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**Working Paper**

## Nationbuilding in Malaysia under conditions of globalization

Duisburg Working Papers on East Asian Studies, No. 25/1999

**Provided in Cooperation with:**

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*Suggested Citation:* Derichs, Claudia (1999) : Nationbuilding in Malaysia under conditions of globalization, Duisburg Working Papers on East Asian Studies, No. 25/1999, Gerhard-Mercator-Universität Duisburg, Institut für Ostasienwissenschaften, Duisburg

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**DUISBURGER ARBEITSPAPIERE OSTASIENWISSENSCHAFTEN  
DUISBURG WORKING PAPERS ON EAST ASIAN STUDIES**

No. 25/1999

**Nationbuilding in Malaysia  
under Conditions of Globalization**

**Claudia Derichs**

Paper presented at the Second International Malaysian Studies Conference  
University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 2-4 August 1999

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Nationbuilding in Malaysia under Conditions of Globalization

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***Abstract:***

Considering the effects of globalization on the political performance opportunities of nation states, we may detect a more transnational orientation in policy formulation as a challenging factor. In Malaysia, e.g., issues of nationbuilding might be affected in various ways, reflecting either the chances offered by globalization or the structural strains accompanying this process while questioning the resilience of nation states as sovereign political actors. The paper thus inspects in how far strategies of nationbuilding change when the external conditions of diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framing change. Malaysia offers a case in point, it is argued, to demonstrate the ever dynamic process of nationbuilding and change of the concept of *nation*. – The concept of nation is challenged constantly and hence embedded in an ongoing struggle for modification and renewal. The adjustment of nationbuilding strategies to changing conditions of shaping the concept of nation is examined with the help of the sociological approach of analyzing *framing processes*.

# NATIONBUILDING IN MALAYSIA UNDER CONDITIONS OF GLOBALIZATION

*Claudia Derichs*

The issue at hand suggests that the overwhelming dynamics of economic globalization, in the sense of ever growing trans- and international trade and financial transactions, may well have repercussions on the political and social development of states, and in particular nation states. We do not have to examine every single nation state on the globe to prove the reciprocal relationship of economic, political, and social dimensions of globalization, for it is evident that all around the world the term *global* is used by fairly different societal groups to address some positive or negative notion. Suffice it to present the very micro-level and bottom-up perspective of looking at globalization from the vantage point of one single political issue in one single nation state: nationbuilding in Malaysia. I will attempt to apply the sociological theory of framing processes to the situation of the „entity“ Malaysia in a nationbuilding process. According to theory, framing processes take place to mobilize and keep together social movements. In our case the scope of the social movement expands to the nation as an aggregate of people believing in a set of boundaries and ideological ties that distinguishes them from other nations. This belief, however, is not something that grows naturally, but rather something that is strategically planned, defined, and produced. Have the tools for the cognitive definition of what shapes the nation changed in the new global context? I will try to show how the smart adjustment of nationbuilding strategies to changing political conditions can be analysed with the help of the theoretical criteria of *framing*.

Two periods of development since Malaysian independence in 1957 are taken into consideration: the early decade from the late 1950s to the late 1960s, and the period of globalization in the above described sense, from the early 1990s until today. The period inbetween, from 1969 to the late 1980s, which includes the racial clashes and the following decades of determined implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP), is only roughly referred to for reasons of space and complexity. (It would well be worth to examine this period in detail in a separate paper.) The Fifties and Sixties will serve as a showcase to break the ground for the theoretical approach and its application to the situation of the 1990s.

The frequently discussed topic of whether globalization will bereave the nation state of its existence as a sovereign actor (e.g. Ohmae 1995) is referred to by arguing that the nation state might very well „survive“ the challenge and continue to function as a point of orientation for social and political organization beneath the global and regional level. What is changing is just the conditions for the mobilization of resources to uphold the national idea.

## **Theoretical approach**

The concept of *framing processes* was introduced in the 1980s by a group of sociologists including David Snow, Robert Benford, Burke Rochford Jr., Steven Worden and others (1986; Snow and Benford 1988) with the intent to pay fresh attention to ideas, sentiments, psychological dynamics, and shared meanings in collective action (McAdam/McCarthy/Zald 1996). Social movement theories had hitherto been dominated

by ‚classical‘ ideas of collective behavior (e.g. Smelser 1962), the rational-choice influenced resource mobilization theory (e.g. McCarthy and Zald 1973; 1977), and, in Europe, the paradigm of new social movements (e.g. Melucci 1980; Touraine 1983; Offe 1985; Raschke 1985; Brand/Büsser/Rucht 1986; Kriesi 1987). The „complex of social psychological dynamics“ though, like collective attribution and social construction, had been fairly neglected in these theoretical approaches (McAdam/McCarthy/Zald 1996: 5). To bring them in meant to recognize the importance of social psychological dynamics for the mobilization of collective action, and thus the importance of ideas within the political process.

Framing processes can be understood as the construction of a frame of meaning that allows movements to legitimate their actions before themselves and before society (Hellmann 1998: 20). Hence we can consider the framing process a *production* of a topic for protest, or, applied to our case, the production of a topic for affirmation, namely the Malaysian nation.<sup>1</sup>

The skill to attach a meaning to social and political phenomena, the power to define them, the ability to interpret ‚the truth‘ out of them and promulgate images is always a game between different, competitive actors in the arena of the public discourse. Ideas, values, attitudes and the like, hence culture is conceived as strategically produced and meant to serve as a reference and orientation for collective identity. The idea of nation is no exception to the many ideas that have been produced not only to donate identity, but also for certain purposes of political power arrangement and symbolism, culminating in the notion of „dying for the nation“. Concentrating on framing as a strategic activity, I will try to shed a light on the repertoire of visions, ideas, and notions that have been put forward by the Malaysian government(s) to give meaning to the very term *Malaysia*.

