

Gapena and the Cape Malays: Initiating Connections, Constructing Images

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ABSTRAK

Rencana memperkatakan bagaimana badan kebudayaan, seperti Gapena di bawah kepimpinan Ismail Hussein, seorang tokoh bukan politik, telah memainkan peranan yang aktif dalam menjalin hubungan antarabangsa. Dalam berbuat demikian, ingin juga ditegaskan tiga pembolehubah, iaitu identiti, kebudayaan dan agama, dalam menggerakkan aktiviti mereka. Selain itu, ingin juga saya soroti hubungan ugama-budaya yang disatukan dan dikukuhkan antara Gapena dengan orang Melayu di Cape, Afrika Selatan dan bagaimana Ismail Hussein mainkan peranannya yang penting di sini. Perbincangan itu didahului pembentangan perdebatan tentang tanggapan Kemelayuan dalam berbilang kaum dan juga pandangan perbandingan mengenainya. Akhirnya, ditunjukkan macam mana identiti orang Melayu di kedua-dua negara itu dibentuk dan bagaimana imej mereka dibina dalam masyarakat yang berlainan itu.

Kata kunci: Orang Melayu, Kemelayuan, Ismail Hussein, Gapena

ABSTRACT

This article intends to demonstrate how cultural organizations, such as Gapena under the leadership of Ismail Hussein, have been among non-state actors that have been active in international relations. It also highlights the three variables, namely identity, culture and religion, which inform the activities of these non-state actors. In addition, it wants to reflect upon the religio-cultural relationship cemented and strengthened between Gapena and South Africa's Cape Malays and it also shares thoughts on how Ismail Hussein played a pivotal role in this. Prior to this, the paper takes into account the debates surrounding the notion of 'Malayness' within the respective communities and offers a comparative view. Finally, it shows how their identities have been framed and how images were constructed within the respective communities.

Key words: Malays, Malayness, Ismail Hussein, Gapena

INTRODUCTION

Connections between Malaysians and South Africans mushroomed over the past decade since South Africa rejoined the international community. The latter's re-entry was welcomed by Malaysian government and many others in the Southeast Asian region. Just prior to the actual 1994 democratic elections in South Africa, Malaysia initiated ties at the governmental level with the hope of enabling substantial investments. However, it was not only the government who was keen on forging and strengthening ties. Non-governmental organizations, such as the Federation of Malaysia Writers' Associations, (hereafter Gapena), were set on linking up with the diasporic Cape Malay community, a community that had been in South Africa for over three centuries and that had been able to maintain a separate and distinct religio-cultural identity, despite having lost contact with the Southeast Asian region for more than two centuries.

The role of non-state actors, such as Gapena and other NGOs, has become an important and significant area of study. Since international relation specialists have focused on the role of these actors alongside that of state actors, we have access to material that enable us to form a holistic view of developments in international relations; we are able to understand the commercial operations and cultural activities that have taken place at the government-to-government level, and between respective communities at the grassroot levels.

Amongst the many non-governmental organizations in Malaysia, Gapena has been amongst those that have been pro-active in initiating and forging relations with diasporic Malay communities. It did so with the intention of bonding with those who had been moved by the colonialists and whose offspring have settled in far away places, such as South Africa's Cape, and have become forgotten diasporic communities. The numerous socio-political and historical factors that involved the Dutch and British colonialists cannot be described here, but need to be borne in mind when one reflects on the social history of these communities.

Gapena under the erstwhile leadership of its president, Tan Sri Ismail Hussein who had for more than two decades been emphasizing Malay consciousness, was determined to re-create *Melayu Dunia* by reconnecting with (to borrow Hussainmiya words) Lost Cousins. The main rationale behind this effort was that these communities still share many cultural and religious characteristics despite the historical gap that was imposed upon them over many years and indeed many generations. When Gapena formerly established the International Malay Secretariat (SMA) in 1996, it aimed at bringing all the Malays from Southeast Asia and the diasporic communities under one international umbrella organization that would aid greater interaction and socialization, and eventually establish and develop trade ties among the different groups. Its basic idea was that all should mutually benefit from these ties.

This article intends to take a close look at the relationship between Malaysians and South Africa's Cape Malays and demonstrate how they have strengthened their bonds over the past decade. In recording and analyzing these links and activities, it also relates the images constructed of one another over the years. However, in order to have an appreciative understanding of these connections and developments, it is necessary first to bring into view an analytical framework that would give a better understanding of the topic discussed in the following pages.

