves suitable to Singapore society. This requires changing flexibly and efficiently, in step with changing demands. If Malays remain basically attached to old ways of thinking, then even if they do manage to change in some ways,

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[43] *Ibid.*
[44] *Ibid.* The nature of these two organizations, for example, whether they were affiliated with NUS, is not clear from the article. It refers to them only as Persekutuan Bahasa Melayu and Persekutuan Islam.
[45] *Berita Harian*, 11th December 1972.
[46] *Berita Harian*, 11th December 1972.

those changes will never be in step with what is needed. They will never be able to keep up. In line with that analysis, the forum concluded that:

> "Modernization is practiced by the Malays only "from the outside," while their mentality is still not modern."[47]

Malays were also set targets for their own conduct in order to eradicate those problems. They were told at the forum that they must "become good at adjusting yourself to change"[48], and that Malays "must make efforts until they can prove that they have changed not only materially but also mentally."[49]

During these years of 1971 and 1972, then, a host of forums and seminars were held under the name of "Change Attitudes". The elite opinion-makers who organized these events and spoke at them were propagandising an exemplary set of conducts under this slogan. They were urging their fellow Malays to detect problems within themselves that stopped them competing successfully with other ethnic groups and to set these problems as targets for improvement. As the same time, the presenters were publicly modelling this very set of conducts of "Change Attitudes." These presenters were Malays who were criticising Malays and thus, ostensibly, at least, themselves in the process. They were demonstrating the practice of tough 'self'-scrutiny and dynamic setting of targets for 'self'-improvement. This was how other Malays should behave too.

4.4 The endless attempt

In the wake of those forums and seminars, "Change Attitudes" was also repeatedly discussed in the Malay newspaper *Berita Harian*, as another means of detecting the problems of the Malays, and of posing the question to Malays of how much they had changed attitudes over different issues. In November 1973, an article titled "Priorities of the Malays" examined how bad the Malays are at making the right priorities and choices, by introducing the opinions and analysis of several high-profile Malay figures.

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[47] *Ibid.*
[48] *Ibid.*
[49] *Ibid.*

The Malay MP, Sha'ari Tadin, interviewed for the article, criticized the Malay women's way of spending money.

> "Although some Malays are at the lowest economic level, they manage to buy various sorts of expensive clothes which the other groups cannot afford. What they regard as significant among their priorities is showy clothes and a life style which can be disadvantageous to them. A [Malay] working woman might use 80% or more of her income on buying expensive clothes, so there is no money left to be used for education at night school, or to be saved for future need ... the issues of living standard, and of thrift, need strong discipline."[50]

In the same article in *Berita Harian* the secretary of the Singapore Malay Teachers' Union, Mamat Samat, similarly criticized the Malays' extravagant life style.

> "Most Malays put a priority on decorations for the home, beautiful expensive clothes, and big feasts, and they waste [the budget for] their children's education. This is surely a very clear example of a mental attitude which is hardly appropriate, and which is dangerous." [51]

Here we see again how the broad sweep of "Change Attitudes" allows practically any attitude of Malays to be identified as a problem that needs fixing.

In August 1973, the Malay MP Rahim Ishak was also interviewed in *Berita Harian* to explain his notion of "Change Attitudes." Rahim Ishak's remarks were presented as a response to argument in the wider society about whether the Malays had already changed their attitudes to make themselves suitable to the developed, industrialized, and urbanized Singapore. [52]

> "In my opinion, this [development of Malays] has already started. The evidence indeed exists. And I myself have that impression too. But in the context of a multi-racial society like Singapore, it is obligatory for us to

[50] *Berita Harian*, 9th November 1973.
[51] *Ibid.*
[52] *Berita Harian*, 21st August 1973.

approach the matter of development from the perspective of comparing the various ethnic groups. For that reason, the issue of the Malays' backwardness cannot be considered in isolation." [53]

Here Rahim Ishak presents it as a simple reality that the Malays are deprived of the power to set the criteria for judging the value of their own conduct. Their achievements must be measured in comparative terms – that is inevitable.

He then explained that in such a situation, the Malays have no choice but to continue changing attitudes:

"It is clear that our attitudes have already changed in various fields of our lives. The issue at stake, however, is not whether we have changed enough or not. Changing attitudes can never end. More important is whether the process of changing attitudes by Malays follows the flow of development actively taking place in the constructive atmosphere which pervades Singapore."[54]

Here Rahim Ishak effectively reveals the essence of "Change Attitudes": a set of conducts under that name can never end. Malays must change their attitudes to suit themselves to the development of Singapore. And so as long as their model keeps changing, Malays must perpetually keep in step by changing themselves with each shift.

Changing attitudes to suit the development of Singapore is not only endless. Rahim Ishak reminds Malays also that "the process of changing attitudes embraces many aspects of life". Again we see here how the notion of "Change Attitudes" is a conveniently loose concept; indeed a vast one. It can cover attitudes to do with anything. Rahim Ishak gives one example to show how the concept can be turned in any specified direction that suits the priorities of the day, telling Malays it includes:

"... inspiring our children to study mechanics and science, and to take part continually in the development of industrialization as fitters, mechanics,

[53] *Berita Harian*, 21st August 1973.
[54] *Ibid.*

technicians, or engineers. There is a lot of evidence for this. Parents and students are aware of this." [55]

Rahim Ishak's remarks capture well the essence of the set of conducts called "Change Attitudes." Firstly, it never ends, and secondly, it can embrace anything. For the Malays, it is a perpetual project of self-examination and self-improvement in every aspect of life, to make themselves suitable for Singapore society.

4.5 Consuming and reproducing 'Change Attitudes'

As well as consuming the set of conducts of "Change Attitudes" expounded by various Malay leading figures, or winners; other Malays reproduced that pattern of behavour themselves through forums in *Berita Harian.* The sections of that newspaper called 'Forum', or 'Issue of the Week' were places for letters from readers. These discourses show how ordinary readers were producing their own opinions in line with the model discourses produced by Malay leading figures. By doing so, they too presented the set of the conducts under the name of "changing attitudes."

A letter by a reader using the pen name *Anak Singapura* (literally, 'Child of Singapore'), in the 'Forum' section of *Berita Harian* in May 1972, defines the context.

> "If we show that the Malays are disorganised and weak, and that we have no discipline but only want to ask and ask for things, then other people will find us apathetic ...let us show that we Malays in Singapore are one community, which is truly serious and wants to play a role in developing Singapore now as well as in the future." [56]

'Child of Singapore' here wants to prove that the Malays are not under the bumiputra ideology of affirmative action any more but rather are willing to contribute to Singapore's development. Such willingness lets this person practise self-examination and detect several problems of Malays, such as being weak and undisciplined, only asking for handouts.

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[55] *Berita Harian*, 21st August 1973.
[56] *Berita Harian*, 15th May 1972.

Another reader's letter in October 1972, titled "The Malays must change and correct themselves," also performs the gaze of self-examination and concludes that Malays have a lot of changing to do – both in attitudes and conduct.

> "... the Malays must change, in order to prove to non-Malays that they are serious people who truly want to stand on their own feet"[57]

> "The Malay themselves must change their situation, change all behaviours and conditions of their life which bind them and obstruct them from seeking improvement. Among other things, we Malays must know and try to help ourselves, before we can ask help from other people." [58]

In this letter, Malays are urged to prove themselves and their desire to establish themselves in Singapore society. And to do this, it seems, they must fix almost everything about themselves.

Another letter to the 'Forum' section in July 1972 illustrates the same notion: let's fix everything. The writer, a Mohd Amin Yusoff, is a banker and is concerned especially that Malays are not active enough in the economy and in business. His self-examination takes place within the familiar comparative frame. He explains: "Discussing the economic performance of Malays must be done from a relative viewpoint, namely, we must compare ourselves with the situation of other groups". And he lays the blame on a variety of Malay attitudes, such as "wasting money, always being dependent, lacking aggression, being reluctant and shy, and so forth".[59] He then appeals to Malays to correct their mentality, saying "If we want to be as competitive as other groups, then we are forced to change those types of attitudes." [60]

In mid-1973 S. Rajaratnam made the pointed remark that minority groups must work harder than the majority to establish a place for themselves within the economy. When

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[57] *Berita Minggu*, 1st October 1972.
[58] *Ibid.*
[59] *Berita Harian*, 20th July 1974.
[60] *Ibid.*

this was reported by *Berita Harian*, several readers sent letters in response. One, a Harun bin Abdullah, stressed the efforts that Malays are making already:

> "The Malays have already accepted "meritocracy" proposed by the government. In addition they are now working harder, as that is one way to achieve development."

So he believes Malays are already showing the right spirit. He is confident furthermore that this will enable them to achieve their desire to become a part of Singapore:

> "I myself say that the Malays in Singapore believe that we will be a part of this nation in future. The process of adapting to life in urbanized society is indeed taking place and I am sure that the result will come."[61]

However responses by other Malay readers to Rajaratnam's remark were more critical of the Malays themselves. One, using the pen name "Dynamic Girl," demonstrated her willingness to become a true Singaporean by posing critical questions and negative comparisons with other groups.

> "How many Malays are indeed aware of this issue [of the 'Malay problem']? We must model our own behaviour on that of other minorities who produce intellectuals within Singapore society... Look just at Indians, and Sikhs. Truly, those groups are smaller than the Malays, but they are what we could call dynamic minority groups, and they are not defeated by the [Chinese] majority in competitive life."[62]

Another commentary on "Change Attitudes" was offered in an April 1973 edition of *Berita Harian*. In its 'Issue of the week' section, looking back at various attempts by Malays to perform "Change Attitudes", *Berita Harian* concluded that the Malays were willing to participate in Singapore's development.

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[61] *Berita Harian*, 25th July 1973.
[62] *Ibid.*

> "Changing attitudes of the Malays in Singapore is not a new issue. It has already been discussed seriously in forums, discussions and seminars organized by many cultural and educational organizations. In these discussions, the issue has not been about whether Malays want to change or not. It is possible to say that all the discussions agreed that the Malays need to follow the currents of development in Singapore today, if they wish to improve and to play an active role as the other nationals play in establishing this country." [63]

This signals that there was by now little question among Malay opinion-makers and other politically engaged Malays over whether the Malays need to examine themselves critically in order to change. This is no longer the question to be asked. "Change attitudes" has been absorbed,; digested by these Malays and made an imperative.

For such Malays, exercising a set of conducts under the name of "Change Attitudes" designed by them in order to catch up with the Singapore society apparently became a way of obtaining satisfaction. This could happen whenever they achieved measurable improvement in statistical terms. And while enjoying those quantifiable achievements, they can also postpone definitive fulfilment of their dreams and desires by demanding ever *more* achievements from themselves. An article in *Berita Harian* by a Malay journalist A. Ghani Nasir, titled "The Malays experience the wave of an era of change" gives credit to the Malays for their achievements. He declares that "many successes have been achieved in education, employment and socio-economic fields."[64] Ghani Nasir feels proud of those successes and of how Malays have managed to change their attitudes to adapt to Singapore society:

> "It can be said that the Malays have carefully followed and been involved in each current of change and development made in tandem with the policies of the government. Their successes over the past ten years in terms of employment and education are encouraging, and clearly show an awareness by

[63] *Berita Harian*, 15th August 1973.
[64] *Berita Minggu*, 16th March 1975.

> Malays about the opportunities that have been laid out widely in front of them in those fields."[65]

The Malays can enjoy pride in what they have accomplished so far. However, Ghani Nasir did not forget to evaluate their performance in comparison with that of other ethnic groups, as after all Malays do not have the power to make the final judgement about their own achievements.

> "The results of a survey also show that 39% of Malays believe that their life today is far better than it was ten years ago. However, if compared to other ethnic groups, it is clear that this percentage is lower, because 40% of Chinese state that their life now is far better than 10 years ago. 44% of Indians stated the same thing ..."[66]

The difference in percentage among the three groups is in fact small. The point here is not about how much the Malays are lagging behind. It is about the fact that the Malays are still somehow lagging behind the other ethnic groups. This narrow difference is used to prove the backwardness of the Malays. A gaze of self-examination does not let this gap in percentage points slip by unnoticed. This gaze can capture any problems.

And Ghani Nasir shows how the perception of such a gap can stimulate Malays to engage further in the set of conducts of "Change Attitudes":

> "After achieving greater success in employment and education, 60.6% of Malays stated that they are still not yet satisfied with all their successes so far. The majority of Malays are [therefore] aware that they must take steps and work hard to improve their standard of living. And the result of the survey further shows that 36% of Malays are certain that they can take action and work hard to achieve the higher standard of living enjoyed [by other Singaporeans] today."[67]

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[65] *Ibid.*
[66] *Berita Minggu*, 16th March 1975.
[67] *Ibid.*

Unlike the Malays of earlier decades, then, the Malays of today who are engaged in "Change Attitudes" are willing to prove themselves in Singapore society. They can take action, to pursue their dreams.

4.6 Conclusion

"Change attitudes" enabled Malays to absorb a set of conducts, namely, examining themselves, detecting problems within themselves, and setting those problems as targets for fixing. It thus enabled them to gain an agency that performed that set of conducts. They performed "Change Attitudes" in order to actualize their desire to become as good as other ethnic groups. That desire was the motive of the Malays' agency, and "Change Attitudes" provided Malays with a way of constantly seeking and detecting obstacles delaying its fulfilment, and so sustaining their positive agency. Malays gained additional satisfaction from such conduct when it resulted in measurable achievement. This became the-way-to-be for the Malays. It is something meaningful and positive for them. However their satisfaction or pride cannot be absolute because their achievement must be measured in a comparative frame. The irony here is that the power to make a final judgement about their achievement is not their own – it belongs to the non-Malays. So, while they may feel temporary satisfaction, their hard work will continue until someone else says, "okay *ah*. Good *lah*."

In 1976, the Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew himself gave credit to the Malays in his speech. He praised them for their readiness to adapt to Singapore society.

> "How quickly the Malays here adjust themselves to the changing way of life in Singapore – it is truly satisfying for everyone."[68]

Their achievements through the campaign of "Change Attitudes" were thus recognized and valued by no other than Lee Kuan Yew. This temporary recognition given to the Malays by other ethnic groups, in particular by the Prime Minister, was reported using the entire page of *Berita Harian*.

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[68] *Berita Minggu*, 17th October 1976.

However, this lull was short-lived. It lasted only until the government prepared new challenges that Malays could embrace, at the start of the 1980s.

Chapter 5 "Change Attitudes" in Action: The Issues of Education and Women in the 1970s

The previous chapter documented the propaganda for "Change Attitudes" implemented by Malays in the 1970s. This chapter focuses on the same decade, but singles out specific issues in order to show how the general push for "Change Attitudes" was enacted in more concrete terms. The most prominent discourses of "Change Attitudes" during that decade were about education and women, and these are the areas that will be examined.

The landmark seminar of 1970 set education as a target area for Malays to work on to improve themselves (see 3.4). This required critical self-investigation in relation to education and the prescription of remedies that had far-reaching implications for Malay culture in Singapore. As for Malay women, they specifically were also required to change their attitude to make themselves suitable to the Singapore context of national development. We will see how some Malay women formed an agency to enact the set of conducts required by "Change Attitudes" to contribute to national development, driven by their desire to become the part of the Singapore mainstream, like women from other ethnic groups.

5.1. "Change Attitudes" in Education

The paper presented by Ma'arof Salleh at the landmark seminar in 1970 set out a diagnosis of the problem:

> "Despite what the government has done, the benefits to Singapore Malays judging by the number of Malays who have gained admission into, and graduated from the University and Technical Institutes remain negligible. It is obvious therefore that a more concerted and sustained effort is imperative if we hope to see any meaningful improvement in the educational qualifications of Singapore Malays." [1]

[1]Sharom Ahmat & James Wong eds., *Malay Participation in the National Development of Singapore*, Singapore: Eurasia Press, 1971, p11. [quotation in original English]

The desire of Malays for "meaningful improvement" is accepted as a given. And to achieve this desire, Malays need to examine themselves for problems. The Malays are at fault; they have not been achieving enough despite state support. The same paper also urged that "obviously the Malays themselves must show they are willing to sweat and toil for improvement, otherwise it becomes invidious to expect others to come to their assistance."[2] So, in order to improve themselves, the Malays would proceed with critical self-examination in the field of education during the rest of the decade.

As an aid to understanding the significance and direction of this development it is necessary to say a few words about the significance of education in the Singapore context, and what the ideal education system was from the viewpoint of becoming part of mainstream Singapore society. This will show the standard of comparison that Malays set themselves. Secondly, we will see how, as part of the conduct of "Change Attitudes," the Malays turned their critical gaze of self-examination onto the value of Malay language and Malay stream education, as they strove to detect obstacles thwarting their desire to become as good as other ethnic groups. Thirdly, we will examine the practical steps engendered in "Change Attitudes" in relation to two proposals made by the Singapore Malay Teachers' Union for changes to education for Malays.

5.1.1 Background: Significance of education in Singapore

Huge importance was placed on education in Singapore society. This was shown by a remark of the Malay MP, Sha'ari Tadin, in the landmark seminar in 1970.

> "If education is the ladder which leads to progress, and it has been and is currently being regarded by non-Malays as such, then education should be regarded by the Malays as a magic wand." [3]

And another Malay MP, Ghazali Ismail, said elsewhere:

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[2] Sharom & Wong eds., 1971, p11.
[3] Sharom & Wong eds., 1971, p4.

"The living standard of the Malays in this republic will be improved if the educational standard of the Malays is improved."[4]

These remarks unequivocally connect education and social advancement. The instant connection between these two elements makes particular sense in the Singapore context, because education in Singapore was overtly designed to meet the demands of economic necessity.[5] In the 1970s, Singapore was undergoing industrialization. On the international economic map the division of labour was shifting so that the task of supplying industrial workers, from engineers to factory workers, was moving partly from the first world to Singapore. Industry was the life line for the Singapore economy. In line with this global division of labour, the Singapore education system was tailored to produce the necessary labour force for Singapore's economic development. At university level, engineering and related disciplines were promoted. Similarly, the status of polytechnics and technical secondary schools such as Upper Serangoon Technical School, which could train mechanics or skilled technical workers for factories, increased in response to the economic trend.[6] At the lower levels of education, the subjects of maths, science and English were given primary significance, and (as mentioned) science and maths were taught in English in schools of every language stream, to make Singapore a part of the world market.[7] Also, from 1969, all male lower secondary pupils were required to have some exposure to technical subjects while girls were given a choice between technical subjects and domestic science.[8] The education system functioned to manufacture the necessary labour force.

By linking economic demand and education so closely, the state aimed at maximizing national human resources to serve economic development. In such circumstances, doing well at school, and in particular being good at the emphasized subjects of

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[4] *Berita Harian*, 6th June 1968.

[5] S. Gopinathan, 'Education,' in Ernest C.T. Chew & Edwin Lee, *A History of Singapore*, 1991, pp.268-87, at p279. "Education thus became a tool to meet the challenge of a growing population, and the state took the path of conventional wisdom in developing new skills and work attitudes to accommodate new economic activities, diversifying education and investing in technical education".

[6] *Berita Harian*, 26 August 1973. Teknikal Upper Serangoon was described as the central facility for Malay students to study technical subjects.

[7] Gopinathan, 1991, p278. "The Prime Minister defended the continued use of the English language, seeing it as a primary utilitarian tool in Singapore's efforts to make the world its market-place."

[8] Gopinathan, 1991, p297.

English, maths and science, can be connected directly with more job opportunities. In this context the comment above by Ghazali Ismail does make sense. And it means that improvement in education level simultaneously contributes to improvement in another target area set in the landmark seminar, that of employment. Thus the issue of education inevitably became a focus of "Change Attitudes."

The educational trends described above had an impact on the Malay organizations' own activities to improve the educational level of Malay students. The courses conducted by the Malay organizations emphasised the important subjects of maths, science and English. For instance, Singapore Malay Youth Library Association (Taman Bacaan) announced in 1971 that the main emphasis of its support courses for Malay students would be on English and maths in line with the education policy of the government.[9] And the Singapore Malay Teachers' Union, which conducted similar courses, announced in 1978 that it would begin to provide courses in English and maths at secondary school level.[10]

To put this linkage the other way round, Malays tended to evaluate education on the basis of whether it made their children good at maths, science and English. If it did, then in the most successful cases perhaps the child could go on to obtain a university degree, and later obtain a professional job, for instance as an engineer or accountant. Or as a more usual case, the child might gain the education to become a skilled technical worker in a factory – also socially encouraged.

A 1973 article in *Berita Harian* titled "More Malays change their attitudes and shift to becoming science and technology experts" reports such a trend in attitudes among Malays. It proudly introduces a young Malay woman, Sukaimi, who managed to graduate in Accountancy at the National University of Singapore, complete with a portrait-style photograph of her.[11] As a winner from among the Malays, she is presented as a model and celebrated, since her achievement ranks high on the Singapore standard applicable to non-Malays. Now Sukaimi's status as a winner entitles her to make a statement:

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[9] *Berita Harian*, 23rd October 1971.
[10] *Berita Harian*, 20th February 1978.
[11] *Berita Minggu*, 26th August 1973.

> "The attitude among Malays students that subjects involving calculation are difficult seems to be an issue which has not yet been quite overcome. Hard work and determination, along with serious guidance from parents and friends – these are the only things that can enable Malay students to study at a high level, and these students should discard notions that a subject is difficult when they haven't even tried it." [12]

Her case is a successful example of "Change Attitudes" in terms of educational achievement. A Malay student who has a good command of English, has knowledge of maths and science, and manages to enter and graduate from University, can become an expert in a sought-after field such as engineering, or in Sukaimi's case, accounting. She personifies the way to be, to her fellow Malays.

To sum up, the goal for Malays in education is this: to reach the level of students from other ethnic groups, especially in English, maths and science, so that they can enter and succeed in higher education, and later attain a standard of living as high as people from other ethnic groups. Education thus tends to be re-examined by Malays in that light. How relevant is the current system of education to these desires, and how well does it help to achieve them?

5.1.2 Malay stream education: an inferior system

In this context Malays came to scrutinise the value of their own language and of Malay stream education, as part of their critical gaze of self-examination. To understand this, let us outline the basic structure of the education system for Malays in Singapore at that time. At the start of the 1970s, the education system offered Malay primary and secondary school students a choice between attending a Malay stream school or an English stream school.[13] In a Malay stream school, by the new education policy introduced in 1969, they would study the three core subjects of science, maths

[12] *Berita Minggu*, 26th August 1973.
[13] In the same way, a Chinese (or Indian) Singaporean student could also choose between a Chinese stream (or Tamil stream) school on the one hand and English stream school on the other. Raj Vasil, *Asianising Singapore: the PAP's management of ethnicity*, Singapore: Heinemann Asia, 1995, p56.

and English through the medium of English.[14] That amounted to 43% of their class hours. They would study other subjects through the medium of Malay, amounting to a further 43% of classroom hours. These included geography, history and civics. The remaining 14% of classroom hours were devoted to ancillary subjects such as art, sport, and music, and were also taught in Malay.[15] On the other hand, a Malay student could attend an English stream school instead. In this case, s/he would naturally be taught the three core subjects of maths, science and English through the medium of English (43% of class hours). Other subjects amounting to 43% of class hours – under what was termed a 'bilingual education' policy – were taught in Malay.[16] However, the Malay student could now opt to study in English for ancillary subjects such as art, sport, and music, which amounted to an extra 14% of teaching hours in English.[17] What is more, in such a school the Malay student would also be exposed to much more English informally, both in and outside the classroom, than in a Malay stream schools.

