

Contested Nationalisms and Propaganda: Birth Pangs of a Malaysian Nation, 1957-1969

By

Cheong Soon Gan

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Committee in charge:

Professor Peter Zinoman (Chair)

Professor Jeffrey Hadler

Professor Andrew Barshay

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Abstract

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This dissertation looks at how the newly independent Malaysian state used propaganda as one of the tools in forging a new nationalism and specific values of citizenship in the face of enduring ethnic cleavages and contesting visions of nationhood. I look at the period from independence in 1957 to the race riots in 1969 that claimed nearly 200 lives and plunged the country into a state of Emergency for a year.

As Malaya achieved independence, the contest between competing visions of the nation that began after World War II not only remained unresolved but also continued to intensify during the 1960s. One vision constructed a nation based on the primacy of the indigenous ethnic group, the Malays, while non-Malays advanced a vision that emphasized the equality of all ethnic groups in the nation. The former became the basis of the official nationalism of independent Malaya/Malaysia, but the ruling coalition tried to blunt opposition to it by co-opting elements of the latter without resolving fully the tensions between these diametrically opposed ideas. The post-colonial government found itself having to continually defend, justify and advance the official meaning of Malaysia through its developmental policies and propaganda campaigns in the 1960s.

The state conducted its propaganda campaigns through both personalized and mass channels using two departments: the Information Department that placed men and women on the ground to conduct face-to-face propaganda across the nation but with an emphasis on rural and semi-rural communities, and Radio Malaysia, the state's primary medium for mass communication until television ownership and broadcasting overtook radio from the 1970s onwards. The dissertation looks at the history, operational procedures and goals of the two agencies from the standpoint of the practice of governmentality. It examines their colonial roots, during which they were key components in the anti-Communist war, to their post-colonial iterations, when they had to adapt to meet peacetime objectives.

I suggest that the Department of Information and Radio Malaysia could not fully transcend their colonial legacies and the operational challenges inherent in bureaucracies to meet these new post-colonial challenges. More importantly, the two organizations

could not resolve the tensions within the message they were preaching, i.e. a contradictory official nationalism that stated, in effect, that all are equal but one is special. Also, some of the entrenched operational structures of the agencies undermined key planks of the official nationalism. It is for these reasons that the two agencies, and by extension, the government, failed to win over decisively the hearts and minds of its new citizens to its vision of the nation; a failure that contributed to its electoral setback in 1969 and the race riots that occurred as a result.

To Mum: Yes, it is done.

Contents

Introduction	iv
Chapter 1: Eyeball to eyeball propaganda	1
Chapter 2: Radio: In every hut and palace	38
Chapter 3: Many tongues, one nation?	62
Chapter 4: National Anthem: A discordant symbol	119
Epilogue	143
Bibliography	153

Note on names

Malay names are generally patronymic; thus, the name of the first Malayan to head Radio Malaya, Dol Ramli, means Dol, son of Ramli. It is the convention to refer to the person's given name after the first mention, and so, Dol Ramli is subsequently identified as Dol. Many Indian Malaysian names are also patronymic and the same rules apply.

The Father of Independence and the first Prime Minister of Malaya/Malaysia was Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra. It is the conventional practice to refer to him from the second mention as the Tunku, even though Tunku (or its variant spelling, Tengku) simply means "prince."

For Chinese Malaysians, the family name appears first, and so Tan Kee Tian, the Department of Information Field Officer whose report opens Chapter 3, is subsequently referred to as Tan.

Introduction

On a late October day in 1957, a Chinese supervisor of plantation workers in Segamat District set out on his 125-mile trip to Johore Bahru, the state capital of Johore. That journey would have first involved finding his way to Segamat town. From there, he would have either taken a slow bus that meandered from central to southern Johore, or a more direct train service—either way, the journey would have taken at least half a day, if not more. This unnamed supervisor, whose formal title was conductor or *kepala* (literally, head), had been nominated by his manager to attend a civics course organized by the Department of Information. When he arrived, he and 27 other frontline supervisors from plantations all over the state were housed at the specially built Civics Course Center, where they spent three days listening to talks on the government's labor policies, the work of the Chinese Affairs department, and topics such as trade unions, cooperative movements and the Good Citizens Movement. When not attending lectures, the department organized visits to various government departments and places of interests, including the Telecoms Exchange building, the Police Signals Headquarters, the Social Welfare Home and Children's Home, the State Council (State Cabinet) chambers, and the Combined Operations Room at the Contingent Police Headquarters, the nerve center of the government's fight against the communists in Johore. The participants even crossed the narrow Straits of Johore to visit the studios of Radio Malaya in Singapore. It must have been a giddy three days for some of them, since quite a few had never been to the state capital, much less encountered the bright lights of the city of Singapore.¹

These civics courses had been conducted since the British returned to power in Malaya after World War II. As part of its effort to reconstitute its civilian colonial government, Britain established the Department of Information and Radio Malaya in 1946 as its twin propaganda arms. Not long after that, the colonial government declared war on its erstwhile WWII allies, the Communist Party of Malaya. This conflict came to be known as the Emergency, and lasted from 1948 to 1960, although the communists had ceased to be an effective fighting force by the mid-1950s. The work of the Department of Information, which was initially broad-based, soon became focused on wartime, anti-communist propaganda. But by the time this Segamat estate supervisor settled into his course, Malaya had been independent for just under two months, and the department was beginning to tinker with its strategies to meet this new political reality. Thus, in addition to the topics mentioned above—standard fare for a wartime colonial propaganda agency—the speakers also emphasized “the role which everyone must play for the nation now that Malaya is Independent, [while also explaining] the rights and responsibilities of a citizen.”²

The aim of the civics course was to win over the hearts and minds of a key section of society: grassroots leaders who had a direct influence on the masses. This was sometimes not an easy task, for there was considerable suspicion of and resistance to the government. Some of that resistance was expressed through racial animosity, a direct

¹ “Report on the Civics Course for Chinese Estate Conductors and Kepalas, October 27-29, 1957,” November 27, 1957. *SIO TR 204, Report on civics courses in other states/settlements.*

² Ibid.

result of the colonial government's divide-and-rule policies that created, maintained and deepened the ethnic cleavages in the colony. In fact, the Segamat supervisor was initially one such skeptic, as he confessed to the department's officers. In their report, they said:

One candidate from an estate in the Segamat district expressed his pleasure profusely for having had the opportunity to attend the course, although before coming he had some misgivings as to the true intentions of Government in asking him to come to Johore Bahru to attend a course, as some of his colleagues in the Estate had told him through their own ignorance, that the Government had sinister designs upon him and that they might never see him again. Now that he had completed the course he said he would tell all his friends how wrong they had been and how much he had benefitted through the generosity of Government in arranging courses like this for the people. As final proof that he had actually visited various institutions and Government Departments, this candidate obtained a list of all these places from the conducting officer, to take home and to show his friends.³

This civics course is one concrete example of the focus of this dissertation, which examines how the newly independent Malaysian state used propaganda as one of the tools in forging a new nationalism and specific values of citizenship in the face of enduring ethnic cleavages and contesting visions of nationhood. I suggest that the official nationalism between independence in 1957 and the race riots of May 1969 was a failed project because the state could not resolve the contradictions and tensions within its vision of the nation. A study of the particular difficulties faced by the propaganda arms of the government reveal a complementary and perhaps equally important cause of this failure: the entrenched and racially-riven bureaucratic structures that not only stymied the propagation of the official nationalism, but also exposed the contradictions within that national vision, thus undermining the message in the eyes and ears of the target audience, the citizenry.

The state conducted its propaganda campaigns through both personalized and mass channels using two departments: the Information Department that placed men and women on the ground to conduct face-to-face propaganda across the nation but with an emphasis on rural and semi-rural communities, and Radio Malaya/Malaysia, the state's primary medium for mass communication until television overtook radio from the 1970s onwards. The dissertation looks at the history, operational procedures and goals of the two agencies, from their colonial roots during which they were key components in the anti-communist war, to their post-colonial iterations, when they had to adapt to meet peacetime objectives. It suggests that the work of the two were compromised because of their colonial legacies and the operational challenges inherent in bureaucracies. The

³ Ibid. Another feature of Civics Courses was the group photograph, in which participants posed with the VIP speaker for the event, which, in this particular example, was the State Secretary of Johore. The department would later send a copy of this photograph to the participants, almost as a visual diploma of their participation, with the aim of boosting their standing in their communities. Some promising participants were also appointed Honorary Information Officers and sent departmental publicity material for them to disseminate.

departments were also hampered by having to promote an official nationalism that was inherently contradictory, one that offered the various ethnic/religious communities equality in the new nation while simultaneously proclaiming the special position of indigenous groups. This contradiction was born of the need to paper over deep differences over issues of citizenship rights, language and education among the many ethnic nationalists who sought independence from the British.

The study of propaganda has usually been associated with war, and while a number of definitions existed for the term, the subject was on the whole regularly seen in a pejorative light. When dealing with propaganda, scholars often used synonyms like lies, distortion, deceit, manipulation, mind control, psychological warfare, and brainwashing.⁴ The propagandists themselves at times preferred to avoid the term, especially the British, who preferred “education,” “information” and “publicity”⁵ when conducting propaganda work in their empire.⁶ At the same time, scholars of propaganda have acknowledged that one’s perception of a form of communication determines what is self-evident and what is controversial, i.e. one person’s propaganda may be another person’s education. Thus, to reclaim propaganda as a legitimate field of scholarship that has an important impact beyond international intrigue or military campaigns, Garth Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell have offered a leaner definition that avoids its pejorative roots and focuses on propaganda as a type of communication. In their influential work *Propaganda and Persuasion*, they define the former as “the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist.”⁷

This dissertation is built on the Jowett/O’Donnell definition that focuses on the mechanics of propaganda as a legitimate site of inquiry instead of merely being an adjunct to the exercise of power. To this end, I am mindful of Michel Foucault’s conception of governance, which transcends the act of an ideological state exercising political power. Power is redistributed, diffused and modified by the apparatuses through which it is exercised and by the expertise of state and non-state actors. To analyze political power through the analytics of government is not to ask what happened and why,⁸ but how. Foucault calls this governmentality, or the “ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses, and reflections; the calculations and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power...”⁹ To achieve “the welfare of the population, the improvement of its condition, the increase of its wealth,

⁴ Garth Jowett, "Propaganda and Communication: The Re-emergence of a Research Tradition," *The Journal of Communication* 37, no. 1 (1987). 97-98.

⁵ When the British first established the Department of Information in 1946, it was called the Department of Public Relations.

⁶ Thomas G. August, *The selling of the empire : British and French imperialist propaganda, 1890-1940*, Contributions in comparative colonial studies, (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985). 55. For the British, the terms information and publicity suggested the delivery of facts while propaganda was associated with delivering ideas.

⁷ Garth Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell, *Propaganda and persuasion*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1999). 6.

⁸ Nikolas S. Rose, *Powers of freedom : reframing political thought* (Cambridge, U.K. ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999). 20.

⁹ Michel Foucault, "Governmentality," in *The essential Foucault : selections from essential works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, ed. Michel Foucault, Paul Rabinow, and Nikolas S. Rose (New York: New Press, 2003). 244.

longevity, health, and so on,”¹⁰ government operates by “educating desires and configuring habits, aspirations and beliefs. ... Persuasion might be applied, as authorities attempt to gain consent.”¹¹

In this formulation, a state’s ideology, official nationalism, and policies have to be digested as they pass through the bowels of bureaucracy before they can act on the collective body of the citizenry. The Department of Information and Radio Malaysia were sites where state power was understood, broken down and repackaged before being redeployed as a tool of persuasion that was a necessary component of government’s continual strategy of reconfiguring habits, aspirations and beliefs. In these two government departments, we observe the state acting directly on the citizenry, as the opening anecdote shows, illuminating how the mechanics of power was translated into action on the ground. The Information Department’s ground troops, called Field Officers, worked face to face (or eyeball to eyeball) with Malaysians of all stripes, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas. The writers, producers, voice talent and reporters of Radio Malaysia produced programs that reached into the homes of most Malaysians, and while they were equally important in both rural and urban areas, they took on a more critical role in the cities and large towns that the Information Department Field Officers could not adequately cover due to manpower challenges. These frontline propagandists explained government policies, provided entertainment, answered questions, listened to the concerns of the people, and observed the situation on the ground. They translated the ideological state’s policies into digestible bits for the consumption of the citizenry, but the process of translation and the departments’ distinct institutional culture inadvertently modified those policies. I use this lens to examine how the government confronted and ultimately failed to meet one of the key challenges of the immediate post-independence years: inculcating the official nationalism among the citizenry in the context of a continuing battle over the meaning of the nation, a contest that mapped over enduring ethnic and linguistic fault lines that first appeared during the colonial era and continued to deepen after independence.

By looking at the people and processes behind the practice of propaganda, I hope to take the first steps toward refocusing the study of power away from the political arena and the actions of the elite, which currently dominate Malaysian historiography of this period. In the scholarship of Malaysian history from 1957-1970, Malaysia’s founding leader, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, looms large, since these were also the years he served as Prime Minister.¹² While the Tunku did not author a memoir, he did write a newspaper column after he left office, and these influential recollections and commentaries on his involvement in public life shaped much of the discourse on post-World War II Malaysian history.¹³ Although these columns touched on a variety of topics,

¹⁰ Ibid. 241.

¹¹ Tania Murray Li, "Governmentality," *Anthropologica* 49, no. 2 (2007). 275.

¹² See for instance Ahmad A. K. Surattee, *Bapa Keamanan. Father of Peace* (Kuala Lumpur,: Malaysian Enterprises, 1969); Kia Soong Kua and K. Das, *K. Das & the Tunku tapes* (Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia: Strategic Info Research Development, 2002); Mubin Sheppard, *Tunku, his life and times : the authorized biography of Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra al-Haj* (Petaling Jaya, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia: Pelanduk Publications, 1995).

¹³ See Abdul Rahman Putra, *Looking back : Monday musings and memories*, 1st ed. (Kuala Lumpur: Pustaka Antara, 1977); Abdul Rahman Putra, *Viewpoints* (Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann Educational Books (Asia), 1978); Abdul Rahman Putra, *As a matter of interest* (Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann Asia, 1981);

it was the politics of the day and the Tunku's actions as a political leader that dominate his writing. The collections thus placed Tunku the politician and the public figure at the heart of this period in Malaysian history.

By and large, the majority of the scholarship of 1957-1970 Malaysia is devoted to politics, with scholars examining the various General Elections in detail¹⁴ to political scientists focusing on the nature of power and political systems in this post-colonial setting.¹⁵ The most comprehensive general treatment of the politics behind the formation of Malaya/Malaysia and the role it played in nation-building is James Ongkili's *Nation-building in Malaysia, 1946-1974*.¹⁶ Ongkili focused on communalism as the "fundamental problem" of nation-building from the perspective of political parties, leaders and ministers "entrusted with the serious responsibility of running the government of the country,"¹⁷ and is representative of the dominance of race in Malaysian historiography, especially works that focus on the link between ethnicity and politics.¹⁸

When Malaya gained her independence in 1957, the ruling Alliance coalition government embarked on an aggressive economic development program, and some scholars examined the political economy of this promising post-colonial nation that had to manage its volatile ethnic mix.¹⁹ These works were also set in the context of

Abdul Rahman Putra, *Lest we forget : further candid reminiscences* (Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia: Eastern Universities Press (M), 1983); Abdul Rahman Putra, *Challenging times* (Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia: Pelanduk Publications, 1985); Abdul Rahman Putra, *Political awakening* (Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia: Pelanduk Publications, 1986).

¹⁴ See K. J. Ratnam and R. S. Milne, *The Malayan parliamentary election of 1964* (Singapore: University of Malaya Press; [sole distributors, Oxford University Press, 1967]; R. K. Vasil, "The 1964 General Elections in Malaya," *International Studies* 7, no. 1 (1965); R. K. Vasil, *The Malaysian general election of 1969*, Oxford in Asia current affairs (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1972).

¹⁵ See, as a sampling, Rupert Emerson, *Malaysia: a study in direct and indirect rule* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1970); Gordon P. Means, *Malaysian politics* (New York: New York University Press, 1970); Mohammad Agus Yusoff, *Consociational politics : the Malaysian experience* (Kuala Lumpur: Perikatan Pemuda Enterprise, 1992); Yu Hock Oo, *Ethnic chameleon : multiracial politics in Malaysia* (Petaling Jaya, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia Pelanduk Publications, 1991); Karl Von Vorzys, *Democracy without consensus : communalism and political stability in Malaysia* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975).

Even the prominent anthropologist/political scientist James Scott, noted for his study on the strategies of resistance employed by the weak based on fieldwork in the rice padi fields of Malaysia, could not resist a romp through the corridors of power. James C. Scott, *Political ideology in Malaysia; reality and the beliefs of an elite* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968); James C. Scott, *Weapons of the weak : everyday forms of peasant resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

¹⁶ James P. Ongkili, *Nation-building in Malaysia, 1946-1974* (Singapore ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

¹⁷ Ibid. v.

¹⁸ The number of works dealing with ethnicity and Malaysian politics is too numerous to list, but two that deal specifically with this period are Charles T. Goh, *Malaysia, beyond communal politics* (Petaling Jaya, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia: Pelanduk Publications, 1994); Hock Guan Lee, *Political parties and the politics of citizenship and ethnicity in peninsular Malay(sia), 1957-1968* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2001).

¹⁹ Alan Fook Yew Chew, *The Malaysian balance of payments, 1960-1970* (Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Universiti Malaya, 1975); Gordon P. Means, "'Special Rights' as a Strategy for Development: The Case of Malaysia," *Comparative Politics* 5, no. 1 (1972). Lim Chong Yah's classic 1967 study encompasses both the colonial and post-colonial period, and while the treatment of the latter does not fully cover the period of

government policies and party politics. One delved deeper into the workings of a specific ministry—Gayl Ness’ in-depth study of the role of the bureaucracy in executing rural development policies that focused on the structure of political systems, and the policies, agendas, organizational flowcharts, and inputs and outputs of the Ministry of Rural Development. Ness provided a valuable insight into the workings of the bureaucracy as seen through organizational theories,²⁰ but her work covered only the first half of the 1960s. Another area of interest was the politics related to the formation of the expanded federation of Malaysia in 1963 and the eventual expulsion of Singapore in 1965.²¹ While these have more than adequately covered the politics and economy of this period, there has been a lack of studies focusing on other topics²² that would provide a more complete picture of the first decade or so of Malaysia’s independence and which could probably complicate the political-economic narrative that dominates the historiography of that period.²³ This dissertation aims to fill that gap.

While nationalism, especially ethnic nationalism, is often used to discuss aspects of political life in Malaysia, most scholars deploy the term without much discussion as to its meaning, reach and limits. Cheah Boon Kheng’s *Malaysia: The Making of a Nation*, which discusses the antecedents and dynamics of the country’s official nationalism,²⁴ is an exception. Cheah identifies the Tunku as the key actor playing the role of an umpire between the officially nationalism based on Malay political primacy and non-Malay visions of the nation. In the initial years of independence, the Tunku masked Malay political dominance within the ruling coalition underneath a sheen of ethnic power sharing.²⁵ However, as the 1960s wore on and Malaya expanded to become Malaysia in 1963, the Tunku became more concerned with achieving national unity through a policy

this dissertation, it is nonetheless an important resource. Chong-Yah Lim, *Economic development of modern Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur,: Oxford University Press, 1967).

²⁰ Gayl D. Ness, *Bureaucracy and rural development in Malaysia* (Berkeley,: University of California Press, 1967). Ness’ study, like Lim Chong Yah’s, does not cover the second half of the 1960s.

²¹ For works exploring the perspective of Sabah and Sarawak toward Malaysia, see among others, Gordon P. Means, "Eastern Malaysia: The Politics of Federalism," *Asian Survey* 8, no. 4 (1968); James P. Ongkili, *The Borneo response to Malaysia, 1961-1963* (Brisbane: Donald Moore Press, 1967).

Singapore’s short and turbulent time as part of the Malaysian federation has produced a number of excellent monographs and memoirs, among them Patrick Keith, *Ousted* (Singapore: Media Masters, 2005); Albert Lau, *A moment of anguish : Singapore in Malaysia and the politics of disengagement* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1998); Tai Yong Tan, *Creating "greater Malaysia" : decolonization and the politics of merger* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008).

²² Among some exceptions are Chee Yoong Chan, ed. *Post-Merdeka architecture : Malaysia 1957-1987* (Malaysia: Pertubuhan Akitek Malaysia, 1987); James D. Chopyak, "The Role of Music in Mass Media, Public Education and the Formation of a Malaysian National Culture," *Ethnomusicology* 31, no. 3 (1987).

²³ The 1957-1970 period could do with a comprehensive work trying together the social, cultural, economic and political aspects of Malaysia, in the same manner as Tim Harper’s excellent work for the period immediately preceding independence. T. N. Harper, *The end of empire and the making of Malaya* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

²⁴ Cheah covers the period from 1945 to 2001. Boon Kheng Cheah, *Malaysia : the making of a nation* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2002). Another illuminating study that tackles the contest over the meaning of Malaya is Tan Liok Ee’s study on the Chinese community’s vision of the nation, but her work covers the pre-independence period. Liok Ee Tan, *The rhetoric of Bangsa and Minzu : community and nation in tension, the Malay Peninsula, 1900-1955* (Clayton, Victoria, Australia: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies Monash University, 1988).

²⁵ Cheah, *Malaysia : the making of a nation*. 49-51.

of “inclusive pluralism,” Cheah’s term for the de facto official nationalism.²⁶ This inclusive pluralism accommodated the aspirations of the other ethnic groups while softening Malay nationalism, and while this achieved some measure of inter-racial harmony, the Tunku’s balancing act did not fully please the influential ethnic hardliners of all stripes. Cheah notes that the race riots of 1969 destroyed the Tunku’s balancing act, and by implication, his official nationalism of inclusive pluralism. While Cheah’s analysis is the most cogent general treatment of Malaysian official nationalism, it does not (and neither do most studies mentioned above) investigate how this political discourse was translated into action or consumed by the body of the nation, i.e. the citizenry. This dissertation looks at one important aspect of that translation, and suggests that the actions of the Tunku and other politicians were not the sole or even overriding cause of the failure of this flawed and contradictory official nationalism. It is self evident that the pronouncements of the government and the Tunku do not reach the citizenry by osmosis and that there is a particular process in which the state acts on the citizenry. The peculiar institutional practices of the Department of Information and Radio Malaysia (especially its racially-organized delivery systems), the agency of the propagandists, and the interaction between process and message all act upon and modify the official nationalism, producing compromised visions of the official nationalism that is itself a compromise between competing meanings of the nation. Together with Lai Chee Kien’s study that focuses on how Malaysia’s official nationalism was translated into the public space through built structures and murals,²⁷ this dissertation hopes to forge a new approach toward the investigation of the key dynamics in Malaysian historiography—race, language, identity and competing nationalisms.

This study also adds to a small but growing body of work on propaganda and mass communications in Malaysia, specifically among scholars working in the fields of communication and history. John Lent and Drew McDaniel cover the basic histories of the Department of Information and Radio Malaya,²⁸ while Mubin Sheppard, who helped create the first Department of Information in 1946, provides some colorful details in his memoir.²⁹ Mohd. Safar Hasim examines the colonial state’s response to specific propaganda incidents between the world wars, but since the centralized colonial propaganda units had yet to be established at that time, his work concentrates on colonial government policy in general.³⁰ Beyond these introductions, propaganda scholarship has

²⁶ Ibid. 75-112.

²⁷ Chee Kien Lai, "Concrete/concentric nationalism : the architecture of independence in Malaysia, 1945-1969" (Thesis Ph D in Architecture --University of California Berkeley Fall 2005, University of California Berkeley, 2005).

²⁸ John A. Lent, "The mass media in Malaysia," in *Cultural pluralism in Malaysia : polity, military, mass media, education, religion, and social class*, ed. John A. Lent, *Special report number 14* (De Kalb, Michigan: Northern Illinois University Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1977); Drew O. McDaniel, *Broadcasting in the Malay world : radio, television, and video in Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore*, [Communication and information science series] (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Pub., 1994).

²⁹ Mubin Sheppard, *Taman budiman : memoirs of an unorthodox civil servant* (Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann Educational Books (Asia), 1979).

³⁰ Mohd. Safar Hasim, "Response to propaganda: a study of incidents between two world wars in British Malaya," in *Propaganda in the 20th century : contributions to its history*, ed. Jurgen Wilke (Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press, 1998). Safar has also written a work on the history of the press in Malaysia. Mohd. Safar Hasim, *Akhbar dan kuasa : perkembangan sistem akhbar di Malaysia sejak 1806* [Power and the press :

focused on its role in the war against the Malayan communists from 1948 to 1960. Among the most important of these are articles by the former head of the Information Department, J.N. McHugh, who gives an invaluable insiders account of the mechanics of propaganda.³¹ Kumar Ramakrishna's *Emergency Propaganda: The Winning of Malayan Hearts and Minds, 1948-1958* is so far the defining work on the role of propaganda during the Emergency, and it examines the work of the Department of Information and Radio Malaya as key components in the war effort in illuminating detail. My dissertation takes off where Ramakrishna's work ends in terms of periodization, and although I am indebted to his meticulous mining of the enormous archive left behind by the two departments in London and Kuala Lumpur, my focus, framework and assumptions depart significantly from his. I examine the propagandists not as subordinate units in a larger war effort, but as key actors in forging a new post-colonial nation during peacetime out of an ethnically fractured society. I also examine how these departments navigated the difficult transition from wartime to peacetime work, and from a colonial to post-colonial milieu. Although both the Department of Information and Radio Malaya had to make these transitions, they faced unique challenges in the course of rethinking their philosophies and reorganizing their operations.

In Chapter 1, I trace the development of the Department of Information from the time it was established as a Malaya-wide department in 1946 to its reorganization in 1960, and evaluate the success of its efforts to reorient itself to a new post-colonial reality in the first half of the 1960s. As detailed by Ramakrishna, McHugh and others, the Information Department's identity was forged in the crucible of the war against the communists, and by independence in 1957, it had become a well-oiled wartime propaganda machine with an extensive and tested infrastructure that permeated the most remote areas of Malaya. But even as it continued to engage the communists in the mid-1950s, independence was looming and the department's senior leaders—the first indigenous senior bureaucrats that replaced the departing Britons—recognized that this mode of operation would become a future liability. Thereafter, they moved to radically change the way the department operated in order for it to be more relevant and effective in a future peacetime post-colonial context. In addition to its anti-communist propaganda, the department's leaders began to inject new content and emphasis into its day-to-day work, such as delivering basic and useful information to community leaders, increasing awareness of key issues like citizenship, and lifting the veil on the workings of the state. However, since the colonial government was still prosecuting the Emergency, the complete overhaul of the Information Department had to wait until the end of the decade when the fighting was formally concluded, and after the government had weathered a recession soon after gaining self-rule in 1957.

In the reorganization of 1960, the government announced a new mission for the Information Department: to educate, exhort and inspire the people. The colonial-era tactics of blanketing communities with leaflets and announcements—blunt tools that emphasized breadth and quantity—were to be de-emphasized, and in their place, Field

the development of the press in Malaysia from 1806] (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Penerbit Universiti Malaya, 1996).

³¹ J. N. McHugh, "Psychological warfare in Malaya (1942-1946)," *Journal of the Historical Society* 4, no. 1965/66 (1965); J. N. McHugh, "Psychological or political warfare in Malaya (part two)," *Journal of the Historical Society* V, no. 1966/67 (1966).

Officers were to spend more time talking to communities in small to medium sized groups, and to soft-pedal the propaganda. The department would also accelerate the change in content that had begun in the mid-1950s. This reorganization required a new breed of propagandists who could master new tactics, be flexible in mixing tools to match the audience, and cover more ground. To achieve this, the department's senior leaders sought not just to fill the vacancies in the department but also to recruit better-educated men and women who could execute this more sophisticated strategy. However, the department was not completely successful in improving the quality of its Field Officers for a variety of reasons, and this would eventually hamper its efforts.

A second problem that bedeviled the department was the inherent bureaucratic tendency toward standardization and number crunching. The first fruits of the 1960 reorganization can be seen in Field Officers' lengthy daily or weekly reports that captured the mood in the specific villages or towns they visited. However, these were type- or hand-written free-form reports with no prescribed length or uniformity in terms of the information supplied. These narratives included all manner of unquantifiable details that seemed innocuous but were actually a window into how the citizenry were responding not just to government policies but also to the department itself. This must have proved maddening for the mid-level supervisors who were trained in the colonial culture of collecting numbers and statistics but had little practice in creative and analytical reading. The department soon introduced a new, standardized form that appeared visually neat, with its rows and columns that gave prominence to the countable aspects of a Field Officer's work, and relegated the creative and revealing descriptions of the places they visited into a thin column on the right that occupied no more than 10 per cent of the report's real estate. Field Officers became content to jot down terse remarks in these skinny columns ("satisfactory" or "needs more work"), and the value of these reports decreased as the 1960s wore on. As a result, if the government was in the business of seeing like a state, these operational difficulties were compromising its vision.

Radio Malaya, the subject of the next chapter, was also reorganized at the end of the 1950s, although it faced different challenges from the Department of Information. Radio transmission had begun in Malaya in 1921 and was the domain of enthusiastic amateurs, both indigenous and expatriate. These amateurs, operating without state support and tapping into their own time, energy and resources, had to be multi-skilled: technically literate, organizationally sound, and able to plan, write, edit and narrate programs. Indigenous radio enthusiasts were invariably better educated and more exposed to members of other ethnic communities than the indigenous population at large, advantages that came from their English education. These Radio Malaya pioneers, culled from every racial group in the colony, shared commonalities that transcended the plural society that had been keeping the majority of Malaysians in their ethnic silos, commonalities that helped define the tenor of Radio Malaya as a more racially integrated organization than the wider Malayan society.

These leaders had to create a Radio Malaya almost from scratch at the end of the 1950s. The colonial-era Radio Malaya served both the Malay peninsula and Singapore, and was headquartered on the island. After Malaya gained her independence without Singapore, the colonial broadcaster split into two, with Radio Singapore inheriting much of the infrastructure, equipment and personnel of the colonial predecessor, and the new Radio Malaya starting afresh. Thus, while the Department of Information had to deal

with the baggage of colonial era philosophies and operational principles, Radio Malaya was less encumbered by wartime strategies. At the same time, its cosmopolitan leadership, who had a direct hand in producing programs that reached into Malayan homes, seemed more suitable to meet the challenges of forging a new nationalism among a multi-ethnic citizenry. But the broadcaster had to deal with other equally formidable challenges: building up quickly the technical and organizational capabilities needed to sustain four separate language services, the constant need to prioritize entertainment over propaganda to cater to the demands of its listeners, and competition from other radio stations.

One problem common to both the Department of Information and Radio Malaya was the tension between the services' delivery systems that were organized along distinct linguistic channels (a legacy from the colonial era), and the official post-independence ideology they were tasked to promote. The government's vision of Malaya was an uneasy yoking of two contradictory visions of the nation that had battled for dominance in the 1950s, a battle that not only was unresolved after independence, but also intensified in the 1960s. On the one hand, Malay nationalists envisioned a Malaya in which Malay culture, language and religion would be dominant, while other ethnic groups visualized a homeland in which all the component groups would have equal standing. These dueling visions of the nation were fought over many turfs, but it was in education and language policies that the contest was most heated. Chapter 3 examines the key education reports of the 1950s to determine why language and education were the flashpoints of this contest over the meaning of the nation. The Alliance, a coalition of mono-ethnic political parties that represented the racial groups involved in this contest, sought the middle ground not by seeking a unified vision acceptable to all its constituencies, but by yoking together these contending visions into an official nationalism that was inherently contradictory. This contradiction was evident in the foundational document of the nation, the Constitution, which guaranteed the special position of the Malays while simultaneously espousing equality for all Malaysians regardless of ethnicity, class or religion. In other words, all are equal but one is special. Islam was to be the official religion but Malaysians were guaranteed the freedom to worship their religions. At the same time, Malay was accorded the status of the sole official language. In education, the government established a National Primary School system that only used the official National Language as the medium of instruction. However, the Alliance government also established a National-Type Primary School system that used the unofficial languages of Mandarin and Tamil as mediums of instruction. These two educational and language philosophies were at the heart of the contest between contending visions of the nation, and the post-colonial government corralled the contradictory imaginings together (i.e. two "national" systems in one national space) without resolving the tensions.

It fell on the Department of Information and Radio Malaysia to "sell" this official vision of the nation to the citizenry, a task made more complicated, and perhaps impossible, by the organizational structures that undermined the message. The Information Department's basic modus operandi was ethnic targeting: i.e. deploying Malay Field Officers to deliver propaganda in Malay to Malay audiences, Chinese officers using one of four Chinese languages to Chinese audiences, and so on. This segmented delivery mechanism gave lie to the official policy of entrenching Malay as the sole National Language and promoting it as the language of unity, capable of bringing the disparate communities together. Non-Malay Field Officers had to explain to their non-

Malay audiences why Malay held the privileged position and why their mother tongues could not be accommodated in the official nationalism, all in the very languages being relegated—a cruelty too much to bear, perhaps, and an irony that could not have been lost on the affected communities. Radio Malaysia too persisted with the four separate language stations the British had established, and this invited pressure from both sides of the language divide. Non-Malay communities took the presence of these “official” radio stations that broadcasted their languages as proof that they deserve equal status in the official sphere, and pressed for the expansion of that equality. At the same time, Malay pressure groups lobbied the broadcaster to alter the mix of programming on the airwaves to reflect the dominance of Malay language and culture.

Ultimately, the state could not alter these racialized structures to bring it closer to official nationalism because the manner in which Radio Malaysia and the Department of Information operated—just like the education system with its multiple mediums of instructions in its multiple “national” systems, and the Constitution with its contradictory Articles—reflected the codification of the uneasy coexistence of competing visions of the nation. This coexistence did not only fail to resolve the tension between the competing visions but on the contrary inflamed the debate over the meaning of Malaysia, adding more weight to those vulnerable structures of compromise.

The government did try to rally the population around “national” symbols of unity that in theory were supposed to rise above the fray of partisan politics and the contest over the meaning of the nation, but these symbols were often problematic. Some were inert (e.g. the National Flag and the constitutional monarch) and failed to capture the imagination of the citizenry, while others were geographically specific (the national monuments) and were not in the visual and imaginative spaces of the majority of the people. One symbol that had the potential to inspire Malaysians was the national anthem, the subject of Chapter 4. What sets a national anthem apart from other symbols is its performative quality that helps it to connect with and evoke a response from citizens, thus allowing them “an active means by which to experience the nation, by which to feel and act national.”³² However, the government could not control the nature of this response and the discourse surrounding negative responses.

What triggered the debate over the national anthem were persistent incidents of moviegoers failing to respect the playing of the anthem at the end of the final show of the day, as they rushed out of the cinema to beat the parking lot jams or catch the last late-night bus home. At first, the discourse over these recalcitrant moviegoers, who were initially generic citizens with no gender, age, religious or racial attributes, was innocent enough: their actions were seen as relatively benign and born out of ignorance. The nation was young, and these newly minted citizens just needed to be educated on the significance of the anthem, so went the general consensus. However, the contest over the meaning of the nation soon engulfed this discourse, and Malay pressure groups started constructing these moviegoers as Chinese Malaysians expressing a treasonous act of rudeness against the nation. The propaganda machinery recognized that there was no basis to these charges and sought to control the escalation of this discourse. The Information Department’s Field Officers had encountered many incidents of such rudeness in its day-to-day work that involved film screenings in rural and semi-urban

³² Sue Tuohy, “The Sonic Dimensions of Nationalism in Modern China: Musical Representation and Transformation,” *Ethnomusicology* 45, no. 1 (2001). 109.

areas. The audience, regardless of ethnicity, would leave after the last show or would talk loudly as the anthem was being played. To the Field Officers, this was not of problem of race. The department and Radio Malaysia, on a micro and macro scale respectively, tried to remedy the situation by continuing to treat it as problem of ignorance and a lack of education, and not as another front in the battle over the meaning of the nation. Eventually, however, the hysteria grew out of control and the government was forced to protect its Malay support by implicitly accepting the new narrative regarding the rude moviegoers. It eventually passed a law that gave it powers to jail anyone showing disrespect to the National Anthem, but in order to avoid this inflammatory escalation, the government simply banned the playing of the anthem in cinemas, thus removing the sore but not curing the disease. Thus, despite the efforts of the propaganda services to protect the integrity of the National Anthem, the symbol that was meant to serve as a rallying point for unity among all the racial groups succumbed to the heated and unresolved contest over the meaning of the nation.

This struggle to define the nation continued after independence and culminated in the May 10, 1969 General Elections. The Alliance coalition suffered significant losses in three of the most important states, and failed to hold on to its two-thirds majority in the federal Parliament. The result can be seen as a repudiation of the official ideology by almost half of the citizenry, and signaled how deep the colonial-era ethnic cleavages continued to be. The government, through more than a decade of aggressive economic development plans and extensive propaganda efforts, had failed to convince a significant majority of Malaysians of its vision for the nation. Three days after the elections, the contest spilled into the streets and racial clashes ensued, eventually claiming almost 200 lives, according to official figures.³³ The government sent in the military, imposed a curfew, suspended parliamentary democracy, and eventually, after the lifting of martial law, implemented a raft of policies that strengthened the dominance of Malay interests in the nation. This entrenched the vision of the nation that privileged one community; an outcome achieved not through persuasion and propaganda, but through military might.

³³ The National Operations Council, *The May 13 tragedy; a report* (Kuala Lumpur: The National Operations Council, 1969).

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Cheong Soon Gan
Berkeley, 2012

Eyeball to eyeball propaganda

The spoken word is the most powerful medium for communicating with the people and the Department is spending about a third of its budget annually to maintain the field staff, vehicles and equipment. ... [Field officers] must not merely be messengers and disseminators of Government information but they must be educators who will exhort and inspire the people to appreciate the services rendered for them by the Government.

– Yaacob bin Abdul Latiff
Director, Department of Information¹

Introduction

From independence in 1957 till the end of the 1960s, the frontline components of the state's propaganda apparatus were the five units under a ministry devoted to information, broadcasting, the press (relations with and monitoring of), news gathering, and politics (the ambiguously named Special Section). Underpinning their work were two other units—the Publications Department and the Malayan Film Unit (later known as the Malaysian Film Unit, or *Filem Negara*)—that churned out paraphernalia for public consumption such as newsreels, films, pamphlets, booklets, posters, car bumper stickers, car decals, and flags; press releases; and material for the use of its own officers, especially those engaged in frontline propaganda work, such as Background Notes, Talking Points and memos. Of the five units, all but the Special Section had roots in the colonial administration, while the news gathering arm was spun off into a national news agency in 1968, still operating under the ministry, but as a statutory body.² This dissertation focuses on the work of the Information Department and the Department of Radio, the subjects of this and the next chapter.

The work of the Department of Information is important because it was one of the key tools used by the state—in rural areas, it would have been *the* primary tool—to promote its national ideology. I suggest that the mechanics, process and infrastructure of propaganda and persuasion are as important as the content of the message, especially outside the major cities. This is because mass media had not penetrated deeply and widely in these parts of Malaya/Malaysia, especially in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and even as radio ownership increased throughout the 1960s, the information field staff continued to be the primary source of information on government policies and ideology.

¹ Yaacob bin Latiff, Director of the Information Department, to all State Information Officers, May 25, 1960: "The Role of Field Units." JP (K/P) 82/60: Role of Field Units

² The government established the Malaysian National News Agency, or *Bernama*, by an Act of Parliament in 1967, and it began operation in May 1968. *Bernama*, "Mengenai BERNAMA (About BERNAMA)," http://www.bernama.com/aboutbernama/bm/about_bernama.htm.

Since the information field staff delivered the message personally, he or she became the face of the government: content and the messenger melding into one body.

With the 1945 defeat of the Japanese in the Pacific War, the British returned to Malaya and unified the Malay states, previously governed through a patchwork of administrative set-ups, into a single colonial administration in 1946. As part of this restructuring of colonial rule, the British established the Information Department, Radio Malaya and the Malayan Film Unit. One of the key themes of this chapter is the continuity in the work, structure and personnel of the Information Department as Malaya moved from being a colony to an independent state.

The main reason for this continuity lies in the nature of Malaya's decolonization. The Alliance coalition, led by Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, an Anglophile conservative prince representing the indigenous establishment, won the pre-independence 1955 General Election convincingly. This allowed the British to withdraw from the colony two years later after some relatively friendly rounds of negotiations with the genial, pro-Western, London-trained lawyer. Thus, the independent government that took over the reins of the nation in 1957 had been already operating for two years, while some indigenous bureaucrats had been serving since the 1940s. Many of the senior officers of the Information Department were recruited as far back as 1946—its director in 1957 was a Malay who had risen to the position in 1955, the first indigenous civil servant to head that department. Continuity was also a matter of necessity. At the time of independence, the government was officially still at war with the Communist Party of Malaya, a conflict (termed the "Emergency") that began in 1948 and would only end officially in 1960. The Information Department was an integral part of the state's war effort, and by the mid-1950s, had become fairly efficient in executing wartime propaganda, an expertise that was still relevant in the first years of independence.

This continuity cut both ways for post-1957 Malaya. On one hand, the independent state could rely on an established propaganda machinery with a well-oiled standard operating procedure and which reached even the most rural parts of the nation, to advance its vision of what an independent Malaya looked like and stood for.

However, that official nationalism was at odds with the goals of the colonial state (even though the late colonial and early independence political leadership were very similar). On paper, the colonial state promoted inter-racial harmony and sought to give the non-indigenous communities (mainly diasporic Chinese and Indians) a stake in Malaya, but its commitment to forging a united and harmonious society was lukewarm at best. Instead, it pursued policies that kept the various communities apart and suspicious of each other in a plural society; a divide-and-rule strategy aimed at preventing the emergence of a unified colonized society capable of threatening its colonial rule. Independent Malaya's official nationalism sought to remedy that schism by promoting racial harmony among its citizens of multiple ethnicities and religions. Thus, a department used to advancing a colonial agenda was being asked to advance a different post-colonial official nationalism.

At the same time, the department had to re-evaluate its operational philosophy. As the conflict with the communists wound down in the late 1950s, the post-colonial state had begun to transition out of its war footing to focus on civilian goals such as rural

development. By 1960, as the Emergency officially ended, the role the Information Department played so well throughout the 1950s—as an integral part of a war effort—became redundant. The political leadership and the department’s senior officers decided that change was necessary.

The story of the Information Department is about the changes it underwent to meet the propaganda challenges of a newly independent nation. The senior officers behind the 1960 reorganization were on the right track, as they correctly identified the problem and proposed an ambitious reorientation of the department’s philosophy. As they saw it, the department had a clear but limited focus on winning the war against the communists and was using propaganda tools that were ineffective in meeting the new peacetime challenges. To remedy that, they instructed their Field Officers to decrease their use of mass information techniques, hitherto a staple in their work, and to concentrate on the more difficult tasks of interacting face to face with small groups of citizens. The department was shifting its focus from being a channel of information to actively educating and exhorting the citizenry.

This chapter suggests that the reorganization ran into problems and could not be fully implemented. The Information Department faced difficulties in recruiting better-qualified officers to carry out the more complex tasks on hand. Discipline and/or low performance continued to be an issue. Thirdly, the department’s reorganization efforts would require the field staff be given more flexibility to execute their work, be more proactive and take more responsibility for the areas under their charge. But this loosening up process ran counter to and could not ultimately overcome the centralization tendencies of bureaucracies that demanded standardized forms in triplicate and quantifiable goals that can be easily translated into statistics for annual reports. Eventually, after the initial burst of post-reorganization enthusiasm, the field staff settled into a more familiar routine of rote propaganda work.

Finally, the department also never fully resolved the tension between elements of the state’s official ideology that it was promoting, and the operational challenges it had to overcome. Specifically, the department’s main goal was to deliver effectively the government message. At the time of independence, there was no single common language that all ethnic groups were fluent in. Thus, the department carried out its duties in translation—churning out four sets of propaganda material (in Malay, Chinese, Tamil and English)—and racialized its operations by matching the ethnically and linguistically appropriate Field Officer with the target community, and organizing many mono-ethnic events. This ran counter with the official ideology of a united Malaya/Malaysia, with Malay as the official language, medium of communication and agent of fostering inter-racial harmony. How did the department promote Malay as the sole National Language with primacy over other languages, when that message was being delivered by a Chinese Malaysian officer to a mono-lingual rural Chinese community in Mandarin? This chapter introduces the contradiction between the official nationalism and the workings of the propaganda machinery, a tension that will be explored in more detail in subsequent chapters.

This is not to say the department proved to be a blunt propaganda instrument. The militarized nature of its operations had its efficiencies—it did reach almost all corners of the country. Somewhat surprisingly, this wartime machinery worked well for the first major developmental project of the newly independent state: Rural Development. This

was because the Deputy Prime Minister, who was concurrently the Minister for Rural Development, ran the program with military efficiency and urgency, which was not surprising since he was also the Minister for Defence.

This tension between change and continuity complicated the work of the Information Department in the first years of independence. The challenge facing the nation in 1957 was to instill in these newly-minted post-colonial citizens, who had been living mainly in racialized silos, a new nationalism that emphasized unity and commonality, and the burden of spreading this message fell onto the state's propaganda arms, including the Information Department. The bloody race riots of 1969 suggests that there had been little progress made on this front in the 12 years since the British left Malaya. This chapter suggests that the inability of the Information Department to come to grips fully with the new peacetime challenges it faced contributed to this lack of progress.

Propaganda and war, 1946-1960

The Information Department, before 1948

While there had been agencies dealing with public relations in colonial Malaya as early as the 1920s,³ the first concerted propaganda efforts came in 1940 in response to the outbreak of World War II. With the fall of Malaya to the Japanese, these agencies moved first to New Delhi and then to Kandy, Ceylon, operating under British military command.⁴ After the defeat of Japan in August 1945, the British returned and set up an interim military administration governing all its Malayan territories.⁵ In September, the wartime propaganda unit-in-exile returned to its pre-war Singapore headquarters and was reincarnated as the Department of Publicity and Printing under the direction of a "uniformed full colonel."⁶ But when a civilian government replaced the military administration on April 1st, 1946, it changed the department's name to the Department of Public Relations (DPR), and moved the headquarters to Kuala Lumpur. The British planned to strengthen its rule over the Malay states by merging them into a single

³ One such example was the Information Agency of the Malay States. Department of Information, Ministry of Information Communication, and Culture. "History of the Establishment of the Department of Information Malaysia".

http://www.penerangan.gov.my/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1808%3Asejarah&catid=329%3Aprofil-organisasi&Itemid=44

⁴ The Far Eastern Bureau of Britain's Ministry of Information moved to Singapore from Hong Kong in 1940. The Bureau and the Oriental Mission of the Ministry of Economic Warfare were responsible for all overt and covert propaganda, including sabotage. Subsequently in Kandy, Ceylon, the agencies were reconstituted as the Malaya Section of the Psychological Warfare Section of the Supreme Allied Commander Southeast Asia HQ, under Lord Louis Mountbatten, in 1944. That section produced some 16.5 million leaflets and newsheets to be distributed in Japanese-controlled Malaya. Kumar Ramakrishna, *Emergency propaganda: the winning of Malayan hearts and minds, 1948-1958* (Richmond: Curzon, 2002). 72-73

⁵ Previously, it had its Malayan possessions under three different administrative units, reflecting its divide and rule philosophy as well as the varying circumstances in which it acquired direct rule or influence over the course of a century. The British Military Administration was the first attempt to govern all the Malayan states as a single entity, and foreshadowed its efforts in 1946 to formalize that arrangement under the civilian Malayan Union plan,

⁶ Mubin Sheppard, *Taman budiman : memoirs of an unorthodox civil servant* (Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann Educational Books (Asia), 1979). 144.

colonial political entity, called the Malayan Union. One of its more contested provisions was the removal of individual Sultans as sovereigns of their respective states, a position that had become ceremonial with the expansion of British influence, and replacing them with the British Monarch. Another provision introduced citizenship to the colony. The requirements for citizenship were fairly liberal and would have allowed many Chinese and Indian residents, for so long seen as temporary migrants by the indigenous Malays and the British rulers, the first chance to put down roots in Malaya.

The Department of Public Relations was under the direction of Mervyn Sheppard and his deputy, J.N. McHugh, both veteran Malaya hands, who had experience working on Malayan propaganda during the war. They had access to some equipment—typesetting machines, newsprint, loudspeakers, among others—and a nucleus of trained Asian staff from the wartime agencies, but these resources were clearly insufficient to meet the expanded needs of the time. Their enthusiasm and energy made up for the lack of resources, and before the month was out, Sheppard touted the department's effectiveness by sending the Governor-General a four-page Kuala Lumpur newspaper in which nine out of ten stories originated from press releases produced from his office. In his memoirs, Sheppard noted that the effort could not have come soon enough, as Kuala Lumpur was a "political volcano, nearing eruption" with Malay nationalists gathered in the colonial capital to fight Britain's efforts to tighten its grip on its Malayan possessions through the Malayan Union plan. Sheppard and McHugh opened two reading rooms in Kuala Lumpur and put together the first mobile information van, with loud speakers and a 16mm film projector, to visit rural areas. Not having any actual newsreels, documentaries or films to screen did not seem to dampen their enthusiasm. The two quickly sought to remedy the situation by prying loose some funds from the tight-fisted Treasury and establishing the Malayan Film Unit that same month.⁷ Even before it celebrated its first anniversary, the DPR, with a team of some 300 experienced European and Asian staff, managed to deploy a Public Relations Officer in almost every state, set up 28 information centers/reading rooms in urban centers, and sent out 11 mobile units, by early 1947.⁸ This example of frenetic activity that outstripped the department's resources would repeat itself with some regularity right till the end of the 1960s as it faced two demanding challenges—a war with the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM), and nation building after independence.

One of the key tasks the department undertook was explaining to the people of Malaya the new political framework for the colony. The colonial government abandoned its Malayan Union plan in the face of concerted Malay opposition and introduced instead the Federation of Malaya Constitution that came into effect on January 31, 1948. This

⁷ Ibid. 144-145. J. N. McHugh, "Psychological or political warfare in Malaya (part two)," *Journal of the Historical Society* V, no. 1966/67 (1966). 77. Sheppard's recollections on the challenges faced in April 1946 were more dramatic than McHugh's, noting that they had "no office, no equipment, ... no money [and] ... a dearth of paper." This exaggeration suggests that Sheppard was more the "big ideas" start-up leader while McHugh was the operational professional. The former's stint in the department would last less than a year, while the latter would succeed him and make a career in propaganda. Sheppard would later retire in Malaysia and convert to Islam, taking up citizenship and the name Mubin. During his tenure in the civil service, Sheppard became instrumental in establishing the National Archives and the National Museum; became a published scholar on Malay culture; and was a confidant of the first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman. He was bestowed one of the nation's highest honors, which carried the title Tan Sri.

⁸ Ramakrishna, *Emergency propaganda*. 73.

new political framework retained the sultans as heads of their respective states, acknowledged the special position of the Malays, and had less liberal citizenship clauses for non-Malays, compared to the Malayan Union. "The conditions of citizenship and the somewhat complex methods of obtaining it necessitated a widespread campaign of publicity through all media. Diagrams and charts in all languages for teachers and schools were supported by a film on the new Federation made by the Film Unit which proved of very great popular value. It was seen by more than 1½ million people in the rural areas alone," McHugh noted.⁹ The DPR was also expending a lot of energy trying to negate the growing influence of the Communist Party of Malaya among workers—educating unionists was a "high priority in the war of ideas"¹⁰—but the communists were much more successful in influencing and controlling the unions. The department failed, McHugh noted, not because it was an inferior propaganda machine, but because the colonial government's labor policy was weak and "indifferent" and the Department of Labor itself "out of date."¹¹ This, McHugh points out, was a typical example of the "comparative uselessness of information, or propaganda, in support of an indifferent policy... [P]ropaganda is an ancillary and can only be effective when the policies it supports are backed by visible action, or at worst, the threat of action."¹² Thus, even during its earliest years, the department had to grapple with the symbiotic relationship between the content and the delivery mechanism: Propaganda would not be effective if either was weak or in contradiction with one another.

On a war footing, 1948-1960

In the face of growing anti-colonial agitation from Malay socialists, trade unionists of all ethnicities, radical Islamic thinkers and clerics, and the mainly-Chinese CPM (which was gearing up for armed conflict), the British colonial state banned a number of organizations, including the CPM, and declared a state of emergency in mid-1948.¹³ The Emergency was simultaneously an anti-colonial and civil war, pitting the

⁹ McHugh, "Psychological or political warfare in Malaya (part two)." 78.

¹⁰ Ibid. 79.

¹¹ Ibid. 80.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ The colonial government officially declared the Emergency on June 16, 1948, after three European planters were killed by the CPM, which was subsequently banned on July 23. During the same period, the British also arrested most of the prominent leaders of the Malay left and radical Islamists who were on the verge of formalizing a broad anti-British alliance.

There are many accounts of the Emergency, both first-person memoirs as well as monographs. See as a sampling, Peng Chin, Ian Ward, and Norma O. Miraflor, *My side of history* (Singapore: Media Masters, 2003); Leon Comber, *Malaya's secret police, 1945-60 : the role of the Special Branch in the Malayan Emergency* (Clayton; Singapore: Monash Asia Institute ; Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008); Hui Ling Ho, *Darurat, 1948-1960 : keadaan sosial di tanah Melayu*, Cet. 1. ed., Siri kajian sejarah Malaysia (Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Universiti Malaya, 2004); Anthony Short, *In pursuit of mountain rats : the Communist insurrection in Malaya* (Singapore: Cultured Lotus, 2000); Richard Stubbs, *Hearts and minds in guerrilla warfare : the Malayan emergency, 1948-1960* (Singapore ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

For an account of the alliance between the left (including Malay socialists-nationalists) and the religious reformers, see Mohamed Salleh Lamry, *Gerakan kiri Melayu dalam perjuangan kemerdekaan [The Malay left in the struggle for independence]* (Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2006).

colonial state and the conservative faction of the local administrative and business elite against radicals, leftists and Islamists.

During the first two years of the Emergency, the communists held the upper hand. The communists had waged a successful guerrilla war from jungle bases against the Japanese occupation of Malaya during World War II, with material and organizational help from the West. The British were disappointed that the Malay elite whom they had cultivated failed to resist the Japanese, and surprised that the Chinese community—previously seen as transient and lacking any attachment to Malaya—took up the fight. After the war, the British lifted the ban on the CPM on condition that it surrender its weapons and demobilize its fighting forces. The CPM made a show of turning over some rifles, but hid most of its weapons in secret jungle locations. When it was declared illegal in 1948, the CPM was quick to reactivate its armed units and infrastructure, and with its experience in guerrilla warfare, gained the early upper hand and had the colonial security forces on the defensive. The colonial state scrambled to set up “all the old war-time routines of psychological warfare... but under a civil government, as additional to the normal work of public information and education with which it interpenetrated.”¹⁴ But the execution of those routines left much to be desired. The state did produce an impressive number of leaflets and posters, and highlighted these statistics in official reports and yearbooks. However, many of these leaflets and posters did not reach the target, due to the DPR’s organizational ineptitude. For example, the department “tended to dispatch large numbers of leaflets to a small number of recipients in each State and Settlement, overloading them; the recipients could not cope with the volume of leaflets and ‘too often used them as scrap paper.’”¹⁵ Also, the DPR “did little more than drop leaflets along the jungle fringes—many of which lodged in the tree canopy or rotted upon reaching the ground—they also sent out loud-speaker vans which were described by the Chinese as ‘loud but empty voices’.”¹⁶ As a result, communist leaflets were a more common sight in the countryside, and their propaganda more effective.

The communists were winning the propaganda war. It was able to identify the grievances of different communities and produced targeted propaganda to address those issues. It was also producing as much propaganda material as the DPR, despite not having the luxury of a colonial bureaucracy behind it. Working from the jungle with poor access to materials was not initially a handicap, since World War II had taught the CPM how to work under difficult operational circumstances. The communists produced copious amounts of leaflets and newssheets stenciled on the back of old Government forms or any available paper. The CPM had their slogans and songs, and adjusted their messages to fit different situations. “When the Communists murdered a villager, or an estate manager, they distributed leaflets explaining their action. When they slashed rubber trees they placarded the gashes with posters and leaflets stating their reasons and hacked off the thumbs of people who removed such propaganda.”¹⁷

The communists also held the early upper hand because their message resonated with large sections of the rural Chinese community. For example, the CPM used the

¹⁴ McHugh, “Psychological or political warfare in Malaya (part two).” 81.

¹⁵ Hugh Carleton Greene. ‘Report on Emergency Information Services, September 1950’, quoted in Ramakrishna, *Emergency propaganda*. 73.

¹⁶ Stubbs, *Hearts and minds in guerrilla warfare*. 85.

¹⁷ McHugh, “Psychological or political warfare in Malaya (part two).” 84-85.

slogan “self-tap, self-sell” to win the support of illiterate rubber tappers who lived in “urine-tainted poverty.”¹⁸ The CPM promised that, under a liberated Malaya, tappers would get a better share of the rubber revenues, which, the communists charged, currently went to fatten the purses of European managers and the overseas companies they worked for. The CPM pointed out the lack of development in the rural areas under the colonial state and promised sweeping political and social reform, which, McHugh acknowledged “could not under the circumstances of the time be met by counter-propaganda describing constructive Government policies of major national or social appeal”¹⁹ because there were none. Against such persuasive anti-British rhetoric, the Colonial Office dictum of “progress towards some measure of self-Government” was “thin material to net a nationalist.”²⁰

The tide started turning against the CPM from 1950 as a result of conditions within and outside the control of the colonial state. The outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950 led to skyrocketing prices for primary products including rubber and tin, Malaya’s primary exports. The colonial state reaped a windfall, and in 1951, national expenditure rose to \$550 million, \$200 million more than the preceding year, with war expenditure doubling.²¹ For the propaganda effort, the colonial state purchased new equipment and expanded programming, the key innovation being the establishment of the Community Listening Scheme, a program that placed community wireless receivers with loudspeakers in remote Malay *kampungs*,²² Chinese New Villages and Indian plantation estate housing complexes, and created special programming for those audiences. In 1949, there were only 32 community receivers in Malaya, but the number rose to 700 in 1950, the first year of operation of the Community Listening Scheme, and 1,400 by the end of 1952.²³

Wages of rubber tappers (both salaried workers and smallholders) and tin mine workers—key segments of the population targeted by the communists for moral and material support—also jumped dramatically, making them less susceptible to communist propaganda. The lowest paid unskilled field-workers, who made up a quarter of the estate workforce, saw their wages rise from \$1.43 per day in the first quarter of 1950 to a record high of \$2.90 per day in the second quarter of 1951. By the middle of 1951, skilled tappers could earn \$4.35 a day on European estates, and three to four times more if they worked for Asian-owned estates or were willing to venture into areas prone to guerrilla attacks. In some smallholdings, skilled tappers on a shared profit scheme could earn up to 70 per cent of production or profits.²⁴ In these rural areas and Chinese New Villages, spending on consumer goods like radios increased dramatically,²⁵ leading to a rapid expansion of the listening audience hungry for news and entertainment.

¹⁸ Ibid. 87.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid. 86.

²¹ Stubbs, *Hearts and minds in guerrilla warfare*. 109.

²² Kampung is the Malay term for village. Ramakrishna, *Emergency propaganda*. 112-113.

²³ Ibid. 76; Stubbs, *Hearts and minds in guerrilla warfare*. 182.

²⁴ All data from Stubbs, *Hearts and minds in guerrilla warfare*. 107-114.

²⁵ There were 34,711 private radio licences in 1950, but the number jumped to 60,000 by 1951, following the outbreak of the Korean War. The number of private radio licences stood at 125,286 by late 1954. Ramakrishna, *Emergency propaganda*. 111-112, 149.

At the beginning of 1950, the colonial state overhauled its war effort, instituted policies to better police the Chinese population, toned down its unpopular intimidation tactics and rough treatment of surrendered communist fighters, and reorganized its propaganda apparatus. The revenue windfall made it possible to accelerate efforts to relocate the scattered rural Chinese population into several centrally controlled New Villages, under the Briggs Plan, named for General Sir Harold Briggs, the new head of the war effort.²⁶ Briggs and, later, General Sir Gerald Templer, spearheaded a more focused war effort and a shift in emphasis from a purely military effort to winning the hearts and minds of the population.²⁷ The colonial state, especially under Templer, took steps to rectify the weaknesses in the propaganda effort—the DPR was renamed Department on Information²⁸ and its duties expanded to include the Emergency Information Services.

