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Gareth Richards
Victor T. King *Editors*

Discourses, Agency and Identity in Malaysia

Critical Perspectives

Asia in Transition

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Editors

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Praise for *Discourses, Agency and Identity in Malaysia: Critical Perspectives*

“Here is a fresh, startling book to aid the task of unbinding the straitjackets of ‘Malay’, ‘Chinese’ and ‘Indian’, with which colonialism bound Malaysia’s plural inheritance, and on which the postcolonial state continues to rely. In it, a panoply of unlikely identities—Bajau liminality, Kelabit philosophy, Islamic feminism, refugee hybridity and more—finds expression and offers hope for liberation.”

—Rachel Leow, *University of Cambridge*

“This book shakes the foundations of race thinking in Malaysian studies by expanding the range of cases, perspectives and outcomes of identity. It offers students of Malaysia an examination of identity and agency that is expansive, critical and engaging, and its interdisciplinary depth brings Malaysian studies into conversation with scholarship across the world.”

—Sumit Mandal, *University of Nottingham Malaysia*

“This is a much-needed work that helps us to take apart the colonial inherited categories of race which informed the notion of the plural society, the idea of plurality without multiculturalism. It complicates the picture of identity by bringing in religion, gender, indigeneity and sexual orientation, and helps us to imagine what a truly multiculturalist Malaysia might look like.”

—Syed Farid Alatas, *National University of Singapore*

In memory of

Salleh Ben Joned (1941–2020)

a fearless writer and public intellectual

Foreword

In 2003 Sumit Mandal coined the term ‘transethnic solidarities’ to refer to a variety of participatory experiences that Malaysians are engaged in without naturally referring to the primordial identifications of race and ethnicity, which have so dominated the politics and everyday lives of its citizens since independence. These include the activities of arts groups, religious communities, civic and business associations, and many others. Scholars, on the other hand, he noted, have been slow to pay attention to and document this important facet of Malaysian society and life.

Nearly two decades later, this volume is a significant step in bringing together scholars, both local and from abroad, and who have written and reflected on the incredible diversity of postcolonial Malaysia so often silenced by the politics of race, contestation and confrontation. In doing so, the editors have given voice to and excavated the multicultural foundation of Malaysian society. The contributions capture a richness and complexity of issues which are normally subsumed in mainstream social science as gender, class, migration, media, environment and popular culture. They are revealing. The range is breathtaking: documenting a vibrant translation culture in the context of a cosmopolitanism in precolonial and colonial Malaya that is underappreciated; rewriting the gender narrative by privileging complementarity over equality in Malay Muslim society; understanding youth activism against the background of the *Reformasi* movement of the late 1990s; drawing attention to the enduring presence of refugee migrants in the local landscape; examining the Kelantanese perspective of the Malaysian story through film; and many more. The contributions also include work from Sabah and Sarawak: the Kelabit perspective of what constitutes the good life within Malaysian developmentalism; the Bajau search for identity through nonterritorial claims; and the evolution of Iban popular music as a reflection of their contemporary condition.

Giving voices to the many in their everyday lives does not mean overlooking the political discourses that inhere in such engagements. Indeed they constitute what I call the ‘micropolitics of a culturally complex society’—borne by both cultural and transethnic solidarities—that from time to time pushes back against the dominant and often racialised narratives.

This will not be the last word, but it is an exciting start to an important conversation on how we make sense of a society that is so multilayered in its origins, as it comes to terms with modernity and globalisation.

Lian Kwen Fee
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Preface and Acknowledgements

Over the past few years Malaysia has experienced unprecedented political turbulence. The defeat of the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition in the 2018 general election was truly epoch-making—signalling the first change of government since independence more than six decades before. This moment has not ushered a new era of change, however. Unsustainable political alliances and backdoor deals soon saw a return to the status quo ante. A key element underpinning this resilient political hegemony has been an enduring public discourse, much of it inherited from the colonial era, captured by the notion of ‘race thinking’, the privileging of essentialised racial categories as the basis for politics and policy. The language of race in Malaysia has not gone away: it has been kept alive even as the country became mired in staggering levels of corruption at the highest levels, the rise of religious intolerance, the curbing of civil liberties and a widespread antipathy to the political class as a whole.

