

# 6

## *Ethnicity and Society*

*[Ethnicity] constitutes one of several forms of association through which individuals pursue their interests relating to economic and political advantage. But there is more to ethnicity than this, since it appears to offer intrinsic satisfaction as well as instrumental utility. Individuals seem to need to distinguish between 'us' and 'them' communities, and ethnic consciousness arises when such psychological constructs are attached to observable differences of language, religion, lifestyle or physiognomy (Brown, 1994: xii).*

*At least in modern social scientific jargon the term ethnic refers to two separable phenomena: the existence of more or less objective markers of human difference on the one hand, and the social recognition of these markers on the other (Kahn, 1992: 159).*

*For better or worse, ethnicity is a widespread – though far from universal – social fact, and it seems to be closely bound up with the institution of the nation state and with the very process of nation building (Benjamin, 1975: 32).*

### **Introduction**

I have made frequent reference to the importance of ethnicity in the understanding of social change in Southeast Asia, not least because the region is ethnically diverse and complex, and comprises what have been referred to as 'plural societies'. Southeast Asia has also been a focus of debate about how we can best comprehend ethnicity and ethnic relations. Therefore, I disagree with Gladney's statement that '[t]he general theoretical discussion of ethnicity and cultural identity has largely been absent from Asian nation studies, and from much of Asian studies in general' (1998a: 3). Osborne has tended to address Southeast Asian ethnic diversity in terms of 'minorities' and 'outsiders' – indigenous and immigrant Asian, but even the majority ethnic groups are internally diverse (2004: 61–69). One only has to dissect the category 'Malay' to realize that, what on the surface appears to be a culturally homogeneous unit is, in effect, a composite of differ-



ent groupings which have been subject to processes of homogenization, rationalization and construction through time (Kahn, 2006).

### **Ethnicity and Class**

We saw in Chapters 4 and 5 that political economy and neo-Marxist interpretations of society have tended to give prominence, not unexpectedly, to class analysis and to see ethnic tensions and conflict as surface or ideological expressions of more deep-seated economic processes, or in Brown's words 'a derivative manifestation of class' (1994: 206). Ethnic ideologies may also be depicted as 'false consciousness' in that they are seen to disguise the underlying economic structure (Cham, 1975; Kahn, 1992: 170–174). However, ethnic identity and consciousness, although interrelated with economic processes and at times generated by them, can also directly affect or influence economic and political action. In other words, ethnic considerations may be a primary motivational force in generating certain organizational forms, behaviour and activity. As Brown's quotation above suggests, it provides a mode of identity formation through which people come together to pursue their interests (1994: xii). Of course, I recognize that social class difference can be expressed as ethnic difference and that ethnicity can be used as an idiom in discourses about political and historical relationships (Muhammad Ikmal Said, 1992: 256–257). The close relationship between ethnicity and class with regard to Chinese entrepreneurship and the processes of inclusion and exclusion which operate in both ethnic and class terms to delineate a Chinese bourgeoisie have been recognized in Wee's and Chan's concept of 'ethno-class' (2006: 336–337). Identity formation and struggles in which people engage to establish and defend their identities are also bound up with processes of modernization and globalization (Wee, 2002a: 1–27). More specifically in constructing, reworking and debating culture and identity, Southeast Asians are engaged in 'a creative dialogue with modernity' and with 'the West'; and debates about ethnicity also shade into the more general postmodern and postcolonial preoccupation with identity construction and transformation (Kahn, 1992: 174; 2006). Having acknowledged this, I still maintain that ethnicity can directly cut across class and other divisions, and appeals to shared ethnic identity can be a powerful means to mobilize people to take a particular course of action.

### **Ethnicity and Culture**

There is a conceptual or categorical dimension of ethnicity in which individuals and groups construct cultural classifications to which they assign themselves and others, and an organizational and behavioural dimension in which ethnicity comprises a field of social interaction and communication. Given this distinction, one may well find that certain categories only exist in the ideational realm and do not translate into identifiable groupings, whilst others, under certain circumstances, such as increased competition for resources take on the characteristics of active

groups (Nagata, 1979). In addition, ethnicity is closely related to the more amorphous concept of culture because, although one element of identity construction may be physical or biological characteristics (usually referred to by the contentious term 'race'), it is primarily a cultural phenomenon. It relates to the realm of values, beliefs and behaviour; it uses for purposes of identification and differentiation such criteria as religion, language and material culture. It also assumes shared or common origins and a shared humanity (King and Wilder, 2003: 198).

In a substantial amount of earlier work on ethnicity, the preoccupation was with what Geertz termed 'primordialism'. In other words, it was assumed that the basic building blocks of society comprised groups formed on the basis of long-established loyalties stemming from kinship, descent, race and locality (1963c). The focus was on origins, 'basic givens' of identity, and on biological self-perpetuation, which, in turn, tended to depict ethnic groups as unchanging, homogeneous, self-reproducing and defined 'culture-bearing units' (Naroll, 1964, 1968). This essentialist position fails to capture the importance of processes of cultural construction and invention, and the role of the state in constructing and transforming identities (Wee, 2002a: 12–13; Kahn, 1992: 160–163). It must be emphasized that it is in social interaction and cultural encounter that identities are created, maintained and transformed because they are part of a system of categories and groupings, and they cannot be formed nor sustained in isolation (Barth, 1969: 9–10). They are created through a process of 'othering'; identity is a product of comparison and contrast with others who are deemed to be different. This is clearly demonstrated in the case of minorities who usually express their identities in relation to a majority population, though, in the same way, majorities are also 'made' or 'created' (Gladney, 1998a).

### **Ethnicity and Boundaries**

In Southeast Asia one has to address the phenomenon of ethnic complexity and a shifting and fluid pattern of differentiation in which it is problematical to draw discrete boundaries, and in which criteria of similarity and difference seldom coincide, different classificatory systems (in simple terms those constructed by 'outsiders' and those deployed by 'insiders') compete with one another, and people change their ethnic affiliation, or claim that they belong to this or that group according to situation (King and Wilder, 2003: 193–230). Boundary-crossing is frequently initiated through such mechanisms as religious conversion, intermarriage, adoption, assimilation, and economic and ecological transformations. Wertheim, for example, refers to processes of 'creolization' and the formation of 'mestizo' cultures in colonial Southeast Asia, as well as 'a partial imposition of one's own value system upon the members of the dominated groups' (1964a: 68–69). However, as we shall see in our case studies below, colonial administrations with their obsession for categorization and naming, tended to draw sharp boundaries around ethnic groups, identify them more precisely for census, tax and administrative purposes, and render them as homogeneous and static entities. Western perceptions of ethnicity

also assumed that pre-colonial groupings could be defined in 'racial' and 'national' terms (Lieberman, 1978: 455–456).

Yet our focus must be on the ways in which people construct, maintain and transform their identities and create and sustain cultural boundaries for purposes of social interaction and avoidance. It is a process of incorporating some and excluding others and selecting certain socio-cultural features which are given priority in constructing identities and boundaries. Ethnic interaction requires the adoption of particular roles based on assumptions about similarity and difference. Identity and boundary formation are also generated and sustained in times of inter-ethnic crisis, seen particularly in recent ethnic conflicts in Myanmar, the southern Philippines, southern Thailand and in numerous places in Indonesia. These conflicts are of two major types, exemplified by recent events in Indonesia:

- Those which occur between ethnic groups; increasingly these take on the character of inter-religious strife, particularly between Christians and Muslims in such places as West Kalimantan, Maluku and Sulawesi, and they often occur when members of one group move into the territory and economic niches of others.
- Conflict between the state and a particular ethnic group which assumes the character of a secessionist movement or one which demands greater autonomy from central government as in Aceh and West Papua; they often occur when the state is strongly centralizing, oppressive and promoting a national ideology which concedes little to local identities (Kusuma and Scott Thompson, 2005a, 2005b: ix–x; Rizal, 2005: 1–41).