At post-secondary level, no education was available in the medium of Malay. No higher education institutions in Singapore such as universities or polytechnics taught in the medium of Malay.[18] By contrast, there was both an English language medium university and a Chinese language medium university in Singapore. So all Malay students were forced to switch to English as their sole medium of instruction at university level, regardless of whether they had previously attended an English-medium school or not.

Within this context, Malays in Singapore began to criticise Malay stream schools for not giving their students enough exposure to English. A critical article in *Berita Harian* titled "Which is better, English stream or Malay stream education?" stressed the importance of English for Malay students:

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[14] 竹下秀邦 [Takeshita Hidekuni], シンガポール：リー・クワン・ユーの時代 , [Singapore: the era of Lee Kuan Yew], アジア経済研究所 [The Institute of Developing Economies, Japan Extra Trade Organization], 1995, p292.
[15] A. Ghani Nasir, "Exposure to Malay continues to cause detriment to Malay students", *Berita Harian*, 30th June 1974.
[16] *Ibid.*
[17] *Ibid.*
[18] Tania Li, *Malays in Singapore: culture, economy, and ideology*, Singapore; New York: Oxford University Press, 1989 p118.

> "To continue education to a higher level, one issue which we cannot neglect is proficiency in English, because English is the medium language at the higher levels, and all texts are written in English... In Singapore, command of English is important for anyone who wishes to continue their education at university no matter in what discipline"[19]

Here the critical gaze focuses on whether this Malay stream education system is relevant to achieve the desire of Malays to make Malay children as successful as those of other ethnic groups. In this light, it is detected as less promising than English stream education. It makes the Malay children less fluent in English than other children and less able to continue their education beyond secondary level.

This idea that Malay education puts children at a disadvantage is overtly expressed in another *Berita Harian* article. It compares the position of Chinese children with that of Malays. Talking about the problem of children not learning enough English in Malay schools, it said:

> "The same problem was faced by Chinese stream schools. Their children, however, are destined for better things because the Chinese community has already realised the significance of tertiary education. That realisation has brought success to Chinese education by the forming of *Nanyang* University in 1953, which was the result of hard work by Chinese."[20]

Although Chinese stream schools too were facing a dramatic decline in student numbers due to competition from English stream schools,[21] and although Nanyang University was destined to close down in 1980 and be integrated into the English medium National University of Singapore, the point here is that during the 1970s

[19] *Berita Minggu*, 30th June 1974.
[20] *Berita Harian*, 1st October 1971.
[21] Raj Vasil, 1995, p58. "Many in Singapore had then been surprised by the ease with which increasing numbers of parents, especially Chinese, had begun readily, and willingly, to subordinate their deep emotional attachment to their community-based educational institutions (which in the past had been one of the most important promoters of their different languages and cultures) to the practical need to secure for their children the education and training which was the best and which prepared them most effectively for higher education or the job market."

Malays could compare their situation with that of Chinese and feel themselves to be at a disadvantage.[22]

Malays looked bluntly at the weakness of Malay schools in equipping their students with adequate English. An article titled "Is the problem of language only a temporary one? Scholarship participants from Malay stream education" quoted Malay students themselves talking about their efforts to cope with English during their post-secondary studies. One student, currently at the National University of Singapore, said:

> "Because English plays a significant role in University education, students from Malay stream education must give much more serious attention to developing their English language ability... The majority of our friends come from Malay stream schools and were disappointed when they continued their study at University. This is because they have inadequate knowledge of English. We have many ways to cultivate our knowledge of English. Firstly, students should read a lot of books, magazines and newspapers in English... Secondly, we must socialise with non-Malay students." [23]

Another Malay student said

> "We need to take every chance to talk with students from English stream schools whenever the opportunity arises, during our school years."[24]

These voices above reveal students' consciousness of their weakness in handling English and their felt need for further efforts to make their English sufficient if they are from Malay stream education. Such stories by students were not so different in the polytechnics. A Malay student of a polytechnic asserted that the Malay stream education system caused anxiety to the Malay students about their ability in handling

[22] It is worth noting that although Nanyang University was founded at the initiative of the Chinese community, in the 1970s it was supported by the government. This is therefore an instance when comparable facilities were not offered to the Malay community, yet rather than mentioning this discrimination (which anyway would have been well known to some readers), *Berita Harian* mentions only the initial hard work by Chinese, as an implicit criticism of the Malay community.
[23] *Berita Minggu*, 11th July 1971.
[24] *Ibid.*

English.[25] An article titled "Institute of Technology also encourages Malay students to gain diplomas" reported that the institute's language laboratory provided remedial support for the Malay students to practise their English intensively. [26] It also quoted a Malay student as saying how helpful this was:

> "The problem of English seems to be a short term problem – only when we started our study. As time goes by, perhaps because of our awareness that we must study seriously to improve our English, this problem can be overcome."[27]

The speaker confirmed that Malay students at the polytechnic are concerned about their English, saying: "They are afraid that they cannot be competitive in studies taught in English."[28]

Malays detected problems with Malay schools not only for continuing their education to a higher level, but also for getting jobs. For one thing, English was the language of communication in many working places. An analytical article in *Berita Harian* titled "New attitudes in children's education for our hopes and for national development" emphasises how important English was for that reason:

> "English has become the language stream in every sector of business and every corporation. Therefore, English is important for everyone wishing to work here [in Singapore]. "[29]

Another article in *Berita Harian* also commented critically on the value of Malay stream education for obtaining jobs, by quoting the voice of ordinary Malays interviewed. One such man in the street was quoted as saying that Malay education does not have as much value as before, because "in the private sector, a Certificate of Malay Education cannot have direct value [to obtain jobs]."[30] This voice continued:

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[25] *Berita Minggu*, 21st September 1975.
[26] *Ibid.*
[27] *Ibid.*
[28] *Berita Minggu*, 21st September 1975.
[29] *Berita Minggu*, 23rd March 1975.
[30] *Berita Minggu*, 24th December 1972.

> "Graduates from Malay schools seem to find it harder and harder to obtain work. They already cannot have the same chance as students with certificates from other language stream schools."[31]

Having quoted a voice like above, the writer of the article summed up the value of Malay stream education in harshly pragmatic terms:

> "It is clear that a certificate from an English stream school enables students to obtain jobs, rather than one from a Malay stream school. Although [students from both streams] have a certificate declaring the same status .... the economic value of Malay stream education can be evaluated from two points of view: firstly, whether it makes it easy or difficult for students to obtain a job, secondly, whether it is valuable for students in continuing their higher education. Measuring from these two perspectives, it is clear in our eyes that a certificate of Malay stream education has lower economic value than one of English stream education." [32]

Malay parents themselves become sceptical about Malay stream education. They questioned the command of English that it gave to children for their higher education and their employment prospects. An article highlighted this concern by parents in its title: "Why most parents do not want to send their children to Malay schools." The writer said that the poor English environment of Malay schools was identified as a problem by parents, and asserted, "English is understood to be only the second language at Malay [stream] schools, therefore, it is indeed true that [the students'] ability in handling this language is inadequate."[33] A second *Berita Harian* article similarly focused on this concern of parents. Titled "Malay parents are reluctant about exposure to Malay language", it reported how Malay parents with children at Malay schools worried that they would not gain a solid and certified command of English. And the writer voiced the hopes of parents that the poor environment of Malay children for learning English could be enriched:

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[31] *Ibid.*
[32] *Berita Harian*, 24th December 1972.
[33] *Ibid.*

"What we hope is that our children can be given better chances to be exposed to English. We all are aware that English is very important because English gives a more assured future, from the point of view of economics and of knowledge."[34]

As the value of Malay stream education came to be gradually doubted by more Malays themselves, the response of some Malay parents was to send their children to an English stream school instead. Statistics showed a decline in the number of students choosing Malay stream education year by year.[35] This move was regarded as part of "Change Attitudes" and was therefore positively perceived, as we see in one article:

"One of the changing attitudes evident in Malays is that of sending their children to the [English stream] primary school. What cannot be denied is that Malay parents are no longer so happy to send their children to a Malay stream primary school ... this recent attitude of the Malays to pursue higher education is now being demonstrated. "[36]

And another article refers to this action of Malay parents in a highly approving way:

"This situation [where English is vital for a child's future] is acknowledged by those Malay parents who are competitively sending their children to English schools. They are thinking about how seriously and urgently this issue must be addressed."[37]

So taking one's children out of a Malay school is something done by parents who think seriously about their children's education, and who want to enable their children

[34] *Berita Harian*, 20th June 1974.

[35]

Medium of Instruction	1972	1982
English	64.66	88.52
Chinese	31.71	11.36
Malay	3.35	0.10
Tamil	0.27	-

Primary School Enrolments, 1972 and 1982 (Reference: Raj Vasil, 1995, p59.)

[36] *Berita Minggu*, 26th August 1973.

[37] *Berita Minggu*, 23rd March 1975.

to compete with those from other ethnic groups. At the same time it is a way of responding to a problem they see with Malay stream education: that it fails to equip Malays to compete successfully in later life.[38]

5.1.3 "Change the education system": Malay proposals

Individual responses to the perceived weakness of Malay stream education were matched by proposals for change at the systemic level. This involved two proposals to change the education system itself: one in 1971 and one in 1974.

The first of the two proposals, in 1971, was the more radical. It involved the merging of all streams of education into a National System of Education. The key element was that all schools in Singapore would use English as the sole medium of instruction. This idea was first presented by the Singapore Malay Teachers' Union itself, in 1971. The Union discussed it at a meeting as follows:

> "An awareness of the lack of socio-economic value of Malay education has been acknowledged publicly; this is not limited to Malay intellectuals. Because most parents today have stopped trusting Malay education, they are already sending their children to English schools. Because of this situation, the proposal by the Union is that the education system be organized as one system by using English in all schools. This seems an issue that needs to be discussed urgently." [39]

This proposal was largely motivated by the desire of Malays to make Malay students as competitive as those other ethnic groups. This was acknowledged by a member of the Singapore Malay Teachers' Union at the time, Wan Hussin Zoohri. According to him, this proposal was intended to "let the Malay students compete on equal strength

[38] In 1983, it was announced by the government that all schools in Singapore would switch to English as the sole medium of instruction at all levels by 1987 (see Raj Vasil, 1995, p60). Regarding the end of Malay stream schools specifically, a Malay man working at the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) called it "a slow death". He added that these schools "died naturally, because there was not much need [for them]". Conversation in English on 29th November 2002.
[39] *Berita Harian*, 3rd April 1971.

for employment without being stigmatized as coming from English or non English stream schools."[40]

An article in *Berita Harian* supported this proposal by the Singapore Malay Teachers' Union as follows:

> "Since 1970, various subjects such as science and maths have been taught in English from primary school onwards so that Malay students' knowledge of English can be intensified. Apart from this, if the Malay secondary schools are integrated [with English schools], the Malay students can then have a full chance to activate their English and to foster understanding and harmony [with other ethnic groups]"[41]

Such a Malay initiative is well in keeping with the theme of "Change Attitudes." To enable Malays to stand alongside other groups as acknowledged equals was an ultimate purpose of "change attitudes." If English is crucial for Singaporeans to become good at maths and science or as a tool to climb up the social ladder, and English stream education has the greater value, then Malays must accept English and seek an education in English, in order to improve their educational level and thus their standard of living.

Besides its core element that all schools in Singapore would use English as the sole medium of instruction, this 1971 proposal contained two other elements. Firstly, Malay language would be taught as a compulsory subject at all schools, as the national language. Secondly, non-Malay students would also learn their own language (e.g. Mandarin or Tamil) as a subject, while Malay students would instead learn Malay literature, including the study of Islamic texts.[42] Those extra provisions would make Malay more widely studied and raise its value in Singapore society. They would help to preserve Malay language, although admittedly weakening its identification with the Malay community. It seems to be due to one or both of these extra conditions that the proposal was rejected – although the government never stated clearly its reasons for

[40] Wan Hussin Zoohri, *The Singapore Malays: the dilemma of development*, Singapore: Kesatuan Guru-Guru Melayu Singapura, 1990, p24. [quotation in original English]
[41] *Berita Minggu*, 24th December 1972.
[42] Wan, 1990, p24.

rejecting it. Commenting on the proposal, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, S. Rajaratnam, said "It seems that the Union has already entered the trap of people who have a sectarian outlook." [43] That remark suggests that for the government, the condition of teaching Malay language to all students in Singapore was a display of Malay ethnic chauvinism. And Sidek Saniff, then head of the Singapore Malay Teachers' Union, confirms that in his opinion the condition that Malay be taught as national language was the government's reason for rejecting this proposal.[44] This outcome provides an illustration of how an attempt by Malay interests to set 'rules' for the whole of Singapore was coldly rebuffed, reinforcing for Malays the lesson that basic criteria must be set by the majority in power.

Three years after the above proposal was rejected, in 1974, the Singapore Malay Teachers' Union made a second proposal. This proposal was accepted by the government later that year.[45] The successful proposal was to increase the exposure to English of those Malay students who were studying in the English stream schools. As we recall, Malay students at English schools received 43% of their tuition through the medium of Malay, and another 43% through English (plus the remaining 14% optionally in English). The Singapore Malay Teachers' Union now proposed that the proportion of core teaching in English be increased by another 10% by reducing that of Malay to 33% only. It made this proposal in a memorandum to the government in June 1974, in which it argued that the current exposure of Malay students to English was not sufficient.[46]

This proposal met with support from Malays outside the Singapore Malay Teachers' Union, too. An article in *Berita Harian* a few days after its announcement strongly supported the proposal and connected it with the wishes of Malay parents. The article was by the Malay journalist A. Ghani Nasir and was titled "Exposure to Malay continues to cause detriment to Malay students". It asked:

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[43] *Berita Harian*, 26th April 1971.
[44] My interview in English with Sidek Saniff at the Ministry of Education on 7th September 1996. According to him, this element of the proposal was considered as ethnic chauvinism of the Malays.
[45] *Berita Minggu*, 25th July 1974.
[46] *Berita Minggu*, 25th July 1974.

> "Why do the Malays teachers treat this matter of 43% of exposure [to Malay in English stream schools] as a serious issue and ask to have the amount cut down? I am certain that not only they but also the Malay parents want it cut down." [47]

A. Ghani Nasir went on to explain that parents want the proportion of Malay-medium class hours reduced because of the low value of the Malay language compared to English and Chinese. And in another article the following month, titled "Malay parents face a dilemma under the bilingual system", he again urged Malays in the direction of more English:

> "Malays do not wish to see their children speak Malay and get a certificate which cannot guarantee their future or give them a good job. ... English will guarantee their future. And, in order to obtain concrete results from our sweat and our efforts, it is English to which we must give our full attention."[48]

Some voices of Malay parents heard in this article also expressed their frustration with the limited exposure to English in English stream schools. Mohd. Palali bin Ismail, a 43 year old working in the army, complained about the current bilingual education system. He had checked the textbooks of his children and realized that many of them were written in Malay. He feels that this situation made it difficult for his child, Zainuri, to speak and socialize in English although Zainuri was studying in the English stream.[49] He complained:

> "Although this education system is the instruction of the government, it does not satisfy my purposes." [50]

Another parent, Hashim bin Abdul Rahman, also objects to the lack of English exposure in his child's English stream school:

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[47] *Berita Minggu*, 30th June 1974.
[48] *Berita Minggu*, 21st July 1974.
[49] *Ibid.*
[50] *Ibid.*

> "My worthy intention has been to enrol my child to study in an English stream school. However, this bilingual education system puts more emphasis on the Malay language [than English], which is frustrating." [51]

During that month another article by A. Ghani Nasir appeared too, this time titled "Malay students will be more successful with more English exposure." It said:

> "Singaporeans who wish to participate in and to increase the prosperity and progress that result from economic development based on English, must be able to handle the language. This has long been acknowledged by Malays, and it is why the Malays send their children to English stream schools... the pressing situation here has caused all Malay stream schools to become empty. This is now a fact and we cannot deny the power and the value of English." [52]

This article by A. Ghani Nasir also talks in revealing terms about the past and present role of English in Singapore. The writer poses the question "So now, should the Malays love English? Do they want to adore or glorify the language of the colonizer who shackled them during earlier times?" The writer's own answer is this:

> "This love [of English] is rational because English is a passport to get a job ... the opportunities from this language are more impressive [than from Malay] and enable us to come out ahead..."[53]

This comment is remarkable for its cool gaze at English, the tool of the colonial master. Such a short time after independence, Malays have already managed to stop looking at English as a tool of the colonizer. The cultural value of English in the past is denied or no longer of concern. Now English is just "a passport" to a better job in Singapore. This remark indeed reveals 'mockery' in Bhabha's terms. The coloniser's perception of the value or meaning of having English as one's language is displaced by the Malays. It becomes a tool that Malays make use of, by their own preference.

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[51] *Ibid.*
[52] *Berita Minggu*, 7th July 1974.
[53] *Ibid*

What is more interesting still about this remark is the limits to its dispassionate gaze. It recognises English as a legacy of the colonial oppressors, and coolly decides not to care. But that gaze is not turned upon their relation to their "own" government in independent Singapore. Why must they have English once again, now that the colonial masters have left? Who has set English as such a powerful tool in Singapore this time? The urgency of Malays' desires to become as competitive as other ethnic groups in every field, makes it difficult for them to see the nexus between the state's ideology and their actual conduct under the name of "change attitudes." Their own conduct in fact nicely functions to complement the state ideology. In this case, their passion to perform "change attitudes" drives them to emphasise English over Malay language by their own will and for their own good.

We can now sum up the Malays' opinions and proposals about education in the 1970s within the context of "change attitudes". Malays compared their own education system and own language with those chosen by other ethnic groups, to calculate their worth in terms of achieving their desire to be as good as those groups. This gaze of self-examination detected a number of problems. Malay language had low value in educational and economic terms. It could not ensure success in the key subjects of maths, science and English. It did not promise a future for Malay children, either in higher education or in employment. To fix these problems in education, the Malay teachers proposed two solutions: firstly, for Malay schools to be merged with other streams, and secondly, for Malay students to use less Malay in English schools – the latter of which was adopted by the government.

These proposals were driven by the Malays' desire to be equal to the ethnic groups. As we saw earlier, Malay teachers made the first proposal for the sake of "letting the Malay students compete on equal strength for employment without being stigmatized as coming from English or non-English stream schools."[54] This desire to be able to compete with other ethnic groups on equal terms is at the heart of "change attitudes." And the attitude of Malay teachers in making these proposals was praised by some other Malays. Wan Hussin Zoohri, who used to be a member of the Singapore Malay Teachers' Union in the 1970s and later became a member of the parliament, remarked about the first proposal in 1971 that:

[54] Wan, 1990, p24.

> "It took intellectual courage on their part to voluntarily advocate the 'abandonment' of the Malay stream schools which could affect the security and tenure of the Malay teachers themselves."[55]

And a year after the second proposal had been accepted, *Berita Harian* praised the attitude that lay behind it:

> "This attitude of The Singapore Malay Teachers' Union ... deserves our attention, because the Union is looking seriously at the destiny of Malay students in the various schools here... This is a step that had to be taken, and it shows how far ahead they are looking in the future to guarantee that Malay children have a command of English." [56]

The agency of Malays that we see in this section is interesting in the light of Bhaba's observations. Bhabha says that when the dominated/minority turns its gaze upon the dominant/majority, in imitating ('mocking') the conduct of the latter, it actually performs differently from it. It thus creates a new agency for itself, which is located between the majority and its own original position (see 1.3.3.1). This is certainly true of our Malay agency that performs "change attitudes" here. However – unlike in Bhabha's own illustration of a minority agency – this Malay agency does not displace the ideology presented by the majority or power-holders. Instead in its very own way it consolidates that ideology. This process occurs when the Malays propose more use of English and less use of Malay for their children through their own will and choice. As a minority, they did not assert the primacy of Malay language over English for Malays, nor criticize the power imbalance that had arisen between English and Malay language. Their desire to become as good as other ethnic groups meant they cooperated in the subordination of their mother tongue.

5.2 "Change Attitudes" for Malay Women in the 1970s

[55] Wan, 1990, p25.
[56] *Berita Minggu*, 23rd March 1975.

The same kind of agency animated "Change Attitudes" for Malay women in Singapore in the 1970s. Specifically, they were required to change their attitude to make themselves suitable to the Singapore context of national development. Perhaps the story of how women were dragged into the process of nation building is a familiar one, seen in every new nation-state. The concern of this section however is rather on discourses about the roles of women by Malay women themselves that formed and sustained an agency to carry out the set of conducts of "Change Attitudes," in the name of contributing to national development. It is the story of how the state-sanctioned vision of the woman's role in Singapore was internalized as a goal by Singapore Malay women, in yet another dimension of the "Change Attitude" project.

5.2.1 The location of women in the context of Singapore in the 1970s

As often seen in the history of nation-forming in other nation-states, the government-sanctioned position of women in Singapore in the 1970s was formulated in order to maximize their labour potential or capacity to contribute to national development. The 1970s was an era of industrialization in Singapore.[57] Factories and businesses in Singapore needed more workers to sustain this economic boom. To fill this demand, especially for factory workers, the Singapore government encouraged women to work in jobs outside the home. This was a junction where the state met Singaporean women. Aline Wong explains this encounter well:

> In 1971, the Prime Minister made an appeal to the Singapore Employer's Federation to plan for employment of more young women workers. By this time, rapid industrialization had caused a labour shortage, and foreign workers had to be employed to fill in the gap. The Prime Minister remarked, "in case we reach the "cut off" point for work permits... may I suggest we start planning now how we can employ our young women workers? They are underutilized."[58]

[57] For a succinct summary of industrialization in Singapore see Carl A. Trocki, *Singapore: wealth, power and the culture of control*, New York: Routledge, 2006, p163.
[58] Aline K. Wong, *Women in Modern Singapore*, Singapore: University Education Press, 1975, pp.31-33.

In this same year of 1971, statistics to support that idea of Lee's were submitted in a report by the National Productivity Centre on how to increase the country's effective supply of labour. The report stressed that Singapore's female labour force was being grossly under-utilized.[59] It thus sought to design the lives of women to meet the demands of national economic development.

Girls were encouraged to stay at school and to become educated. This education would make them suitable to contribute to the labour force by fostering both skills and the right mentality for work. As Wong puts it:

> "It is generally recognized that education ... provides women with the occupational skills, as well as the "modernistic" attitudes required by the modern industrial system, such as rationality, achievement-motivation and individualism, etc."[60]

In short, girls were being constructed to become suitable productive workers after their education.

A potential labour force can consist not only of young recently educated women, but also of married women. To turn those married women who were engaged in domestic labour into members of the paid workforce as well, a policy to control the number of their children was appropriate. A White Paper on family planning had been published in 1966 outlining a five-year plan. Its chief purpose was stated as follows: to "liberate our women from the burden of bearing an unnecessarily large number of children and as a consequence, to increase in human happiness for all."[61] How this increase in human happiness for all would be achieved was explained by the Minister for Health, Chua Sian Chin, in 1973.

> "In an industrialized and highly urbanized Singapore of the 1970s, a large family is a tragedy for the children, a burden to their parents, and a drag on the whole society... As our economy expands, wages will go up. But the rise in

[59] Wong, 1975, p33.
[60] Wong, 1975, p39.
[61] Chang Chen Tung, Ong Jin Hui, and Peter S.J. Chen, *Culture and Fertility: The Case of Singapore*, 1980, p20.

