

# Emotion as the Key to Better Ethnic Relations in Malaysia

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## Abstract

Much has been written on ethnic relations from the social, cultural, political, historical and legal perspectives. Yet a substantial part of the working of the human mind is at the subconscious level. These are underpinned by the various well-accepted concepts of how the mind works. It is thus essential to understand the “hidden” psychological factors that affect ethnic relations and bring them into conscious awareness and open discussion. The issues that are important are firstly, those related to the human self-concept; i.e., the ethnic “identity” and “dignity;” and how the Malaysian “we” is being constructed. An emphasis on the contributions by all ethnic groups to nation building; “participation in global economy” and “striving towards better governance” would facilitate an inclusive “We.”

**Keywords:** ethnic relations, conscious and subconscious mind, emotions, Malays and Chinese

## Introduction

I have been practising medicine in Malaysia since the 1970s after my training in Australia. One of the differences in practising medicine between the East and the West is the relative lack of understanding of the close link between emotional and physical factors among East Asians. In the past, patients were unable to accept that their physical symptoms may in fact be related to the stress in their emotional lives. The situation has since improved. In my own clinical practice, it is not uncommon to see people who bring their elderly parents for consultation to ask whether their parents’ physical symptoms, change of behaviour and personality are due to underlying depression that may be treated by medication.

I believe that inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia are also related to hidden emotions that shape our conscious mind and thereby could create or reduce conflict situations. This possibility

is hardly discussed in Malaysia. We may thus have missed an important factor in our discussions of ethnic relations. A better understanding of the how our mind works, just like appreciating the link between mind and body in physical health, may help to strengthen the foundation of inter-ethnic relationship.

### **The Conscious and Subconscious Mind**

The word “subconscious” comes from the French *subconscient*. It was coined by the psychologist Pierre Janet (1859–1947), who argued that underneath the layers of critical-thought functions of the conscious mind lay a powerful segment that he called the subconscious mind. In the strict psychological sense, the term is defined as “operating or existing outside of consciousness.” The great psychiatrist Carl Jung explained why humans need such a “below-ground segment.” He said that since there is a limit to what can be held in conscious awareness, an alternative storehouse of one’s knowledge and prior experience is needed.

The idea of the “unconscious mind” was explored by the 18th-century German philosopher Friedrich Schelling and was popularised by Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) an Austrian neurologist and founder of psychoanalysis school of psychology. Sigmund Freud initially used the term “subconscious” to describe associations and impulses that are not accessible to consciousness. He later abandoned the term in favour of “unconscious.”

It is not necessary to question whether the hidden mind is totally “unconscious” or “subconscious,” i.e., it potentially can be drawn into consciousness. The main point of understanding how our mind works is that its operation is overwhelmingly *hidden*, and that we are not aware of how it functions. The usual analogy is that the conscious mind is only the tip of the iceberg, the larger part that is invisible or unknown is below the surface. Automatic thoughts show that the subconscious can be brought to consciousness.

Another advancement in psychology that helps our understanding of the subconscious mind is the work done by the American psychiatrist Aaron Beck. Beck is referred to as the father of “cognitive behavioural therapy,” a popular method used in treating psychological illness in the late 1960s. Cognitive therapy is based on a theory that thoughts, feelings and behaviour are all connected, and that we can overcome our emotional difficulties by identifying and replacing or altering unhelpful or improper thoughts, thus relieving distressing emotions. For example, a patient with depression may have started with the experience of a series of failure. This then leads to a “subconscious automatic” thought that he is useless, that he cannot do anything right, that things will never change and that he will never improve. This creates feelings of frustrations and hopelessness. He may then avoid the challenges at work and these add to his sense of uselessness. So the origin of his emotions and behaviour are his subconscious automatic interpretation of his experiences. The goal of the psychological therapist is to help reveal his unhealthy beliefs, so as to change his behaviour and remove his depression.

So the cognitive behavioural therapy form of treatment shows that the “subconscious” “automatic” thoughts that afflict our emotions and behaviour can, with careful effort, be brought to awareness and consciousness, be altered and corrected, and to relieve emotional distress due to negative thoughts.

### **Fast and Slow Thinking**

The third psychological theory that helps to expand the concept of the subconscious is by the Nobel Prize laureate Daniel Kahneman. Kahneman pointed out that in our daily lives, we engage in two modes of thinking, the “System 1 fast” and the “System 2 slow” thinking. His bestselling book *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2011) explains that former system is instinctive and emotional, and the latter is more deliberative and logical.

Fast thinking is the mode we operate in most of the time. This is a mode of thinking that we are unaware of but it is highly efficient. It makes use of the vast resources of knowledge that we have accumulated from which the mind would make instinctive judgement. An example is the decisions made by a driver in competitive racing. The response of the driver is instantaneous and instinctive. If the driver is to delay and deliberate on the best decision to take, he might end up in a crash. Such a mode of thinking also operates in the “professional judgement” field. For example, the diagnosis of a patient by a physician is often made instantaneously based on “pattern recognition,” which is, in fact, a form of System 1 fast thinking.