The increasing intensity of religious conflict in the region, closely entwined with inter-ethnic tensions, is an especially vexing and tragic one. It is generated and sustained by a range of factors, among others political oppression, economic exploitation, inter-ethnic competition, cultural dissonance, and the messages framed and disseminated by the global media. As Cady and Simon state, 'The emotional resonance of religious narrative, symbols, and rituals, their power to shape individual and collective identity, and their transcendental frames qualitatively transform violent religious conflict. When religion enters the mix ... the violent conflict becomes less susceptible to negotiation' (2007b: 16; 2007a; Schober, 2007: 63). Evidence of this intensification of religious violence can be seen not only in the recent events in Indonesia but also those perpetrated in southern Thailand in the encounter between the Muslim minority and state-sponsored Buddhism, and in the Philippines between the marginalized Muslims of the south and a Roman Catholic majority government (Liow, 2007: 154–173; Ferrer, 2005: 109–150).

### **Pluralism**

As we have seen Southeast Asian social science witnessed an early attempt to address ethnic diversity. Furnivall's concept of the plural society focused on some

of the socio-economic, political and cultural consequences of economic immigration during the colonial period (1956 [1948]; 1980). We should also take note of the underlying political position which Furnivall adopted in analysing Burmese society, his involvement in the Fabian movement, his qualified criticism of British colonialism, and his hope for the integrating possibilities of Burmese nationalism (Pham, 2005: 321–348; see Chapter 4). Yet in spite of his championing of Burmese nationalism to solve the problems of pluralism, this was tempered by evidence of Furnivall's paternalism and Orientalism, and his desire that Burmese nationalists would remain closely tied to the British Commonwealth and build a polity on the basis of British ideals and principles (Pham, 2004: 237–268).

Furnivall's concept also gave rise to the related notion of the 'ethnic division of labour' and 'economic castes'. In other words, he claimed to have discovered a coincidence of class and ethnicity because members of different ethnic groupings were seen to occupy different positions in systems of production, exchange and distribution. I have also noted that, though there was indeed an interrelationship between ethnicity and labour (anyone with only a superficial acquaintance with Southeast Asia would immediately recognize, for example, the important position of the ethnic Chinese in economic life and in central urban commercial districts), the situation was and is much more complex than this. In class terms, for example, one could discern broadly in overseas Chinese society, an entrepreneurial upper class (or elite), a 'middle class' of shopkeepers, wholesalers, moneylenders and skilled craftsmen, and a substantial working class in both urban and rural areas (Clammer, 1978: 174). It is misleading to categorize the Chinese in simple terms as a class of intermediaries or 'middlemen' linking the indigenous population with Europeans.

### **National Identity, Imagined Communities and the State**

A further complication, which has emerged significantly in the post-war period with decolonization and nation-building, is a concern with the relationships between pluralism, ethnicity and national identity (or 'national communities') (Anderson, 1991 [1983]). National identity requires the construction or creation or 'imagining' of similarity or homogeneity based, among other things, on shared ethnicity or cultural roots. States invent or create these shared identities and construct the clearly defined boundaries between insiders and outsiders by various means. These usually comprise a national language policy and print media; narratives of a shared history (which may include shared struggles against enemies or outside domination); an educational policy which socializes the younger generations into a particular view of the world; often but not always a shared religion; and finally shared national symbols (which include monumental architecture, flags, rituals including national day or independence day celebrations, anthems, institutions, and the creation of a national 'cult' in capital cities, where various of the symbolic forms are condensed and brought into close relationship one with another) (Evans, 1998; see Chapter 10).

A fascinating case of the creation of a national identity from a multi-ethnic environment is Laos. It is all the more interesting because of the complex shifts in political and ideological positions: from French protectorate status and the emergence of a national identity in opposition to the French, to an independent kingdom with its nationalism based on ethnic Lao culture and differentiation between the majority Lao and minorities, then to a poly-ethnic socialist state which incorporated ethnic minorities on socialist principles and attempted to create 'a social homogeneity which would transcend ethnic identity', and finally to a post-socialist nationalism (Pholsena, 2006: 55; Evans, 1998, 1999). In dismantling the monarchy and Buddhism, but, then recently from the late 1980s, retreating from socialism, Lao political leaders have attempted to create national images of cultural homogeneity and historical continuity, with the accompanying resurgence of Buddhism as an important part of Lao identity (Pholsena, 2006: 10–11). This national identity, in turn, depends on working out the relationships between the majority lowland Lao, who dominate national politics and myth-making, and the surrounding ethnic minorities in the upland areas (ibid.: 13). There is then a mix of socialist principles and the struggle for modernity, but harking back to a reconstructed, and partly invented and shared authentic cultural heritage, which combines the majority culture with those of the minorities, in a unity within diversity framework (ibid.: 46–73). Pholsena proposes that a nation is not merely about myths and images, but it has to make sense to the citizens, providing them with or giving them access to resources; as citizens they have rights and obligations (ibid.: 214–215). With the distancing of socialism, the incorporation of Laos into the global market as a 'backward' country, as well as the state promotion of tradition and the search for an 'eternal Lao-ness', Evans detects 'a deep and growing sense of disorientation in Lao society' (1998: 191). A similar situation of uncertainty can be found in Cambodia as it too has moved from socialism to embrace the market and from authoritarianism to democracy. But there the forging of a nation is even more problematical, given the country's recent violent history and the massive social and economic dislocation which it has suffered during the last 30 years (Hughes, 2003).

The problematical nature of nation-building and the encounter with ethnicity are issues which Brown has addressed in his ambitious comparative studies. He argues, in his examination of the state and ethnicity, that the ways in which ethnic relations and ethnic politics work themselves out depend crucially on 'the capacity of the state' and on the strategies for creating a national consciousness and identity (1994: 258–265; Lian, 1997: 1–6). This helps explain why there is 'endemic violence in Burma, fragile but generally non-violent ethnic relations in Malaysia, and generally harmonious ethnic relations in Singapore' (Brown, 1994: 259). In each case we are dealing with plural societies, which the state seeks to portray as 'potentially culturally homogeneous' and as possessing 'a cultural core around which nationhood can develop'. In Malaysia the core has been built around the attributes of the Malay-Muslim indigenous populations, and those claimed to be indigenous (the *bumiputra*, or 'sons of the soil'), in Burma the focus has been lowland Buddhist

Burman values and identity, and in Singapore it has been based on 'consensual Asian values' (ibid.: 261). What is interesting is the contradiction and tension in the ways in which states confront and deploy ethnicity; at one moment it is likely to be 'designated as subversive communalism' and at another 'applauded as the legitimate articulation of cultural values and interests' (ibid.: 264; Wee, 2002a: 8–9).

### **Country Case Studies**

#### *Malaysia*

Returning to the theme of the intersection of class and ethnicity in earlier neo-Marxist analyses and the primary role given to class, Brennan's analysis of class, politics and race in Malay(si)a captures this kind of perspective (1985: 93–127; Cham, 1975; Lim, 1980). He examines the creation of Malay(si)a as a dependent economy and society within the world capitalist system and the ways in which a dominant class maintains its control through 'the repressive and ideological apparatuses' of the state (ibid.: 94). Malaya on independence in 1957, and subsequently Malaysia in 1963, demonstrated the classic features of a colonial economy with the focus on the production and export of a limited number of primary products, specifically tin and rubber.

It was also a plural society comprising three major macro-level ethnic categories, frequently referred to misleadingly as 'races': Malays, Chinese and Indians, with a significant number of indigenous minorities. The British had adopted a pragmatic colonial policy to ensure that the indigenous population, most of whom came to be categorized and constructed as 'Malay', continued their close relationships with the land and agriculture, contained within the framework of indirect rule under Muslim Malay sultans. The British assigned the rural Malay population as rice producers on 'reserved' land to provide basic foodstuffs for the expanding population, which in turn comprised mainly immigrant labour brought in to service and support the colonial economy. But in any case it was unlikely that the Malays, given their firm commitment to rural livelihoods, would have been prepared to move in any sufficient numbers into employment in mines and plantations as wage labourers. Malays, other than a limited number from royalty and the aristocracy, were also educated primarily in the vernacular and not in English, and it was the urban Chinese and Indians who benefited most from English medium education. Malays were recruited into various areas of government service and the army and police force. We should also recognize what Kahn has recently referred to as 'other Malays'; those who came to the Malayan Peninsula from other parts of island Southeast Asia, often mobile, culturally and ethnically heterogeneous, and involved in small-scale market-oriented activities and wage work (2006: 29–76). This dimension of 'Malayness' was gradually suppressed in favour of a colonial and, importantly, a Malay nationalist narrative of the 'autonomous, communalistic and racially homogeneous villages where Malays could live among their own in a manner to which they were accustomed' (ibid.: 29).

