Introduction

> I hate all the demands of good manners. Nowadays I keep repeating that line: 'Much rather would I be an Arab Bedouin!' Oh for a healthy, strong, unfettered barbarity!
>
> Rabindranath Tagore (1892)[1]

> There probably has been no imperialism like that of Islam and the Arabs … Islam seeks as an article of faith to erase the past; the believers in the end honour Arabia alone; they have nothing to return to.
>
> V. S. Naipaul (1998)[2]

Negotiating Race Categories

This book examines the power and limits of race categories through a history of Arabs in the Malay world. It focuses on the racialised rule that came into being with the consolidation of European colonial power in the Malay world in the nineteenth century. Creole Hadrami communities, whose fathers came from Yemen, increasingly came to be understood as Arabs in the process. This marked a change in ways of identification that was of great and lasting significance. As the epigraphs suggest, the figure of the Arab has been the object of fascination and dread worldwide since the nineteenth century. Caricatures produced in the European encounter with Arabs travelled great distances with colonialism. The poet Rabindranath Tagore reproduced as his own the exoticised representation of the noble bedouin of the desert, in a letter written in Bengali to his niece. Forty years later, in 1932, he was able to fulfil his youthful fancy when he was entertained by bedouins in Iraq. Locating

[1] Rabindranath Tagore, Krishna Dutta, and Andrew Robinson, *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 31.

[2] Naipaul's views are from *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions among the Converted Peoples* (London: Abacus, 1999), p. 354. First published in London by Little, Brown and Company, 1998.

Tagore in the expansive and cosmopolitan history of the Indian Ocean, Sugata Bose sees the poet's travels and thinking as transcending the territorial and cultural divisions of the colonial era.[3] Although Tagore wrote when colonial racial policies were becoming entrenched, the fascination with which the poet beholds the bedouin emerged from a sense of affinity rather than exclusion. The figure of the Arab in this instance is permeable and expansive.

Quite the opposite is at work in the case of the writer V. S. Naipaul over a hundred years later. His view is an unflinching characterisation of the Arab as a colonising force set upon the world. This kind of perspective became a rather dominant representation of Arabs and Islam at the turn of the twenty-first century. Books that demonise Arabs, such as Raphael Patai's *The Arab Mind*, though discredited by many scholars, were influential in the United States.[4] Racialised narratives, of course, were typically associated with efforts to link Islam and terrorism.[5] In 2001, the political leadership of the United States launched a programme of security and military actions described as the War on Terror in retaliation for a series of dramatic aeroplane attacks on the country. Arabs and Muslims were subsequently represented, more frequently than in the past, as fanatics, misogynists, and terrorists, by mass media organisations with a global reach. The figure of the Arab here is impermeable and closed.

These observations would appear to be far removed from a book concerning Arabs in the Malay world, in the nineteenth century at that. The War on Terror discourse, however, associated Arabs and Muslims with such force of conviction that its ramifications were felt far afield. On the one hand, Muslims within the United States as well as those planning to visit or study in the country faced the intensified scrutiny of security authorities. On the other, Arabs who had lived for generations in Latin America found themselves the target of mass media coverage that linked them to terrorism.[6] Speculative and pernicious journalistic accounts were produced that racialised heterogeneous communities and faith practices in a language that was uncannily similar to those of the European colonisers, and that recall in more than one way the nineteenth century moment under study.

[3] Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 233–71.
[4] Raphael Patai, *The Arab Mind* (Long Island City: Hatherleigh Press, 2002). First published in New York by Charles Scribners and Sons, 1973.
[5] Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: Islam, the USA, and the Global War against Terror* (New York: Pantheon, 2004).
[6] John Tofik Karam, 'Crossing the Americas: The U.S. War on Terror and Arab Cross-Border Mobilizations in a South American Frontier Region', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, vol. 31, no. 2 (2011), pp. 251–66.

With the advent of colonialism, ideas of race and nation were advanced well beyond the confines of Europe, profoundly reordering and reinterpreting the historical dispersal of peoples around the world. This reordering was visualised in the map of the world, with individual nations variously coloured to represent clearly differentiated sites of belonging for all. Categorisation by race simplified the complex and interrelated cultural constitution of social groups, disrupted transnational connections, and thereby rendered the colonised governable. As ideas of race were intimately tied to notions of national belonging, colonisers not only identified separate racial groups but in doing so decided who belonged and who did not. Some were declared 'indigenous' and others 'foreign'. The latter were repatriated, if not in fact, then figuratively, through policies that erased their longstanding presence and ties to the local context – their indigeneity.