THE ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK: IDENTITY, CULTURE AND RELIGION

Where cultural connections between historically estranged communities are concerned, the issue of identity looms large; this, in turn, leads us to the issues of culture and religion. International relations (hereafter IR) as a subject has generally concerned itself with bilateral and multilateral links between states. The discipline has thus been oblivious of the crucial role played by religion and culture in the forging of links between individuals and communities. It has failed to take cognizance of the extent to which these two variables have contributed towards a better understanding of the contemporary world. Both are, however, firmly rooted within the concept of identity. Let us first look at the concept of identity before we turn our attention to the respective concepts of culture and religion.

Identity as a variable remains an ambiguous one because it implies both uniqueness and sameness. But, apart from this ambiguity, its importance lies in that fact that identity is not merely a concept but also a contestation in contemporary socio-political life. We live in a world where identity matters and it provides a way of understanding the interplay between our subjective experience of the world and the cultural and historical set-up in which that fragile subjectivity is formed. In the process of providing this type of understanding, identity also harnesses an exceptional plurality of meanings, which – as mentioned moments ago – is as much about difference or uniqueness as about shared belonging or sameness, and marks out the divisions and sub-categories in our social lives. His views concur with those who argue that the concept is multi-layered in that identity determines how you are treated, what is expected of you, what you expect of yourself and whether you will be seen as an enemy or a friend.

It is generally agreed that identity is not a fixed, closed or an unchanging variable, and that it has always been part of a process of formation and construction. The acceptance of a multiplicity of identities in contemporary society is indicative of the fact that identity has always been in the making. In other words, it is basically dynamic. For this reason, identity has been taken to be the starting point for cultural analyses (Jacquin-Berdal et al. 2002: 5) as well as religious interpretations.

CULTURE

Let us now turn to the notion of culture and more specifically to cultural identity. The concept of culture has never been easy to define because it is “a slippery term, malleable, morphing, growing and developing expansively...” (Mistry 2001: 1). A working definition of the term was however proposed by Jacquin-Berdal et al. (2002: 2); their formulation is as follows: “... any interpersonally shared system of meanings, perceptions and values”. This definition is a slightly adapted one and is closely associated with Clifford Geertz’ oft-quoted definition, which defines it as “an intersubjective system of meanings” (Leander 1997: 147).

Geertz’ ideas were also useful to Jahn (2000: 5-6) who points out:

how culture lies at the heart of the problematic of international relations irrespective of time and place, and why the study of culture as the framework in which political action, societal organization and moral direction are worked out in specific cases...

His argument echoes that of Ali Mazrui who expresses the notion that culture is at the heart of the nature of power in International Relations. Mazrui further posits the understanding that cultural identity is an issue of increased significance in the contemporary world. Soon after Mazrui’s article was circulated, Huntington (1996) produced his highly debatable article on “The Clash of Civilizations”, which theorizes about the futuristic conflictual nature of culturally (and religiously) embedded communities, who adhere to their specific religio-cultural traditions and fundamentalist outlook.

Cultural identity, according to Stuart Hall (1997: 51), may be thought of in two ways: The first is to define it “in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective ‘one true self’, hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed ‘selves’, which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common”. He then goes on to explain what he means by this definition; he states that

our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as ‘one people’, with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history.

And the second – taking into account the many points of similarity – recognizes that

there are also critical points of deep and significant *difference* which constitute ‘what we really are’; or rather – since history has intervened – ‘what we have become’. We cannot speak for very long, with any exactness, about ‘one experience, one identity’, without acknowledging its other side – the ruptures and discontinuities which constitute (our) uniqueness (Hall 1997: 52).

This scholar, of course, elaborates upon the definition of cultural identity with specific reference to the Caribbean Islands – from where he hails, and his interest in their (and his) Caribbeanness as well as their (and his) black experience.

The two positions that he so clearly and eloquently defines, and upon which he further elaborates, are well suited for the theme of this article, which deals not only with the idea of “Malayness” and the “Malay diaspora”, but also with the connection that has been forged over the years, and with the images that have been constructed. Before we turn to that, we need to comment, albeit briefly, on what is understood by a ‘religious identity’. This identity is invariably coupled with cultural identity, which is easily noted when one takes a closer look at Malaysians and the Cape Malays.