To service the expanding colonial economy based on rubber and tin, the British facilitated the immigration of Chinese and Indian labour. The Chinese had a significant stake in the tin-mining industry, both in terms of capital and labour, and in smaller scale commercial agriculture. Indian labour, especially Tamils from southern India, played a vital role in the rubber plantations. But immigrant Asians were also involved in the urban-based economy, in trade, retailing, professional and technical services, transport and manufacturing. The Malays were increasingly recruited into government service, as well as working in the small-holding cash-crop sector. Europeans, particularly the British, owned and controlled the major economic enterprises – plantations, mines, banks, manufacturing, trading houses, transport and public utilities (Khoo, 2001: 180). Therefore, the rural Malays were 'locked into an immiserating [sic] close-to-subsistence sector, whereas sections of Chinese and Indian migrants took advantage of an expanding urban sector to gain upward mobility through commerce, education, and the professions' (ibid.: 181). However, in focusing on the distinctions between the migrant populations and the indigenous populations, we should not lose sight of the internal differences within the immigrant communities, including the poverty among working class Chinese and the fact that 'Chinese capitalists were the worst exploiters of their own people' (Clammer, 1978a: 179).

The relatively close, but by no means perfect, correlation between class (including occupation) and ethnicity, and the ethnic division of labour, did serve to ensure that ethnic identity became 'the form in which class consciousness [was] manifested' (Brown, 1994: 213; Khoo, 2006: 173). Moreover the colonial government 'committed to an ideology of primordial racial incompatibility, welcomed and fostered the compartmentalization of society along racial-occupational lines, so that there existed only limited interactions between the various racial-occupational groups' (Brown, 1994: 217). Certain prominent Malay nationalist intellectuals, teachers and journalists also constructed an anti-immigrant ideology and an image of the rural-based Malay who required protection and support, rather than a narrative based on that segment of 'Malay' society which comprised mobile artisans, merchants and entrepreneurs (Kahn, 2006: 57–71). The decolonization process in the 1950s ensured that the major ethnic groupings would unite to defend their interests and form ethnic-based political parties, presenting a view of their own community which facilitated ethnic differentiation and demarcation. This occurred in a situation of great uncertainty and the failure of the British attempts to establish a Malayan Union and de-emphasize the special position of the Malays, which was exacerbated further by the Malayan Emergency and the mainly Chinese-promoted communist insurgency. Both the British and those who took over the reins of power on independence presented Malaysian society and politics in ethnic terms. The development of the image of Malayness and its roots in village republics, overwhelmed and marginalized by aggressive immigrants from China and India, was left to the conservative nationalists who provided the leadership of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO)

and promoted notions of Malay backwardness and the need for segregation (*ibid.*: 105–106, 109–117, 150–157).

It should be noted that the three broad categories – Malays, Chinese and Indians – did not crystallize until the emergence of ethnic-based political movements in the inter-war years and the immediate pre-independence period. These also came to be defined in terms of economic inequalities and the contrasts between ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’, mainly associated with the distinctions between modern, urban, wealthy Chinese and traditional, rural, poor Malays, and on the basis of the special rights and privileges of the indigenous Malays as against the recently arrived, and therefore ‘alien’ Chinese and Indians (Lee, 1986a, 1986b). Although this ethnic consolidation occurred rather late, the British had already begun to rationalize it from the nineteenth century through such mechanisms as census-taking, classification and stereotyping, and in museum displays and scholarly discourses on the peoples and cultures of Malaya and northern Borneo (Hirschman, 1986, 1987; Shamsul, 1998: 136–137; 2001). Therefore, identities are constructed or ‘invented’, ‘artificial’, ‘traditionalized’, relative, and are also malleable and subject to change (Shamsul, 1998: 138–150; Milner, 1998: 152). The colonial government served as the arbiter between the different ethnic groups and by means of the force and sanctions of the state sustained a fragile and precarious plural society. The different occupations, preferences, and capacities of the different ethnic groupings came to be explained in terms of innate racial characteristics and traditional cultural values (Nagata, 1979: 81–82). The boundaries between the three major categories also hardened increasingly as the size of the immigrant communities grew, as migrant men were accompanied increasingly by their womenfolk, and therefore married within their own communities rather than outside, and as they came into more contact with local people in the urban environment (*ibid.*: 4). This process of simplification was also applied to the indigenous minorities: the small, scattered non-Malay native communities of the interior Peninsula were gradually lumped together as ‘Orang Asli’ (aboriginals) and those of Borneo as ‘Dayak’ (Winzeler, 1997: 1–29).

Historically intra-ethnic relations were just as important if not more important than inter-ethnic relations. Throughout much of the colonial period, British administrators in such places as the Straits Settlements and Malaya usually differentiated internally the categories that came to be consolidated as Malay, Chinese and Indian. The definition ‘Malay’, for example, is now firmly established in Malaysia in constitutional terms, and in terms of religion, language and custom, but it comprises a range of diverse sub-groupings including long-established peninsular Malays as well as relatively recent migrants like the Javanese, Madurese, Minangkabau, Acehese, Banjarese and Bugis from the Indonesian archipelago. The Chinese too comprise different linguistic, cultural and territorial groups, mainly from the overcrowded southeastern provinces of China (Guangdong and Fujian) – Hokkien (Fujianhua), Teochiu (Chaozhouhua), Cantonese (Guangfuhua), Hakka (Kejiahua), and Hailamese (Hainanhua). Indians include Tamils, Bengalis, Gujaratis, Sikhs, Chulias (Muslims from the Coromandel coast), Parsees (from Bombay), Malayalees

(from Malabar) and so on. There were also hybrid populations arising from inter-marriage and cultural exchange like the Peranakan, Straits or Baba Chinese, who combined elements of Chinese and Malay culture, and emerged mainly from earlier migrations which predominantly comprised males who then intermarried or formed liaisons with local women; Eurasians such as the mixed Portuguese-Malay community in Malacca; Jawi Peranakans or Indian Muslims of mixed Indian-Malay ancestry; and partly Malayized Hindu-Indian Babas or Malacca Chittys (Clammer, 1980, 1986; Nagata, 1979: 25–49).

Post-independence political activity in Malay(si)a was directed to the promotion of economic growth and diversification through such processes as industrialization and the modernization and expansion of capitalist agriculture, as well as the development of an indigenous (Malay) capitalist class by state-directed restructuring (Jomo, 1987: 113–148). In the 1950s and 1960s this was undertaken through ISI and a relatively hands-off approach to international and domestic capital, with supportive policies on behalf of the Malays (Khoo, 2006: 174–175). EOI policies were introduced from the later 1960s, and especially from the early 1970s with the introduction of the Second Malaysia Plan and the New Economic Policy (NEP), and the expansion of the electronics, electrical goods and textile industries; attention has also been paid to the development of a heavy industry base and most recently high technology industries. Fortuitously from the 1970s, economic growth was supported by the exploitation of such other primary resources as oil, gas and timber.

Building on the work of Lim (1980, 1985), Hashim (1977), Stenson (1976, 1980), and Selveratnam (1974), Brennan constructs a class model of Malaysian society which cuts across ethnic divisions. According to him, the dominant class, dependent on international capital, comprises various ‘fragments’ or fractions: a Malay governing or bureaucratic group with roots in the [feudal] aristocracy, a Malay rural landlord group, mainly Malay senior state including military functionaries, with a minority of Indians, and a primarily non-Malay, mainly Chinese capitalist or comprador class, including Indians (1985: 93–127). However, it is the Malay element of this class, which Brown terms a ‘bureaucratic bourgeoisie’ through UMNO, which ultimately has political control; the other, non-Malay fractions, representing the Chinese through the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Indians through the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), are dependent within the National Alliance, and, from 1974, the National Front (Brown, 1994: 214; Jomo, 1986; Crouch, 1993, 1996; Jesudason, 1989). Up to the time of the Malay-Chinese ‘race riots’ in May 1969 following the general elections, the representatives of the state sought to balance the different interests of the dominant class and its constituent fractions through the formation of a national alliance (Brown, 1994: 211). However, the composition and character of the Malay bureaucratic bourgeoisie also changed considerably, which in turn upset the balance between the class fractions.

