

# Chapter 7

## The Formation of Malayness in the Urban Space of Colonial Kuala Lumpur

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### Introduction

This paper reconsiders the history of Kuala Lumpur during the British colonial period as a process of the formation of ‘Malayness’ within an urban multi-ethnic society through an examination of articles that appeared in the Malay newspaper *Majlis* during the 1930s.

British Malaya is often described as a plural society mainly composed of Malays, Chinese, and Indians.<sup>1</sup> Previous research on Malayan colonial history has been conducted within ethnic boundaries; for example, there have been Malay studies and Chinese studies, while inter-ethnic relationships have not yet been adequately explored. Colonial cities can serve as good examples of how plural communities encounter each other and interact, because they typically develop through multiple waves of immigration as they are becoming political centres in the colonial regime.

This paper traces how the ethnic framework of Malays (Malayness: what is Malay) acquired its form in the multi-ethnic context of colonial Kuala Lumpur.<sup>2</sup> The question of who are the Malays has attracted academic attention because of the diversity and complexity of this ethnic group [Barnard (ed.) 2004]. While Malayness had historically had more fluidity in the premodern period, it became formulated and rigid in the colonial period with the introduction of the concept of ‘race’ by the British.<sup>3</sup> However, a certain degree of fluidity remained in Malayness even during the colonial period.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> J. S. Furnivall, formerly British administrator in Burma, described a colonial society where Europeans, Asian immigrants, and natives coexisted without socially mingling with each other within a single political unit [Furnivall 1967].

<sup>2</sup> A history of Kuala Lumpur during the colonial period has been provided by Gullick in a series of works on colonial history [Gullick 1993; 1998]. Meanwhile, some Chinese works have focussed on the history of the Chinese in colonial Kuala Lumpur [Zhang 2007].

<sup>3</sup> Hirshman has argued that the Malayan population was categorised into races such as Malays, Chinese, and Indians through the administration of the census by the British [Hirshman 1987].

<sup>4</sup> For example, no Pan-Malayan Malay political organisation was ever formed in Malaya prior to the Second World War because of disagreement regarding the definition of Malay identity [Roff

A topic closely related to the emergence of Malayness in the colonial period is the rise of Malay nationalism, on which several works have been published already [Roff 1994; Milner 1995; 2008]. These works show that a Malay ethnic identity formed during the colonial period. Yet their focus tends to converge on contestation over the Malay identity within the Malay community. As Malaya was a multi-ethnic society, however, the relationships between the Malay and other communities should be taken into account in any interpretation of the development of Malay nationalism.

This paper focuses on the contents of a Malay newspaper to analyse ethnic politics in colonial Malaya. Malay periodicals frequently cited English papers as well as Malay papers when controversies between Malays and non-Malays arose. The intertextuality in such periodicals sheds light on Malay ethnic relations at that time. Kuala Lumpur, where *Majlis* was launched in 1931, was a typical multi-ethnic urban space in Malaya.

This paper explores how *Majlis* responded to political events in Malaya during the early 1930s. The first section clarifies the development of Kuala Lumpur as a colonial city, and the second section examines the political stance of *Majlis* at the time of its launch. The third section focuses on the reports printed about a visit by an official of the Colonial Office as an example of interacting ethnic politics in Malaya in a discussion that led to the formation of a Malay association, as shown in the fourth section.

## 1. Kuala Lumpur as a Multi-Ethnic Colonial City

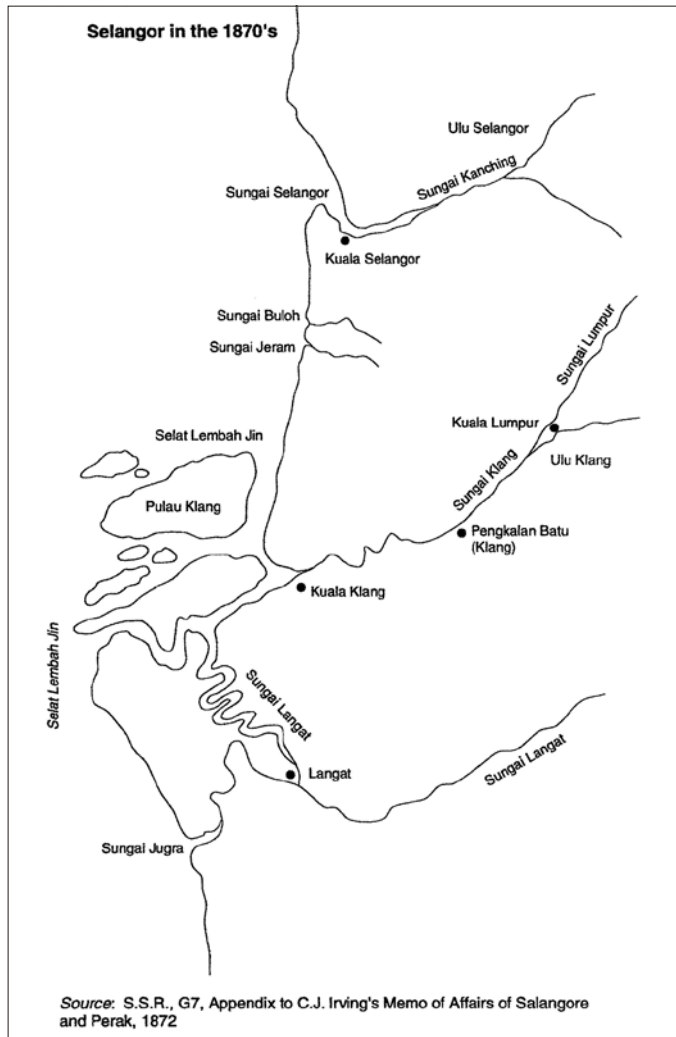
This section describes the development of the urban society of Kuala Lumpur during the British colonial period.<sup>5</sup> Though it was formerly a sparsely-populated region, the Malay Peninsula saw a rapid population increase as a result of a massive influx of immigrant workers from China and India starting in the late nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup>

