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ETHNO-RACIAL MARGINALITY IN WEST MALAYSIA: THE CASE OF THE PERANAKAN HINDU MELEKA OR MALACCAN CHITTY COMMUNITY

One has only to consult the HRAF ethnographic map of Southeast Asia to note that every country in this region comprises numbers of racial and ethnic groups living in relative isolation and with minimal interaction with one another.¹ There have been problems of inter-ethnic animosity causing socio-political instability which are due to attempts by the politically dominant ethnic group to create a system of rewards and punishments and greater cohesion through the assimilation of these 'others' into its indigenous and usually dominant culture. The politics and socioeconomic life of these countries is based on constant efforts to find a *modus vivendi* to ensure that these diverse groups live in peace and harmony. Mere political cooperation between them was found to be inadequate and destabilizing, leading to a search for other formulae to facilitate cultural assimilation. There have been few sociological investigations of these various groups as they relate to the central national concern for unity through assimilationist strategies; the existing literature in the field has been limited to certain outdated classics.² As it was ethno-racial conflict which attracted such social inquiry into the subject, these studies focussed their attention essentially on the separate ethno-racial groups and differences. In the case of multi-racial Malaysia, such inquiry studied the manifestly divergent Malay and non-Malay communities and recommended pluralistic political, economic and socio-cultural formulae accordingly. It was felt that the existing ethno-racial cleavages could never be bridged and therefore the political formula of 'cultural pluralism' was adopted to provide the foundation for national unity and political stability. The conflict orientated social scientist tended to neglect the existence of the long-standing convergence of ethnoracial boundaries and resultant intermediary or marginally ethnic groups. Even under pressing demands for national integration through

increased political, economic and socio-cultural assimilation experienced in these countries, confronted with the ethno-racial dilemma, scholars, policy makers and social engineers have tended to neglect studying these small and less glamorous marginal ethnic groups, which may well provide better lessons for assimilationist strategies. The present study is only meant to be a preliminary enquiry into the subject of ethnic marginality in the classic multi-ethnic society in Southeast Asia, Malaysia.

In Malaysia too where the traditional preoccupation with the three major divergent groups form the structure of national political, economic and social life the expediency of "cultural pluralism" made the subject of the assimilation of the non-Malays into Malay culture and society a politically sensitive subject. Thus, smaller non-Malay communities that had long since assimilated into the dominant-indigenous Malay culture while retaining significant aspects of their ethno-racial heritage, were ignored except for passing mention of them by historians. Such a community is the Malacca Chitty community of Indians, who, while manifesting a degree of assimilation into secular Malay culture unsurpassed by any other group, have nevertheless remained staunchly loyal to their original Hindu faith since they came to Malacca in the fifteenth century.³

The racial-political crisis of May 1969 represents an important watershed in the development of national politics and socio-economic life, as it was responsible for ushering in radical changes which rejected the existing pluralist system in operation since 1957, in favour of the socio-politico-economic assimilation of the non-Malay groups under a more rigid Malay polity. Malay and non-Malay leaders alike and their respective communities were agreed on the urgent need for greater socio-cultural assimilation into the secular aspects of indigenous Malay culture, which the 1971 National Culture Conference came to define and adopt as the true national culture.⁴ The political and social realities of the new post-May era of Rukungara (the new national ideology similar to Pancasila in Indonesia) is a definite step in the general direction of assimilation, although religious differences and the degree of assimilation expected and accepted are still controversial issues in the Malay and non-Malay camps. Be that as it may, the neglect of the colourful array of non-Malay marginal ethnic groups by citizen, scholar and social engineer, is regrettable, considering the valuable lessons in cultural assimilation these groups may well provide.

Before proceeding further, it is pertinent to define the central concept of ethno-racial marginality, or, as it is more meaningful to the Malaysian

case, cultural marginality. Cultural marginality describes a situation in which a group of people in interaction with the dominant and indigenous population of a society are assimilated into the rubric of their socio-cultural life in terms of the complex whole which includes knowledge, art, morals, law, custom, as well as other acquired capabilities and habits (including language and religion) while retaining some aspects of their original heritage. Minority and especially immigrant minority groups have been known to assimilate into the dominant socio-cultural tradition while retaining their original religious faith. To this extent they manifest qualities of ethnic or cultural marginality, in the sense that they are marginal to both societies. Where national, racial and ethnic boundaries converge, through social interaction and miscegenation, marginal ethnicity and racial hybrids emerge to pose problems for integration, unity and political stability. In this paper, marginal ethnicity is examined in non-Malay groups (Chinese and Indonesian) which manifest varying degrees of socio-cultural assimilation into Malay culture, while remaining in some significant way true to their original ethno-racial tradition, usually in regard to their religious affiliation. Such marginal ethnic groups have for long existed 'isolated' (in the sense that they have not made an impact on the mainstream of national political, socio-cultural and economic life) and small, and do not fall into the distinct traditional Malay—non-Malay socio-cultural dichotomy.