This book was originally conceived some time ago by Zawawi Ibrahim in an effort to offer an alternative reading of Malaysian cultural politics, interrogating areas of social life that are all too often overlooked in mainstream narratives. Joined later by Gareth Richards and Victor T. King, the editors sought contributions—notably from younger Malaysian scholars—that addressed questions of discourse, agency and identity formation in a critical, interdisciplinary and expansive way. The result is what we hope is a groundbreaking collection of essays. The contributions reveal, in our view, the extent to which the critical agency of different social actors has been able to challenge the prevailing normative discourse. At the same time, the analyses presented here offer the possibility that another Malaysia—freed from the fetters of narrow-minded and reactionary postures—is both necessary and possible.

The editors owe a debt of gratitude to a number of people. We wish to thank all the contributors for their patience and willingness to respond to our demands. We are grateful to Bruno Jetin of the Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam, for agreeing to include the volume in Springer’s Asia in Transition series, and who provided financial assistance for editing and the eventual publication of the book. Two anonymous reviewers offered extended commentaries on drafts of the text and we hope we have done justice to their insightful comments. Rachel Leow, Sumit Mandal and Syed Farid Alatas—exemplary critical scholars in their own right—all

responded in a timely fashion to our request for endorsements. Helena Dodge-Wan undertook the copy-editing with her customary good humour and attention to detail, while Eryn Tan proofread the whole book and prepared the index. The book is dedicated to the memory of Salleh Ben Joned, who died not long before we were due to go to press. For many years he was one of Malaysia's most fearless writers and organic intellectuals, and his untimely passing leaves an enormous gap in the world of critical discourse—a gap we hope a younger generation will fill.

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Penang, Malaysia
Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei Darussalam
May 2021

Zawawi Ibrahim
Gareth Richards
Victor T. King

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

ABIM	Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia)
API	Angkatan Pemuda Insaf (Movement of Aware Youth)
APU	Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah (People's Unity Front)
ASAS '50	Angkatan Sasterawan '50 (Writers' Movement '50)
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BB1M	Baucer Buku 1Malaysia (1Malaysia book voucher)
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BERJASA	Barisan Jemaah Islamiah Se-Malaysia (Islamic Congregation Front of Malaysia)
Bersih	Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections
BFM	Business FM
BN	Barisan Nasional (National Front)
CAP	Consumers' Association of Penang
CHAMPSEA	Child Health and Migrant Parents in South-East Asia
CMIO	Chinese, Malays, Indians and others
CTI-CFF	Coral Triangle Initiative on Coral Reefs, Fisheries, and Food Security
DANIDA	Danish International Development Agency
DAP	Democratic Action Party
DARA	Pahang Tenggara Regional Development Authority
DIY	do-it-yourself
EIA	environmental impact assessment
EPSM	Environmental Protection Society Malaysia
ETP	Economic Transformation Programme
eWOM	online word-of-mouth
GDP	gross domestic product
GERAK	Gerakan Alam Sekitar Rakyat Malaysia (Environmental Movement of Malaysians)
GERAM	Gerakan Rakyat Hentikan Pencemaran Bauksit (People's Movement to Stop Bauxite Pollution)