But as Kahneman (2011) pointed out, fast thinking though highly efficient, is prone to errors. This “automatic” mode that operates within our subconscious mind is subject to biases. An example is the effect of “framing.” An illustration of the dramatic effect of framing can be seen in the vastly different rate of organ donation between the neighbouring countries of Austria and Germany, both ethnically German with a similar social system, wealth and culture. The organ donation rate in 2003 was close to 100% in Austria, but only 12% in Germany. Another pair of neighbouring countries that demonstrates this difference is Sweden and Denmark. Both Swedish and Danish are Protestant Christians in Scandinavia and speak similar languages. Yet the organ donation rate in Sweden was 83% and only 4% in Denmark. Kahneman provides an explanation to the vast difference in attitude and behaviour. He attributed this difference to a “*framing effect*” arising from the format of the framing question. The high donation countries adopted an *opt-out* form require individuals who do not wish to donate to check an appropriate box. Unless they take this simple action, they are considered willing donors. On the other hand, the low donation countries had an *opt-in* form, and individuals must check a box to become a donor.

However, other than the effect of framing in fast thinking, Kahneman also attributed the vast difference in organ donation to the laziness involved in slow thinking. The framing effect is the result of automatic fast thinking. This bias in the fast thinking mode can be corrected by slow thinking. However, humans are too lazy to make the effort required to practise the slow thinking process. Human beings are capable of System 2 slow and reflective

thinking. This is probably one of the key differences between humans and animals. It is meant to correct the biases that comes from the fast and automatic thinking. As Kahneman has pointed out, we are aware of the inadequacies of the fast and automatic thinking, when we observe the lack of *coherence* in the story or pattern that we perceive. We would then call for help from slow thinking. He argued that the way to block errors that originated from fast thinking was to recognise the signs that we are in a cognitive minefield, to slow down and ask for reinforcement from slow thinking. We bring these automatic thoughts into consciousness, verbalise them, discuss them and analyse them, and correct the biases in our subconscious mind such as the automatic thoughts or fast thinking. But slow thinking requires attention, consumes energy and time; and it is deliberate, which is against our human nature. As we observe in the organ donation case, the human nature is lazy and naturally do not want to use this thinking mode. Our ability to be in slow thinking mode is also the result of our habit. Our ability to correct the bias in fast thinking is dependent on how aware and familiar we are with the biases in our automatic thoughts. These “insights” of biases may not be common but thankfully can be taught, learnt and be improved upon.

The automatic thoughts emphasised by the psychological treatment technique “cognitive behaviour therapy” founded by Aaron Beck, and the fast and slow thinking by Kahneman confirmed that much of how our mind works is at the automatic level. It is subconscious but it is not mysterious. We can learn to be familiar with it, and access it from our conscious mind.

### **Artificial Intelligence and Deep Learning**

Another way to appreciate the “subconscious” autonomous nature of how our mind works is by looking at the operation of artificial intelligence (AI). AI is the next wave of technology that is transforming the world. It is expanding in its application to make human life easier. One of the most promising areas in AI is “deep learning” to imitate how the human brain works. One of the problems in understanding how AI works is the “black box” phenomenon. Its working is “non-transparent” and it is not possible to decipher how AI arrives at a solution. Its prediction is not traceable by human effort because the “factors” for decision making are all entangled. As a result, there is a search for “explainable” AI, whose decision would then be more “transparent” and explainable. AI could then be simpler, and where the flow of mathematical equations is more straightforward. However, this also renders this version of AI less powerful. As deep learning is meant to imitate the working of the human brain, it is not surprising that the machine is similar to the brain with a large part of its process being also hidden, non-transparent and not explainable.

### **Emotions is the Master that Drives the Cognitive Mind**

So what are the unconscious and subconscious that drive the cognitive and the conscious mind? Modern science has taught that man is mainly driven by his underlying emotions. The



cognitive mind serves the emotions but in ways that we are often unaware of. Our rational minds are often limited to justifying these emotions so that they appear rational. Of course, emotions are not the only drive in the subconscious and unconscious mind. There are also many other automatic thoughts and learned skills shown by Kahneman in his System 1 thinking. However, emotions play a large role in the subconscious mind in driving our cognitive mind and our daily lives.

One observation that supports the role of emotion is Freud's theory on *defence mechanism*. Defence mechanisms are psychological strategies brought into play by the unconscious mind to manipulate, deny or distort reality in order to defend against feelings of anxiety as well as impulses that are socially unacceptable. Examples of these processes are: *repression*: the burying of a painful feeling or thought from one's awareness; *denial*: a refusal to accept external reality because it is too threatening; *rationalization*: the justification of one's behaviour and motivations by substituting "good" acceptable reasons for the actual motivations; *projection*: attributing one's own unacknowledged, unacceptable, or unwanted thoughts and emotions to another person.

Psychologist Kahneman argued that "when we think of ourselves, we identify with 'System 2', the conscious, reasoning self that has beliefs, makes choices, and decides what to think about and what to do. While 'System 2' believes itself to be where the action is, automatic 'System 1' is the hero of the book" (Kahneman, 2011).