The development of the Malay element of the dominant class was boosted from the 1970s, with the increasing intervention of the state in the economy and

the introduction of the NEP which aimed to address the roots of ethnic tension expressed in the traumatic conflicts of 1969 (Zakaria and Suzaina, 2005: 42–64). This entailed the restructuring of the economy and a substantial increase in the involvement of the Malays in the modern sector; in the process the power, position and influence of Malay politicians, senior officials and ‘politically well-connected businessmen’ were significantly enhanced (Jomo, 1987: 147). It was during the period of the NEP that the representatives of the state directly deployed an ethnic ideology but also an economic nationalist or, more precisely, a Malay nationalist ideology to achieve its aims of economic restructuring (Khoo, 2001: 185–186). The core of national identity became one which was focused on the ‘indigenous’ population (*bumiputra*).

Those Malays in business were given special preferences in licensing, financing and contracting and non-Malay businesses were encouraged to take in Malay partners and shareholders. The state also established public companies and took over foreign-owned enterprises which were then turned over to Malay management, and were open to Malay shareholding: UMNO too became a major player in the economy (Crouch, 1993: 145; Khoo, 2006: 175–177). Although the thrust of the restructuring policy was softened from 1990 with the introduction of the National Development Plan, and an increasing emphasis on economic growth and the private sector, the support for the development of Malay business continued. However, ‘Malay businesspeople were not entrepreneurs who set up new enterprises but clients of politicians who were given business opportunities as rewards for political support ... . Many were politicians or retired bureaucrats and some were members of royalty’ (Crouch, 1993: 146). In this situation Malay business had a client status, with considerable dependence on the UMNO-dominated government; many were also members of UMNO.

There is also a middle class or what Brennan terms a ‘petit-bourgeoisie’ broadly divided into smaller-scale Chinese and Indian capitalists (mainly in retailing and distribution), and middle level Malay civil servants and other government workers; and finally the ‘dominated classes’, comprising the Malay peasantry (which is a very broad and crude catch-all category, including those Malays who had been incorporated into large resettlement schemes growing plantation crops), a mainly Indian and Chinese rural proletariat working in plantations, and previously in tin mines, and a multi-racial (Chinese, Malay and Indian) urban proletariat (Brennan, 1985: 98–111). However, what was a relatively small middle class, and mainly non-Malay, in the immediate post-independence years, had expanded considerably by the 1990s as had the Malay component of this class, given specially directed government support in creating an educated, increasingly urban-based indigenous community (Crouch, 1993: 140–144). The working class, which comprised primarily immigrant Asians in the early years of independence, was progressively opened to Malays after 1970. One important addition to this class was that of young Malay rural women who entered the manufacturing sector, particularly the electronics and textile industries, as cheap-non-unionized labour (see Chapter 9).

According to Brennan, the 'ideology of race', or more accurately ethnicity, is used to legitimize particular positions of class and power. In other words, he argues that the Malay fraction of the upper class appeals to the Malay lower classes by deploying 'a populist, nationalist and racialist ideology' in order to keep a check on Chinese compradors with whom, in a contradictory fashion they are in a necessary alliance, and to demonstrate that Malay interests are not endangered. This has been combined with the strategy to encourage the development of a Malay capitalist class. In turn, the Chinese fraction of the upper class has to demonstrate that it is protecting Chinese interests against the Malays by appealing to other Chinese voters (Brennan, 1985: 112–113). The overall strategy is to undermine the possibility of multiracial, class-based action by the lower orders of society, ensure that the interests of international and domestic capital are protected, and use state power, through constitutional, repressive and ideological means, to keep in check any ethnic conflict. Overall, then, for Brennan, 'all racial conflict in the Malaysian social formation has its origins in the struggle between classes' (ibid.: 118).

Let us examine this proposition and recent changes in Malaysian economic and political life in more detail, given the importance I attach to the non-ideological dimensions of ethnic identity. As Crouch has said, in his analysis of Malaysian politics, 'Although communal rivalries cannot be understood apart from their socio-economic and political context, they cannot be dismissed as merely disguised expressions of class interest. The political struggle in Malaysia is not only about the ownership of wealth and the distribution of material benefits but also involves ethnic identity' (1993: 135–136). Despite the clear authoritarian character of the Malaysian state, and its increasing authoritarianism in the 1990s (Crouch, 1992: 21–43), there is room for an opposition and electoral politics, even though these are restricted by the dominant Malay ruling group, supported by various co-opted elements from other ethnic groups and parties (Maznah and Wong, 2001a: 25–26).

UMNO depends significantly on patronage to ensure that it retains the majority support of the Malays and it also demonstrates a degree of responsive to the needs, interests and demands of its constituents (Crouch, 1993: 138–139). The repressive character of the ruling class to which Brennan refers needs qualification, as does the rather simple way in which he views the use of a racial ideology in that the continued existence of democratic, oppositional elements within the Malaysian political system softens authoritarianism and complicates the inter-relationships between class, politics and ethnicity. These complexities have been enhanced with the growth of a plural, variegated middle class, which, though it has broadly supported government policies, also has elements which support opposition parties and which have become involved in non-governmental movements critical of government (ibid.: 143–144). In other words, class-based action is not only complicated by appeals to ethnicity and ethnic consciousness, but also by the complexities of social inequality and the increasing importance of status and other credentials, which are not merely a product of the division of labour and the ownership or non-ownership of the means of production. As we have seen in Chapter

5, the complexities of the class structure and the emergence of class fractions, or strategic groups, also have the effect, in certain circumstances, of undermining or softening class identities. In this connection the growth of the middle class across Southeast Asia has introduced all kinds of ambiguities and uncertainties (and 'fragmentation') into the arena of political and cultural identity (Crouch, 1992; Loh and Kahn, 1992).

It should also be borne in mind that ethnic identity can have a powerful influence on the ways in which social hierarchy is perceived. Nagata proposes that Malaysians express 'social differences in an ethnic idiom', and that emerging classes are really not characterized by class consciousness (1974, 1975a, 1975b, 1979). Rather, and as with Evers's concept of strategic groups, they comprise something less than classes; she identifies, for example, businessmen, professionals, civil servants, and workers. She also suggests that ethnic groups take on the character of status groups 'associated with a particular evaluation of honour and ideal style of life' (1975b: 117). She, therefore, incorporates subjective considerations of status to reveal differences in the ways in which Malays, Chinese and Indians perceive stratification. Malays tend not to accord priority to social class, but instead operate with a complex and finely graded status ranking which includes elements of the traditional system of royalty and aristocracy, the grading of religious authority and prestige, and positions in the bureaucracy and the modern economy (1979: 147–150). In contrast, the Chinese accord particular importance to wealth, urban occupations and English education so that businessmen are given higher priority than professionals, politicians and government officers; but they also considered clan affiliation, dialect and region of origin when differentiating people within their own ethnic group (*ibid.*: 160). Among the Indians the main principle of categorization is religious affiliation followed by regional and linguistic differences, but in status terms wealth, professional position, qualifications and the English language are important. Nagata concludes that these ethnic differences and the 'subjective pluralism' which they generate continue to cut across class and occupational formations. Inequality, therefore, is not perceived primarily in class terms but instead is personalized and individualized within ethnic and patron–client frames of reference. Malaysians of different ethnic identity would also tend to rank different ethnic groups one above the other rather than separate out particular sub-groupings within ethnic groups according to class (*ibid.*: 127,133–134).

It is clear, therefore, that class-based action is compromised by communal considerations and certainly economic, political and ethnic factors are very closely interrelated in Malaysia. Class interests have been overridden by ethnic ones so that it is difficult to argue for the primacy of class when it has a weaker claim to people's loyalties than ethnic identity and communalism. Even left-wing or left-leaning political organizations, though usually expressing a non-communal perspective 'end up carving mass support along communal lines' (Muhammad Ikmail Said, 1992: 254). Moreover, the Malay rural population and the Malay elements of the upper and middle classes have mainly supported the UMNO-dominated

government, though with important exceptions in, for example, certain of the east coast states of Peninsular Malaysia. They have not formed class alliances with those from other ethnic groups, and this is especially noticeable among the middle and lower classes. However, as Crouch has suggested, communal politics though linked to economic concerns also 'involved fundamental perceptions of identity' (1993: 151). These perceptions and the identifications of similarity and difference are based on certain core precepts: that the Malays are native to the area and therefore have a prior and overriding claim to Malaysia as a territorial and political unit, and pre-eminence in formulating what defines the nation. Chinese and Indians, on the other hand, point to the importance of citizenship, place of birth and equality before the law in defining a nation. There are also very clear cultural differences in religion, customs and behaviour between Malays and non-Malays despite some cross-cultural exchanges and interaction.