> wages will not bring a better life to those families who increase their burden by having more children to feed, clothe, and nurture. When parents have more children than they can adequately feed and care for, these children will have poorer diet and health. Their education and training will suffer and they will remain at the lower levels of incomes and unskilled jobs. No amount of subsidies by the Government can remedy the lack of adequate food and care at home... In fact, the greater the feather-bedding of large antisocial families, the greater will be the numbers of large families... Moreover, social friction and tensions will increase because [children in large families] will do poorly because they are deprived of adequate food and care. It is a vicious circle which we must break. It is kinder in the long run to put disincentives on large families. Certainly it will carry less danger of social tensions, overcrowding, and generally lower standards in the very limited space of Singapore... To bring each child to his or her full potential, we must break this vicious cycle."[62]

So, large families were antisocial, and would cause the whole society to lag behind in development. When this policy was launched, the central slogan for its publicity and education campaign was "Plan Your Family." In 1968, the slogan was changed to present the rather precise intention of this policy. The new slogan was "Plan your Family Small."[63]

To educate Singaporeans about this new idea of "planning your family small," a multi-media campaign was conducted. A two-child family as the normative shape for a family, and sterilization as a birth control method for couples with two or more children, were encouraged and promoted as a part of the policy of population control. For the purpose of population control, two Acts were passed in 1970, one making abortion legal and one making voluntary sterilization legal. Services were provided at several government hospitals for female sterilization and abortion.

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[62] Janet W. Salaff, *State and Family in Singapore: restructuring a developing society*, Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 1988, pp.37-38.
[63] Chang, Ong, and Chen, 1980, pp.20-21.

The connection between small family size and the supply of female labour is precisely pointed out by Linda Y. C Lim as follows.

> "The drastic reduction of family size to a 2- to 3- child norm, facilitated by an intense and comprehensive national family planning campaign, reduced the time and effort required for reproductive tasks like child-bearing, nursing and rearing and housework, while the new jobs created in offices and factories did not require heavy physical labour at which women would be disadvantaged."[64]

This small nuclear family size also matched the housing planning of the Singapore government. To utilize the limited physical space in Singapore, the government launched a housing policy based on state-designed housing. The Housing and Development Board (HDB) was in charge of replacing old style *kampong* and squatter houses with high rise buildings which could accommodate more families within a smaller space than houses. The new government flats in these high rise buildings were not designed to meet the demands of the actual size of families, but rather, the size of the flats helped to shape the size of the family. Small sized families were also given priority in the allocation of the flats. Until 1970, priority of access had been given to families with larger numbers of children. This policy was reversed in 1970, so that small families with no more than three children were now officially given priority over larger families in the allocation of HDB flats.[65] So through the government's housing plans as well, "Plan Your Family Small" was encouraged.

Women's participation in national development did not end with carrying out birth control and becoming workers for industry. Those women who were mothers bore the added responsibility of raising a new generation that possessed the necessary skills and knowledge to serve the economic prosperity of Singapore. They were expected to do this by ensuring that the child obtained as much and as good an education as possible, and by supervising the child's education at home as well.

In summary, the ideal women is designed to contribute to national development both inside and outside the home. Young female students are encouraged to study hard to

[64] Linda Y.C. Lim, *Women in the Singapore Economy*, Singapore: Chopmen, 1982, p5.
[65] Chang, Ong, and Chen, 1980, p25.

obtain a suitable mindset as well as ability in relevant subjects to work in a modernized industrial setting. Women who are already married are strongly recommended to have a small family with a maximum of two children, and to become a source of labour for industry at the same time. As mothers, women are obliged to reproduce the next generation who can perform meritocracy ideology in their turn and contribute to national development. Women are expected to juggle their roles inside and outside the house. This was the government-sanctioned picture of being a woman in Singapore society. The next question is how the Malay women responded to such a picture.

5.2.2. Opening speech at the seminar "Malay Women's participation in the development of Singapore society"

In 1974, a seminar titled "Malay women's participation in the development of Singapore Society" was organized by the women's wing of the Central Council of Malay Cultural Organizations, Singapore (Majlis Pusat). This seminar, which was held by Majlis Pusat, was reported in some detail in *Berita Harian*. Furthermore, a collection of all the papers from the seminar was published by Majlis Pusat in booklet form (titled *Seminar Penyertaan Wanita Melayu Dalam Pembangunan Masyarakat*). The opening talk at the seminar was by Asmah Alsagoff, the vice chair of Majlis Pusat. We will examine this speech to see how it declares the intentions and desire of Malay women in Singapore – a desire underlying performance of "Change Attitudes" during that decade. Asmah Alsagoff began by observing:

> "This is the first time that Malay/Moslem women can get together at the Council like this to exchange our ideas and think about the problems, big or small, that we are facing."[66]

By this introduction, she establishes that the seminar was a women's version of the landmark seminar 'Malay participation in national development' in 1970. In that earlier seminar, leading Malay figures had placed themselves and their fellow Malays

[66] Jabatan Wanita Majlis Pusat, *Seminar Penyertaan Wanita Melayu dalam Pembangunan Masyarakat, Singapore*, Singapore: Chopmen, 1975, p4. [quotation translated from original Malay by Yasuko Kobayashi]

under scrutiny as a group which was lagging behind the other ethnic groups. In the same way, at this seminar in 1974 Malay women specifically put themselves under scrutiny to detect their problems. And as Asmah Alsagoff continues her speech, we see another similarity. Malays at the landmark seminar had deployed comparisons with non-Malays as a basis for detecting their own problems. And so too Malay women are invited to compare themselves with non-Malay women, for the same purpose:

> "We believe that many problems currently faced by Malay and Muslim women do not seem to be problems for other women. We are certain that half of the problems related to everyday life and life as social beings are faced more by Malay/Muslims than by other ethnic groups. For instance, the issues of nutrition and of choosing suitable life priorities seem to be 'non-problems' for the Chinese community and the Indian community. These issues still seem to be discussed and debated [in the Malay community]." [67]

The message here is that Malay women are different from the rest, and that 'different' means 'behind'. Malay women are felt to have problems which other women in Singapore do not have, or no longer have – from matters of basic health to basic setting of priorities in life.

The mention of life priorities above seems to imply a problem of attitude. And Asmah Alsagoff indeed regards "Change Attitudes" as the essential conduct for Malay women. They are lagging behind other women in Singapore in terms of changing their attitudes:

> "We are aware that "change attitudes and our way of life" seems difficult. It seems a time-consuming process. Maybe [it will take] a couple of decades, or perhaps a couple of generations, or perhaps a couple of centuries. "Change" requires sacrifice, and its results are yet to be clearly seen or felt. We are aware

[67]Jabatan Wanita Majlis Pusat, 1975, p4. [quotation translated from original Malay by Yasuko Kobayashi]

> of this. We are also aware that among us women, old ways of thinking are still strong; whereas in our society, the winds of change are blowing."[68]

The distance between Malay women and other women can be measured in decades, generations, or even centuries, in terms of how long it will take to catch up. However, this feeling of being lagging behind is not itself the core of the Malay agency that is forming here. Rather, that feeling creates a desire to be as good as people from other groups. Asmah Alsagoff goes on to express a future wish on behalf of Malay women at the seminar to improve themselves, to become good enough to compete with other people in Singapore.

> "...participants [in the seminar] will have a chance to find out about aspects of society and development which may not have been quite clear before now .... We pray that ... through this seminar, our zest for knowledge, and our desire to join in the race as part of the competition of life in a multi-racial society, can be fostered and strengthened... we also hope that through this seminar, old notions which are already outdated and unsuited to the pace of this era can be discussed and removed so that they do not remain as obstacles to the progress of Malay/Moslem women. And we hope that new concepts of life which are suited to [this new] era can be discussed and raised. We as a group of women must be good at adapting ourselves, at equipping ourselves for the developments of the age. If we do not do that, then the age will leave us behind..."[69]

Here Asmah Alsagoff rallies her audience to detect the obsolete notions that are holding back Malay women and hindering their fitness for competition in modern Singapore, and set them as targets for fixing.

These discourses about how Malay women should improve their lives display another similarity to the landmark seminar in 1970. At that earlier seminar, prominent Malays declared that there was no further need for affirmative action – that Malays should and

[68]Jabatan Wanita Majlis Pusat, 1975, p4. [quotation translated from original Malay by Yasuko Kobayashi]
[69]Jabatan Wanita Majlis Pusat, 1975, p4. [quotation translated from original Malay by Yasuko Kobayashi]

must help themselves. And at this 1974 seminar, self-effort by Malay women is similarly declared as the way to improve their community:

> "We must try to improve our destiny by ourselves, before hoping that other people will help or support us in improving it... We Malay and Muslim women can more or less try to seek ways to fix our problems by ourselves, so that our lives will not be too deprived and backward." [70]

This opening speech of the seminar is an important public statement on behalf of Malay women about their position in Singapore. It expresses a desire to match the picture of the ideal capable woman in Singapore like women from other ethnic groups. It is apparently this shared desire that leads others among Malay women to perform "Change Attitudes" during the coming decade by examining themselves as a group, detecting problems, and setting them as targets for fixing.

Ucapan penutup dari Cik Asmah Alsagoff.

1) Opening speech by Asmah Alsagoff[71]

[70] Jabatan Wanita Majlis Pusat,1975, p4. [quotation translated from original Malay by Yasuko Kobayashi]
[71] Jabatan Wanita Majlis Pusat, 1975, back cover.

Para peserta dalam sidang pleno.

2) Participants in the seminar[72]

5.2.3 Performance of "Change Attitudes" for Malay women

The specific problems relating to Malay women identified and set as targets for fixing can be grouped under three main headings: family planning, participation in the workforce, and helping children to succeed at school. As we consider how these issues were handled we will notice how Malay women themselves took an increasingly active role in performing "Change Attitudes". At the start of the 1970s this set of conducts tended mostly to involve Malay men detecting problems with Malay women that needed fixing. But Malay women accepted such diagnoses of their problems by Malay men, and as the decade went on, it was largely they who began to examine themselves in order to detect their own problems and set them as targets for self-improvement.

5.2.3.1 Family Planning

The issue of family planning for Malay women was mainly about controlling the number of children by using contraceptive pills or other methods of contraception. A family with a maximum of two children was considered the standard type. However, the Malay women's high fertility prevented them from achieving such an ideal style. This high fertility was detected as a problem by using the familiar comparative

[72] Jabatan Wanita Majlis Pusat, 1975, back cover.

framework of Malays vs non-Malays. A 1972 research study of the national family planning program reported:

> "Of the three major ethnic groups, the Chinese are most likely to have one or no child on their first visit [to a family planning clinic to arrange contraception]. The proportion is 33% for the Chinese, 23% for the Indians and Pakistanis, and 19% percent for Malays. On the other hand, 43% of the Malay 'acceptors' already have at least five children on their first visit..."[73]

The same study also reported that "among the three ethnic groups, the Malays are the most likely to be new to the practice of birth control: four in five among those with at least three children had never practised contraception before."[74]

Once the problem had been quantified in this way, it was soon taken into serious consideration by the Malays themselves. In the same year, a TV forum was held to discuss the family planning of Malays. Here Malay male figures outlined solutions and reconfirmed the direction for the Malay women to take. The forum was chaired by the Malay MP Sha'ari Tadin. It took the form of a discussion among three participants: a child welfare officer, Mansor Haji Fadzal; a registrar from the Syariah Court, Abu Bakar Hashim; and a doctor from a hospital at Outram, Ghazali Ismail.

Mansor Haji Fadzal argued that Malay women should limit their number of children, saying: "In the context of Singapore today, Singaporeans need to have a small family – this is purely to give maximum opportunities to the children later..."[75] Abu Bakar Hashim agreed with him, adding, "If by having a certain number of children we feel we can guarantee them a better life in the future and can give full attention to them, then I think we must limit the size of our family."[76]

The discussion thus showed clearly the attitude that Malays should adopt: plan to have a small family. As an adjunct to this theme, Dr Ghazali Ismail prescribed a concrete

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[73] Chang Chen Tung & Stephan H.K. Yeh, *A Study of Singapore's National Family Planning Programme*, Singapore: University of Singapore, Economic Research Centre, 1972, pp.57-8.
[74] Chang & Yeh, 1972, p59.
[75] *Berita Harian*, 25th July 1972.
[76] *Ibid.*

way to put this attitude into action: use the contraceptive pill. He acknowledged the widespread fears among Malay women about the health risks of the pill, but stated firmly that using the pill does not harm a woman's health.[77] He explained that initial symptoms of using the pill (nausea or headache) can cause scepticism among the Malay women, but that these symptoms will disappear after a couple of months of use.[78]

In addition to medical approval for using the pill there was religious approval from Abu Bakar Hashim. He explained the Islamic understanding of contraception, assuring viewers that contraception was not against Islamic religion. This was because it was not a measure to directly prevent the birth of a child, but only to regulate or delay the birth of a child.[79] Abu Bakar Hashim quoted a verse (*ayat*) from Islamic scripture which says: "Do nothing which causes harm, and do not cause harm to ourselves". He offered his interpretation of that verse as follows:

> "Here [in this *ayat*] we can see that, in a case where having a baby would bring harm to the mother and the family, then Islam forbids us from doing it."[80]

In other words, if having another child would bring social or economic harm to the mother and family by making the size of the family too large, then it is wrong to have that child.

This TV program, and the feature article in *Berita Harian* reporting on it, showed Malay women how they should change their attitudes regarding family planning. They should control their problematic fertility by using the contraceptive pill properly and with religious approval. These voices are those of male Malays, and so it appears that such diagnoses about Malay women were being made from a male Malay viewpoint, not by Malay women themselves. However, we also hear the voices of Malay women – largely members of the elite but also some ordinary Malays whose discourses are cited approvingly in *Berita Harian* – who have come to accept and to appropriate

[77] *Ibid.*
[78] *Ibid.*
[79] *Ibid.*
[80] *Berita Harian*, 25th July 1972.

these diagnoses. They became dynamic performers of "Change Attitudes" by their own choice.

One such performance was a talk by Salamah Baharuddin to other Malay women at the 1974 seminar. Here she declares that they must reduce their fertility and follow family planning to improve the quality of their lives.

> "Family planning will improve the standard of living per family. A woman does not need to produce children every minute. [With a small number of children] she can feel happier in managing domestic work while watching her child. And only in such a condition can a father feel at peace with his wife and children. In this way, a husband does not need to stay out of the house, to avoid coming back to see his children or wife in an atmosphere with no peace. Children [in a small family] can obtain better education and guidance from their parents. With family planning, children can have a better chance of gaining a higher education."[81]

Here Salamah Baharuddin forcefully argues the benefits that Malay women can win for themselves, their husbands, and their children by taking a more sensible attitude to family planning.

More Malay women evidently came to share the conviction that a small family was a road to greater happiness and success. An article in *Berita Harian* in 1976 was titled "Most agree that a small family is a better guarantee of the future." It reported that many Malay women had stated to *Berita Harian* that they had changed their preference to having a small family.[82] It featured two Malay families and interviewed them about their family life.[83] A Malay female teacher, Aishah Akil, stated the benefits that a small family brought her:

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[81] Jabatan Wanita Majlis Pusat, 1975, p31. [quotation translated from original Malay by Yasuko Kobayashi]
[82] *Berita Minggu*, 28th March 1976
[83] *Ibid.* The views of the Malay women from the other family, Hasni binti Ma'azid, were not reported in the article.

> "With a small-sized family, I can continue my career success and can see that my family has sufficient financial capacity for everyday life which is indeed becoming more expensive." [84]

The achievements of Malay women in adopting family planning were also celebrated in a 1977 article in *Berita Harian* by a Malay female journalist, Zawiyah Salleh. In the past, she said, Malay women had wrong notions about family planning:

> "Around five or six years ago, it was difficult for us to see Malay women in particular going to the clinic to ask about family planning... most Malay women thought that family planning was to prevent them from having children. Consequently, they did not understand the concept of the family planning."[85]

However, Zawiyah Salleh asserted, most of her fellow Malay women think differently nowdays:

> "Most woman now not only understand the concept [of family planning], but are no longer shy about meeting doctors and talking with them [about family planning] if there is a problem." [86]

> "Most Malay women have changed, and have now accepted the concept of family planning. They have changed their attitudes during the past five or six years."[87]

In this section we see how some Malay women came to regard old attitudes to fertility as a problem and take steps to fix them. They can gain a feeling of satisfaction by following the way of the majority in this regard. When prominent Malay women came to think that Malay women should have smaller families and to tell them so, we can expect that they feel they are doing it for the Malays. When ordinary Malay women adjust their attitude in the same direction, they most likely feel they are doing it for

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[84] *Ibid.*
[85] *Berita Harian*, 17th January 1977.
[86] *Berita Harian*, 17th January 1977.
[87] *Ibid.*

themselves and their families – as Aishah Akil does above. However this conduct in fact nicely overlapped with what the state wishes them to achieve.

1) The blessed family of Aishah Akil [88]

2) A cheerful and happy atmosphere seen in the faces of a small successful family watching TV together[89]

[88] Photo from *Berita Minggu*, 28th March 1976.
[89] Photo of Hamid Ahmad Shad's family, also interviewed, *Berita Minggu*, 28th March 1976.

5.2.3.2 Becoming working women

The state's expectation in the 1970s that women would obtain education and a job to help fill the shortage of labour (see 5.2.1.) also affected the Malays. Like women of other ethnic groups, Malay women were encouraged to obtain jobs outside the house. The year after the Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, appealed for more female workers to be employed (see 5.2.1), the Young Women Muslim Association (*Persatuan Pemudi Islam Singapura*) organized a public lecture by a member of Majlis Pusat, Sharom Ahmat, on how Malay women should behave regarding jobs. Firstly, Sharom Ahmat outlined for these Malay women the basic elements of the 'Malay problem' in Singapore, as it had been formulated at the landmark seminar a year earlier:

> "The fact we should be aware of in the context of Singapore is that we as a minority cannot hope that the government will change the policy for Malays or other ethnic groups in education, economy or other social issues. Conversely, we ourselves must be aware that the Malays in Singapore are lagging far behind. Therefore, we Malays cannot keep ourselves silent about this issue [of Malay backwardness]. We ourselves must be responsible and change our situation."[90]

After this statement that Malays can expect no affirmative action and must change their situation themselves, Sharom Ahmat went on to emphasise that message, by adding that "we must work hard to change our destiny."[91]

This time Malay women were expected to make changes in their attitudes to work. By Sharom Ahmat's diagnosis, these attitudes of Malay women were a problem.

> "Among Malay young women, there are those who are reluctant to take factory jobs that are low-paid. The issue of salary is not only experienced by the Malays, it includes all factory workers. If we acquire high skills, we will

[90] *Berita Harian*, 15th April 1971.
[91] *Ibid.*

have no difficulty in getting well-paid jobs in factories. However, if our skill is low, we must start from the bottom."[92]

The attitude at stake here is Malay women's reluctance to take jobs for low wages. If only demeaning and low paid jobs are available that is because of their own weakness because they have not acquired the right skills. How they should change their attitudes is by grasping any job available, to help supply labour to factories.

Sharom Ahmat also recommends that Malay women work in hotels as waitresses.[93] Conventionally, from an Islamic viewpoint, working as a waitress was considered wrong because dealing with pork or carrying pork was a sin. However, he explains that this view of work as a waitress was incorrect:

> "The Islamic Religious Council has provided interpretations by experts about work in hotels. Some Malay mothers prevent their children from working in hotels because they think it is unlawful... Working as a waitress forces them to carry dishes like pork. From a religious viewpoint, touching pork is filthy, and considered unlawful. However, a waitress carries pork that is sitting on top of a plate. Is it also unlawful to carry pork without touching the pork itself?"[94]

This recommendation to work as a waitress also corresponds to the new labour market of the 1970s. Tourism was expanding in Singapore, and was considered as a key new money-generating industry. Whatever new job opportunities arise, wherever labour is needed, Malay women should make themselves fit in – for example by discarding conventional attitudes about being a waitress.

These attitudes to work suggested by Sharom Ahmat precisely correspond to Lee Kuan Yew's ideas about utilizing female labour in Singapore. Their attitudes to work were examined to diagnose problems, such as choosiness in jobs or lack of enterprise in embracing new possible types of work.

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[92] *Ibid.*
[93] *Ibid.*
[94] *Berita Harian*, 15th April 1971.

The ideas propounded here by Sharom Ahmat about problematic attitudes of the Malay working women began to be expressed by some Malay women too. A Malay female reader of *Berita Harian* in a letter the following year, titled "Women in factories: do we still want others to support us?" claimed that Malay women themselves were already practising to fix these problems:

> "Are women unaware about this current era? Oh, no no. We choose to seek work. No matter where jobs appear, we will rush off quickly... When there is a chance given to young Malay people, then I think we must seize that opportunity. There is no point in us being unwilling to take a job just because the salary is small and the working environment is not pleasant. We must not take such an attitude."[95]

This letter by a reader of *Berita Harian* warns against outdated choosy attitudes to job seeking and asserts that Malay women are abandoning such attitudes themselves. She claimed they were now willing to take any type of job. This type of conduct of "Change Attitudes" by Malay women is also illustrated in a 1973 article titled "More Malay girls choose to become a waitress in a coffee house."[96] It reported the voices of Malay young women working as waitresses. One Malay waitress said "my work is not as dirty as many of our parents thought that it would be"[97]. Another said,

> "My parents now encourage me to work at this job, because they are aware of how it can be difficult to find work, and because being a waitress is not a humiliating job."[98]

The 1974 seminar gave politically active and aware Malay women another forum to enact and consume this type of conduct. Here, Malay women participants exercised their gaze of self-examination to detect the problems of Malay women in obtaining jobs. A paper on this very topic by Firdaus Akip discussed how Malay mothers should help their daughters to become more able to compete for jobs. In particular, she said,

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[95] *Berita Harian*, 14th August 1972.
[96] *Berita Harian*, 6th November 1973.
[97] *Ibid.*
[98] *Ibid.*

mothers should be aware that their children's command of English is crucial for them to be able to get good jobs:

> "English is very important for a student to become successful in this world. English allows our girls to obtain more knowledge about the duties and work of a judge, or of a nurse, and so on...We must plant in the minds of Malay girls a strong spirit of effort and diligence [in learning English][99]

After the seminar, some other Malay women continued to detect problematic attitudes of Malay female workers. The female journalist Zawiyah Salleh did so in two articles in *Berita Harian*, that year and the following year. In the first of these, titled "Are Malay women still reluctant to work as bus conductors?," she criticised Malay women's choosy attitudes to work – using the familiar comparative frame between Malays and Chinese. She acknowledged that in terms of jobs in factories, Malay women had already changed their attitudes and began to take those jobs more willingly. However, she said that in relation to other jobs, such as that of bus conductor, Malay women were still hampered by their old attitude of reluctance. They felt that jobs such as bus conductor only suitable for men – even though young Chinese women as well as men already did them.

The article introduced the voices of young Chinese women who worked as bus conductors. One of them, Chia Sai Cheng, talked about her job.

> "My life is good, because the enthusiasm of us women is wanted at work as well these days... This job is not so heavy, contrary to what most women imagine." [100]

After citing this example of a good attitude, Zawiyah Salleh contrasts it with the attitude of Malay women. They are still particular about what work they do:

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[99] Firdaus Akip, 'Masalah pelajaran yang dihadapi oleh gadis-gadis Melayu,' in Jabatan Wanita Majlis Pusat, 1975, pp.23-29. [quotation translated from original Malay by Yasuko Kobayashi]
[100] *Berita Harian*, 24th September 1974.

