

Papia, Relijang e Tradisang

The Portuguese Eurasians in Malaysia : *Bumiquest*, A Search for Self Identity

« The last few acres of land
This last bastion of cultural stand.
Echos of cannons roaring
Drowning the cries, casting nets
In muddy waters, shrimp people
Once Conquerors
Now Fishermen
Where do we go from here ?
Identity in confusion
Bumi status we seek
Why only Invest ?
Why under "others" ?
Portuguese Eurasians Indigenous
Papua, Relijang e tradisang ».

The Portuguese were in Malacca since the year 1511. It is one of the oldest communities in Malaysia. As a community of individuals with mixed parentage, Caucasian and Asiatic, it is an example of the type of fusion of culturally and geographically disparate people not uncommon in Third World territories that were formally under colonial domination. The uniqueness of the Portuguese Eurasians is reflected in the continuity in their survival intact with their language traditions and religion. Despite not having schools, and cut off from Portugal for almost five centuries, since 1641, the Government and public still refers this community as « Portuguese ». The Portuguese Eurasians have in fact assimilated Malay culture but at the same time maintained their Portuguese heritage as reflected in the arts and language and religion. The Luso-Malay descendents can best be described as an ethno-marginal community whereby a minority having assimilated into the dominant Malay culture retain significant aspects of their Portuguese heritage.

Identity

Identity is to know oneself. There has been times when the Malacca Eurasian is confused as to where he belongs. In 1974, an article was

published in *Asia Magazine, People without a Country-Portuguese in Malacca seek self-identity*, by Arnold Abrams. The uncertainty of being accepted into the mainstream of Malaysian society has been a worry for a minority without economic and political leverage, the future seemed bleak. Now, twenty-five years later, the situation is much the same – the old question of getting equal status as an indigenous race still persists.

Names

The Portuguese Eurasians have been known under many names and nick-names as different people have called them. When the Portuguese first landed, the natives called them « Benggali Puteh » or « White Bengalis ». This designation describes how the Malays at that time perceived Europeans, seeing them for the first time, their first impression was to compare them to the people from Bengal, India, except that they were fair. Later, they called them « Nasrani » (Serani) or « Nazarens » from Nazareth. This is probably a reference to their Christian religion. Later to simplify the origins of race as with other immigrant, the Government referred to the community as « Portuguese » being the original country of origin. The nickname that is always used to humiliate is *Grago*, a reference to the traditional fishermen. The shrimp that is caught along the coast of Malacca is used to make *blachan*, a paste cake that is an important ingredient for flavoring in cooking. The word most often used by the Community themselves is *Kristang* which is synonymous to their religion – Christian –, in the Creole language – *Papia Kristang* –, and as a community *Gente Kristang*. For historians, the term Luso-Malay is often utilized to denote the integration and assimilation of the Portuguese with the Malays. The term used now is « Portuguese Eurasians » as a reference to a mixed race of a European and an Asian. Some of the state associations have adopted this term. Another reference used for Portuguese is *Ferrenge*, or Franks as found in the *Sejarah Melayu* and also a place in Penang called *Batu Ferrenge*, which was a stop over for ships in the 16th century. The terms *Mestiços* and *Black Christians* were used by the Dutch to denote the Portuguese descendents.

Malaysia's Multi-Racial Mix and Political Involvement

The multi-racial composition of Malaysia's population was the result of British policy to import foreign labour from India (rubber industry) and China (mining industry). Immigration from the Indonesian islands also took place during more recent times for construction industry. A rough estimate of the composition is 60 % Malays, 30 % Chinese and 9 % Indians. The remaining 1 % being « others », minority groups like the Eurasians which in 1991 showed a population of 0.009 % or around 12,000 (Malaysian population is now 22 millions). Being a minority means no political weight, especially in democratic elections. Only one senator, Mr George Shelly was nominated by the first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman in the 60s. On state level, Mr Bernard Santa Maria held for three terms the Bandar Hilir, Malacca constituency on the Opposition ticket. The general norm was the Portuguese Eurasians kept away from politics, their associations clearly stated in their constitutions as being non-political and involved only in social and cultural activities. Unlike other races who, from the onset, had set

up political parties, thus assuring a political foundation for future generations. The Portuguese Eurasians were even unclear of their identities as to whether to include other Eurasians from different origins when asked in the proposals for the formation of Malaya in 1957. The Eurasian Union set up during pre-war gave clear indications to follow the new nation's destiny and to be loyal to their king (Agong). They identified themselves more to the Malay race than to their European counterpart. This of course meant that Malaysia was their home. There were some Eurasians who had migrated to Australia after the May 13 riots in 1969, but their being small in number does not show the general trend.