GPMS	Gabungan Pelajar Melayu Semenanjung (Federation of Malay Students in the Peninsula)
GTP	Government Transformation Programme
HAMIM	Hizb al-Muslimun (Party of Muslims)
ISA	Internal Security Act
ITBM	Institut Terjemahan dan Buku Malaysia (Malaysian Institute of Translation and Books)
JAIS	Jabatan Agama Islam Selangor (Department of Islamic Affairs Selangor)
JAKOA	Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli (Department of Orang Asli Development)
JHEOA	Jabatan Hal Ehwal Orang Asli (Department of Orang Asli Affairs)
JKOAK	Jaringan Kampung Orang Asli Kelantan (Network of Orang Asli Villages of Kelantan)
JKOAP	Jaringan Kampung Orang Asli Pahang (Network of Orang Asli Villages of Pahang)
JOAS	Jaringan Orang Asal SeMalaysia (Indigenous Peoples' Network of Malaysia)
KB1M	Kedai Buku 1Malaysia (1Malaysia Bookshop)
KDM	Kadazan-Dusun-Murut, KadazanDusun and Murut
KECAP	Persatuan Kelip-Kelip (Firefly Association)
KLIBF	Kuala Lumpur International Book Fair
KMM	Kesatuan Melayu Muda (Young Malays Union)
Kowani	Badan Kongres Wanita Indonesia (Congress of Indonesian Women)
KUASA	Persatuan Aktivis Sahabat Alam (Friends of the Earth Activist Association)
LGBT	lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual
MBM	Majlis Belia Malaysia (Youth Council of Malaysia)
MENGO	Malaysian Environmental NGOs
MISPI	Mitra Sejati Perempuan Indonesia (The True Partner of Indonesian Women)
MNS	Malaysian Nature Society
MP	member of parliament
MPBN	Majlis Perundingan Belia Negara (National Youth Consultative Council)
MUDA	Malaysian United Democratic Alliance
MyKad	<i>Kad Pengenalan Malaysia</i> (Malaysian identity card)
NAM	Non-Aligned Movement
NCP	National Culture Policy
NDP	National Development Policy
NEM	New Economic Model
NEP	New Economic Policy
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NMP	National Mission Policy
PAS	Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party)

PATI	<i>pendatang asing tanpa izin</i> , lit. 'foreign visitors without permission'
PBMUM	Persatuan Bahasa Melayu Universiti Malaya (Universiti Malaya Malay Language Society)
PEA	Penang Eurasian Association
PEKA	Pertubuhan Pelindung Khazanah Alam Malaysia (Malaysian Society for the Protection of Malaysia's Treasures of the Earth)
Petronas	Petroliam Nasional Berhad
PIUM	Persatuan Islam (Islamic Society)
PKBM	Pasukan Kadet Bersatu Malaysia (Malaysian United Cadet Corps)
PKMM	Partai Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya (Malay Nationalist Party)
PKPM	Persatuan Kebangsaan Pelajar-Pelajar Malaysia (National Union of Malaysian Students)
PKR	Parti Keadilan Rakyat (People's Justice Party)
PLU	people like us
PMIUM	Persatuan Mahasiswa Islam Universiti Malaya (University of Malaya Islamic Students' Society)
PN	Perikatan Nasional (National Alliance)
PPBM	Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Malaysian United Indigenous Party)
PPII	Perikatan Perhimpunan Istri Indonesia (Federation of Indonesian Women's Associations)
PSM	Parti Sosialis Malaysia (Socialist Party of Malaysia)
RCOMM	Recycle Community Malaysia
REACH	Regional Environmental Awareness Cameron Highlands
RM	Malaysian ringgit
RPS	<i>rancangan penempatan semula</i> (regroupment or resettlement programme)
RTM	Radio Televisyen Malaysia
S46	Semangat 46 (Spirit of 46)
SAM	Sahabat Alam Malaysia (Friends of the Earth of Malaysia)
SoCoMo	social context mobile
SUARAM	Suara Rakyat Malaysia (Voice of the Citizens)
UBU	Universiti Bangsar Utama
UMNO	United Malays National Organisation
UMSU	University of Malaya Student's Union (Persatuan Mahasiswa Universiti Malaya)
UN	United Nations
UNDRIP	United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UPKO	United Pasokmomogun Kadazandusun Murut Organisation
USD	United States dollar
UUCA	University and University Colleges Act
WWF	World Wide Fund for Nature

