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## Colonial Construction of Malayness: The Influence of Population Size and Composition

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# **Colonial Construction of Malayness: The Influence of Population Size and Composition**

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## **Abstract**

Malaysia's present population of 26 million is ethnically classified under the categories of 'Bumiputera', 'Chinese', 'Indian' and 'Others'. These ethnic classifications of 'Malay', Chinese, 'Indian' and 'Others' mask the diversities of ethnicities within each category. Using census categories as a tool for analysis, this paper focuses on the creation of the category of 'Malays and Other Natives of the Archipelago' which first appeared in the 1891 Straits Settlements census and the various ethnicities it compassed that have influenced the boundaries of Malayness today. It focuses on migrants from the Dutch East Indies who were classified under the category of 'Malays and other Natives of the Archipelago', and demonstrates that the absolute and relative population size of these communities and the Malay population in relation to other communities, was a major factor which determined their inclusion into the above category which laid down the boundaries of Malayness.

## **Race and Ethnicity in Malaysia: Background**

Malaysia's present population of approximately 26 million<sup>1</sup> is classified under four major categories of '*Bumiputera*', 'Chinese', 'Indian' and 'Others'. The *Bumiputera* - 'sons of the soil' are the major category consisting of about 65% of Malaysia's population. The term *Bumiputera* includes ethnic Malays and other non-Malay indigenous groups. The Chinese are the next largest ethnic group at 26% of the population, followed by the Indians at 8%. Other minority ethnicities are categorized as 'Others', making up 1% of the total population<sup>2</sup>. Islam is the major religion, with over 60% of the population stating themselves as Muslim.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Statistics Malaysia (Population at 25.99 million for 2005 1<sup>st</sup> quarter)

<sup>2</sup> Malaysia Population and Housing Census 2000

Approximately 19% of Malaysians are Buddhists, 9% are Christians, 6% are Hindus and over 2% follow Confucianism / Taoism or other Chinese religions.<sup>3</sup>

Ethnicity is a crucial defining factor in Malaysia and the relevance of ethnicity in everyday activities such as finding a room to rent or a job is illustrated through advertisements from leading Malaysian English newspapers<sup>4</sup>.

**ROOMS TO LET (a)**

- "Sect. 3. Shah Alam, B'glow hse, near MARA Institute / shop, easy access. **Malay girls only.** 016-3700914
- OUG, Old Klang Road. Furnished with bathroom. **Working Chinese lady.** Privacy. RM300. 012-2507199
- Sect 6, PJ. Part furnished at RM250. Available 01/01/04, **Indian house.** Tel: 03-79800133

**HOUSES TO LET (a)**

- Section 17/1A. 2 rooms, rental RM700 per month. **Chinese family only.** Tel: 78051589

**VACANCIES**

- Accounts Officer (b)  
Minimum SPM with LCCI higher / diploma in accounting. Able to keep full set of account. Computer literate. Familiar with Acctrak 21 accounting software. **Chinese female preferred.** Remuneration will commensurate with qualification & experience.
- Security Guards (c)  
Minimum SRP. Strong and healthy. Age 30 - 45 years. Able to work shift / public holidays. **Bumiputera preferred.**
- Lorry Driver (c)  
An established company in Jln Ipoh required urgently Lorry driver & general workers **any race.** Call 4046288.

The current ethnic classifications of 'Malay', 'Chinese', 'Indian' and 'Others' mask the diversities of ethnicities within each category. The development of these categories can be

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<sup>3</sup> Other categories for religion listed in the Malaysia Population and Housing Census are folk religion, others and no religion.

<sup>4</sup> Advertisements from the New Straits Times (a), the Star (b) and the Malay Mail (c) on Friday, December 19, 2003. Highlights done by author.

traced back to colonial practices, with the census playing a major role in shaping these categories. The fluidity of the boundaries of Malayness is well recognized (Andaya 2001, Nagata 1974, Shamsul 2004) and continues to be challenged. This paper focuses on the creation of the category of 'Malays and Other Natives of the Archipelago' which first appeared in the 1891 Straits Settlements census and the various ethnicities it compassed that have influenced the boundaries of Malayness today.

