

ULASAN BUKU/BOOK REVIEW

Cultural Contestations: Mediating Identities in a Changing Malaysian Society by Zawawi Ibrahim, ed., London: ASEAN Academic Press, 1998. 204 pp. index.

The essays in this volume first appeared in the *Tonan Ajia Kenkyu* journal of the Centre for Southeast Asian Studies in Kyoto. It is fitting that Zawawi Ibrahim of Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) has now made them available to Malaysianists in book form.

The five essays in the book address an enduring theme in the social sciences in what has now become the newly recognised field of cultural studies. It is indeed welcome that editor Zawawi, a social anthropologist, has taken up the cudgels for cultural studies in Malaysia.

The leading essay by Shamsul A.B. tries to set the parameters for mediating identities in a changing Malaysian society. The author artfully tackles the problems of discourse analysis thus far by locating them along two major tropes, namely, "authority-defined" and everyday-defined" forms of social reality. Too much construction of knowledge on Malaysia falls under the first category and much this is also "ethnicised" knowledge. Shamsul himself has delved into the other level of social reality but laments the fact that Malaysianists of the second type have in general failed to make an impact. He takes particular issue with "radical" scholarship of the second genre for failing to transcend ethnicised knowledge.

Shamsul suggests the already available notion of "nation-in-intent" (contra "imagined community" of Benedict Anderson) as a way out of the discursive impasse of identity politics in Malaysia. Perhaps even such a concept falters because of its implicit authoritative posture. Malaysianist efforts at the expansion of the discursive terrains of identity politics, including the effort of Shamsul himself, seemingly continue to be locked in the valorization of the authority-defining "nation" as the construct of analysis. Such a stance defeats the author's own pleas for the increased profiling of "everyday-defined" discourses.

The second essay tackles Chinese ethnicity head on. Political scientist Heng Pek Koon minces few words in suggesting that Malaysian "Chineseness" in its various political-economic ramifications will be invariably defined in the context of "Malay hegemony". In the current phase of politics, the notion of "Bangsa Malaysia" seems like a departure from this hegemonic discourse. Says the author, "By widening the word's connotation to embrace non-Malay

membership, Mahathir appeared to be breaking from the convention of Malay nationalist exclusivity". (p.73)

The author intimates that on closer examination the National Development Policy (NDP), on which Bangsa Malaysia is anchored, remains encumbered by New Economic Policy (NEP)-type strategies on the part of both Malays and Chinese. In other words, ethnicity still functions as a lynchpin of the political practice of Malays and Chinese. The hope that Malays and Chinese will be "co-equals" in political life remains a fond hope, not a reality, confides the author. If such is the case, how does this square with the leading essay's implorations for a departure from "ethnicised" knowledge?

Perhaps some clues could come from Abdul Rahman Embong's piece on social transformation, the state and the middle classes, the third essay in the volume. Abdul Rahman's competent empirical study certainly paints a picture of a fast-transforming Malaysian society in which the middle classes have virtually become the dominant feature of an industrial and consumerist society, perhaps increasingly shorn of its ethnic moorings.

The author's statistical rendering of this social transformation is unassailable but he also makes the assertion that, "There is an increasing trend amongst members of the Malay middle class, despite their state-sponsored mobility, to assert independence of the state in terms of career choices." Is this a suggestion that the convergence of middle class lifestyles augurs for more universalised rather than ethnicised discourses on politics and social life? Unfortunately the essay sidesteps the issue and leaving it tantalizingly unanswered.

The fourth essay by Hendrik Maier takes an analytical stab at a modern-day Malay *hikayat* by Ahmad Kotot called "Hikayat Percintaan Kasih Kemudaan". Describing it as a "juicy and sweet stick of sugar cane", the author suggests that Ahmad Kotot's tale of youthful love celebrates pleasure and merriment and shows the lighter side of Malay culture. Ahmad Kotot's writings were conducted in the period of intense Malay transition of the late 1920s, prompting editor Zawawi to suggest that Maier's essay "underscores the pathos of such identity-making" and implicitly "laments the inability of modern Malay writers to laugh at their own condition." (p. 14).

This leads us to Zawawi's own essay on the Orang Asli. Without much ado, the author launches into the discourse of subalternity as the defining feature of the "dispossession crisis" of these minority groupings of Malaysian society. Such a subaltern status has propelled the search for "new subjectivities" among the Orang Asli. Zawawi uses various case studies and copious interviews and conversations with his subjects to make his points.

His analysis forces the reader to engage with the Orang Asli on his own terms as a post-colonial subject dislocated by a developmentalism which has become the dominant mode of the Malaysian political economy.

Is there a discourse and praxis of resistance among the Orang Asli, and what forms do they take? Zawawi intimates that the discourses that he has succeeded in unraveling do hint at "relations of resistance" and a "new political assertion in the making". Orang Asli organizations such as Persatuan Orang Asli Malaysia (POASM) are in the forefront of legal battles with state authorities. The very survival of Orang Asli identity may well depend on their success on such new battlegrounds.

As one of several pioneering ventures to profile "cultural studies" by Malaysians, Zawawi and his co-writers have certainly begun to whet our appetite for more-of-the-same or is it more-of-not-the-same in our celebration of new-found Malaysian *pluralisms*?

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