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Deafness, Ethnicity, and Minority Politics in Modern Malaysia¹

Karen Nakamura

The experience of being deaf is popularly imagined as relatively stable across cultures, perhaps because of its basis in the biological absence of hearing. For example, many hearing people think that there is a universal sign language that deaf people in all nations use. Closer cross-cultural ethnographic exploration of deaf identities reveals, however, that the social structures in which they are embedded play a significant role in determining the particular form of identity, language, and politics that deaf individuals engage in. The often random ways that languages develop and migrate lead to odd occurrences such as French Sign Language (LSF) and American Sign Language (ASL) being cognates and thus relatively mutually intelligible, while ASL and British Sign Language are utterly incompatible.

Malaysia, as a multiethnic society at the crossroads of diversity in Southeast Asia, is intriguing regarding the status of the deaf and the forms of sign language that might be used. My own research into deaf culture and minority identity in Japan and the United States has given me some understanding of deafness contextualized against issues of nationalism, modernization, and globalization. But in Malaysia, there was the added dimension of religion and ethnicity. Could the deaf possibly be seen as a form of crosscutting intersectional identity? Would deaf Muslims have anything in common with deaf Chinese in Malaysia?

In the United States, the deaf movement since the 1980s has been strongly influenced by the Black and feminist civil rights movements

and has operated in a social framework accepting of (indeed, demanding) minority identity politics. Thus, the particular forms of culturally “Deaf” identity that have emerged in the U.S. tend to reflect the nature of civil society and individual diversity promulgated by larger cultural factors. This culminated in the 1988 *Deaf President Now!* student movement at Gallaudet University, which resulted in that institution’s first deaf president.² Since then, the culturally Deaf frame has been primarily operant in the United States, resulting in the recognition of American Sign Language (ASL) as a foreign language and the institution of Deaf Studies Programs at numerous institutions, modeled on other ethnic studies programs.

When beginning my doctoral studies, I became curious about whether this type of minority/ethnic identity politics could be successful in Japan, which likes to imagine itself as being mono-ethnic, devoid of any minority groups.³ In my research, I found sharp differences in identity formation, with age and type of education being the primary dependent variables. In Japan, deaf identity changed around three pivotal moments in history. The first occurred in 1878, with the establishment of the first schools for the deaf in Japan and the emergence of the first deaf communities. The second was in 1948, with the introduction of compulsory education for the deaf and the concomitant development of a powerful deaf political movement. The third shift was mass integration (mainstreaming) of deaf children into hearing schools in the early 1970s.⁴

These developments created three cohorts of Japanese deaf individuals who react very differently to the issue of identity, language, and politics. In particular, the immediate postwar generation with its relatively assimilationist politics has been clashing with a younger generation who are trying to incorporate American deaf identity politics into Japan. This form of identity politics, which is an extension of the aforementioned American ethnic minorities contextual frame, has not gained much ground thus far in contemporary Japan.

The birthplace of deaf culture is in schools for the deaf. To understand the history of the deaf in a given country, one must look at the history of deaf education. Prelingual deafness⁵ only strikes a very small minority of a population (often around 0.5% but variable, based on the level of medical advancement), so even in a small town of 1,000 people,

there would only be about five deaf people. Without any shared experience in childhood, these individuals are unlikely to develop a culture and language of their own.

Urbanization, industrialization, and compulsory education in special schools are determining factors for sufficiently large numbers of deaf children to attend the same school system. In a now classic example, the development of schools for the deaf in the 1970s, following the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, led to the first mass education of deaf children there. Within a few generations, the children in the schools were able to develop their own auctotonous sign language, Idioma de Signos Nicaraguense (ISN or Nicaraguan Sign Language).⁶ The graduates of the school retained their affiliation with each other, which led to an emerging deaf community, identity, and politics. Linguistic and ethnographic evidence from the Nicaraguan Sign Language Project reiterates the primacy of deaf education in forming deaf communities and deaf identities.

What, then, of Malaysia? This country suffered under British and Japanese colonial regimes, gained its independence in 1963, and then went through a change from a primarily agrarian economy to an emerging high-technology, industrial nation in the 1980s and 1990s. Demographically, Malaysia is majority Malay and has several minority groups: the ethnic Chinese, who comprise about a third of the population; an Indian/South Asian community, who constitute about 10 percent; and a small number of Eurasians and other groups. In an interesting twist and a remnant of the colonial period, the merchant-class Chinese minority is the most well off economically, with the Malays in the middle, and the Indians at the bottom of the heap. In order to counter this situation, the Malays, who have the political power, have instituted a number of preferential treatment programs for their own ethnic group at the expense of Chinese and Indian minorities. This New Economy Policy, first launched in 1971, has caused a degree of socioeconomic balancing while also creating its own inter-ethnic frictions. (To understand the socioeconomic and political situation in Malaysia, Maznah Mohamad's *Risking Malaysia* is extremely informative.⁷)

In researching the ethnic tensions in Malaysia and learning of the failure of even feminist ideologies/identities to overcome inter-ethnic

difference,⁸ I wondered if deafness could serve as a cross-cutting intersectional identity. That is, would deaf people in Malaysia identify primarily as deaf and thus stop privileging ethnic and religious difference?