Prior to the onset of colonialism, the residents of the Malay Peninsula could not be said to have held a high degree of ethnic identification (Nagata 1981:97-101). Colonial immigration policies, which needed labor for tin mining and agriculture plantations resulted in a huge influx of immigrants. The large scale migration which took place from 1850 - 1920 contributed towards changing the demographic composition of the country (Hirschman and Suan-Pow 1979:2). In 1911, the Malayan Peninsula had a population size of only 2.3 million. However by 1947, this had doubled to 4.9 million with the growth being entirely due to immigration (Hirschman 1980:104-105). Migrant workers came from China, India, with the third largest migrant group coming from the then Dutch East Indies islands of Java and Sumatra (Kaur 2004:1). These laborers soon outnumbered the Malay population in the Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States, resulting in rapid political and economic changes, and also raising ethnic awareness (Hirschman 1986:336).

Censuses are a powerful tool in creating ethnic categories and shaping boundaries. The first modern census in Malaya was in 1871, covering the Straits Settlements, which were the port cities of Penang, Malacca and Singapore. Further population censuses were carried out in the Straits Settlements in 1881, 1891, 1901, and 1911 (Hirschman 1987:559). Between 1871 and 1957 when independence was announced, the colonial government of Malaya conducted at least 14 censuses.

Through developing various ethnic classification schemes and categorizing the population, the census-maker had an influential role in setting ethnic boundaries.

This paper will argue that in creating and deciding which ethnicities fell under the category of 'Malays and other Natives of the Archipelago', the major factor influencing the census-maker's

decision in determining the boundaries of Malayness was the population size of each ethnic community.

***Population size as a factor in constructing ethnic boundaries: Javanese and Sumatrans communities***

Many of the Malays today are descendents of migrants from Java, Borneo, the Celebes and Sumatra (Dodge 1980:442). Due to the fluid boundary of Malayness since the pre-colonial era, there was a high rate of assimilation which has resulted in many present-day Malays, although born in Malaysia, having shallow genealogical roots on the peninsula (Nagata 1993, Andaya 2001, Miller 1998). According to Vlieland, Superintendent of the 1931 Census, *‘only a negligible fraction of the Malay population consists of descendents of pre-nineteenth century immigrants and ... more than half of it has less than 50 years prescriptive right to the title of “owners of the soil” ...’* (Vlieland in Dodge 1980:443).

Data from Table 1 below shows that as late as 1947, almost thirty percent of the ‘Malaysian’ population was still foreign born. The term ‘Malaysian’ was used for the first time in the 1931 British census and again in the 1947. It referred to the Malay, aboriginal and Indonesian ethnicities, and not to a nationality as it’s presently used today.

**Table 1: Estimate of ‘Malaysian’ based on the 1947 Census.**

Malays	born in Malaya	2,199, 598
Javanese	born in Java	187, 755
Sundanese	born in Java	751
Boyanesse	born in Sumatra	20,429
Achinese	born in Sumatra	1,143
Menangkabau	born in Sumatra	10,866
Korinchi	born in Sumatra	2,412
Palembangan	born in Sumatra	1,116
Djambi	born in Sumatra	980
Other Sumatran people	born in Sumatra	9,806
Bandjarese	born in Borneo	62,356
Bugis	born in Celebes	6,962
Other Malaysians		343,971

Source: Fisher, C.A, South-East Asia. London: Methuan & Co. Ltd, table 85, p.637 in Kaur 2004:10

Under colonialism, European planters and British officials were keen to obtain laborers from the Dutch East Indies as they were regarded as better suited to the climate and would assimilate more easily with the local Malays because of ethnic and cultural similarities (Parmer 1960:109).

The British both viewed and treated migrants from Indonesia differently since they were regarded as originating from the same racial stock as the Malays (Kaur 2004:4). In preparing census classifications, the Indonesia population was classified together with the Malay population. This colonial action had a strong influence in defining the boundaries of Malayness.