Two categories of marginal ethnic groups emerge when the concept and condition are defined in terms of the basic Malay and non-Malay marginal continuum. There are both Malay and non-Malay marginal ethnic groups, and it is possible to identify specific groups in each. Malay marginal ethnicity refers essentially to the immigrant Javanese and other islander Malay groups of the Indonesian archipelago. These groups remain marginal for only a short time and are then relatively easily and effectively assimilated soon afterwards to become an integral part of the Islamic-based Malay community. Their successful assimilation is facilitated by the fact that they are fellow Muslim members of the Malay world and only ethno-linguistic differences keep them temporarily separate from the Malay community. These groups are of little political relevance and of little interest to the advocates of the assimilationist strategy. It is the second category of non-Malay marginal ethnic groups which is the focus of this paper. Within this category it is necessary to identify separately the Muslim and non-Muslim groups. Examples of Muslim non-Malay marginal ethnic groups are the Arabs and the *Darah Keturnunan Keling* (D.K.K. or Mamak as they are

popularly referred to). Although these two are of non-Malayo-Polynesian racial stock, religious affinity (Islam) has facilitated their near complete assimilation into Malay society after three generations.⁵ As they are practically assimilated and accepted into Malay society these two groups are of little political relevance and interest to this study.

Mixed racial groups also exist in Malaysia, dispersed along the length and breadth of the country.⁶ Such mixed Malay-Thai groups exist all along the Thailand-Malaysia frontier. In the border areas of Kelantan, Kedah, Perak and Perlis, there are many Thai communities which, while remaining Buddhist, have been assimilated into the fabric of local Malay socio-economic and cultural tradition. Archimbault's study of one of these Thai-Malay frontier communities, the Sam-Sam, needs updating, but the threat to national security has made it very difficult for serious social research to be conducted in these regions.⁷ In Kelantan and some other areas of the East Coast are also to be found dispersed small groups of Muslim Pathans married to local Malay women who live a largely assimilated Malay way of life, although retaining some of their Pathan heritage.⁸ These groups are too few in numbers to be worth studying, but they add to the general picture of the extensive racial mixing and ethnic marginality in multi-racial Malaysia.

Marginality takes its extreme form in cases where miscegenation has resulted in racially hybrid groups, who have been regarded ambivalently in most countries and sometimes subjected to racial prejudice and discrimination.⁹ While a very small and dispersed group of Eurasians exist in Malaysia the dominant theme in marginal ethnicity is of the culturally assimilated variety mentioned earlier. These clearly identifiable marginal ethnic groups such as the Chitty (also known as *Peranakan Hindu Melaka*), Baba Chinese and Portuguese communities of the state of Malacca, have a long history.

These groups will now be identified and discussed briefly, in order to acquire a comparative perspective on the particular case of the Malacca Chittys. Firstly, there are the two well-known groups in Malacca, the Baba Chinese and the Portuguese communities. There is some literature on these groups, both scholarly and popular, but the third marginal group, the Chittys, which manifests the highest degree of assimilation into Malay culture of any non-Malay marginal group in the country, is largely unknown to scholars and the general public.¹⁰ Two unique marginal Chinese communities from the East Coast state of Trengganu will also be discussed briefly: the Yunnan Chinese Muslim community (or *Cina Yunnan*) of Kuala Trengganu and the non-Muslim

(Buddhist) Malay culture-oriented Chinese community of Kampung Tirok (or *Cina Tirok*) who also live near Kuala Trengganu.

I. ETHNIC MARGINALITY AND MALACCA:

THE BABA CHINESE AND PORTUGUESE COMMUNITIES

The small southern state of Malacca has come to be synonymous with ethnic mixing and marginal groups. The Baba or Straits Chinese are considered to be oldest established Chinese community in the Malay Peninsula, dating back to the 16th century. They mostly live in certain areas of Malacca township, such as Jalan Terengkerah and Jalan Cheng Lock. At present they number about 3000 and are mainly Buddhists and Christians. They do not speak a Chinese dialect but converse largely in colloquial Malay and English. However, recent observations indicate that the younger generation of Babas are becoming increasingly conscious of themselves as Chinese, and as a result they speak less Malay at home and are making efforts to learn their Chinese cultural traditions. Nevertheless, the dominant socio-cultural habits of Babas bring them closer to the secular aspects of Malay culture than to the Chinese ones from which they originate. Although physically Chinese, the dress of the women, particularly the older and the more traditionally-oriented younger ones, as well as their cuisine, are very Malay. They are not held in high esteem by other Chinese and to that extent they find themselves somewhat alienated from the wider Chinese community.¹¹ In socio-economic terms, most fall into the lower-middle and middle class categories. As a group they are also prominent in big business and in the professions. Large numbers of Babas work in the lower-middle and middle ranks of the Public Service. This marginally ethnic group is thus unique in that it manifests many Malay socio-cultural habits even though it is non-Muslim.