Shamsul A.B. has presented several related examinations, using the approach of the „nations-of-intent“ and pointing out the competitiveness of different concepts of nation (1996a; 1996b; 1997). But the approach of the nations-of-intent does not provide an analytical structure that would lead us to clear-cut categories for comparative research. The analysis of framing processes is, admittedly, also still on the road to conceptual precision; it has been developed though, in the time of a decade, and offers at least some useful criteria to structure its research object. Four different groups or dimensions of criteria are usually assembled for the analysis of framing processes (Gessenharter 1999).

First, there are three tasks that a social movement organization, read here: government, has to fulfill. These are called *diagnostic framing*, *prognostic framing*, and *motivational framing*. The diagnosis of a problem is e.g. necessary in order to suggest solutions („No solution without a problem“). Also, the cause of the problem has to be defined. The solutions that are propagated belong already to the prognostic frame, because they are yet to become reality. Motivational framing then indicates the strategies that are employed to motivate action. Moral and behavioral principles of the audience (society) have to be detected; not all of these principles can be addressed to mobilize for action, but a selected set which serves the objectives of the mobilizers best may do. To address, e.g., the honesty of people towards one another might be a moral principle to motivate the physical and intellectual effort to achieve a rich and wealthy nation. The motto would be „honest work brings us to wealth“.

The second dimension of the framing process deals with the criteria of *centrality*, *range*, and *interrelatedness*. All three criteria refer to the relation of mobilizers and addressed audience. To look for the centrality of a problem means to look at how it really affects the people. Of how much importance may the creation of a wealthy nation be to

the people? Is „honesty“ one of the values that occupy the top positions in the value hierarchy of the people? Is „the nation“ *central* for people's worldview or even daily life? If it were central, one may reason, its range of touching people's thoughts and emotions should be fairly wide. Moreover, the frame („nation“) should be composed of interrelated elements (territorial aspects, ethnic aspects, political order, social order, etc.) that might stabilize one another, so that the frame does not fall apart as soon as one single element is hurt or has to be eliminated from the concept.

Thirdly, the frame's relevance for the addressees is dependent on variables like *empirical credibility*, *experiential commensurability*, and *narrative fidelity*. In the case of social movements, the term empirical credibility indicates that the potential participants in a movement have gained a collection of experiences that have become familiar to them. When the frame is crosschecked with their experiences and appears reasonable, it possesses credibility. To be exploited as an employee, for instance, is a bad situation. So the prospective of abolishing the inferiority by replacing it through equality is all the more reasonable and wishful for people who have experienced exploitation. They are likely then to join the labor unions and the labor movement. Applied to our case and to international relations, we may say that being not regarded a sovereign nation bears various disadvantages. The experience of colonialism bears, compared to the existence as a nation in its own rights, clearly not the connotations of independence, freedom, autonomy and the like. Based on people's experiences, the concept of a sovereign nation is far more attractive than the concept of a colony.

The frame may, however, still appear as an experiment that is hardly commensurable with people's everyday life or with their future goals. Why should people become active in an anti-nuclear plant movement, when the nuclear power station is merely a „factory building“ standing somewhere and quietly producing energy. Thinking that the building could do any harm to human beings seems without a persuasive proof of the contrary just as unreal as thinking of a plane falling down on your house. – Should people join an anti-aircraft movement because of this probability? In other words, the bigger the distance between the frame and people's reality, the more difficult mobilization and persuasion to believe in the importance of engaging in a movement become. We will relate this thought to the question of nationbuilding below.

The narrative fidelity as the last criterion of the group of criteria that make for an addressee-oriented dimension emphasizes the „natural setting“ of the frame in terms of the view of reality it provides. Sticking to the example of the anti-nuclear movement, we may assume that it has not been easy in the beginning for mobilizing organizations to convince the people of the necessity to reject the building of a nuclear power station in their neighborhood. Nuclear power stations produce energy, provide jobs, and pay taxes – why then complain? Only after some significant accidents the general attitude changed and the perception of nuclear power production took on more and more negative connotations. The pattern of interpretation changed considerably with the effect that the version of the anti-nuclear movement gained narrative fidelity.

Fourthly, the dimension of *frame alignment* is of analytical interest. Theory depicts four criteria: *frame bridging*, *frame amplification*, *frame extension*, and *frame transformation*. Briefly put, frame bridging can be understood as the crossroad appeal a frame possesses, so that it actually forges links between two or more ideological and/or value systems. The frame can be amplified and extended into realms of realities that might not be interesting for the mobilizers in the first place, but might be essential to address when active support is sought. Frame transformation then takes place when the frame reveals itself as not appropriate (any more) to gain people's support. Internal structural changes like the shift from local to global aspects – which was in fact

performed in many environmental protection movements – can indicate such a transformation.

### **Framing the nation in the early years (1957-1967)**

Malaysia achieved independence and became a sovereign state in 1957. It was not yet called *Malaysia*, but *Federation of Malaya*, and the years to come would be accompanied by several territorial rearrangements. Singapore joined the Federation in 1963, together with Sabah and Sarawak in the East, and the new entity was then named *Malaysia*. Singapore's integration, however, lasted but a mere 23 months. In 1965, the island declared its separation from the mainland and became a sovereign city state (see Mohamed Noordin Sopiee 1974; Abdullah 1985; Lau 1998).

The „childhood period“ of the young independent nation of 1957 and beyond has frequently been attributed to as a period of striking *communalism*. As Ongkili (1985: v) puts it in the preface of his great work on nationbuilding in Malaysia between 1946 and 1974,

„communalism was the fundamental problem of nation-building in Malaysia during the period under study. Communal groups, such as political parties, ... sought representation during the period of nation-building from the Malayan Union of 1946 to the formation of Malaysia in 1963. Every major effort to establish a nation highlighted communalism in the country; but the same problem of communalism also determined at length the nature of politics and political system which the Malaysians adopted.“

The challenge for politicians in 1957 lay thus in the task of inventing and implementing a political system and social order that would prevent communal clashes and enhance stability. This stability was thought to be achieved by according the Malays special rights which were sanctioned by the constitution (Sheridan 1961). The fact that the government under Tunku Abdul Rahman gave the preponderance of political power to the Malays and that the constitution allowed them privileges which were not granted to other ethnic communities is an interesting phenomenon when we try to approach it with the analytical categories of framing.