A key component of that reorganization was the recruitment of Hugh Carlton Greene, on secondment from the British Broadcasting Corporation, as head of Emergency Information Services in September 1950.²⁹ It was General Briggs who noted that government propaganda had been non-existent and recommended Greene for the post. Greene, journalist and brother of the novelist Graham Greene, had extensive experience in wartime propaganda as head of the BBC's German service during World War II and would later become Director General of the BBC. In Malaya, he noted that, given Malaya's low literacy rates, the colonial state's propaganda effort was stalling because it relied too heavily on generic leaflets. So, he expanded audio-visual propaganda by reorganizing radio programming to make it more appealing to a wider audience, introduced the Community Listening Scheme, ramped up the number of films produced by the Malayan Film Unit, and increased the number of mobile units (16 in 1951; 90 by 1954, serving a million people a month)³⁰ that brought the films into the rural heartland. Greene also stepped up the use of surrendered guerrillas for propaganda purposes. Instead of persecuting them, the state used the surrendered guerrillas to produce pamphlets and leaflets in their own handwriting detailing the good treatment they received from their captors. This form of propaganda worked because the state realized that only when "the deeds of Government agents communicated care and concern would the rural Chinese

²⁶ General Briggs was appointed Director of Operations in 1950, and drew up a plan to resettle half a million Chinese residents living in rural areas, especially near the fringes of the Malayan jungle, into New Villages. These rural Chinese were an important source of support and resources for the communists—some supported the CPM out of conviction; others out of fear. Through the New Villages, the government could police the Chinese community, and, perhaps more critically, improve the delivery of services to them. The resettlement policy began to work, and the CPM was put on the defensive. See: *ibid.* Chapter 4; Short, *In pursuit of mountain rats*. 231-253; Stubbs, *Hearts and minds in guerrilla warfare*. Chapter 4.

²⁷ General Sir Gerald Templer was appointed High Commissioner of the Federation of Malaya and the Director of Operations in January 1952, unifying civil and military authority. His energetic leadership and emphasis on "hearts and minds," which became the slogan of the Emergency under his leadership, struck the decisive blow against the CPM.

²⁸ Ministry of Information Communication Department of Information and Culture, "History of the establishment of the Department of Information Malaysia," http://www.penerangan.gov.my/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1808%3Asejarah&catid=329%3Aprofil-organisasi&Itemid=44.

²⁹ Stubbs, *Hearts and minds in guerrilla warfare*. 121; Ramakrishna, *Emergency propaganda*. 105-106.

³⁰ Stubbs, *Hearts and minds in guerrilla warfare*. 182.

believe Government leaflets projecting the same message.”³¹ Greene also increased the number of vernacular newssheets published by the department, making sure they were distributed in rural community centers and coffee shops, tapping into the oral news culture where a more literate resident would read the news out to fellow patrons.³²

By 1951, the communists realized that they would not succeed. They were losing the military battles and propaganda war as the colonial state rectified its mistakes. The CPM’s campaign of sabotage and killing European planters, soldiers, policemen and Malaysians it deemed to be collaborators with the state, was not successful. This setback was “a bitter pill to swallow” for senior communist cadres, and its leader Chin Peng instructed the rank-and-file to cease slashing rubber trees, confiscating identity cards, burning buses and attacking civilian trains, all acts which they had managed to justify in the earlier years but had begun, from a propaganda standpoint, to “cost them clearly.”³³ The communists never recovered the initiative and retreated into the jungles along the Thai-Malayan border. By the middle of the decade, the shooting war was mostly over. The 1955 general elections, which the Alliance coalition won, was an important turning point. It strengthened the multi-racial coalition—led by the future first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra—and put the colony firmly on the path to self-government and independence, developments that took the ideological wind out of the communist struggle. In response, the party tried to negotiate a favorable surrender, which the Tunku—flush from winning a strong mandate and negotiating from a position of strength—did not concede.

By 1956, the state’s propaganda machine was humming along nicely. Personnel from the Department of Information were even more tightly integrated into the military and intelligence gathering operations. The department directed soldiers and policemen to retrieve every scrap of paper, no matter how insignificant it appeared to be, and pass it along quickly to the psychological warfare arm of the department so it could glean information on the CPM units operating in the area.³⁴ In areas where the communists were deemed to be still active (black areas), the department carried out civic courses for some 11,000 teachers, community and youth leaders in the last years of the Emergency. To ensure that its message was effectively delivered, the department made its visits more entertaining, putting on variety shows full of sketches, dances and popular film shows alongside its posters and talks by propaganda officials, local leaders and surrendered terrorists. It also increased the frequency of its messages—in 1956, over 600 distinct voice messages were recorded and broadcast through more than 2,200 flights by voice aircrafts (military planes with attached loudspeakers flying low over the jungle) that had began operating after the reorganization of the early 1950s. By 1957, the year of independence, 116 million leaflets had been distributed; the Malayan Film Unit was producing 28 films and the Federal Film Library had increased its lending of films to 6,000 copies to commercial cinemas and 37,000 copies to the public; and the department distributed 3 million copies of its vernacular publications, six times its 1952 figures. The

³¹ Ramakrishna, *Emergency propaganda*. 109.

³² Greene added the Chinese language New Path News in 1951 (first run, 50,000 copies) to a stable of Malay, Tamil and Chinese newssheets (the latter including the popular and practical Farmers’ News) and by 1952, there were 500,000 copies of 13 monthly publications in wide circulation. Stubbs, *Hearts and minds in guerrilla warfare*. 182.

³³ Chin, Ward, and Miraflor, *My side of history*. 279-284.

³⁴ Ramakrishna, *Emergency propaganda*. 108.

increase in volume was matched by the growing sophistication of the intelligence/propaganda apparatus: the mass bombing of generic leaflets gave way to tailored messages for individual guerrillas known to be operating in an area. (See Figure 1.1) These leaflets named specific individuals and carried pictures of his since-surrendered comrades reunited with their families and enjoying the pleasures of city life. "Even more disconcerting from a guerrilla's point of view was for him to hear his name, and even an appeal to surrender from his mother, wife, or friend, being broadcast from an aircraft flying only a few thousand feet above his head."³⁵

Conclusion

After the return of the British in 1945, the state's propaganda apparatus was set up but did not get to grips with the task of peacetime information work before the Emergency was declared three years later. In the first years of the war with the communists, the colonial government was on the defensive not just in the armed battles, but also on the propaganda front. The information agency relied heavily on posters and leaflets at a time when the literacy rate for those aged 15 and over in colony was only 33 per cent³⁶, and probably much lower in the rural areas,³⁷ the main theater of war. The realization that the war was going badly forced the colonial state to reorganize, a development that serendipitously coincided with the dramatic increase of government revenue as a result of rising rubber and tin prices due to the Korean War. The propaganda agency improved the quantity, content and delivery of information, but the key to its success lay in the improvement of colonial policies—better treatment of surrendered guerrillas and improved delivery of services to the rural and semi-urban Chinese population. The message was better synchronized with actions, and thus more credible.

As psychological warfare became an integral part of the Emergency, the Information Department grew rapidly and by the time of independence and the end of the Emergency, the propaganda apparatus in Malaya was fully developed (even if finding enough qualified personnel presented a continuing challenge). The department ramped up its audio-visual capacity, diversified its delivery mechanisms, and placed new emphasis on face-to-face, personal and targeted propaganda even as it continued to utilize mass distribution methods. However, these improvements have to be seen in the context of a fundamental orientation of the propaganda effort after 1950—as part of the war effort. In its early, pre-1948 years, the Department of Public Relations struggled to explain issues such as constitutionality and citizenship because it was still finding its feet after World War II and it was short of money. These issues were complex and required a nuanced approach. But after the colonial state co-opted the Information Services into the war effort in 1950, the department's propaganda contribution to defeating communism and the Communist Party of Malaya became more focused. By the official end of the Emergency in 1960, three years after independence, Malaya faced the new peacetime

³⁵ McHugh, "Psychological or political warfare in Malaya (part two)." 88-89; Stubbs, *Hearts and minds in guerrilla warfare*. 237-238.

³⁶ Federation of Malaya Government, *Official year book volume one 1961* (Kuala Lumpur: Department of Information Services, Federation of Malaya, 1961). 482.

³⁷ McHugh notes that in some states, adult literacy rates were only 15% in 1946. McHugh, "Psychological or political warfare in Malaya (part two)." 78

challenge of building a post-colonial nation with a propaganda apparatus still stuck in a Cold War, military footing.

Forging a new nation, 1960-1970

A shift in emphasis: from war against communism to war against rural poverty

After gaining independence on August 31, 1957, the Federation of Malaya entered a period of consolidation, as it wound down the war with the communists and weathered a global recession that lasted until 1958. Nation-building momentum picked up toward the end of 1959, after the Alliance government gained a fresh mandate from the August Parliamentary General Elections of that year.³⁸ The Emergency was all but over, save for a formal declaration in 1960, and the government turned its attention to rural development. Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman made it clear that this was his government's top priority. Almost three in four Malaysians lived in rural areas,³⁹ and the "problem of human development and human welfare in the kampung communities, therefore, is a tremendous challenge to all of us: the responsibility facing us is very great," he said. The aim of the government, he added, was to bring "as many as possible of the amenities and attractions of city development" to the kampungs to prevent a drift toward the cities. He acknowledged that kampung dwellers had been neglected in the past and that "unless something is done to help them, they would not keep pace with the nation's progress. A new nation cannot afford to have an unbalanced population. It is very important for all people in cities and towns to understand that priority for the kampung is a national necessity. You cannot have prosperity in towns and poverty in the kampungs if you want a land of happiness."⁴⁰

Left unsaid in this and many official explications on the main challenges facing the new nation was that this deep economic inequality was not only a rural-urban divide, but was also mapped onto ethnic suspicions and jealousy. For the Tunku, and in many official speeches, "kampung" and "rural" were code words for the Malay community, while "cities" and "towns" represented the non-Malay communities living not just in urban areas and New Villages (a large number of which were technically in rural areas), but also in the tiny main streets of Malay kampungs where they were mainly shopkeepers and occasionally landowners and moneylenders. Tunku's oblique message was that the continued survival of this new nation depended on redressing this economic imbalance between Malays and non-Malays (mainly Chinese). This economic divide was no small trifle: In 1947, Malays made up 44 per cent of the population of British Malaya

³⁸ It won 51.78 per cent of votes cast, and 74 out of 104 seats, gaining a two-thirds majority that allowed it to amend the Constitution. R. K. Vasil, "The 1964 General Elections in Malaya," *International Studies* 7, no. 1 (1965). 61.

³⁹ Only 26.2 per cent of the 6.3 million population lived in urban areas, according to the 1957 Census. Dorothy Z. Fernandez, Amos H. Hawley, and Silvia Predaza, *The population of Malaysia*, 1974 World Population Year (C.I.C.R.E.D. [Committee for International Cooperation in National Research in Demography], 1975). 47.

⁴⁰ "Speech by the Prime Minister at the opening of the Community Development Seminar at the Tunku Abdul Rahman Hall, Kuala Lumpur on 20th September, 1958", Abdul Rahman Putra, *Ucapan-ucapan Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra 1958 [Speeches by Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra 1958]* ([Petaling Jaya]: Arkib Negara Malaysia, 1981).78-83.

(including the mainly-Chinese Singapore) but took home 22 per cent of total individual income (compare that to the numbers for the Chinese community—45 per cent of population; 57 per cent of total individual income). Furthermore, some 90 per cent of employers and owners of non-European businesses were Chinese. The situation had hardly changed a decade later. The Malay community now accounted for half the population of independent Malaya (excluding Singapore) but took home just under a third of total individual income, while the Chinese had inverse numbers (53 per cent of income on 37 per cent of the population). An even more telling statistic was the average monthly family income for rural families earning \$12,000 or less per annum—\$128 for Malays, \$260 for Chinese and \$212 for Indians. The rural Chinese' income was comparable to the urban income for all races, but the rural Malay was lagging far behind. Since fully 80 per cent of Malays (or 45 per cent of the total population) lived in the rural areas, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the bulk of the Malays were poor.⁴¹

After World War II, the colonial government, aware of the dire condition of the kampung Malay, promised to develop the rural sector. It was difficult to gauge the sincerity of that rhetoric, however, since the British spent the bulk its resources fighting the communists after 1948, and the financially conservative treasury would not run a deficit to pursue developmental programs that did not generate revenue. Not convinced by the colonial state's reasoning, Malay leaders continued pressing for development; demands that reached a peak in 1952 after the state had made significant progress in resettling half a million rural and semi-urban Chinese residents into New Villages. Malay leaders pointed out that it was their community that was fighting the war against the communists by the side of the British, but their Malay kampungs that were being neglected even as the colonial state was busy supplying amenities and social services to the Chinese-populated New Villages. The colonial state continued to be deaf to these entreaties, reasoning that security concerns and financial prudence meant it could not meet those demands.⁴²

The 1955 general elections, which installed an indigenous government responsible for local affairs, changed all that. The Alliance coalition campaigned on a

⁴¹ Malaya: Aggregate individual incomes, by race, 1947 (including Singapore)

	Malays	Chinese	Indians	Total*
Aggregate individual incomes (\$m.)	656	1,714	337	3,023
Percentage of total	22	57	11	100
Population (m.)	2.54	2.61	0.60	5.82

Federation: Approximate distribution of total individual incomes by race, 1957 (excluding Singapore)

	Malays	Chinese	Indians	Total*
Total individual incomes (\$m.)	1,150	1,950	476	3,675
Percentage of total	31	53	13	100
Population (m.)	3.13	2.33	0.71	6.28

* Including Europeans and others.

Source: Thomas H. Silcock, "Appendix A : Approximate racial division of national income," in *The political economy of independent Malaya; a case-study in development*, ed. Thomas H. Silcock and E. K. Fisk (Canberra,: Australian National University, 1963). 279

⁴² The colonial state did set up the Rural Industrial Development Authority (RIDA) in 1951 to combat Malay poverty, but it did not give it sufficient bureaucratic heft and budget to achieve its goals. Gayl D. Ness, *Bureaucracy and rural development in Malaysia* (Berkeley,: University of California Press, 1967). 98-99.

platform that emphasized both rural development and gaining independence. Upon winning the elections convincingly, it established the Federal Land Development Authority (FLDA) in 1956 to provide land to the landless, many of whom were Malays, as a first step toward fulfilling its campaign promises, but the global recession hampered its efforts. It was only in 1959 that it began its rural development program in earnest—at the end of that year, the government formed a new Ministry of Rural Development. To make clear that rural development was the state's top priority, the Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Razak Hussein, headed the new ministry, which became the chief engine of an organized attempt to stimulate growth in the rural economy by providing “social overhead capital and physical improvements.” In the first years of its operation, the countryside “experienced a wave of new construction including new roads and bridges, new schools and health centers, village wells and community halls, and the opening of new agricultural land. The Ministry's chief success thus lies in providing a powerful wave of new construction that reaches to the remotest rural areas.”⁴³

If the Tunku was the avuncular, charismatic man of the people, loved by all communities, his deputy made up for his relative dourness by being a “fine administrator—a better one than the Tunku, actually...”⁴⁴ Razak approached his rural development mission with the efficiency and precision of a general:

“The headquarters of the development plan... is a glistening modern operations room in a new glass-walled building beside the Parliament Building in Kuala Lumpur; from here, with absolute military efficiency, Razak and his staff direct the execution of the scheme throughout the country, which has been divided into eighty [sic] districts. Razak himself keeps in close touch with every phase of the project, even in the smallest kampong, and any laxity, any bit of over-lapping immediately catches his eye and prompts him to dispatch a letter to the person responsible, demanding, in clipped military style, an immediate explanation.”⁴⁵

To make sure the detailed plans are followed promptly, Razak began an extensive series of tours to all 11 states—visiting each of the 70 district offices twice a year from 1960-1962—to explain the plan and the purpose of the new program.⁴⁶ He focused on results, and had little patience for inter-agency rivalry, red tape and other standard excuses that bedevil a bureaucracy. Recalcitrant or underperforming local officers felt the full force of his political and administrative power—Razak often gave them a public dressing down when goals were not met.⁴⁷ Thus, state and district Rural Development

⁴³ Ibid. 123.

⁴⁴ Robert Shaplen, “The imminence of a nation,” *The New Yorker*, April 6 1963. 141.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 144.

⁴⁶ For this section, see 142-167, Ness, *Bureaucracy and rural development in Malaysia*. Shaplen was probably misinformed about the number of districts in Malaysia. The number is 70.

⁴⁷ “I had no idea that your officers regarded me as a man ‘with the big stick.’ If I have given the impression of using, so to speak the ‘big stick’ I can assure you that I only use the ‘stick’ when the pace of progress ‘sticks’ and need pushing.” Speech by the Deputy Prime Minister at Public Works Department Engineers’ Conference at Dewan Tunku Abdul Rahman, Kuala Lumpur on 6th April, 1962. Abdul Razak Hussein, *Ucapan-ucapan Tun Haji Abdul Razak bin Hussein 1962* (Kuala Lumpur: Arkib Negara Malaysia, 1978). 71.

Committees worked feverishly when their offices were part of his scheduled stops. But those along the route also had to be on their toes as the Deputy Prime Minister made frequent, unscheduled visits to state and district development operations rooms to inspect plans and ongoing projects. The resemblance to a military campaign went beyond a matter of style or the fact Tun Razak was also concurrently Minister for Defence; the legacy of the Emergency was evident in substantive matters as well. The state and district Rural Development Committees were replicas of state and district War Executive Committees, and their operations rooms were almost identical—full of maps, diagrams, progress charts and a large conference table.

By and large, the state succeeded in meeting the goals of rural development in the 1960s for a number of reasons: it gave it its highest priority and allocated significant resources to it; Razak was an excellent administrator; and the program itself was popular among the Malays, if not the public at large. But there was one other reason for its success—Razak was very propaganda-savvy. The Ministry of Rural Development “has always been far ahead of other ministries in presenting its image to the public. From the very beginning, the Minister demanded that the program be visible; there must not only be results, but the results must be visible. The program has always received a great deal of publicity, and a large proportion of the press releases of the Department of Information have been devoted to rural development. The Malayan Film Unit follows all the Minister’s tours and has produced a series of documentary films on rural development, which are shown in public movie houses throughout the country. The operations rooms have also been designed to show not only the officials but also the general public what is being done under the new program. Civic groups, school children, and groups of local leaders are continually given briefings on the program.”⁴⁸

Propaganda reset: The reorganization of 1960

The need for reorganization, reorientation and expansion of the state’s propaganda machinery crystallized in March 1960 at the annual conference of senior federal and state Information Officers, at which the Senior Information Officer (Field and Training), Ahmad Nordin Md. Zain, presented a three-page paper, “Mobile units: their future role.”⁴⁹ In it, he noted that the Deputy Prime Minister, in opening the conference, had stressed that rural development was of “utmost importance” and that the government had given it “the highest priority.” Ahmad Nordin then said the Information Services’ role was to “prepare the ground on which to do development by breaking down the wall of ignorance surrounding the rural dwellers and re-orientating them to a national and progressive outlook.” The Senior Information Officer said mobile units would spearhead this effort, as they did in the past fighting the communists during the Emergency, because they were the most effective medium of reaching the people in light of the “high rate of illiteracy and difficulties of communication.”⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Ness, *Bureaucracy and rural development in Malaysia*. 158. For example, in the first quarter of 1962, a quarter of all Information Department press releases dealt with rural development.

⁴⁹ Ahmad Nordin Md. Zain, “Mobile units: their future role: Paper read by SIO (Field & Training) at the Conference of Information Officers on Saturday 12th March, 1960.” JP (K/P) 82/60. Ahmad Nordin would eventually rise to become Director of Information Services from 1971-1975.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 1.

He acknowledged that mobile units were also the most expensive propaganda tools, swallowing up a third of the department's budget, and that its previous successes may have been illusory. Of its seemingly impressive penetration level—reaching up to a million people a month—he first noted that the number was often exaggerated, and went on to note: “Can we honestly and with a clear conscience say that much of what was done did not go over the heads of this large number of people?”⁵¹ Thus, in future, the goal of the department should be quality over quantity. The department, he said, should stop relying on Public Addresses blared out through the loudspeakers attached to the vehicle—a widely used tactic to inform rural folks of government policies and propaganda during the Emergency. Instead, it should increase the number of Organized Talks, in which the field officer speaks to groups of between 30 and 40, or Group Discussions, which are more informal and spontaneous discussions with small groups of between 10 and 20 as part of the regular cinema shows/lectures or at coffee shops, during lunch, after prayers at the mosque, or whenever the opportunities arose. The lower number of people being reached would not be a problem: “We can at least be sure that they are listening and apparently with interest because our field officers are talking directly to them, as one man to another, watching their faces all the time instead of the impersonal, indirect and nonchalant manner in which the so-called Public Addresses are at present given.”⁵² Field officers, in short, would now have to literally eyeball their audience.

The changes spelt out by Ahmad Nordin would require the department's Field Officers to operate at a higher level of sophistication. Instead of following prescribed routines blindly, mobile unit staff should judge each situation they encounter and tailor their methods accordingly, for instance, gauging whether the time after film shows (the usual crowd pleasers) would be appropriate for talks on serious subjects. The burden would not be solely on the field staff. He directed state and district-level supervisors to take a more active role in mentoring the Field Officers, especially in making sure their subordinates understand fully the more complex material on government policies that would be sent out.

Ahmad Nordin also stressed that this was not merely about improving operational efficiency, but instead was about overhauling the core philosophy of the department, a fundamental shift that was necessary because the department's role had been gradually changing since the threat of the Emergency started to recede. He wrote: “We are finding ourselves engaged on an ever increasing scale in programmes of public education as opposed to the largely informational role which we have hitherto played. Soon, I believe, our officers will no longer be the messengers and disseminators of government information, as they have been, but *educators* of the public to *exhort and inspire* them [my emphasis].”⁵³ He did not mean the Field Staff were to be transformed into teachers conducting formal classes. Instead, what was expected was a more level of propaganda work. Instead of just talking about the what, where, when and how of a government project or policy, they should also focus on the rationale of the scheme, the benefits for the citizens, and the impact on the nation.

⁵¹ Ibid. 2.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

Ahmad Nordin's suggestions were accepted and two months later, the Director of Information, Yaacob bin Abdul Latiff, sent out a memo outlining the department's new direction and elaborating on Ahmad Nordin's proposals.⁵⁴ A key aim, Yaacob said, was to ensure uniformity in the content of the message and the forms of delivery. A monthly "Field Publicity Programme" would be used as the guide for all mobile units nationwide. Each unit should have a circuit consisting of "a specific area marked out with a list of kampongs." Every unit is expected to visit at least three places a day and carry out Organized Talks during the day and Organized Talks/cinema shows during the night, and the unit heads have to submit daily reports. The propaganda program should include:

- a. "Talks on subjects which the Federal Government requires to be publicized; direction to originate from this HQ.
- b. "Talks on subjects aimed at educating the people in the basic requirements of nation building and citizenship; themes to be determined by this HQ.
- c. "News talks on development, events and other matters considered newsworthy for the information of the citizens.
- d. "Announcements of national/local interest, e.g. date of withdrawal of Emergency Regulations."

The key terms, *educate*, *exhort* and *inspire* were retained in the core mission statement of the department, and the Director emphasized again the importance of their mission: "The Field Staff by virtue of the direct contact with the public are looked upon as 'ambassadors.' It is therefore essential for them to treat contact work as an important aspect of their normal field duty."⁵⁵

The department's propaganda work during the colonial, wartime era had rested on two extremes of contact with the public: mass dissemination through mobile units reaching hundreds, if not thousands of citizens at one time; and, at the other end of the scale, intensive, multi-day civics courses for small groups of carefully selected participants. What the department was trying to do in the reorganization was to graft some of the virtues of its civics courses, conducted at infrequent intervals, onto the daily, bread and butter work of the mobile units.

At the core of propaganda work: civics courses

As with all the propaganda tools at the department's disposal, civics courses were developed from the beginning of the Emergency with the purpose of countering communist propaganda among influential community leaders. Civics courses were residential programs for around 40 participants that ran from three to five days, and included talks by various government officials, discussion groups, entertainment, exercise programs, and games; as well as tours of government facilities, businesses, museums, and social organizations either in the state or federal capital. It was particularly effective⁵⁶ because participants were able to concentrate on the lectures, talks and materials over a number of days without distraction; had access to and were often impressed with senior government officials and ministers; were often overawed with the visit—a first for many

⁵⁴ Yaacob bin Latiff, Director of the Information Department, to all State Information Officers, May 25, 1960: "The Role of Field Units." JP (K/P) 82/60.

⁵⁵ JP (K/P) 82/60.

⁵⁶ There were detailed reports on civics courses.

participants—to Kuala Lumpur; and had chances to give frank feedback on the issues of the day.

The mid-1950s proved to be a turning point for Malaya, and for civics courses. The shooting war with the communists had all but been won and in 1954, a new man was appointed head of the Information Services—Yaacob bin Abdul Latiff⁵⁷. Having the first Malayan to head the department was another signal that Malaya was inexorably headed toward independence, of which the first significant step would be the 1955 general elections that would usher in new locally-dominated legislative assembly and an indigenous federal government headed by a Chief Minister and his Cabinet. As he assumed the Directorship of the Information Services, a full-scale Malaya-wide information campaign on the nuts and bolts of the elections (how to register; how and where to vote; etc.) was already underway. Yet, Yaacob recognized that as Malaya was on the cusp of significant change, the department he headed needed a new, more ambitious mission that went beyond the nuts and bolts of elections based on the colonial playbook. The birth of a new nation—and its baby citizens—was imminent, and Yaacob planned a campaign that would begin after the 1955 elections that would guide the department's work until the close of the 1960s.

Yaacob outlined his plan in a memo to the Secretary to the Member for Home Affairs (as the minister was then called, and whom Yaacob reported to) in December 1954. He called it Education in Citizenship⁵⁸ and stressed that it had been the main subject discussed at the just concluded annual conference for information officers. The campaign would be the “sequel to the present policy of breaking down the barrier of public ignorance of the Government and its administration... Citizens should have a clear and precise understanding of the principles and practices of government ... what it stands for and what it does.” Ignorance is dangerous because, Yaacob noted, it “begets doubts, and doubts sow the seeds of distrust which can be easily nurtured by impractical theorists or mischievous agitators.”⁵⁹ Nestled among the lofty rhetoric on the benefits of democracy and the ideals of government⁶⁰ is a hard-headed realization that many

⁵⁷ Yaacob bin Abdul Latiff was recruited into the Information Services by Mervyn Sheppard in 1946 when he cobbled together the first Department of Public Relations. Yaacob was not unfamiliar with government service: his father was the first Malay government medical officer. A pre-war friend of Sheppard's, Yaacob served as a warrant officer in the Federated Malay States volunteer Force during the Japanese invasion of Malaya. Soon after the return of the British, he joined the civil service, and eventually accepted Sheppard's offer to be Public Relations Officer for Negeri Sembilan. Sheppard, *Taman budiman : memoirs of an unorthodox civil servant*. 146. After rising through the ranks of the Information Department and reaching its pinnacle as Director, Yaacob moved on to be Ambassador to Thailand and later Indonesia, as well as a stint as the mayor of Kuala Lumpur. He was awarded the second highest Federal civilian honor, which carried the title Tan Sri.

⁵⁸ Yaacob bin Abdul Latiff, Director, Information Services, to Secretary to the Member for Home Affairs, December 15, 1954, “Memorandum on Education in Citizenship.” INF 1028/54.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 1.

⁶⁰ Yaacob writes: ““The purpose of Government must be clearly defined. It is to secure the safety and happiness of the people, and it is attained through the protection of their lives, liberties and property; through the establishment and preservation of just, harmonious relations with the members of the community and with neighbouring communities—to govern, to promote such conditions that the people may live in joy, felicity and work and trade in peace—trade being an essential part of the life of the people.” Note the glancing acknowledgement to the racial dimension of the challenges facing the nascent nation. Ibid.

residents of Malaya—especially the rural embryonic citizens—were indeed ignorant as to the most basic workings of government. The focus then would be on the machinery of government, shorn of political and ideological shadings. “From time to time in all countries widely divergent views are held as to how best to attain the purpose for which governments are instituted. With such views, however, we are not concerned here because they are in the realm of political doctrine. Here, we are concerned with the *mechanics of government*, [my italics] where the various departments form the “cogs” in the “wheel” of the government how the “wheel” goes round, who keeps it in motion, and the part played by Ahmad, Ah Seng and Ramasamy in its revolution should be clearly explained.”⁶¹ Over the next decade and a half, the Information Services would find the task of keeping its propaganda work politically neutral challenging. However, Yaacob’s call did mark the shift in emphasis from ideological warfare to mechanistic governance, a shift that characterized not just the work of the Information Services, but also the orientation of a newly independent Malaya/Malaysia.

Mechanistic governance, according to this campaign, cannot be an idea taught solely through lectures and films. The citizens have to be able to see, touch and feel the very cogs and wheels that run the nation. Yaacob suggested a Federation-wide civics drive to achieve this aim. Tours, especially to the seat of power that is Kuala Lumpur, would be the key component of civics courses. “Visits and excursions to the various department and institutions, demonstrations to illustrate points brought out in lectures will help to crystallise their thoughts and make indelible imprints on their minds.”⁶² The effectiveness of these tours cannot be over-emphasized. In 1965, a decade after Yaacob’s memo, and a full eight years after independence, one such civics course-cum-tour brought appreciative responses from the participants, who noted that they would not have had a chance to visit the capital if not for the course.⁶³ What was remarkable about this comment was that the participants were not from some rural community in the northern-most or northeastern-most states, but from Negeri Sembilan, a state whose capital is but a 90 minute drive to Kuala Lumpur, whose inhabitants are relatively well off, and whose economy is closely linked to the commercial heartbeat of the federal capital. The wonderment of these citizens residing so close to Kuala Lumpur reflected the significant gap between the center of power and the rest of the country that seemed to transcend physical distance; and the bridging of this gap was to be the main focus of the Information Services’ work.

Another notable feature of this new campaign was the emphasis it placed on the responsibility an individual held toward the society. Yaacob pointed out that it was not enough to inform and educate Malaysians on how the government functioned and what it could do for its citizens, for citizenship came not just with privileges. “Once the common man understands that he is a definite unit in a big set-up, and not an isolated individual, the sooner will he realize his own responsibilities towards the organized society of which he is a member.”⁶⁴ The idea of “responsibility” is intertwined with patriotism, expressed

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid. 3.

⁶³ ‘Report on a civics tour to Kuala Lumpur on 9th March, 1965’ by Lee Peck Swee, Conducting Officer, March 16, 1965. PEN NS 54/65.

⁶⁴ Yaacob bin Abdul Latiff, “Memorandum on Education in Citizenship.” 2.

through loyalty to and cooperation with the state, the inculcation of which became central to the work of the Information Services.

In short, civics education needed a curriculum overhaul—from focusing on ideological warfare against communism and the mechanics of engaging the enemy, surrender terms and procedures, the good treatment of guerrillas who left the jungle, and so on; to the meaning of citizenship, the workings of government and the obligations of the state to the citizenry, and vice-versa. Therein lies the department’s definition of civics. Yaacob writes in his memo: “Drive home to them the rights and privileges of citizenship which they enjoy. Freedom of speech. Freedom of assembly, freedom of the press, personal security, protection of private property—to mention a few. The law of ‘give and take’ applies here too. Citizens do not only receive, but they have to give the State something in return. What a citizen gives in return for civic rights are called ‘civic duties.’ ... In our endeavour to form a Malayan nation with one loyalty to Malaya I see no better way than Education in Civics.”⁶⁵

Targeting Tom, Dick and Harry, and Indian barbers too

When the Director of Information Services Yaacob bin Abdul Latiff declared that one of the chief aims of civics courses concerned how the wheels of government turn and the part played by “Ahmad, Ah Seng and Ramasamy in its revolution,” he was offering a local take on a stock English phrase that refers to anyone or everyone. But this witticism, like many borrowed colonial ideas and artifacts, had had its meaning altered through the process of localization. Ahmad, Ah Seng and Ramasamy refer to the Malay, Chinese and Indian communities that make up Malaya’s population. The key difference between Yaacob’s local variant and the original is that while Tom, Dick and Harry were generic, interchangeable stock characters signifying the Everyman, Ahmad, Ah Seng and Ramasamy were anything but interchangeable. On the contrary, they represented three distinct and very separate communities in ethnic, religious, economic and geographical terms. Except for a tiny minority who attended the relatively multiracial English schools, most Malaysians were literate only in their own languages, and found communication across ethnicities difficult.

The Information Department ran two types of civics courses—the standard, multi-day courses and the one-day variant. The one-day courses were rapid-response tools that could be organized quickly to deal with specific subjects of current importance that required immediate attention. The aims were by design short-term and achievable,⁶⁶ and the target audience generally bigger than regular civics courses. But it was the standard courses that were the main vehicle for citizenship studies. These were three- to five-day (on occasion, two- or six-day ones were also held) residential courses that had broader and loftier objectives:

1. To impart knowledge and promote understanding of matters affecting the trainees.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ The aims were: (1) To counteract ‘bad influence,’ e.g. instigation and intimidation by groups of people; (2) To support any government action (e.g. Amnesty, Savings Bank, Land Rent); (3) To interpret and explain Government decisions (e.g. specific new regulations passed by the government). Yaacob bin Abdul Latiff, ‘Notes on civics courses for discussion at the Information Officers annual conference,’ 1955. SIO TR 98/55, 1.

2. To create a body of healthy opinion and discussion.
3. To persuade trainees to disseminate the knowledge they have acquired (training towards leadership).⁶⁷

The state-level heads of the Information Department were enthusiastic about these multi-day civics courses, with one noting that “nominees from different kampongs and trades would stay together, [during which] not only can we gain their confidence, but will also provide a medium through which they will be able to exchange their ideas and evaluations.”⁶⁸ Another pointed out that even though civics courses had long ceased to be a novelty, almost all who were invited accepted, and usually wanted the course to be longer.⁶⁹

A key debate over how best to achieve the objectives laid out by Yaacob centered on the selection of the participants. Since another of the aims of these courses was to foster racial harmony, Yaacob noted that courses for racially mixed groups should be given due consideration.⁷⁰ There were examples of such successful courses: One advocate said that participants who came from different localities and ethnicities learned to “appreciate the value of neighbourly love”⁷¹ when living together for those few days; another group of respondents said they had never been in such close quarters with people of other ethnicities, were surprised to find themselves making new friends and agreed that this was the “best opportunity for them to meet one another to foster a better understanding between the different races.”⁷² However, it was felt that the courses would be most effective if the groups were tightly defined by geography, occupation and/or ethnicity. The specific concerns of Chinese schoolteachers would be better addressed if they participated as a group rather than as part of a larger, racially mixed cohort. In fact, some states did not organize any courses for racially-mixed participants due to the organizational difficulties regarding translation and religion, which affected board and lodging arrangements;⁷³ the exception being the information office responsible for Kuala Lumpur, which conducted courses for groups of older student leaders from mixed races from the capital and its surrounding suburbs.

Thus, over the next decade and a half, the department focused mainly on mono-ethnic groups drawn from community leaders and those in professions likely to influence a wide range of people. Among them were village heads (penghulus of Malay kampungs; heads of clan and business associations in Chinese New Villages); trade union leaders (who were mainly Indians); schoolteachers, leaders of women’s organizations, youth leaders, religious leaders and elected members of Local Councils (before local council elections were abolished in 1965). More unusual were a host of other groups that would

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibrahim Izzudin, State Information Officer, Kelantan, to Director of Information Services, February 2, 1956, ‘Report on Civics Courses for the year 1955.’ SIO TR 139.

⁶⁹ C.J. Stanbury, State Information Officer, Perak: ‘Report on civics courses held during 1955 under the auspices of Information Services, Perak and an outline of plans for 1956.’ December 31, 1955.’ SIO TR 139.

⁷⁰ Yaacob bin Abdul Latiff, ‘Notes on civics courses for discussion at the Information Officers annual conference,’ 1955.

⁷¹ Ibrahim Izzudin, ‘Report on Civics Courses for the year 1955.’

⁷² Wong Ah Woon, Information Officer, Pahang: ‘The eighth state civics course Pahang,’ January 7, 1954. SIO TR 32/54.

⁷³ C.J. Stanbury, ‘Report on civics courses held during 1955.’

not be considered community leaders, but had their ears close to the ground, among them, rickshaw pullers, Indian barbers, grounds keepers of mosques and suraus, grocery store workers, car and bus drivers, carpenters, fitters, petty traders, housewives, photographers and many more. The core content of the courses were similar, with some adjustments made to the nature of the group, e.g. rural development programs were highlighted in courses for penghulus; language and education issues, and the National Language Policy were given more time when Chinese schoolteachers were in residence; and so on.

Take, for example, a course for Indian barbers in February 1957, just months before independence. The Information Department selected twenty-nine barbers, between 21 and 49 years old, from various small towns and villages across the northern state of Kedah, in the state capital of Alor Star for a three-day course. Indian Field Officer K.K.V. Nathan supervised and conducted the course, and also acted as interpreter for the lectures not conducted in Tamil. Nathan also co-wrote the three-page report on the course, which was sent not only to the headquarters in Kuala Lumpur but also to all state Information Offices.⁷⁴ The barbers were selected because “they form an influential section of their community and are noted for their fondness in carrying on conversations not only among themselves but also with customers. Their subjects may range from politics to local gossip. It is hoped that by giving them a course of this nature, not only will they understand what the Government is but also stop spreading false propaganda which they very often unknowingly indulge in.”⁷⁵ The program included talks on the standard issues of the day, including the Emergency; the structure of the government and how it works on the local level; the police and you; the Reid commission and the drafting of the new Malayan Constitution; citizenship—what it means and who is eligible for it; and so on.

Not surprisingly, independence was a hot topic. Speakers focused on the role of Indians in independent Malaya: One lecturer, Mr. K. Nair, J.P. (Justice of Peace), was quoted in the report as saying: “Indians will have to decide as to the choice of their home. With the new constitution in the making, every right and privilege is being offered to the inhabitants here. So the ‘sit-on-the-fence’ attitude should be changed.”⁷⁶ Another event that was of interest to this group was the visit to the Historical Museum. The organizers noted that a talk given by the president of the Kedah Branch of the Malayan Historical Society, delivered in Malay (and presumably translated), “was well appreciated and many questions relating to traces of Indian civilizations found in Kedah were asked, as also whether any inter-marriages took place then.”⁷⁷ The question regarding the Indianized heritage of Malaya was a sensitive topic that could only have been addressed in this mono-ethnic forum. The Alliance coalition government that was negotiating the terms of independence with the British was promoting an official nationalism that privileged the indigenous Malay community, language, religion and history. The pre-Islamic Hindu roots of Malay states could not have been broached to a Malay audience without arousing disquiet among them.

⁷⁴ ‘Report on the Civics Course for Indian barbers.’ Abdullah Sani, for State Information Officer, Kedah/Perlis, and K.K.V. Nathan, Conducting Officer, to Director, Information Services, March 21, 1957. SIO TR 204.

⁷⁵ Ibid. 1.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

While the Indian barbers of Kedah were grateful for the chance to have access to new information and senior government officials, they were not cowed or tractable. The information officers noted that the barbers showed “a high degree of intelligence and enthusiasm that was reflected in a flow of questions and criticisms such as no other course for Indians had dared to make,”⁷⁸ expressing vigorously their conviction that the non-Malay minorities would be treated unfairly after independence. Although the report on the course made no mention whether those doubts were addressed successfully or not, the point of these residential civics courses was precisely to give the department a chance to address these awkward questions over the period of a few days, thus increasing the chances that the state’s message would be better received.

These civics courses were also an opportunity for participants to air local and/or more specific concerns, beyond larger national topics. The Indian barbers quizzed a panel made up of senior government officials on how to improve the standard of hairdressing saloons in this country so that they would compare favorably with those in Western countries. The report noted that since “nearly all members on the panel had been to the United Kingdom, Europe or America, many suggestions regarding hygiene and sanitation, use of modern equipment, air-conditioning and other facilities were made.”⁷⁹ The concern with local issues was not unique to Indian barbers. In a series of civics courses conducted in Trengganu, a largely rural, pious and Malay state in the northeast, the state information chief noted that while there were questions relating to politics and national issues, most of the participants were concerned with local rural development projects and religious matters.⁸⁰

The department persisted with conducting the majority of its civics courses for participants from one ethnic group because hot-button racial issues, especially dealing with ethnic stereotyping, tension or conflict, could be addressed more bluntly and effectively than in racially mixed courses. In one such example, a course for 40 Chinese carpenters, fitters, petty traders, housewives, photographers and businessmen from the central state of Negeri Sembilan in March 1965, participants wanted to know the appropriateness of referring to Indian and Malay Malaysians as “Keling Kuai” and “Malai Kuai.”⁸¹ These were derogatory terms that were in wide, habitual and casual usage among the Chinese community, and reflected the racial stereotyping that was common and persistent throughout the nation. When the subject of racial intolerance and national unity were discussed in the public sphere of official speeches and newspaper articles, editorials and letters to the editor, it was always couched in generalities that had a quality of careful optimism overlaying it. To go into such raw details as the casual use of derogatory slurs, in the public sphere, would have subjected the nation that was still searching for agreement on the very meaning of Malaysia itself to the sort of racial debate and tensions the outcome of which would have been uncertain and potentially

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ ‘Report on the Civics Course for Indian barbers.’

⁸⁰ ‘Laporan ringkas kursus tata rakyat bagi Daerah Kuala Trengganu mulai pada 17.3.1964 hingga 19.4.1964. [Brief report on civics course for Kuala Trengganu District from March 17-19, 1964]’ Wan Omar, State Information Officer, Trengganu, to State Secretary Trengganu, March 8, 1964. SIO TR 318 Pt. VI.

⁸¹ ‘Report on a civics tour to Kuala Lumpur on 9th March, 1965’ by Lee Peck Swee, Conducting Officer, March 16, 1965. PEN NS 54/65.

violent. So, the civics courses proved to be a safe and controlled environment in which such issues could be addressed frankly.

The department sought to create a conducive environment for frank discussions⁸² by selecting participants that were “similar in intelligence, education, experience and environment.”⁸³ A second way of winning over the participants was to provide information that they would find either new and enlightening, or practical and useful. Yaacob’s reorientation of the department’s work from ideological to mechanistic was the first step in that direction. The courses were filled with practical tips on everyday concerns such as applying for various licenses, registering for schools, using the postal services, how to save for retirement and so on. Addressing local and municipal concerns was another way to achieve this end. Civics course organizers were taught that having VIP speakers would impress the participants and magnify the importance of the event, which in turn, would make the participants feel important. But Information Officers were also reminded to ensure that these VIP speakers were able to understand and deal with the “kampong/new village/labor line problems” that invariably arise. Speakers were themselves advised not to talk down to the audience and treat them as children, and to use rhetorical devices like “we” instead of “you” whenever possible.⁸⁴

Getting the right speakers—often someone who could lighten the mood—often made or broke the course. The conducting officer for the Negeri Sembilan course for 40 Chinese participants in March 1965 complimented a speaker’s talk that was “well-worded, with a sense of humour, and this no doubt captured the rapt attention of the participants.”⁸⁵ Another experienced Malay officer in Negeri Sembilan noted that his most recent course featured the best line-up of speakers he had seen in the 10 years he had been organizing such courses, singling three who were particularly funny, and had the participants in stitches while delivering serious points.⁸⁶ When a talk was particularly plodding, this was reflected in the reports. In a course conducted by the same official two months later, he noted that the Assistant Veterinary Supervisor from Jelubu had no sense of humor and “the manner in which he delivered his speech was rather stiff; while his grasp of the national language was very limited.”⁸⁷ The veterinary officer he was referring to was probably a non-Malay.⁸⁸ What is revealing about this last comment is

⁸² Note that one of its three objectives for these courses was “To create a body of healthy opinion and discussion.”

⁸³ Department of Information, ‘Civics Course: Do’s and Dont’s (Hints to organizers and instructors).’ October 27, 1956. SIO TR 98/55. 1.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ ‘Report on a civics tour to Kuala Lumpur on 9th March, 1965.’

⁸⁶ ‘Laporan kursus tata rakyat sa-hari di-balairaya Lubok China, 13-5-65 [Report on one-day civics course at the Lubok China Community Hall, May 13, 1965].’ By Abd. Majid b. A. Rahman, District Information Officer, Rembau, May 19th, 1965. PEN NS 54/65.

⁸⁷ ‘Laporan kursus tata rakyat sa-hari di-Balairaya Batu 3, Pedas – 15.7.1965 [Report on one-day civics course at the Batu 3, Pedas community hall].’ By Abd. Majid b. A. Rahman, Pegawai Penerangan Daerah, Rembau, July 20, 1965. PEN NS 54/65.

⁸⁸ The author of the report did not give the speaker’s name or gender. By 1965, the Malayanization of the civil service was in full swing, and while Malays were being promoted in administrative positions, the technical and professional services of the civil service were still the domain of Chinese and Indian officers (Boon Kheng Cheah, *Malaysia : the making of a nation* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2002). 85.). Thus, this officer was likely a non-Malay because he or she was in the professional services (veterinary) and it was highly unlikely that a senior Malay civil servant would have a limited grasp Malay.

that humor, or the lack of, was used as a euphemism for commenting on a non-Malay's lack of expertise in Malay, the national language. The issue of language was a contentious one in the negotiations over the meaning and Constitution of an independent Malaya/Malaysia, and remained so after independence.

These courses gave an opportunity not just to the participants but also the speakers to speak frankly, often using stronger language than was not suitable for mass media reports. Pushing back against questions from Chinese Malaysian participants regarding the neglect, perceived or real, of non-Malay citizens, the Chief Minister of Negeri Sembilan, the main speaker of the course, was said to have spoken "emphatically on the poverty of the Malays generally, and countered rumours that Chinese did not benefit by the National Development Plan which is aimed to redress the economic imbalance between the urban and rural people."⁸⁹ At the height of Konfrontasi, Indonesia's armed opposition to the formation of the enlarged Malaysian federation in 1963, speakers took advantage of the off-the-record setting to engage in some populist, rabble-rousing language, e.g. attacking Sukarno as evil incarnate: "No sane person can understand the attitude of Indonesia and its President, Sukarno. They declare themselves to be independence fighters. They hate imperialism. But when these states [Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak] achieve independence through Malaysia, they intrude into our country; they send regular and guerrilla troops who inflict treacherous acts that violate the bounds of humanity... Sukarno is a ferocious dragon and appetite for violence will not be quenched until he achieves what he has dreamed of all this while – the subjugation of Southeast Asia under his rule. His evil spirit is like Hitler..."⁹⁰ There does appear to be a fair amount of straight talking from speakers and participants going on at these civics courses.

Apart from occupation-specific and mono-ethnic courses, there were also village-specific affairs, which, although they were geographically oriented, were also largely mono-ethnic, since rural communities were still organized around largely Malay kampungs, Chinese New Villages and Indian plantation estate settlements. These courses were typically for the remotest kampungs that the department could not cover regularly on its circuit, like communities in Pergau Valley, for instance, described as the "furthestmost riverine village on the heart of Ulu Kelantan"⁹¹ or Padang Sanai in northern Kedah, which was accessible only by "walking or cycling across stretches of forest

⁸⁹ 'Report on a civics tour to Kuala Lumpur on 9th March, 1965.'

⁹⁰ 'Ucapan Yang Amat Berhormat Dato' Menteri Besar Trengganu pada upacara pembukaan kursus penerangan di-Dewan Pejabat Daerah Kuala Trengganu pada 27.7.1964 jam 9.30 pagi. [Speech by the Honorable Chief Minister of Trengganu at the opening of the Information Course at the Kuala Trengganu District Office Auditorium on July 17, 1964, at 9.30 a.m.] The original excerpt reads: "Tidak ada orang siuman yang akan dapat memahami akan sikap yang di-ambil oleh Indonesia dan Presiden-nya Sukarno. Mereka menggelar diri mereka pejuang2 kemerdekaan. Mereka benchi melihat penjajahan. Tetapi apa bila negeri2 ini menerusi Malaysia menchapai Kemerdekaan, mereka melakukan pencherobohan, mereka menghantar askar2 gurila dan askar2 biasa mereka masok ka-dalam kawasan kita, melakukan penkhianatan dan berbagai2 perbuatan di-luar peri Kemanusiaan... Sukarno ia-lah naga yang ganas, pada masa sekarang ini, dan ia tidak akan Berhenti dari pada keganasan-nya sa-hingga ia telah mendapat apa yang di-idam-nya selama ini – ia-itu menjadikan kawasan2 dalam Asia Tenggara tunduk dan terta'lok kepada-nya. Ia mempunyai nafsu yang jahat seperti juga Hitler..."

⁹¹ Ibrahim Izzudin, 'Report on Civics Courses for the year 1955.'

reserve.”⁹² There were certain advantages in holding village and district-specific courses. Yaacob revealed an understanding of the rhythm of village life when he wrote: “They may know each other and when they return to their kampongs they will invariably meet each other during the daily life. They are bound to talk about the course... The students will discuss and try to implement what they have learned.”⁹³ These local affairs also had another advantage: it gave the department a chance to follow-up with the participants. Among the strategies used to ensure that the impact of the course continued to be felt after the last day of classes, Yaacob came up with a two-pronged strategy: follow up and flattery. Occasional short refresher courses were to be held for “alumni,” and Field Officers were tasked with keeping in touch with participants individually.⁹⁴ As for flattery, Yaacob notes: “The fact that certain people have attended a course should be made public either at the mosque or the news should be passed by word of mouth,”⁹⁵ which would not only build up the image of the alumni among his community, but arouse the curiosity of his neighbors. Another option was to appoint them “Honorary Information Officer” and call on them occasionally to help conduct classes or serve as a liaison between the department and their community.

However, no matter how important and relatively effective civics courses were, the department found it impossible to increase significantly the number it could organize because of budgetary and logistical constraints. These courses were expensive to put together, and the same fiscal conservatism that held back a newly independent government from going on a spending spree in the midst of the 1958-59 recession, when it needed to reinforce its legitimacy, also capped the department’s budget at a steady rate. There would be no revenue windfall *a la* the Korean War in the early 1950s that doubled state revenue and spurred the rapid growth of government machinery. Even if the number of courses were to increase, there was also a limit to the number of hours heads of departments could spare to give lectures. Spreading the workload to lower-level bureaucrats would devalue the prestige of the course, and the participants might also not be getting the best minds at the lectern. So, the number of Malaysians/Malaysians reached by these civic courses remained somewhere in the constant 4,000 range from 1955 to 1969.⁹⁶ If the Information Services wanted to increase the effectiveness of its propaganda work, it could not simply expand its most effective tool, but had to look to other means.

Problems following the 1960 reorganization

The 1960 reorganization of the Department of Information, still under the leadership of Yaacob bin Abdul Latiff, was an attempt to find new ways of being

⁹² ‘Report on Civics Course for 15 couples from Padang Sanai, 2nd – 3rd Sept.’ by Saad bin Din, for State Information Officer, Kedah/Perlis, to Director, Information Services, September 22, 1956. SIO TR 139.

⁹³ Yaacob bin Abdul Latiff, Director, Information Services, to Secretary to the Member for Home Affairs, December 15, 1954: “Education in Citizenship.” INF 1028/54.

⁹⁴ Organizers of civics courses were to instruct Field Officers to “keep track of their ‘bright’ pupils and impress them with the necessity of passing on what they have learned” and to keep them abreast of local developments that might be of interest to them. ‘Civics Course: Do’s and Dont’s.’ 5.

⁹⁵ Yaacob bin Abdul Latiff, “Education in Citizenship.”

⁹⁶ 4,290 in 1960; 3,509 in 1963; and 3,995 in 1967 (not counting Sabah and Sarawak). Figures derived by tabulating numbers from Information Services Monthly Reports for 1960, 1963 and 1967. Figures are approximate, taking into account a couple of missing months, and occasional over-reporting (e.g. Kedah conducting one civics course in July 1960 that it said reached 10,000 people).

effective persuaders of the state's message. The tools of mass propaganda—Public Addresses, mass rallies, distribution of leaflets and so on—seem effective judging by the sheer number of people reached, but the top brass were correct to question their effectiveness. With the expansion of civics courses not an option due to budgetary and logistical limitations, the department turned to two tools used by mobile units in their day-to-day work—Organized Talks and Group Discussions—as the centerpiece of their new philosophy. Organized Talks are short talks/lectures on pre-arranged subjects to groups of between 30 and 40 and Group Discussions are seemingly spontaneous discussions with even smaller groups of people (of between 10 and 20) in informal settings. These were already part of the array of tools deployed by the mobile units; what the department wanted was to deploy them with greater sophistication, and to increase their frequency, at the expense of other tools of mass propagation. Unlike the ramping up of civics courses, the retooling of the work of the mobile units would not require more money; the key was to upgrade the quality of the Field Officers that fanned out across the country in their mobile vehicles. Although the memo on reorganization did not explicitly mention civics courses as a model, it is evident that field staff were being asked to replicate some of the best features of those multi-day courses in their daily work, including selecting participants with care so they can feel confident to express frank views; mixing entertainment and humor in a soft-sell approach; providing useful and enlightening information on national and local issues; be sensitive to local, municipal problems; and so on. Field Officers were not expected to have the same expertise on specific subjects as heads of government departments, but they were asked to be thoroughly familiar with all the Background Notes and Talking Point materials the department produced for their reading.

This change from being disseminators of information to agents who exhort and inspire a citizenry was a huge leap for the department. The men and women on the ground were being asked to raise their game. The field staff had to master new tactics, be flexible in mixing tools to match the audience, and cover more ground, while the state-level leadership were to make better use of propaganda materials and step up their guidance and mentoring of the field staff. The task required more propagandists who were better educated, better paid, better trained and better equipped. On all these counts, the Information Department failed through the 1960s.

The department tackled this personnel challenge on two fronts: recruitment and training. There were many vacancies to fill, especially at the entry-level positions, and the requirements were fairly high for that time. Those applying for the post of Field Officers in the early 1960s had to be between 20 and 26 years old; had passed their Certificate Examination (the rough equivalent of a high school diploma, or 'O' Levels, completed after 10 or 11 years of schooling) with a credit pass in Malay, English or Mandarin. Those applying to be Chinese Field Officers should be able to speak two other Chinese dialects.⁹⁷ The salary, which ranged from \$192 to \$450 a month (with an additional cost of living adjustment at market rates), was reasonable for a young single man or woman, but men with families found the pay insufficient if they were the sole breadwinners, had a

⁹⁷ These requirements were laid out for the position of Temporary Field Officers, who were confirmed to full-time positions if they excelled at their work. 'Advertisement for Temporary Field Officers,' September 26, 1961. PEN 617/61.

large family, and lived in the capital.⁹⁸ As a comparison, the monthly salary of the Director of Information Services in 1961 was \$1,670.⁹⁹

In the hiring process, the senior officers of the Information Department were aware that the job required considerable people skills. Throughout the interview process, senior officers carried a master list of applicants and a summary of their qualifications. Scrawled on the margins of the list against the names were notations on personality type. This was often the critical factor in deciding whom to hire.¹⁰⁰ Many were rejected for having fair or poor personalities even though they might have had acceptable or superior paper qualifications. Holders of the Certificate Examinations would have been more than capable in executing the pre-1960 work of disseminating information but would prove to be inadequate for the higher demands in terms of workload and sophistication. The rare university graduate who applied was invariably offered a job.

The goal of the department was to have an Area Information Officer (AIO) assigned to head the propaganda work for each district in the country. An AIO should have significantly more experience or was more qualified than the Field Officer, and he or she oversaw the work of several mobile units in the district. Despite the reasonable pay scale, the department had difficulties filling vacancies in the Field Officer and AIO level, and it was only in 1970 that each district had its own AIO.¹⁰¹

Training took the form of refresher courses held annually or every two years for every level of staff, from Field Officers/Assistants, Mobile Cinema Operators and Liaison Officers (journalists) who were the backbone of mobile units, to higher-level staff including AIOs. Instead of training camps, State Information Officers and senior federal officers held annual conferences to review the department's performance, thrash out operational issues, and set policy. Training for senior officers took the form of overseas conferences and attachments. Technical staff (the department's photographers, and the producers and cinematographers of the Malayan Film Unit) were also sent abroad for periodic training stints. Every two or three years, five or six refresher courses were held for recently recruited field staff or for those who had not attended one for some years and had been promoted. The first series of post-independence refresher courses were held from 1958-1959 for almost 200 field officers¹⁰² and proved to be the template for such programs through the 1960s. All but one of these two-week residential courses

⁹⁸ PEN (K/P) 80/58: Permanent and pensionable appointments for Field Officers.

⁹⁹ Secretary, Public Services Commission, to The Principal Establishment Officer, July 19, 1961.

¹⁰⁰ 'Secondment of Inche Mohd. Sopiae bin Sheikh Ibrahim as Director of Information Services.' PEN 432/61.

¹⁰⁰ November 21, 1963. 'The recommendations of Interview Board held at Information Office, Alor Star of candidates for Kedah on 10th November, 1963.' PEN 653/62.

¹⁰¹ March 27, 1970. Zulkiflee Dadameah, Head of Civics and Social Services, for Director of Information Services, Malaysia, to All State Information Officers, West Malaysia. 'Penyusunan semula Jabatan Penerangan ibu pejabat dan negeri2 [Reorganization of HQ and State Departments of Information]'. PEN.NS 69 Pt. 1. This was achieved when, during a reorganization of state and national information departments, 20 Field Officers were promoted to the rank of Area Information Officers. Because the promotion caused a shortage of Field Officers that were not filled immediately, those promoted were asked to continue doing their old jobs in addition to carrying out their new responsibilities. The salary scales for Field Officers, Temporary Field Officers, Assistant Information Officers and all other grades had remained stable through the 1960s.

¹⁰² 'Report on the Refresher Courses for Assistant Information Officers and Field Officers held at Segenting, Port Dickson, from November 3, 1958 to March 7, 1959. By Ahmad Nordin Md Zain, Ag. Senior Information Officer (Field & Training),' PEN 551/58.

were conducted in English. Attendees were drawn from various ethnic groups; the exception being a course conducted in Malay. At one of these courses, special provisions were also made for Chinese field staff who spoke little English: Senior Chinese Malaysian officers gave summaries of the lectures in Mandarin, and the field staff exempted from taking the journalism aptitude test in English. These refresher courses were made up of a series of lectures on the workings of the department, the duties and responsibilities of field staff, the main government policies of the day, as well as practical tips and hands-on sessions on how to conduct their work. The field staff also toured key government departments in Kuala Lumpur, and had leisure, sports and entertainment time built into the program. Attendees also had to sit for tests: General Knowledge; a two-part General Paper; Journalism Aptitude; and a Writing test (writing out a talk to be delivered at Organized Talks or Group Discussions).

At the conclusion of the 1958-59 refresher courses, it became evident that the task ahead for the department was formidable. Most of the participants fared poorly in the tests.¹⁰³ A good number of officers were ignorant of the most basic facts regarding not only their nation, but of the district they were serving in. Many Malay officers could not even sing the National Anthem in full, stumbling over the words. Of the copious amount of material supplied by the Information Department headquarters (Talking Points, Background Notes, Press Releases, copies of policy statements and White Papers), many field officers either did not receive them, did not seek them out from their district offices, or if they had them, did not read them.

The Senior Information Officer in charge of Training found that most Field Officers lacked the two essential qualities for their work—a creative mind and initiative. If one of the aims of the courses was to “re-orientate the minds and attitude of the officers in regard to their responsibilities to the nation in the post-Merdeka period,” the result was also discouraging.

“It became increasingly apparent as the Course progressed that many Field Officers lacked a sense of purpose and were hardly conscious of the heavier responsibilities which Merdeka has brought upon them. A good many appeared to have little interest in their work or in improving themselves, and some even showed a cynical attitude towards the Course as if they had nothing useful to learn from it. This was especially true of those Field Officers who, being already on the pensionable establishment, imagined that no matter what they did nothing could shake them in their present position.”¹⁰⁴

The transition from colonial to post-colonial mindset was proving to be a challenge on the practical front as well. Most officers pointed out that routine public addresses at weekly fairs and street junctions—staple work during the Emergency—were not effective while Organized Talks were. But when asked if they had ever organized such talks, few raised their hands. Officers from states at the forefront of the fight against

¹⁰³ The department considered a score of 75 or higher out of 100 as outstanding, while anything less than 40 was a failing grade. Most of the attendees fell into the 50+ range. See Figure 1.2.

¹⁰⁴ ‘Report on the Refresher Courses for Assistant Information Officers and Field Officers held at Seginting, Port Dickson.’

the communists were knowledgeable and confident of their craft. The department heads acknowledged that such work was strenuous and dangerous, but pointed out that it was relatively easy to carry out when compared to civil information work, because while the former involved publicizing government measures that had the force of law behind them, the latter's effectiveness "relied more upon the persuasiveness of the speaker in order to win the co-operation or understanding of his audience."¹⁰⁵ The course showed that few of the officers were equipped for these new challenges.

Not only did most of the officers lack the skills to connect with rural folks, some even had an inflated sense of self-worth. They resented...