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Chapter 1

Introduction



Victor T. King, Gareth Richards, and Zawawi Ibrahim

Abstract This introduction demonstrates how this volume seeks to break new ground, both empirically and conceptually, in examining discourses of identity formation and the agency of critical social practices in Malaysia. In conceiving the volume, we are advancing an inclusive cultural studies perspective that addresses central issues that, in a Malaysian context, necessarily deal with ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ as the dominant ideological narrative to explain societal conflicts, cleavages and contestations. How have hegemonic discourses of identity been rationalised, naturalised and legitimated in the name of certain forms of political power? How far has the critical agency of different social actors been able to challenge and escape from these normative foundations? In addressing these questions, the contributions provide a truly interdisciplinary and critical method to understanding changing meanings of identities ‘on the move’, at both national and subnational levels. The contributions are organised in three broad themes. Part I, ‘Identities in Contestation: Borders, Complexity and Hybridities’, takes a range of empirical studies—dealing, *inter alia*, with literary translation, religion, gender, ethnicity, indigeneity and sexual orientation—to break down preconceived notions of fixed identities. In doing so the chapters posit a more complex, nuanced notion of hybridity and discuss whether this adequately captures these moving identities. This then opens up an examination in Part II, ‘Identities and Movements: Agency and Alternative Discourses’, in which contributors deal with what can be described as counter-hegemonic social movements and discourses—of antiracism, young people, environmentalism and independent publishing—that explicitly seek to claim greater critical, democratic space within the Malaysian polity. Part III, ‘Identities and Narratives: Culture and Media’, then provides a close (textual) reading of some exemplars of new (and not

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so new) cultural practices found in personal (oral) testimony, popular music, film, radio programming and storytelling who have consciously created bodies of work that question the dominant national narrative.

Keywords Malaysia · Cultural studies · Discourses · Identity · Narratives · Agency · Chapter summaries

This volume provides an empirical and conceptual revisiting and rethinking of agency and identity in Malaysia. In the initial conception of the volume, the editors decided to adopt an inclusive cultural studies perspective in seeking to address key discourses, issues and questions that, in a Malaysian context, necessarily deal with issues of ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ as the dominant approach in explaining societal interactions, conflicts, cleavages, contestations and ideologies. The volume aims to provide a forum for scholars and cultural practitioners to contemplate the multiple identities contained in a nation-state which, from its colonial legacy, has had the impulse to think, imagine and represent its citizens in terms of fixed and primordial ‘racial’ categories. Official renderings of the Malaysian government and its agencies, such as Tourism Malaysia, present to the world beyond a multiracial country which is straightforwardly categorised into ‘Malays’, ‘Chinese’ and ‘Indians’, with the brief and occasional reference to ‘Others’ (the exotic, marginal populations of interior peninsular Malaysia, Sarawak and Sabah). In this volume we present substantial empirical evidence that this is not the case. Malaysia, in terms of its identities and how these are negotiated, is endlessly complex and provides an ideal laboratory for the investigation of what identity means in our globalised world.

The focus on race and ethnicity as the main means to express and sustain identity in Malaysia is, if nothing else, obsessive. The book seeks to contribute to an interdisciplinary and critical dialogue about changing meanings of identity in Malaysia which have both national and transnational significance. However, our concept of identity is not confined to ethnicity and race but also encompasses issues of gender, socioeconomic class and age (particularly youth activism and politics), and identities which are generated through the medium of popular culture, a medium which lends itself to the emergence and development of ‘alternative discourses’. More specifically we also address matters of religion, particularly and obviously Islam, as an identifier, and though a major sociocultural element in ethnic definition, it is also a vitally important mode of identification and orientation in Malaysian national and local life. What we have tried to capture, then, are those alternative narratives—from the perspectives of minorities, populations at the margins of the nation-state, youth, migrants, refugees, cultural practitioners—that are removed from the dominant, and what we consider to be the rather tedious, politically driven discussions of ‘race’ and ‘primordialism’ in Malaysia. Taking note of the fact that Malaysia’s preoccupations in the nation-building process are not to do with race at all, if we conceive of race in an appropriately technical anthropological-archaeological sense, we focus on ethnic identities. Our volume reveals that some alternative narratives have enjoyed some success in disseminating their views, interests and aspirations. But there are others in

such fields as environmental activism, sexual identities and independent publishing which, in effect, have been incorporated into mainstream or dominant discourses or at least have struggled to claim and maintain an independent and recognised voice.

