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Malaysia/Singapore as Immigrant Societies

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Malaysia/Singapore as Immigrant Societies¹

I'd like to ask everyone, especially those characterized as 'Malays', to list their family histories. And see how many of us can really go back further than three generations born in this land. I know I can't.²

It is a distinct honour to me to have been asked to give this Jackson Lecture, for two reasons in particular. Firstly, because Jim Jackson was a precious friend and mentor. He was part of a significant academic movement from Malaysia to Australia in the 1960s and seventies by people who served their apprenticeships in the universities of Malaysia and Singapore and then enriched not only this Society but this country. There were geographers Terry McGee and Bobby Ho as well as Jim Jackson; economists Fred Fisk and Anne Booth; political scientists Harold Crouch and David Brown; historians Wang Gungwu, Leonard and Barbara Andaya, John Drabble, Amarjit Kaur and myself. Jim was ahead of me at the University of Malaya, finishing his Ph D in Geography there about the time I arrived in 1965 as a young lecturer in History. He was a little behind me in moving to Australia, and I recall the pleasure Helen and I had in meeting him, Souk-han and their then young children during their brief season at ANU on the way to Griffith.

The symposium on Malaysia that he and Martin Rudner organized at Griffith in 1977 amidst the excitement of establishing ASAA was the first of what would eventually become the regular biennial symposia, though we didn't know it at the time. Martin was a tireless organizer, and we shared a desire to keep Malaysia viable at the ANU. The book of that conference, dedicated to Jim after his death, was also the first conference volume we published in the SEAPS series, and in fact the first book of any kind that I saw through that series from start to finish (Ingleson and Sutherland having been inherited from ANU Press in an advanced state).

The second reason for me to be honoured is that it suggests I may be accepted into the club of Malaysianists, of which I think all the other 14 Jackson lecturers were full members. Reading the *Straits Times* every day for the last 6 years, and eating my share of *nasi lemak* and *char kueh tiaw*, has finally paid off.

¹ This paper was delivered to the Malaysia and Singapore Society of the ASAA as its 15th James C. Jackson Memorial Lecture on 3 July 2008, and published soon after by the Society through the University of New England. Hard copies of that lecture are available from the Society. I am most grateful to Peter Lee, a UBC intern with ARI during 2008, for formatting the tables and graphs, and to Greg Huff, Gavin Jones and Brenda Yeoh for much help with sources. (Editor's note: This paper is included in ARI's WPS not as an unpublished working paper but as work done in ARI and worthy of wider distribution through the online medium)

² Marina Mahathir blog, 9.9.08, as cited in *Straits Times* 10.9.08

It is conventional to divide our planet into the Old World and the New. The Old World is seen as the Eurasian mega-continent together with North Africa, all part of a zone integrated by trade and the sharing of crops, domestic animals and disease pools since ancient times. The New World represents especially the Americas but also Australia and New Zealand, relatively isolated from the Old until 1492, with Africa South of the Sahara in a slightly ambivalent position.

The New World, we say, was colonized by the old after 1492. The overwhelming majority of its peoples today derive from ancestors who were not there before 1492. They are therefore ‘Immigrant countries’, which for most of their history since 1492 have accepted migrants from the old world, and which are still among the leaders in the acceptance of legal migrants and refugees. The nationalisms which developed there were opposed to foreign control but not against migration per se-- only against certain kinds of migrants. Such societies have seen some of the ugliest examples of unfreedom (slavery) and racist boundaries, but have also been ahead of the field in pioneering freedoms and human rights for all, and the earliest applications of democracy with universal suffrage.

Like all dichotomies, this way of dividing the world is too simple. In the New World Bolivia, Guatemala and Peru still have populations most of whose ancestors were there before 1492, and which do not see themselves in the same way as immigrant societies. In the Old World there are vast areas of Siberia, Manchuria and elsewhere which have been colonized and peopled by outsiders in recent centuries, and where the frontier form of analysis works quite well. Recently Li Tana and Nola Cooke have reminded us that the Mekong Delta was another frontier of migration in the 18th and 19th centuries.³ But still there is a conceptual gulf between how we think of Australia and America, and how we think of Asian societies in this regard. Some of this difference of perception results from bad habits of thinking in racial or geographic boxes, and I want to get rid of those factors by simply looking at people-as-migrants. Having done so, we may be left with more interesting factors that do still differentiate these societies, and from which we can draw some useful conclusions.

I should say that I am not the first to speak of Singapore, at least, as a Migrant society. I attended a conference in Singapore in September 2000 on ‘Immigrant Societies and Modern Education’ which clearly included Singapore. There is today little resistance in Singapore to the idea of Singapore’s being an immigrant society, but distinct reluctance to take the next step of considering whether it is thereby a different type of polity, out of sink with its ASEAN neighbours to that extent. In Malaysia of course official ideology requires that 62% of the population be regarded as ‘sons of the soil’, defined in racial terms rather than place of birth. But there is also an older pre-nationalist tradition there of understanding Malaya as an immigrant society, and a tendency as in other immigrant societies for the relatively recent migrants in all communities to provide much of the innovative energy and leadership – witness Hussein Onn, Tun Razak and Dr Mahathir in Malay politics.

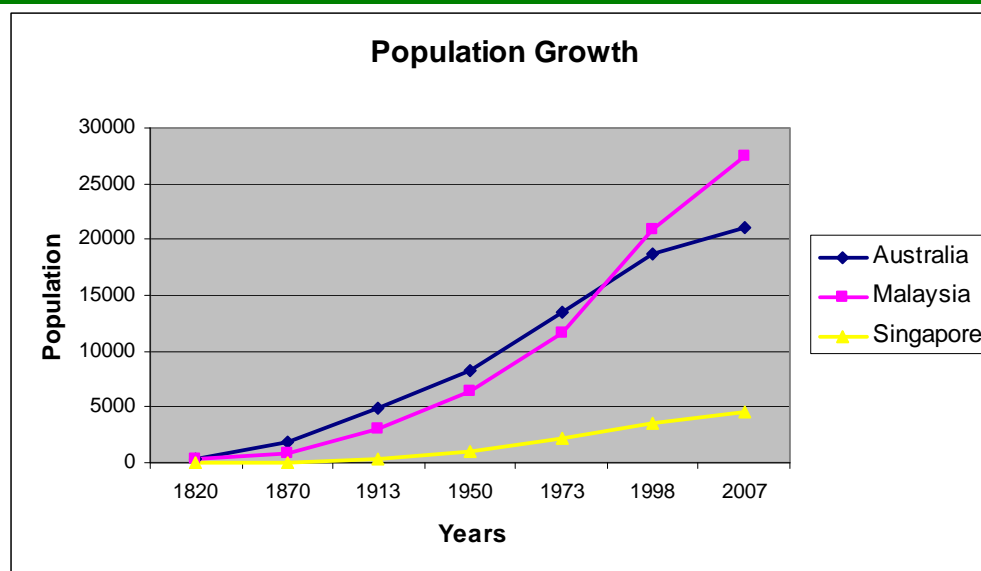
³ *Water Frontier: Commerce and the Chinese in the lower Mekong Region, 1750-1880*, ed. Nola Cooke and Li Tana (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, and Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2004).