> "Half of, well, maybe most of Malay women still like to be choosy about their work and want to obtain jobs out of line with their qualifications. They stay unemployed waiting for an opportunity to work in a factory or office so that they can work in a job which they regard as suitable for themselves." [101]

Such attitudes will not enable one to become like women from other ethnic groups – women who can take any jobs, without regard for preference or conventional notions of what is suitable work for a woman. Such work attitudes are already actualized by Chinese young women, but not by Malay women yet. Malay women must aspire to this goal, in order to be as good as other women in Singapore. Zawiyah Salleh's remark, "We can see many non-Malay women who have already become bus conductors. Why can't we be as capable as them?"[102] expresses a kind of frustration to her fellow Malay women readers while urging them to change and become as good as other women in Singapore.

A year later, another article by Zawiyah Salleh appeared on the theme of problems of women in work. Titled "Are women at the level of men?",[103] it took the approach of comparing men and women in Singapore generally, and the problems of the latter in terms of attitude to work outside the home. However, once again she is addressing Malays, in a Malay newspaper, in order to detect the problems of women in work; so she is in effect urging Malay women once again to improve their attitudes to work.

Zawiyah gives reasons why women are less successful in the workplace than men (citing statistics to support each point). Firstly, women change their place of work more frequently than men do. Secondly, female blue collar workers tend to resign their jobs for reasons of family, because they take their family more seriously than jobs. Lastly, women tend to think about desirable jobs in terms of conventional choices such as being a teacher or a nurse. This attitude prevents them from obtaining jobs in areas involving technology.[104] To sum up, Zawiyah detects women's lack of real commitment to paid work and their stereotyped notions of suitable jobs for

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[101] *Ibid.*
[102] *Ibid.*
[103] *Berita Harian*, 21st January 1975.
[104] *Ibid.*

women, as attitudes that they need to change. And this message is directed to Malays, as her audience of readers.

During the late 1970s, articles in *Berita Harian* came to celebrate Malay women's increasing success in changing their attitudes. A 1978 article titled "Five Malay girls accept the challenge of the shipping docks," by Khairani Ahmad, focused on young Malay women who had obtained jobs at a dockyard and were undergoing a training course there.[105] These girls, the writer explains, "choose heavy work because they hope to prove that women can also do work which is monopolized by men."[106] One of the young Malay women, Faridah Beram, aged 18, said

> "Perhaps most people imagine that heavy work like this can only be done by male workers. But, it seems that if women are also capable of working at heavy duties and are determined to face challenges, then they will be able to obtain expert jobs like men."[107]

> "I am lucky because I was chosen to participate in the course. It is not so difficult for me to understand the operation of the work because I am from the technical [college education] stream."[108]

These comments pose a contrast to the problematic attitudes of Malay women that were identified earlier. Malay women used to be choosy about the type of work they did and moved from one workplace to another with little passion or commitment toward their work. But now they are willing to shed the conventional notions of what female work is and to enter fields that are unfamiliar for women. Hardworking and determined, they want to stay in the same job and train to obtain high technical skills in their field.

Another example of Malay women who had conquered the old work attitudes appeared in another *Berita Harian* article in the same year by Zawiyah Salleh. These women had succeeded in becoming supervisors in a factory. Some of them earned

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[105] *Berita Minggu*, 11th June 1978.
[106] *Ibid.*
[107] *Ibid.*
[108] *Ibid.*

1) Samiah Rahman (left) and Faridah Beram are carrying out their tasks. [109]

from 700 dollars to 1,000 dollars a month. The key to the success of these women was their perseverance in staying in the same job for long enough to build their skills and win promotion. One Malay woman in such a supervisory position stated:

> "It is certain that their success is nothing other than the result of their determination or patience in working at the one kind of job. They do not want to change their job, but rather want to increase their skills in the one field."[110]

These women are not only working for money, but also for the personal satisfaction obtained from working at a skilled and challenging job. This supervisor goes on to say:

[109] Photo from *Berita Minggu*, 11th June 1978.
[110] *Berita Minggu*, 9th July 1978.

> "Those who like to change jobs are likely to face a future of working in unchallenging jobs. Usually this type of person will suffer disadvantage, because they will not obtain the positive and meaningful experiences of working in a skilled specialised field."[111]

These comments by these Malay women reveal how they performed "Change Attitudes" in the workplace to fix their problems and so become more like women from other ethnic groups. Such conduct also provides a source of satisfaction and confidence for Malay women; the confidence that enables the factory supervisor above to declare:

> "It can be said that the majority of Malay girls have already become as competitive at work as girls from other ethnic groups."[112]

While this performance of "Change attitudes to work" was a response to new priorities in the developing Singapore economy, it cannot be understood as something that was forced upon Malay women by the state or imposed on them by Malay men. It appears that increasing numbers of them took this path as a way of obtaining meaningful goals, including notably, the desire to match the success of women from other ethnic groups.

5.2.3.3 Guiding children academically

Just as the roles of Malay women outside the home were redefined to suit the Singapore context, so were the roles of Malay women inside the home as mothers. This was done by singling out a specific duty of mothers for overriding emphasis; namely, the duty to guide one's children to achieve high success at school. Emphasising this duty reflected the fact that education was the key vehicle to ascend the economic ladder in Singapore (see 5.1.1). The main challenge presented to Malay women with regard to this duty as mothers was to fulfil it successfully while at the same time pursuing their exemplary role of worker and income-earner outside the home.

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[111] *Berita Minggu*, 9th July 1978.
[112] *Ibid.*

This expectation of Malay mothers was stressed by Sharom Ahmat in the 1971 public lecture organized by Young Women Muslim Association mentioned earlier.

> "The role of our women in the process of national development is vital, because they are the ones to educate our children who will become the next generation. Mothers must plant in their children a spirit of enthusiasm, so that their children can improve their level of education and standard of living in the future."[113]

Sharom Ahmat asserts here that the crucial duty of Malay mothers is to educate their children, and particularly to motivate them to do well at school and in work.

The responsibility of mothers for their children's education became a topic discussed in the 1970s in *Berita Harian.* In order to succeed in education, Malay children themselves were expected to work hard. However, what children can do by disciplining themselves has limits. In a series of *Berita Harian* articles, some Malay women – writers, or the women they interviewed, or both – examined their duty to guide their children's education and the extent to which they succeeded in fulfilling it.

A 1972 article titled "Why Malay children are weak in education", focused on how parents can help their children to do better at school. [114] Four Malay parents, two fathers and two mothers, presented their own opinions about how parents could participate in that goal. While the Malay fathers mentioned how parents should discipline their children, [115] and should be involved in educating their children at home, [116] the two Malay mothers focused on the difficulty that they had in fulfilling those duties properly. Both felt that their absence from home due to their long hours of work caused their children to lack discipline.

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[113] *Berita Harian*, 15th April 1971.
[114] *Berita Minggu*, 16th July 1972.
[115] *Ibid.* "Our children are aware that we always pay attention to how much they study. And recently, they feel scared to ignore their study."
[116] *Ibid.* "I think that in guiding children, parents play an important role. During their time at home [after school] there is plenty of free time. Parents need to quiz them on all subjects and review all their exercise books and give them necessary practice..." "Parents need to organize a tutorial to lead their children's studies or take their children to after-hours coaching school. This is happening in Singapore quite a lot... Parents should take serious action and examine what the children have studied at school."

Zainab Abdul Rahman pointed out that Malay families with a low income had no choice but for both parents to work outside the home for long hours. This can harm the children's education, she said, because parents could not then supervise their children's study or check and test the child on the work that the child had done. [117] And without their parents to supervise them, their children could also come to mix with the wrong people, such as "naughty friends who like marijuana." [118]

A similar point was made by Hosminah binti Mohd.Yunos. She too said that while parents are out of home working long hours and unable to supervise their children, the children could associate with friends of bad character. And she said that Malay parents had to try to guard against this:

> "Parents also have to pay attention to the issue of friendship, of whose children they are mixing with – because it does happen that our children associate with badly behaved friends and that this causes them to carry out illegal conduct. If this type of thing continues, it will harm our students."

The remarks above by these Malay women show they accept that it is their duty to supervise their children's academic and moral education, and that they find it difficult to do so. The main challenge is juggling those duties with their duties outside the home. Their discourses demonstrate the idea that both sets of duties are essential for Malay working women: they cannot escape the responsibility for their children's education because of their jobs.

At the 1974 seminar too, Malay women participants again discussed their duty to guide their children's education. A Malay teacher, Salmah Yunos, presented a paper titled "Child development and education." She asserted that a key way for a woman to contribute to development of the society was through her duty to the family, and in particular her duty to produce a good next generation. This entailed providing good heredity for her children, by making sure of her own health as a mother before giving birth; as well as providing a good environment after the child is born. And the main

[117] *Berita Minggu*, 16th July 1972.
[118] *Ibid.*

way to create such an environment for the child was to give the child the right education.[119] After the seminar, similar understandings about the role of women in the education of children continued to be enacted and consumed through *Berita Harian.* Two more articles by the Malay female journalist, Zawiyah Salleh appeared, both urging Malay working mothers to be mindful of their responsibilities to educate their children. In one of them, titled "Advice for working mothers: Do not ignore education for your children," Zawiyah Salleh starts with this observation:

> "The current social infrastructure causes the majority of housewives to work outside the home to supplement the income of their husband. However, doesn't this have a negative impact on their children's education? This becomes a problem for most working mothers... many children are left to do what they like and become obsessed with playing games because there is no one to watch or guide them at home."[120]

Zawiyah Salleh is not telling Malay women to go back to being full time housewives and mothers, and so make sure of their children's education. Rather, she sees the problem as being one of ignorance or negligence by working mothers in guiding their children's education. She asks:

> "What efforts should be made by the working mothers to ensure that their children are not neglected and that they study as diligently [when their mother is at work] as when their mother is at home?"[121]

By way of answer, the Malay teacher Salmah Yunos is quoted as giving this concrete advice on how working mothers should perform their duties at home.

> "No matter how tired the working mothers are, they must make time to look at various books with their children. What is important for working mothers is that they have a serious attitude towards children's education. If a mother

[119] Salmah Yunos, 'Perkembangan Kanak-kanak dan Pendidikan,' [Child development and education] in Jabatan Wanita Majlis Pusat, 1975, pp.10-15.
[120] *Berita Harian*, 2nd July 1974. The other article, which took a very similar line, was titled "The duty of working wives to domestic work is more important," and appeared on 25th February 1975.
[121] *Berita Harian*, 2nd July 1974.

> neither does [school] work with her child nor pays attention to the child's education, then as a result of this indifferent attitude of hers towards education, the child will become a weak student. But if a working mother takes her child's education seriously after she gets home from work, then the child will certainly sense this serious attitude of its mother towards education."[122]

And a model is provided of a Malay working woman who does manage to fulfil her duties as a mother successfully. The model for this exemplary ritualized performance is Siti Muzakker, who works as a secretary for a textile company. She explains how she fulfils her duties as a mother:

> "In my case, after coming back from work, I eat dinner and have a rest, and then usually I sit with my children for about an hour to teach them. In the evenings, to fill in empty time that the children have, I give them homework to do, such as ten maths problems to do, and also homework in other subjects. And, on Sunday, I teach my children for two hours. In addition, every day, mothers must not forget to listen to their children as they read aloud from various kinds of books. If the children make mistakes in reading aloud or do not understand the book, then the mother must help them." [123]

After describing here how she successfully supervises her child's learning, Siti Muzakker goes on to say as Salmah Yunos did earlier that the mother must set the correct model of a serious attitude for the child to follow:

> "Working mothers cannot be free from the responsibility of educating children, in particular, their school education. School children do not understand how significant education is, so children are influenced by mothers' serious attitude about education." [124]

As well as this secretary, a factory worker Salibia Ahmad also displays an exemplary attitude to her child's education. Salibia Ahmad says:

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[122] *Ibid.*
[123] *Ibid.*
[124] *Berita Harian*, 2nd July 1974.

"the issue of [school] children is very complex. Although I work at the factory and so do shift work, I certainly manage to perform my task of teaching the children... I always force my primary school children to read books."[125]

Salibia Ahmad admits that she cannot supervise the study of her older children who have finished primary school, since she herself did not get sufficient education to do that. She reports that in the case of those older children, as part of her duty as a responsible mother she sends them to a coaching college in the evening after their regular school.[126]

Through these Malay women – both Zawiyah Salleh and the three Malay women she interviews, looking after the child's education after getting home from work is presented/ performed as a vital obligation for working mothers.

* * *

This section shows some voices articulated by Malay women themselves, in relation to issues of family planning, work and children's education. The critical examination of Malay women's attitudes by Malay male leaders was re-asserted and re-created by Malay women opinion-leaders and consumed and enacted by others among them; ordinary women whose voices are heard through readers' letters or interviews in *Berita Harian*. In this way such Malay women formed an agency of "Change Attitudes" to enact a set of conducts to make them as successful as women from other ethnic groups.

5.3 Conclusion

This chapter examined a set of conducts by Malays under the name of "Change Attitudes" in relation to two issues, Education and Malay women.

[125] *Ibid.*
[126] *Ibid.*

Both issues demonstrated a covert complicity between the ideology and conduct of the minority and that of the dominated. The minority were certainly working hard for their own good and satisfaction, by their own will. This conduct is best understood not as something forced upon them, but as something chosen by their desire to improve their position in Singapore. Their conduct becomes a way to obtain temporary satisfaction.

This nexus between state ideology and Malays' pursuit of their own desires explains some puzzling answers I met while I was in Singapore. During my first months in Singapore, I visited several Malay/Muslim organizations just to get to know about them and deepen my understanding about Malays in Singapore. The people at these organizations kindly explained about their organizations and projects to me. When these staff claimed how unique and enterepreneurial their projects were, I could not help seeing a clear nexus between the state ideologies and their self-initiated projects. Then I would delicately enquire whether they had any kind of support from the government, and they would answer with words to this effect. "Government? No, nothing *lah*. We do if for ourselves, our own organization. We are different."

What did it mean to be Malay in the 1970s? In part it meant performing a set of conducts: self-examination, detection of problems, setting them as targets for improvement, and getting temporary satisfaction by doing so. This patterned behaviour of "Change Attitudes" gradually became internalized as a natural and reflexive response when new challenges or targets were set. This new formation of Malay agency became a most effective force for the state to manipulate during the following decade – the 1980s.

Chapter 6 Changed Attitudes: the Foundation of *Mendaki* - Council on Education for Muslim Children

In the library of the National University of Singapore, there is a "Singapore Malaysia" section. This section contains collections of newspaper clippings about different issues – and one such collection is about the Malays in Singapore. This particular collection starts from 1982. This date is not coincidental, as 1982 was a memorable year for the Malays in Singapore. It is the time when the Council on the Education of Muslim Children (Majlis Pendidikan Anak-Anak Islam, or *Mendaki*) was publicly launched.[1]

The foundation of the Council on Education for Muslim Children (*Mendaki*)[2] was a response to a new challenge presented by the government at the beginning of the 1980s. As the 1970s had begun with a public declaration by Malay community leaders of Malay commitment to meritocracy and self-improvement (in the form of the landmark seminar: see Chapter 3); the 1980s opened with a new challenge from the government to prove that commitment.

This chapter attempts to understand the foundation of the Council as a continuation of the patterned conduct of "change attitudes" performed in the 1970s. At the start of the 1980, the government explicitly compared the performance of different ethnic groups in Singapore in education and employment, through newly released census figures, and these statistics placed Malays at the bottom of the ladder. In response to this stigma combined with a series of speeches by ministers which subtly or less subtly branded Malays as lagging behind, politically engaged Malays responded with that familiar set of conducts. The term "change attitudes' itself fell out of use after the 1970s, but the set of conducts appears to have been already patterned and even naturalized in the minds of these Malays. So when their underachievement was pinpointed by non-Malay Singaporeans in the early 1980s, this provoked and aroused their long-standing desire to become a part of mainstream Singapore society. And this

[1] *The Straits Times*, 17th May 1982.

[2] The name of the same organization has been changing over the course of the time. However, when it was started, the name of the council was the "Council on Education for Muslim Children." See Mendaki, *Making the Difference: 10 years of MENDAKI,* Singapore: Yayasan Mendaki, 1992, p8. Therefore in this chapter, the Council is described as "Council on Education for Muslim Children."

time the response took the shape of conceiving and forming the Educational Council, Mendaki.

6.1 State attitudes to ethnicity in the 1980s

Lily Rahim asserts that the state's approach to the Malay/Muslim community in the 1980s shifted to "an interventionist approach" whereby it openly pinpointed Malays as a problematic group in society.[3] Behind this shift were certain conditions which enabled the state to touch upon Malay issues more openly and less sensitively than before.

At the end of the 1970s the Singapore government began to handle the sensitive issue of ethnicity differently. During that decade it had viewed ethnic groups as a source of ethnic chauvinism. Ethnic riots had taken place during Singapore's earlier history and left the government fearful of ethnic groups being politicised. It attempted to avoid this by downplaying the existence of ethnic differences and stressing a single unified Singapore national identity.

Around the turn of the decade this strategy changed. Ethnic groups were now depoliticised not by avoiding mention of their cultural differences but by encouraging each to identify with a selected set of cultural elements, as a component of Singapore's national identity. This re-creation of ethnic identity was marked by the introduction of the 'Speak Mandarin' campaign aimed at Chinese Singaporeans in 1979. The government provided a re-essentialized package of being Chinese Singaporean: "Chinese ethnicity, Chinese language, and Confucianism" The timing for this state revival of Chinese culture and language is not a matter of chance, but is linked to the completion of the task of removing the remnants of the Chinese Community Party (CCP) in Singapore. The government gained control of Nanyang University, a bastion of Chinese intellectuals, and a year later (1980) forced it to close

[3] Lily Zubaidah Rahim, *The Singapore Dilemma: the political and educational marginality of the Malay community*, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; Oxford, U.K.; Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp.211-212.

down.[4] It also restructured and gained editorial control over what had been the largest-circulation Chinese newspaper in Southeast Asia, *Nanyang Siang Pau*, ensuring that it would never provoke society again.[5] The Labour Union, too, successfully transformed into a legitimate and harmless body. Having eradicated the legacy of the CCP from the social space, the state could safely summon a tamed and compliant Chinese-ness to serve its ideology, a version that matched the orientalist gaze of those products of a colonial education system, Singapore's English- educated leaders.

In line with this Chinese Singaporean model of ethnicity, the state began to reinforce a parallel version of Malay ethnicity and Indian ethnicity as well. The Malay version consisted of: 'Malay ethnicity, Malay language, and Islam', while the Indian version consisted of 'Indian ethnicity, Tamil language, and Hinduism.'[6] Packaging ethnicity in this way helped turn the ethnic groups into managable elements. The process was forcefully implemented by such means as the 'Speak Mandarin' campaign, so as to allow no reminders or whispers of the older style of ethnicity that had played a role as a political vehicle.

A consequence of such changes was that the government became more willing to mention ethnic groups, including their 'problems'. In the reworked context, mentioning ethnicity was less likely to arouse political sentiments than to stimulate cultural identity – and this could be encouraged as ethnic groups and national identity were conceived by the state as complementary to each other.

In the 1980s, then, the 'Malay problem' was more publicly exposed to other ethnic groups than formerly. It began to be mentioned in government publications like the *Mirror* magazine, and more importantly, in the national newspaper, *The Straits Times*. The coverage of Malay issues in *The Straits Times* in the 1980s is much greater than during the 1970s, when there had been very little mention of them.[7]

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[4]竹下秀邦 [Takeshita Hidekuni], シンガポール：リー・クワン・ユーの時代, [*Singapore: the era of Lee Kuan Yew*], アジア経済研究所 [The Institute of Developing Economies, Japan Extra Trade Organization], 1995, p389.
[5]竹下 [Takeshita], 1995, pp.382-383, p386.
[6] John Clammer, *Race and state in independent Singapore, 1965-1990: the cultural politics of pluralism in a multiethnic society*, Aldershot, Hants., ; Brookfield, Vt.: Ashgate, 1998, p157.
[7] I have compared the amount of coverage of Malay issues in *The Straits Times* with that in *Berita Harian* in the 1970s and then the 1980s.

The timing was perfect for the government to initiate a new project for the 1980s of cracking down on the lowest achievers, the Malay/Muslim community. There was little danger of causing a chauvinistic backlash from Malays by doing so. A 1980 article in *Berita Harian* reports with some justification that Malays by that time did not generally regard ethnic identity as a political issue.[8] Even if the government singled out one ethnic group to pin down with the label "you are the bottom of the society," this did not tend to foster feelings of ethnic chauvinism, so long as ethnic groups could be constructed as sub-groups of the one nation.

We should bear in mind that the "interventionist approach" to the Malay problem only represents one side of the state's approach to the Malays. The fundamental ideology of meritocracy remained unchanged. Therefore when it came to the issue of *support* for Malays by the state, there was no intervention. In this respect the state took a hands-off approach. As Tania Li states:

> The firm suggestion from the government was that Malays should seek to solve these problems... The Prime Minister stated that no government efforts could help the Malays as effectively as could the Malay leaders themselves.[9]

Therefore the government undertook to urge, stimulate and provoke Malays to make greater efforts in the 1980s, without providing any affirmative action for them. And the way it did that was essentially the same as in the previous decade, as we will see shortly.

6.2 New state targets set for Singaporeans

At the start of the 1980s the state challenged and provoked Malays by once again labelling them as underachievers compared to other ethnic groups. Their performance was put under new scrutiny with regard to education and employment. In order to

[8] "Singapore succeeds in preventing language from becoming the issue of chauvinism," *Berita Harian*, 4th May 1980.
[9] Tania Li, *Malays in Singapore: culture, economy, and ideology*, Singapore; New York: Oxford University Press, 1989, p 174.

understand why this was done, a brief explanation of the changes taking place in the Singapore society is needed.

From 1979 to 1985, Singapore entered a Second Industrial Revolution.[10] In order to continue its economic growth, Singapore aimed at shifting from a labour-intensive industrialized economy to one that focused on capital-intensive, high technology industries, such as information technology. The latter was given special emphasis and in 1981 a National Computing Board was founded. Therefore Singapore now urgently needed a labour force able to engage in such high technology industries. Under the state's new policy, training such a highly skilled labour force was given top priority. The state sought to raise educational levels by setting up a Vocational and Industrial Training Board and by emphasizing engineering and the sciences in tertiary education. It also invested heavily in the promotion, research and development of high technology.[11]

The adequacy of the current education system for this new economic era was also examined. A government study produced the "Goh Report" in 1979 on problems of the education system. One conclusion was that educational resources were being wasted without making children achieve the expected standard, and that this could impede the production of the necessary human resources for high technology industries.[12]

The education system was thus redesigned to be maximally efficient. Firstly, as early as primary school, students were identified as fast, medium or slow learners based on their academic ability.[13] The fast learners as the elite-to-be enjoyed a curriculum and materials designed to continue their education to university level. On the other hand, those identified as slow learners followed a curriculum to provide basic literacy and numeracy in preparation for training at vocational institutes.[14] In other words, more and better resources were given to those who were brilliant, and less given to those

[10] Jonathan Rigg, 'Singapore and the Recession of 1985,' *Asian Survey*, vol. 28, no.3 (March 1988), pp. 340-52, at p342.
[11] Rigg, 1985, p343.
[12] Paul Cheung, 'Educational development and manpower planning in Singapore,' *CUHK Education Journal*, vol. 21, no.2, & vol. 22, no.1, 1994, pp.185-95, at p187.
[13] Cheung, 1994, p187.
[14] Cheung, 1994, p187.

who were not. The minister in charge of this educational reform, the then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, described this system as one "customized" by the government "to maximize the potential and creativity of every Singaporean."[15]

What did this educational reform and economic structural change mean to the everyday life of Singaporeans? An individual or ethnic group that wishes to become successful, must be highly educated enough to work in high-technology industries. Membership of Singapore's meritocratic community now required one to become such a human resource. This is the context in which Malays were set a renewed and now more urgent challenge: to catch up to the other ethnic groups in education.

