

Textbooks and Nation Construction in Malaysia*

Sandra Khor Manickam

Teaching Assistant, Department of History, National University of Singapore

Textbooks that teach history by the state are often indicative of the uses of the past by the state and are a key tool in the endeavour of nation-building. Textbooks and the nation are intimate with one another; textbooks being one of the ways in which to represent the type of nation that is projected by the state. But what if that projection itself is not consistent? How are the different projections seen in the textbooks, making them evidence of contradictions in the process of nation-building?

This paper seeks to look at the contents of Malaysian state-approved history textbooks as indicative of nation projection. Certain key themes, actors, events, and frameworks in the 2003 edition of secondary school history textbooks will be mapped. In particular, the contradictions in the endeavour of nation building are our focus. While attempting to create a basis of inclusion, the textbooks also maintain exclusionary categories within the state cutting between citizens themselves. Basing the nation on the characteristics of Malay ethnicity, culture, language and religion, yet accounting for the presence of those that fall outside within a plural society framework, the push then is to project the nation as Malay, yet to explain the plural condition of Malaysian society. An internal contradiction arises when the nation is given certain characteristics, yet not everyone who is given membership in the nation shares those characteristics.

As a conclusion to the paper, we will also point out that in providing a critique of the textbooks, such an analysis is also complicit in a similar

* Revised version of the paper presented at the 18th Conference of International Association of Historians of Asia (IAHA), December 6-10, 2004, Academia Sinica, Taipei, Taiwan.

politics of representation by taking a position of “non-Malay”. Ironically, the positions from which to counter a hegemonic version of the Malaysian nation emerges from within the textbooks themselves. These positions are not suppressed by the current version of history textbooks though they are skimmed over, showing again the inconsistencies of the nation-building project.

The Frameworks: National Policies

The grand narrative of the history textbooks operates in line with other policies of the Malaysian state. The process by which Malaysia is supposed to have come into being is itself a narrative of a mythic ideal nation cut down to size by colonial and, in general, “foreign” incursions. Policies implemented on part of the state such as the National Language Policy, the National Economic Policy, the National Cultural Policy and the National Education Policy have their basis in such a narrative and seek to undo perceived injustices to a certain extent. Whereas during the colonial era, English was the medium of instruction in government and in some educational institutions, Malay is now instituted as the rightful “local” language. Government policy concerning language places Malay as the national language and medium of instruction at the secondary school level. This has been amended recently with the teaching of the subjects of Science and Mathematics in English. The subject of history, however, continues to be taught in Malay (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka 2001).

The National Economic Policy, as spelt out in 1970, aims to even out income inequalities as well as to reconfigure distribution of ethnic groups according to occupation. The link between these two aspects of society is targeted as a major source of disunity, projected as having its roots in a colonial past. Hence, there is the belief that working towards their eradication will bring about national unity (Jasbir Sarjit Singh and Hena Mukherjee 1990: 3). Lastly, the National Cultural Policy specifies national culture as the culture “native” to this region (in particular, culture seen as

relating to Malays), and that Islam plays an important role in the national culture. Traits from “othered” cultures, however, may be introduced into the national culture (Aziz Deraman 1984: 2, 11).

Education, in general and specifically through history textbooks, is yet another method to redress imbalances in Malaysia that are seen as the heritage of a colonial past. The rationale behind the education system in Malaysia may be seen in tandem with the other national policies mentioned above (Aziz Deraman 1984: 13). For instance, education also plays a role in the National Economic Policy. Providing a national education is but one of the means by which redistribution of wealth according to ethnic group is to be fulfilled (Jasbir Sarjit Singh and Hena Mukherjee 1990: 3). In the effort of nation building, there is the need for a common cultural value system to promote national identity and nationhood (Aziz Deraman 1984: 2, 11). Education, in the Malay language mostly, with a common curriculum to inculcate common values through national schools, is but one of the ways in which nation building is carried out.