The essays in this volume also have significance beyond Malaysia, even though it is not comparative in scope. We are conscious of the fact that many of the themes which we address have relevance for the wider Southeast Asia. In particular, there are chapters that have resonance with other neighbouring Muslim communities in the region (in Indonesia, Brunei, Singapore, southern Thailand and the southern Philippines) in relation to gender, identities, youth, the environment and development. Such issues as refugees, minority identities and popular culture find parallels with neighbouring countries such as Thailand and, again, Indonesia. However, in order to provide an intellectual and analytical intensity and an empirical richness to our concern with discourses, agency and representation we have chosen to focus on Malaysia although we contextualise our case material not only within the nation-state but also within Southeast Asia.

1.1 The Main Themes

We have organised and divided the contributions into three broad themes or sections on the ways that identities have been understood in everyday discourse and understandings in Malaysia and in officially sanctioned exchanges based principally on government decisions about identities, constitutional definitions and categories, and politically and religiously driven ideologies—and how these have been debated and contested. We recognise that these themes are permeable and open-ended. We could have organised the chapters in different ways since there is overlap between the themes and connections between chapters across the three sections. Nevertheless, we suggest that the themes are reasonably coherent, provisionally productive and enable us to direct ourselves to future research agendas.

Our first section is entitled ‘Identities in Contestation: Borders, Complexity and Hybridities’. It embraces a range of empirical studies of different forms and expressions of identity—addressing, *inter alia*, literary translation, religion, gender, age, ethnicity, indigeneity and sexual orientation—in the context of preconceived, or what we might term ‘primordial’, notions of fixed identities. However, fixity is not a characteristic which we can apply easily and straightforwardly to our research on ethnic identities, interactions and transformations. Identities are generated in the realm of ideas and subjective understandings and perceptions, and then ‘fixed’ in political, constitutional, legal and ideological terms in Malaysia. In this regard, we have to recognise that some identities, particularly those of majority populations (in this case Muslim Malays), are more stable, fixed and enduring (though subject to challenge). And at the same time, these forces are constantly at work, successfully or unsuccessfully, to bring minority populations into their concept of identity, which is usually one based on some notion of a homogeneous, culturally defined nation-state which has its origins in an imagined past, in Benedict Anderson’s terms. It is a macro-level

identity with certain key defining elements giving shape and form to an overarching conception of what is thought to constitute ‘Malaysian-ness’. Nevertheless, identities at a subnational level, particularly among minorities who feel themselves to be excluded from an ‘essentialised’ and primordial Malaysia, constantly negotiate and construct their identities in an uneasy and seemingly never-ending relationship of adaptation and contention.

In some respects, our first section on identities in contestation could have embraced the whole volume. Identities are always contested and in the process of (re)formation, though we recognise that, depending on political, economic, historical and cultural circumstances, room for manoeuvre and flexibility varies. Therefore, side by side with complexity and hybridity, we emphasise firmly, in the second section of the volume, the possibilities of agency and alternatives. The several chapters in this section on ‘Identities and Movements: Agency and Alternative Discourses’ present a complex, nuanced notion of movement and movements, in which contributors deal with what can be described as counter-hegemonic discourses and ideas—of antiracism, youth activism, environmentalism and independent publishing—which engage with issues concerning the need for greater critical, democratic space within the Malaysian polity. Here we address the organisational dimensions of alternative narratives. Then the third section, ‘Identities and Narratives: Culture and Media’, provides a close (textual) reading of some exemplars of new (and not so new) cultural practices found in personal testimonies, popular music, film, radio programming and storytelling who have consciously created bodies of work that question the dominant national narrative. This is where our cultural studies preoccupations exhibit themselves to the full.