Both the Straits Settlement censuses of 1871 and 1881 contained a list of categories with three Western groups at the top, followed by an alphabetical list of the rest of the population (Hirschman 1987:571) (with the addition of the category of the British Military and Chinese dialect groups in the 1881 census). These early censuses listed the Malays, aboriginal groups and ethnic groups from Indonesia, which included the Achinese, Andamanese, Boyanese, Bugis and Javanese separately (Hirschman 1987:571).

In the 1891 Straits Settlements census however, the census-maker made major structural changes in the classification of ethnicities. Six major headings were introduced which were 'Europeans and Americans', 'Eurasians', 'Chinese', 'Malays and other Natives of the archipelago', 'Tamils and other Natives of India' and 'Other Races'. The forty-eight different ethnicities were sorted under these major headings. Under the category 'Malays and Natives of the archipelago', the Achinese, Boyanese, Bugis, Javanese, and Malays were listed among other ethnicities (from Census of 1891, in Hirschman 1987:571). The word race appeared for the first time in the 1891 census, in the appendix providing instructions to enumerators (Merewether 1892 in Hirschman 1987:561). The creation of the category of 'Malay and other Natives of the Archipelago' and the inclusion of the various ethnicities in it contributed towards formalizing the boundaries of Malayness.

The structure of the 1891 Straits Settlement census with its subheadings was replicated in all further censuses administered by the British in the Straits Settlement and in the Federate Malay



States in 1901 and 1911, and later in British Malaya from 1921 – 1947. Even though census categories were often arbitrarily created and loosely defined, the colonial tool of census taking has played a major role in defining group membership (Cohn 1987 in Gladney 1998:7).

Though it may appear that the census classifications appear fluid and arbitrary, I argue that demographic conditions influenced the way these headings were constructed and the choice of ethnicities included under each heading. As the earliest censuses were created and implemented in the Straits Settlements, the demographic conditions prevailing in the Straits Settlements, notably Penang would have had an influence on the classification scheme. Table 2 illustrates the population size of the various ethnic categories in the Straits Settlements of Penang from 1812 – 1891.

**Table 2: Population size of the Malays, “Other Malaysians”, Chinese and Indian categories in selected years from 1812 – 1891 in Penang.**

Year	Malays	Other Malaysians	Chinese	Indian	Total
1812	9,854a (37.7%)		7,558 (28.9%)	7,113	26,107
1820	14,080a (40.2%)		8,595 (24.5%)	8,536 (24.4%)	35,035
1842	18,442a (45.5%)		9,715 (23.9%)	9,681 (23.9%)	40,499
1860	71,723a (57.4%)		36,222 (29%)	14,132 (11.3%)	124,772
1871	70,533 (52.9%)	4,683 (3.5%)	36,561 (27.4%)	18,611 (13.9%)	133,230
1881	82,981 (44%)	7,150 (3.8%)	67,354 (37.8%)	27,202 (14.4%)	188,245
1891	92,681 (39.9%)	11,674 (5%)	86,988 (37.5%)	35,987 (15.5%)	232,003

a. Including “Other Malaysians”

Source: Figures from Report on the 1947 Census of Population, p584

Figures as early as 1812 state that the Malay population (which included long settled migrants from Indonesia) in Penang was 37.7% (9,854) while the next biggest group was the Chinese at 28.9% (7,558). It may have captured the attention of the colonial authorities that the Malays, who were regarded as being indigenous and whose interest they were supposed to protect, were gradually becoming a minority in relation to other groups, especially with the Chinese.

Further analysis of the combined population size in all the Straits Settlements from 1871, when the first census was implemented, emphasizes this point. Table 3 shows that by 1881 the Malays were already slightly outnumbered by the Chinese.

**Table 3: Total combined population breakdown according to ethnic groupings in the Straits Settlements of Penang, Malacca and Singapore**

Year	Malays	Other Malaysians	Chinese	Indian	Total
1871	147,340 (47.8%)	12,151 (3.9%)	104,615 (33.9%)	33,389 (10.8%)	308,097
1881	172,649 (41%)	19,974 (4.7%)	173,861 (41.3%)	41,231 (9.8%)	421,032
1891	184,809 (36.3%)	26,398 (5.2%)	227,057 (44.6%)	53,669 (10.5%)	509,290

Source: Figures from Report on the 1947 Census of Population: 584, 588

In discussing population size as a factor in ethnic boundary construction, Chai (1996:289) states that in a large population center, *‘the optimal size will be considerably larger than the number of migrants from any single community of origin.’* Competition for scarce resources such as jobs, education, goods and services result in individuals forming alliances with groups that pursue shared interests to gain political leverage. Chai (2005:9) adds that a group that gets too large risks fragmenting (Chai 2005:9). A probable explanation would be that once a group gets bigger than the size necessary to leverage political pressure, resources would have to be divided or shared over a larger number of individuals resulting in a smaller share for everyone, hence resentment.