The Portuguese community of Malacca number about 1400 inhabitants, and trace their origins to the era of Portuguese Malacca between 1511 and 1641 A.D. They are essentially the products of miscegenation between Portuguese men and local Malay women. Physically they are similar to Malays. They have likewise acquired many aspects of Malay culture such as language, food and dress styles, but at the same time they remain loyal to certain aspects of their Portuguese tradition: they speak an archaic language called *Christao* and they are staunch Catholics. In socio-economic terms, they fall largely into the subordinate and lower-middle class strata of the society. Most of the men engage in offshore fishing and are indistinguishable from poor Malay fishermen.¹²

II. THE YUNNAN CHINESE MUSLIM AND THE KAMPUNG TIROK CHINESE COMMUNITIES OF KUALA TRENGGANU

It is generally assumed that this community of Yunnan Chinese Muslims arrived in this part of the Malay Peninsula around 1920. Presently they number about 120 members (about 30 households), and live within the vicinity of the township of Kuala Trengganu. They came as Muslims from China, a fact which facilitated a certain degree of acceptance and assimilation into the Malay community of their new home, but they still retain and manifest strong Chinese socio-cultural habits in their homes and communal organisations, for example, in language spoken (Chinese), dress (of males) and cooking habits. Like other Chinese they steam most of their food while, being orthodox Muslims, they refrain from the consumption of pork. Until the recent scarcity of marriage partners from within their own community, they rarely intermarried with Malays. Economically, they are largely engaged in medium scale commercial ventures (eg. bookshops) and several members of the community are respected *ustaz* (religious teachers engaged to teach Islam to Muslim students) in the public school system. Although they converse in fluent Malay, they use the Chinese language at home and between members of the community. Here we have a non-Malay community manifesting a significant degree of assimilation and acceptance into Malay society, yet retaining at home the Chinese socio-cultural heritage.¹³

The rural Chinese community of Kampung Tirok comprising about 100 members is located in Serada, Kuala Trengganu. They are Chinese Buddhists who are assimilated into the Malay culture. Although inter-marriage with Malays is non-existent, some members of this community resemble Malays in their skin colour, being slightly darker than most Chinese. They speak only Malay and both male and female members of the community dress in Malay style except for the occasional Western-style trousers and shirt. They are a poor rural community of small scale farmers engaged in rubber cultivation and nearly all fall into the lower income bracket. Their homes and the general village environment closely resemble a Malay village or *Kampung* and are similarly characterised by a slower pace of life. They do not seem to possess those commercial interests that one generally associates with Chinese elsewhere in rural and urban settings. Here we have a rural, poor, Chinese Buddhist community who have adopted many of the Malay socio-cultural norms.

III. THE CHITTY COMMUNITY OF MALACCA OR THE PERANAKAN HINDU MELAKA

The Malacca Chitty community (not to be confused with the South Indian money lending caste, the Nattukottai Chettiars) is unique in being an assimilated Indian marginal community completely Malay socio-culturally — in their language, dress, food habits and other aspects of their general social conduct — nevertheless, in their religion strict Hindus from the 15th Century. It is important that physically they are identical to Malays, possessing mongoloid rather than the aquiline features of South Indians. They speak the Malay language although they can also speak English. They have no knowledge of Tamil, nor of any other Indian language.

The history of the community can be pieced together from several reliable written sources, notably the *Sejarah Melayu*, and Portuguese and Dutch accounts and records. There has also been brief mention of this community of early Indians in Malacca by a few scholars.¹⁴ Leaders and community elders, basing their belief on oral tradition, claim that their ancestors were followers of Parameswara, the Hindu prince who in about 1403 A.D. settled in Malacca, which was then an unknown Malay fishing village. In 1412 he married the Muslim princess of Pasai in Sumatra and embraced Islamic faith, assuming the name Iskandar Shah. It was not long before Islam was embraced by most of the indigenous Malay population as well as by the others who came to settle there. Thus, according to this theory, their origins date back to the beginnings of Malacca. Others argue that they originate from Indian traders of the Coromandel Coast of South India (based in the port of Kaligapatnam) who were frequent visitors to Malacca, and who at some point intermarried with local Malay women, gradually forming a distinct settlement of "Chittys" or traders. Oral tradition also has it that members of the community were held in very high esteem by the Malay rulers, and given important public functions, such as that of the harbour master or *Dato Shahbandar*. If it is the case that they intermarried and settled down there after Malacca had embraced Islam and was attempting to convert the rest of Southeast Asia to the new faith, it is strange that they were allowed to marry Malay women and still remain Hindus. There are two possible explanations. Firstly, they must have come to Malacca and intermarried with Malay women before the Islamic faith had taken complete hold. It may have been a transitional period in the spread of Islam, when pockets of non-Muslim Malay communities still existed, among the Hindus and animists. Secondly, it is likely that the