1.2 The National Context in Identity Formation, Flux and Hybridity

As a nation-state moves through its era of postcolonialism it has to meet both the internal and global challenges of nation-building, economic development and all the attendant processes of modernisation and transformation. Malaysia, in this national and global context, is no different. Since Malaya’s independence in 1957 to the 13 May 1969 ‘racial riots’ tragedy, and then through to the New Economic Policy (NEP) period from the 1970s until the current post-NEP phase and globalisation, including the embrace of the Mahathir Mohamad-inspired Vision 2020, the country’s preoccupation with ‘development’—in its broadest economic, social, cultural and political senses—has always been its political *raison d’être* and the anchor of its ruling classes. We should also remind ourselves of the fact that the British colonial ‘plural society’ legacy of Malaya from 1957 and then the wider Federation of Malaysia from 1963 (which, with the Malaysian Borneo territories, added further complexities to ethnic/racial politics) has also been a critical factor in driving home the urgency of redressing the problems of the economy, in particular the economic

imbalance between the Malays and other indigenous populations (or *Bumiputera*) and the non-Malay components of the populace (especially the Chinese).

Mediated through the rationale of a Malay-dominated polity, the economic basis of its postcolonial nationalism was transparent from 1957 onwards. However, what is often forgotten is that these are also processes of contestation involving the state apparatus, institutions, and various socially and culturally defined actors. These include those defined by gender and transgender, refugees, immigrants, indigenous minorities, artists and musicians, popular culture practitioners, youth activists, and representatives of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and socioeconomic classes in which identities are continuously being constructed and reconstructed, and negotiated and renegotiated. At the empirical, on-the-ground level, it is apparent that changes are occurring in the arena of political and sociocultural contestation, and particularly in the shifting discourse of meanings attached to identities, and continuously reconstituted by state policies, globalisation, and the ever-changing and locally situated political and lived social processes of transformation. It is therefore crucial that questions of identities are examined and understood in the context of the rapidly changing and modernising nation-state of Malaysia, and that as spaces open up for debate and discussion we turn our attention to alternative ways of framing identities.

In terms of conceptual framework and perspective, it is equally pertinent that existing analyses of identities move on from the conventional 'plural society' or 'race relations' concepts. It is essential to incorporate, in our current analyses, reference to the changing dynamics of Malaysian nationhood and political economy without being entrapped in the increasingly old-fashioned 'modernisation' or 'dependency' approaches, or a Marxist view of society which sees contestation purely in terms of 'class struggle' and identities as a manifestation of that struggle, or in a neo-Marxism which cannot adequately grapple with the question of identity or other superstructural themes. Therefore, we propose that, in adopting a cultural studies approach that is situated in an Asian and more specifically a Southeast Asian context, we can then present, in this volume, a challenge to the dominant discourses which have hitherto dictated the understanding of identity formation and transformation. In this exercise we explore the concept of culture, its complex relationships to 'social forms', and what we might refer to as 'sociocultures'. In examining the relationships between the 'cultural' and the 'social' and their expressions in 'identities', we are hopeful that we have been able to embrace processes of hybridisation, syncretism, the definition, maintenance and (possible) shifting of boundaries, and indigenisation, situated in the context of national projects which promote dominant discourses or, in Gramscian terms, cultural hegemony.