UMNO, MCA and MIC = Malaysia's Ruling Party-Barisan Nasional

The United Malay National Organization (UMNO) is the ruling party of Malaysia representing the dominant Malay race in the Government. Since independence (Merdeka), UMNO together with two other communal political parties, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Association (MIC) formed the Alliance Party, now known as the Barisan Nasional, or the National Front.

Although, there are other political parties which are multi-racial, the general trend is that a party has to have some communal standing, and stress on issues that will benefit the race it represents, or it can never get support. The Pan Islamic Party (PAS) for example stresses on the Islamic religion to garner support, and is in control of Kelantan – a northern state in Malaysia. The main opposition is the Democratic Action Party, which is also Chinese based. As from the layout in the Malaysian party system, it can be seen that the minority groups like the Portuguese Eurasian has no standing, and it is therefore wise to stay away from the political arena and stress more on its cultural presence.

The NEP (New Economic Policy) also brought about the involvement of political parties into the corporate sector. Political patronage forcing the involvement of the Malays into being part of the business world. All three component parties of Barisan Nasional set up corporate arms to capitalize on the boom years of the 90s. The Portuguese Eurasians on the other hand were handicapped with a lack of patronage but the Prime Minister Dr Mahatir's concern of the deprived community, led to the acceptance of Portuguese Eurasians into the National Unit Trust Scheme, a trust under the National Capital Limited which invested in government and blue chip shares reserved only for *Bumiputeras*.

Bumiputera Status

The word *Bumiputera* comes from the Sanskrit, meaning « Sons of the Soil ». In the Malaysian context it means the original dwellers or indigenous people of the country. The Malays were the first to start a kingdom and government in Malacca. There were a few other Hindu kingdoms like Ganganegara in Kedah. But these were all insignificant and no written records exist. The Malacca Sultanate had a vast territory which included some states in Sumatra. The Malacca Sultanate was the mother of the other Malay governments in the other states and there was continuity until this

present day. The original inhabitants are the aborigines who live in tribes and are still found in the jungles of the interior.

1969-watershed in Malaysian History

Definition of race became all the more important when the *Bumiputera* Concept was revived and took greater meaning after the 1969 racial-riots, whereby in 1970, the NEP sought to redress the instability of economic imbalance between the two dominant race – the Malays and the Chinese. The two pronged strategy was to eradicate poverty irrespective of race and to restructure society so that the Malays could play a more active role in business and that race would not equate with occupation. The Malays targeted to attain at least 30 % of the business sector by 1990 and the status was extended up to the present and no date-line has been fixed. The NEP gave the Malays an upper edge in the granting of privileges in the business, corporate, education, bank loans, the civil service and social sectors.

UMNO's Entrance into Sabah and the Acceptance of Christians in the Party (1991)

In 1991, when news of UMNO 's entry into Sabah gave rise to a situation of the party's accepting non-Muslims in becoming UMNO's members, for the citizens of Sabah are *Bumiputras* as defined in the Federal Constitution, Datuk Mohamed Sovie in his column¹ stated that :

« As non-*Bumiputras* in Peninsula Malaysia like the Orang Asli, Thai, and Eurasians of Portuguese decent in Malacca are also eligible for membership in UMNO, it will in time become as multi-racial as any other party in the country ».