religion was at the time far more accepting of such inter-faith marriages.

A theory of their origin which is controversial and unpopular among the Chittys themselves, but which is propagated by, among others, the non-Chitty Indian communities of Malacca, has come to be known as the "convict theory". According to it, the Chitty community derives from released Indian convicts (criminals and anti-British nationalists) who were brought to operate public projects in what was then British Malacca, from the penal colony of the Andaman Islands. Released after their period of conviction was over, they were supposed to have married and settled locally, thus laying the foundations of the present Chitty community. This theory and its supposed date of origin is invalidated by accounts of the community in the *Sejarah Melayu*, the Portuguese and later Dutch accounts, all of which preceded the arrival of the British in Malacca in 1795.

Initially the Chittys settled in the centre of Malacca town as traders, but gradually they took to agricultural pursuits. Among their early commercial ventures was a thriving brick-kiln business, and there were also Chitty goldsmiths. For predominantly religious, but also for commercial and settlement reasons, they acquired and accumulated large tracts of land from the Portuguese and Dutch authorities between 1511 and 1824. The community still possesses Dutch titles to land alienated as such, on which their many Hindu temples and shrines were erected. It was this change to an agricultural vocation that led them to settle in their present location of Gajah Berang (the name of which, I was informed, is a distorted derivative of the South Indian port of Kanchipuram). Under British rule, they once again returned to wage labour and commerce, while maintaining their agricultural properties. Many entered the lower and subordinate ranks of the public service, and continue to be in these occupations to this day, as clerks, teachers, technicians and unskilled labourers.

The Chitty community is presently located in Gajah Berang (Kampung Tujuh) and to a far lesser extent, in the adjacent area of Terengkerah, although some families are scattered over other parts of the state of Malacca. Geographical homogeneity and identity are, however, restricted to Kampung Tujuh. The communal complex in Gajah Berang is bordered by Jalan Gajah Berang, Terengkerah, Bachang and Lorong Pandan, and covers an area of about seven acres of land. If, however, communal land outside Gajah Berang is taken into account, the community owns altogether about twelve acres of land. The Chittys also acquired a few acres of land in a nearby estate and used it for their

community burial ground. It is worth noting that far larger tracts of land in the Gajah Berang, Terengkerah and Klebang areas also once belonged to individual Chittys but these were sold to Chinese buyers, thus halving the original size of the landed property. The existing Chitty complex in Gajah Berang is in itself no longer a geographically homogeneous unit due to the widespread sale of individual holdings to Chinese settlers. But some communal ownership of land by an elected Chitty Trusteeship Council has prevented the sale of this land and thus saved the community. Some of the unused agricultural land belonging to the community reverted back to the state government and was another factor responsible for reducing the original Chitty landholdings. The Chitty homes are located around the Mariamman and Anglamman temples of Kampung Tujuh. There are also several Hindu shrines scattered about Gajah Berang, particularly near the former paddy fields, which remain unused.

The population of the Chitty community under study comprises 300 persons living in 34 households, and are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1: Chitty community by sex and age

Age group	Male		Female		Total	
	Numbers	%	Numbers	%	Numbers	%
0— 9	19	13.1	18	11.6	37	12.3
10—19	40	27.6	40	25.8	80	26.7
20—29	29	20.0	38	24.5	67	22.3
30—39	24	16.5	18	11.6	42	14.0
40—49	11	7.6	19	12.3	30	10.0
50—59	11	7.6	13	8.4	24	8.0
60 and over	11	7.6	9	5.8	20	6.7
Total	145	100.0	155	100.0	300	100.0

A large exodus of Chittys to Singapore before the Second World War in search of better employment opportunities considerably reduced the original size of the Chitty community. Emigration of fewer but nevertheless significant numbers of Chittys continued after Independence in 1957, so that it is estimated that more than 50 % of the total Chitty population now reside in Singapore, and to a lesser extent, in the larger Malaysian towns. The Chittys in Singapore are dispersed over the metropolitan

area. The migration to Singapore has come to a standstill recently due to difficulties in obtaining work permits from the Singapore government, but contact between Chittys in Singapore and Malacca continues. In general, the Chitty migrants have acquired a higher socio-economic status than those who remained behind in Gajah Berang, a fact which is a constant temptation to the younger generation to leave. Large-scale emigration from Gajah Berang could soon threaten the very existence of this old Hindu-Indian community.

