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Hoffstaedter, Gerhard (2011), *Modern Muslim Identities: Negotiating Religion and Ethnicity in Malaysia*

Copenhagen: NIAS Press (= NIAS Monographs # 119), ISBN 978-87-7694-081-2, 304 pages

Publications on identity, ethnicity and race in Malaysia have been booming for the last two decades. In Malaysia, the omnipresent nature of “race”, as it is called in the Federal Constitution, dominates discourses of public, political and social life. Thus, it is not surprising that many sociologists, anthropologists, historians and, last but not least, political scientists have focused on the construction and uses and abuses of various concepts of identity in Malaysia. The book under review here seeks to combine approaches from social anthropology and political science to discuss Muslim identities and the role of religion in Malaysia. Hoffstaedter carried out a total of 18 months of intensive fieldwork among Malay middle-class people in Shah Alam in the state of Selangor, a highly urbanized and industrialized region near Malaysia’s capital, Kuala Lumpur, and in Kota Bharu, the capital of the rural state Kelantan, which is often regarded as the Malay “heartland” with a Malay population of more than 90 per cent.

The book is divided into eight chapters, plus a short preface. The first chapter outlines the philosophical (Heidegger, Hegel) and anthropological (Eriksen, Barth) principles the author applied in this study. Chapter 2 presents the roots and meanings of Malayness, while the next chapter discusses in detail Islamic public spaces and their outward appearances in Malaysia. The next parts analyse the approach of the Malaysian government to Islam (especially its Islam Hadhari programme) and the critique of that approach by Malaysian Islamic opposition parties and groups. Chapter 5 describes the relations between Islam, identity and modern Malaysian civil society. The role and success of reactionary Islamic groups as well as the importance of Islamic consumption are discussed in Chapter 6, while Chapter 7 outlines the various aspects of Malay identity, which has been and continues to be influenced by developments from within not only Malaysia, but also Indonesia and other areas in the “Muslim world”. Chapter 8 is a short, but well-written conclusion that sums up Hoffstaedter’s study. Although the title claims that this book is intended to be a study comprising the whole of Malaysia, it actually covers only the Malay Peninsula. Muslim and/or Malay identities in Sarawak and Sabah are not discussed; if they had been, however, this might have delivered a more differentiated picture of Malaysian Muslim societies.

The discussion of ethnicity, particularly in Malaysia, displays several shortcomings. While it is correct that “in Malaysia [...] racial identity is a key identity marker” (p. 2), I have problems with Hoffstaedter’s statement that

in this state, “identities retain a foundation of primordial and essentialist origin” (p. 21). Although Hoffstaedter has made use of important theoretical works on ethnicity and identity like those of Fredrik Barth and Thomas Eriksen, he falls back into the primordial discussions of identity by social anthropologist Clifford Geertz and sociologist Edward Shils, which have been heavily criticized for quite some time in social sciences. The author states that “Malays” migrated from Taiwan to Southeast Asia several thousand years ago and uncritically adopts Andaya’s questionable hypothesis that Malay ethnicity was already present in Sumatra by the seventh century CE at the latest (p. 32). As a comparison, what if we were to claim that French ethnicity already existed at the time of Vercingetorix and Caesar – any serious historian or social scientist would reject this. The reading of ethnicity theorists like Jean and John Comaroff or Richard Jenkins, or of historians like Benedict Anderson or Eric Hobsbawm, would have led to the book presenting quite a different picture, one that would not fit so easily into the common ideology of the Malay ruling class that promotes the idea that the Malays are the “original people” of the country. The author omits a critical discussion of the Malay(sian) blood-and-soil ideology based on race and ethnicity. This is surprising, as Hoffstaedter himself meticulously analysed how the Malaysian state constructs uniform and homogeneous ethnic and cultural entities like “Malayness” or “Chineseness”, which were presented as the cultural heritage of the Malaysian nation (p. 65ff.). The use of the latest writings of Anthony Milner would have led to differing views.

However, the book also has its strong points. Chapter 3 is an original analysis of Islamic public spaces and their relation to governmental politics. The public space in Malaysia’s administrative centre, Putrajaya, is characterized by the will of the government to present this newly created city as a mirror of its Islamization policies. This newly created city can also be interpreted as part of the efforts of the government and its bureaucracy to control Islamic discourse. Chapter 6 presents a discussion truly worth reading of performing Islam and Muslim identity among the Malaysian public based on data collected by the author during his intensive fieldwork. Herein lies the strongest point of Hoffstaedter’s work: While studies on Malay identity and Malayness by Anthony Milner, William Roff, Khoo Gaik Cheng and also – though, to a lesser extent – Joel Kahn were based on the interpretation of chiefly textual sources, Hoffstaedter’s material also derives from personal observation. The author peppers his text with this material, allowing the reader to follow first-hand accounts of “average”, middle-class Malay Muslims.

Finally, upon finishing the book, I was left feeling ambivalent. While the foundations of the study have some shortcomings and sometimes pre-

sent objectionable material, the rest of the book does not refer to these. The author carried out an intensive period of fieldwork and is able to present this experience in his findings and interpretations. Overall, the book is well written and carefully edited. Taken with a grain of salt, it can serve as an interesting starting point for further research on various aspects of Islam and identity in West Malaysia.

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