

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-14853-6 - Taming Babel: Language in the Making of Malaysia

Rachel Leow

Excerpt

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## Introduction

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### In the Beginning

*‘...And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech...’*

The story of Babel has exerted a hold on our collective imaginations for millennia. It is not only a Christian story, though the Bible is where it has gained the widest audience. It echoes a far more ancient story whose roots trace back to ancient Sumer, and it has spawned commentaries, artistic creations, fictions, and metaphors which stretch all the way to our present day. It was at Babel that God confounded the language of all the earth and scattered the fragments abroad. From the perspective of Babel, the scattering of tongues is a wound in humanity’s imagined history: the original sin and the price of arrogance. Babel is the City of Confusion. It is the tragic reason for humanity’s plurilingualism.

That is the classical interpretation. But other interpretations exist too: the story of Babel has been an endlessly appropriated symbol. The classical pride-and-punishment story has met some challenge in recent Biblical, as well as literary, critical scholarship. God’s actions were not, some suggest, punitive. Our many languages are not a tragedy. Rather, the tower of Babel is the birthplace of a divinely willed diversity, the sacred cradle of man’s multiple civilizations. ‘This sense of horror before the wounded name is not universal... Many writers find the plurality of tongues a joyous experience. The fall from unity into multiplicity represents a fortunate fall, a curse that reveals itself as a blessing.’<sup>1</sup> Babel, in these interpretations, is the place where our glorious multiplicity began: not the City of Confusion, the Hebrew Balal, but the Akkadian Bab-ilu, the Gate of God.

<sup>1</sup> Debra A. Castillo, *The Translated World: A Postmodern Tour of Libraries in Literature* (Gainesville: Florida State University Press, 1984), 15. In Biblical scholarship, this alternative interpretation has been forwarded most forcefully by Theodore Hiebert, ‘The Tower of Babel and the Origin of the World’s Cultures,’ *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126, no. 1 (2007), 29–58.

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Ought we to praise or mourn the fall of the Tower of Babel? From the point of view of the modern nation-state, plurilingualism seems to have mostly inherited the classical interpretation.<sup>2</sup> The plurality of languages within a single bounded territorial polity (itself a relatively modern way of organizing space) often appears as a curse to unity: something monstrous to be tamed by the hegemony of a national language, or a standardized vernacular, or carefully wrought policies regulating how, when, and who speaks, in how many languages. The isomorphism of language, nation, and state has become normative. Many scholars trace this back to the writings of Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), who defined language as a fundamental marker of ethnic groups and ethnic nations, and posited most famously that language is an authentic product of an ancestral, innate culture, predating all political reason: one which expresses the soul or sentiments of a people.<sup>3</sup> His insights were elaborated by subsequent German Romantics, in particular A. W. Schegel and Johann Gottlieb Fichte, the latter of whose *Address to the German Nation* (1807–1808) can be regarded as the ‘apogee’ of Herderian thinking.<sup>4</sup>

Herder’s long shadow can be discerned in the slogans of modern ethnolinguistic movements. Two such powerful ethnolinguistic nationalisms have vied over the hearts, minds, and political loyalties of postcolonial Malaysians. *Bahasa jiwa bangsa*, Malay-language ethnonationalists shout: language is the soul of the nation. Chinese speakers have a similar saying: *yuyan shi yi ge minzu de linghun*. Both these sayings invoke *linghun*, *jiwa* – the ‘national soul’ – as well as Herder’s *Völker* (folk, people) – *bangsa*, *minzu*.<sup>5</sup> From the lectures of Martin Luther (1483–1546), who called the division of languages the ‘seedbed of all evils’, to the modern proponents of the view that linguistic diversity leads to inevitable chaos, questions of language frequently appear as problems for nation-states.<sup>6</sup> Especially in relatively new nation-states, from Canada, Fiji, and Spain to Belgium, Sri Lanka, India, and, of course, Malaysia, language has been

<sup>2</sup> I use the word *plurilingual* to distinguish from multilingualism, which I take to be a specifically political concept and more distinctly associated with policy. *Plurilingual*, which I place alongside *bilingual* and *polyglot*, refer more to the speaking abilities of individuals and the existence of multiple languages within a given territory, e.g., a household or a country.