200 YEARS OF IMMIGRATION IN AUSTRALIA AND MALAYA: THE NUMBERS

As Table 1 shows, the populations of Malaysia, Singapore and Australia all grew at exceptionally high rates over the past two centuries, so far above the Asian average up to 1950 as to mark them as standouts. Overall, however, it is Malaysia/Singapore that had the more exceptional rates of growth, among the highest in the world for most periods before 1950. Australia grew faster than the United States, but Malaysia/Singapore faster still. In consequence Malaysia/Singapore surpassed Australia's population in the 1970s, and Malaysia alone did so in the 1980s.

Table 1: Population Growth

Years	Australia	Malaysia	Singapore
1820	333	287	30
1870	1,770	800	84
1913	4,821	3,084	323
1950	8,177	6,434	1,022
1973	13,505	11,712	2,193
1998	18,751	20,933	3,490
2007	21,097	27,460	4,590



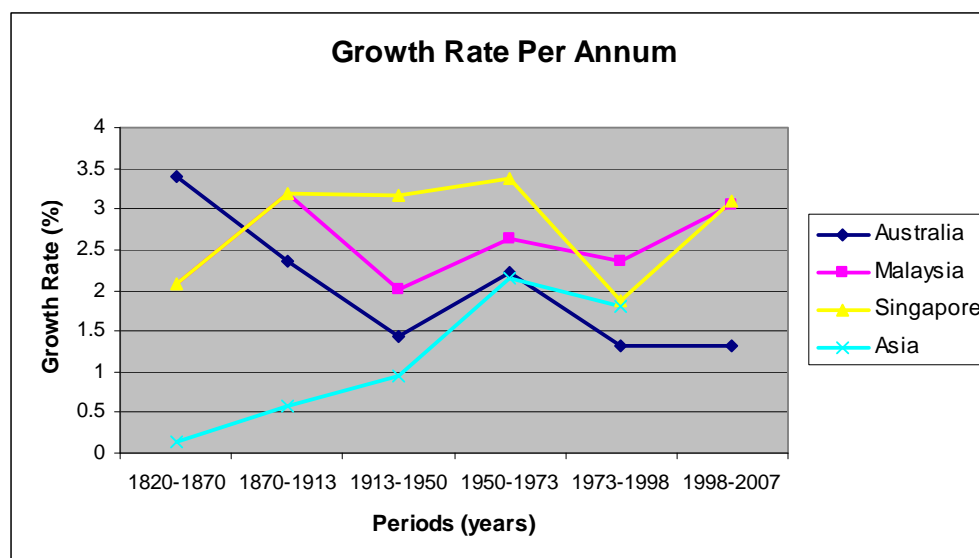
How much of this exceptional growth was due to immigration? In Australia the overall share of migration in the population rise between 1865 and 1935 was roughly 25%, with the proportion rising to nearly 40% in the peak migration periods – 1880s, 1920s, and 1950s.⁴ In Malaysia/Singapore it was much higher a proportion, and always the major source of growth in the better-studied period between 1870 and 1930. The immigration rate (immigrants per 1,000 population) of Malaya (Peninsula Malaysia and Singapore) was the highest in the world throughout the period 1881-1939, more than ten times as high a rate as the United States or other so-called ‘immigrant societies’, as Table 2 shows. In each decade until the 1930s, the number of immigrants arriving in Malaya represented between 84% and 100% of

⁴ Allen C. Kelley, ‘International Migration and Economic Growth: Australia, 1865-1935’, *The Journal of Economic History* 25: 3 (1965), p.334.

its total population. A total of around 10 million Chinese and 3 million Indians were documented as arriving between 1880 and 1939. Unfortunately there is no such accurate data for unregulated Southeast Asian (and non-indentured Indian) immigrants, except for the minority (only around 20,000) of Javanese plantation labourers recruited through formal Dutch channels.⁵

Table 2: Growth Rate Per Annum

<i>Periods</i>	<i>Australia</i>	<i>Malaysia</i>	<i>Singapore</i>	<i>Asia</i>
1820-1870	3.4	2.07	2.08	0.15
1870-1913	2.36	3.19	3.18	0.57
1913-1950	1.44	2.01	3.16	0.94
1950-1973	2.21	2.64	3.38	2.14
1973-1998	1.32	2.35	1.88	1.81
1998-2007	1.32	3.06	3.09	



