

CHAPTER 2

THE FEDERATION OF MALAYSIA



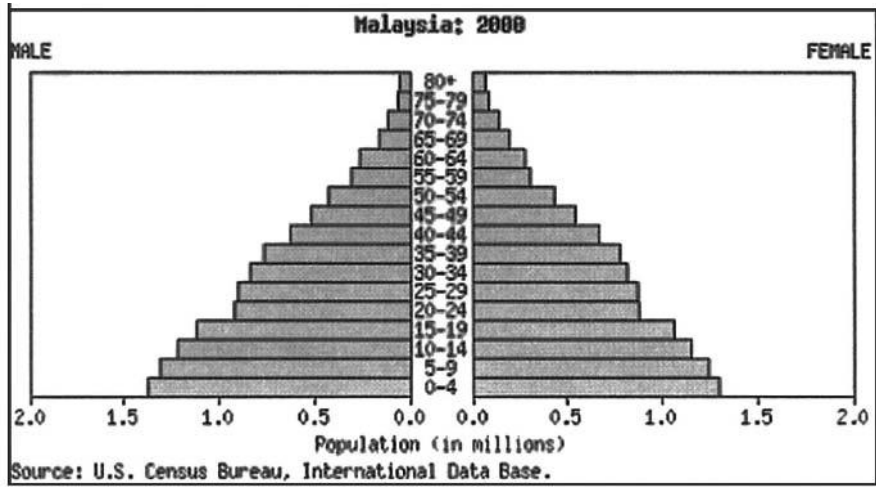
CIA World Factbook, 2005

This chapter concentrates on the tensions arising out of the policy differences between the Malay language and the English language in Malaysia. The Malay language is the official language of Malaysia and is enshrined in the Malaysian Constitution. Malay has been both the *de jure* and *de facto* language of choice among most Malaysians since independence in 1963. Malay is the language of nation building and represents the concept of *adat-istiadat* (traditional Malay cultural practices). It is deemed anti-constitutional for locals or foreigners to criticize or challenge the special position of the Malay language in any manner. The official and legal status of Malay has aided nation-building to a large extent but it has also made it a challenge for policymakers to implement other languages such as English, Chinese and Tamil in government policy. Too much emphasis on other languages such as English has often resulted in a political groundswell against the federal government and the state governments. This state of affairs has resulted in the sporadic and occasional implementation of English, for example, despite the importance of the role of English in technology and globalization. But as we show below, this does not mean that non-Malay languages are not used widely across the nation in business and social activities. As we mentioned previously, our focus is on overt language policies. However, we also noted that overt policies are constrained by nationalistic narratives, and the concept of

adat-istiadat is a key element in the Malaysian nationalist narrative, emphasizing the important role played by the Malay language in constituting the Malaysian identity. The presence of *adat-istiadat*, as we demonstrate below, therefore makes it all the more difficult for Malaysia to reconcile elements of its traditional past with the challenges of modernity.¹ And in speaking of modernity, we come, of course, to the English language. For a long time, English represented the language of the ex-colonizer, and it is now is considered the language of Western capitalism. The widespread use English in Malaysian law, trade, commerce, and education is a result of an accident of historical fact. The ‘use-value’ of English is seen in its omnipresence as the language of technology and communication, making it a language that Malaysia cannot afford to simply ignore, nor for state policymakers to marginalize.

Before we proceed any further, we will examine the demography of Malaysia.² Refer to Figure 2-1. The demographic character of Malaysia helps provide a useful backdrop to the study of language policy. The country’s GNP is about RM296 billion (S\$148 billion or US\$74 billion) with a population of ‘about 22.3 million living within its sovereign land mass of approximately 329,749 sq km including the states of Sabah and Sarawak, and the Federal Territory of Labuan in the North-Western coast. About a million foreign nationals live and work in Malaysia.

Figure 2-1 The Population of Malaysia



Note that ethnic Malays comprise almost 60% of the population, while Chinese make up a quarter of the population, and Eurasians and Indians make up the remaining 7.5%. Malaysia’s population pyramid is illustrated in Figure 2-1. This chapter is therefore concerned primarily with the ways in which the positioning of the Malay and English languages within modern Malaysia will facilitate ethnic integration, ethnic-

tolerance, and multiethnic nation-building as the country attempts to negotiate the processes of modernity (often described together as globalization, democratization, capitalism, and a dependence on technological and scientific expertise). Our main argument is that the Malaysian state (i.e. the federal government) has to negotiate a careful balancing act between the competing tensions arising from the relationship between the Malay language (known variously as Bahasa Malaysia, the national language, or the national cultural language), and the use of English (usually and practically British and American English) as the international language of modernity. The problematic of language policy and modernity in Malaysia therefore provides an interesting and growing bank of data for conceptual analyses among decision-makers on one hand and the academic study of politics and policy on the other.

Milton J. Esman once wrote that the salience of the language choices made by decision-makers is itself an extension of the political community as a whole, "Language is a calculated policy issue in the hands of the political elites, with major impacts on society. A language regime can facilitate societal integration, exacerbate interethnic conflict, or foster pluralistic coexistence" (Esman, 1990:185). Indeed, such policy decisions do not merely facilitate or foster integration, conflict or coexistence on their own. Rather, as we shall see in this chapter, language policy decisions can produce integration of ethnic identity (for example at the level of national identity) while simultaneously suppressing ethnic conflict (as seen in ethnic claims over indigenous, spiritual and cultural spaces in the case of the bumiputera or son-of-the-soil policy), thus ensuring a seemingly peaceful quotidian co-existence during periods of interethnic contact (Case, 1993).

Esman's theoretical start-point was chosen because of his earlier work and familiarity with Malaysia seen in *Administration and Development in Malaysia* (1972). Note that 'administration' and 'development' symbolize two crucial facets of modernity, and remind us of the importance of language policy in supporting the progress of the nation-state in its search for an ideological equilibrium. Esman's views therefore provide a useful segue into the major theme of this chapter: the tensions and problems that arise in reconciling Malay and English both at the level of nationalist narrative and overt language policy.

In the next section, we provide a brief overview of the origins of modern Malaysia, leading up to the Malaysian nationalist narrative as it currently stands. We then deal with specific issues that arise from the intersection of this narrative with language policy. These include the bumiputera policy (a policy of affirmative action for ethnic Malays), the attempts to construct a relationship of equivalence between Malay and English, and the question of whether Malay is itself becoming seen in more instrumentalist terms.

2-1 THE ONSET OF MODERNITY IN MALAYSIA

Southeast Asian modernity began with the arrival of the Western colonizers and that 'first contact' for Malaya was in the 1511 invasion and conquest of Melaka by the Portuguese. This historical start-point eventually develops a Malaysian modernity

that is broken up into stridently different, competing colonial periods (Portuguese, Dutch, and British), each containing new and different emphases on warfare, military and civilian administration, legal infrastructure, and language policies.

While it was the Dutch period that enabled the rise of Malay as both an oral and written means of official and vernacular communications (Benjamin, 1988), it was the British period from 1874 to 1963 that generated the greatest impact on language policy in Malaysian modernity today. The British colonizers' legal *articles of arrangement*, called the Treaty of Pangkor, Clause VI (1874), ensured that British *residents* (a title accorded to Senior Colonial Officers of standing) would be the primary economic and administrative advisors of the Royal Malay Households (Gullick, 1969:53; Wilkinson, [1923] 1971:100-105; Rappa, 1997b:3). This was to be the first legal piece of legislature created to promote the Malay language. Such a legal device was an explicit recognition of the sovereign Malay status over non-Malays, and by the end of the British colonial period, became the political legitimization of Malay language and culture over the indigenous and other cultures of the peninsula. Therefore, without the advent of the British colonial period, Malay might not have ever attained its predominance in modernity. Additionally, the Treaty politically marginalized the *Orang Asli* who were the first people to settle in the archipelago and although the Merdeka Constitution of 1957 guarantees the rights of non-Malay bumiputera or 'indigenous people', the role of these marginalized bumiputera in politics and economics is limited. It is significant that "a primary motivation of the Treaty was to harmonize the large number of territorial wars and disputes among the various Malay kingdoms. The British needed to establish a favorable political climate for their mercantilist economics and subsequently devoted the entire ninety year period between 1824 and 1914 to the structuring of a comprehensive political economy for the benefit of the British Crown" (Rappa, 1997b:13).

