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ISSN 2040-3151

**Legible pluralism: The politics of  
ethnic and religious identification  
in Malaysia**

Graham K. Brown

Working Paper no. 3  
March 2009



Bath Papers in International Development  
A working paper series of the  
Centre for Development Studies, University of Bath  
<http://www.bath.ac.uk/cds/>

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Published by:  
The Centre for Development Studies  
University of Bath  
Claverton Down  
Bath, BA2 7AY, UK  
<http://www.bath.ac.uk/cds/>

ISSN 2040-3151

Series Editor:  
Graham K. Brown



bath papers in international development

# LEGIBLE PLURALISM: THE POLITICS OF ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS IDENTIFICATION IN MALAYSIA

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*Graham K. Brown, Centre for Development Studies, University of Bath*

**Bath Papers in International Development no. 3**

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Series Editor: Graham K. Brown

Website: <http://www.bath.ac.uk/cds/bpd>

Email: [bpd@bath.ac.uk](mailto:bpd@bath.ac.uk)



The Centre for Development Studies  
University of Bath, Bath, BA2 7AY  
<http://www.bath.ac.uk/cds/>



# Legible pluralism: The politics of ethnic and religious identification in Malaysia

Graham K. Brown

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## **Legible pluralism: The politics of ethnic and religious identification in Malaysia**

**Graham K. Brown**

### **Abstract**

This paper examines the changing nature of ethnic and religious identification in Malaysia, drawing upon a survey of attitudes conducted in three locations in Malaysia. The paper argues that the widely perceived political shift from a prevailing ethnic Malay/non-Malay dichotomy towards a more religious Muslim/non-Muslim dichotomy is more complex than previous analyses have suggested. Moreover, the paper argues that while this shift has typically been seen as primarily societally driven, a more complete explanation of these changes needs to account for the changing role of the state in identity construction and boundary-making. To this end, the paper appropriates Scott's notion of 'legibility' and argues that the changing politics of ethnicity and religion in Malaysia must be located within the bureaucratic politics of identity and the increasing 'legibility' of religion vis-à-vis ethnicity for a state concerned to differentiate and stratify its citizenry.

**Key Words:** ethnicity; religion; identity; Malaysia.

### **Acknowledgement**

This research, including the survey, was funded by the Centre for Research on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity (CRISE), a DfID Development Research Centre at the University of Oxford. The survey was conducted in partnership with the Institut Kajian Malaysia dan Antarabangsa at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, in a team led by Prof. Ragayah Mat Zin. I am grateful to Frances Stewart, Arnim Langer, and James Copestake for comments on a previous version.

### **Corresponding Author**

Dr Graham K. Brown

Department of Economics and International Development  
University of Bath, BA2 7AY, UK

Email: [g.k.brown@bath.ac.uk](mailto:g.k.brown@bath.ac.uk)

Tel: +44 (1225) 383549

# 1 Introduction

In April 2001, a High Court judge in Malaysia rejected a petition by Lina Joy, a Muslim-born Malay woman who had converted to Christianity, to have the word 'Islam' removed from her identity card. Apostasy, or conversion away from Islam, is highly sinful in most interpretations of Islam and in some schools of Islamic jurisprudence is considered punishable by death (Mohamed Azam Mohamed Adil 2007). The judge rejected her application by rejecting her conversion, stating that '[t]he appellant being originally a Malay, by reason of the definition of "Malay" in Clause (2) of Article 160 of the Federal Constitution, with its requirement of professing the religion of Islam, the appellant will remain a Malay to her dying day and cannot renounce Islam'.<sup>1</sup> Lina Joy appealed against this decision, first to the Court of Appeal and subsequently to the Federal Court, Malaysia's highest court, both of which rejected her appeal. These rulings against Lina Joy did not go as far as the High Court in rejecting her conversion per se, however, but rather rejected the appeal on the constitutional grounds that matters pertaining to Islam are in the sole purview of the country's parallel Shari'a Court system, over which the Federal Court or any other secular court has no jurisdiction.

The appeal rulings against Lina Joy, together with similar rulings in other cases, created – or at any rate highlighted – something of a constitutional quagmire in Malaysia over the position and jurisdiction of the Shari'a Courts within the broader legal system. My initial concern here, however, is not with this crisis per se but with the nature and ramifications of the various courts' reasoning. The High Court's judgment in dismissing her petition was based not on religious reasoning or Islamic jurisprudence, but rather on an explicitly ethnic logic; it was her status as a 'Malay' that prevented Lina Joy from converting to Christianity, rather than her status as a Muslim. The Malaysian constitution includes a number of provisions for 'Special Rights' for Malays and other indigenous groups, initially largely derived from British colonial policies but radically extended following the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP) affirmative action programme in 1971, which, among other provisions, stipulated ethnic quotas in all higher education institutions, ethnic employment quotas for companies seeking government contracts, and ethnic share distribution quotas for companies newly listing on the stock market. In this context, an explicit definition of what legally constitutes a 'Malay' – comprised by Article 160(2), to which the judge referred, which defines a 'Malay' as a Malaysian citizen 'who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language [and] conforms to Malay custom [*adat*]' – was clearly of bureaucratic advantage in terms of identifying which individuals were *entitled* to the benefits of these 'Special Rights'. In this case, however, the judge's interpretation effectively reversed the thrust of the clause – instead of interpreting the clause as bestowing entitlements upon a specific group of individuals, he interpreted it as enforcing religious *obligations* upon her because of her ethno-racial descent. In contrast, in rulings in both the Appeal Court and the Federal Court dismissed the relevance of these arguments but nonetheless upheld the High Court's rejection of her application on the grounds that the matter, dealing as it did with Islamic affairs, should have been brought to the Shari'a Court, over which the secular courts have no jurisdiction. The higher courts' reasoning was hence based entirely upon matter of religion and

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<sup>1</sup> Reported in the Judgment of Abdul Aziz Mohamad JCA, *Lina Joy v. Majlis Agama Islam Wilayah Persekutuan & 2 Others*, *Mahkamah Rayuan Malaysia* [Appeals Court of Malaysia], 19 September 2005.

legal jurisdiction, without addressing the question of the appellant's ethnic background and the associated entitlements or obligations.

I have chosen to begin by highlighting this case because it presents something of a microcosm of the central argument that I make in this paper. As will be explored further below, many analysts see a declining influence of ethnic identification in Malaysia, particularly among urban Malays, and a concomitant increasing import for religious identification. The state's response to these changing sociological dynamics of identification have, until relatively recently, been largely 'defensive', seeking to appropriate the renewed legitimacy afforded by state-sponsored religiosity without undermining the essentially secular nature of the elite political consensus that has abided, more or less intact, since independence (see, e.g., Case 1996). More recently, however, a more stridently pro-Islam line has entered mainstream politics; instead of the just 'form', Islam has an increasing role in the 'content' of national politics and policy-making. In seeking to understand this 'desecularizing' shift towards a more prominent role for religion in state discourse and practice, this paper examines the relationship between religious and ethnic identity in Malaysia, particularly among the politically dominant Malay community; and asks how, and why, does the state seek to privilege particular forms of identity distinction over and above other forms? I argue that it must be understood both within the context of the bottom-up shift in identity contours of Malaysian, and particularly Malay, society – the declining import of ethnicity vis-à-vis religion – but also as a consequence of the increasing top-down 'legibility' of religion as a means of differentiating, and 'disciplining' the population and exerting social control.

This paper proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the political and anthropological literature on the role of ethnicity and identity in Malaysian society, paying particular attention to recent works that identify a fundamental shift in societal divisions from an ethnic Malay/non-Malay dichotomy to a largely coincident but qualitative different religious dichotomy of Muslim/non-Muslim. Section 3 examines the 'bottom-up' dimension of this identity shift through the results of a survey of attitudes towards identity undertaken in two Malaysian states, which both complements and complicates the existing, largely ethnographic literature. Section 4 turns attention to the top-down dimension of identity shift, exploring the changing ways in which the Malaysian state has sought to privilege and protect certain identities over others. Section 5 concludes by reflecting on these findings within the broader context of theoretical debates about ethnicity and identity.