The subject of history is crucial in inculcating national unity and national identity building. A 1994 National Report from Malaysia concerning the development of education states that “the cultivation of the spirit of citizenship is emphasized in a number of subjects. For example, in the teaching history, values which will nurture and strengthen the spirit of citizenship are inculcated. Through an understanding and an appreciation of the history of the nation, the practice of parliamentary democracy, efforts to build a Malaysian identity are stressed and given priority.” Furthermore, the report goes on to say that “the history syllabus stresses on the developmental process of the society and nation as well as elements of unity” (Ministry of Education 1994: 42).

That unity, however, is bound by the elements of a state-defined nation. Through the discussion of national policies, we can construct a picture of the nation in Malaysia. That nation should have Malay as its language, and Malay culture and religion as its base. That nation should also have those in

the defined racial grouping of Malays in particular involved in the state's economy and political processes. That this nation is saturated with assumptions about race and indigenusness, and their place in the modern nation-state, is apparent. The linkage between a group defined as Malays with Malay language, Islam, and indigenusness is seen in state policies which seek to redress a perceived imbalance in the natural scheme of how the nation should be. The naturalisation of a particular version of nation in Malaysia, and the linkages between that nation and Malays-Malay language-Islam-indigenusness, can be seen to operate in the writing of secondary school textbooks.

Secondary School History Textbooks: 2003 Edition

Already in Form One textbooks, the uses of history are described in relation to the state. History, the students are taught, can explain the contemporary condition of the country, and can show students how to be good citizens (Ahmad Fauzi bin Mohd. Basri, Mohd. Fo'ad bin Sakdan and Azami bin Man 2003: 8, 14-15). The narrative of the nation starts in secondary schools with the example that history can tell students how Chinese and Indians came to be in Malaysia. With these simple beginnings, the terms of understanding Malaysia are already established. Firstly, it is assumed that it is natural that the group "Malays" was already in Malaysia, and conversely, it is not as self-evident how or why Chinese and Indians should be in the same geo-political space as well. This line of thinking is carried through to the various levels of history textbooks. Secondly, coercion is part of this plural allocation of peoples, with the British put as the main cause behind such a situation. The groups mentioned earlier are allied to the British, the colonizer, and are presented as benefiting from colonial rule (Ahmad Fauzi et al. 2003: 8; Masariah Binti Mispari, Johana binti Abdul Wahab, Ridzuan bin Hasan 2003: 142, 158).

Besides these basic tenets for understanding Malaysian history, there is another line of thought presented in the textbooks. While naturalising a

Malay-based nation, the textbooks are also entrusted with the task of inculcating a form of unity among the students in the present. However, because there is more than one state-defined racial group in the potential readership of the textbooks, the two rationales in the textbooks quickly become contradictory. The operation of this tension can be seen in particular through the textbooks' use of seemingly inclusive terms such as *rakyat* and *bangsa*. Reading the textbooks from a non-Malay and a non-*bumiputera* position renders the nation projection, and the calls for a particular kind of unity in a Malaysian nation, irreconcilable. The way in which this position is opened up by the textbooks themselves, and the resulting issues surrounding this subjectivity, will be addressed later.

The emphasis on a particular unity within the state of Malaysia among the citizens of Malaysia is mentioned explicitly in the newest version of secondary school textbooks. The first chapter of the Form One textbook sets up the present conditions under which students are consuming history and its purpose: the goal of unity among races and progress of the country. Present-day Malaysia is presented as a society with many racial groups.¹ The textbooks then address this society as a common audience. The inclusive "us" is employed when talking about the uses of history, and "our" place in the present Malaysia (Ahmad Fauzi et al. 2003: 2; Masariah et al. 2003: 3). Malaysia is referred to as "our country" or "our nation/race and country".²

Furthermore, the textbook lays claim to a link between the present Malaysia with its multi-racial society and events, peoples and governments that have been documented in the past. As mentioned above, the Form One textbook tells the students that history can provide answers to present conditions. The book addresses the common audience in saying that history can tell us why there are many ethnic groups in "our country". The present condition of the country is put down to the British who brought in Chinese

¹ For instance, "*sebagai contoh, kewujudan masyarakat berbilang kaum di negara kita*" (Ahmad Fauzi et al. 2003: 8).