The end of the Portuguese and Dutch colonial eras in Malaysia resulted in the entrenchment of the Malay, Chinese, and Tamil languages as the primary means of communications with the subsequent British-style of colonization making the most significant mark on these linguistic communities. This was because the British tactic of dividing their colonized towns and cities into the 'Chinese', 'Malay', 'Indian', 'Eurasian', and 'European' quarters became as much as a facet of British colonial life as it was part of the Malayan postcolonial experience. The effects of the British divide and rule policy explain much of the problems and issues present in Malaysian language and modernity today. After the end of the Pacific War, the peninsula was compartmentalized into roughly the same three political divisions of the pre-war years: the Federated Malay States, the Unfederated Malay States (UFMS), and the Straits Settlements of Penang, Melaka, and Singapore. However, the end of the Pacific War saw the ultimate demise of British and other colonial controls over their former colonies.

The rise of Malay nationalism that began in the first quarter of the 20th century came to fruition with the abortive Malayan Union proposal of 1946 – that sought to unify all three political regimes into a single unitary format – and signaled the formal rise of the indigenous political elite. Access to employment opportunities in the colonial administration depended heavily on one's skill in written or spoken English: the greater one's skill at the language, the higher the chances of enjoying greater occupational

mobility and social mobility. In this regard, English as always been viewed in linguistic instrumentalist terms in Malaysia. By the early 1950s however, British colonial policy towards education continued to play second fiddle to their primary objective of economic exploitation and political control over the archipelago.

The watershed federal election of 1955 legitimated the position of the incumbent umbrella political party, the Alliance, vis-à-vis the colonial administrators (Rappa, 1997). This was the umbrella political party that Mahathir Mohamad – the longest serving head of government in Southeast Asia till October 2003 – thought “continually favored Chinese over the Malays” (Mahathir, 1970:13). This narrational fragment from Mahathir, written over a decade before he came into power, revealed the reality of the ethnic tensions that were largely created by British colonial policies that entrenched the separate economic, social, and cultural development of the ethnic communities in Malaysia. This had a profound effect on the Malays who had traditionally perceived Malaya (before political independence in 1963) and Malaysia (as it was known after independence from the British colonialists) as being inherently their ‘own’ land.

The 1955 federal election also represented a political watershed for the Malay, Chinese, and Indian nationalists under the Alliance that was headed by the United Malay National Organization (UMNO), which won 51 out of the 52 seats contested. Subsequently, the ‘political bargain’ enshrined in the 1957 version of the Malaysian Constitution codified the importance of Malay indigenous/special rights (political rights) and predominance of Chinese-controlled businesses in the economy.

Six years after the formation of Malaysia, the cleavages between Malay political ‘rights’ and Chinese economic ‘privileges’ resulted in the May 13th 1969 riots. This led to the authoritarian implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1970-1971 when the democratically-elected parliament was suspended and dissolved and Malaysia was governed by an authoritarian, executive council in the name of communal unity and national peace (Hirschman, 1979; Hirschman, 1987; Jomo, 1990/1; Rappa, 1997). The move to marginalize the power of the centrist and moderate politician Tunku Abdul Rahman, by the right-wing, pro-Malay Tun Razak, would establish the supreme right of the Malays as enshrined in the Constitution for the first time in modern Malay history and provide political leverage for the Malay bumiputera claim over Malaya. Malays were not only given special rights in administration and education but also in terms of language and culture. The intention thereafter was to increase the Malay population from about half the citizenry to a sizeable majority in the 21st century.

Much of the motivation for the bumiputera policy came from the fact that Malay control over their homeland had been historically weakened by British colonial policy on migrant workers. For example, the policy on the local tin mines and other areas used Chinese migrant workers “until the Malays were excluded from these fields of employment” (Mahathir, 1970:27). This would eventually lead Mahathir to develop the argument that Malays would have to receive special protection and privileges in order to circumvent non-Malay intrusion into the spheres of Malay labor. The Malay dilemma for Mahathir was that unless they effectively engaged the challenges imposed by colonial rule, they would eventually lose control over their own tradition and culture. And if they did not face the fact of Malay backwardness, then they would only have

themselves to blame. This was because up till the late 1960s, there was a general reluctance among Malays to talk about the disparity between the Malays and the Chinese. Ignorance may be bliss (Mahathir, 1970:60) but for Mahathir (1970:103-114), the Malay dilemma was in effect a Malaysian dilemma.

The pressures involved in engaging Malaysian modernity was to an extent exemplified by Mahathir's surprise announcement at the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) general assembly on June 21, 2002, that he had resigned his party political presidency and all other party political posts in Barisan Nasional (BN) and UMNO. Mahathir's statement of resignation was eventually rescinded after a resolution to reject the resignation by his own deputy, the current prime minister of Malaysia, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. Mahathir's outburst over national television caught his Cabinet colleagues by surprise. But it also reflected a series of 'political failures' that include his self-admitted inability to raise the general status and attitudes of Malay bumiputera, Malay culture, Malay language, and Malay educational performance since he became prime minister in 1981.

2-2 A NARRATIVE OF MODERN MALAYSIA

While Malaysia is a modern nation-state, it is also clear that it is a place of great social and cultural contrasts and political paradoxes. One such paradox is seen in its official multiethnic showcase of tranquility and peacefulness (*kesentosaan*) and harmony (*keharmonian*) between the bumiputera (the indigenous son-of-the-soil who enjoy Constitutionally-guarded special rights) and non-bumiputera, between the Chinese and the Malays, between the ultra orthodox Muslims, moderate Muslim majority, fundamentalist Islamic supporters who are propagating a Malaysian Islamic state, and the Islamic terrorist organizations with international connections to Al-Qaeda and other globally-located terrorist organizations.

How does the state act to reduce the level of ethnic tensions within modern Malaysia despite its multiethnic showcase that claims to represent all the major bumiputera and non-bumiputera people? One way in which this is done can be seen in the state's representation of *pondok* schools. The Malay word *pondok* means 'a small village hut'; and a *pondok* school is a village religious school. These are often found in the countryside and along the coasts of peninsula Malaysia.

In early 2002, the then prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad, announced that the *pondok* schools were being used as a front by people who were involved in training cadres for violent activities under the guise of Islamic theology and who were not interested in imparting true religious language and religious knowledge. When Mahathir referred to these village schools, he was emphasizing their simplistic, fundamentalist, and backward nature. The *pondok* school is an anti-modernist metaphor that involves simplicity, stasis, and an adherence to basic beliefs over the complexity, development and progress of modernity. Mahathir's comments came in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks against the twin towers of World Trade Center in New York. As a result, the Malaysian government had introduced a standard religious curriculum for all religious schools so that the teachers would not deviate from these standards (*The Star*, February

2, 2002). The *pondok* school therefore represents, within the Malaysian narrative, a kind of political sleeper, dormant and working quietly in the rubber plantations and rural areas and undermining the moderate Islamic practices of the central government. The *pondok* school epitomizes one set of challenges to Malaysia's desire to achieve the status of a developed nation by the year 2020.

The prime minister Abdullah Badawi is pursuing a different brand of Islam from that of his predecessor, Mahathir Mohammad. The new prime minister's thinking is reflected in *Islam Hadhari* or moderate Islam. The middle-path strategy that Badawi advocates in *Islam Hadhari* is a particularly intelligent political strategy for three reasons: (1) it is a substantial continuation of Mahathir's moderate mixture of Islamic tolerance, which allows for political continuity and policy coherence at the highest levels of Malaysian politics; (2) the strategy emphasizes the peaceful and tolerant aspects of Islam, which puts the non-Muslim Malaysians at ease within the polity; and (3) *Islam Hadhari* announces to the neoliberal world that it can work within the capitalist structures by reconciling with the pressures from the US and its major Allies to fight terrorism associated with the right-wing fundamentalist Islam that the international media has portrayed in the West for the past four decades, ostensibly since the beginning of the Cold War in 1955. *Islam Hadhari* is in part based on the combination of the thoughts of Malaysian based Islamic scholars, Arab consultants, and the research output of the International Islamic University in Kuala Lumpur, the federal capital of Malaysia. Yet there are some troubling aspects within Malaysian modernity that resist Badawi's new strategy such as the *pondok* schools of Islam.

While Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's prime ministership is still too new to make a comprehensive analysis of its performance, it seems likely that he will continue to adopt a moderate path for Islam and place emphasis on the implementation of such moderation in the rural areas of Malaysia. The strategy of *Islam Hadhari* will be supplemented by Badawi's emphasis on the agricultural sector and the importance of hard work and self-reliance at the grassroots levels. This contrasts with Mahathir's push towards global economic development across all sectors. Under Mahathir, the government's developmental drive had been based on a relentless economic rationality that tended to marginalize the Malay and non-Malay poor and had resulted in the loss of two states to the political opposition. It is therefore politically telling that the retirement of Mahathir has since resulted in the regaining of the state of Trengganu to the Barisan Nasional.