### *Diagnostic frame*

Defining the problem and transmitting an attractive idea of a „nation“ had since the Forties been a sharp contest between different political parties, the British Colonial Office (or its representatives), and other groups within what we might call the political public. When the Malayan Union model was designed and finally inaugurated in 1946, the intent of the architects had been to unite the then-British settlement without granting any privileges to the Malays. The perception of the „problem“ was quite different for the British on the one hand and Malay political actors on the other hand (Lau 1998: 3ff.). The British plan was based on the assumption that the ignorance of the Malayan Chinese's demands for political recognition could well lead to social unrest. And this was to be avoided at any rate, for the British sought, of course, the smooth incorporation of their settlements into their cluster of regional security conceptions, whereas the Malays in the region were not really fond of sharing political power with the Malayan Chinese. The United Malays National Organization (UMNO) was consequently formed in 1946 as a political organization that expressed the Malays' harsh opposition to the Malayan Union concept. In fact it symbolized – willingly or unwillingly – an organized force against Britain's new colonialism.

The UMNO program gained momentum in the years to follow. The diagnosis that too much political recognition of the non-Malays (adding to the anyway persisting economic strength of the Chinese) violated the legitimate right of the Malays as the true indigenes to rule, reign, and rig up the country evoked exponential appreciation among the addressed Malay audience. As early as 1948, after barely two years, the Malayan Union was replaced by the Federation of Malaya; becoming a citizen of the Federation as a non-Malay was limited. Full-fledged application of the UMNO-designed concept of nation, i.e. the concept of *bangsa* and *kebangsaan Melayu* which claimed unlimited predominance of the Malays, became only possible, though, with the help of the national bureaucracy, and, surprisingly, the help of Chinese and Indian coalition parties (Shamsul 1996b: 25):

„When UMNO, together with elite-controlled MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association) and MIC (Malaysian Indian Congress) formed the Alliance (in 1952 [MCA] and 1955 [MIC]; C.D.), a coalition political party, and won its first national election in 1955 and continued to be successful until today, but now under a much expanded coalition called the National Front, the Malayan federation concept, which legally recognized Malay dominance, remained the concept of nation which Malaysia upholds. ... It is UMNO's concept of *bangsa* and *kebangsaan Melayu* which informed the construction of Malaysia's 'national character'. The national bureaucracies then have the task to provide a guiding framework and a kind of operational social barometer, calibrated by legalistic and other measures, to gauge personal and social, local and national identities.“

The „guiding framework“ Shamsul mentions has to be provided in order to promulgate a specific image or idea or concept. Different from the situation of a social movement, which normally does not have the opportunity to utilize powerful official institutions to promote and spread its ideas (except for media support maybe), the political parties UMNO, MCA, and MIC endorsed their „idea promotion“ over to the national bureaucracy.

The diagnosis sounds logical, so far: The Malays run the danger of being kept in inferiority (again); the cause of this problem are British and the non-Malays, in particular the economically well-off Chinese.

### *Prognostic frame*

Why did UMNO's vision of a Malaysian nation in which the Malays would enjoy many privileges carry such a persuasive appeal? The somewhat classical notions of restoring neglected rights and dignity could have been a scenario for others too, not just for one ethnic or communal group of people. For the Malays, the support of UMNO seems somewhat obvious. The outlook on the future appeared almost bright and encompassed the withdrawal of the British as well as the degradation of the non-Malays. This was a fairly simple prognosis, if it had not been for the sake of the nation that UMNO formed a coalition with representatives of the very people that had been the subjects of argument during and after the protests against the Malayan Union (MCA in 1952). From the perspective of prognostic framing though, we can trace the line back to the 1940s to come to an explanation.

Chinese guerrillas had fought against the Japanese during the Japanese occupation (1943-45) and hoped to seize power over the Malay Peninsula after Japan's surrender – apparently not a good idea in regard of the communal relations (Mahatir 1998a: 3). Shamsul (1996b: 22) states that the „impact of the Japanese Occupation on the Malay nationalist project must not be under-rated.“ The Malayan logic that spurred nationalist sentiments („Power for the Malays to defend our rights“) finds a counterpart on the



Chinese side when we allege that the Chinese felt somehow uncomfortable with the memory of the occupation. Standing on the „wrong side“ again would certainly not develop a harmonious co-existence of the respective communal groups. Accordingly, to form a coalition and be part of the government worked out better for MCA and MIC than to stand aside and have only limited access to central political decision making. The prognostic frame of UMNO still stuck to a nation with special rights for the Malays, but could at the same time be extended to a frame that incorporated the notion of tolerance and generous cooperation with the non-Malays. The coalition partners could raise attention for the fact that they did not leave political decision making to the Malayan UMNO alone, but joined the government and promoted at the same time the notion of living together peacefully. The Alliance adopted the model of a „plural society“ state which the British had preferred, although UMNO would have liked the adoption of its exclusively Malay-oriented model better.

### *Motivational frame*

The motivation of the sympathizers of UMNO to adhere to the UMNO-sponsored concept of a Malaysian nation was predominantly shaped by the prospective of an equal social and economic position to the non-Malays and in particular to the Chinese. The proportional distribution of Malays and non-Malays in urban and rural areas, the distribution of occupation as well as the distribution in education showed clear disadvantages for the Malays (Jayasuriya 1983: 75-101). Bringing Malays and „Malayness“ in must have sounded promising in those days. The definition of what constitutes Malayness, offered by UMNO, leads us to the question of empirical credibility, experiential commensurability, and narrative fidelity. Before that, we will look at the centrality, the range, and the interrelatedness of the nation-frame.