Later a news report² announced that the Prime Minister had given the green light for the Portuguese to join UMNO and that two hundred forms had been sent by UMNO's Secretary to the acting Regedor Mr Serge Lazaroo to be filled. At this point of time the Portuguese Eurasians had not been given full *Bumiputra* status and were only allowed to invest in the National Unit Trust scheme. There was some confusion amongst the UMNO and members were taken by surprise. In fact the report itself was quite sensitive, as UMNO for in its constitution had stated that the party is the patron of Islam and, to set up a Christian UMNO branch was unacceptable to many. The problem is that for most Malays the concept of being Malay and Muslim is immutable, even though many of the most influential Malay families settled from all parts of Indonesia long after the Portuguese arrival. The acceptance of Thais in Kedah who are Buddhists, and the Kadazans in Sabah, many of them being Christians, into UMNO gave rise to the possibility for the Portuguese also to be accepted. The decision by UMNO's Supreme Council was for the Portuguese to be considered *Bumiputra* first, before being admitted into UMNO. The state then decided to form a panel of historians to determine whether the Portuguese community could be accorded the *Bumiputra* status. The Prime Minister had said that Malaysians of Portuguese descent can become UMNO members if they are proven to be

1. *Star*, 3rd of February, 1991.

2. *Star*, 23th of February 1993.

*Bumiputras*³. The panel headed by Malacca's State Secretary En. Ahmad Ithnin said that the Panel's terms of reference are :

- The panel will not be politically influenced
- Religion will not be taken into account because it is out of context
- The main contention is whether the Portuguese descendents are of Malay stock
- Though the Portuguese community can invest in the ASN/ASB, this will not be taken into account⁴.

The historian panel's decision on this matter is still pending and no news have been given on this matter. There was mixed reaction on the Portuguese being accepted as full-fledged Bumis. The Johore and Malacca UMNO branches voiced out their rejection to the proposal. But there were some members who were sympathetic and were willing to accept. According to Professor Khoo Kay Kim, one of the historian of the panel commented :

« UMNO should spell out the qualifying criteria for *Bumiputeras*, then decide whether the definition encompassed the Portuguese descendents. This matter is not for historical verification but is a political question ».

He added that the Portuguese community had become highly localized since their arrival in the 16th century but whether this was sufficient to describe them as indigenous and therefore as *Bumiputeras*, depended on UMNO⁵.

In the *Far Eastern Economic Review*⁶, Professor Khoo commented that a trend towards pluralism within UMNO is inevitable : « If UMNO wants broader [political control], it must have direct links with all groups in society ».

The historian panel also accepted papers from community members and others, regarding their views and arguments. Members of the community reacted and a number of papers were presented. Below I would like to give a few comments by individuals.

Tan Sri Rahim Thamby Chik (Chief Minister of Malacca 1993) on the Portuguese of Malacca :

« Historically, the Portuguese community was from Malay stock following the intermarriage of the Portuguese with locals during the Portuguese rule of Malacca »⁷.

UMNO veteran and historian, Datuk Haji Aziz Tapa :

« A rational study of the Malacca Portuguese would show they are ethnically and culturally close to Malays. Although the community traced its ancestry to the Portuguese conquest of Malacca in 1511, they are very different from the people of Portugal. The Portuguese community's food, music, dressing and other aspects of culture were similar to that of the Malays »⁸.

UMNO Secretary General, Datuk Mohamad Rahmat (1993) :

« There should be no problem over their eligibility. If the Chinese, who married Malays, automatically achieved *Bumiputera* status, then I don't see why our Portuguese community cannot be considered *Bumiputeras* »⁹.

3. *Sunday Times*, 7th of March, 1993.

4. *Star*, 3rd of April, 1993.

5. *New Straits Times*, 8th of March, 1993.

6. 15th of April 1993.

7. *Star*, 2, 4th of March 1993.

8. *Star*, 9th of March 1993.

9. *New Straits Times*, 28th of March 1993.

There were also negative news reports in the Malay medium newspaper (*Berita Harian*) which had a full write-up on *Bumi* issue with the headlines : « Portuguese Issue, Let Us Not Make A Wrong Move »¹⁰. Some of the arguments which I would like to highlight are :

- Why should we accept the descendents of a certain race which used to colonise and destroy the Malacca Sultanate ?
- The Portuguese cannot use the excuse of the admittance of the *pribumis* in Sabah
- The Malacca Kampung Morten UMNO branch felt that the Portuguese could always join another component party of the National Front.