This was particularly true for Kuala Lumpur in the state of Selangor. Kuala Lumpur was a typical colonial city in that its population had increased dramatically since the middle of the nineteenth century. In contrast, the centre of pre-colonial Selangor had been located at the mouths of the Selangor and Langat Rivers [Gullick 1998]. Situated in the

1994: 235–247].

<sup>5</sup> British Malaya consisted of the Straits Settlements (Singapore, Penang, and Malacca) and nine Malay states. While the Straits Settlements enjoyed the status of a crown colony, the Malay states were protectorates, where the Malay rulers nominally maintained their authority but British advisers (residents) actually held the power. Four Malay states which had become protectorates during the late nineteenth century, including Selangor, formed the Federated Malay States (FMS) in 1896, after which the other five states were called the Unfederated Malay States.

<sup>6</sup> The population of British Malaya (the Straits Settlements and the FMS) increased from 930,869 in 1891 to 2,827,111 in 1931, according to the census.



From: J. M. Gullick, *A History of Selangor* (1998), p. 53.

upper stream of the Klang River, Kuala Lumpur had developed rapidly because of the ‘tin rush’ starting in the 1850s. Lured by rich deposits of tin, large numbers of immigrants had arrived at Kuala Lumpur via inland routes, mainly from Malacca.

The history of Kuala Lumpur began when Chinese labourers, mainly Hakka, were brought in by Raja Abdullah of Selangor as part of a venture backed by Chinese merchants in Malacca. The labourers immigrated from Lukut, a mining district on the southern border with Negeri Sembilan, to the Klang River valley and settled at the confluence of the Klang and Gombak Rivers (now around *Masjid Jamek*) [Gullick 2000: 6–7]. It was Yap Ah Loy,<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Yap Ah Loy (1837–1885), a Fui Chiu Hakka born in Guangdong province, arrived in Malaya in

who greatly contributed to the construction of the city of Kuala Lumpur. After becoming the 3<sup>rd</sup> Kapitan Cina of the city in 1868 and emerging victorious from a civil war (Klang War, 1867–1874), he laid out the present Chinatown and constructed roads connecting the city to mining areas.

Meanwhile, in addition to the Chinese immigrants, a certain number of Malay immigrants were living around Kuala Lumpur. Early settlers were mainly Mandailing from Sumatra under the prominent trader Sutan Puasa [Abdul Razak 2018]. As a result of the Klang War, the Minangkabau and Pahang Malays drove out the Mandailing to become the main component of the Malay population in Kuala Lumpur. They were engaged in tin mining and vegetable cultivation for supplying food to the city.

When Selangor became a British protectorate in 1874, Kuala Lumpur already had a mixed population of Chinese and Malays. In 1879, when an unofficial census was taken, the population of Kuala Lumpur was 2,330, which included 1,906 Chinese and 390 Malays. The fact that males were predominant among both Chinese (1,434 out of 1,906) and Malays (295 out of 390) showed that both populations consisted mostly of immigrant labourers. As for their occupations, 1,133 were engaged in mining, 553 in commerce, and 230 in agriculture in the city, though the ethnic composition of the people engaged in each of these occupations remains unknown [SSF 339/79].