"...having to serve themselves at tea time and insisted that they should be served instead "because we are officers." Several of them said during discussion time that walking or cycling into a kampong was degrading in the eye of the villagers. For the same reason they disliked the idea of going on the stage to participate in a live-show and of "roughing it out" whenever they visited a kampong. This type of officer is hardly suited for work in the rural areas because they can never identify themselves fully with the lives of the villagers and so cannot hope to win their goodwill and understanding."¹⁰⁶

This damning assessment of the first series of post-independence refresher courses inspired for the 1960 reorganization of the department.¹⁰⁷ The results of these 1958-59 courses led the department to hire younger and more educated officers, to pursue a less mechanical and more personal form of propaganda delivery, and to give its field officers more flexibility albeit with closer supervision by their immediate supervisors. However, the reorganization ran into problems almost immediately because of the difficulty in attracting sufficient numbers of qualified staff and the continued presence of holdover staff with attitude problems, which the department had difficulty firing. One State Information Officer, just nine months after the reorganization, lamented that the flexibility given to the men and women on the ground to tailor their activities to meet different situations had been abused. Targets were not being met, Field Officers were taking vehicles out on their own without the support staff, Field Officers were packing up immediately after cinema shows without conducting any talks, entire events were being cancelled at the slightest drop of rain, and informal chats that may have just been sharing a cup of coffee with friends were being dressed up as higher-level Organized Talks. He recommended that HQ send down stricter guidelines and that flexibility be curtailed.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ In fact, both the Refresher Course report and the memo on Reorganization were written by the same senior Information Officer.

¹⁰⁸ February 23, 1961. State Information Officer for Kedah and Perlis, Saad Din, to all Assistant and District Information Officers, and Field Officers 'Tugas2 Pasokan Luar [Duties of Field Teams].' PEN (K) 82/60. A national-level review a year later also found that mobile units were meeting their Public Address targets, but not organizing the more conducting enough face-to-face activities. See 'High Cost for Low Returns,' paper presented by Senior Information Officer (Field & Training) at the Conference of State Information Officers, 29th March, 1962.

Refresher courses continued to be carried out throughout the 1960s, but it becomes more difficult to evaluate their effectiveness. The department conducted nine two-week refresher courses in 1961, and the one key difference between these and the 1958-59 set were the absence of across-the-board standardized tests. During the 1958-59 series, Field Officers anxiously asked their supervisors whether the tests were to be used as the basis for promotions evaluations. Since the department heads chose to be strategically vague with their answers, the attendees spent the nights studying the course material (and complaining about it bitterly in feedback sessions), leading one observer to note that the halls resembled student dorms during finals.¹⁰⁹ The lack of tests in subsequent years is unexplained, but their absence probably would have reduced the effectiveness of the lectures and talks. Another reason why it is harder to judge the value of the later refresher courses is that the reports on these courses dealt more with the logistical aspects of putting together the program and were less frank and detailed about the aptitude of the attendees, and the content and effectiveness of the course. The report for the courses in 1965 highlighted some comments from the attendees, which included not having enough of their own furniture; difficulties in borrowing typewriters from other departments; a suggestion that classes be cancelled for the day following Pay Day; requests for Swan Brand rain coats to be supplied to all officers; and so on.¹¹⁰ The reports read less like a critical review of a key component of the department's staff, and more like a list of demands from pampered children.

The problem with generating useful reports afflicted other aspects of the department's work. If Field Officers were being asked to be more adaptable in their propaganda work by judging each situation on its merits and applying the appropriate forms of persuasion, then the reports they were being asked to file should have enough flexibility to reflect the myriad situations they faced and the different strategies they used. In fact, the first post-reorganization reports had no fixed format. As long as the Field Officer included basic logistical information, he or she could write the report in any format, and the free-writing form that most Field Officers adopted allowed them to recount in narrative form their day-to-day encounters. An example of one such report,¹¹¹ by a Female Field Officer in the state of Negeri Sembilan in May 1961, provides revealing little nuggets about the varying reactions of the audience and even questions from men, who were gatecrashers at this women-only event. The reader, which would have been the senior Information Officers responsible for compiling reports for ministers and the Prime Minister, could get a sense of what was happening on the ground. However, just less than half a year later, the drive to standardize these reports led to the introduction of forms¹¹² that required the Field Officers to fill in all the logistical figures in neat columns and rows but which relegated the human details of the interactions to a small column on the right. Field Officers were to supplement these forms with free-writing addendums, and while many did initially, these fell by the wayside soon enough

¹⁰⁹ PEN 551/58.

¹¹⁰ May 20, 1965. Field and Training Division, Department of Information, Malaysia. 'Report on refresher courses for Field Officers and Field Assistants.' For the 1968 and 1969 refresher courses, there are lists of participants and course program, but no extant reports at all. PEN (K) 44/64.

¹¹¹ See Figure 1.3. 'Report by Female Field Officer Ramlah binte Abdul Wahab for May 15-18, 1961.' PEN/NS 62/61.

¹¹² See Figure 1.4. 'Report by Female Field Officer Ramlah binte Abdul Wahab for November 20-29, 1961.' PEN/NS 62/61.

and what was eventually left were reams and reams of these standardized forms that privileged data over description. This bureaucratization made the compilation of state and national numbers easier, but it leached out the human aspect of the work of the propagandists, which was the point of the 1960 reorientation of the department.

Conclusion

This is not to say that the Information Department failed in its propaganda duties. The department ramped up the number of Organized Talks and Group Discussions after the 1960 reorganization, the number of the latter rising from 4,031 in 1960 to 8,541 in 1967, reaching some 400,000 people, while the number of group discussions jumped six times in the same period, reaching 450,000 Peninsula Malaysians.¹¹³ Civics courses continued to be conducted at a steady pace while training and professional development opportunities continued to grow, especially after the merger with Sabah and Sarawak, when the need to improve the information infrastructure and personnel of the Borneo states became an additional priority. The Malayan Film Unit, which supplied the newsreels and documentaries that were popular in the rural areas, increased its output and improved the quality of its productions.

This increase in output, however, masked two sets of competing dynamics that hobbled the Information Department. The first was the tension between continuity and change. When Malaya gained independence in 1957, there was no dramatic upheaval of the state. In fact, the post-colonial government resembled closely the late colonial state, the main difference being that the British Governor had departed and handed power over to the Prime Minister, who—with his Cabinet—was already in charge of the day-to-day business of governing before independence as the Chief Minister. As for the Information Department, it was a well-oiled wartime propaganda machine by 1957, with a settled infrastructure that reached into the most rural areas of the nation and an operational nous derived from years of anti-communist information campaigns. But the department's senior leaders, some of whom were with the propaganda infrastructure right from the beginning when the Department of Public Relations was formed 1946, recognized that this continuity would be a liability, and that the Information Department needed to dramatically change the way it operated in order for it to be more relevant and effective. The change began with the re-vamping of civics courses in 1955, from being a blunt tool of ideological warfare, to a multi-faceted and nuanced medium to deliver basic and useful information to community leaders and influential groups in society, increase awareness of key issues like citizenship and lift the veil on the working of the state. By emphasizing the cogs and wheels of government, the Department of Information hoped to persuade the people that a newly independent nation would be radically different from the colonial state in that it would be working for the benefit of the people. A focus on the mechanistic state would also, in theory at least, de-couple the government from electoral politics, a goal more honored in rhetoric than in practice. This was a major reorganization that

¹¹³ Organized Talks – 1960: 4,031 (113,904 people reached); 1963: 8,577 (377,050); 1967: 8,541 (396,166). Discussion Groups – 1960: 8,168 (133,332); 1963: 35,521 (366,959); 1967: 45,102 (450,842). For Peninsula Malaysia, not including Sabah and Sarawak. Figures derived by tabulating numbers from Information Services Monthly Reports for 1960, 1963 and 1967.

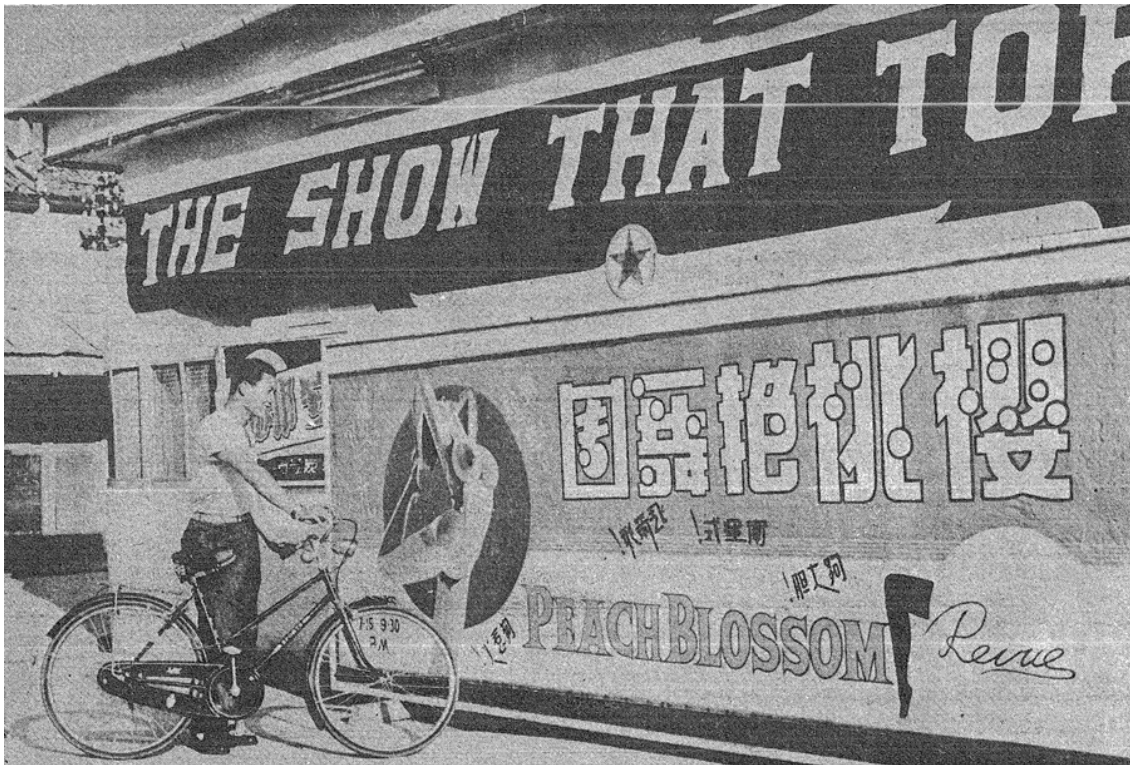
aimed to upgrade significantly the quality and range of the department's propaganda work. It did not fully reach its new goals, but it still managed to chug along day after day, with its field staff making their rounds, meeting people in small settings, screening films, conducting multi-day courses, gathering feedback, accompanying selected citizens on trips to state capitals and to Kuala Lumpur; all the while filing copious reports on its activities.

It is ironic that the department, focusing on the processes of government, would find its own mechanisms of delivery wanting. Its bureaucratization tendencies thwarted the spirit of improvisation needed to fulfill its more ambitious goals. The regularization of reports is the clearest reflection of these opposing dynamics. As the forms became more standard and dry as the 1960s wore on, it did not necessarily mean that the quality of the work on the ground was declining. But it did mean that if the government was in the business of seeing like a state, it was having its vision blurred because the rich details of what went on when its propaganda field staff met its citizens face to face every day were no longer present in the rigid rows and columns of the bureaucratic forms the field staff filled out religiously. After the race riots of May 1969, the state and the information services realized its mistake, and the field staff was tasked with taking the pulse of the nation and reporting back their findings. The reports that were produced were reminiscent of the early days of post-reorganization in 1960: i.e. they were narrative based and detail-rich reports that followed no fixed formats; were as long or as short as the content dictated; and could cover a day's or a week's work, depending on the urgency and complexity of the area being covered.¹¹⁴

A second set of competing dynamics revolved around the tension between the state's official ideology and the department's practical, operational realities. If the official nationalism promoted Malay as the only national language, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting was forced to treat all the four main languages in Malaya/Malaysia on a de facto equal footing, to ensure that government policies were understood by as many citizens as possible. This practical necessity reinforced the ethnic and linguistic divide in the department's operational set-up, a divide that mirrored the continued ethnic and linguistic cleavages in the society at large, but was at odds with what the state was trying to achieve. Some of these tensions are evident in this chapter and are more fully explored in Chapter 3. But first, we have to examine how the state engaged its citizens in the public sphere, through the mass mediums of radio and television.

¹¹⁴ See for instance Daily Field Reports in PEN 2/69.

Figure 1.1



Leaflet showing a picture of Ah Leen @ Yee Weng Shee. On the back of the leaflet is an appeal to terrorist Ah Mun @ Fung Shun Kheng. It reads:

"Ah Mun, it is because of you that I have come down today. After I have come down I have been very happy and am very satisfied because I can behave like an ordinary citizen and live a life of happiness and peace... The Government allowed me to go back to see my family and friends... Since I came down I have been to the cinema more than 10 times and have seen more than 10 strip tease shows... I have bought a new Hopper bicycle costing \$96." [SIS.NS 8/54 Pt.17]

Figure 1.2
Test results for Field Officers' First Refresher Course, November 3-15, 1958

Field Officers' First Refresher Course.						
Test results.						
No.	Name	State	Avg %	Talking Point	General Test	Press Release Survey
1.	Ahmad Saifuddin b.A.Rahman	Johore	46	45	47.5 47	C C
2.	Mohd.Mahir b.Hj.Ahmad	"	43	40	46.7 44	C C
3.	Leong Boon Fah	"	50	55	45.6 60	C C
4.	Tan Aik Cheong	"	58	55	61.3 39	C B
5.	Leong Hoong Kye	"	46	55	37.5 47	C C
6.	Hashim b. Mansor	Kedah	44	50	37.5 44	C C
7.	Tunku Ahmad b.T.Adnan	"	59	65	52.5 59	C B
8.	Loh Kim Chuan	"	40	60	20.7 41	C B
9.	Ibrahim b.Hj. Mahmood	Kelantan	69	65	73.7 40	B B
10.	Abdul Hamid b. Omar	"	66	60	72.5 67	B A
11.	Tuan Abdullah b.Tuan Mohamed	"	49	50	47.5 49	C Sick
12.	Rahim b. Haji Othman	Malacca	60	55	64.6 55	C B
13.	Ng Meng Hooi	N.Sembilan	65	65	Sick	C B
14.	Kamarulzaman b.Jaafar	"	64	65	62.5 64	A B
15.	Ghadzalli b. Ahmad	"	69	70	67.5 69	B B
16.	Chong Leong Soon	Pahang	57	55	46.3 57	C B
17.	Johari b. Hj. Hussein	"	46	55	37.5 47	C B
18.	Ismail b. Ali	"	49	55	42.5 49	C B
19.	Koay Khooon Hook	Penang	56	60	51.8 56	B C
20.	Mohd. Noor b. Osman	"	55	60	49.2 55	C C
21.	Abdul Rahman b.Alg.Md.Yassin Perak		57	60	57.7 57	C B
22.	Abdul Rahman b.Hj.Bahrie	"	50	55	45.2 50	C B
23.	Ismail Mokhtar b.Bahaudin	"	54	55	52.5 54	C B
24.	Ong Lip Leong	"	55	55	Sick	C C
25.	Wong Nam Hing	"	42	60	23.2 42	C C
26.	Shu Tong Poh	Selangor	57	60	58.1 57	C C
27.	Md.Judan b.Md.Darus	"	45	40	50.6 45	B B
28.	Shaaron b. Shaaban	"	47	40	53.5 47	C B
29.	Chik b. Muda	Trengganu	50	65	34.6 50	C B
30.	Othman b.A.Karim	"	36	40	32.5 37	C B
31.	Peter Loke Shing Hoi	Headquarters	56	45	66 56	C B

Figure 1.3
Report by Female Field Assistant Ramlah Abdul Wahab for May 15-18, 1961

15-62/01 (2)

PENYATA PEMBANTU PEGAWAI LUAR WANITA
pada 15hb. Hingga 18hb. May 1961

15.5.61 ; Untuk Membuat Perhubungan dengan sa-orang Ibu di-Kampung Senama Tengah, Rembau.

Saya dan Che' Halimah telah pergi di-Kampung Senama Rembau, untuk membuat perhubungan dengan sa-orang Ibu, supaya dapat kerjasama mengadakan satu sahrahan Terator di-Masjid Kampung tersebut pada 18hb. May 1961 yang lalu.

16.5.61 ; Pada pukul 2.30 petang, saya telah pergi dengan sa-orang Jururawat dari Seremban bersama2 dengan Che'Halimah untuk mengadakan satu Perhimpuan bersama2 Tata-Rayyat di-Kampung Legong Ulu, Rembau. Jururawat tersebut telah memberi sharahan berkenaan dengan kesihatan kepada ibu2 di-Kampung itu, juga bagaimana chara2 mengaja anak2 kechil. Kaum Ibu telah berpuas hati benar tentang sharahan2 dan ramai Ibu2 yang mendengar pasehat Che' amunah itu ada-lah paling tenang sekali. Walau pun ramai ibu2 yang gemar ~~xxx~~ perchakapan Jururawat itu tetapi ada juga di-anantara wanita2 yang maseh ~~xxx~~ jelita yang mengangapkan perchakapan itu ta'perlu di-dengar. Ini ada-lah mereka yang maseh belum mnger mengerti lagi akant anggong jawab yang mustahak sekali apabila masa-nya tiba kelak. Perhimpuan ini telah di-adakan di-sabuah Sekolah Agama Menegah dantelah di-pengurusi oleh saya sendiri. Jamuan rangan telah di-adakan.

18.6.61 Kampung Senama Tengah, Rembau.

Satu Sharahan Terator telah di-adakan di-Masjid Kampung tersebut, lebih dari 40 orang Kaum Ibu telah hadir, termasuk juga Kaum apa telah turut sama di-Masjid itu untuk mendengar serba sedikit penerangan dari saya berkenaan dengan Perbanguan Luar andar. Che'Halimah telah menjawab beberapa soalan dari Ibu2 dan Bapak2 di-hari itu tentang pembukaan tanah baru, ranchangan2 Kerajaan itu. Juga lain2 emajuan, Kedatangan kami di-hari itu ada-lah mendapat sambutan dari ibu di-Kampung tesebut.

Tambahan: Sa-orang Kaum bapa, telah menyocal berkenaan permohonan orang Kampung di-situ dalam soal permintaan ayer2 paip telah memakan masa yang lama tetapi tidak ada keputusan, dan surat permohonan itu di-diamkan bagitu sahaja, oleh yang demikian orang Kampung telah mengadu agar perkara ini akan dapat satu perhatian oleh yang berkenaan.

Masjlis ini di-tutup dengan jamuan rangan dengan perbelanjaan sebanyak \$9.90.

(Ramlah bti Hj. Abd Wahab)
Pembantu Pegawai Luar Wanita,

20.5.1961

Figure 1.4
Report by Female Field Assistant Ramlah Abdul Wahab for November 20-29, 1961

JABATAN PENERANGAN PERSEKUTUAN TANAH MELAYU
(PERKHIDMATAN BAHAGIAN KHAS)

(B. KHS. 1/61)

Pegawai Luar. Ramlah binti A. Wahab.(1) Minggu pertama/dua/tiga/keempat.....(4)
Jabatan Penerangan Negeri Sembilan.....(2) Daripada 20.11.61... hingga 29.11.61.....(5)
Pusat Penempatan Kerja Seremban.....(3) Daerah. Jelbu dan Port Dickson.....(6)

LAPORAN MINGGUAN, BULAN November 1961

(7) Tarikh	(8) Tempat/Kampung/Mukim	(9) Jenis Kerja	(10) Bahan2 Penerangan	(11) Jumlah Peserta	(12) Kenyataan
20.11.61.	Rumah Ketua Kampung. (Kg: Gelang) (Pertang)	P. Ramlah Tamah.	Pembangunan Luar Bandar	8 Orang.	Perlu di-ulangi
21.11.61.	Rumah Ketua Kampung. (Kampung Petaseh Ulu) (Pertang)	Sharahan Ter- ator.	Pembangunan Luar Bandar. Pelajaran Diwasa. Peranan Kaum Ibu Kam- pong.	30 "	Memuaskan.
22.11.61.	Rumah Pegawai Penerangan an Daerah Jejbu. (Kg: Peregai) (Peradong)	P. Ramlah Tamah.	Pembangunan Luar Bandar. Pelajaran Diwasa.	25 "	Memuaskan.
27.11.61.	Balai Raya. (Kg: Bukit Tebok) (Pasir Panjang)	P. Ramlah Tamah.	Pembangunan Luar Bandar	10 "	Perlu di-ulangi.
28.11.61.	Surau. (Kg: Pengkalan Durian) (Linggi)	P. Ramlah Tamah.	Paedah Menyimpan wang di-Pejabat Post.	15 "	Sederhana.

Chapter 3

Radio: In every hut and palace

Radio ... allows one to think, to hone one's mind so as to sharpen and develop one's intellect. It is true that *the eye leaves nothing to the imagination—but the ear does*. When we listen to a radio play, we create our own conceptions. If a thousand people tune in, you will have a thousand different conceptions because our imagination takes flight on a journey of exploration that creates our own unique fantasy... So, when we listen to radio, our mind and thoughts are always throbbing, and we sit on the throne as an individual and not as a *digit in a madding crowd*. But when we watch TV... *others do the thinking for you*—others create the conception because it is true that *the eye spoon-feeds the mind*. Even though millions of viewers watch “Dallas”, what is produced is a single conception, since “Dallas” has been described as *a mass hysteria based on a single madness*.

– Zain Mahmood¹

When veteran Malaysian broadcasters, born in the 1920s and 1930s, reminisce about the early days, they are prone to wax lyrical about the magic of radio. Such lyrical remembrances are not just products of a rose-tinted reordering of history. As Rudolf Mrazek observes in an impressionistic, heady manner inspired perhaps by his subject matter, radio in the late colonial period—from the 1920s onwards when it was introduced to much of Western-controlled Southeast Asia—crossed geographical obstacles in an instant and became a tool for the state to define the modern colonial space² and an instrument to unmoor the listener from his “troubled locality.”³ “While the people handled, or were handled by, the new technologies, their time, space, culture, identity and nation came to feel awry.”⁴ The effect on the listener was unsettling and liberating, and it is no wonder that Malaysians encountering this new technology remembered the heady feeling of falling in love for the first time. The few who chose to pursue radio as enthusiasts and eventually as professionals had to be multi-talented and driven individuals as there were no easy paths into broadcasting. They could not count on state-sponsored radio stations to provide training and support, as the colonial government was initially uninterested in broadcasting. Instead, they had to rely on themselves and their fellow hobbyists. To join amateur wireless societies in the inter-war years, an enthusiast

¹ Zain Mahmood worked in Malaysian radio and television from the 1950s in various capacities before retiring as Director of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting in 1987. Zain Mahmood, “Life begins at forty,” in *Penyiaran - 4 dekad bersama anda [Broadcasting - 4 decades with you]*, ed. Abdul Aziz Abas, et al. (Kuala Lumpur: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1987). 12-13. The words in italics were the English phrases Zain used in his original Malay text.

² Rudolf Mrazek, *Engineers of happy land : technology and nationalism in a colony*, Princeton studies in culture/power/history (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002). 168.

³ Ibid. 169.

⁴ Ibid. xvi.

needed to be both technically minded and creative. He should be able to source, from local and overseas suppliers, parts to assemble and maintain receivers, transmitters and antennas. He needed the organizational skills to manage even a modest line-up of programs. And finally, he had to have creative skills to write and produce programs, and an engaging personality (not to mention a pleasant voice) to hold his listeners' attention. In short, one needed to be educated, self-motivated and self-sufficient, which the first wave of local amateur radio enthusiasts was. This chapter introduces the first such cohort to work in Radio Malaya and to eventually lead the service after independence. It also looks at the historical context in which radio was introduced, the colonial state's use of it as a propaganda tool, how Radio Malaya gained its independence in 1950 with a split from Radio Singapore, and the first reactions toward this new national broadcaster of a post-colonial state.

In 1921, a British engineer imported the first radio set to Malaya and began intermittent transmission. From then until 1946, when the colonial state established Radio Malaya, broadcasting was in the hands of amateur enthusiasts. In the absence of state-sponsored radio stations, local Malaysians were active in the many amateur wireless societies that sprouted out in urban areas during the inter-war years. Some of these enthusiasts formed the local staff when Radio Malaya was formed. They shared similar educational backgrounds and a cosmopolitan outlook. Despite coming from various ethnic groups, an inter-communal bond formed over a common professional interest and goal that was uncommon in an ethnically divided plural society.

This chapter also examines the differences between the two propaganda arms of the colonial state—Radio Malaya and the Department of Information—and how these differences impacted the way they carried out their work in the post-colonial setting. Even though both, at the time of their concurrent establishment in 1946, were the first pan-Malayan iterations of their units, one major difference was that radio had been an amateur pursuit before World War II while on-the-ground information work had always been carried out by government agencies. There had always been an element of tedium in the rote processes of information work, and the more glamorous radio attracted a higher caliber of enthusiasts. At the same time, information work required many bodies on the ground spread thin to achieve even modest coverage while radio required significantly fewer people concentrated in a few centers to reach anyone with a receiver in most parts of the defined space. This allowed the small group of well-educated broadcasters to have an impact on the general population far exceeding that of individual or even collective Field Officers of the Information Department.

In the previous chapter, we examined how the Information Department had, after a rocky beginning, become an efficient propaganda tool in the war against communists from 1948-1960. This competence however proved much less useful when Malaya became independent in 1957, and the Department struggled to shed its wartime colonial baggage to meet the new, more complex demands of a developing post-colonial state in peacetime. This chapter also looks at the work of Radio Malaya during the communist war (the Emergency), especially through the Community Listening Scheme, a separate network aimed at rural communities of all ethnicities who were in the frontline of the fighting. Like the Information Department, Radio Malaya also carried out its anti-communist responsibilities effectively, putting together multi-lingual programming that targeted its audience during the prime evening listening hours with a generous dose of

entertainment and practical news features that sweetened the overt propaganda programs. But unlike the Department of Information, Radio Malaya was not bogged down with a military-oriented set-up as independence approached and the war was won. While important, the Community Listening Scheme (CLS) was but one part of the station's four services that broadcast in Malay, English, Tamil and four to seven Chinese languages. Since its broadcasts spread across the nation and were accessed by all Malaysians, Radio Malaya had to continually meet their listening needs, and not just concentrate on anti-communist propaganda. Also, the CLS was launched in the early 1950s on the premise that radio receivers were expensive and out of the reach of most rural residents and communities. The colonial state provided around a thousand receivers in the most impoverished rural kampongs, New Villages and estate plantations to reach its residents there. However, as the decade progressed, rural income rose and advances in technology made portable transistor radios affordable to even rural residents,⁵ Radio Malaya was able to wind down the hardware portion of the CLS and to absorb the programming aspect into its general program line-up. In contrast to the Department of Information, Radio Malaya was thus not burdened by legacy hardware or bureaucratic processes more suited for fighting the Communist Party of Malaya. Free of a lumbering wartime burden, and staffed with leaders who were energetic, professional and cosmopolitan, Radio Malaya was in a much better position to transition to a peacetime, postcolonial mode.

In 1957, according to another nostalgic memoir, Radio Malaya brought the historic sounds of a nation achieving self-rule. It echoed "in every hut and palace across the land."⁶ Hyperbole aside, radio was the only form of broadcast mass communication till 1963, when the fledgling television service was launched, and even after that, through the 1960s while TV ownership was low. The number of licensed sets jumped 700 per cent from 1947, the year registration was implemented, to 1957.⁷ Radio provided news, entertainment, and a variety of practical knowledge programs for a wide section of Malaysians in multiple languages, even those not prone to flights of fantasy. It did indeed record and broadcast all the significant events of the day and had its listeners glued to their sets as the negotiations between the Alliance leadership led by Tunku Abdul Rahman and the colonial authorities over independence reached their peak in the mid-1950s. This chapter traces the first act of how it came to occupy the ears and imaginations of Malaysians before and after independence and how it balanced its entertainment and propaganda roles.

⁵ The first newspaper advertisements for portable transistor radios appeared in early 1957. These American and European sets cost between \$80 and \$200 (local currency), about half to a month's income for the average rural resident. By 1959, Japanese models were available in Malaya and the price had dropped to the \$30-\$50 range. See advertisements in *The Straits Times*, June 4, 1957 (Page 1), September 1, 1957 (Page 9), September 27, 1957 (Notices, Page 12), November 16, 1957 (Classifieds, Page 17), and *The Singapore Free Press*, June 4, 1959 (Page 11), among others. One 1959 advertisement touted a 2-band, 8-transistor Japanese model as the "world's best" that was "ideal for kampongs, estates, farms, hunting & fishing trips etc." *The Singapore Free Press*, August 20, 1959 (Page 1).

⁶ Zain Mahmood, "Life begins at forty." 12.

⁷ Drew O. McDaniel, *Broadcasting in the Malay world : radio, television, and video in Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore*, [Communication and information science series] (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Pub., 1994). 68-69. Kumar Ramakrishna, *Emergency propaganda : the winning of Malayan hearts and minds, 1948-1958* (Richmond: Curzon, 2002). 184.

1921-1959: Radio in the colonial era

Early beginnings

The history of radio in Malaya began in 1921 when an engineer employed by the Johor government, A. L. Birch, imported the first radio set into the Malay states. Over the next decade or so, radio enthusiasts across the colonies set up regional private wireless clubs, including the Johore Wireless Society, Singapore Wireless Society, Malayan Wireless Society and Penang Wireless Society, transmitting intermittently on short or medium waves.⁸ In 1934, Station ZHJ of Penang Wireless Society began transmission in Malay, Chinese, Tamil and English,⁹ marking the first time the four major languages of the Malay states were used in radio broadcasts.¹⁰ The station's schedule was "the most ambitious of any Malayan broadcaster up to that time,"¹¹ coming on air from 6.40 p.m. to 8.40 p.m., Mondays to Saturdays. Three years later, the private British Malaya Broadcasting Corporation (BMBC) began broadcasting from Caldecott Hill, Singapore.¹² As World War II broke out in 1939, Britain's Ministry of Information established a Far Eastern Bureau (FEB) responsible for broadcasting, war information and propaganda in the Asian and Pacific theatres of war. The Straits Settlement's Department of Information and Publicity became the FEB's arm in Singapore¹³ and the metropole took even greater control of Malayan propaganda when the FEB moved its headquarters from Hong Kong to Singapore in 1940.¹⁴ Compared to the "foot-dragging"¹⁵ Malayan authorities, the FEB officers in Singapore recognized the importance of propaganda, especially the broadcast services, and acted swiftly to improve the infrastructure in Malaya. The Bureau constructed wired loudspeakers on tall poles connected to radio receivers in Singapore and other areas including Malacca, which were used to relay radio newscasts in Malay, Chinese, or Tamil in community areas such as market locations or parks. The office also resurrected transmissions from Kuala Lumpur (which had ended when the Kuala Lumpur Amateur Radio Society became defunct) with news and music shows in Malay, Tamil,

⁸ "Perkembangan RTM dalam 4 dekad [The growth of RTM over 4 decades]," in *Penyiaran - 4 dekad bersama anda [Broadcasting - 4 decades with you]*, ed. Abdul Aziz Abas, et al. (Kuala Lumpur: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1987). 80. Radio Malaysia, *Ini-lah Radio Malaysia 1969 [This is Radio Malaysia 1969]* (Kuala Lumpur: Radio Malaysia, 1969). 36. One scholar considers the accounts of broadcasts in the 1920s as "second- or third-hand accounts that cannot be corroborated by contemporary accounts" and the 1921 date as "improbable" because the technology that made voice and music broadcasts possible was not readily available to amateurs in Europe and North America until the mid-1920s, so it could not have been available in colonial Malaya. McDaniel, *Broadcasting in the Malay world*. 22-24.

⁹ Noordin Che Din, "Siaran radio di Pulau Pinang," in *Penyiaran - 4 dekad bersama anda [Broadcasting - 4 decades with you]*, ed. Abdul Aziz Abas, et al. (Kuala Lumpur: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1987). 35; Radio Malaysia, *Ini-lah Radio Malaysia 1969 [This is Radio Malaysia 1969]*. 36.

¹⁰ John A. Lent, "The mass media in Malaysia," in *Cultural pluralism in Malaysia : polity, military, mass media, education, religion, and social class*, ed. John A. Lent, *Special report number 14* (De Kalb, Michigan: Northern Illinois University Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1977). 33

¹¹ McDaniel, *Broadcasting in the Malay world*. 32.

¹² "Normal" transmissions began on March 1, 1937. Ibid. 36. Some sources have 1936 as the year the BMBC began operations, and though these give no details, one might presume that test transmission began that year. Mediacorp. "Mediacorp Radio: Overview". <<http://www.corporate.mediacorp.sg/radio/>>.

¹³ Ibid. 41.

¹⁴ Ramakrishna, *Emergency propaganda*. 72.

¹⁵ McDaniel, *Broadcasting in the Malay world*. 41.

Hokkien and Cantonese. The FEB built 14 wired loudspeakers across the capital and the surrounding state of Selangor to extend the reach of the Kuala Lumpur broadcasts. “Large crowds were said to have gathered around public loudspeakers in Pudu and Sentul near Kuala Lumpur in the first week of broadcasts.”¹⁶

With the threat of war heightening, the colonial government took control of the BMBC, renamed it the Malaya Broadcasting Corporation and placed it under the control of the British Ministry of Information.¹⁷ With the defeat of the Japanese in 1945, the British returned later that year. In order to consolidate its hold over the Malay states, Britain established the Malayan Union government over all the peninsular states except Singapore on April 1, 1946, replacing the different legal and administrative units it had employed since it first acquired control of Penang in 1786. On that day, the various state propaganda units were formed, including the Department of Public Relations (DPR, see previous chapter) and the Department of Radio.¹⁸

The DPR and Radio Malaya were relatively new “pan-Malayan” departments; their precursors had been hastily set up as WWII got underway, just before the Japanese overran Malaya. Before World War II, there was little uniformity in the way public relations departments and radio services were established and operated, a situation that reflected Britain’s patchwork governance of the peninsula. It had ruled its first Malayan possessions—the trading ports of Singapore, Malacca and Penang—directly as crown colonies under the Straits Settlements government, led by the colony’s Governor. As it extended its influence into the peninsula in the latter half of the 19th century, the British exercised control through indirect rule, and organized the states into two groups—the Federated Malay States and Unfederated Malay States. The former comprised the economically important states of Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, Perak and Pahang, and even though their hereditary Sultans retained their crowns, they were no more than nominal heads as the British exerted effective control through a comprehensive state- and federation-level bureaucratic machinery.¹⁹ The Unfederated Malay States—comprising Johore, Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan and Trengganu—had “no special inner ties among themselves” and were “lumped together” by the British through “historical accident”²⁰ and retained a greater degree of autonomy compared to their Federated counterparts. In short, Britain exercised varying degrees of control over 12 Malayan states using different political structures and administrative tools, a situation that hampered the creation of pan-Malayan agencies such as the DPR and Radio Malaya.

¹⁶ Ibid. 42.

¹⁷ Radio Malaysia, *Ini-lah Radio Malaysia 1969 [This is Radio Malaysia 1969]*. 36

¹⁸ Known also as Radio Malaya, or the Pan-Malayan Department of Broadcasting.

¹⁹ Each state had a Resident who started out “advising” the Sultan, but soon came to be de facto rulers of the state, setting up legal and judicial systems and a bureaucracy that oversaw infrastructure, education, economic activities, taxation, security and health. As state governments grew more complex, the need for uniform policies across the four states became more urgent, and a centralized Federation-level bureaucracy emerged, headed by a Resident-General, to whom the four Residents reported. Although on paper the Resident-General reported to the Governor of the Straits Settlements, in reality he retained considerable autonomy. Richard Allen, *Malaysia; prospect and retrospect: the impact and aftermath of colonial rule* (London, New York, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1968). 55-57.

²⁰ In contrast to the Federated Malay States, the Unfederated Malay States had no common bureaucracy. Rupert Emerson, *Malaysia: a study in direct and indirect rule* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1970). 194; Allen, *Malaysia; prospect and retrospect*. 57-58.

There were also a number of differences between the two organizations. First, pre-WWII propaganda work, however intermittent and localized, had always been the domain of government bureaucracy, headed by colonial administrators, many of whom were not formally trained in communications. Radio broadcasting, on the other hand, had always been in the hands of amateur enthusiasts, many of them engineers or technically minded hobbyists. They were familiar with the science behind wireless technology and were adept at fixing sets, and even building receivers and transmitters from parts.²¹ Some, like the Johore state engineer who imported the first wireless set into Malaya, were colonial bureaucrats, but they pursued radio as a hobby outside of their government duties. Thus, the activity of wireless societies waxed and waned depending on the enthusiasm, energy and free time of its members.²² Even the first truly pan-Malayan station, the British Malaya Broadcasting Corporation (BMBC), was a private concern. Up until 1934, the colonial authorities had been curiously lukewarm toward the idea of establishing its own pan-Malayan station, or providing active material support for amateur enthusiasts, an ambivalence that was hard to explain given Singapore's key position as a port and key military base. One possible reason was the decentralized nature of Britain's colonial governance. The separate political units in "British Malaya"—the Straits Settlements, the Federated Malay States and the individual components of the Unfederated Malay States—ran their own Posts and Telegraph offices that regulated wireless transmissions. It was only in 1934 that the separate units were combined into a single, pan-Malayan Posts and Telegraph Office, which soon granted a license to the BMBC to begin operations. The BMBC then moved slowly, taking three years to start broadcasting using medium wave transmitters that were more reliable than short wave transmitters but had a shorter range. It was only a year after its March 1937 inauguration, (in July 1938 when it began short wave transmission) that its programs reached most of Malaya.²³

One key characteristic of radio broadcasting in Malaya during the 1920s and 1930s that set it apart from other colonies was the participation of talented non-Europeans. Local residents took the lead in setting up radio stations and helped to manage its operations. In 1924, a public lecture on "Broadcasting for Malaya" by Powell Robinson in Malacca was held at the Chinese Malacca Club under the auspices of the Malacca Chinese Chamber of Commerce.²⁴ About half the members of the Kuala

²¹ Advertisements for wireless sets in the early years of broadcasting in Malaya included receiving sets and accessories. One example in 1923, by a company in Singapore which touted itself as members of the British Broadcasting Co. Ltd., had in mind as customers those returning to England ("going on leave") or those "experimenting in this country." "Wireless telegraphy," *The Straits Times*, October 22 1923. Rudolf Mrazek notes a similar if not stronger (probably because the electronics giant Philips was a Dutch company that advertised heavily in the colony) do-it-yourself impulse in the Dutch East Indies during the inter-war years when radio became popular in the Dutch East Indies: "Listeners in the Indies showed an increasing passion for building their radios themselves. Easy-to-assemble segments (like arms, legs, and heads of dolls) were provided by Philips, direct from the Netherlands" which enabled radio amateurs there, both expatriate and local, to feel "self-sufficient and self-contained." Mrazek, *Engineers of happy land* 169.

²² For example, the Johore Wireless Society, the first to be formed in 1921, ceased broadcasting in 1924 and was revived a couple of years later. Radio Malaysia, *Ini-lah Radio Malaysia 1969 [This is Radio Malaysia 1969]*. 36.

²³ McDaniel, *Broadcasting in the Malay world*. 38.

²⁴ The advertisement for the talk on Saturday, May 24, 1924, under the headline "Broadcasting for Malaya – On to Malacca" appealed to "every potential listener-in of Malacca and surround district" to attend the

Lumpur Amateur Radio Society in 1930 were Asian, with the majority Chinese, including the society's vice-president.²⁵ The membership of the Penang Wireless Society, responsible for Station ZHJ, from its inception in 1934, was equally multi-racial, and the station produced many of its own programs of local interests.²⁶

Since the colonial state had little interest in setting up an official radio station, broadcasting in this era was almost entirely an amateur affair, and the hobbyists—both expatriates and locals—needed to be resourceful, multi-skilled individuals. In addition to the technical skills needed to build and maintain wireless sets, these enthusiasts created programming from scratch and were often the announcers for the programs. In short, they had to be Jacks of all trades. The first wave of indigenous Malayan broadcasters that came of age in the 1950s and who went on to assume the leadership of post-independent Radio Malaya, were indeed such multi-skilled individuals. These pioneer local broadcasters are important because what they did and who they were had a direct impact on Malaysians listening to Radio Malaya's programs.

Malaya v Malaya

A second difference between the two propaganda units concerned their geographical reach. When Britain consolidated its rule after WWII and established the Malayan Union, it left Singapore out for three reasons: economic, political and racial. According to Albert Lau, senior officials in London recognized that Singapore and the peninsula had divergent economic interests. The former depended largely on entrepot trade with the rest of the world, while the economy of the peninsula was driven by primary production. Politically, the inclusion of Singapore in the union, historically the seat of colonial rule for the region, would mean that the Chinese-majority island would continue to be the political center of the new union. British officials calculated that the union plan would gain more support from Malay political leaders if Singapore was left out and the political center shifted to Kuala Lumpur. But the most important reason had to do with population numbers. Without Singapore in the Union, non-Malays would already slightly outnumber Malays, but the latter would still be the largest ethnic group in the union. The inclusion of Singapore would not just widen the gap between non-Malays and Malays, but would also mean that the Chinese would become the largest ethnic group in the Union, the result of which the Malays would likely become "dispirited and antagonized," a situation London was keen to avoid.²⁷

On April 1, 1946, the British split its administration into the Malayan Union and Singapore governments, each with its own information services. But Britain retained Radio Malaya as a pan-Malayan unit serving both political entities, and, crucially, continued to headquarter it in Singapore because "the main studios and shortwave transmitters were there; Singapore was also the centre of international communications, cultural and educational life and had easy access to news agencies, while the technical opinion at the time held that the best radio coverage of the Federation could be provided

lecture. Admission was free but by ticket only, which can be obtained by writing to the secretary of the Malacca Chinese Chamber of Commerce, Tan Swi Chay, Esq. "Broadcasting for Malaya," *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, May 21 1924.

²⁵ McDaniel, *Broadcasting in the Malay world*. 29.

²⁶ Ibid. 33.

²⁷ Albert Lau, *A moment of anguish : Singapore in Malaysia and the politics of disengagement* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1998). 2-4.

from a point to the south of the territory, from whence shortwave paths could be followed on either side of the central mountain spine of Malaya.”²⁸ The British did set up another station in Kuala Lumpur, with relay stations in Penang, Malacca and Seremban, but it was clear that radio was controlled out of Singapore, and not surprisingly, retained a strong island focus, leading Malaysian radio pioneer Dol Ramli to remark that the mainland, in every aspect of radio broadcasting, was relegated to a “second-class status,” as if it were “a satellite revolving around Singapore.”²⁹

Radio broadcasting continued to be controlled by the British from the island even after Malaya gained her independence in August 1957, and this awkward situation was not resolved until early 1959 when the service split into two, with Radio Malaya in Singapore becoming Radio Singapore, and the Kuala Lumpur station of colonial Radio Malaya becoming Radio Malaya of independent Malaya. Even after that split, Radio Singapore continued to be responsible for providing almost all the news bulletins and many of the entertainment programs to Radio Malaya. In fact, for much of 1959, Radio Singapore continued to be re-broadcast *in toto* over Radio Malaya, retaining its own station identification, in the first and last hours of transmission.³⁰ Even after Radio Malaya built up its capacity and stopped relying substantially on Radio Singapore for programming, the latter continued to be a thorn in the side of the peninsula; its southern listeners preferring the strong signal and, according to them, better programming of Radio Singapore, while those in northern Malaya/Malaysia wrote letters to the station or the newspapers, asking Radio Malaya to include programming from the island station.

This confusing nomenclature of (the new) Radio Malaya’s messy divorce from (the old) Radio Malaya (which changed its name to Radio Singapore) reiterates one of the key points of this dissertation: the contested nationalisms in Malaya/Malaysia were so deep-rooted and intractable that they extended even to the basic emblems of a polity, including its name. The British did not use “Malaya” officially in any of its political entities.³¹ At the same time, the term retained a certain amount of ambiguity in informal use, sometimes referring to the whole peninsula (e.g. British Malaya, Britain’s Malayan possessions, pan-Malayan, etc.), or to the Malay states excluding the colonies of Penang, Melaka and Singapore, or even more confusingly including Penang and Melaka, but not Singapore. This ambiguity gave rise to the slightly bizarre situation in which for the first 17 months of independent Malaya’s existence, the remnants of colonial Malaya ruled its airwaves, and continued to provide a significant portion of its programming after the split.³² This foreshadowed the contested definitions of “Malaya”, “Malaysia” and

²⁸ Ramakrishna, *Emergency propaganda*. P.

²⁹ Dol Ramli, “Kenangan manis seorang penyiar lama: 1948-1974 [Fond recollections of a veteran broadcaster, 1948-1974],” in *Penyiaran - 4 dekad bersama anda [Broadcasting - 4 decades with you]*, ed. Abdul Aziz Abas, et al. (Kuala Lumpur: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1987). 20.

³⁰ See PEN 420/58 “Radio weekly programme, in English” for the schedule of programs for the week beginning January 11, 1959, soon after (independent) Radio Malaya began operations, and PEN 242/59 “Radio Malaysia English Programmes, 1959” for the schedule for the week beginning August 9, 1959. Despite the titles of the files, the documents cover Radio Malaya’s broadcasts in all languages.

³¹ Which were the Straits Settlements, the Federated Malay States and the Unfederated Malay States.

³² For example, in a typical week in August 1959, Radio Singapore accounted for about a third of all English-language programming, including all the news broadcasts, and ironically, the half-hour “Learn Malay” program on Sundays. It accounted for significantly lower percentage of Malay-language programming, although it was still responsible for the Malay news broadcasts, as well as news in the four Chinese languages, and Tamil. PEN 420/58 “Radio Weekly programme, in English”.

“Malaysian”—key terms that, instead of being the receptacle for a new post-colonial nationalism, came to represent contradictory visions of the meaning of the nation.

The pioneer crew

The story of independent Malaya’s Department of Radio up till 1970 is closely linked with the rise of its first Director, Dol Ramli. In the official publication marking the 40th anniversary of broadcasting in Malaysia, Dol contributes a short and highly personal account of his time working in radio.³³ He had a keen interest in music and deployed Radio Malaya’s resources to record the many obscure and dying regional Malay song and dance forms. He was also the prime mover behind the formation of the Radio Malaya Orchestra. He came into prominence in the 1950s with a small cohort of multi-ethnic broadcasters, who would become the leaders of Malaysian radio and television, and whose presence loom large in the archives of that period. This is a striking contrast to the Department of Information files, in which its senior officers produced many reams of paper, but left little of their personalities behind. The Radio Malaya files of the first years of independence, 1957-1970, are replete with Dol’s sharp memos on policy matters, pointed missives to recalcitrant subordinates, encouragement for jobs well done, informal and warm correspondence with fellow broadcasters from around the world, sarcastic responses to what he considered clueless fellow senior officers in other branches of government and stout defenses of his station’s programming, especially against accusations from religious and linguistic extremists of all stripes. By comparison, the “color” in the Information Department comes from the work of the Field Staff, whose free-form reports in the first years of independence captured a slice of the richness of the rural and semi-urban Malayan landscape.

Dol Ramli was born in Singapore into a family that could not afford textbooks for his education. Such economic constraints did not hold him back—he walked three miles to school every day, borrowed the books he needed from friends, and topped his class every year. Teachers, recognizing his talent, helped him successfully apply for scholarships and he eventually attended the top school in Singapore (Raffles Institution) scoring six distinctions in the School Certificate Examinations (the equivalent of the pre-university British “A” levels). He attended the University of Malaya, the sole institution of higher learning in the colony, graduating with an Honours degree, and counted among his peers many future leaders of Malaysia and Singapore.³⁴

Dol Ramli joined the world of broadcasting in Singapore on October 4, 1948 as a translator/announcer, the lowest rung in the service for \$160/month. He served for 26 years, retiring in 1974 at the apex of the service as the Director-General of Broadcasting. On finishing his degree in 1955 at the University of Malaya in Singapore, his employers promoted him to head the Malay Programming division at the Kuala Lumpur office, which we have already seen him describe as second-class.³⁵ There, he became part of a small multi-racial crew of about 200 announcers, producers, reporters, editors, translators and engineers that served the entire Federation. Through much of the 1950s, they were huddled in temporary offices that were converted from old hospital wards—situated right next to a railway track—that suffered from poor soundproofing. The rumbling sound of

³³ Dol Ramli, "Kenangan manis."

³⁴ T. Puvirajasingam, "Meet the 'big three' in our radio and television," *The Sunday Times*, March 11 1973.

³⁵ Dol Ramli, "Kenangan manis." 20.

passing trains and their sonorous horns seeped into the broadcasts and were heard at regular intervals throughout the length and breadth of Malaya,³⁶ an audio version of the locomotive steaming through Anderson's Javanese countryside. Dol became the first Malayan to head Radio Malaya in 1961 when the expatriate Director retired.³⁷

Dol Ramli actually used the phrase "Jack of all trades, master of none"³⁸ to describe the work of this small crew in Kuala Lumpur, although perhaps he was being modest about the second half of that expression, since what was required of them was a mastery of many skills. A radio announcer or presenter at that time, according to Dol, did not just sit behind a microphone and read from a script. He or she had to produce, translate, read the news, act in radio plays, record local orchestras in the studio, edit voice clips, record musical or news items in the field and provide commentary for them.

To cover the entire peninsula, the Kuala Lumpur crew relied on stringers throughout Malaya, and they too were multi-talented and driven by a passion for broadcasting. One eager part-timer was Mokhtar Daud, who started out as a freelancer in the 1950s before joining the station fulltime and becoming Head of Malay Programming in the 1960s. According to his memoirs, Mokhtar's first exposure to radio came as a student in an English school in the east coast state of Trengganu. He was intrigued by the programs coming from his neighbor, an English officer with the state government. In order to better hear the programs, Mokhtar climbed up a rambutan tree by the side of his neighbor's home.³⁹ Mokhtar would return to his home state, Melaka, to complete his education at the Malacca High School.⁴⁰ He made friends with the multi-racial programming and technical staff of Radio Malaya Melaka, which was located just behind the school, and stayed in touch with them when he went abroad.⁴¹ Mokhtar would eventually spend two years at the Malayan Teachers' Training College in Kirkby, Liverpool, returning in the mid-1950s to his teaching position.

Mokhtar, however, never stopped dreaming of broadcasting, and from 1958-1961, while teaching in Melaka, he used his connections to land a position as a freelance broadcaster from 1958-1961, a job that included news reporting, editing, announcing and, one of his favorite jobs, sports reporting. Juggling two jobs taxed Mokhtar's energy and wits. In the mornings, he would teach, then rush from school to the radio office in the afternoon, where he would work till nighttime. During soccer season, he would cover matches all over his district, crossing two rivers by ferry to get to Batu Pahat for the Malaya Cup match. As he was always rushing to return to the station by 9.30 p.m. for the

³⁶ Ibid. 21.

³⁷ Puvirajasingam, "Meet the 'big three' in our radio and television."

³⁸ Dol Ramli, "Kenangan manis." 21.

³⁹ Mokhtar Daud, "Memanjat rambutan tak berbuah [Climbing a rambutan tree that bore no fruits]," in *Penyiaran - 4 dekad bersama anda [Broadcasting - 4 decades with you]*, ed. Abdul Aziz Abas, et al. (Kuala Lumpur: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1987). 67.

⁴⁰ The Malacca High School (MHS) was one of the few schools in Malaya at that time that offered the equivalent of the British "A" Levels examination, a prerequisite for tertiary studies in Malaya and Britain. The MHS was also a prestigious English school that graduated many well-known Malaysian personalities, including the most important Malaysian Chinese politicians of the day, including the founder of the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), Tun Sir Tan Cheng Lock, and his son, Tun Tan Siew Sin, also an MCA president. Mokhtar would have been a minority in a predominantly non-Malay student population. Bok Chye Chua, *Our story - Malacca High School (1826-2006)* (Kuala Lumpur: MHS Anniversary, 2006).

⁴¹ Mokhtar Daud, "Memanjat rambutan tak berbuah." 66.

10.10 p.m. broadcast, he persuaded the ferry operators and managers to allow him to get to the head of the queue. Since he drove his own car without the official Radio Malaya logos, other passengers could not understand why he got special treatment and often sounded their horns in anger. Mokhtar had charmed the ferry managers so much that the latter placated the other passengers by telling them that Mokhtar was a doctor rushing to a house call.⁴²

This anecdote highlights a key difference between the radio and information arms of state propaganda: the caliber of its frontline personnel. Radio attracted better-educated, intelligent multi-taskers with a can-do attitude, while the Department of Information failed to recruit many Field Officers with those qualities. Part of the reason is that the Information Department had to place more officers on the ground, and the pool of talented university graduates with strong language skills was small. Also, the rote work of the information Field Staff during the Emergency was neither challenging nor glamorous. In the 1960 reorganization of the Information Department, the propaganda chiefs acknowledged that merely informing the population of government policies—a role they fulfilled with some degree of success during the colonial, wartime period—was no longer relevant and the department needed to educate, exhort and inspire the post-colonial citizen. In order to achieve this new, elevated goal, Field Officers were instructed to move beyond mechanical and repetitive distribution of information on a mass scale and pursue personal contacts with small groups using soft-sell techniques that required a more intelligent and subtle approach. The Information Department never managed to fully carry out its plans in part due to its inability to recruit better-qualified Field Staff. The Information Department's senior officers were cut from the same cloth as the broadcasters of Radio Malaya, but the former were administrators and policy makers while the latter's work had a more direct impact on the population. Radio did not have a large on-the-ground presence like the Information Department, and Radio (and later Television) Malaya's small group of writers, producers, broadcasters and supervisors were on the propaganda frontline, and were certainly more educated, competent and motivated than the Information Department's frontline Field Staff. In fact, in 1963, the top echelon of the newly inaugurated Television Malaysia were called "field officers."⁴³

Another feature of Radio Malaya's pioneer indigenous crew was its multi-racial composition and strong sense of camaraderie. During the 1950s pre-independence period, the leaders of this exiled-from-Singapore crew in Kuala Lumpur were Dol Ramli as head of Malay programming, Luke Ang (news), and Kirpal Singh (engineering). They represented the three major ethnic groups of Malaya at that time (Malay, Chinese and Indian), but this was not a product of some carefully constructed public relations exercise to showcase an idealized form of racial harmony. On the contrary, all three were qualified for their jobs, having proved themselves by rising through the ranks. Luke Ang had been a reporter with the Singapore newspaper *Malayan Tribune* before joining Radio Malaya in 1951 as news editor. During his time in broadcasting, the state sent him on multiple journalism training trips in Australia, the U.S. and Canada. He reached the top of his unit as acting head of news service in 1963 before being tapped to head the news division of the fledgling TV Malaysia.⁴⁴ Kirpal Singh was born in Perak in 1921 and graduated from

⁴² Ibid. 68.

⁴³ "The big four in television," *The Sunday Times*, December 22 1963.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

the Technical College, Kuala Lumpur, with an Honours Diploma in Telecommunications Engineering in 1942. After running his own business for a couple of years, he joined the BBC's British Far Eastern Service in Singapore as Junior Maintenance Engineer after the war. Soon after, he landed a job with Radio Malaya in 1948 as a technical assistant, before rising to the position of engineer-in-charge of Kuala Lumpur studios and transmitting station.⁴⁵ When Malaya gained her independence in 1957, the Singapore-based Radio Malaya created a new post for Kirpal—superintending engineer of all stations in independent Malaya—and he became the youngest Asian engineer in Malaya to hold a superscale government job, the highest salary rank in the civil service.⁴⁶ And when Radio Malaya split from Radio Singapore in 1959, his title was formally changed to Chief Engineer, a position he would retain for the rest of his career, retiring in 1976. The government also sent Kirpal on numerous training stints and conferences. One such stint in Britain in 1956—a study scholarship awarded by the Federation of British Industries and the colonial Malayan government, which included attachments with the Marconi Wireless Telegraphy Company, the B.B.C. and other radio organizations—lasted the whole year.⁴⁷ He was the 100th engineer to go to Britain under the colonial government's three-year-old overseas scholarship scheme, and upon his arrival, the Federation of British Industries called a press conference to welcome him, an event reported on the front page of colony's most prominent English newspaper, *The Straits Times*.⁴⁸

The senior civil servants of this era came of age under the colonial system, and they were the fortunate few to attend English-language schools up to a tertiary level. The broadcasters of Radio Malaya shared a similar educational background and were fluent in English, which was the lingua franca of the station. They also took parallel paths in their professional development, since the government sent most of them for training with the BBC or the national broadcasters of Canada, Australia and New Zealand. These similarities produced a shared middle-class, cosmopolitan Malayan outlook in Radio Malaya/Malaysia through the first decade of independence, a commonality that had a moderating effect on a broadcaster that aired multiple monolingual services.

Radio and the Emergency

From the establishment of Radio Malaya in 1946 to the separation of the Malaya and Singapore services in 1959, the Department of Radio, like the Department of Information, was an integral part of the war (known as the Emergency) against the ethnic Chinese-dominated Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) that ran from 1948 to 1960.

⁴⁵ Puvirajasingam, "Meet the 'big three' in our radio and television."

⁴⁶ "To take charge of radio stations," *The Straits Times*, February 24 1958.

⁴⁷ "Off on a year's study trip," *The Straits Times*, January 13 1956.

⁴⁸ "'Mr. 100th'," *The Straits Times*, January 18 1956. Kirpal also served for 10 years with the Auxiliary Air Force, retired with the rank of Flight Lieutenant, and became active in the Ex-Services Association, Selangor Branch. Kirpal was also interested in transcendental meditation, and served as president of the Malaysian chapter of the Spiritual Regeneration Movement, helping to arrange for the visit of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi to Singapore and Malaysia in 1968. After retirement, Kirpal devoted himself to his spiritual interests and became a meditation guru. Puvirajasingam, "Meet the 'big three' in our radio and television." "Re-elected as chairman," *The Straits Times*, October 14 1963. "'I am coming' cables the touring Maharishi," *The Straits Times*, September 16 1968. "Maharishi flies into Singapore to a quiet welcome," *The Straits Times*, September 24 1968. "World Spiritual Foundation: Bhai Sahib, founder and honorable brother, World Spiritual Foundation," http://earthportals.com/Portal_Messenger/biosahib.html.

While the Information Department concentrated on ground propaganda through its field officers, radio was seen as a relatively inexpensive and effective medium of mass dissemination of the government's message, since it could reach the far corners of Malaya with a few powerful transmitters. At the same time, private ownership of radio sets were rising rapidly. In 1947, the year licensing began, there were by December 11,043 licenses, but this rose quickly to 46,522 by the end of 1950. In 1955, as the CPM was well on the way to losing the war, there were 135,437 private receivers in Malaya, and when the nation achieved independence in 1957, the number had risen to 175,000,⁴⁹ a 276 per cent increase from 1947 that outstripped the population growth of 30 per cent over the same decade.⁵⁰

Despite this impressive growth in private radio ownership, the state was aware that it was not reaching the rural population via the airwaves in the early years of the Emergency, since private radios, which had a listenership ratio of 1:6 were concentrated in urban and semi-urban areas. One solution was Community Listening, which was a scheme to place low-cost public wireless receivers in rural areas that would enable large groups of people to listen to broadcasts at any time and an important innovation across the British Empire especially in Africa in the inter-war years.⁵¹ Community receivers had a listenership ratio of up to 50 per receiver, and just one set installed in a community hall would reach almost every resident of a small village. However, just as the on-the-ground propaganda efforts of the Information Department were in disarray in the first years of the Emergency, so too were Radio Malaya's anti-communist efforts. The Community Listening Scheme failed to get off the ground initially, and it was only in 1950 that provisions were made for 1,000 community receivers,⁵² and the first Emergency broadcasts on the "Green Network"⁵³ in Malay, Tamil, and four Chinese languages—Mandarin, Cantonese, Hakka and Hokkien—targeting the rural areas began in February 1951.⁵⁴ The scheme was a partnership between state and federal governments and the private sector. State governments identified the suitable villages while the state branches of the Information Department supervised the running and maintenance of the receivers. The federal Information Services liaised with General Electric Company for set installation, documentation and the administration of funds, and by the end of 1954, at the completion of the installation exercise, there were 1,047 sets across Malaya.⁵⁵

The Scheme was not just about installing wireless sets in rural and remote villages, but also involved creating specific programs for those audiences. Community Listening programs were broadcast by Radio Malaya between 5:00 and 7:30 every evening, and dealt specifically with life in villages and rural development. One commentator argues that because of the need to win over the hearts and minds of the rural population, which was in the frontline of the war against the communists, Radio Malaya

⁴⁹ Ramakrishna, *Emergency propaganda*. 75, 184.

⁵⁰ Population of Malaya in 1947 and 1947 were 4,908,086 and 6,278,758 respectively. Swee-Hock Saw, *The population of peninsular Malaysia* (Singapore: Singapore University Press National University of Singapore, 1988). 50.

⁵¹ Ramakrishna, *Emergency propaganda*. 17.

⁵² "1,000 community radio centres," *Singapore Free Press*, August 4 1949. "Community radio sets plan passed," *The Straits Times*, June 24 1950.