What this discussion shows, then, is that the Malaysian narrative is primarily characterized by the desire to privilege a specific, ethnically-inflected sense of identity, that of the Malay bumiputera. Because of this, the Malay language and the various religious and cultural values it is felt to embody (*adat-istiadat*) must always be given special prominence in the narrative. The problem here is that English, as the lingua franca of global communication and technological access, cannot be easily accommodated within this narrative without at the same time threatening to undermine the prestige of the Malay language.

Abdullah Badawi's *Islam Hadhari* is one attempt to address the intersection of tradition and modernity. By claiming that it is possible to strive for a more moderate version of Islam – one that is compatible with the demands of modernity while not compromising on traditional Islamic values – Badawi hopes to pre-empt accusations

from the more fundamentalist sectors of Malaysian society that he is disrespectful of the religion or undermining the central position that Malays ought to occupy in Malaysian society. It is obviously too early to judge the success of *Islam Hadhari*, but a crucial factor in Badawi's favor is the general consensus in Malaysian society that his credentials as an scholar of Islam are impeccable, thus lending essential weight to his pronouncements concerning the relationship between Islam and modernity.

2-3 THE NEOCOLONIAL MALAY STATE

The neocolonial Malay state itself continues to enshrine and protect Malay language interests in terms that have been widened into civil society structures such as *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka* (the Malay language academy) and the media companies owned by political parties.

The *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka* gained autonomy for its special role in developing programs and expanding the language and literature through various professional activities in its corporate functions under Ordinance 1959 (also known as the *Acta DBP*, 1959). The Act granted the DBP the legal autonomy to develop and expand Bahasa Melayu, the language of the Malays, into Bahasa Malaysia the language of Malaysia. The intention is, in due course, to develop Malay into a world language by the year 2020 with the motto, "*Bahasa Jiwa Bangsa*" (Language, Life, Culture). The year 1959 was important because it was the year that Malaya (rather than Malaysia which only came into being in 1963) received permission for internal self-government from the British masters. The DBP Act was amended in 1978 and expanded in 1995 to include:

- (1) implementing the national language in all fields including science and technology;
- (2) expanding Bahasa Malaysia's special and official place as the national language with respect to its literary basis and content;
- (3) to encourage the correct use of the national language; and technical development of the language in terms of *istilah* (grammar) and other areas that require specialist attention. The DBP is therefore empowered by the state to use state money to prevent the linguistic displacement of the Malay language to avoid language stasis, and language death as seen in the case of Latin.

Note that attempting to implement Malay in science and technology (1) represents a direct attempt to assert that Malay, too, is capable of functioning in domains that English normally would occupy. This is a sign that rather than being content with consigning Malay to the 'traditional' domain of cultural practices, Malaysian language policy is hoping to position Malay in instrumentalist terms. That is, it is being positioned as a language that allows its speakers access to greater socioeconomic mobility, and not just traditional Malay culture.

This instrumentalist positioning of Malay vis-à-vis English demonstrates that awareness of and attention to English is never far away. Thus, the *New Straits Times*-in-Education program (NIE) is an example of a media-sponsored English program where the media is seen to be an instrument of modernity (*New Straits Times*, March 13, 2002). More importantly, the state announced on June 7, 2002 through the new

education minister Shamsudin Aziz that the study of English would be made compulsory for all Malaysian students. This recognizes the continuing importance of English as the instrument of the state in Malaysian modernity. In fact, Malaysian ministers themselves often give speeches and interviews that are interspersed with English and Malay. Phrases in both languages are used as points of (political) emphasis in these speeches and interviews. On formal occasions such as speeches made in Parliament and other legislative chambers, it is not uncommon for the political representative to also make use of Koranic verses and phrases at the beginning and at the end of these speeches. When he opens parliament, the paramount ruler or King of Malaysia, the Yang Di-Pertuan Agong, also makes use of Koranic phrases in his public and private speeches since he carries with him the sacred responsibility of safeguarding the Muslim religion. This is a tradition that was institutionalized after first contact with the British colonizers by the British themselves. The British wanted the Malay rulers to make use of their own religion (Islam) to gain the trust and confidence of the people, rather than imposing the Christian religion on the Malays.

The English language is therefore often used in policy directives about national interest objectives in terms of acquisition of knowledge in science, technology, industry, business, banking, finance, and commerce. The Malay language on the other hand is used as a vehicle for bonding citizens within the multiethnic, multilingual, and multiethnic nation-state across ethnic, religious, and class lines. As the official national language, Malay is supposed to serving the following two main policy functions which were to act as:

- (1) an emblem of the Malay people who are considered constitutionally as the indigenous people of Malaysia; and,
- (2) a bearer of traditional values, thus securing the survival of Malay primordialism.

The importance of Malay in Malaysian modernity cannot be discounted not just because it continues to be the official national language; it is also the working language of many Malays and non-Malays alike within Malaysia and outside its borders. Also, there are linguistically different Malay languages and dialects in the Southeast Asian region that are habitually spoken by about 200 million people in Southeast Asia and parts of the Middle-East and Africa. This makes the Malay language the fifth largest of all language communities worldwide. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* defines the Malay language as:

a member of the Western, or Indonesian, branch of the Malayo-Polynesian language family, spoken as a native language by more than 33,000,000 persons distributed over the Malay Peninsula, Sumatra, Borneo, and the numerous smaller islands of the area, and widely used in Malaysia and Indonesia as a second language. Malay shows the closest relationship to most of the other languages of Sumatra (Minangkabau, Kerintji, Rejang) and is clearly, but not so closely, related to the other Austronesian languages of Sumatra, Borneo, Java, and to the Cham languages of Vietnam. Of the various dialects of Malay, the most important is that of the southern Malay Peninsula, the basis of standard Malay and of the official language of the Republic of Indonesia, Bahasa Indonesia, or Indonesian. A Malay pidgin called Bazaar Malay ... was widely used as a lingua franca in the East Indian archipelago and was the basis of the colonial language used in Indonesia by the Dutch. The version of Bazaar Malay used in Chinese merchant communities in Malaysia is called Baba Malay. Languages or dialects closely related to Malay that are spoken on Borneo include Iban (Sea Dayak), Brunei Malay, Sambas Malay, Kutai Malay, and Banjarese.

Given such a definition, it becomes clear why the Malay language has been used to 'ground' the indigenous claim of the Malays. The special rights of the bumiputera are enshrined in the Malaysian Constitution whereby all bumiputera are accorded special rights in terms of education, housing, land acquisition, bank loans, trust funds and privileged positions in the Malaysian Civil Service (MSC) and in the private sector. Over the years, this has created a two-class system of citizenship in Malaysian politics. Therefore in constitutional terms, it would appear that bumiputera Malaysians constitute 'first class citizens' while the non-bumiputera Malaysians such as the Chinese and Indians, constitute 'second class citizens.'

2-4 EDUCATION AND MALAYSIAN MODERNITY

The Abdul Razak Committee on Education was formed in 1955 in the same year that Malaysia 'received' or acquired internal self-government from its British colonial masters. Razak would eventually become the first Minister of Education and succeed Tunku Abdul Razak as the second Malaysian prime minister. The 1956 Razak Education Report as it came to be known recommended that a national education system be created for the newly independent country with Malay as the national language. The Razak report became the keystone of Malaysia's education system gazetted in the Education Ordinance of 1957. It would also become the source of future problems for the system of education in Malaysia. However, it was not till the Rahman Talib Review (1960) that a clearer legal basis for education was established in the Education Act (1961). A clause within the Act empowered the state to make Malay – as the national language – compulsory in Malaysian primary and secondary schools as well as institutions for government and government related training such as the police force and the military. This keystone language clause has neither been revised nor challenged for over 4 decades and appears to have served the Malay community very well.

There is another reason why there have been no apparent challenges to the Education Act, and this is found in another law, the Sedition Act (1948) that was introduced during the Emergency period (1946-1960) by the British to control and contain the communist movement under the banner of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP). The Constitution (Amendment) Act, 1971, which enshrined Malay as official and other languages as being tolerated, clearly states that Malay, "may no longer be questioned, it being considered that such a sensitive issue should for ever be removed from the arena of public discussion". The law provided for all English-medium schools to incrementally adopt Malay language as a subject of compulsory study. Singapore separated from Malaysia in 1965 after barely two years in the federation and their language policies now took on a radical divergence, with Singapore's policy focusing on English (the native dialect and mother-tongue of the Eurasians) and three other official languages of 'Mandarin/Chinese', 'Malay' and 'Tamil'; and Malaysia's policy developing into the study of Malay as the national language with the vernacular languages and English receiving lower emphasis. This means that the Malaysian

Constitution has been the primary legal-rational tool for raising the status of Malay vis-à-vis English, Chinese and Tamil.