In Japan, the deaf groups are almost all mono-ethnic Japanese (that is, in my research, I did not encounter ethnic minority deaf people active in the deaf groups with which I was associated). In the United States, the issue of intersectional deaf identities is more fraught with difficulties. Black deaf communities were traditionally segregated in pre-Civil Rights America, and even now, socioeconomic and cultural differences separate black and majority white deaf communities to some extent.⁹ Gay and lesbian deaf people in America also find themselves caught between gay/lesbian and deaf communities.¹⁰

My first introduction to schools for the deaf in Malaysia was through Dato' Hajjah Saleena Yahaya-Isa, a prominent member of Penang society. Although Chinese, she married a Malay man and converted to Islam. She carries the honorary title of Dato', bequeathed by the Rajah of Penang in recognition of her services, much as knighthood is bequeathed by British royalty.

In 1952, Dato' Saleena helped to found the first school for the deaf in Malaysia, the Sekolah Menengah Pendidikan Khas Persekutuan (Secondary School for Special Education) in Tanjung Bungah, Penang. This was immediately after World War II. The Japanese had left, and Malaysia was still a British protectorate. The British governor's wife gave her name to the project, but did not provide any financial assistance. Dato' Saleena obtained funds from a broad array of prominent citizens in Penang and from all of the ethnic groups in order to found her school. The doors opened in 1954. The Dato' served as a volunteer, a teacher, and then as the school's headmistress until her retirement in 1987. From the very beginning, it was a residential school, which meant that deaf children from all over Malaysia were sent to live in the school, just outside of George Town.¹¹ From my research perspective, this was promising because residential schools provided the "24/7" interaction between deaf children that might lead to the formation of new sign languages and identities.

Unfortunately, I did not locate information on any early sign languages used by the children at the Penang school in its formative

years. I was particularly curious as to whether they might use variant forms of Japanese Sign Language, examples of which can be found in Taiwan and Korea (both occupied by Japan during the war). This may be unlikely because Malaysia was not officially considered part of the Japanese nation and national schools were not established there during the occupation, unlike in the East Asian colonial territories. The Dato' had traveled to England to learn British styles of deaf education. From there, she brought back a form of strict oral (lip-reading and speech skills) education, which meant that any public signing by the students would be punished by the staff, who were all hearing individuals. Nonetheless, the Dato' admits that the students were most probably signing in the dorm rooms in private.¹²

In 1971, Dr. Peggy Parsons of Gallaudet University visited the Penang school. This was just ten years after the linguist William Stokoe "discovered" the linguistic principles of American Sign Language,¹³ establishing it as a natural human language on par with English, Spanish, Chinese, and so forth, and not a degenerate form of miming as previously believed. Stokoe's subsequent dictionary and early grammar¹⁴ of ASL helped turn the tide toward more forms of signing in deaf classrooms.

The Dato' Saleena, who was by that time the Principal of the school, became convinced that signing was the way of the future for her school children. In an interesting twist, she chose to use ASL signs rather than using any autochthonous sign forms. There were several reasons for this. At that time, the classroom language was English, as the Bahasa Malayu movement had not yet spread far. In addition, the Dato' thought that the graduates of her school might then be able to go to the United States and attend Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C. This was not, coincidentally, the same time frame as young Malaysian hearing students were traveling to the U.S. to attend schools such as Macalester College. There was much initial resistance to her plan from the teachers, who were all instructed in the oral method. Dr. Parsons agreed to help teach the teachers American Sign Language.

In 1978, the Dato' sent a letter to the Minister of Education (at that time, Mohathir Mohamad, who went on to become the Prime Minister) asking his permission to implement an experiment to see if the new sign education was superior to the previous oral forms. Two cohorts of students would be educated, one using sign and the other using only oral methods. Although originally proposed to track students over three years, the results were clear within a year. The school switched to

using ASL signs in the classroom. Unfortunately, full ASL was not implemented, rather ASL signs were used with English grammar and spoken English words, a method that is often referred to as Total Communication (TC) or Manually Coded English (MCE). The Dato' wanted to use MCE so that the children would also be able to integrate into hearing Malaysian society. With solely pure signing, they would not be able to assimilate because they could only communicate with each other.¹⁵

Because the students learned English/MCE, many were able to go to the United States and graduate from Gallaudet University. The first was Eleanor Culas, who graduated with a B.A. in 1976.¹⁶ Few returned, however. Later, the medium of education changed to Bahasa Malayu and used MCE signs. Correspondingly, their English skills weakened to the point where the students were no longer able to attend Gallaudet. This same change occurred all over Malaysia, and student emigration to the U.S. slowed to a trickle. No sign interpreters are provided for college education in Malaysia (and there are only a handful of interpreters in the nation, even now). A few of the top students went to Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) or Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), but even they struggled. Most of the students now continue on to vocational schools for blue-collar work.

