

# Malaysia, a Racialized Nation: Study of the Concept of Race in Malaysia

Rie Nakamura<sup>1</sup>

School of International Studies Universiti Utara Malaysia

**Abstract.** This paper investigates the reasons why university students in Malaysia prefer the term race over ethnic groups. The usage of the word race by students and faculty members in the classroom will be examined, along with academic writings and media usages of this term. Further, reasons for the pervasiveness of the term race in Malaysia will be explored. In this paper I argue that the concept of race is used to create a notion that the three major ethnic groups in Malaysia are physically/biologically separate groups, and that their differences will never be changed. Such sedentary ethnic divisions are important for the maintenance of social hierarchy and status quo in Malaysia.

**Keywords:** Race, Racial Discourse, *Bumiputera*, Ethnic Groups, Colonialism

## 1. Introduction

This paper is an attempt to understand the reason why in Malaysia the word race is preferred over the more widely accepted term ethnic groups and ethnicity to describe different groups in academia. I first examine how students used the word race in their coursework, and how faculty members and other scholars (including anthropologists) use the word race. I then shift to examine the term race in Malaysia historically. I compare racial discourse which was introduced and spread under British colonial domination with contemporary racial discourse. Finally I explore the reasons for the pervasive usage of race in Malaysia, and argue that the concept of race is useful to create the notion that the three major ethnic groups in Malaysia – Malays, ethnic Chinese and ethnic Indians – are separate groups and that their differences will never be changed. Such fixed divisions are important for Malaysia where every aspect of the citizen's life is based on ethnic divisions. The concept of race therefore supports ethnic hierarchy and status quo.

## 2. "Race" in the classroom

When I asked students to explain different ethnic groups in Malaysia, they often referred to physical appearance, especially skin color in: "Malay people have olive color skin" or "Chinese people have fair skin". The Malay students who are from mixed ethnic backgrounds, with mixed parentage from groups like Javanese, Bugis, Arab, Minangkabau, Chinese, Indian, and so on indicated their awareness of their physical differences from so-called "pure" Malay. They believe that they are mistaken for other ethnic groups since they do not look "typically Malay" due to their skin color, the shape of their face, eyes, nose and so forth. Despite the fact that they see ethnic groups as cultural groups<sup>2</sup> when they identify other's ethnic background, physical appearance is the main measurement to classify others in Malaysia.

The confusion of the concepts of race and ethnic groups is also found in the teaching materials for a course called Ethnic Relations. With widespread discussion of ethnic relations in 2007 (Shamsul A. B. 2008, p.8) the Ministry of Higher Education under the Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi made Ethnic Relations a compulsory course to be taught in all Malaysian universities (Martinez 2005, p.197) to facilitate interaction amongst different ethnic groups and to promote better understanding amongst them (Shamsul A. B. 2008, p.8-9).

According to Shamsul A. B. who was appointed as the general editor of the textbook<sup>3</sup> used in this course, the textbook was a publication that "had received so much attention from the Cabinet", "in the

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<sup>1</sup> Contacts: Tel: +60-4-928-6640, fax: +60-4-928-6602, email:rnakamura23@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup> The problems of defining ethnic groups as cultural groups have been pointed out in 1960s by the works like M. Moerman's "who are the Lue?" and E. Leach's classical work, Political systems of the highland Burma (Leach 1964; Moerman 1965). It has been agreed amongst anthropologists that ethnic groups cannot be defined by culture.

<sup>3</sup> The first Ethnic Relations course was taught in Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) in 2006. A textbook prepared by two UPM lecturers for this course was criticized as biased and insensitive especially about the accounts of ethnic crash on the May 13, 1969 and the kampong Medan incidents (Husna Yusop 2006). The controversy of UPM's textbook was raised in parliament and Lim Kit

history of post-colonial Malaysia” (Shamsul A. B. 2008, p.9). It was made under exceptional attention of the cabinet. The contemporary view on the race concept is that it is a system for biologically categorizing human beings. It was established during late 18<sup>th</sup> to early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries when Europe expanded its hegemony to other parts of the world, and was utilized to legitimize their domination over others. Though the Ethnic Relations course indicates that race is a social construct, it does not further explain this in the context of colonialism. The description of race as lineage group further confuses students about the concepts of race and ethnic groups.