In a rather more complex treatment of the relationships between class and ethnicity in Malaysia which moves beyond the view that ethnic ideologies are deployed by the dominant class to serve their interests, those of the state and domestic and international capital, Brown proposes that the state does not simply manipulate ethnicity but serves 'as the arena in which the contending ethnic ideologies must be problematically balanced' (1994: 207). In this perspective, the state (or more specifically state bureaucrats and politicians) is seen not as the tool of a dominant class, but as a sufficiently autonomous actor which mediates between contending classes and class fractions and also 'expresses the contradictory relations between the different fractions within the power bloc' (ibid.: 210). In the run up to independence and thereafter the governing alliance which took over from the departing British was organized into ethnic-based class fractions. Their electoral success and strength was based on their claims to protect and promote the interests and welfare of lower-class constituents within their respective ethnic groups. However, what happened from the late 1950s through to the late 1960s was an increase in the economic disparities between the ruling groups within the alliance and the subordinate classes. In explaining the 1969 Malay-Chinese 'race riots' in Kuala Lumpur in which 196 people died, over 9,100 were arrested and over 750 buildings damaged, Brown points to the 'widespread discontent amongst both the Chinese and the Malay subordinate classes that their bourgeois "patrons" had failed to defend their interests, and had instead furthered their own bourgeois interests' (ibid.: 235). Nevertheless, it was not class conflict and consciousness which were the result, but rather the search for alternative 'communal patrons' and the outbreak of ethnic conflict (ibid.: 234).

However, this partial breakdown in intra-ethnic relationships was not a sufficient reason for the open conflict. Brown also points to the increasing contact between members of different ethnic groups, primarily of the labouring class, as a result of modernization, Malay migration to urban areas and competition for employment and resources, combined with the fact that the Malays and non-Malays 'did not interact with each other on an equal basis, so that their interactions tended

to promote mutual distrust and resentment rather than integration' (ibid.: 237). There were also changes in the composition of the Malay state bureaucracy from the 1950s, which, up until then, was dominated by the aristocratic-landowning group, with the recruitment of civil servants from mainly rural and lower- or middle-class backgrounds (ibid.: 239).

This change in the composition of the Malay element of the state bureaucracy occasioned a shift in the approach to inter-ethnic relations and the partial undermining of the compromise that had been reached between the fractions of the Malay and Chinese upper class and their agreement on power sharing. The new recruits to the middle ranks of UMNO and to the Malay bureaucracy argued for more direct state intervention in the economy and greater active support for the Malay community in order 'to foster the entry of poor rural Malays into entrepreneurial activities' and to provide 'state help for aspiring Malay businessmen' (ibid.: 241). They gave a particular edge to the claims for the special position of the Malays, emphasized the importance of developing a specifically Malay dimension to national ideology and drew attention persistently to the dangers for the Malay community of being overwhelmed, left behind and economically marginalized within their own country.

Although this change in emphasis on ethnic identity and inter-ethnic relations had something to do with issues of class and power, it also arose from a very firm commitment to one's own group. From Brennan's preoccupation with the deployment of ethnic ideology by a ruling class we move with Brown towards a much greater concern with the interests and needs of one's own ethnic group. There was still the need to sustain some form of dominant class alliance and to respond to the demands of the lower classes, as well as to ensure overall political stability and the health of domestic and international capital, but there was a shift by UMNO towards an emphasis on ethnicity qua ethnicity, and a more vigorous emphasis on the unifying power of Islam and Malay culture, following the riots of 1969. This change in strategy was given substance with the introduction of the NEP in 1970. It marked the emergence of 'bureaucratic entrepreneurs' or a 'bureaucratic bourgeoisie' or 'bureaucratic capitalist class' (ibid.: 245–248). It also marked the emergence and development of various kinds of informal arrangements and cooperation between Malay state bureaucrats and entrepreneurs and Chinese businessmen (Khou, 2001: 188). Especially during the later Mahathir period, with the privatization of state assets and monopolies, and the award of large infrastructural projects to favoured political clients, '[a] new category of politically connected Malay, non-Malay, or often interethnic conglomerates arose and evolved into privileged oligopolies' (Khou, 2006: 184).

Overall Brown proposes a class-based analysis of Malaysian society and politics, but one which recognizes the complexities of the relations between class, ethnicity, power and the state. Rather than a straightforward use of ethnicity by the ruling class, we find a more subtle relationship in the ways in which the state's representatives use ethnicity, characterized by a combination of 'reactive, respon-

sive and manipulative elements' (Brown, 1994: 257). In addition, as competition for power, resources and capital intensified following economic restructuring, relations became increasingly strained between the Malay-dominated bureaucracy (administrators, technocrats and professionals), UMNO, as well as 'old-style' senior and 'young Turk' junior politicians within the party, and emerging Malay capitalists (Khoo, 2001: 188). Furthermore, the post-Mahathir government of Abdullah Badawi has sought to rein in some of the excesses of the previous regime and the politics of corruption and patronage by appealing to the interests and sensitivities of 'rural Malay communities, the [Malay] civil service, and the UMNO grassroots' (Khoo, 2006: 192).

### *Burma*

Burma provides us with an excellent example of the differences in the perceptions of boundaries between the British and the Burmese Konbaung monarchs, particularly during the reign of Bodawpaya (1782–1819) and his grandson Bagyidaw (1819–1837), and the ways in which boundary definition became more explicit as the British progressively incorporated Burmese communities into a colonial administration. From the turn of the nineteenth century the main issues at stake between the British East India Company and the Konbaung dynasty 'involved differing concepts of sovereignty and territorial control' as well as trade and respective socio-political statuses (Owen, 2005: 87). Whilst the British held to the importance of clearly delineated borders within which they exercised political and administrative control and which should not be violated by outside powers, the Burmese 'perceived a zone of overlapping influences' with more vaguely defined, shifting boundaries, frontiers and spheres (ibid.; Osborne, 2004: 73–74). These differences in political viewpoint eventually contributed to open military conflict and Bagyidaw's invasion of British Bengal, progressive territorial annexation following the three Anglo-Burmese wars (1824–26; 1852–53; 1885), the fall of the Burmese capital at Mandalay, the deposition of King Thibaw (1878–1885) and the abolition of the monarchy. The British concept of a state with demarcated borders, within which its government at Rangoon exercised sovereignty, prevailed, and it was this concept which had consequences for inter-ethnic relations and ethnicity, given that, prior to British intervention, identities were also relatively fluid and unbounded. So that over time 'the colonized came to perceive the world in much the same terms as the colonizers did' (Owen, 2005: 202).

I have described in Chapter 4 the major transformations in Burma from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards: the rapid increase in commodity production and the integration of the Burmese economy into the global economy and administratively into British India; the influx of Indian merchants, moneylenders, clerks, civil servants and ordinary labourers into the Burma Delta; the imposition of direct rule in the lowland areas of the country dominated by the Burman population where a new indigenous administrative class was created and where traditional supravillage institutions, other than the Buddhist monkhood (*sangha*),

were dismantled, and the separate systems of indirect rule through local elites in the upland minority areas. Even the Burman village system was reorganized. The British then set about demarcating people and territories, surveying 'tribal' areas, describing and categorizing customs and local laws, and presenting diverse, exotic cultures in museums and ethnographic narratives. Ethnic groups were established as primordial within a British discourse about origins and shared histories. It is far too simple to capture this process as a deliberate policy of 'divide and rule'; it had elements of that, but it was part of a more complex and subtle encounter with those who were different, whose values, beliefs and behaviours had to be understood at least insofar as this was necessary for administrative and commercial purposes, and who were dependents of regimes which styled themselves enlightened, 'civilizing' and progressive (Taylor, 1982, 1987). Yet the administrative separation between the majority Buddhist Burmans in 'Burma Proper' and the minority hill peoples in the 'Frontier Areas' (many of whom were converted to Christianity and some who served in the colonial army) only served to sow the seeds of conflict after political independence in 1948. As Smith says, British colonialism 'did immense damage to inter-communal relations; the appearance of preferential treatment for different ethnic groups did, without doubt, bring about a widely varying response to British rule' (1991: 46).