⁵³ "Green network to fight reds," *The Straits Times*, December 23 1950.

⁵⁴ Ramakrishna, *Emergency propaganda*. 76, 112.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 149.

committed “far greater resources” to rural development broadcasting “than it otherwise would have done. Indeed, one might say that Radio Malaya was forced to invent the concept of rural development radio.”⁵⁶ The Community Listening Scheme programs covered a wide range of topics from entertainment and culture to health and agriculture. Radio Malaya was also active in bringing the station to its audience. The station bought portable tape-recording machines to capture life in the kampungs, New Villages and plantation estates.⁵⁷ This resulted in programs such as *Meet the People*, which portrayed life in the New Villages; *A Visit to Cheras New Village* and *At the Street Corner*, which was based on conversations with artisans, hawkers, bus conductors and trishaw riders; and *The Truth Teller*, a popular figure in the Tamil rural service. The Truth Teller answered questions from listeners and discussed various development topics twice a week and was said to receive more fan mail than any other Radio Malaya personality.⁵⁸ Another example of “inventive development broadcasting project”⁵⁹ was an attempt to teach Malays how to read the Romanized script using 75 radio lessons accompanied by a booklet, an effort UNESCO credits as being the first attempt to teach reading by radio alone.⁶⁰

The Community Listening Scheme programs were popular, judging by the responses and fan mail Radio Malaya received, and the occasional news report. One radio columnist, writing in 1956, noted:

“I am writing this in an attap hut on a nearby island with the sound of the waves beneath my feet. I can hear the community radio set blasting forth in the still evening from the clearing in the centre of the kampong. Nobody seems to be listening, for the area around the loud-speaker is deserted. Yet I can hear laughter echoing from the dark interiors of the neighbouring huts as the Malay comedians scream their way through their unscripted dialogue. Then, a few minutes later, cheerful voices join in the chorus as a popular Malay vocalist shrills the latest hits. I relax with a contented sigh in one of the few chairs on the island and, remembering that this sort of thing is going on in kampongs all over the country, I mentally doff my cap (or would if I wore one) to Radio Malaya. They are doing an important job, and, from what I can gather, doing it well. What a wonderfully cheap form of entertainment radio is—and what a useful weapon.”⁶¹

Another noted that with the launch of the Scheme, “thousands of rural people on estates and mines, in kampongs and new villages” were listening in coffeeshops, community centers, clan association halls (*kongsi*) or the home of the Malay village headman (*penghulu*) to their favorite programs, including the “extraordinarily popular serial-stories of Lee Dai Soh, the music of Malay Kronchong parties, [and] the Tamil

⁵⁶ McDaniel, *Broadcasting in the Malay world*. 63.

⁵⁷ Rural Malaya was by and large ethnically segregated, with Malays living in *kampungs* (villages), Chinese in New Villages and Indians in rubber estate plantation quarters.

⁵⁸ Ramakrishna, *Emergency propaganda*. 149; McDaniel, *Broadcasting in the Malay world*. 62-63.

⁵⁹ McDaniel, *Broadcasting in the Malay world*. 63.

⁶⁰ See also “Languages by radio in rural areas,” *The Straits Times*, March 16 1951.

⁶¹ Mike Watcher, “Hats off to Radio Malaya,” *The Straits Times*, August 12 1956.

musical plays.”⁶² If the *Truth Teller* was the star of the Tamil service, his Chinese counterpart was Lee Dai Soh, a Cantonese storyteller who was so popular that rural listeners with no access to a community receiver were known to have walked long distances to a wireless-equipped coffeeshop to listen to his show.⁶³ Other popular types of programs dealt with practical information: For example, *Surveys of Market Prices for Local Produce*, a daily broadcast in Hokkien, Hakka and Cantonese zeroed in on the core economic activity of the rural Chinese; *Village Gossip*, a weekly program in Hakka and Cantonese, dealt with issues such as the application for licenses, business registration, radio licenses and identity cards;⁶⁴ and *Kampong Doctor* looked at basic health and sanitation issues in a Malay village.⁶⁵ In short, the Community Listening Scheme had a balanced line-up, with programs devoted to pure propaganda (e.g. *This is Communism*), entertainment and practical rural living.

The Emergency also forced Radio Malaya to expand significantly its Chinese language service. The jungle-based CPM was drawing support from rural Chinese residents, so the colonial government consolidated the scattered Chinese communities into larger New Villages to better protect and police them. As most rural Chinese were poor, illiterate and spoke distinct languages, radio was the most effective medium for delivering the government’s message, and when the Community Listening Scheme was launched in 1951, it broadcast in Hakka between 5:00 and 5:45 p.m., in Cantonese between 5:45 and 6:30 p.m. and in Mandarin between 6:30 and 7:00 p.m.⁶⁶ Radio Malaya broadcast in four official Chinese languages (Mandarin, Hokkien, Cantonese and Hakka) but at the height of the Emergency, it sometimes aired programs in Teochew, Hakka, and Hylam as well. This meant that in the early- to mid-1950s, Chinese programming took up 33.7 per cent of all Radio Malaya programs, more than twice that of either Malay (16.4%) or Indian (16.2%) programming.⁶⁷

The press played its part in promoting the Scheme, and it looked for human-interest stories that would attract readers. One such window into the world of community listening reflected the intersection of propaganda, a glamorous female singer, and dialect songs. Miss Moo Yoon Kyau was a Hakka singer whose shapely figure the press used to good effect soon after the launch of the scheme. Miss Moo, who was 22 years old in 1952, was a former rubber tapper who found a less onerous career in entertainment and was reported to have caused a “mild sensation”⁶⁸ among the coffeeshop listeners to the Chinese community broadcast with her singing. Her specialty was traditional Hakka folk songs with a twist—altered lyrics often with an anti-communist theme. One example was the popular Hakka folk love song *San Ko*, which had new words written by a surrendered bandit attacking the cruelty and wickedness of his former superior, the political commissar of the local platoon, Moo Yat Mei (presumably of no direct relation to Miss Moo). The head of Chinese Community Broadcasting, interviewed for the article, said

⁶² Noni Wright, "Radio comes to the people," *The Straits Times*, December 3 1952.

⁶³ Ramakrishna, *Emergency propaganda*. 113.

⁶⁴ Ibid. 186.

⁶⁵ McDaniel, *Broadcasting in the Malay world*. 63.

⁶⁶ Ramakrishna, *Emergency propaganda*. 112.

⁶⁷ McDaniel, *Broadcasting in the Malay world*. 64.

⁶⁸ Noni Wright, "Miss Moo sings about a wicked bandit chief," *The Straits Times*, June 29 1952. Her photo was used even when she did not appear in the accompanying article, Wright, "Radio comes to the people."

they hoped to have a new song for Miss Moo every week, as almost any event could be set to a tune, even a news bulletin.

Summary

The idea of Miss Moo singing the daily news bulletin in Hakka to the tune of traditional folk songs may have been brought up in jest, but it reflects the innovative thinking that was part of Radio Malaya's culture, a feature that has its roots in the do-it-yourself amateur enthusiast ethos that marked the birth of radio in Malaya from the 1920s. Observers recognized the strength of Radio Malaya's capacity for innovative thinking, and welcomed the announcement that it would take over responsibility of the Community Listening Scheme from the Emergency Information Services (which the Information Department had morphed into) soon after the Scheme's launch in 1951, noting that the transfer would likely mean that the Scheme's programs would be made "a great deal more effective, and a great deal more attractive."⁶⁹ The colonial government recognized that in order for the Scheme to be effective, it not only had to be in the right hands—Radio Malaya—but also had to be close to its intended audience, and so the Community and Rural Broadcasting section was the only division of Radio Malaya to be based in Kuala Lumpur instead of Singapore.⁷⁰ This pragmatism, allied with a spirit of improvisation ran through the ranks of Radio Malaya producers whether in its Singapore headquarters, its Kuala Lumpur station or the part-timers spread out across the peninsula. The Kuala Lumpur crew and the nation-wide network of freelancers led by Dol Ramli also shared similar educational backgrounds—of which education and fluency in the colonial language English was key—and a certain cosmopolitan outlook that came from having opportunities to interact with those outside of their ethnic groups and, later in their professional careers, to travel abroad and experience similar training opportunities. In a Malaya marked by a divide-and-rule colonial policy of keeping ethnic groups apart in a plural society, such cosmopolitanism was rare and durable, exhibiting itself after independence and through the first decade of self-rule.

In the previous chapter, we saw how the Information Department became defined structurally and operationally by the Emergency. After its formation in 1946, its effectiveness was initially hampered by a lack of resources, and then—with the declaration of war against the communists—a confusion over how to fulfill the sometimes competing wartime and civilian objectives. Those obstacles were overcome first in the early 1950s with the worldwide boom in prices of primary products, especially rubber, which more than doubled the coffers of the colonial state and allowed the British to pour significantly more resources into all aspects of the Emergency. At the same time, the government reorganized the war effort and turned the Information Department into a focused wartime propaganda machinery. By the time independence arrived in 1957, the Communist Party of Malaya had been significantly neutralized as a military force, and the nation was ready to tackle a new set of peacetime issues—nation-building, rural development, meaning of citizenship, ethnic relations and so on. Unfortunately, the Information Department had become so efficient in its wartime operations that efforts to

⁶⁹ "Community listening," *The Straits Times*, May 11 1951.

⁷⁰ McDaniel, *Broadcasting in the Malay world*. 60-61.

reorient and upgrade its mission and mode of operation were only partially successful in the 1960s.

The Emergency, however, did not prove to be a similar albatross for Radio Malaya. The Community Listening Scheme was the Department of Radio's most visible contribution to the anti-communist war, and commentators on radio policy noted that rural broadcasting would have "come much more slowly were it not for the Communist war."⁷¹ However, the scheme was only part of Radio Malaya's overall programming, and the national broadcaster continued putting out general programming in Malay, English, Tamil and the Chinese languages that encompassed general local and foreign news, entertainment, regional and local issues, business programs and so on. Radio Malaya was aware that entertainment was the most popular aspect of its programming, and it needed inventive ways to ensure its listeners paid attention to the less sparkly aspect of its mission—the dissemination of government propaganda. This was evident in how it programmed the Community Listening Scheme: long on music, cultural, storytelling, entertainment, and practical shows, with a judicious sprinkling of overt propaganda. This dexterity in juggling to sometimes competing demands would be evident in the post-colonial years.

A second reason why Radio Malaya was not unduly shackled by its wartime efforts is that the Community Listening Scheme had an inbuilt technological expiration date. The first wave of wireless receivers installed in the early 1950 and 1951 ran on batteries since few rural communities had electricity. These batteries needed to be recharged, maintained and eventually replaced, but the program to replace the batteries at the five-year mark ran into all sorts of problems. General Electric, which supplied the original sets and was contracted to carry out the in the mid-1950s, was not prepared to hire more staff for what was essentially a temporary exercise, and so the target of having some 600 new batteries in 1956 was not met, with the slow process continuing into 1959. The GE engineers also claimed to have been slowed down by having difficulty in contacting the Information Department staff responsible for the individual sets, by discovering that a number of the batteries had been poorly handled and recharged at unauthorized centers, and by not having sufficient spare parts in its workshop.⁷² But the state continued to improve the infrastructure of the country, bringing electrical power lines to more and more rural communities, thus enabling them to purchase more reliable radio sets that ran on electricity. More and more rural residents were purchasing personal radio sets⁷³, which meant that Radio Malaya could free itself from the hardware portion of the Community Listening Scheme, and thus need not carry any structural baggage from the Emergency years after independence. In 1954, Community Listening staff members, who were signed on one-year rolling contracts, were absorbed into the Radio Malaya establishment, a first step toward absorbing the Scheme into the general radio programming. So, when Radio Malaya separated from Radio Singapore in 1959 and looked forward to the 1960s, it faced many challenges, including a continued reliance on Radio Singapore; the lure of Radio Singapore's programming even after Radio Malaya

⁷¹ "Broadcasting takes stock," *The Straits Times*, January 2 1953.

⁷² B.H. Snow, Manager of the Radio and Sound Reproduction Dept, on behalf of the General Manager of The General Electric Co. (Malaya) Ltd., to Director of Information Services, March 28, 1957. PEN 656/56 – Community Listening Scheme 5th Year Major Overhaul.

⁷³ Ramakrishna, *Emergency propaganda*. 184.

gained the capacity to produce all the programs it needed; technical challenges; the absorption of Radio Sabah and Radio Sarawak into the enlarged Malaysian federation; the struggle to disseminate a national ideology with its inherent contradictions; and so on. But unlike the Information Department, it would be relatively free of baggage from the colonial era, which instead bequeathed Radio Malaya with a staff that exhibited a high level of professionalism and a cosmopolitan outlook.

1959: Radio independence and early challenges

In the first years of its existence, Radio Malaya comprised seven units: the Administrative Section; News Division, in charge of news bulletins in all languages; Schools Division, responsible for instructional programs for use in the classroom; Community and Rural Broadcasting Service; Program Division, which produced all broadcast material not handled by the news, schools or community/rural divisions; Special News Service, that monitored overseas broadcasts; and Engineering.⁷⁴ The structure had not changed by the time Radio Malaya split from Radio Singapore in 1959, but as the service experienced rapid growth in the 1960s, it streamlined its operations into four main divisions—Administrations, Engineering, News and Programming. The latter would be responsible for all non-news programs, and was divided into 13 sections: the separate Malay, English, Chinese and Indian Services; Schools Broadcast, Talks and Features; Rural Broadcast; Ancillary Services, which was responsible for Iban, Kadazan, (the two principle languages of Sabah and Sarawak) Aborigines and Religious programs; Music Service, which was responsible for the music library and the in-house orchestra; Monitoring Service; and Program Operations.⁷⁵ Also, from 1963 onwards, the station began broadcasting its overseas service, *Suara Malaysia*, initially as a propaganda weapon in the Konfrantasi with Indonesia. The Director of Radio ran the station and was assisted by a Deputy Director (the Chief Engineer also held a concurrent position of Deputy Director (Engineering) but was largely responsible for technical matters). At the time of the separation, Kirpal Singh was the Chief Engineer, while the top two posts remained in the hands of expatriates, but not for long. The Malayanization of the civil service was underway, and with the retirement of the Director and the Deputy Director in 1961, Dol Ramli became the first Malayan to head the radio service, with Ahmad Murtadza Za'aba assuming the No. 2 position.⁷⁶

Meanwhile, radio ownership expanded rapidly after independence, from 175,000 licensed sets in 1957, to 420,000 in 1969,⁷⁷ due in large part to advancements in transistorized receivers. The wide availability to cheap dry battery power freed radio sets from an electrical outlet (which itself was a fairly new advancement that replaced the unreliable sets using rechargeable battery sets only in the second half of the 1950s), made them portable and became an immediate success, especially with the rural population.

⁷⁴ McDaniel, *Broadcasting in the Malay world*. 60-61.

⁷⁵ Organizational charts for Radio Malaysia, dated May 20, 1966. Treasury (2.10) 576-2, "Organisational structure of the Department of Radio".

⁷⁶ "Dol takes over top radio job : appointed acting director in place of Lyttle, who is retiring under Malayanisation," *The Straits Times*, March 30 1961. "Radio Malaya No. 2 retires on July 7," *The Straits Times*, May 26 1961.

⁷⁷ Radio Malaysia, *Ini-lah Radio Malaysia 1969 [This is Radio Malaysia 1969]*. 23.

The government also abolished the import duty on small transistor radios to stimulate its adoption, especially among the rural communities.⁷⁸ The number of radio sets in Malaya grew from 270,000 to 630,000 between June 1960 and December 1963 as a consequence of transistor set sales.⁷⁹ Radio Malaya was aware that these official figures of licensed sets were conservative at best, since it was reasonable to assume that not every radio owner paid the licensing fees. A 1961 private study, while not speculating on the number of radio sets in the country at that point, noted that 90 per cent of the population was exposed to radio broadcasting sometime in the week and that 84 per cent of households had at least one radio set at home.⁸⁰ The government itself suggested that the 1969 figure of 420,000 was far off the mark, citing another independent report that had the number at 675,000 in 1963.⁸¹ Whatever the actual number of sets eventually was, it proved to be an impressive growth in the first decade or so of independence. But the staff of Radio Malaya could not have foreseen that, and anyway, in 1958 and 1959, they were busy preparing for their own independence from the Singapore headquarters.

1959: Delayed independence for Radio Malaya

The British relinquished control of Malaya in 1957, but Radio Malaya, headquartered in Singapore, remained in colonial control, a curious situation that arose not from any lack of desire on the part of the new Federation of Malaya government for its own broadcasting station but more from the difficulty of working out how to split an integrated service. In the first place, most of the resources—the most powerful transmitters, the majority of the staff and the best studios and other equipment—were in Singapore. In the initial stages of discussion in late 1957 and early 1958 on separating the services, Radio Malaya staff in Singapore refused to transfer to Kuala Lumpur because of fears of lower pay, uncertain promotion prospects and lower quality of life,⁸² prompting the Chief Minister of Singapore Lim Yew Hock to assure the Singapore staff that their interests would be protected.⁸³ What proved trickier was the division of assets, a point of contention that had not been resolved as late as two months before the split.⁸⁴ Eventually, Singapore kept almost all of its staff and equipment, leaving Radio Malaya officially independent when the split occurred on January 4, 1959, but still relying heavily on Radio Singapore for the bulk of its programming, including all the news bulletins.

In launching the independent Radio Malaya on January 4, 1959, Deputy Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak acknowledged it was extremely difficult to break the colonial broadcaster into two separate services, a process that posed serious challenges to the new Radio Malaya, which now had to recruit and train an additional 160 officers to serve the nation. This was a task he did not expect to be accomplished overnight.⁸⁵ He also noted

⁷⁸ "Duty on small radios waived," *The Straits Times*, June 1 1959.

⁷⁹ McDaniel, *Broadcasting in the Malay world*. 75.

⁸⁰ Far East Research Organisation, "Radio listenership in the Federation of Malaya : a study undertaken for the Government of the Federation of Malaya by the Far East Organisation in March and April, 1961," ([Kuala Lumpur]1961). Section I, page 1; Section 2, page 2.

⁸¹ Radio Malaysia, *Ini-lah Radio Malaysia 1969 [This is Radio Malaysia 1969]*. 23.

⁸² Ramakrishna, *Emergency propaganda*. 185.

⁸³ "Talks on the future of Radio Malaya," *The Straits Times*, April 11 1958.

⁸⁴ "The radio split: a property problem," *The Straits Times*, October 11 1958.

⁸⁵ Federal Government Press Statement D. INF 1/59/25, "Text of broadcast by Acting Prime Minister, Dato Abdul Razak bin Hussein, over Radio Malaya at 7.10 p.m. on Sunday, January 4, 1959." PEN/PP 18 Pt. II.

that it was “unfortunate” that part of the Development Plan, which included the expansion of Radio Malaya, had to be deferred, a victim of the worldwide recession of 1957 and 1958 that led to belt-tightening⁸⁶ and which also put on hold the expansion of the Department of Information. In fact, the split and the modest expansion of Radio Malaya in 1959 was only made possible by a low-interest \$100 million loan from oil-rich Brunei.⁸⁷ Razak noted that the task ahead was considerable since Radio Malaya should be treated as four instead of one service, since it broadcast in four languages (Malay, English, Tamil and “Chinese”, seven if you consider that it produces news and other programs in four distinct Chinese languages) and needed to find the equipment and manpower to fill 220 hours of airtime a week.⁸⁸ He pleaded for patience from listeners, and then laid out the short- and medium-term goals for the broadcasting service, which were to produce the bulk of the national news bulletins by July; inaugurate a temporary service for the East Coast states within the next few months as a bridge toward a more comprehensive regional service later; and expand the technical capacities and range of the Penang and Malacca stations.

In order to show that the split was not merely cosmetic, the new Radio Malaya announced the creation of a medium-wave all-Malay service for the region surrounding the capital Kuala Lumpur, thus increasing Malay broadcasting from 20 to 70 hours a week.⁸⁹ Razak took pains to emphasize this development, noting that listeners can hear a “greatly improved” transmission of his voice over the new network, and that this was the first time listeners to the Malay service on shortwave have their own programs uninterrupted by any other languages. “So far, the English language has been the linking factor between the various communities, but as our National Language gradually assumes its proper role it will ultimately be the Malay language that binds our listeners into one family,” he promised. The issue of languages and their place in the post-colonial national ideology would loom large in the work of Radio Malaya in the 1960s, and is explored in the next chapter.

Listeners write back

As for the newly independent radio service, expectations ran high in Malaya, fuelled in part by some cheerleading in the sections of the press. One report was headlined “Radio split pleases listeners—They say: we’ve wider choice, longer service and scope for greater improvement,”⁹⁰ but upon reading the lede, one soon realized that listeners were more cautious than pleased, with most noting that little had changed after the split (which was accurate, since what they were listening to was still, in effect, the old Radio Malaya, now renamed Radio Singapore). Listeners in Malaya expressed hope for an improvement in the overall service, highlighting their pet peeves about the existing

⁸⁶ “\$28 mil. cut in Federal spending,” *The Straits Times*, November 11 1958.

⁸⁷ The other projects financed by the loan were infrastructure (roads and bridges), the opening up of secondary forest to provide farming land for the landless poor, the financing of banks to assist rural industries, developing a university in the capital, and other medical and community development schemes.

“Loan a sign of trust in us - Tengku,” *The Straits Times*, November 11 1958. Yen Fooi Chang, “A Sultan’s \$60mil. gesture : that’s the amount saved on low interest rates,” *The Straits Times*, November 20 1958.

⁸⁸ Federal Government Press Statement D. INF 1/59/25,

⁸⁹ Radio Malaya Press Statement D. INF. 1/59/20 (BCST), January 3, 1959. PEN/PP 18 Pt. II.

⁹⁰ “Radio split pleases listeners—They say: we’ve wider choice, longer service and scope for greater improvement,” *The Straits Times*, January 6 1959.

(Radio Singapore) programs and suggesting that Radio Malaya fix those problems. The expansion of Malay broadcasting was welcomed, the report noted, but there was little else that was new for the Malayan listener to get excited about. Writing to the press, listeners were less impressed with the service and more pointed in their criticisms. The government had said unequivocally that it would take time for Radio Malaya to gain the capacity to produce its own news programs, but that did not stop listeners from clamoring for local control of news bulletins that would not only “give Malaya a sense of prestige, but also remove the absurdity of hearing about Federation affairs through Radio Singapore when we have our own Radio Malaya.”⁹¹ Another listener/reader and critic did not buy into the “wild enthusiasm” and suggested that Malayan listeners “seem to have the worst of the split, for not only are they unable to get any reception from Radio Singapore on the medium wave, but also Radio Malaya programmes leave much to be desired...” and would have been much worse if some Radio Singapore programs had not been rebroadcast.⁹² A minor skirmish broke out in the English-language press over whether the name of the station should be changed to Radio Tanah Melayu⁹³ (literally, Land of the Malays), reflecting the continued contestation over the name of the nation, with its colonial roots. Radio Malaya did not help its cause by not rebroadcasting some of Radio Singapore’s more useful programs, like the daily morning report on the London and New York rubber quotations, a move that drew such sustained criticisms that it forced Radio Malaya to backtrack.⁹⁴ Another common complaint was the perceived dominance of talk shows and the corresponding lack of entertainment programs, especially those that present a “largely uninterrupted flow of a variety of music.”⁹⁵

Other complainants nit-picked their way through the details of Radio Malaya’s delivery. Some took exception to the speed of the reading.⁹⁶ One writer was unhappy about how “nuice,” “ministas” and “guvamen” were being pronounced, suggesting that such butchering of the English language did not inspire any confidence in the government’s efforts to develop the Malay language.⁹⁷ Another amateur grammarian pointed out that the term “world’s news” was incorrect—one does not say house’s rent or kitchen’s knife—and was also unimpressed by a particular newsreader’s fondness for saying professah, areah and, yes, ministah.⁹⁸ There was some credence to these missives: one Australian broadcaster brought in to train Radio Malaya staff for four months in 1961

⁹¹ "Radio Malaya should have its own news bulletin," *The Straits Times*, February 10 1959. The use of the term “Federation” was one of many ways to distinguish the peninsular government from Singapore, since, as noted earlier, the term “Malaya” could refer to a number of geographical combinations, depending on the context.

⁹² "Radio Malaya programmes show no improvement," *The Straits Times*, February 4 1959.

⁹³ "Radio Malaya needs a new name," *The Straits Times*, January 31 1959. "A mouthful over the radio," *The Straits Times*, February 14 1959. "Radio Malaya programmes show no improvement."

⁹⁴ "Traders hail resumed radio news on rubber," *The Straits Times*, March 25 1959.

⁹⁵ "Too much talk!," *The Straits Times*, May 21 1960.

⁹⁶ One wrote that the morning news announcer “seem to be in a great hurry to catch the last plane to the North Pole. Sometimes I can even hear their heavy breathing. And their pronunciation is disgraceful.”

"Here is the news' radio shocker," *The Straits Times*, January 2 1960. This prompted another writer to enquire as to the exact speed the news was being read. The answer, by the resident “Know-it-all” was “150 words a minute” on average. "Just one look," *The Straits Times*, January 3 1960.

⁹⁷ "The 'nuice'," *The Straits Times*, July 18 1960.

⁹⁸ This prompted the newspaper’s sub-editor to write a cheeky headline. "A posah," *The Straits Times*, July 8 1960.

under the Colombo Plan, found that wrong accentuation was a “big fault” among some of the announcers, although he did note that their grammar was “faultless.”⁹⁹

Some of the feedback appears petty on the surface, but the letters point to the challenges Radio Malaya faced from the time of its independence in 1959 through the 1960s. One was its fraught relationship with Radio Singapore, on whom it relied for much of its programming up till 1961. Even after Radio Malaya became self-sufficient in terms of programming, radio listeners in the northern part of the Federation continued to clamor for Radio Singapore programs. At the same time, many of those in the south preferred to listen to the island’s networks, which continued to reach them loud and clear (even to this present day) and which presented a problem to the Federation government that feared it was not getting its message through strongly enough to a third of the country.

A second challenge was how to balance entertainment, information and propaganda. The Department of Information’s Field Officers also had to use entertainment as a means of sweetening the propaganda being offered. But by and large, Field Officers had a captive audience, whether in informal small group discussions, slightly larger organized talks, intensive multi-day civics courses or the variety and film shows that attracted whole villages and towns. Once the Officers faced their audience, the challenge was to keep their attention. For Radio Malaya, however, their listeners were not captive and could easily turn off their sets if what they heard was not to their liking, a reality that often relegated propaganda to a secondary status behind entertainment across the national airwaves.

The debate over the name of the service itself—Radio Malaya or Radio Tanah Melayu—was also a microcosm of the competition over the meaning of the nation that was being played out in politics and society at large. Radio Malaya faced competing pressures from outside groups to enlarge and/or reduce their language services, while hewing as close as possible to the government line. As we shall see, the distinct and shared cosmopolitan outlook of the Radio Malaya leadership was a significant factor in how it negotiated this political minefield. And finally, the quibbling over pronunciation and grammar was a symptom of a key difference between radio and the information services: the public/private sphere of their operations. The Information Department Field Officers’ work was localized and generally flew under the radar. In contrast, Radio Malaya, as a mass media outlet, conducted its work in the constant glare of the national spotlight. Every minor linguistic slip, every dropped reception on a rainy and windy night prompted irate listeners (who paid an annual license fee to own a radio) to write to the station and to the press. It was not surprising then that Radio Malaya proved to be more sensitive to public opinion, and was not as hobbled by bureaucratic baggage as was the Department of Information.

Conclusion

Despite an infusion of funds in early 1959,¹⁰⁰ Radio Malaya found it difficult to meet the programming targets, especially news. The Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Razak

⁹⁹ An example would be to put the accent on the first syllable of “encourage,” making it sound like “anchorage.” “Radio men put accent on the wrong syllABLE,” *The Straits Times*, May 1 1961.

Hussein had promised a fully independent news division by July 1959, but Radio Malaya only managed to produce the nightly local bulletin in late August,¹⁰¹ the lunchtime bulletin in November¹⁰² and the morning bulletin in January 1960. This last date was the first anniversary of its split from Radio Singapore and an important turning point as it also marked the date the station finally reached the capacity to produce all its own programs except for the Schools Broadcast.¹⁰³ In effect, 1960 was the watershed year for the government's two propaganda arms—by finally being able to meet its programming needs, Radio Malaya achieved its substantive independence a year after having declared it (and three years after the nation raised its flag and Malaysians sang their own National Anthem) while the Information Department embarked on a massive reorganization to meet the needs of a by-then not-so-newly independent nation.

As both these state propaganda units took stock, Radio Malaya was in a better shape to move forward. The amateur roots of Malaysian radio, from the beginning of radio transmission in 1921 up till the formation of Radio Malaya in 1946, allowed the space for local enthusiasts to take part. The first wave of local broadcasters in Radio Malaya remembered their early days as one in which they had to be technically adept while planning, writing, recording, editing and narrating programs, a hobby that required driven, multi-talented individuals who were willing to spend their leisure time in this pursuit. They were invariably better educated—which in the colonial period meant having secondary English education—and were more exposed to members of other ethnic communities through their education and/or occupations, using English as the language of communication. Thus, the pioneer batch of multi-ethnic Radio Malaya broadcaster had much in common—a passion for the profession; a hands-on, jack-of-all-trades attitude to work; a shared educational background; a cosmopolitan outlook; and similar professional development experiences (mainly overseas training attachments to the BBC or the national broadcasting corporations of Canada, Australia and New Zealand, or US broadcasters). Their counterparts, in terms of rank and salary, at the Information Department would have been the senior federal officers and the state chiefs. But the Radio Malaya broadcasters had a more direct impact on the population, since the policies they enacted and implemented, and the programs they planned and produced reached the population directly. In contrast, the senior Information Department officers set policies and operating procedures, but the execution of propaganda work lay in the hands of Field Officers, who, as the ground troops in the propaganda campaign, were not as talented as the Radio Malaya broadcasters, despite attempts by the Information Department leadership to broaden the scope of Field Officers' responsibilities, give them more discretion on how to execute their tasks and recruit more qualified personnel for the positions. The two units then faced the challenges confronting them and the key issues of the 1960s—the contest over the meaning of citizenship and what the nation stood for; language and national culture, the special position of the Malay community, the formation of Malaysia, the meaning of “Malaysia”, the expulsion of Singapore, rural

¹⁰⁰ "Million-dollar step to independent radio : a wider cover—and less reliance on Singapore," *The Straits Times*, April 23 1959.

¹⁰¹ The English and Tamil news bulletins came on at 7 pm, and the Malay and Chinese bulletins at 8 pm. Foreign news were still edited in Singapore and sent to Kuala Lumpur via teleprinter. "Birthday gift from Radio Malaya," *The Straits Times*, August 25 1959.

¹⁰² "'Here is the news'—by Radio Malaya," *The Straits Times*, November 13 1959.

¹⁰³ "Morning news now on Radio Malaya," *The Straits Times*, January 4 1960.

development, and race relations, among others—from different starting points, with the colonial era wartime baggage weighing heavier on the Information Department than on Radio Malaya. How they addressed these issues through their propaganda work, how effective were these efforts and what different segments of the population made of them, is the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 3

Many tongues, one nation?

After another month of groundwork among the Chinese Malaysian community in Malacca, the Department of Information's Tan Kee Tian, a Field Assistant, filed his report for January 1965. In it, he covered the basic details of his work—the number of visits he made and people he reached, the Department of Information publications he used—as well as noting that during his Organized Talks sessions, “there were very few youngsters and women attending besides adults.”¹ Presumably, he meant adult males. Among the long list of subjects Tan covered were many relating to security,² not surprising since at that time Indonesia had been conducting a diplomatic, political and armed campaign, the *Konfrantasi*, against the formation of Malaysia. Of the topics not related to security issues, Tan focused on two. The first was a single paragraph on taxes, in which he noted that the businessmen he had talked to had been happy the government was backtracking on earlier plans to introduce a new tax. The next two and a half pages dealt with a second issue: language and education.³

“The Chinese’s claim that Chinese language should be adopted as an official language is realistic. Besides the truth that Chinese language is universally used the reasons for the claim are as follows:-

(i) The education in this country is insidiously harmful to Chinese school. Before independence Chinese schools had the right to develop themselves... With the implementation of comprehensive schools the only two teaching media are English and Malay [in the secondary schools]. In 1967 National Language [i.e. Malay] will be the sole official language and the National Type schools will probably be converted to national school. This means that the present Chinese primary schools might be transformed and Chinese language might not be deemed as compulsory but as optional. The state of affairs has been unreasonable in that Malay has been elevated but Chinese has been suppressed and on the decline. According to official sources the reason why Chinese language cannot be adopted as teaching medium and be used in various examinations is that it is not an official

¹ “Tan Kee Tian, Report for the month of January 1965 for Chinese Field Assistant.” In PEN 542/62 D. Tan conducted 38 Group Discussions and Organized Talks for 820 people held in community halls, Chinese schools and the offices of the Malaysian Chinese Association, a member of the ruling Alliance coalition.

² The 11 subjects that were discussed were: (a) Do not believe in rumors; (b) Join the Vigilante Corps; (c) To unite is to defend the nation; (d) Inspection of the revised electoral rolls; (e) Action to be taken in event of an attack; (f) Government guaranteed minimum price for padi 1964/65 season; (g) The new taxes; (f) comprehensive education scheme; (i) Mass miniature X-ray campaign for Malacca state; (j) Coastal population to be more vigilant; (k) Post your Hari Raya Puasa and Chinese New Year greeting cards early. Ibid.

³ While there were some grammatical lapses in his reports (that are retained in extracts and quotes in this chapter), Tan’s writing is sufficiently clear for his meaning to be unambiguous.

language. Therefore we, The Chinese Race, are to demand that Chinese language should be an official language.”⁴

This extract highlights how inextricably linked language and education were in the contest over the meaning of Malaysia. Tan is reporting on the Chinese Malaysian community’s anxieties over education, eight years after independence. These concerns were not about the quality of or access to education, although both were important issues that had previously been raised and continued to be sticking points in the community’s relationship with the federal government. Instead, its concerns were framed as a question of the language of instruction, i.e. whether schools using Mandarin as a medium of instruction would continue to exist in post-colonial Malaysia. The fear was that Mandarin would be relegated from being the medium of instruction to an optional subject in a new National School system that used only Malay as the language of instruction, since Malay was to be the sole national and official language of the nation (English had a temporary status as an official language for the first 10 years of independence). To ensure that Mandarin Chinese could be used as a language of instruction, the Chinese community expressed to Tan its view that the language should be elevated to the status of an official language. What was at stake for the Chinese Malaysian community, in its view, was not merely the nature of the education system, but the community’s very survival as a distinct cultural entity. Tan went on to note: “The Chinese people will be satisfied only if the Chinese language is adopted as an official language, so that they will preserve their culture...”⁵

The linkage between education, language and the place of one ethnic community in the larger imagining of a nation was at the heart of the debate over the meaning of Malaysia. On one hand, the official nationalism places the Malay community and its language, religion, and culture at the heart of the nation. A contending view imagines a Malaysia in which all the different ethnic groups, cultures, religions, and languages are equal constituent parts of a Malaysian whole. This debate began after World War II, as a weakened Britain regained control of her colonies. The prospect of holding on to her large and costly empire was dim: Britain’s resources were depleted and world opinion was turning toward self-determination and independence for the colonized. As the British prepared for Malaya’s independence on the best possible terms it could extract, debate among the various Malayan ethnic groups on what this new nation would look like became heated, and central to that debate was the issue of language and education.

Language and education became an issue in the colonial administration soon after the East India Company acquired Penang as a strategic port in 1786. From that moment until the fall of Malaya to the Japanese in 1941, the British oversaw the development of an education system that was highly stratified along ethnic/linguistic lines. This initially came about through British neglect and reluctance to commit resources to education. However, from 1874, after London assumed direct rule over the Straits Settlements from the Company and embarked on extending her control into the Malay states, the colonial administration pursued deliberate policies that institutionalized and further expanded the earlier trajectory. During this period, the colonial government gave state support for English and Malay schools. The former was designed to meet the bureaucratic and

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

commercial needs of the colony and, following lessons learned in India, carefully rationed to prevent the emergence of an empowered, multi-racial local elite likely to challenge British rule.

The British also gave little support to vernacular education. While the colonial government made a big show of providing free education to the Malay community as part of its responsibility to “protect” them, Malay education for the masses was limited to four years of rudimentary primary education designed to make sons of fisherman and farmers more productive and obedient fishermen and farmers. Non-Malay vernacular education received almost no state support and was left to develop on its own. Chinese schools became widespread and even though many were of poor quality they were often the only options available for Chinese parents especially in rural and semi-urban areas. The British sought to control Chinese schools after the turn of the 20th century when the latter became enmeshed in the politics of China. That effort failed for a variety of reasons: The authorities employed heavy-handed powers of arrest and deportation that deepened the community’s distrust of the government. At the same time, it would not change its policy of rationing English education despite pleas from Chinese community leaders, who argued that better access to English education would blunt the appeal of Chinese schools. As a result, the divide between the different language streams deepened up till World War II, a symptom of the plural society that was developing and becoming more entrenched under colonial rule.

When debate over the meaning of the forthcoming independent Malaya erupted after World War II, its participants represented this entrenched divide, and their visions of Malaya reflected this schism. I suggest that these contestations were most heated when it came to language and education, none more so than in the key education reports of the 1950s—the Barnes, Fenn-Wu and Razak reports. A close re-reading of these familiar and oft-cited documents, which make up the first part of this chapter, reveal that they were much more than differing proposals on what the education system should look like: The Barnes and Fenn-Wu reports of 1951 were in fact the concretization of the competing Malayas as imagined by the different ethnic groups. The Barnes committee, convened by the colonial state and consisting of British and Malay members, recommended a National Schools system in which Malay and English would be the only languages of instruction and posits Malay as the language that unites the various ethnic groups. It also stated that the continued existence of non-Malay schools would undermine the National Schools project. The Fenn-Wu report, written by two independent American specialists in Chinese education, suggested that the way to achieve a new Malayan nation was through a common syllabus using the same textbooks that were translated and taught in all the different language school streams, which would have equal standing in a “national system.” A Malayan culture would emerge through a natural mingling of the different races over time, would have Chinese culture as an important base, and cannot be forced by fiat. The Razak Report of 1956 sought to bring the two together, but it was less a compromise and more a forced and uneasy yoking of the two. A National Schools system was established that would use only Malay and English, the official languages, for instruction (and after 1967, only Malay) but Chinese and Tamil primary schools would be brought into the fold as “National-Type” schools, the future of which was uncertain. This forced, combustible, and contradictory situation centered on language and education

became emblematic of the contested vision of the new Malaya and was the main source of conflict in the 1960s.

The second half of the chapter looks at how the Department of Information, and radio and television dealt with promoting the official vision of a united Malaya/Malaysia in which Malay was one of the symbols and agents of unity even as the education system continued to be segmented. Here again, language proved to be important on two levels—content and delivery. With regards to content, the government's language and education policies became ubiquitous topics in the day-to-day work of Information Department Field Officers from independence until the end of the 1960s, even during periods between major policy announcements and the issues of language and education did not hog the mass media headlines. This suggests that language and education were constant and important grassroots concerns that had to be tended to carefully and repeatedly. The propaganda services had to constantly attenuate the message on language and education within the larger debate over the meaning of the nation. This task was made even more difficult by the organizational structures of the propaganda arms, in which language now functioned as the medium of delivery. These structures were racially-segmented—a legacy of the colonial era—and the propaganda arms persisted with this set-up largely because it remained the most effective way to reach a society that was still plural and which barely reflected the official vision of the nation as a harmonious multi-ethnic community united under a common National Language. Racial targeting was an operational reality: Chinese field officers like Tan Kee Tian were recruited to target Chinese communities, Malays for Malay communities and so on, while Radio Malaya continued to have individual language streams for its listeners.

For the Department of Information problems arose when the message they were promoting—e.g. Malay as a national language and unifier of the people—was undermined by the operational reality of having to deliver that message in Tamil and the various Chinese languages (Mandarin, Hokkien, Cantonese and Hakka were used by the department). For officers like Tan, fluency in two or more of these languages was more crucial than competency in Malay or English since this was key in gaining the trust of their target audience. As such, most of these officers were recruited from Chinese schools, the very cradles of a vision of Malaya/Malaysia that was in opposition to the one they were supposed to promote. They occupied a tension-riddled space in this arena of contestation: representatives of the state tasked to persuade and promote a vision of the nation using a language outside of that national imagining. This liminality is sometimes reflected in their reports: in the extract above, Tan drops the usual linguistic cues that signal his role as a third party reporting the views of others, and it becomes less clear whether the obvious passion and anger on the typewritten page is his or his audience's.

Radio Malaya/Malaysia had different problems. As a medium of mass communication, its linguistically distinct channels of delivery serve as a constant and public contradiction of the official line of Malay as the sole national language. At the same time, the legitimacy of radio rested on its ability to entertain its audience, who could turn off the radio or worse, listen to Radio Singapore, the BBC and others. Listeners wanted their entertainment in their own languages, and the government delivered. As a result of this tension between operational reality and national vision, radio and television often had to deal with demands from other minorities to have their own

language service, as well as from Malay nationalists complaining about the continued existence of the English, Tamil and Chinese services.

The first two chapters traced the genesis of the Department of Information and Radio Malaya as the primary tools of state propaganda. It examined the difficulties they faced in shedding their colonial skin as they took on the challenges of post-colonial Malaya. One of the main arguments of this dissertation is that the contest over the meaning of Malaysia was not only unresolved at the time of independence but also became more heated throughout the 1960s. Consequently, the propaganda arms were thrust into the vortex of this contestation, and were ultimately ineffective in persuading a significant majority of Malaysians of the desirability of the official nationalism. The struggle over the definition of Malaya/Malaysia was fought on many fronts, the most public (and most studied) being politics and elections. I suggest that another site of the contest that was equally intense was over language and education, to which the government's propaganda agencies paid close attention. At the same time, this struggle over language was also evident, and perhaps more revealing, in an even more unlikely place: the cogs and wheels of bureaucracy, specifically that parts charged with persuasion and propaganda that were in the forefront of promoting the official meaning of the nation. In other words, while language as a medium of instruction in the education system was a critical component of the contested Malaysia, language as a medium of propaganda delivery was also a key factor that hampered the state's effectiveness in promoting its official ideology in the contest over the meaning of the nation. This chapter examines both these modes of contestation.

Education under colonial rule, before WWII

British policies on education and language in colonial Malaya is a subject that has been adequately covered by scholars.⁶ There were two distinct phases in British control over Malaya up till the outbreak of World War II: from 1786 to 1874, during which Britain, mainly through the East India Company, controlled the port cities of Penang, Melaka, and Singapore as the Straits Settlements, and between 1874 and 1941, a period that began soon after the Colonial Office in London assumed direct control of Malaya, and which also marked Britain's expansion of its influence into the Malay states, ultimately bringing the entire Malay peninsular under its control. For the first phase, most scholars agree that the actions, and more importantly, the inaction of the administrators were consistent with the colonial state's divide-and-rule policy and were one of the key drivers in the creation of a plural society in Malaya.⁷ The colonial state itself

⁶ See for instance Peter Wicks, "Education, British Colonialism, and a Plural Society in West Malaysia: The Development of Education in the British Settlements along the Straits of Malacca, 1786-1874," *History of Education Quarterly* 20, no. 2 (1980). Philip Fook Seng Loh, *Seeds of separatism : educational policy in Malaya, 1874-1940* (Kuala Lumpur ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1975); Rex Stevenson, *Cultivators and administrators : British educational policy towards the Malays, 1875-1906* (Kuala Lumpur ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).

⁷ The exception is Wicks, who argues that there were a multitude of actors shaping the educational landscape in the Straits Settlements and that the British cannot be held primarily responsible for sowing the seeds of separation.

acknowledged that for almost a century after it had set foot in Malaya in 1786, “no schools of importance ... were established by the Government, and no system of supervision of schools provided.”⁸ Most of the important English-language schools, both secular and religious, were established by missionaries and concerned individuals. Throughout the Straits Settlements and later in the Malay states, Malay families—fearful that their children would be converted to Christianity—shunned not just the overtly religious institutions like the Anglo-Chinese College, but also the secular types like the Penang Free School and the Raffles’ Institution.⁹

Malay families, instead, sent their children to informal village religious “schools” to learn Quranic recitation in Arabic. As for Chinese education, there were insufficient schools in the early years of British rule and what little existed was not of particularly high standard.¹⁰ Apart from the rare exception, vernacular education was left to the respective communities to organize and support, with poor results.¹¹ When it came to English education, the Straits Settlements government—very much constrained by its budget-conscious superiors in India—provided modest financial support and the occasional land grant from 1786-1874, but it was left to private parties to establish and maintain these institutions that were the only sites that allowed children from various ethnic groups to transcend the structural ethnic cleavages. However, the scarcity of English schools meant that only a tiny minority of students benefitted from these contacts, and the vast majority of non-European students experienced what little education they had in monolingual and mono-ethnic settings.

That situation would not change much after 1874. In the Federated Malay States (FMS),¹² the Federal government had initially established a number of English schools but soon began to divest its control to private concerns—mainly religious missions—by the end of the 19th century. In terms of vernacular education, however, London recognized that it could not continue its policy of near total neglect and pursued some limited reforms,¹³ including the establishment of an education department and a fully-subsidized, village school system that taught both Malay written in the Arabic script

⁸ This referred to the 1786-1872 period. J.B. Elcium, Director of Public Instruction, Straits Settlements, *The System of Education in the Straits Settlements*, January, 1902, in Board of Education, "Special reports on educational subjects Volume 14," ed. Board of Education (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1905). 135.

⁹ For the origins of the Penang Free School, established 1816, and the Anglo-Chinese College (1820) in Malacca, see J.B. Elcium, "The system of education in the Straits Settlements," in *Special reports on educational subjects Volume 14*, ed. Board of Education (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1902; reprint, 1905). 135, and Wicks, "Education, British Colonialism, and a Plural Society in West Malaysia: The Development of Education in the British Settlements along the Straits of Malacca, 1786-1874." 169-171.

¹⁰ Jonas Daniel Vaughan, *The manners and customs of the Chinese of the Straits Settlements* (Kuala Lumpur;: Oxford University Press, 1971). 89.

¹¹ Elcium, "The system of education in the Straits Settlements." 138.

¹² The Federated Malay States was the federation of the first four Malay states the British controlled after 1874. These—Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Pahang—were also the most important states in terms of their economic value. Henceforth, it will be referred to as the Federation or FMS while its administration will be referred to as the Federal government. The term “colonial government” refers to the Federal and Straits Settlements governments that were in theory distinct but in practice often worked in concert on key policies.

¹³ Wicks, "Education, British Colonialism, and a Plural Society in West Malaysia: The Development of Education in the British Settlements along the Straits of Malacca, 1786-1874." 181.

(Jawi) and Romanized Malay (Rumi),¹⁴ reforms that were subsequently extended to the Malay states. The aim of this vernacular primary education was to enable a Malay boy “to acquire the rudiments of reading and writing in his native tongue, and to teach him the four simple rules as applied to abstract numbers and to the money currency, the weights and the measures of his country,”¹⁵ which should be sufficient for him to continue in his traditional occupations of “bullock-waggon drivers, padi-growers, fishermen, etc ... [or] to keep accounts if become small shopkeepers.”¹⁶ Not surprisingly, schooling consisted of four years of a “very elementary”¹⁷ curriculum that was weak in intellectual content.¹⁸

In terms of non-Malay vernacular education, the colonial authorities adopted a laissez-faire policy, setting up only two government Chinese schools and one government Tamil school by 1901,¹⁹ and left the respective communities to take care of the education of its children. Apart from the issue of costs, British officials also viewed the migrant communities as transient, and any investment into their education was seen as a waste of limited resources. Up till this point, when the British “imagined” the Malay political entities under their control, it saw no space in them for the non-Malay Asian communities. However, the politicization of Chinese schools from the beginning of the 20th century drew the state into taking a more direct role in its governance. These schools were caught up in the revolutionary fervor surrounding China at that time, and the modernization, politicization and the increasing anti-Western bias²⁰ of Chinese schools alarmed the British. The colonial government realized that these schools were becoming “instruments of propaganda for political parties outside Malaya whose objectives were often entirely opposed to the policy of the Malayan Governments...”²¹ The colonial government responded in 1920 with an education law that had two aims: to give it the tools to control the registration of schools and teachers, and, at the same time, to expand

¹⁴ Loh, *Seeds of separatism : educational policy in Malaya, 1874-1940*. 4.

¹⁵ Federal Education Office, "The system of education in the Federated Malay States," in *Special reports on educational subjects Volume 14*, ed. Board of Education (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1902; reprint, 1905). 7.

¹⁶ Ibid. 9.

¹⁷ Ibid. 9.

¹⁸ The colonial state's attitude toward Malay education up till its defeat to the Japanese in World War II is best encapsulated in George Maxwell's well-known and oft-quoted remarks: “The aim of the Government is not to turn out a few well-educated youths, nor yet numbers of less well-educated boys; rather it is to improve the bulk of the people and to make the son of the fisherman or peasant a more intelligent fisherman or peasant than his father had been, and a man whose education will enable him to understand how his own lot in life fits in with the scheme of life around him.” Chief Secretary's Report, FMS 1920. Report to the Governor, quoted in Loh, *Seeds of separatism : educational policy in Malaya, 1874-1940*. 29.

¹⁹ Federal Education Office, "The system of education in the Federated Malay States." 11. The combined enrolment of the two Chinese schools were 80, a fraction of the 7,000 Chinese boys under 15 years' old in the FMS at that time. Loh, *Seeds of separatism : educational policy in Malaya, 1874-1940*. 37.

²⁰ All the textbooks used in Chinese schools were printed in China and after 1925 “a great deal of anti-foreign material was introduced into them, intended in particular to stir up hatred of the British. For example a drawing in a text-book intended for children of about twelve years of age showed the May 30th Incident at Shanghai in 1925 with English policemen in uniform shooting down an unarmed crowd.” Victor Purcell, *The Chinese in Malaya* (London, New York,: G. Cumberlege Oxford Univ. Press, 1948). 228.

²¹ Ibid. 228-229. Victor Purcell made this observation as a Cambridge historian, but before he embarked on a career in academia after World War II, Purcell was the most senior colonial official in charge of Chinese affairs in British Malaya.

its influence in the day-to-day running of these schools by offering them grants-in-aid and other schemes.²² While it wanted to control the Chinese schools, what the government did not want to do was to “nationalize” all the schools and take over the administrative and financial burden of running all the vernacular schools.

The 1920 law that brought non-Malay vernacular education under the control of the colonial government was a watershed in Malaysian history and set the stage for how successive Malayan governments—whether colonial, colonial-indigenous or independent—dealt with the vexing issue of language, education, belonging and citizenship, which is the focus of this chapter. I suggest that this was the first time a Malayan government confronted the issue of the place that resident, non-Malay communities would occupy in a Malayan polity, a dilemma that not surprisingly and quite appropriately was being expressed through the issue of education. Three points pertaining to this shift in policy in 1920 are relevant to the future contestations over the meaning of independent Malaysia. The first is that the British had begun to re-evaluate their vision of Malaya. Even as it continued to regard the adult, male Chinese and Indian workforce as transient, the 1920 law forced it to acknowledge that there were Chinese and Tamil children who could be “induced” to settle permanently, and the state had to take a deeper interest in their education.²³ In other words, the British were now imagining a multi-ethnic Malaya.

The second point is the relationship between the limits of the 1920 law and the impact of the colonial government’s education policies on this newly imagined multi-ethnic Malaya. The British stopped short of a complete takeover of Chinese and Tamil schools not simply because of the cost involved but also because it did not want to be seen to be promoting non-Malay vernacular education. In its view, government sponsorship of Chinese and Tamil schools would “be *strengthening rather than breaking down the barriers of race*, would hinder rather than help these various alien races from having any commercial or other intercourse with each other, by preventing them from learning the vernacular of the country of their adoption, and the only medium by which such intercourse can be maintained, and would be committing the fatal error of tending to keep them aliens, and encouraging them in the idea that China or India is their home.”²⁴ This was a curious and contradictory stance. On one hand, the state recognized that separate educational systems that operated in different languages hindered the creation of bridges between the various ethnic groups. It justified its policy of not giving the Chinese and Tamil schools the official stamp on the grounds that this would entrench the different linguistic education streams and amplify the divisions between the ethnic groups. However, by narrowing the aim of the 1920 legislation to controlling the political orientation of the Chinese schools, the colonial government left intact the separate

²² The Registration of Schools Enactment gave the Education Department legal control over all schools and the teachers employed in them. Under the law, if a school did not meet certain management, curriculum and sanitary standards, the Director of Education could close the school. Although the enactment applied to all schools in the Straits Settlements and the FMS, this was clearly an attempt to control the political activity of Chinese schools. Loh, *Seeds of separatism : educational policy in Malaya, 1874-1940*. 94. Incentives to promote enrolment and curb absenteeism in Malay schools, like free season rail tickets, were also extended to Chinese school students. Purcell, *The Chinese in Malaya*. 230.

²³ Federal Education Office, “The system of education in the Federated Malay States.” 4.

²⁴ Ibid. 11, my emphasis.

educational structures that had been in place, and thus perpetuated the very outcome—a divided, resident plural society—it publically wanted to avoid.

There was a way out of this “damned if I do and damned if I don’t” conundrum, which leads us to the final point: the relationship between English-medium education and the state of the plural society in Malaya as its communities began to contemplate independence after World War II. The colonial government did have one tool that could conceivably be used to break down the barriers of race in this context: English-language education. There was no lack of demand for this from all the communities²⁵ but the colonial government continued to restrict access to English education.²⁶ This was hardly surprising, since British policy before World War II centered not on breaking down the barriers of race or creating a unified community in Malaya, but on the maintenance of colonial rule.²⁷ Thus, ethno-linguistic divisions in education that mirrored the divided social, economic and political landscape in Malaya became increasingly entrenched as Britain consolidated its rule over all the Malay states, even as it began to imagine a Malaya that was home to many ethnic groups. When British power began to wane and local ethnic communities began to espouse competing visions of an independent Malaya, they were doing so from diametrically and linguistically opposite positions.

Who belongs to this land? Education, language and birth of a nation, 1946-1957

After World War II, Malaysians began clamoring for self-rule and Britain, exhausted from the war that drained its capacity to retain her vast empire, sought to manage the process of decolonization in a manner that best protected its strategic and economic interests. In the case of Malaya, this meant shepherding in a democratic pro-Western post-colonial nation that was politically and socially stable. This stability rested on enhancing mutual understanding and maintaining peaceful relations between the colony’s various ethnic groups. However, the divide-and-rule policies that had served the British well in maintaining colonial control now proved ill suited as a means of nurturing a new nation. Not surprisingly, the entrenched ethno-linguistic divisions in education became a major barrier to the formation of a united Malayan community during the period when local political figures were negotiating difficult issues like citizenship, rights and language. In fact, education became a key site in which these issues were played out

²⁵ Loh, *Seeds of separatism : educational policy in Malaya, 1874-1940*. 53-54, 106. Federal Education Office, "The system of education in the Federated Malay States." 11.

²⁶ Loh, *Seeds of separatism : educational policy in Malaya, 1874-1940*. 98. The British government’s lack of support for teaching English in Chinese schools and the restricted opportunities for more Chinese children to gain an English education became one of the main rebuttals Chinese educationists used against the colonial authority when the latter accused Chinese schools of lacking a “Malayan consciousness” and being too focused on China.

²⁷ The lesson from India was that expansion of English education would have threatened British rule. The only exception the British made was to cater to demands from the Malay royal and aristocratic classes for more access to English education and subsequently to the upper echelons of the civil service. In a secret dispatch to London in 1932, Governor Cecil Clementi argued that a revitalized Malay monarchy would be a buffer against the growing democratic demands of the Chinese for more representation and voice in the running of Malaya, requests which “could not possibly be granted in Malaya without great political danger.” Loh, *Seeds of separatism : educational policy in Malaya, 1874-1940*. 74-75.

during the 1950s, specifically the four reports produced to revamp education policy during the decade: the Barnes Report, Fenn-Wu Report (both 1951), Razak Report (1956) and Rahman Talib Report (1960).

Before Britain's defeat by Japan in 1941, it had controlled its Malayan territories through a patchwork of administrative structures. Upon returning to power at the end of the War, it consolidated these structures (with the exception of Singapore) into a single administrative unit, creating for the first time the borders of independent Malaya and enabling the concretization of the hitherto abstract concepts of "Malayan consciousness", "Malayan outlook" and "Malayan citizenship." Simultaneously, the colonial government sought to give non-Malay residents a stake in this new political entity through liberal citizenship provisions. This represented a radical break from an earlier colonial policy that treated Malays as the only rightful claimants to Malaya, a policy that had begun to change with the 1920 education laws discussed earlier in this chapter. This change was partly a result of the unexpected cooperation the British received from sections of the Chinese community during the conflict with the Japanese. As might be expected, this change provoked strong opposition from large sections of the Malay community, leading the colonial state to quickly backtrack. Moreover, whatever goodwill the British felt toward the non-Malay communities soon disappeared when the mainly Chinese and ideologically Maoist Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) challenged colonial rule, seeking immediate independence. Britain declared war on the CPM in 1948, and the Emergency, as the war was euphemistically named, called into question again the loyalties of the Chinese toward Malaya.

As these events were unfolding, the British took stock of their administration,²⁸ and as part of the exercise, the colonial state surveyed and made certain recommendations regarding education. Malay educationists and community leaders were displeased that not enough attention had been paid to the improvement of Malay education, which was in a dire state. In response, the British set up a committee to look into Malay education, headed by sociologist Leonard Barnes, who was Director of Social Training, Oxford University, in 1950. The 14-member committee was made up of five European members (Barnes and four senior education bureaucrats and headmasters of leading institutions in Malaya) and nine Malay members. Its aim was to "inquire into the adequacy or otherwise of the educational facilities available for Malays..."²⁹ Its recommendations were published in June 1951 in what is generally referred to as the Barnes Report.

The historiography of this period normally highlights the most controversial aspect of the report, which was its recommendation for the establishment of a National

²⁸ This reorganization gave birth to the Department of Information and Radio Malaya (see Chapter 2).

²⁹ The committee's full parameters were to look into and make recommendations pertaining to:

- (i) the system of Malay vernacular education;
- (ii) the method of selection of students for admission to Malay Training Colleges;
- (iii) the means of raising the scholastic attainment and improving the pedagogic training of College Students;
- (iv) the content of curricula of the Malay Teacher Training Colleges;
- (v) the methods required to raise the scholastic attainments of pupils in Malay schools;
- (vi) the steps necessary to advance the education of Malays in English;
- (vii) any desirable improvement in organisation such as the creation of local education authorities or other local bodies with similar functions...

Federation of Malaya, *Report of the committee on Malay education* (Kuala Lumpur: Government Press, 1951). v.

School system, open to pupils of all races and staffed by teachers of any race, that taught in English and Malay in primary schools and English only from the secondary level onward.³⁰ “Our approach is governed by the belief that the primary school should be treated avowedly and with full deliberation as an instrument for *building up a common Malayan nationality* [my emphasis] on the basis of those elements in the population who regard Malaya as their permanent home and as the object of their loyalty. This we regard as an essential part of the process of achieving self-government within the Commonwealth.”³¹ The committee came to the “straightforward but rather radical conclusion”³² that the existing segregated system, where the vast majority of Malay, Chinese and Tamil children attended mono-ethnic schools in which their mother tongues were the medium of instructions, would not meet this objective. Thus, it concluded without any ambiguity, this conception of primary education would lead to “the eventual disappearance of all Government provision and assistance of vernacular schools...”³³ It justified its hardline approach by stating: “Our scheme would be seriously weakened if any large proportion of the Chinese, Indian, and other non-Malay communities were to determine to provide their own primary classes independently of the public educational system.”³⁴

The committee couched its recommendation for National Schools as not merely an educational issue, but as a larger, more fundamental concern dealing with citizenship, loyalty and belonging. “We repeat here that our proposed new school is conceived as a school of citizenship, a nation-building school.”³⁵ According to the committee, a Malayan citizen should be defined in part by his fluency in Malay and English—a standard that required state support for a bilingual school system.³⁶ The dismissal of Chinese and Tamil vernacular education, and even Chinese and Tamil as languages taught in the National School system³⁷, suggested the elimination of these wide-used tongues³⁸ in this

³⁰ For a sampling of scholarship on this period, see Paul Ming Phang Chang, *Educational development in a plural society : a Malaysian case study*, Monograph series on educational development (Singapore: Academia Publications, 1973). 41-45; Ibrahim Saad, *Pendidikan dan politik di Malaysia*, Cet. 1. ed. (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1977). 51-55; Pek Koon Heng, *Chinese politics in Malaysia : a history of the Malaysian Chinese Association*, East Asian historical monographs (Singapore ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). 191-194; Victor Purcell, “The crisis in Malayan education,” *Pacific Affairs* 26, no. 1 (1953). 70-76; Keng Yek Sia, “Kedudukan Sekolah Rendah Jenis Kebangsaan Cina dalam sistem pendidikan kebangsaan, 1956-2000” (Thesis presented to fulfil the requirements for Doctor of Philosophy, University of Malaya, 2003). 16-35; T.H. Silcock and Ungku Abdul Aziz, “Nationalism in Malaya,” in *Asian nationalism and the West; a symposium based on documents and reports of the eleventh conference, Institute of Pacific Relations*, ed. W. L. Holland (New York: Macmillan, 1953). 336-341; J. K. P. Watson, “Education and cultural pluralism in South East Asia, with special reference to Peninsular Malaysia,” *Comparative Education* 16, no. 2 (1980). 141.

