

MALAYSIAN WORLD-VIEW

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MALAYSIAN WORLD-VIEW

EDITED BY

MOHD. TAIB OSMAN

 SEASP SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES PROGRAM

 ISEAS INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

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FOREWORD

The Southeast Asian Studies Program (SEASP) was established in 1976 in response to a need to promote comparative research and writing on Southeast Asia by scholars in the Social Sciences and Humanities. Of particular concern was the lack of appropriate tertiary level teaching and reference materials pertaining to the region and written from local, though not necessarily nationalistic, perspectives.

Towards this end, SEASP launched three projects: one focused on the preparation of a series of country-specific volumes on Politics and Government, the second on History, and the third on World-View.

The project on World-View initially comprised the production of a volume each on Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand, but was finally scaled down to those involving Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand only. As the work involved almost thirty scholars and the project was complicated, it became increasingly evident that the task was going to take much longer than originally envisaged. Each manuscript had to undergo a process of review by two independent referees - one from within and one from outside the region - to ensure the desired quality. The first volume of the series was published in Thailand in June this year. We are delighted to see the second volume of the series, Malaysia World-View, in print

and look forward to the publication of the Philippine volume in due course.

Needless to say, the project on World-View could not have been completed without the co-operation of the individual contributors, the editor, and the co-ordinator involved. In the case of Malaysia, we are especially thankful to Prof Mohd. Taib Osman, who in addition to being the editor, was the coordinator of the project as a whole. We would also like to express our appreciation to the Ford Foundation for its generous financial support to SEASP and its various projects, including that on World-View.

In thanking all our benefactors and contributors, as well as others who have in one way or another helped to make this publication possible, it is clearly understood that the responsibility for the facts and opinions expressed in Malaysia World-View rests with the individual authors and editor, and their interpretations do not necessarily reflect the views and policies of SEASP or its supporters.

THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE
SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES PROGRAM

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Gratitude is also due to the scholars who kindly agreed to participate in a seminar to discuss the concept of the project at the beginning. Needless to say, the responsibility for the contents and views expounded in this book remains with the respective authors themselves.

Kuala Lumpur
September 1985

Mohd. Taib Osman
Editor

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INTRODUCTION

MOHD. TAIB OSMAN

The essays collected in this volume arise from the need to introduce the world-view of the peoples of Southeast Asia to the outside world as much as to the Southeast Asians themselves. It is a myth that Southeast Asians know themselves or about each other, for after the experience of thousands of years of history, and being truncated into many states and kingdoms over the past hundreds of years, and further subjected to various colonial rules and Western influence in recent times, the peoples of Southeast Asia are as varied in their background as ever in spite of the efforts to bring them together with the formation of ASEAN. It is to foster better understanding between the Southeast Asian nations, whose creations were very much a colonial legacy in the region, that the project to describe and discuss the world-view of each people or nation was envisaged.

Malaysia gained its independence from the British in 1963, as a result of the unification of three colonial territories -- British North Borneo, Sarawak and Singapore -- and the independent states of the Federation of Malaya. In 1965, Singapore left Malaysia, thus leaving the eleven states in the Malay Peninsula and the territories of Sabah (North Borneo) and Sarawak to forge a new nation. There are many factors that make Malaysia a viable nation, an important factor being that more than half of the people are indigenous and most of them adhere to Islam as a religion. Because of the background of the nine Malay

states which formed the backbone of the new nation and which had Islam as their official religion, the Federation of Malaysia adopted Islam as the official religion of the state, although it does not make Malaysia a Muslim state.

Bearing this fact in mind, the first essay presented here deals with the Islamic world-view of man, society and nature among the Malays of Malaysia. In it, one finds an exposition of how a universal religion like Islam finds expression in the books of kitabs as written by Malay scholars in the past. Although Islam provides the inviolable tenets through Allah's revelation to Holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be unto him) as found in the Qur'an, Islam has encouraged man to enquire and research further, to seek the truth of His word. The Malay scholars during the Islamic period had written a great number of works dealing with the teachings of Islam, and this "kitab literature" as it is known amongst scholars, has influenced the Malay mind over the last 500 years. It is not in keeping with reality therefore to ignore Islam from the Malay's world-view, for it forms the very essence of his personality. Thus, Mohd. Nor Ngah's essay is placed first in the present volume.