For the definition of ethnicity, the course emphasizes both objective and subjective aspects of identity. The objective aspects involve culture, language, religion, tradition, dress, foods, and even hair style, while the subjective aspects indicate group feelings, shared beliefs, origins and lineage. The course defines ethnic groups as cultural groups and differentiates them from racial groups. Yet when it refers to ethnic minorities, the concept of race is predominant: “minorities [sic] refer to social groups (which are) oppressed because of ethnic character, biology, etc.” The course quotes Kinloch in order to explain the four aspects of minority groups, which are physical, cultural, economic and behavioral aspects. For the physical aspects, issues of race, gender and age groups are discussed. With regards to cultural aspects, religion and ethnicity are discussed, while for economic aspects social classes are concerned, and for the behavioral aspects “deviant behaviors” are mentioned (Kinloch 1974). These definitions indicate that there are physiological differences between minority and majority people and one can “see” divisions between minority and majority groups. In the course subsection called prejudice, the word race is used interchangeably with the term ethnic group. The lack of critical analysis of the concept of race and the indifference toward the historical development of this concept has resulted in confusion over the terms ethnic and race amongst Malaysian university students.

The confusion about these concepts is further observed amongst faculty members. Questionnaires were distributed to faculty members in one department in our university to gauge understandings of the concepts of race and ethnic groups. There was only one faculty member who clearly stated that the concept of race is irrelevant. One of the faculty members complained that the survey questions were confusing and there should be a clear definition of race and ethnic group stated at the beginning of the questionnaires. There is a general sense of confusion about the terms race and ethnic groups in higher education.

The survey was initially distributed amongst university students, and later the same questionnaires were distributed amongst the faculty members for a comparison. A list of different groups was provided and students were asked if they think that the group that they identify with was a racial group or an ethnic group. The survey result revealed a tendency amongst the students to see the major ethnic groups of Malaysia – Malay, ethnic Chinese and ethnic Indian – as racial groups, while they view the indigenous people of Sabah and Sarawak, non-Malay indigenous people, and other minorities as ethnic groups. The students’ responses reflected those from faculty members in identifying racial groups and ethnic groups although faculty members’ response was limited<sup>4</sup>.

### 3. Race and the term ethnic in the media

I have examined newspaper articles in English<sup>5</sup> published in Malaysia since 1975 by using the online Bernama News archive. Nine hundreds eighty-four articles contain the term racial in their heading, while 268 articles had the term ethnic<sup>6</sup>. The majority of the race articles discussed issues of national integration, racial unity, efforts to decrease racial sentiment and the eradication of racial antagonism. The races discussed in these articles predominantly imply the three major ethnic groups -Malay, ethnic Chinese and ethnic Indian. The word race also connotes something negative. For example, “don’t raise issues that can incur racial wrath”, “do not stoke racial tensions”, “do not vote along racial lines” or “do not attempt racial politics”. Similarly, headlines such as “don’t play up racial issues for political mileage” can be seen, along with “don’t

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Siang, the chair of Democratic Action Party, an opposition party of Malaysia, accused this textbook as “tendentious, divisive and mischievous”(Lim Kit Siang 2007). The UPM finally withdrew the textbook, and the Ministry of Higher Education formed a committee to come up with a new textbook. There was a discussion if the government’s intervention for Ethnic Relations textbook could be seen as a sign of loosing of universities’ academic autonomy (Ras Fg Ha 2007)

<sup>4</sup> In the survey, there are two questions: 1) which one of the following groups you consider as a racial group? Please circles as many as you identify as a racial group 2) which one of the following groups you consider as an ethnic group? Please circle as many as you identify as an ethnic group. The same names of 34 groups were provided to be classified as a racial group or an ethnic group. The valid responses from students counted 145 and from faculty members counted 17.

<sup>5</sup> I used English articles since there is no Malay equivalent to the term “race”. The Malay word *bangsa* which is translated as race is also used to indicate an ethnic group, and a nation.

<sup>6</sup> There were 30 articles which talked about the ethnic relationships outside of Malaysia. These articles were not included in the sample.

create racial tension”, “do not tinkle with racial politics”, “do not exploit racial issues to seek popularity”, “do not stir up racial sentiment” or “do not harp on racial and religious sentiments”, and so forth.