³¹ Federation of Malaya, *Barnes Report*. 20.

³² Ibid. 20.

³³ Ibid. 21.

³⁴ Ibid. 24.

³⁵ Ibid. 24.

³⁶ The committee took pains to emphasize that the new National Schools would neither be the existing Malay or English schools, but would instead be rigorously bilingual. The co-primacy of English was to be expected, since Malaya was still under British rule, but would become an issue as independence neared. Ibid. 22.

³⁷ “It has been clear throughout that two languages, and only two languages, should be taught in the National Schools, and that those two must be the official languages of the country, namely, Malay and English.” Ibid. 21.

new imagining of Malayan identity. Thus, resistance to the National School system proposal was cast in larger terms beyond the issue of education. "We have set up bilingualism in Malay and English as its objective because we believe that all parents who regard Malaya as their permanent home and the object of their undivided loyalty will be happy to have their children educated in those languages. If any parents were not happy about this, their unhappiness would properly be taken as an indication that they did not so regard Malaya."³⁹

Commentators have noted the obvious point that the committee had exceeded its original mandate and that, as a group comprised only of Britons and Malays, and who received memorandums from and interviewed only European and Malay groups and individuals, it was hardly qualified to talk about a national system that affected all the ethnic communities in Malaya.⁴⁰ What has not been discussed is how exactly the committee exceeded its mandate.

Since it made the National Schools system the centerpiece of its recommendations, one might expect that this issue loomed large in the committee's overall mission. However, beyond the trumpeted recommendations, the bulk of its work focused on the history, ills and remedies of the Malay education system. Very little of the actual work of the committee dealt with practical questions of how the National School system would go about its task of being a school of citizenship and nation-building.

For example, in sections with dealing religious instruction,⁴¹ textbooks⁴² and education for girls,⁴³ almost nothing is mentioned regarding the concerns of non-Malay communities. The report acknowledged that religious instruction was key to building character, and proceeded to address the question of whether Islam should be taught during or after school hours. No mention was made, even in passing, of other religions, their role in character building, or what non-Muslim students should be doing during Islamic classes. The section on textbooks dealt at length with the problem of previous and current textbook shortages in Malay schools and whether the content of these textbooks were intellectually appropriate and relevant to the Malay community. Nothing was said, however, about the content of future textbooks and whether they needed to be modified to meet the requirements of nation building.

The section dealing with "Special arrangements for girls", which one would assume would refer to all girls in the new National Schools, begins thus: "It is imperative that Malay parents—especially mothers—should shake off their age-old, and now long

³⁸ Critics of the policy, not surprisingly, linked language with culture, and accused the committee of trying to destroy Chinese and Indian cultures.

³⁹ Federation of Malaya, *Barnes Report*. 24.

⁴⁰ See for instance Purcell, "The crisis in Malayan education." 71; Silcock and Ungku Abdul Aziz, "Nationalism in Malaya." 337. Silcock and Ungku Aziz, writing in 1953 while the issue was still heated, were careful in their criticisms, describing the recommendation to end Chinese and Tamil vernacular education as "unwise" and "a deplorable lack of tact", and the committee's exceeding its terms of reference as "a mistake." Ungku Aziz, an economist, was at that time, one of the few indigenous academics at the University of Malaya. Born in London into the Johore royal family, Ungku Aziz—of Turkish, English and Malay descent—would eventually become the first Malaysian Vice-Chancellor of the flagship University Malaya, a position he held for 20 years, the longest tenured Vice-Chancellor in the university's history. Purcell, also writing contemporaneously, was much harsher in his language.

⁴¹ Federation of Malaya, *Barnes Report*. 29-30

⁴² Ibid. 30-33

⁴³ Ibid. 40-43

outworn, prejudice and apathy, and should insist on their daughters being given the opportunity to fit themselves, as the daughters of the other races of this country are already doing in their rapidly increasing numbers, for the complexities and difficulties ahead of them.”⁴⁴ This is the only time the “daughters of the other races”—future students of the proposed National Schools who will require a new Malayan outlook—are mentioned, and even here they are referred to in passing and only as a foil. The section goes on to consider the attitude of Malay parents toward female education, the status of rural Malay girls, the high dropout rate among Malay girls, the curriculum that would be suitable in educating the Malay girl to fulfill her role in Malay society, and so on.

In other words, while the committee met the first part of its mandate—conducting a thorough review of the Malay education system⁴⁵—it proposed remedies that reached far beyond Malay education and provided no substance for what its vision of a National School system would look like beyond general principles. One could read this as a glaring omission on the part of an inept committee, but this does not make sense. As mentioned earlier, all five Europeans in the committee were experts in education, four of them senior civil servants in the Malayan education department. Of the nine Malay members, three were Malay community leaders while the other six were education experts.⁴⁶ There was more than enough technical expertise in the committee to produce a detailed, “professional” blueprint for the proposed National School system, matching the depth and breadth of its dissection of the ills of the Malay education system. Thus, the two aspects of the Barnes Report—the examination of the Malay education system and the National Schools recommendation—come across almost as two separate documents, with the latter only tenuously linked to “professional” section of the report.⁴⁷ I suggest then that the recommendation is a political document that expresses the maximalist Malay position with regards to the central questions of citizenship, loyalty and belonging, and this position reflects not just the views of the 14-member committee but the larger Malay community, and endorsed by the colonial state.

James Ongkili has described the report as “nationalistic”⁴⁸ while Victor Purcell goes even further, calling it “saturated with Malay nationalism and resentment of the Chinese” and describing its orientation as having a “strong pro-Malay, anti-Chinese

⁴⁴ Ibid. 40.

⁴⁵ See footnote #60.

⁴⁶ The community leaders were the Chief Minister of Kedah, Tuanku Ya’acob ibni Sultan Abdul Hamid; Mahmood Mahyideen of Kelantan, and Dr. Mustapha bin Osman, and Umno leader from Kedah. The other Malay members were Tom binte Abdul Razak, Lady Superintendent of Malay Schools, Kedah; Aminuddin Baki, University of Malaya; S.M. Zainal Abidin, Inspector of Schools, Province Wellesley; Syed Esa bin Alwee, Inspector of Malay Schools, Batu Pahat; Syed Nasir bin Ismail, Assistant Inspector of Malay Schools, Johore Bahru; and Mohamed Nor bin Suleiman, Group Teacher, Johore. Federation of Malaya, *Barnes Report*. iii.

⁴⁷ The committee acknowledged that the “weight of authority in educational opinion is heavily on the side of the view that a child’s natural development is best promoted when his early education is in the language of his home.” Its conception of National Schools, however, runs counter to this professional opinion, and the committee justified its recommendation by stating that it was made “within limits set by the overriding necessity, on citizenship grounds, for an all-race primary school of a single type.” Or, in other words, the political end was more important than the professional process. Ibid. 23.

⁴⁸ James P. Ongkili, *Nation-building in Malaysia, 1946-1974* (Singapore ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). 107.

bias.”⁴⁹ What these commentators were referring to was not the “technical” portion of the report, which was delivered in a dry, objective tone matched with facts and figures and which makes up the bulk of the report, but the National Schools recommendation and the sections related to it. One such section dealt with the history of Malay education and is titled “The education problem: some Malay views.” After a brief opening paragraph that contained a carefully worded qualification that the section was not a “rewriting of history” but an “anthology of Malay opinion,” the rest of the section laid the blame for the ills of Malay education and the backwardness of the Malay community squarely on the shoulders of the Chinese and Indian communities.

“The immigrant races, taking full advantage of the improvidence of the simple Malay, tempted him with a system of forward selling of crop and catch for ready cash. Thus began the economic slavery of the Malay in full view of the protecting power; and so it has remained to this day. Now even if he wanted education he could no longer afford it. This strangulation went further. It produced malnutrition which seriously interfered with his health and sapped his vitality, which in turn reduced his earning power, increased the infant mortality rate, and shortened his expectation of life. Thus an easily preventable disease began to assume the form of a dangerous epidemic.”⁵⁰

The section was shorn of any statistics or references to previous studies: its tone was confrontational, and its claims polemical, all in stark contrast to the “technical” portion of the overall report. The role played by Britain—the architect of the plural society and the unequal and segregated education, social and economic systems in Malaya—in the exploitation of the Malays has been conveniently scrubbed clean in this not-so-benign “anthology.” This “non-rewriting of history” in which the immigrant races (mainly Chinese) are demonized and the British exculpated is the only section of the report that dovetails neatly with a National School recommendation that sidelines non-Malay languages and preserves the primacy of English (the sole medium of instruction on post-primary education) in the education system of a new Malaya.

To understand the significance of these two aspects of the Barnes Report—the technical and the nationalistic—one has to place the committee’s work in the political context of its time. After 1945, the main issue facing Malaysians and their colonial rulers was the constitution and meaning of an eventual independent nation. The key component of that issue was the problem of citizenship, loyalty, belonging and the political status of the non-Malay communities vis-à-vis the Malays: Who would be counted as a citizen? How would citizens be defined in terms of ethnicity, linguistic ability, culture, religion and so on? How does one measure the loyalty of the Chinese and Indians to Malaya? The Barnes Report was commissioned and published just as various groups staked out their positions on these issues, which were the opening gambits of the contest over the meaning of Malaya. The Barnes Report’s National Schools recommendation, more

⁴⁹ Purcell, “The crisis in Malayan education.” 71. Purcell’s involvement with the Malayan Chinese community has already been noted (see Footnote #37). Rightly or otherwise, he was seen as a pro-Chinese voice, although his academic work reveal an even-handed approach to Malayan Chinese subjects.

⁵⁰ Federation of Malaya, *Barnes Report*. 8.

concerned about ideology than pedagogy, was one of the first salvos fired in this contest, and, significantly, signaled that the first substantive battle over the meaning of Malaya would be fought over education and language policies, a fight that would last through the 1960s and beyond, and would occupy a substantial portion of the work of the propaganda departments after independence. The Report reflected the Malay community's stance, with British backing, and outlined a vision of independent Malaya in which Malay culture and language would be overwhelmingly dominant, while other cultures and languages would receive no space within the official sphere and would be subordinate. The implication of this is that what applies to education and language would also translate into politics. The non-Malay groups who opposed the recommendation also tacitly acknowledged they were dealing with something broader than education because the chief line of attack was not that the recommendation lacked any professional basis, but that it would lead to the destruction of non-Malay cultures in the new Malaysian nation. These views would be articulated in the next report on education, the Fenn-Wu Report.

As the Barnes committee went about its inquiry into Malay education over a 14-month period from 1950 to 1951, the colonial government in January 1951 invited American education experts Dr William P. Fenn and Dr Wu Teh-yao, to look into the issue of Chinese education. They arrived in Malaya in February, spent two months conducting their work, and produced a report,⁵¹ which the colonial government released in July, soon after the publication of the Barnes Report. The Fenn-Wu Report was, according to an editorial, a "remarkable document" in that it was "the first non-British report on any aspect of British policy" in Malaya.⁵² The authors "pulled no punches [and

⁵¹ Federation of Malaya, *Chinese schools and the education of Chinese Malaysians : The report of a mission invited by the Federation Government to study the problem of the education of Chinese in Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur: Government Press, 1951). This will henceforth be referred to as the Fenn-Wu Report.

In the report, Fenn and Wu are described as "Associate Executive Secretary of the Board of Trustees of a dozen institutions of higher learning in China" and "an official of the United Nations" respectively. Ibid. 1. In various local press reports, Fenn and Wu were most often described as American "educationalists" and Chinese experts. Fenn's long stint teaching in elementary and secondary schools in China and serving as head of the department of English language and literature at Nanking University were also mentioned. "Learning—with a Malay touch," *The Straits Times*, February 23 1951.

Press articles highlight China-born Wu's connection to Malaya—he arrived in Penang when he was 11 years old to attend the prestigious Chung Ling High School and went on to represent Malaya at the Chinese Olympic Games in Shanghai in 1935. He later earned a Bachelor's degree from Nanking University, a Master of Arts degree from the School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University, and a Ph.D. in political science from Harvard. "Penang scholar returns," *The Straits Times*, April 12, 1951. Wu would later go on to be president of Tunghai University, Taiwan; Acting Vice-Chancellor of Nanyang University, Singapore; and Professor of Political Science at the National University of Singapore. National University of Singapore, "Our Chancellors and Vice-Chancellors : a biographical sketch : Our Vice-Chancellors. Wu Teh Yao." <http://www.lib.nus.edu.sg/nusbiodata/bionuwutehyao.htm>

What were not highlighted in Malaya were their religious backgrounds. Fenn was a Protestant missionary educator and, by 1951, the executive secretary of the United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia, a position he held until his retirement in 1970. "William P. Fenn, 90, Protestant Missionary," *The New York Times*, April 25 1993. Wu was a self-described "Christian and Presbyterian elder." Barbara Crossette, "Added Element in Asia: Confucius," *The New York Times*, June 28 1987.

⁵² "Dr. Fenn and Dr. Wu," *The Straits Times*, July 11 1951.

did not] mince their words”⁵³ and even some of their critics found in the report “a freshness [that was] invigorating.”⁵⁴

This independence was apparent in the first paragraphs of the report, in which the authors gently but unequivocally attacked the British colonial government for not being upfront about its intentions regarding the mission’s objectives. The authors noted that, following a series of meetings with British officials in Washington, they understood their task to be a general survey of the state of Chinese education with the aim of making recommendations “that would lead to a greater contribution by Chinese schools in Malaya to the goal of an independent Malayan nation composed of people of many races but having a common loyalty.” More importantly, colonial officials assured Fenn and Wu that there were “no prior commitments to which the mission would be expected to conform. The survey was intended to consider facts and devise ways and means, not to follow any preconceived pattern.”⁵⁵ However, before the two arrived in Malaya, the colonial government announced that the mission’s task was to make a preliminary survey of Chinese education with particular reference to “bridging the gap between the present communal system of school and the time when education will be on a non-communal basis with English or Malay as medium of instruction and other language as optional subject, and advising on ... preparation of text books for present use with a Malayan as distinct from a Chinese background and content.”⁵⁶ This was quite different from making recommendations that followed no preconceived patterns. Fenn and Wu noted the Chinese press’ reactions, which viewed “in no uncertain terms” the revised terms of reference as being “anti-Chinese” and the mission itself “a mere tool designed to further an established government policy.”⁵⁷ The authors brought their concerns to the government, which then backed down and reverted to the more open-ended original mandate.⁵⁸

Fenn and Wu were clearly aware of the position expressed by the Barnes committee; they presented in their report a pointed rebuttal to the latter’s National Schools system. If professional and political elements co-existed uneasily in the Barnes Report, the opposite was true of the Fenn-Wu Report. The latter mission identified many technical problems in the Chinese vernacular school system (quality of textbooks in terms of pedagogy and content, teaching, funding, curriculum and so on) and offered detailed suggestions to fix them. However, these recommendations were linked closely to an alternative vision of what “Malayan culture” would look like and the meaning of a future independent “Malaya.” In fact, the report took a stab at defining the term “Malayan” (or, took a stab at the term “Malayan”).

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ “Languages a burden, says professor,” *The Straits Times*, November 7 1951. The professor in question was Frederic Mason, who was at that time Professor of Education, University of Malaya.

⁵⁵ Federation of Malaya, *Fenn-Wu Report*. 1.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 2

⁵⁷ Ibid. 2

⁵⁸ Ibid. 3. The re-worded mandate reads: “The purpose of the mission was to survey sympathetically but objectively the entire field of the education of Chinese in Malaya, and to recommend such constructive changes and improvements as would lead to the Chinese schools making the greatest contribution to the future welfare and happiness of the people of Malaya and in particular of the Chinese who have chosen that prosperous land as their home.” To ensure the colonial government saved face, Fenn and Wu attributed the change in policy to the High Commissioner’s “thoroughly understanding and sympathetic” reception to their concerns.

The Barnes Report had used “Malayanization” and achieving a “Malayan outlook” as the *raison d’être* for its recommendation. But for Fenn and Wu, the use of the terms had been “the too casual and unconsidered.” To most Chinese in Malaya, Fenn and Wu wrote, Malayanization “is anathema. In view of the absence of a culture, or even a society, which can as yet be called Malayan, it is interpreted as meaning to make Malay rather Malayan.”⁵⁹ When the Chinese community read “Malayanization” in government pronouncements and in the Barnes Report, they take it as shorthand for “the elimination of Chinese schools and the relegating of the Chinese language to an inferior status with the ultimate result, if not the present purpose, of the extinction of Chinese culture in Malaya.”⁶⁰ The report fired a warning: “It is not possible artificially to create one culture out of several, certainly not quickly ... [and] any attempt at the moment to force unwilling fusion will almost certainly lead to further cleavage, which neither Malaya nor the world can afford.”⁶¹

However, the report acknowledges that the terms Malayan, Malayanization and its derivatives are important because they express “a desirable goal.”⁶² The report does not define this goal in precise terms, but does say that it will be a product of “the natural mingling of diverse cultural elements for generations” and not a something produced by “fiat.”⁶³ Another feature of a desirable Malayan nation/culture, according to the Fenn and Wu Report, was the inclusion of Chinese culture as one of its constituents. It does not repudiate the Barnes Report’s emphasis on the importance of Malay and English,⁶⁴ but it argues for a place for Chinese alongside them in this future Malayan nation/culture. The language used is revealing: “[We] must remember that Chinese is one of the great languages of the world, key to one of the world’s great cultures. Its beauty and richness are unquestioned. Nothing is to be gained by trying to deprive any section of the population of what a knowledge of Chinese has to give. Just as Europeans study Latin, other races in Malaya might well benefit from a study of Chinese. However, because of its difficulty and the time involved in mastering it, the study of Chinese is likely to be undertaken largely by Chinese. They should be helped and encouraged in their concern *for the Chinese background of the Malayan culture of the future.*”⁶⁵ It is clear from this last phrase that for Fenn and Wu (reflecting the views of the groups they interviewed), Chinese culture should not only be preserved for its own sake, but should be an important ingredient of a Malayan culture.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 4

⁶⁰ Ibid. 4-5

⁶¹ Ibid. 4

⁶² Ibid. 5

⁶³ Ibid. 5

⁶⁴ “...it must be recognized that Malay has been made an official language and is a required subject of instruction in all schools in Malaya. As the indigenous language of the country, spoken extensively throughout the Malayan archipelago, it deserves study by all the peoples of Malaya. Such common knowledge can contribute to communal understanding and co-operation. [The Chinese] have on the whole accepted Malay as a required subject in the last two years of Chinese primary schools. ... [It] is obvious that English is ... a common business language for all races in Malaya ... [and] a world language. The social, academic, scientific, cultural, economic, and political advantages it can give a child need no amplification. [This has prompted the Chinese] to pay more attention to the teaching of English in Chinese schools.” Ibid. 6.

⁶⁵ My italics. Ibid. 6.

The Chinese community's belief that its culture should be an integral part of the Malayan nation was not a merely an act of self-preservation, i.e. preserving its way of life, but also stems from an entrenched pride and belief in the intrinsic worth of the culture/language which, in the community's view, is equal to the greatest cultures of the world, even those of the economically and politically dominant West. This pride is reflected in other parts of the report. For example, there is a strong belief (not without foundation) in the community's self-sufficiency when the report states that the Chinese school system—which in 1950 taught 202,969 students out of the 564,972 students attending all schools in Malaya⁶⁶—had been developed almost entirely through the community's own resources with minimal British aid. Fenn and Wu concluded that “Chinese schools will persist in Malaya for a long time to come. Any attempt to crush them will result, as it has already done, in greater determination to preserve them. And Chinese schools in the open are greatly to be preferred to Chinese schools underground: They cannot be eliminated until the Chinese themselves decide that they are not needed, which will happen only if and when there is an adequate and satisfactory alternative.”⁶⁷

One of the most serious charges leveled against Chinese schools is that they were too focused on China—all textbooks and a good proportion of teachers were from China—and the students were socialized not to be loyal to their country of residence but to the place their parents or grandparents migrated from. Chinese vernacular schools were accused of being hostile to the government and resisting any efforts to bring them under control. Thus, Chinese vernacular schools needed to be “Malayanized.” This allegation became more acute after the 1949 communist victory in China and the escalation of the war against the mainly ethnic-Chinese Communist Party of Malaya from 1948.⁶⁸ The Fenn-Wu report did not deny those allegations; in fact, it acknowledged that the Chinese schools were indeed too China-focused, a situation detrimental for developing a desirable Malayan nation/culture.⁶⁹ However, it asserted that Chinese schools were not entirely to blame for this China-focus, which developed largely because of the colonial government's neglect of vernacular education.⁷⁰ The report also criticized British policy for not expanding government (English) schools to meet the needs of the Chinese

⁶⁶ Ibid. 9

⁶⁷ Ibid. 10

⁶⁸ Even Purcell, the supposed Chinese apologist, noted that in the 1920s some Chinese schools “were not educational institutions at all, merely centres of Communist propaganda, especially the Hailam night schools for adults, where Marx, Engels, and Lenin and other Communist authors were studied by pupils ...” Purcell, *The Chinese in Malaya*. 232. Hailam is a variation of Hainanese, who originated from Hainan Island and made up one of the many Chinese linguistic groups in Malaya.

⁶⁹ Chinese schools in Malaya are China-conscious to a degree that is not “required by the present situation and that limits their consciousness of being part of Malaya. Whatever the cause, the fact is that fostering of old loyalties instead of encouraging new [ones] tends to turn the child's gaze backward rather than forward. Commendable desire to preserve cultural values often blinds to [sic] the need of association with the community in which the child is to live and to the importance of participation in its development.” Federation of Malaya, *Fenn-Wu Report*. 9.

⁷⁰ “Because of Government neglect, the Chinese were forced to establish schools for their own children. [It was] only natural for Chinese in Malaya to copy the school system of the land from which they had come, just as English schools are replicas of schools in the United Kingdom. Had they not used the same textbooks and availed themselves of the services of Chinese teachers from China, to what other source could they have gone? ... [Had] had they not been neglected in the past, it is doubtful if they would ever have become so pro-Chinese or so suspicious of the Government.” Ibid. 10.

community,⁷¹ a policy implemented to restrict the political consciousness of a colonized people. In fact, Fenn and Wu went to great lengths to emphasize the Chinese community's support for English education and the expansion of the teaching of English in Chinese schools.⁷² The charge that Chinese schools were suspicious of the British was also accepted by the report, but Fenn and Wu suggested that that was a natural result when "practically all Government approaches to Chinese schools have been negative and fault-finding, ... There has been little constructive guidance and little aid. When help has been given, it has almost always been conditional, thus intensifying the atmosphere of suspicion."⁷³

Fenn and Wu also accepted the criticism that Chinese vernacular schools do not have a "Malayan outlook." It pinpointed this deficiency through a detailed technical examination of the nuts and bolts of the system. For instance, with regards to the content of textbooks, it first categorized the textbooks by subject matter, and then examined the geographical focus of each subject taught in the schools. It found that many of the textbooks devoted at least half of the content to China or Chinese-centric material, and very little to Malayan topics. Fenn and Wu found this situation unacceptable and stressed that "thoughtful Chinese" were fully aware of these problems and were "as desirous of improvement in equipment and teaching. Nor are they opposed to change."⁷⁴

Fenn and Wu also pointed out that the lack of a Malayan focus was not confined to Chinese schools, but was a feature of *all* schools in Malaya. "... English schools in Malaya are still heavily oriented in outlook toward England and Europe, Indian schools toward India, and Malay schools toward a Malay nation."⁷⁵ What is remarkable about this assertion was that it did not perceive the proposed Malayan culture as automatically and naturally Malay, i.e. it decoupled "Malay" from "Malayan". The Barnes Report situated Malay language and culture at the core of the Malayan nation, and shared space at this core only with English (a temporary concession until self-rule is achieved). In this construction of the meaning of "Malaya/Malayan," the strength and prominence of other languages/culture was a threat to the Malayan nation and Malayanness. The Fenn-Wu report repudiated this conception of nationhood. By contrasting a Malay nation with the Malayan nation, setting the two apart, the report was saying that the vision of Malaya as imagined by the maximalist Malay position and expressed through the Barnes Report lacked inclusiveness and was thus as un-Malayan as the China-centric orientation of Chinese schools. This lack of a Malayan focus was a defect that *all* language streams, including Malay schools, needed to correct with a common syllabus that should focus on

⁷¹ The orientation towards China is "largely the result of the absence of sufficient Government schools." Ibid. 10.

⁷² "We have been impressed by the degree to which Chinese Malaysians not only accept the need for English but actively insist on learning it. This demand is motivated largely by obvious utilitarian value, but it also stems in part from a recognition of its political and cultural values. To them English is the logical and destined lingua franca for Malaya. This fact explains both the Chinese preference, in many cases, for English schools and their insistence that English be taught, and taught effectively, in the Chinese schools." Ibid. 35.

⁷³ Ibid. 12

⁷⁴ Ibid. 9

⁷⁵ Ibid. 7. The report saw it fit to repeat this point for emphasis: "The fact that they have not developed a Malayan outlook is hardly to be wondered at, especially in light of the British cast of English schools, and the predominantly Malay (as contrasted with Malayan) outlook of Malay schools, not to mention the Indian-ness of Indian schools." Ibid. 10.

Malayan subjects, while not neglecting, in order of importance, Asian and global topics. "All of the elements in the life of the country must be given adequate place in the curricula of all schools, even though the primary emphasis must be on Malaya." This does not mean that Britain, China or India should be excluded since it would be "unwise" to ignore the "social, cultural, and economic ties of Malaya with these areas."⁷⁶

At the core of this common syllabus is a single primary school textbook in different languages for the different mediums of instructions "dealing with social, ethical, and moral values. In such a series, the Malayan boy or girl would learn that the shaking of hands of the European, the bending of the waist of the Chinese, and the touching of forehead and chest of the Malay are but different ways of expressing the common basic value of good manners and mutual respect. In it, he might also receive some of the moral and ethical teaching now generally conspicuous by its absence. English schools believe the desired results are achieved unconsciously in the classroom and on the playing field; Chinese schools attempt to fill a gap of which they are acutely aware through their so-called "civics" course. A common approach through a common textbook would further communal understanding and co-operation in building, a truly Malayan community."⁷⁷

This extract illuminates how the different cultural components in Malaya would interact with each other in Fenn-Wu's imagining of a desirable Malayan nation/culture. Placing these cultural practices side by side within the boundaries of a textbook emphasized the equality of the cultures in this Malayan nation/culture. This ideology of equality is not threatened by the linguistically diverse delivery mechanism because these different delivery mechanisms—different language education systems—work on the basis of equality and off a common message. In other words, there was no contradiction (at least on paper, in its ideal form) between message and delivery mechanism. All language streams and delivery mechanisms are equal and the message is one of equality. This is in sharp contrast to how the Department of Information and Radio Malaya handled the language issue with regards to harmonizing the message and the delivery mechanism. The propaganda arms of the government, by necessity and for historical reasons, worked through multiple linguistic delivery mechanisms, but there was an inherent linguistic tension between this multiplicity and the message it was sending out. The variety of delivery mechanisms suggested some measure of equality between the languages but the message it promoted emphasized hierarchy (or tried to de-emphasize hierarchy when the delivery mechanism made the propagation of certain government policies awkward.) More on this in the latter half of this chapter.

The answer to the problem of the lack of Malayan focus in Chinese schools was not to shut them down but rather "to recognize the need for the existence of Chinese schools, and to strengthen them and find for them their proper place in the educational system"⁷⁸ since Chinese language and culture have "important cultural significance"⁷⁹ in a desirable Malayan nation/culture. Writ large, the Fenn-Wu Report articulated a vision

⁷⁶ Ibid. 7. For example, a history textbook "should pay greater attention to world history than to the history of either China, India, or the British Empire; but it should not neglect the areas from which the inhabitants of Malaya have come. The riches of Chinese and Indian literature—Confucius, Tang poetry, the Hindu epics, even in translation—are at least as significant for Malayan youth as are most British writers." Ibid. 15-16.

⁷⁷ Ibid. 15.

⁷⁸ Ibid. 11

⁷⁹ Ibid. 40.

of a new nation in which non-Malay cultures and languages have a proper, significant and equal place in a new Malayan culture that would transcend the schisms perpetuated by colonial rule.

Faced with two competing reports on education representing two visions of Malaya, the colonial government largely ignored the Fenn-Wu Report and enacted the 1952 Education Ordinance based almost entirely on the Barnes Report—the only concession it made was to allow the teaching of Tamil or Chinese in National Schools if more than 15 parents requested it.⁸⁰ However, the ordinance could not be implemented because of the “rapidly changing political scene.”⁸¹ The United Malay National Organization (Umno) and the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA), mono-ethnic political parties representing their respective communities, had entered into an electoral partnership that scored victories in several municipal elections, but the key test for this Alliance coalition would be the 1955 General Elections. The coalition, which was expanded to include the Malayan Indian Congress in 1954, won 51 out of 52 seats, thus securing the mandate to negotiate independence terms with the British and to have a strong say in the constitution of the emerging nation. Non-Malay opposition to the Barnes Report and the Education Ordinance of 1952 had been fierce, and were led principally by Chinese educationists through two organizations, the Jiao Zong and the Dong Zong.⁸² The MCA tapped into this anger by aligning itself with their interests and riding their support toward electoral success.⁸³ The MCA, led by conservative wealthy businessmen,

⁸⁰ In response to the Barnes and Fenn-Wu reports, the government convened another committee consisting of 20 members, including four Chinese, to study the dueling recommendations. This *Report of the Central Advisory Committee on Education*, released in September 1951 and sometimes irreverently referred to as the report on the reports, overwhelmingly favored the Barnes recommendations. This “report on the reports” was then taken up by a Special Committee appointed by the Legislative Council of the Federation (the highest legislative body in the colony) made up of 11 Members of Council (with two Chinese members). Its report (i.e. the report on the report on the reports) endorsed the pro-Barnes Central Advisory Committee report, and formed the basis of the Education Ordinance of 1952. Purcell, “The crisis in Malayan education.” 74.

⁸¹ Hon-chan Chai, *Education and nation-building in plural societies : the West Malaysian experience*, Development Studies Centre Monograph Series (Canberra: Development Studies Centre Australian National University, 1977). 23.

⁸² The United Chinese School Teachers’ Association Of Malaysia (or, *Jiao Zong*) was established in 1951, and under the leadership of Lim Lian Geok from 1953, became one of the principal voices speaking out against colonial education policies. The other influential group was the United Chinese School Committees Association (*Dong Zong*), established in 1954. The two groups conducted campaigns, wrote memorandums to the colonial government, made use of the sympathetic Chinese press to put their viewpoints across and pressured Chinese-based political parties to take up their cause. For a fuller treatment on the activities of the two groups during this period and the relationship between them and the MCA, see Heng, *Chinese politics in Malaysia*, 193-200; and Kia Soong Kua, *A protean saga: the Chinese schools of Malaysia*, 3rd ed. (Kuala Lumpur: Dong Jiao Zong Higher Learning Centre, 1990). 48-59.

Political leaders and educationists in the Indian Malayan community also protested the Barnes Report, the Education Ordinance of 1952, and certain provisions of the Razak Report by making their views known in the press and sending memorandums to the government. However, scholars of Indian education in Malaya do acknowledge that it was the Jiao Zong and Dong Zong that took the lead in articulating the non-Malay position during this pre-independence period, R. Santhiram, *Education of minorities : the case of Indians in Malaysia* (Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia: Child Information Learning and Development Centre, 1999). 38-39

⁸³ Liok Ee Tan, “Chinese leadership in Peninsular Malaysia: some preliminary observations on continuity and change,” in *Southeast Asian Chinese: the socio-cultural dimension*, ed. Leo Suryadinata (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1995). 119-120

assured the Chinese educationists that they would use their influence in the Alliance to soften the more radical features of the 1952 laws. It was clear that the colonial government was no longer the singular voice behind domestic policy and it could not advance the 1952 ordinance in the face of a Malayan political coalition with a strong mandate that had different ideas about education policies. Thus, the conversion of vernacular schools to “National Schools” after the passage of the ordinance was confined to Malay schools only.

After its victory in 1955, the Alliance government set up a committee to look into the education system chaired by the Education Minister, Abdul Razak bin Hussain, who was the deputy leader of Umno, and would become the Deputy Prime Minister after independence. Its report,⁸⁴ released in 1956, became the blueprint for the 1957 Education Ordinance that continues today to serve as the cornerstone of education policy in Malaysia. The committee consisted of nine Malay members, five Chinese and one Indian, the majority of whom were Cabinet ministers or Alliance members.⁸⁵ Its task was to “examine the present Education policy of the Federation of Malaya and to recommend any alterations or adaptations that are necessary with a view to establishing a national system of education *acceptable to the people of the Federation as a whole* which will satisfy their needs and promote their cultural, social, economic and political development as a nation, having regard to the intention to make Malay the national language of the country whilst preserving and sustaining the growth of the language and culture of other communities living in the country.”⁸⁶ The wording of the terms of reference and its final recommendations showed that this was the Barnes and Fenn-Wu reports yoked uncomfortably together. Balance and compromise was rife in the language and ideas proposed—on one hand, to make Malay the national language while on the other to preserve and sustain the *growth* of non-Malay cultures and languages. Even when the report stated its “ultimate objective” was to bring the children of all races under a national educational system in which the national language is the main medium of instruction, it attached a caveat when it recognized that “progress toward this goal cannot be rushed and must be gradual.”⁸⁷

To emphasize the need to encompass multiple views and visions within its recommendations, the report self-consciously repeats the phrase *acceptable to the people of the Federation as a whole* multiple times. To that end, it made two recommendations: the first, the establishment of a national primary school system in which two types of schools co-exist—the National Primary School that would use Malay as the medium of instruction, and the National-type school in which the language of instruction may be English, Tamil or Mandarin.⁸⁸ There would also be a single National Secondary School system in which the “question of the language medium of instruction in these schools is

⁸⁴ Federation of Malaya, *Report of the education committee 1956* (Kuala Lumpur: Government Press, 1956).

⁸⁵ Of the five Chinese members, four were from the MCA, including the Assistant Minister for Education. Heng, *Chinese politics in Malaysia*, 241.

⁸⁶ My italics. Federation of Malaya, *Razak Report*, 1.

⁸⁷ Ibid. 3.

⁸⁸ Ibid. 9-10. The original terms used in the Razak Report were Standard and Standard-type Primary Schools but these would be changed to National Primary Schools and National-type Primary Schools (Sekolah Rendah Kebangsaan and Sekolah Rendah Jenis Kebangsaan) under the Education Ordinance of 1957. These terms continue to be in use today.

not a matter of first importance... More than one medium of instruction may be used. There will be sufficient flexibility in the curriculum to allow schools or parts of schools to give special attention to particular Malayan languages and cultures.”⁸⁹

To achieve a Malayan outlook that was a “necessary” aim of the national schools, the committee suggested a common syllabus, its second recommendation. “We cannot over-emphasize our conviction that the introduction of syllabuses common to all schools in the Federation is the crucial requirement of educational policy in Malaya. It is an essential element in the development of a united Malayan nation. It is the key that will unlock the gates hitherto standing locked and barred against the establishment of an educational system “acceptable to the people of Malaya as a whole”. Once all schools are working to a common content syllabus, irrespective of the language medium of instruction, we consider the country will have taken the most important step towards establishing a national system of education which will satisfy the needs of the people and promote their cultural, social, economic, and political development as a nation.”⁹⁰

These two recommendations reflect how much of the Fenn-Wu report the Razak committee had accepted. The Fenn-Wu Report had placed the onus on creating a new Malayan nation not on the teaching of a single national language but on the teaching of a common Malayan-centric syllabus across multiple languages. The Razak Report may have had the rhetoric of ultimately making Malay the single language of instruction in schools, but its recommendations betray the Alliance’s realization that non-Malay cultures and languages needed to form a significant part of the imagined community. Like the phrase *acceptable to the people of the Federation as a whole*, the central role of the common syllabus is re-iterated throughout the report.

English had a prominent role in the Barnes Report and the Razak Report sought to preserve its place in the new post-independence education system. English would be a compulsory subject in all primary schools⁹¹ and, as already noted, could be a medium of instruction in a National-type Primary or National Secondary school. The emphasis on English in 1951 was not surprising since the Barnes Report had been authored by the British colonial government. However, its continued prominence in the Razak Report was unpopular with more radical Malay groups,⁹² who took issue with the prominence

⁸⁹ Ibid. 4

⁹⁰ Ibid. 18

⁹¹ Ibid. 10

⁹² The Umno leadership faced pressures from within and outside the party. Rival Malay political parties such as the Pan-Malayan Islamic Party and the Parti Negara (the latter headed by the first Umno president, Onn Jaafar) staked out positions to the right of the Umno leadership. Within Umno, Tunku Abdul Rahman and top party officials faced constant pressures from the “radical” faction comprising middle-ranking party leaders. The top leaders were mainly from aristocratic backgrounds, were senior civil servants or members of the royalty, and had studied abroad, mainly in England. The radicals were largely from the middle or working classes, had previous exposure to radical Malay nationalist politics, and were drawn from the ranks of teachers, journalists and government clerks. The Tunku tried to control the radical group with varying levels of success by requiring them to submit to party headquarters their responses to major government policies and to the commission drafting the independence constitution, instead of directly to the public. For a fuller account of the intra-Umno tensions that draws from existing scholarship, see Joseph M. Fernando, *The making of the Malayan constitution* (Kuala Lumpur: MBRAS, 2002). 75-81. Malay educationists such as the Federation of Malay Teachers’ Union were lukewarm toward the Education Ordinance of 1952 and the Razak Report because, in their view, it not only did not going far enough to strengthen the position of Malay but was also a cover to ensure the continued dominance of English beyond

accorded to non-Malay cultures and languages—including the language of the colonizer—in the new imagined nation, and who wanted Malay to be the sole language of instruction in schools and the sole national and official language of the nation.⁹³ Still, the report's continued emphasis on English was understandable since a provision in the Constitution allowed English to be used for official purposes for ten years after independence, alongside the sole national language, Malay. The Chief Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman defended the policy by pointing out that an overnight switch to Malay would not be possible because "all records in the Government departments are in English and it is also the language medium in the secondary schools."⁹⁴

The Razak committee had sought to pre-empt these attacks by stating, "we unanimously agreed that our task was the practical one of planning for the immediate future, which might be defined as the next ten years, a period which may be regarded as transitional in Malayan education. Our recommendations should be read in the light of this practical and short-term consideration. We have not looked into the crystal [ball] for a vision of our far posterity."⁹⁵ The emphasis on being practical was intended to signal to the Malay conservatives that these provisions were temporary and subject to change. This tentativeness and reluctance in making any grand statements about a National School system or a national ideology reflected the committee's recognition that the issue of education was an emotive proxy for the meaning of the nation. I also suggest that the Alliance leaders were aware that even though the cobbled-together compromises exemplified in the awkward way the Razak Report tried to yoke the Barnes and Fenn-Wu reports together had served them well in past elections, they were too inherently contradictory to serve as a unifying vision of a future nation.

The Razak Report became the basis of the Education Ordinance of 1957. Despite the fact that non-Malay vernacular schools were in a much better position in 1957 than in 1951 or 1952 under the old Education Ordinance, there was still opposition from Jiao Zong, Dong Zong and other Chinese groups who were seeking to have Chinese declared an official language, on par with Malay. However, Chinese press reaction to the law tended to be more favorable than unfavorable,⁹⁶ which indicated that Chinese opposition was not widespread. Even the Dong Zong acknowledged that the law integrated mother tongue education at the primary level into the national education system and was heartened that the Ordinance dispensed with the phrase "ultimate objective" in its wording.⁹⁷ In 1960, the now independent Alliance government established another committee headed by the new Education Minister Abdul Rahman bin Haji Talib to review the implementation of the Razak Report proposals. The Rahman Talib report⁹⁸ endorsed the Razak proposals and made only one substantive but important change: removing the ambiguity over the medium of instruction in National Secondary schools by

independence. See Santhiram, *Education of minorities*. 39; and Alis Puteh, *Language & nation building : a study of the language medium policy in Malaysia* (Petaling Jaya, Selangor: SIRD, 2006). 82.

⁹³ Sia, "Kedudukan Sekolah Rendah Jenis Kebangsaan Cina dalam sistem pendidikan kebangsaan, 1956-2000." 41.

⁹⁴ "Tengku: Malay only in 10 years," *The Straits Times*, May 2 1956.

⁹⁵ Federation of Malaya, *Razak Report*. 2

⁹⁶ Heng, *Chinese politics in Malaysia*. 242.

⁹⁷ Kua, *A protean saga*. 72-73.

⁹⁸ Federation of Malaya, *Report of the education review committee 1960* (Kuala Lumpur: Government Press, 1960).

recommending that such public schools teach only in the official languages, i.e. Malay and English, and Malay only 10 years after independence.⁹⁹

The Alliance's imagining of a new Malayan nation was less a coherent vision of what the nation would be but more a series of awkward compromises between the political parties that made up the coalition. This uneasy compromise is reflected in the framing of the Constitution. In British Commonwealth countries like Burma, Ceylon, Ghana and Pakistan, local legislators and professionals, either on their own or in partnership with foreign constitutional experts, had drawn up their nations' founding document. The Alliance coalition, however, opted for a wholly non-Malayan commission because it felt that such a body "would be able to avoid local prejudices and perform its task with complete impartiality."¹⁰⁰ However, the commission did not have a free hand in its work—its recommendations were "primarily influenced" and "at times constrained" by the submissions of the Alliance especially on "most of the contentious communal issues."¹⁰¹ After winning an overwhelming mandate in the 1955 general elections, the Alliance government should have felt confident enough to take on the task of drafting the constitution. However, the fact that it needed the defensive cover of a foreign commission to advance its "vision" of Malaya suggests that the "delicate compromises"¹⁰² it hashed out among its constituent members were tenuous, only grudgingly accepted despite the coalition's electoral success, and subject to continued and serious challenges as the reality of the new nation drew near.

Margaret Roff has rightly identified the Razak Report as "the most consequential document in the development of Malayan education"¹⁰³ but, like the Barnes and Fenn-Wu reports, the Razak Report transcends the subject matter by articulating a vision of the nation that touches on all the issues critical to the formation of an independent Malayan nation, society and life. As a foundational document, it is second only to—or, perhaps, as important as—the constitution itself, since the latter deals with generalities while the former gives a glimpse into how the vision of compromises (or the compromised vision?) would work. The Razak Report is schizophrenic—every important recommendation is modified by strong and often contradictory caveats—and this reflects the contortions it had to go through to reconcile the Barnes and Fenn-Wu reports, which was a microcosm of the larger effort to define the nation.

⁹⁹ The report noted that it would "incompatible with an educational policy designed to create national consciousness and having the intention of making the Malay language the national language of the country to extend and to perpetuate a language and racial differential throughout the publicly-financed educational system. ... [We] recommend that education at secondary level paid for from public funds shall be conducted mainly in the medium of one of the two official languages with the intention of ultimately using the national language as the main medium of instruction, except that other languages and literatures may be taught and learnt in their own media. ... It is not possible, within the framework of a policy which is truly national, to satisfy completely all the individual demands of each cultural and language group in the country. We believe that the present system of providing at public expense primary education in each of the four main languages ... goes as far as is reasonably possible for a national Malayan system to go in satisfying the needs of our various peoples." Ibid. 3-4.

¹⁰⁰ Fernando, *The making of the Malayan constitution*. 103. The Reid Commission was made up of members from Britain, India, Pakistan and Australia.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. 98.

¹⁰² Ibid. 98.

¹⁰³ Margaret Roff, "The Politics of Language in Malaya," *Asian Survey* 7, no. 5 (1967). 318.

Conclusion

As noted earlier, the developments in Malayan education from 1945 to 1957, and the various reports associated with them, has been extensively covered by a number of scholars. They have focused on the key educational issues, explored the politics behind them, and examined the main players. However, this re-reading of key post-World War II documents suggests that the contest over the direction of language and education policies had a greater than the subject matters themselves, and that, in fact, language and education were at the core of the definition, conception and construction of the new Malayan/Malaysian nation. In other words and the various ethnic and political groups were involved in a tussle not just over the form of primary and secondary education in Malaya, but the very meaning and basis of the nation.

The recommendation by the Barnes committee on a “National Schools” system was polemical and nationalistic, and reflected one vision of an independent Malaya that was on being anticipated. The non-Malays offered a competing vision that was also expressed within the boundaries of an education report (Fenn-Wu), thereby re-emphasizing the centrality of language and education to this battle over the shape of the nation. The Alliance coalition of Malay, Chinese and Indian political parties embraced the middle ground by bringing these two competing visions of Malaya firstly into their election manifesto and subsequently into another education report, the Razak Report. However, the coalition’s resounding success in the 1955 General Elections masked the reality that these competing visions of Malaya were difficult to reconcile except in an awkward and unsatisfactory manner. Yoking one conception of Malaya in which Malay language, culture and religion was dominant together with another vision that emphasized the equality of all ethnic groups produced not a harmonious compromise but a ticking time-bomb vulnerable to the contradictory tensions within. Ultimately, many Malaysians would reject that vision and the coalition suffered significant losses in the 1969 general elections. The subsequent racial violence represented the failure to contain the inherent tensions within that vision as embodied in the Razak Report and the Constitution of the nation.

This was the vision that the propaganda arms of the newly independent government had to promote and defend. Through campaigns, civics courses, tours, over the air programming and the publication and distribution of materials, the Department of Information and Radio Malaya highlighted the official ideology of a united and harmonious nation while defending the contradictory compromises that made up that vision. Even as they went about wrestling with the issues of language and education as proxies for the meaning of the nation, they had to deal with the problematic of language on another dimension: structural process. Specifically, the propaganda arms had to work through linguistically fractured mediums and processes that problematized and often contradicted the official ideology. Thus, the Department of Information and Radio Malaysia wrestled with centrality of language to the meaning of the nation in both matters of content and its own internal structure.

Language, education and propaganda: 1960-69

The rest of this chapter examines how the Department of Information and Radio Malaya/Malaysia handled the various education and language issues that arose in the 1960s as specific policy issues as well as proxies for the larger contest over the meaning of Malaysia. There were four landmark policies and concerns during the decade: (1) The 1961 Education Act that arose from the Rahman Talib Report of 1960; (2) The question of Malay as the sole National Language; (3) The future role of English as 1967 approached (the Constitution allowed English to be a temporary official language for the 10 years after Malaya achieved independence in 1957),¹⁰⁴ and; (4) The various campaigns run by the Information Services to promote the use of Malay, including the National Language Month. We will also focus on the origins, philosophy, operating procedures, strengths and weaknesses of the channels used by the Information Department and Radio Malaya to deliver their message and services to their audience. These delivery mechanisms were divided and organized along linguistic lines—the Information Department employed Malay Field Officers to reach the Malay community, Chinese Field Officer to reach the Chinese community, and so on, while Radio Malaya/Malaysia operated separate Malay, English, Chinese and Tamil stations in the peninsula, and later another station for the languages of Sabah and Sarawak.

Within this operational framework, we will examine the contradictions that arise from using these language-specific delivery mechanisms. Take for instance the ideological problems that arose from the work of Chinese Field Officers in the Department of Information and Radio Malaya's use of the various Chinese languages. As the propaganda arm of the state, the Information Services had to uphold and promote the official vision of Malaysia, one of its the central planks being the primacy of Malay culture, religion and language. But the Information Services, for practical purposes, had to extensively use non-official languages such the various Chinese languages to deliver the official ideology. These Chinese languages inhabited the interstitial and tension-wracked space in the national imagining—not sanctioned yet not quite exiled. The government recognized their importance by using Mandarin, Cantonese, Hokkien and Hakka to gather, translate and disseminate information, and to deliver services, even as it denied these languages a place in the official imagining of the nation. At the same time, the Alliance coalition—sensitive to the impact of more hardline Malay criticisms on its electoral performance—could not be seen to be overly promoting or celebrating non-Malay languages. This was the quandary the Information Services found itself in, and it was not surprising that they were apologetic when their use of non-official languages was questioned and seemed happier if that use passed by unnoticed. In that manner, the Chinese languages and Tamil came to be non-official semi-official languages, and this tension and contradiction adversely affected the effectiveness of the Information Services.

The structure of the Department of Information and Radio Malaya

The year 1960 was pivotal for both the Department of Information and Radio Malaya. The latter had formally split from Radio Singapore a year before, but because

¹⁰⁴ The second and third issues were related and came to a head during the debate over the enactment of the National Language Act of 1963/1967.

most of the operations, staff and equipment of the colonial-era radio service that served British Malaya were on the island, the independent Radio Malaya still relied heavily on Radio Singapore for much of its programming and technical assistance in 1959. It was only at the beginning of the 1960s that Radio Malaya asserted more independence, producing more of its own shows—including news bulletins—as well as beefing up the number of transmitters throughout the peninsula to enhance coverage.¹⁰⁵ But even as it was going through growing pains, Radio Malaysia kept the structure, philosophy and staff of its colonial-era predecessor intact.

There was also continuity between the colonial and post-colonial versions of the Department of Information in terms of organization, structure, leadership and manpower. However, the government and the senior information bureaucrats determined that a change in philosophy and, consequently, a change in the techniques of propaganda, were needed. The launch of an ambitious rural development program aimed at redressing the economic imbalance between the Malay and non-Malay communities—the Malays overwhelmingly lived in the countryside and were poor—crystallized in the minds of the senior information leaders the inadequacies of the existing operating procedures that had been developed to fight the propaganda battle as part of the larger war against the Communist Party of Malaya in the late 1940s and 1950s. The 1960 reorganization of the department¹⁰⁶ reflected a philosophical move from a war to peacetime footing and to the appropriate operational techniques and expansion strategies to meet these new challenges. The new peacetime mandate, of which the promotion of the rural development program was a top priority, also included teaching the new citizens of a newly independent democracy the nuts and bolts and meaning of citizenship and representative democracy; promoting the state ideology of the nation and nationhood; and explaining other government policies of the day. Operationally, the department hoped to move from quantity to quality. What was now considered ineffective were colonial-era practices such as carpet-bombing the population with leaflets, posters and announcements broadcast by loudspeaker as mobile information units drove through rural areas and small towns. The new emphasis was on small group discussions. “In order to effectively play our role of educating the public and re-orientating them to a national and progressive outlook our own field staff must themselves be re-orientated to the importance of the role.”¹⁰⁷ Field officers were now expected to educate, exhort and inspire the population.

This new mandate—to create citizens by first reorienting individuals toward a national and progressive outlook—resembled the rhetoric found in the Barnes Report which depicted the model national school as a nation-building instrument for the promotion of citizenship. Yet, the delivery mechanism used by the re-invented Department of Information was anything but national and progressive. In fact, it was quite the opposite: colonial and regressive. The senior officers retained the basic structure of the department that was so successful in the war against the communists, including the use of Malay, Chinese and Tamil Field Officers to target their respective ethnic communities.

¹⁰⁵ The separation from Radio Singapore is covered in more detail in the previous chapter, pages 56-57.

¹⁰⁶ This is a summary of the 1960 reorganization covered in greater detail in Chapter 1, pages 15-17.

¹⁰⁷ Ahmad Nordin Md. Zain, “Mobile units: their future role: Paper read by SIO (Field & Training) at the Conference of Information Officers on Saturday 12th March, 1960’, in JP (K/P) 82/60. Role of Field Units

This was not immediately obvious when one examines the key documents relating to the reorganization of the department. The continued reliance on ethnic targeting was only referred to obliquely, and this masked the importance of such linguistically and ethnically specific modes of propaganda delivery. For instance, one memorandum laid out two different types of field units: a mobile team using a vehicle or boat and consisting of a Mobile Cinema Operator and at least one Field Officer; and Roving Field Officers working individually. Each mobile unit would be responsible for a circuit made up of a list of towns, villages and settlements within a geographic area (usually a district)¹⁰⁸, while Roving Field Officers would be given “specific tasks over a period of time and his area of operation must be decided by the [State Information Officer]. In arranging a programme for a roving field officer the SIO should take into consideration the needs of an area and other circumstances prevailing at that time.”¹⁰⁹ There was no mention of the ethnicity of the officers or the racial make-up of the communities they were targeting. However, what became clear in the implementation of the system was that Malay Field Officers attached to mobile units covered a circuit of kampungs while Chinese Field Officers were responsible for Chinese settlements and New Villages. When there were not enough Chinese settlements and New Villages to make up a circuit for a Chinese Field Officer, he would be designated a Roving Field Officer to cover those settlements spread across a wider geographic area. Indian Malaysians made up just 10 per cent of the population, and the rural Indian population was concentrated in settlements along the railway network (which they built) and in plantation estates. There were never enough estates within a geographical area normally covered by a mobile unit, so Tamil Field Officers were almost always roving officers covering a significantly wider ground.¹¹⁰ The department also set up a Railway Unit, made up of at least one Malay and one Tamil Field Officer as well as a film crew, to travel the length of the rail system twice a year to reach those communities. If a mobile unit had more than one Field Officer, the department instructed the Malay and Chinese/Indian Field Officers to conduct “two separate talks for two different groups at a place.”¹¹¹ These officers may have travelled and arrived together at a multi-ethnic destination, but their work still fell strictly along linguistic and racial lines. The task of supervising the field officers’ work was sometimes also implemented along ethnic lines. At the state level, the chain of command was racially-blind: the State Information Officer would supervise his team of District Information Officers, assistant Information Officers and Field Officers regardless of their ethnicity. But when the Federal Headquarters sent senior officers to inspect the work of Field Officers, that inspection was conducted along racial lines, i.e. Malay supervisors evaluating Malay Field Officers, and so on. The Federal office justified this by stating: “You will agree that no single officer in the State can do this. Inspection in this way is bound to be more effective and produce results.”¹¹² In other words, the policymakers in

¹⁰⁸ The nation was divided into states and each state was further divided into districts, administered by a District Officer.

¹⁰⁹ Yaacob bin Latiff, Director of the Information Department, to all State Information Officers, May 25, 1960: “The Role of Field Units.” JP (K/P) 82/60.

¹¹⁰ Another group of roving officers were Female (or “Lady”) Field Officers, responsible for reaching out to housewives and grandmothers.

¹¹¹ Ahmad Nordin Md. Zain, “Mobile units: their future role.” JP (K/P) 82/60.

¹¹² Ahmad Nordin Md. Zain, “Notes of a discussion on “Field Activities” by S.I.O. (Field & Training) at the Information Officers’ Conference on 29th March, 1962.” In PEN (K) 82/60: Role of field units.

the federal Information Department were not confident that a Field Officer's work could be evaluated outside the context of ethnic targeting.

The department had no choice but to persist with this delivery mechanism that was divided along linguistic and racial lines because most rural and semi-urban communities were still largely mono-ethnic. This was a "legacy system"¹¹³ within a "legacy department" that retained many if not all of the same personnel, including its senior leaders. This legacy system had been successful in bringing colonial propaganda to a racially segmented population who had little in common (including the basic questions of where their loyalty lay and the meaning of Malaya in their lives) with each other. But a new official vision of the nation came into force with independence. An operational overhaul more consistent with the new national ideology would be to conduct all propaganda exercises in the sole national language, Malay, and provide for translations whenever necessary. Any Field Officer can visit any community, as long as the language used was Malay. There should have been no problems deploying Chinese or Indian officers to Malay kampungs. Conversely, Malay officers could conduct their work in Chinese New Villages or Indian plantations if they worked with translators. In the latter case, the hierarchy of languages within the new national imagining of Malaya would be obvious.

While this would have been ideologically correct, senior information officers correctly calculated that it would harm the effectiveness of the department since fluency in Malay among non-Malays was still low. The fact that propaganda policymakers did not pursue this path but instead chose to retain the legacy system even as they sought to move the department toward a more national orientation reflected the reality that independent Malaya continued to be a deeply entrenched plural society. The presence of Tamil and Chinese languages in a contradictory non-official yet semi-official limbo mirrored the tension, contradiction and ambiguity of the education system, in which "national" primary education was fully national when the medium of instruction was Malay and partly (or semi) national when it was not. At the same time, because these semi-national schools (officially called National-Type) used non-official languages, they were not fully within the official vision of Malaya/Malaysia as a united and harmonious nation in which Malay was not only destined to be the sole national language but was seen as the language that unites all the ethnic communities. In the reorganization of 1960, the Information Department sought to emphasize different components in its menu of tactics, but for all intents and purposes, its use of the legacy delivery system meant that it continued to function, in the 1960s, as a propaganda organization optimized for a deeply divided plural society. The new "national" philosophy of the department—and in a larger scale, the official ideology of the state—was more aspirational than real.

¹¹³ "Legacy system" is a phrase borrowed from the field of computing and technology, meaning an "obsolete computer system that may still be in use because its data cannot be changed to newer or standard formats, or its application programs cannot be upgraded." "What is legacy system? definition and meaning," <http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/legacy-system.html>. The concept is applicable in non-computing contexts, such as in situations where organizations or groups of people are saddled with older methods or behaviors that are no longer relevant or efficient, but remain in use due to the high cost of or operational challenges in changing to a new method or behavior.

“Chinese”?

A second level of complexity lies in there being not one but four Chinese languages in play. Actually, Chinese Malaysians/Malaysians spoke more than four languages, but the colonial state identified the most-widely spoken languages—Mandarin, Hokkien, Cantonese and Hakka—and built delivery mechanisms around them. This structure was inherited and perpetuated by the independent Malayan government, thus making the four another level of unofficial yet semi-official languages. The presence of these four distinct languages had budgetary, political and operational significance.

Before the late 19th century/early 20th century, most schools in British Malaya were founded by dialect and clan groups teaching in their own languages, a reflection of the keen rivalry between the different Chinese language groups that had been a feature of the “Chinese” community’s presence in Malaya. These distinct groups could hardly understand each other, as contemporary observers noted.¹¹⁴ William Skinner, in his classic work on the Chinese in Thailand, showed how migrant groups from China had a stronger attachment to their regional and linguistic identity than a “national” one during the 19th century. Business competition between Cantonese, Hokkien, Hakka and Teochew groups was intense and there were frequent and often violent and fatal clashes between them. Efforts to engender a nationalist Chinese identity that transcended speech group identity only gathered steam from the early 20th century with the efforts of the late Qing reformers and the establishment of the Republic of China.¹¹⁵ A similar situation existed in Malaya.¹¹⁶ Even when modern Chinese schools, teaching in Mandarin, started taking root in Malaya, these schools were established by different Chinese dialect groups in competition with each other, with the Hokkiens—the predominant group in Singapore—taking the lead in the island.¹¹⁷

The British government had always taken into account this linguistic heterogeneity when dealing with the Chinese. When it established the first government department dealing specifically with the community in 1877, it appointed William Pickering as the Protector of Chinese in part because of his fluency in Hokkien, which he had picked up from his adventures in Formosa and which made him ideally suited for his Singapore base. Victor Purcell, a later successor to Pickering,¹¹⁸ was eventually based in

¹¹⁴ One missionary wrote about her work in Kuala Lumpur: “The Methodist Girls' School is prospering; we have had ninety-four enrolled since examination last November, and sixty-five present during May, 1903. The increase is largely in the lowest class where children of all nationalities come to learn English. I have been obliged to make teachers of my older girls. We have Tamils, Singhalese, Burmese, and several different dialects of Chinese who cannot speak to each other unless they both speak Malay. The lesson in English must be taught in Malay.” Mary C. Meek, “Post-Office Box,” *Woman's missionary friend* XXXV, no. 10 (1903). 378

¹¹⁵ G. William Skinner, *Chinese society in Thailand: an analytical history* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1957). See particularly Chapter 2.

¹¹⁶ Lau Fong Mak, *The dynamics of Chinese dialect groups in early Malaya* (Singapore: Singapore Society of Asian Studies, 1995). 188-189.

¹¹⁷ Ching Hwang Yen, “Hokkien immigrant society and modern Chinese education in British Malaya, 1904-1941,” in *Chinese migrants abroad : cultural, educational and social dimensions of the Chinese diaspora*, ed. Michael W. Charney, Brenda S. A. Yeoh, and Chee Kiong Tong (Singapore: Singapore University Press : World Scientific, 2003). 166-117.

¹¹⁸ From the mid-1920s onwards. Victor Purcell, *The memoirs of a Malayan official* (London,: Cassell, 1965). Chapter 9.