Kahneman provided an example of how fast thinking responds more strongly to fear of loss than to gain (loss aversion), illustrating how our automatic mind is prone to emotional bias. Kahneman gave an example of an experiment where physicians in Harvard Medical School were given treatment choice for lung cancer: surgery or radiation. The two descriptions of the short-term outcome of surgery were:

*"The one-month survival rate is 90%."*

*"There is a 10% mortality rate in the first month."*

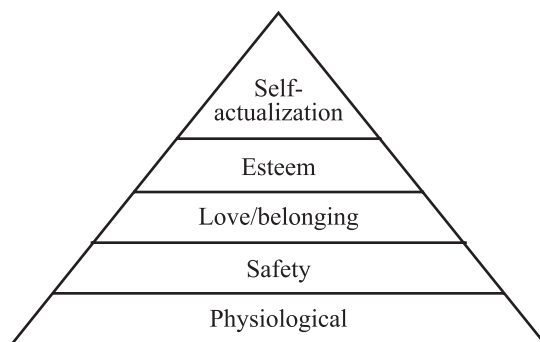
As one would have expected, surgery was a more popular choice in the former frame (80%) than in the latter (50%). The two prescriptions were identical, but fast thinking responded to the emotional word, "mortality" as bad, while "survival" is good. This shows that highly skilled physicians in a top American medical school were just as susceptible to the bias of the emotions. He gave other examples where fast thinking responds more to a *loss* than a *cost*. He wrote, "We should not be surprised: *losses* evoke stronger negative feelings than *costs*. Choices are not reality-bound because 'System 1' is not reality-bound" (Kahneman, 2011). What then are the human needs which our emotions respond to?

### Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs

The understanding of human needs is best depicted by the American psychologist Abraham Maslow, who proposed a hierarchy of human needs in 1943. Although there were subsequent modifications, the basic structure remains intact. According to this theory, most basic needs are physiological which includes health, food, water, sleep and clothes, followed by the need for safety such as personal, emotional and financial security. This is followed by the need for social belonging, which includes the need for friendship, intimacy and family. Humans need to love and be loved. Next is self-esteem through getting recognition and respect. People desire to get recognition, status, importance, self-respect, acceptance, and being valued by others. Finally, there are the higher needs of self-actualization and transcendence. Self-actualization is to fully develop one's potential, to accomplish everything that one is able to, to become the most that one can be. People may have a strong desire to become an ideal parent, to succeed in sports, or aesthetically to produce paintings, pictures or inventions. Transcendence is about giving to something beyond oneself—for example, in altruism or spirituality.

Figure 1

*Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*



Maslow's hierarchy of needs is often portrayed in the shape of a pyramid with the most fundamental needs at the bottom and the need for self-actualization and transcendence at the top. The fundamental and basic four layers of the pyramid contain what Maslow called "deficiency needs:" esteem, friendship and love, security, and physical needs. Then there are the higher needs of fulfilment in self-actualization and transcendence. However, the human brain is a complex system with different needs running in parallel, all at the same time. The hierarchy shows that other than physiological needs, the rest are emotional, thereby confirming the importance of emotional drives.

## **The Dynamics between Individuals and Group**

Our discussion has so far been about the conscious and subconscious of an individual mind driven by his emotions and his needs. But our main concern here is on the relationship between groups, that of inter-ethnic relations. The dynamics between individuals and groups are multi-directional. To begin with, only individuals are able to feel and think, and has introspection, insight, and the ability to discard old habit and to recreate himself. Does a group of people collectively have feelings, emotions, opinion and thinking? Yes, there are collective thoughts and emotions of a group. The collective feelings and perception of a group can be gathered from obtaining sampling of the group. However, as the group consists of individuals with different feelings and thoughts, one can argue that the samples represent only the majority or segments of individuals in the group.

However, human beings are social creatures. As individuals within a group interact socially and dynamically, they can influence the opinions and moods of the group. In history, it is observed how “prophets” in a community introduced new thinking which eventually becomes the norm in society. The thinking of an individual can influence the thinking process of the majority of the group. Just consider Indonesia where regional populations not so long ago thought of themselves as Achenese, Minang, Sundanese, Madurese, Balinese, Bugis, Minahasan, Hakka or Hokkien (Fujian). But then Sukarno and others in the 1920s imagined a larger entity which they termed as “Indonesia”, and this eventually became a reality in 1945. Today Indonesia as a national entity is a reality.

On the other hand, we are also influenced by the majority view of the group. This is the underlying reason for the phenomenon of “herd instinct,” that is often seen in the share market. It is an exaggerated response to an adverse event or good news that is disproportionate to the importance of the event or news itself. We are influenced by how the majority thinks within the group.

### **Carl Jung’s “Collective Unconscious”**

It is relevant to introduce here the concept of “collective unconscious” by Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung. The concept was first proposed in 1916. It refers to the unconscious mind shared among those of the same stock. According to Jung, the human “collective unconscious” is populated by archetypes, a primitive mental image inherited from the earliest ancestors, with its various shared symbols. Jung believed that the “collective unconscious” underpins and envelops the personal unconscious mind, and this distinguishes it from the unconscious of Freudian psychoanalysis. He argued that the “collective unconscious” has profound influence on the lives of individuals, who lived out its symbols and clothed their personal lives with meaning. They bring into the consciousness an unknown psychic life belonging to a remote past. It is the mind of unknown ancestors, their way of thinking and feeling, their way of experiencing life

and the world. The psychotherapeutic practice of Jung's analytical psychology revolves around examining the patient's relationship to the "collective unconscious."