<sup>3</sup> Johann Gottfried Herder, ‘Treatise on the Origin of Language’ (1772), reproduced in *Herder: Philosophical Writings*, ed. Michael N. Forster, (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), 65–165.

<sup>4</sup> Tony Judt and Denis Lacorne, *Language, Nation, and State: Identity Politics in a Multilingual Age* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 3.

<sup>5</sup> For a sophisticated discussion, see Tan Liok Ee, ‘The Rhetoric of Bangsa and Minzu: Community and the Nation in Tension, the Malay Peninsula, 1900–1955,’ Working paper no. 52, Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University (Clayton, Victoria: Monash University, 1988).

<sup>6</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan et al, eds. *Luther’s Works, Vol. 2: Lectures on Genesis: Chs. 6–14* (St Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1960), 214–15.

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one of the slow-burning fires that flare into hot nationalisms in moments of defensiveness and cultural fury. At times, as Sumathi Ramaswamy's beautiful study of Tamil shows, these 'passions of the tongue' can flare, literally, into self-immolation.<sup>7</sup> But language problems, passionate as they are, often transcend questions of identity and cultural or national self-hood. Polyglot states, particularly empires, have also suffered, fundamentally, from crises of governmentality. For how, exactly, does a monoglot state govern a polyglot society to which it cannot reliably speak?

This book proceeds from the conviction that language is at once an unstoppable producer of social and political possibilities, as well as a site of extraordinary discipline and governance by both the colonial and postcolonial states. It focuses on one extremely linguistically heterogeneous space, British Malaya – modern Malaysia and Singapore – and seeks to trace and make visible an often invisible history of state anxiety over languages. These crises, I suggest, arise from a fundamental, perhaps inevitable, disconnect between a monoglot state and its polyglot subjects. Vicente Rafael has referred to this phenomenon, in his work on the Spanish Philippines, as the problem of address. 'This question of address,' he writes, 'its formulation, conventionalization, disruption and recuperation – animates the relationship between colonialism and nationalism... "Who speaks?" is always contingent on "Who is spoken to?"'<sup>8</sup> Between the speaker and the spoken-to lies a field of power relations enacted through language. What impact have these crises of address had on the postcolonial trajectories of modern Malaysia?

In exploring the anxieties and endemic shortfalls of polyglot governance, I show that for the most part, language diversity has appeared to the state as something to be managed and mourned as a terrible confusion and a source of crisis, rather than something to be praised as a source of connection, human creativity, and alternative modes of being national. And this is because, I suggest, there may be in the basic nature of the modern state a propensity to react in this way to diversity: to regard it as crisis rather than opportunity.

**Babel in Southeast Asia**

'...let us go down, and there confound their language...'

The Herderian isomorphism of language, nation, and race belies the fundamental plurality of all three of these conceptual containers. It seems

<sup>7</sup> Sumathi Ramaswamy, *Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil India, 1891–1970* (Berkeley: UCP, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> Vicente Rafael, *The Promise of the Foreign: Nationalism and the Technics of Translation in the Spanish Philippines* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 159–64.

