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Blackness in Malaysia: Indigenous Kensiu Semang and Tamil Indians

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Blackness in Malaysia is associated with Semang or "Negritos" and Indians, ranked groups based on a mix of biological and cultural attributes in colonial and postcolonial racial worldviews. They inhabited separate but lower rungs of "civilized" and "aboriginal" slots in colonial Malaya and are treated as second-class citizens in postcolonial Malaysia. Ethnographic accounts demonstrate their experiences of prejudice and discrimination in contemporary Malaysia. Kensiu Semang and Tamil Indian racial projects for improving their conditions interact with other racial projects serving different interests. The social and cultural configuration shapes their positive self-identities that are not rooted in Blackness.

Keywords: Blackness, indigeneity, Orang Asli, Indian, double consciousness, Malaysia.

Indigenous Semang, Indians and dark-skinned visitors from Africa and North America experience anti-Black racism in Malaysia, a former British colony with white supremacist legacies. Attempting to explain contemporary racism in Malaysia, scholars often stress postcolonial racialization and Otherness stemming from Malay supremacy (Ong 1999, p. 221; Kahn 2006; Peletz 2020, p. 94). For instance, Kahn (2006, p. xv) states, "Like many others, I have been disturbed by the high levels of racism, patriarchy and exclusion that continue to exist at all levels of Malaysian society, a consequence of the hegemony of a particular nationalist narrative of Malay indignity." The complex connections of colonial white supremacy to postcolonial racial formations have been undertheorized. To what extent are frameworks and logics for construing Blackness

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continuations and/or transformations of white supremacy? How do racial worldviews, integral to racial formations, shape manifestations of "double consciousness" among groups racialized as Black? How are their oppositional self-identities moulded by the contexts of their struggles for social justice? In this study of Blackness in the Muslim-majority society of Malaysia, I attempt to answer these questions and contribute to an anthropology of white supremacy (see Beliso-De Jesús and Pierre 2019).

I draw on racial formation theory to analyse social structures and racial worldviews that the British colonial power constructed as well as those that Malaysian nationalist elites produced in altered postcolonial contexts. Racial formation theory

> conceptualizes race as situated within the recursive relationship between social structures and cultural representations.… Both are held separate yet interconnected. Historically constructed, ever-changing racial formations organize racialized groups, the specific patterns of racial inequality that link racialized populations, and social problems that ensue. (Collins 2015, p. 4)

British colonial rulers constructed a system of power and material relations in which highly evaluated "whites" rested atop a diverse society of "foreign" Chinese and Indians, "native" Malays, and several other indigenous groups categorized as "aboriginal" tribes of peninsular Malaya, North Borneo (later Sabah) and Sarawak (Lee 1986, p. 30; Andaya and Andaya 2001, pp. 183–4; Daniels 2005, p. 31; Manickam 2015, pp. 172–3). Their racial worldview, changing over time, entailed notions of distinct and ranked groups based on a mix of biological and cultural attributes (Milner 1998, p. 161; Daniels 2005, p. 281).

Foreign Chinese and Indians along with native Malays were categorized as "civilized" groups and organized into largely separate residential and economic spaces. British colonial rulers imported Indians, primarily dark-skinned Tamils, to labour on rubber estates, where they were evaluated lower than rural Malays, who were connected to the civil service and Malay sultans, and urban Chinese

engaged in mining, planting and trade. Following the Indian Mutiny of 1849, Indians were "increasingly to be assimilated within a generalized dark-skinned racial fraternity stigmatized by the epithet 'nigger'" (Stocking 1987, p. 63). However, Lord Curzon, viceroy of India (1898–1905), stressed the importance of differentiating between black Africans and black Indians: "the similarity of colour may be held to justify similarity of treatment, and may obscure the fact that the native Indian and the Native African stand on entirely different levels" (quoted in Abraham 1997, p. 159). This influential British statesman expressed the view that Africans and Indians were different kinds of Blacks, with Indians being projected as more highly ranked and civilized. British colonial figures also imposed categories and meanings upon phenotypic variation among indigenous groups. Manickam describes the tripartite racial division that was a major product of the Cambridge Expedition to the Malay States from 1899 to 1900:

> In 1902, Skeat and Blagden's *Pagan Races* declared three simple categories of indigenous people that are still in use today: Semang, Sakai and Jakun. Skeat wrote that there were "at least three groups of savage and heathen tribes" that could be discerned on the basis of their hair. The first was the "woolly-haired Negrito tribes called Semang", the second "the wavy-haired tribes called Sakai" and the third "the straight-haired tribes called Jakun". (2015, p. 137)

British officials and anthropologists often used the terms "tame" and "wild" to differentiate the "aboriginal" tribes of peninsular Malaya and Borneo. "Negrito" or "Semang" indigenous groups, categorized on the basis of their "woolly hair" and dark skin, were generally considered the "wildest" and most primitive (Manickam 2015, p. 177). Thus, people represented as "Blacks" in both the civilized and aboriginal colonial compartments were relegated to the bottom of racial hierarchies.

It is essential, however, to contrast the racial worldviews of colonial Malaya and North America. In North America, the key ideological elements were beliefs in exclusive, discrete and ranked

biological groups, phenotypic characteristics as surface manifestations of inner inheritable qualities, and unbridgeable differences (Smedley and Smedley 2012, pp. 25–26). Dichotomous racial categories of "white" and "black" were set and inflexible. Whereas, in colonial Malaya, emphasis was placed on a mix of biology and culture whereby many differences were conceived of as being based on social background and upbringing. For instance, in the concerted effort to recruit Tamils from lower-caste agricultural backgrounds, their subservient temperaments were considered a product of lower-caste conditioning rather than innate dispositions inherited by dark-skinned people (Abraham 1997, p. 159). Moreover, although British colonial administrators were suspicious of "half-breeds" or hybrids, they did assign "Eurasians" to secondary positions in private firms and state bureaucracies and lumped diverse groups into simplistic racial categories (Andaya and Andaya 2001, p. 183).