The idea that a community may have a collective memory through stories, recall of history, mythology, symbols, and shared experience resulting in a collective identity and personality that have unconscious influence on individuals, is possible. Thus, for the English, the symbols of the "collective unconscious" may be made up of a complex of Christmas trees, Cromwell, God Save the Queen, the Union Jack, the Cross, the Beatles, and the football clubs of Liverpool, and Manchester United.

### **The "Collective Unconscious" of the Malays**

In multi-ethnic Malaysia, each group has its own "collective unconscious." The Malays comprise the majority group. Yet the term "Malay" was seldom mentioned in the pre-colonial period of Malaysia. According to historian Anthony Milner (2008), "the term 'Malay' was seldom used, the 'Malay awareness' is a feeling that 'perhaps never existed' at that time." He asserted that there was evidence that the declaration "*Hidup Melayu*" (Long Live the Malays) became a powerful rallying cry in the Malay Peninsula during the late 1940s. Such concepts of "*kerajaan*" (the sultanate), Islam, the Malay language and "*adat*" (custom) are important components of the "collective unconscious" of the Malays. Their culture is also especially concerned about courtesy and sincerity. The people lived in the *kampung* (villages) made up of wooden houses raised on stilts and often arranged in an open and informal manner to encourage friendly social relations. The womenfolk wore the "*sarong kebaya*" (a traditional apparel) and the men wore the "*baju*" (loose shirt). The *keris* (wavy-bladed dagger) was valued as a symbol of ancient Malay weapons (Milner, 2008).

### **The "Collective Unconscious" of the Chinese**

The Chinese, who comprise the second largest ethnic community of Malaysia, have their "collective unconscious" derived from their culture. Chinese scholars such as Yu Qiuyu (2012) maintained that the many features that constitute the "collective unconscious" of the Chinese include iconic episodes of the people's collective memory such as the ancient legend of Chang-Er soaring to the moon, a story often recounted during the Mid-Autumn moon festival, and the rich cultural traditions including the time-honoured image of the "gentleman" (*junzi*) and the ideal of becoming one. This concept predates Confucius but was crystallised by him. Yu claims that it is the concept that helps to gel the Chinese collective personality. It corresponds to Carl Jung's "collective unconscious" that allows "a soul that finds its way back to the homeland;" that forms its archetype, primordial images, and self-portrait.

The "gentleman" is the ideal person, in contrast to the "petty person." One may not live up to being a gentleman, but it is the ideal to strive for. This corresponds to "the enlightened," "prophet," "giant," "gentleman," "knight," or "samurai" of other cultures (Yu, 2012). Yu summarised the quintessence of the gentleman as follows:

In the context of Chinese culture, to become a gentleman is everything, if one is not a gentleman one would have striven in vain. Being the gentleman is to become the most qualified and ideal Chinese. I feel that Chinese culture has not eventually withered away is because the gentleman has not disappeared, and integrity is intact (Yu, 2014, p. 13).

A community can also act cruelly and violently against another community as if it has a personality and life of its own. For individuals who carry out such cruel acts, their underlying motives may be hidden and not recognised. It is therefore important that we draw out the collective unconscious to the consciousness, and to identify the powerful drives of underlying emotions of the collective unconscious.

### **The Two Selves**

Daniel Kahneman proposed the concept of two selves. He divided the self into the “experiencing self” and the “remembering/evaluating self.” The experiencing self asks the question: “Does it hurt now?” while the remembering self would recall the previous experience, which answers the question: “How was it, on the whole?” (Kahneman, 2011).

To illustrate the difference, Kahneman and his partner carried out a colonoscopy study where patients undergoing painful colonoscopy was prompted every 60 seconds to grade the level of their pain, representing the experiencing self; and their overall assessment of the level of pain after the event, representing their remembering self. The patients were in two groups, where there was difference in the duration of the procedure, 8 minutes and 24 minutes. Whilst the total amount of pain experienced by the 24-minutes group was three times more, yet after the event, the 8-minutes group recalled a much worse level of pain because the procedure ended abruptly at the point when the patients felt severe pain. So Kahneman found that in the evaluation by the remembering self; what matters is the worst experience of pain and the duration of pain had no effect whatsoever on the ratings of the total pain. The experiment shows that it is the remembering self that “keeps scores and governs what we learn from living, and it is the one that makes decision,” while “the experiencing self does not have a voice” (Kahneman, 2011).

What we remember determines how we evaluate our experience. It is the remembering self that determines the values that we adopt, what we regard as good and bad; our future direction and future action; and how we evaluate our future life experiences or achievements (Milner, 2008).

Our collective memory or “collective evaluating self” is dependent on the narratives of our professional narrator of our common experiences, the historians. How they make up our collective memories will determine our sense of “We,” and that may influence ethnic relations, common values and future directions.