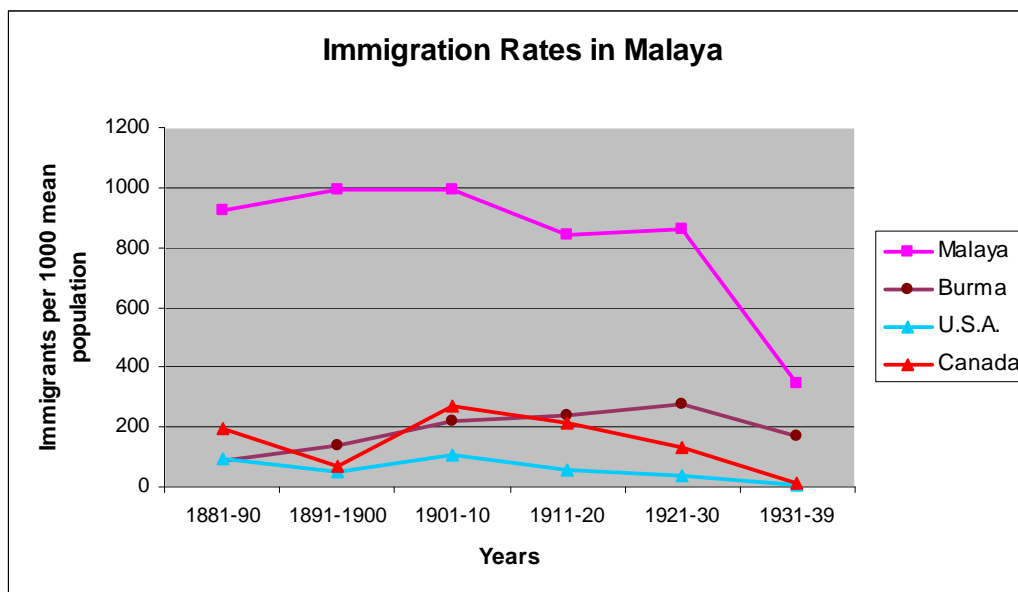
Pre-war immigrants to Malaysia and Singapore, however, were much less likely to stay than those arriving in Australia or other New World societies. The distances were shorter and the costs of return were much less in Malaya, while the cultural, racial and class barriers to succeeding in diaspora were much higher than for the European majority of migrants to Australia. Of every 10 immigrants to Malaya in this period only 2 stayed, whereas up to 7 might do so in the US or Australia. Only the Chinese migrants to Australia had this sojourning character to the same degree as in Malaya, and the high rates of return among them were not entirely voluntary. If we compare net immigration rates (immigrants minus emigrants) therefore, Malaya remains a leader in immigration, but by a lesser margin than its nearest competitors. Throughout the period 1880-1940 Australia averaged no more than 25,000 net immigrants a year, whereas Malaya's rate was around 4 times that.⁶

⁵ Tengku Shamsul Bahrin, 'Indonesian Labour in Malaya', *Kajian Ekonomi Malaysia* II: 1 (June 1965), pp.53-70

⁶ Gregg Huff and Giovanni Caggiano, 'Globalization and Labor Market Integration in Late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Asia', *Research in Economic History* 25 (2008), 255-317.

Table 3: Immigration Rates Compared

Years	Malaya	Burma	U.S.A.	Canada
1881-90	921.9	85.3	91.6	193.4
1891-1900	994.5	138.4	52.5	67.1
1901-10	993.5	219.7	103.8	268.4
1911-20	838.9	240.9	57.2	216.3
1921-30	859.7	277.2	35.3	130.4
1931-39	346.0	167.8	3.6	13.6



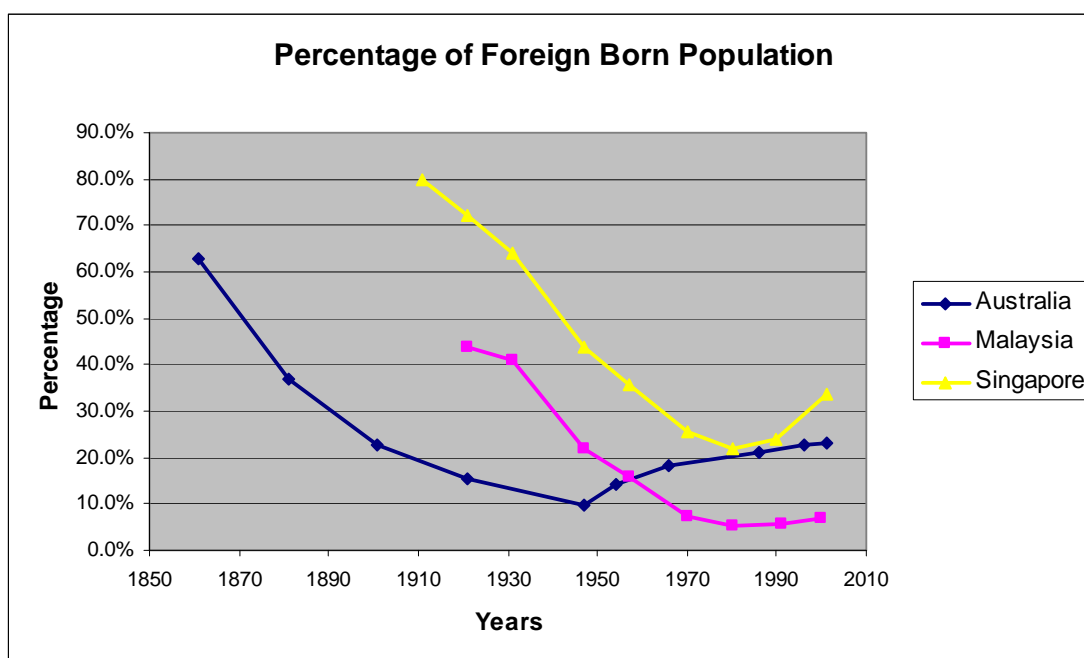
In the period of nationalism and nation-building after the war, on the other hand, immigration rates in Malaya and Singapore fell drastically, while Australia embarked on another burst of assisted immigration in the 1950s. Malaya and Singapore appeared to turn their back on their migrant character in the interests of building a coherent population. Had that continued, this talk might have been of purely historical interest. But since 1980 both Malaysia and Singapore have returned to a pattern of importing migrant labour on a large scale to keep unskilled wages low and help build their booming economies. Put another way, the frontier character of the Peninsula and northern Borneo has reasserted itself, resuming the pattern since 1400 for the relatively affluent 'empty centre' of Southeast Asia to attract migrants on a scale at least as large as that of the professed migrant societies.

The data on this phenomenon is now better collected than in the colonial era, but less well publicized by statistical offices in Singapore and Malaysia, for whom migration has become another 'sensitive' subject. The striking point is that all three populations became more 'local' in the middle of the nationalist century, but became more cosmopolitan again towards its end. The numbers however make Singapore look far more 'migrant' than does Australia at every period. The foreign-born (meaning not Straits-born in the earliest cases, then not Malaya-born and finally not Singapore-born) proportion of Singapore was a world-beating figure in excess of 80% of the population in the first census, 1911, and fell gradually as Singapore sought to become a more settled society and eventually a nation-state, to 72% in

1921; 44% in 1947; 36% in 1957, and 21.8% in 1980.⁷ That figure was still very high even by the standards of immigrant societies, but it marked the historic minimum of Singapore's attempt to become an Old World-type nation-state. After that it rose to 24% in 1990 and 33.6% in 2000.