Societies reordered by colonialism have persisted in the independent nation-states that followed. The category of race has been thereby implicitly reproduced despite the widespread opprobrium with which it is held in significant parts of the world. Many more countries are represented with distinctive colours in the post-independence map of the world. People are seen to belong to specific nations rather than to be variously dispersed across them. Although there is an awareness of the transnational movement of peoples, and the culturally complex character of societies worldwide, the understanding persists of countries as homogeneous, multiracial, or based on an indigenous core.

Scholarship on diaspora has no doubt decentred such perspectives in recent years, but nation-bound thinking continues to exert a strong influence in academic work, more so in the countries of the Malay world itself – Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore for the purposes of this book. Additionally, such thinking dominates journalism and popular perceptions across the board. When transnational or diasporic movement is acknowledged, many still regard the notion of the ethnic or national core as being more authentic or historic, and interconnectedness as being a relatively recent phenomenon, namely the function of contemporary globalisation. Notions of an indigenous core and majoritarianism dominate thinking so much that the constructed character of majorities, as demonstrated by Dru Gladney, becomes invisible.[7] In the same breath, longstanding cultural interconnectedness and complex identifications are seen to be part of a distant past, and of little

[7] Dru C. Gladney, 'Introduction: Making and Marking Majorities', in Dru C. Gladney, ed., *Making Majorities: Constituting the Nation in Japan, Korea, China, Malaysia, Fiji, Turkey, and the United States* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 1–9.

relevance to contemporary societies. The diversity that has resulted from contemporary globalisation notwithstanding, the dispersal of peoples and their modes of identification have assumed a complex shape for millennia.

By moving beyond the Middle East, where Arabs are understood to belong, and turning to the Malay world, this book unsettles the persistent pattern of viewing the world through the national and regional schemata that emerged from colonialism. People from the Hadramaut, the narrow valley on the southern edge of the Arabian peninsula, have migrated extensively to the littoral of the Indian Ocean in the last five hundred years. The transoceanic significance of their historical movement was disrupted only with the firm establishment of European power in the vast region. Hadramis, as they are commonly known in English, were a small but prominent part of the transregional flows of people that converged on the Malay world. Besides them, few other Arabs made this journey. The mostly male migrants married women from the places in which they settled, and distinctive creole communities emerged from the interaction that were neither Hadrami nor local (say Malay, Bugis, or Javanese). When European colonisers encountered these creoles, they regarded them as part of the Arab 'race' whose proper place was not in the Malay world but in the Middle East. Hence they categorised these creoles as 'foreign' despite their intimate cultural connection to the region. This process was profound, for it rendered longstanding creole communities resident in the region – Chinese and Indians, besides Arabs – anomalous to the 'indigenous' social context. Such categorisation was nevertheless not totalising in effect. Arabs responded in a number of ways, and charted their own course within and beyond the ruling categories.

The Power and Limits of Race Categories

Our ways of seeing the world have been profoundly shaped by racialised representations of colonised societies produced in the nineteenth century. Lithography, followed by photography, allowed for the replication and dissemination of images of races and social settings said to be typical of the colony. The dress, implements of work and trade, and physical appearance of the people portrayed, were transported to libraries, offices, and homes in Europe and the colony. These influential images would appear to represent the different races in their natural state, undisturbed by the growing regulation of life and work imposed by the colonial state. Christopher Bayly rightly cautions us against an evaluation of the past on the basis of representations 'unless it is grounded in a

study of political institutions and connections that make those representations possible'.[8] Representations in themselves, nevertheless, capture our attention, as the reproduced image has until somewhat recently been regarded as unadorned, and hence a reliable or truthful reflection of the colonised. Today, we view these images with a critical eye. We would take note, firstly, of how the idea of races as discrete social categories is visualised and reproduced through the images and, secondly, how these races are invoked as a condition natural to the colony. The part played by colonial discursive and political practices in the constitution of these categories – underscored by Bayly – is thereby rendered invisible. In this manner, the fiction of discrete racial groups is both normalised and reproduced for broad consumption. The task of uncovering the normalisation remains necessary, decades after the end of colonial rule, and so too an acknowledgement of the ongoing production and reproduction of race. Illustrations of Arabs of the colonial era are thus presented in this book as part of the narrative of the development of a race category rather than self-explanatory images.