Prior to the setting up of separate administrative structures for both the lowland and upland regions, the relationships between the majority Burmans and the minorities, including the Shan, Kachin, Karen (Kayin), Chin, Karenni (Kayah), Palaung and Wa, were relatively fluid and characterized as 'variations on a theme' rather than fixed, contrasting ethnic categories. To be sure there were armed conflicts and tensions, but these were tempered by relations of patronage, accommodation, alliance, intermarriage, cultural exchange, and multiple identities, and disaffected minorities could still switch their allegiance between other contending powers (Leach, 1954; Lehman, 1963, 1967, 1979; Taylor, 1982). Minorities were also divided by territory, clan and kinship, and did not usually react to outsiders in a unified way. The situation in Burma was further complicated by the presence of significant minorities who inhabited the lowland areas intermixed with the Burmans; these included the Mons, the Arakanese and the Karen.

Nevertheless, what the colonial project demanded was 'the maintenance of clear racial and cultural boundaries between colonizers and colonized, between Westerners and Southeast Asians' (Owen, 2005: 246). These preoccupations in situations in which Europeans, natives and other Asians were brought together, especially in the expanding urban areas of Southeast Asia where they usually resided in defined 'quarters', served to enhance the importance of ethnicity and identity, and during the late colonial period, when indigenous, anti-colonial nationalisms emerged, to cement divisions between broad categories of people and emphasize the importance of boundaries. One such broad rallying point for the lowland Burmans was Buddhism, and early on educated Burmese formed the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA) in 1906 to begin to establish a modern and separate

identity from the British, the Indians and others (ibid.: 324; Smith, 1991: 49). Some of the more radical members of the YMBA then formed the General Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA) in 1917 (Brown, 1994: 43). Even the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) which fought the Japanese on a nationalist platform to embrace all indigenous people, was dominated by the Burmans (ibid.: 45). Moreover, 'it developed as an essentially Burman ethnic-nationalist movement which articulated the goal of Burmese independence in the name of a defence of Burman ethnic language and culture, and of the Buddhist religion, portraying the independent Burmese state as rightful successor to the Burmese dynasties of the past' (ibid.).

The differences between the Burmans and the Indians were further cemented during the Depression years when a considerable amount of land passed into the hands of Indian moneylenders and, with the decrease in the availability of employment, Burmans and Indians competed for jobs in both urban and rural areas. Anti-Indian riots broke out in Rangoon in May 1930 (Owen, 2005: 327). In addition, increasing economic dislocation triggered a rebellion in lower Burma in December 1930, led by a former monk, Saya San. He had been active in the radical wing of the GCBA in the 1920s. The rebellion was an anti-colonial protest, but also directed against the Indians and Chinese, who were seen as beneficiaries of colonialism. Its major symbolic rallying point was Buddhism and Burman identity, and Saya San harked back to the Burmese monarchy as a focus of Burman loyalty and patriotic sentiment.

It was in the first phase of independence that the first Prime Minister, U Nu, a devout Buddhist, amended the constitution of the Union of Burma to establish Buddhism as the state religion, though there were also safeguards for followers of other religions, at least in constitutional terms (Brown, 1994: 46; Owen, 2005: 334). These safeguards were countered by a significant Buddhist missionary push among the minorities. U Nu was at heart a Burman assimilationist. The constitution of the Union of Burma, which had been drafted in 1947, a year before independence, had also included the option for the Shan and Karenni states to secede from the semi-federal 'union' after a period of ten years. Limited administrative discretion was given to these states, along with that of the Kachin; a 'special division' was also established for the Chin. In crucial meetings to draft the constitution, some of the minorities, including the Karen and the Karenni, along with the Arakanese and Mon were not represented (Smith, 1991: 79). The powers of the minorities were therefore limited, and the difficulties faced by the Karen (Kayin) were compounded because they lived intermingled with the Burmans and there was no possibility to carve out a physically distinct regional enclave for them (ibid.: 82). In addition, the Burman language was introduced into government business circles in 1952 and as the medium of instruction in schools, and Burman history was introduced into the school curriculum.

Brown argues that the emasculation of established socio-political structures in lowland Burma and the displacement of traditional elites provided spaces (or a

‘power vacuum’) within which a more Burman-, Buddhist-oriented identity could ultimately flourish (1994: 41, 46). He refers to Burma as an ‘ethnocratic state’, which is one dominated by a majority ethnic community. He also includes Thailand and the Philippines within this category (1988). ‘Ethnocracy’ is characterized as a situation in which ‘the state acts as the agency of the dominant ethnic community’ in the promotion of its ethnic values, policies and resource distribution as the core of its nationalist ideology and practice (ibid.: 34, 36). The state takes on a ‘distinctly centralizing and assimilationist character’ (ibid.: 38; Silverstein, 1980: 239), and is the ‘key causal agency of ethnic rebellion’ (Brown, 1994: 64). Members of the ethnic majority are favoured in appointments to public office and the political institutions of the state are contrived to ensure that the majority continues to monopolize power. Therefore, ethnocratic states direct themselves to the marginalization of minorities, and it is this which generates a response from the minorities, and the solidification of their identity in relation to a dominant and threatening ‘other’. The majority also espouses their modernity, advancement and nationalist credentials in comparison with their backward minorities (ibid.: 48). The leaders of the minority groups search for an accommodation and attempt to secure room for manoeuvre with the central politicians, but when they do not succeed in this, they take more overt forms of action, usually expressed in rebellion. ‘Each of the peripheral communities has come to see the expanding state as the dominant influence upon them, and to identify themselves in relation to this dominant other’ (ibid.: 51). But the realization of identity is a complex process, and in the case of Burma it was generated not only by the confrontation between majority and minority but also by the action of Western agents in creating distinct ethnic groups.

Therefore, Burma, perhaps most markedly of all in Southeast Asia, became an arena for widespread inter-ethnic tensions, ethnic unrest, and armed rebellion; the political and military situation in the country was also complicated by the civil war waged between the governing elite and their former communist allies, and by the influx of defeated Guomintang troops from China into the Shan Hills. With regard to inter-ethnic conflicts, predictably the Karens, who felt themselves under threat and with no safeguard of a state of their own, were the first to confront the Burman-dominated government. ‘[W]ithin a year of independence the Karen National Union (KNU) took up arms against the government, commencing an insurgency that lasted into the next century’ (Owen, 2005: 332). It should also be noted that the forerunner of the KNU, the Karen National Association (KNA), as a firm expression of Karen identity, was established in 1881, and pre-dated the Burman-based Young Men’s Buddhist Association by over two decades (Smith, 1991: 45).

It is therefore not surprising that after independence several of the minority groups engaged in rebellions against the central government and began to develop a pan-ethnic consciousness which overrode local, village-based loyalties. They did so because they felt that their own leaders and communities were likely to be bypassed by the central government, although the Chin appear to be an excep-

tion to this (Taylor, 1982: 15). Karen armed resistance, which began in 1949, was followed by rebellions among the Karenni, Mon and Pao, then the Shans in 1952, as they came together to recognize a 'Shanness' which was not really identifiable prior to independence. The Shan leaders (*sawbwawas*) attempted to reach an accommodation with the Burman politicians during the 1950s, but failed, and the more radical Shan, allied with some young Shan aristocrats, formed the Shan State Independence Army in 1958 in order to secede from the Union. They had become increasingly unhappy about the intervention of the central state in their affairs and the reduction in their already very limited administrative autonomy, and clashes with the Burmese army began to occur in 1959. Open insurrection was triggered following the military coup of April 1962 and the arrest of senior Shan leaders who were attempting to negotiate genuine autonomy for the Shan state. The Karens, led by an educated Christian elite, also experienced this ethnic awakening, though an emerging sense of identity was already evident by the late nineteenth century (Brown, 1994: 60–61). The Karens were also prominent in the colonial army and the lower levels of the administration. Demands for a separate Karen colony and a status distinct from the Burman-dominated post-colonial state went unrealized, and helps explain the founding of the Karen National Defence Organization (KNDO). During the decade after independence some Karen leaders attempted to reach an accommodation with the central government, some even converted to Buddhism, but it became increasingly clear that compromise would not secure what they wanted. The relations between the Burman state and the minorities had become so dire that, by 1961, the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) had also raised arms and was involved in an insurrection (Smith, 1991: 93).