The word ethnic was used in reference to the cultural differences between groups, including literature, music, dance, dress, foods, jewelries, crafts, traditions, festivals and so on. The word exotic was found to accompany the word ethnic on several occasions. The term was also used to talk about the people of Sabah and Sarawak, as well as ethnic minorities including *orang asli*<sup>7</sup> none-Malay indigenous people. Considerable numbers of articles also used the term race along with ethnic which indicates that two terms are considered to be the same.

It can be summarized that the Malaysian media tends to use the word race when reporting about national integration, policies and interrelationships between the three major ethnic groups, while they tend to choose the word ethnic when discussing about the peoples in Sabah and Sarawak and cultural issues. The tendency of the usage of race and ethnic in the media is similar to the tendency found amongst university students and faculty members.

#### 4. “Race” in academic writings

In the fields and subfields of social sciences it widely agreed that the concept of race to classify and analyze particular groups of people has no scientific foundation and the concept of race has been rejected as an analytical concept<sup>8</sup> The dominant concern of race studies has been on the process of constructing race as a social reality or the survival of race as a concept through the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Barkan 1992; Banton 1998, 2000, pp.51-63; Takezawa 2005, 2009).

In Malaysia, however, the term race is widely used in academic writings as an accepted “scientific” concept to discuss ethnic relations. For instance, Syed Husin Ali, a trained anthropologist, completed his Ph.D. at the London School of Economics and served as a professor of anthropology for many years at the University of Malaya, reflected his belief in race in his recent publication on ethnic relationship in Malaysia. In this book, he stated that the concerned groups, such as Malay, ethnic Chinese, ethnic Indian and so on should be referred as ethnic group rather than racial group. One of the four explanations<sup>9</sup>, he gave was that all so called racial group in Malaysia belong to the same racial stock, namely Mongoloid. Thus it is different from the situation in countries like the USA or South Africa where Caucasoid race and Negroid race exist. He argued that “ethnic relations in Malaysia have its own character, quite different from that existing in other countries” (Syed Husin Ali 2009, p.1). His explanation indicates that race is a legitimate scientific term to classify human population. It has to be noted that three racial groups, he listed Mongoloid, Caucasoid and Negroid, originated from Johann Friedrich Blumenbach’s classification of human race in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Blumenbach’s classification had great impact on development of racial studies, and it has been widely accepted and pervasive amongst the people through education. Yet, examination of racial categories in various fields have proven that there is no scientific ground to group human populations based on their physical appearance as Blumenbach did (Barkan 1992; Takezawa 2005).

Syed Husin Ali’s usage of the term race was crosschecked against a sample of theses written by Malaysian students who received graduate degrees in the West. It was found that most of the theses used the term ethnic groups rather than race, however Sundram’s Master thesis at Michigan State University discussing the class relationship in Malaysia purposively used the word race. Sundram stated that this term was used in order to discuss social stratification of the three major ethnic groups in Malaysia, arguing that race is a social construction, yet “once racial categorization takes on a particular configuration within a society on an everyday level” (Sundram 1983, p.29) it has become reality. Racial groups are stratified along class differences and have their own goals and interests, which might cause conflicts (Sundram 1983, p.30).

I believe Sundram chose the term race to discuss class differences in Malaysia because the term itself embodies power relationships. According to Banton, those who study racial relations using class analysis view the concept of race as a signifier or symbol of social conflicts. Furthermore, stated that race uses biological differences to exclude others from privileges (Banton 1998, pp.186-99). The reason for the pervasiveness of the concept of race in academic discourses seemed to be the nature of ethnic relationships in Malaysia, and its way of constructing the nation-state.

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<sup>7</sup> There are various discussions on marginalization of indigenous population in the *bumiputera*, affirmative action policies toward “original people” of Malaysia. See C. Nicholas 2000 and T. Nobuta 2009.

<sup>8</sup> The Association of American Anthropologists, for instance, released statements in 1994 and 1998 to denounce the concept of race: <http://www.aaanet.org/stmts/race.htm> and <http://www.aaanet.org/stmts/racepp.htm>

<sup>9</sup> Another three points are as follows: 1) each ethnic group in Malaysia is not homogeneous; there are political, economical and social differences amongst them. 2) The ethnic relations in Malaysia are not based on the population size, in other words, majority-minority relationships. Rather, they are based on degrees of power and influence. 3) Despite existing ethnic discontent there is no major ethnic violence in Malaysia (Syed Husin Ali 2009, pp.2-3).