RELIGION

Religion has been defined in many ways by an array of scholars; there has been none that has been fully approved, however, and thus we are left with a large variety to choose from. In the long list, we find the following: ‘religion is an illusion’, ‘religion masks the face of God’, ‘a belief in spiritual beings’, ‘it is a virus’, ‘a religion is a seven-dimensional organism, ritual, doctrinal, mythical or narrative, experimental or emotional, ethical or legal, organizational or social, material or artistic’, and ‘it is a way of life’ (Crawford 2002: 1-8). Although the last two are very broad, they quintessentially capture the notion that religion is an integral part of identity. And since it has been viewed as part of identity, it has also permeated all sectors and all levels of humanity. IR has been one of those areas that have brought religion back into the debate because of the manner in which it affected development across the globe within a short space of time.

IR sees religion as a main source of individual and social identity. Globalization has been one of the major processes that have contributed to this perception: “religion is a central force” in present day political and social affairs. Religion brings and welds co-religionists together to pursue or protest against a specific cause or issue. The process of globalization has universalized the religious experiences of the religionists, and solidified their beliefs and values. Since co-religionists have established a universal tendency, religion has become a transnational phenomenon. Religion has become a potent politico-cultural force within nation states. These movements have, in turn, developed into transnational actors. As transnational actors, they have also been influencing IR through their potent, religious ideas.

Indeed, it is via the spread of ideas that socio-cultural and political groups have attempted to extend their tentacles of influence from the local level to the international level. This has been evident in many communities, such as those of the Malaysians and the Cape Malays, where religion and culture form an inextricable part of the identity of the individual, the community and of society at large. With these three frames – identity, culture and religion – in place, we can now shift to the debate surrounding “Malayness”, an issue which Gapena and other Malay organizations have endlessly discussed, debated and defined.

MALAYNESS: DISCUSSIONS, DEBATES AND DEFINITIONS

Returning to Hall (1997), the two questions that need a response – “Who are we” and “what have we become” – assist us in fully appreciating the debates that have been raging around the issue of identity. The concept of “who is a Malay” has been an issue that many have commented upon; academics and cultural activists in the Southeast Asian region as well as among the diasporic communities living in Sri Lanka, South Africa, Madagascar, the Philippines and elsewhere have been grappling with it. No agreement has been reached because of the nature of the debate and the manner in which the socio-political world changed during the last four decades of the 20th century.

The mere fact that societies have been carved up and boxed into nation states by their former colonialists during the mentioned period forced scholars to handle the issue of religious identity in a sensitive way. For example, among the Cape Malays, it was observed that “religious identity” was seen as a convenient – if not a more appropriate and better suited – label than the “ethnic identity” that had been employed throughout South Africa’s apartheid years, and in the case of Malaysia, even though the Federal Constitution defines what is meant by a Malay, it continues to be an issue of debate. For the sake of our discussion, it might be useful to undertake a comparative perspective of how ethnic/racial identity was accepted by the Malaysians and by Cape Malays.

Hall’s (1997) exposé of cultural identity fits in neatly with the discussion that tackles and interrogates the Malay identity, which is not just a cultural identity – as has already been established – but also a religious one. If we compare the two (with much more concentration on the Cape Malays), then we will observe similarities and differences that Hall so eloquently spoke about. Let us begin by referring to former Malaysian Prime Minister Dr. Mohamed Mahathir’s speech on his official visit in August 1995 to South Africa, in which he outlined the Malay identity.

MALAYNESS: IN THE EARLY 20th CENTURY

Mohamed Mahathir made reference in his speech to the definition of who was Malay. He said: “The Malays are among the few people whose race is legally defined. Thus the Malay constitution states that a Malay is one who habitually speaks Malay, professes the religion of Islam, and practices Malay customs” (Nah 2003: 521-522). The three elements contained in this definition are language, religion and culture. The essence of this definition, as articulated by the former prime minister and as contained in the Federal Malaysian Constitution [160(2)], is not very different from the way the Cape Malays define themselves (or were defined by administrators such as Izak D. DuPlessies).