Elite Malay production of the postcolonial racial formation altered some aspects of the pre-existing formation but preserved others. The white supremacy racial model was reproduced in economic and political relations with white-dominated countries, global institutions and companies, and sustained in political, legal and educational institutions inherited from the colonial period. It is also reinforced and reflected in global flows of popular culture and the widespread marketing of skin whitening creams in contemporary Malaysia (Daniels 2022, p. 16).

Although a white supremacy racial model was perpetuated, the postcolonial racial formation entailed the political ascendancy of Malays and emergence of a Malay supremacy racial schema in the dominant vision of the nation. A Malay nationalist-led political alliance—the Barisan Nasional, or National Front—controlled the federal government and initiated affirmative action policies aimed at raising the Malay share of economic resources. Malays were represented as the supreme group of sovereign *bumiputera* (sons of the soil) or indigenous people of *Tanah Melayu* (the land of Malays), while Chinese and Indians were constructed as "outsiders" or guests (*tumpang*) relegated to second-class citizenship in the postcolonial

nation-state. This Malay supremacy model raised the value of religion and indigeneity as features of the supreme group (Loh and Kahn 1992, p. 13; Heng 1998, p. 52; Daniels 2005, pp. 40–43, 96). In addition, the Malay-dominated administration coined the term "Orang Asli" in the 1960s (Jegatesen 2020, p. 6), distinguishing the "primitive" indigenous groups of peninsular Malaysia from Malays. A similar distinction was made differentiating the indigeneity of Malays from the lower-ranked indigeneity of the natives of Sabah and Sarawak. Non-Malay indigenous groups of peninsular Malaysia, Sabah, and Sarawak are often displaced and marginalized by development projects (Endicott 1987, pp. 48–49; Dentan et al. 1997, pp. 110–12; Rusaslina 2022, p. 78). The postcolonial racial worldview entails a more extensive embrace of flexibility and hybridity in the manner of categorizing individuals of mixed parentage and groups construed as a blend (Daniels 2005, pp. 67–78, 200–206). Nevertheless, dark-skinned indigenous groups, such as Kensiu, Bateq and Kintaq, still labelled "Negritos", are accorded the lowest evaluations of physical and moral worth. Like indigenous West Papuans in Indonesia, dark-skinned southern Indians—Tamils, Malayalees and Telugus—and Kensiu and other Semang groups are subjected to the logic of white supremacy and Malay primacy. Thus, they experience forms of *compound racial subordination*, construed and treated as low on the scale of humanity and citizenship.

The concept of racial projects within racial formation theory further extends the dynamism and processual character of this framework for understanding the entanglement of sociopolitical structures and cultural representations, beliefs and models that constitute racial worldviews (Omi and Winant 2002, pp. 124–28; Mullings 2005, pp. 671–73; Smedley and Smedley 2012, p. 15; Harrison 2012, p. 238; Collins 2015, p. 4).

> Racial formations have distinctive configurations of racial projects for which interest groups advance various interpretations of racial inequality. Within racial formation theory, ideas matter, not simply as hegemonic ideologies produced by elites but also as tangible, multiple knowledge projects that are advanced by specific interpretative communities. (Collins 2015, p. 4)

I examine multiple racial projects, including those of Malay nationalist elites and others produced by non-*bumiputera* racial minorities, Orang Asli and opposition political parties. These racial projects provide insights into contests over interpretations of racial inequality and the challenges and openings for Indian and Orang Asli movements for social justice.

In this article, I attempt to link the racial formation framework to the critical concept of double consciousness, much as W.E.B Du Bois did, while using different terminology.

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideas in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Du Bois 1903, p. 5)

Du Bois proceeded to describe the structures of social, political and economic inequality and the intensity of anti-Black racial prejudice, degradation and disdain. He depicts post-Emancipation Black people's yearnings for liberty and the "youth with dawning self-consciousness, self-realization, self-respect" (Du Bois 1903, p. 9). People of African descent in the Black Atlantic, constrained by the biological emphasis of racial categorization in dominant worldviews, often adopt an oppositional Black identity and consciousness within racial projects for social justice (Smitherman 1977, p. 35; Torres and Whitten 1998, p. 28; Mbembe 2017, p. 159). In Southeast Asia, West Papuans, stigmatized as biologically inferior "stone age" people, also construct an oppositional Black identity in their struggle for human rights and independence (Kusumaryati 2021, pp. 9–11; Webb-Gannon 2022, p. 11; Daniels 2022, p. 9). Across many socio-historical contexts of North America, Afro-Latin America and the Caribbean, and Melanesia, groups racialized and degraded as discrete Black biological kinds have actively embraced positive self-identification with their Blackness. In contrast, Tamil Indians and

Kensiu Semang do not self-identify as Blacks, and actively produce different identities and affinities without a basis in Blackness. I argue that British colonial and Malaysian postcolonial racial worldviews construe blackness as an attribute, together with cultural features, of their categories rather than as a rigid definitive characteristic. Tamil Indians and Kensiu Semang emphasize other prominent attributes of their categories, such as religion or indigeneity, as a resource for constructing collective affinities and oppositional identities that they express in racial projects for change.

Here, I report stories of local people racialized as Black. These stories are gleaned from my field notes and diaries spanning many years of research, from my first field experience in Malaysia in 1998 to my most recent trip in 2022. Following a discussion of these ethnographic vignettes and interviews, I will analyse Blackness and double consciousness in Malaysia.

Indigenous Kensiu Semang and Blackness

In July 2022, Mohamad Azmin, my Malay Muslim driver, a twenty-eight-year-old graduate of a traditional Islamic school, drove me from Sungai Petani to Baling, Kedah.[1] Along the way, we noticed a large wave of Malays on motorcycles and cars heading to the hot spring recreation area. Signs reading "Rekreasi Kolam Air Panas" (Hot Spring Recreation) abound on roads traversing this eastern portion of the state. We were travelling to visit Kampung Lubuk Legong, the Kensiu Semang village in Baling, home to a subgroup of indigenous people the Malaysian government categorizes as Negritos. As we drove past their village on the main road, we noticed a collection of small wooden houses on both sides of the road and a small group of Kensiu youth socializing in the shade under a large tree. We proceeded on the main roads until we reached the area beside the hot spring that was full of houses rented out as homestays to visitors. They were owned by Malay Muslims. I rented a few rooms in a row house owned by a Malay schoolteacher. Mohamad and I travelled into the small town for dinner and found that it was full of

Malay and Chinese businesses, a manifestation of the postcolonial racial formation.