What are the hidden psychological issues that determines ethnic relations? The first group of psychological issues relevant to ethnic relationship relates to the unique human ability of

having self-awareness, and consequently the individual self-concept. The first aspect of a person's self-concept is his identity; the group he feels he belongs to, that provides him with a sense of security. Identity also comes with a person's social role, thus his sense of responsibility that forms an important basis of his daily decision making.

There has been a move to make identity the foundation of the nation-state. This identity is largely based on ethnicity, religion and culture. However, many of the new emerging nations are plural societies with the majority group commanding dominant power. Inter-ethnic tensions and conflicts often arise from a multiplicity of possible causes. Thus, it is necessary for these emergent multi-ethnic nations to recognise the identities and resulting emotional needs of their minority groups.

The second aspect of self-concept related to identity is that in multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural nations, there is a need to nurture a shared identity, to inculcate a sense of "we" that is inclusive. The sense of an inclusive "we" is largely derived from the narratives of a shared memory of history. This idea deserves to be explored in greater details.

The other component of self-concept is how we evaluate ourselves, our self-esteem and dignity. As our personal self-esteem is dependent on the dignity of the group that we identify with and belong to, group dignity is thus crucial. In fact, political scientist Francis Fukuyama asserts that the demand for recognition and dignity of the group is the master concept that drives politics today, both in the developing as well as the developed world (Fukuyama, 2018). When we look at how people of different nationalities evaluate each other as a group, we realise that it is largely based on their strength and competence, the leadership of their political elites, and their behaviour as world corporate citizens. The last is consistent with the concept that humans are, at the core, moral beings. Thus, the direction of enhancing our own dignity should also be to develop our true competence, and to nurture goodness.

Other than issues related to self-concept, fear of loss is another important subconscious emotional drive that can have an enormous impact on our mind and affect ethnic relationship. The commonly used subconscious coping mechanism by the mind when facing the fear of loss is the so-called "mental defence mechanism" that can often be unhealthy. The unhealthy defence mechanism can also operate at the group level as reflected in the behaviour of communities and nations. These are often misused by the politicians in this modern age of "identity politics." As citizens of the nation-state, we should be aware of this trend, and to overcome the fear of loss by strengthening true competence and capacities.

While inter-ethnic relations among communities as groups is important, it is also advisable to promote close friendship at the personal level that transcends the ethnic and religious divides. However, the factors that result in close personal friendship are complex and go beyond ethnic differences. Thus, it is crucial that the authorities make available opportunities to promote this relationship. Close friendship is best regarded as a separate "sphere sovereignty," respecting its own functions and rules. The authorities should avoid imposing policies with the intention to assimilate, but promote to facilitate "friendship that transcends ethnic boundaries."



## Historical Narratives and the Nurturing of an Inclusive “We”

In the above discussion on the “two selves,” it has been mentioned that it is the remembering self that determines the values that we adopt, what we regard as good and bad; our future direction and future action. As for the collective memory of the whole group, we are largely dependent on the historians to reconstruct the narratives of our common experience, our history. How the historians reconstruct our collective memories will determine our sense of “We.” This is a mental process that we may not be consciously aware of, but may profoundly affect our emotion and cognition. It is thus important that we bring these mental processes based on the historical narratives into awareness, and see whether we can modify our perceptions and narratives to nurture harmonious ethnic relations.

### Malay Race (*Bangsa Melayu*)

Malaysian history may be regarded as consisting of four main themes: the development of *Bangsa Melayu*, the plural society, global economy and better governance.

The making of *Bangsa Melayu* has five components: identity, nature, culture and language, economic position, and political status. The evolution of the identity of *Bangsa Melayu* has assumed different aspects. The first was the *making of an ethnic identity that transcends geography*. Traditionally the identity of the Malays is tied up with the *kerajaan*, based on the *raja* or sultan. It is thus based on a locality (Milner, 2008). The second was to make the Malay a more inclusive concept. That is, as the colonial period drew to a close, the term “Malays” was defined as referring to the Javanese, Bugis, Minangkabau, Aceh, Madurese, and in Singapore, even the Christian Batak.

Another revolutionary change in the early part of the 20th century was the relationship between the *raja* and the *rakyat* (subjects), where the *rakyat* and *bangsa* as an idea became as important as that of the *raja*. Thirdly, there was the crucial role of the Malay language, as exemplified by the slogan *Bahasa Jiwa Bangsa* (language is the soul of the nation). The fourth, and an ongoing agenda, is to alleviate poverty among the Malays and to remove the identification of occupation with ethnicity. There are two further developments to the concept of *Bangsa Melayu*: the gaining of national independence that subsequently led on to the formulation of the Malay *Bumiputera* status.