In the case of the Cape Malays, the term does not only contain their cultural or ethnic identity, it also implies their religious identity. They have been quite

contented with this for many decades without splitting hairs over the matter. The origins of the term have not satisfactorily been researched, however. Moreover, it is concluded that the slave population that came from parts of Africa and Southeast Asia, also spoke Melayu in addition to their dialects; the maturity and status of the language allowed it to become the dominant spoken tongue. Its dominance has been supported by some of the extant manuscripts kept in the South African library and in private collections (Haron 1997; Munazzah 1998).

However, the colonialists and the apartheid regime, who eventually took over the reins, used the term for pure racial and discriminatory purposes with the intention of slotting them in as a sub-set within the coloured racial group and to keep them separate and distinct from the Asians, Whites and the majority of Africans. The apartheid regime's discriminatory policies, which are well documented, affected the oppressed society deeply; and since the Cape Malays formed part of the latter, they also experienced the trauma and pains that have scarred the contemporary generation of the Cape Malays.

The Cape Malay leadership was acutely aware of these abusive policies and most of the leaders were also affected by policies such as the notorious Group Areas Act; and even though they were not openly satisfied with the status quo at the time, they saw the socio-political circumstances in a different light and theologically interpreted that the Cape Malays must observe the rule of the law no matter how difficult the circumstances were. The racial boundaries set out by the apartheid regime forced them not to readily socialize with Africans and members of other racial groups. Despite these laws, integration and intermingling took place on a limited scale and this caused some of those belonging to other racial groups to marry into the Cape Malay community (and by implication convert to Islam). Since the Cape Malays were generally very open, they had little objections to anyone wishing to join their ranks, individually or collectively.

The term Cape Malay was "sponge-like". In other words, it was a very flexible and absorbent term. It was flexible because it did not stop anyone from using the label; in fact, to have been Cape Malay had its apparent advantages within the respective South African colonial and apartheid systems. For those who entered the community via marriage or conversion, they enjoyed "more" freedom than others such as the Indian Muslims who had to have a permit when they intended to move from one area to another, or permission from the local governor to trade within a specific geographical location.

Thus, marriage and conversion were seen as two important conduits in bolstering the Cape Malay community. Many Cape Malays are of mixed ancestry and were generally – as stated earlier – quite happy to be referred to as such, since they reaped certain social and to some degree economic benefits from it. Their attitude is strikingly similar to that of Abdullah Munsyi whose grandparents were from Yemen and India respectively and whose mother had been a

Jawi; and he was someone who fluently spoke Tamil, Arabic and Malay. It was observed that “in spite of his mixed ancestry, he always thought of himself a Malay” (Nagata 1985). Amongst the Cape Malays, mixed ancestry is widespread. There are only a handful of families who can boast that they have a pure lineage back to the Southeast Asian region. One of the reasons for the existence of this – almost intact – family tree was that they married within the extended families. Attempts have, however, been made by a group to study the genealogical structures at the Cape, and to trace how the identity of this community developed.

In both instances, the colonialists constructed the identities of the Malays. In the case of the Malays of the Malay Peninsula, Lian Kwen Fee (2001) and Shamsul (1997) have made ample reference to the colonial construction of the Malay identity. Lian made reference to Maier’s stimulating study that demonstrated that there were two groups of British colonialists who had a direct hand in constructing Malayness. These groups eventually concluded that the Malays were inherently weak, not industrious, and ill-disciplined; and because of these perceptions decided through their divide-and-rule system to place them on the lower rungs of the hierarchy of races.

The Malays’ contribution in carving out their own identity came about at the beginning of the 20th century, at a time when the Cape Malays were incidentally debating their identity too. The newspaper *Utusan Melayu* (est. 1915) played an instrumental role in disseminating and spreading information, and helped shape the Malay political discourse. Ideas articulated by Malay nationalists were in response to the presence of immigrants, and in the process, they carved out an exclusive identity. Lian comments that “[t]he Malay identity in the Peninsula was circumscribed by specific ethnic sentiments”. And he further states that “the construction of Malayness was the product of two different though related forces: an exogenous one, namely the colonial capital economy which intruded into the Malay society, and an endogenous one, namely traditional social distinction that evolved into class-type distinction as a consequence of modernization”.