The following morning, I returned to the indigenous Kensiu Semang village and spoke with Yusof, a local man in his thirties, about his background and experiences. He told me he was born in the forest in Perak and his family moved to this village when he was a teenager.[2] Yusof said, "We moved here because it was better. We did not have a house, no stores, and the hospital was far away, and there were no schools. Here, there are schools and stores, and other things. There was lots of work to do when we lived outside, in the forest." They subsisted through collecting fruits and vegetables and hunting. Sometimes they would plant yam and rice. His father used a blowpipe to catch game. Nowadays, Yusof travels to Penang to work in a factory as a packer. On another occasion, I spoke with Noraini, a woman in her early thirties, who told me that most Kensiu women who take up jobs outside of housekeeping work as operators in factories. Many factory operators work in Kulim, which is closer than Penang. Some village women work as domestic servants in Malay homes in Baling. Noraini works as a babysitter, caring for local children. She said her monthly salary helps to support her family.[3] Kensiu, having made the transition from forest to sedentary village life, occupy the lower rungs of the socio-economic ladder.

As Mohamad drove me around Baling, I wondered why there were no indigenous Kensiu-owned businesses and homestays; after all, this is their customary land. I asked a local Kensiu leader, Jazlan, about this economic situation and he told me:

> Here, there are no Semang businesses. The political officials in the area have control. If you want to start a business, you must pay fees to the government. Kensiu are not brave when it comes to business. They don't want to compete with outsiders.… They are *lambat* [lagging behind other groups]…. The government has the ability, but it does not give help to everyone. They look and decide whether groups have potential for business. This person is from Kensiu Semang, do they have the potential for business, they think. If they consider that they have less potential for

> business, the government is not going to help.… Kensiu Semang are *lambat*, lingering behind other groups of Orang Asli, like Temuan, near Melaka. They are quick to go with people from outside. They are brave to go into business.... Their interaction with people is different.

The Malay-dominated government will not provide support for Kensiu to go into business because it deems them incapable of handling business. This village leader repeated the term *lambat*, an adjective I heard repeatedly in reference to Kensiu Semang.[4] Institutional authorities in the local schools and government use the term to explain poor outcomes for Kensiu children and adults. Kensiu leaders I spoke with repeated this adjectival rendering of their condition, an indication of double consciousness, looking at themselves from the perspective of dominant others.

The Orang Asli Development Department (Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli, JAKOA) classifies Orang Asli into three overarching racial categories: “Proto-Malay”, “Senoi” and “Negrito”. The Malaysian government categorizes Temuan as Proto-Malay rather than Negrito, the label used for Kensiu. There is a persistent hierarchy of Orang Asli groups: Proto-Malay is at the top stratum and Negrito at the bottom. Groups categorized within the racial category Senoi are situated in the middle in this scheme. My interlocutors informed me that they prefer identifying themselves as indigenous Kensiu Semang rather than as Negritos. They reject the racialized category the Malaysian government imposes on them and adopt an identity that expresses their indigeneity and cultural pride.

I asked Jazlan why Kensiu are not as “brave” as other Orang Asli groups, such as Temuan people, and he stated:

> For example, let’s say that a Kensiu person wants to make *mee goreng* [fried noodles], outsiders say they don’t want to eat the food. There is a dividing line, like a wall. If a Kensiu person opens a small restaurant, coffee shop or noodle shop, for example, outside people will not want to eat. A Kensiu person can open a handicraft business, build traditional houses, Kensiu people can do this. Outsiders may say they want five of these

> products, Kensiu can make these and sell. However, regarding food business by Kensiu people, Malays say that people will not accept it, there is a wall. They don't want to eat any of it.

They are not brave enough to open businesses, other than those entailing production of traditional crafts or structures, because they fear that people holding negative stereotypes of them—considering them dirty, backward and primitive—will refuse to purchase their products. Jazlan stresses that Malays say there is a *get* or dividing line that they must draw between themselves and Kensiu. Many Malays, according to him, would not accept food or drinks from Kensiu because they have negative ideas about Kensiu. They continue to stigmatize Kensiu as people who lived in the forest and ate dirty forbidden foods.[5] Jazlan added that there are "Malays who still consider them to be slaves". He was offended by this rejection because, as he stressed, Kensiu had taken cooking classes through which they had learned to cook cuisine popular with Muslims, and more significantly, they had converted to Islam. Carey noted that Kensiu "suffered from some highly annoying forms of racial discrimination", including the refusal to serve them in coffee shops and objections to Kensiu children attending the local school (Carey 1970, p. 151). There is a persistent stigma attached to the Semang or Negrito category in the dominant postcolonial racial worldview.

Like other Orang Asli communities, Kensiu Semang exhibit socio-economic indicators that point to the community's poor well-being (see Rusaslina 2019). They are a minority among the Orang Asli minority, who number approximately 180,000 individuals—less than one per cent of the peninsular Malaysian population (Jegatesen 2020, p. 4). Most Kensiu Semang have been relocated to the Lubuk Legong village, which consists of about eighty-five families whose members predominantly perform low-wage domestic and factory labour. But if they had been given access to their customary land in this region, that would have provided them with an opportunity to improve their everyday economic lives. A Kensiu leader explained what happened to their customary land:

> Yes, there are lots of businesses for outsiders around the hot water spring, all owned by other groups. The colonial government grabbed Kensiu people during the time of the Emergency; they feared we were working with the communists. They gathered Kensiu people and forced us to settle outside, away from the hot water spring and forest. Then there was an outsider who was placed on the land, a Malay person … to have a house there. The government shifted Kensiu to reside here in this village.… Orang Asli people are saying together that we want land … we have lived here for thousands of years, but rights for land, we don't have…

The British colonial government declared a state of emergency in June 1948 amid fighting against communist pro-independence forces (Andaya and Andaya 2001, pp. 270–74). They implemented numerous security measures, including increased scrutiny of Orang Asli living near the forests that were often a base for communist fighters. In the early 1950s, under emergency regulations, Kensiu Semang were forced off their customary land and resettled in a village. Subsequently, Malays began to occupy and build structures on their land. However, after the end of the emergency and the advent of political independence in 1957, Kensiu have not been restored to their customary territory. Jazlan expressed identification and unity with the national struggle of Orang Asli to regain control over their customary lands. Rampant development projects—including logging, mining, highways and plantation enterprises—precipitated environmental destruction, complicating the Orang Asli's struggle and rendering it more urgent (Rusaslina 2011, p. 69; 2019, p. 6).