² For example, "*negara kita*" and "*... bangsa dan negara kita*" (Ahmad Fauzi et al. 2003: 2, 15).

and Indian workers during their rule in Malaya. At the same time, history is supposed to bring understanding, and with an understanding of each group's habits and culture, "we" can live in peace and unity (Ahmad Fauzi et al. 2003: 8).

Although emphasizing a common audience and a relationship between that audience and material in the textbooks, this link is tenuous as the presence of multiple races is not projected back into history other than being nominally and negatively mentioned. This limited projection stems from the need to draw from material related to, and seen as the cultural property of, mainly one state-defined racial group: Malays. The disjuncture between these two aims makes itself evident when group terms used in different time periods have different meanings. At least two time periods are used in the textbooks: one, a general past which is the subject of history, and the other, a present addressing the students. Whereas in the present, the *rakyat* or *bangsa* is used to refer to all students, in the material of the past, those terms only refer to one section of society. The "we" that first took all races into its fold is simultaneously a "we" which only refers to one section of society in the majority of material presented in the textbooks.

The case of Melaka as a building block of the country is such a case of limited projection and dual meanings of group signifiers. Melaka is presented as the once ideal government said to be the basis of the present government of Malaysia. The textbook goes on to pronounce that as citizens/people of Malaysia today (*rakyat Malaysia*), we should be proud of the present system of governance. The root of Melaka's downfall is explained in terms of issues of unity. Rivalries between Malays and Indian-Muslims sparked off problems within the Melaka Sultanate which eventually led to its downfall. The conclusion of the chapter on Melaka talks about the noble efforts of the *rakyat* who were willing to sacrifice themselves for "*bangsa dan negara*" (Ahmad Fauzi et al. 2003: 46, 60, 92, 98).

While presuming Melaka to be a common platform for the country, the presentation of its history does not allow for such a general application.

Several issues are noteworthy in the discussion of Melaka as an example of government and the place of *rakyat* in that discussion. The textbook presents the Melaka Sultanate as a specifically Malay sultanate. The government had leaders who were Malay and the *rakyat* that were mentioned consisted only of Malays, *Orang Laut* and *Orang Asli*. Other peoples were presented as traders and not as part of the *rakyat* (Ahmad Fauzi et al. 2003: 52, 64). A inconsistency thus arises by the usage of the same term, *rakyat*, to refer to separate groupings in the past and present. In reference to Melaka, the *rakyat* are presented racially as Malays, *Orang Laut* and *Orang Asli*, and are not the other racial groups presented as traders. Yet in the present, the textbook tries to reach out to a *rakyat* who just pages ago were referred to as outsiders. *Rakyat* takes on the tones of referring specifically to Malays, making it an unviable option in which to build unity (Santhiram 1999: 127).

The ambiguities surrounding the application of *rakyat* in the textbooks is further compounded by the multiple applications of *bangsa*. The many meanings of *bangsa* are talked about in the Form Five textbook. Firstly, *bangsa* is said to refer to a group of people tied by citizenship to a country (Ramlah binti Adam, Shakila Parween binti Yacob, Abdul Hakim bin Samuri, Muslimin bin Fadzil 2003: 66). However, another definition found in a section discussing the rise of nationalism in Europe presents *bangsa* as a race or ethnic group which share the same language, customs, art and historical experience.³ For example, the greater empires of Austria, Russia and Turkey were broken down by nationalist movements into separate *bangsa* based on similarities of language and culture which then constituted the contemporary nation-state.⁴ A third definition of *bangsa* arises when the term is used in tandem with “Malaysia”. The *bangsa Malaysia* was a new

³ “*Bangsa merujuk kepada sekumpulan manusia yang mendiami sesebuah wilayah serta yang mempunyai persamaan dari segi bahasa, adat resam, kesenian dan pengalaman sejarah*” (Ramlah et al. 2003: 73).