## **2 'Race', ethnicity, and religious identity in Malaysia**

Malaysia has long been a popular site for the scholarly investigation of the politics and sociology of multiethnic societies, featuring prominently in the work of such classic comparativists as Arend Lijphart (1977) and Donald Horowitz (1985; 1989). As Horowitz notes (1989), at the time of independence, most observers expressed a pessimistic prognosis for Malaysia (then Malaya), largely due to perceived insurmountable problems in the management of the country's diversity. In 1957, Malaya's population was precariously balanced between indigenous Muslim Malays, who formed less than half the population, and immigrant groups, primarily Chinese and Indians. Moreover, decades of either benign neglect or, by some accounts, active marginalization of the Malay community by the British colonial powers had left the Malays socio-economically

disadvantaged in what they perceived to be their land (*tanah Melayu*). The expansion of Malaysia to include two British territories on Borneo<sup>2</sup> went some way towards solidifying the demographic dominance of the indigenous ‘bumiputera’ groups – an umbrella terms for the peninsular Malays and the East Malaysian indigenous groups – but with the Chinese also economically dominant in the Borneo states, the socio-economic problem remained. Moreover, while the Malay elites at the time of the merger expressed confidence that the East Malaysian indigenous groups would largely assimilate into the broader Malay identity, or at least act in tandem with them, this has largely failed to emerge. Historically, East Malaysian bumiputera have been subject to various state sponsored assimilation programmes aimed at bringing them within a broader ambit of ‘Malay’ identity, including Islamization. Yet while Islamization programmes, usually with distinctly developmentalist inducements, have been relatively successful, ethnic identification in East Malaysia has remained remarkably impervious to this kind of modernist, homogenizing ‘racialization’ programmes, and indeed has occasionally sparked regionalist backlashes (Lim 2008).

Malaysia has largely confounded these dire predictions, however. With a developmental record near unmatched in the post-Second World War era – only Botswana and Singapore have outgrown Malaysia over the period as a whole – Malaysia is now often held up as a country that has successfully combined prudent ethnic balancing in the political realm with a relatively effective programme of ethnic restructuring, particularly since the inception of the redistributive New Economic Policy following ethnic rioting in 1969 (e.g. Snodgrass 1995). Certainly, Malaysia’s democratic record does not live up to many liberal expectations – Malaysia has been governed by the *Barisan Nasional* (BN, National Front) coalition of ethnically-based political parties since independence<sup>3</sup> and, while the basic political structures of democracy remain largely in place, these have largely been undermined by electoral machinations and gerrymandering, selective repression of political opponents and a virtually unchallenged control over the mass media (Brown 2005a; Brown 2005b; Lim 2003; Zaharom Nain 2002). But for many political theorists, and, indeed, many Malaysians (Welsh 1996), not only is this a reasonable price to pay for stability and development, but moreover the assumptions of majoritarian rule instilled within the liberal conception of democracy are seen as entirely inappropriate in multiethnic contexts such as Malaysia (Lijphart 1986).

In much social theory and research, the term ‘race’ has long been abandoned in favour of ‘ethnicity’. Particularly for scholars of the developing world, ‘racial’ categories are now largely seen as colonial constructs which combined bureaucratic and political purposes with a racist ideology that correlated a variety of social and individual attributes – intelligence, industriousness, aggressiveness – with biological descent, marked by physiological differences

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<sup>2</sup> The Federation of Malaysia was formed in 1963 through the merger of Malaya, independent since 1957, with Singapore, which had been internally self-governing since 1959, and the British territories on Borneo: North Borneo (now Sabah) and Sarawak. The historical consensus is that the merger was driven by British concerns over the increasingly Communist leanings of Singapore and a belief that incorporation into Malaya was the best way to dilute these influences. The Malay elites in Malaya, however, were unwilling to countenance accepting Chinese-dominated Singapore without a demographic ‘counterweight’ of indigenous groups, which the Borneo territories provided. The rapid and acrimonious departure of Singapore from the federation two years later solidified the demographic dominance of the bumiputera (Tilman 1963).

<sup>3</sup> Prior to 1971, the BN was known as the Alliance and was composed of fewer parties.

(Lentz 2006; Ratcliffe 1994; Ukiwo 2005). Colonial Malaya is no exception and has provided rich historical evidence of such processes of colonial 'racialisation'. Charles Hirschman, for instance, argues that prior to the arrival of European colonial powers in the region, Malaya was home to a range of ethnic stereotypes and prejudice, but that this was accompanied by 'patterns of acculturation, shifting ethnic coalitions, and the possibility of ethnic boundaries being bridged' (Hirschman 1986: p.332). Indeed, any form of systematic ethnic identification appears to be a relative recent historical phenomenon in the Malay Peninsula. Matheson's (1979) careful reading of the Malay *hikayat* (historical sagas) suggests that the term *Melayu* (Malay) itself has its origins in a vertical designation of aristocratic lineage, rather than any horizontal form of 'imagined community'. In 1931, the British superintendant of the census in Malaya was complaining that 'most Oriental peoples have themselves no clear conception of race, and commonly regard religion as the most important, if not determinant, element. The Malay, for instance, regards adherence to Islam in much the same light as a European regards a racial distinction' (C.A. Vlieland, quoted in Hirschman 1987: p.565).

It was with the arrival of Europeans and their more biological and deterministic discourses of 'race' that the salience of ethnoracial identification increased and ethnic fluidity restrained. Changing census classifications reflect and, in some interpretations, concretized this discourse. In the earliest censuses of the late nineteenth century Straits Settlements, migrant groups from within the broader 'Malay world' such as 'Javanese' and 'Boyanes' (Buginese) stood as census categories alongside 'Malay' and, for that matter, 'Arab', 'Tamil', 'Singhalese' and so forth. Later, such migrant groups from within the region had been reduced to sub-categories of, first, in 1901, 'Malays and other Natives'; then, in 1911, to 'Malays and Allied Races', and finally, in 1921, becoming subsumed with the 'Malay Population' (Hirschman 1987). By the time of independence, it is argued, this racialisation of Malaya was deeply ingrained such that for many, if not most, Malaysians 'race' is taken for granted both as a concrete social category and the defining feature of political organization (Mandal 2004).

Modern anthropological perspectives on identity have, of course, long challenged 'primordial', racially-based concepts of ethnicity, both in Malaysia and elsewhere. In a seminal anthropological essay on the 'situational selection of identity', Nagata (1974) showed how many people who typically identified themselves as 'Malay' would, under certain circumstances, identify themselves as 'Arab' or 'Javanese' and actively differentiate themselves from 'Malays', abjuring the latter's laziness, or other perceived stereotypical characteristics. Similarly, Sharon Carstens has shown how ethnic 'Chinese' in Malaysia negotiate a 'labyrinth' of identities, encompassing 'clan' identities – Hakka, Hokkien, Cantonese and so forth – alongside the broader categories of 'Chinese', 'Malaysian Chinese' and 'Malaysian' (Carstens 2005).

Since the 1980s, scholars of Malaysia have become interested in the increasingly important role that religion plays in Malaysian society, particularly the Islamic resurgence that began in the 1970s, to the extent that since the turn of the century, many scholars are arguing that the overriding political salience of the old ethnic dichotomy of Malay/non-Malay is being supplanted by a religious dichotomy of Muslim/non-Muslim (Hussin Mutalib 1991; Korff 2001; Sharifah Zaleha Syed Hassan 2001). While Islam has long been an integral aspect of Malay identity, it has taken an increasingly prominent role, both within the Malay community and in Malaysian politics more broadly. For most scholars, this Islamic resurgence has emerged very much 'from below' and any institutionalization it has received in the political realm, such as the promotion of Islamic

banking and the formation of an Islamic University, has largely been seen as the begrudging and 'largely symbolic' (Jomo and Ahmad Shabery Cheek 1992: p.92) concessions of a predominantly secular political elite, aimed at harnessing but not encouraging this resurgence. Explanations for this bottom-up process have typically been implicitly or explicitly formulated within the broad framework what one could term neo-modernization theory (cf. Inglehart and Welzel 2005), which locates processes of cultural change in the context of the changing social context of economic development, albeit in a non-linear fashion. In this context, the rapid urbanization of the Malay population associated with the New Economic Policy has been interpreted as something of a 'push factor' in identity change, as Malay identity, rooted in rural notions of the 'origin point' (Peletz 1996), loses its social purchase in the modern, urban environment (Bunnell 2002a; Sharifah Zaleha Syed Hassan 2001). In contrast, broader social and economic forces of globalization are interpreted as more of a 'pull factor' for Islamic identification, providing a route for linking local identities with a broader, internationalist identity, albeit one at odds in some ways from the dominant Western liberal ideology (Bunnell 2002b; Korff 2001).