Regarding the first point that the Portuguese destroyed the Sultanate is a fact of history which cannot be changed or be brought as an argument in this context since the argument is accepting the Portuguese descendents as part of the Malay Community because of their past links and similarities.

The second point of comparison of the *pribumis* of Sabah too is obvious that UMNO cannot practice double standards. The same criteria should also apply to the Portuguese.

The third point is missing the objectives of the Portuguese eagerness to be part of the Malaysian goal in the NEP to rid themselves of poverty and to be represented in the Government. Joining another component party will lead to nowhere as they do not have the clout that UMNO has.

It is obvious that the arguments do not merit a standing against the Portuguese to apply in becoming *Bumiputeras* as they have more to gain than accepting defeat.

The historical arguments for the Portuguese to prove they are indigenous are many and as earlier mentioned, that historical verification is pointless : it is more a political decision. There were hardly any Portuguese women who came to Malacca and the policy was to encourage mixed marriages through material incentives like land and cattle, and to create a local community to defend towns in case of attacks. When the Portuguese was defeated, the *casados* (Portuguese men who married native Malay women) were reluctant to escape to other Portuguese colonies because they had struck their roots deep and went inland to assimilate into the local environment. They lived in villages (*kampungs*) like in Malacca Pindah near Alor Gajah and became part of the Malay community, except that they still retained their religion. There are many similarities in the customs and way of life of the Portuguese Eurasians and the Malays especially in their food, past-times, language, folklore, marriage customs. As in any culture the present generation is more westernized.

Contribution of the Portuguese Eurasians to Malaysian Society

In 1995, I organized an International Conference on « Save our Portuguese heritage ». The themes were to portray the contributions of the Portuguese to Malaysian society. The Portuguese presence in Malaysia is one of the most astonishing survival stories to be recorded. Historians, social scientists, anthropologists all converge to the Portuguese settlement to study the presence of Portuguese descendents still speaking a language which has a Malay grammar and archaic Portuguese words. The unique community

¹⁰. *Berita Harian*, 15th of March 1993.

has indeed contributed to the tourist industry with its colorful costumes and fast latin rhythms. The *branyo*, a localized Portuguese dance is now part of the Malay dances called the *joget*. The music of *keroncong* has also Portuguese influence. The musical instruments itself, like the *tambo* and *biola*, violin came from the Portuguese. In Malacca one still finds road names like Tranqueira, Kubu, Jalan Portugis, Banda Hilir, Banda Kaba still being used. Cakes and food although more Malay, has some Portuguese influence like, *molho*, *bolo koku*, *portugal*, etc.

In the Malay language, there are about four hundred words of Portuguese origins. As the first colonial power to establish itself in Malaysia, especially in Malacca, its presence is still felt in a living museum called the Portuguese Settlement with about one thousand residents. Other Eurasian communities like the Dutch and British have in fact assimilated into the Portuguese community as they do not have the cultural foundation of language, culture and religion. The present generation of Portuguese Eurasians have developed new skills and discarded the traditional fishing industry, they have gone into professions like teachers, lawyers, businessmen, and in other occupations.

In the historiography of Malaysia, Portuguese references have become indispensable. The works of Tome Pires, Casthanada, João de Barros, Eredia are all important references.

A Turning Point

One interesting point to consider in this issue is that the Malay society is prepared to discuss the issue more rationally and not be biased by sentiments of religion and race, something which would not have happened twenty years ago. UMNO itself has undergone many changes in accepting Christian *Bumiputeras* including the *Kadazans* from Sabah whose members do not include true *Bumis*. The Siamese-Malay descendents from *Kedah* are also accepted by UMNO. It is reported that there is an UMNO Branch in Penang whose members are more fit to be Malaysian Indian Association members.

The Vice President of UMNO has said that the acceptance of the Portuguese into UMNO would not jeopardize the position of Malays as the champions of Islam. The acceptance of the Portuguese minority is a turning point in the history of the party as representing every single sector of the population. It is in keeping with the aims of the vision 2020, that is to create a united Malaysian race. Accepting the Portuguese into UMNO should also be viewed on a wider scope, making UMNO the leader and a catalyst of change in Malaysia society.

1998

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