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almost incontrovertible that, contrary to Benedict Anderson's peculiar assertion in *Imagined Communities* that 'the bulk of mankind is monoglot',<sup>9</sup> most of the world is, in fact, best characterized as polyglot: fluid, plurilingual territories bounded by arbitrary borders, whose various peoples move between and among tongues far more than even linguists tend to acknowledge.<sup>10</sup> In few other places in the world is this fluidity more evident than in Southeast Asia, whose very regional construction proceeds from heterogeneity. Mainland Southeast Asia is a rumpled quilt of riverine basins and jungled mountains: gnarled tips of a great tectonic shelf mostly submerged under the South China Sea. Maritime Southeast Asia is a fragmentary, archipelagic space made of promontories and islands, and surrounded by bodies of water that have seen thousands of years of movement – of travel, commerce, migration, imperial conquest, and religious exchange. Its default state is diversity. Southeast Asia's highlands and oceans delineate what biologists call an 'ecotone': a zone where several distinct physical and botanical environments meet and slowly interlace. Barbara Andaya urged us to extend this perception of the region beyond its flora and fauna and into the human dimension, seeing in the early modern period a realm of constant cultural overlap, in which Sinitic and Indic gender, religious, and sociological norms interlace and blend with a range of indigenous practices to produce new hybrids.<sup>11</sup> As a region of the world which has seen colonial conquest at one point or another by almost all the European imperial powers throughout the early modern and modern period, it is also an example *par excellence* of what Marie Louise Pratt has called the contact zone: 'social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today'.<sup>12</sup> Already one of the most linguistically heterogeneous regions on earth, Southeast Asia's era of colonial encounter produced new hybrids out of plurality, and added layers of complexity to its peoples, cultures, and religions. Creoles, hybrid, and contact languages testify to centuries of cultural, commercial, and intimate interactions. Many of these encounters were underwritten by Malay, that great trading *lingua franca* of the early modern world, which spawned creole Malay varieties as it scattered in port cities across the archipelago: Baba, Betawi, Sri Lankan, Makassar,

<sup>9</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2006), 38.

<sup>10</sup> For a critique in this vein, see Michel Degraff, 'Linguists' Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Creole Exceptionalism,' *Language and Society* 34 (2005), 533–91.

<sup>11</sup> Barbara Andaya, *The Flaming Womb: Repositioning Women in Early Modern Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: UH Press, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, 'Arts of the Contact Zone,' *Profession* 91 (1991), 33–40.

Ambonese and other Malay tongues which spun off from each other and were refashioned in local particulars.<sup>13</sup> Arabic and Sanskrit made their respective marks in the region: as languages of religious, commercial and high-cultural significance, they gifted culturally charged lexicons to Southeast Asian vernaculars. Sanskrit words like *sakti* (power), *budaya* (culture) and *bahasa* (language) were taken and transformed or, in O. W. Wolters' words, localized: *sakti*, for example, became Javanese's 'supernatural power', Toba Batak's 'verified magic', and Balinese's 'ancestral power'.<sup>14</sup> China's languages, too, form part of the linguistic sedimentation of the region and its practical vocabularies are embedded in Malay; in the Baba Malay creole spoken among acculturated Chinese-Malay families in the late nineteenth century, it was estimated that their lexicon was two-thirds Malay, a fifth Hokkien, and the rest a combination of English, Dutch, Portuguese, and Tamil. Chinese languages have also loaned words to Malay, mostly of South Fujian origin, a large proportion of which are nouns.<sup>15</sup> Southeast Asian diversity is not limited to its languages; rather, its languages index and underwrite other kinds of pluralisms – gender, religious, and legal, among them.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> For a treatment of Malay varieties, see James T. Collins, *Malay, World Language: A Short History* (KL: DBP, 1998); James T. Collins, *Ambonese Malay and Creolization Theory* (KL: DBP, 1980); James T. Collins, *The Historical Relationships of the Languages of Central Maluku, Indonesia* (Canberra: Department of Linguistics Australian National University, 1983).

<sup>14</sup> On Indic influence in Southeast Asia, see O. W. Wolters, *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives*, Rev. ed. (Ithaca, NY: SEAP, Cornell University Press, 1999). On Arabic, see Ronit Ricci, *Islam Translated: Literature, Conversion, and the Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> On the cultural interactions of Chinese and Malay see Anne Pakir, 'A Linguistic Investigation of Baba Malay', unpublished PhD diss., University of Hawai'i (1986); Tan Chee Beng, *The Baba of Melaka: Culture and Identity of a Chinese Peranakan Community in Malaysia* (Petaling Jaya, Malaysia: Pelanduk Publications, 1988); Claudine Salmon, ed. *Literary Migrations: Traditional Chinese Fiction in Asia (17–20th Centuries)* (Beijing: International Culture Publishing, 1987). For early studies of loanwords between Chinese and Malay languages, see C. O. Blagden and E. D. Edwards, 'A Chinese Vocabulary of Malacca Malay Words and Phrases Collected Between AD 1403 and 1511,' *BSOAS* 6 (1932), 715–49; William Girdlestone Shellabear, 'Baba Malay: An Introduction to the Language of the Straits-Born Chinese,' *JSRAS* 65 (1913), 49–63.