From that time the development of Kuala Lumpur accelerated as it became the economic and political centre of Selangor as well as of British Malaya.<sup>8</sup> The decennial census of 1891, the first official census in the state, showed that the population had increased rapidly throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Though the tin industry saw its peak at the end of the nineteenth century and began to decline thereafter, rubber plantations had expanded and a number of labourers from Southern India had

**Table: The Population of the Municipality of Kuala Lumpur, 1891–1931**

	Malays	Chinese	Indians	Others	Total
1891	2,333	13,552	2,367	768	19,020
1901	3,727	23,181	4,435	1,038	32,381
1911	4,226	31,152	9,068	2,272	46,718
1921	7,297	48,587	20,889	3,651	80,424
1931	10,769	67,929	25,342	7,378	111,418

Source: Census 1891–1931

1854. After making his fortune in Lukut, he went to Kuala Lumpur in 1862. After Kuala Lumpur was hit by a heavy fire in 1881, he spent a large amount of money to build the present Chinatown and Brickfields neighbourhoods. For a biography, see [Middlebrook 1983; Li (ed.) 1997; Chen (ed.) 2006].

<sup>8</sup> Kuala Lumpur became the capital of Selangor in 1880. When the FMS were formed in 1896 by the four Malay Protectorates, Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, and Pahang, Kuala Lumpur was chosen as the capital of the Federation.

poured into the state. The population of the city had increased to 111,418 by 1931, mainly due to increased Chinese and Indian populations.

Meanwhile, Kuala Lumpur had never been a cultural or political centre for Selangor Malays. Though the Malay Sultan was the sovereign of Selangor, the Sultan never resided in Kuala Lumpur although it was the state capital. At the time of colonisation, the Sultan had resided at Jugra, at the mouth of the Langat River, and had moved to Klang in 1905. As mentioned above, many Malays in Kuala Lumpur were of Sumatran origin. When the Malay agricultural settlement scheme was adopted in the early twentieth century to increase the Malay population in Kuala Lumpur, those who were given lands in the settlement (the present *Kampung Bahru*) were mainly Sumatra Malays and Javanese [Gullick 2000: 190–191].

According to the 1931 census, 19,478 out of 64,952 (30%) Malays in Selangor were ‘other Malaysians’, which indicates that they were of foreign origin; they were mainly from what is now Indonesia.<sup>9</sup> In addition, the census report pointed out that a number of Sumatran Malays were returned as ‘Malay’ simply, because in many cases the immigrants from Sumatra felt it to be in his interest to conceal the degree of his ‘alienhood’ [Census 1931: 76]. Clearly, however, the Malay population of Selangor took shape through a process of immigration and settlement.<sup>10</sup>

Kuala Lumpur was a microcosm of Malaya as a multi-ethnic society. Though the state had formally been a Malay state, the real power was held by British authorities, and the Chinese were primarily in command of its economy. In addition, its Malay population was also heterogeneous such that Malayness was ambiguous. It was this context, i.e. an urban society with a diverse cosmopolitan population, into which the newspaper *Majlis* was born in 1931.

## 2. Malay Nationalism under the Colonial Regime: *Majlis* in the Early 1930s

### 2.1 Malayness as ‘Nativeness’

This section deals with the origins of the Malay paper *Majlis* and introduces some themes of its discourse in the early 1930s. Its discourse reflected the political atmosphere of Malaya during that period in that it was characterised by ethnic politics in which Malays

<sup>9</sup> In the 1931 census, the Malay population was sub-categorised into (Peninsular) Malays and ‘Other Malaysians’ who had originated from the Malay Archipelago (presently part of Indonesia), such as Javanese, Minangkabau, and so on [Hirshman 1987: 561].

<sup>10</sup> Haji Abdullah Hukum, a Minangkabau leader from the Bangsar area of Kuala Lumpur, wrote his autobiography as a series of articles that appeared in *Warta Malaya* in 1932 [Adnan (ed.) 1997].

and non-Malays such as Chinese and Indians sometimes came into conflict. It was in this setting that Malay nationalism developed.

*Majlis*, the first Malay newspaper in Kuala Lumpur, was first published in December 1931. According to the Government Gazette, 2,000 copies of the first issue were printed and circulated [Proudfoot 1985: 11]. The paper started with two issues per week and increased to three issues per week starting in March 1937. The publication of *Jawi* (Malay written in an Arabic script) newspapers and magazines saw remarkable development in the 1930s.<sup>11</sup> These periodicals not only delivered news reports but also served as vehicles for political opinions in editorials and letters from readers [Emanuel 2010]. The increase in *Jawi* periodicals at this time was closely related to the ongoing development of Malay nationalism and led to the formation of a unique media space for the dissemination of political opinions.