6.3 Speeches by ministers about Malays in 1980

The first event that provoked Malays over their achievement compared to other ethnic groups was the release of results of the latest national census figures in 1981. The report had divided up its results by ethnic groups in order to clearly compare the participation and performance of each group, at different levels of the education system. This displayed the Malays as in bottom position across the range of educational indicators (see Goh's speech later). The announcement of the census results made the Malay leaders feel "deeply depressed,"[16] and, "calling each other on the phone, they reached the conclusion that "this time, something just had to be done."[17]

Following closely on that event were three speeches about Malays made in the same month of August 1980. Two were by the Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and one by the Minister of Trade and Industry, Goh Chok Tong. Through the comparison of Malays with other groups in the census results and these speeches, the government subtly or less subtly put a renewed challenge to the Malays to catch up to the other groups.

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[15] Goh Chok Tong, "*Speech by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong at The May Day Rally at the National Trades Union Congress Centre, On Marina Boulevard, on 1 May 2004*," Ministry of Information, Communications and The Arts, http://app.mfa.gov.sg/pr/read_content.asp?View,3830 (accessed 15th May 2006).
[16] Mendaki, 1993, p53.
[17] Mendaki, 1993, p53.

On 11th of August, 1980, Lee delivered his *Hari Raya Puasa* message to the Malays.[18] His reference to Malay achievements was couched as praise – but in terms that made it clear that their task is to catch up and join the mainstream. Lee said:

> The far–reaching changes in the physical landscape are self-evident. What is not so visible is the equally significant change in the mental outlook of Singaporeans, including Malay Singaporeans. Instead of hovering on the sidelines, filled with anxieties about their national identity or their future, they have plunged into the mainstream of life, in the schools, VITB [the training courses founded by Vocational & Industrial Training Board], Polytechnics, Ngee Ann [Technology Institute], the University, in the factories, offices, hotels and shopping complexes. They have made steady progress in raising their education levels and in acquiring technical competence and skills to improve their socio-economic status. [19]

What is interesting here is his wording, "including Malay Singaporeans." By adding them to Singaporeans, he actually emphasises their separateness from them. Similarly, by saying that Malays "have plunged *into* the mainstream", he reveals that the Malays in Singapore are not quite a part of the mainstream. And his praise of their actual achievements in education and work, that they "have made steady progress", suggests that they are catching up, closing the gap. So in his message to Malays, he does two things. He mentions the issue of how well Malays are doing, and he raises subtly the notion of a time lag between Malays and other Singaporeans in terms of participating in national development. That notion of a time lag is one he will develop bluntly and at length in a speech to Malays two years later (see 6.4.3.1).

A week later at the National Day Rally, Lee again addressed remarks to Malays, which were also reported in *Berita Harian*.[20] In this speech he asserted that there were no problems special to the Malays in Singapore.

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[18] Lee Kuan Yew, "*Prime Minister's Hari Raya Puasa Message - 1980* (official translation from Malay into English)," Speech Text Archival and Retrieval System, National Archive of Singapore, http://stars.nhb.gov.sg/public/index.html (accessed on 15th May 2006).
[19] Lee Kuan Yew, *Ibid.*
[20] *Berita Harian*, 18th August 1980.

> Every year at this National Day Rally ... I ask all Malay Ministers and MPs for their assessments of any special problems or concern of the Malay community so that I can make reference to them and seek solutions for them. For the first time, they each told me there are no special Malay problems. Jobs, education, resettlement, demolition of old mosques, building of new mosques, they have been sorted out. The problems of life for the Malays in Singapore are the problems of life faced by all Singaporeans – Malays, Indians, or Chinese. There are problems, but they are the same problems common to Chinese, Indian and Malay Singaporeans – problems over work attitudes, overtime, shift work, and impatience in training.[21]
>
> If in the next 15 years Malay Singaporeans make the same progress that they have in the last 15, Singapore will be a better society where Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and Christians can worship in their different ways without any cleavages in the social life of our new towns.[22]

By stressing that there are "no special Malay problems," Lee is not saying that Malays have overcome their problems, and are now doing as well as other ethnic groups. That is very clear from the final sentence of his extract above. There he gives a clear message that Malays are still behind the other groups, despite the improvements they have already made – and that it will take them at least another 15 years to catch up. Moreover, he suggests that Malay backwardness is disrupting national unity ("cleavages in the social life"). So the message here is that Malays have yet to win the acceptance and approval of other Singaporeans. In that case, when Lee says "there are no special Malay problems", what is he telling them? He means Malays face no structural problems that are unique to them by virtue of their *Bumiputra* status, which call for special help and support. They are on the right track by now to catch up to the others – they just haven't caught up yet. As all ethnic groups face the same challenges, there are no grounds for affirmative action for Malays to help them improve their situation.

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[21] Lee Kuan Yew, "*Prime Minister's Opening Speech in Malay at the National Day Rally on 17 Aug 80 At the National Theatre*," Speech Text Archival and Retrieval System, National Archive of Singapore, http://stars.nhb.gov.sg/public/index.html (accessed on 15th May 2006).
[22] Lee Kuan Yew, *Ibid.*

The government's view about the achievement of Malays/Muslims emerged more explicitly in a speech by the Minister of Trade and Industry, Goh Chok Tong, the same month. Goh's speech was to Malay members of the PAP, and was given full-page coverage in *Berita Minggu*, the Sunday edition of *Berita Harian*.[23]

Goh drew on the recently released census statistics comparing the performance of the ethnic groups. He began by praising the progress of Malays in both employment and education. He cited census figures that showed a rise in the number of Malays participating in the workforce between 1966 and 1978. Similarly, he cited figures to show that during the same period the number of Malay students passing final primary school examinations, completing a vocational qualification, passing GCE O levels and passing GCE A levels had all increased, while the number dropping out of school had decreased.

However Goh then clarified the implied message of Lee's speeches, by explicitly saying that Malays must do better. He told his audience that even though Malays were participating more overall, they were not doing so at the higher levels of education and employment.

> "...what we should bear in mind is that that the improvement demonstrated through the statistics today is only in the amount of participation.
>
> Increasing the total participation is important, but the quality of participation is more important. It is particularly so now, as Singapore is undertaking the process of overall economic restructuring.
>
> Expert skills need to be improved and high technology has to be given attention. Raising the total percentage of participation must now continue in the form of enhancing quality, as well."[24]

[23] *Berita Minggu*, 31st August 1980.
[24] *Berita Minggu*, 31st August 1980.

Goh also gave specific examples of sectors where Malays should enhance the quality of their performance. One was the elite employment sectors of business and the professions. The proportion of working Malays who were business people had risen only fractionally between 1966 and 1978 (from 10.8% to 11.2%), and so had the proportion of working Malays who were professionals (from 5.0% to 6.0%).[25]

In short, Goh told the Malays that they were not producing top quality human resources – the kind that was in demand for the new high technology era. He concluded his talk with these provocative remarks:

> Generally speaking, Malays can be proud of the progress they have achieved, however, feeling proud is not enough. It is worse still if that attitude is actually the only result that you achieve.
>
> The progress which has been made so far should be considered as just a beginning. There is still much more that should and can be done to order to keep developing and not be left behind. The challenge faced by the Malay community now is how to activate more of their children to enter university and technical colleges in the near future, while also activating those young Malays who are already working to improve their skills and qualities. This is not difficult to achieve.[26]

Here Goh emphasises just how far Malays still have to go (it is "just the beginning;" there is "much more to be done".) He suggests they are still being "left behind" the other groups and urges them to work harder to catch up, issuing the provocative challenge that "it is not difficult to achieve".

Combining the above speeches by Lee and Goh, the comprehensive view of the Government about the Malays can be seen more clearly. Malays are recognised to be doing better than they were in education and employment. But to meet the demands of the new high technology era in Singapore, expectations have been raised – and Malays

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[25] *Ibid.*
[26] *Ibid.*

are once again not doing well enough. They need to improve themselves by their own efforts and without expecting any affirmative action, to produce highly educated and qualified workers like other ethnic groups. This is the new target set for Malays. And the gap between target and achievement prevents them from being accepted as part of Singapore society.

6.4 "Total Approach"– a Malay response to state criticisms of underachievement

Malays responded to these criticism by the state with the formation of the Council on Education for Muslim Children (Mendaki) in 1982. Mendaki was and is a source of pride for many Malays. Its establishment is regarded as an epoch-making moment. One Malay leader told me that "this was the time that Malays got together, grassroots leaders and Malay MPs, to work with each other."[27] This Malay voice makes it sound as if the foundation of the Council was an "alternative" action by Malays. What this section attempts to do is to demonstrate that it was performed by the same Malay agency of "change attitudes" as in the 1970s. That slogan of "Change Attitudes" itself had become obsolete, however the discourses and behaviour of Malay leaders and organisations directed to improving the educational level of Malays in the early 1980s reveal that familiar patterned set of conducts, aroused by the same desire.

Since the name of the new Council was the Council on the Education for Muslim Children, it is possible to ask whether it is a response of Malays or Muslims. This unity between being Malay and being Muslim needs to be explained. Firstly, practically all Malays in Singapore are Muslim (99.6% as at 1990),[28] and Malays also comprise the overwhelming majority (85.2%) of Muslims in Singapore.[29] Secondly, the unity of being Malay and being Muslim was now assumed in the context of the 1980s. As shown previously (6.1), ethnic groups in the 1980s were now depoliticised by encouraging each to identify with a selected set of cultural elements. Under these circumstances, it was highly acceptable for Malays themselves to present Islam as if it

[27]Casual conversation with a former leader of a Malay educational organization in the mosque at Ang Mo Kio on 18th June 2002.
[28] Eddie C.Y. Kuo & Tong Chee Kiong eds., *Religion in Singapore*, Singapore: SNP Publishers, 1995, p8.
[29] Kuo & Tong eds., 1995, p9.

were one of the core elements of being Malay. For the wider Singapore society, the term "Muslim children," was virtually synonymous with "Malay children."

6.4.1 Naturalised "change attitudes"

In the 1980s, the slogan "change attitudes" was used less and less in the discourses of Malays. This does not mean that the spirit and set of conducts embodied in that slogan had faded away. On the contrary, they had apparently become a natural part of life for many Malays through a decade of pursuing their desire to become like other ethnic groups in Singapore. They had absorbed into their veins a quasi-ritualized set of conducts of "change attitudes" by performing it through their everyday lives: self-examination in comparison with other ethnic groups, detecting problems within themselves, and setting them as targets for fixing. This set of conducts had also become a regular source of temporary satisfaction derived from their achievement. So when new problems and challenges were presented to Malays in the new era of the early 1980s, "change attitudes" was the conditioned response. It was Malays who must change themselves, once again, to be suitable and relevant to the society.

An article in *Berita Harian* in February 1980 illustrates how this attitude persisted. Titled "Achievement and its meaning to Singaporeans"[30], it discusses the attitudes suitable to current Singapore society. Without using the catch-cry "Change Attitudes," it displays the spirit embodied in that slogan.

> Those people who achieve success in life have a basic attitude, namely, a confidence in their own ability to face the problems of one era to another. If this sort of attitude can be enhanced in children then it will make them happy in their future life.
>
> In this era, especially in Singapore, an attitude of longing for achievement or of chasing success in work or economic activity is utterly necessary. The

[30] *Berita Harian*, 13th February 1980.

> Malays in Singapore should also create developments in all fields of Singapore's economy."[31]

Here the writer shows the essence of "change attitudes". Malays are advised to develop confidence in their own ability to meet the shifting challenges of each new era, and to instil such an attitude of confidence in their children as well. They are also told they should acquire an attitude of longing for material success. What is also interesting here is that such an ability to change attitudes involves "confidence." Malays can derive satisfaction by feeling secure in their own ability to change on demand in order to pursue each new target set by Singapore society.

This way of thinking by the agency of performing attitudes can also be seen in a reader's letter to *Berita Harian* in the same year, 1980. The writer starts as follows:

> How far do we still want to go towards being recognized and towards achieving our target of achieving an socio-economic status equal to the national status?" [32]

Here the writer is explicit about the desire that drives this particular Malay agency, namely to be recognised as equal in achievement to other Singaporeans; and then rhetorically poses the question whether they should keep pursuing it. The writer continues:

> We need to think how the Malays want to be embodied in Singapore. Do we want Malays to improve their technological achievements? Be hard-working and diligent? Be disciplined? Loyal, and capable of speaking English and Malay fluently? Highly moral? Tolerant of other languages and ethnicities? Educated? Knowing the value of art?[33]

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[31] *Berita Harian*, 13th February 1980.
[32] *Berita Harian*, 13th October 1980.
[33] *Ibid.*

Here Malays are told to think about what they want to achieve. In what ways do they want to improve themselves? What are they trying to become? The writer concludes with a vigorous call to Malays to work harder to meet the challenges of the new era:

> "The Malays in Singapore are heading on a course of living in an urbanized and industrial centre. We must work and be competitive with other ethnic groups here, who are clearly already ahead of us. The Malays must not only face their duty to improve their achievements, to be competitive as a part of the socio-economic nation, but must also face the challenge of identity..."[34]

So Malays must fulfil their normal duties to work hard and become more competitive in order to catch up the other ethnic groups, plus more as well. They also have a duty to work out exactly what they want to be. This uncertainty about their own identity is just one more problem that Malays must fix about themselves, one more attitude that they must change, in order to fulfil their dream of becoming worthy Singaporeans.

As the agency of performing "change attitudes" was evidently ingrained for some Malays by this time, it is not surprising that it was triggered by an alarming message from the government in the 1980s: that Malays were performing poorly in education compared to other ethnic groups. This message frustrated and provoked the desire of the Malays concerned to become a decent part of Singapore society.

6.4.2 Response of the Malay leaders

Malay MP and non-MP leaders analysed the situation. A Malay MP, recalling that difficult period, says that the task for Malay MPs at the time was to "analyse trends and problems, and opportunities, so that we could gather our resources and provide effective leadership for the community."[35] As for the basic problem, it was that Malays were being evaluated as poor achievers compared to the other groups. [36] And as a first step in tackling the problem, the Malay MPs looked critically at the existing efforts of the Malay community to improve their children's education. During the

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[34] *Berita Harian*, 13th October 1980.
[35] Mendaki, 1992, p54. This is the recall of the Malay MP Mansor. [quotation from original English]
[36] Mendaki, 1992, p57. [quotation from original English]

previous decade Malay/Muslim organisations had already set up various tuition and scholarship programs for Malay children. So why weren't Malay students doing better? As one Malay MP said, recalling the situation a decade later:

> "These organizations had been rendering service to Muslim students and their parents through the tuition classes. They felt they were doing "*kebajikan*", good service, and the parents were grateful. But I knew, and many others knew, that the children who went to the tuition classes still did not do well in school, while many of the students who did well in school did not attend tuition classes."[37]

Malay MP and non-MP leaders started to work together to plan how to deal with the problem of Malays' underachievement in education. As the first step towards such a relationship a symposium was held at National University of Singapore, on the 18th of July in 1981. Its purpose was to examine Malay problems in education and present resolutions on how to deal with them.[38]

6.4.2.1 Symposium on problems of Malay education in July 1981

One Malay MP and two non-MP Malay leaders were invited to speak at the symposium. Mansor Haji Sukaimi was the Malay MP, the others were Yatiman Yusof, a journalist from the Malay newspaper *Berita Harian*; and Abdul Hamil Kader, the president of the Singapore Malay Youth Library Association (*Taman Bacaan)*. The speeches of all three were reported in detail in *Berita Harian.*

This symposium was constructed in a familiar way of approaching Malay issues. The notion shared by participants from the outset was that Malays faced a problem, namely that "Malay children's education still has not been able to improve to the level of non-Malay children's," [39] and that Malays must find a way to fix it by themselves.

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[37] Mendaki, 1992, p55. [quotation from original English]
[38] *Berita Harian*, 15th July 1981.
[39] *Berita Harian*, 8th September 1981.

The first speaker, the Malay MP Mansor Sukaimi, presented a paper titled "Problems and new developments in the education of the Malay children." He stated that many old problems of Malay education had already been largely fixed. The old reluctance of parents to educate their daughters, and their reluctance to send their children (especially daughters) to an English stream school, had been fixed through changing attitudes of parents. The financial problems that prevented Malay children from continuing their education to higher levels had been largely dealt with, through the supply of scholarships by Malay organizations.[40] Mansor posed the question: What is the new problem now? His answer was:

> "While various sorts of efforts to help have been made by the government and by local organizations involved directly in education, what is left now is students, parents, and their family themselves."[41]

So, *all* Malays now had to work together to improve education, especially those who were most intimately involved of all: the students and their families. This idea of a 'total approach', a concerted effort by all Malays, was a cornerstone of Mendaki.

The next speaker, the Malay journalist Yatiman, presented a paper "Education and the Malays: past and present." He started by saying that Malay organisations had not been doing well enough in raising the education of Malays:

> About 20 Malay organizations here are active in the field of education... Most of them were formed a couple of decades ago, and they have been satisfied with the educational achievements of Malay children. Haven't they pondered on the adequacy of their efforts since then?"[42]

As for what should be done, Yatiman's proposal was very similar to that of Mansor Sukaimi. Yatiman Yosof argued that all possible Malay parties: parents, family, school, and society, should work together to raise the education level of Malays.[43] He captured this idea by using a term highly familiar to Malays, *gotong-royong* (working

[40] *Berita Minggu*, 8th September 1981.
[41] *Ibid.*
[42] *Ibid.*
[43] *Ibid.*

together in mutual cooperation). [44] And he linked this notion of *gotong-royong* to self-reliance by Malays and rejection of affirmative action by declaring to his audience that if their response was "based on *gotong-royong*", the Malays would not need to depend on support from the government." [45]

The third speaker, the President of Taman Bacaan, Abdul Hamil Kader, spoke on "Social achievement and Malay children's education: the role of volunteer Malay/Muslim organizations." Like the two speakers before him, he found fault with how well these organisations were doing in raising the education of Malays. Abdul Hamil Kader talked mainly about how such organizations could play a more impressive role. He stated that they should continue to conduct tuition classes for Malay children while also giving them different forms of stimulation and encouragement as well. This rather vague proposal shares a basic element with those of Mansor Sukaimi and Yatiman Yosof: that Malays should tackle the issue of education for Malay children more broadly than they have been doing so far.

To sum up the symposium, the three talks dimly pointed to a direction for improving the education of Malay children. The main thrust was that (a) the efforts of the various organisations did not add up to a satisfactory result, and (b) all Malays must work together. These two ideas led to a consensus by the Malay MPs and the non-MP Malay leaders that Malays must take a more unified approach: a 'total approach'.

6.4.2.2 Lee Kuan Yew's 1981 National Day rally speech

Around this time Malays received an extra spur to action in the form of further public criticisms by Lee Kuan Yew. Lee gave a National Day rally speech two days after the symposium. In it he called on all Singaporeans to help boost economic growth, and singled out Malays for some blunt criticisms. He gave that section of the speech in Malay, but as well as being reported in *Berita Harian* it was faithfully summarised in the English language national daily *The Straits Times*. [46]

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[44] *Berita Minggu*, 8th September 1981.
[45] *Ibid.*
[46] *The Straits Times*, 22nd August 1981.

Lee's speech echoed the theme of Goh's speech earlier (see 6.3), that Malays were not reaching high enough levels of education. He remarked in his speech on the relatively large proportion of Malay children who still failed to continue their schooling or vocational training to the age of 18 – saying he was confident that this state of affairs would be improved by the end of the decade.[47] He stated that 63% of Malays in Singapore did not have O levels, and stressed that the skills and income of this group needed to be raised. He further pointed out that of this group, 42% had not even passed their Primary School Leaving Examination.[48] He emphasised in his speech that the education and training of those Malays must be given top priority by the Malay leaders and educationists."[49] So in this speech the achievements of Malays in education were publicly compared with those of other ethnic groups and judged inadequate. Looking back a decade later on this 1981 speech of Lee, the official Mendaki book recalled that his speech was a "call to action" for Malays and that it produced a flurry of activity during the following weeks by grassroots activists and government officials.[50]

6.4.2.3 The establishment of Mendaki

Two days after Lee's above speech Malay MPs called a meeting, to which representatives of the Malay/Muslim organizations were invited to discuss a concerted, unified approach to the problems of education.[51] Leaders of a large number of Malay organisations attended, including most of the major ones.[52] Participants at the meeting agreed that the strategy to be taken was this: to found a central organization, which

[47] *Ibid.*
[48] *Ibid.*
[49] *Ibid.*
[50] Mendaki, 1992, p56.
[51] Mendaki, 1992, p54.
[52] Mendaki, 1992, p54. Mansor Sukaimi recalls that members of the following organizations attended: Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS); Central Council of Malay Cultural Organisations, Singapore (Majlis Pusat); Singapore Malay Teachers' Union (KGMS); Prophet Muhammad's Birthday Memorial Scholarship Fund Board (LBKM); Singapore Malay Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DPMS); Malay Youth Literary Association (4PM); the Singapore Malay Youth Library Association (Taman Bacaan); Islamic Theological Association of Singapore (PERTAPIS); Muslim Missionary Society, Singapore (Jamiyah); and Singapore Religious Teachers Association (PERGAS). He recalled that other organizations were also invited and participated, however, the names of them were not recorded.

would coordinate the efforts of the entire Malay community to improve the education of Malays.[53]

After two such meetings, as well as various meetings privately among Malay MPs and among leaders of Malay/Muslim organizations at different levels of authority,[54] a task force was set up to form the Council on Education for Malay Children (Mendaki), in late August of 1981.[55] The Malay MP Mansor Haji Sukaimi, a decade later, described the general aim of the new organization as follows:

> The main objective of MENDAKI (the Council) was to help raise the capacity of the Muslim organizations, individuals and parents, so that they could take on new and better work with greater result.[56]

This description captures the broad nature of the strategy. Mendaki was to be a central organization to activate and motivate the entire Malay community, organizations, families, parents, and Malay children themselves, to improve the problems that had been identified in Malay children's educational achievement. It took the shape of a kind of think-tank. It would detect problems and design strategies and projects to overcome them, which might involve any part of the Malay community as needed. As Ahmad Matter said, looking back a decade later:

> "Whatever is done by the government, including the education system, whatever the encouragement by MENDAKI and its intellectuals and activists, it will not be able to replace the attitudes necessary for every family, every individual and every student." [57]

This endeavour to bring about an en masse change in attitudes to education by Malays was named a "Total Approach" by the President of Mendaki, Ahmad Matter, and "total approach" became the key term for the new challenge.