It has been my hope to explore deafness as an intersectional identity in Southeast Asia for quite a while. My early research in Japan did not reveal any substantial activity in that area. A brief field survey of Thailand, in the summer of 2001, showed that there was substantial bifurcation along ethnic lines between the Chinese and the ethnic Thai deaf. The Chinese deaf were able to leverage their higher socioeconomic class to obtain better education and white-collar positions in their family businesses while the ethnic Thai were mostly relegated to blue-collar positions. Within the National Association of the Deaf in Thailand, leadership positions were occupied mainly by ethnic Chinese. While I did not see overt friction, this was not the type of intersectionality for which I had hoped.

Ethnicity is almost always linked to issues of socioeconomic class. (Marxist-influenced scholars might argue that our ideas of ethnicity are the result of the need for class differentiation.) In the case of Malaysia, how would ethnic identification among the deaf be affected

by the fact that the majority Malays are socioeconomically depressed at the same time that they are the political majority?

The Penang School for the Deaf was initially started as a multiethnic venture. The Dato' mentioned that she was careful to solicit from all of the ethnic groups. However, ever since the beginning, all of the principals of the school have been ethnic Chinese, and a cursory examination of the major donors indicate a plethora of Chinese companies. Most of the early teachers were Chinese as well (given their general standing as the educated, English-speaking class in Malaysia). However, since the school's transition from a fully private to a public institution in the late 1960s, there have been growing numbers of Malay/Muslim staff. Looking at the faculty list for the year 2002, approximately 64 percent of the teaching staff were Chinese, 25 percent Muslim/Malay, and 10 percent Indian/other (C=25; M=10; I=4; n=39).¹⁷ The general trend, according to the principal, has been an increase in the number of Malay/Muslim teachers dispatched by the central government. None are trained in any form of special education skills.

Within the classroom, the ethnic groups are clearly delineated by the Muslim Malay girls, who wear a standard *mini-telekung* (headscarf) as part of the school uniform. Ethnicity is less marked for the boys, although as in all Malaysian society, one's ethnicity is clearly marked by one's name. The Muslim female teachers all wear the *mini-telekung*, as well. Even the Dato', as a converted Muslim, wore a headscarf.

It is my sense, however, that before the increased Malay/Muslim nationalist and religious fervor of the late 1980s and 1990s, ethnicity and religion were less pronounced at the school. Headscarves were not popular then and most of the teachers would have been Chinese. The deaf would have been more insulated from larger social issues at the residential school. Chinese students may have had a leg-up due to their higher socioeconomic class (this can be seen by the greater number of Chinese who emigrated to the U.S. to attend Gallaudet University), but the situation did not seem as marked as it was in Thailand.

I was interested in the situation facing the deaf in the "real" world in terms of ethnic integration. In Kuala Lumpur, I visited the Malaysian Federation of the Deaf (MFD) where I met Mohamad Sazali Shaari, the president of MFD. The MFD Council (their Board) consists of twelve members. Only one, the president of the Penang Society for the Deaf,

was ethnic Chinese.¹⁸ This is odd given that most of the prominent deaf citizens are Chinese, as evidenced by a web page listing their achievements in the community.¹⁹

I suspect that the same thing that is happening in Malaysian politics is occurring within the associations for the deaf. Although the Chinese deaf are more successful economically and educationally, political power is accumulating in the hands of Malay deaf individuals. Given that the deaf association depends on the government for funding, its mimicking of the broader power structure is not unexpected. Unfortunately, I was not able to attend general membership meetings in Penang or Kuala Lumpur, which would have given a better sense of the degree of cross-ethnic affiliation in the community.

In Japan, deaf organizations, deaf identities, and sign languages have all been strongly shaped by various constraints of the state and institutional forces.²⁰ In America, the same can be said about deaf organizations and deaf identity here. Thus, it is no surprise that in Malaysia, deaf organizations and deaf identities would be shaped by state, institutional, and cultural forces. The early use of ASL and English in the classrooms as part of modernization and Westernization, the subsequent switch to Bahasa as part of the national project, and the turn towards the Islamization of the teachers and administration as well as deaf organizations all point to social forces in Malaysia that are much stronger than the minority identity itself.