In fact, there were early attempts to displace English, and replace it with Malay. For example, English-medium schools were abolished in this period amidst resistance from the English-speaking population. The political intention was two-fold, and meant to:

- (1) rid Malaysia of the colonial language;
- (2) weaken the Chinese-grasp of the English language. But to the chagrin of the Malay ethnocrats (Rappa, 1999c:90-120), many of the best Chinese students were eventually out performing the Malay bumiputera in the study of Malay language itself.

Another benchmark report was the 1979 Mahathir Report on Education reflecting over seven years of study in development administration. The report widened the scope of education to include the nationalistic goals of patriotism as well as functionalist ones such as the production of skilled manpower for the economy. However it was not until the mid-1990s that the Education Act (1961) was amended to meet or to face the challenges of 21st century Malaysian modernity that formed part of Mahathir's Wawasan 2020 (Vision in the Year 2020) which intended for Malaysia to achieve developed nation status by that year as well as creating a nation of excellence within an education system that developed individuals who were not only capable of the highest possible level of personal achievement but also the best possible contribution to the family, the society, and the nation as a whole.

A third benchmark is the New Education Act (1995) that provides free education from ages 6-18 with the last two as options depending on academic and other performance criteria. The system of 'free' education has been implemented across a nation-wide system of 5244 national Malay schools; 1282 Chinese language schools with Chinese as the medium of instruction; 530 Tamil language schools with Tamil as the medium of instruction, and 28 special schools for the physically challenged. Malaysia continues to practice a system of automatic promotion to secondary schools regardless of whether students have passed the primary school examinations (PSAT). Students who attend the non-Malay national schools have to read an additional year before entering Form One to bring them up to speed in the national language. Since the beginning of the NEP (1970), considerable resources have been devoted towards Malay bumiputera education in order for these indigenous citizens to acquire a greater stake in the historically Chinese-dominated economy. While some critics have claimed that the intended 30% stake by Malay bumiputera was indeed achieved well before the target year of 1990, successive UMNO-led governments have resisted such criticisms and implemented what is now known as the National Development Policy (NDP) that is a continuation of the affirmative action strategy (Pong, 1993) despite the speeches by Mahathir on the need to wean (Malay) bumiputera away from a dependence on quotas and other forms of non-merit based selection systems (Pong, 1993). Pong's article examines the results of the affirmative action policy of Malaysia in terms of gender and socioeconomic difference with data that was based on the 2nd Malaysian Family Life Survey (MFLS2) for birth cohorts born between 1940 and 1969. Pong concludes that over time, Malays were increasingly more likely to attain secondary school than were non-Malays because of the policy. However, this quantitative assessment negates

several qualitative factors such as (1) the quality of high school graduates; (2) their ability in English language as the language of modernity; and (3) the performance of each high school graduate in tertiary education.

In 2001, Tan Sri Musa Mohammed reported that the university quota system, which reserves 55% of places in public universities for Malay students, would not be affected by the merit-based system. Royal Professor Emeritus Ungku Aziz however disagreed with direct meritorious selection because “it was reminiscent of the way the Mandarins were picked in ancient China or even the way students were selected in Singapore” (*The Straits Times*, August 11, 2001). The unequal system of selection by ethnicity therefore continues to be a perennial problem for UMNO and BN. The problem is that even with the help of the racial quota system, the Malay bumiputera students are not performing as well as their non-bumiputera counterparts, as seen in the ratios of first class honors by ‘race’ in Tables 2-1 to 2-3.³

Table 2-1
Proportion of First Class Honors for Malay and Non-Malay Students
(University of Malaya)

University of Malaya	First Class Honors			
	Malay	%	Non- Malay	%
1994	29	21.5	106	78.5
1995	34	22.4	118	77.6
1996	38	18.8	164	81.2
1997	46	19.5	190	80.5
1998	72	23.7	232	76.3
1999	96	27.0	259	73
Total	315	22.8	1069	77.2

Table 2-2
Proportion of First Class Honors for Malay and Non-Malay Students
(Universiti Teknologi Malaysia)

Universiti Teknologi Malaysia	First Class Honors			
	Malay	%	Non- Malay	%
1994	3	6.3	45	93.7
1995	1	2.2	44	97.8
1996	1	2.7	36	97.3
1997	6	15.8	32	84.2
1998	10	16.9	49	83.1
1999	7	6.9	95	93.1
Total	28	8.5	301	91.5

Table 2-3
Proportion of First Class Honors for Malay and Non-Malay Students
(Universiti Utara Malaysia)

Universiti Utara Malaysia	First Class Honors			
	Malay	%	Non-Malay	%
1994	-	0	17	100
1995	1	6.7	14	93.3
1996	-	0	39	100
1997	-	0	50	100
1998	1	5.9	16	94.1
1999	-	0	1	100
Total	2	1.4	137	98.6

It seems that regardless of the kinds of obstacles that non-bumiputera students face, including the racially based selection system to university, they continue to outperform their bumiputera counterparts. This has led to many questions about the value of the racial quota system and the extent to which it has effectively helped Malay bumiputera students:

UMNO politicians are worried about how to explain the (merit-based) policy to their grassroots supporters given that the party's rallying cry has long been '*UMNO membela Melayu*' (Umno provides for Malays)...[under the affirmative action/quota system of bumiputera preferential treatment] a non-Malay student needs ten As to qualify for medical school but a Malay student is accepted with only seven As...it is also a poorly kept secret that university lecturers are often asked to lower the passing grade in order to enable Malay students to get through their courses. (*The Straits Times*, August 11, 2001)

How then does the policy analyst make sense of the kind of failure of a racial quota system to produce the kinds of results that it was intended to have achieved in the first place? Let us explain. The ethnocratist Malay state represents a complex matrix of power where the primary ethnic community captures the state in order to promulgate public policies primarily for the benefit of co-ethnic Malays (Rappa, 1999c:90-120). Since the capture of the state by the Malay ethnic community, there has been a general level of tranquility and the Malaysian state has also secured a sufficiently high standard of living for most Malaysians since independence in 1963.

As a result of Malay power, Malay has become the national language for all Malaysians. Theoretically, the status and value of Malay should be at least equivalent to that of other local languages and English. But this does not appear to be so among the Chinese Malaysian community, for example, for the following six reasons:

- (1) many Chinese Malaysians prefer to send their children to Chinese medium schools, rather than national type schools where the medium of instruction is Malay;
- (2) Chinese Malaysians have been trying to build a Chinese university with Chinese as the medium of instruction for over 33 years and have only recently been given Cabinet approval;
- (3) many Malaysian Chinese prefer to send their children overseas to the National University of Singapore, the Nanyang Technological University, and other world universities rather than to Malaysia's many universities;
- (4) the Chinese protested the introduction of Malay as the language of instruction in the early 1970s;
- (5) many Chinese in Kuala Lumpur and their own communities elsewhere in Malaysia prefer not to use the Malay language because it reminds them of the unfavorable power imbalance between their community and the Malay community; and,
- (6) there is much unhappiness between the Chinese and Malays communities. However no one community overtly expresses it because of:
 - the importance of the national community over the self and the ethnic community;
 - the belief in nationalism and the importance of the imagined community over the politicized one;
 - the fear of political coercion from the state vis-à-vis the Internal Security Act;
 - since the implementation of the NEP in 1971, the Chinese have become increasingly insular with a tendency towards political apathy, and a 'preference' for political in-fighting within the Chinese community, while simultaneously attending to business development and familial ties;
 - neither the Chinese nor the Malays want a return to the riots of the 1960s.

The problem here is that the generation that remembers the political violence and riots of the 1960s is now in its 60s and 70s and will soon die out over the next 15-25 years. The people in the next generation who are in their 40s and 50s are themselves

too young to vividly remember the riots of the 1960s. Therefore, there are inter-generational differences of memory between and across cohorts that often makes attitudes between and across generations less than stable. The status of Malay is therefore dependent on the attitudes of the Chinese, Indians, Eurasians and the Malays themselves. But because the Malay language has the backing of political power there will continue to be a level of distrust of power and the use of power to enhance Malay language and culture within the Malaysian democratic transition.

The immediate post-British era saw the rise of Malay in nationalist colors and a rejection of all things that were associated with the colonial period. Yet the development of English as an international language has resulted in this language gaining an international prominence that cannot be thwarted by emotive appeals to traditional language use or to authoritarian policies that demand certain languages be used over others. English has become irresistible. It is part of a globalized modernity, not only to Malaysia and Malaysians within the modern frame (Rappa, 1997b:1-56), but also to all other states and societies across the globe.