<sup>16</sup> On gender, see e.g. Michael Peletz, *Gender Pluralism: Southeast Asia Since Early Modern Times* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Andaya, *The Flaming Womb*. On religion, see e.g. Chiara Formichi, ed. *Religious Pluralism, State and Society in Asia* (London: Routledge, 2013); Rey Ito, *Pasyon and Revolution: Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1840–1910* (Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1979). On the law, see e.g., M. Barry Hooker, ed. *Law and the Chinese in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2002); Michael Peletz, *Islamic Modern: Religious Courts and Cultural Politics in Malaysia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002); Jothie Rajah, *Authoritarian Rule of Law: Legislation, Discourse and Legitimacy in Singapore* (Cambridge: CUP, 2012); Marcus Colchester, ed. *Divers Paths to Justice: Legal Pluralism and the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in Southeast Asia* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Forest Peoples Programme, 2011).

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Given this deep history of diversity and admixture, it is revealing that a central theme that runs through many modern Southeast Asian histories is that of border making. The literature here is especially strong on national borders, because those are the borders that appear most obviously as infant creations, new hard lines erected around this more ancient world in motion.<sup>17</sup> Thongchai Winichakul wrote of the most literal borders: those of the geographical nation-state, inscribed onto maps, which gave new form to a hitherto non-existent geo-body of Thainess.<sup>18</sup> Robert Elson, too, wrote of the ‘idea’ of modern Indonesia as a bewildering concatenation of islands into a space whose borders are an ambivalent inheritance from Dutch maps.<sup>19</sup> Eric Tagliacozzo has written of the ‘freezing’ of the porous trading borders between Dutch and British spheres of the Malay world over the course of the nineteenth century, across which one could chart centuries of movement that became criminalized, as the region’s hardening maritime borders became increasingly managed with new infrastructures, and policed with networks of intelligence.<sup>20</sup> Long ago, Edmund Leach cautioned that Southeast Asia was best seen as ‘a collection of indeterminate discursive fields of dynamic cultural relationships rather than societies frozen within fixed political boundaries’.<sup>21</sup> James Scott, who has always been in one way or another concerned with borders, has taken this task on board, writing most recently of the historical borderlessness of the Zomia region, where stateless highland peoples move, love, speak, and identify without regard for the standards and conventions of the state-making lowlands.<sup>22</sup> And Sunil Amrith has restored from historical oblivion the Bay of Bengal, a loose region between South and Southeast Asia, ‘once at the heart of global history’, but whose deep connected past was sundered by histories of twentieth-century nation-states and the iron curtains of area studies.<sup>23</sup> These histories are as much histories of

<sup>17</sup> For an overview of the early modern history of Southeast Asia, see Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450–1680: The Lands Below the Winds*, vol. 1 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988); Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Early Modern Era: Trade, Power, and Belief*, vol. 2 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993).

<sup>18</sup> Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: UH Press, 1994).

<sup>19</sup> Robert Edward Elson, *The Idea of Indonesia: A History* (Cambridge: CUP, 2008).

<sup>20</sup> Eric Tagliacozzo, *Secret Trades, Porous Borders: Smuggling and States Along a Southeast Asian Frontier, 1865–1915* (Cambridge: CUP, 2005).

<sup>21</sup> Edmund R. Leach, ‘The Frontiers of “Burma”’, *CSSH* 3, no. 01 (1960), 49–68.

<sup>22</sup> James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

<sup>23</sup> Sunil S. Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The Furies of Nature and the Fortunes of Migrants* (Cambridge, MA: HUP, 2013).



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borders as accounts of their transgressions: stories of migrants, pirates, and marauders in Southern straits and seas; the seepage of indigenous riverine trade across the porous Bornean frontiers; the persistent autonomy of a peasantry at the margins of loose shapeless polities whose rulers rarely knew the true nature of their own state boundaries until the era of colonial rule forced their hardening.