Yet particularly since the retirement of long-time prime minister Mahathir Mohamad (1981-2003), the new administration under Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has become increasingly concerned with placing a particular interpretation of Islamic governance – dubbed *Islam Hadhari* (Civilizational Islam) – at the centre of the government's political strategy. Such literature that exists on Islam Hadhari sees it as little more than a rhetorical reworking of the decades-old ideological contest over the 'proper' interpretation of Islam between the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the senior partner in the Barisan Nasional coalition, and the Partai Islam seMalaysia (PAS, Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party), one of the main opposition parties (Chong 2006). While its rhetorical content is indeed little different from previous manifestations of UMNO ideology, however, its emergence has been coincident with increasing role for Islam in the practice of governance; moreover, even in rhetorical ways, religion in the form of Islam Hadhari is increasingly encroaching on areas previously relatively secularized, such as development policy. A discussion and an explanation of this trend will be offered in section 4. First, however, we turn to 'bottom-up' question of the trajectory of religious and ethnic identification.

### **3 Ethnic and religious identification: Survey evidence**

In this section, I draw upon evidence from a survey of attitudes towards ethnicity and religion conducted in two state capitals in Malaysia and their rural peripheries in 2006: Georgetown and the rural areas of Penang Island in the state of Penang; Kuantan district in Pahang, comprising both the state capital of Kuantan and its rural periphery.<sup>4</sup> The survey was also conducted in the West Coast division of Sabah state, including the state capital of Kota Kinabalu, although I do not discuss these results extensively here. The survey interviewed 300 randomly selected individuals in each site, with an addition 50 urban Malays sampled at a later date due to their small population size. All results are weighted by ethnicity, urban-rural status and region. The aim of this section is to examine how far these data complement or complicate the largely ethnographic accounts of Malaysian identity shift outlined above.

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<sup>4</sup> For keen Malaysianists, it is important to note that the survey was conducted prior to the escalation of ethnic and religious tensions associated with the Hindraf movement and the "Article 11" debate.

Before examining the West Malaysian in more detail below, however, I want to begin this section by asking how far the historic ‘racialisation’ of Malaysian society identified above has really impacted upon people’s perceptions of themselves and others. The simplest way to do so is to examine how people identify themselves when given an open-ended question about their ethnicity. In the two sites surveyed in West Malaysia, only a handful of respondents provided a self-description other than the ‘big three’ identities of Malay, Chinese and Indian: one ‘Chinese’ respondent described themselves by their regional/clan ancestry of Ruijiu; six ‘Indian’ respondents selected to describe themselves as Tamil, and one as ‘Sikh’. Although the question was asked in a completely open-ended way, it might be suggested that something in the construction of the interview or the question led people towards the ‘easy’ answers, but we can disavow this possibility by comparing these results with the responses given in the East Malaysian state of Sabah, where over forty different ethnic labels were provided by respondents, including even extremely localized identities such as ‘Dusun Lotud’, a sub-category of ‘Dusun’, itself a sub-category of the (largely political) identity of Kadazandusun, or by concatenated identities reflecting diverse parentage, including three-part self-descriptions such as ‘Bajau Suluk Dusun’. This, it should be noted, is despite a concerted political campaign to promote ‘Kadazandusun’ as an umbrella identity for many of Sabah’s indigenous groups (Reid 1997; Roff 1969). In comparison, none of the peninsular ‘Malays’ interviewed identified themselves as *Melayu Minangkabau*, Javanese Malay, Arab Malay or indeed offered any such qualifier. It might again be argued that the indigenous groups of Sabah are characterised by far greater linguistic and religious diversity than the ‘Malay’ population of West Malaysia, and there is certainly a point to be made here. But an even more direct comparison between the West Malaysia strata and Sabah can be made in terms of the population of Chinese origin. Table 1 shows how respondents in the three regional strata who could be post facto coded as ‘Chinese’ reported their own ethnic identity in response to the open-ended question. In Kuantan and Penang combined, only one respondent chose not to describe themselves as Chinese (or *Cina*) – a result particularly remarkable in urban Penang, given that it is widely seen as a Chinese-dominated town and, hence, one might expect intra-Chinese identity differentials to become important. In contrast, in Sabah only around 12.8% of the ‘Chinese’ population reported themselves as such, with the remainder giving their ‘clan’ or linguistic affiliation.

**Table 1: Self-description of ‘Chinese’ survey respondents by survey stratum**

	Kuantan	Penang	Sabah
'Chinese'	99.2%	100.0%	12.8%
Cantonese	0.0%	0.0%	5.1%
Foochew	0.0%	0.0%	7.7%
Hainan	0.0%	0.0%	5.1%
Hakka	0.0%	0.0%	46.2%
Hokkien	0.0%	0.0%	17.9%
Ruijiu	0.8%	0.0%	0.0%
Teochew	0.0%	0.0%	5.1%

Of course, ‘identity’ is a multiple and layered phenomenon and it might be the case that the nuances picked up in the ‘ethnic’ self-description by Sabahan Chinese but virtually absent from West Malaysian Chinese self-description are nonetheless important to the latter’s sense of identity, but simply not perceived of as part of their ‘ethnic’ identity. As is explored further below, this does indeed appear to be the case with respect to the importance attributed to

language, which is one of the main markers of difference between Chinese clans. But this does not obviate from the point here, which is that in contrast to Sabahan Chinese, West Malaysian Chinese viewed their *ethnic* identities more-or-less uniformly in terms of the macro 'racial' category of 'Chinese/Cina'. While multiple and over-lapping constituents of ethnic identity may well remain important to people, as the anthropological literature suggests, this finding confirms that in West Malaysia (in contrast to Sabah), the most immediately salient dimension of ethnicity – the first thing people turn to, so to speak – has indeed become almost uniformly trichotomized into the three 'races' of Malay, Chinese, and Indian.

Table 2: Importance of identity aspects by ethnic group

		Percent	Rank	95% C.I.		Significance of diff. from Malay (t-stat)	
Religion	Malay	93.3%	1	89.6%	96.9%		
	Chinese	41.1%	4	34.4%	47.9%	-13.29	***
	Indian	71.1%	1	59.7%	82.6%	-3.61	***
	All Groups	67.6%	1	63.4%	71.9%		
Nationality	Malay	68.1%	2	61.7%	74.6%		
	Chinese	38.9%	5	32.1%	45.7%	-6.10	***
	Indian	38.1%	4	26.6%	49.6%	-4.41	***
	All Groups	52.4%	2	48.0%	56.8%		
Ethnicity	Malay	37.8%	3	31.7%	43.8%		
	Chinese	50.2%	1	43.2%	57.2%	2.62	***
	Indian	43.7%	3	31.9%	55.6%	0.86	
	All Groups	43.9%	3	39.5%	48.3%		
Language	Malay	29.4%	4	23.1%	35.8%		
	Chinese	47.5%	2	40.5%	54.5%	3.77	***
	Indian	28.5%	5	17.2%	39.8%	-0.14	
	All Groups	37.7%	4	33.2%	42.1%		
Occupation	Malay	22.8%	6	16.9%	28.8%		
	Chinese	41.8%	3	34.9%	48.7%	4.06	***
	Indian	52.8%	2	40.7%	64.8%	4.35	***
	All Groups	33.9%	5	29.5%	38.2%		
Gender	Malay	28.9%	5	22.6%	35.3%		
	Chinese	22.5%	6	16.5%	28.5%	-1.44	
	Indian	10.2%	8	2.6%	17.7%	-3.73	***
	All Groups	24.5%	6	20.4%	28.6%		
Place of Residence	Malay	4.6%	8	2.0%	7.3%		
	Chinese	15.1%	7	10.1%	20.0%	3.65	***
	Indian	13.0%	6	4.4%	21.6%	1.83	
	All Groups	10.1%	7	7.4%	12.8%		
Place of Birth	Malay	3.8%	9	0.8%	6.7%		
	Chinese	9.0%	8	4.8%	13.3%	2.00	*
	Indian	12.3%	7	3.8%	20.8%	1.86	
	All Groups	6.9%	8	4.4%	9.3%		
Political ideology	Malay	4.8%	7	1.5%	8.0%		
	Chinese	2.6%	9	0.3%	4.9%	-1.05	
	Indian	5.3%	9	-0.5%	11.1%	0.15	
	All Groups	3.8%	9	1.9%	5.7%		

Note: Significance of t-stat designated by asterisks: \* <5%; \*\* <2.5%; \*\*\* <1%.