The national education system has therefore played an important part in entrenching the Malay language in modern Malaysia. The system also has provided an integrating and assimilating role for all Malaysian students to help 'nation building' and 'racial integration'. For their part, the Malaysian vernacular schools hold closely to the traditional and cultural bases of value and are themselves sites of social resistance against the modernizing forces of educational change in Malaysian modernity. However, there are limits to the use of local vernacular languages for these Chinese and Tamil schools since they only exist at the primary and lower secondary levels. Up till recently, the closest entity that the Malaysian Chinese community had in terms of higher education in Chinese was the Tunku Abdul Rahman College or Kolej Tunku Abdul Rahman (the main campus is in Kuala Lumpur). When, in Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew closed down the Nanyang University and merged the campus with the University of Singapore to form the National University of Singapore in 1980 there was no other place in Southeast Asia that offered Chinese-language in the vernacular medium for the Chinese Diaspora.

However, after over 33 years of battling various Malay-bumiputera governments from the time of Tunku Abdul Rahman and Tun Abdul Razak to Hussein Onn and Mahathir Mohamad, a new university was finally launched in June 2002 to cater to the needs of the Chinese community. The Malaysian cabinet approved the Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR) in 2001. Unlike the other Malaysian universities that use a quota system for its selection of students – therefore giving Malay bumiputera students a much greater chance than they would actually have – UTAR implements a meritorious system of selection regardless of the student's background. However, the political reality is that those who qualify for a university place are likely to be Chinese since they tend to outperform the Malay bumiputera students and often even in Bahasa Malaysia. However, UTAR is likely to come under pressure to accept non-Chinese students under the former Mahathir government. There is no current campus and UTAR will have to rent office space from a local newspaper, the old Star Office Building in Petaling Jaya, for a period of three years for RM594, 000, which adds to the other problem of over 3000 applicants for 500 university places.

UTAR's main funding is likely to come from state coffers with the backing of

the Barisan Nasional or National Front (BN) component, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) under Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik. The leading faction of the BN is Mahathir Mohamad's UMNO. The students who qualify will have the option of choosing from eight different Bachelors' Degree courses including a Bachelor of Arts (Honors) in Chinese Studies. The Education Act, the Universities and University Colleges Act, and the Malaysian Ministry of Education's National Accreditation Board will govern UTAR like the other Malaysian universities. The formation of UTAR is highly political even within the Chinese community since not all Chinese Malaysians support the MCA which has been the main political party backing the project as seen in this press release by the opposition Democratic Action Party (DAP) Central Executive Committee Member, Penang State chairman, and Member of Parliament (MP) for Tanjung, Chow Kon Yeow:

Malaysians are shock[ed] today that the MCA president Datuk Seri Ling Liong Sik has gone against the grain of widespread opposition of the [Chinese] community to complete the purchase of Nanyang Siang Pau and China Press... Many MCA members are already feeling the heat from the community over the party's handling of issues ranging from the closure of the Damansara Chinese primary school, its support for Vision School, the abuse of the quota system in university admission, the Chang Min Thien Education Fund and the J.E. Humanitarian Fund. (DAP media conference statement in Penang, May 29, 2001)

Apart from the political in-fighting within the Chinese community, it is also not publicly clear why the Malaysian government has consistently delayed the setting up of a university for the Chinese over the past 33 years. Part of the reason for the delay might be the fear that a Chinese university in Malaysia would facilitate the education of university-educated Chinese elites in Malaysia who would pose a formidable political challenge to traditional Malay rights.

It is possible that these long delays could be linked to the NEP that tried to correct the imbalances between the (mainly Chinese Malaysian) citizens who tended to possess economic wealth and the (mainly Malay Malaysian) citizens who did not possess economic wealth but had economic power. The intention of the NEP was to ensure a 30% stake in 'their' economy by 1990. Not surprisingly – as affirmative action policies tend to be – this target was not achieved and a new policy called the National Development Policy was implemented, lawfully of course, by the Malaysian government in the years 1990 to 1991. The indirect consequences for the educational policy have been made public by the opposition:

a narrow attitude that bumiputera students must be helped at all cost, even at the expense of other citizens who are high achievers in public examinations... It does not make sense for Education Minister Tan Sri Musa Mohamed to propose that the much disputed quota system be extended to the private sector which would further curb the limited opportunities available to non-bumiputera. (DAP media conference statement in Penang, May 28, 2001)

Thus, there continues to be much resistance from the ground against the Malaysian government's use of the ethnic quota system. As we have seen, the NEP and NDP have been consistently used as instruments for controlling student intake at the university level and in the Malaysian Civil Service (MCS), and this has resulted in more Malay bumiputera students gaining places in Malaysian universities since 1971 (see, for example, Tables 2-1 to 2-3). This means that very good non-bumiputera students were

forced to seek alternative universities overseas, including the National University of Singapore where student placement is based on educational merit, language ability in English and a second language, rather than on ethnic identity. While Chinese Malaysian students now have a (limited) opportunity to pursue higher tertiary education in Malaysia at UTAR, the actual number of places is too small to accommodate other non-bumiputera students such as the Indian Malaysian student population. Currently, and since Malaysian independence in 1963, Indian students have no recourse to institutions of higher educational where the medium of instruction is in their own various vernaculars such as Tamil and Hindi. (*New Straits Times*, January 21, 2002)

There is also an increasing problem of ‘numbers’ as the section on demography showed since the bumiputera population is much greater than all the minority ethnic groups in Malaysia combined. The use of a quota system (legitimized by the bumiputera policy) has skewed the nature of meritorious education and education as a means of knowledge acquisition to that of state rhetoric and ring-side challenges from the political opposition. For example, Lim Kit Siang, the DAP national chairman, suggested that Tan Sri Musa Mohamad and Datuk Mahadzir Khir were wrong when they claimed that bumiputera students constituted only 55% of all local public universities (IPTA) and 10% of all local private institutions of higher learning (IPTS). Lim suggested, rather, that bumiputera students in IPTA “formed between 65.9% to 69.9% in 1990” (Lim Kit Siang, Minyak Beku DAP Branch Anniversary Dinner, May 26, 2001). These are very strong allegations against a powerful state but apparently there has been no official response to Lim’s allegations.

While the Malaysian education continues to grapple with the problems posed by a quota system favoring the bumiputera, the difficulties it faces are compounded by the fact that it simply cannot afford to ignore the importance of English. This is underscored by the New Education Policy (not to be confused with the New Economic Policy – the NEP, 1970-1990), which is designed to move the national-type and vernacular schools towards achieving Wawasan 2020 (Vision 2020) and represents former prime minister Mahathir Mohammad’s strategy for achieving developed nation status for this nation-state. In order to accomplish this goal Malaysia needs to have a world-class education system and must acquire the use of world languages, the most important one of which is English. Malay is of course not a world language, which is why the DBP continues to struggle with its mission. Whatever the case might be, the Malaysian government faces a pressing need to remain democratically legitimate by ensuring that its own political support at the ground level does not falter or begin to be eroded by PAS and other similarly directed political parties; and in order to sustain the ground support for UMNO and the BN the political leaders cannot sever links with their bumiputera policy of guaranteeing the special position of the Malays.

This special position requires a strategic kind of policy maintenance and affirmative action for those who are unable to keep up with the Chinese and Indian communities because of social class, cultural background, or economic impoverishment. The choice of such a strategy has unfortunately developed a ‘crutch mentality’ among many Malay bumiputera. While the bumiputera policy has helped create a large Malay middle class and has made many Malays millionaires overnight, there continues to be a large and growing underclass especially in the larger, more traditional, more religious, economically poorer northern states in the peninsula. The

'crutch mentality' has generated resistance to the concept of meritocracy and prevented the implementation of newer more efficient and less costly policies. There continues to be a fear among many Malaysians about English and the study and use of English as a medium for the acquisition of knowledge and skills. The current prime minister believes that:

[Malaysia] must embrace meritocracy positively and view it as an opportunity to gain dignity for the community by proving we can achieve success on own merit...Our approach to achieve excellence should follow the tide of changes in line with current development and globalized environment...To remain relevant, we have to upgrade the quality of our struggle by understanding not only internal challenges but also world issues surrounding us. We would not be able to come up with effective decision making without taking into consideration the impact happenings in other countries has on us...We have to face competition head-on and meritocracy will drive us towards becoming more committed, ambitious and hard working to achieve successes. (*The Star*, Sunday, June 9, 2002)

The fear of failure seen in the light of global competition requires the state to perform an important function, as all states do, even if divergent segments of their citizens do not support the value of what we will now turn to, the politics of cultural gatekeeping in Malaysian modernity.