The general acceptance of these dominant discourses, exemplified in the Foucauldian 'regimes of truth', gives testimony to the correlations in cultural studies between meaning, power and knowledge. In short, it refers to the power to define and interpret in a certain discursive field, the outcome of which will have far-reaching implications for both the scholarly and public understanding of certain critical issues in society and its transformations. Power is exercised through the state apparatus which deploys a range of agencies: constitutional, politico-ideological, legal. In

practical terms, these embrace rewards and punishments, advantages and disadvantages, positive and negative images of good and not-so-good citizens. While public understanding and interpretation may often be easily swayed by such persuasion (for instance, the all-too-familiar pronouncement which correlates Islam with terrorism), the task of scholars, though some are more independent than others, is based generally on a more privileged position. In this excursion into a multiplicity of Malaysian identities we endeavour to engage in critical scholarship, to contest, and provide as evidence a credible empirical record. We have attempted, insofar as our empirical research allows, to deconstruct these knowledges and narratives that have been elevated as ‘dominant discourses’ or ‘regimes of truth’ in understanding post-independence Malaysia. Ultimately, through critical research, detailed empirical inquiry, a set of perspectives which uses elements of a cultural studies approach, and with the utilisation of appropriate methodological tools, we seek to unravel alternative ways of ‘seeing the world’, specifically the ‘Malaysian world’, and to uncover the subjugated discourses that have remained hidden in the ongoing struggle over meanings with a view ultimately to develop alternative narratives.

1.3 The Structure and Content of the Volume

1.3.1 Identities in Contestation: Borders, Complexity and Hybridities

We commence our excursion with a collection of essays on identities in contestation. In their several ways, they suggest how and in what contexts identities are constructed and transformed. Victor T. King, in ‘Culture and Identity on the Move’, addresses the dynamism and transformational quality of culture and identity, its complex inter-relationship with social forms, and the relevance of this conceptual fluidity to the experiences of Malaysia and its place within Southeast Asia. This chapter focuses on images of cultural identity in Malaysia and their modes of representation and classification at different levels or scales of magnitude. This in turn requires an examination of expressions of nationhood, in the context of nation-building, in interaction and engagement with identities at the subnational level which comprise what he refers to as ethnic groups and categories. Identity in its specific expression in ethnicity is a form of social cleavage, and a means of boundary-setting and organising social and cultural relations in terms of similarity and difference. It is argued that identity cannot exist apart from the establishment and maintenance of cultural difference and the construction and operation of boundaries, and is generated and sustained in relationships, both at the level of ideas and in practice with others who are perceived to be and categorised as ‘not us’ or ‘other’. In other words, the ways in which identity operates is relational. The Malaysian case is situated in a South-east Asian context in which the ethnic paradigm has played an important role in the modern social science of the region, and particularly in historical, social, cultural,

economic and political studies. The challenge to dominant discourses in relation to race and ethnicity is exemplified in case material taken from the experiences of two categories of Malaysian ‘indigenes’ outside the Malay states: non-Malay indigenous populations in Sarawak and Portuguese Eurasians in Penang. King’s main concern is to understand how and under what circumstances identities are formed and transformed, an issue which is brought into sharp focus in the context of post-independent nation-building.

The next three chapters add historical depth to questions of identity formation and its accommodations and contestations. In ‘The Travelling Text’ Gareth Richards focuses on the plural, multiethnic and multilingual Malay world. While much of the discussion is on the nineteenth-century port cities of the Straits Settlements, notably Penang, he adopts a much longer historical view to identify the antecedents to the making of this world. His analysis draws on Edward Said’s notion of ‘travelling theory’ and the histories of the production, dissemination and reception of knowledge and ideas, as well as the analogous concept of the ‘travelling text’ which comprises the cross-fertilisation, retelling, grafting, borrowing and imitation of the written word across space and time. In doing so, the discussion poses the question of how and why ideas circulate and knowledge is constructed. The analysis proposes that linguistic transmission and translation over the *longue durée*, and the absorption, localisation and indigenisation of world languages and texts, created deeply sedimented cultural norms and a sense of a hybrid identity in the Malay world.