In order to assess the varying importance of different aspects to an overall sense of (group) identity, survey respondents were presented with a list of nine possible identity 'aspects' and asked to rank the three aspects most important to their sense of their own identity.<sup>5</sup> Respondents were also allowed to nominate identity aspects not on the list, although only very few did. Table 2 summarizes the results of this table for the three ethnic groups. The first column shows the raw percentage of respondents who reported each identity factor among their top three, along with the implied rank that each identity factor obtains for the relevant group in the second column. The third and fourth column report the 95% confidence interval for the population from which the survey was sampled. For the Chinese and Indian groups, the final column reports the statistical significance of the difference between their reported levels of attachment to the relevant identity factor and that reported by the Malay respondents. These results are, of course, somewhat crude and may obscure considerable variation both within and between groups in relation to such other factors as age, gender, education, and so forth. But even at this level of aggregation, interesting results differences emerge. Indeed, the extent to which the groups vary in the importance they attach to different identity aspects is marked; in all but the overall least-popular aspect of 'political ideology', at least one of the non-Malay groups reported a level of importance with a statistically significant difference from the Malay population. The difference between the importance attached to religion, language, and gender by Chinese and Indians was also statistically significant.<sup>6</sup>

Clearly, the strongest single association between a given ethnic group and a given identity aspect is between Malays and religion; even at the lowest estimate of the confidence interval, 9 in 10 Malays would still report religion as one of their three most important identity aspect. Moreover, 77% of Malays who reported religion as important, or 72% of all Malays, ranked religion as their most important identity aspect. No other correlation between an ethnic group and a particular identity aspect was anywhere near as strong; the next closest was the identification of Indian respondents with, again, religion. But even this pales in comparison; 72% of Indians reported religion among their top three identity aspects but only 28% reported it as their most important aspect; moreover, because Indians are such a small proportion of the population, the number of Indians respondents surveyed was relatively small, meaning that the confidence interval for Indians is very wide (as with other results for this group throughout the survey).

The next result to note is the relatively low importance that Malay respondents attached to ethnicity and language, which for the group as a whole ranked third and fourth respectively, with positive responses well below both religion and the second ranked aspect of 'nationality'. Even taking the upper bound of the confidence interval, less than half the Malay population consider ethnicity among their top three identity aspects; even fewer for language. Moreover, there were no Malay respondents at all who ranked ethnicity as their most important identity aspect and only 5.7% (confidence interval: 3.0%-10.5%) who ranked language as their most important aspect. This is in marked contrast to the Chinese population, which as a group ranked ethnicity as its most important aspect; around 1 in 5 (18.2%, C.I. 13.7%-23.7%) Chinese respondents ranked it as the most important of the three identity aspects they nominated.

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<sup>5</sup> The nine aspects were: gender, language, ethnicity, religion, nationality, place of birth, place of residence, employment/occupation, political ideology.

<sup>6</sup> Results not reported in table for space considerations.

At this point it is worth returning to the issue of identity overlap. Because particular identities, especially ‘ethnic’ identity, often overlap with other dimensions, it is plausible that some of these results may be explained in that in nominating one identity aspect, respondent took it for granted, so to speak, that this included or implied the importance of other aspects. Indeed, as already noted, Malay identity is constitutionally linked to religion and language, which is likely both to reflect and to have a heavy impact of its own on the way Malays actually perceive their ‘ethnic’ identity. The ‘overlap’ between religion and ethnicity for Malays does not explain why ethnicity ranks lowly when compared with religion although if the results had been the other way round we might have been able to explain a low showing for religion in terms of the importance attached to ethnicity, as religion is if anything constitutive of ethnic Malay identity rather than vice versa. But it may help explain the relatively low showing for both ethnicity and language if these labels were taken by respondents as ‘substitutes’, to speak economically, expressing essentially the same thing, albeit with nuances that a survey such as this could not pick up. Conversely, for the Chinese, ‘ethnic’ Chinese identity – which we may reasonably take ‘ethnicity’ to represent in this case given the uniform answer given to the open-ended question discussed above – is more likely to be taken as something qualitatively much more distinct from ‘language’, which respondents may have linked to their ‘clan’ group.

**Table 3: Proportion of Malays and Chinese reporting language and ethnicity among their most important identity aspects (percent of group)**

		MALAY			CHINESE		
		Language			Language		
		No	Yes	Total	No	Yes	Total
Ethnicity	No	34.1 [28.0-40.7]	28.1 [22.3-34.8]	62.2 [56.7-67.5]	21.9 [16.6-28.4]	27.9 [22.1-34.6]	49.8 [42.9-56.8]
	Yes	36.5 [31.3-42.0]	1.3 [0.4-4.3]	37.8 [32.5-43.3]	30.6 [24.5-37.4]	19.6 [14.7-25.7]	50.2 [43.2-57.1]
Total		70.6 [63.9-76.5]	29.4 [23.5-36.1]	100.0 -	52.5 [45.5-59.4]	47.5 [40.6-54.5]	100.0 -

Note: Figure in square brackets gives 95% confidence interval

To examine these possibilities, Table 3 cross-tabulates the responses for language and ethnicity for the Malay and Chinese respondents. Within the Malay responses, there is clear evidence of a ‘substitution effect’ between ethnicity and language – while over 60% picked at least one of the two, less than 2% of respondents selected both. This has important effects on the results of Table 2 because if we recode ‘ethnicity’ and ‘language’ into one variable of ‘ethnicity/language’ for the Malay population, this produces a much higher results of 65.9% (C.I. 59.3-72.5), although this combined result still does not quite dislodge ‘nationality’ as the second-ranking identity aspect for Malays as a group. The situation is much less clear for the Chinese, where around 1 in 5 respondents reported both language and ethnicity, suggesting that these elements are indeed seen as something distinct and separate, at least by some sections of the Chinese community. It is worth noting here that the design of the question means that, at a very practical and systemic level, all the options were substitutes as respondents could only select three options and, hence, the selection of one option automatically reduces the likelihood that another option is chosen. Given this systemic bias towards substitution within the question design, it is all the more

convincing evidence of the non-substitutability of language and ethnicity for Chinese, given that the Chinese rate of selection for both options was so high.<sup>7</sup> Confirming evidence that ‘language’ for the Chinese respondents is more associated with ‘clan’ identity can be confirmed by examining responses to a question on the main language spoken at home. We saw above that virtually all Chinese respondents gave ‘Chinese’ in response to an open-ended question on ethnic identity; in contrast when asked an equally open-ended question about the main language they spoke at home, 84.2% of Chinese respondents named a particular Chinese language or dialect, with only 8.0% responding ‘Chinese’; the remainder spoke English at home. We will return to this question later when we consider intra-group differences in attitudes towards identity.