At the Cape in South Africa, a slightly different scenario took place. Arshad Gamiet formed the Cape Malay Association (est. 1923, hereafter CMA) as a vehicle to officially represent the Cape Malays; he and his CMA were however opposed by others such as Abdurahman (d. 1940), who identified strongly with other non-Malay and African oriented social and cultural groups. Their concern was not to confine their struggle to any specific ethnic groups, but to work for all the oppressed masses. In fact, the *Moslem Outlook*, which was circulated at the Cape between 1925 and 1927, did not cover any reports on the activities of the Cape Malays, which subtly indicated that the owners of and columnists in the paper did not identify with Malayism at the Cape. Gamiet was unsuccessful in rallying the community to his aid, and he also briefly tried to coax the Nationalist Party to support the goals of the CMA by granting them certain favors.

However, even though Gamiet failed and disappeared from the cultural scene by the 1930s, Izak du Plessies, whose doctoral thesis focused on the Cape Malays, took up the challenge of making a special case for the Cape Malays within the political structures of the time. He was the one who supported various Cape Malay activities such as the Malay Choirs. Although the term Cape Malays was not regularly debated in public during these times, there were groups, particularly in the late 1950s that began to raise the issue for discussion, since they found the term acceptable to them. However, it was brought more into the open from the 1970s onwards. We will comment further on this later.

Returning to Malaysia, we note that the fight for independence was high on the agenda of the Malay nationalists who came into conflict with the British colonialists and other racial groups, mainly the immigrants who were in a more advantaged position and thus had better privileges compared to the Malays. They were thus bent on instilling Malay consciousness because, as far as they were concerned, it was suppressed and the British had given the impression that Malays were lazy and lacked confidence, and suffered from an inferiority complex. These nationalists worked towards rectifying the position. They did this first by gaining independence in 1957 and then strove to bring about Malay consciousness and implementing affirmative action with the introduction of the New Economic Policy in the 1970s.

MALAYNESS: LATE 20th CENTURY

Within the socio-political climate of the 1970s, the United Malay National Organization (hereafter UMNO) assisted Malays in carving out a distinctive ethnic identity, stemmed from their insecurity, to protect their Malayness. During this period, UMNO emphasized Malay interests and aspirations in the political, economic and cultural life of the nation. These conditions granted them the opportunity and the necessary confidence in making demands, such as in applying affirmative action, so that they could also gain equal access to an economy that was dominated by Chinese and Indians. Shamsul (1997) interprets the events in a slightly different way. He mentions that the emerging *dakwah* movements such as ABIM, which was then led by Anwar Ibrahim, underlined Islam as the pillar of Malay identity, and this tilted UMNO policy towards adopting an Islamization strategy. This meant that the redefinition of Malayness led to the mainstreaming of Islam in all domains of Malaysian social life. These factors contributed towards a different Malay mind-set from that period onwards until the implementation of UMNO's *Vision 2020* in 1991. Although the Cape Malays did not undergo the exact same experiences as their fellow Malays in Malaysia between the 1970s and 1980s, there were certain similarities such as the emergence of Islamic movements that had close ties with ABIM. More importantly, the Cape Malays debated racial identities in South Africa, and gradually replaced their ethnic identity with a religious one. We will return to the issue of

transformation later. For now we wish to turn attention to how these identities are and have been depicted within South Africa's different socio-political periods.

DEPICTING OSCILLATING IDENTITIES

It might be useful to represent the transformation within two time frames during the 20th century. In the first time frame, between the 1900s and 1960s, the primary identity of the community was essentially an ethnic/racial one, and in the second, a religious one. These two complimentary identities are further buttressed by national and regional identities. The second time frame reflects the opposite. In this frame, the core identity is religious and the second is ethnic/racial. The latter frame falls within the latter part of the 20th century from 1960 onwards. As far as can be ascertained, these two interrelated identities have not operated alongside each other. The main argument for this is that the community existed within socio-political structures that emphasized ethnic/racial identities above all other identities. As an ethnically isolated minority, they went along with these structures for they found themselves to be in a comfortable, convenient and fairly advantaged position. However, there were those within the community who felt otherwise. These groups of individuals periodically objected to the employment of the ethnic/racial identity and opted for the use of religious identity as a more neutral label.