Table 4: Percentage of Foreign Born Population

Australia		Malaysia		Singapore	
Years	%	Years	%	Years	%
1861	62.8%			1911	80.0%
1881	36.8%			1921	72.2%
1901	22.9%	1921	43.6%	1931	64.2%
1921	15.5%	1931	41.1%	1947	43.9%
1947	9.8%	1947	21.7%	1957	35.7%
1954	14.3%	1957	15.7%	1970	25.6%
1966	18.4%	1970	7.3%	1980	21.8%
1986	21.1%	1980	5.1%	1990	24.0%
1996	22.8%	1991	5.6%	2001	33.6%
2001	23.1%	2000	7.0%		



These figures for 1990 and 2000 are not provided to the public by the Singapore Department of Statistics, which since the 1990 census has given detailed figures only for what it calls the 'Resident' population, meaning citizens and permanent residents. It must be closer to 40% today, since the "non-resident" population grew by a further quarter million between the 2000 census and 2008, when it reached 1.2 million, or 25% of the total population. Adding the 478,000 Permanent Residents (predominately foreign-born) brings the total to 35%, before

⁷ Saw Swee Hock, *The Population of Singapore* (Singapore: ISEAS, 1999), p. 33; Singapore Census 2000.

considering the proportion of citizens who are foreign-born.⁸ The non-residents (contract workers) increased by a dramatic 15% (14.9%) in a single year to September 2007.⁹ The statistics do not of course count the transient tourists, who number about 120,000 on an average day.¹⁰

Singapore then, is again statistically an immigrant society. Its foreign-born population far outstrips Australia's (21.9%), which is the champion among acknowledged immigrant societies of New World type – cf. 18.4% in Canada and only 11.1% in USA. Even in comparison with city populations alone, which tend to outstrip rural areas in attracting migrants, Singapore is well ahead of any Australian city (Sydney the highest at 31%), though it cannot quite match Miami (59%) and Toronto (44%) at the top of the world rankings.¹¹

In Malaysia, official statistics showed the foreign-born population rising in Malaysia from just under a million at the 1991 census (43% of them from Indonesia) to 1.64 million in 2005, the latter representing 6.5% of the population. But most estimates put the total number of immigrants including the illegals at around 3 million, so that the true number of the foreign-born must be around 11-12%. This puts it about the middle range of what are today considered immigrant societies, comparable with the US.

WHO ARE THE NON-IMMIGRANTS? QUESTIONS OF INDIGENEITY

The Malayan Peninsula (henceforth more satisfactorily, the Peninsula), then unrelated northern Borneo, and Australia, were all relatively sparsely populated before the arrival of the British in these places in the 1780s. Although figures are highly controversial, the Peninsula and Australia appear each to have then had sparse populations below a half-million in total. The environment was inimical to agriculture in both cases, but for opposite reasons – extreme dryness in Australia, particularly in that northern part of the continent which might have been expected to learn agricultural techniques from Asian neighbours; and year-round heavy rain and poor soils in Malaysia. The absence of agriculture in the sixth continent before 1788 is well known, though debate continues on how numerous an aboriginal population there may have been in hunter-gatherer conditions.

The question of indigeneity, or indigeny as Geoffrey Benjamin insists on calling it, is extremely politicized in Malaysia, and defining it is far more problematic than in the Australian case. I propose to do this primarily in terms of the means of subsistence, in the hope of finding something measurable. Given the difficulty of the southern peninsula's environment for rice agriculture, I will take the view that those who dwelt in the forests as hunter-gatherers or shifting cultivators were highly adapted to their difficult environment and had dwelt there for a very long time. The fact of their survival, in contrast with the virtual absence of comparable forest-dwellers in most Indonesian islands, confirms how relatively recent and marginal was the impact of agricultural Austronesians in that world.

⁸ Singapore Statistics accessed 1 October at <http://www.singstat.gov.sg/stats/latestdata.html>. See also Straits Times 27 November 2008.

⁹ *Straits Times* 5 October 2007 More detail in the official report at <http://www.singstat.gov.sg/pubn/popn/population2007.pdf>

¹⁰ <http://app.stb.com.sg/asp/index.asp>

¹¹ http://app.mfa.gov.sg/pr/read_script.asp?View,3957, accessed 13.6.2008.

Wheatley (1961: 232) concludes from the silence of Arab navigators in the previous period that they found no ‘civilised human settlement and opportunity for trade’ to the south of the place they called Kalah. Kalah on the west coast of the Peninsula and Langkasuka on the east may have embraced some of the present territory of Kedah (the Bujang valley Buddhist sites providing archeological confirmation) and Kelantan respectively, although the agricultural centres of both seem to have been north of the modern Malaysia/Thailand boundary.

In contrast to the Australian situation, the indigenous population of the Peninsula had for millennia brought forest produce for sale to international markets, and had some degree of mixing with traders. Only with the arrival of Islam in Melaka was there a clear boundary between outer and inner, migrant and indigenous, and even that was often crossed by raiding for slaves and especially women. Nevertheless the earliest careful account of them, that of Newbold (1839) noted:

“Many well informed Natives corroborate my belief that most of the present race of Malays who at this day, inhabit the Peninsula, are the descendents of Jakun females, and the early colonists from Sumatra, with a subsequent sprinkling of Arab blood. The different tribes sometimes pass under the general denomination Orang Benua, men of the soil.”¹²

A pattern of regular raiding of orang asli populations for women and children is described by numerous observers in the second half of nineteenth century,¹³ although I am not aware of earlier accounts save for a throwaway line of Crawford that the Negritos “are hunted down like the wild animals of the forest”.¹⁴ I suspect that the far higher competitive stakes for control of rivers (and of Chinese, and of women) once Chinese mining began on a major scale, and the wider availability of firearms giving Malays an unprecedented advantage over orang asli, made raiding a particular feature of that period (as Bigalke showed it to be for the Toraja in Sulawesi¹⁵). Those conditions of the 19th century may have been particularly harsh for Malayan, as for Australian, aborigines.

¹² T.J. Newbold, *British Settlements in the Straits of Malacca* I: 421

¹³ See sources cited by K.M. Endicott, ‘Slave Raiding in the Malay Peninsula’, in *Slavery, Bondage and Dependency in Southeast Asia*, ed. Anthony Reid (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1983), esp. pp.221-4. Also **Robert** K. Denton, *The Semai: A Non-Violent People of Malaya* (New York: Holt, Rhinehart, 1968), pp.2-4; and the evocative description of Hugh Clifford, *The Further Side of Silence* (New York: Doubleday, 1927), pp. 253-7.

¹⁴ John Crawford, *History of the Indian Archipelago* (Edinburgh: 1820), I: 26.