Along with displacement from their customary territories, Orang Asli have been the target of a concerted Islamization project, especially since 1980. "Once the Islamic resurgence movement was in full swing, the assimilation of the Orang Asli into Malay society and conversion to the Islamic faith became official policy" (Toshihiro 2009, p. 10). The government has used inclusion in special affirmative action benefits as an incentive for Orang Asli people to convert to Islam (Ong 1999, p. 221; Toshihiro 2009, p. 254). These race-based privileges for Malay natives were part of a racial project

to increase their economic standing vis-à-vis the Chinese minority who maintained greater economic strength in the postcolonial context. Although there have been increasing numbers of Orang Asli converting to Islam, Toshihiro's ethnography demonstrates intense resistance to the government's Islamization project. I asked Jazlan to tell me how Kensiu Semang became Muslims and he stated:

> Kensiu began to embrace Islam in the late 1960s, around 1968. It began with one Kensiu man who married a Malay woman. This was the first Kensiu to become Muslim. They lived in a Malay village at first, but Malays could not accept them, so they moved to a Kensiu village. They returned and lived among Kensiu and Kensiu could accept them although they were Muslims. They had children, two or three. They made *dakwah,* teaching Islamic principles—you can do this and can't do this, close *aurat*, wear *tudung*, avoid foods that are forbidden, and take care of your speech. They told people about Islam … prayers five times per day and that there is an early morning prayer. They practised this and Kensiu people observed and realized Islam is like this. Then, after a while, a second person converted and married a Muslim. Then as time passed, another family converted. Then later, in the 1970s, all Kensiu people were sitting together, and Almarhum Sultan Abdul Halim of Kedah came to our village and raised up the declaration of faith of Kensiu people; everyone recited *Ashaduan laa ilaaha illallah wa ashaduanna Muhammadur Rasulullah*. Almost all Kensiu converted. There were a few that had not yet received the guidance to embrace Islam, but most became Muslim then…

At first, conversions occurred one at a time, until the mass conversion of hundreds of Kensiu Semang by the late sultan of Kedah, the head of religion in the state according to the Federal Constitution and an important symbol of Malay sovereignty. How could they refuse to convert to Islam in the face of such power? They were compelled to convert, submitting to this royal Islamization initiative, but many Kensiu Semang continue to exercise their agency by choosing to remain nominal Muslims, combining Islam with Kensiu customs, and for a smaller group, asserting their non-Muslim identity as believers in traditional Kensiu notions of *semangat alam*

(nature spirits). When I told Noraini that none of the Kensiu youth entered the prayer hall to perform their afternoon prayer with me and Mohamad, she giggled together with two Malay women and told me:

> *Adat* (custom) and traditional culture is still followed here. From the perspective of the implementation of Islam, most are doing things on their own and not focused on improving their religious practice. They find following their own religious beliefs a bit more pleasing. They believe in their origins again.

Similarly, Jazlan also described the process of religious change as a gradual one that is incomplete. “They have gotten rid of some aspects of culture, but it is ongoing. It has been a slow process, changing things little by little.” Even practising Muslims continue to follow customary rules for interacting with relatives, including rules for avoiding certain categories of kin. Moreover, Noraini and her Malay friends informed me that there were still eleven villagers who had not converted to Islam; they believed in spirits associated with places in the natural environment.

Education, other than religious instruction, has been difficult for Kensiu Semang. There are several organizations—such as the Hidayah Centre Foundation (HCF), Malaysian Islamic Welfare Association (PERKIM), Sultan Abdul Halim Mu’adzam Shah Islamic Guidance Centre (PUSBA), and the Kedah Convert Muslim Association (KECMA)—focused on the education of Muslim converts in the state of Kedah (Syahrul et al. 2018, pp. 1126–27). Yusof told me he studied at a PUSBA school after he moved from Perak to Baling, Kedah. Several Kensiu women attend classes on basic Islamic principles (*fardhu ain*) and Qur’anic recitation three days a week taught by a Malay woman from PERKIM. In addition, an official from the state *zakat* (Islamic tithe) agency visited the Lubuk Legong village and offered scholarships for twelve Kensiu children to study in Islamic schools focused on memorizing the entire Qur’an. A local leader informed me that these twelve children, ten girls and only two boys, had just begun their study that year. Explaining the gender differential, Jazlan stated that Kensiu girls have more enthusiasm for

studying religion, whereas the boys are more interested in following their ancestors' way of life.

The staff of general education institutions tend to characterize Kensiu Semang as *lambat*. When I visited the kindergarten (*tadika*) on the main road across from the village prayer hall, I spoke with three Malay teachers, who told me that the Kensiu children are *lambat*, developmentally behind Malay children in kindergarten as well as in elementary school.[6] One of the teachers said the Kensiu children appear to want to be independent and to move around on their own. She went on to state that the children with parents who work seem to be less "wild". Although these teachers were obviously concerned about the welfare of the Kensiu children, they were expressing some stereotypes of Orang Asli as well. They acknowledged that Kensiu children spoke their mother tongue at home, an endangered language in the Austroasiatic language family (Adilah, Pillai and Mohd Hilmi 2022, p. 91), whereas the medium of instruction in public schools was Malay. A teacher noted that the children often wanted to speak Kensiu, and she tried to learn their language to communicate with them better, but she stressed that they had to develop proficiency in Malay to do well in elementary school. Alias and Salasiah (2015, p. 29) argue that if the language shift to Malay continues in the Kensiu community, their "language is in imminent danger of facing extinction". Jazlan lamented that the highest level of education that a Semang person had attained was a high school diploma; none had gone to college. He said it was hard to say why people from other Orang Asli groups, Senoi and Proto-Malay, had advanced much higher than Semang. This lack of advancement is an indication of the institutionalized racism that the Kensiu Semang experience as a stigmatized group of Black "aborigines".