However much the Malay is imbued with Islam, he has as part of his cultural heritage, the traditions he had with him before he was converted to Islam. To-day, although Islam provides him with the foundation of his life, as a human being he still has his cultural roots to contend with. In reality, many facets of his life are still dictated by his pre-Islamic past, a combination of his indigenous and Hindu heritage. Realising the importance of this, the second essay by Mohd. Taib Osman attempts to deal with the traditional Malay socio-political world-view. As stated in the essay, the unifying factor in the constitution of Malaysia, the Yang Di Pertuan Agong, was born out of a contemporary political necessity, yet the institution is an old one, going way back to the early history of the Malays. Besides

that, the structure of the Malay state and that of the village, especially the world-view pertaining to them, are important to the understanding of the nation's viability as a political entity. It throws light on how the Malays are facing meaningfully the situation of change. It is imperative to realise that today in Malaysia, the Malays and other indigenous groups still form the definitive backbone of the Malaysian society.

With this in mind, two essays were set for Sabah and Sarawak. Unfortunately, the one on the Sarawak world-view was not forthcoming as the writer had gone to Australia to pursue a higher degree. However, the essay on the Sabah world-view was received from Yap Beng Liang, whose field-work was carried out among a remote Bajau community in that state. However, for the purpose of this volume, she has cast her net wider so as to include other groups besides the Bajau. She has utilised both the published sources and primary data to enable the reader to get an overall perspective of the world-view of the main groups in Sabah.

The Chinese who make up more than 30 per cent of Malaysia's population come from different dialect groups, depending on the original districts of China they hail from. However, in the early history of their immigration to Malaysia, they must have had some kind of world-view with regard to their sense of belonging or sense of togetherness, for otherwise they would not have prospered, let alone survived, in the hostile and unfamiliar environment. A lot of credit must be given to the role of secret societies, the clans and dialect-group associations in initially fostering a sense of social belonging among the Chinese. The essay by Lee Poh Ping attempts at outlining this factor in Malaysian history, especially in the nineteenth century, when the British first colonised the Malay states. Similarly, the Indians who form about 10 per cent of the Malaysian population, had the

same problem. Although the Indian population is mixed, with some of the urban Tamils hailing from Ceylon, yet the majority of the Indian labourers imported by the British to work in the rubber estates and plantations were Tamils from South India. R. Rajoo has written an essay covering the period 1900-57 showing the world-view among the estate Tamils regarding social belongings. It is undeniable that many of the Tamils at the time regarded Malaya as a place to earn money before returning to India to retire. And it cannot be gainsaid that many still retain the ties with the mother-country, although they now hold Malaysian citizenship. Whatever it is, it is interesting to perceive how the world-view of the Indians or Tamils in this country is developing: from entertaining the idea of Malaya being a place of transit to Malaysia being a place of permanent residence.

It was unfortunate that a paper showing the world-view with regard to belonging to Malaysia among the various races had to be left out, as the writer was too busy, for otherwise we would have a complete picture encompassing all ethnic groups. As part of this volume, however, we have the world-view as expressed in the language, folk-tales and the arts in Malaysia. The essay by Asmah Haji Omar deals with the language of the Kedah peasantry, thus showing how the world-view of the traditional padi-planters is expressed in their language. It is an example of how rich and how expressive a language can be, and how the varied world-view of the people who live close to nature can be elicited from their language. It is important to know the richness of the dialect, for in the endeavour to build up a national vocabulary, the expressiveness of a dialect should not be ignored. The last essay deals with the world-view as gleaned from traditional folk-tales. The background is the same as the essay on language, that is, the Malay peasantry. Here the essay deals with content analysis. The essay by Salleh Jaafar tries to analyse the culture of the Malay folk-tale and folk drama. Besides emphasizing the points highlighted by the tales and dramas, which

show deep concern of the peasants, it also deals with the perception and aspiration of the people. And these can be gathered from the concept of distances, either physically or socially, as revealed by the tale or drama, or by the symbolism used. Salleh Jaafar tries to cover as much ground as possible, but a subject like this, to be really exhaustive, would warrant a book. Although the original plan included discussions of the world-view as evidenced by modern literature and the arts (like painting or sculpture), this had to be abandoned finally as the writers were too engrossed in other aspects of the world-view. Thus, only seven essays form this volume of work on the world-view.