

## BOOK REVIEWS

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Zawawi Ibrahim (ed.), (1998) *Cultural Contestations: Mediating Identities in a Changing Malaysian Society*. London: ASEAN Academic Press. 204 pages. ISBN 1-901919-04-8

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*Cultural Contestations* does not provide the reader with a coherent argument regarding the book's theme of "mediating identities in a changing Malaysian society." Its five chapters range widely over contexts and content of identity debates (Shamsul A.B.), Chinese politics (Heng Pek Koon), postcolonial middle-class formation (Abdul Rahman Embong), laughter in Malay literature (Hendrik M.J. Maier), and aboriginal subaltern subjectivity (Zawawi Ibrahim). The essays are equally diffuse and divergent with regard to theoretical and methodological perspectives. There seems to be little but the thinnest thread of *identity* and coincidence of collocation in Malaysia holding these essays together. But that, perhaps, is precisely the point.

Like such precursors as *Fragmented Visions: Culture and Politics in Contemporary Malaysia* (Joel S. Kahn and Francis Loh Kok Wah, 1992) and *Malaysia: Critical Perspectives* (Muhammad Ikmal Said and Zahid Emby, 1996), *Cultural Contestations* displays the great and perhaps irreconcilable diversity of that place known as Malaysia, a diversity for which terms such as "plural society" or "race relations" seem only a poor gloss or at worst a mask (12). Readers looking for a clear, singular thesis on how identities are *mediated* in Malaysia will be disappointed. What the reader will find however is a collection of essays by five longtime scholars of Malaysia in the fields of anthropology, literature, political science, and sociology. Each of the essays encapsulates the author's recent empirical and theoretical contributions to understanding various aspects of Malaysian society, often in dialogue with other writings on Malaysia in the form of critical appraisal (especially the chapters by Shamsul and Abdul Rahman). To a greater or lesser extent, all five essays present overviews of arguments that each author has been developing over many years and which have appeared elsewhere in various forms.

Contributions by Shamsul and Zawawi perhaps address the theme of *identities* most directly (at least in what I would take to be the most common understanding of that term, as social and cultural identities). Shamsul (Chapter 1) presents his "two social reality" approach to analysing contested identities (especially Malay and Bumiputera identities) in the context of Malaysia, arguing that identity formation takes place in a dialectic between "authority-defined" and "everyday-defined" social reality (18). In particular, he is interested in how certain "nations-of-intent, or concept(s) of nation" (27) have played out in the postcolonial era. In addition to reciting the

outlines of ethno-national identity construction in the post-independence era, Shamsul takes aim at the “ethnicisation” (one might perhaps use the term “Balkanisation”) of academic, social science writing on Malaysia, though it is clear from the division of labour found in *Cultural Contestations* itself that this ghost is far from being exorcised and continues to haunt nearly all writings on Malaysia. A reader who has followed Shamsul’s work closely will find this contribution very familiar, as a restatement of key themes in his *oeuvre* on Malay and Bumiputera identity produced especially over the past decade. In this work, he positions his writings most sharply in relationship to that of other authors, particularly Joel Kahn and Muhammad Ikmal Said (two of the editors of the volumes mentioned above).

Zawawi’s contribution (Chapter 5) addresses identity at the level of everyday subjectivity, in particular, the subaltern subjectivity of *Orang Asli* (“aboriginal”) peoples in the face of intrusions and displacements carried out in the name of development and profit. Zawawi’s extensive case studies demonstrate the intricate dance of cooptation and resistance. Cooptation here is not the cooptation of those who *sell out* but rather the forging of particular *subaltern* identities that cannot help but be in dialogue with a dominant state and its allied interests (particularly of capital). Zawawi’s sensitive reading (and reporting) of *Orang Asli* voices argues that *Orang Asli* resistance to intrusions and displacements does not come from a place outside the discourse of the state and capital, but rather from the emergent subaltern identity within it.

Heng Pek Koon (Chapter 2) and Abdul Rahman Embong (Chapter 3) are more thoroughly grounded in questions particular to the Malaysian experience. While each has implications for more general theoretical questions (minority political identity and postcolonial middle-class development), their focus is more to the intricacies of the Malaysian case than to general theoretical conceptualisation. Heng provides a detailed account of the development of Malaysian Chinese political identity in relationship to Malay political hegemony (a case which might be seen to have some commonality with that of Zawawi’s *Orang Asli*, though the parallels are not explicitly spelled out). Likewise, Abdul Rahman provides an account of the growth of the middle class (or classes) in Malaysia, arguing for a thesis that these developments have been crucially shaped by the post-independence period, contrary to those scholars who argue that the crucial developments were set in motion by the end of British colonial rule.

Among these contributions, which diverge so widely in the contexts and materials they address, we find yet another divergence, this time from social science into literature, in the penultimate chapter by Maier (albeit, literature in its social context). Maier’s essay (Chapter 4) is a contemplation on Ahmad Kotot’s late 1920s *Hikayat Percintaan Kasih Kemudaan* (a tale of youthful love). For Maier, the near erasure of this novel, a novel that

weaves back and forth between serious themes and the slapstick, marks a particular absence of laughter, playfulness and joy within Malaysia's Malay language literature (at least in the form of the novel). The great seriousness of the national struggle for independence and the forging of a new nation have led "modern writers . . . (to) no longer know what fun and pleasure are like" (144). By highlighting the possibility of a novel such as the *Hikayat Percintaan Kasih Kemudaan*, Maier would seem to be calling for (or at least hoping for) a return to laughter in Malay language literature.

This book is not recommended for those who want a simple or simplistic overview of *Malaysian society* as it were. As the introduction notes, there are at least as many absences as there are presences in this text (12). It does, however, provide a valuable collection for those seeking an introduction to critical theoretical perspectives on culture and identity in Malaysia and for specialists of Malaysia and the region.

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Frans Husken and Huub de Jonge (eds.) (2002) *Violence and Vengeance: Discontent and Conflict in New Order Indonesia*. Saarbrücken: Nijmegen Studies in Development and Cultural Change. 163 pages. ISBN 3-88156-758-5.

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Forgotten how to properly commit *carok* (Madurese "self-help" murder)? Well, "nowadays a sharp weapon, a sickle is the preferred implement, although a knife or crowbar may always be used" (de Jonge, 2002:147). For anyone who has ever suffered the ear-splitting din of election parades and the violent behaviour that often ensues from them, you may be interested to find the roots of Indonesian "processional" violence in the "overbearing and affected conduct" (van Dijk, 2002:82) of the Sarekat Islam cyclists' association.

*Violence and Vengeance* does cover some eclectic ground in its mocking inquiry into New Order stability. Whilst much of the material on political violence rehashes standard material on the Soeharto years (violence that is probably not as long-forgotten as the editors may have assumed), varying new interpretations are ventured and less travelled paths explored. In "The Myth of Harmony", the implications of organicism for the denial of domestic violence in Javanese society are probed. Noting that domestic violence is one social evil shared by Java with many Western countries, the authors argue that the pervasive discourse of harmony in New Order Indonesia further stunted recognition of the problem and action to address it. From the family to the school, van Dijk's chapter brings us the world