The chief editor of *Majlis* was Abdul Rahim Kajai, known as the father of Malay journalism. Though he was born near Kuala Lumpur, his father had originated from Minangkabau, Sumatra. Thus, he was a typical ‘Malay’ of foreign origin in Kuala Lumpur. After a period of study in Mecca, where his father was staying at the time, he returned to Malaya to become a journalist and an ideologue of Malay nationalism.<sup>12</sup>

It is not surprising, therefore, that his paper *Majlis* was very much influenced by Malay nationalism. The front page of the first issue of *Majlis*, printed 17 December 1931, featured a ‘Preface (*Pendahuluan*)’ emphasising the significance of the first publication of a *Jawi* newspaper in Kuala Lumpur and repeatedly declaring that the paper would serve the Malay ‘nation (*bangsa*)’, ‘homeland (*watan*)’, and ‘religion (*agama*)’ [*Majlis* 1931.12.18: 1].

In addition, the article dealt with ‘Malayness’. It pointed out the division among Malays and made an appeal for unity. *Majlis* observed that Malays had been disunited by division into various political states for a long time. For example, the Selangor Malays were considered ‘foreigners’ in Malacca, and the Terengganu Malays were said to be ‘foreigners’ in Perak. If this situation continued, Malays would certainly be left behind by foreign races. Instead, it was a Malay nation, homeland, and religion that Malays should unite behind, according to the article [*Majlis* 1931.12.18: 1]. Malayness was an important issue, especially in a heterogeneous society such as Kuala Lumpur.

At the same time, *Majlis* was engaged in ethnic politics. Ethnic frameworks such as those of the Malays, Chinese, and Indians were embedded into the colonial administration

<sup>11</sup> The number of Malay magazines in publication prior to the 1910s was 10, but it increased to 28 in the 1920s and to 72 in the 1930s [Hamed 2002: 14].

<sup>12</sup> He not only emphasised the rights of Malays but also tried to purify Malayness. He attacked Malay-speaking Arabs and Indian Muslims and attempted to drive them out of the Malays. For a biography and a collection of his writings, see [Abdul Latiff 1984; Maier 2010].

of Malaya.<sup>13</sup> Political bodies such as the State Council and the Federal Council set up by the British also included ethnic representatives intended to represent each community.<sup>14</sup>

The focus of the controversies in the 1930s was on the so-called ‘pro-Malay’ and decentralisation policies. The former had given administrative preference to Malays since the beginning of the twentieth century as a means of protecting natives from immigrants such as Chinese and Indians in the Malay States.<sup>15</sup> The latter included a series of administrative reforms made after the First World War wherein the transfer of Federal government authority to the Malay Sultanate was discussed. At the same time, however, Chinese and Indians began to express political opinions. Though these ethnic groups were generally regarded as immigrant workers and sojourners, the numbers of Malayan-born Chinese and Indians had rapidly increased.<sup>16</sup> They called themselves ‘Malayan’ in order to claim the same rights as Malays as locally (Malayan-)born British subjects. When Malaya was hit by the Great Depression in the early 1930s, ethnic politics became especially tense.

When the pro-Malay policies and the special position of Malays were criticised by Chinese and Indians, *Majlis* fought back. An editorial in the 3<sup>rd</sup> issue highlighted other ethnic groups’ antipathy against ‘Malayans’ and insisted that Malays were being pressured by Chinese and Indians. *Majlis* emphasised that Malays were the natives of Malaya, as follows.

The Malay country (*negeri Melayu*) has become nominal only! Fearfully, even the name may disappear. The name of the country should be Malay, the natives of the country (*anak negeri*) must be Malays. We should be very concerned about the activities of foreign races. They insisted that they want to be the natives of the country with political rights... They strongly insist that the name of the country should be “Malaya” and the natives should be called “Malayan”. This means that they will become sons of the soil... Royals and aristocrats in the State Council and

<sup>13</sup> The British government appointed the officer administering immigrant labourers such as the Chinese Protectorate and the Indian Immigration Agent [Parmer 1960: 29–30, 130–133]. Meanwhile, Malays, as natives, did not have a special officer to administer their concerns.

<sup>14</sup> The Selangor State Council, set up in 1877, included four Malay and two Chinese members [Sadka 1968: 177–179]. The Sanitary Board, which was set up in 1895 to administer the municipality of Kuala Lumpur, included two Malays and two Chinese members [Zhang 2007: 104].

<sup>15</sup> The pro-Malay policies included the protection of Malay land tenures and the promotion of Malay administrative officers [Roff 1994: 113–125].

<sup>16</sup> According to the 1931 census, 32% of the Chinese in Selangor and 23% of the Indians were born in Malaya. Though these proportions were low compared to the 72% of Malays born in Malaya, the raw numbers of Chinese and Indian residents born in Malaya were quite high at 76,761 and 35,093, respectively, compared to 88,073 Malays [Census 1931: 218, 222, 225].