In the chapters to follow, I examine closely the race categories introduced in Java – the political and economic centre of the Netherlands Indies – as the colonial state consolidated its bureaucratic and territorial control in the latter half of the nineteenth century. On the one hand, my purpose is to render visible the hand of the colonial state in the creation and application of race categories, and the attendant policing of residence, travel, and dress. The impact of these measures was profound. Social worlds composed of Arab and other creoles faced pressure to conform to the racialised norms instituted with growing force in the public life of Java. The face of the island was radically transformed as a result, in conjunction with economic, infrastructural, and technological change, especially in the urban areas of the north coast.

On the other hand, I assess critically the reach of the selfsame categories, as their significance has been overstated with lasting implications for the Malay world. Colonial categorisation led to the preponderance of racial identification in public life, but did not erase the creole altogether. Scholarship on the Malay world, however, has typically viewed the transformation of creoles into races in rather totalising terms. Colonial scholar-bureaucrats of the late nineteenth century, for the most part, simply could not see the creole and hybrid in their midst, as these lay outside

[8] Christopher A. Bayly, 'Representing Copts and Muhammadans: Empire, Nation, and Community in Egypt and India, 1880–1914', in Leila T. Fawaz, Christopher A. Bayly, and Robert Ilbert, eds., *Modernity and Culture: From the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 193.

their racialised lines of vision. Nationalist historiography traced back the racial origins of modern nationalist movements to a glorious precolonial past, and thereby took nineteenth-century race categories to be self-evident. Colonial and nationalist writings, nevertheless, are only partially responsible for establishing the primacy of the view that racialisation was totalising. Much scholarship, produced within and beyond the nation-states of the contemporary Malay world, has perpetuated reified notions of race or ethnicity without much critical reflection. This scholarship has rested too comfortably on the grounds that Arabs, Chinese, Javanese, Malays, and other ethnic groups are natural and neatly bounded entities. Anthony Milner has noted, for instance, how the field of Malay studies has fostered the notion of a coherent Malay community.[9] Although the colonial beginnings of these categories are usually acknowledged, they are nevertheless reproduced rather uncritically, and the implications of this reproduction are left unexamined.

This book rests on the premise that colonial categorisation was powerful but not totalising. Races never amounted to the discrete entities desired by the coloniser. Consequently, we are in a position to see racial identification as a commanding project in a society that nevertheless had substantial social and cultural variation. Racial hierarchy then becomes a partially fulfilled fantasy rather than the state of colonial society itself. Indeed, as Ann Stoler reminds us, the very emergence of race politics was contingent on an evolving colonial practice rather than a carefully laid-out plan.[10] As we shall see, race categories were imposed on the culturally diverse population of Java only with difficulty, and with mixed results. Dutch colonial officers identified and enumerated discrete racial groups in the population by omitting the range of variation within and beyond them. Culturally hybrid forms of identification were nevertheless present, even if relegated to the margins.

The persistence of social and cultural variation is significant not merely as evidence of partial racialisation. Rather, it is a salient manifestation of 'sites of interaction' between the diverse peoples, languages, and cultures of the Malay world.[11] By representing interconnectedness, the creole margins raise questions about the exclusionary claims of race at

[9] Anthony Milner, *The Malays* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), p. 9.
[10] Ann L. Stoler, 'Rethinking Colonial Categories: European Communities and the Boundaries of Rule', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 31, no. 1 (1989), pp. 134–161.
[11] Tim Harper and Sunil Amrith, 'Introduction', in Tim Harper and Sunil Amrith, eds., *Sites of Asian Interaction: Ideas, Networks and Mobility* (Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 1–9.

the centre.[12] Correspondingly, Tim Harper's efforts to restore to Malay world historiography its diasporic dimensions expand our understanding of the past beyond the terms of race.[13] He acknowledges that race had become 'the primary category of belonging' in the British colony of Singapore in the late nineteenth century.[14] By drawing our attention to the diasporic convergences in the island state, however, Harper brings to light various conversations and shared spaces that point to other kinds of belonging.