### *Centrality, range, interrelatedness*

Apparently, bringing „things Malayan“ into the political, economic, and societal public was a central concern for the Malays. The UMNO concept of nation recurred to high ideal values like dignity, equality, freedom (*merdeka*), justice, democracy, independence, etc. as well as to materialistic values like wealth, property, access to education, infrastructure of the kampungs, or an acceptable standard of living. The value of pluralism or plural society was probably more central to the political elite than to the average population at that time - for pragmatic reasons. To accept the British-recommended model of a plural society had been a compromise between UMNO and the British during the period of protest against the Malayan Union.

„The adoption of the British system signaled the failure of the Malay nationalist (sic) to institute their concept of a ‚Malay nation‘. What came in to being was a compromised choice, namely, the United Malay Kerajaan, otherwise known as Persekutuan Tanah Melayu. Its English translation, the Federation of Malaya, does not really capture and convey the full meaning of the term Persekutuan Tanah Melayu and what it symbolizes for the Malays and their concept of ‚Malayness‘. (Shamsul 1997b: 244).

Prime Minister Mahatir Mohamad points out that the candidates of the UMNO-MCA-MIC coalition had been successful in the 1955 elections primarily because „they could count on the support of all races, whereas the other parties contesting the elections drew their support from only one ethnic group.“ (Mahatir 1998a: 4)

Hitting the focal points of what the Malays were concerned about in those days, the UMNO model of the nation could well claim centrality, even centralities, because it served the expectations of both the Malays in the streets and the „politically aware“ Malays who also spent time thinking about plurality in the social structure. Ongkili (1985: 116) judges:

„As a whole, the Alliance manifesto offered to the people of Malaya a pragmatic programme covering all the major aspects of life in a nation of the modern world: forms of national and local government; administration; citizenship; national language; national security; financial and banking systems; land, agriculture and fishery policies; education; health and social welfare services; and a number of other minor matters.“

The fairly wide range of the concept is furthermore underpinned by the election results of 1955 thru 1969 (Ongkili 1985: 117; 127; 202). The question of interrelatedness can be addressed to by looking at some features of the economic agenda of UMNO, which we have not paid much attention to yet.

Economic success as a driving force for national identification should admittedly best be examined in detail for the period of the NEP, as was done by a few (see Shamsul 1997b; Mahatir 1998a), but is left out here. Economic aspects have nevertheless had an extraordinary impact on the framing process of the early nation concept, too. The striking rural poverty of the Malays led to the launching of Development Plans, the first of which covered the period of 1956 to 1960, and the second 1961 to 1965. A Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA)<sup>2</sup> was organized as early as 1950 with the short-term objective of remedying underemployed or even landless farmers, and with the long-term goal of promoting economic growth. The Five-Year Plans were oriented towards improving the standard of living, and among the conditions for reaching this goal, the provision of social services and social justice was mentioned. The interrelatedness of social, political, and economic aspects encompassed by the concept of nation is thus evident, at least when we regard it from the perspective of the planners. Framing theory but renders the question of interrelatedness to the perspective of the audience. Is it clear and evident to the people, in how far the economic, social, and political development under the roof of the „nation“ affects their own individual improvement of the standard of living, their well-being?

Opinions are not quite unanimous in answering the question. Proponents of the „Malay dilemma“ viewpoint (Mahatir 1970), e.g., claim that the Malays and non-Malays were aware of the situation and that the Malays had been willing to appreciate the governments incentives. Full accommodation to the visions of Malay entrepreneurship and the like through the activity and skill of the people themselves had turned out difficult, however, because of the lack of what theory describes as „experiential commensurability“ (see below). Government failure to comprehend what happened in people’s minds added, it is argued, to the anyway problematic hereditary and environmental factors as causes for economic backwardness of the Malays. Proponents of the „myth of the lazy native“ viewpoint (Alatas 1977), as another example, would rather call the „dilemma“ viewpoint Orientalist, and instead claim that it is the concept itself which cannot bridge the gap between its own demand and reality. This leads inevitably to the vicious circle that the Malays „reproduce in themselves stereotyped and colonized ideas about the backwardness of the Malays“ (Abaza 1998: 137).

Both viewpoints, although diverse as can be, back the impression that some of the links between concept (frame) and daily life have been quite weak. From a comparative perspective, the fact that it has not been as easy in Malaysia as perhaps in late nineteenth century Japan to convey the idea of a „strong nation“ (Japan employed slogans for the

public like *fukoku kyôhei* = „rich nation, strong army“ or *bunmei kaika* = „civilization and enlightenment“ to transmit interrelatedness and arouse commitment to the nation), displays some of the peculiarities of the Malaysian case. The reality of ethnic diversity as a contrast to the relatively homogenous ethnic composition in Japan may be one of the most significant differences that make for the difficulties to evoke sentiments of national identity. External threat, in the case of Japan an essential element, may be another difference, although the *konfrontasi* with Indonesia in the 1960s also spurred national sentiments and loyalty to the government, hence to the nation, in Malaysia.

In other words, the attempt to integrate both communalist reality and claimed plural society-ism into the UMNO concept of nation made it difficult to cope with the fact that both the systems were at the same time obstacles to what was to be achieved: Giving priority to the promotion of Malayness meant to preserve communalism in one form or another – and thereby preserved a fundamental problem of the young nation –, whereas the tolerance of non-Malayness to allow a pluralist ensemble of national features encouraged the anti-communalists to raise support – and thereby nurtured the criticism of a nation concept that is based on communal biases.

#### *Empirical credibility, experiential commensurability, narrative fidelity*

The nation project on the whole was inevitably connected very closely with the notions of „race“ and „ethnicity“ as categories to mark differences between human beings. The externally introduced concept of „race“ („race“ as a distinguishing feature apart from lineage or clan was, like in China and elsewhere, introduced in the Straits settlements by the colonial Western powers) seemed to obtain confirmation in regard of the geographical, occupational, educational, political, economic, and religious group alignments within the Malaysian society. Accordingly, the utilization of cultural nationalisms for the framing of the nation concept facilitated the task of attaching empirical credibility and narrative fidelity to it. We return here to the question of whether „bringing Malayness in“ has had some impact on the project of nationbuilding with respect to the theoretical criteria of *empirical credibility, experiential commensurability, narrative fidelity*.