Kuala Lumpur, and not surprisingly was fluent in Cantonese,¹¹⁹ the widest-spoken Chinese language in the federal capital. The colonial state was keenly aware of this diversity and how it impacted education, noting that the Chinese component of the Malayan population came predominantly from “five tribes from Southern China, each speaking its own language,”¹²⁰ a situation which rendered the “confusion worse confounded.”¹²¹ It then cited this heterogeneity as one of the reasons it chose not to sponsor official “Chinese” or Tamil vernacular schools, stressing that it would be an expensive undertaking and would pose “enormous difficulties” operationally. “It would be necessary to provide at least two, and perhaps three, different kinds of instructors for the three prevalent dialects of Chinese; viz., Cantonese, Hokien and Kheh, another for the Tamils, and yet another for the Bengalis.”¹²²

Even as Mandarin began to gain ground as a medium of instruction, it was taught “with varying success. Many of the teachers came from provinces in China where the Mandarin spoken was not pure; the pupils had consequently to separate in their minds *kuo yu* from the particular dialect they spoke at home.”¹²³ It has been noted earlier¹²⁴ that certain Chinese night schools catering primarily to one language group had been a hotbed for communist propaganda. Mandarin had become a political badge for the leftists who “all spoke Mandarin of a sort and were unwilling to speak their own dialect. This was partly to be explained by the fact that many of the leaders were Hailams or Hakkas who wished to lose their slightly ‘un-Chinese’ origin in a common Chinese nationality.”¹²⁵

This multiple Chineseness, nesting within the multiple delivery mechanisms, placed an additional operational burden on Radio Malaya and the Information Department, and was a factor that could not be ignored. In the run up to its separation from Radio Singapore in January 1969, Radio Malaya had asked the State Information Departments to collect views on the programming wish-list of the people.¹²⁶ The responses from Penang—which had a majority Chinese population—were largely in favor of retaining the status quo of having multiple Chinese languages. Many asked Radio Malaya to expand local news in all Chinese dialects and to make sure that these did not overlap with similar programs from Radio Singapore.¹²⁷ In covering news events or producing news features, Radio Malaya’s Chinese Section often had to ensure that it

¹¹⁹ Purcell noted that he could cope adequately with Hokkien and Hakka, but Mandarin was his weakest language. Ibid. 118.

¹²⁰ Elcium, “The system of education in the Straits Settlements.” 135.

¹²¹ Federal Education Office, “The system of education in the Federated Malay States.” 3.

¹²² Kheh and Hokien are derivatives of Hakka and Hokkien. Ibid. 11.

¹²³ Kuo Yu (or Guo Yu in *hanyu pinyin*, 国语, literally National Language) refers to Mandarin. Purcell, *The Chinese in Malaya*. 233.

¹²⁴ See Footnote #99.

¹²⁵ Purcell, *The Chinese in Malaya*. 234. Purcell does not elaborate on what he means by “slightly ‘un-Chinese’ origin.” It is possible that Purcell perceives the Hainanese (Hailams) and the Hakkas to be on the periphery of Chinese life and identity. The Hainanese originated from Hainan Island, which, being off the south-western-most coast of China, is on the physical periphery of China. The Hakkas, meanwhile, have no province to call their own (unlike the Cantonese and the Hokkiens) and are a wandering minority in the southern China.

¹²⁶ F.W. Bastin, Deputy Director, for Director, Information Services, to All S.I.Os. and Dy. S.I.O. Perlis, 7th November, 1958, “Radio Programme.” PEN 540/58: Radio programmes: Radio Federation.

¹²⁷ See responses from Field Officer Chan Lam Lau (December 8, 1958), Yahaya bin Long, O.C. Unit No. 40 (December 5); O.C. Unit 106 (Undated); and O.C. Unit 39 (December 8), in *INF/PP 18 pt. ii: Department of Broadcasting*.

could cover the various dialect speakers either through its own manpower or through translators.¹²⁸

The Department of Information was equally attuned to this “dialect dynamic.” In the hiring process,¹²⁹ potential Chinese field staff sat for written and oral tests before being selected for interviews. The written test included translation from Romanized Malay to Chinese, and vice-versa, and simple composition in English. The oral component tested their conversational skill in Malay, Mandarin and three other Chinese languages—Hokkien, Cantonese and Hakka. Apart from knowledge of Mandarin and two of these Chinese languages, candidates had to be able to speak Malay “with some proficiency,” have knowledge of national affairs, customs and traditions and have experience in public speaking and public relations. Knowledge of English and some experience in journalism would have been an advantage.¹³⁰ However, it was fluency in Chinese languages that was critical. Many small rural and semi-urban Chinese communities were relatively homogeneous linguistically and thus Field Officers would need to speak their language in order to establish trust and legitimacy. In putting together civics courses,¹³¹ the department targeted specific groups within specific languages: for example, courses for 40 female hairdressers and seamstresses, 80 trade union members of Chinese guilds in the capital Kuala Lumpur and Port Klang; and 400 members of various Chinese associations were held in Cantonese.¹³² Field Officers also reported that entire villages would tend to vote opposition if the local opposition leader came from the same language group.¹³³

When a Chinese Field Officer did not have the requisite language skills to speak to a community, the results were disastrous. One complainant noted that an officer had begun his talk in Mandarin before suddenly changing into broken Hokkien and finally concluding in broken Cantonese. The result was that the mainly Hokkien speaking audience “understood nothing” and the writer asked the department to send someone who could speak that language “to maintain good relation [sic] between the people and the

¹²⁸ For example, in producing a news feature marking the official end of the Emergency, the head of the Chinese Service sought the help of the head of the Penang State Information Office to arrange for interviews in Cantonese, Hakka and Mandarin. Leong Teng Sin, Head Chinese Service, Radio Malaya, to SIO Penang and DO Bukit Mertajam, P.W., May 30, 1960, “Recording Trip to P.W.” *INF/PP 18 pt. ii*.

¹²⁹ Details of the recruitment process and minimum requirements for Field Officers in general is explored in details in Chapter 1, pages 27-28.

¹³⁰ Text of recruitment advertisement, drafted on September 13, 1961 to be run in Chinese newspapers. *PEN 696/60 pt. IV SJ 62*.

¹³¹ These are two to three day courses for about 30-50 participants in which they visit various state and federal departments, museums, stadiums as well as social organizations; hear lectures on topics such as the structure of governance, the constitution, citizenship, and key policies on education, rural development among others. The participants range from high school students to teachers, community and youth leaders, village heads, women, religious leaders, trishaw pullers, barbers, shopkeepers, drivers – the list is fairly varied. While the content is fairly standard, the department often used to occasion to address some pressing local issues, often to do with inter-ethnic/religious tensions or perceived deviant Islamic sects. For a detailed treatment of civics courses, see Chapter 1, pages 20-26.

¹³² These courses were held in Selangor state on, respectively, June 22 and 30, 1959 and July 15, 1960. *PEN 217/59* and *PEN 189/60*.

¹³³ An officer attributed one village’s support for the opposition Socialist Front to “clannish inclination.” Report for October 1962: Chinese Field Officer Lim Kheak Teong to State Information Officer, Johore; November 3, 1962. *PEN 524/62A*.

Government.”¹³⁴ In operational terms, the categories “Cantonese,” “Hokkien” and “Hakka” had more relevance than “Chinese,” although in the public discourse, political actors found it more useful to treat these ethnic categories as monoliths.¹³⁵

The need to consider multiple languages in the delivery of propaganda complicated routine bureaucratic practices like training and reporting. As noted above, Chinese officers were expected to have some proficiency in Malay, but in reality, that expectation was probably often waived. Chinese Field Officers, hired mainly for their fluency in Mandarin and other Chinese languages, would have gone through the Chinese vernacular school system, in which the teaching of Malay and English, though mandatory, was poor. Special provisions had to be made for them in training courses, which were run in English and Malay (mainly English in the early post-independence years). In preparation for its 1960 reorganization, the Department of Information conducted six two-week refresher courses from 1958 to 1959 in which 199 front-line officers attended.¹³⁶ The training supervisor noted that a number of Chinese and Malay Field Officers understood little English. One session was reserved entirely for Malay officers with the weakest English: during those two weeks, most of the lectures and talks were conducted in Malay instead of English and the officers were also permitted to answer their tests in Malay. Chinese officers weak in English were grouped together in another session and provided a translator who summarized the main points of the classes for them. They were permitted to take their tests in a mixture of English and Chinese.¹³⁷ The reliance on English as the language of bureaucracy could not be avoided but this ran counter to the post-independence policy of promoting Malay as the National Language, which led senior department officers to continually urge front-line officers to use Malay “wherever possible,”¹³⁸ even as its non-Malay officers were hired to conduct their work in their own languages while being trained in English.

Impartiality, credibility and the Special Section

The Department of Information, from pre-colonial days, had been mindful of the need to appear impartial in carrying out its work. In order for its message to be delivered effectively, the people—its target audience—must find its officers credible and

¹³⁴ Liew T. Leng to Director, Information Service, June 22, 1960. The department investigated the matter and cleared its officer, although it is unclear whether this exoneration was an exercise to paper over an operational blunder. *PEN* 463/60.

¹³⁵ According to Charles Hirschman, “modern ‘race relations’ in Peninsular Malaysia, in the sense of impenetrable group boundaries, were a byproduct of British colonialism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Prior to 1850 inter-ethnic relations among Asian populations were marked by cultural stereotypes and occasional hostility, but there were also possibilities for inter-ethnic alliances and acculturation. Direct colonial rule brought European racial theory and constructed a social and economic order structured by ‘race’.” Charles Hirschman, “The Making of Race in Colonial Malaya: Political Economy and Racial Ideology,” *Sociological Forum* 1, no. 2 (1986): 330; and Charles Hirschman, “The Meaning and Measurement of Ethnicity in Malaysia: An Analysis of Census Classifications,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 46, no. 3 (1987).

¹³⁶ “Report on the Refresher Courses for Assistant Information Officers and Field Officers held at Segenting, Port Dickson, from November 3, 1958 to March 7, 1959. By Ahmad Nordin Md Zain, Ag. Senior Information Officer (Field & Training).” *PEN* 551/58.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.* This is not to say that the Chinese officers who attended the other four sessions had a good command of English. Their test scores are available, but not individual answer sheets, so it is impossible to know if poor scores are due to a deficiency in knowledge or language difficulties.

¹³⁸ “Minutes of meeting of the SIOs Conference 2nd & 3rd Feb. 61.” *INF* 192/61.

trustworthy. The need for impartiality crystallized in the 1950s when a series of municipal elections were held, culminating in the 1955 general elections. Much of the work in the run-up to polling day involved spreading basic and useful information like how to vote (with an X and not a tick, for example), to educating the public on the basics of nationhood, including the arms of government, the concept of citizenship, representative democracy and so on.¹³⁹

A 1954 circular addressing the issue stressed that “civil servants in responsible positions should not indulge in political or party controversy lest by doing so they should appear no longer the disinterested advisers or officers of their Departments or able impartially to execute the policy of the Government.”¹⁴⁰ The circular placed civil servants into two groups: lower-ranked bureaucrats (mechanics, telephone operators, storekeepers, laboratory assistants, light keepers, daily-rated officers and so on) and mid- to higher-ranked officers (called Group B officers). The former (except members of the armed forces and the police) was allowed to take part in political activities outside of their official working hours. The second group was required to “maintain a reserve in political matters and must not associate themselves prominently with the affairs of a political party.” They may join a political party but cannot hold office. The circular prohibited them from speaking in public on political controversies; writing letters to the press on such matters; publishing books or articles or circulating leaflets setting forth their views on party political matters; or engaging in canvassing support for candidates during elections. However, these restrictions would ultimately prove to be toothless. The government gave a blanket exemption to those who were on leave prior to retirement.¹⁴¹ For the other Group B officers, the circular allowed a “temporary” suspension of those prohibitions if those officers obtained permission from the head of the civil service. These exemptions were repeatedly renewed after the 1955 elections—with some tightening and loosening of specific details¹⁴²—and were in place past the 1969 general elections.

The Information Department—more sensitive to the link between its officers’ propaganda work and politics—could not afford such wiggle room. “It should be clear, but it cannot be too often stressed, that Information Services must retain a completely

¹³⁹ A more detailed discussion on the role of the Information Department during the 1955 general elections is in Chapter 1, pages 17-19.

¹⁴⁰ Federal Government, “F.E.O. Circular No. 4 of 1954, Political activities of government servants”, dated September 18, 1954. F.E.O. 126/46/3. In *INF J 137/54*. These instructions were to take effect from October 1954.

¹⁴¹ They had to obtain permission from the head of the civil service, must do nothing that is inconsistent with their duty as government servants or with their loyalty to the Queen or to their Sultans and cannot reveal to their party information obtained in the course of their duty as government servants. F.E.O. Circulars No. 4 of 1955, dated May 4, 1955. *INF J 137/54*.

¹⁴² They were prohibited from serving as polling agents, but were allowed to lend their personal cars—though not official cars with official government markings—to transport voters on polling day as long as it did not involve “prominent association with a political party” and if the officer was not the driver. (See F.E.O. Circulars No. 5 and No. 11 of 1955, dated May 20 and July 4 respectively.) In 1956, the temporary suspension of the rule prohibiting Group B officers from engaging in politics was renewed but they were now prohibited from holding the highest posts (chairman, vice-chair, secretary or treasurer) of a political party (F.E.O. Circular No. 30 of 1956, December 1, 1956). *INF J 137/54*. In 1969, the government was as concerned with civil servants’ indebtedness and bankruptcies affecting their credibility as with their involvement in politics, even as the provisions in the earlier circulars were renewed. *PEN/NS 41/69: Arahan daripada ibu pejabat*.

objective attitude towards Malayan politics and hold completely aloof from party politics,” a senior officer instructed in 1954.¹⁴³ At the same time, senior department officers acknowledged that the very nature of the work by even the most scrupulous field officer would open him up to criticism of being politically partial.¹⁴⁴ Certainly, Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Razak bin Hussain was aware of this tension. When he addressed the participants of the 1959 refresher courses for the field staff, he stressed that government servants must not only explain the Government’s policies but also defend them, if necessary. At the same time, he warned officers against any overt participation in politics, reminding them that the facilities of the mobile unit must not be used for electioneering or any other purposes of a political party.¹⁴⁵ Senior information officers, obviously aware of the difficulty in balancing advocacy and impartiality, made some attempts to curb the more politically minded or less subtle field staff. For example, in one internal evaluation not meant for public consumption and thus not subject to public relations spin, a Temporary Field Officer was praised for being a good speaker but also chided for being “inclined to stray into politics when giving his talks.”¹⁴⁶

It appeared, however, that there were occasions, especially when elections drew near, that this rhetorical commitment to impartiality was more honored in the breach than in its observance. Ratnam and Milne note that the Alliance coalition benefitted “a great deal”¹⁴⁷ from the co-operation given to it by the Department of Information during the 1964 general elections. The department printed a number of posters extolling the virtues of the government in providing a variety of amenities, services and improvements to the people—for example, religious education and pilgrimages, the telephone service, health, rural development, electrification, education, the building of mosques and prayer houses, and the promotion of Quran reading competitions. On one hand, these posters could be seen as apolitical. Certainly many of these posters, leaflets and pamphlets contain information that was useful to its target audience. At the same time, Malaya/Malaysia was still a young democratic nation in the 1960s, and the need to educate the public about basic services and democratic practices was still pressing. Even up till the 1969 general elections—the fourth in Malaya/Malaysia and held 13 years after independence—the voting public was still mishandling the ballot papers.¹⁴⁸ The government could also be

¹⁴³ F.W. Bastin, Assistant Director (Field), for Director-General, Information Services, to all State Information Officers and Assistant Information Officers (copies for Field Officers), 29th June, 1954. *INF J* 137/54.

¹⁴⁴ “If, for instance, in stating the facts of a constitutional situation we controvert a political party which is misrepresenting facts or relying on public ignorance of facts, we may—speciously but convincingly—be accused of being “anti” that party. Moreover, any inquiries we may make (as part of our function as a two-way channel between people and Government) regarding reaction to any development may be represented as our opposing or supporting such development.” Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ “Report on the Refresher Courses for Assistant Information Officers and Field Officers held at Segenting, Port Dickson, from November 3, 1958 to March 7, 1959. By Ahmad Nordin Md Zain, Ag. Senior Information Officer (Field & Training).” *PEN* 551/58.

¹⁴⁶ “Chin Kee Onn, State Information Officer, Pahang, to HQ, Information Department, March 2, 1959.” *PEN* 567/58. Chin was sending the weekly reports for January 1959 by temporary Field Officer Austaz Mahyuddin bin Hussain and appending his evaluation of Austaz Mahyuddin’s work.

¹⁴⁷ K. J. Ratnam and R. S. Milne, *The Malayan parliamentary election of 1964* (Singapore,: University of Malaya Press, 1967). 179.

¹⁴⁸ That was the first time elections to the state and federal legislatures were held simultaneously, and some voters in the rural and semi-urban areas would discard one of the two ballot papers, thinking they were

justified in saying that highlighting the social and economic progress Malaya had achieved would foster pride in the nation and encourage unity among the citizens in the face of Indonesian hostilities and propaganda during the first half of the 1960s.

However, these informational material crossed the line from subtle advocacy to overt support for the ruling coalition with the insertion of the tagline “Support Tengku” that accompanied most of these posters and the prominence of phrases such as “Since the Alliance came to power in 1955 ...”¹⁴⁹ It was also “a not uncommon practice” for local Alliance leaders to contact the Information Department for “various kinds of information and help,” and the opposition even complained that the latter would schedule its visits to rural communities—complete with the popular film shows—to coincide with opposition rallies.¹⁵⁰ Despite the obviously partisan role played by the Department of Information, opposition leaders made few explicit complaints about the breach of impartiality, as if some of them considered it natural for the party in office to enjoy such advantages.¹⁵¹

In order to solve the problem of this tension between impartiality and advocacy, the government set up the Special Section within the Information Department to conduct more overt political propaganda and intelligence gathering, and to put some distance between that and the regular work done by Field Officers. The Special Section is the only addition to the colonial Information Services after Malaya achieved her independence. According to Wan Abdul Kadir Ismail, the first head of the Special Section, the government saw the need for this section in late 1959 when it found that the “religious feelings of the Malays had been dangerously exploited by certain political elements for plain political gains.”¹⁵² Wan Abdul Kadir identified the new task in the post-independence era as “winning the hearts of the people [so that they can] contribute in every possible way in the construction of the new nation, in the gigantic efforts of the development of the country, and in building a united, soundly enlightened, nation.” The Special Section’s role was to “go deep into the peoples’ hearts, in order to win them. These efforts should be adjusted to their psychology and their frame of mind.” Since religion was “always an enormously influential factor” among the Malays, Wan Abdul Kadir noted that the Special Section needed men and women “of a special background of knowledge and preparedness, ... who have good knowledge of Islamic religion, ... well-versed in Malay customs and traditions and have thorough understanding of the psychology of the Malays, full of initiative and drive, and, if possible, with a sound political insight and experience.”¹⁵³ Wan Abdul Kadir assumed his position in June 1960, and the first Special Section officers, called Field Assistants to distinguish them from the regular Field Officers, began work in January 1961.

duplicates. Karl Von Vorys, *Democracy without consensus : communalism and political stability in Malaysia* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975). 295-296.

¹⁴⁹ Ratnam and Milne, *The Malayan parliamentary election of 1964*. 179-181.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid. 185.

¹⁵¹ Ibid. 181.

¹⁵² The report noted that these “certain political elements” “thrived on the fondness of the Malays for their religion and their ignorance of real teachings of Islam concerning non-Muslims, preaching hatred and enmity against non-Muslim citizens of the country, as well as against interracial harmony and cooperation.” Wan Abdul Kadir Ismail, December 29, 1961, “Special Section”. Report presented at the Senior Information Officers’ conference, 1961, 1. *PEN (K/P) 84/61 Bahagian Khas*.

¹⁵³ Ibid. All quotes from page 1.

At first glance, it appears that the Special Section focused on religious instead of political work. However, the reference to “certain political elements” alluded to the Pan-Malayan Islamic Party (PMIP/PAS), which had been providing a stiff critique of the coalition’s policies and gaining ground in rural areas. Furthermore, the report noted that the Field Assistants with political experience had proved to be “very seasoned with the work in the Special Section, and have more grasp with the psychology of the masses.”¹⁵⁴ Also, they had contributed “in their own way of work, [to] the favourable results of local elections for the Central Government. And this is definitely a measure of success of any field worker in the Department.”¹⁵⁵ Who were these officers with “political insight and experience” in addition to religious knowledge? It turns out that among the first 35 Field Assistants and Senior Field Assistants hired, many had been members of Umno or had worked for senior Umno leaders.¹⁵⁶

The Field Assistants were to make meticulous surveys of their areas of responsibility, to assess the political situation and attitude of the people and their problems, and to prepare a map of that area that showed “places of importance [and] means of communications.”¹⁵⁷ Intelligence gathering was a key component of their work. They were asked to report on the progress of development projects, activities that are harmful to national interests, the relationship between the people and the government, the effectiveness of social welfare organizations, to ascertain the extent to which citizens understood and supported (or opposed) government policies and, lastly, to report on the general political situation of the area.¹⁵⁸ The Special Section was soon expanded to include a Chinese unit.¹⁵⁹

One example of the close-knit operational relationship between Special Section officers and the ruling coalition was this exchange between the Department of Information and Umno Negeri Sembilan. The Information Secretary of Umno Negeri Sembilan had petitioned the party Secretary-General, who was also the Assistant Minister for Information and Broadcasting, to get the Information Department to visit villages throughout the year, and not just during elections, so that the opposition would not be able to accuse Umno of using the department for campaigning purposes. The Umno Secretary-General-cum-Assistant Minister for Information and Broadcasting then forwarded the request to his subordinate, the head of Special Section, who replied that officers do indeed visit villages year round but because of manpower shortages, the frequency of the visits was low. However, to allow greater coordination between the department and the party, Wan Abdul Kadir Ismail said he would instruct the Negeri

¹⁵⁴ Ibid. 5.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid. 4.

¹⁵⁶ For example, of the 23 candidates shortlisted for interviews for three Special Section positions in Kedah, all had strong religious backgrounds and one was the chief of an Umno division and head of the Umno information department for western Kedah. Of the four successful candidates out of 23 interviewees for positions in Kelantan and Terengganu, one had stood twice for council elections on an Umno ticket while another, whose political experience not noted, was hired despite having a poor personality. *PEN 653/62: Special Section—candidates selected for appointment as Field Assistant.*

¹⁵⁷ Wan Abdul Kadir Ismail, “Special Section”. 3.

¹⁵⁸ Soon Cheng Hor, for Director, Information Department, June 19, 1961, “Tugas Permulaan Pembantu Luar.” *PEN/NS 62/61.*

¹⁵⁹ Wan Abdul Kadir Ismail, “Special Section”. 3.

Sembilan information office to send a copy of the Malay Field Officers' and Assistants' itineraries to all Umno/Malay MPs and State Assemblymen in Negeri Sembilan.¹⁶⁰

Slanting the message and the messengers' slant

One of the main problems the propaganda services faced was promoting government policies to a deeply divided plural society that was only beginning to build commonalities across the racial divide. The ruling Alliance coalition functioned on the basis of compromise and balancing the contending agendas of its constituent parties that largely represented communal agendas. As such, government initiatives also tended to reflect a sense of balance and compromise, or sought to embrace conflicting agendas without resolving the contradictions (such as the education and language policies). Such policies could be perceived to be promoting a sectional interest, and these ran the risk of generating opposition from rival groups while policies trying to appease all the ethnic communities often ended up being viewed with suspicion by all.

The Department of Information sought to overcome this problem by teaching field officers "how to introduce slants in their talks, so that there will be a Malay angle to their talks when speaking to a Malay audience, a Chinese angle for a Chinese audience and so on."¹⁶¹ The senior officer in charge of field activities, Ahmad Nordin bin Mohammad Zain, stated: "I do not have to emphasise how very important this technique is in our work. Its effectiveness depends on how good we are at this game. ... We had not paid sufficient attention to the need for slanting our publicity"¹⁶² The terms "slant," "slanting" and "angle" dominate Ahmad Nordin's memorandum, which was also filled with practical examples on how to spin the message, including one related to the constitutional amendments of 1962. The government, through these amendments, had repealed the provision that granted automatic citizenship to anyone born in Malaya. In its place, a person born in Malaya would be granted citizenship if one of his parents was a citizen or permanently resident in the federation at the time of his/her birth. If he or she did not fulfil that requirement, the person can still be a citizen if the denial of Malayan citizenship meant that he or she would be stateless, i.e. not a citizen of any country. The expected implication of that amendment was that fewer Chinese compared to other racial groups would become citizens and "find their way on to the electoral roll."¹⁶³ Ahmad Nordin then instructed his officers that, to the Malays, "the line to take is that the amendments are a further proof of the government's determination to plug loopholes and flaws in the Constitution. To the others, however, it is necessary to assure them that the government did not intend to penalize those who are true and loyal to the country and that

¹⁶⁰ See Taha bin Talib, Setia Usaha Perhubungan Umno, Negeri Sembilan, to Syed Jaafar Albar, Setia Usaha Agong Umno, dated 21st December 1962. "Tugas Jabatan Penerangan (Bhg Ugama Persekutuan Tanah Melayu)", Syed Jaafar Albar, Setia Usaha Agong Umno, to Wan Abdul Kadir bin Ismail, Ketua Jabatan Khas, Jabatan Penerangan P.T.M., dated 11th January 1963. "Pegawai-pegawai Luar Agama", and Wan Abdul Kadir bin Ismail, Ketua, Bahagian Khas, b.p. Pengarah, Jabatan Penerangan, Persekutuan Tanah Melayu, to Setia Usaha Agong Umno Malaya, dated 24th January 1963. "Pegawai-pegawai luar Bahagian Khas." *PEN NS* 20/62.

¹⁶¹ Ahmad Nordin Md. Zain, "Notes of a discussion on "Field Activities" by S.I.O. (Field & Training) at the Information Officers' Conference on 29th March, 1962." 4. *PEN (K)* 82/60

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ L. A. Sheridan, "Constitutional Problems of Malaysia," *The International and Comparative Law Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (1964). 1362.

the action was taken to protect the interests of Malaysians.”¹⁶⁴ In other words, to the groups most adversely affected by the amendment, the Field Officers were to downplay the nature and effect of the amendments, and to emphasize the conciliatory rhetoric of government leaders.

To help achieve the correct slanting of the message and to regularize the work of the officers across the nation, the department sent out monthly “Field Publicity Programmes” which list, in order of priority, the topics to be covered, the angles to take where appropriate, the resources to use (specific Press Releases, Background Notes, Talking Points, posters, etc.) and the films to show. The first Field Publicity Programme (FPP) was released for July 1960¹⁶⁵ [see Figure 3.1] as part of the reorganization of that year. Topics were divided into three categories: (A) Subjects which the Federal Government require to be publicised; (B) Subjects aimed at educating the people in the basic requirements of nation building and citizenship; and (C) Newstalks on developments/events and any matters considered newsworthy for the information of the people. Category A, the largest category, listed the important issues of the day that required publicizing, and thus had a rotating list of topics. This formed the bulk of Field Officers’ day to day propaganda work, and we discern from this list what the government considered important and needed addressing on the ground. Category B, a much shorter list, was reserved for important national issues that were not time-sensitive or tied to any particular policies. With rare exceptions, “Unity amongst the various races living in Malaya and un-divided loyalty to Malaya”¹⁶⁶ was the sole item under Category B until the FPP format was changed from September 1962. Field Officers may or may not address this topic directly in their work, but the theme was often woven into discussions on issues listed in Category A. Category C was reserved for less important items or topics that were being introduced on a smaller scale that would likely become important later (for example, the formation of Malaysia).

In the first Field Publicity Programme (FPP), three subjects came under Category A—Rural Development Plan (Second Five-Year Plan), New Identity Cards and Anti-Corruption. By the next FPP, the Rahman Talib Report,¹⁶⁷ which had been scheduled for publication that month, had made it into Category C and remained on the radar until October. The November FPP¹⁶⁸ was the first to include slants, and the subject that required racially-sensitive propaganda work was, not surprisingly, the Rahman Talib Report, which had moved up to become the second item under Category A. The department instructed its Field Officers to emphasize seven points: (a) the aim of the report was nation-building; (b) free primary education for all; (c) raising of school-leaving age; (d) continuation schools; (e) better opportunities for employment as a result of examinations conducted in Malay or English at secondary level; (f) Education in the

¹⁶⁴ Ahmad Nordin Md. Zain, “Notes of a discussion on “Field Activities” by S.I.O. (Field & Training) at the Information Officers’ Conference on 29th March, 1962.” 4. *PEN (K)* 82/60

¹⁶⁵ Serial No. 1/60. *PEN (K)* 82/60

¹⁶⁶ Under this topic, officers were instructed to emphasize (a) Understanding of each o others’ way of life, customs and religions, and (b) spirit of tolerance.

¹⁶⁷ Field Publicity Programme for the month of August, Serial No. 2/60. *PEN (K)* 82/60. The Rahman Talib Report was the report published by the Education Review Committee chaired by the Minister for Education and which largely endorsed the Razak Report of 1956. The Rahman Talib Report of 1960 became the basis of the Education Act of 1961.

¹⁶⁸ Field Publicity Programme for the month of November, Serial No. 5/60. *PEN (K)* 82/60

national language will be free throughout the school system; and (g) Islamic religious instruction in assisted school for the first time.¹⁶⁹ Items (a) to (d) were general or technical points suitable for the public at large. For items (f) and (g), the last two points, the FPP stated that these were “for Malay audience only.”¹⁷⁰ This slanting is understandable for item (g): The department probably felt (justifiably) that highlighting the presence of Islamic classes in national-type schools teaching in Mandarin and Tamil might not go down well with the non-Malay communities. But the slanting for item (f)—Education in the national language will be free throughout the school system—is less obvious. Why was this not suitable for non-Malay audiences? After all, using Malay (the National Language) in the education system was already a given, and the point of it being free was hardly new since schools were now fully or partially-government aided and primary education was free. In fact, it could be seen as a positive for everyone. I suggest that since the Information Department was the one government agency that had boots on the ground, it was sensitive to sentiments of the various groups it encounters every day, and in this instance, judged that highlighting a seemingly innocuous reference to the ubiquity of the National Language might provoke negative sentiments from groups unhappy about the non-ubiquity of other languages.

There was also one item meant for non-Malay ears, which was item (e)—“better opportunities for employment as a result of examinations conducted in Malay or English at secondary level.” Although the Rahman Talib and Razak reports were almost identical, there was one small yet significant difference. The newer report resolves the ambiguity over secondary schools by recommending government withdrawal of support for Chinese-medium secondary schools and institutionalizing a single National Secondary School system (as opposed to the dual National and National-type Primary School system). The medium of instructions in all government secondary schools would now be in English or Malay (and subsequently, only in Malay) and all examinations would be conducted in the official languages. Thus, it was not surprising that the department chose to highlight the positive economic effects of this change—“better opportunities for employment”—to non-Malays. What the department obviously did not want to do was to tell Malays, who had higher poverty rates and were lagging significantly behind non-Malays in terms of education and wealth, that the education policy was going to economically benefit non-Malays even more.

By April 1961, the department had dropped the last two, Malay-only items, and began to focus much more on the Chinese community.¹⁷¹ In September, this shift became more pronounced in anticipation of the parliamentary debate over and enactment of the Education Act the following month. The department instructed its officers to “(a) continue to prove with all available facts and figures that the Government’s intention, far from destroying Chinese language and culture, is in fact helping Chinese education; (b) [stress that the] Rahman Talib Report is no different from the Razak Report; and (c) [highlight the] Minister of Education’s statement that the Government will not concede demands to have public examinations in Chinese and make Chinese an official

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ The FPP noted that propaganda regarding the Rahman Talib Report should be targeted “particularly among the Chinese.” Field Publicity Programme for the month of April 1961, Serial No. 10/60. *INF* 664/60.

language.”¹⁷² More importantly, the department stated that these were applicable to Chinese audiences only, reflecting the intense debate on the ground among that community. The heated debate over the passage of the Bill in October hogged the headlines¹⁷³ and the Information Department continued to target the Chinese community until early 1962. By then, the publicity campaign on the Education Act reverted to a more comprehensive coverage, but other education and language issues specific to Chinese concerns kept surfacing and re-surfacing throughout the 1960s, suggesting that the rumblings on the ground persisted.

The question of education and/or national language would be one of the main propaganda subjects for the department, and featured prominently—with rare exceptions—on the Field Publicity Programmes throughout the decade. A close examination of these FPPs, seemingly routine and mundane documents, provides insight into the issues being discussed in coffee shops, streets, mosques and in other everyday situations. Field Officers used these FPPs as the basis of their face-to-face propaganda work, and then wrote daily and weekly reports on the effectiveness of the message. This feedback, together with the government’s agenda, determined the content of subsequent FPPs. Press reports also give a sense of what was happening on the ground, but because the media, like the rest of the nation, was also divided along linguistic lines, it often reflected the concern of one particular group.¹⁷⁴ For instance, a reader who only read newspaper reports from one, or even two, linguistic media streams would not gain a full picture of what was happening on the ground, especially in rural and semi-urban areas. The Department of Information however was concerned with the nation as a whole, and the FPP, together with the field staff’s reports, formed a more coherent picture of how issues and concerns were being played out. The irony is that even as the department captured the multiplicity of views and concerns of this ethnically divided nation in its internal intelligence and operational documents, it continued to pursue propaganda strategies, like slanting the message, and linguistically diverse delivery mechanisms that were inherited from the colonial era, that perpetuated the very ethnic divisions it was supposed to overcome.

Even as the department took pains to tailor different angles for different ethnic groups, it also worried about how the biases and views of its own Field Officers, specifically non-Malay officers, would shape the delivery of the message. Slanting the message was acceptable, even required. What it did not want was the officer’s own slant to the message. This concern was captured in the code words “Malayan” and the reminders that officers had to be loyal. We have seen how the Barnes and Fenn-Wu reports had different definitions of “Malayan.” The Fenn-Wu Report asserts that there is no such thing as Malayan culture or way of thinking, at least in the early 1950s when the report was published. Malayan culture would eventually emerge from a natural mingling

¹⁷² Field Publicity Programme for the month of September 1961, Serial No. 13/60. *INF 664/60*.

¹⁷³ See “Offer to schools ‘proof of Govt’s sincerity’,” *The Straits Times*, October 20 1961; “An education system to suit the nation and please parents—by Rahman Talib,” *The Straits Times*, October 20 1961; “Controversial Education Bill passed,” *The Straits Times*, October 21 1961; “Teachers who fear losing their certificates and jobs,” *The Straits Times*, October 21 1961.

¹⁷⁴ For example, when the colonial government announced the terms of reference for the Fenn-Wu mission before the arrival of the two American educationists in 1951, the English-language press barely mentioned the terms or covered much of the controversy it generated. The Chinese press however gave it extensive coverage.

of different cultures over time. If these distinct cultures—Malay, Chinese and Indian—continued to look inward (or outward to China and India), they are un-Malayan. Even Malay culture and nationalism can be un-Malayan if it only emphasized a Malay homeland. On the other hand, for the Barnes Report, Malayan was a simple substitute for Malay, and a Malayan nation and culture was a Malay nation based largely on a Malay culture that accommodated, to a limited extent, non-Malay communities and culture. In that worldview, it would be impossible for Malay culture to be un-Malayan.

The official vision of post-independence Malaya did not resolve the contradictions between these two competing visions, but yoked them uncomfortably and in a permanent state of tension under one roof. We see this in the inner workings of the Department of Information and Radio Malaya. In speaking at the Senior Information Officers' Conference in February 1961, the Assistant Minister for Information and Broadcasting, Syed Jaafar Albar, took the opportunity to expand on the weakness of the department and its officers. After going through a long list of deficiencies, he noted that there were still not enough Field Officers to assign to every district in the nation, and suggested absorbing some of the Field Assistants from the newly established Special Section into the larger corps of Field Officers. Regarding the men and women from the Special Section, he said the Malay Field Assistants "will have the duty of trying to change the outlook and the way of thinking of the Malays. The Chinese and Indian Officers of the section must be truly Malayan in spirit so that they will be able to work among their own people and try to orientate their thinking to a Malayan way of life."¹⁷⁵ The assistant minister also "warned about the dangers of *emotionalism* [my emphasis] and the need for the Field staff to have a Malayan outlook before we can achieve the highly important task of nation building. Hence, one of the criteria of appointment of Field Officers would be persons with Malayan outlook ... [who] would be genuinely interested in the work and personally believes in the policies of the Government and not pay lip service to it."¹⁷⁶ The preceding two quotes come from two different drafts of the final minutes, which framed the Assistant Minister's words slightly differently: "...Chinese Field Officers and Indian Field Officers must have a Malayan outlook, possess the missionary spirit and believe in what they have to disseminate before they can carry out their duties efficiently."¹⁷⁷

What does the Assistant Minister mean here by "Malayan?" Was he channeling Barnes or Fenn-Wu? It has to be noted that Syed Jaafar Albar identifies the main mission of the Special Section field staff, regardless of ethnicity, as being agents of change. The Malay Field Assistants were tasked with changing the outlook of the Malays. The non-Malay officers were also to be agents of change, but their work was additionally placed within a Malayan versus non-Malayan context. Thus, the Malayanness of Malays was not a problem. At the same time, the chief task of non-Malay officers seemed to be to shepherd their communities toward a "Malayan way of life," which suggests that non-Malay Malaysians at that time were seen to be un-Malayan or not Malayan enough.

In fact, in the copious files of the Information Department for this period, there were no discussions on the Malayanness (or lack of) of the Malay community. Although Malayanness is not defined explicitly, it is not unreasonable to suggest that the Assistant

¹⁷⁵ "Brief notes of the SIOs Conference held at Alor Star on 2nd and 3rd February, 1961." *INF 192/61*.

¹⁷⁶ "Minutes of meeting of SIOs Conference 2nd & 3rd Feb. 61." *INF 192/61*.

¹⁷⁷ "Minutes of SIOs Conference held at Alor Star 2nd & 3rd Feb. 1961." *INF 192/61*.

Minister, as a representative of the government's vision of the national ideology and as the political leader of the Department of Information and Radio Malaya, conflated Malay with Malayan. If Malayanness (and later, Malaysianness) was the natural state of being Malay and not something that was acquired, the opposite was true for non-Malays. Chinese and Indian Malaysians had to work at attaining a Malayan spirit or outlook. This implication was applied not just to non-Malay citizens, the subject of the department's propaganda efforts, but also to its own officers. The opposite of the natural Malayanness of Malays and Malay officers were the Chinese and Indian officers who were vulnerable to emotionalism and who tended to pay lip service to government policies. Thus, un-Malayanness was equated with both ethnicity and a lack of loyalty to the state. The Prime Minister himself made this link explicit six months before Syed Jaafar Albar's speech, noting that the policies contained in the Rahman Talib Report had to be a success if the people of Malaya "are to be Malaysians. There are a few persons, however, who still retain loyalty to the lands of their racial origins and they are against the policy."¹⁷⁸

I suggest that while the Assistant Minister's attempt to cast aspersions on the work of non-Malay officers in Malayan/un-Malayan terms was ideological and contentious, there was some grounds to be concerned. Part of the reason lay in the practical outcomes stemming from the department's operational procedures. Officers—hired to slot into the linguistically balkanized delivery system—came from different backgrounds and had different objectives. Even the head of the Special Section, in the memo dealing with his section, noted that the Chinese wing had different approaches and methods in tackling their tasks.¹⁷⁹ Senior officers had different criteria for Malay and Chinese Field Assistants, as reflected in the recruitment forms they used. For the former, the candidates' previous experience—especially political experience—featured prominently in the master interview sheet [See Figure 3.2] and thus applicants had to prove their political bona fides. For the Chinese candidates, there was no column for their political experience on the master interview sheet. The only way to glean the nature of their political connections or leanings was to examine the names of their references, and even then, these were often just names that revealed no clues as to their politics. What occupied the most prominent space in the master interview sheet [See Figure 3.3] was the candidates' fluency in the four Chinese languages. They had been tested and their grades noted in the central columns of the interview sheet.

The Chinese officers had an unenviable task. They had to gain the trust of their target audience in order to effectively promote and defend government policies, some of which were unpopular with the community. For instance, Chinese officers had to explain why Malay was the sole national language, why Chinese had no place as an official language in the state ideology, and how these policies were not an attempt to destroy Chinese language and culture. This was complicated—perhaps made impossible—by the officers having to do such propaganda work *in the very languages* that was—at least in the subjects' perception—under threat. Gaining the trust of the community would have involved some level of empathy for their views and concerns. Fluency in the language was also a marker of credibility, so it was not surprising that department's interview process focused on linguistic competency and that the successful hires had come from the

¹⁷⁸ "Tengku tells nation: Our policy is happiness for all true Malaysians," *The Straits Times*, August 31 1960.

¹⁷⁹ Wan Abdul Kadir Ismail, December 29, 1961, "Special Section". Report presented at the Senior Information Officers' conference, 1961, 1. *PEN (K/P)* 84/61.

Chinese school system. This was the very school system that was the cradle of alternative conceptions of the nation that were at odds with the officially sanctioned ideology. In other words, those brought up steeped in the alternative vision of Malaya were being hired by the government to promote an official nationalism potentially at odds with their personal outlook, and they had to do it in a language that was perceived not just by their audience but probably by themselves to be unfairly under threat.

We see this tension in the reports filed by the Chinese Field Officers/Assistants. On paper, these were standard accounts of their work and include observations on how the subjects of their propaganda felt toward specific policies and the government in general. These take the form of newspaper-like objective reports, with phrases such as “The people said...” “One person noted...” “According to the teachers, ...” and so on prefacing the views expressed. It is clear that the Field Officer is reporting his subjects’ views. He stands aloof, his personal views absent from the account. But there are many examples where such objectivity is put to test, one of which was Tan Kee Tian’s monthly report of his activities in Malacca in January 1965.¹⁸⁰ In the section dealing with the mood on the ground, Tan started off by recounting his subjects’ views toward specific government policies and projects. It is their views he was relaying to his superiors; Tan stands apart, observing, recording and reporting. The communities he had visited were clearly the subjects here, linguistically marked by phrases such as “The people and traders were very grateful recently...” or “According to some local leaders...” and so on.¹⁸¹ But as addressed the topic of “Language Issue,” the narrative took a stylistic turn. He no longer identified specific groups as authors of these views but suddenly slipped into general statements using “The Chinese people” or “The Chinese” as subjects, and even sometimes inserting the personal pronoun “we”. For example: “If the government understands the feelings of the people and adopts Chinese language as official language it is to be blessed. The government must rest assured that Chinese will not supersede Malay. The Chinese people will be satisfied only if the Chinese language is adopted as an official language, so that they will preserve their culture and benefit in all walks of life. We are born here, eat here, live here, learn here, work here and we will die here. Malaysia is our country. We must not stand aside when our country is in danger. We wish that the government will understand the feelings of the Chinese people in regard to the treatment of the language and request that Chinese language be adopted as one of the official languages.”¹⁸²

Some highly charged statements stand alone, without attribution, for example: “As each person had his self-respect, so does various races. Like Indians and Malays who love their own culture, the Chinese love their own culture also. This is natural. If whosoever is going to kill other race’s culture he is infringing against the Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations. ... The argument that unity is accomplished only

¹⁸⁰ “Monthly report by Field Assistant (Special Section) Tan Kee Tian for January 1965” *PEN 524/62D*.

What was also potentially revealing was that some of his reports were marked “Secret” while others were not. This particular one bore that mark.

¹⁸¹ On the recent tax policy: “The people and traders are very grateful recently because Mr. Tan Siew Sin the Finance Minister had of late declared that the turnover tax would be further reviewed by the government in future. ... According to some local leaders said, Thailand was once imposed turnover tax by means of collecting 1% turnover tax in the form of using stamp duty in every dollar goods being sold ...” *Ibid.*

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

when there is one language for one country is not justified.”¹⁸³ By removing the linguistic cues that signaled third party reporting and which marked the boundary between him and his subjects, it appears that Tan—the representative of the state, the agent of propaganda, the carrier of official nationalism—had unobtrusively entered the arena of ideological contest between different meanings of Malaysia. How did that affect his work? What was he saying to his audience? What did he actually feel as he went about promoting the government’s language and education policies with the talking points prescribed by his superiors? He was working off the same departmental hymn sheet that was the Field Publicity Programme, with its slants and all, but was he singing in harmony with his fellow Malay officers?

These reports were an intriguing glimpse into not just the mood on the ground but also the Field Officer’s sometimes-problematic role as the racially inflected vehicle of communication. But these reports are only useful when they provided sufficient details. In the first years after the 1960 reorganization of the Information Department, field staff sent in regular, long-form reports in no particular format. The department’s drive to standardize those reports¹⁸⁴ led to structured forms with columns that privileged data over description, and which leached out the more useful details of the officers’ work. Most Chinese officers started out writing in Chinese. Not all their reports were translated (or at least, not all the translations were on file), perhaps because they were mundane or were repeating themes covered in previous reports. But even seemingly mundane details provide clues on what was happening on the ground, if read properly. Something was being lost in the selective translation of reports filed by Chinese officers. At the same time, senior department officers were urging their subordinates to use Malay more often,¹⁸⁵ which the Chinese officers struggled to do since they were hired largely for their ability in Chinese languages. The bureaucratization of reports offered an inadvertent solution for Chinese officers. The new forms relegated the comments section to a small column on the far right, and more and more reports from Chinese officers appeared in this format, suggesting that they found it within their comfort zone to write a few words in Malay in this narrow column compared to writing a multi-page report in the national language, which was beyond their language skills. They still carried out their fieldwork in Chinese languages, but they were now able to meet departmental directives regarding form filling and the use of the National Language. The Department of Information headquarters could collect statistics more easily with this form, especially from the mid-1960s onwards, but I suggest they lost touch with what was happening on the ground with these new standardized reports. The losses suffered by the Alliance government in the 1969 general elections was not just a repudiation of the coalition’s vision of Malaysia, but was also an indictment of the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of the propaganda arms to promote the message. We see a tacit acknowledgement of this deficiency when, in the immediate months after that 1969 elections and race riots, Field Officers (on instructions from headquarters) abandoned the number-centric structured forms and returned to multi-page, free-form reports rich in descriptive details.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ See Chapter 1, pages 31-32.

¹⁸⁵ “Minutes of meeting of SIOs Conference 2nd & 3rd Feb. 61.” 1. *INF 192/61*.

¹⁸⁶ See PEN 2/69.

Entertaining the masses: Radio Malaya, language and the nation

As noted above, Radio Malaya inherited, continued with and strengthened the multiple linguistic channels of its colonial predecessor. Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Razak Hussein had noted in 1959 that the enormous task of building up the new Radio Malaya to serve an independent Malaya was complicated not just by the fact that it was starting almost from scratch¹⁸⁷ but also that Radio Malaya was not one but actually four linguistically distinct radio services (Malay, English, Tamil and Chinese—seven if count Mandarin, Cantonese, Hokkien and Hakka as separate languages). The multiple channels of delivery had been a successful anti-communist tactic in the 1950s—in fact, the Chinese language service grew significantly during the Emergency and, at one point, there were more programs in the Chinese languages than other language service.¹⁸⁸ There was little discussion of creating a different structure or operating philosophy for the new Radio Malaya—it appeared there was tacit acknowledgement that the existing structure was best suited to serve a society in which ethnic cleavages still run deep, independence or not independence.

The continuation of this balkanized delivery channels impacted Radio Malaya differently from the Department of Information. While the latter sought to change its operational philosophy—from wartime mass propaganda to peacetime face-to-face work—Radio Malaya’s challenges were initially more technical (hiring more local talent to produce “Malayan” programming and extending the stations’ coverage through boosting the power of transmission stations and building relay stations) than philosophical. Also, Radio Malaya was a smaller operation than the Department of Information although its reach was wider. Its “front-line” staff were reporters, writers, performers and senior officials, men and women who were much better educated than the Information Department’s Field Officers and Assistants. And even though the former operated through multiple channels of delivery, they had more in common with each other—many had English education and those from different services who went for overseas training went to the same places, e.g. the BBC—than the Information Department’s men on the ground.¹⁸⁹ The more cosmopolitan nature of the broadcasters impacted how Radio Malaya/Radio Malaysia handled challenges to its linguistically diverse operations.

Another difference between the two propaganda arms was the way that each interacted with their respective audiences, and the role of entertainment. The Department of Information’s Field Officers had to use entertainment—usually by showing film shows and occasionally putting on live variety shows—as a means of sweetening the propaganda being offered. But by and large, Field Officers had a captive audience, whether in informal small group discussions, slightly larger organized talks, intensive multi-day civics courses or the “variety and film show nights” that attracted whole villages and towns. Once the Officers faced their audience, the challenge was to keep their attention. However, for Radio, and subsequently, Television Malaya/Malaysia, their listeners were not captive and could easily turn off their sets if what they heard was not to their liking, a reality that often relegated propaganda to a secondary status behind

¹⁸⁷ Most of the equipment and manpower were based in Singapore and after the division of colonial Radio Malaya, became Radio Singapore.

¹⁸⁸ See Chapter 2, page 52.

¹⁸⁹ See Chapter 2, pages 48-49.

entertainment across the national airwaves. In a commemorative book celebrating 40 years of broadcasting, one veteran radio and television producer noted that information should come in small capsules instead of crates because listeners and viewers are easily bored. She suggested that propaganda should not be left in the hands of producers, noting that propaganda “is a serious business. It should be handled full time by people who are trained in it, and who know their business. We cannot expect effective propaganda from a guy who produces “Boria” or “Hiburan Malam Minggu” [popular entertainment and variety programs of that era] as his full time job and meddle with propaganda only as a necessary evil.” Those in the entertainment arms would then be able to work on their strengths (which is not inserting propaganda into entertainment programs).¹⁹⁰ Listeners also had a choice: Radio Singapore’s strong signals could easily reach the southern third of the peninsula, while those in the north could access a station broadcast out of the Royal Australian Air Force Butterworth Base in Penang.¹⁹¹ Indonesian radio could also be heard and those with short-wave radios could get the BBC World Service. In short, Radio Malaya/Radio Malaysia had to be very sensitive to their listeners’ need and requests, and walked a fine line between promoting the government’s vision of Malaya/Malaysia and catering to the entertainment needs of their audience.

By choosing to continue operating with four distinct language services, Radio Malaya could not help but be drawn into the larger contestation over the meaning of the nation, a contestation in which language was a key battlefield. Throughout the 1960s, Radio Malaya/Malaysia fielded requests from champions of particular languages to expand “their” service or complaints from them regarding perceived slights to their culture. At the same time, minorities whose languages were not represented sufficiently or were totally absent from the airwaves (for example, Teochew, Hockchiew, Telugu, Malayalee and Hindustani¹⁹²) also brought pressure on the broadcasters. Some of these complaints may be seen as exercises in political theatre—local branches/divisions of political parties would hold meetings and pass resolutions, including demanding the expansion of airtime for their particular language, and forwarded them to the government. These are usually carefully typewritten on letterheads bearing prominently the name of the political party, and used formal language, all intended to impress the reader. Other types of correspondence came from language, literary and cultural associations that would send in requests complete with signatures from members (tens or sometimes hundreds) asking for pretty much the same thing. These, however, have a more authentic grassroots feel. Many are handwritten, sometimes on paper taken from blank school exercise books used by students. Many are deferential, contain quirky details and

¹⁹⁰ Zaimah, “Of kangaroo courts, capsules and mothballs (RTM woes),” in *Penyiaran - 4 dekad bersama anda [Broadcasting - 4 decades with you]*, ed. Abdul Aziz Abas, et al. (Kuala Lumpur: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1987). 18-19.

¹⁹¹ The British built the base in 1941 and used it during the Emergency in the 1950s. In 1958, the RAF transferred the base to the Royal Australian Air Force, which operated it until 1988, when the Royal Malaysian Air Force took over. The RAAF still maintains a small presence there. Department of Defence, “Royal Malaysian Air Force Base, Butterworth, Malaysia : Australian Defence Force facilities rationalisation,” ed. Department of Defence (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2007). On certain days, Radio RAAF Butterworth could be heard as far as Sri Lanka and India. “Radio RAAF Butterworth.” <http://www.raafschoolpenang.com/photopages/rrb.htm>

¹⁹² “A. Apparao, Bagan Pasir Estate, Telok Anson, Perak, to The Director, Radio Malaysia (Indian Section), March 15, 1967.” In *KPP 1926/B. Aduan Jabatan Radio (Complaints – radio)*. The letter contained 301 signatures.

requests, and are often centered on the desire for more entertainment, especially song request programs. One such request bemoaned how out of date Radio Malaya's collection of Telugu music was ("We are really fed up to hear the same Telugu songs over and over again.") and then went on to provide a helpful list of the 20 current and popular hits (more details on this request later).

Radio Malaya/Malaysia filed and responded to the more important requests (of which there were many) but those archived must have been a tip of the iceberg since the station received hundreds of thousands of letters a year.¹⁹³ Radio Malaya/Malaysia would ignore some of the more ludicrous demands or would respond politely denying other requests. Sometimes, the broadcasters would meet them halfway. The reasons cited in these responses give an insight into how radio and television balanced the need to advance government policies while catering to their listeners, who could easily turn off the radio or switch stations if they were unhappy. Commenting on one particularly absurd request that Radio Malaysia did not even bother replying to, the senior Radio Malaysia official informed his boss, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting's Permanent Secretary, that the ministry should not be entertaining "communal organizations that are based on racial sentiments."¹⁹⁴ This is however ironic since Malaysian politics at that time was largely based on racial sentiments and the partners in the ruling coalition were communal organizations representing the interests of one ethnic group. In fact, it could be said that the whole structure of Radio Malaysia was based on racial sentiments even as it professed to move toward a more Malayan/Malaysian outlook.

To those asking the station to add to the languages being broadcast, Radio Malaysia had a standard response. Replying to a letter requesting that Radio Malaysia introduce news and commentaries in the Hainanese dialect, Dol Ramli,¹⁹⁵ the Director of Radio, said: "[It] is not proposed to increase the number of languages or dialects for broadcasting purpose. It is felt that the four Chinese dialects currently used over Radio Malaysia serve the needs of our Chinese-speaking citizens adequately. Any new additions would tend to fragment the present limited airtime unnecessarily. *I personally feel we should move towards fewer (not more) languages in our country to facilitate communications among citizens and enhance their sense of belonging and togetherness*

¹⁹³ Radio Malaysia said it had received between 550,000 and 900,000 letters a year between 1963 and 1967. "Dol Ramli, Pengarah [Director], Jabatan Radio, to Tuan Pengarang [Editor], Utusan Melayu, March 8, 1967." In *KPP 1926/B. Aduan Jabatan Radio (Complaints – radio)*.

¹⁹⁴ The request came from the Tamil Youth Club of Penang, asking for Suara Malaysia to be also broadcast in Tamil. This was one of 13 resolutions passed by the club's inaugural convention in Penang on December 13, 1964. "Tamil Youth Bell Club, Penang, to The Permanent Secretary to the Minister of Information and Broadcasting, January 22, 1965." *KPP 1926/B*

Suara Malaysia, literally The Voice of Malaysia, is similar to the Voice of America and the BBC World Service. It began broadcasting in 1962 initially to meet the propaganda threat posed by Sukarno Confrontation with Malaya. Broadcast over short-wave transmission, it was aimed at listeners outside of Malaya, and could be heard in Malay, English, Bahasa Indonesia and Chinese (the latter service used to counter communist propaganda coming from China). Since the Tamil-speaking south India was not a security and propaganda threat to Malaya/Malaysia, there was little need to expand Suara Malaysia to include Tamil.

Radio Malaysia's response, in Malay, was written on the "Minute Paper" section of the file, which records comments and annotations on particular documents by officials as they pass the file from one to another. It was probably written by the Director or Deputy Director.

¹⁹⁵ For more on Dol Ramli, see Chapter 2, pages 46-47.

[my emphasis].”¹⁹⁶ This justification reflects the official ideology in which Malay as the sole National Language supposed to serve as the common language that unites the disparate Malaysian communities. However, there were not any serious efforts within the broadcasting service or the government to do away with the non-Malay stations and to offer programming only in the national language. Responding to requests in 1968 from the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC)—part of the ruling alliance coalition—for more Tamil and Chinese programming on radio and television, the Minister of Information and Broadcasting said that since parliament had recently passed the National Language Act of 1967 certifying Malay as the sole national language, the ministry would only expand Malay programming. Chinese and Indian programming would remain at the same level. “But I am pleased to announce that there will be no reductions in Chinese and Tamil programs.”¹⁹⁷ Despite the Minister’s unequivocal response, Chinese and Indian programming did increase, largely through the expansion of television. What is more striking is the official stand preserving the status quo, a policy that gives lie to the official ideology of the National Language, Malay, as the language of unity.

Let us return to the first example, the writer with the Telugu Top 20 hits. Telugu is spoken in south India, and Telugu speakers made up the second largest group behind Tamil speakers among Indian Malaysians. Advocates for Telugu programs pointed out that there were 150,000 Telugu speakers in Malaysia and emphasized that many Telugu speakers did not understand Tamil.¹⁹⁸ Radio Malaysia was careful in its reply, as, presumably, it did not want to encourage more such requests. While there had been requests for other dialects to be added to Radio Malaysia, the broadcaster had been especially deluged with petitions from Telugu associations and from the MIC.¹⁹⁹ Dol Ramli noted, again, that it is not the station’s policy to add languages to the Indian service but he was “prepared to consider the possibility of having more Telugu songs for your listening pleasure in the near future.” Referring to the writer’s suggested list of songs, Dol says: “We will do what we can, within our present limited budget.” In a blind carbon copy of the letter to the head of the Indian Service, which the original recipient would not have seen, Dol—in contrast to his circumspect official response that promised nothing—unequivocally instructs the head to look at the list of songs and singers and to take action.²⁰⁰ This was another instance in which the propaganda unit had to publically

¹⁹⁶ “Dol Ramli, Pengarah, Jabatan Radio, to The President, Federation of Kheng Chew Hwee Kwan of Malaysia and Singapore, September 1, 1967.” *KPP 1926/B*.

¹⁹⁷ Senu bin Abdul Rahman, Minister of Information and Broadcasting, to Mr. Kam Woon Wah, Secretary-General, Malaysian Chinese Association, June 17, 1968.” *KPP 1926/B*.

¹⁹⁸ “M. Somunaidu, PJK, PPM, Setiausaha, MIC Bahagian Bagan Datoh [Secretary, MIC Bagan Datoh Division] to Y.T.M. Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj, Perdana Menteri Malaysia, April 8, 1969.” *KPP 1926/B*.

¹⁹⁹ One official, in forwarding three more letters regarding Telugu programming to the Secretary to the Ministry, wrote in obvious exasperation that these letters keep coming despite Radio Malaysia’s repeated declaration that it was not government policy to add more language streams to its programming. “Murtadza Zaba, b.p. Pengarah, Jabatan Radio, to Setia Usaha, Kementerian Penerangan dan Penyiaran, May 9, 1969.” *KPP 1926/B*. This letter was dated a day before the May 10, 1969 general elections, and four days before the May 13 race riots.

²⁰⁰ “Dol Ramli, Pengarah, Jabatan Radio, to Mr. A, Apparao, May 3, 1967,” with blind carbon copies to the Secretary, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting; Director of Information and Broadcasting, Ministry

maintain a commitment to the official national ideology but was forced to pursue a contradictory operational path. It could be argued that Dol and other senior broadcasters were sensitive to the different needs of different segments of this racially divided society. Or, it is also possible that these senior broadcasters, almost all educated in a multi-racial, English-medium setting, held personal views that were sometimes at variance with the official ideology. This of course was being played out in the larger context of the whole structure of Radio Malaya/Malaysia (four language services in which three of them—Malay, English and Chinese—had rough parity) being out of sync with the official imagining of the nation in which Malay was supposed to be dominant.

When faced with pressure from Malay interests, Radio Malaysia could be equally stout in defending its operations, including the English, Chinese and Indian services. One organization, the Muslim League of Penang and Province Wellesley, had complained to the minister that the Indian Service was broadcasting Hindu religious music that was a threat to Islam, and bemoaned the lack of Islamic music on the service on Fridays. In replying to the Minister, Dol Ramli forwarded the explanation given by the Head of the Indian Service, who noted that it would not be possible to convert the entire Indian Service programming on Friday to Islamic music since the vast majority of Indian Malaysians were Hindus, Sikhs or Christians. Furthermore, the service already broadcasted Tamil songs based on Islamic literary works. Finally, the service head noted that religious ethics and morals “permeate the whole gamut of Indian (Hindu) society and life. As such, all songs are found to contain elements of religion or ethics and morals ... In the circumstances, no musical programme could be considered non-religious ... [or] wholly religious...” Dol endorsed the defense, stating that the service chief’s views were well grounded and should be given the strongest consideration when the minister gives his reply.²⁰¹ On another occasion, when writing to correct an article in a Malay newspaper regarding the prominence of English in the broadcasting services, Dol reminded the editor that English was still an official language under the Constitution.²⁰²

Many of the requests from Telugu and Hindustani speakers were based on two precedents: the presence of four Chinese languages in the Chinese service, and Radio Malaysia’s addition of the major languages spoken in Sabah and Sarawak to its programming when the federation was expanded to include the two northern Borneo states in 1963. In their minds, if Radio Malaysia accommodated them, why not us?²⁰³ Contained within these requests were alternative visions of the nation. In the minds of these petitioners, they were equal partners in the nation with other ethnic groups despite being minorities, and their languages should be accorded equal status in the national imagining, and, on a more practical level, some space on the national airwaves. They stressed their loyalty to the nation. One considered the absence of more Telugu programs

of Information and Broadcasting; Program Officer, Radio Malaysia; and Head, Indian Service, Radio Malaysia. *KPP 1926/B*. Dol wrote the letter in English.