The general welfare and activities of the community is delegated to the elected Sri Poyathar Vinagar Moorthi Kuil Management Committee. This Chitty Management Committee is made up of three Trustees (who are elderly prominent members of the community), the Honorary Secretary of the S.P.V.M. Management Committee, a Treasurer and 7 Committee members (with two extras). All Chittys over the age of 21 vote to select the Committee members with the tacit understanding that only married Chittys over 21 be eligible for office. The Trustees look after the Chitty communal property such as the landholdings, temples and the many shrines. The communal ownership of land prevents it from falling into the possession of outside buyers. While land is communally owned, individual Chitty households pay a nominal rent for the plot they occupy. The younger members of the community have also organised a Youth Committee to facilitate recreational activities and to mobilize the youth for communal projects. This committee also provides a training ground for future Chitty leadership in the Management Committee. In general, all matters concerning the community are conducted in a manner reminiscent of the traditional Hindu *panchayat* system of village councils, where the authority and wisdom of the elders prevail.

Socio-economic conditions

The advent of Colonial rule, first Portuguese and later Dutch, disrupted the traditional Chitty participation in trade and commerce. By the time of the British in 1824, they were displaced from international trade, brick-kiln and goldsmith commercial operations, and they were forced to turn to agriculture, notably *padi*/maize cultivation at the outskirts of what was then the municipality of Malacca. This change led them to settle in their present location in and around Gajah Berang. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, they also entered into private and public wage labour employment in the lower-middle rungs of the commercial agency houses and the British administration.

At present, of the total population of about 300, only 108 are gainfully employed. Of this number, only 22 are women. Table 2 indicates the kind of employment Chittys are engaged in, and Table 3 provides a picture of the income structure of those employed. Both tables were compiled from a socio-economic survey conducted in July 1976.

Table 2: Occupational status in the private and public sector by sex *

Job type	Private sector		Public sector	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Manager	1			
School teacher				1
Technician			6	
Clerk		3	2	
Driver	5		4	
Soldier/Policeman			4	
Nurse			3	3
Municipal/Contract labourer	17		9	
Maid servants		4		
Trishaw riders	5			
Linesman/Fitter/Foreman	3		6	
Office-boy	9			
Factory hand/Salesworker/Waiter	5	10		
Odd jobs	7	1		
Unemployed	12	25		
Pensioner	9			
Housewife		60		

* Information from a survey conducted by author, June-July 1976.

Table 2 indicates low female employment, significant unemployment (45 persons, if the odd-job category is included) and the fact that the majority of Chittys are employed in the private sector of the economy. It is worth noting that no member of the community is engaged in commerce or farming, for which they were previously well-known. All of them are wage labourers, and the majority fall within the lower-

Table 3: Individual Income Levels in (M\$) *

Income Categories	Number	%
below M\$ 100	26	22.2
M\$ 101—250.00	62	53.0
M\$ 251—500.00	24	20.5
M\$ 501 and above	5	4.3
Total	117	100.0

* M\$ 1 = U.S.\$ 0.40.

middle and subordinate categories of the private and public sectors. Most Chittys have an income of between M\$100 - M\$250 per month, while only a very small number earn above M\$500 per month. (See table 3) Thus their socio-economic conditions may best be described as modest, and consequently few households can afford modern domestic conveniences such as television sets, radios, motor cycles and refrigerators. Chitty homes, constructed of wood with zinc and attap roofing, are modest but comfortable, and the nominal rent payments made to the S.P.V.M. Temple Committee amount to between M\$1-3 per month.

The educational level of the community is low. Only 12 Chittys have passed the Malaysian Certificate of Education (M.C.E. is equivalent to the high school diploma). Since 1976, only two girls have passed the Higher School Certificate which is a university entrant qualification. The total number of school-going children is 60, as indicated in Table 4. Many of those presently attending school can be expected to fail as the survey revealed that the community had for long suffered a serious school drop-out problem which was largely responsible for rising unemployment among the Chitty youths.¹⁵ Many of these drop outs are

Table 4: Educational level of those in school

Level	Number	%
Primary education	32	53.3
Lower secondary education	18	30.0
Upper secondary education	10	16.7
Total	60	100.0

engaged in odd and part time employment such as waiters, maidservants and the like. The recent establishment of several foreign electronic firms in Malacca town has partly alleviated this problem, as many Chitty youths were able to find employment as factory hands in these firms.