The three pillars of Malayness, language (*bahasa*), religion (*agama*), and royalty (*raja*) have not been invented by UMNO cadres in a few days, but their emergence and development „have been very much externally-derived and took place during British colonial rule during which time there was a marked increased (sic) of an immigrant population, namely the Chinese and Indian.“ (Shamsul 1996b: 21) Talking language, *Bahasa Melayu* competed of course with English on the one hand, and Chinese on the other hand, when Malaysia became independent. The question of which language were to be accorded the status of an official language caused arguments time and again, and it is reported that in 1964 the then-Singapore Prime Minister Lee Kwan Yew himself launched a campaign to have the Chinese language awarded equal status with Malay. The National Language Act of 1967 made Malay the single national language, though English and Chinese language were not erased completely in education (Jayasuriya 1983: 91).

The language policy itself did in fact not support the national project as much as it had been intended to. UMNO's idea of *Bahasa Melayu* as the standard language of the Malays may be compared to what the introduction of Modern Standard Arabic donated to the creation of an Arab identity. Apart from the uniting effects it undoubtedly had, the introduction of *Bahasa Melayu* still means that many Malays have to learn it almost as they learn a foreign language (and so do 99% of Arabs). The smack of a constructed

language is still strong, but the process itself is by no means unusual, when we look e.g. at France and its history of introducing French as the national tongue.

To endow „language“ with empirical credibility as a central feature of Malayness, it is probably necessary to leave the borders of what is still regarded as „Malay language“ and what is not (dialects, Bahasa Indonesia, ... ) rather open. A similar vagueness escorts the element of „religion“, hence Islam.

Islam as religion is as diverse in its spiritual and practical expressions in Malaysia as it is somewhere else. That is why we usually avoid to speak of *the* Islam. Important for the question of what is meant with Islamic religion as a constituent element of Malayness is therefore, in how far it contributed to the distinction of Malayness from other “-nesses“. Being Muslim is nothing special in the global perspective, but can be something special in the national setting. In the Malaysian case, being Muslim is automatically linked to the racial connotation of the term „Malay“, and the racial assignment is, as we have seen, the ticket to enjoy important privileges. It remains vague, however, whether converting to Islam is a precondition in order to become a nationalist if the concept of nation is culturally informed by the three-pillar concept of Malayness. The experiential commensurability, or in simple words, the equation Malay = Muslim, fitted to the situation of the 1950s and 1960s, because it was the everyday experience of the people that Malays were Muslims. Also, the narrative fidelity was sufficiently fed by declaring the religion of Islam a constituent of the nation. The Malay Muslims as the oppressed community that would be set free and gain respect under the leadership of UMNO/the Alliance functioned perfectly as the narrative of the nation.

The pillar was shaken, though, when the 1969 riots provoked a different policy (NEP) and, as one result in that context, the concept of *bumiputera* was introduced. We may borrow Shamsul’s formulation (1996b: 29f.) once again to summarize the changes that took place.

„What is also significant for us to observe is the politico-cultural implications of the NEP hence the concept Malay and Malayness. In political terms the NEP established some basic political parameters the most important of which is the transformation of ‚Malay dominance‘ to ‚Malay hegemony‘ within the plural society-based ‚Malaysian federation‘ nation concept. Legislations were introduced to ensure that bumiputeras’ interests be regarded as non-negotiables and ‚politicking‘ on bumiputera-related issues was deemed illegal. The Seditious Act of 1970 was one such legislations which declared seditious and punishable any public discussion on Malay special rights hence the three pillars of Malayness: language, religion and the royalty. ... The exercise of providing the material basis for the Malay nationalist cause has been conducted within the UMNO’s framework utilising the bumiputera concept. As such bumiputeraism has often been seen as a kind of Malay ‚economic nationalism‘ by the UMNO elites.“

The accompanying and maybe even unintended effect of the merger of the concepts of Malayness, bumiputeraism, and nation show a sober form of frame extension:

„However, since the introduction of UMNO in Sabah the term bumiputera has somewhat become (sic) more relaxed to accomodate the predominantly Christian Kadazan who could now join UMNO. This is the first time in UMNO’s history that non-Muslims have been accepted within its framework of *bangsa* and *kebangsaan Melayu*.“ (Shamsul 196b: 30)

Political pragmatism thus led to what we will analyse more detailed under the topic of *frame alignment*, namely the changing opportunities to let the religious Islamic element play a keyrole in the UMNO concept of nation. Before, a brief glimpse at the third pillar, royalty (*raja*), shall conclude the inspection of Malayness in the context of the framing theory.

The concept of *raja* is informed by the notion of dynastic Sultan polity – Sultans as chiefs in the states (*negeri*) – and „communitarian assumptions that underpinned the old kerajaan (Malay kingdom; C.D.)“ (Milner 1998: 161). Indeed, the system of electing the King (constitutional monarch) every five years out of the group of state Sultans is unique to Malaysia. The Sultans in the states are not only the political chiefs in their territories, but also the chiefs of religion, i.e. of Islam. Working the system of Sultans and *negeri* into modern democracy tells a story of the empirical credibility of the democratic system as introduced in 1957 and feeds the narrative of the „natural“ connection of Malays and Sultans. Since there are no Sultans in Penang, Melakka, Sabah and Sarawak, however, the concept of *raja* had to be stretched in order to fit into the framework of the nation as a political entity. Although sanctioned in the Constitution and transferred into systemic political reality, the concept of royalty is much more a culturally connotated concept than it were a political one (see Milner 1998). It may be comparable to the concept of the *Tennô* in Japan, which recurs to ancient traditions (often enough invented traditions) and is much more culturally associated than it were an important political fact to have a royal emperor at the top of the state.

For the purpose of framing the UMNO concept of nation in the early years of independence, royalty fitted the requirement of narrative fidelity, although the complementarity of the cultural and the political realm can only evolve when the element of territory is faded out.