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[53] Mendaki, 1992, p55.
[54] Mendaki, 1992, p57. Further details of these additional meetings are not documented by Mendaki, 1992.
[55] Mendaki, 1992, p57.
[56] Mendaki, 1992, p55.
[57] Mendaki, 1992, p102.

The task force to found Mendaki consisted of 24 members. A concentration of the leaders from both parliament and the Malay/Muslim organizations was considered crucial for its success and to embody the philosophy of a "total approach." The chairman of the task force was Ahmad Matter, the Minister for the Environment. The secretary was the Malay MP Mansor Sukaimi. The assistant secretary was Abdullah Musa, secretary of the Prophet Muhammad's Birthday Memorial Scholarship Fund Board (LBKM), and the treasurer was Kalil Haron from the Singapore Malay Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DPMS). Other representatives in the task force included six other Malay MPs,[58] and leaders of other Malay/Muslim organizations. All the major Malay/Muslim organizations were represented, including the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS), the Central Council of Malay Cultural Organizations, Singapore (Majlis Pusat), the Prophet Muhammad's Birthday Memorial Scholarship Fund Board (LBKM), the Singapore Malay Youth Literary Association (4PM), the Singapore Malay Teachers' Union (KGMS), the Singapore Malay Youth Library Association (Taman Bacaan), and Singapore Malay Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DPMS).[59] The budget to found the Council was managed by the Central Malay Provident Fund.

6.4.3 The Mendaki Conference: May 1982

In October 1981, Mendaki was officially founded. Some months later, Mendaki's approach to Malay education was revealed in detail to the Singapore public. This took place at a three day conference held for that purpose from 28th to 30th of May 1982, at the Singapore Conference Hall. Before Mendaki's Total Approach was unveiled at the conference, Lee Kuan Yew gave an opening speech to participants. This speech by Lee is well worth examining for its interesting remarks about Malays.

6.4.3.1 Lee's opening speech at the Mendaki 3 day conference

Lee's speech was a provocation to Malays. He made sharp and fundamental criticisms of Malay attitudes towards and achievements in education – more openly than in his

[58] Sidek Saniff, Wan Hussin Zoohri, Rahan Kamis, Abbas Abu Amin, Othan Harin Eusofe, Saidi Shariff.
[59] Mendaki, 1992, p57.

earlier speeches in 1980 or even his speech of 1981 (see 6.3). Even at this time when Malays were obviously taking steps already to meet the new state target of performance in education, Lee sharply reminded them yet again that they were lagging behind the other groups, and were not yet part of mainstream Singapore society. This time he emphasised how deep-rooted the 'Malay problem' was; how it was linked to Malays' cultural and historical background. This speech was published not only in *Berita Harian*,[60] but also in the main English language daily, *The Straits Times*,[61] so Lee's points about Malays were publicized to the whole Singapore society.

First of all, Lee presented statistics to show that Malays' performance in education had improved little in the five years from 1976 to 1981.[62] He showed that the proportion of Malays who graduated from university was still only a small fraction of the Malays entering primary school. Lee also presented results showing that Malay children performed worse at school in English and in Science when they were at a school with many other Malay pupils.[63] They did better if they are in a school where most of their fellow students are non-Malays instead. Lee remarked on this:

> It is valuable to know that when the Malays are forced by their smaller numbers in school to speak in English with their fellow students, their score improved.[64]

Lee laid much of the blame for the weakness of Malay stream students on Malay parents. He said that by choosing to speak Malay at home with their children, they stopped their children from being exposed to English. To back up this point, Lee quoted statistics showing that Malay children who used more English at home did better in English at school.[65] And he declared that:

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[60] *Berita Harian*, 29th May 1982. Lee's speech was published in Malay translation in this issue.
[61] *The Straits Times*, 29th May 1982.
[62] The source of the statistics presented by Lee in his speech is not mentioned in the newspaper reports of that speech.
[63] *Ibid.*
[64] *Ibid.*
[65] *Ibid.*

> "Parents have to decide on the trade-off between the conveniences of speaking Malay or the mother tongue at home with their children at the cost of English language as first language." [66]

However, Lee did not stop there in blaming Malays. He claimed that the reason Malays failed to do well in education was because of deep-seated flaws in their attitudes towards it. Malay parents and children lacked awareness of the importance of education because of their history and their culture. Lee declared:

> "There are no easy or quick solutions. The attitudes of Chinese and Indian parents to learning as the road to progress are the result of historical experience. However, the basic values of parents take a long time to get established. These basic values have a profound influence on their children." [67]

> "For more than 2,000 years, off and on, as dynasties rise and fall, the Imperial examinations in China offered every Chinese the chance of becoming a magistrate and a high official through scholarship. So the importance of performance in examinations has become part of the culture of Chinese. For over 100 years in India, the British ran competitive examinations for entrance into the Indian Civil Service. Hence the Indians too are keenly aware of the importance of studies and examinations as the road to success. I am sure Muslims can draw similar lessons from Islamic teachings and culture." [68]

The specific logic of this explanation is not the point. The significance is that Lee here maps a racial/ethnic hierarchy based on "cultural" characteristics constructed through "length" of history. The hierarchy is created by connecting ethnic groups to their historical past and their cultural practices during that past. The Chinese are located at the top of the hierarchy. The Indians are placed second. The Malays are placed last – and as for their history, Lee does not even bother to investigate it. They are located as a peripheral group historically and culturally. His vague remark about being "sure Muslims can draw similar lessons from Islamic teachings and culture" lacks

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[66] *Ibid.*
[67] *Ibid.*
[68] *Ibid.*

conviction – his clear message is that Malays have been harmed rather than helped by their own culture and history.[69]

What needs to be pondered here is why Lee reveals his neo-racist beliefs about the Singapore racial hierarchy without reserve. His purpose is to stress how large and difficult the task that faces Malays is. The Malay/Muslims must catch up to groups who have a head start of at least a hundred years, and as many as two thousand. This echoes with Goh's message earlier, "There is still much more that should be and can be done in order to keep developing and not be left behind." [70] It re-creates a gap between the Malays and the rest of Singapore society. In the 1970s the Malays did manage to visibly improve their performance. Now the challenge is renewed. The gap still exists between the Malays and the rest of the Singapore society, and is revealed to be fundamental since it is deeply rooted in historical and cultural factors.

Lee also told Malays that the state would not provide any further support to them to help them face their daunting challenge:

> "You can better succeed because you will be more effective with Malay/Muslim parents than government officers or school teachers and principals. You can reach them through their hearts, not just their minds. You have the motivation, the dedication and commitment, this emotional/psychological support can make a vast difference, between a student who tries, fails, and tries again and another who fails and gives up." [71]

This remark displays a twin set of meritocratic notions. Firstly, it is not for the government to provide affirmative action or resolve the problem, but for the Malays alone to tackle it. Secondly, the success that Malays achieve will be equal to the amount of the effort they make and the psychological commitment they invest.

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[69] Clammer identifies this kind of neoracist notion used by the Singapore government, although he does not use the term 'neoracism.' He observes: "The view that economic participation differences are to be explained on genetic grounds occasionally rears its ugly head." See John Clammer, 1998, p39.
[70] *Berita Minggu*, 31st August 1980.
[71] *The Straits Times*, 29th May 1982.

There is also a new twist not evident in the 1970s; but which was prefigured in Goh's speech: the 'Malay problem' is now framed as a problem for all Singaporeans. Lee declares:

> "It is in the interest of all to have Malay Singaporeans better-educated and better qualified and to increase their contribution to Singapore's development. Your real achievement is one which will raise the living standards of the majority.[72]

The struggle by Malays to catch up to other groups, reported in the national English-language daily, now becomes a public spectacle, and the message is that their poor performance is harming the living standards of the Singapore majority as well. The Malays are indeed being well-provoked to greater efforts to prove themselves as potential members of mainstream society.

6.4.3.2 The unveiling of Mendaki and its 'Total Approach'

After Lee's opening speech, Mendaki's Total Approach was unveiled for discussion by conference participants. The centrepiece of its Total Approach was a set of detailed guidelines for the education of a Malay child to adulthood.

If the project under the slogan of "Changing Attitudes" in the 1970s to improve Malay education had lacked concrete detail and direction, the Council was determined not to make the same mistake again. Its guidelines were presented in an elaborate chart (see Table 1 below). In this chart the life of a Malay was objectified in a blueprint for the engineering of their education. As explained in a paper presented by Mendaki at the conference titled "Formal Education"[73], their life was plotted in seven

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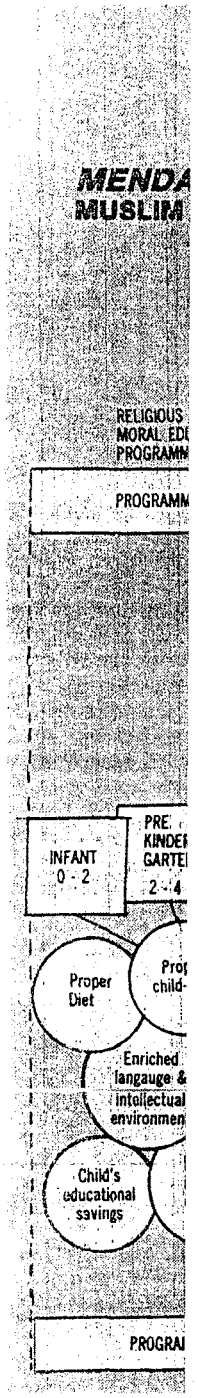
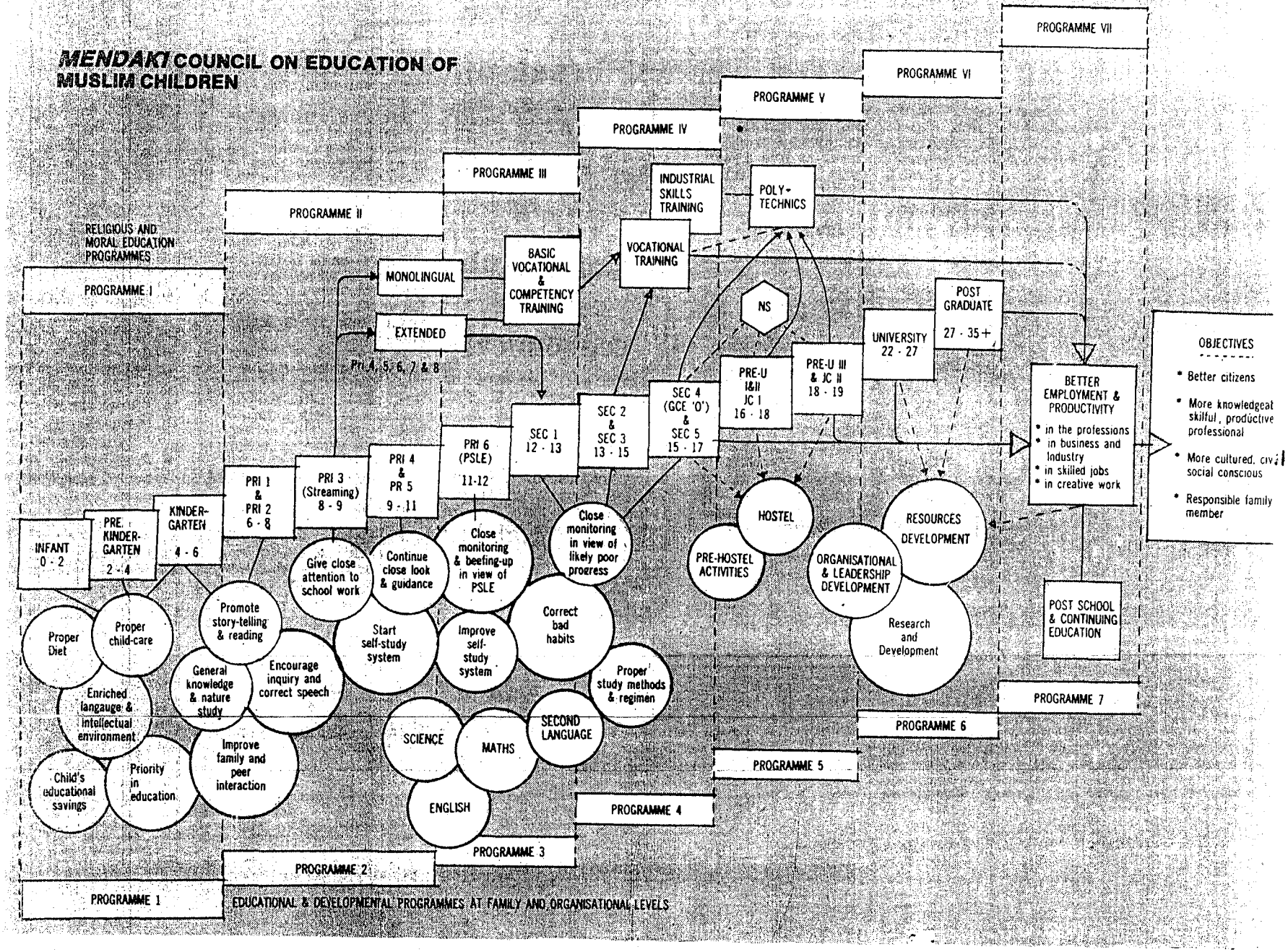
[72] *Ibid.*

[73] 'Pendidikan Formal' [Formal Education], in *Kongres Pendidikan Anak-anak Islam anjuran MENDAKI* [The Congress for Education of Muslim Children sponsored by MENDAKI], Mendaki: Singapore, 1982, pp.45-55. [quotation translated from original Malay by Yasuko Kobayashi]. Before it was revealed by this paper at the 3 day conference, the chart was already revealed to Malays by *Berita Minggu*. *Berita Minggu*, 31st January 1982. Note that all papers were delivered in English at the conference; however, this 1982 Mendaki publication consists of Malay translations of all the papers in full.

Table 1. Chart for analysing and planning Mendaki projects and activities[1]



[1] *The Straits Times*, 24th May 1982


MENDAKI COUNCIL ON EDUCATION OF MUSLIM CHILDREN
PROGRAMME VII
PROGRAMME VI
PROGRAMME V
PROGRAMME IV
PROGRAMME III
PROGRAMME II
PROGRAMME I
RELIGIOUS AND MORAL EDUCATION PROGRAMMES
INDUSTRIAL SKILLS TRAINING
POLY-TECHNICS
VOCATIONAL TRAINING
BASIC VOCATIONAL & COMPETENCY TRAINING
MONOLINGUAL
EXTENDED
Pri 4, 5, 6, 7 & 8
NS
POST GRADUATE 27 - 35+
UNIVERSITY 22 - 27
PRE-U I&II JC I 16 - 18
PRE-U III & JC II 18 - 19
SEC 4 (GCE 'O') & SEC 5 15 - 17
SEC 2 & SEC 3 13 - 15
SEC 1 12 - 13
PRI 6 (PSLE) 11-12
PRI 4 & PR 5 9 - 11
PRI 3 (Streaming) 8 - 9
PRI 1 & PRI 2 6 - 8
KINDER-GARTEN 4 - 6
PRE-KINDER-GARTEN 2 - 4
INFANT 0 - 2
BETTER EMPLOYMENT & PRODUCTIVITY
* in the professions
* in business and industry
* in skilled jobs
* in creative work
OBJECTIVES
* Better citizens
* More knowledgeat skilful, productive professional
* More cultured, civic social conscious
* Responsible family member
HOSTEL
PRE-HOSTEL ACTIVITIES
RESOURCES DEVELOPMENT
ORGANISATIONAL & LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT
Research and Development
POST SCHOOL & CONTINUING EDUCATION
Close monitoring in view of likely poor progress
Close monitoring & beefing-up in view of PSLE
Continue close look & guidance
Give close attention to school work
Correct bad habits
Improve self-study system
Start self-study system
Proper study methods & regimen
Promote story-telling & reading
Encourage inquiry and correct speech
General knowledge & nature study
Improve family and peer interaction
Enriched langauge & intellectual environment
Proper child-care
Proper Diet
Priority in education
Child's educational savings
SECOND LANGUAGE
MATHS
SCIENCE
ENGLISH
PROGRAMME 7
PROGRAMME 6
PROGRAMME 5
PROGRAMME 4
PROGRAMME 3
PROGRAMME 2
PROGRAMME 1
EDUCATIONAL & DEVELOPMENTAL PROGRAMMES AT FAMILY AND ORGANISATIONAL LEVELS

stages from birth to adulthood. The chart explained what duties or efforts should be performed by Malay children, adults, families and organizations at each of these seven stages of a Malay person's development. To take one example only, at the stage from age 0 to 6, it was incumbent upon various parties to provide the child with a proper diet, to provide the child with proper care while the parents were at work, to save money in order to budget for the child's education, to enrich the child's linguistic and intellectual environment, and to prioritize the child's education at home. The information in the chart was also supplemented with a separate, detailed written commentary about how to implement each step on it.

The mapped course on the chart also covered the life of a young Muslim adult. The Council created a scheme for a happier marriage, [74] part of which was a training course for Malay newly-weds about their health, finance, and education for children.[75] From cradle to responsible adult age, the chart covers and instructs on 'Dos' and by implication 'Don'ts' for the education of Malays.

In essence, this schematised chart is a Do It Yourself system for the Malays to perform "change attitudes" in their everyday life in a very concrete sense. By presenting the fundamental 'Dos' as an encompassing model it reminds them constantly of their duties or efforts toward the goal of to producing successful Malay children. Malay parents and organisations especially could use this map of required actions and attitudes as a reference to "pin-point areas which need improvement and rectification." [76] They could critically examine themselves for the extent and effectiveness of their own efforts to help Malay children.

The conference paper "Formal Education" concluded with the remark that "parents need to take an attitude of "Total Approach" towards the education of their children."[77] A shift in attitude is thus required for Malay parents to strive to integrate their children's education into all facets of daily life, in both the public and private sphere.

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[74] *The Straits Times*, 8th February 1982.
[75] *The Straits Times*, 15th February 1982.
[76] *The Straits Times*, 28th May 1982.
[77] 'Pendidikan Formal' [Formal Education], in *Kongres Pendidikan Anak-anak Islam anjuran MENDAKI* [The Congress for Education of Muslim Children sponsored by MENDAKI], Mendaki: Singapore, 1982, pp.45-55. [quotation translated from original Malay by Yasuko Kobayashi.]

In pursuit of this target of improving the education of Malays, all possible parties from the Malay/Muslim community were called on to participate. Some participants mentioned in articles in *Berita Harian* and/or *The Straits Times* during these years of 1981 and 1982 are as follows. The Council formed a pool of 30 professionals including doctors, sociologists, teachers and journalists, to work as volunteers to help run its projects.[78] The doctors, for example, were enlisted to deal with the importance of the diet in a child's growth.[79] The teachers were to provide guidance for Malay parents in how to help improve the educational performance and achievement of their children.[80] Malay university students were also urged to support the Council, for instance by teaching supplementary courses designed by the Council to help Malay pupils to improve their performance at school. In response to this, some Malay students at National University of Singapore displayed their readiness to teach on these courses. One of them, a Zaid bin Hamzah, represented this willing attitude with his comment quoted in *Berita Harian* that "Malay/Muslim university students must come forward to help to make the project of the Council successful.[81]

Islamic religion was mobilised as the source of moral/ethical values to serve this target. Apart from the fact that Muslim organisations offered tuition programs for Malay students, the Malay Theological Society (a Muslim body) conducted the above-mentioned training course for Malay newly-weds, [82] and mosques offered their meeting rooms as classrooms for the projects of the Council. For instance An-nur Mosque in Woodlands provided its meeting room as the classroom for the Malay/Muslim students to take a tuition course of the Council which prepared them to take their A level examination.[83]

6.4.4 Winning the hearts of Malays

A Total Approach naturally cannot involve Malays at the mechanical level of systematic Dos and Don'ts without also winning their emotional commitment to the

[78] *The Straits Times*, 28th January 1982.
[79] *Ibid.*
[80] *The Straits Times*, 1st February 1982.
[81] *Berita Minggu*, 11th October 1981.
[82] *The Straits Times*,15th February 1982
[83] *The Straits Times*, 3rd June 1982.

target. As the president of the Council, Ahmad Matter announced at the 3 day conference:

> "Mendaki can do everything but if the students are not interested, nothing can be achieved. Parents too must realize the importance of education and must accept that education of their children is an investment."[84]

And in other speeches to Malays as well in those months of mid-1982, Ahmad Matter called upon them to foster an attitude of deep and serious commitment to education – speeches that were reported in the national daily, *The Straits Times*.[85] And he also urged newspaper journalists to stress the issue of education in their writings, in order to remind parents how important it was for their children.[86]

To urge Malays to participate in the shared project, Mendaki also found a less conventional way to appeal to them. A documentary titled "A Mother's Hope" was produced in Malay language by Zainab Rahim from the Singapore Broadcasting Commission, in cooperation with Mendaki, and was screened at Channel 5 on the evening of the 26th of May (shortly before the three-day conference). Its story was reported in detail in *The Straits Times*, as follows.[87]

The main characters in this documentary are three Malay children, Mislan, Zalina, and Noor, and their parents. Mislan is a child who spent his free time selling food at his family's hawker stall. Due to the relaxed attitude of his mother toward her children, Mislan falls into bad company in high school. What with his daily shuttle between

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[84] *The Straits Times*, 28th May 1982.

[85] *(i) The Straits Times*, 18th April 1982. '*Let study come first*'.
"Help correct the attitude subscribed to by some old-fashioned parents and grandparents that their children, especially their daughters, must marry early in life. We must discard the thinking that if a girl is not married during her teens, she is considered to be on the shelf."
(ii) The Straits Times, 21st June 1982. '*Advice for Malay parents from Dr Matter*'
"Malay parents should take great interest in their children's education and supervise their study more closely...They should also be ready to act as advisers, inspiring examples and counsellors to their children. Only then can they ensure their children's educational success."
(iii) The Straits Times, 22nd July 1982. *'Muslims urged to change attitudes on education'*
Dr Ahmad Matter urged Muslim families to change their attitudes towards education.
(iv) Berita Harian, 31st May 1982. "Escape from mentality of begging"
"Dr Ahmad Matter stressed that a mentality of begging will not only damage the image of Malays but also bring nothing good."

[86] *The Straits Times*, 29th August 1982.

[87] *The Straits Times*, 24th May 1982.

playing with friends and working at the family stall, he fails his O level examinations. By contrast, the two other Malay children devote most of their time to books. Zalina scores four distinctions in her O level examinations and is now studying in Hwa Chong Junior college. Noor Hakim is doing even better. He has done well in his A level examinations and is an aspiring doctor.

What makes these three Malay children different is the attitude of their parents. Marian, the mother of Mislan, believes strongly in the value of a sound education but does not know how to discipline or encourage her children to study. Apart from nagging them occasionally about the need to study hard, there is nothing much she can do. She only wants them to be obedient and not to argue with her. Her idea of what her son should be is this: a decent hardworking young man who tells his mother where he is going and helps the family to make ends meet.

By contrast, Zalina's mother, Puteh, encourages her daughter in her education. Although she does not have much time to spend with her daughter since she works as a domestic servant to pay for her daughter's education, whenever she does have free time, she sits and talks with Zalina. She encourages Zalina to study hard, although she is unable to help with her homework. Zalina is left very much on her own. But she is a disciplined girl and attends classes organized by Mendaki to learn the best methods of studying.