¹⁵ T. Bigalke, ‘Dynamics of the Torajan Slave Trade in South Sulawesi,’ in *Slavery, Bondage and Dependency*, pp.341-63.

ABORIGINAL NUMBERS

The issues involved in counting the aboriginal population are almost as complex in Malaysia as in Australia, though much further from the public discourse. Curiously, Australian statisticians only began to count Aborigines as part of the Australian population in 1971,¹⁶ just when Malaysian statisticians stopped doing so. Since there has been so much larger an academic literature on aborigines in Australia over the last 20 years, we may use it to help illuminate the likely trajectory of Malaya's *orang asli*.

Aboriginal populations tend to shrink rapidly at initial contact from disease and dispossession. Raids and massacres were traumatic in spreading terror, but a relatively minor factor demographically. Noel Butlin's reconstruction of a pre-1788 aboriginal population of Australia in excess of a million is possible, and would imply a drastic decline to reach the 50,000 or so reported early in the 20th Century.¹⁷ The consensus seems to hover around 300,000, which still gives a rapid decline which has no equivalent in Malaya with its much longer-term pattern of interaction. After the initial catastrophe, however, there is similarity in the way aboriginal populations continue to shrink through assimilation as long as aboriginal status is despised and demeaned. The whole theme of Leonard Smith's pathbreaking study of Australian aboriginal demography is that the ever larger proportion of mixed ancestry tended not to identify as aboriginal because it was a despised category. He considered the aboriginal population in reality to have begun increasing demographically around the 1930s, although the official count (since they were counted, as in Malaysia, even if not included in the census returns) only began to increase dramatically from 1966, when aboriginality began to be acceptable. From 80,000, or around 0.8% of the population in 1966, there are now by self-identification half a million, or 2.5% of Australia's population.

The Malayan picture is harder to assemble from very inadequate data, but appears to show a similar pattern of decline. British census counts between 1911 and 1970 each pointed to the great difficulties of contacting *orang asli* and counting them, and that each census had uncovered more than the one before. The British census-takers pointed out that known populations kept diminishing by disease, by assimilation as Malays or by failure to reproduce, and the numbers were kept up only by discovering new communities or better efforts to penetrate the jungle. Winstedt, who wrote the report in 1921, noted "Certain tribes, like the Negritoes of Selama, in Perak, are dying out. ... The influenza epidemics are reported to have wrought great havoc among all tribes", especially in more settled areas. "In states like Negri Sembilan the merging of the aborigines into the Muhammadan Malay is rapid."¹⁸ Noting also very low reproduction, he cited the report of the District Officer of Pekan (Pahang), who noted how strikingly "the number of childless families [tend] to grow greater and greater as civilization was approached." In downriver communities, "the settlements are dying out".¹⁹

¹⁶ Smith, Leonard Robert *The Aboriginal Population of Australia*. Aborigines in Australian Society no 14. Canberra, The Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, 1980. Reprinted on the World Wide Web 1997, <http://www.anu.edu.au/nceph/indigenous-population/assa-web-reprint>

¹⁷ N. G. Butlin, *Economics and the Dreamtime: A Hypothetical History* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp.138-9.

¹⁸ R.O. Winstedt, 'The Aboriginal Races', in J.E. Nathan, ed. *The Census of British Malaya 1921*, p.124.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 129

In 1947 it was noted that nomadic aborigines had suffered many losses from having to leave their traditional areas during the war. Among settled communities, the tendency to ‘masuk Melayu’ as Muslims had reportedly increased over the past 46 years, as did the tendency “for the Malays to tolerate, if not actually encourage, it”.²⁰

A careful reconstruction of figures by extrapolating backwards from new populations discovered, would certainly mean that the official figures (Table 5) for the early censuses should be increased. My estimate is that the true population in 1911 must have been at least 60,000, and may well have been considerably more at the beginning of the 19th century, given the terrible depredations then reported against them. As a percentage of Malaya’s population, Orang Asli must have been at least 15% around 1800 (compare 13.4% in Australia 1861, according to Price²¹), dropping to 2.5% by 1911 and 0.7% by 1947.²²

Table 5: Reported Aboriginal Populations at Successive Censuses

1911	28,000 “Sakai” (none enumerated for Kelantan, and patchy in all UFMS).
1921	32,448 (incl. 3,700 in Kelantan). Notes that populations in Negri Sembilan reducing quickly by assimilation, and that flu epidemic had very severe results.
1931	31,852
1947	34,747 - suspects much assimilation to Malays. Probably better count of nomads. Curiously low female population (some women cohabit with Chinese on disused East Coast railway)
1957	41,360 [cf 82,000 estimate 1952 by anthropologist William-Hunt – cited Nik Haslina 2007]
1970	53,379. Subsequent censuses do not list them.
1996	90,000 ²³
2003	143,000, of whom 4,000 Negrito; 82,000 Senoi (Temiar, Semai, etc – Austro-Asiatic languages); and 61,000 Aboriginal Malay (Jakun, Temuan, etc). ²⁴

²⁰ M.V. del Tufo, *Malaya, comprising the Federation of Malaya and the Colony of Singapore: A Report on the 1947 Census of Population*. London: Crown Agents for the Colonies, p.117.

²¹ Howard Price figures cited in Stephen Castles, William Foster, Robyn Iredale and Glenn Withers, *Immigration and Australia: Myths and Realities* (St.Leonards NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1998), p.41

²² Some of the early pre-census estimates suggest that a high proportion of aborigines remained up until British intervention in the 1870s. J.F.A.McNair, *Perak and the Malays* (1878, reprinted OUP 1972), pp.156-7, gave the “wild tribes” of Perak as 5,000 to 6,000, representing somewhere between 6% and 20% of the total population depending on estimates of the latter.

²³ Geoffrey Benjamin, in *Tribal Communities in the Malay World* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2002), p.22. He cites the figures from the Jabatan Hal Ehwal Orang Asli (JHEOA) web-site in 2002, though suspecting the figures are from 1996.

²⁴ Taken 24.6.08 from web-site of the Centre for Orang Asli Concerns, of Colin Nicholas, who attributes this data to 2003; www.coac.org.my

What is striking, however, is that despite the change in government policy which appears designed to eliminate orang asli as a category distinct from Malays, the Orang Asli communities have tripled in official numbers, and held their own as a percentage – currently 0.5% of Malaysia as a whole or 0.7% of Peninsula Malaysia. The key point appears to be that there are in today's world routes to modernity and hope other than the assimilationist one. The Centre for Orang Asli Concerns with its educated leadership is a prime example. Nik Haslina's 2007 article²⁵ is also important in seeking to 'write orang asli into Malaysian history'.