### **Framing the nation in the era of globalization (1990s)**

The early concept of nation had merits as well as deficits. As we have seen, the requirement of interrelatedness was the least met in UMNO's ambitions to frame the nation concept. The metaphor of a frame that breaks when one of its angles is hit fits the development of the early Malaysian nation. The frame nearly broke into pieces in 1969, when the ethnic riots shook it. Since it was the parliamentary and the state elections in that year that triggered the outbursts, one may conjecture that it was the „political angle“ of the frame that had been the weakest and was thus attacked blatantly. UMNO however reasoned that the failure to increase voter support lay in the still poor economic performance of the Malays.

It is not the place and space here to go into detail, so suffice it to point out that the New Economic Policy which was launched after the riots and stood for the result of the lesson drawn from the escalations of May 1969, shows clearly a new alignment of the features of the nation concept. The „economic angle“ was emphasized to the extent that all the other „angles“, including Malayness, were subordinated to it, which means that the frame's internal structure witnessed a severe modification. The collisions with the „old frame“ which the „new frame“ logically provoked have been exemplified above (e.g. *bumiputera* concept and Malayness).

Another important modification should be mentioned before turning attention to the 1990s, and that is the policy of responding to the resurgence of Islam as not only in the pure religious or spiritual context, but as a value system, ideology, and philosophy of life in the 1970s. The scholarly advocated Islamization of knowledge symbolizes one of the expressions of this reassertion. The political response to the resurgence – which was influenced to a great deal by the success of the Iranian revolution – was a *frame amplification* in the form of young Muslim leader Anwar Ibrahim's adoption into UMNO. The cooptation of Anwar signified, as many observers have noticed, that the government was ambitious to gain at least indirect control of a strong Islamic social movement (e.g. Khoo Boo Teik 1995; Abaza 1996; rather contrary: e.g. Milne and Mauzy

1999). The government could have tried to turn the movement down, of course, but the opportunity to retrieve a somewhat neglected feature of the concept of nation (neglected in favour of economic growth) was all the more attractive, because it served the Malays' religious and moral sentiments and followed the trend of fresh appreciation of Islam in the Muslim world. The frame was amplified in the sense that appreciation by the people of an international trend was responded to and even promoted by the government in order to form a „springboard for mobilizing support“ (Snow et al. 1986: 469).

After the officially declared end of the NEP in 1990 (Mahatir 1998a), the abbreviation was kept and now indicates the National Economic Policy. The expression is not just a play on words or letters, but consciously chosen. It plays a major role in the *Vision 2020* (Wawasan 2020), i.e. the target of Malaysia's future development, the background of which we will roughly summarize.<sup>3</sup>

### *Vision 2020 and Mahatir*

If we are to depict turning points in Malaysian politics of the last 20 years, the beginning and end of the NEP are almost less important than the rise to power of the fourth Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad in 1981. The era of his rule has hallmarked the country's history for more than 18 years now, and „Dr. M.“ is still a leader with surprises for the population. He has led both UMNO and the nation state as a whole through two decades of Malaysian developmentalism and accelerated modernization; strokes to the overall leadership hit his party in some state elections (Kelantan with a high support for the Islamic Party [PAS] is a well known example), but did never hurt the Prime Minister's image seriously. Critique is mostly directed to his authoritarian style of ruling.

Under Mahathir, strategies of nationbuilding have become so popular that we find a bunch of publications on that topic in the bookstores. The Prime Minister himself publishes his thoughts under titles like „The Way Forward“ (1998a), or „The Building of a Nation“ (1998b). Other authors write, with reference to his (still lasting) period of rule, about „Malaysian Politics under Mahathir“ (Milne and Mauzy 1999), „The Paradoxes of Mahathirism“ (Khoo Boo Teik 1995), or „CEO Malaysia. Strategy in Nation-Building“ (Hng Hung Yong 1998). Since 1981, nationbuilding has been inseparably associated with the leadership of Mahathir Mohamad. His strategy of nationbuilding is propagated as an outstanding success story that invites to be copied and repeated elsewhere (which might be a reason for the frequent publications in English language).

Mahathir's concept of nation has allowed several changes during time, all of which tried to keep track of not only the domestic social, political, and economic changes, but also of the international developments that affected the country in one way or other. The determination to make Malaysia a fully modernized, knowledge-based state with the private sector as the main gear in the engine of growth, stands in the centre of program. To spread information on and commitment to government policies, Mahathir gives out neat slogans (e.g. „Look East“ or „Leadership by Example“) which remind us of the Japanese slogans mentioned above. The slogans had indeed repercussions on the self-consciousness of the surrounding states in the region. In regard of the concept of the Malaysian nation, the slogans and visions are very much outward-oriented. The reward for national efforts frequently shows up in the form of international respect and recognition (though negative criticism is not an exception, too). The prognostic frame's appeal is informed by the notion of pride („a nation to be proud of“). This has become possible in the 1990s, since Malaysia can honestly present the harvest of its economic effort. The diagnosis of the situation in 1990 can be described as „good, but not yet

enough“. The end of the New Economic Policy fell together by coincidence with the end of the Cold War, hence a globally orchestrated expectation of something new to happen.

### *Frame alignment*

With the end of the Cold War, one form of the competition of systems was buried, but others gained momentum. The challenge to position the nations freshly and steadily in the international setting was taken on by many states, including the economies in the Asia-Pacific region who were anyway driving a lively discourse on the paradigms of change. A steady international standing of a nation, however, can best be achieved, when a state is able to create for itself a specific profile that receives general acceptance and draws (positive) connotations - at home *and* internationally (which is a plausible, but not a natural connection, as seen, e.g., in the case of the USA). Since one of the facets of globalization is accelerated global communication, supported and enhanced by an unprecedented appreciation of new communication technologies, it is thus commensurable that Malaysia's Vision 2020 is grounded on the image of a knowledge-based, technologically top-equipped nation. The shift from the national goals described above to this new concept can be regarded as a typical outcome of frame alignment. We will inspect it more detailed with the help of the four criteria amplification, bridging, extension, and transformation.