⁴ “*Kebangkitan nasionalisme telah mengancam empayar Austria, Rusia dan Turki yang mempunyai penduduk berbilang bangsa. Para nasionalis menggunakan unsur persamaan rumpun bangsa dan bahasa untuk membentuk negara bangsa masing-masing*”. (Ramlah et al. 2003: 67).

concept put forth by former Prime Minister Dr. Mahatir Mohamad in a speech in 1991. The textbook explains that this concept provides the framework for explaining differences between pre-independent Malaya and independent Malaysia. *Bangsa Malaysia* refers to the condition of the present Malaysian society with many races as well as different languages, cultures and beliefs (Ramlah et al. 2003: 66, 67). Malaysia is described by this definition in pluralistic and inclusive terms. The impression that one gets is that the varying elements of society is recognised by the state as having a place in the image of the nation in Malaysia.

Several problems arise from the many uses of *bangsa* which is related to the non-neutral term of *bangsa Malaysia*. Similar to the use of *rakyat*, the different applications of *bangsa* at different time periods contradicts its claim to inclusiveness. In the discussion concerning the Malayan Union scheme put forth by the British, the resistance towards this plan is explained in terms of “saving the race/nation”.⁵ The question of which race/nation is answered a few pages later. The Malayan Union is supposed to be the focal point of loyalties of the immigrant races, while it would decrease the political power of Malays (Ramlah et al. 2003: 96). A similar disjuncture in meaning and usage can be found in the discussion of anti-colonial resistance. In the Form Two textbooks, a chapter entitled “*Perjuangan rakyat tempatan mengembalikan kedaulatan bangsa*” (The local people’s struggle to return the sovereignty of the *bangsa*”) tells of the actions of specifically Malay or *Bumiputera* men. Non-Malay and non-*Bumiputera* groups are mentioned in the Form Two textbook, but as foreigners who take away the resources of the local people (Ramlah et al. 2003: 129, 136, 162). The present purpose of forging a unity between various races is not reflected in the writing of history which does not concede much ground to races other than Malays being represented in that history.

These slippages and contradictions in fact find resonance with the other

⁵ “[Orang tempatan] bangun menentang Malayan Union untuk menyelamatkan bangsa” (Ramlah et al. 2003: 94).

meanings brought into *bangsa Malaysia*. Academics such as Jasbir Sarjit Singh and Hena Mukherjee, are quick to note that even in the concept of *bangsa Malaysia*, the identity and unity already implicit is Malay. In the section of Form Five textbooks that discussed *bangsa Malaysia*, it is explained that that *bangsa* is formed through the use of “one national language, as well as participation in the national culture and the Rukun Negara”⁶. That Malay identity is laid out in the National Cultural policy which puts Malay culture, Islam and Malay language as the crux of Malaysia. The unity implied in the term is predicated on taking that identity as the base. While *bangsa Malaysia* is at first defined as taking in plurality under its wing, the presentation of information and the use of *bangsa* in much of the textbooks is decidedly singular in focus to mean the *bangsa Melayu* in accordance with the intended Malay base of unity (Jasbir Sarjit Singh and Hena Mukherjee 1990: 7-8).

Taking one defined racial groups as a base of the nation makes it more difficult to explain the presence and role of non-Malay peoples in Malaya and Malaysia. These marginal groups are accommodated in the narrative largely by omitting them from certain sections, or presenting them negatively. At the outset, the Form One textbook accounts for their presence by saying simply that ‘the British did it’. Such an explanation leaves no room for the long history of migration between South Asia, East Asia and the Malay Peninsula and the various reasons for the movements of people. This reading reaffirms key assumptions about the nation: that it should be and is mono-racial to begin with, and that changes to such a situation happen only with drastic outside intervention. The methods of arrival and those groups’ employment in particular sectors of the economy are talked about with the reiteration that they were bearers of substantial negative change (Masariah et al. 2003: 142).

Such negative characterization over-shadows other threads in the textbooks. For instance, the fact that members of the court brought in

⁶ “Bangsa Malaysia telah dibentuk melalui penggunaan satu bahasa kebangsaan serta pengamalan kebudayaan kebangsaan dan Rukun Negara.” (Ramlah et al. 2003: 66, 67).