Noor Hakim's mother, Asmah, is a rare gem. She takes an active interest in her children's progress at school. She dedicates her time to supporting her children by providing food and drinks while they are studying. She and her husband, Syukur, both impose strict control over the activities of Noor, and also of his sister Norseha who is a final year undergraduate in National University of Singapore. The children are only allowed limited time to watch television. Outings are family affairs. Each must have a very good reason for wanting to go out on his own.

This story of three Malay children sends the message that permeates Mendaki's DIY chart, namely, that the crucial thing is your attitude. And the story also poses a challenge to Malays. It copies the state's own way of provoking Malays, by displaying

to them an image of poor achievers and high achievers, and asking them: which one do you want to be? Can you do it?

The meaning of "total approach" now becomes clearer. All Malays were to dedicate their minds and hearts to pursuing a common goal of improving the education of their children. And this required them to examine themselves, and detect any flaws in their attitudes and conducts as targets for improveemnt. "Change attitudes" now had a new name, 'total approach." The foundation of Mendaki in the 1980s is another initiative by that same Malay agency of the previous decade.

6.5 Conclusion

The founding of the Council on Education for Muslim Children constructs the same Malay agency of "change attitudes" as we observed in the 1970s.

The government compared Malays in Singapore with other ethnic groups for their educational achievement and declared publicly that they were achieving poorly. In line with meritocratic ideals, where success is equated with amount of effort made to achieve it, Malay leaders and members of organizations accepted the verdict passed upon them and posed no questions about structural factors that might prevent them from competing equally with the other groups in Singapore. Instead they accepted that their 'backwardness' was due to their own lack of effort as a group, and strove to improve themselves enough to catch up to the other groups and prove they were decent members of Singapore society.

We also see something else that we have noted in earlier decades about this Malay agency. By performing this conduct, the Malays concerned are able to gain temporary satisfaction, such as feelings of renewed confidence and pride. What Malays can feel proud of this time is not only their achievement in forming Mendaki but also their established pattern of handling problems. That is illustrated in this statement by a paper presented at the 3 day conference:

> "The thinking of the Malays towards education, and particularly the problems faced by the Malay community in this respect, is closely linked with political

developments in Singapore. But in this process, the Malays have shown that they are able to adapt themselves to the realities of living in a country where they do not form the majority and one in which the political philosophy is based on the development of a multi-racial society. They have also shown that they realise their own problems and have taken serious measures to solve them."[88]

This Malay agency finds the core of its confidence in the way it performs "change attitudes". Malays who demonstrated this agency can take pride in their patterned way of adapting themselves to social changes. This attitude harmonises nicely with meritocratic ideals. When society changes in some way, Singaporeans must change themselves in order to succeed under the new conditions, and may not blame structural factors for their failure. And there is satisfaction for these Malays in knowing that they too can now perform as meritocratic agents in this way, by themselves.

At this point there is no conflict between the majority and the minority. We saw this with Malays under "change attitudes" in the 1970s as well. Malays as members of the lowly minority actively pursue their desire of becoming decent Singaporeans for their own confidence, dignity, and good. It is a meaningful goal that yields satisfaction. Ironically though, by the different logic of the state, the Malays are also conforming to what it demands and are obediently serving its economic and social goals.

The word *mendaki*, as well as being an acronym for the Malay name of the Council, is a Malay word that means 'to climb, to ascend'.[89] And as that name suggests, Malays in the 1980s had to continue their efforts to climb higher and higher in Singapore – towards the place where one day they can stand beside the other ethnic groups.

[88] Mendaki, 1992, p96.
[89] Mendaki, 1992, p51.

Chapter 7 'Change Attitudes' into the 21st Century: the Case of a Volunteer Organization[1]

"*Malays are a minority. It is always important for us to be credible in the eyes of other communities.*" (Fieldwork conversation with Fuad bin Abdul Kodir, a leading member of An-Nisaa organization in Singapore)

In previous chapters we have seen how "change attitudes" was expounded, enacted, and imprinted in Malay minds in Singapore up to the early 1980s. By the beginning of the 1980s the slogan itself had faded away and only rarely appeared in Malay discourses. However, as we have just seen in the previous chapter, this did not mean that the agency that performed "change attitudes" also weakened. On the contrary, after a decade of performance, that set of conducts had apparently become internalized into the thinking and behaving of many Malays. Even without that slogan, the agency that performed it could be aroused in pursuit of the dream of becoming part of mainstream Singapore society.

We might ask now whether that agency of 'change attitudes' is still alive at the start of the 21st century. As it turns out, this Malay agency is still a vital one. We had a hint of that from two vignettes offered in Chapter 1, both from 2002 and concerning the issue of religious extremism. The government created two categories of extremist and moderate Muslims in Singapore, and called on Malays/ Muslims to prove that they are capable of being moderate Muslims in Singapore by speaking up against extremist Muslims.[2] One Malay Muslim, as we saw earlier, replied to Goh's call as follows:

> I would like Mr Goh Chok Tong to know this: I am a Muslim and I will give up everything I have for Singapore willingly, including my life if need be ... I also wish to assure PM Goh that Muslims here are as Singaporean as other

[1] Much of the material in this chapter has appeared in Yasuko Kobayashi, "Mocking without Mockery," in *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs*, vol. 38, no.1, 2004, pp.99-122, or in Yasuko Kobayashi 'Borders in our mind: border control at a cognitive level,' in Peer-reviewed Proceedings of the 15th Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia, 2004. (http://coombs.anu.edu.au/ASAA/conference/proceedings/Kobayashi-Y-ASAA2004.pdf)

[2] "Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong yesterday urged Singapore's Malay/Muslim community to speak up against extremism and build a model Muslim community that is progressive." *The Straits Times*, 19th August 2002.

Singaporeans, and we are prepared to play our part just like the others.[3]

And in the other vignette we saw from the same year, a Malay woman who was working as a cleaner in a university library anxiously assured me that she was a moderate Muslim, not an extremist, unlike Muslims in Indonesia. The issue of Malay discourses on Islamic extremism is outside the scope of this thesis, and those two instances above of Malays responding to Goh's provocative call with assurances that they held the right attitude to Islam and to Singapore, were just ones that I happened to come across during my fieldwork. But these instances do suggest that the old Malay agency of "change attitudes" is alive and well at the start of the 21st century. They suggest too that this agency can explain the behaviour of Malays in realms outside those issues of work and education examined in earlier chapters. And those contentions are borne out by a study that I made in 2002 of a quite different issue for Malays – which is the topic of this chapter.

That study concerns a volunteer group called *An-Nisaa*. This group, whose name *An-Nisaa* means 'woman/women' in Arabic, holds classes in a mosque once a fortnight for Indonesian domestic workers in Singapore. Their story demonstrates how the agency of performing "change attitudes" is aroused at the start of the 21st century in the everyday life of some Malays who are not members of a major or a well-known organization. This chapter tells the story of the Malays who started this volunteer activity and of what it means to them.

The members of An-Nisaa are Singaporean Malays who teach English conversation, Koranic reading, and handicraft skills to Indonesian female domestic workers, or 'maids' as they are often called in Singapore. This unique approach by these Singaporeans to the issue of Indonesian maids appears to demonstrate a virtuous side to Singapore society that contrasts with the picture painted by the many stories of abuse of foreign domestic workers by Singaporean employers. What created a possible space for An-Nisaa in Singapore? Is it that the minority agency of these Malay Singaporeans contested the agency of the majority and took different action from that majority? Or is it that a global Islamic network enables these Malay

[3] *The Straits Times*, 20th August 2002. The author of this letter to the editor is Mohamed Taufiq Abdullah.

Muslims in An-Nisaa to feel solidarity with Indonesian maids, in contrast to the feelings of the Singapore majority, which draws such a clear line between Singaporeans and migrant workers from Indonesia? Actually, we will see that An-Nisaa is largely motivated by the desire of these Malays to be regarded as part of decent Singapore society. The Indonesian maids pose a threat to the image of Malays/ Muslims in Singapore. The Malay agency of "change attitudes" is aroused to detect the problem posed by the Indonesian workers and take steps to fix it. In the past, this Malay agency was often provoked into action when the state pinpointed Malays as lagging behind the other ethnic groups. This time the same desire to be accepted as part of Singapore drives Malays in An-Nisaa to perform "change attitudes" by detecting and targeting the problem before the state even needs to brand them as a backward group.

This chapter will firstly show the place of Indonesian domestic workers in Singapore society by examining the discourses of Chinese Singapore employers about them. Secondly it will explain how and why Indonesian foreign domestic workers came to be a concern for the Malays of An-Nisaa and shed some light on the apparent intentions behind the project of An-Nisaa. Thirdly, it will show the actual scheme of An-Nisaa which is designed to fix problems of Indonesian domestic workers detected by certain Malay Muslims in Singapore.

7.1 Where Indonesian domestic workers are located

Indonesian domestic workers are 'half-persons.'[4] This term accurately reflects how Indonesian domestic workers are seen by Singaporeans both at state level and in the popular view. Firstly, the state policy toward unskilled migrant workers supports the idea of half-person by keeping unskilled migrant workers under rigid control as demonstrated in the guidelines for visa permission on the website of the Ministry of Manpower.[5] Singaporeans often mention how brutally the state can treat unskilled migrant workers if they stay in Singapore illegally. This state control is justified by

[4] This term was used to describe the position of Indonesian domestic workers by a Chinese Singaporean, a student of NUS, in a conversation with me on NUS campus on 24th April 2002.
[5] Ministry of Manpower, "*For Employers of Foreign Domestic Workers*," http://www.mom.gov.sg/ProceduresAndGuidelines/WorkPermit/ForEmployersofForeignDomesticWorkers/ (accessed on 4th April 2006).

Singaporeans in their everyday discourse through several images. Unskilled domestic workers are believed to be from underdeveloped countries and poorly educated, they are desperate to work in Singapore, they are construction workers or domestic workers, and they perform work in which Singaporean are reluctant to be engaged. In short, unskilled migrant workers are working in less preferable occupations since "they are uneducated people from poor countries."[6] This entails the idea that they are potentially criminal. Since they are poor, they steal; since they are not educated, they commit rape.[7] Such discourse provides an excuse for the state to control them and for people to make a contrast between Singaporeans and migrant workers.

In the case of foreign domestic workers, this contrast between Singaporean employers and foreign domestic workers is reinforced by a charging system. Firstly, every Singaporean who wishes to have a foreign domestic worker is required to pay a levy ($345 or $250 per month) to the government.[8] Secondly, employers must pay a security deposit of $5000 and this will be lost if the maid gets pregnant and the employer fails to repatriate her as soon as her pregnancy is detected.[9] Thirdly, Singaporean employers will be charged if foreign domestic workers commit any crime. These are state regulations which at the same time legitimize and justify absolute power of Singaporean employers over Indonesian domestic workers.

These levies and fines are broadly interpreted in two ways. Firstly, for some Singaporean employers, such charges are part of the price of foreign domestic workers they paid. The maids thereby become a commodity, dehumanized, to operate at their employer's will. Thus it is reasonable to say. "We paid for her. What is wrong if we treat her as we want, ah?"[10]

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[6] Said to me by a Chinese Singaporean during a casual conversation, while I was visiting her socially at her home on 25th April 2002.

[7] When I interviewed people living in the north tip of Singapore (Marsiling, Yishun, Admiralty, Sembawang), residents of these areas often mentioned this area was less safe than other areas, because non-Singaporean workers cross the border every day from Malaysia to enter Singapore. Interviews from 10th May to 6th July 2002.

[8] A family with a child aged below 12 or parents aged above 65 can get a discounted levy which is 250 dollars a month.

[9] Maids may not become pregnant even through marriage, since they are barred from marrying Singaporean citizens during their service.

[10] Said to me by a Singaporean employer of an Indonesian domestic worker in a conversation on 26th May 2002.

The process of dehumanization is also constantly reinforced by maid agencies. Foreign domestic workers are displayed in a video tape 'showcase.' When the camera focuses on her, the foreign domestic worker states her name, age, languages spoken, where she is from, what housework she is good at, her previous experience, and so forth.[11] These video tapes are run constantly in maid agency waiting rooms. Some agencies display photographs of domestic workers with a brief description.[12] In both cases, the women strike the same pose with their hands together in front of their chest. Some agencies actually display live maids wearing a costume calculated to create certain images for the market. [13] For instance, some wear a simple shirt and skirt, while reading a book in order to appear intelligent; others wear a short-sleeved shirt and pants to appear diligent.

The price is set by market demand. Those who speak English (usually from the Philippines) are more expensive than those who do not. Those who are educated (again mainly from the Philippines) are also more expensive. The price of Indonesian domestic workers is lower since they are presumed not to meet either of these criteria.[14] Although this does not reflect the reality, as some Indonesian domestic workers can speak English and are educated, an image of non-English speaking and less-educated Indonesian domestic workers is nonetheless established by the maid agencies and influences the price paid. A Singaporean told me that "Indonesian ones are cheaper lah," [15] thus inscribing the location of "cheapest available products" on them.

The second way that some Singaporean employers interpret the system of fines on employers outlined above is to feel that they are legally allowed to supervise their foreign domestic workers strictly in order to prevent them from committing any loose or illegal conduct. Levying a fine in Singapore conveys an order to comply with state

[11] This style of displaying pooled foreign domestic workers is used in the maid agencies in Arab Street.
[12] This is one of the common styles taken by various maid agencies in Singapore including several in Clementy.
[13] This style is used by agencies in Bukit Timah shopping complex.
[14] According to the maid agencies I asked, Indonesian domestic workers are generally 200 dollars a month cheaper than Filipino domestic workers.
[15] A Chinese Singaporean employer of a Filipino maid, a resident in the same block of HDB flat as me, on 18th April 2002. She proudly explained that her affluence enabled her to afford a more expensive maid.

policy.[16] In order to comply with this, supervision of domestic workers is necessary. This interpretation provides Singaporean employers with power to prevent their foreign domestic workers from going out. They can prohibit them from using a home telephone, since the workers might get tips for wicked conduct from other domestic workers once they start having contact. [17] "If something happens with my maid, I have to pay for her." [18] Strict control over purchased commodities sums up the relationship between Singaporean employers and Indonesian domestic workers.[19]

In such a situation, how do Singaporean employers describe the abuse of Indonesian domestic workers? Basically their discourses tend to be constructed in order to protect their face. Upper-class Chinese who are relatively well off might blame problems on the lower stratum. "We have been using maids for a long time. We know how to use maids. Those who are having problems with maids recently are newcomers. They are not used to dealing with them. Therefore, they have problems." [20]

The middle class, those who are novices as employers of maids in the eyes of the upper class, tend to justify abuse by pointing out the poor qualifications of Indonesian domestic workers. "These maids are terrible lah. How? Example ah. They do not know how to use electronic machines such as washing machine and vacuum cleaner. Terrible kampong people." [21] Another Chinese professional lady mentioned her experience. "Since they are not trained, they do not know how to look after our children. They have no sense of hygiene. I had terrible experiences."[22]

The pattern here is Singaporean/Indonesian; employer/domestic worker; educated/less educated; urbanized/rural; advanced/backward; hygienic/unhygienic. Another

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[16] This is frequently-heard discourse in Singapore. Singaporeans cite as an example the fine charged in the train station if you eat on the platform at the train station

[17] Conversation with a Chinese Singaporean employer, the elderly relative of a friend of mine, on 14th April 2002.

[18] Conversation with a Chinese Singaporean employer, a young professional female, a social acquaintance whom I met through a friend, on 5th May 2002.

[19] Regarding how Singaporean employers of foreign domestic workers control their workers, see Yasuko Kobayashi, 'Risk-Management of Foreign Domestic Workers,' *Asia Rights*, issue 5, 2005. (http://rspas.anu.edu.au/asiarightsjournal/Kobayashi.pdf)

[20] Conversation with a friend, a young female Chinese Singaporean postgraduate student whose parents employ an Indonesian domestic worker, on 6th June 2002.

[21] Conversation with a middle-aged Indian Singaporean women living in the same block of HDB flats as me, on 2nd September 2002.

[22] Conversation with a Chinese Singaporean female, an employee of NUS, on 9th September 2002.

employer explained that Indonesian domestic workers can be untrustworthy. "These people are not quite educated and have no commonsense. They sometimes do tricky things. They can make overseas calls from my house and use my stuff."[23] In the end, these discourses relate to character: sensible Singaporeans versus untrustworthy Indonesian domestic workers.

All this discourse about Indonesian domestic workers place them firmly below Singaporeans. There is no equality of regard. A person never lets a half-person talk back. This silence is where Indonesian domestic workers are.[24]

7.2 The gaze of Malays at Indonesian domestic workers

We have just seen how Singaporean Chinese employers of Indonesian domestic workers tend to draw a clear line between themselves and those maids, and locate the latter as inferior to themselves by a particular gaze on them and by their everyday discourses. On the other hand, the Singaporean Malays of An-Nisaa try to educate these Indonesian maids. What make the Malays of An-Nisaa take this approach, and what is their own gaze at the maids?

Most members of An-Nisaa have a connection with Indonesia through their relatives, and say that this personal connection with Indonesia motivates them to help Indonesian domestic workers. Such ties, however, were by no means the sole motivation for them to start An-Nisaa, as discussed shortly.

Fuad bin Abdul Kadir is one of the three leading members of An-Nisaa and was the one to generate the idea of An-Nisaa. The other two leading members are his uncle, Faruhan bin Hassan, and Faruhan's wife, Omayah Hassam.

Fuad bin Abdul Kadir attributes his starting of An-Nisaa to an association with Indonesia through his family. He is a Malay Singaporean who did his university study

[23] Conversation with a female Chinese Singaporean PhD student whose sister employs a foreign domestic worker, on 8th September 2002.

[24] For discussion of how Singaporean employers demarcate themselves psychologically from foreign domestic workers, see Yasuko Kobayashi (2004) 'Borders in our mind: border control at a cognitive level,' in Peer-reviewed Proceedings of the 15th Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia. (http://coombs.anu.edu.au/ASAA/conference/proceedings/Kobayashi-Y-ASAA2004.pdf)

in Malaysia,[25] and he also has blood relatives in Indonesia and business connections there. He asserts that these ties to Indonesia enabled him to see the complex structure of the problem that Indonesian domestic workers were having in Singapore.

Fuad analyses the situation as follows: although the host society of Singapore subscribes to the conventional idea that Indonesian maids come to Singapore just to earn money to support their families, in reality, they also expect a new life with better chances for themselves in Singapore. In short, they come to Singapore both for a job and for a life. Their desire to seek a new life motivates them to explore the most highly urbanized space in Southeast Asia. As they cannot afford to buy goods in Singapore, they end up walking around Orchard Road or gathering in public spaces such as the Botanic Gardens.[26] Consequently, "we now see bunches of Indonesian domestic workers walking around the town."[27]

A question to ask here is why that sight of groups of Indonesian maids attracted Fuad's attention. It is because he saw these maids as a problem due to their misbehavior as Muslims. Firstly, their dress code is inappropriate for Muslims in Singapore: some walk around town in a short-sleeved shirt and short pants, showing their skin to the public. Secondly some of them are known to have sexual relations with Pakistani Muslims. Fuad cites two causes for such misbehaviour, one being simply that they are ignorant of how to behave in Singapore. He said

> "Since Singaporean Muslims are well educated, we know how to behave as Muslims. But Indonesian maids just do not know how to behave in Singapore. They are lost in Singapore just because they do not know." [28]

The other reason Fuad gives for maids having relations with Pakistani Muslim men is that the maids' lack of English makes them unable to communicate properly with

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[25] Conversation with Faud bin Abdul Kadir on 12th May 2002.
Fuad was born in Singapore in 1954 and identifies himself as Malay in Singapore. Racially speaking, his background is mixed. His father's father was a Bugis from Sulawesi and descended from a Bugis aristocratic family, while his father's mother was Indian from Malaysia. His father thus shares those two backgrounds. His mother is born in a Chinese family, but was adopted by a Malay Muslim family during the second World War and raised as a Muslim.
[26] Conversation with Fuad bin Abdul Kadir on 26th May 2002.
[27] Conversation with Fuad bin Abdul Kadir on 26th May 2002.
[28] Conversation with Fuad bin Abdul Kadir on 23rd June 2002

Singaporeans in general, which encourages them to seek solace in the company of people who at least share their religion and their position as foreigners in Singapore. Fuad explains that the inability of Indonesian domestic workers to communicate with most Singaporeans due to language differences isolates them from society.[29]

We can see how Fuad draws a clear line between Singaporean Malay Muslims and Indonesian Muslims, and at the same time locates the latter as inferior (e.g. as 'uneducated' instead of 'educated'). In that sense there is little difference between Fuad and the Chinese Singaporean employers of Indonesian maids. Why, despite this, does he care about the Indonesian maids in Singapore? Or more broadly, why should Singaporean Malay/Muslims be concerned about their behaviour? Fuad provided an answer to that during casual conversations I had with him. He asserted that their behaviour can damage the reputation of Malays/ Muslims in Singapore. As he put it on one occasion:

> "Malays are a minority. It is always important for us to be credible in the eyes of other communities. Our effort to be good Muslims will be spoiled by their misbehavior." [30]

This is the second important point about the place of Indonesian maids in Singapore. Although in the minds of Malays these Indonesian domestic workers are clearly different from themselves, in the eyes of the other communities this is not so. Singaporeans tend to regard Indonesians maids as the kindred of Malay Singaporeans,[31] as their fellow Muslims and as a part of them. And it is this gaze of the Singaporean majority upon Malays that is crucial. Malays have long tried to prove that they are worthy to be a part of Singapore mainstream society. And by now, even

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[29] Conversation with Fuad bin Abdul Kadir on 9th June 2002.

[30] Conversation with Fuad bin Abdul Kadir on 23rd June 2002. This idea that the misbehavior of Indonesian maids damages the reputation of Malays/ Muslims in Singapore was asserted by Fuad in another conversation with me on 26th May 2002 as well. It was also expressed separately by the other head members of An-Nisaa as mentioned in this chapter. The same idea was also expressed by a member of the Singapore Muslim Converts Association in a conversation with me on 8th August 2002.

[31] A Singaporean Indian woman whom I knew well in Singapore expressed this idea with the phrase "their own people". She asserted that for Singapore Malays, the Indonesian maids are their own people, as they share the same language and same religion as them (conversation with her on 7th April 2002). This attitude prevails in Singapore even though not all Indonesian domestic workers in Singapore are in fact Muslim.

without being goaded once again to prove themselves by the government, they can examine themselves for flaws and detect problems which will thwart their desire to be accepted as equal Singaporeans – as Fuad does here. Even if the problems do not lie within the Malays themselves, that it is not the point. The ritual performance of "change attitudes" by Malays can be stimulated by the flawed attitudes and behaviour of the Indonesian domestic workers.