Federal Council should prevent this dangerous word from invading the rights of our nation and country. [*Majlis* 1931.12.24: 1]

In the early 1930s, contestation for shares of the political authority and economy among ethnic groups was a main political focus in Malaya. Nationalism developed within each group. Malay papers particularly emphasised the ‘nativeness’ of Malays in Malaya in an attempt to protect their rights against the demands of non-Malays. *Majlis* soon joined the fray.

## 2.2 Heterogeneity of Urban Malays

The nativeness of Malays, however, was questioned by non-Malays on the grounds that Malayness itself was fluid and debatable. Another point of focus was the existence of ‘foreign Malays’ (*Melayu dagang*) originating from outside Malaya, mainly from the Dutch East Indies (present-day Indonesia) such as Sumatra, Java, and so on. The Malayan side responded by pointing out that they were officially classified as Malays and privileged as natives of Malaya regardless of whether they had foreign or Malayan origins.

A debate over this issue arose in Kuala Lumpur between the Malay paper *Majlis* and the English paper *Malay Mail*. On 10 March 1932, an editorial in *Majlis* entitled ‘Malayan citizenship’ criticised *Malay Mail* for demanding rights for foreigners and emphasising the differences between Peninsular Malays and foreign Malays. *Majlis* then stressed the legitimacy of treating Indonesian immigrants as Malays, as they share a lineage, language, and religion. *Majlis* insisted that ethnicity and political affiliation were different, as people in Patani under the rule of Siam, in Indonesia under the Netherlands, in Timor under Portugal, and in the Peninsula under the British nevertheless had brotherly relations. On the other hand, relationships were not automatically generated by being ruled by a single colonial power: as the article pointed out, people in Ceylon, Hong Kong, the Straits Settlements, and Cyprus were not compatriots even though all of them were under British rule. So ‘it was not surprising that foreign races could have a sibling relationship with local people on the peninsula’ [*Majlis* 1932.3.10: 1].

Whenever the issue of whether Indonesians should be regarded as Malays was raised, *Majlis* argued that Indonesians were Malays. For example, an editorial insisted that Indonesians were closer to Malays than were seventh-generation Malaysians in Malacca. At the same time, the article pointed out that the Chinese had already numerically surpassed Malays in the Peninsula and that Malays could not exclude Indonesians [*Majlis* 1932.11.17: 5]. An article by an author named Asmara emphasised that the inclusion of Indonesians into the Malay race would increase the numbers of Malays on paper and could thus be



beneficial to Malay interests in Malaya [*Majlis* 1933.2.6: 1].<sup>17</sup>

These ethnic politics were also seen in media spaces, especially in Kuala Lumpur. *Majlis*, as a Malay paper, defended preferential treatment for Malays and argued against the English paper's interpretation of Malayan rights in Malaya. Controversy thus arose between these two sides concerning the definition of Malayness. Though Malays themselves were heterogeneous, the nativeness of foreign Malays with Indonesian origins was stressed and confirmed by *Majlis* through the discussion.

### 3. Ethnic Politics under British Rule

#### 3.1 Politics around the Visit of Sir Samuel Wilson

This section will focus on the process of ethnic politics as related to the visit of Sir Samuel Wilson, British Undersecretary for the Colonies, to Malaya in 1932. As the decentralisation policy had aroused political controversies and stimulated ethnic consciousness, the Colonial Office had dispatched Wilson to investigate the situation and to consider future policy in Malaya. Responses to his visit from both Malays and non-Malays provide a good example of how *Majlis* tried to represent the opinions of Malays.

*Majlis* showed a deep interest in Wilson's visit from the beginning. Its first editorial on the matter was 'New policy and Sir Wilson's visit: Opportunities for foreigners?' on 6 June 1932. The article commented that the news of Wilson's visit had been welcomed especially by English papers representing the opinions of 'foreign races (*bangsa dagang*).'*Majlis* expressed suspicion that foreign races were behind the articles in the English papers. The *Majlis* article concluded as follows:

It does not matter even if foreign races were to hold a large conference and demand rights with a loud voice, or to get permission for their representatives to see Sir Wilson. Even though they sent a petition requesting rights, Sir Wilson would not have authority over the requested rights. That right is in the hands of the Malay Sultanate. What Malays should do is to appeal to Sir Wilson about the plight of the Malays who are being pressured by foreigners. [*Majlis* 1932.6.6: 1]

In the next issue, *Majlis* again expressed concerns about foreign races in an editorial. 'The foreign races have established a conference, requested rights by sending a delegation,

<sup>17</sup> The article was posted because Malayness had attracted attention when Minangkabau residents were prohibited from attending a weekly market for Malays because of their foreign origin [*Majlis* 1933.2.6: 1].

claimed responsibility for contributing to land development, and criticised the slogan of “Malaya for Malays” as hurting them, but we cannot allow this land to be changed to the Sakai<sup>18</sup> Peninsula or Malayan Peninsula [*Majlis* 1932.6.9: 1]. *Majlis* argued that the name of the place should be the Malay Peninsula, implying that the Malays were the natives, rather than the Malayan Peninsula, implying that all people born in British Malaya, including Chinese and Indians, were natives.