Importantly, although some of the rebellions have been associated with communist sympathies and perhaps suggest an economic dimension to the conflicts, the prime-mover in revolt has been ethnic antipathies and issues of self-determination, with, in the most extreme position, demands for complete secession from the Burmese Union. The military takeover of 1962 under General Ne Win, who assumed full executive, judicial and legislative powers, and the establishment of the Revolutionary Council and its political wing, the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), was aimed at arresting the political and economic chaos, factionalism and corruption generated by the experiments in multi-party democracy (Smith, 1991: 198–218). The central government became even more Burman-centric and xenophobic; it nationalized all foreign and larger domestic businesses in 1963–64, forcing out of the country some 300,000 Indians and 100,000 Chinese between 1963 and 1967, and, in consequence, lost a considerable entrepreneurial resource (*ibid.*: 219). A centralized socialist one-party state, based on the national ideology of the 'Burmese Way to Socialism', and the associated command economy were introduced in 1974 (Tin Maung Maung Than, 2004: 187,197, 209; 2005: 76–78). Overall 'the unitary structure of both the BSPP and government put an end to all discussion of rights of autonomy, secession or independent political representation' (Smith, 1991: 200).

The harshness of the regime and its uncompromising stand against ethnic self-determination and human rights meant that unrest continued apace. The government announced in 1981 that it was facing armed opposition from four major and eleven minor opposition groups, including the Karen (Kayin) National Liberation Army (KNLA), which was the armed force of the KNU, the Shan State Independence Army (SSIA), the Pao Nationalist Movement (PNM), the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), the Lahu Nationalist United Party (LNUP), and the Wa National Army (WNA) (Owen, 2005: 500; Smith, 1991: 322–354). The Burma Communist Party (BCP) also served as a rallying point in the 1980s for disaffected members of the minorities including the Shan and Wa, and they were also allied to the Kachin Independence Army (KIA). However, these insurrections had depended substantially on Communist China's support, which was withdrawn in the mid-1980s as China reached a rapprochement with the Burmese government. During much of Ne Win's tenure the armed insurrections increased in scale, intensity and complexity, with fissions and factions occurring within ethnic groups as well (Smith, 1991: 96–9).

However, by the middle of the 1990s most of the ethnic insurgent groups had reached an agreement with the military-dominated State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which came to power in 1988, to cease hostilities in return for a measure of autonomy within their own areas, with authority given to the leaders of ethnic minorities within their defined territories, the promise of consultation, and the provision of government assistance in development (*ibid.*: 503; Tin Maung Maung Than, 2004: 207; 2005: 65–108). However, some groups like the KNU continued their struggle, and the fundamental grievances of the minorities have still not been satisfactorily addressed (Smith, 2001: 33). Ethnic-based resistance rumbles on, some cease-fires continue as among the Wa and Kokang, but some have collapsed, and defections within the minority areas and outbreaks of protest and discontent from armed organizations among such groups as the Karen, Shan, Karenni, Mon and Wa continue (Tin Maung Maung Than, 2004: 207; Smith, 2001: 33–39). There have also been recent reports of Burmese military operations, forced relocation and armed resistance from ethnic minorities in Karen and Karenni state and a continuing exodus of refugees. There are still some 140,000 Karen, Karenni and Mon refugees in Thailand and some 600,000 displaced persons in the upland areas ([info@burmacampaign.org.uk](mailto:info@burmacampaign.org.uk), September 2006).

In summing up the situation in Burma or Myanmar, Brown states that 'ethnic-nationalist rebellion provided for both a response which offered a symbolic solution, – the assertion of group worth, status and rights – and also, potentially, a practical solution – authority positions for the elites and communal stability for the masses' (1994: 64). What the Burmese case demonstrates above all is that ethnic identity, as a principle of social organization, comprises 'the main structural basis for political alignments and for communal consciousness in independent Burma'. Indeed, it has become 'so institutionalized and ideologized [*sic*] that it constitutes, in the form of Burman ethnic nationalism, the core component of Burmese state identity' (*ibid.*:

36). It is also clear that Burmese state-building is so closely interwoven with inter-ethnic war and violence that it has imparted a certain character to the military government – inward-looking, coercive, preoccupied with counter-insurgency and unwilling to meet extra-state demands and interests. As Tin Maung Maung Than says, ‘the military junta is determined to push forward the establishment of a highly centralized unitary state structure ... . They expect the ethnic groups to embrace “Union Spirit” – a constant refrain in the government-controlled media and the staple of the leaders’ numerous speeches on national unity’ (2005: 96).

### *Singapore*

My final case study in this chapter presents interesting contrasts and comparisons with Malaysia and Burma, but like these two countries Singapore demonstrates how the state attempts to manage a national cultural identity (Clammer, 1985). Singapore comprises a primarily ethnic Chinese, urban or city state surrounded by territorially larger and more populous Muslim (Malay) neighbours (though Malaysia and Indonesia have significant resident ethnic Chinese communities as well). Ethnicity and national identity and resilience are therefore ever-present phenomena in the consciousness of Singaporeans and, in particular, in that of the political elite, which has to manage socio-political relations both domestically and regionally. Indeed, national leaders have ‘developed a marked predisposition to depict and to organize Singaporean society along primarily ethnic lines’ (Brown, 1994: 77; 1993). It has also been concerned to develop what Wee, with reference to the work of Appadurai (1996), calls a ‘national culturalism’, a state-generated national culture or identity based on the management of and reconfiguration of ethnicity (2002b: 130–133).

Singapore is a nation formed from immigration and commerce, and very much the creation of a Western power from the early nineteenth century, unlike Burma which had an established monarchy surrounded by diverse ethnic minorities, and Malay(si)a which had several established Muslim sultanates, although subject progressively to Asian immigration. However, like the colonial experience in Burma and Malay(si)a, the colonial administration created and presided over an ethnic division of labour and justified it in terms of assumed, innate cultural and genetic characteristics. Singapore was also incorporated briefly into the Federation of Malaysia from 1963 to 1965 in which issues of ethnicity and its politicization, particularly in the relations between Malays and Chinese, played a dominant role, and led ultimately to Singapore’s expulsion from the then newly-created hotchpotch of former British territories.

Although Singapore’s population of some 4 million, is approximately 78 per cent ethnic Chinese (internally differentiated into mainly Hokkien, Teochiu and Cantonese), it is, like its neighbours, a plural society, with the remainder of the population made up of Muslim Malays (some 14 per cent, comprising Malays proper and immigrants from the Indonesian islands, including Javanese), Indians (7 per cent, mainly Tamils, Malayalees, Bengalis, and Punjabis), and a diverse mi-

nority of 'others' comprising, in part, hybrid populations like the Eurasians. What the highly interventionist and centralist government of Singapore, dominated by Lee Kuan Yew's People's Action Party (PAP), has done – as it has in much of the state's social, cultural, economic and political life – is control, restructure and domesticate its pluralism to ensure that it does not become a source of tension, conflict and opposition (Brown, 1994: 66–67). Indeed, up until today '[t]he state remains a pervasive force in all aspects of economic, social, and political life in the city-state' (Rodan, 2006a: 160). This kind of political system has been styled 'corporatist' in that 'an avowedly autonomous state elite, comprised primarily of bureaucrats and technocrats, controls and organizes the various constituents of the state, limits popular participation and channels it through state-controlled institutions, develops an overriding loyalty and commitment to the state, constructs a national cultural identity, and builds through political mechanisms a unified, organic, harmonious society on the basis of a partnership between state and people (ibid.: 68–71; Tremewan, 1996). Whether or not Singapore is fully corporatist rather than straightforwardly authoritarian (Deyo, 1981; Rodan, 1989) has been the subject of intense debate, but the evidence suggests that the government and its supporting administration work through a variety of indirect and direct controls to ensure compliance and obedience. Brown argues that the state became increasingly corporatist from the early 1980s and prior to that was characterized more usually as 'bureaucratic', 'administrative' or 'bureaucratic-authoritarian' (1994: 78).