In my many discussions with Kensiu Semang, not once did any of them refer to themselves as Black people (*orang Hitam*). Although I sought to visit their village and meet them out of interest in the way they have been racialized as Blacks under colonial and postcolonial regimes, I never directly led them to a discussion of Blackness. I gave them ample opportunities to express a Black identity, including

through queries about how they prefer to identify themselves. They consistently identified as *pribumi Kensiu Semang* (indigenous Kensiu Semang) and with the larger category of Orang Asli. Unlike Black Americans, who were forcibly defined as a discrete biological category, Kensiu have the latitude to select cultural attributes as the basis of their self-identification.

Moreover, local Kensiu leaders expressed agreement with the collective demand of indigenous groups for rights over their customary lands. In 1977, a group of educated Orang Asli formed the Orang Asli Association of Peninsular Malaysia (Persatuan Orang Asli Semenanjung Malaysia, POASM) to advance Orang Asli interests (Endicott 1987, p. 50; Jegatesen 2020, p. 41). In addition, the Center for Orang Asli Concerns (COAC), formed in 1989, has grown into an organization with over ten thousand members, contributing to legal proceedings involving land issues and advocacy for structural change (Jegatesan 2020, p. 41). There has been a growing movement of Orang Asli on the peninsula uniting with the indigenous peoples of Sabah and Sarawak and collectively identifying with each other under an overarching category, *Orang Asal*. Together, these indigenous groups have formed coalitions, such as the Indigenous Peoples Network of Malaysia (Jaringan Orang Asal SeMalaysia, JOAS), and participated in protests demanding their rights and reforms to Malaysian government policies (Rusaslina 2019, p. 1; Jegatesen 2020, p. 41). Within the broader racial project challenging Malay hegemony and supremacy—furthered by the more populous Chinese and Indian minorities over the last few decades—the rights of indigenous people have increasingly been recognized, although significant challenges remain, as described below.

Malaysian Indians and Blackness

During several field trips to Malaysia, I developed relationships with dark-skinned Indian Malaysians, listened to their stories and witnessed the circulation of racist ideas about them. For instance, in December 1998, when I was sitting and socializing with some leaders

and members of the YWCA in Melaka, the president's husband told me that he disqualified the dark-skinned Indian boy in a Christmas party contest because "he looked like a crook". A light-skinned Chinese boy won the event.[7] Similarly, in January 1999, I had a discussion with Ken, a Chinese stall owner at a major shopping mall in Melaka. First, he contrasted Chinese with Indians and then proceeded to describe the differences between various Indian ethnic groups. Ken said,

> The Tamils were brought here as labourers on the tea and rubber estates, but the Gujarati were wealthy traders, and the Bengali were guards and police for the British because they were large and trustworthy, but the Indians, the Tamils, are not trustworthy, and we say that if you see a snake and a Tamil, you better shoot the Tamil first.[8]

He laughed and walked back to his cake stand and finished taking inventory. In his discourse, "Tamils", the largest group of Malaysian Indians, were associated with negative stereotypes that situated them at the bottom of the ethnic and racial hierarchies of non-indigenous groups.

Malaysian Indians also experience structural racism in residential and employment matters. Thousands of Indians face the problem of being displaced from their homes as a result of the land being sold to private developers (Jaipragas and Sen 2013, pp. 18–19). Indians also face "rental racism" when trying to rent residential units. An African international student told me that when she and her friends made calls searching for apartments to rent, "Chinese [landlords] tell us they don't want to rent to any Black people, Africans or Indians." The Pusat KOMAS "Malaysia Racial Discrimination Report 2019" states that a "Chindian" (Chinese Indian) man was rejected from renting a room when the landlord found out that one of his parents was Indian (Pusat KOMAS 2019, p. 45). Pusat KOMAS also received a report about a jewellery store job advertisement that stipulated that "it is open for female Chinese applicants only" (Pusat KOMAS 2019, p. 46). These reports resonate with the Indians

I had personal contact with, who complained of problems with residential displacement and employment in the private sector, in which Malaysian Chinese have extensive influence.

In addition, some of my Indian interlocutors with experience in the Malay-dominated civil service complained of racial discrimination. When I attended Saravanan's Deepavali open house in October 1998, we discussed how things were going for Indians in Malaysia.[9] Saravanan, a local leader of the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), told me that, "The Indians who have done the worst are those who were formerly in the civil service, the government service sector; they have not gotten advancement and have not been treated well.... [T]hat is why I have retired from government service." He added, "I tell members of the Indian community that it is better to get a trade or to go into business than to work in the civil service, which is not a good future for them." Saravanan eventually left the MIC, a component party in the Barisan Nasional, and supported the opposition in the general election of 2018. He also welcomed P. Waytha Moorthy's organization of a new political party in 2019, the Malaysian Advancement Party (MAP), designed to promote the interests of Indians and other marginalized groups.

In my relations with Tamil Indians, both Muslims and Hindus, we recognized our common blackness in terms of phenotype but not racial identity. For instance, in June 2000, acknowledging our shared darker skin tones, leaders of the Indian Muslim League invited me to march in their contingent of the Maulidur Rasul public parade in Melaka.[10] Similarly, in October 1998, Tamil Hindu leaders joked with me about shaking the hand of the dark-skinned winner of a Deepavali sari contest. Two MIC leaders came over to me and said, "We have a very important question to ask you and you have fifty seconds to answer. Why, of all the girls on the stage, did you come over to the one girl and shake her hand?" I told them, "Because she was the overall winner." One of the Tamil leaders retorted, "You shook her hand because she is the darkest girl, she is black and you are black", and we all laughed.[11] Although we shared identification based on our common phenotypic blackness, I never felt the

deeper affinity as Black people that I experienced with Papuans in Indonesia and African international students in Malaysia. Malaysian Indians' understanding of blackness is significantly different from mine. For dark-skinned Tamils, blackness is a phenotypic attribute of their category; whereas for me, as a product of North American racialization, blackness is an important aspect of my self-identity. They tended to stress their Tamil, Indian, Asian and Hindu identities rather than align themselves with a sense of global Blackness the way my Papuan and African interlocutors did (Daniels 2014, pp. 859, 865–66; Daniels 2022, p. 9).