### Plural Society

Until the 19th century, Peninsular Malaya and Borneo were very sparsely populated. The Malay population in the Peninsula in 1874 was estimated at 150,000 (Ryan, 1967). The community was open and multi-ethnic as it integrated various indigenous communities of insular Southeast Asia into its fold. When the Palembang fugitive prince Parameswara established the Melaka kingdom in the 15th century, he was joined by the local aborigines or Orang Asli and the Orang Laut. At the beginning of the 16th century, Portuguese sources refer

to a total population of Melaka of between 40,000 and 100,000. The population was diverse and speaking many different languages such as “Gujarati, Tamils, Javanese, Chinese, ...Japan, Armenian...each ethnic group lived in its own kampong with its own jurisdiction and places of worship” (Andaya & Andaya, 2017). The Johor sultanate succeeded that of Melaka in a revival in the 17th century served as a reminder that all Malay politics shared Melaka’s most notable features: an openness to the outside world that contributed to a cosmopolitan outlook and the acceptance and even encouragement of a multicultural environment. In the same period, there were increasing numbers of Indians, Chinese, Minangkabau and Bugis. The Bugis in particular, exerted large political influence in Johor-Riau and Kelang-Selangor in the 18th century (Andaya & Andaya, 2017). By the early 20th century, the present-day population pattern was largely established. As the British colonial period drew to a close, “the first generation arrivals combined with descendants of ‘Indonesian’ immigrants account for about 40% of the total Peninsular ‘Malay’ population” (Milner, 2008).

### **Participation in the Global Economy**

An active role in the global economy is another feature in the historical development of Malaya. The Melaka kingdom in the 15th century was built on the trade between Europe and China, and succeeded the role of the older Srivijaya empire.

This was replaced by the Portuguese in the 16th century, and then the Dutch in the 17th century. The Dutch were more interested in building up Batavia (Jakarta) and their interest in Melaka was to prevent the Malay states from trading with their European rivals (Ryan, 1967). This allowed the rise of Riau-Johore sultanate to succeed Melaka to dominate the Malay entrepôt trade in the late 17th and 18th centuries (Andaya & Andaya, 2017).

The setting up of the Straits Settlements comprising Penang, Singapore and Melaka by the British in 1786 marked the demise of the Malay entrepôt state. The original motivation was for the British to have a port along the China trade route, and to obtain tin from Perak for the East India Company to sell to China (Ryan, 1967). By the 19th century, instead of the gathering of jungle products to trade internationally, British and Chinese merchants realised the need to invest in commercial agriculture and tin mining to service both China trade and the growing market in Europe (Andaya & Andaya, 2017). The importance of tin and rubber have since diminished, and replaced by oil palm, petroleum, electronic products, and now the growing importance of service industries. But the basic thrust is towards an active role in the open globalised economy. The result is that Malaysia from the early 20th century has been among the most developed countries in Southeast Asia.

### **Better Governance**

Malay rulers were known for their good governance. Chinese sources of the 14th century mentioned that the Malay states along the east coast of the Malay Peninsula had a tradition of settled government and stable administration. Trade between local and foreign merchants was

conducted with ease and the inhabitants were honest, and “the calibre of those in control” was commendable (Andaya & Andaya, 2017). The Melaka sultanate too enjoyed good governance. Trade was facilitated by the safety of the sea-lanes, good commercial facilities, security and protection of foreign merchants. The ruler was regarded as “a man of justice and liberal to the merchants and their goods” and the legal and administrative machinery was efficient. The widespread use of Malay as *lingua franca* in Southeast Asia was an indication of the commercial success of Melaka and the existence of an extensive Malay middleman network (Andaya & Andaya, 2017).

The British colonial period brought further improvements in governance. Firstly, they facilitated an ideological transformation in the relationship between the people and the rulers. From the traditional *kerajaan* system in which the *rakyat* were a “subject” of the “*raja*,” they are now “citizens.” The *bangsa* has now assumed a position similar to that of the *raja* (Milner, 2008). Upon this was created a British system of public administration and legal system. This process started with the setting up of the Straits Settlements. With the Pangkor Treaty in 1874 and the formation of the Federated Malay States comprising the states of Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Pahang in 1895, all departments of government began to expand rapidly (Ryan, 1967). There was a transfer of power from the rulers to the British Residents. A Federal Council was set up in 1909, then the Federal Legislative Council which was the forerunner of the Federal Parliament. The first elections were held in 1955 in the transition towards a democratic system of government.

At the same time, various public and civil institutions were established including the legal system, police, different branches of the civil service, the revenue system, and the building of roads, railways and ports; power and water supply; drainage and irrigation. An education system was created including the setting up elite schools such as the Penang Free School in 1816 and the Malay College in Kuala Kangsar in 1905, and institutions of higher learning such as the King Edward VII College of Medicine in 1904 which later became part of the University of Malaya.

The growth of volunteer societies and associations saw an expansion of English and Chinese schools set up by the churches and Chinese clan associations. English schools trained a large number of youths to serve in public administration for which knowledge of the language was essential as well as to serve as a medium of communication among the middle class.

A health service supported by district and general hospitals was created. The Penang General Hospital began in 1854 and the Institute of Medical Research in 1901. The local community too played its part. The Pauper Hospital of Penang was established by a Chinese merchant to provide for the poor and the rehabilitation of opium addicts.

### **How the Narrative of Bangsa Melayu may Nurture a Malaysian “We”**

The making of Bangsa Melayu is the story of development of a people and nation, and an important component of Malaysian history. It is only in understanding this history that one can

appreciate the structure and character of the nation today. Its emotional significance is in the enhancement of a people's "identity" and "dignity." Its effect is like the Indonesians winning the Thomas cup in badminton, Filipino beauties acquiring the Miss Universe title, Singapore Changi being voted the best airport in the world, a Korean being appointed Secretary General of United Nation, and Beijing's glamorous opening ceremony in the 2008 Summer Olympics.