At this stage, it is also worth noting the level of support for ‘nationality’ as an identity aspect. First, it should be noted that the proportion of the overall survey population that listed nationality among their top three identity aspects was surprisingly high compared with similar surveys in different countries. In Ghana and Nigeria, less than 40% of respondents selected nationality (Jomo and Ahmad 1992: p.97), while in Central Sulawesi province of neighbouring Indonesia, less than 15% of respondents chose nationality. Given the heavy nationalistic emphasis on ‘patriotism’ in the political discourse of the BN regime – from the first year it is taught in primary school, the stated objective of the history curriculum is the inculcation of ‘patriotism’ (1983) – this is perhaps unsurprising. But after religion, ‘nationality’ is also the identity aspect in which there is the largest difference between Malay and non-Malay (particularly Chinese) response rates. As discussed above, a considerable ethnographic literature has built up in Malaysia identifying significant identity distinctions between urban and rural contexts, particularly for the Malay population. Urban Malays, mostly relatively recent migrants, are seen as experiencing a radical identity reformulation as the old *kampung* (village) social context and hierarchies lose their relevance in a new urban setting. These scholars have identified a consequential resurgence of urban Malay identification with Islam and Islamic ways of life as filling the gap, so to speak, left by the decline of kampung attachments.

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<sup>7</sup> If all three options were chosen at random from the nine available (excluding for the moment the self-nominated option), then there would be a 37.9% chance of a given aspect  $\alpha_x$  being selected ( $1/9+1/8+1/7$ ). If, on the other hand, a respondent actively selected one option  $\alpha_y$  but randomly picked the other two, then there would be only a 26.8% chance ( $1/8+1/7$ ) of  $\alpha_x$  appearing in the final list. In other words, suppose Chinese respondents who picked ‘ethnicity’ did so actively but distributed their other options randomly, then we would expect to see only 26.8% listing of them listing ‘language’ as well, and vice versa; the actual figures are 39.1% and 41.2% respectively. Note that in some senses, then, we should be interpreting the results of this question in relation to a possible random distribution, i.e. testing how far group responses deviate from a random likelihood distributed around a mean of 37.9%. We can defend the current interpretation against this by returning to the possibility within the question of self-nominating an alternative identity aspect, which generates a potentially limitless list of options to choose from, and the possibility of selection ‘no-response’ (which was exercised by 2.8% of interviewees on this question), effectively removing the in-built substitution effect. Nonetheless, we must accept that the question may at least have influenced respondents towards the pre-listed options, implying a degree of substitution effect.

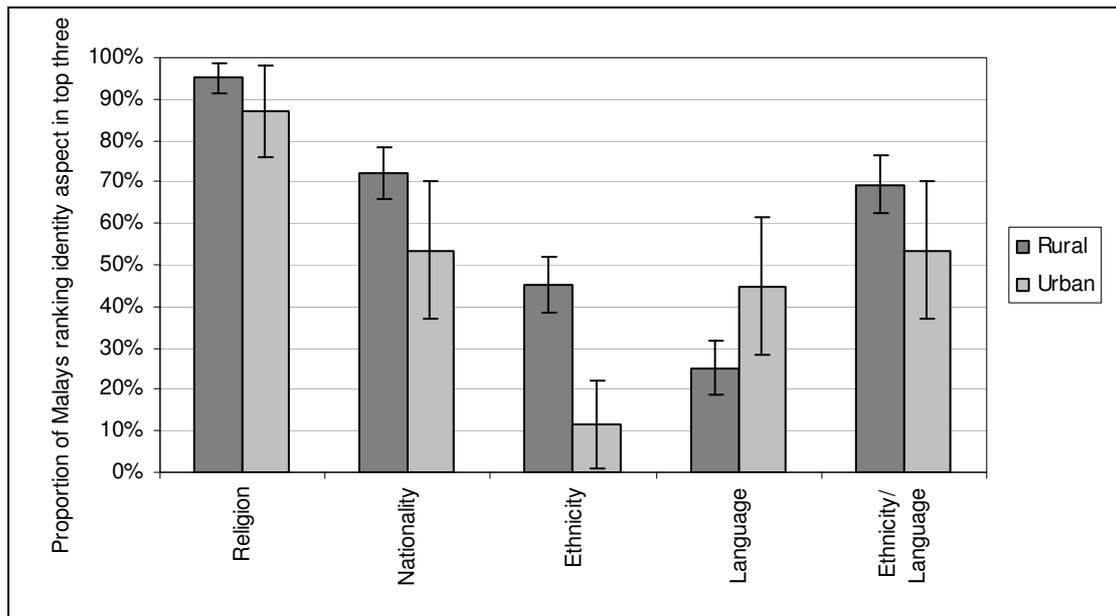


Figure 1: Importance of identity aspects for Malay respondents, by urban status

Note: Error bars report 95% confidence interval

Comparing the survey data with these broad conclusions, however, produces some interesting point of tension and agreement. Figure 1 shows the four most important identity aspects identified by Malays in Table 2 above, broken down by urban-rural status; it also includes the combined measure of ethnicity/language. Firstly, there is no evident difference between the overall importance ranking for religion produced by urban and rural Malays; for both sub-groups, it is by far the common important identity aspect and the slightly higher result for rural Malays in the figure is not statistically significant ( $t=1.38$ ,  $P>|t|=0.169$ ). Moreover, if we break these groups down by the individual rankings given to religion, then the data suggest that if anything rural Malays have a stronger religious attachment than urban Malays (Table 4); around four-fifths of urban Malays ranked religion as their most important identity aspect, compared with less than half the urban Malay respondents, while almost three times as many urban Malays than rural Malays did not list religion at all. Of course, these data only provide a snapshot view, but in response to a different retrospective question on whether the importance of religion in general was increasing, decreasing or unchanged over time, 89.6% of rural Malays saw religion as becoming more important compared with 77.2% of urban Malays although again the difference is not statistically significant. Nonetheless, the point here is that increasing religiosity among urban Malays may be *qualitatively* different from urban areas – as indeed will be argued below – but not quantitatively so.

**Table 4: Importance of religion to Malay respondents' sense of identity, by urban status**

% of respondents	Rural	Urban
Not ranked	5.0% [2.4-9.9]	11.6% [6.1-20.8]
Ranked third	2.9% [1.1-7.5]	16.3% [9.4-26.8]
Ranked second	12.2% [7.9-18.6]	26.5% [17.9-37.3]
Ranked first	79.9% [73.1-85.4]	45.6% [34.9-56.7]
Total	100.0% -	100.0% -

Note: 95% confidence intervals in square brackets

If the level and trend in identification with religion is not significantly different between urban and rural Malays, there is certainly a considerable and statistically significant ( $t=5.26$ ,  $P>|t|=0.000$ ) difference between the importance attached to 'ethnicity' between the two groups. Indeed, while 'ethnicity' remained the fourth most important identity aspect for rural Malays, it drops to eighth position for urban Malays, with only 11.6% ranking it among their top three identity aspects. Interestingly, the single factor to rank lower for urban Malays was place of residence with only 1.4%, which may be interpreted as confirming a broad sense of dislocation among urban Malays. Similarly, in response to a different question, the proportion of urban Malays who reported objections to interethnic marriages was significantly lower than for rural Malays, at 14.0% against 37.2%.

While 'ethnicity' appears to be a less important issue for urban Malays than their rural counterparts, however, a significantly *higher* proportion of urban Malays than rural Malays ranked language among their three most important identity aspects ( $t= -2.18$ ,  $P>|t|=0.030$ ). As we saw earlier, 'language' and 'ethnicity' were to some degree treated as substitutes by the Malay population and when we consider the combined ethnicity/language variable, fewer urban Malay respondents ranked it as important than rural Malays, but the difference is no longer strongly statistically significant ( $t=1.73$ ,  $P>|t|=0.084$ ). But whereas among both sub-groups language and ethnicity appear to remain substitutes – with less than 3% of urban Malays selecting both aspects and less than 1% of their rural counterparts doing so – the selection between 'ethnicity' and 'language' is clearly skewed between the two groups, with over two-thirds of urban Malays who selected one of the two preferring 'language' against more than three quarters of rural Malays preferring 'ethnicity'.