## 5. Introduction of race to Malaysia

The word equivalent to race in the Malay language is *bangsa*. Looking at the development of the word *bangsa*, it is both polysemous and ambiguous. Milner argues that *bangsa Melayu*<sup>10</sup> is a concept that was invented during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He examined the etymology of the term and demonstrated how the word originally meant genealogy, lineage and family, and then developed into something equivalent to the ethnic group which was used to group people based on their origin, customs and religion (Milner 1998, 2002, 2004). Further, Milner explains how the term *bangsa* developed to the notion of nation (Milner 2002, pp.51, 68–9, 100, 106).

According to Hirschman the notion of race, which is an attempt to differentiate people biologically, was brought into Malaysia by the British colonial administration. By examining the development of ethnic classifications in the censuses during the British colonial era, Hirschman found that modern censuses are different from the census conducted previously. It was essentially a 19<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon that all of the population had to be categorized and “‘invented’ from experience and common knowledge” (Hirschman 1987, p.561). The word nationality was used in the earlier census, but this word was replaced by the term race because this term is “a wider and more exhaustive expression than ‘nationality’” (Hirschman 1987, p.561). However the officials did not seem to have a clear understanding of this term. The term race had become dominant in the census because it was armed with the scientific theory, namely Social Darwinism. In this theory different races are to reflect different levels of progress or evolutionary stages. This “scientific” theory provided legitimacy to British to justify its colonial dominance as a superior race. Hirschman argued that the changes of census categorization reflect the changes in European racial beliefs and their imperial role (Hirschman 1987, p.568).

British colonial administration utilized local political systems for their colonial management and developed paternalistic attitudes toward Malays, as if “a father dealing with his children” (Hirschman 1986, p.342). Malays have been portrayed as docile, loyal and dependent people who have a weak intellectual capability, and the well-known stereotype of Malay people was their indolence or laziness. For ethnic Chinese people, the British considered them to be more industrious, hardworking and capable, and developed sense of resentment and fear of the Chinese as thieves, which could be a threat to the British economic establishment. Ethnic Indian people were considered as cheap and docile laborers, much easier to control in comparison to the ethnic Chinese, and they filled the labor shortage in plantations (Hirschman 1986, pp.346-7). Syed Hussein Alatas argued that such stereotypes of three ethnic groups were result of expansion of “colonially controlled urban capitalist economic activities” (Syed 2009:80). As subsistence farmers, Malays were unwilling to participate in colonial capitalistic economy while ethnic Chinese and Indian became important labors to support the colonial capitalism (Syed 2009). Application of the race concept to the local population made such stereotypes of local populations based on the colonial perception as biologically determined characteristics of the local population.

Neither Hirschman nor Milner explicitly discussed how the scientific classification of race, mostly expressed as physical appearance, has penetrated people’s minds and become a social reality in Malaysia. However, two school textbooks widely read by students of British Malaya, *Hikayat Abdullah* and *Hikayat Dunia*, were examined by Milner in the *Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya*. This gives us an idea how British created education played a role in the propagation of the concept of race. Milner’s in-depth analysis of these two texts indicates that there was the origin of the notion of *bangsa* as nation-state, in which the nation-state is considered as territorial political unit and humans are understood as members of nation-state and also different races (Milner 2002, pp.93, 95, 290).

According to Milner Malay people did not have a notion of grouping people by race prior to European domination. For instance, in the Malay sultanates’ historical accounts, *Sejarah Melayu* or Malay Annals, the word *bangsa* was only used once (Milner 2007, p.85). In the English translation of *Sejarah Melayu* by Leyden, the word race is used more than once, however there is no physical description of people as we see in the colonial writings. When it talked about beautiful princess, it did not mention about her skin color, shape of her eyes, or nose. Similarly, I did not find any physical description of people in *Malay Myths and Legends* compiled and translated by Knappert. In the epic history of *Bidasari*, a queen gave a birth to “the most beautiful baby you have ever seen” and the description of the baby was “golden all over with a sunny sheen on her skin” (Knappert 1980, p.153). In the story of Hang Tuah, there is similar description found. A prince from the Kingdom of Palembang encountered a mysterious girl in the woods who was “with a shining golden color to her skin” (Knappert 1980, p.197). The fair skin which is preferred in contemporary Malaysian society does not seem to be one of the elements of beauty in pre-colonial time.