Dominant Malay nationalist racial projects, emphasizing differences or affinities, facilitate these identities as part of the self-consciousness of Tamil Indians. Since political independence in 1957, these racial projects have argued for the correctness of Malay and Muslim dominance and primacy in a country they conceive of as their own, in which they are the sovereign indigenous people whose ancestors established precolonial states. Malay and Muslim identities are closely interwoven in the Federal Constitution and in the popular imaginary. At times, the Islamic Party of Malaysia (Parti Islam SeMalaysia, PAS) has contested this project, stressing Muslim identity over Malay racial identity (Daniels 2017, pp. 150–52). However, following a dispute with the Chinese-based Democratic Action Party (DAP) and an internal split, PAS has joined hands with social forces claiming the appropriateness of Malay pre-eminence. Although this racial project asserted the superordinate position and privilege of Malays, it also entailed representations and practices that included Indians and other racialized groups in Malaysia's diverse society. Indians and Chinese were represented in images of Malaysia, nationalist cultural performances and festival open house practices. This multicultural component of the racial project, championed by former long-term prime minister Mahathir Mohamad, promoted friendly and tolerant relations among Malaysian citizens of different backgrounds (Daniels 2005, pp. 80–95). Thus, Tamil, Indian and Hindu identities were represented as valuable parts of Malaysian society. Promotional and tourist slogans such as "Malaysia Truly

Asia", accompanied by pictures of Malays, Chinese and Indians in festive attire, produced a cherished portrayal of the country and of the presumed affinity of its predominant racial groups as "Asian".

Tamil Indian activists tend to represent this Malay nationalist racial project in terms of what they perceive to be most problematic. In 2020, Peter Manokar, a seventy-year-old Tamil activist, told me: "So, what is happening now among Malays is the concept of 'this is Malaysia, our land'. We are Malays; we have to rule Malaysia. The rest have to step out. That kind of policy, Malay hegemony."[12] Likewise, Suresh Muthusamy, a Tamil lawyer and human rights activist in his mid-sixties, stated:

> So, the idea of Malays goes back strictly to who are Malays in the Constitution.… [T]he Constitution clearly defines Malays as those who habitually speak the Malay language and they are Muslims. And then it goes on to give them special privileges in the Constitution itself.… [A]nd the country is ruled by Malay rulers … and Article 153 specifically allocates unfettered discretion on to the policymakers to give favouritism and job opportunities and economic growth for Malays.… So it is a kind of strong positive discriminatory policy entrenched in the Constitution that took shape in the 1970s in the form of the New Economic Policy.… So Malay intellectuals felt that this country cannot be ruled by anyone except Malays and the wealth of this country primarily should serve the Malays and not anybody else.[13]

Tamil activists appear to interpret the hegemonic Malay nationalist racial project in terms of its slant towards maintaining Malay political dominance and the use of power to provide special economic and educational benefits for Malays.

During the 1990s and 2000s, Indian and Chinese activists advanced a racial project questioning the validity of the political, economic and social advantages bestowed on Malay citizens. They argued that political power and economic resources should be shared more equitably across Malaysia's diverse society, and that special educational benefits enjoyed by Malays are unfair to minorities and should be reformed. This racial project also contested Muslim

religious prejudice and discrimination against religious minorities, especially practices targeting Buddhists, Hindus and Christians. Given that race and religion are intertwined in the postcolonial racial formation, defending the sanctity of Hindu temples also meant defending the dignity of Indians. A significant number of Malays have begun to support this reform-oriented racial project over the last few decades. A broad array of organizations and coalitions have embraced this racial project, bringing into the fray different ideologies and models that shape their interpretations of racial inequality and strategies for change (Weiss 2006, p. 4; Daniels 2017, pp. 163–81). Speaking about the perspectives of political parties during campaigning for the 2013 general election, Suresh expressed ideas constitutive of this racial project. “Of course, you can see a change in the national political parties themselves, that they need to create more inclusive policies and not go on with the rhetoric of a total Malay-centred approach.”[14]

A large part of what precipitated this shift in Malaysian political parties is a heightening of Indian activism in the 1990s and the “Indian awakening” and mass protests of 2007 that forwarded a racial project calling attention to the conditions of marginalized Indians and demanding change. Suresh told me he was part of the Group of Concerned Citizens, a coalition of Indian non-governmental organizations, which held more than thirty townhall meetings in the early 1990s soliciting the aspirations of working-class Indians across the country. They compiled the key concerns of grassroots participants into a document, which they presented to all the political parties planning to participate in the 2008 general election, and they subsequently took these key concerns up with the ruling government. Suresh stated that they challenged the conservative approach of the MIC, whose leaders “felt that, given the kind of entrenched Malay politics, we can only create a greater inflow of support and funds for the Indian community through patronizing the Malay politicians and not by confronting them.” The Group of Concerned Citizens expressed a sense of self-confidence and self-consciousness that they belonged to Malaysia as Malaysian Indians and held a

rightful claim to share the country's resources. Rather than playing patronage politics, Suresh added that they felt "it is the taxpayers' and the country's wealth that needs to be addressed from various development programmes to reach the poor". They argued that the specific allocation of resources directed to the Indian community only benefited middle- and upper-middle-class Indians. The group demanded housing, wage increases, free education and scholarships for working-class and poor Indians, and protested outside the MIC general assembly, calling for its leaders to deliver for poor Indians or resign.

This increasingly confrontational activism culminated in the massive Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF) rally of 2007 in Kuala Lumpur, in which protesters demanded an end to discriminatory policies favouring Malays and Muslims (Willford 2014, pp. 236–39). Comprising nearly seven per cent of the Malaysian population, and with extensive representation in civil society organizations, Indians made their numbers felt in the streets of the capital. Suresh, one of the Indian professionals who organized the rally, spoke of the historic significance of this event:

> It was one of the really galvanizing moments in Malaysian Indian history, where the middle class massively participated. Prior to that when we organized, we got mobilization from groups that were of the lower-class group. But the HINDRAF rally was totally supported by the Indian community, reflecting the trend that middle-class and rich people are feeling like victims of the Malay hegemonic state.