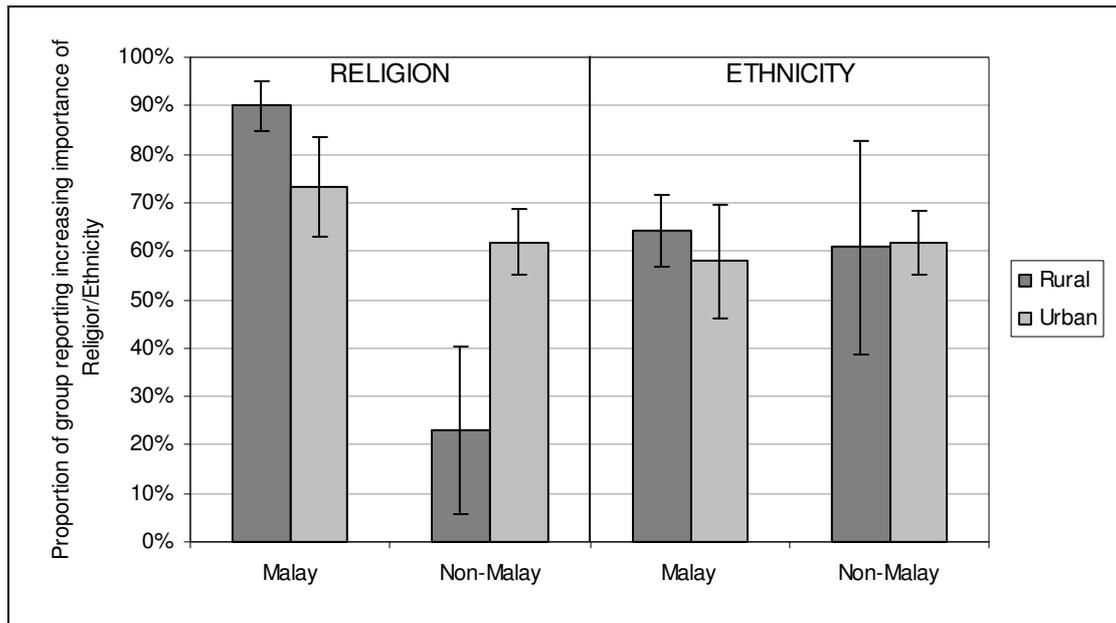


Figure 2: Perceptions of changing importance of religion and ethnicity

As already mentioned, the limitations of a survey such as this is that it only provides us with a static snapshot of perceptions of identity. In an attempt to address this problem, the survey also asked two questions to gauge whether respondents felt that the importance of ethnicity and religion had increased, decreased, or remained about the same over recent years. Figure 2 reports the proportion of respondents reporting an *increased* importance for religion or ethnicity, broken down by ethnicity and urban-rural status. In terms of ethnicity, answers were remarkably uniform. Around sixty per cent of the population, whether Malay or non-Malay, urban or rural, felt that ethnicity had increased in importance over recent years. The results for the importance of religion were more varied, however. In urban areas, there was no statistically significant difference between the proportion of Malays and non-Malays reporting an increased importance for religion, and levels were rough parallel with the equivalent proportions reporting an increased importance for ethnicity. In rural areas, however, there was a stark divide – around 9 in 10 Malays compared with around a quarter of non-Malays reported an increased importance of religion. In terms of the intra-ethnic differences, it is important to note that while the majority of Malays in both urban and rural areas reported an increasing importance for religion, the proportion was significantly higher among rural Malays than their urban counterparts, complementing the results above suggesting that while religion is typically of great importance to all Malays, this is particularly strong in the rural areas. The intra-ethnic differential among non-Malays was even starker, however, with a clear majority of urban non-Malays reporting an increase in the importance of religion but only around a quarter of their rural counterparts doing likewise. As will be explored further in the next section, a plausible explanation for this differential may be the extent to which the increasing moral policing associated with religion has played out primarily in urban areas. Figure 2 does not report the proportion of respondents reporting a *decrease* in the importance of religion and ethnicity, as these figures were very low across the board, with one exception. Less than ten percent of all groups reported a decreased importance of either religion or ethnicity, except for the urban Malays, around a quarter of whom (23.1%) reported a decrease in the importance of *ethnicity*.

To conclude this section, the survey evidence presented here provides clear confirming evidence that religion overwhelmingly trumps ethnicity as a source of identification for the Malay population both in urban and rural areas and that this is an increasing trend, but suggests that if anything religion is slightly more important among rural Malays than urban Malays. It also somewhat complicates the existing story about declining ethnic identification among Malays. While the survey broadly confirms the ethnographic accounts of a relatively low importance for ethnicity among at least a section of the urban Malay, it suggests that an identification with language may be taking up some of the slack, so to speak, rather than a uniform turn to religion. Moreover, there is no evidence of a declining trend in ethnic identification.

## **4 Making identity legible: The bureaucratization of cultural entry and exit**

Thus far, then, we have seen that when we examine the perceptions and attitudes towards group identity in peninsular Malaysia, there are significant differences between the main ethnic groups, as one might expect, but also within ethnic groups, particularly between urban and rural areas. In this section, I turn attention to the state-sponsored desecularization of Malaysia in recent years. As already noted, Islam has played an increasingly important role in regime attempts to mould a 'new Malay' (*Melayu baru*). In the 1980s, when the BN government under Mahathir began an Islamization drive that saw the establishment of Islamic banking and an Islamic university among other measures, many observers saw this as little more than 'largely symbolic concessions' aimed at harnessing the legitimacy of the resurgence of Islam within society while 'taming' (Weiss 2004) its political drive. A prescient article by Mauzy and Milne (1983), however, saw something more than symbolic in Mahathir's drive; Islam, they argued, was a means of 'disciplining' the Malays. Over the ensuing two decades, particularly since Abdullah replaced Mahathir as prime minister, this phenomenon has become ever clearer. Early in his premiership, Abdullah publicized his concept of Islam Hadhari, a ten-point programme that entwined Islamic injunctions with a social and economic developmentalism. Concomitant with the promotion of Islam Hadhari, the Abdullah administration has seen religion take up a position in the developmental discourse of the government in a way it had not done previously. While the Mahathir administration had pursued selected policies that emphasized Islamic development, these were very much parallel to a mostly secular development strategy.

The Ninth Malaysia Plan, the first of the country's five year development programmes to be designed and implemented by the Abdullah administration, reversed both of these trends. Firstly, it gave Abdullah's conception of Islam Hadhari a central place in the government's development vision, stating that all development initiatives would 'be guided by the universal principles of Islam Hadhari' as a 'comprehensive and universal development framework for the nation' (Malaysia 2006). Secondly, the Plan returned the practice of setting specific targets for the reduction of ethnic inequalities across multiple dimensions, a practice that had largely been dropped by the Mahathir administration.

Reading the parliamentary debates following the tabling of the Plan in April 2006, however, it is marked how far opposition disquiet over the Plan revolved around the promotion of Islam

Hadhari as the central developmental tenet rather than the restoration of a more vigorous ethnic restructuring thrust. The leader of the opposition, veteran MP Lim Kit Siang, expressed these concerns thus:

*When Islam Hadhari is raised in rank and status to become the directive principal for all Malaysians, irrespective of religion, and not limited only to the Islamic population, an important principle of democratic governance is questioned.*

(Hansard, *Dewan Rakyat*, 03.04.2006, my translation)

As noted in the previous sections, for the large part ethnic identity in West Malaysia has indeed largely congealed into the three 'racial' groups of Malay, Chinese and Indian. The Malaysian state has long been concerned with the fuzzy edges of this formula, however. As already noted, ethnic identity in the eastern Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak is considerably more fragmented than in the peninsula.