### *Frame amplification*

We have referred to the question of frame amplification in the discussion of the incorporation of Islamic resurgence trends into the concept of the Malaysian nation. Although neither Mahathir nor Anwar can be pushed into the corner of hardcore Islamism, the official encouragement of Islamic reassertion cannot be denied. Anwar Ibrahim's famous pleading for an Asian Renaissance (Anwar 1996) seeks to assemble elements of all major traditions in the history of ideas to a „One World“-like vision; Islamic codes of behaviour primarily fill out the moral component. The moral appeal as such also served parts of the *Asian Values* debate.

To play the Islamic card would not have turned out too advantageous in the long run. Observers judge that the attempted Islamization of knowledge did not give birth to any sound scientific theory which could have led to an eventual revolution of the history of science. The Malaysian government seems to have decided that in the age of globalization, it makes more sense to bet on technological and educational progress. Amplification takes place in that the global mood of appreciation towards internet and cyber communication is incorporated into the concept of the knowledge-based Malaysian nation.

### *Frame bridging*

If we recall the theoretical ascription of frame bridging, it reads that a frame shall be able to forge links between two or more value systems. Media research tells us that styles of communicational behaviour are merging rapidly, while at the same time training courses on cross-cultural communication are blooming because of the apparent difficulties of international understanding. One of the paradoxes of globalization obviously lies in the fact that certain differences become blurred, while others are emphasized and even cultivated in order to preserve something unique or (culturally) specific.

For a comparatively young state being still in the process of nationbuilding, globalization should at first sight be regarded a danger to the efforts of shaping the nation. What can be preserved if shared meanings and shared beliefs are not yet fully evolved? In a multiracial society like Malaysia, the potential of an outburst of competing value systems appears *a priori* higher than it does within a more homogenous setting. The Asian renaissance has unfortunately not been offered many opportunities to develop smoothly (the financial crisis in the region posing one of the recent menaces) before globalization hit the public discourse so powerful that external support for internal (intra-national) interest articulation has almost become a routine procedure. NGOs, for instance, are living off such external support to a great extent.

The path of handling the reality of globalization which has been taken by the Malaysian government may be considered rational and pragmatic, if we believe Anwar's esteem for the goodies it provides:

„We must approach globalisation from a position of strength and confidence. Globalisation has done us a good service, particularly in the economic sphere, a sphere in which the table has been turned, with the dominator fearing the loss of his domination. The precise reason why globalisation has become the buzzword in Europe and North America is that it is set to change their economic fortunes. Since the rise of the Atlantic societies Asia has had to adjust itself to external elements and these centuries have prepared Asians to accomodate externally induced changes.“ (Anwar 1998: 2f.)

What Anwar calls „accomodation“ can well be called a frame bridging: Externally induced changes, and hence challenges, have been accomodated and turned into adavantages. A good case in point is the use of internet in Malaysia. The challenge of the introduction of internet was clearly perceived by the government, especially in terms of losing control over much of the „dissident traffic“ in the world wide web. Nevertheless Mahathir went ahead and launched the project of the Multimedia Super Corridor, which evetually forces the government to give people free access to internet if it does not want to lose face. Building a bridge to what will affect the youth in manifold manners – internet and multimedia technology –, the challenge is turned into an advantage by setting the goal to catapult Malaysia into the position of „a contributor to the scientific and technological civilization of the future“ (Hng Hung Yong 1998: 40). The Chief Operating Officer of the Multimedia Development Corporation, Dr. Arif Nun, recently pintpointed the target when he said that Malaysia should not understand the multicultural, multireligious, and multiethnic composition of its society as a disadvantage any more, but instead grasp the advantage it offers: the microcosm of the world is daily reality in Malaysia. Issues of global relevance „tested“ in Malaysia! „Finally, the Multimedia Super Corridor provides the conduit for high impact research and development efforts to be focussed, directed and aligned to the national vision.“<sup>4</sup>

#### *Frame extension and frame transformation*

The two remaining criteria of the *frame alignment* theorem are *frame extension* and *frame transformation*. Actually, they do not differ that much from the other two theorems above, but are very closely related to them and have a complementary function. A frame is extended into realms that are of thorough importance to the audience. Without the extension, the frame would soon lose its mobilizing potential. Frame transformation then focuses on the internal structure of the frame, which might need to be changed in order to mobilize potential adherents successfully.



Applied to our case, several extensions can be detected. The fairly narrow scope of the frame in the 1950s and 1960s, when nationbuilding was concentrated on tackling the problem of communalism, was extended in the 1970s in that the economic dimension gained predominance over the question of race – predominance at least in the cognitive definition, for the *Rukunegara* was somehow in the shade of the NEP, „utilised as a ‚behaviour code““ that „outlined the governments’s basic strategy on communal issues“ (Norma Mahmood 1994: 66). In the 1990s, another extension took place, this time in the direction of technology and education.

Since the private colleges, which are mostly staffed by non-Malays, are training a number of students that is about equal to the number of students in public (government-run) universities, they cannot be neglected as actors in the competitive business of education (Zakaria Haji Ahmad 1998; Hiebert 1999). So it was just pragmatic to set the national goal of making Malaysia an education centre (= extend the frame) and thereby integrate the private colleges into the concept of (the educated) nation. Taking part in shaping the country’s educational future should be of considerable salience to the non-Malay Malaysians, too. The fact that the private colleges’ accounts are comfortably in the black fits the plan of mobilizing the private sector perfectly - although much is left to be done in order to really gain the support of the non-Malay education sector for the national goal (Zakaria Haji Ahmad 1998).

Educational programs go hand in hand with the extension of the frame to technology. Virtual institutions of higher education like *Universiti Tun Abdul Razak* or *Universiti Multimedia Telekom* (UNITELE) symbolize the combination of technology („knowledge-based nation“) and education („education centre“). The *Multimedia Super Corridor* symbolizes, in turn, the international orientation of the frame. The increasing attention to Malaysia’s standing in the international/global setting also reflects a transformation of the frame structure. International aspects have not replaced the national ones, but they are attributed to much more often than before. In some situations, it is in particular the negative sanction of Malaysia’s standing that works in favour of (trans-communal) national identification. A good example to raise is the general indignation that arose when North American Vice-President Al Gore showed signs of giving unadapted fatherly advices on how to handle political problems (APEC summit in Kuala Lumpur 1999; the motive was the treatment of former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim).