However, the way the story is narrated and interpreted may also lead to divisions in the society. It may unintentionally create two classes of community; the "insider" and the "outsider", the "master" and "the second class." In this context, the use of the term *Ketuanan Melayu* (Malay Supremacy) to describe the Malay position may be particularly unfortunate. It is perfectly legitimate to recognise a group of people for their historical and special role and contributions to the nation. Being different and special is the essence of a group's "identity." However, psychologists tell us that closeness or intimacy requires parity of power. This applies to individuals as well as relationships among groups. Thus, when narrating the Bangsa Melayu story we must avoid the "special" evolving into a different status, a "higher" versus a "lower" status, thus affecting the construction of an inclusive "We." This calls for a nuanced account of the Malaysian historical narrative.

The key to make the narrative of the Malaysian history inclusive is to transcend the story from particular to general, from the spiritual and emotional journey of a particular ethnic community, to that which encompasses the whole nation.

The Bangsa Melayu story reflects three underlying elements of identity, dignity and democracy. They are about who is a Malay, his identity. His ethnic dignity is enhanced through the development of his culture and language, the alleviation of poverty through the New Economic Policy and the gaining of political independence. The transition from *kerajaan* to *rakyat* is a process of evolving towards democracy. Democracy is also about dignity; rather than plutocracy in which dignity is limited to the elites in the group. Democracy is about the dignity of all individuals in the group. It may be concluded that the story of Bangsa Melayu is about the struggle for dignity of a people, and how they labour and strive to rebuild their self-esteem and image. Such a story of a particular group can help to enhance ethnic relations if its underlying universal needs of group identity and dignity relate to the same needs of other ethnic groups.

While the story of the struggle of Bangsa Melayu reflecting the emotions and spirit of a great people to build their identity and dignity is amazing, its full expression requires the co-operation and efforts of all Malaysians, particularly in the realm of economy and better governance. Bangsa Melayu will be meaningful because it is expressed, materialised, and grows into definitive structures, put into bone and flesh, actualised or worked out using the platform of the other main themes in the Malaysian national development agenda, the plural society, globalised economy and modernity.

## **The Development of the Global Economy and Modernity**

An emphasis on the role of all ethnic communities in the other main themes of the Malaysian nation building – the participation in the global economy and striving for better governance – can help to enhance an inclusive Malaysian ‘We’.

Modern history textbooks have downplayed the roles of non-Malays in the development of the nation. Historically, the Chinese community have played a crucial role in the development of the tin mining industry and the towns. Local scholars claim that “All historians worth their salt will admit that Yap Ah Loy was primarily responsible for transforming Kuala Lumpur from a mining village into a leading commercial and mining centre after it was largely destroyed during the Selangor Civil War (1867–1873)” (Ranjit Singh Malhi et al., 2018). Many of the towns in the Federated Malay States and the Straits Settlements were developed primarily by the enterprise of the Chinese (Ranjit Singh Malhi, 2017; Shennan, 2019). Indian labour had formed the backbone of the rubber industry that was mainly responsible for opening up much of Peninsular Malaysia with their sweat, blood and tears. Indian labour was also used in the building of roads, railways and bridges and other constructing projects (Ranjit Singh Malhi, 2017). Thus, a historical narrative of nation building that is constructed in a comprehensive and objective manner would help to build an inclusive Malaysian “We.”

The narrative of British colonisation also has an effect on the concept of “We.”

Although British rule between 1786 and 1963 lasted only 177 years, it has left an indelible mark on the new nation, particularly in the spheres of good governance and the integration of the economy to that of the global market. How the narrative of history presents the role of British colonisation has an important impact on nurturing an inclusive Malaysian “We.” In the subconscious mind of nationalist history narrators, the plural society has been imposed by the colonial power at a time when the kerajaan authority was weak. It thus follows that the future direction of the nation “ought” to restore the old glory of the kerajaan-sultan-Malay-Islam civilisational nexus. Some choose to interpret the colonial period as one of shame and that non-Malays, seen as collaborators of the colonial power, are thus subconsciously rejected from being part of the collective Malaysian “We,” but rather looked upon as “outsiders.”

As an example of this subconscious thought is the voicing of strong objections to the greater use of English to teach science and technology in some quarters, even among some scientists. Historian Harper (1999) mentioned the psychological factor of “English language as a symbol of humiliation of Malay nation” in this subconscious rejection. It is thus important that we re-examine this important period of the Malaysian past with an open mind and to be truthful to historical facts.

## **If Colonial Rule had Never Happened**

Assuming the hypothetical situation that colonial rule had never happened, what might have been the faith of the Malay Peninsula?



A legacy of British colonial rule was the creation of Malaya and later as Malaysia as a national entity. While the Palembang fugitive prince was able to build an important trading and cultural centre in Melaka in 1402, it lasted only slightly more than a century. The separate kerajaan in the subsequent centuries was small and weak and did not always work together. It was the founding of the Federated Malay States that the first Rulers' Conference was held in Kuala Kangsar in 1897. Together with the Straits Settlements, the Federated Malay States became the nucleus of modern Malaya (Ryan, 1967).