The rally and movement brought together Indians of all class backgrounds, demanding that the political authorities address Muslim-biased conversion cases, demolition of Hindu temples, displacement of Indians from plantations, and the existence of stateless Indians (Jaipragas and Sen 2013, pp. 28–36). HINDRAF's charismatic leader, Waytha Moorthy, claimed that the British colonial and the postcolonial Malaysian governments had violated the human rights of Indians. In an interview in 2020, he stated:

> I decided to … sue the British government … on the eve of Malaysia's fiftieth independence anniversary … for forcibly bringing the indentured labour into Malaya, exploiting them for 150 years, and when they left the country in 1957, they failed to adequately protect the rights of the minority Indians in the Constitution. And I'm also going one step further. I'm saying as a result of the Article 153 which gives special privileges to the Malays that has been exploited and the British government allowed this provision which is against fundamental human rights of equality among citizens and therefore Britain is liable for the … marginalization of Malaysian Indians over the last fifty years.[15]

Peter Manokar, a participant in the first two HINDRAF rallies, declared: "Waytha Moorthy was able to gain a kind of status among the Indians that he could become a saviour for the Indian community." Indeed, as a lawyer using his skills in service of popular Indian interests, Waytha Moorthy inspired and uplifted the self-consciousness of Indians, targeting the historical structural conditions that underlie contemporary patterns of racial inequality (Willford 2014, pp. 237–38). Moorthy claimed that there were approximately 800,000 Indian workers displaced from plantations and that there are about 300,000 stateless Indians lacking formal citizenship in Malaysia who are being "used as cheap labour by Chinese businessmen … who pay them lower than foreign workers from Bangladesh and Myanmar".[16]

Prior to the 2013 general election, Waytha Moorthy approached the opposition coalition Pakatan Harapan (Alliance of Hope, PH) offering an alliance with his political movement, with sway over hundreds of thousands of Indian voters, in return for several demands, including an extensive allocation of funds to address Indian problems (Jaipragas and Sen 2013, p. 12). PH rejected his proposal, expressing its commitment to a colour-blind racial project subscribing to a needs-based approach. Waytha Moorthy divulged that Anwar Ibrahim, the leader of the PH coalition, told him that his proposal was "racist". In response, he questioned how his proposal can be racist when Indians have been sidelined and 800,000 displaced Indian

workers needed specific programmes to tackle their condition. Peter and Suresh, however, like many other Indian activists, posit that a needs-based approach would help poor and working-class Indians, who make up most of the Indian community. On the other hand, in 2013, Waytha Moorthy struck a deal with the National Front and the then prime minister Najib Razak, who appointed him to the parliament and gave him a post in the prime minister's department overseeing the distribution of funds to Indian recipients. Najib also directed MIC intellectuals to draft a "Malaysian Indian Blueprint" (Prime Minister's Office 2017), a document that many Indian activists welcomed. It presents a model for Indian educational, economic and sociocultural inclusion in Malaysian society.

Following the historic PH victory in the general election of 2018, Waytha Moorthy requested to be appointed as a "people's representative" in the parliament, but the Partai Keadilan Rakyat (People's Justice Party, PKR), the key component party of PH, and the DAP rejected him again. However, then prime minister Mahathir appointed him to the upper house and provided him a ministerial post in the short-lived PH government. Many Indian activists opined that Waytha Moorthy had been co-opted by Najib, and then Mahathir, steering him off the course of demanding change for Indians.[17] Although he noted the limitations of not being an elected member of parliament and not having a party base at the time, Waytha Moorthy claimed that he had made two key accomplishments: revamping the unit he directed under Najib to allocate funds to Indians in a transparent fashion, and organizing a national convention to have indigenous leaders develop a blueprint for their advancement. Waytha Moorthy expressed frustration with PH's lack of will to change policy towards Orang Asli:

> I was working hard to ensure that indigenous people had their land secured because the federal government was encroaching into their land. I tried my level best.… I was not successful also because some of the state governments are our own government, Pakatan Harapan government … like the Perak government.… The chief minister, in his state, he gave licences to companies to

> encroach into the indigenous people's land.… We were told not to have open confrontation.… When they are out of power, they will talk about human rights, about indigenous people's rights, but when they are in power, they will give permits and licences to business people to go into the forest and do logging and all sorts of nonsense.… There is no real change in the government.[18]

Waytha Moorthy pushed for new policies to address the issue of stateless Indians and to secure the customary lands of indigenous peoples, but these efforts stalled with the collapse of the PH government in early 2020 after only twenty-two months in power. It is evident, however, that as critical Indian leaders—such as Waytha Moorthy—gain power and influence, there is the possibility for the emergence of a broad racial project aimed at defending the human rights of Indians, Orang Asli and all marginalized people.

Blackness and Double Consciousness

In the postcolonial Malaysian racial worldview, Blackness is associated with Semang, or Negrito, and Indian categories. Semang, conceived of as having darker skin and curlier hair than the other two Orang Asli categories are ranked the lowest in this aboriginal division of peoples. Similarly, Indians are thought of as a dark or black-skinned race, lower ranked than "brown-skinned" Malays and "light-skinned" or white Chinese, their fellow inhabitants of the civilized division of the three "main" races. As the devaluation of Malays vis-à-vis Chinese in terms of skin tone indicates, biophysical attributes are not determinative. In contrast to North American racial ideologies in which biological attributes "eclipsed" linguistic and cultural characteristics (Smedley and Smedley 2012, p. 25), Malaysian racial classification combines biological and cultural attributes to construct a hierarchy of inequality. Positive evaluations of Islam, the Malay language and indigeneity in the postcolonial worldview raised the status of Malays. Combining biological and cultural attributes in this joint and flexible manner, race in Malaysia is distinguished from race and ethnicity in North America and many other places.