2-5 CULTURAL GATEKEEPING

In colonial times, decisions concerning the Malay language and culture had to be approved by the British, who declared that:

the Sultan receive and provide a suitable residence for a British Officer, to be called Resident, who shall be accredited to his Court, and whose advice must be asked and acted upon in all questions other than those touching Malay religion and custom. (Gullick, 1969:100-5)

The postcolonial Malay ethnocratist state has since 1955 taken on the function of the former British Residents in addition to issues "touching Malay religion and custom". Naturally, the politics of governance today in Malaysia is far more complex than when it was at the time of the signing of the Treaty of Pangkor in 1974 (Rappa, 1999c:99-120). This situation of complexity is demonstrated in terms of the re-introduction of English as a medium of instruction as opposed to *the* medium of instruction in Malaysian schools. For example, we recall that on June 7, 2002, the deputy education minister Shamsudin Aziz announced that English would be compulsory for all Malaysian students. On June 11, he announced that the mathematics and science subjects would be taught in English but only in primary schools (*Star-Asia News Network*, June 11, 2002). This was in reaction to reports about English being simultaneously introduced at the secondary school level. The introduction of English at the primary level is considered much easier since the students are relatively younger and the subjects much less complex, but this is made more difficult at the secondary level because the students are older, in their adolescent stage of development, have

more difficult subjects, and have more habits that are not easily modified. There are greater political risks for the incumbent party such as:

- the parents of school-going children have greater investments of time, money, and effort in their children's education, and changes in the curricula with consequences for the student's examinations have a(n indirect) bearing on the future of their children;
- while teachers may have received elementary training in English, their exposure and experience in teaching in the English medium is very limited;
- the number of experienced teachers is limited and the state may be hard put to devote more resources towards expatriate teachers since the results of these efforts may only be known a generation later when the students themselves begin work; and,
- the political parties in power have a limited mandate beyond which they have to return to the ballot box for extension of their terms of office. The state needs to defend its policy initiatives and program implementation under the following:
 - the maintenance of the national interest (military security, economic development, cultural and social unity, political stability);
 - the devolution of power to agencies that also require sufficient resources for carrying out the tasks;
 - the prioritization of values and norms that are important for the efficient functioning of state and society. The notion of cultural gatekeeping tends to fall under the third category.

The deputy education minister's political rhetoric for example shows the difficulties involved in carrying out what might be seen as a simple task of getting people to learn English for the benefit of the national economy. The negotiation between competing demands is a function of the cultural gatekeeping role. How does Malaysia maintain its special identity, retain values, continue to be internationally competitive, and survive modernity? As the gatekeeper of values, the state has to negotiate a fine balance between the demands of its electorate (whose support it needs for extending its political mandate) and the demands of surviving in a dynamic, international neo-liberal world system. The role of the gatekeeper is to decide on what is best and how to keep what is wanted and deflect what is not wanted for the general good of society.

Yet the Malay-Malaysian state is bent on employing a kind of linguistic protectionism not only through politically weak instruments (such as the DBP) but also through the rhetoric of the prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. His rhetoric illustrates how cultural gatekeeping occurs at the domestic political level. Here, Malay values and *adat-istiadat* that are 'integral' and 'inherent' in the language are protected by the non-introduction of English-medium schools that have been ruled out as a backward step. Note how he immediately ties in the issue with the National Education Policy:

We will not reintroduce English-medium schools because it would be contrary to the National Education Policy... Schools will also be introducing contemporary English Literature to further expose students to the language... The Government will always ensure that the status of Bahasa Melayu is maintained as provided for in the Constitution and as part of efforts in building a united country with its own identity... But we also have to accept the fact that amidst the era of globalization, mastering at least one foreign language for business, knowledge and international relations is crucial. (*The Star*, Friday, May 17, 2002)

The strategic use of both languages affords the potential to the Malaysian state to act as a cultural gatekeeper to ensure that the machinery of state that keeps the economy developing and producing through an English language interface with the outside world of global communications technology, shipping, transportation, advances in science and industry, and other forms of externally produced goods and services; while the Malay language ensures that the cultural fabric within the Malay community and across communities within Malaysia retains its shape and form and does not buckle under the increasing weight of the global forces of modernity such as the universalization of human rights, and the weakening of traditional political boundaries by transnational corporations and other non-governmental organizations. But the emphasis given to the paramount importance of Malay only makes for a tenser situation over languages:

It does look like a warped sense of insecurity sometimes... There may be instigators and opportunists at work here, but the fact that feathers can be ruffled by this sort of thing 45 years after Merdeka [Malaysian independence] says much about the level of mistrust that still remains to muddy national objectives... Such theatrical demonstrations can be tolerated in a democracy. But they are harder to forgive should they seek to turn their quibbles into a politically motivated condemnation of the Government. When there are fewer resources, foreign languages become marginalized. (*New Straits Times* March 16, 2002)

The debate over the concept of the Vision School is another Pandora's box. The state introduced the Vision School, which puts three Malay, Mandarin and Tamil medium primary schools in the same physical compound to "promote integration and unity among students of various races" (*Malaysiakini*, June 7, 2002). The state also appears to be caught on the wrong foot by acting as a cultural gatekeeper of the Malay community. The clearest rationalization and realization that the bumiputera policy cannot remain in place forever can be seen in the modernist rhetoric of its political elite. In the excerpt below, he advises Malay students not to be overtly dependent on the bumiputera policy, and to rid themselves of the 'crutch mentality' as seen in a recent statement by the current prime minister, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, at the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) (*Seminar Kecemerlangan dan Kepimpinan Mahasiswa Melayu of the Institut Pengajian Tinggi Awam* (IPTA) 2002). Then there is the question of English as the language of modernity, and how Malaysian can remain competitive without widespread English language proficiency. The Universiti Malaysia in Sarawak (Unimas) spent RM1.6 million on multimedia systems in 24 out of 33 lecture halls in their own preparation to connect with a globally changing world and to prepare the Sarawakians for their future role in this dynamic world. Unimas has also taken the initiative to promote English language usage, recently announced by its vice-chancellor Yusuf Hadi:

Universiti Malaysia Sarawak will use English to teach 50% of its courses from the new academic year... Several faculties, like Medicine and Health Science, Engineering and Information Technology, had been using English for most of the teaching... English is the language of the Internet, the international community and a language of knowledge... It is critical for the learning process at the university and the workplace... Practice lifelong learning by cultivating the reading habit as well as sourcing and processing knowledge using the information and communication technology. (*The Star Online*, June 1, 2002)

It is not known how Kuala Lumpur – which is geographically displaced from Sarawak – is likely to react to this in terms of its national cultural gatekeeping role. It is likely to be more supportive of the Unimas initiative for three reasons:

- (1) Unimas will stand as a model university for including the language of modernity into its curricula besides being a new university with less administrative and academic resistance to change;
- (2) Unimas is displaced from the different complexities that comprise KL politics;
- (3) if Unimas is ultimately successful – and this is likely to take many more years before results can be first reaped – then it will circumscribe and undermine the position of opposition-held, right-wing states such as Kelantan and Trengganu which are much less IT savvy, with lower literacy levels, and with greater Islamic resilience.

The former prime minister of Malaysia himself, Mahathir Mohamad, in his ‘semi-official’ capacity as the principal gatekeeper of the mandated values of the Malays stirred up a hornet’s nest when he announced that 10 per cent of all places in national-type junior colleges would be opened up to non-bumiputera Malaysians because it would help inter-ethnic understanding. This move is radical because it supports a more meritocratic basis for education. However, in order for it to be truly effective, he needs to also deal with the following three factors:

- (1) *Akta Perbadanan Tabung Pendidikan Tinggi Nasional 1997* (Akta 566) and its legal agency, *Perbadanan Tabung Pendidikan Tinggi Nasional* for all (bumiputera and non-bumiputera) Malaysian students has limited funding for its loans and bursaries;
- (2) the pro-bumiputera quota system remains in place for university places and *biasiswa dan pinjaman pelajaran* (scholarships and study loans);
- (3) the current pro-bumiputera business provides start up funds, shares in blue-chip companies; and low-cost housing financial arrangements while not providing any alternatives for the non-bumiputera;

Badawi’s position on the bumiputera policy is likely to elicit political resistance from three main sources:

- (1) the opposition PAS and DAP;
- (2) right wing and fundamentalist *ulama* (religious teachers); and,
- (3) vernacular and national school education officers previously burdened with changing state language policy at the national and state levels.