Without British rule, the northern Malay States of Trengganu, Kelantan, Kedah and Perlis would likely be part of the kingdom of Siam. They were under "Siamese suzerainty" before British rule was imposed in 1909. In fact, during the Japanese Occupation, the northern states of Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan and Trengganu were ceded to Thailand. The status in the Federated Malay States might probably be similar to those of Riau, Jambi, Palembang, Bengkulu, Lampong, and Bengkulu, all drawn together with Sumatra into a new federation (Harper, 1999). Sabah and Sarawak would likely be similar to North and West Kalimantan; Johor and Singapore might have been part of the Riau archipelago to from part of Dutch East Indies. Singapore would not have become an international financial and trading centre; and Penang might have been a replica of Bangka island in Sumatra.

The amalgamation of the Malay States into a single sovereign entity was the outcome of British rule and part of the history of Malaysia. The cultural influences of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity as well as those of the Chinese, Indians, and Siamese and the West have contributed to the making of Malaysia today. Instead of viewing British colonisation as a period of humiliation or shame, Malaysians should accept it as part of the historical evolution in the formation of the nation.

The Malay Peninsula in the 19th century was scarcely populated. It was British colonial labour policy that had significantly changed the demography of the land and the creation of a plural society. The historian Milner claimed that the Malay rulers had no idea of the territorial extent of their realms, what mattered was whether there were people working on the land and to whom these people owed their allegiance. The sultans were "more interested in the control of people and their activities, and the right to take tax and tribute from them, than in ownership of land." Thus, the land was not about who owned it, but who could work on it (Milner, 2008).

Traditionally, there were serious disincentives facing the rakyat who desired to create wealth under the kerajaan system. A subject of the ruler who possessed some wealth was looked upon as "a possible threat." The kerajaan considered that every subject should "know his place." Yet the rulers were open to commerce and could play a major role in trade and welcomed foreign merchants to their ports. But engagement by the rakyat in commerce "had to be on behalf of the ruler, or at least within the hierarchical structure of the polity." The absence of an indigenous merchant class was a pre-colonial feature of the kerajaan and was partly responsible for contributing to the making of the plural society of modern Malaysia.



The dependence on imported labour ought to be viewed in the context of the 19th century perceptions concerning the people and the land, and the attitude of the native *kerajaan* towards business activities among the *rakyat* and “foreigners.” Chinese labour was brought in to develop the land, the mines, and commercial activities. The community eventually gained much influence on the economy. The Malays, on the other hand, established a hold on the administration of the land. But it was the “foreign entrepreneurs” who dominated the economy. The Chinese who were kept outside “the hierarchical logic of the *kerajaan*” were relatively free to accumulate wealth (Milner, 2008).

The inflow of Chinese labour had preceded the formation of the Federated Malay States in 1874 and the beginning of the residential system. In 1872, there were already 30,000–40,000 Chinese in the Larut mines of Perak; 10,000 in the Sungei Ujung mines; and 100,000 engaged in commercial agriculture in Johor. In these areas and in Kuala Lumpur where Yap Ah Loy was active from the 1860s, the Chinese had arrived when these various states were under the rule of the Sultans, Mentris and Malay territorial chiefs, and to serve diverse needs that the Malays had no aptitude to fill (Andaya & Andaya, 2017; Ryan, 1967). Thus the plural society had already emerged before the advent of the British.

It may be argued that the *entrepôt* trade of jungle and sea products, tin mining or commercial agriculture, the early British colonial trade policy was a continuation of the *kerajaan* policies of openness and active participation in the global economy. Similarly, the labour policy of the colonial government was the continuation of that of the *kerajaan*.

## Conclusions

In the re-examination of ethnic relations from the perspective of how the mind works, a key concept is that the working of the mind is largely “subconscious,” “automatic” and “unaware,” although some of these hidden thoughts may be brought to awareness with deliberate efforts. This is supported by the Freudian psychoanalysis, Aaron Beck’s “automatic thoughts,” Kahneman’s “fast and slow thinking,” and the “deep learning theory” in AI. It is the emotions that is the key that drives the cognitive mind. There is also the “collective unconscious” of the group to which one belongs that have a profound influence on the individuals. The main psychological issues that are highly relevant in ethnic relations are those related to the human self-concept, i.e., “identity,” and “dignity” of the group to which one belongs. How we conceptualise the “We” of the group is also crucial. In terms of group identity, it is largely based on the narratives that form the collective memory as re-constructed by historians. It is thus essential that the reconstructed history should facilitate an inclusive “We.” As such, the narrative of the development of Bangsa Melayu should lead to an empathy with the ethnic “identity” and “dignity” of other ethnic groups, rather than a society with two tiers that of the “insider” and “outsider.” A narrative that emphasises the roles of all ethnic groups in the major themes of the Malaysian nation building, i.e., “participation in the global economy” and “striving towards better governance” would also

facilitate an inclusive “We.” Viewing the labour and economic policies of colonial rule as a continuation of the traditional kerajaan policy might encourage a more tolerant understanding of how Malaysia’s multi-ethnic society came about and thereby promote the acceptance of a more inclusive “We.”

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