The borders that to me have made the deepest impact in the region, however, are not physical or political borders, but mental ones which demarcate intangible vectors of inclusion and exclusion, above all race, ethnicity, and cultural identity. In other words, *labels*: in particular, the two labels Anthony Reid identified as having had the most ‘widespread, ambiguous and portentous’ influence in Southeast Asia: *Melayu* (Malay) and *Cina* (Chinese).<sup>24</sup> Both *Melayu* and *Cina* are ever-shifting historical concepts which are often treated as racial categories, though they are also, perhaps unfortunately, languages, as well as, today, nations. The labels have come to denote named communities sharing a common culture (language or religion), myth of ancestry, territory, and with a strong feeling of being similar – what Anthony Smith calls *ethnies*.<sup>25</sup> And, in part because of this strange and quite fateful overlaying of all these important valences of human belonging, they have also frozen into identities: problematic vessels of two problematic concepts we call ‘Malayness’ and ‘Chineseness’.<sup>26</sup>

### Chaining the Winds

‘...and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.’

These names – Malay, Chinese – have come under increasing scrutiny in recent years. Interrogations of Malayness have burgeoned, perhaps most articulately in Anthony Milner’s *The Malays*, and in Leonard Andaya’s almost contemporaneous *Leaves of the Same Tree*; but there are many others.<sup>27</sup> The collected volumes which have emerged in the last decade on

<sup>24</sup> Anthony Reid, *Imperial Alchemy: Nationalism and Political Identity in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010), chs. 3–4.

<sup>25</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 22–31.

<sup>26</sup> On the problematic quality of the concept ‘identity’ and the inadequacy of the word to the conceptual work required of it by the social sciences, see Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: UCP, 2005), ch. 5.

<sup>27</sup> Anthony Milner, *The Malays* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008); Leonard Y. Andaya, *Leaves of the Same Tree: Trade and Ethnicity in the Straits of Melaka* (Honolulu: UH Press, 2008); Timothy P. Barnard, *Contesting Malayness: Malay Identity Across Boundaries* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2004); Maznah Mohamad and Syed Muhd. Khairudin

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Malayness, especially from anthropological, but also political, cultural, and civilizational perspectives, have all amply demonstrated the essential flexibility of what we understand to be 'Malay'. Anthropological and sociological interrogations of Malayness have shown without question that the label 'Malay' is like a thin elastic skin stretched over a bewildering multitude of peoples, from Bataks to Bugis to Ambonese to Kadazans and Dusuns.<sup>28</sup> 'Chineseness' has also begun to be unravelled. From the transnational turn in studies of Chinese overseas communities to the literary critical challenge of the Sinophone, including its transformations in the Southeast Asian context, scholars have challenged the dimensions of Chineseness and begun to theorize the connections between language possession, ethnicity, and cultural value. They have asked probing questions about whether it is possible to be Chinese without speaking it, without being from the national space we call China, without clear ancestral roots, without blood purity, without engaging in the performance of cultural Chineseness.<sup>29</sup> These deconstructive explorations collectively insist that the labels we know as Malayness and Chineseness are not perfectly formed single identities to be worn or removed like a hat, but disciplined, social creations, cognitive process or even mindsets and sociocognitive frames, which produces a certain lived reality.<sup>30</sup>

Alongside these cultural deconstructions, sociolinguistics has also shown not only the historical mutability of language in the region, but how much identities and cultural practices change alongside them. Much

Aljunied, eds. *Melayu: The Politics, Poetics, and Paradoxes of Malayness* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2011); Joel S. Kahn, *Other Malays: Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Malay World* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2006). See also the special issue in *JSEAS* 32 No. 3 (October 2001), 'Understanding Melayu as a Source of Diverse Modern Identities'.

<sup>28</sup> See e.g., James T. Collins, 'Contesting Straits-Malayness: The Fact of Borneo,' *JSEAS* 32, no. 3 (2001), 385–95.