Wilson’s visit stimulated the political consciousness of both Malays and non-Malays and visualised the political structure under the colonial regime. Inspired by English papers, *Majlis* began to appeal to Malay readers about the importance of Wilson’s visit.

### 3.2 *The British and Malays as Natives*

On July 4 and 6, editorials titled ‘What is Malay’s preparation for Sir Wilson’s visit?’ were posted in succession. The first part, published on the 4, warned that no preparations had yet been made by the Malay *umat* (Muslim community), though his visit was approaching [*Majlis* 1932.7.4: 5]. More specific issues were addressed in the second part published on the 6. This part of the article argued that the reason for Wilson’s visit was to conduct a survey of the decentralisation policy. *Majlis* insisted on an abolition of the post of Chief Secretary, the top official in the FMS second to the Governor of the Straits Settlements.<sup>19</sup> *Majlis* stated that the time for change had come in the FMS, and requested a new treaty so that the rights of the Malay *umat* would never be violated by foreigners [*Majlis* 1932.7.6: 5].

When Wilson left the United Kingdom in October, the editorial ‘Sir Wilson’s visit’, published October 24, emphasised that Sir Wilson’s visit was related to the issue of decentralisation and that the transfer of authority from the Federal Chief Secretary should not be hindered by the Straits Settlements. The article went on to point out that any requests from the Chinese to Wilson, such as requests for an increased number of unofficial members of the legislative council (of the Straits Settlements), entry of non-Malays into the Malayan Civil Service, and so on, were not related to the purpose of his visit [*Majlis* 1932.10.24: 5].

Furthermore, an editorial published on November 10, titled ‘Welcoming Sir Wilson’s

<sup>18</sup> Sakai meant indigenous peoples (present Orang Asli). The term Sakai Peninsula implied that the Sakai were the original people of the Peninsula, and that Malays were also latecomers comparable to the Chinese, etc.

<sup>19</sup> In the discussion of the decentralisation policy, the abolition of the Chief Secretary post was proposed to reduce administrative costs [Yeo 1982]. *Majlis* was concerned that the Chief Secretary was influenced by foreign races [*Majlis* 1932.7.6: 5].

visit', also stressed the special position of Malays.

What should be noted is that, unlike the other British colonies he visited, here is a Malay state. While only the Straits Settlements are crown colonies, the remainder is federated and unfederated Malay states, which are Sultanates under a British protectorate. This peninsula is the 'Malay Peninsula', and only Malays are direct heirs of the state (*rakyat kandung kerajaan*). This relationship should be recognised as different from the step-child relationship (*rakyat tiri*) of the non-Malays. [*Majlis* 1932.11.10: 5]

These articles emphasised that the major issues to which Wilson's visit pertained were limited to the decentralisation policy and the relationship between Britain and the Sultanates in the Malay States (especially the FMS), shutting down the claims of non-Malays. By limiting Wilson's purpose to policies related to the Malay States, where Malays were the natives, *Majlis* was trying to undermine any assertions from the Straits Settlements, which could be dominated by non-Malays.

### 3.3 *The Malayan Strategy: Association, Representatives, and Petition*

Wilson visited various places in Malaya, including Kuala Lumpur, from November to December 1932 to hear public opinions. He received various requests from all the communities in Malaya.

Regarding Wilson's visit, on September 5 *Majlis* reported the establishment of a 'Malay States Association' in Kuala Lumpur in an article that quoted *Malay Mail*. According to *Malay Mail*, the Malay State Association was composed of European, Chinese, and Ceylonese members. Its Chairman stated that they were hoping to be in a position to meet with Sir Wilson who would visit Malaya on various policy issues, if necessary [*Malay Mail* 1932.9.1: 10]. *Majlis* commented that the purpose of the organisation was to commit to the issue of political rights and to prepare for a meeting with Sir Wilson, and that 99% of the work of this organisation would represent the demands of non-Malays [*Majlis* 1932.9.5: 7].

An editorial of November 24 titled 'Sir Wilson and the daydreams of foreigners' reported that every non-Malay community had delivered its opinions to Sir Wilson as the British representative. In Penang on November 10, Wilson was welcomed by Chinese, Indian, Ceylonese, and Chettiar (Indian moneylending caste) residents. According to the article, they had sent delegations with petitions as well as asking for new policies and making various requests. When asked about the concerns raised by the Chinese, Wilson replied to a reporter of *Malay Mail* that there was no reason for the Chinese to be so afraid

[*Majlis* 1932.11.24: 5].