WHO WERE THE IMMIGRANTS?

In Australia the nature of the migrant population is well enough known. In the first phase it was overwhelmingly English and Irish; in the gold rush phase it was extremely diverse, with the majority from Europe and North America, but a large minority, sometimes up to 30%, from Asia-- particularly Cantonese through Hong Kong. At its peak of diversity in 1857, there were 26,000 Chinese miners on the Victorian goldfields, or 32% of the mining population. Thanks to various restrictions imposed by the colonies, at the insistence of the politically dominant group of existing migrants, there were in 1881 a total of only 38,000 Chinese in Australia, or 1.7 percent of the total of migrants, most of the rest of whom were European. The proportion dropped further to 1.2% in 1901 and 0.82 in 1911.²⁶

Nevertheless, so dominant was the British element of the migration in the next phase, 1901-40, often around 90%, that the second largest category of arrivals was frequently Chinese, competing with German and French before the Great War and with American thereafter.²⁷ An exceptionally homogeneous population was created by 1945.

In the post-1945 period migration again became diverse, with 50% coming from East and Southern Europe in 1947-51, a third from Southern Europe and a quarter from Germany and Scandinavia in the 1950s, and the proportion from Asia rising to 5% in 1961-6, 11% in 1966-71; and 21% in 1971-3.²⁸ Only in the 21st Century will Australia's population approach in diversity that of Malaysia. Price estimated that the British/Irish percent of the population, nearly 90% in 1947 and still 75% in 1988, will have dropped to 62% by 2025, when the Asian proportion should be 15%.²⁹

Malaysia was infinitely less isolated than Australia, so that there is no clear date when we can say that migration begins. Pockets of rice-cultivators may already have settled the river-mouth areas of Kedah, Kelantan and Pahang before 1400, presumably through interactions of Indian traders, aboriginal populations, and other mobile Southeast Asians from Sumatra and

²⁵ Nik Haslina Nik Hussain, 'Writing on Orang Asli into Malaysian History,' in *New Perspectives and Research into Malaysian History*, ed. Cheah Boon Kheng (Kuala Lumpur: MBRAS, 2007), pp.

²⁶ P.C. Campbell, *Chinese Emigration to Canada, Australia and New Zealand* (London: P.S. King & Sons, 1923), pp. 58, 64, 77.

²⁷ Walter Willcox, *International Migrations, Vol. I, Statistics* (New York: National Bureau of Economic Research, 1929), pp. 952-4.

²⁸ Price, 1973, cited in W.D. Borrie, *The European Peopling of Australia: A Demographic History, 1788-1988* (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1994), p.242.

²⁹ Cited in Castles et al, *Immigration and Australia*, p.41.

elsewhere. We cannot label them ethnically before the category ‘Malay’ began to be created by the hybridizing genius of fifteenth century Melaka. In such a crossroads of trade routes, the migrants were also more diverse than Australia’s. The major waves of migrants before 1870 were:

- the line of Malay kings from Bukit Seguntang (Palembang) to Temasek to Melaka (14th-15th centuries), with their orang laut and other followers;
- the Minangkabau pioneers who settled the area behind Melaka, perhaps beginning in the 15th century but much added to in 17th, that became eventually Negri Sembilan;
- the Bugis who dominated Selangor, Kedah and Johor for most of what Engseng Ho calls the ‘Bugis century’ (1700-1824) following the Andayas and others. As Ho points out the same period is looked upon by Hadhrami Arabs as their century, since their network spread out to influence many kingdoms and claim the thrones of some.³⁰ An additional force of substance were the Minangkabau who interfered particularly in the politics of Johor;
- the European/Chinese/Indian/SEAsian urban complexes of Melaka from 1511, Penang from 1786, and Singapore from 1819. As we know, these were extraordinarily plural places, with no dominant community up to the mid-19th Century. In the 1820s James Low complained that the Penang courts had to deal with English, Hindustani, Tamil, Arabic, Telugu, Bengali, at least ten dialects of Chinese, Burmese, Mon, Siamese, Malay, Javanese, Buginese and Batak.³¹ In Singapore the picture was similar, although ‘Chinese’ (a category clear enough at least to British and Malay eyes) were a majority by 1860.
- Chinese mining & agricultural pioneers, first celebrated in Jim Jackson’s 1965 thesis. He drew attention to the way in which Teochiu gambir planters drove back the agricultural frontier through the Kangchu system in Johor at the beginning of the 19th century, as well as to many other little-appreciated cash-crop pioneers in the 19th Century.³² In mining one of the earliest Chinese settlements on the Peninsula was Pulai, in upper Kelantan, which Hakka gold-miners had opened by the second half of the eighteenth century.³³ Graham (1908: 101) however suggests it was considerably older, and that in earlier times “the mineral products of Kelantan considerably exceeded in value those of any other State” in the Peninsula. During the reign of Sultan Mahmat in Kelantan (1807-37), however, the ruler’s son was killed by the previously self-governing Chinese miners, when he tried to enforce his newly-granted monopoly of rice distribution by cutting off the mining settlement from all supplies coming up the river to them. The dead prince’s son then organised a

³⁰ Engseng Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley: U.C. Press, 2006), pp. 159-168. Cf Andaya & Andaya, *A History of Malaysia* (London: Macmillan, 1982) pp.80-84.

³¹ James Low, *The British Settlement of Penang* (Singapore, 1826; reprinted Kuala Lumpur: OUP, 1972), pp.291-92.

³² James C. Jackson, *Planters and Speculators*

³³ Sharon Carstens 1980

massacre of the whole Chinese settlement, “and the gold mining industry of Kelantan came to a sudden end”.³⁴

At a similar time in late eighteenth century Chinese migrants began being contracted by local river-chiefs for tin-mining in the peninsula, first Perak, then Negri Sembilan. Each time violence broke out, Chinese were killed and the rest fled, new miners were induced to return a few years later.³⁵

- Organised contract labourers, the best documented category, mostly Cantonese and Tamil, with fewer Javanese. Most returned or (in the 19th Century) died early, but enough did remain to boost numbers.
- Enterprising people from anywhere in Asia, but especially Banjarese, Mandailing, Hainanese, Hokchiu and various others who came on their own initiative to the most open and promising frontier of Asia.