Race is also distinct from colourism in Malaysia and other societies in Asia. In many places in Asia, darker skin tones are evaluated negatively, whereas lighter complexions are more highly valued. Darker coloured skin is often associated with lower-class status or agricultural labour. In Thailand, the impoverished dark-skinned farmers of Isaan are denigrated and viewed as rightfully punished for sins committed in past lives (Tausig 2023, p. 3). When I visited a Temuan (Proto-Malay) Orang Asli village in Alor Gajah, Melaka, with the Kiwanis Club, Puan Hamidah, an Indian Muslim member, exclaimed how "beautiful" the young Temuan women were because of their light skin tones.[19] Some Malays are put down for their dark complexions, often darker brown than many Indians. But there is a distinction between their blackness and the blackness of Indians and Semang. Dark-skinned Malays are still "Malay" and enjoy the positive evaluation of cultural attributes attached to that category. Semang and Indians are kinds of Black people with dark skin colour mapped onto their "maximal" identities together with several other negatively evaluated characteristics that constitute their racial categories.

Socially and politically subordinated groups, such as Kensiu and Tamils, face a slew of damaging ideas as they view themselves through the discourses and perspectives of more powerful Malays and Chinese. Many of these prejudicial beliefs focus on cultural and religious rather than biological difference. Their racialization as Blacks is often not the decisive factor lowering their standing; it is frequently their non-Muslim identity and "foreign" origin or association with forest-dwelling. This characteristic contrasts with "the all-pervading desire to inculcate disdain for everything black" that Black Americans experienced in the post-bellum United States (Du Bois 1903, p. 10). In addition, friendly and "family-like" ideas promoted by the Malay elite racial project circulate alongside an assortment of negative beliefs and ideologies about racialized groups. These cultural models that represent all Malaysians as citizen members of the nation, relating to each other as friends or family, soften the contempt and disdain directed towards Kensiu and Tamils.

Kensiu and Tamil Indians create positive self-conscious identities by using cultural attributes associated with their categories or valorized characteristics linked to more prestigious groups. Kensiu produce proud identities of themselves as a people maintaining their own cultural knowledge, language and customs. Some of their local leaders emphasize identities as new Muslims and knowledgeable producers of Malay cuisine. In their self-identification, they foreground their indigeneity, an attribute exalted in the postcolonial racial formation. They also construct unifying and oppositional identities as Orang Asli and Orang Asal possessing claims to customary land. Similarly, Tamils express proud identities as Tamils, Indians and Hindus, holding special connections to temples and shrines. Tamil Indians highlight their professional achievements despite modest plantation backgrounds and their belonging in Malaysia as one of the three major races. They also underscore their non-indigenous and non-Muslim identities as they ally with the more prestigious Chinese to contest Malay special privileges and Muslim-biased policies.

Conclusion

Racial denigration of blackness, a product of the legacy of white supremacy and newly emergent postcolonial Malay supremacy, is evident in contemporary Malaysia. Malay primacy is the cornerstone of the postcolonial racial worldview; however, white supremacy is still expressed in skin colour prejudice and in biophysical evaluations of groups in the racial hierarchy. Cultural models of white supremacy and contemporary Malay primacy merge to generate the compound racial subordination of Kensiu and Tamils, seen as inferior to light-complexioned people and as lowly ranked citizens. Biological attributes were constituents but not definitive of group ranking in colonial or postcolonial racial formations. Furthermore, given the uplifting of Islam and indigeneity instead of whiteness in the hegemonic nationalist vision, the framework for construing Blackness has shifted. Kensiu and Tamils are not primarily interpreted as inferior to Malays because of their blackness, but rather as non-Muslims, new converts to Islam, speakers of non-Malay languages, former

forest dwellers, or foreign guests. In addition, the configuration of categorizing Kensiu within the larger group of Orang Asli or “original peoples” and Tamils as non-natives but one of the three “principal” races shapes their sense of double consciousness and the availability of unifying affinities in the struggle for social justice.

Interacting in a dynamic political field today are racial projects that are either Malay race-based, opposed to Malay and Muslim supremacy, colour-blind, or supportive of Indian affirmative action. Many groups have pinned their hopes for change on the electoral victory of the reform-oriented PH coalition. But tense exchanges between PH leaders and proponents of a racial project focusing specifically on addressing the structural inequality of Indians may signal complications. A needs-based approach may help to alleviate some of the economic problems of working-class Indians, but Indians suffer discrimination and racial inequality more broadly in society. Moreover, Muslim-biased policies and Chinese capital influence still pose challenges for reform-minded politicians and racial projects. Nevertheless, there is some hope for the growth of an encompassing racial project striving for social justice for all marginalized groups in Malaysian society.

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NOTES

1. I use pseudonyms for all my local interlocutors except for P. Waytha Moorthy, a well-known Tamil Indian activist.
2. Interview with Yusof, Baling, Kedah, 24 July 2022.
3. Interview with Noraini, Baling, Kedah, 25 July 2022.
4. Interview with Jazlan, Baling, Kedah, 24 July 2022.
5. This leader described the stigma that many Malays associate with Kensiu using the terms *hutan* (forest or jungle) for their former residence and *makanan yang kotoran* (dirty, filthy foods) for the food they used to eat. I interpret that this was broader than *haram* or forbidden foods according to Islamic proscriptions; it included items that were considered not appropriate

for consumption based on Malay cultural preferences, such as porcupines and wild roots and tubers.

6. Fieldnotes, Baling, Kedah, 25 July 2022.
7. Fieldnotes, Melaka, 16 December 1998.
8. Fieldnotes, Melaka, 11 January 1999.
9. Fieldnotes, Melaka, 19 October 1998.
10. Fieldnotes, Melaka, 8 June 2000.
11. Fieldnotes, Melaka, 17 October 1998.
12. Zoom interview with Peter Manokar, 27 October 2020.
13. Zoom interview with Suresh Muthusamy, 4 October 2020.
14. Zoom interview with Suresh Muthusamy, 2 August 2022.
15. Zoom interview with P. Waytha Moorthy, 19 November 2020.
16. Ibid.
17. Malhi (2020) provides a detailed report of the complications surrounding the failed attempt to establish a National Harmony Commission.
18. Zoom interview with P. Waytha Moorthy, 19 November 2020.
19. Fieldnotes, Melaka, 27 November 1998.

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