In short, the general socio-economic state of the Chitty community may be described as lower-middle and lower class, with its attendant low status. The financing of community activities and projects has always posed a problem, and for this reason some of the Chitty temples are financially managed by the wealthy South Indian Nattukottai Chettiar Hindus, as in the case of the Sri Poyathar Vinayagar Moorthi Temple, reputed to be the oldest Hindu temple in the Peninsula, erected in 1781 A.D. Another temple along Jalan Gajah Berang was similarly 'handed' out to the Jaffna or Ceylon Tamil community.

Language and religion

Although the Chittys are a Hindu-Indian community, Malay is the language which they speak at home and with members of their community. Those who attended English schools acquired some knowledge of the English language. It is perhaps astonishing that none of them speak, read or write Tamil, a fact which is generally regretted. Free Tamil classes are conducted for Chitty adults and children with the help of Tamil school teachers who volunteer their services without pay. However, progress has been discouraging, and this is attributed by the community members to the fact that Chittys are too deeply immersed in the Malay language and culture. The children are sent to public schools in the area, mostly to the former English medium schools. Most community members read English and romanised Malay publications. They speak fluent Malay with the correct local accent with the exact nuances and facial expressions although this may be considered *kasar* (crude) by the stricter literary standards of the Malay language. It should be noted, however, that the Chittys incorporate many words in their Malay, especially words related to socio-cultural religious matters. Tamil words, for example *sami* (god or holy man), *ubayam* (auspice), *poosari* (priest), *abishegam* (bathing the deity), *viboothi* and *thirunooru* (holy ash worn by some Hindus), *maalai* (garland), and *poojai* (ceremonial carrying of offerings) figure prominently in their conversations.

The Chittys regret their ignorance of the Tamil language for two reasons: they wish to maintain their Hindu-Indian tradition and to pass it down through the generations; more important, knowledge of Tamil

would make them less dependent upon the Indian community for the management of Chitty secular and socio-religious functions. As they are ignorant of Tamil they are forced to employ Tamil speaking South Indian priests and also to seek other forms of assistance for community socio-religious functions from a South Indian Tamil community that is prejudiced against the Malay-speaking and Malay culture-oriented Chittys.

The Chittys, being strict Hindus make every effort to abide by Hindu beliefs and socio-cultural practices. They belong to the Shaiva sect of Hinduism, and the Hindu religion has remained their most important source of unity and identity throughout the period that the community has survived intact in the Malay Peninsula. Hindu beliefs, customs and socio-cultural practices play a central role in their everyday lives. They strictly observe holy days, diet and the other prescriptions of Hinduism more than is usual among Hindu Indians. They abstain from eating beef and adhere to the Friday vegetarian dietary rule of Hinduism. They celebrate the usual Hindu festivals, but the greatest celebration is undoubtedly the *Amman Thirunal* (a festival devoted to a Hindu goddess) which is held in the month of May, when Chittys settled elsewhere return to renew familial and communal obligations. The celebration takes place over a week within the Chitty communal setting of Gajah Berang where the Amman temple stands. The celebration culminates in the carrying of *Kavadi* ceremonial offerings accompanied by devotion and prayers by members of the community as well as by other non-Chitty and even non-Indian devotees. In strict accordance with the Hindu tradition of sexual segregation, Chittys discourage male and female mixing among the youth, and girls are not encouraged to have further education, nor to be career oriented. Chitty children are given traditional and old-fashioned Hindu names of Gods or Goddesses such as Ganesan, Saraswathi, Lakshmi and Vengadesan, although the new generation of Chitty parents prefer to give their children more modern Indian names of, among others, Indian movie personalities.

The hierarchical system of caste divisions into upper, middle, lower and outcastes, is a fundamental feature of Hinduism and of all Hindu Indian societies. The Indian community of Malaysia is no exception to this, and caste divisions and the attendant socio-cultural practices are pervasive. One of the reasons cited by historians for the sudden conversion of Indianised Southeast Asia to Islam, is the caste factor. Many embraced Islam which had no such caste system in order to escape the rigid confines of caste practices. Although the survey identi-

fied ten caste divisions among the Malacca Chittys, there is no discrimination along caste lines, nor is there a rigidly defined high-low system of caste hierarchy. Table 5 indicates the various caste groups and provides a breakdown of the community into these different groups.