Chinese labour even before major British intervention in the Western Malay States is mentioned but not given prominence. Amidst the claims that mainly the British and non-Malays were in the modern, exploitive economy, it is mentioned that tin mining was also carried out by members of the court with Chinese labour, and that alliances were formed between the two groups (Masariah et al. 2003: 40, 135). In addition to this, that many of the workers did not reap economic benefits from working in the modern sector is not highlighted. Instead, non-Malays are grouped together with the British groups colluding to oppress locals for self gain. The unity which does not necessarily apply to all students, and the negative stereotypes inculcated through history of non-Malays, both make the textbooks lacking as a representation of a nation which is comprised, admittedly by the state itself, of more than one integral racial group (Santhiram 1999: 128-129).

As a parting note for this paper, the inadequacies pointed out in the textbooks force a more general question concerning the politics of representation. As Taufik Abdullah succinctly asks, “if having a general text on national history is indeed a national necessity, how should it be perceived and conceptualised?” (Taufik Abdullah 1994: 204). The current version of history textbooks provide one way in which the nation is perceived. Similarly, a critique of textbooks is an exercise in reconceptualising and redefining that nation but from different positions. Although textbooks put forth a government-endorsed version of the nation which aims to supersede other versions, it is ironic that by addressing the “other people” present in Malaysian history and in the body of the citizenry, the textbooks themselves present the opportunity to read from those marginalised positions and to rethink the nation. These positions are created through the various exclusions of Chinese and Indians actors from *rakyat* and *bangsa* as noted before. Thus, the construction of a non-Malay position, and possibilities for an alternative representation of nation, itself derives in part from the state’s and history textbook’s incoherent construction of the ideal Malaysian nation with Malayness at its base.

That these other positions are utilised in discussing the textbooks by both politicians and academics points to the short-coming of the textbooks as an ideological vehicle for many of the so-called *bangsa Malaysia*. Indeed, this outcome is at once a success and a failure of the textbooks: a success at excluding those who are not seen anyway as belonging to Malaysia in a natural sense, and a failure at inculcating the intended unity because of adherence to the earlier exclusion. At the level of the textual operation of the history books, the conflict is unresolved. The state-sanctioned grand narrative of the nation prevails at the expense of achieving an ideological unity among the citizens, though that unity is assumed to underpin the survival of modern Malaysia.

References

- Aziz Deraman. 1984. *The Development of Culture, Communication and Education in Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur: Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports.
- Ahmad Fauzi bin Mohd. Basri, Mohd. Fo'ad bin Sakdan and Azami bin Man. 2003. *Sejarah Tingkatan 1: Buku Teks* (History, Form One: A textbook). Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka. 2001. Kenyataan Media oleh Dato' Haji Abdul Rahim bin Abu Bakar. <http://dbp.gov.my/dbp98/majalah/pelita21/feb/pb02med2.html>
- Jasbir Sarjit Singh and Hena Mukherjee. 1990. *Education and National Integration in Malaysia: Stocktaking Thirty Years after Independence*. Kuala Lumpur: Pengajian Pembangunan Manusia, Institut Pengajian Tinggi.
- Masariah Binti Mispari, Johana binti Abdul Wahab, Ridzuan bin Hasan. 2003. *Sejarah Tingkatan 2: Buku Teks* (History, Form Two: A textbook). Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Ministry of Education. 1994. *The Development of Education: National Report from Malaysia*. Presented at "International Conference on Education", Geneva, Swiss.

- Ramlah binti Adam, Shakila Parween binti Yacob, Abdul Hakim bin Samuri, Muslimin bin Fadzil. 2003. *Sejarah Tingkatan 5: Buku Teks*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Santhiram, R. 1999. *Education of Minorities: The Case of Indians in Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur: Child Information, Learning and Development Centre.
- Taufik Abdullah. 1994. In Search of a National History: Experiences of a Multi-Ethnic and Multi-Historic Indonesia. In *Constructing a National Past: National History and Historiography in Brunei, Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, the Phillipines and Vietnam*, ed. Putu Davies. Brunei: Universiti Brunei Darussalam.