My argument in this section, then, is that the BN regime in Malaysia has of late given a prominent position to Islam within its political and developmental programme partially in response to the growing sociological importance of religion identified in the previous section, but also because the bureaucratization of religion and religious practices increasingly offers a more practical and bureaucratically efficient way of stratifying the population than ethnicity does. It is helpful to conceptualize this in terms of Scott's notion of 'legibility'. James Scott has influentially argued that states engaged on large scale 'development' projects such as 'scientific' forestry in Prussia or villagization in Tanzania, are often driven by a desire to make their country 'legible' – to map, classify and plan the environment as part of a 'high modernist' project (Scott 1998). In the cases Scott discusses, the state is not concerned with individuals per se – the citizen is, in his terminology, 'abstract' and, indeed, it is the abstraction of the citizen and the consequent absence of *mētis* or 'local knowledge' that undermines the success of such high modernist projects. In Malaysia, however, the modernist, developmental project is inextricably tied to an a legitimizing discourse based explicitly on the plural fabric of society, termed elsewhere the 'ethnic leviathan' (Brown 2007): individuals are defined first and foremost by their group affiliation and political order is derived there from in a form of 'authoritarian consociationalism' which posits the suppression of liberal democratic rights and norms and a concomitant submissive dedication to a modernist project of 'development' as the necessary price to pay in a Hobbesian bargain to obvert ethnic conflict. Increasingly, however, religion, rather than ethnicity, has proved more salient in this respect.

It is the porosity of ethnic boundaries, I want to suggest, which has rendered it increasingly redundant as a source of deliberate social stratification. This is particularly the case with respect to Malay identity – which the state has previously sought to privilege – both because it is of declining salience in urban areas and because the cultural basis of Malay identity itself is remarkably fluid. Cultural 'entry' to 'Malayness' has historically and contemporarily been remarkably easy. As already noted, from a bureaucratic perspective the census classification of 'Malay' has broadened considerably over time. With the nonnegotiable caveat of accepting Islam, acceptance into the Malay community – usually, though not always, through marriage – is largely uncontested. Indeed, interethnic heritages are not uncommon among prominent and stridently ethnonationalist Malay politicians. UMNO founder Onn Jaafar had a Turkish mother;

the mother of Tunku Abdul Rahman, the country's first prime minister, was of Thai descent; Hussein Onn, third prime minister, was the son of Onn Jaafar and hence also had Turkish ancestry; Mahathir has Indian ancestry – a particularly remarkable fact given the virulence of his Malay chauvinism in his early career (Mahathir 1970). More broadly, the fluidity of cultural entry to 'Malaydom' has left a linguistic trail in the virtual coterminous use of *masuk Islam* (enter/convert to Islam) and *masuk Melayu* (enter/become Malay).

Returning to the survey, respondents were asked whether they would object to an interethnic or inter-religious marriage by their daughter or sister. Interpreting the results of the inter-religious question for Malay respondents proved impossible precisely because of the conversion issue; many Malay respondents who expressed such an objection provided the explanation '*mesti masuk Islam*' (must convert) and given that this is indeed a legal requirement – marriage to a Muslim is only legal if the non-Muslim partner, whether the man or the woman, first converts to Islam – it is unclear how many Malay respondents who did not express such an opposition did so precisely because they took such a caveat for granted. These issues do not concern us when we consider objections to interethnic marriages, however. Figure 3 shows the proportion of respondents objecting to interethnic marriage, broken down by ethnicity and urban-rural status. Unsurprisingly, urban objections to interethnic marriage are significantly lower than rural objections within each group.<sup>8</sup> More importantly, however, in both urban and rural areas, Malay objections to interethnic marriage were likewise significantly lower than for the non-Malay groups; in urban areas less than 15% of Malay respondents professed an objection to interethnic marriages.

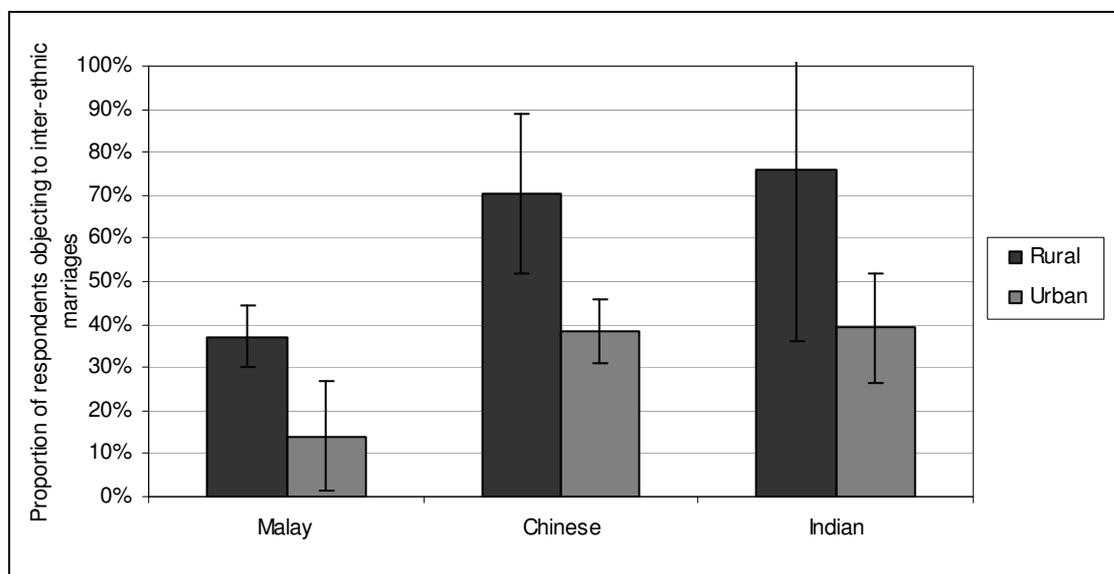


Figure 3: Proportion of respondents objecting to inter-ethnic marriages by ethnicity and urban-rural status

Notes: Error bars report 95% confidence interval

<sup>8</sup> Again, the significance of this result for the Indian population is unclear given the small number of rural Indians sampled and, hence, the large confidence interval.

If cultural entry to Malayness is relatively easy once the necessity of conversion is accepted, cultural exit is extremely difficult, again for religious reasons. Apostasy, or rejecting Islam, is legally extremely difficult for Muslims in Malaysia, whether Malay or not. Islamic affairs being under the jurisdiction of state administrations rather than the federal government, rules and practices on Muslim apostasy vary from state to state. In some states, apostasy is explicitly outlawed, punishable with fines, imprisonment or whipping. In other states, it is technically legal but requires the acceptance of a declaration of apostasy by a Shariah court, which also has the power to refuse to accept such a declaration and to send the appellant to a 'rehabilitation centre' to reconsider their faith.

While apostasy has been accepted in limited circumstances, however, this has been overwhelmingly restricted to converts to Islam (*saudara baru*, lit. new brothers/sisters), usually for the sake of marriage, who have subsequently rejected Islam, usually after the breakdown of that marriage; acceptance of apostasy for Muslim-born Malaysians, whether Malay or otherwise, is virtually unheard of.<sup>9</sup> Yet even at this low level, apostasy clearly presents a potential threat to (extreme communalist perceptions of) *Malay* identity, however, precisely because of the relative fluidity of Malay cultural entry. Hence, for instance, in 1993 a Malay deputy minister in the federal government publicly expressed concern about the equation of *masuk Islam* with *masuk Melayu*, precisely because of the 'large proportion' (*sebahagian besar*) of these converts who subsequently rejected Islam.<sup>10</sup> What is noticeable here is that the boundaries of ethnic Malay identity were seen as requiring extra shoring up against the relative porousness of Islam rather than vice versa.

More important for the argument being made here, however, is the noticeable shift in the secular courts in Malaysia from accepting evidence of religious *practice* as evidence of religious identity to relying on a bureaucratic definition of a Muslim, referring issues of apostasy to the Shari'a Courts. Two comparable cases in 1991 and 1992 highlight this transition. Both cases related to recent widows petitioning the court to recognize that their deceased husbands were not Muslim at the time of their death, in order to be able to bury them according to non-Islamic rituals. In the first case, a Chinese woman was successful in persuading the court that her husband had been a practising Buddhist at the time of his death, but a year later in similar circumstances, an Indian woman was unsuccessful in a similar petition because, while the court accepted evidence that her husband had eaten pork and prayed at a Sikh temple, he lacked a ruling from the Shari'a Court that he had indeed renounced Islam, and hence must be treated as a Muslim. In a landmark 1999 ruling, the Federal Court – Malaysia's highest court – subsequently ruled that it has no jurisdiction over matters of apostasy, which are now in the sole purview of the Shari'a Courts. Islam remains constitutionally designated as a matter for state administrations rather than the federal government, but in 2003 the federal government undertook an initiative to introduce a standardized package of Islamic laws at the state level,

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<sup>9</sup> The closest public case revolves around an elderly Malay woman who converted to Buddhism upon marriage in the 1930s. Having lived as a practicing Buddhist all her life without significant problems, she petitioned for apostasy when her husband died in order that she would be able to be buried alongside him, but was refused. After her own death, however, the Syariah court agreed that she had been a *de facto* apostate and hence allowed her to be buried in a non-Muslim cemetery.