²⁰¹ “Dol Ramli, Pengarah, Jabatan Radio, to Setia Usaha, Kementerian Penerangan dan Penyiaran [Secretary, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting], November 5, 1966.” *KPP 1926/B*.

²⁰² “Dol Ramli, Pengarah, Jabatan Radio, to Tuan Pengarang [Editor], Utusan Melayu, November 4, 1965.” *KPP 1926/B*.

²⁰³ See “A. Apparao, Bagan Pasir Estate, Telok Anson, Perak, to The Director, Radio Malaysia (Indian Section), March 15, 1967”, “Andhras, Kuala Bernam Estate, to The Director, Radio Malaysia (Indian Section, undated”, “M. Somunaidu, to Tunku Abdul Rahman, April 8, 1969” and other similar requests. *KPP 1926/B*.

“a terrible discrimination. Are we not Malaysians to share happiness as other brother Malaysians? Have we not done anything for our Motherland Malaysia?”²⁰⁴ Another pleaded somewhat dramatically: “We are not asking for anything great. ... We are really begging and not demanding for happiness. So please throw us a few coins on our begging hands to make us happy. Anyway, if you think we are not fit to be called sons of Malaysia then leave us desperate.”²⁰⁵ The reference to “sons of Malaysia” alludes to the wider debate regarding belonging and citizenship in the nation. It is used in opposition to the term *bumiputra*, or “sons of the soil”, which refers to Malays and the natives of Sabah and Sarawak whose special position in the nation is guaranteed by the Constitution.²⁰⁶ By using “sons of Malaysia,” the writer conceives of a different Malaysia in which his minority language shares equal space with Malay and other languages.²⁰⁷ Another justification for these requests rests on the importance of the mother tongue in Malaysian history and the Malaysian imagination. One petitioner wrote that Telugu had been spoken here for decades and “is a language of Malaysians. Telugu people love to learn their MOTHER tongue in English schools...”²⁰⁸, referring to English-language schools during the colonial era which provided for after-hours mother-tongue instruction for its students. The ministry’s reply was instructive. It said it agreed with the writer that one should honor one’s mother tongue. However, the letter went on to state: “You should know, sir, that according to the National Constitution our Mother Tongue here is the National Language. So, this means that all resources and support should be given to expand the use of the National Language as an instrument of National unity, and this has been repeatedly stressed by our leaders.”²⁰⁹ This amazing declaration—a misreading of the Constitution—posits Malay not just as a national language but the mother tongue of all Malaysians, an assertion that would have confirmed the fears of the opponents of the Barnes Report who viewed Malayization as a code word for the marginalization and eventual suppression of non-Malay languages and culture.

Conclusion

These examples of how radio and television managed the constant pressure on its Malay, English, Chinese and Indian services (from ignoring baseless requests²¹⁰ to

²⁰⁴ “A. Apparao, Bagan Pasir Estate, Telok Anson, Perak, to The Director, Radio Malaysia (Indian Section), March 15, 1967.” *KPP 1926/B*.

²⁰⁵ “Andhras, Kuala Bernam Estate, to The Director, Radio Malaysia (Indian Section, undated.” *KPP 1926/B*.

²⁰⁶ Article 153. Malaysia, “Laws of Malaysia : Federal Constitution incorporating all amendments up to 1 January 2006,” (Kuala Lumpur: The Commissioner of Law Revision, Malaysia, 2006).

²⁰⁷ As this dissertation is being written, the term sons of Malaysia—*anak Malaysia* or *anak bangsa Malaysia*—continues to be a rallying cry for those opposed to the government’s vision of Malaysia.

²⁰⁸ “M. Somunaidu, to Tunku Abdul Rahman, April 8, 1969.” *KPP 1926/B*.

²⁰⁹ “Mohd. Affandi Hassan, b.p. Setia Usaha, Kementerian Penerangan dan Penyiaran [for the Secretary, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting], to Mr. M. Somunaidu, Setia Usaha MIC, Bahagian Bagan Dato, April 18, 1969.” *KPP 1926/B*.

²¹⁰ However, even when dismissing one particularly abusive and threatening letter, Dol said in a note to his superiors: “Much of this is rubbish but some indications of Indian feelings re use of Malay as National Language are useful for the Government and our Ministers to note.” “Dol Ramli to Secretary, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, November 11, 1965.” *KPP 1926/B*.

surreptitiously meeting others halfway) and how it had to prioritize entertainment over propaganda in its programming, reveal how difficult it was for the broadcasting unit of the government's propaganda arm to reflect and promote an official idea of the nation when the very structure (distinct linguistic channels) and professional imperatives (entertainment before propaganda) of radio and television undermined the official vision of Malaysia. This was true for the Department of Information even though operated on a less public stage than radio and television, and faced different forms of pressure. The reorganization of 1960 was meant to shift the emphasis from mass to more personal propaganda. It was no longer sufficient for field officers and assistants to blanket their communities with information. They now had to work in smaller groups, interact closely with their target community and use gentle persuasion to put across the government's vision and message. The key to their success was gaining the trust of their audience, and the Department of Information judged that this was best achieved by retaining the racially segmented method of delivery that it inherited. This standard operating procedure was conceived under colonial rule as the best method to reach a plural society in which the ethnic cleavages were entrenched. The continued use of this delivery mechanism by the independent Malayan government, even as it shifted its operational philosophy, revealed how resilient those cleavages were. The tension facing the department lay in trying to promote a vision of Malaya/Malaysia, in which the Malay language as the sole National Language was envisioned as the means of bridging the racial divide, through a mechanism that recognized the resiliency of that divide and which undermined the message. In other words, by persisting with the racially divided delivery mechanism, the government either had no confidence in its own official message or was willing to accept the yawning gap between rhetoric and operation as the price to pay for holding the fragile coalition together and staying in power.

Thus, there was no realistic way to meaningfully alter these structures to align it closer to official nationalism. The multiple linguistic channels on radio and television; the Department of Information's ethnically divided field work; the education system with its multiple mediums of instructions at the primary level; and the constitution with its contradiction between having one group with special privileges while declaring that all are equal; all these reflected the codification of a set of compromises that were in constant tension with each other and which were a result of the unresolved contestation over the meaning of the nation. The codification of these compromises did not resolve the contestation: on the contrary, they inflamed the debate over the meaning of Malaysia, adding more weight to those structures of compromise. The government did try to rally the population around other symbols of unity—the flag, the national anthem, the King—but these seemingly innocuous symbols that were supposed to stand above the fray of politics, were also subject to the strains of the compromised vision of the nation. This is the subject of the next chapter.

Figure 3.1
Field Publicity Programme for July 1960, Serial No. 1/60. PEN (K) 82/60

FIELD PUBLICITY PROGRAMME		
Serial No.1/60.	For the month of JULY.	
SUBJECTS	POINTS TO EMPHASISE	PERIOD OF PUBLICITY
A. <u>Subjects which the Federal Government require to be publicised.</u>		
(i) Rural Development (Second Five-Year Plan)	(a) Federal Government policy.	0 0 0 Until
	(b) State Government plans and development work carried out locally.	0 0 September
	(c) The new role of the kampong dweller.	0 0 1960.
(ii) New Identity Card (2½-year scheme)	(a) Reason for and procedure of re-registration.	0 0 As agreed
	(b) Costs of photographs and negatives.	0 0 with local
		0 0 Registration Officers.
(iii) Anti-Corruption	(a) Value and importance of integrity.	0 0 Second phase
	(b) Corruption is an evil.	0 0 of campaign.
		0 0 Until
		0 0 31.12.60.
B. <u>Subjects aimed at educating the people in the basic requirements of nation building and citizenship.</u>		
(i) Unity amongst the various races living in Malaya and undivided loyalty to Malaya.	(a) Understanding of each others ways of life, customs & traditions.	0 0 0 Until
	(b) Spirit of tolerance.	0 0 31.12.60.
	<u>Note:</u> Quote HM's & PM's speeches.	
C. <u>Newstalks on developments/ events and any matters considered newsworthy for the information of the people.</u>		
(i) PM's recent visit to the UK & Europe.	PM's accomplishments and utterances on important international matters.	0 0 One circuit tour. (Back-ground notes will be sent in the next few days.
(ii) Social Welfare Lottery benefits.	The various benefits.	-do-
(iii) Counter-subversion laws.	-	As and when necessary.
D. <u>Announcements of National/ local interest.</u>		
	As per Talking Point 6/60.	Until 31.12.60.

Figure 3.2

PEN 653/62 - Special section - candidates selected for appointment as Field Assistant

PEN. 653/62/P.A.A.				K E D A H	
Nama dan Alamat	Umur	Kelulusan	Pengalaman	Kenyataan	
1. Mohd Ali b. Hassan, Pati 214, Jalan Yen, Pekan Terol, Yen, Kedah.	30	Sekolah Melayu darjah V. Lulus darjah V Sekolah Ugama, tamat di Madrasah Alwiah Arul, Perlis.	1978 Malt Y/D Youth Club Gua Chempedak, 1962. Pen. S. Usaha Pemuda Desa Kampong Terol merangkap Jawatankuasa Pelajaran Pemuda Desa Terol. J/K. PIZ Lembaga Pengurus Sekolah Kebangsaan Terol. J/K. UMNO ne- rangkap Penerangan UMNO chempedak Terol.	<i>1978 Malt Y/D Youth Club Gua Chempedak, 1962. Pen. S. Usaha Pemuda Desa Kampong Terol merangkap Jawatankuasa Pelajaran Pemuda Desa Terol. J/K. PIZ Lembaga Pengurus Sekolah Kebangsaan Terol. J/K. UMNO ne-rangkap Penerangan UMNO chempedak Terol.</i> <i>Guru Ugama selangit terol - penerangan terol</i> <i>1962 Malt Y/D Youth Club Gua Chempedak, 1962. Pen. S. Usaha Pemuda Desa Kampong Terol merangkap Jawatankuasa Pelajaran Pemuda Desa Terol. J/K. PIZ Lembaga Pengurus Sekolah Kebangsaan Terol. J/K. UMNO ne-rangkap Penerangan UMNO chempedak Terol.</i>	
2. Abdul Halik b. Hj. Abdul Hamid, Simpang Piasa, Pejabat Pos Kerangan Kulim, Kedah.	27	Lulus darjah IX pangkat II di Madrasah Alwiah Arul, Isimiah Pokok Sena kepala Batas, P.W.		<i>Guru Ugama selangit terol - penerangan terol</i> <i>1962 Malt Y/D Youth Club Gua Chempedak, 1962. Pen. S. Usaha Pemuda Desa Kampong Terol merangkap Jawatankuasa Pelajaran Pemuda Desa Terol. J/K. PIZ Lembaga Pengurus Sekolah Kebangsaan Terol. J/K. UMNO ne-rangkap Penerangan UMNO chempedak Terol.</i>	
3. Sellahudin Mansor, Kg. Baharu Tambak Bungas, Jalan Kuala, Alor Star.	23	Tamat Pringkat Berakhat Sekolah Ugama Kerajaan Kedah Maktab Mahmud Alor Star, Lulus darjah V Sekolah Melayu.		<i>1962 Malt Y/D Youth Club Gua Chempedak, 1962. Pen. S. Usaha Pemuda Desa Kampong Terol merangkap Jawatankuasa Pelajaran Pemuda Desa Terol. J/K. PIZ Lembaga Pengurus Sekolah Kebangsaan Terol. J/K. UMNO ne-rangkap Penerangan UMNO chempedak Terol.</i>	
4. Omar bin Mohd. Aswad, Sekolah Kebangsaan Alor Beser Kota Serang Sebat, Alor Star, Kedah.	23	Lulus darjah VII Sekolah Melayu Pangkat II, Lulus I.C.E. Pangkat I.		<i>1962 Malt Y/D Youth Club Gua Chempedak, 1962. Pen. S. Usaha Pemuda Desa Kampong Terol merangkap Jawatankuasa Pelajaran Pemuda Desa Terol. J/K. PIZ Lembaga Pengurus Sekolah Kebangsaan Terol. J/K. UMNO ne-rangkap Penerangan UMNO chempedak Terol.</i>	
5. Haji Hamid b. Hashim, d/a Pondok Haji Nawari, Sungai Yen Kedah, Yen, Kedah.	26	Lulus darjah VIII Sekolah Arab Societah Mela dan lulus darjah V Sekolah Kebangsaan.		<i>1962 Malt Y/D Youth Club Gua Chempedak, 1962. Pen. S. Usaha Pemuda Desa Kampong Terol merangkap Jawatankuasa Pelajaran Pemuda Desa Terol. J/K. PIZ Lembaga Pengurus Sekolah Kebangsaan Terol. J/K. UMNO ne-rangkap Penerangan UMNO chempedak Terol.</i>	
6. Mohd bin Abdul Hamid @ Mat Rajab bin Abdul Kg. Berserah, Kulim, Kedah.	25	Lulus darjah VIII atau Form III di Maktab Mahmud, Alor Star.		<i>1962 Malt Y/D Youth Club Gua Chempedak, 1962. Pen. S. Usaha Pemuda Desa Kampong Terol merangkap Jawatankuasa Pelajaran Pemuda Desa Terol. J/K. PIZ Lembaga Pengurus Sekolah Kebangsaan Terol. J/K. UMNO ne-rangkap Penerangan UMNO chempedak Terol.</i>	

[illegible]

Chapter 4

National Anthem: the reluctant symbol

It was 4:30 p.m. on a warm February afternoon when the trumpets sounded across the Selangor Club *Padang* announcing the arrival of His Majesty the Yang Di-Pertuan Agong.¹ A “mammoth”² crowd of school children, civil servants, workers and other Malaysians had gathered on the field, some having hopped on the free bus and train services that had fanned out across the state of Selangor, picking up participants as early as 2.30 p.m. to bring them to Kuala Lumpur. The rally, organized to launch the 1967 edition of the National Solidarity Week, was one of many held simultaneously across the nation, together drawing “millions”³ of participants. At the dais awaiting the King and Queen were the assembled dignitaries, diplomats, Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, his deputy Abdul Razak Hussein and other Cabinet ministers, including Minister of Information and Broadcasting Senu Abdul Rahman, who chaired the organizing committee. After the Royal Highnesses took their place at the head of the elevated stand, the band struck up the strains of *Negara-Ku* (the National Anthem, literally, My Country), and some 50,000 voices⁴ sang along.

On this occasion, the singing of the National Anthem was not just a mere formality since one of the main aims of the campaign was to inculcate respect and reverence for the anthem, which, the Agong stressed in his speech, was a “symbol of independence and sovereignty.”⁵ On the surface, it seemed logical and uncontroversial for the government to focus on the anthem and on the other symbol of the nation, the National Flag, as rallying points for national unity. After all, anthems and flags are part of the repertoire of symbols a state acquires and projects to denote and proclaim its independence. A national anthem is a musical form that is elevated to represent official nationalism, and in the process, it transcends the form, becoming a “unique musical work in that it functions primarily as a malleable symbol of a bounded geographical region.”⁶ Along with other symbols, music is an “important vessel of nationalism, with musical forms and instruments serving as expressions of a national identity.”⁷ Thus, a national anthem is normally conceived to stand above the fray of the common and to bring together all strains of society, regardless of class, race, religion, gender, geography and politics. This was the intent of the *Negara-Ku*, and even the opposition Democratic Action Party publicly endorsed the Solidarity Week, although it could not resist pointing out its policy differences with the Alliance government.⁸

¹ “Millions turn out to start the big Week,” *The Straits Times*, February 9, 1967.

² “King: What you can do for your country ...”, *The Straits Times*, February 9, 1967.

³ “Millions turn out to start the big Week.”

⁴ “Nation-wide celebrations,” *The Straits Times*, February 8, 1967.

⁵ “King: What you can do for your country ...”.

⁶ Carlos R. Abril, “Functions of a National Anthem in Society and Education: A Sociocultural Perspective,” *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, no. 172 (2007). 73.

⁷ Jason Gibbs, “The Music of the State: Vietnam’s Quest for a National Anthem,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 2, no. 2 (2007). 129.

⁸ “The DAP backs Solidarity Week,” *The Straits Times*, February 5, 1967. This is not to say that there is no contest over a national anthem, which, like most national symbols is “far from being static or monologic in its meaning, [and] carries a range of diverse, often conflicting, meanings that are integral aspects of specific materials and social situations.” Nancy Guy, ““Republic of China National Anthem” on Taiwan: One Anthem, One Performance, Multiple Realities,” *Ethnomusicology* 46, no. 1 (2002). 96.

However, the focus on the National Anthem was not as *pro forma* as it seemed. On the contrary, it was a deliberate attempt by the government to wrest control over the discourse on loyalty, nationalism and the anthem that had begun just days after the nation's independence, achieved 10 years earlier. The discourse had begun innocuously enough in the form of a few short letters tucked into the corner of a newspaper's letters page. The writers had complained about the rudeness of some cinemagoers who, after the last show of the night, rushed for the exits immediately instead of standing respectfully at attention while the anthem was played. This chapter examines how that discourse gathered momentum and changed character. At first, members of the public (whether writing to newspapers or being interviewed in news reports), editorial writers, youth leaders, politicians, activists and the government focused on ignorance as the cause of the problem: The nation had just been created; those showing disrespect were unfamiliar with its symbols; these newly-minted citizens did not understand the significance of or did not know the proper way to behave toward these symbols; the remedy was education. The discourse also looked at tweaking the process, i.e. whether shifting the timing of and/or adding explanatory slides before the playing of the anthem in cinemas would solve the problem.

As the debate progressed, however, the discourse became more heated, took on a racial tone and turned more and more to the question of loyalty to the nation. Thus, if the recalcitrant cinemagoers (not racially identified) were initially seen as being ignorant (and/or selfish) in their rush to avoid the parking lot jam in order to get home before midnight, they were subsequently re-characterized as Chinese Malaysians whose actions reflected their allegiance to foreign powers and whose disloyalty threatened the very foundations of Malaya/Malaysia.

This change in the tenor and content of the discourse put the Alliance government in a bind. It had initially hoped to manage and prevent a racialization of the discourse that would have dragged a national symbol down into continuing contestation over the meaning of the nation, an ideological struggle that had already compromised one other emblem of the nation—the Constitution—as a symbol of national unity. The Constitution reflected the deep divide between Malaysians with radically different ideas of what the nation meant and how it was supposed to function. Specifically, the division lay over the special position of the Malays. One article of the Constitution guaranteed equal rights for all communities while another acknowledged the “special position” of the Malays and the privileges that follow from occupying that special position.⁹ This contradiction—all are equal but one is special—in the Constitution was the result of the unresolved contest over the meaning of the nation before independence, a contest played out in the political discourse of that time over language and education, citizenship, and economic opportunities, among others.

This continuing divide and struggle over the meaning of the nation did not prevent the Alliance government from introducing a series of national symbols after independence in 1957. In addition to the King, the Flag and the National Anthem, the government embarked on a vigorous building program to erect a number of “National Buildings,” including the Parliament House and the National Museum among others. Its broader agenda was to begin forging a nation out of the disparate ethnic groups that had been kept apart during the colonial era in a classic

⁹ Article 153(1) of the Constitution of Malaysia reads: “It shall be the responsibility of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong to safeguard the special position of the Malays and natives of any of the States of Sabah and Sarawak and the legitimate interests of other communities in accordance with the provisions of this Article.” Article 8 (1) and (2) reads: “All persons are equal before the law and entitled to the equal protection of the law. Except as expressly authorized by this Constitution, there shall be no discrimination against citizens on the ground only of religion, race, descent or place of birth in any law relating to the acquisition, holding or disposition of property or the establishing or carrying on of any trade, business, profession, vocation or employment.”

plural society. In politics, the Alliance coalition presented itself as the exemplar of how different ethnic groups with competing interests could compromise and work together. The government also pursued an aggressive rural development program aimed at bridging the economic gap between the Malay and non-Malay communities.¹⁰ At the same time, the government presented the national symbols as icons that all citizens could rally around as focal points of unity and loyalty. However, not all the symbols lent themselves to propaganda work. The National Anthem appeared to connect better with the citizenry because of its performative nature, and the other symbols appeared relatively mute by comparison.

Ultimately, the government's effort to instill loyalty through the veneration of national symbols partly floundered because these supposedly "national" and above-the-fray icons were themselves compromised, a reflection of how the very meaning of the nation (i.e. the "national") was under continued challenge. The government could not prevent the discourse over showing disrespect to the National Anthem from encroaching into the realm of ideological and political contestation. It tried education and campaigns like the National Solidarity Week, to no avail. Eventually, it switched tack, accepting the characterization of the National Anthem recalcitrants as Chinese and disloyal, and tackling the problem not through propaganda and persuasion, but through legislative coercion in the form of the National Anthem Act of 1968 that allowed it to fine and imprison anyone who knowingly showed disrespect to the anthem. The passage of the law marked the failure of a decade's worth of propaganda efforts to rally the citizenry around the symbols of a contested nation. Now, armed with the weight of the law behind it, the government could compel citizens to respect the anthem, or at least show respect to it on the surface. But instead of pressing on with the fight over symbols, the government banned the playing of the National Anthem in cinemas, ending the supposedly widespread show of indifference to the Anthem. However, this merely treated the symptom of the problem but not the cause.

By the May 10, 1969 General Elections, this contest over the meaning of Malaysia that first began with the establishment of the Malayan Union in 1946, and which remained unresolved even through independence in 1957, came to a head. The twin and related matters of language and education became a central campaign issue again. Opposition parties criticized the Information Services' propaganda initiatives such as National Solidarity Week as being superficial and ineffective, calling into question the government's effort to promote unity and loyalty through symbols. The Alliance coalition suffered significant losses in key states, a setback that led to the demonstrations that sparked the race riots of May 13. What followed were the suspension of parliamentary democracy and the imposition of a military-backed curfew. Power was transferred from the Cabinet to the National Operations Council headed by the Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Razak. The Tunku, the father of independence and a symbol (he, too, was used as a symbol in the Information Services' campaigns) of the compromise that formed the basis of independent Malaya/Malaysia, resigned a year later. The new government then passed laws that entrenched the policy of affirmative action favoring Malays and other indigenous people and restricted the ability to debate and question this vision of Malaysia. Opponents of the official nationalism, vigorous in their advocacy of their vision in the 1960s, fell into line. A winner was declared.

¹⁰ See Chapter 1, pages 12-15 on the close relationships between the rural development program and the Information Services' propaganda work.

The problem with symbols

In 1955, the Alliance coalition won a decisive victory in the first Malayan general elections that gave its leader Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra a mandate to negotiate the terms of independence, penciled for 1957, with the British government. Among the issues on the table was the form of government: the Tunku favored a British-style bicameral parliamentary system with a constitutional monarch as the head of state. The King, or the Yang di-Pertuan Agong, would not wield executive powers but would be a symbol of the nation. The Alliance leaders also had to decide on the other symbols that would represent the new nation—a National Anthem, a National Flag, crests and so on. At the same time, the Tunku embarked on the construction of the Merdeka Stadium, in which the Declaration of Independence would be held,¹¹ the first in a series of National Building projects over the next 10 years that would include the Parliament House, the National Monument, the National Mosque and the National Museum, that would also represent the nation. These icons were meant to symbolize the meaning and promise of a post-colonial state and serve as rallying points for unity and solidarity for citizens who hitherto had been kept apart by the deliberate divide-and-rule policies of the colonial British government. On the cusp of independence, Malayan society continued to be divided by persistent racial and religious cleavages, and this manifested itself most strikingly in the contest over the very core meaning of the nation, played out in debates over language, education, citizenship and culture. The symbols of the new nation were intended to stay above the fray of these contests, but their effectiveness was undermined by a number of factors: the attitude of the government toward symbols, the muteness of the symbols and their perceived distance from the citizenry, the compromised meanings of the symbols themselves and a geographic specificity of some symbols that hampered their conception as “national” icons.

Despite introducing these myriad symbols to the nation with much fanfare, the government and the Information Services never utilized them (with the exception of the National Anthem) extensively in the pursuit of engendering unity among the people and loyalty to the nation. Part of the reason lay in the pragmatic approach of the Alliance government that emphasized concrete progress over symbolism. As discussed in Chapter 1, the government embarked on an ambitious rural development plan in 1960 to close the economic gap between the Malays and non-Malays. Both the timing and the substance of the program reflected the government’s pragmatic approach. The program was not implemented immediately after independence due to a 1958-59 economic recession even though it would have been tempting to embark on deficit spending to shore up the legitimacy of a young government by delivering on election promises. Instead, the cautious and fiscally conservative politicians and bureaucrats waited till the treasury was healthier, an approach rewarded by another convincing victory in the 1959 General Elections.

From 1960 onward, the Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister, Abdul Razak Hussein, took control of the rural development program and implemented it with energy and military precision, roping in the Information Services to provide extensive publicity. The Field Officer’s bible was the monthly “Field Publicity Programme (FPP)” issued by the Information Department headquarters to ensure uniformity in propaganda work across the nation. In the FPP, the topics Field Officers had to cover were divided into three categories that signaled the relative

¹¹ Chee Kien Lai, "Concrete/concentric nationalism : the architecture of independence in Malaysia, 1945-1969" (Thesis Ph D in Architecture --University of California Berkeley Fall 2005, University of California Berkeley, 2005). 190-199.

importance of the topics of the month: (A) Subjects which the Federal Government require to be publicized; (B) Subjects aimed at educating the people in the basic requirements of nation building and citizenship; and (C) “Newstalks” on developments/events and any matters considered newsworthy for the information of the people. The government’s concern with bringing together an ethnically fractured society is reflected in the constant presence of the topic “Unity amongst the various races living in Malaya and un-divided loyalty to Malaya” from the first FPP in mid-1960 to August 1962. However, this appeared under Category (B), reflecting its secondary importance viz-a-viz topics under Category (A), which was dominated by on-going major themes such as Rural Development, Education, Language and Land Policy, as well as more situational topics, campaigns and mundane issues such as the issuance of new Identity Cards, World Health Day, National Plan to fight Tuberculosis, Save Your Money in the Post Office Savings Bank and so on. There would of course be opportunities for the Field Officers to talk about unity and loyalty in the course of engaging these specific topics, but that would have depended on the initiative of individual officers since “unity and loyalty” were not listed as talking points under each of these subjects. Also significant was that when Field Officers did touch on unity and loyalty under Category (B), headquarters instructed them to emphasize “(a) Understanding of each others’ way of life, customs and religions, and (b) spirit of tolerance.”¹² There was no mention of the Agong, the National Flag, the National Anthem or National Buildings.¹³ The government, it appeared, preferred to emphasize social and economic progress over symbols as a vehicle toward achieving a more cohesive Malaya.

A second reason why symbols were not a more integral part of the government’s propaganda efforts was that many of the symbols appeared distant from the everyday consciousness of the people. Take for instance the office of the King, which was created specifically for the post-colonial state, and was rotated among the nine hereditary Sultans of the Malay states, with each Sultan serving one five-year term.¹⁴ The Tunku envisioned the Agong playing not just the role of a constitutional monarch but also serving as a unifying focal point and “stabilizing factor” for Malaysians “of many racial origins, professing every kind of belief known on earth ... with such divided interests.”¹⁵ On the cusp of independence, the Tunku said the choice of the first Agong was of “vital importance to this country. The person chosen should be one who will command the love, respect and absolute loyalty to the Malayan peoples.”¹⁶ To non-Malays who were “nervous about their future,” the Tunku assured them that the Agong “is also

¹² Field Publicity Programmes for 1960-62 are in PEN 664/60 and PEN 264/62. Category (C) was reserved for less important items or topics that were being introduced on a smaller scale that would likely become important later (for example, the formation of Malaysia).

¹³ From September 1962 onward, the Information Department did away with sub-categories to denote the hierarchy of topics, which were now simply numbered to denote their importance. As a result, “loyalty and unity” was no longer ever-present in the FPPs, appearing only when the situation warranted it (e.g. at the height of the Indonesian *Konfrontasi* in 1963-65 and when the National Anthem controversy reached its peak in 1967-68.)

¹⁴ Tunku Abdul Rahman, a member of the royalty who understood the intricacies of the relationships between the royal houses of Malaya. See “Malaysia’s monarch: democratic symbol and basis for stable government,” “The Rulers and their responsibility: Institution must be preserved with honour and dignity” and “The Kings and I: Malaysians are better served by Rulers—A unique system in operation here,” (originally published on July 13 and July 18, 1975, and March 1, 1976 respectively) in Abdul Rahman Putra, *Looking back : Monday musings and memories*, 1st ed. (Kuala Lumpur: Pustaka Antara, 1977).. Also, “The Yang Dipertuan Agong” in Abdul Rahman Putra, *Viewpoints* (Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann Educational Books (Asia), 1978).

¹⁵ Abdul Rahman Putra, *Looking back*. 211.

¹⁶ “Speech in the Federal Legislative Council, Kuala Lumpur on 10th July, 1957,” in Abdul Rahman Putra, *Malaysia, the road to independence* (Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia: Pelanduk Publications, 1984). 191.

required to safeguard their legitimate interests.”¹⁷ Despite such lofty aims ascribed to the King, the Agong—as a person and as an institution—did not insinuate himself forcefully into the imagination of the nation. As a constitutional monarch with no executive powers, the Agong makes few pronouncements of importance,¹⁸ which the propaganda arms treat in a perfunctory manner: they are always tucked at the bottom of the Field Publicity Programmes.¹⁹ At the same time, an individual Agong has little time to capture the imagination of or create a lasting bond with the people because of his short five-year term.²⁰

National symbols of Malaya/Malaysia also struggled with staying above the fray of partisan politics in large part because these symbols were supposed to embody the meaning and essence of the nation, which themselves were vigorously contested before, during and after independence. The contradiction within the official nationalism that privileges Malay culture and religion while seeking to embrace citizens of all ethnicities and faiths, infected symbols such as the national buildings²¹ and the King.²²

¹⁷ Ibid. 207. In fact, in the problematic Constitutional article that expresses the irreconcilable difference between the competing visions of the nation, it is the Agong that tries to serve as the unifying institution. Article 153 reads: “It shall be the responsibility of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong to safeguard the special position of the Malays and natives of any of the States of Sabah and Sarawak and the legitimate interests of other communities in accordance with the provisions of this Article.”

¹⁸ The King’s address at the opening of Parliament is the most substantive policy speech he delivers, and it usually sets out the agenda of the government for that legislative session. The speech is often a long laundry list of items to be covered, with some exhortations that are appropriate for the political situation of the day thrown in as well. The newspapers give it prominent coverage and radio news bulletins lead with that item, but that is more due to the occasion than the substance of the speech. The Agong also makes remarks during major religious holidays, but again those messages contain standard nods toward unity and tolerance, while lacking in important policy announcements.

¹⁹ See the Field Publicity Programmes for March 1962, April 1968, June, July and November 1969 among others, in *PEN 264/62 Field Publicity Programme—1962* and *PEN/NS 20/64 Role of Field Units - Field Publicity Programme*.

²⁰ At the end of his reign, the Agong returns to his hereditary role as Sultan of his state, while the position passes on to another of his eight brother rulers. If all the Kings serve their full terms, it would be 40 years before a Sultan could ascend the throne a second time, assuming he was still alive. The current Agong (in 2012), Tuanku Abdul Halim of Kedah (the Tunku’s nephew) is the first Sultan to serve as King twice. After his first term from 1970-1975, two of the eight other Sultans who served as Agong after him died before the end of their terms. Tuanku Abdul Halim was 84-years-old when he ascended the throne the second time in 2011.

²¹ In 1963, the Alliance government designated a group of seven structures, the King’s List, as the foundation of the newly formed Malaysia, the expanded federation that included Malaya, Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak. Although the list was announced specifically to mark the formation of Malaysia, many of the buildings were either completed before Malaya’s independence in 1957 or were commissioned soon after as a symbol of an emerging post-colonial nation. Each structure was assigned a symbolic purpose:

1. The Parliament Building as a monument to faith in parliamentary democracy,
2. The National Mosque as a monument to freedom of worship,
3. The University Colleges and institutions of learning as faith in education and enlightenment of the people,
4. The Stadiums Merdeka and Negara as symbols of “a healthy mind through a healthy body,”
5. The National Monument as it stood for the spirit of sacrifice in defence of the nation,
6. The Language and Literature Agency as symbol of the rich heritage and special position of the National Language, and
7. The National Museum as a focal point for the development of national culture.

Many of these structures, especially the Parliament House and the National Museum, had prominent physical features that celebrated Malay architectural and cultural traditions. At the same time, these “national buildings” also had to reflect the importance of the ethnical plurality of the nation.

For an exhaustive and illuminating treatment on the symbolic power of these national buildings, and the inherent tensions and contradictions of these symbols of concrete nationalism, see Lai Chee Kean’s dissertation,

Finally, some symbols, particularly the national buildings, were constrained by their geographic location and the technological limitations of the era that constrained the ability of the government to project them (literally) into the consciousness of citizens across the nation. Every single one of the designated national structures was situated in the Kuala Lumpur. Meanwhile, radio was still the primary form of state-controlled mass media throughout the 1960s, and especially during the first half of the decade. When the Parliament House and National Museum were completed in 1963, television service had not even begun.²³ Thus, the effectiveness of these national buildings as visual and concrete symbols of national unity was blunted because they failed to penetrate the everyday consciousness of citizens living outside of the capital region. As a consequence, the Information Department did not distribute or promote these visual images aggressively.

Despite the intention to elevate national symbols above the fray of partisan politics and the contest over the meaning of the nation, they came to embody instead the unresolved tension over the relative place of the various ethnic groups and their culture in the national imagining. The symbolic power of the national buildings was also not easily translatable and transportable outside the capital city. At the same time, the practical and pragmatic orientation of the government more concerned with showing concrete results in the economy and social sphere meant that the Information Services relegated these national symbols as a focal point for unity and loyalty to the background. Thus, these national symbols were made mute through their distance from the people and their contradictory symbolic functions. But one symbol—the National Anthem—stood out from the rest, not because it was free from the problems that bedeviled other symbols but because its performative nature meant that it was the most present icon in the everyday imagination of the citizens. It had to be produced and performed every time, it was heard and felt, and it demanded a response.

Negara-Ku: The performative symbol

A national anthem is starkly different from other national symbols because of its ability to connect with and evoke a response from citizens through its performative quality. Music has an “emotional expression” function, i.e. “music serves as an expression of emotion and a vehicle for evoking emotional responses that cannot be attained through ordinary discourse alone.”²⁴ Scientific research has also documented the ways music is capable of “expressing as well as inducing emotional states in listeners.”²⁵ When this ability to express and evoke emotional states is transposed to the national, an anthem, when performed, then acts as an “active means of

“Concrete/concentric nationalism: the architecture of independence in Malaysia, 1945-1969.” Thesis Ph D in Architecture --University of California Berkeley Fall 2005, University of California Berkeley, 2005.

²² While the King was the constitutional monarch of all Malaysians/Malayans regardless of ethnicity and religion, the office is based on the Malay Sultan, who was traditionally both the administrative and religious head of his Muslim kingdom. Thus, the King functions as the head of Islam in states that do not have a hereditary sultan. And when the King’s term expires, he returns to his own state and resumes his position as the head of religion for his Muslim subjects. Thus, the “Malay-ness” of the Sultan/Agong shares space with the “national-ness” of the position in the imagining of the nation. This did not mean that the non-Malay communities opposed the office of the Sultan/Agong. Opposition parties continually declared their loyalty to the King. However, the Malay-ness of the rulers and their positions as heads of religion in their states complicated their other role as symbols of national unity.

²³ Television broadcasting began on December 28, 1963.

²⁴ Alan Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music*, quoted in Abril, “Functions of a National Anthem in Society”. 73.

²⁵ Ibid.

organizing people, drawing upon widespread beliefs that music can stir as well as depict emotions, can create as well as represent community. Going beyond the image or text, music adds a performative dimension—an active means by which to experience the nation, by which to feel and act national.”²⁶ It is this dynamic quality of a national anthem that sets it apart from its more static counterparts like flags and monuments.

This dynamic ability of an anthem to connect with citizens was evident in Malaya even before there were citizens, and this was reflected in the enthusiastic response of Malaysians when given an opportunity to influence the selection of the anthem. As the colony geared up for independence, Tunku Abdul Rahman announced an international competition in March 1956 to choose a national anthem, with a top prize of \$10,000.²⁷ The Director of Information Services took charge of the competition²⁸ and Radio Malaya’s task was to vet the many entries, compile the shortlists, and play the shortlisted tunes for a panel of seven judges that included the Chief Minister himself.²⁹ The closing date was Oct 31, 1956,³⁰ and because there was a deluge of entries, the judges convened several times to hear different sets of finalists.

From the beginning, the government said that it had no preference for the tempo of the anthem, but that it should have “a strong melody and must be inspiring and easy to sing.”³¹ The Tunku, mindful of the role the anthem would have to play, said that it should also have “a certain solemnity, dignity and a stirring quality, symbolic of the birth of a new nation.”³² Above all, the organizing committee said in announcing the competition that it “must appeal to all communities.”³³ The government stressed that the public would have a say in the selection of the anthem, and the best scores would be orchestrated and broadcast over the radio.³⁴ By September, the Information Services had received 108 entries, not only from Malaya, but also from Indonesia, Hungary, Australia, the United States of America, India, Yugoslavia and Britain.³⁵ It whittled them down to a first set of seven finalists, to be broadcast over radio on all language services on Sunday, September 23.³⁶

The public responded to the opportunity to have their say with gusto. The Information Services reported that, within a week of the broadcast, it had received 800 letters not just from Malaya and Singapore, but also from North Borneo (later to become Sabah), Sarawak and Indonesia, representing the views of over 5,000 people. Fifty letters said all seven tunes were

²⁶ Sue Tuohy, "The Sonic Dimensions of Nationalism in Modern China: Musical Representation and Transformation," *Ethnomusicology* 45, no. 1 (2001). 109.

²⁷ In the initial announcement, the prize was \$5,000. "Write an anthem: \$5,000," *The Straits Times*, March 7, 1956. This was eventually doubled and an additional \$4,000 was also to be awarded as consolation prizes as well as prizes for lyrics. Eventually, it would be known as the \$14,000 competition.

²⁸ "They write a song for Malaya," *The Straits Times*, July 19, 1956.

²⁹ "'Our Anthem must sing the birth of a nation'," *The Straits Times*, July 6, 1956. "Tengku to pick a \$10,000 tune," *The Straits Times*, August 3, 1956. The judges were the Chief Minister; the Minister for Education, Abdul Razak bin Hussein; the Keeper of the Rulers' Seal, Tuan Haji Mustapha Albakri; the Director of Information Services, Ya'acob Abdul Latiff, Deputy Director of Broadcasting, Tony Beamish; Director of Music, Malay Regiment. Captain E. Lenthall; and Director of Music, Police Band, A.W. Crofts. "Five men face the music," *The Straits Times*, August 14, 1956.

³⁰ "Five men face the music."

³¹ Ibid.

³² "'Our Anthem must sing the birth of a nation'."

³³ "Write an anthem: \$5,000."

³⁴ "The public will help choose National Anthem," *The Straits Times*, September 9, 1956.

³⁵ "108 anthems go to judges: 101 rejected," *The Straits Times*, September 4, 1956; "Five men face the music." One entry was from the well-known American harmonica player, Larry Adler, which was rejected.

³⁶ "Anthems on the air," *The Straits Times*, September 21, 1956.

suitable, while five said they were dull and un-Malayan.³⁷ Other members of the public, whether letter-writers or interviewed in the newspapers, were much less charitable. One report, polling the views of professional musicians, music teachers and conductors, was especially damning. A music teacher said the seven were “lousy, terrible” and sounded like German Christmas songs. The conductor of the Singapore Symphony Orchestra managed an “oh dear, oh dear.” Tellingly, the most frequent criticism was that the finalists contained nothing that was “characteristically Malayan.” Letter writers echoed that criticism, with one asking for compositions only from Malaysians.³⁸ Another, Addy Tan from Singapore, criticized the seven finalists as sounding more like funeral marches.³⁹ A newspaper editorial opined that the idea for the contest was “essentially unsound” since the Muse cannot inspire on demand, even if there was a generous cash prize to be had. Also, it noted that most countries did not arrive at their national anthems by way of a competition but adapted existing tunes for the purpose. “Is it not possible, from the hundreds of songs that the Malays have sung for generations, to find one suitable for the purpose? It would at least have the outstanding merit of belonging to this country and its people.”⁴⁰ Addy Tan of Singapore went one step further, suggesting a specific tune: “The tempo of *Terang Bulan* is more cheerful and pleasant and should meet with local approval.”⁴¹

Terang Bulan, or Bright Moon, was a popular Malay song widely played on radio and nightclubs and available in jukeboxes. Its melody served as the basis for Perak’s State Anthem for 55 years, and it was this State Anthem that became the National Anthem, with new words written for it.⁴² By the end of the contest (extended several times), the judges had eliminated over 500 entries, including one from Benjamin Britten,⁴³ and went through a number of finalists, all played over radio. There is no evidence to suggest that the judges picked a tune based on a short letter to the editor, since the Perak anthem and other state anthems would have logically come under consideration, if not as a candidate for the National Anthem, at least as examples of anthems already in circulation in Malaya. The fact that the tune of the anthem was based on a popular pop song and that the lyrics subsequently written for the anthem was in Malay did not appear to be a problem. When a piece of music is “pulled into national arenas, ... its meanings transform within the avowedly national contexts of performance as prior attachments to the musical sounds are transposed to affiliations to the national idea... The sounds—and, theoretically, the identities associated with them—then collapse into the national frame to be heard and felt as national.”⁴⁴ If its popular roots did not pose a problem, neither did its Malay provenance, for there appeared to be little or no disagreement over the language of the National Anthem lyrics.

What was significant was that there was an outpouring of opinions regarding the anthem, an enthusiasm not seen in responses to other national symbols. The contest to decide on the

³⁷ One letter carried 75 signatures. “5,000 write in about the anthem contest,” *The Straits Times*, September 30, 1956.

³⁸ “Malayan panel for national anthem,” *The Straits Times*, October 2, 1956.

³⁹ “The Anthem contest,” *The Straits Times*, September 29, 1956.

⁴⁰ “National Anthem,” *The Straits Times*, September 27, 1956.

⁴¹ “The Anthem contest.”

⁴² “*Terang Bulan* recommended as anthem,” *The Straits Times*, August 6, 1957.

⁴³ “494 ‘anthems’ rejected: 20 still to judge,” *The Straits Times*, May 15, 1957. English composer Benjamin Britten’s entry was submitted at the last minute directly to the Chief Minister. A spokesman for the Tunku said, perhaps diplomatically: “We have played Mr. Britten’s composition and we have sent it back to him today with certain suggestions.” “Britten writes a Malayan anthem,” *The Straits Times*, July 18, 1957.

⁴⁴ Tuohy, “The Sonic Dimensions of Nationalism in Modern China.” 109.

National Flag was also carried out in public, with finalists' designs printed in newspapers, but that process did not elicit even a fraction of the enthusiasm that the anthem did. This was due not just to the performative nature of music and its ability to express and evoke feelings, but also to a certain familiarity with the role and symbolic importance of national anthems. As a British colony, the practice of playing God Save the Queen in cinemas at the end of the last film show of the day, and on the radio, was widespread and common. Malaysians witnessed Britons and Europeans standing up when the anthem was played and recognized the form and protocol surrounding this symbol. Thus, when given a chance to help choose the one national symbol that was more closely interwoven with the daily rhythms of their lives than other more static symbols, Malaysians jumped at the chance. After all, this was one symbol that was supposed to represent their new nation, symbolize all Malaysians, be acceptable to all communities and be a focal point of unity for a diverse nation.

Problems after independence

The ability of national anthems to connect better with the imagination of citizens could and eventually did prove to be a double-edged sword in Malaya. Anthropologists and ethnomusicologists have noted that a national anthem, because of its performative quality, "holds something of a blank canvas quality [in that] it may be filled with additional meaning beyond that dictated by printed words and music notation..."⁴⁵ Anthems are "interpreted and realized by the performer(s), situated in a sociocultural and historical context."⁴⁶ I suggest that listeners also "interpret" the symbolic meaning of the anthem through their varying actions and reactions to the playing of the anthem. And because the anthem stands out from other national symbols as the one that is more able to express and evoke an inner emotional response, the unpredictable nature of the physical and outward response—itsself a performance—to the playing of the anthem destabilizes the symbol and makes it more prone to controversy.

The first controversy over the playing of *Negara-Ku* occurred before the flush of excitement over independence had barely passed. The issue of the lack of respect for the *Negara-Ku* surfaced and sparked a flurry of letters in the newspapers within a fortnight of Merdeka. The initial set of letters laid out most of the themes for the debate over this issue for the next decade or so until 1969. The first letter, a very brief 78-word missive from Disgusted of Telok Anson, identified the problem: "Chinese, Malays and Indians laugh, giggle and rush out of the nearest exit" of the cinema hall when the Anthem is played at the end of the last screening of the day.⁴⁷ What was notable was that Disgusted racialized the recalcitrant moviegoers. Since Malays, Chinese and Indians make up almost all of the citizens of the nation, the writer could have achieved the same effect by using "everyone" or "all locals" or any other noun that signaled the widespread nature of the problem. However, he did not, and we do not know why Disgusted chose to racialize the situation. It could have been an innocuous and instinctive form of expression, a local version of Tom, Dick and Harry. It could also have been an example of how race can reflexively and almost automatically color debates over any issue in Malaya. Or it could have

⁴⁵ Guy, "'Republic of China National Anthem' on Taiwan." 96.

⁴⁶ Abril, "Functions of a National Anthem in Society". 73.

⁴⁷ "Respect for the anthem," *The Straits Times*, September 10, 1957. The last show usually ends near midnight. The charge hurt even more as the writer contrasted this behavior with that of some Britons who were "standing stiffly to attention" as the anthem was played.

reflected the concern, conscious or unconscious, over how the discourse on loyalty to the nascent nation had become specifically racialized. Whatever the motives, the effect of the phrasing was apparent: even Malays, whose respect for the symbols of and loyalty to the nation had been taken for granted by virtue of their status as the indigenous people occupying a special position in the nation, were walking out on the Anthem. The response of the Malay community to the Anthem would fade in the public debate over the issue, especially a decade later when the National Anthem Act was about to be enacted, and the discourse would center primarily on the actions of the Chinese community.

Disgusted proposed two solutions—coercion *or* eliminating the opportunity for disrespect—and debates over the feasibility and effectiveness of these two solutions would dominate the discourse in the years ahead. Not surprisingly, that discourse was also racialized. Disgusted suggested that the cinema management lock their patrons inside until the completion of the playing of the Anthem. This of course would not have guaranteed that the patrons showed the appropriate respect. The second solution involved not playing the Anthem so that it would not be “disgraced.”⁴⁸ Another writer suggested that the Anthem be played only for “ceremonies of State or public functions”⁴⁹ and had no place in nightclubs and cinemas. Others advocated a middle ground between coercion and avoidance. The problem lay in the timing of the playing of the anthem, and once that was fixed, so would the problem. D.S. Banner of Taiping said that the Anthem should be played at the beginning of the film screening, “ensuring that it gets the recognition which it is due.”⁵⁰ The writer also noted a technical problem: the image requesting patrons to show respect to the anthem that was projected on the screen was written in English, and while “the majority of Europeans” remain standing, “90 percent of the remaining patrons walk out completely.” The implication is that perhaps some of the non-European patrons did not understand English. Not every reader agreed that fiddling with the mechanics of the situation was the solution. P. Ramiah of Ipoh thought that D.S. Banner’s solution “would amount to [the] use of force.”⁵¹

These three solutions—coercion, adjusting the mechanics of the situation, and avoiding the situation altogether—did not address the underlying reason for such shows of disrespect, nor what to do about it. The first attempts to get to the root cause of the problem focused on education, or the lack thereof. D.L. Eadon of Singapore suggested that Europeans were better behaved because they had been taught “from very early ages to stand up as a mark of respect whenever their National Anthem was played.”⁵² “The uneducated people do not know what to do when the National Anthem is played,” wrote A.D. Mahendran of Segamat, who suggested that “illiteracy and ignorance” were the root causes of the problem.⁵³

Two months passed before the government responded, stating that it would not force people to observe the Anthem.⁵⁴ The clarification came in response to a call by Umno’s women’s

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ “Reserve it for ceremonies,” *The Straits Times*, September 13, 1957.

⁵⁰ “Respect for Anthem,” *The Straits Times*, November 23, 1957.

⁵¹ “A sight to be proud of,” *The Straits Times*, November 27, 1957. P. Ramiah was the lone letter contradicting the other letters on the matter. P. Ramiah recalled an incident in a Kuala Lumpur cinema. The projection man had been slow in playing the Anthem after the end of the film and people had begun to head for the exits. When the strains of *Negara Ku* came on, “every man, woman and child stood stone still facing in different directions till the whole Anthem was played. This was a sight to be proud of.”

⁵² “Train to respect National Anthem,” *The Straits Times*, September 13, 1957.

⁵³ “Confusion over the Anthem,” *The Straits Times*, September 17, 1957.

⁵⁴ “Anthem: There will be no compulsion,” *The Straits Times*, October 31, 1957.

division, which lobbied for a law punishing those who ignored the anthem. Ultimately, the government would take that very tack, enacting the National Anthem Act in 1968 criminalizing expressions of disrespect for the Anthem, and marking the logical end of the coercion solution. However, rather than actually jail someone for not standing stiffly when the Anthem was played, the government would eventually discontinue the practice of playing the anthem in cinemas at the end of the day, even after the passage of the law. But in its October 1957 response, there was no hint of this ultimate path. Instead, the National Anthem Committee announced that an “anthem film” would be made showing the Agong and the National Flag while the Anthem was played, just “like the one showing the Queen and the Union Jack now screened in British cinemas.”⁵⁵ This implied that showing a better slide more consistent with international standards would solve the problem, although a newspaper editorial published six months later noted that even in pre-independent Malaya, cinema patrons did not stand up when the National Anthem of Britain was played.⁵⁶

What is striking about these initial efforts to get to the root cause of the problem is the absence of the discourse on loyalty and patriotism until the debate began to mature in the beginning of 1958. A leader of a women’s organization urged its members to “build up patriotism” as an antidote to the problem.⁵⁷ But a more resonant word that would color the racialized debate over the National Anthem in the 1960s also entered the discourse: loyalty. Patriotic Student from Kuala Lumpur said that he (or she) and others who “pay our due respect to our National Anthem feel insulted at seeing people going out of the cinema” while it was being played. “If Malaysians do not show any sign of loyalty by just standing at attention for a few minutes, then who will?”⁵⁸ Politicians soon picked up on the theme⁵⁹ while leaders of youth organizations called on the government and voluntary organizations to embark on an “extensive campaign ... to ‘instill’ loyalty in the citizens of the country.”⁶⁰ One of the leaders interviewed stressed that the people should have “loyalty at heart. If you close the door of the cinema when the anthem is being played the people may stand up but that may not necessarily mean that they are loyal.” As the debate unfolded, the accent slowly moved away from the practicalities of the problem toward a fundamental question regarding a citizen’s commitment to his new nation.

Some resisted changing the framework of debate, though. One editorial explicitly challenged the linkage between disrespect for the Anthem and disloyalty to the nation, stating that it was “a mistake to infer too much from the behaviour of cinema patrons...” Scrambling for the exit doors meant nothing more than exactly that: a “desire to be the first out of the hall...” The problem is ignorance, the panacea education. “Once the ordinary citizen realises that the anthem is not musical entertainment and that it is disrespectful to bolt for the door, the people will respond.”⁶¹ Another letter writer, C.K. Chen from Singapore, repeated the move-the-anthem solution, but with a couple of twists. The writer found inspiration from his or her time in China in the 1940s, when the Kuomintang government mandated the playing of its National Anthem *before* the beginning of movies. “Patrons always stood (if not out of loyalty then out of desire to avoid unwanted stares)...”⁶² To C.K. Chen, the act of standing up itself is useful, regardless of

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ “Anthem habit,” *The Straits Times*, April 5, 1958.

⁵⁷ “Respect Anthem, leader urges,” *The Straits Times*, February 10, 1958.

⁵⁸ “Respect for Anthem,” *The Straits Times*, February 22, 1958.

⁵⁹ “Teach loyalty: Mayor,” *The Straits Times*, March 24, 1958.

⁶⁰ “Disrespect for the anthem: Youth leaders call for a campaign,” *The Straits Times*, April 4, 1958.

⁶¹ “Anthem habit.”

⁶² “Cinema-going and loyalty,” *The Straits Times*, April 9, 1958.

what one feels inside. Nevertheless, this outward sign of respect often resulted in large numbers joining “lustily in the singing” which would help “instil loyalty” in the moviegoers, the writer noted.

Looking back, C.K. Chen from Singapore’s letter is ironic because as the debate over the National Anthem in the mid to late 1960s came to focus on the lack of loyalty of the Chinese Malaysian population, one of the charges against some members of the community was that they were indeed singing lustily to a national anthem, just not the Malaysian National Anthem. In any case, the linkage between Chinese Malaysians and their perceived lack of commitment to the new nation began to creep into the National Anthem debate as the 1950s drew to a close. Another letter writer in December of 1959, Chinese from Ipoh, noted that during the beginning of a Chinese movie screening, a request was made for patrons to stand for the Anthem but “practically everyone in the audience remained glued to his seat.”⁶³ The Chief Minister of that state, Perak, took the opportunity when addressing Chinese teachers attending a three-day civics course organized by the Department of Information during that same month, to register his concern over the issue and to urge the teachers to “instil love for Malaya and respect for the national flag and the anthem in their schoolchildren.” The unspoken thrust of the message was clear: in the public discourse, the problem was no longer that of “Chinese, Malay and Indian” patrons showing disrespect for the anthem (as mentioned in the first letter on the topic) but Chinese Malaysians whose loyalties were in question.

While the discourse on the National Anthem was playing out especially in the pages of newspapers, the Information Services was evaluating the situation outside of the public gaze during the first half of the 1960s. As discussed in Chapter 1 and 2, 1960 was a pivotal year for both the Department of Information and Radio Malaya. The former, once a well-oiled colonial department that engaged in relatively straightforward wartime propaganda, was undergoing a critical reorganization of its philosophy and capabilities to meet the more complex propaganda demands of a newly independent country in peacetime. At the same time, Radio Malaya had just separated from Radio Singapore, and was slowly building up its infrastructure and manpower to fill the broadcasting needs of Malaya. As part of that reorganization and stocktaking, the Director of Information requested Radio Malaya to detail the steps it was implementing to promote the National Anthem. The station said it would continue to start and end each day’s programming on all four of its language services with a “simple, clear sung version of the Anthem”.⁶⁴ In addition, Radio Malaya would start broadcasting a “teaching version” of the anthem to coincide with the Independence Day celebrations of that year. Dol Ramli, who would eventually become the first Malayan to head Radio Malaya, would use “simple, colloquial Malay” to teach listeners the words, tune and rhythm of the Anthem and may also conduct “a simple exposition of the full meaning” of the words. The station planned to broadcast this teaching version every day from August 28 to September 3 immediately following the main news bulletin of each language service. The teaching version would last approximately 12 minutes. After the Merdeka Day period, Radio Malaya planned to broadcast the teaching version every Saturday morning over all its language services. The Director then instructed Radio Malaya to provide portable audio copies of the “teaching version” for use by the Field Units of the Information Department.

⁶³ “Glued down,” *The Straits Times*, December 25, 1959.

⁶⁴ M.J. Smee, Acting Deputy Director (Programmes), to Ya’acob bin Abdul Latiff, Director, Department of Information, August 12, 1960, in *PEN 540/58. Radio programmes – Radio Federation*. The languages services begin broadcasting at various times in the morning—6 am for the Malay and English services, 6.30 am for the Chinese service and 5.30 am for the Tamil service.

At this point, the propaganda units, reflecting government policy, were still focused on education even as the public discourse over the Anthem had slowly begun to shift its focus from disrespect to disloyalty, and was increasingly racialized. This continuing focus on education reflected the unspoken premise that what was lacking among the new citizenry was the knowledge and appreciation of the role and symbolic power of the anthem. The deliberate use of simple and colloquial Malay was the Information Services' way of disseminating its intended message among the many non-Malays whose grasp of the National Language was rudimentary while still preserving the integrity of the Malayness of the symbol. Dol Ramli was the right person for the job not just because he was Head of Malay Programming at that time, but also because he had a genuine interest in music and the arts. He was the prime mover behind the formation of the Radio Malaya Orchestra,⁶⁵ helped plan the Music Service for Radio Sabah in 1964 after it joined the Federation,⁶⁶ and was active in expanding the music and arts coverage of Radio Malaysia before that portfolio was taken over by the newly-created Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports.⁶⁷ Dol's direct involvement in the National Anthem question from the beginning meant that he had his hand on the pulse of the matter a few years later as the issue erupted.

Meanwhile, the impending formation of Malaysia and Sukarno's resistance to it recast the contest over the meaning of Malaya/Malaysia. The Alliance government used the Indonesian President's sustained diplomatic and military opposition to Malaysia as a rallying cry to unite the nation and to bolster weak national symbols. It labeled opposition to the official vision and meaning of Malaysia as pro-Sukarno, pro-communist and treasonous, a task made easier by Sukarno's larger than life rhetoric and action, which included one pointed insult to the National Anthem. On April 29, 1963, the Indonesian President hosted a reception at Bogor for the delegates of the Afro-Asian Journalists' Conference. Sukarno had apparently led the singing of the song *Terang Bulan*. Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman deplored Sukarno's action, stating that it was "most unbecoming" for a Head of State to make fun of another country's national anthem "in front of so many foreign guests, especially the delegation from Malaya." The Tunku described this incident as yet another example of Sukarno's "pranks and clowning" and went on to say that he took "strong exception to the new attempt to belittle the Government and the people of this country in the presence of so many foreign guests."⁶⁸ After Malaya gained her independence on August 31, 1957, *Terang Bulan* was no longer played in Malaya out of respect to the Anthem. Indonesia, too, followed suit, prohibiting the playing of the tune, a move The Straits Times described as a "courteous gesture." This made Sukarno's performance in 1963 even more egregious in that he violated his government's prohibition.

The original report on this matter was a wire agency report filed by UPI (United Press International). It noted that Sukarno had joined hands with Hartini (the fifth of his ten wives) and Foreign Minister Dr Subandrio in singing the song. Sukarno is reported to have introduced the

⁶⁵ Radio Malaysia, *Ini-lah Radio Malaysia 1966 [This is Radio Malaysia 1966]* (Kuala Lumpur: Radio Malaysia, 1966). 32.

⁶⁶ See KPP 2015: *Letters to and from Che Dol Ramli while in Borneo*.

⁶⁷ One of Dol's most ambitious projects was a systematic recording and preservation of traditional Malay and aboriginal music of Malaysia. That project, hatched in 1963 with the assistance of University of Hawaii musicologist Barbara Smith, did not get off the ground due to a lack of resources, funding and trained personnel. Dol tried to revive it as part of a Cultural Map of Malaysia project, which also did not take off. See exchange of letters between the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting and Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports in KPP 2195: *Peta Kebudayaan Malaysia*.

⁶⁸ "'Terang Bulan' prank angers Tengku," *The Straits Times*, April 30 1963.

song as one that “is very popular in Indonesia and has been sung for more than 100 years.” After the three had sung individual verses of the song, Sukarno “walked from guest to guest inviting each to contribute an impromptu verse.” The delegate from “North Borneo Revolutionaries”, a group opposed to the formation of Malaysia and supported by Indonesia, sang: “Don’t trust the voice of Malaysia, just believe in ourselves.” While expressing its support for the North Borneo rebels, Indonesia had characterized the formation of the enlarged Malaysia Federation as “substituting one form of colonialism for another.”⁶⁹ All but two of the Malayan delegation walked out as the singing began. The leader of the Malayan delegation said he took “strong exception” to the matter.⁷⁰ A member of the delegation, head of Radio Malaya’s news division Hashim Hassan, noted that Malaya had joined 38 other countries in signing the “Jakarta Declaration” condemning all forms of colonialism. Yet Hashim also noted that everyone, including the Indonesian delegates were “friendly” toward the Malaysians, who were treated “well” and given “the best transport and food in spite of Indonesia’s economic difficulty.”⁷¹ It appeared that until the presidential reception, the Malaysians were not treated as neo-colonialists, making Sukarno’s impromptu musical insult even more stinging.