At the same time, racial identification was not upheld by the coloniser alone, especially at the end of the nineteenth century. The racialised images which I discussed earlier, for instance, became part of the visual vocabulary not only of the coloniser, but of the colonised as well. In their respective work, Susan Bayly and Jonathan Glassman aptly caution against viewing racial identification as a European preserve, and an instrument of colonial exploitation alone. Bayly observes as follows: 'Abhorrent as their methods and teachings are to us today, it is important to understand the enormous influence of race theory both within and beyond Western intellectual circles, and enduring long after the colonial era.'[15] Comparing intellectual activity in French and British colonies, she shows how race thinking framed the reflections of Europeans on what they believed to be their own civilisational decline. At the same time, race undergirded the efforts of indigenous intellectuals to produce concepts of faith and nationhood to meet the challenges of colonial modernity, especially from the 1890s to the 1920s – widely experienced as a time of great intellectual ferment. In the case of the Malay world, Sandra Khor Manickam reiterates Bayly's observation by demonstrating how intellectuals drew from the race vocabulary of the British, but developed their own understandings and uses for it.[16]

[12] I found Thongchai Winichakul's discussion of the value of the margins in historical inquiry helpful here. See his 'Writing at the Margins: Southeast Asian Historians and Postnational Histories in Southeast Asia', in Abu Talib Ahmad and Tan Liok Ee, eds., *New Terrains in Southeast Asian History* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2003), pp. 3–29.

[13] Tim Harper, 'Globalism and the Pursuit of Authenticity: The Making of a Diasporic Public Sphere in Singapore', *Sojourn*, vol. 12, no. 2 (1997), pp. 261–92; 'Empire, Diaspora and the Languages of Globalism, 1850–1914', in A. G. Hopkins, ed., *Globalization in World History* (London: Pimlico, 2002), pp. 141–66.

[14] Harper, 'Globalism', p. 286.

[15] Susan Bayly, 'Racial Readings of Empire: Britain, France, and Colonial Modernity in the Mediterranean and Asia', in Leila T. Fawaz, Christopher A. Bayly, and Robert Ilbert, eds., *Modernity and Culture: From the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 291.

[16] Sandra Khor Manickam, 'Common Ground: Race and the Colonial Universe in British Malaya', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 40, no. 3 (2009), pp. 593–612.

Drawing from his work on Zanzibar, the island off the eastern coast of Africa, Glassman shows how the racial hatred that surfaced in the 1950s to the 1960s was rooted in the political discourse of indigenous intellectuals. Scholars, he argues, mistakenly attribute race thinking purely to Europeans and the pseudoscientific terms they used to organise the colonised in a social hierarchy marked by biological characteristics. The role played by indigenous intellectuals in the production of forms of race discourses based on other kinds of exclusionary criteria, such as civilisational markers, is thereby erased. Racism in the post-independence era then is attributed to colonial rather than indigenous thinkers. Correspondingly, scholarship in the past few decades has tended to use the term 'ethnicity' rather than 'race' to describe social groups formed in post-independent nation-states. Oppressive forms of ethnic politics – racism in another guise – once again are understood to be solely the legacy of the colonial era and thus have little to do with the nation-states that followed. Glassman acknowledges that 'the links between colonial rule and contemporary ethnic politics are unmistakable'; however, 'they alone are not sufficient for explaining the often profound resonance of ethnic demagoguery, especially its ability to evoke ethnic violence'.[17] He believes that an adequate explanation of the persistence of race or ethnic politics in the nation-state requires a historical perspective that goes beyond a focus on the colonial state alone.

Bayly and Glassman are joined by others who emphasise the multiple sources – both European and colonised – of race thinking, over the conventional attribution to the colonial state. Significantly, this scholarly perspective paves the way for acknowledging and engaging exclusionary politics in independent nation-states with greater clarity. Naming indigenous forms of racial thinking is significant as it forces a reconsideration of what are often profoundly well-established notions of the national self. China, for instance, is not commonly associated with race thinking. Frank Dikötter has nevertheless demonstrated that racialised identities have been central to Chinese intellectual traditions.[18] He maintains, however, that scholars of China, indeed East Asia as a whole, have tended to view race as purely European in origin, and have thereby failed to recognise its Chinese forms.

Besides an exploration of Dutch thinking on race in relation to Arabs, I do not explore its local variants in any depth in the chapters to come.

[17] Jonathan Glassman, 'Slower Than a Massacre: The Multiple Sources of Racial Thought in Colonial Africa', *The American Historical Review*, vol. 109, no. 3 (2004), pp. 720–54.
[18] Frank Dikötter, 'Introduction', in Frank Dikötter, ed., *The Construction of Racial Identities in China and Japan* (London: C. Hurst and Co., 1997), pp. 1–11.