<sup>29</sup> See e.g., Shih Shu-mei, *Visibility and Identity: Sinophone Articulations Across the Pacific* (Berkeley: UCP, 2007); Shih Shu-mei, Chien-Hsin Tsai, and Brian Bernards, eds. *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); E. K. Tan, *Rethinking Chineseness: Translational Sinophone Identities in the Nanyang Literary World* (Berkeley, CA: Cambria Press, 2013); Ien Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living Between Asia and the West* (London: Routledge, 2001); Aihwa Ong and Donald Nonini, *Ungrounded Empires: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Wen-hsin Yeh, *Cross-Cultural Readings of Chineseness: Narratives, Images, and Interpretations of the 1990s* (Berkeley: UCP, 2000); Elena Barabantseva, *Overseas Chinese, Ethnic Minorities and Nationalism: De-Centering China* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2010). See also the special issue in *Asian Ethnicities*, 10, No. 3 (October 2009), 'Chineseness Unbound'. For a recent literary treatment, see Brian Bernards, *Writing the South Seas: Imagining the Nanyang in Chinese and Southeast Asian Postcolonial Literature* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015).

<sup>30</sup> Eviatar Zerubavel, *Social Mindscapes: An Invitation to Cognitive Sociology* (Cambridge, MA: HUP, 2009). For an application of sociocognitive frames as producers of language and identity in the Indian context, see A. Aneesh, 'Bloody Language: Clashes and Constructions of Linguistic Nationalism in India,' *Sociological Forum* 25, no. 1 (2010), 86–109.



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work has been done on the linguistic creolization of Sino-Southeast Asian communities over the course of their long engagement in the ‘Nanyang’.<sup>31</sup> Today the story of Chinese languages in the world remains a testament to the power and dynamism of language in migration.<sup>32</sup> Malay, as a world language, is no less fluid. ‘The everyday manifestations of *Melayu*,’ Henk Maier has written, ‘should evoke a distinct sense of differentiations, a process in which elements of other languages are assimilated just as easily as inside dialogues are perpetuated, driven by an ever destabilizing energy that makes it irrelevant to speak or even think in terms of identity...uniformity [or] ethnicity’.<sup>33</sup> This looseness evokes Bakhtin, who, writing about heteroglossia, insisted that ‘the diversity of varieties, a centrifugal proliferation of styles, accents registers, languages – is ubiquitous, the ordinary condition of linguistic life’.<sup>34</sup> In the sociolinguistic meeting of the Chinese and Malay language ecotones, creolization, and proliferation were the order (and in colonial eyes, the disorder) of the day.

These two great labels, *Cina* and *Melayu*, meet most obstreperously in Malaysia. Despite this long and intellectually sensitive history of pluralism, which has been outlined with care and insight in much recent scholarship, the labels of *Melayu* and *Cina* in political praxis in Malaysia have seemed only to have narrowed and calcified the older the postcolonial nation gets.<sup>35</sup> Malaya, as it was once known, is a tiny promontory at the elbow of the ancient trade routes that stretched from Canton to Basra, and has trapped a thousand years’ sediment of mobility through its monsoonal straits. Slowly colonized by the British from the late eighteenth century onward, it became a battleground of language: as colonial observers frequently called it, the Babel of the East. It was a plurilingual and pluri-ethnic state from the beginning, but in the course of the colonial transition

<sup>31</sup> Anthony Reid and Kristine Alilunas-Rodgers, eds. *Sojourners and Settlers: Histories of Southeast China and the Chinese* (Honolulu: UH Press, 1996); Leonard Blussé, *Strange Company: Chinese Settlers, Mestizo Women and the Dutch in VOC Batavia* (Dordrecht-Holland: Foris, 1986); George William Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand: An Analytical History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1957).

<sup>32</sup> Jing Tsu, *Sound and Script in Chinese Diaspora* (Cambridge, MA: HUP, 2010).

<sup>33</sup> Hendrik Maier, ‘Melayu and Malay – a Story of Appropriate Behaviour,’ in *Melayu*, ed. Maznah Mohamad and Syed Muhd. Khairudin Aljunied (Singapore: NUS Press, 2011), 318.