Colonial descriptions of the local people as racial groups have pervaded in the local population. Soda examined the transmission of colonial knowledge by analyzing textbooks used in the systematized Malay vernacular education, and argued that the concept of race was popularized among the people of British

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<sup>10</sup> Discussion of historical development of *orang Melayu* (Malay people) see L. Andaya 2010.

Malaya through the education system, mass media and law. Local people were racialized and their nature and capabilities were evaluated in relation to their colonial masters (Soda 2001, p.189). The legacy of British colonial domination and its classification of people into different types with different capabilities and characteristics have been inherited amongst the educated as well. Mahathir's notion of Malays as a "weak race" (Mahathir 1970), and the depiction of Malays as less innovative, pleasure-seeking people in Senu Abdul Rahman's *Revolusi Mental* (Mental Revolution)<sup>11</sup> are just a few examples (Senu Abdul Rahman 2002).

## 6. Survival of the concept of race

Malaysian people's sentiment of nationalism was developed during the time of Japanese occupation of Malaya until the end of World War II (Hooker 2003, p.10)<sup>12</sup>. Malaysia achieved independence from the British in 1957 and included Sabah and Sarawak in their federation in 1963. The new state of Malaysia ought to have been engaging in nation-building projects which can be understood as a decolonizing process. Then why has such a nation-state inherited and retained the colonial concept of race? Hirschman stated that even after racist elements have been eliminated from census classification after independence Malaysian society still suffering from "the residue of racial ideology" (Hirschman 1987, p.570). Why is this concept still surviving in Malaysian society, indeed becoming more prominent than concept of ethnic groups? Farish A. Noor stated that many governments in Africa and Asia including Malaysian that have won their independence against the colonial powers relapsed into "repressive neo-colonial rule" by retaining colonial regulations and system (Farish A. Noor 2009, p.82).

An examination of the caste system in India, for instance, shows that "all the stories about race are to 'naturalize' inequality created by society and human being" (Channa 2005, p.347). There are arguments that India's caste system and the word caste itself were invented during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the late British colonial period (Chatterjee 1993; Channa 2005; Hobson 2007). Channa argued that before the British colonial period, no concept of caste existed. Instead a status structure called *jati* or *varna* was in place, which did not establish a fixed social hierarchy, but rather regulated social stratification with some space for negotiation and contestation. The concept of caste and the caste system were completed by application of the concept of race to the existing local social stratification by the British colonizers. The concept of race which was armed by the science of biology and body measurement made non-rigid traditional social stratification into a fixed and rigid hierarchical system. The Aryan language group has been converted into a racial group and considered superior to the local population. The difference between low caste and high caste are considered to be racial differences<sup>13</sup>. Application of race concept to traditional social stratification gave higher caste people and elites some benefits. They could legitimize their superiority and privileges against the lower caste people, thus the caste system and concept were accepted and perpetuated by Indians themselves. In the contemporary discourse on Indian caste, one can find that the stereotyping of physical characteristics is a result of the penetration of the race concept in India (Channa 2005).

A similar argument can be applied to the case of Malaysia. Retaining the race concept inherited from the British colonial regime gives legitimacy to Malay dominated governments to sustain and protect their positions of power and Malay privileged positions as recognized by the Federal Constitution of Malaysia. The Malaysian Federal Constitution was said to be the result of ethnic bargaining and accommodation amongst the three major ethnic groups. Non-Malays obtained citizenship with the protection of their culture and language while Malays were guaranteed their special position inherited from the British colonial administration (Tan 1987, pp.245-6; Shad Saleem Faruqi 2005, pp.33-4). Article 153 of the Federal Constitution charges the monarch to "safeguard the special position" of Malays and other indigenous groups in Malaysia (Constitution of Malaysia; Mason and Ariffin 2005, p.2). Shad Saleem Faruqi explained that Article 153 indicates the special treatment of Malay and natives of Sabah and Sarawak on the matter of priorities in "the federal public service, scholarships, educational and training privileges or facilities, permits or licenses for the operation of any trade or business" (Shad Saleem Faruqi 2005, p.34).