Therefore the New Education Policy and the changes to this policy seem to be incongruent with the NEP and NDP at least superficially. The real objective of achieving the status of a developed nation demands that present and future Malaysian cabinets, including the prime minister as the *primus inter pares* political leader of UMNO and the BN-coalition, negotiate a fine balance between the value of retaining Malay as the national language (Bahasa Malaysia), and the value of incorporating English into these schools as a hedge against the pressures of modernity.

Apart from this balancing act between state and society, and between the state and other states, the federal government has engaged language issues through the legitimate use of the Merdeka Constitution, the National Language Acts of 1963, 1967, and 1971; and the National Education Act of 1961, and the New Education Act (1995). In addition, Article 152 of the Constitution states that “the national language of

Malaysia is Malay and defines a Malay as, one who habitually practices Malay traditions and customs, speaks the Malay language and embraces Islam". No other ethnic community – Chinese, Eurasian, Singhalese, Arab, or Tamil – has a similar Constitutional definition, and a virtual legal guarantee of their ethnic existence. Although a careful examination of the definition reveals that almost any person could potentially become Malay simply by abiding by the Constitutional requirements, the special position of the Malay language is unchallengeable and any person, group, or association that challenges the special position of the Malays may face the Sedition Act (1948). There have never been reports of widespread use of this draconian Act against local or foreign persons relating to the use/abuse of the Malay language. Article 153 safeguards "the special position of the Malays and the natives of the states of Sabah and Sarawak and ensures that land reserved for Malays and natives of any of the States of Sabah and Sarawak" (*Federal Constitution*, Article 153:1-2; see also Rappa, 1997b).

Richard Mead provides three rather compelling reasons why the language policy directive to convert the legal system from an English one to a Malay one in 1981 over two and a half decades after independence was an abortive one: firstly, the prime minister did not enjoy the kinds of royal connections of his predecessors nor shared their legal training at a British University (Mahathir graduated in medicine from the University of Singapore) thereby placing him in the best of possible positions to "introduce language reforms with relative impunity" (Mead, 1988:40). The second reason according to Mead was that the language policy symbolized the dominance of Malayness, and offered Mahathir the potential for political mobilization and support of the Malay middle class – a bourgeois class with no royal connections themselves. The third reason was by far the most negative where Mead suggests that the virtual silence of the MCA and MIC indicated the sovereign position that the Malays and UMNO continued to possess since the transformation of the elite political leaders (Case, 1993) from the Alliance into the Barisan Nasional in 1974 (Mead 1988; Rappa, 1997b).

The state as the gatekeeper of languages and language policy determines which language gets in and which remains outside the realm of empowerment. Clearly, Malay is not the disempowered language at this point in Malaysian history. Malay language dominance is seen in the explicit use of Malay as it is enshrined in the Merdeka Constitution and deep within the structures of the civil service. Bahasa Melayu (Malay Language) is Bahasa Malaysia, so that the 'naming' of the national language privileges this language over the vernacular languages used by Malaysians in their everyday lives. As a policy maker of significant influence in Malaysian politics, Mahathir's own views on language are clearly seen in his early political narratives:

We are now in the process of building a new nation which is to be an amalgam of different racial groups. The form of this new nation and this new citizenship must be such as to satisfy all the constituent races [authors: but here is the main point] An understanding of the relative rights and claims of each race is important if we are to avoid the differences which selfish racial prejudices will engender ... *I contend that the Malays are the original or indigenous people of Malaya.* (Mahathir, 1970:133, *italics in original*)

This narrative promotes the use of the single dominant ethnic community's language and culture over that of others. Apart from raising the prestige of Malay, the move to convert Bahasa Melayu into Bahasa Malaysia forces non-Malay ethnic communities to accept and validate the official and national language (Rappa, 1997).

Bahasa Malaysia is compulsory in all Malaysian schools and is the medium of instruction at all institutions of higher learning under the University and University Colleges Act and the New Education Act (1995). The problem for the Malays is that English has become the staple international language medium of science, technology, industry, finance, communications, and multi-national organizations. This means that Malay and Malaysian students cannot neglect the study of English if Malaysia is to survive as a globally competitive nation-state. Yet while the Malay language continues to dominate at Federal and local government levels with some degree of circumvention in law and the legal service, there is always a continual fear that English will usurp Malay in terms of status perception in modernity. For example, the Malaysian minister Goh Cheng Teik announced at a seminar on *Tamaddun Berbahasa Melayu Menjelang Tahun 2020* (Malay Civilizational and Cultural Development Towards the Year 2020) that Bahasa Melayu/Bahasa Malaysia be used as:

a tool to unite the Malaysian race. That all users could follow the language effectively and to enhance the status of a Malaysian race with its own identity. Malaysians should be proud that Bahasa Malaysia as the national language was now the main form of communication among the various races...English should not exceed Bahasa Malaysia in status and value as the medium of language in administration and education. (*Berita*, July 28, 1995)

Once again we note that Malay is being pitched in instrumentalist terms. It must not lose out to English in the arenas of administration and education. In other words, the Malaysian nationalist narrative cannot be content with merely retaining Malay as a marker of cultural identity. This is necessary though far from sufficient. Malay must also be able to compete with English in social arenas typically associated with modernity, and it is this pressure to compete that forces Malay into being represented in instrumentalist terms. Anything less would be disastrous for the prestige and centrality accorded to the Malay language. In this regard, the minister's use of the phrase, the 'Malaysian Race' is instructive. This was not a merely a rhetorical device. Rather, the idea of the 'Malaysian Race' represents a calculated political motif, a *leit motif* designed on the form of 'one united people' but on the substance of a single dominant race. Since the state acknowledges that Malaysia is a multi-ethnic country and in the same breadth calls for a united 'Malaysian Race', the basis of this national race must be grounded in some value-system. And this value-system is one that uses the Malay race as metonymically standing in for all other races, thus implicitly reinforcing the rights of the bumiputera. Mahathir stated that the New Education Act (1995) has wider and deeper policy goals. As explained by Mahathir:

The government will continue to uphold Bahasa Malaysia as the National Language and will not compromise in this matter. Bahasa Malaysia will be used as much as possible to achieve that objective [for creating a competitive society] but where found necessary we will also use other languages, especially English. Bahasa Malaysia is compulsory in the vernacular schools and students are required to take the subject in their examinations. (*Bernama*, December 14, 1995)

But the study of English has not yet been made compulsory at all levels given the closure of English medium schools in the early 1970s after the implementation of the NEP. The concern over the use of Malay as Bahasa Malaysia has caused unhappiness and frustration among the non-Malay communities. However, given the

power of state ethnocratism to crush dissent, any opposition to the New Education Act could be seen as seditious and unpatriotic.

2-6 CONCLUSION

The Razak report became the keystone of Malaysia's education system gazetted in the Education Ordinance of 1957. It would also become source of future problems for the system of education in Malaysia. Language policy in Malaysia emanates from this report and the later, more crucial Mahathir Report, the New Education Policy, the NEP, NDP, and the National Cultural Policy. Malaysian language policy also faces two strategic problems. The first problem is the need to resurrect English as the language of globalization and technology that has been marginalized since the Constitution (Amendment) Act (1971). The second strategic problem is maintaining the importance of Malay as the language of all Malaysians without antagonizing the non-Malay bumiputera communities. This situation is worsened by the tendency among many non-Malay Malaysian students to openly reject Bahasa Malaysia. The first problem appears to have received sporadic attention from the Mahathir government with ironic results. His Cabinet's sometime encouragement and emphasis on the study of English language has received positive support from industry leaders and the parents of school-going children:

Some journalists and critics believe that the government and parents have glorified English to the exclusion of Bahasa Melayu. Mahathir, supported by captains of industry, has said that Malaysians will be left behind if they refuse to learn English, the language of globalization and technology. (*The Straits Times*, March 6, 2001)

The high failure rate in Bahasa Melayu/Bahasa Malaysia as revealed by the education ministry also showed the alarming problem of one in five failures being ethnically Malay bumiputera. Critics have offered three reasons for this setback:

- (1) some Malays and Malay students have the impression that since Bahasa Melayu/Bahasa Malaysia is their mother tongue, it is fairly simple and need not be taken seriously;
- (2) Students of any ethnic community may be admitted into private colleges without a pass in Bahasa Melayu/Bahasa Malaysia. This is because the New Education Act (1995) and the University and University Colleges Act (UUCA) do not include entry/graduation requirements;
- (3) the state is torn between the push for economic development with English, and the need for the study of mother-tongue languages for social bonding.