Richards deploys the notion of ‘cosmopolises of language’ to show how Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian in particular, and to a different extent Chinese, fashioned networks of ideas, elaborated through language, and diffused by borrowing, translation and adaptation that resulted in a syncretic, mutable and plural culture in Southeast Asia. These networks were extended, and not erased, by the imposition of colonial rule, especially from the eighteenth century onwards. The worlds that emerged from the history of cultural exchange and translation—a discourse often reduced to the trope of European Orientalism—contained important continuities even across the ruptures created by colonialism. This provides a corrective to the notion that colonial knowledge and cosmopolitanism were constructed by Europeans alone. Instead, it is argued that ‘Oriental’ knowledge has been both a European and an Asian invention. Richards illustrates these processes through a close reading of some exemplary travelling or world texts that circulated the globe and settled and were indigenised in the Malay world. He then describes the ways the British, under the sponsorship of the East India Company and Evangelical missionaries, made concerted efforts to grapple with the translation of texts. While most historical analyses privilege the role of Europeans—Orientalists—in these processes, Richards seeks to rescue indigenous translators and writers from the margins of the archival record and to emphasise their relative autonomy and agency. In the context of the cosmopolitan Straits Settlements, hybrid translators, scribes and writers such as Ibrahim Kandu, Ahmad Rijaluddin, Siami and Munshi Abdullah bridged cultural boundaries and helped write new kinds of texts for new kinds of readers. In this effort, they were abetted by the print revolution that fundamentally altered the dissemination of texts in the Malay world and beyond. In

turn, they would help lay the foundations for a new print culture that would generate the means to write back to empire and to write a new society.

In her chapter 'In Body and Spirit' Wazir Jahan B. Karim provides an encouraging message to all Muslim women across Southeast Asia. She explores the implications of an 'indigenous feminism', the challenge that it presents to their status as a 'biological category' that is assigned, in primordial mode terms, to a 'pristine domesticity'. It further challenges the 'masculine voice' and examines the intensely debated issue of sexual complementarity, but Karim does so here in relation to formal Islamic discourses. She also compares these formal discourses to cultural perspectives on sexual equality in the Malay world of Southeast Asia based on *adat* or custom. It argues that Islam does not advocate sexual equality, since it highlights differences of biology, sex and function between men and women. In other words, Islam advocates gender complementarity more than equality, with differences in status and function located in political, jural and domestic leadership. However, the extent to which ideas of complementarity negate or promote women's empowerment is the crucial issue.

A dominant indigenous view in Malay society, based on *adat*, is that the complementarity of sex and gender provides women with their own sphere of influence and dominance, which can be just as empowering and balanced as the public and political roles granted to men through both *adat* and Islam. This indigenous view opposes mainstream Western feminist theory which advocates gender equality as a necessary universal in modern society. Rather, the argument supports an alternative view that women are significantly empowered provided they are able to interpret these differences to their advantage and build innovative trends in leadership, economic activities and social life. What is a poignant reminder of the ways in which Southeast Asian peoples have addressed their everyday lives is that 'practical culture challenges faith'. But not only this—it challenges a universal interpretation of religion and faith. Karim leaves us with one of the main motivations for embarking on this volume, in this case specific to Muslim women in Malaysia, that they 'can elude, negotiate, ignore, oppose and challenge biological categories'. We might add that all kinds of categories (biological-gender-race, cultural-ethnic, politico-ideological) which are imposed by dominant political elites can be challenged.

We then move from gender to ethnic minorities in Sarawak and Sabah. Valerie Mashman, on behalf of the Kelabit of Sarawak, is in search of their perceptions of 'the good life at the edge of Malaysia'. She proposes that the oral history of the indigenous peoples of Sarawak has remained a muted component in the discourse of national history. This comes as no surprise with the demise of the Borneo Literature Bureau some years ago and its championing of indigenous languages, which was then incorporated into Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka with a mission to promote a Malay-based national language policy. Yet, as her case study of the narratives of the headman of Long Peluan longhouse in the Kelabit highlands on the margins of the Malaysian nation-state reveals, it can be a source of insight into the perceptions and aspirations of its multiethnic populations. The study conveys how crucial the inclusive identity *lun tauh* (our people) was for the ancestors as they migrated with their allies to find a safe place to live. The narrative then moves forward to a time that the Kelabit refer to as *ulun perintah* (life of government), describing their quest for assistance from