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<sup>11</sup> Syed Hussein Alatas criticizes academic quality of arguments found in *Revolusi Mental* as "a chaotic amalgamation of sound common knowledge of no depth, and absolutely ridiculous inferences" (Syed Hussein Alatas 2010:149) and ascribes its poor academic quality to "the intellectual poverty of the authors" (Syed Hussein Alatas 2010:153).

<sup>12</sup> The permanent exhibition of modern Malaysian history at the National Museum in Kuala Lumpur shows a documentary film of Malaysia under British and Japanese occupation. While British occupation was depicted somewhat positively by bringing education to Malaysia (despite making people suffer and experience poverty), Japanese occupation was depicted as causing total destruction of the communities. It further explained that people of Malaysia under the British could not be united, however under Japanese harsh and brutal occupation people were united to protect their homeland.

<sup>13</sup> Several ethnic Indian students in my courses indicated similar belief of the relationship between caste and skin color; the dark skin Indians belong to the lower caste while the fair skin Indians belong to the upper caste.

Safeguarding Malays and other indigenous people's special position has been achieved through a series of policies which can be generally coined as *bumiputera* policies<sup>14</sup> *Bumiputera* means "son of the soil" referring to Malays and other indigenous people such as *orang asli*, and native people of Sabah and Sarawak (Mason and Ariffin 2005, p.2). *Bumiputera* policies were developed after the May 13 incident which involved violent clashes between Malays and ethnic Chinese. The alleged cause of the May 13 incident was economic inequality amongst the ethnic groups, and the government of Malaysia carried out New Economic Policies (NEP) to eradicate poverty from Malaysia regardless of ethnic backgrounds and to improve the economic standing of the *bumiputera* (Kubo 2004, pp.36-7; Mason and Ariffin 2005, p.3). NEP was carried out from 1970 to 1990, followed by National Development Policies to further eradicate poverty. Kubo argues that the intention of NEP was, in reality, to enhance the socio-economic position of Malay people. Especially in education and employment, Malays have been prioritized. There are more Malay students in engineering and medicine. Malay employment in non-agrarian sectors was encouraged and employment in the public sectors has been dominated by the Malays (Kubo 2004, pp.38-9).

Some Malaysian students indicated that *bumiputera* policies such as the ethnic quota system made them aware of their ethnic standings in society. Although the ethnic quota system in the universities has been abolished since 2002, many of my students believe that it is still practiced, for instance at the time of university entrance and for scholarship opportunities. The students claim that Malays as a privileged group can enter universities with lower marks than ethnic Chinese and Indian students while qualified ethnic Chinese and Indian students are not accepted by universities or not able to secure scholarships. The ethnic quota system can be found in various aspects of university life, from the ethnic ratios of professors, university staffs, and students' council members to the number of Malay, ethnic Chinese and Indian restaurants on campus. It is an irony that *bumiputera* policies, whose goals were to achieve socio-economic equality amongst the population of Malaysia and national unity, are actually deepening gaps amongst the ethnic groups and creating ethnic discontent and antagonism (Kubo 2004, p.38; Zakaria Haji Ahmad and Kadir 2005, pp.56-7).

Malay's special position is supported by a series of *bumiputera* policies, creating and sustaining ethnic hierarchy in Malaysia. By retaining the colonial legacy of race attributed to the three major ethnic groups, the differences amongst these three groups are considered to be biological differences and have become nonnegotiable. Thus the ethnic differences amongst the three are perpetuated, and the privileges of Malays as the genuine race of the *tanah Melayu* (land of Malay) will not be challenged. Moreover, using the racial argument of Malays as a "gentle race" legitimizes *bumiputera* policies. Such racial arguments to protect the position of Malays against "stronger races" can be found throughout Mahathir's *Malay Dilemma*<sup>15</sup> (Mahathir 1970).

The definition of Malay in Article 160 of Malaysian Constitution indicates that the Malay is a person who professes Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language and practices Malay customs. Given the frequent use of this concept of race documented in this paper, it is a striking contrast that the constitutional text does not have any physical definition or condition of descent to determine Malay. It is worth trying to think about why the constitution itself shirks away from a racial definition.