Table 5: Caste Divisions in the Chitty Community

Caste group	Number	%
Pillay	151	50.3
Padayachi	22	7.3
Patter	19	6.3
Naidu	17	5.7
Rajah	16	5.3
Kallan	11	3.7
Naicker	26	8.7
Mudaliar	8	2.7
Chitty	27	9.0
Konner	3	1.0
Total	300	100.0

Although there is no caste discrimination within the ten-tiered Chitty caste community, there is nonetheless a perceived and internalised sense of belonging to a better or lesser caste group. The Pillay caste group, which is the largest is regarded as superior to the others. However, as most families in the community are related through a network of marriages, such a sentiment is of little significance and certainly does not prevent social interaction between Chittys from different caste groups. It is widely believed that the original Indian settlers from South India were descended from the middle caste and that the emergence of a division into the ten Chitty caste groupings related to the specific economic activity engaged in by different Chitty families. For example, the Patter Chitty caste were supposed to have been goldsmiths.

Small minority communities that find themselves in a dominant alien culture and land have been known to manifest extreme communal defensive postures which serve largely to prevent loss of identity through assimilation into the dominant system. They tend to tighten their mores

and customs and have been known to exercise caste orthodox practices even more rigidly than in the motherland. Thus in many parts of the world immigrant Indian and Chinese minorities have been known to adhere more conservatively to their respective heritages than their counterparts in the country from which they originated, and this in turn has been a barrier to national unity in their adoptive countries. The Chitty Hindu community of Malacca, while strictly Hindu, is nevertheless unique in being free of the kind of caste orthodoxy found in India, and over the centuries they have adopted many of the features of the dominant indigenous Malay culture. It is possible that this assimilation into Malay culture, together with their marginal status, eroded any early sense of caste consciousness and orthodoxy.

Dress, food and other social customs

The most common basic domestic attire of Chitty males and females is the Malay costume. The men wear the *sarung*, and the women the *sarung kebaya*. The adoption of typical Malay attire is most pronounced among the women, both young and old. The *sarung kebaya* style differs between the 'grandmother' generation whose *kebayas* reach the shin, while the younger women use the shorter hip length ones. The younger female generation also experiments increasingly with the Indian saree and Western style clothing.

Chitty food is most similar to Malay, although increasing interaction with other South Indians has led to their experimenting with South Indian style cooking. But they mainly eat food prepared in the Malay way such as *nasi ikan*, *sambal tumis*, *acar*, *ikan bilis*, and an assortment of vegetables also prepared in Malay fashion. Like Malays, they use *belacan*, *limau* and *santan* in food preparation, all of which are essential to Malay cuisine, and *nasi lemak* is the most popular breakfast food. The cakes are also mainly Malay ones, such as *bingka*, *pulut*, *dodol*, and *rengas*. Chittys, like Malays, use the fingers of their right hand for eating and wash their hands before and after meals in a centrally located bowl of water.

In terms of the three other important social customs of marriage, birth and death, the Chittys adhere strictly to Hindu rites. The marriage costumes of bride and bridegroom before the Second World War reflect indigenous influence, resembling very much those traditionally worn by the Malacca Baba Chinese community. The Malacca Chittys have their own burial ground in a nearby estate, yet another manifestation of Chitty identity.

Technique du corps

Marcel Mauss provides a useful dimension to the study of assimilation. He refers to typical socially acquired expressions or reactions of the body that he terms *technique du corps*. The body is trained by the norms of society to adopt certain physically acceptable ways when performing daily chores such as playing, working, eating, sleeping, walking and also in the execution of all other socially conditioned physical reactions.¹⁶ Different sexes and ethno-racial groups thus impart to their members both consciously and subconsciously, the correct or polite bodily reactions. Women are expected to conduct themselves in a "feminine" manner while the same effeminate reactions in men would be considered strange and unacceptable. In Malaysia one can observe certain differences in *technique du corps* as between Malays, Chinese and Indians. What is the significance of such a concept? There are two distinct levels or stages involved in the process of complete assimilation. The initial phase is the acceptance of the outsider as a member of the group on the basis of formal requirements, as in the case of religious conversion. The more significant phase of assimilation is when the new member has successfully internalised the "way of life" of his new group and is fully accepted into it. There is usually a lengthy period between the time of the initial religious conversion and the full acquisition and internalisation of the new life style when the convert has embraced an identical *technique du corps*. Mere religious conversion thus does not necessarily lead to the ultimate process of assimilation, although it may encourage the process. If the second level or phase of full assimilation is not attained, a cleavage will always remain that could create problems for the new member vis-à-vis his adoptive group. Thus, in Malaysia, where many consider conversion of the non-Malay into the Islamic faith as the solution to the problems of racial disunity, it should be borne in mind that *masuk Islam* is not the same thing as *masuk Melayu*. Adat not only precedes the coming of Islam to the Malay world of Southeast Asia but is also an important aspect of contemporary Malay society.¹⁷ To be fully accepted and assimilated into the Malay community, one has to go beyond the mere stage of conversion into the Islamic faith and attain the Malay *technique du corps*. This has implications for any large scale program of assimilation through religious conversion. The candidate must live within the new social environment and successfully internalise the new way of life he has chosen. Even then, full assimilation may only be realised in the next generation.