<sup>34</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Carly Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Judith Nagata’s comments on the contemporary ‘narrowness’ of Malayness, and Yao Souchou on the inescapable ‘closures’ in the expression of Chineseness. Judith A. Nagata, ‘Boundaries of Malayness: “We Have Made Malaysia: Now it is Time to (Re)Make the Malays but Who Interprets the History?”’, in *Melayu*, eds. Maznah Mohamad and Syed Muhd. Khairudin Aljunied (Singapore: NUS Press, 2011); Yao Souchou, ‘Being Essentially Chinese,’ *Asian Ethnicity* 10, no. 3 (2009), 251–62.

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it became a place named and designed for a people called ‘the Malays’. Its modern demography, politics, and economy has been fundamentally shaped by the tremendous influx of migrant labourers in the nineteenth century during the high colonial period. Although Chinese communities have traded and intermingled in the Malay world for centuries,<sup>36</sup> this nineteenth century escalation turned Malaysia and Singapore into the leading concentrations of Chinese labouring communities after 1870, and also provided grist to a century-long mill of antagonistic identity sharpening, under the watchful and nervous eyes of the colonizers. To the two labels, then, were assigned further burdens of meaning: *Melayu*, the Indigene, the Insider; *Cina*, the Immigrant, the ‘essential Outsiders’.<sup>37</sup>

The political, social, and economic tensions between Chinese and Malay communities in the course of Malaysia’s decolonization and nationhood have been seen to have thoroughly shaped Malaysia’s recent history. It has produced a thematic emphasis on the communalism of the recent past that has tended to dominate everything else. From the fractious early history of Sino-Malay relations in the colonial era,<sup>38</sup> to the Sino-Malay clashes in the immediate aftermath of the Japanese occupation,<sup>39</sup> to the racialized social contract of Malaysian independence,<sup>40</sup> to the Sino-Malay race riots of 13 May 1969 and beyond,<sup>41</sup> race has been a central explanatory factor of modern Malaysian life, a conceptual touchstone attached like a ball and chain to the onward march of postcolonial Malaysian history.<sup>42</sup> Since independence, political parties

<sup>36</sup> On this, see Derek Heng, *Sino-Malay Trade and Diplomacy from the Tenth Through the Fourteenth Century* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2009).

<sup>37</sup> For creation of Malays as Indigene, see Shamsul A. B., *From British to Bumiputera Rule: Local Politics and Rural Development in Peninsular Malaysia* (Singapore: ISEAS, 1986). For creation of Chinese as essential outsiders, see Daniel Chirot and Anthony Reid, eds. *Essential Outsiders: Chinese and Jews in the Modern Transformation of Southeast Asia and Central Europe* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997).

<sup>38</sup> Khoo Kay Kim, ‘Sino-Malay Relations in Peninsular Malaysia Before 1942,’ *JSEAS* 12, no. 1 (1981), 93–107.

<sup>39</sup> Cheah Boon Kheng, ‘Sino-Malay Conflicts in Malaya, 1945–46: Communist Vendetta and Islamic Resistance,’ *JSEAS* 12, no. 1 (1981), 108–17.

<sup>40</sup> Norani Othman, et al., *Sharing the Nation: Faith, Difference, Power, and the State 50 Years After Merdeka* (Petaling Jaya: SIRD, 2008).

<sup>41</sup> Leon Comber, *13 May 1969: A Historical Survey of Sino-Malay Relations* (Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann Asia, 1983); Kua Kia Soong, *May 13: Declassified Documents on the Malaysian Riots of 1969* (KL: Suaram, 2007).

<sup>42</sup> The present book is much less than a general history of Malaya, for which the following books provide invaluable reading: Mary Constance Turnbull, *A History of Singapore, 1819–1988* (Singapore: OUP, 1989); Rupert Emerson, *Malaysia: A Study in Direct and Indirect Rule* (KL: UM Press, 1970); T. N. Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya* (Cambridge: CUP, 2001). For a recent and important volume conveying the exhaustion of racial discourse in Malaysia, see Lim Teck Ghee, Alberto Gomes, and Azly Rahman, eds. *Multiethnic Malaysia: Past, Present and Future* (Petaling Jaya, Selangor: SIRD, 2009).