Letters expressing anger and disgust over recalcitrant cinemagoers disappeared temporarily from the National Anthem discourse to be replaced by anger and disgust over Sukarno’s actions.⁷² But this did not mean that the issue had gone away. The Department of Information was receiving reports not just of continued shows of disrespect for the Anthem at commercial cinemas, but also similar behavior during the visits of its Mobile Film Units to rural or semi-urban areas. These units and the Field Officers that travel with them would begin their visits in the late afternoon when residents of their target villages or towns started returning home at the end of the workday. The Field Officers would conduct Organized Talks or Group Discussions, depending on the size of the crowd or the issues of the day. They would also set up a large screen and show a variety of entertainment and news films. The National Anthem was usually played, just as in the cinemas, at the end of the night’s screening.

There were periodic efforts to educate the audience on the meaning and significance of the Anthem. One particular exercise, in the multi-ethnic state of Negeri Sembilan in 1963 some months after the Sukarno-*Terang Bulan* incident, is a revealing marker of the progress of the Information Services’ efforts at instilling a national ideology in the people. The State Information Officer had reminded all mobile units to not just play the anthem “to arouse national spirit,”⁷³ but also to make a prior announcement so that the crowd will not disperse immediately after the show. A month later, some District Information Officers complained that despite the announcement, some members of the audience continued to leave as the Anthem was being played. The state chief stressed again that it was the department’s duty “to educate the masses” and thus instructed the mobile units to play the Anthem in the middle (instead of at the end) of the final feature film, and to make a short educational announcement before that.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ “North Borneo rebels supported by Indonesian mission,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, March 12 1963.

⁷⁰ “Malayans walk out as Soekarno, wife sing ‘Terang Bulan,’” *The Straits Times*, April 30 1963.

⁷¹ “Hashim had a brush with Aidit over *Terang Bulan*,” *The Straits Times*, May 3 1963.

⁷² See, for example, “Anthem insult,” *The Straits Times*, May 2 1963; “Cheap insult,” *The Straits Times*, April 30 1963.

⁷³ “Notes of the Field Staff Co-ordination Meeting held in Seremban on 17.10.63” in *PEN/NS 8/61: Co-ordination meetings II*.

⁷⁴ “Notes of the briefing of Field Staff held in Seremban on 27th Nov, ‘63” in *PEN/NS 8/61*.

A fortnight later, the reports started flowing in. The Rembau District information officer, in a brief note, said the response was “satisfactory.”⁷⁵ The Tampin officer characterized the general reaction as “very encouraging”⁷⁶ while the results in the Malay kampungs were “extremely good.” However, he noted that in the Indian estates and Chinese New Villages, most of the people appeared not know how or what the Anthem sounded like and “still many more could not understand the significance of playing the National Anthem.” After giving an explanation and inviting them to stand at attention during the interval, the audience “gladly obliged ... but each time we still could find some kids and even some adults among the crowd ... walking and chattering in spite of our efforts to educate them...” The Tampin officer concluded that the situation would improve “given sufficient time.” Meanwhile, the Seremban district information officer noted that the response from Malay kampungs was “good, just like it had been before,” with 75 per cent of the adult audience respecting the anthem when it was played. As for the Indian estates and Chinese New Villages, the officer offered a somewhat diplomatic assessment, stating that the response, when compared to the pre-independence era, had not changed much. “Even though they stand when the anthem is played, there are still many who walk about.”⁷⁷

It appears that the officers were being slightly generous when they described the responses as “satisfactory” or “good”, in the light of the details they provide. There were geographical variations in how different ethnic groups responded. While the Seremban report was discreetly critical of the non-Malay communities, the Jelubu District information officer painted a more even racial picture. He remarked that on the whole the Jelubu folks could identify the National Anthem and “understood somewhat”⁷⁸ its significance and the proper way to behave when it was played. However he did not think that the State Information Officer’s idea of playing the Anthem in the middle of the film was a good idea. Since the audience would have liked to see the rest of the movie, he wrote, “they not surprisingly waited in silence when the National Anthem was played,”⁷⁹ the implication being that loyalty and respect had nothing to do with their proper behavior. This entirely plausible reason for the positive response to the National Anthem would apply to other districts as well. However, perhaps realizing that his cynicism was not what the State Information Officer wanted to hear, he injected an unconvincing note of optimism of his belief that the people will “slowly understand”⁸⁰ the significance of the anthem. What is more revealing though was his estimate of the percentage of his Jelubu audience who understood and respected this national symbol—40 per cent of the Malays and 20 per cent of Chinese.

Taking all the district information officers’ reports together, it is clear that while there were some differences in how various ethnic groups reacted to the playing of the anthem, there

⁷⁵ Mohd. Haniff bin Baki, District Information Officer, Rembau, to State Information Officer, Negeri Sembilan, December 18, 1963, in in *PEN/NS 8/61*.

⁷⁶ “Cheah Kim Mun, District Information Officer, Tampin, to State Information Officer, Negeri Sembilan, December 18, 1963, in in *PEN/NS 8/61*.

⁷⁷ “... tidak ada sangat perubahan-nya. Sungguh pun mereka berdiri tetapi banyak di-antara yang juga kesana kemari.” The Malay language, with its preponderance of passive constructions, is particularly suitable for employing gentle criticisms. District Information Officer, Seremban, to State Information Officer, Negeri Sembilan, December 19, 1963, in in *PEN/NS 8/61*.

⁷⁸ “... mengertilah sedikit-sedikit ...” Jelubu District Information Officer, to State Information Officer, Negeri Sembilan, December 18, 1963, in *PEN/NS 8/61*.

⁷⁹ “... sudah tentu mereka tunggu dan diam apabila ‘Lagu Negara-ku’ itu di-bunyi-kan.” Ibid.

⁸⁰ “... beransur faham ...” Ibid.

were significant numbers of *all* ethnic groups who were ignorant of the anthem, its symbolic meaning and the proper way to respond to it.⁸¹ This recalls the first post-independence letter that sparked the public debate on this issue, which noted that Malays, Chinese and Indians were walking out of cinema halls. Six years after independence, it appears that the efforts of the government, especially the Information Services, to promote the National Anthem as one of the national symbols of unity, had stalled among *all* ethnic groups. This led Dol Ramli, who by 1964 had become Director of Radio, to send an unsolicited and classified memo to the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting's Secretary, expressing his exasperation over the persistent "low regard [shown by] many filmgoers"⁸² to the Anthem. He stressed the need to educate the masses yet acknowledged that this might take a long time. In the meantime, he advocated implementing "good and practical" measures to address the problem. Toward this end, Dol suggested using a shorter instead of the standard version of the Anthem,⁸³ and to play it before the start and not after the end of the last feature. "This will force all viewers to stand up and respect this national symbol, whether they want to or not, so as not to appear to be rude, as they do now, actions of which have a very negative psychological impact and may leach into their attitude towards other national symbols."⁸⁴ Dol's sense of urgency—he urged his superiors to act "quickly"—came from the realization that if this matter was not tackled decisively, it had the potential of compromising the other new national symbols.

Dol Ramli's recommendations eventually formed the basis of the government's policy, unveiled five months later in March 1965. The Director of Information Services announced a two-prong plan: instructing cinemas to play the anthem at the start of the last show of the day and showing a "special standard trailer on the significance of the anthem"⁸⁵ before it was to be played. The trailer would incorporate "something that goes with the image of Malaysian unity. For example, ... the king and the Parliament House, both symbols of unity which are readily identifiable." The government hoped that these trailers would evoke a "spontaneous" response. The Director stressed that there would be no element of compulsion in the government's plan. "Paying respect to the national anthem is a civic law which is unwritten," he said.⁸⁶

I suggest that this policy marked the end of the first stage of the government's handling of the National Anthem as a national symbol meant to rally Malaysians of all stripes together. It began with the National Anthem Committee's first response to the lack of respect problem in 1957,⁸⁷ discussed above, which had been very similar to the 1965 policy.⁸⁸ When we

⁸¹ There is little reason to doubt the veracity of these observations—they were for internal consumption and not "dressed up" for the public.

⁸² "...bagaimana rendah-nya perasaan kebanyakan orang yang menuntun wayang2 gambar ..." Dol Ramli, Director, Radio Malaysia, to Secretary, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, October 28, 1964. In *KPP 1926/B: Aduan jabatan radio (Complaints – radio)*. Dol wrote that he was "very sad and disappointed" (*sunggoh sedih dan dukachita*) at the situation.

⁸³ Whether this would have helped is debatable since the full version of the anthem is just under 1½ minutes, by no means a lengthy tune.

⁸⁴ "Inl akan memaksa semua para penntun supaya bangun menghormati lambang negara kita itu, sama ada mahu atau tidak dan tidak-lah berupa biadab sebagaimana yang terdapat di-masa ini, yang akibat-nya sunggoh burok dari segi psycholoji dan mungkin melarat2 kepada lain2 lambang negara pula." Ibid.

⁸⁵ "Respect for anthem at cinemas: Govt plan," *The Straits Times*, March 27, 1965.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ "Anthem: There will be no compulsion."

⁸⁸ The 1957 policy did not include the suggestion to move the playing of the anthem to the beginning of the films. It did endorse the playing of a new trailer that included images of the King and the National Flag. The 1965 version

consider the 1957 and 1965 announcements together with the government's internal deliberations, a few features of its National Anthem policy becomes clear. The first is that the government identified the problem as one of relatively benign ignorance that could be addressed through education. Dol Ramli's assessment of the problem—that inner change takes time and the government should start with small steps that affect outward behavior—and his solution reflect the practical and mechanistic approach toward educating the masses. There was some discussion on the harm that continued disrespect to the anthem could do to other national symbols, but the deliberations were generally shorn of ideology. A third feature was the government's reluctance to resort to legislation to deal with the issue. And finally, the government's position was also free of even a hint of racialization. On paper, the problem cut across racial lines and the solution was correspondingly non-racial, an approach that was not conceived merely as a public relations exercise but had been backed up by reports from the ground and by confidential deliberations among the Information Services' senior officers. Thus, even as initial public discourse on the National Anthem issue had begun to veer into issues of loyalty and race, the government stuck firmly to its even-handed and cautious policy, perhaps sensitive to the dangers of dragging a national symbol into the quagmire of racial politics and the contestation over the meaning of the nation.

This policy made sense within the political climate of the period. As discussed in the previous chapter, the continued struggle over the meaning of the nation was most heated in the arena of language and education. This had began in the early 1950s with dueling reports on the state of education in Malaya (the Barnes and Fenn-Wu reports) staking out oppositional visions not just of the future of education but the very character of the anticipated independent nation. The reports of 1956 and 1960 (the Razak and Rahman Talib reports) failed to mediate the contestation because it merely yoked the two visions together, spawning not one but two “national” education systems, a “National” and a “National-Type” school. This not only perpetuated the conflict but also institutionalized and intensified it, with both sides laying claim to the “national-ness” of their visions. As this conflict intensified in the first years of independence leading up to the release of the Rahman Talib Report in 1960, it was not surprising that the government sought to insulate national symbols, including the National Anthem, from this contestation. Subsequently, the enlargement of the federation to include Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak, and Sukarno's military and diplomatic opposition to Malaysia, came to dominate the first half of the 1960s. The Alliance government adroitly used the Sukarno threat to bolster its position and rally Malaysians behind its vision of Malaysia, and was successful in tarring those who opposed its vision of the nation as traitors. Thus it was not surprising that it comfortably won the 1964 General Election, during which the opposition “was put on the defensive, and touchy issues like the position of Chinese education and language, and equality for all citizens of the country ... were hardly raised and discussed.”⁸⁹ This was mirrored, as we saw earlier in this chapter, in the direction the public discourse over disrespecting the National Anthem was taking. Just as it had shown signs of mutating into another front in the battle over the nation's identity at the close of the 1950s, the Sukarno-*Terang Bulan* incident happened to

had included the recently completed Parliament House. Incidentally, the images of the first Agong and the Parliament House appear on the currency notes.

⁸⁹ R. K. Vasil, "The 1964 General Elections in Malaya," *International Studies* 7, no. 1 (1965). 39. The Alliance coalition was successful in branding the Socialist Front and the Pan-Malayan Islamic Party as anti-national and pro-Indonesian parties. The coalition scored a landslide victory, capturing 89 out of 104 Parliamentary seats, an increase from the 74 it won in the 1959 General Elections. Its success was also mirrored in the State assemblies. Ibid. 40 and 46.

temporarily redefine the discourse and place the anthem as the unquestionable national symbol coming under attack from a belligerent foreign element.

However, the government's position on the National Anthem question would change from 1966. The catalyst for that shift came from the very event that led to Sukarno's policy of *Konfrantasi*: the formation of Malaysia in 1963. The enlarged Federation now included Singapore, whose Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew espoused a vision of the new nation that was at odds with the official ideology. This attempt at re-imagining and re-defining Malaysia bore a striking similarity to the values espoused in the Fenn-Wu report, and he became the standard bearer for those advocating more equality among the different groups, and a non-communal approach toward politics and society in the country. Lee's entry into the battle over the meaning of the nation raised the stakes, as he brought considerable political support from Singapore, was actively forming an alliance with Sabah and Sarawak, was confident in securing the support of non-communalists in the peninsula, and carried the prestige of being a successful and skilled politician and negotiator, as evidenced in the autonomy he carved out for Singapore in the new federation.⁹⁰ At the same time, Lee's obdurate, confrontational and unrelenting style gave substance to his declaration that "[we] are for a Malaysian Malaysia or nothing. We cannot agree to anything but a Malaysian Malaysia. We are prepared to play it in accordance with the rules, perhaps wait five years or fifteen years, but the ideas we represent must come through."⁹¹ His opponents could not have been reassured by Lee's zero-sum-game approach.

On top of that, Lee's branding of his vision was a stroke of genius. Using "Malaysian" as the adjective to describe his Malaysia served three primary functions. By using the name of the country as the adjective, he rhetorically anchored his vision firmly within the national space, pre-empting attacks that he was a tool of foreign governments or interest. From the propaganda standpoint, it allowed Lee to present his vision as fully Malaysian. Contrast this to the labels affixed on the competing visions of the nation as expressed through the education system. The government labeled the products of the uneasy compromise between the visions as National and National-type schools. The National-type school, while incorporated into the national space, was an inferior form of the national, as evidenced by the "type" suffix. A "Malaysian Malaysia" resonates because there is no ambiguity over the fullness of the national character of the vision. The phrase also allowed Lee to go on the offensive. First, Lee started alluding to the government's vision of the country as "Malay Malaysia." Subsequently, the Malaysian Solidarity Convention (MSC), a coalition of five non-Malay parties from Sarawak, the peninsula and Singapore, including Lee's People's Action Party (PAP), challenged one of the most fundamental provisions of the Malaysia agreement: the special position of the Malays and the indigenous communities of Sabah and Sarawak.⁹² Indeed, the MSC declared: "A Malaysian Malaysia is the antithesis of a Malay Malaysia, a Chinese Malaysia, a Dyak Malaysia, an Indian Malaysia or Kadazan Malaysia and so on."⁹³ The Alliance government found both Lee and his concept difficult to handle, and even though it would eventually expel Singapore (and Lee) from the Federation on August 9, 1965, the Malaysian government found that it now had to deal with a resurgent alternative vision it thought it had vanquished in the early 1960s. The Alliance

⁹⁰ As an indication of the important position of Singapore in the enlarged federation, Lee retained his title as Prime Minister of Singapore, while the political leaders of other states in the Malaysian Federation were designated as Chief Ministers.

⁹¹ Kuan Yew Lee, *The battle for a Malaysian Malaysia* ([Singapore,: Ministry of Culture, 1965). 49.

⁹² James P. Ongkili, *Nation-building in Malaysia, 1946-1974* (Singapore ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). 184-185. The MSC was formed in May 1965.

⁹³ *Ibid.* 190.

coalition government twisted itself into discursive and rhetorical knots by claiming to have been for Malaysian Malaysia before there was Malaysian Malaysia, or that it had invented it, or that it was actually pursuing it,⁹⁴ while at the same time attacking the concept and Lee. Singapore's exit apparently did not blunt the appeal of this vision, now with a catchy name. The PAP's successor, the Democratic Action Party (DAP), and like-minded parties made significant gains in the 1969 General Elections, a result Lim Kit Siang, the young leader of the DAP, hailed as a vindication of that vision.⁹⁵

Thus, it was in this highly charged political atmosphere of late 1965/early 1966 that the government's policy on disrespect to the National Anthem began to change. The public discourse had again begun to move from treating the matter as a symptom of the ignorance of a young nation's citizens to racializing the recalcitrants and imputing on them treasonous attitudes toward the nation. The "loyalty" paradigm re-emerged. The Menteri Besar (Chief Minister) of Selangor, Harun Idris, told teachers of Chinese-medium primary schools that they should conduct flag-raising ceremonies and singing of the National Anthem every morning to instill in their students "the spirit of unity, love and loyalty to the country,"⁹⁶ implicitly suggesting that this was a Chinese problem.⁹⁷ At the same time, reports starting surfacing from Malay pressure groups urging the government to take "appropriate action" against those who disrespect the anthem.⁹⁸

The official racialization of the problem could not have been more dramatic. It was the Minister of Information and Broadcasting who fired the first salvo in July 1966 by lashing out at those who disrespected the Agong and the anthem, citing for example, "shops, owned by Malaysians, who put up pictures of leaders of other countries"⁹⁹ instead of the King and the Tunku. The minister, Senu Abdul Rahman, noted that there were some Malaysians who were making political donations to leaders of foreign countries. "It only goes to show that these people do not owe allegiance to this country." Senu then challenged "these people" to make up their minds whether to be loyal citizens of Malaysia or another country and declared that it would be better for those who chose the latter to leave Malaysia.¹⁰⁰ Readers would have understood that Senu was talking specifically about Chinese Malaysians, a point that would become explicit a year later when the rhetoric reached its peak intensity. In early 1967, in response to even more pressure from Umno groups to act against "scoffers",¹⁰¹ Senu warned that "action will be taken"

⁹⁴ See speeches by government leaders that were eventually packaged into informational booklets by the Department of Information, for instance: Ismail bin Abdul Rahman, *Alliance Malaysian Malaysia in two stages; Pendapat Parti Perikatan tentang konsep Malaysia bagi ra'ayat Malaysia dalam dua peringkat* (Kuala Lumpur: Federal Department of Information Malaysia, 1965); Siew Sin Tan, *The concept of a Malaysian Malaysia was born on the day the Alliance was born* (Kuala Lumpur: Federal Department of Information Malaysia, 1965).

⁹⁵ "A victory for Malaysian Malaysia, says DAP's Kit Siang," *The Straits Times*, May 12 1969.

⁹⁶ "Teaching loyalty," *The Straits Times*, November 9, 1965. Harun Idris was also the Menteri Besar of Selangor during the May 13, 1969 riots. As mainly non-Malay groups marched through the streets of Kuala Lumpur after the May 10th elections celebrating electoral gains by the opposition, Harun Idris played a key role in the counter-march of Malay youths that sparked the riots.

⁹⁷ The meme of a Malay Chief Minister addressing Chinese teachers and lecturing them on the importance of respecting the anthem as a sign of loyalty to the country was not new. In 1959, the Menteri Besar of Perak used almost the same words in a similar setting, but as noted above, the racialization of the discourse was overtaken by the Sukarno-Konfrantasi threat. "Concern over disrespect for national anthem," *The Straits Times*, December 8, 1959.

⁹⁸ "Govt urged: Enforce respect for national anthem," *The Straits Times*, April 13, 1966.

⁹⁹ "Senu lashes out at those who do not respect King and flag," *The Straits Times*, July 10 1966.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ "Anthem: 'Act against those scoffers'," *The Straits Times*, February 18 1967.

against those who showed no respect for the National Anthem or flag, people whom he described as “unpatriotic Malaysians” who were “forcing the hand of the Government against them.”¹⁰²

What was curious about these dramatic outbursts was that there appeared to have been very little or no on-the-ground propaganda work on the policy announced by the minister in charge of propaganda. In the Federal Information Department’s internal report detailing its work across the nation for July 1966, no mention was made of Senu’s July 9th speech in Port Klang, Selangor, much less its content. For that month, the department concentrated its publicity efforts on the winding up of the Indonesian Konfrantasi, rural development programs, the National Language Month, official visits by the Agong and the Prime Minister to various states, and the anti-communist operations in Sabah and Sarawak.¹⁰³ Under the section “Highlights from the states,” Senu’s speech also does not merit any mention in the Selangor section, while he is listed as having attended a play some 110 miles south of Port Klang, presumably his second engagement of the day.¹⁰⁴ The Selangor Information Office’s July 1966 report did note that the minister officiated a one-day civics course in Port Klang, but made no mention of the content of his speech, while the National Anthem was not listed as one of the numerous subjects the Field Officers talked about that month. This disconnect between the public discourse and the ground-level propaganda work is striking, especially when contrasted with issues like language and education, which had almost permanent place in the Field Publicity Programmes of the Information Department, replete with detailed and ever-changing talking points to match the current public discourse on the subject. In other words, if the government considered a subject critical, it would have spent energy on both the public front as well as the behind the scenes operations to ensure its message got through. But this was not the case for the National Anthem issue.

One possible reading was that the government continued to be conflicted about dragging the anthem down from its pedestal into the grubby world of politics. The year 1967 was going to be a crucial test for the Alliance government, as it would mark the end of the transitional period in which English continued to be used as an official language. In its place, Malay would become the sole official language of administration. Already, the debate between the Barnes and Fenn-Wu visions of the nation was intensifying, and the Alliance coalition was feeling the pressure from within its ranks as well as from external critics. Seen in this context, I suggest that the ratcheting up of the National Anthem rhetoric may have been a tactic by the government to buy some credibility among conservative Malay groups while navigating a middle path. The government had to limit whatever potential damage the symbol might suffer from the being used as a political tool, and the Information Services’ lack of effort in promoting the government’s increasingly hardline policy (on paper) was one such damage limitation exercise.

The National Language Act of 1967 was another example of an awkward compromise that pleased no one. Advocates of equality failed to get other languages recognized as official languages, while provisions that provided for the continued use of English in some capacity after 1967 disappointed Malay conservatives. By early 1968, the government was ready to move on the National Anthem problem. Senu Abdul Rahman set the stage by criticizing “a handful of hooligans that show their disloyalty by jeering and booing and refusing to stand.” He claimed that many others did not stand up because they were afraid of these “rowdies.”¹⁰⁵ One can see a

¹⁰² “Senu warns all who fail to respect anthem or flag,” *The Straits Times*, February 18 1967.

¹⁰³ Federal Department of Information Malaysia, *Monthly report – July 1966*, 1.

¹⁰⁴ Senu was in the audience for the play *Gelombang*, staged by the Bandar Melaka Youth Club, Ibid. 8.

¹⁰⁵ “Anthem: No rush law to force respect,” *The Straits Times*, January 25 1968.

clear progression in how the government characterized the problem. In the first years after independence, what had been objectionable was the fact that moviegoers bolted for the door immediately following the end of the final show (usually ending between 11 p.m. and midnight), ignoring the anthem presumably in a hurry to get home or to avoid the jam at the parking lot. These were ignorant folks who needed education. In Senu's July 1966 speech, he suddenly yoked these recalcitrant filmgoers with other people who hung pictures of non-Malaysian leaders on the walls of their homes or businesses, thereby tarring the former with the latter's active defiance of Malaysia. Now in 1968, those moviegoers were billed as a group not just ignoring the anthem, but actively jeering it and bullying those who wanted to show some respect for it.

It is hard to ascertain how widespread this jeering and bullying was. The daily and weekly reports filed by Field Officers make no mention of such behavior during their regular film screenings in villages and towns. Complaints to the press were sporadic and inconclusive, and no newspaper seemed to have conducted any in-depth investigation into the phenomenon. However, these jeerers and bullies gave the Prime Minister the perfect stick with which to beat his political opponents. Rebutting charges that not all Malaysians were given equal opportunities under the Alliance coalition's vision of Malaysia, the Tunku hit back, stating: "This is very true. Equal opportunities for all who give their undivided loyalty to this country is our motto. We cannot give equal opportunities to people who look elsewhere for their loyalty—people who jeer at everything we hold dear here; people who refuse to stand up for our National Anthem; people who refuse to respect our National Flag. Until these people showed their loyalty to the country, the problem of equal opportunities would always arise."¹⁰⁶ Thus, the Tunku was characterizing Malaysians who disagreed with the Alliance coalition's vision of Malaysia in which one racial group holds a special position in the nation, not as fellow citizens with a legitimate and oppositional interpretation of the nation, but as disloyal jeerers and bullies. The National Anthem had become a tool in the bitter political fight to define the nation.

The government tabled the National Anthem Act for debate in Parliament on February 24, 1968. It was eventually passed and enacted into law on April 4 that same year. The Act stipulated that: "Any person who knowingly shows disrespect towards the National Anthem in any public place shall be liable to a fine not exceeding one hundred ringgit or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding one month."¹⁰⁷ In the debate over the Act, the highest ranking Chinese Malaysian in the Cabinet, Finance Minister Tan Siew Sin, said that he was "ashamed to admit" that the small section of citizens showing disrespect to the National Anthem constituted Malaysians of Chinese origin.¹⁰⁸ He noted that when the Government allowed the screening of a picture produced in China entitled *The Wall has Two Sides*, some audience members "not only hooted and jeered at the anthem; those same people cheered lustily when the pictures of Mao Tse-tung and Chou En-lai were flashed on the screen. This shows all too clearly that these people are prepared to boast openly of their complete disloyalty to this country and show at the same time that they regard Communist China as their homeland."¹⁰⁹ Tan asserted though that these "malcontents" were few and therefore it was "imperative that they should not allow the few bad

¹⁰⁶ Felix Abisheganaden, "No punches pulled as the Tengku puts Seeni and Tan on the carpet," *The Straits Times*, January 28 1968.

¹⁰⁷ Article 8(2), National Anthem Act 1968.

¹⁰⁸ "A few malcontents tarnish our good name, says Tan," *The Straits Times*, March 2 1968.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. The documentary *The Wall has Two Sides* was made by Felix Greene, a British-American journalist, in 1965, depicting daily life in China. Considered sympathetic to China, *The Wall* opened for screening in Singapore in July 1967, and made a circuit of Malaysian cinemas at the same time as well. See movie advertisements in various regional editions of *The Straits Times* for July and August 1967.

ones to tarnish the good name” of loyal Chinese Malaysians.¹¹⁰ In moving the Act, the Minister of Local Government and Housing, Khaw Kai Boh, said that the government intended to “deprive offenders of their citizenship in the case of citizens and to expel offenders in the case of non-citizens,”¹¹¹ even though that provision was not in the Act.

It seems likely that the appearance of jeerers and bullies in the National Anthem discourse was a recent phenomenon, and could probably be traced directly to the screening of the documentary in cinemas. Prior to that, there had been no descriptions of overt hostility toward the anthem, just indifference. It was also never clear from the letters to the editors that it was a racial problem; indeed, there were many letters that noted otherwise. And finally, buried deep in the newspaper account of the Parliamentary debate over the National Anthem Act was an observation by a government Member of Parliament who spoke of his own personal experiences where he heard some audience members whistling to the tune of the anthem as it was being played, noting that this disrespect was “not limited to non-bumiputras only.”¹¹² Rather than having to enforce the law and jail errant cinemagoers, the government banned the playing of it in cinemas before the Act came into force.¹¹³ Subsequently, the issue disappeared from the public discourse as well as the ground-level propaganda work of the Information Department Field Officers. The government, apparently having made its point, defused the issue and shelved it away, perhaps hoping that the anthem had not suffered irreparable harm to its symbolic value.

Conclusion

On February 8, 1969, the Malaysian government launched the fifth edition of its National Solidarity Week. When it was first mooted in 1964 and held that November,¹¹⁴ it was meant to rally the nation against Sukarno’s Konfrantasi, but after the passing of that threat, the campaign needed a new focal point, which it found in the unofficial symbol of unity and solidarity: the avuncular Father of Independence and Prime Minister. From 1967, National Solidarity Week would kick off on February 8, Tunku Abdul Rahman’s birthday. The symbols of the nation—the Agong, the fluttering flags, the gaily decorated national monuments—coalesced around a mass rally-cum-birthday party where the Tunku, after a rendition of the National Anthem, exhorted the nation to unity. Then, the National Anthem was the theme of the Solidarity Week but by 1969, the Anthem issue had been put into the backburner, and the government was more preoccupied with the upcoming General Elections. So the Solidarity Week that year emphasized economic progress and also tried to bring back the spirit of 1964, recalling how the nation came together in the face of a belligerent and much larger antagonist. The government and its allies in the mass media sought to paper over the racial divisions that had plagued Malaya/Malaysia from independence and emphasized the unity of the nation. One editorial recounted the Alliance’s role in guiding the nation to independence and stability, charting its expansion and electoral successes. “But the importance of the Solidarity Week is not partisan; this is the nation’s week.”¹¹⁵

¹¹⁰ “Anthem Bill now waits for Royal Assent,” *The Straits Times*, March 2 1968.

¹¹¹ “Anthem Bill,” *The Straits Times*, March 2 1968.

¹¹² Ibid. The MP was Rafael Ancheta from Sabah. Bumiputras refer to the indigenous people of Malaysia.

¹¹³ “Now an anthem ban in night clubs, cinemas,” *The Straits Times*, April 4 1968.

¹¹⁴ There was no National Solidarity Week for 1966.

¹¹⁵ “The nation’s week,” *The Straits Times*, February 8, 1969.

This attempt to elevate the Solidarity Week above the fray of partisan politics did not go uncontested. Lim Kit Siang, the leader of the Democratic Action Party, the successor to Lee Kuan Yew's People's Action Party, ridiculed the propaganda effort by noting that six years of rallies, flag-raising ceremonies, cultural shows and other propaganda tools had not "prevented the first major racial conflict in Penang and a ridiculous law to compel respect to the National Anthem..."¹¹⁶ Lim did not challenge the symbols of the nation as valid repositories of the nation's loyalty; instead, he criticized the government for being hypocritical. The Alliance coalition, he said, promoted these symbols as focal points for a multi-cultural and multi-racial nation's loyalties even as its own racialized policies and politics drove the groups apart. Lim called this propaganda effort "an abject failure."¹¹⁷

The symbols of the nation—the Agong, the National Anthem, the national monuments, and even the name of the nation itself—had been forced to symbolize the unity of a Malaysia built on an unresolved and continuing contestation over the core meaning of the nation. This tension sometimes threatened the symbol itself, as the case of the National Anthem suggests. The Information Services' attempts to resist using the Anthem as a political tool failed, and this erstwhile symbol that transcended race was used to put a spotlight on one community's alleged disloyalty to the nation. The propaganda arms struggled to contain the volatile nature of the public discourse over the anthem because, as a performative icon that expresses and evokes an emotional response in the performer and listener, it was the one national symbol that had a meaningful presence in the daily lives of most citizens, and thus one that resonates the most with Malaysians. Other symbols were more inert (the Agong, the Flag) or were geographically specific (the national monuments). But even then, these symbols carried the same contradictory tensions of the nation. The office of the Agong originated in the Malay Sultanate, and its traditional role as the religious, cultural and political head of one community sat uneasily with its new national role as a sovereign of all the people. Furthermore, the unique rotating nature of the office meant that citizens did not have much of a chance to develop any personal chemistry with a ruler that could have transcended or bridged these cleavages. The national monuments faced the same dilemma in addition to their spatial limitations: too often they had to reflect a Malay character as a basis of their national-ness, a requirement that called into question their effectiveness in representing a multi-ethnic citizenry. And so, Lim's attacks cut too close to the bone, and not surprisingly, they had little exposure in the mass media. His critiques could have been simply dismissed as partisan politics, except that the results of the May 10, 1969 General Elections, in which the Alliance coalition suffered significant reversals, proved that his Malaysian Malaysia vision for the nation still resonated with vast swathes of the citizenry. The contest over the meaning of the nation continued and even intensified, despite more than a decade's worth of propaganda work on substantive and symbolic issues by the Information Services to paper over the contestations over and contradictions in the meaning of the nation.

¹¹⁶ Kit Siang Lim, "National Solidarity: Speech by DAP Organising Secretary, Mr. Lim Kit Siang, at a DAP Public Rally in Port Dickson on Saturday, February 9, 1969 at 6 p.m.," <http://bibliotheca.limkitsiang.com/1969/02/09/national-solidarity/>.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

Epilogue

The 1969 General Election was the fourth General Election in Malaysia. In the first, held in 1955 under colonial rule, Malays made up almost 85 per cent of the electorate,¹ and the Alliance coalition of three ethnic-based political parties representing the three major ethnic communities of Malaya won convincingly,² thus earning the mandate to negotiate the terms of independence with Britain. The 1959 General Election was the first post-independence election in which the Alliance sought to cement its mandate with an expanded electorate, and although the Alliance coalition won comfortably again, its margin was not as convincing compared to 1955.³ R.K. Vasil notes that the main issues of the 1969 General Election were similar to the 1955 and 1959 elections – political position of the non-Malays and the role of their languages and cultures.⁴ The 1964 General Election had been an anomaly, coming at the height of the Konfrantasi with Indonesia, which the Alliance had succeeded in projecting as the principal election issue. The ruling coalition cast itself as the only party capable of safeguarding the nation and suggesting that a vote for the opposition was equivalent to a vote for Indonesian control of the nation. The other issues that normally dominate the political discourse—Malay special rights, language and education, and so on—were de-emphasized.⁵

By the end of the decade, however, these issues resumed their customary position as the main themes of the election, but with a difference. In 1955 and 1959, the Malaysian Chinese Association was willing to concede the primary position in the Alliance to its coalition partner, Umno. Vasil notes that during the period immediately before and after independence, the non-Malays “were on the defensive. They were not sure that Malaya was their home. The country was passing through a period of vital transition and with the future uncertain they were possibly willing to concede that Malaya belonged to the Malays in so far as they were the *bumiputras* (the indigenous people). This reflected the fact that they themselves had not made up their minds whether they were going to identify themselves with the country of their adoption. ... However, the

¹ Of the 1.28 million registered voters, Malays made up 84.2%, Chinese 11.2%, Indians 3.7% and Others 7%. Of the 600,000 eligible Chinese citizens, only a quarter registered as voters. K. J. Ratnam, *Communalism and the political process in Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malay Press, 1965). 186-187.

² The Alliance won 51 out of 52 seats and garnered 79.6% of valid votes cast; voter turnout was 85%. Ibid. 195.

³ Out of the total electorate of 1, 217,000, Malays made up 56.8%, Chinese 35.6%, Indians 7.4% and Others 0.2%. The significant increase in the number of non-Malay voters is the result of two factors: In 1955, three out of four non-Malay citizens were under 21 years old and too young to vote – many of them qualified in 1959. Also, the independence Constitution of 1957 liberalized the criteria for citizenship, which principally benefitted non-Malays. The Alliance won 74 out of 104 seats and its share of the total valid votes cast was 51.5%. Ibid. 200-203.

⁴ R. K. Vasil, *The Malaysian general election of 1969* (Singapore, : Oxford University Press, 1972). 1.

⁵ See K. J. Ratnam and R. S. Milne, *The Malayan parliamentary election of 1964* (Singapore, : University of Malaya Press, 1967). 110-120; and R. K. Vasil, "The 1964 General Elections in Malaya," *International Studies* 7, no. 1 (1965). 39-44.

situation in 1969 ... was entirely different. The compromises made in 1956-7 and 1959 now proved less acceptable to the non-Malays, who during the intervening period had become more certain of themselves, and were willing to consider more positive action.”⁶ In other words, the 1969 General Election was shaping up to be the most heated and contentious the fledgling nation had faced so far in which the contested meanings of the nation would come to a head.

With both the Malay and non-Malay opposition parties, staking out hardline positions on language, education and the special position of Malays, the Alliance component parties found themselves on the defensive, accused by the more nationalist members of their base of “selling out” to their coalition partners. The Alliance had legitimate reasons to be worried. In past elections, the component parties did not fare well in seats where one ethnic group dominated, winning most of their seats in mixed-constituencies. In a straight fight with an opposition party for the votes of one ethnic group, the Alliance component party would lose more often than it won. It needed the votes of other ethnic communities to win a seat.⁷ If there were a significant swing of one community’s votes to the opposition, the Alliance would be in trouble.

Stepping up the propaganda effort

In March 1969, the election was only two months away, but the Field Officers of the Department of Information still had to take care of a range of issues that were part of their regular routine. It was still printing in large quantities its mainstay publication *Warta Malaysia*, a summary of important events for the month and circulated within the bureaucracy and also made available to the public—220,000 copies in Romanized Malay, 92,500 in Jawi Malay, 175,000 in English, 160,000 in Chinese and 55,000 in Tamil.⁸ It was still churning out Background Notes and Talking Points⁹ on a variety of topics for its

⁶ Vasil, *The Malaysian general election of 1969*. 1

⁷ For example, for the 1959 and 1964 General Elections, in the Malay heartland states where Umno went head to head with the Pan-Malayan Islamic Party (PMIP, or PAS), Umno would lose heavily in seats where Malays made up more than 90% of the electorate (won 2, lost 11 in 1959; won 4, lost 8 in 1964) but would be much more successful in seats where non-Malays made up more than 10% of the electorate (won 13, lost 3 in 1959; won 15, lost 1 in 1964). The same was true for the MCA. It found it difficult to win a majority of the Chinese votes, so much of its success came in constituencies where Malays made up more than a quarter of the voters, did not split its vote with between the Alliance and PAS, and voted overwhelmingly for the ruling coalition. When the MCA fielded candidates in seats with a majority of non-Malay votes and could not rely on a significant number of votes from the Malays (in seats where they make up less than a quarter of the electorate) the Alliance Chinese candidates won 2 and lost 8 in 1959 and would win only one seat and lose 12 in 1969 (the 1964 election was the anomaly). Ibid. 38-39.

⁸ “Cawangan Pembahagian – Penyata Bulanan, Mach 1969.” KPP 1765/A/2. Laporan bulanan – Jabatan Penerangan

⁹ Background Notes (*Latar Belakang*), as the name implies, are fact sheets on specific topics to be used as background reading by all information officers. They often, but not always, are extracted from speeches given by Cabinet Ministers in the course of their work or during Parliamentary debates. They may address an issue in the news but may also be of general interest. Talking Points (*Butir-butir Sharahan*) are condensed, often in point form, notes that field officers would use in their daily interactions with the public. They are almost always topical – addressing the issue of the moment – and are printed in multiple languages (Background Notes are often printed in one language – Malay or English.) For March 1969, there were Background Notes for “Padi”, “Religious Activities”, “Education Statistics for Primary/Secondary Schools”, “Health statistics”, “Aid to Handicapped Persons”, “Veterinary Matters” and “Youth Activities” (520 copies each). Talking Point topics were “Racial Harmony”, “National Rice Year”, “Forged Currency: Singapore \$50 Note”, “Forged Currency: Malaysia \$50 Note”, “Malaysian Parliament

Field Officers to use as they went about their rounds. It also published what it termed “Occasional Publications” for distribution in Malaysia and among Malaysian embassies, consulates and missions abroad.¹⁰

The department also distributed publications from other sources, almost always in small quantities. The local publications were innocuous enough—they were often the official news digests from the various state governments. What is intriguing however is the continuing distribution of propaganda material from the former colonial master, and for March 1969, the Malaysian Department of Information sent out 15 copies of “In Britain—Coming Events”, and 10 copies each of “British Book News” and “The Guardian”.¹¹ These were not specific British propaganda publications targeted at Malaysia or even its former colonies as a whole. It would have been understandable when the department sent along overseas-sourced material that would be useful to its officers or might be of some interest to Malaysians, as it sometimes did. For instance, it distributed 650 copies of “Australia—Facts and Figures” in April 1969, as well as “Touring Historic Britain” and “Some Inns of Britain” the next month.¹² But “In Britain—Coming Events” and “British Book News” are run-of-the-mill material seemingly sent out en masse without thought of its suitability to the recipients. Headquarters only had enough to send only one copy of each publication to each state, and these were likely to be displayed in the State Information Office Reading Rooms located in the state capitals, thus restricting their readership to the English-literate urban residents. Granted, the impact of this tiny sliver of official British propaganda would have been miniscule, it still raises the question why London would think (if it did think at all) the Malaysian masses would be interested in the calendar of domestic events in Britain, and more importantly, why the Malaysian Department of Information thought it might be useful to for distribution. Was this an example of the institutional inertia that drives bureaucracies to mindlessly replicate ingrained and mechanized past practices without thought to their current relevance? Or was there a residual sense of sympathy for the old empire among the senior ranks of the Department of Information, many if not all of whom would have studied in English schools and would have had training stints in Commonwealth countries (if not in Britain itself) or the United States as part of their climb up the civil service? It appears to be a combination of both, as the continued extensive use of English suggests.

As discussed earlier in Chapter 3, the independence Constitution stated that while Malay would be the sole national language of the new nation, English would continue to be a temporary official language for 10 years. Many Malay leaders had pressured the government to expand the use of Malay for official purposes even before the end of the

Dissolves”, “General Election – Why Your Vote is Important”. The Department of Information printed these in Romanized Malay (520 copies), English (520 copies), Chinese (215 copies) and Tamil (115 copies). *Ibid.*

¹⁰ For March 1969, these included Malaysian Press in Digest (in English, 15,000 copies), “*Persidangan Islam Sa-Malaysia*” (“Pan-Malaysian Islamic Conference”, language unknown, 400 copies); the booklet “The Truth About Communism” (in Iban, 5,000 copies); and the booklet “*Ajenda untok Tindakan*” (“Agenda for Action”, in Romanized Malay, 5,000 copies). *Ibid.*

¹¹ It is not clear whether the last refers to the daily newspaper. *Ibid.*

¹² 650 copies of “Australia – Facts and Figures” and 15 copies each of “Touring Historic Britain” and “Some Inns of Britain” were sent out. “Cawangan Pembahagian – Penyata Bulanan, April 1969” and “Cawangan Pembahagian – Penyata Bulanan, Mei 1969”. KPP 1765/A/2. Laporan bulanan – Jabatan Penerangan.

10-year period, and had expected English to be cast aside formally in 1967. Instead, the government reserved the right to continue to use English past the 10-year exemption and the National Language Act of 1963/1967 stated that the “Yang di-Pertuan Agong may permit the continued use of the English language for such official purposes as may be deemed fit.”¹³ As such, it was not surprising to see the Department of Information continue to publish widely in English, to cater to a significant portion of its staff and the population in general still fluent and comfortable in that language. As noted above, the department printed 175,000 English copies of “*Warta Malaysia*” in March 1969, second only to the Romanized Malay version and 10,000 copies more than those in Chinese. The Background Notes were largely in English, and Talking Points—the most ready-to-use material Field Officers had at their disposal when carrying out their duties—were also available in English as well as the three other major languages of Malaysia (with the same number of copies printed for the Malay and English versions, more than Chinese and Tamil versions). English continued to be used significantly in official government business because it continued to be an effective medium not just for reaching certain segments of the population but also for some of the department’s staff in terms of understanding the material they were bound to communicate. Its relevance, the residual sympathies senior department officers held for the language of their education, and the momentum generated by a bureaucratic machine that just over a decade previously had operated almost solely in the language of the colonizer, ensured that English remained close to the forefront of official use, and of the nation at large. The contradictions between the official nationalism that privileges Malay and the bureaucratic structures that continue to operate with four de facto official languages was still entrenched just a few weeks before the pivotal May 1969 General Elections.

Even as the department went about its regular business in March, it was also gearing up for those elections. It produced one “regular” poster printed for that month,¹⁴ but the other three were election-related: “*Bersatu Sokong Tunku*” (“Unite in Support of Tunku”), “*Pimpinan*” (“Leadership”) and “Election Do’s and Don’ts”. The last was an informational poster¹⁵ printed in Malay, English, Chinese, Tamil, Iban and Kadazan (707,000 copies) and is politically neutral but the other two raises some questions. The “Unite in Support of Tunku” poster is reminiscent of the 1964 General Elections poster “Support Tunku” that blurred the line between government and party politics. That it was printed only in Romanized and Jawi Malay suggests that the ruling Alliance coalition was getting a head start in the battle against the opposition PMIP (PAS) for the Malay votes, especially in the eastern and northern states. The Tunku was under pressure from the Malay opposition as well as the more extreme nationalists within his own ranks who were unhappy with his decision to continue using English as a de facto official language and accused him of selling out to the non-Malays, particularly Chinese Malaysians. A copy of the “Leadership” poster is not available currently but the fact that the department ordered only the Jawi Malay version suggests that the poster addressed the question of leadership

¹³ Government of Malaysia, “Act 32 : National Language Acts of 1963/67 incorporating all amendments up to 1 January 2006,” (Kuala Lumpur: The Commissioner of Law Revision, Malaysia, 2006). Paragraph 4.

¹⁴ “*Banyak Lagi Tanah Di-buka*” (“More Land Has Been Developed”, in Iban, 10,000 copies). Posters are pasted on notice boards in government departments and in public spaces. “Cawangan Pembahagian – Penyata Bulanan, Mach 1969.”

¹⁵ See Figure 5.1 for a booklet version of the poster.

of the Malay community and was aimed at the older, more conservative generation in the rural Malay heartland.¹⁶

By April, the Department of Information was focusing almost entirely on the elections. It diverted resources away from non-election work: For instance, the department reduced the print run of *Warta Malaysia* by about 20 per cent; it temporarily halted the printing of Background Notes, and distributed only two Talking Points, “Communist Threat During Elections” and “Increased Rate of Withdrawal on Demand in the Post Office Savings Bank”, the former resurrecting the specter of the threat posed by the Communist Party of Malaysia, which had lost the shooting war with the colonial government in the mid-1950s and had by now been reduced to a shell of its former self operating along the fringes of the Thai-Malaysia border.¹⁷

Correspondingly, the department cranked up production of election-related material. It printed election scoreboards for all state offices for public display¹⁸, and about 750,000 “Polling Day” posters in all languages. It also sent out 10,000 copies each of two pamphlets dealing with Islam and development, and education. These were printed only in Jawi Malay, which meant that that the state had identified them as challenging topics in the rural Malay heartland. Another example of language narrowcasting was the publication of, in Chinese and English only, the booklet “Freedom of Religious Worship.”¹⁹ This echoed the rhetoric of non-Malay Alliance leaders who, while on the campaign trail, were highlighting the Constitution guarantee protecting citizens’ rights to practice their different faiths even as Islam is recognized as the official religion of the nation.²⁰ The booklet was not printed in Malay probably because the message of religious freedom would not have been a point the Alliance wanted to emphasize with the Malay community as it would have reminded the latter of the compromises the coalition partners made among themselves in the run-up to independence. Thus, slanting the message along ethnic lines, which the Information Department first instructed its Field Officers to carry out in 1960, was alive and well in the end of the decade.

When it came to broadcasting, the major political parties—the Alliance, the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PMIP/PAS), the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Gerakan—were granted time on Radio Malaysia for political broadcasts. The Alliance coalition was allocated 50 per cent of the total time, with the rest of the selected parties dividing the remaining period among themselves on the basis of seats contested. Each party could broadcast over the four language networks, with each session lasting 13.5 minutes. Scripts had to be submitted prior to broadcast to Radio Malaysia, and the

¹⁶ There were 10,000 copies each of the Romanized and Jawi “Unite in Support of Tunku” poster and the Jawi “Leadership” poster. “Cawangan Pembahagian – Penyata Bulanan, Mach 1969.”

¹⁷ *Warta Malaysia* print run: 176,000 in Romanized Malay, 74,000 in Jawi Malay, 140,000 in English, 128,000 in Chinese and 44,000 in Tamil. Talking Points print run: 520 for each topic in each of these languages – Romanized Malay, English and Chinese – and 120 for Tamil. . “Cawangan Pembahagian – Penyata Bulanan, April 1969.” KPP 1765/A/2. Laporan bulanan – Jabatan Penerangan

¹⁸ See Figure 5.2.

¹⁹ The Department produced 11 and 12 scoreboards for State and Parliamentary seats respectively, one each for every state. “Polling Day” posters: 35,000 in Kadazan, 43,000 in Iban, 150,000 in Jawi Malay, and 500,000 in all the other languages. “Freedom of Religious Worship” booklet: 8,000 in Chinese and 4,000 in English. “Cawangan Pembahagian – Penyata Bulanan, April 1969.”

²⁰ The Minister of Labour and president of the Malaysian Indian Congress, an Alliance coalition member, stressed that the government had “given millions of dollars for the construction of temples and churches in the past 14 years.” “Mani: Alliance has done a lot for religions,” *The Straits Times*, April 14 1969.

Director of Broadcasting, Dol Ramli, would act as the “final arbiter” of what could or could not go on air. There would be no political broadcasts on television because “TV is not country-wide and would be unfair to political parties in States not reached by Television Malaysia,” said Dol.²¹ This allocation followed a formula instituted for the 1964 General Election, in which political parties had access to Radio Malaysia for the first time.²² Then, the Alliance government started with the premise that it was “privileged to command 50 per cent of the total allotted airtimes for Party political broadcasts, and to start and end the series.”²³ Radio and Television Malaysia also aired, in the run-up to the 1964 elections, a series of about 20 ministerial broadcasts on the work of various government departments, and while these are ostensibly non-political, the broadcasts highlighted the achievements and progress “under the Alliance government.”²⁴ And since the Alliance reserved the final broadcast on the last day of campaigning for itself—given by the Prime Minister as leader of the governing coalition—it ensured that newspapers gave front page prominence to the Alliance on the eve of polling day,²⁵ while reports of opposition radio broadcasts were buried in the inside pages of newspapers, if they received any coverage at all. It has been noted earlier that opposition leaders made few explicit complaints about the breach of impartiality in 1964, as if some of them considered it natural for the party in office to enjoy such advantages. There were muted complaints in 1969 too regarding the partisan work of the state propaganda arms and unequal coverage in the press, with only one party making the issue part of its election manifesto.²⁶

The results of the May 10 elections shook the Alliance government; not so much from the number of seats it lost, but from the psychological blow dealt by the opposition.²⁷ The government was still in power—it retained a comfortable majority in the federal Parliament—but it had lost the two-thirds majority that allowed it to amend the Constitution by itself. Its share of the vote slipped below the 50% mark for both the Federal and State elections, and more significantly, its non-Malay component parties suffered devastating losses.²⁸ In the State elections, the Alliance suffered even more

²¹ “Air-time on Radio Malaysia for polls campaign,” *The Straits Times*, April 16, 1969.

²² Ratnam and Milne, *The Malayan parliamentary election of 1964*. 214-224.

²³ “Four main parties agree on radio time,” *The Straits Times*, April 8, 1964. The four parties were the Alliance coalition, the Socialist Front coalition, the Pan-Malayan Islamic Party (PMIP/PAS), and the United Democratic Party, a predecessor to Gerakan.

²⁴ Ratnam and Milne, *The Malayan parliamentary election of 1964*. p. 223. See also various drafts submitted by the departments of radio, television, information and film to the Minister of Information and Broadcasting for the series, with phrases such as “... the Alliance government has carved yet another record achievement ...”, “The achievement of the Alliance government has been phenomenal since 1959...”, “The Alliance government has kept its promise ...” etc. “KPP 1882: *Uchapan menteri/menteri2 muda menerusi radio dan talivishen* [Speeches by Ministers and Assistant Ministers over radio and television]”

²⁵ See “Broadcast by Tengku: ‘Be loyal’ call,” *The Straits Times*, April 24, 1964.; and “A democratic Malaysia: This is the proof, says Tengku,” *The Straits Times*, May 9, 1969.

²⁶ The People’s Progressive Party condemned the “shameless abuse” of radio and TV by the Alliance government, and vowed – if elected – to set up non-political statutory boards to control and administer Radio and Television Malaysia. Vasil, *The Malaysian general election of 1969*. 67.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 37.

²⁸ It won 48.41 per cent of the vote in the Federal elections, compared to 51.57 per cent and 58.37 per cent for the 1959 and 1964 General Elections respectively. For the elections to the various State Assemblies, the

setbacks in the predominantly non-Malay states of Selangor, Perak and Penang. In the first two states, the incumbent Alliance governments lost their majorities, but eventually formed the state governments after “considerable manoeuvre and manipulation.”²⁹ In Penang, where the Malaysian Chinese Association was leading the charge for the Alliance, the coalition suffered a crushing defeat, managing only to secure four out of the 24 seats.³⁰

This was an unequivocal repudiation of the government’s vision of the nation, especially among the non-Malay population. From independence through much of the 1960s, the Alliance government managed to garner sufficient support from the various communities for an official nationalism built on compromises and the yoking together of contradictory views. However, in 1969, the majority of non-Malays voted in favor of the vision of the nation that emphasized equality of all communities instead of the primacy of one. The compromises of the 1950s that the Department of Information and Radio Malaya strove to continually sell to the population after independence had unraveled.

After the elections, jubilant opposition supporters, mainly non-Malays, marched through the streets of Kuala Lumpur celebrating their victory, prompting counter-marches from Malay groups that eventually led to bloody clashes between the two. The clashes intensified and the government eventually declared a state of emergency and sent in the military to enforce the curfew. In all, the race riots claimed, officially, 196 lives,³¹ but the conflicting opinions on who was responsible for provoking the riots, the number of casualties, the conduct of the military and other details is not within the ambit of this dissertation. What was clear was the steps taken by the government to strengthen its hand in the aftermath. It may have lost the mandate to pursue its vision of the nation at the polls, but the riots allowed it to suspend parliamentary democracy, impose a rule through emergency powers backed by the military, and, on the back of these extra-parliamentary moves, eventually implemented a series of economic and social policies that entrenched the special position of the Malays and stifled debate over the issue. The contest over the meaning of Malaysia had been decided, not through the persuasive powers of the government, but through unilateral force.

In response to the riots, the Department of Information swung into action. Units in the Selangor information office, especially those for the Kuala Lumpur District, were out every day until past midnight functioning as a propaganda “fire brigade,” i.e. they had to be ready at any time when racial tensions flared up in specific areas and they had to respond immediately. Their main task was to counter rumors and calm the people. To cope with the increasing frequency of the flare-ups, headquarters dispatched several units from the rest of the country to the scene.³² Other units conducted modified versions of their daily routine. Because of the curfew, the department reduced the number of their

Alliance won 47.95 per cent of the total vote compared to 55.52 per cent and 57.62 per cent in 1959 and 1964 respectively. Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid. 37. The Alliance won 14 out of 28 seats in Selangor, and 20 out of 40 in Perak.

³⁰ It had won 17 and 18 seats in 1959 and 1964 respectively. Ibid.

³¹ This is the official figure for deaths in riots that occurred throughout the country from May 13 to June 30. The National Operations Council, *The May 13 tragedy: a report* (Kuala Lumpur: The National Operations Council, 1969). 88.

³² Two units from Pahang, and one each from Kelantan, Terengganu, Perak and Kedah were sent to help in around the capital area. “Monthly report of the Selangor State Information Office, July 16, 1969”, in KPP 1765/A/2: Laporan Bulanan – Jabatan Penerangan

nighttime film shows, suspended civics courses but increased the number of general talks, mainly Organised Talks and informal gatherings. Film screenings were restarted only when curfew was relaxed till midnight. Field Officers concentrated on topics related to unity and race relations, putting aside other topics such as rural development.³³ Field Officers were instructed to abandon their standard forms and return to using free-form narrative style reports of their work.

This frenetic activity stands in sharp contrast to the methodical work of the propaganda arms in the last decade since Radio Malaya and the Department of Information and Radio Malaya charted new courses in 1959 and 1960 respectively. The country had faced some tough challenges—the Konfrantasi, Singapore's exit from the federation—and witnessed two General Elections before 1969, but the Information Services always used their standard operating procedures to address those extra-ordinary events. The abandonment of these standard operating procedures for a helter-skelter approach reflected not just the gravity of the May 13 riots but also the shortcomings of the Information Services' institutional framework. The Balkanized channels of delivery that divided the citizenry into distinct ethnic bodies to be acted upon by propagandists from their own group using their own mother tongues gave official status to the many languages of Malaysia that theoretically had no space within the official nationalism. This tension between process and message undermined the latter and was a contributing factor to the failure of the official nationalism, expressed most visibly and violently in the May 10 General Elections results and the riots that followed. The government had tried to downplay the contradictions of its vision of the nation, or sought to emphasize different aspects of it to different communities, which, in the case of the propaganda arms, resulted in Field Officers "slanting the message". And while it made progress in economic development and the delivery of services to the people, these practical gains that were touted as proof of the viability of the official nationalism could not paper over the tensions within that vision. The birth pangs of the Malaysian nation continued after the unfurling of the flag and the singing of the National Anthem in 1957, in part because of the tussle over the meaning of nation continued to escalate and also because efforts by the government to articulate its vision failed due to the inherent tensions within the vision and to the structural and operational flaws of the propaganda arms charged with that articulation.

³³ Some units in the northern states that were deemed less affected by the riots did continue to talk about Rural Development. Ibid.

Figure 5.1
Selected pages from the booklet “Elections Do’s and Don’ts for Voters”



Source: Arkib Negara Malaysia

Figure 5.2

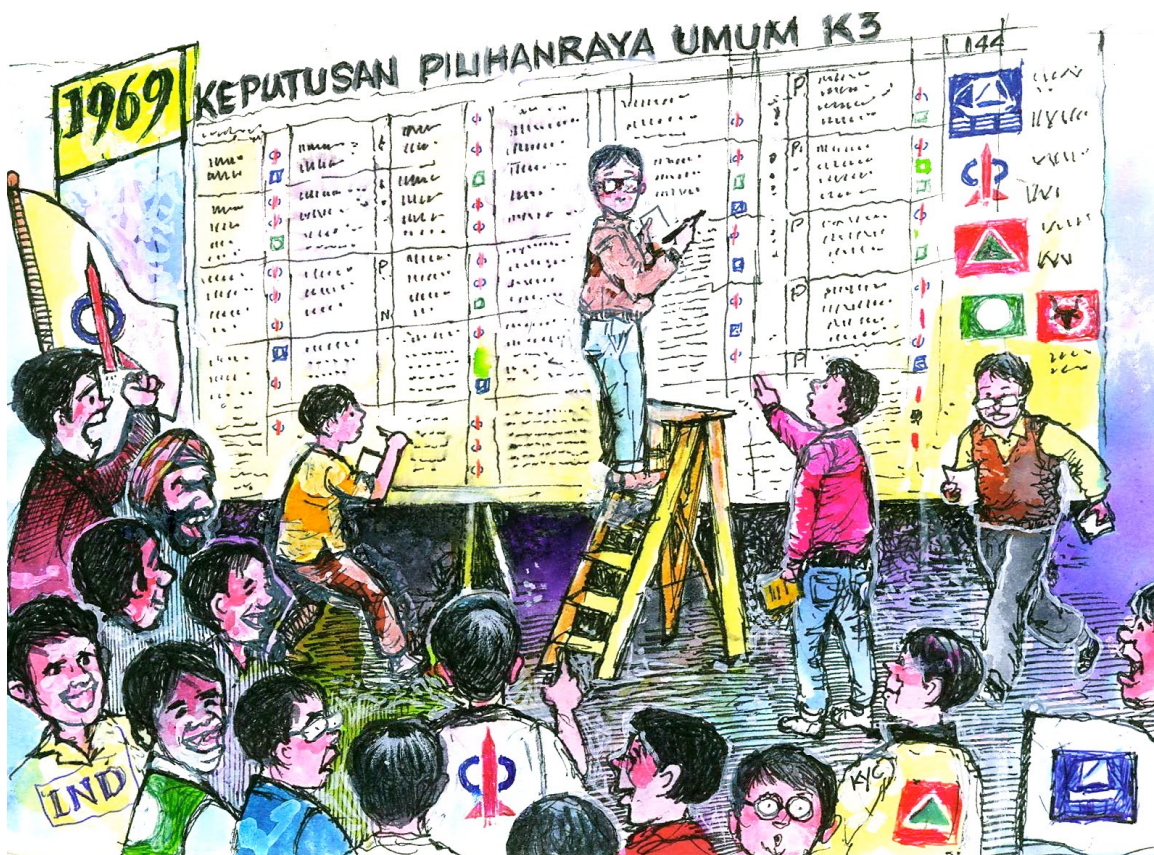


Illustration by K.Y. Cheah, who was a civil servant in the thick of the May 1969 General Elections. Cheah writes: "My department put up giant scoreboards for public viewing of the results. We work on shifts. My job was to clamor up ladders with red and blue markers to fill in the blanks as soon as the officers bring in the results on little pieces of paper. The results were communicated to the press centre via 15 hot telephone lines. ...

Each time I wrote a result that they liked, they'd let out whoops of delight, shouting themselves hoarse and rattled the iron grills so hard that I thought they would collapse on us. Sure we had some tense moments especially with the vociferous crowd who sometimes got unruly. That was a mob outside and tensions always running high at a time like this. You never know what's gonna happen next. ... No untoward incident that night.

Thank goodness for that. ... In retrospect, I think we were fortunate that the boisterous crowd did not get out of control and run riot. I shudder to think of the consequences that might certainly have arisen if they did. *Phew* That was a close call!"³⁴

³⁴ K. Y. Cheah, "Reminiscence: may 13 1969," (2010).

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