By the 1920 census 180,000 Indonesian-origin migrants were counted, 11% of those classified under the racial umbrella of Malay. Of these 113,000 were listed as Javanese (50,000 of whom in Johor) and 38,000 as Banjarese (25,000 in Perak). It seems likely that the rate of assimilation and self-identification as simply Malays was higher for the far more numerous Sumatran migrants.

RELATIONS BETWEEN COMMUNITIES IN A MIGRANT SOCIETY

What does it change if we acknowledge that Malaysia and Singapore are migrant societies?

Firstly, there is a certain frontier mentality, a pragmatic determination to adopt policies that are good for the country rather than reiterating ancient beliefs or shibboleths. There is dynamic readiness to adopt what works which can result in innovation. Thus Snodgrass in the 1990s argued that what held Malaysia together under the NEP was “a deep commitment to material improvement that is shared by all groups in Malaysia's essentially immigrant society.”³⁶ There also tends to be some disrespect for pretentiousness, tall poppies and hierarchy.

This latter might seem to work better for Chinese than for Malay Malaysians, given the heavy emphasis on most modern Malay societies on kingship and loyalty as the epitome of Malayness. But we might rather agree with Jim Scott, and with Kassim Ahmad, that the emphasis on the sin of *derhaka* (disloyalty) towards the raja in the *Sejarah Melayu* and the *Hang Tuah* stories is primarily a demonstration of how fragile monarchy was in such a polyglot and diverse society, so that it could only survive as a mediator between groups if reinforced by supernatural and magical sanctions. From the vantage point of Singapore, indeed, it is hard not to envy the irreverence of Lat cartoons, Huzir Sulaiman plays and Raja Petra blogs.

³⁴ W.A. Graham, *Kelantan* (London: 1908), p. 103

³⁵ Wong Lin Ken 1965: 17-27; Mary Somer Heidhues 1992: 10; Mary Turnbull 1972, pp.298-304.

³⁶ Donald R. Snodgrass, ‘Successful Economic Development in a Multi-Ethnic Society: The Malaysian Case,’ Harvard Institute for International Development, Paper presented to Salzburg Seminar, 1994.

Secondly, immigrant societies were readier to define the object of nationalist loyalty as a territory rather than a people, inclining them to civic rather than ethno nationalism.³⁷ Because of this feature of the United States and Australia it has long been acceptable to hyphenate as Italian-Americans or Chinese-Australians. Indian-Malaysians are also imaginable (though less common than Malaysian Indians), in a way that Indian-English, Turkish-Germans or Korean-Japanese are not. The alternative ‘nationalism of blood’, a dangerous feature of eastern and southern Europe, can not convince when it would have to embrace distant and diverse origin places. Instead there developed a more artificial racial construct of ‘whiteness’ (in Australia) or ‘Malayness’ (in Malaysia), which could be all the more shrill because it had no basis in a shared past.

Thirdly, there was/is a readiness to accept further migration in the interests of growing the economy and attracting talent, but combined with a fierce competition between generations and types of migrants, about the identity of the state and the types of new migrants. Racism has been a marked feature of migrant societies, because of the way the dominant migrant community seeks to cohere against both the aboriginal population and other more recent and hungry migrant groups who threaten their control. The unnaturalness of these exclusions was part of the reason why racism reached such shrill heights at times in the 20th Century. Nevertheless, the experience of more readily self-defining immigrant societies is ultimately reassuring, as this racist anxiety seldom gave rise to large-scale violence of the kind the ‘blood nationalism’ did, and in the long run tended to give way to the inherent logic of territorial or civic nationalism under democratic conditions.

We might hope that migrants would be highly tolerant of other migrants, sympathetic to their needs and to their legitimacy. In this regard the Malay rulers and gate-keepers get the highest marks for tolerance and absorption of a diversity of migrants. Malay identity proved wonderfully absorptive in the 15th Century as a creative creole, turning Indians, Arabs, Chinese, Javanese and Filipinos into loyal subjects of the sultan, bilingual in their own language and Malay. Although the line between Muslim insiders and non-Muslim outsiders became gradually more firm from the 16th century, right up to the 20th migrants constantly joined the main game through accepting Islam (*masuk Melayu*). In this the Malay record long-term is far more generous and accommodating than that of the British in places such as Australia.

But the insecurities of the nationalist 20th Century produced some extreme ethno-nationalism in our three cases. The record shows that the imperial government in London, and the colonial elite of employers, were relatively tolerant towards high and diverse immigration levels. Those were the people who remained in charge in Malaya until the 1940s, and kept its immigration open, abundant and diverse. But newly established migrants always feared an influx of new migrants who might challenge their position, especially in the 20th Century era of nationalism. The new racially-tinged nationalism of such established migrants, whether (British) Australian in the 1890s or Malay of the 1940s was not a particularly pretty sight to look back upon, though it was an essential part of these societies growing up and establishing their own identity. By comparison with these populist victories of ethno-nationalism, Singapore looks more like an immigrant society of which the international establishment never did quite lose control to the same degree, since the only ethno-nationalist populism it experienced was the Maoism of the 1950s and ‘60s (itself highly contradictory about its

³⁷ The distinction between these kinds of nationalism has been well chronicled for Europe and America by Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).

goals), swiftly defeated by Lee Kuan Yew and the British. Singapore's pro-migration stance of recent times has thus far been little troubled by populist backlash.

In taking this comparative approach to Malaysia and Australia I do of course have a famous predecessor in Dr Mahathir, Malaysia's longest-serving Prime Minister (1981-2003). Dr Mahathir's 1970 book, *The Malay Dilemma*, written in the aftermath of the traumatic Kuala Lumpur riots, argued that every country has a 'definitive people' who were the first immigrants to set up states in the territory in question. Since the aborigines in both Malaysia and Australia were stateless peoples who did not do this, it was the Malays in Malaya, like the English-speaking Christians in Australia, who defined the core culture and set the conditions by which subsequent migrants were admitted. Interpreting Australia somewhat idiosyncratically to suit his argument for permanent Malay supremacy in Malaysia, he wrote:

The first settlers in Australia were of British extraction. Subsequently there were settlers of other European extraction. But by the time other races came, the Australian was recognizable as an international personality....The establishment of this identity meant that the settlers who came later from other European and even Asian countries had to conform to this identity. Failure to conform would mean failure to obtain legal status as an Australian. The fact that the non-British settler has severed all connections with his original country, and does not intend to leave Australia, does not automatically make him an Australian. It is the definitive Australians who decide when the newcomer can call himself an Australian.