Let us return to the issue of transformation among the Cape Malays. The debate regarding Cape Malay identity only took shape in the late 20th century when socio-economic and political conditions had changed. During these times, from 1970s to 1980s, the young generation that included university graduates and professionally trained members of the community began critically to question the use of the term. Although their grip with the term was more against the manner in which the apartheid state employed it, they also championed an alternative, which was the use of a religious appellation, instead of an ethnic/racial one. They clamored for the use of Cape Muslim instead of Cape Malays. One of the young firebrands at the time was Shamil Jeppie (1987: 1996) and who advocated an anti-Cape Malays stance. He critically argued against individuals such as Izak du Plessies and those in the community who held onto this label. Although no heated debates had been raging, there was a silent acceptance and compliance by the majority, who was basically not against the use of the term.

THE ACTORS & THE STRUCTURE: GAPENA, ISMAIL HUSSEIN & THE SMA

The issue of identity was dragged back into the debate after GAPENA made its maiden voyage to the Cape in April 1993. The seminar that was jointly organized between the National University of Malaysia (hereafter UKM) and the University

of the Western Cape (hereafter UWC) focused on “Muslim” identity, rather than “Malay” identity. The main reason was that the Cape organizers were somewhat hesitant about using the term. They sought instead to shift attention to GAPENA, its leader and its Secretariat.

GAPENA

GAPENA (est. 1970) came into existence at a time when the Malaysian government was putting its New Economic Policy into place. This policy was to bring about significant socio-economic changes in the country. Its origins apparently lay in the failure of the National Writers Union (est. 1961, hereafter PENA) to attract writers from different parts of the Malaysia Peninsula. In fact, it intended to unite all the literary associations across the country, but was not successful. In the end, the federation was agreed upon and it came into being in October 1970.

As a federation, it became home to a variety of bodies that drew literary figures, journalists, cultural activists, teachers, lawyers and other interested individuals and parties. Over the years, it grew rapidly and gained wide support for its cultural objectives and activities. An aspect that GAPENA was definitely proud of was that it attracted individuals from diverse backgrounds, particularly those with natural talent (i.e. Bakat Alam) who showed a deep affection for their culture and language. GAPENA helped individuals to write short stories and novels, encouraged the reciting of poetry, and offered journalists and artists the opportunity to demonstrate their writing and artistic skills. GAPENA was thus from the very outset at the vanguard of the cultural struggle. The organization has and still plays a crucial role in gathering talented persons from different parts of the country and the region to participate in seminars, workshops and conferences. At these forums, they display their poetic and other talents. The Federation’s success throughout the country provided the necessary confidence to look beyond their borders and scout for talented individuals amongst the diasporic Melayu communities.

Over the years, it became more than a writers’ organization and gradually developed an interest in promoting a global Malay culture as well as a united Malay-Speaking World. Between 1970 and 1990, GAPENA organized numerous meetings, which yielded positive results for society. In Abdul-Latiff Abu Bakr’s (2002: 218-283) biography of Ismail Hussein, he listed all the events in which Ismail Hussein participated, and many of these were specific GAPENA gatherings. GAPENA was home to a row of politicians, academics and others. The first *Hari Sastera* gathering in Kota Baru on June 2, 1972 was an historical event that proved overwhelmingly successful and attractive. It drew more about 3,000 people of all walks of life. The event demonstrated that modern Malay culture was not an elitist type meant only for the aristocracy, but one that could be enjoyed by all. In the famous words of Ismail Hussein (1989): “Modern Malay culture is a democratic culture.”

ISMAIL HUSSEIN

One of the driving forces behind the popular support for GAPENA has been its founder and president, Ismail Hussein. His basic simple philosophy about culture being democratic (of the people, for the people) transformed GAPENA into a vibrant organization. His time in office turned him into a high profile cultural activist who oversaw the flowering of Malay culture through the use of the national language. He felt strongly about creating Malay cultural consciousness amongst Malaysians and in the region. Ismail Hussein wished for the culture and the language to be made known not only in all the kampungs, towns and cities in Malaysia, but also in the greater Southeast Asian region and particularly among the diasporic Malay communities.

He traveled extensively in order to realize his objectives. He spent his time networking within Malaysia, visiting villages and towns and showing his passion for the culture. He crossed continents to initiate links and forge connections. Before he landed with a strong delegation of 55 individuals in Cape Town in April 1993, he had been in close contact with Sri Lankan Malays where the “*Simposium Dunia Melayu*” was held from 3rd to 11th August 1985 (Hussainmiya 2003). This event laid the basis for connections with diasporic communities. The major obstacle in his path that forced him to delay initiating ties with Cape Malays was South Africa’s harsh discriminatory laws. However, despite this, he corresponded with a few individuals, such as Ismail Petersen, whose role in cementing the connections cannot be overemphasized (Haron 1997). Ismail Hussein was already knowledgeable about the Cape Malays: He read different texts he received from individuals, such as Ismail Petersen, and was informed through his connections with individuals in the Cape.