Amplification, bridging, extension, and transformation are not clearly separated criteria. They and the other criteria inspected here all complement each other, so that the framing process as a whole is never cut into pieces. In a time perspective, frame alignment comes after a certain concept of a frame has been produced, but reveals itself as not appropriate any more to serve the purpose. The new social, political, and economic paradigms that came up with globalization have forced many nation states, be they „consolidated nations“ or not, forced to perform a sort of frame alignment. Some adjusted or „accomodated“ quickly, like Malaysia, others still struggle for new definitions, like Germany (in part of course because the factor of supranational, regional European integration adds to the problem of framing the concept of nation).

The aspects presented here do by no means display the whole scope of the subject under research. Hundreds of examples could be cited to illustrate theoretical relations in a more detailed fashion, let alone the fact that the complexity of the topic will always leave space for doubts and conspicuous remarks. What has been attempted here is just a preliminary excerpt of what could be undertaken in an ample scholarly examination. Nevertheless, some conclusive remarks shall be drawn from the paper at hand.

## Conclusive remarks

National identification is not a mere problem of „form follows function“ or „function follows form“, like integration theory suggests. Whether identification with a nation can be aroused or not depends to a great deal on whether the concept of nation has a positive appeal or not. A concept is actively produced (although parts of it may also take on their own dynamic), so there is always anybody who is endowed with *framing* it.

As we have seen, the concept of nation that has been constructed for a particular national entity is an ever-challenged product. The concept of *Bangsa Malaysia* is sometimes judged to be vague and flat, so that the meaning of *bangsa* becomes somehow shapeless. When we regard it from the vantage point of framing processes, however, it appears as a flexible, elastic concept, which is open to extension and transformation. The problem of what *bangsa* really means is not really a *problem*, for whenever challenges occur, the flexibility of the concept allows adjustment to new situations. Despite the various nations-of-intent in Malaysia, there exists one dominant *frame*, filled with content by a powerful government machinery, which is constantly facing internal and external challenges. Just like the mobilizers of a social movement are requested to offer something that creates and preserves collective identity, the „framers“ of a nation are requested to offer the cognitive material to create and preserve shared meanings. Once the people share the meaning that it is good to have a nation and not only a territory with a border around it and a political order in it, joint efforts to produce shared goods and reach shared goals can be mobilized.

The case of Malaysia shows that the creation of shared meanings is not that easy, when, e.g., strong communalistic orientations prevail. The janus-faced solution of declaring commitment to the plural-society state on the one hand and serving communalism on the other hand compares to the attempt of bringing *demos* and *ethnos* into a balance.<sup>5</sup> The trial ended in 1969. In the following framing process, *demos* was given priority (NEP). The very fact of ethnic differentiation had officially been watered down through the introduction of the *bumiputera* concept. After 1969, however, it was obvious that nationbuilding in Malaysia would not get along with these categories any more. The public discourse on *ethnos* was subdued until the element of *demos* had become strong enough to let the political leadership perform a frame alignment that would gradually bring in the ethnic factor again by stressing the positive features of it („ICT culture“ policy [Arif Nun]).

Frame alignment also showed that new political mentalities have developed in the dawn of globalization. In Europe, globalization and re-nationalization - a seeming contradiction - did not yet get a grips on each other by way of adjustment to a changing order. West Europeans used to utter opinions like „We have to overcome the nation state-oriented thinking of the 19<sup>th</sup> century“. Yet the dissolution of the Eastern bloc showed how necessary it was to have something to draw back to, i.e. to have at least the reminiscence of nation states in the former boundaries of which regional re-arrangements could take place. Although difficult in some cases, re-nationalization is a means to keep pieces together that would get lost if left alone in the global world without even a regional affiliation.

In Southeast Asia, the regional integration (ASEAN) is not as strong as to pose a stable counterweight against blows like the crisis of 1997. The task of coping with a crisis is still left to the nation states. And globalization, too, does not mean global integration with the effect of increasing solidarity. If proper frame alignment takes place, nation states need not cease to function as sovereign actors in international politics and economics; the status of the nation state as a collective actor just diminished within the

ensemble of regional and global actorship. We might speculate that the nation state becomes a socio-political movement that, if it wants to make ends meet under conditions of globalization, is continuously forced to mobilize resources, create national collective identity and adjust its framing processes to the requirements of the international order.

The application of a sociological approach to a research topic of political science might appear inappropriate at first glance. We have seen, however, that changes of the concept of nation can well be structured and analysed with the help of *framing* criteria.

**Notes:**

- 1) David A. Snow's original definition of framing focussed on „the *conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action.*“ (see McAdam/McCarthy/Zald 1996: 6; italics by the editors)
- 2) FELDA was actually the descendant of the Rural Industrial Development Authority (RIDA) that had been set up in 1950 „with the express purpose of encouraging Malay participation in commerce and industry by extending loans, forming bus and other transportation services, setting up processing factories, and offering technical, management and marketing assistance to small Malay enterprises.“ (Ongkili 1985: 125)
- 3) For a detailed, though uncritical description of the Vision 2020 (including *The Vision 2020 Statement*) see Hng Hung Yong 1998. The book may well be called an homage to Dr. Mahathir.
- 4) Presentation entitled „MSC: State Vision and ICT Culture“, given at the *Seminar Literasi Siber 21*, Universiti Malaya, 22 May 1999. Quote from the outline of the paper. [ICT = Information and Communication Technologies]
- 5) *Ethnos* refers to an apolitical component of images of unity; it is composed of language, customs, cultural traditions, and common descent/origin as elements that found community. *Demos* refers to the political component, which declares common national goods like shared ideas of political order and political morale, a common set of guiding political frameworks, and collective beliefs in fundamental political meanings the sponsors of national identity. (Behr 1998: 228)

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