Mohd Arish argued that federal constitutional category of Malays was created "in the political context for purpose of granting economic and political privileges" to the people who can be slotted into the category of Malay (Mohd Arish 1983, p.9). He reported on a group of recent Indonesian migrants who could obtain the status of Malay and therefore *bumiputera* by utilizing the constitutional category of Malay. Many Indonesian migrants are Muslim, speak *bahasa* Indonesia which is almost similar to the *bahasa* Malay and can easily adapt Malay customs. He also mentioned the fact that the Malaysian Statistics Department has dropped categories of various Indonesian ethnic groups, Arabs and Indian descent Malay and all have been counted as Malay. During his field research, his informants expressed their discomfort with questions about their ethnic identity. They argued that such a question destroys the unity of the community, and that one should understand that Malays are all the same people (Mohd Arish 1983, pp.32, 41). They feared that an ethnic question which may reveal one's mixed heritage with various Indonesian ethnic groups may create divisions and problems amongst the Malay community.

The culturally defined constitutional category of Malay people enables the government to establish a larger Malay reservoir with the people of different ethnic backgrounds which strengthened the political standing of Malay people. The same rationale can be applied to those groups who are categorically ambiguous, such as non-Malay (non-Muslim), native populations like *orang asli*, and various ethnic groups of Sabah and

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<sup>14</sup> The Malaysia government has never used the term *bumiputera* policies officially (Kubo 2004, p.37; Mason and Ariffin 2005, p.1; Onozawa 2009, p.103).

<sup>15</sup> Syed criticized that Mahathir's image of Malay people is overgeneralization of a particular segment of Malay society, namely the ruling class. He argued that the Malay community is not as homogenous as Mahathir claims, and applying of the characteristics of Malay ruling class to entire Malay population of Malaysia makes little sense (Syed Hussein Alatas 2010:155-163). Adaptation of the race concept in *Malay dilemma* enabled such overgeneralization of traits of some people to entire ethnic group.

Sarawak. They are often described as ethnic groups and have not been racialized since they could be allied with Malay as the same *bumiputera*<sup>16</sup>. While applying inherited racialized discourse to *bumiputera* (Malays) and non *bumiputera* (ethnic Chinese and ethnic Indian), the ethnic hierarchy has been successfully established in Malaysia, and racialized ethnic relationships will maintain this rigid social hierarchy based on the racial differences just like the caste system (Mohd Arish 1983, p.9).

The race concept entrenches differences within the population, serving as a useful tool to divide people and maintain privileges. Survival of the colonial concept of race in post-independent Malaysia is not a natural development that comes with ethnic diversity but result of a political intention.

## 7. Conclusion

It will take a considerable effort to shake off racialized discourse and eradicate racial categorization from the minds of people in Malaysia. Goldberg defined race as racialized discourse and stated that the function of this concept can be interpreted as follows:

(Race) has established who can be imported and who exported, who are immigrants and who are indigenous, who may be property and who citizens; and among the latter who get to vote and who do not, who are protected by the law and who are its objects, who are employable and who are not, who have access and privilege and who are (to be) marginalized. Race continues to assume significance in this complex way (Goldberg 1993, p.87).

Hirschman defined the concept of race is real only on the base of racism. People are still discriminated on the base of assumed race and in such context race is real though classification of human population into racial categories is flawed (Hirschman 2004, pp.407-9).

It is a paradox that a country which has carried out a series of national unity and integration projects such as *bangsa* Malaysia under Mahathir and the recent One Malaysia campaign has retained the concept of race and been racializing its population. As long as the concept of race persists in understandings of inter-group relationships, national integration will remain elusive. University students who introduce themselves to me, a foreign lecturer, as Malaysian-Chinese or Malaysian-Indian instead of Chinese-Malaysian or Indian-Malaysian reflect how national integration projects have little effect on their mind.

There is no such thing as race in Malaysia, but rather racialized and hierarchical ethnic relationships. The racialized discourse turns ethnic boundaries into unchangeable biological boundaries. This is what Homi K. Bhabha described as “the concept of fixity in the ideological construction of otherness” and it is the “important feature of colonial discourse” (Homi K. Bhabha 1983, p.18). In order to build inclusive national discourses, and to achieve national integration, Malaysia needs to abandon its colonial vestiges.

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<sup>16</sup> For instance, a book titled “Representation, identity and Multiculturalism in Sarawak”, edited by Zawawi Ibrahim, published in 2008 consisted of fifteen chapters does not use the word “race” to indicate ethnic relationship in Sarawak.

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