Perhaps we Western academics place too much hope in minority identities to do what the majority cannot — overcome the biases present in society. Thus, we are disappointed when we find that feminist groups in Malaysia are fractured by the same issues of ethnicity and religion as the greater society or that deaf groups encounter the same problems. A large part of anthropological theory has been on the ability of individuals to work agentively within the superstructures of society.²¹ But as Foucault reminds us, patterns of resistance are shaped by the same structures that create domination and power.²²

Working within those structures, I found vibrant communities within minority identities in Malaysia. What we as Western academics saw as constraints, they might see as opportunities. Resistance and power are indeed flip sides of the same coin. In contemplating my experience in Malaysia and imagining how research there might play

itself out in the future, I am reminded of what I think is the true potential of the discipline of anthropology: to show us as just one culture and community in a sea of cultures and communities. Malaysia is more like us than we imagine, but differs in myriad ways that can spark our imagination. I cannot wait to return. ●

Notes

1. The research that this meditative essay is based upon was conducted with the kind support and assistance of Ahmed Samatar, Michael Monahan, Dato' Hajjah Saleena Yahaya-Isa, Mohamad Szali Shaari, and countless others.
2. J. B. Christiansen and S. M. Barnardt, *Deaf President Now!: The 1988 Revolution at Gallaudet University* (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1995).
3. There are, in fact, quite a number of ethnic and national minorities: the Burakumin (former outcastes); resident Koreans and Chinese (legacies of the colonial period); Ainu (former native people of Japan); atomic bomb survivors; Brazilian migrant workers of Japanese descent; and so forth. See M. Weiner, ed., *Japan's Minorities: The Illusion of Homogeneity* (New York: Routledge, 1997).
4. K. Nakamura, "'Deaf Shock,' and the Hard of Hearing: Japanese Deaf Identities at the Borderlands," in *Many Ways to be Deaf: International Linguistic and Sociocultural Variation*, edited by L. F. Monaghan, K. Nakamura, G. Turner, and C. Schmalig (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, forthcoming).
5. Prelingual deafness refers to deafness before the onset of speech skills (usually age 3–4). Prelingual deaf children usually have great difficulty in learning how to speak or lip-read, having never consciously heard a human voice. Postlingual deaf children and late-deafened adults, on the other hand, can usually pick up lip-reading fairly easily and have good speech skills.
6. R. J. Senghas and J. Kegl, "Social Considerations in the Emergence of Idioma de Signos Nicaraguense (Nicaraguan Sign Language)," *Signpost* 7 (1): 40–46.
7. M. Maznah and W. S. Koon, eds., *Risking Malaysia: Culture, Politics, and Identity* (Selangor, Malaysia: UKM Bangi, 2001).
8. R. Ariffin, "Feminism in Malaysia: a Historical and Present Perspective of Women's Struggles in Malaysia," *Women's Studies International Forum* 22 (4): 417–423. Also, personal interview with Rohana Ariffin, January 14, 2002.
9. A. J. Aramburo, "Sociolinguistic Aspects of the Black Deaf Community," in *Linguistics of American Sign Language*, edited by C. Valli and C. Lucas (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1995), pp. 367–379. Also, see E. Hairston and L. Smith, *Black and Deaf in America: Are We that Different?* (Silver Spring, Md.: T.J. Publishers, 1983).
10. R. Luczak, ed., *Eyes of Desire: A Deaf Gay and Lesbian Reader* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1993).
11. Interview with Dato' Hajjah Saleena Yahaya-Isa, January 12, 2002.
12. Ibid.
13. W. C. Stokoe, "Sign Language Structure," *Studies in Linguistics: Occasional Papers* 8.

14. W. C. Stokoe and D. C. Casterline, et. al., *A Dictionary of American Sign Language on Linguistic Principles* (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet College Press, 1965).
15. Interview with Dato' Hajjah Saleena Yahaya-Isa, January 12, 2002.
16. To date, there have been fourteen Malaysian graduates of Gallaudet University according to Anne Raymond's Gallaudet Malaysian Graduates home page (<http://www.geocities.com/anneyraymond/>; updated October 17, 2000; accessed March 30, 2002). Of the fourteen graduates, only four (29%) have returned to Malaysia and the majority have stayed in the U.S. Four of the fourteen appear to have Muslim names (29%).
17. Senerai Nama Guru, unpublished internal memo (Penang: Sekolah Menengah Pendidikan Khas Persekutuan Pulau Pinang, 2002).
18. MFD Exco (<http://www.mfd.org.my/MFD/EXCO.htm>; accessed March 30, 2002).
19. Malaysia Boleh (<http://www.mfd.org.my/MFD/MalaysiaBoleh.htm>; accessed March 30, 2002).
20. K. Nakamura, "Resistance and Co-optation: the Japanese Federation of the Deaf and its Relations with State Power," *Social Science Japan Journal* 5 (1): 17–35.
21. Cf. Giddens, A., *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979). See also, A. Ong, *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline: Factory Women in Malaysia* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1979).
22. M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).