Also, there appears to be a dovetailing of the problem with the two languages, and that given the limited time and space considerations in modernity for economic, social, cultural, and political survival, there continues to be a competition between English and the vernacular languages over the same public and private space. This problem is exacerbated when there already is an ethnic quota system that puts non-bumiputera Malaysians at a disadvantage. The question of dovetailing weakens the linguistic instrumentalism of government policy when local educational associations

suggest a covariance between the language of tradition and nationalism (Bahasa Melayu/Bahasa Malaysia), the language of modernity (English) with religious overtones. For example, the Utusan Melayu newspaper reported a recent Association of Malaysian Private Colleges statement that claimed “Malay was not an important subject and everyone closes their eyes to such humiliation as a result English has become the medium of instruction in these colleges and this is not viewed as a sin”. This situation becomes amplified when one considers that Malaysia currently has one of the lowest literacy rates in ASEAN and had the lowest literacy rate in the 1993/4 periods (*New Straits Times*, 28 May 1994; *Asiaweek*, 25 May 1994) and a lack of interest in reading, according to a survey conducted by the Malaysian Strategic Research Centre. Malay-Muslims also have the additional pressure of having to be tested on their religious knowledge and conviction in a test known as the *Ujian Perkara Am Fardu Ain* (*Bernama*, December, 1993).

In conclusion, language policy in Malaysian modernity consists of a series of complex negotiations within an ethnic-based polity that cuts across class-based differences skewed over the past forty years by a series of constitutional determinants and legal decisions that have blurred rather than clarified the relationship between tradition and modernity. Any lack of clarity in the interpretations of the Malaysian Constitution will create confusion at the grassroots, among the people both bumiputera and non-bumiputera alike. We would like to recommend that there are three major implications for the lackluster, incommensurate, and incoherent language policy in Malaysia:

- (1) there are signs that Mahathir’s and Badawi’s pronouncements and warnings over the modernity issue have been proven correct, but the state machinery does not seem sufficiently capable of responding effectively to their cautionary speeches;
- (2) there is more likely than not to be a falling away of the political ground towards the Islamic right as the ineffective, perhaps incoherent use of linguistic instrumentalism has bungled public policy, thereby driving the middle ground (potential UMNO and Barisan Nasional voters) towards right-wing parties such as PAS rather than alternative centrist/moderate parties such as the Spirit of 46, the Justice Party, and the opposition alliance seeking to unseat Mahathir’s power-base for the past two decades since 1981;
- (3) there is an emphasis at both ends where Malaysians are themselves torn between spiritual traditionalism among Chinese, Indians and Malays (the Eurasians are consistently loyal supporters of the Barisan Nasional) and the importance of traditional religious practice (Taoism, Ancestor worship, Hinduism, and Islam) on the one hand, and the capitalist attractions of the global flow of goods and services that are increasingly available to all Malaysians.

Ironically, the more Malaysia succeeds economically, the greater the dangers of it evolving into another capitalist enclave that weakens the central government’s ability to act as a cultural gatekeeper, making it difficult to encourage the people towards economic productivity while simultaneously retaining their traditional values. Modernity brings success but it also brings the prospect of the dissolution of traditional and cultural values that is likely to result in a displacement of one language for another rather than a peaceful coexistence of two or main three languages in Malaysia’s democratic transition.

2-7 APPENDIX

IMPORTANT MILESTONES IN LANGUAGE POLICY AND MODERNITY IN MALAYSIA⁴

- 1956 Report of the Education Committee (Razak)
- 1957 The Education Ordinance
- 1960 Report of the Education Review Committee (Rahman Talib)
- 1961 Education Act
- 1962 Degrees and Diplomas Act
- 1963/1967
Akta Bahasa Kebangsaan (Disemak, 1971) National Language Act (Amended, 1971)
- 1971 *Akta Universiti dan Kolej Universiti* (University and University Colleges Act)
- 1974 *Akta Institusi-Institusi Pelajaran (Tatatertib)* (Educational Institutions (Discipline) Act)
- 1975 *Semua Sekolah Rendah Inggeris selesai ditukar menjadi Sekolah Rendah Kebangsaan* (all English-medium primary schools modified to National-type primary schools)
- 1976 *Akta Universiti Teknologi MARA* (Universiti Teknologi MARA Act)
- 1979 *Laporan Jawatankuasa Kabinet mengkaji Pelaksanaan Dasar Pelajaran* (Mahathir Report) (Report of the Cabinet Research Committee on Basic Educational Principles)
- 1980 *Akta Majlis Peperiksaan Malaysia* (Malaysia Examinations Council Act)
- 1994 *Acta Akademi Sains Malaysia* (Academy of Sciences, Malaysia Act)
- 1995 *Akta Universiti dan Kolej* (University and University and University Colleges

(Amendment) Act

- 1996 *Akta Pendidikan* (Education Act) (Acta 550)
Akta Majlis Pendidikan Tinggi Negara (National Council on Higher Education Act)
Akta Pendidikan Tinggi Swasta (Private Higher Educational Institutions Act)
Acta Lembaga Akreditasi Negara (National Accreditation Board Act)
- 1997 Education Act (Curriculum Regulations)
Akta Perbadanan Tabung Pendidikan Tinggi Nasional (Perbadanan Tabung Pendidikan Tinggi Nasional Act)
- 1998 *Akta Kumpulan Wang Persaraan Guru-Guru (Sabah)* (*Pembubaran*)
 Teachers' Superannuation Fund (Sabah) (Dissolution) Act

2-8 GLOSSARY

Acta: Act. For example, the *Acta* DBP 1959 (DBP Act of 1959) granted the DBP the legal autonomy to develop and expand Bahasa Melayu, the language of the Malays, into Bahasa Malaysia the language of Malaysia.

Bahasa: Language

Bangsa: Culture

BN: Barisan Nasional or the National Front. The governing Alliance of political parties, headed by UMNO (PKMB).

Bumiputera:
 Literally, 'son-of-the-soil', it is used to refer to the indigenous people of Malaysia that includes the majority ethnic Malay community, and other minority ethnic communities such as the Land Dayak, Sea Dayak, Iban, and Melanau.

DAP: Democratic Action Party. A Malaysian Opposition Political Party that was formed from the 'remnants' of the People's Action Party (PAP) when the latter was still operating in Malaysia up till 1965 when Singapore and Malaysia separated. The DAP is linked to Socialist International and promotes the concept of democratic socialism, which the PAP government in Singapore views as a contradiction in terms.

DBP: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (The Malay Language Academy)

MCA: Malaysian Chinese Association

MCP: Malayan Communist Party

MIC: Malaysian Indian Congress

MSC: Malaysian Civil Service

NDP: National Development Policy

NEP: New Economic Policy

NIE: *New Straits Times*-in-Education program.

Partai/Parti:

A political party

PAS: Partai Islam Se-Malaysia (Islamic Party of Malaysia)

PKMB: UMNO

UKM: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia or the National University of Malaysia.

UM: Universiti Malaya or the University of Malaysia

UMNO: United Malays National Organization or Pertubuhan Kebangsaan Melayu Bersatu (PKMB). The leading political party of the governing National Front or Barisan Nasional.

UTAR: Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman

UUM: Universiti Utara Malaysia. Unlike the other universities, there is no official translation of UUM into the English language, however it generally means 'University of North Malaysia'.

2-8 NOTES

¹ We thank an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this point.

² Peninsular Malaysia covers 131,598 sq. km, has borders with Thailand and Singapore. The East Malaysian states of Sabah (73,620 sq. km) and Sarawak (124,449 sq. km) border the Indonesian state of Kalimantan. Sabah, Sarawak, Brunei and Kalimantan used to form what was once known as Borneo or British Borneo. The Federation attained internal self-government after the 1955 watershed elections and, in addition to Sabah and Sarawak, is made up of the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur, Perlis, Pulau Pinang, Kedah, Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, Melaka, Johor, Pahang, Terengganu and Kelantan. Sabah consists of 5 divisions: Tawau, Sandakan, Kudat, West Coast and Interior, while Sarawak has 9 divisions: Kuching, Sri Aman, Sibul, Miri, Sarekei, Limbang, Kapit, Bintulu and Kota Samarahan. Sarawak is geographically almost as large as Peninsular (West) Malaysia.

³ Tables 2-1, 2-2 and 2-3 are adapted from G. Chandradas, *The Sun*, 1999-2000.

⁴ Collated by the authors from the following sources: Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2002; Malaysia Ministry of Education research reports (online); *The New Straits Times* (Kuala Lumpur), *The Straits Times* (Singapore), *The Star*, *Bernama*, *The Star Online/Asia News Network*, *Utusan Melayu*, *Berita Harian*, *Berita Minggu*, Commissioner of Law Revision, Malaysia, *Malayan Law Journal*, *Percetakan Nasional Malaysia*.

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