*Majlis* reported in an editorial on 15 December 1932, titled ‘Chinese of the Peninsula misunderstand Sir Wilson’s visit’, that the Chinese Chamber of Commerce of the Peninsula<sup>20</sup> had sent a letter to Wilson on December 9. The article commented that Sir Wilson would be ‘full’ of petitions from the Chinese. ‘If this request is accepted, Malaya will definitely be the 19<sup>th</sup> province of China’, it insisted. *Majlis* reproached Malaysians for forgetting the fact that they were in the Malay States and that most of them had come to Malaya as immigrants [*Majlis* 1932.12.15: 5].

The impact of Wilson’s visit on Malaya’s political history was, in fact, not great.<sup>21</sup> Yet the debate over this visit reveals much about the mechanisms of political representation in Malaya. *Majlis* observed that the Malayan strategy was to send representatives to the public, set up a conference, and hand over petitions signed by the public. This sheds light on the characteristics of ethnic politics in Malaya, where each community searched for channels to deliver their opinions to the government.

#### 4. Towards the Selangor Malay Association

##### 4.1 *Wilson’s Visit and Malay Nationalism*

This section analyses the discussion in *Majlis* about a Malay political association in Selangor after Wilson’s visit. The discussions in *Majlis* show that Wilson’s visit was a first step towards the formation of the Malay association in Selangor.

On the occasion of Wilson’s visit, *Majlis* first urged Malays to unite. As a next step, *Majlis* began to appeal for the formation of a Malay association to deliver their opinions to Wilson. *Majlis* adopted a strategy similar to that used by the Malayan, who formed organisations with the words ‘Malaya/Malayan’ in their names and expressed their opinions in English papers.

On Wilson’s visit, an editorial in *Majlis* on 29 August 1932 reported that the Sultans of the Federated States would hold a meeting. As the article believed that the representations of Malay opinions were insufficient compared with those of other races’ opinions, *Majlis* stressed the importance of this meeting among Malay royals with chiefs and *ulama* to

<sup>20</sup> Chinese Chambers of Commerce were established in many cities in Southeast Asia during the 1900s. For example, the Selangor Chinese Chamber of Commerce was established in 1904 [Gullick 2000: 195].

<sup>21</sup> A report on Wilson’s visit to Malaya was published in April 1933. The content of the Wilson report almost uniformly approves of the current direction of policies, which were advantageous for the British government and the Malay side [Andaya and Andaya 2007: 253].

express their own opinions [*Majlis* 1932.8.29: 5].

*Majlis*, in the July 4 editorial mentioned above, had insisted on the necessity of delivering Malay requests to Wilson as a means of influencing colonial policy. To that end, it was crucial for the Malay *umat* to have a unified opinion that could be expressed through senior officials and political representatives such as Raja Chulan (Perak) and Dato Rembau (chief of Negeri Sembilan), both of whom were Federal Council members. Yet the Malays were not sufficiently united for this purpose. *Majlis* called for influential Malay papers in other cities to post their opinions and tried to strengthen the voice of the Malays.

‘Even if Malays are asked for their ideas, we are divided into two classes. One is an upper class consisting of Sultan and *waris negeri*,<sup>22</sup> and the other is the Malay *umat*, the ordinary people. But these two classes must unite at any cost. Sir Wilson’s visit is ...a visit to decide the direction of the British protectorates’ reform. In future, Malays must protect themselves not only from external enemies but also from attacks and oppression of enemies in blankets with the help of the British government. We must prepare the opinion that we will hold before Sir Wilson arrives. ... In order to make decisions in line with the interests of the government and the country, *Warta Malaya*, the leading newspaper of our nation (*bangsa*), should give an opinion first, then *Saudara* in Penang, *Pengasuh* in Kelantan, and so on should continue to express their view’ [*Majlis* 1932.7.4: 5].

*Majlis* envisioned to unite opinions of Malay papers to represent the Malay nation.

#### 4.2 Proposal of a Malay Association

Opinions of this nature led to the proposal that Malays should establish a ‘conference (*konferens*)’. In the editorial ‘About the conference’ on July 21, *Majlis* emphasised that Malay papers such as *Saudara* and *Pengasuh* had approved the establishment of a conference. Considering that ‘the difference in influence between an opinion issued by a conference and an opinion given by an individual is clear’, *Majlis* insisted that Malay papers should lead the establishment of the conference together. ‘If Malays would pursue their interests together, the situation would surely be known to the Malay *rajas* who will meet with Sir Wilson’ [*Majlis* 1932.7.21: 1]. The authors of *Majlis* thought that setting up a conference would put pressure on *waris negeri* and thus on the British.