The *technique du corps* of the Malacca Chitty is identical to Malays and clearly sets them apart from both their fellow Indians and Chinese. As I mentioned earlier, they speak the Malay language just as Malays do, and exhibit the selfsame body and facial expressions. This is one indication of the degree to which they have adopted the Malay way of life while still remaining strict Hindus.

Relations with other communities

The Malacca Chittys are a simple, friendly and open community. They do not manifest religious, ethnic or racial prejudice towards the other groups with whom they come into contact such as the local Indian, Chinese and Malay communities. A Malay *kampung* adjoins the Chitty settlement in Gajah Berang, and relations between them have been informal and friendly. The Chittys have over the years developed a special bond with the Baba Chinese community, which is manifested at all Chitty temple festivals, when the Baba Chinese participation rivals that of the Chitty themselves. Relations with Indian Tamils is unique and merits further investigation. The Indian community is generally prejudiced against the non-Tamil speaking Chittys and have succeeded in instilling a sense of inferiority in most members of the Chitty community. This is most pronounced among the youths. In cases of marriage between Indian males and Chitty women, most children of these unions have attempted to conceal their Chitty origins.

The survey indicates that there have been 22 cases of intermarriage between Chittys and outsiders, mainly with Indians and Baba Chinese. There were also five cases of marriages between Chittys and Malay-Muslims all of whom settled outside the community. Intermarriage between Chitty girls and Indian males is on the increase due to the fact that the Indians are usually able to provide better economic security. Several Chitty males have married girls from the Baba Chinese community. As I mentioned earlier, Chitty community elders do feel a certain disdain for what they regard as increasing encroachment by other Indians on matters affecting the Chitty community, but they are not strongly antagonistic or prejudiced.

The future of the Chitty community is indeed threatened by people emigrating in search of employment and by the increasing number of intermarriages. The exodus of half the Chitty population to Singapore and to other West Malaysian towns has threatened the very existence and identity of this long established community.

Chittys in Singapore and elsewhere live dispersed among other ethnic

communities and have tended to lose their identity. Also, the superior socio-economic status of these 'foreign' Chittys serves as a constant temptation to those who remain behind in Gajah Berang to move. In cases of intermarriage, it is most common for such couples to settle outside the Chitty communal complex of Gajah Berang.

CONCLUSION

One interesting fact that emerges from this discussion of the several non-Malay marginal groups, is that religion which is so basic to their lives, does not prevent them from assimilating into the secular aspects of the dominant Malay-Muslim culture. It is worth noting that the orthodox Muslim Yunnan Chinese community of Kuala Trengganu manifests an equal or lower degree of assimilation into Malay culture than the non-Muslim Chinese communities of Kampung Tirok or the Baba Chinese of Malacca. In a multiracial Malaysia beset with problems of national unity, the Chitty community emerges as a prime example of socio-cultural adaptation. They have demonstrated that religious conviction need not pose problems for assimilation into the secular aspect of another culture. It is possible that socio-cultural assimilation of the non-Malays into a secular Malay culture along the lines of the Malacca Chittys may be the answer to the pressing national problems of ethnic diversity. The question is whether people should be allowed to assimilate with time or whether the political, social and economic instruments of the government should attempt to engineer such ethnic assimilation.

University of Malaya

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- ¹⁴ W. G. Shellabear, *Sejarah Melayu*, Singapore 1961, p. 168. Usha Mahajani, *The Role of the Indian Minorities in Burma and Malaya*, Bombay, 1960. George Netto, *Indians in Malaya*, Singapore, 1960.

- ¹⁵ Several facts may explain the serious school dropout problem. They include: a) low aspirations on the part of the students, coupled with a serious lack of parental encouragement; b) the poor economic circumstances of the parents; and c) as Malay is the language they are the most fluent in, those attending English schools did find the language of instruction an impediment. The language of these schools is now being changed to Malay (Bahasa Malaysia), however, and improvements may result.

- ¹⁶ For a further elaboration of this concept, see Marcel Mauss, *Sociologie et Anthropologie*, 5th Edition, Paris 1973, pp. 365-386.

- ¹⁷ For a discussion of this rather controversial issue of the distinction between Masuk Islam and Masuk Melayu, see the clarification by the Secretary of the Penang Religious Department, Haji Abdul Rahim Khan; "What it Means to Embrace Islam", *Malay Mail*, Kuala Lumpur, Dec. 6, 1972, p. 5.

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