Based on the above principle, grouping migrants from Indonesia who were already viewed as being closer in culture to the Malays in the “Malays and other Natives of the Archipelago” category of the 1891 census, provided a small but significant increase to this overall category. In addition to being dependent on what they seek to encompass, boundaries are also dependent on what they seek to exclude. The other communities, in particular the Chinese, were too large to be included but instead, were sizable enough to construct a boundary against. Thus, it can be argued that the category of ‘Malays and other Natives of the Archipelago’ was created to assist in maintaining a demographic balance in the Straits Settlements. This in turn created an

imaginary indigenous majority ethnicity, which indirectly laid down the boundaries of Malayness. Nagata (1979:45) adds that the close cultural, religious and linguistic affinities of all the Malay and Indonesian-origin peoples, who almost without exception are Muslims, may have undoubtedly helped in this easy identification and ‘census assimilation’.

However it is arguable whether this ‘cultural stuff’ as Barth would have referred to, in this case being Muslim and sharing a similar culture, would have been as important if the Indonesian migrant category had been as large as the other immigrant communities. If the Malays had already been in a majority position, it is also questionable whether the boundaries of Malayness would have been as flexible to include migrants from Indonesia. In such a scenario, the boundaries of Malayness may have been constructed to exclude the Indonesian migrants. Under the situation prevailing in the 1890s however, population size rather than religion and culture appear to have been a more important criterion, as the category of “Malays and Other Natives of the Archipelago” also included non-Muslim migrant communities such as the ‘Manilamen’ who were presumably Filipino and Catholic.

Studies of the Javanese and Sumatran communities however, illustrate differing levels of assimilation, which varied according to state. In the state of Johor, Javanese seem more inclined to identify as Malay compared with Javanese in the state of Selangor. The high level of assimilation in Johor among migrants from Java and Sumatra is noted in the 1947 census (Del Tufo 1947:73). The 1947 census contained the categories of “Malay“ and “Other Malaysians” among its seven main ‘race’ categories (Del Tufo, 1947:71). The 1947 census report states that the distinction between Malays and Other Malaysians was not very great, and respondents were classified according to their preferences (Del Tufo, 1947:71,72). In Johor, the numbers of those classified as “Other Malaysians” decrease from 51.41% in 1931 to 31.38% in 1947. At the same time, those classifying themselves as Malays increased from 48.3% in 1931 to 68.2% in 1947 (Del Tufo 1947:73).

Barth (1969) states that changes in circumstances bring about incentives to change one’s identity. Once again, I argue that ethnic boundary maintenance is dependent on demographic factors,

resulting in different rates of assimilation of the Javanese communities in Selangor and Johor into becoming Malays.

Table 4 shows the total population size in the states of Selangor and Johor. While the population of Johor was smaller than the population of Selangor in 1911 and 1921, it experienced rapid population increase and was marginally more populous than Selangor by 1947 (Del Tufo 1947:39). However unlike Selangor which experienced a steady growth rate, the growth rate in Johor fluctuated widely.

**Table 4: Changing Population Size in the States of Selangor and Johore**

	Total Population				Percentage Increase		
	1911	1921	1931	1947	1911-1921	1921-1931	1931-1947
Selangor	294,035	401,009	533,197	710,788	36.3	32.9	33.3
Johor	180,412	282,234	505,311	738,251	56.4	79.0	46.1

Source: Census of 1947:39

The high population growth rate in Johor was due to an influx of migrants from China, India and also from Java and Sumatra. A rapid changing environment brings about high levels of political and economic uncertainty. It would have been a rational choice for the Javanese to align themselves quickly with the Malays as they would have occupied a more stable position in society. In comparison with Selangor, which had uniformed percentage increases, the level of uncertainty may not have been as high, and thus there was less need for the Selangor Javanese to align themselves with the Malays.