In September 1932, discussions leading towards the establishment of the Malay

<sup>22</sup> *Waris negeri* literally means ‘heritage of the nation’ and refers to the royal family in this case.

association filled the pages of *Majlis*. An article on September 1 titled ‘Malays themselves should establish a Malay conference’ claimed that:

Indian people were more respected than the Malay *umat* by the government because of the influence of Indian nationalism movements. Representatives at public bodies such as the State Council had great influence and the government was obliged to listen to their opinions. For this reason, it is necessary for the *umat* to seek such influence through representatives in the public bodies [*Majlis* 1932.9.1: 1].<sup>23</sup>

An editorial on September 8 clearly proposed a Malay association with the authority to send representatives to the Federal Council. ‘We, under the name of the obligation as subjects, appeal to establish the Malay national association as soon as possible’ [*Majlis* 1932.9.8: 5].

In addition, many letters from readers who supported the conference were also printed in *Majlis*. For example, under the pen name of IBHY, Ibrahim Yaakob, a Malay Nationalist leader who later became the editor of *Majlis*,<sup>24</sup> appealed to the importance of nationalism and the establishment of such an organisation [*Majlis* 1932.9.22: 8].

An October 3 editorial titled ‘Does the Selangor Malaysian Association hatch?’ reported that, in response to the strong demands in the newspaper, some Malays had met to form a Malay organisation in Selangor. They insisted that Malays should not be kept out of the government office or the royal court, and tried to collect Malays’ opinions for themselves. The article argued that ‘when wishing for peace for the *umat* in political and economic competition against other races, it is necessary to secure your position, especially in politics’ [*Majlis* 1932.10.3: 5].

However, the attempt to establish an association ended in failure at that time. Although a meeting was held in October 1932 for the Selangor Malay Association, the meeting broke up without reaching consensus [Roff 1968: 118]. Malays of Selangor could not agree on the definition of membership due to diversity of origins.<sup>25</sup> Though state-based

<sup>23</sup> Another example of such a discourse was an editorial on September 5, which insisted that all associations and conferences bearing the names of foreign races had the right to speak freely at all, and natives should also have a conference in the Malay States for protecting the rights of Malays [*Majlis* 1932.9.5: 5].

<sup>24</sup> Ibrahim Yaakob, while working as a teacher in Pahang, contributed a series of articles on ‘the Peninsula and nationalism’ to *Majlis*. He later moved to Kuala Lumpur and became the chief editor of *Majlis* in 1939. He was a radical member of the ‘Malay Left’ insisting on immediate independence and the formation of Melayu Raya (integration of Malaya and Indonesia). For his biography, see [Bachtiar 1985].

<sup>25</sup> Even when the Selangor Malay Association was formed in 1938, it could not reach a conclusion on the definition of Malays [Roff 1968: 141].

Malay associations took form mainly in the late 1930s, no pan-Malayan Malay association had been realised during the pre-war period because Malays retained too much loyalty to their own states [Roff 1994: 247].

In discussions after Wilson's visit, unity among Malays was stressed and the heterogeneity of Malayness was apparently undermined in an attempt to turn the focus on Malay relations with other communities. Within the Malay community, however, increased attention was returned to the diversity among urban Malays.

## Conclusion

This paper analyses the process of the formation of a concept of Malayness by examining the discourses in *Majlis* in Kuala Lumpur during the 1930s. Our tentative conclusions are as follows:

First, *Majlis* formed a part of the multilingual media space of Malaya. The paper regularly referred to other papers, both Malay and English, but consistently expressed opinions on behalf of the Malays although various communities were striving for rights in the political arena at that time. Ethnic relations in colonial Malaya were embedded into the media space.

Second, the articles in *Majlis* pertaining to Wilson's visit provide us with an example of how Malay and English papers interacted. Inspired by English papers, *Majlis* appealed for the solidarity of the Malay community. This discussion led to a proposal for the establishment of a Malay association in Selangor. Referring to the Chinese way of doing politics, *Majlis* proposed the creation of a comparable organisation that could send representatives. Malay nationalism had developed in parallel with and referring to that of other communities.

Third, Kuala Lumpur, as a colonial city, was a context where plural communities gathered and interacted. Malay nationalism had developed because of the multi-ethnic nature of the city. However, attempts to establish a Malay association failed due to the diversity among Malays at that time. The formation of a sense of Malayness in Kuala Lumpur was a long process, partly because such a variety of immigrants were gathered there. It was in the setting of this multi-ethnic colonial city, however, that Malay nationalism developed, while, paradoxically, the formation of a sense of Malayness was slow to develop. Further studies on colonial cities will reveal not only pluralistic but also complex structures in Malayan society.

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