Should he conform to the accepted conditions for becoming an Australian, he obtains legal status and his offspring become Australian. But his rights and those of his offspring do not extend to insisting that the definition of what is an Australian should be changed so that the language, customs and traditions conform to those of this country of origin....[eg a Russian-Australian may not press for Russian language]. The original English speaking Australians would not tolerate such a move and would take steps to prevent any further weakening of their position by expelling such neo-Australians and stopping the immigration of more like them.³⁸

The burden of my argument is that the Malays are the rightful owners of Malaya, and that if citizenship is conferred of races other than the Malays, it is because the Malays consent to this. That consent is conditional.³⁹

Fortunately the social reality that Mahathir perceived in 1960s Australia was not even then the legal-constitutional position, and even that reality has changed markedly since. Today few people in either Australia or Malaysia would insist that Chinese must prove their credentials by losing their Chinese language before being accepted as full Australians or Malaysians. Today none of the three governments I am discussing likes to talk about the racial bias in its immigration policy. Australia, perhaps by virtue of having to live down a racist past, but also by its relative sense of security today, has gone furthest towards a race-blind policy. The Singapore government too has launched a campaign in recent years to convince its citizens to

³⁸ Mahathir Mohammad, *The Malay Dilemma* (Singapore: Donald Moore, 1970 – reprinted Kuala Lumpur: Federal Publications, 1983), pp. 122-3

³⁹ Ibid p. 126

accept high and diverse immigration. Prime Minister Lee Hsien-Loong's 2006 National Day speech seemed to endorse that Singapore was again the diverse immigrant society it had been for most of its history. He applauded the role of:

not just the three major races, Chinese or the Indians or the Malays but also many other smaller groups. In the earlier generations, we had Parsis, we had Jews from Iraq, we had Armenians, we had Arabs – little, little groups came to Singapore and made their home here and made their contribution here. Today, we get people from all over the world too. We have people from Turkey, there are Portuguese, somebody from Venezuela, somebody from Morocco, even a Korean or two, some Russians. And they add colour and diversity to this society.⁴⁰

While we noted the upturn in migration in both Malaysia and Singapore after 1980, it is salutary to see how Singapore and Malaysia diverged in this period in terms of the sources of origin of the migrants. In Malaysia the Indonesian-born share of the population has just kept going up, from 76,000 in 1970 to 423,000 in 1991 and 660,000 in 2000. The China-born have by contrast kept going down, from 416,000 in 1970 to 55,000 in 2000.⁴¹ Second place in this league is taken by the Philippines (largely Muslim Filipinos into Sabah) and third is India, but the Indonesian share of the migrants (as covered in the census) is exactly two thirds. In Singapore, on the other hand, the 2000 census showed Malaysia as the greatest source of immigrants who joined the so-called Resident population (304,000) followed by Greater China (146,000), South Asia as a whole (58,000) and Indonesia (29,000). The census reveals that of these total migrants, 77% were declared Chinese by ethnicity, including 85% of the Malaysia-born and 75% of the Indonesia-born (Table 6).

Table 6: Singapore Foreign-Born by Race, 2000⁴²

Birthplace	Chinese	Malay	Indian	Other	Total
Malaysia	258,406	28,184	15,317	1,921	303,828
Indonesia	21,858	6,797	384	275	29,314
Greater China	145,428	0	119	329	145,876
South Asia	142	257	57,350	544	58,293
Other Asia	5,187	253	465	8,555	14,459
Europe	1,417	29	240	3,001	4,687
N.America	2,205	26	139	1,044	3,414
Other	2,114	143	256	1,045	3,558
Total	436,757	38,560	74,270	16,714	566,301

⁴⁰ Lee Hsien Loong National Day Speech, 20 August 2006, <http://www.gov.sg/NDR06Engspeechtranscript.pdf>

⁴¹ Saw Swee Hok, *The Population of Malaysia* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2007), p.41.

⁴² Leow Bee Geok, *Census of Population 2000: Demographic Characteristics* (Singapore: Department of Statistics, 2001), pp.55-57.

Curiously, the migrants from all the East and SE Asian countries were very disproportionately female, with twice as many Chinese Indonesian females as males represented. The marriage market has long been a factor in female migration to Singapore.

While selective immigration has certainly enabled Malaysia to become more “Malay”, helping to ease the undoubted racial anxiety of earlier years, the dominant element in Australia and Singapore has gradually been diluted. In Australia this is very well known and a clear result of a more race-blind immigration policy. In Singapore it may be said to be despite the efforts to increase the Chinese component by migration, which cannot overcome the exceptionally low birth rate of Singapore Chinese women at 1.09 per woman, less than half the replacement level. The “Chinese” category in the statistics of Singapore residents (ie citizens + PRs) is in gradual decline, from 77.8% in 1990 to 76.8% in 2000 and 74.7% in 2008.⁴³ The Malay community is stable at around 13-14%, thanks to an above-average birth-rate. The very diverse category labeled “Indian” has grown healthily from 7% of the resident population in 1990 to 9% today, and the “other” population (my favorite, since it was around 5% in Singapore’s earlier history), rocketed from 1.1% in 1990 to 2.7%. Singapore is indeed competing fiercely to attract the world’s best talent into its population, at the same time as using a strict contract for unskilled laborers who are absolutely not intended to remain.

Lastly, Relations between the migrant society and the older indigenous population are tense and tortured, including massacres in the early period, mutual fear and detestation, attempts both to ignore and to assimilate, along with a paternalistic desire to improve, and individual heroes who go out of their way to empathize and change majority attitudes.

In Australia the unusually sharp line between migrant and indigenous populations has no parallel elsewhere, and there was less chance of pretending that the peoples of this vast continent might just die out or assimilate. Australia has more obviously had to deal with the problem than has Malaysia, and it can hardly be said to have made a good job of it. But if only in its mistakes, there are valuable lessons for Malaysia, as the *orang asli* leaders themselves are the first to realize.

In the 21st Century a more intense international movement of people is likely to follow the international movement of goods and services that has been so striking a feature of the last 20 years. Immigrant societies have much to teach the rest of the world in ways to handle and integrate newcomers into their populations. Even in their troubled relations with indigenous peoples there appears to be progress.

⁴³ <http://www.singstat.gov.sg/pubn/popn/population2007.pdf>. *Straits Times* 27 September 2008.