Furthermore, the rapid demographic changes in Johor which reduced the position of the Malays from being in the largest community at 40% of the population in 1911 to 22% in 1931 (Del Tufo 1947:585,586) may have also forced the Malays to be flexible with their ethnic boundaries. Between 1911 and 1931, the Chinese population increased from 35% to 43%, making them the largest community in Johor, while the Indonesian (majority Javanese) population increased from 21% to 24% (Del Tufo 1947:585,586). With the Malays no longer being in the majority, the

boundary of Malayness may have become flexible and sought to incorporate the Javanese and Sumatrans communities.

Barth (1969) states that a group's adaptation to a niche in nature is affected by its absolute size, while a group's adaptation to a niche constituted by another ethnic group is affected by its relative size. The relative size of the Javanese and Sumatrans in Selangor and Johor had differing impacts on ethnic boundaries, both in terms of maintaining their identities and assimilating to Malayness. Table 5 shows the percentage breakdown according to ethnicity in the states of Selangor and Johor in 1931 and 1947.

**Table 5: Ethnic composition of population in Selangor and Johor in 1947 as percentage of total population. Figures in brackets refer to 1931 figures.**

	Malays	Other Malaysians*	Chinese	Indians	Other Groups
Selangor	14.96 (12.5)	11.39 (10.6)	51.03 (45.3)	20.43 (29.2)	2.19 (2.4)
Johor	30.08 (22.5)	13.76 (23.9)	48.06 (41.4)	7.46 (10.1)	0.64 (2.1)

Source: Census of 1947, p41

\* Javanese consisted about 60% of 'Other Malaysians' in Selangor and 76% of 'Other Malaysians' in Johore.

The proportion of Malays and Other Malaysians (majority Javanese) were about the same size in Johor in 1931 at 22.5% and 23.6% respectively, while the Chinese were at a dominant size of 41.4%. An ideal point for an ethnic group size is approximately half the size of the population (Chai 1996:289). As discussed above, ethnic boundaries of Malayness may have become more flexible in Johor when the Malays felt that their position was threatened and thus saw incorporating the Javanese into the Malay ethnicity an attractive option to maintain an ideal group size of about half the population. The percentage increase in the Malay category, combined with a reduction in the 'Other Malaysians' category by 1947, indicates that ethnic boundaries would have been flexible.

In contrast in Selangor in 1931, the Chinese occupied a highly dominant position at 45.3%, while both the Malays and 'Other Malaysians' were in the minority at 12.5% and 10.6%. It may have made perfect sense for boundaries to become flexible and for both groups to merge.

Nevertheless unlike Johor, this happened at a very much slower rate. A possible explanation could be that as early as 1891, the Chinese were already in the majority at 62% while the Malays were at 29% (Del Tufo 1947:585). The boundaries of Malayness would have been constructed against the Chinese. Being in a displaced minority position, the Malays may have developed a stricter interpretation of Malayness, which became rigid over the years. Any merger with the Javanese or Sumatran or any other community in the ‘Other Malaysian’ category still would not have given the Malays a numerical advantage in Selangor.

Both absolute and relative population size of an ethnic group appear to be an important factor in the construction and maintenance of boundaries of Malayness, especially in relation to the Javanese.

### **Conclusion**

The census category of ‘Malay and other Natives of the Archipelago’ and the ethnicities it contained laid down the foundations of the boundaries of present day ‘Malayness’. As discussed, it appeared that the rapidly changing demographic structure much influenced the decision of the census-makers in deciding how to classify an ethnic group. The optimal size of the ‘Indonesian’ migrant community combined with the perceived close cultural ties with the Malay population, made them an ideal group to extend the boundaries of Malayness for inclusion.

In line with Gladney’s (1998:1) statement of majorities being made and not born, the construction of the boundaries of Malayness appears to owe much to the political consideration of the colonial authorities in striving to keep the perceived indigenous community in the majority.

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