The state's energies in Singapore have therefore been directed to engineering ethnicity and to demand absolute political loyalty from the constituent ethnic communities; there is no encouragement or tolerance of potentially subversive 'competing sub-national loyalties, including ethnic loyalties' (ibid.: 76). In contrast to Burma where inter-ethnic conflicts have been largely uncontrolled and uncontrollable by the Burman-dominated government, and Malaysia where, after a period of tension and open conflict, they have been brought under some control by the Malay-dominated state, in Singapore the task adopted by the state has been 'to modify ethnic affiliations so that they can become compatible with, and component elements of, the organic national identity' (ibid.). The management of ethnicity in Singapore has been one of simultaneously 'seeking to erode ethnic political loyalties' whilst addressing the national political imperative to 'promote and develop the approved ethnic cultural values' (ibid.). Singapore could not structure its national identity on the basis of 'Chineseness' developing a Chinese state within a predominantly Muslim Malay–Indonesian region. Nor could it assimilate its minorities into Chinese culture, nor, given the sensitivities of a decolonizing region, could it promote Western values and culture as a means of unifying the nation. After the departure from Malaysia Singapore's leaders were also acutely conscious of the weakness and insecurity of their country in relation to their large ethnically different neighbours.

The state therefore initially adopted a national ideology based on ethnic diversity and 'multiracialism', in other words, on the notion of an 'ethnic mosaic', un-

derpinned by mutual tolerance, accommodation and respect. The government decided to establish four official languages: Malay, Mandarin, Tamil and English, with Malay as the national language; political and administrative offices were allocated on the basis of a balanced 'ethnic arithmetic'; the educational system was based on bilingualism (English plus an 'ethnic' or 'home' language) and on the existence of 'ethnic streams'; and public housing policy was directed to promoting inter-ethnic residential arrangements (ibid.: 78–79, 281; Benjamin, 1975). However, from the 1970s multiracialism was integrated into an ideology of national development and progress which promoted the values of a meritocracy (the 'ethnically neutral state'), 'discipline and rugged self-reliance, pragmatism, egalitarian competition, and the pursuit of excellence'; there was an accompanying shift from calculations based on ethnic arithmetic to ones based on merit (Brown, 1994: 80; Wee, 2002b: 136–137). Ethnicity was increasingly neutralized and de-politicized; it became part of 'high culture' and its potential destabilizing, conflict-generating qualities were warned against and subsequently eliminated from the political scene. 'Singaporeans are still repeatedly reminded that ethnic political loyalties ... constitute primordial and irrational bonds which are easy to ignite and which constantly threaten to explode' (Brown, 1994: 91).

Since the early 1980s there has been another shift in national policy in order to address the charge that Singapore was becoming too westernized and that ethnicity, in a meritocratic environment, had been assigned a too marginal position in the development of a national consciousness. Instead the racial groups have been incorporated into an overarching ideology focusing on common 'Asian values' as against 'Western values' (see Chapter 8). Asian values, principally derived from Confucianism, constitute the national consensus and identity in the process of 'Asianizing Singapore'. They comprise an ideological amalgam or composite of 'core values' of discipline, hard work, respect for authority, and community consciousness (including commitment to the family and the wider society) rather than 'hedonistic individualism'. They are also claimed to characterize a pan-Asian culture, and are conveniently encapsulated in Singapore's harmonious, balanced, hard-working, resilient and loyal Asian citizenry (Brown, 1994: 92–96; Wee, 2002b: 139). The principles of Asian-ness also drew on Japanese models of industrial and commercial organization with an emphasis on the state's role in the economy, consensus decision-making, and loyalty to the enterprise. As Wee has said 'Dramatic changes occurred in the ... government's cultural management through ethnicity from the 1970s, when the state had an "ethnically neutral" policy undergirded by a rational commitment to cultural modernization, to the international appearance of the "Asian values" discourse and the 1980's re-ethnicization of Singaporeans into hyphenated identities' (2002b: 130; see also Wee, 2001: 248–253).

These shared Asian values provided a 'positive work ethic' which was seen to provide 'a bridge' between traditional Asian culture and a capitalist-oriented modernity, integrating different levels of identity and action, from the family at the lowest level through the four major racial groups to the wider nation (Wee,

2002b: 141; 1999; Chua, 1998: 34–36). They are also part of the more general process of ‘othering’ the West (Lee, 2001: 95–116). These values are in turn underpinned by the earlier notions of ethnic tolerance, consensus in decision-making and the importance of the family ‘as the core unit of society’ (Brown, 1994: 94).

The complexities of ethnic identity in Singapore were also progressively simplified, stereotyped and essentialized into a four-‘race’ model of society in which each major category – Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Other (CMIO) – was seen as culturally distinctive one from another and internally homogeneous, as well as separate from the political process; but ultimately they were mutually compatible (Wee, 2002b: 135). Singaporeans have been ‘Asianized’ through a long process set in motion during the British colonial period (Chua, 1998: 39–42,45; PuruShotam, 1998a: 51–94). There was firm state control of this process, through such things as ‘licensed debates’ on ethnic issues within parameters set and legitimized by the government, and individuals were pressed into identifying with one of these races and conforming to the characteristics, which government had designated and decreed, of that particular racial group. Siddique refers to this multiracial model as ‘interactionist’ rather than ‘integrationist’ or ‘assimilationist’ in that each race has been encouraged to retain its distinctiveness within an overarching national framework (1997: 109). In other words certain of the primary values which were seen by the government to characterize and underpin the constituent racial groups were also seen to depict and identify the national culture. Ethnic affiliation, therefore, has been engineered to form ‘a cultural building block from which an Asian communitarian form of national identity can be created’ (Brown, 1994: 106). However, the distinctions which the government draws between ethnicity as ‘cultural anchor’, as ‘political loyalty’ and as ‘legitimate interest’ are difficult ones to draw, and they have also caused confusion and tensions within Singaporean society (ibid.: 107). The government has been very successful in managing ethnicity in Singapore, but it runs the risk of depriving it of ‘its intrinsic power and appeal, so that it becomes eventually a new source of anxiety and confusion rather than a source of security’ (ibid.: 111). However, the government has been especially skilful in its development of ‘national culturalism’ and in the provision of the cultural ‘ballast’ and moral and spiritual support ‘to further support discipline for a labour force that competes within global capitalism’ (Wee, 2002b: 150). Wee argues that we cannot separate out the Singapore state’s involvement in ethnic management from its need to secure capitalist modernity and ‘to mobilize the country towards the economic goal of becoming a first-world society under the conditions of a burgeoning international economy’ (ibid.: 132). Rodan too provides a broader contextualization of the political management of social change, when he points to the very limited nature of middle class activism in Singapore and the ways in which the government has not only controlled and co-opted ethnic interests, but also those of business, professional and women’s groups (2001: 160).

What distinguishes Singapore has been its flexible approach to the construction of national symbolism which has been adjusted as domestic, regional and

global circumstances require. Wee notes a further shift following the 1997 Asian economic crisis and the more general questioning of Asian values and the 'Asian way'. Although 'national culturalism' is still promoted the 'idea of pan-Asian capitalist culture started to weaken by the early 1990s' and a Singaporean 'multiculturalism', a 'common culture' was re-emphasized, but integrated into 'a universal neo-liberalism and the institutions of the global economy' (2002b: 148–149).

### **Conclusion**

I have argued that ethnicity is an important social organizational principle in Southeast Asia, but it is subject to state action and to manipulation, construction and transformation to serve such needs as nation-building. We have seen how different nations within the region have addressed the issue of ethnic identity, some more successfully than others, and, even though it serves ideological purposes, it is a reference point for individuals and a means to mobilize and organize groups. It is difficult, for example, to explain the scale and intensity of conflict within Myanmar without addressing the importance of ethnicity and the willingness of people to struggle and lose their lives in fighting for ethnic self-determination, even though these identities must also be understood, at least in part, as products of external action and influence. With reference to the creation of 'colonial [ethnic] categories' and their subsequent use, Goh, for example, argues that these 'turn out to be a potential cultural framework for re-formed identities' (2002: 186). Wee also notes in relation to Singapore's 'national culturalism', that it is not merely 'pastiche', but is 'a significant site of cultural practice' (2002b: 151).

In comparison with class, 'ethnicity often appears to offer a more all-embracing and emotionally satisfying way of defining an individual's identity' (Brown, 1994: xviii). In addition, it is not merely an expression of class structures and struggle. It is 'in part generated by the political and socio-economic structure of society, but is also in part a "given" which plays a causal role; it is neither fully determined by the cultural structure of society, nor is it a totally elastic response to situational variations' (ibid.). It does, however, have a close relationship with the state, and I shall return to the theme of identity and state management in the concluding chapter. But now I turn to another organizational principle which cuts across class identities and that is patron–client relations.