One day in August 2000, while Fuad was pondering on this problem of Indonesian maids, he bumped into one in the World Trade Centre building. Her name was Sugiarti binti Nurcholis. Later, she became one of the first registered students of An-nissa. She explained to him that she had nowhere to go in Singapore because of the high prices, she had no close friends to talk to, and she had difficulty communicating since her English was not adequate. As a result she had begun to feel lost in Singapore.[32] This conversation showed Fuad that "Indonesian domestic workers need a place to go and spend time, to learn English and to learn how to behave in Singapore."[33]

This analysis neatly fits the problems that Indonesian maids pose to Malays. Having "a place to go and spend time" will help to reduce their visibility. It is better to make these problematic "kindred" less visible by accommodating them in a certain place than to have them gathering in public and attracting attention. Learning "how to behave in Singapore" will include learning how to dress more modestly. Fuad believes that poor religious teaching in Indonesia has failed to instill adequate knowledge about Islam and Islamic practices. Due to this, Indonesian maids do not know how to practise Islam properly, including how to dress as proper Muslim women.[34] Learning how to behave as Muslim women in Singapore will also discourage them from loose sexual conduct, for example with Pakistani Moslems. Learning English is intended to discourage that behaviour as well. Conversation skill in English will enable them to communicate more with Singaporeans, and thus feel less isolated. It will also help them to avoid misunderstandings with their employers that make employers angry with them and which heighten the risk of abuse.[35]

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[32] Conversation with Fuad bin Abdul Kadir on 26th May 2002.
[33] *Ibid.*
[34] Omayah Hassam shares this view of Fuad that the maids' dress code is due to the inaccurate Islamic education they received in Indonesia. Conversation with Omayah Hassan on 12th May 2002.
[35] Conversation with Fuad bin Abdul Kadir on 9th June 2002.

The problems with maids have been detected and the remedy devised. Now Fuad needed a place to put the plans into action – a place to accommodate Indonesian maids and educate them. Fuad discussed this issue with his uncle, Faruhan bin Hassam, a member of the trustee committee of the Sultan mosque and also its chair. Faruhan's position as chair entitled him to make final decisions about any issue related to the mosque. Faruhan agreed to support this project and to provide the facilities of the Sultan mosque for it.

Although Faruhan too claimed an ethnic link with Indonesia, he had other motives as well. Firstly, like Fuad, he regarded Indonesian maids as a danger to the good standing of Malay Muslims in Singapore. He believed they were already harming the credibility of Malay Muslims due to their behaviour and reputation.[36] Secondly, this project suited a particular ambition of his. He was keen to enhance the reputation of the mosque in Singapore and in Southeast Asia. When he joined the trustee committee of the Sultan mosque in 1985, the committee members hoped to make the mosque a centre of the community by organizing activities for the benefit of Muslims. Faruhan submitted a petition to the government in 1989 asking for financial support for a new building. In 1993 this Annex building was declared open by the Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong, and in the same year Faruhan was elected chair of the committee. Faruhan said to me:

> "Later on, some of Indonesian maids in An-Nisaa will start the same type of school in Indonesia. Then what will happen? The Sultan mosque will become known as a model." [37]

Faruhan's attempts to promote the Sultan mosque in the region matched the policy of the government to promote Singapore as a key centre in Southeast Asia in all fields (including education, technology, medicine, and Islamic banking). His initiative will therefore count as a contribution to achieving state policy, which is a way for Malays to prove themselves as a part of mainstream Singapore society.

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[36] Conversation with Faruhan bin Hassam on 19th April 2002
[37] Conversation with Faruhan bin Hassam on 28th April 2002.

The next step was to set up a committee for the project and recruit volunteer members for it who would carry this project at an operational level. The lead members of An-Nisaa, Faruhan bin Hassam, Omayah Hassam, and Fuad bin Abdul Kadir, set up the committee together.[38] As for finding volunteer members for it, Faruhan Bin Hassam consulted his wife, Omayah Hassam. As female chair of the committee, she was another lead member who found the misbehavior of Indonesian domestic workers problematic for the reputation of Malay Muslims.[39] Omayah took full charge of selecting and recruiting people to serve as volunteers on the project. Six more such members were recruited, all Malay Muslim women.[40] These six members function at an operational level for An-Nisaa without payment. For instance, they are in charge of teaching the Koranic reading course or the handicraft course.

7.3 The scheme of An-Nisaa

The name of the organization was selected. *An-Nisaa* literally means "woman/women" in Arabic. In fact, it means more than that for the Singaporean members of An-Nisaa. Omayah Hassam explains that it means "respected" woman.[41] And Fuad Bin Abdul Kadir agrees, saying this name An-Nisaa was chosen because "we want Indonesian maids to be respected by the society."[42] As we have discussed, this desire in turn reflects the desire of these members of An-Nisaa for they and other Malays in Singapore to be respected themselves. These Malays have detected problems that threaten the fulfillment of that desire and have set out to fix them.

Details of the courses run by An-Nisaa are as follows. The English course is organized and taught by Fuad bin Abdul Kadir. Fuad teaches English by using concrete examples

[38] Conversation with Omayah Hassam and Fuad bin Abdul Kadir on 12th May 2002.
[39] Conversation with Omayah Hassan on 12th May 2002.
[40] The members of the An-Nisaa Committee as at June 2002 were:

Daing Faruhan bin Hassam	(lead member)
Daing Omayah Hassam	(lead member)
Daing Fuad bin Abdul Kadir	(lead member, and English teacher)
Suaida bte Ali	(handicraft teacher)
Juminah bte Ahmad	(Koranic lecturer)
Norsam bte Iblahim	(handicraft teacher)
Rukinah bte Hj. Mukmin	(handicraft teacher)
Nuraminah bte MD. Noor	(handicraft teacher)
Marhamah bte Beujol	(handicraft teacher)

[41] Conversation with Omayah Hassam on 12th May 2002.
[42] Conversation with Faud bin Abdul Kadi on 9th June 2002.

for maids about what to say in common situations, especially ones where they are talking to their employers (e.g. how to answer when their employer asks them to bring fruit to the table).[43] Here the main point is how they can use English not to displease their employers. It is better to use "Could I" or "May I" when they want to ask if they can do something. If they want their employer to do something, the appropriate beginning is "Could you". Any time they need to address their employer, they should start with "Sir" (or "Madam"). If they are asked to bring fruit to the table, they should not forget to answer "Yes, Sir". Not only English but also manners commonly used in Singapore everyday life are explained.[44] Through these tips about what to say and how to interact during their daily life in Singapore, they can learn how to ease their communication problems.

The second subject is a Koranic reading course. As we saw, Fuad bin Abdul Kodir and Omayah Hassam blame Indonesian teachings about Islam for some problems with Indonesian maids in Singapore. This is particularly true for dress code. They see the problem as this: while in Singapore the dress code for Muslim women is long sleeves, long pants or skirt, and a head cover, this is not necessarily the case in Indonesia. At An-Nisaa the dress code in the mosque is strictly kept. When Indonesians attend any courses conducted by An-Nisaa, they are expected to wear long sleeves, pants, and a head cover (*tudung*). As most of them do not have a head scarf, there are spare head scarves in the Sultan Mosque.[45] Their trying on a head cover through An-Nisaa is a chance to learn new manners.

The difference between Singaporean Muslims' interpretations and daily practices of Islam, and those of Indonesian maids, is not simply a matter of difference. Omayah Hassan remarks

> "In Java, for instance, they burn incense to pray as my parents do. But we do not mix up the local customs with Islam. But they still do." [46]

[43] Fieldwork observation in the Sultan Mosque on 26th May 2002 and 9th June 2002.
[44] Fieldwork observation in the Sultan Mosque on 26th May 2002 and 9th June 2002.
[45] Fieldwork observation in the Sultan Mosque on 12th May 2002 and 26th May 2002.
[46] Conversation with Omayah Hassan on 12th May 2002.

In Singapore the right Islamic practices prevail, while in Indonesia Islam is not practiced in a pure form. Here, the line between superior (and modern) Malay Muslims in Singapore and inferior (and backward) Indonesian domestic workers is clearly drawn.

Learning how Islam is practised in Singapore through Koran reading and explanation is meant to help maids improve their conduct in other ways as well. This includes their relations with men. Fuad comments that when Indonesian maids loiter in the company of men on busy Orchard Road, dressed in skimpy clothes, as "Muslims", they look disgraceful to many sets of eyes.[47] The course of Koran reading is designed to give them a notion of where they are as Muslims in Singapore society.

The last course provided by An-Nisaa is a handicraft course. In this course, Indonesian domestic workers can learn how to make accessories by skills such as beadwork and how to arrange flowers. Pieces of work done by both teachers and students are displayed and sold as souvenirs to tourists visiting the Sultan mosque. [48] The handicraft course functions indirectly to help Indonesian maids improve the problems of miscommunication, In this course, they are advised to offer their employer the handicrafts that they have created as a gift. Fuad bin Abdul Kodir said, "giving their handicrafts in this way may be of use to improve their relation with their employer."[49] In order to be recognized as more acceptable in Singapore society, it is the Indonesian domestic workers who bring a gift to their employers.

In An-Nissa, all Indonesian participants are referred to as students. Singaporean teachers instruct them. Omayah Hassam, the female lead member, has selected certain students to be representatives. She says this is in order to make An-Nissa an interactive venture between Singaporean committee members and Indonesian domestic workers. [50] What it also indicates is that not all students are free to communicate with the Singaporean teachers outside class hours. Only the student representatives occasionally come into the room for the Singaporean teachers to have

[47] Conversation with Omayah Hassam on 12th May 2002.
[48] Conversation with Omayah Hassam on 12th May 2002.
[49] Conversation with Fuad bin Abdul Kadir on 26th May 2002.
[50] Conversation with Omayah Hassam on 26th May 2002.

a chat with them.

An-Nisaa also maintains a good relationship with the employers of its students.[51] An-Nisaa sends a letter to employers inviting them to come and have a close look at what their domestic workers are learning and experiencing at the Sultan mosque. According to them, this invitation is intended to deliver an accurate picture of what An-Nissa is doing, and so create a better understanding between employers and domestic workers. An-Nisaa also keep the record of attendance of each student. This record is also sent to their employers.

What does the project of An-Nisaa actually do? It is not a form of bi-lateral relations to help Singaporeans and Indonesian domestic workers to bridge the gap separating them. Rather, it is Indonesian domestic workers who are required to suit themselves to the Singaporean code of conduct. The Malays of An-Nissa seek to turn Indonesian domestic workers into something more suitable to that society. Objectified Indonesian domestic workers are reshaped through education and taught how to use English, how to dress and how to behave properly as Muslims, as Malays in Singapore themselves have been objectifying and correcting themselves in similar ways and for the same purpose of learning to be accepted as decent Singaporeans.

In earlier chapters we saw how Malays in Singapore regularly gained confidence and satisfaction through their performance of "change attitudes." Likewise, in the course of this project, Singaporean members of An-Nisaa began to gain satisfaction in various ways. Positive responses from the employers also helped them to feel virtuous about their project.

> "We are having a good response and reputation from employers. Having seen all activities, they are quite happy about what we are doing".[52]

This approval from employers also meets their desire to gain credit from the other communities in Singapore and keeps the members of An-Nisaa happy about their activities. Fuad bin Abdul Kadir mentioned that there was no government subsidy for

[51] Conversation with Fuad bin Abdul Kadir on 26th May 2002.
[52] Conversation with Fuad bin Abdul Kadir and Omayah Hassam on 26th May 2002.

this project and told me "we are doing this out of our own heart and initiative, not by the state"[53]. When the national newspaper, *The Straits Times*, came to cover An-Nisaa and wrote it up, the committee was overjoyed.[54] There was much greater celebration than there had been over the earlier recognition of An-Nisaa by the Indonesian embassy. Although the problems of Indonesian domestic workers had not been completely fixed yet, Malay Muslims in Singapore had achieved some official recognition and approval from the mainstream of Singapore society.

7.4 Conclusion

What makes An-Nisaa possible? It arises mainly from the desire of Singapore Malays to be recognized as part of decent Singapore society. Malay Muslims in Singapore do not see Indonesian domestic workers as part of themselves and locate the maids as inferior to themselves through their discourses and conduct. But the Singapore majority does look upon Indonesian domestic workers as a part of the Malay/ Muslim community in Singapore, and that gaze is what matters. This makes the maids a potential problem for Malays, and some among the Malays are moved to detect and to fix that problem – this time without even being spurred into action by the state. The agency of performing "change attitudes" can now be aroused in all kinds of contexts. It is a part of everyday life for many Malays and can be exercised mundanely at the core of their thought and behaviour.

This case of An-Nisaa illustrates another idea from earlier chapters too. Bhabha asserts that minority agency displaces and subverts the discourse of the majority, through mockery. An-Nisaa shows once again how 'mocking' by the minority community is sometimes rather too serious to allow a space in the mind to be playful enough to displace the dominant discourse. Just as the maid agencies institutionalize Indonesian maids to make them suit the norms of the Singapore society, so too do the Malays of An-Nisaa. Their desire to be added to the dominant majority drives them to consolidate the dominant discourses of that majority without necessarily being aware

[53] Conversation with Faruhan bin Hassam on 28th April 2002. The expenditure for An-Nisaa activity is covered by donations to the Sultan mosque.
[54] This coverage appeared in *The Sunday Times*, 11th August 2002. When I was at the Sultan mosque two weeks later, Omayah Hassam and the other female volunteer members of An-Nisaa discussed the coverage excitedly with me. (25th August 2002).

of it.

In short, the same basic desire and familiar set of conducts based on that desire remain important for Malays even into the 21st century.

Conclusion

This thesis helps us to understand how Malays as an ethnic minority have attempted to locate themselves in Singapore society since Singapore's independence. For this task the study traces the formation of a certain Malay psychological agency, using Lacan's notion of agency as further developed by Slavoj Žižek and Ghassan Hage. The study finds that when Malays perceive a threat to their desire to be accepted as equal Singaporeans, they are driven to perform a patterned set of conducts: examining themselves critically, detecting flaws and setting those problems as targets for improvement. They do this by their own initiative and for their own good, without necessarily being aware that their discourses and conducts are reconfirming the mainstream ideologies.

The study traces the formation of this agency over time in order to provide a fuller understanding of it. The story starts in the period from 1965 to 1970. We saw how Malays were located by the new government of an independent Singapore, and how this agency was aroused among politically engaged Malays – first Malay MPs and then leaders and members of Malay organisations as well – in response to the challenge by the state for Malays to embrace meritocracy (Ch 2 & 3). Next we examined how this psychological agency developed during the 1970s. Malay MPs and other leaders of their community led Malays to make themselves more fit to perform by the logic of meritocracy like the other ethnic groups in Singapore. This gave rise to a set of Malay conducts for self-improvement under the slogan "Change Attitudes" (Ch 4 & 5). Politically engaged Malays began to participate in that set of conducts through a series of public seminars and through newspaper forums and discussions, while it was also consumed by a broader audience of Malay newspaper readers. During this decade this behaviour also became a way for Malays to obtain temporary satisfaction, by demonstrating measurable achievements that brought them closer to acceptance as decent Singaporeans.

By the early 1980s, this Malay agency had developed to a new stage by which it now performed the relevant conducts of "Change Attitudes" without the need for that explicit slogan any longer (Ch 6). This is the culmination of the development we have

traced through from the late 1960s. By now the pattern was set for how Malays responded when they felt compared to other ethnic groups. For our purposes the late 1980s and 1990s are not very significant; although that period too saw vulnerabilities for Malays regarding their position in Singapore and provocations for Malays,[1] the agency in the logic of meritocracy was not shaken. Finally, we saw how the same psychological agency is still active in the 21st century. The origins and practices of a small and newly created volunteer organisation (Ch 7) reveal how the desire to be accepted as equal Singaporeans influences the conduct of some ordinary Malays in their everyday lives.

If Malays keep trying long enough and hard enough to improve themselves through the patterned set of conducts examined above, can they one day achieve their goal of being accepted as equal Singaporeans? This would appear to be logically impossible. From the viewpoint of the majority, the logic is plain. In order to validate and maintain their own sense of self as majority, they are compelled to differentiate some other people as minority. They can recognize themselves only beside others who are different from themselves. The precise grounds on which the minority can be demarcated do not matter; new grounds can be constantly created, the point being to keep the mechanism of differentiation working and serving its purpose.

On the side of the Malays, too, their desire for acceptance by the majority can never be more than temporarily attained. The agency of "Change Attitudes" is aroused and maintained only by finding problems within oneself and making efforts to fix them. This set of conducts creates a sense of purpose and is a source of pride and confidence, so that for the Malays concerned it becomes part of their everyday life. Thus the uneven relationship between power/majority on the one hand and minority on the

[1] One issue arose in 1986 when the then Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, raised the question of the loyalty of Singapore Malays – as Muslims – to the Singapore nation at the time of the visit of the Israeli President (see *The Straits Times*, 15th December 1986). A related issue arose in 1987 when the Minister of Trade and Industry and Second Defence Minister, Brigadier-General Lee Hsien Loong, mentioned his scepticism about the loyalty of Singapore Malays to the Singapore nation. The general stated that Malay Singaporeans identified strongly as Muslims and that this created a potential conflict of loyalties for them, so that the Singapore Air Force tended not to hire Malays as air force pilots (see *The Straits Times*, 25th February 1987).

other is mutually constructed by both parties, for their own needs and by quite different logic.

Some mention of the scope and limitations of the thesis is appropriate here. This study attempts neither to create another meta-narrative about a homogeneous Malay community nor to create a sole collective Malay identity. The term "identity" is very vague. Malays in Singapore can have multiple identities in different contexts. This study is an attempt to show one agency that is aroused among Malays in a particular context; namely, when Malays see themselves juxtaposed with (members of) other ethnic groups. It thus concerns only one way by Malays of trying to locate themselves in Singapore society. This way is, however, an important one. This Malay agency can be aroused both in personal contexts where interethnic relations are concerned as well as in political contexts where Malays feel their community to be compared with others. Understanding this agency thus sheds light on the power relations of Singapore society at both the individual and community levels. It reveals how this minority actively helps to maintain the mechanisms for control by the government. That insight may also be useful for understanding how the Singapore state manages people more broadly, not only Malays, with such success.

In a related point, one might ask how widely shared this psychological agency is among Malays in Singapore. As discussed before, the range of Malay voices examined in the thesis is limited. Most of the voices examined might be regarded as edited to a greater or lesser degree, and moreover, the range is largely confined to Malays who are politically engaged – if only to the extent of contributing to newspaper forums and discussions. The last chapter perhaps goes some way to complementing the types of voices examined in the earlier parts of the thesis, by examining the unedited discourses and the conducts of a few Malays who were not leaders or members of an established organisation, but simply people who decided to set up a small one themselves.

One implication of the findings in this study concerns the clear division of labour between studies of nation and of ethnicity found in many previous academic works. The agency of Malays in Singapore revealed here demonstrates that these Malays are not constructed simply as an ethnic group. Instead, an agency of ethnicity interacts

with an ideal model of being Singaporean presented by the powerful or the majority as nation to arouse the agency in question. This shows that it is important to untangle how these two elements (nation and ethnicity) are inscribed, in order to understand an agency of an ethnic minority.

The study also has implications for earlier work on Malays in Singapore specifically. It enhances and in some ways modifies the picture of Malays presented by those studies (see Li and Rahim)[2]. Li's work touches on the psychology of Malays when she suggests that Malay political leaders (MPs) have been passively inculcated with the stereotypical view of Malays as lagging behind, through the ideology of the non-Malay majority (especially politicians). Rahim's study presents an image of Malays as a community marginalized by state policies and structural factors, one might almost say an image of Malays as victims. [3] However, Malays in the present study are neither passive recipients of state ideology nor victims of the socio-economic and political structure in Singapore. On the contrary, they pursue meaningful goals by their own initiative and derive satisfaction from doing so. Moreover, those very attitudes and conducts are revealed to be another factor that maintain their marginality in Singapore society.

As for previous work on Singapore society more broadly, this study is helpful for understanding relations between that society and the state. Specifically, it leads us to examine the points at which and the logic by which Singapore state and society are harmoniously compatible with each other. It shows how a minority helps to consolidate the state ideology for its own purposes rather than for the sake of the state. This raises the likelihood that mechanisms of complicity based on psychological agency are also at work between the state and other groups in Singapore.

Another implication of this study is for Bhabha's model of minority agency. This study finds a different type of agency from the one presented in Bhabha's model. It shows that a minority agency does not always function to displace the majority

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[2] See Li, 1989. Rahim, 1998.

[3] Hussim Mutalib criticised Rahim's work since it does not grasp active voices of Malays in Singapore. Hussin Mutalib, 'Singapore's Quest for a National Identity: the triumphs and trials of government policies,' in Ban Kah Choon, Anne Pakir & Tong Chee Kiong eds., *Imagining Singapore*, Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2004 (2nd ed), pp - .

discourses by virtue of its other-ness or difference. When the Malays in Singapore interact with the majority this does indeed create a 'third space' as Bhabha suggests. The Malays cannot help changing themselves through their interaction with the majority. However this particular Malay agency does not displace the ideology presented by the majority or the powerful as Bhabha suggested in his model. It is not as playful as that of Bhabha's "mocking" minority; it does not make fun of the dominant norms or ideologies and so subvert them. An earnest desire to be a part of mainstream Singapore society cannot afford such a playful agency. Instead, in its very own way this Malay agency consolidates the norms or ideologies of the powerful/the majority.

That finding in turn yields an insight into how one must analyse an agency of a minority. It is necessary to focus carefully on how difference is constructed, and in particular how it is perceived and experienced by the minority. Bhabha, an academic from the third world, created his model of minority agency for a certain political purpose: to prompt us to read non-western histories as an expression of agencies that are different from those of the colonizers and are aroused in complicated intersections. By forming his model he asserts the existence of a site at which narratives of the non-west may be articulated. For this purpose, his strategy was effective. What needs to be done after Bhabha, however, is not to present the colonized/ minorities through wishful thinking by invoking his model as suitable in all cases. Instead we should also try to understand the mechanisms by which more 'disappointing' types of minority agency may be aroused – at the junction between positive performance with autonomous spirit on the one hand and unaware subordination on the other.

Whether this way that Malays locate themselves in Singapore is the best way for them to behave is not for us to discuss here. However we might wonder whether it is the only possible way. That question is obviously not only one for those Malays. A similar pattern of agency of an ethnic minority in Japan is also demonstrated by Tomiyama Ichiro. Tomiyama examines Okinawans, who became a part of Japan after modernization and tended to be considered as inferior to those Japanese who lived on the mainland. This ethnic minority attempted to improve themselves by promoting a standard mainland variety of Japanese and banning use of their own Okinawan dialect. By displaying their willingness to promote standard Japanese over their everyday

dialect, they were aiming at becoming a part of the mainland Japanese, rather than being regarded as inferior like other colonized people, such as Taiwanese in Taiwan.[4]

Taking an example closer to home, that same question is also one for me myself and for minorities in Australia whenever white nationalism becomes prominent. In December 2005, racial attacks by white Australians directed at Lebanese Australians took place at a Sydney beach. Shortly afterwards an Australian-born Lebanese posted his thoughts to *The Sydney Morning Herald.* His letter was placed as main feature of the Letters section under a large heading "In defence of loyal, hard-working Lebanese." What especially caught my attention were these phrases of his:

> The majority of Lebanese [here] love Australia, and appreciate what this country has to offer. Many, like me, would be willing to pay the ultimate sacrifice for this beautiful country.[5]

This voice resonates in harmony with Malay voices across the seas in Singapore. It seems hard to find a way to co-exist with the majority other than trying to prove we can live up to the code of conduct defined by its norms. One step in this direction perhaps is to know whose desire we are really seeking to fulfil. We always need to be aware that an innocent affirmation of seemingly positive terms such as 'acting for ourselves', by 'our own will' and for 'our own sake,' can unguardedly and unconsciously subordinate us to others.

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[4]富山一郎 [Tomiyama Ichiro], 『戦場の記憶』 [*Memories at the War Front*], 日本経済評論者 [Tokyo: Nihon keizai hyoronsha], 1995.
[5] *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 21st December, 2005.

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