I nevertheless acknowledge at some length the multiple sources of race thinking at the outset in order to complement my focus on the power and limits of race categorisation. The official histories of contemporary nation-states in the Malay world present race and racism in almost sacrosanct terms as the legacy of the colonial state's policy of divide and rule. Scholarship on the subject offers further nuance but has not departed considerably from the official readings, and provides little in the way of a critique of local racial discourses. This prompts us to ask further questions about the provenance of race and the quality of its exclusionary character.

The Quality of Boundaries

The present book is focused not only on the exclusionary politics of race but on gaining a better understanding of its cost by delving into race categories and the quality and intensity of the exclusion they produce. Among other things, we could ask: what do these categories represent across time and space? How do they work? For Malaysia, Singapore, and, in a different way, Indonesia, ethnic particularism has been central to the formal political system for some time. This in itself may be a source of insecurity for some ethnic groups but need not always be ruinous for them. In each country, the politics of ethnicity or race has had different outcomes, some evaluated favourably, others not. Reflecting on the Malay world in the late 1990s, Robert Hefner makes the observation that Indonesia, with a national heritage 'of inclusive and egalitarian citizenship', has only invited appeals to identity politics, while Malaysia, despite its 'democratic shortcomings', has managed 'to make progress in ethnic relations'.[19] Should Hefner's evaluation be correct, Malaysia has had a better record even though its formal politics is based on the recognition of ethnic groups as distinct components of the country. The question then is not the political or moral reprehensibility of the deployment of ethnic categories, but how deep or destructive this might be. Categories, as well as the essentialism that can underlie their exclusionary pretences, are frequently regarded negatively. At the same time, intermixing between groups and freedom from boundaries may be held up to be positive in a rather uncritical manner. In this connection, Joel Kahn helpfully reminds us that 'essentialism does not always

[19] Robert W. Hefner, 'Introduction: Multiculturalism and Citizenship in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia', in Robert W. Hefner, ed., *The Politics of Multiculturalism: Pluralism and Citizenship in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia* (Hawai'i: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), p. 28.

imply exclusion' while 'cultural hybridity' does not 'guarantee genuine cosmopolitanism'.[20]

In developing a critical approach to categories, it is helpful to revisit the influential views of J. S. Furnivall. This colonial scholar-bureaucrat's well-known definition of the Netherlands Indies as a plural society is as follows: 'a society, that is, comprising two or more elements or social orders which live side by side, yet without mingling, in one political unit'.[21] Furnivall assumed the existence of separate social and economic spheres in the archipelago from precolonial times until the height of Dutch power in the Indies at the beginning of the twentieth century. Although he attributed the intensification of political and economic divisions loosely based on race to Dutch rule, he presented these divisions as a much more long-term and organic aspect of society: 'Thus, in Hindu-Java, besides the ruling race and subject race there was already a Chinese element, interested solely in commerce, in economic contact with local society but forming no part of it.'[22] And, for Furnivall, while the rise of a 'definitely Javanese' civilisation can be ascertained by the fifteenth century, the culture of the north coast remained outside its boundaries: 'In the ports, however, the Chinese still remained a race apart, and the growing number of Moslem Arab traders was introducing a new alien element.'[23] It would appear, then, that in Furnivall's terms, Dutch rule imposed a state structure, and exacerbated racial divisions, in a pre-existing plural society. In this view, racial identities were merely reinforced, rather than introduced newly.

In advancing his own views on pluralism in the region, Hefner observes that Furnivall did not give sufficient weight to the role played by the Dutch colonial authorities in shaping a plural society. Hefner develops a nuanced and close understanding of the different kinds of plurality that may be found in the Malay world in comparison to other regions. Nevertheless, he differs from Furnivall in degree rather than substance. Hefner makes the fair claim that social groups were bounded along ethno-cultural lines before the arrival of the Dutch colonial state, argues against the economism that informs the work of some scholars, and offers a convincing argument of his own for the present. However,

[20] Joel S. Kahn, *Other Malays: Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Malay World* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2006), p. 167.
[21] J. S. Furnivall, *Netherlands India: A Study of Plural Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1944), p. 447. See also The Siauw Giap, 'Group Conflict in a Plural Society', *Revue du Sud-Est Asiatique*, no. 2 (1966), pp. 216–17.
[22] Ibid., p. 8.
[23] Ibid., p. 14.