<sup>10</sup> 'Anut Islam bukan masuk Melayu', *Berita Harian*, 18 September 1993.

which all but one state had passed by April 2005.<sup>11</sup> This kind of bureaucratization of the Islamic legal system and informal practices, then, has increasingly rendered religion a more legible means of differentiating and stratifying society than the amorphous concept of 'Malayness'.

Indeed, looking beyond the West Malaysian peninsula to East Malaysia, the legibility advantages for the state of differentiating along religious rather than ethnic lines are even clearer. As noted above, ethnic identity in East Malaysia is much less clearly bounded than in West Malaysia. Inter-marriage rates are high – more than 20% of the survey respondents in Sabah reported mixed parentage against only a handful of respondents in the West Malaysia sites – and a significant proportion of these are 'Sinos' – those of mixed Chinese and bumiputera descent (from a common contraction of Sino-Kadazan, Sino-Dusun, etc.). Until recently, bumiputera status was transferred inter-generationally through either parent. Hence, it is not entirely uncommon to find an East Malaysian bumiputera with an entirely Chinese sounding name and who practices Buddhism; indeed, a prominent Christian bumiputera family in Sabah which has produced a number of state and federal ministers carries the family name Ongkili, reportedly a concatenation of a paternal ancestor Ong Ki Li.<sup>12</sup> In this context, state-sponsored Islamization with developmental inducements, and even 'backdoor' citizenship for Muslim migrants from neighbouring Indonesia and the Philippines, has a long track-record in East Malaysia (Lim 2008; Sadiq 2005).

Social control as well as stratification is clearly implicated in this shift. Prosecutions for *khalwat* (illicit proximity) have long been a feature of Malaysian society – although usually kept out of the courts through the rapid marriage of the offending parties – but this has been extended in recent years by a very public increase in moral policing associated with Islamic law. In January 2005, the Kuala Lumpur religious authorities, JAWI (*Jabatan Agama Wilayah Persekutuan*), raided a nightclub, detaining around a hundred Muslims and raising accusations of harassment of the female detainees. While the government quickly responded in the wake of the public reaction, criticisms were largely leveled at the way in which the raid was conducted, rather than the principle that JAWI was entitled to conduct such raids.<sup>13</sup> JAWI subsequently announced plans to set up 'volunteer squads' to watch for 'indecent acts' that contravene Islamic norms, including holding hands in public<sup>14</sup>; in 2003, a Chinese couple had been booked for holding hands in the KLCC Park in the city centre. More recently, the Selangor state religious department JAIS (*Jabatan Agama Islam Selangor*) conducted a similar raid on a hotel nightclub, detaining around 100 Muslims and charging seven of them with consumption of alcohol.<sup>15</sup> In commenting on this increase in moral policing with specific respect to the politics of 'illegal migrants', Hedman (2008: p.381) argues that the very public practice of such policing 'reflects and reproduces the deeper anxieties (and ambitions) as to the requisites of constituting a properly reformed 'Malay' subject in Malaysia... [suggesting] a powerful dialectic at work in the (re)production of 'Malay-ness' through public spectacle and popular participation'. I would argue, however, that short of being an attempt to reassert and reformulate Malay identity,

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<sup>11</sup> Reported by Abdullah bin Md. Zin, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, in the Dewan Rakyat (lower house of Parliament); Hansard, *Dewan Rakyat*, 19 April 2004.

<sup>12</sup> Interview, anonymous member of the Ongkili family, April 2007.

<sup>13</sup> 'Editorial: Beyond moral indignation', *New Straits Times*, 31 January 2005.

<sup>14</sup> 'FT religious department wants to go ahead with its snoop squad', *The Star*, 20 January 2006.

<sup>15</sup> 'JAIS cites hotel customers', *The Star*, 18 August 2008.

increasing social policing is, rather, a reflection of the decreasing salience of the 'Malay/non-Malay' dichotomy and the increasing sociological importance and bureaucratic convenience of the 'Muslim/non-Muslim' dichotomy.

This is not to suggest that ethnicity and ethnic identification will eventually give way to religion across the board – it seems highly unlikely, for instance, that Malaysia's affirmative action policies will ever be recast in explicitly religious rather than ethnic terms. Moreover, Malaysia certainly still has its fair share of 'ethnic entrepreneurs' (cf. Brass 1997; Brass 2005; Lake & Rothchild 1998) – from UMNO national leaders like Hishamuddin Hussain waving the *kris*, a Malay ceremonial dagger, at the party convention to aspiring local politicians like Penang based Ahmad Ismail describing the Chinese as 'squatters' in Malaysia.<sup>16</sup> But such events are increasingly treated as something of an embarrassment by the BN coalition – Hishamuddin was forced to issue a public apology<sup>17</sup>, while Ahmad was suspended from his party for three years.<sup>18</sup> Rather, in the state arena at least, ethnicity is increasingly being 'operationalized' through religious affiliation. Indeed, intra-Malay political competition – primarily between UMNO and PAS – has historically revolved around differing interpretations of Islam, although the emergence of the broadly pan-ethnic *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* (PKR) in recent years may herald a change here (cf. Brown 2008). But, Islam is increasingly taking up a more central role in Malay ethnic identification although, as the remarks of the British superintendent of the census quoted above demonstrated, this can be seen as something of a pendulum swing.

## 5 Conclusions

This article has examined the changing dynamics of group identification in Malaysia, paying particular attention to the politically dominant Malay community and the shift in emphasis from ethnicity as the basis of identification to religion. I have argued that this should be understood as a dual process, resulting both from a 'bottom-up' Islamization movement drive largely by sociological pressures but also as a result of 'top-down' cultural and bureaucratic rationalization driven by state incentives for social 'legibility'. Within the context of a broadly hierarchical multi-cultural society, 'Islam' has become, for the state, a more legible means of differentiating and, to some extent, controlling the population than 'Malay/bumiputera'.

Ann Swidler (1986) influentially characterized culture as a 'tool kit' through which individuals understand and respond to the world around them. Yet culture is not just a resource that individuals draw upon, it is also drawn upon and reshaped by the state and state practices. Many scholars have analysed the ways in which aspects of idealized Malay culture – notably a supposed unquestioning deference to leadership and social norms based on 'politeness' (*kesopanan*) and village practices – have been exploited by the state to claim political advantage (e.g. Chandra 1979; Walker 2004), but the political traction of these claims has become less viable in the modern, urban context – in one of his last major speeches as prime minister, Mahathir lambasted the Malays for 'forgetting easily' and failing to transfer their rural practices to the urban context.

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<sup>17</sup> 'Malaysian politician apologizes for knife act', *Reuters*, 25 April 2008.

<sup>18</sup> 'Ahmad suspended three years', *The Star Online*, 10 September 2008.

To extend Swidler's metaphor, thick identities provide more powerful tools; as religious identity has thickened in Malaysia, so state practices dichotomized along religious rather than ethnic lines have become a more potent source of social stratification and control for the state. While the thickness of identity aspects may undergird the potency of cultural resources – the tools in the toolkit – however, culture is not infinitely malleable and the content of different cultures may gain more or less traction in different contexts. Whereas Malay ethnic culture offers few resources for the state to draw upon in seeking to proscribe behaviour and norms in the modern, urban economy, particular interpretations of Islam – such as Abdullah's Islam Hadhari – do offer such resources.

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