When Ismail Hussein eventually landed on Cape shores in 1992, he met a number of representatives from the community, and these meetings culminated in the planning of the seminar in during April 1993. The seminar was thus organized jointly by UKM and UWC under the theme “*The Evolving Identity of the Cape Muslim*”. For the purpose of organizing the event, a Malaysian Welcoming Committee was formed. This committee was in constant contact with Ismail Hussein, and had endless debates about whether the term “*Cape Malay*” was to be used instead of “*Cape Muslim*”. At one stage they proposed a compromise by drafting the title in the following manner: “*The evolving identity of the Cape Malay/Muslim*”. This concretely demonstrated their dilemma. In the end the term “*Cape Muslim*” was employed because it reflected the sentiments of the younger, vibrant generation who preferred to be known by their religious identity rather than by their ethnic identity.

The rejection of the label did not deter others from accepting it. In fact, when Najib Razak, the then Minister of Defense, participated in the tercentenary celebrations of Islam in South Africa during 1994, the Cape Malays were proud to be identified with Malaysia. The mere presence of one of Malaysia’s cabinet ministers left an indelible impression on them, and they therefore showed that

they had no qualms in being referred to in the new South Africa as Cape Malays. As a consequence, two organizations emerged in the 1990s; the first was the South African Malay Cultural Society that was spearheaded by Mogamat Hashiem Salie, and the second was the Forum for Malay Culture in South Africa, formed by Mrs. Tasnim Kalam. Both were and remained in close contact with Tan Sri Ismail Hussein, who supported and patronized their activities in the Cape and in Malaysia. As a matter of fact, Tan Sri Ismail Hussein played a very diplomatic role when it came to communicating and liaising with many Cape cultural activists who did not work together. Despite these internal squabbles and external divisions, Tan Sri Ismail Hussein and GAPENA kept lines of communication open in order to monitor the extent of the conflicts, but more importantly, to see to it that Malay cultural activities were given necessary support, and that their cultural project was advanced rather than hampered by petty internal and local differences.

THE INTERNATIONAL MALAY SECRETARIAT

An important outcome of the seminars and symposiums that GAPENA organized was the setting up of the International Malay Secretariat in April 1996 in Shah Alam, the regional capital of Selangor Darul Ehsan. The idea of the secretariat was for quite a while embedded in the mind of Ismail Hussein as part of his vision for the future. He, however, had to hold back its formation and implementation because the structures and the financial support were not yet in place. It was only when Mohd Taib, the then Chief Minister of Selangor Darul Ehsan, pledged his moral and financial support that the idea gradually unfolded and developed. The setting up of the SMA in April 1996 came closely after the huge Malay World Symposium held in the Philippines at the Mindanao State University between the 31st of March and 6th April 1996. The main objective was to bring on board representatives from diaporic communities who would advance the cause of the Malay world in their respective areas and regions. Tan Sri Taib spelled out its function by stating that although the main purpose of the Secretariat was to facilitate an intellectual discourse on Malay culture, language and philosophy among the Malays the world over and it could directly help develop Malay networking in the business and economic field. Alongside the Malay World Symposium, the organizing committee also planned an International Malay Trade Exposition for September 1996 involving Malay business persons and entrepreneurs. The purpose for the symposium was to project a new vibrant voice for the Malays around the world that would be “dynamic, strong and confident”. Another reason was to rectify the image that the Malays were “a lazy race”. The SMA was boosted by the different chairs for Malay Studies established in New Zealand and the Netherlands, as well as by plans for similar structures and programs in countries such as South Africa.

In the September 1996 issue of the special SMA newsletter, namely *Lampiran Warta GAPENA*, Salazar made some relevant remarks on “Malay Networking”. He

basically proposed that three circles be constructed: the first circle would represent the core Malay states (Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore, Indonesia and Philippines), the middle circle the Malay diaphora and the outer circle the rest of the world. Then, he further proposed exchanges amongst different communities at different levels, and people to people networking. In addition, he contributed a few other thoughts in advancing SMA objectives. Unfortunately, although the SMA got off to an enthusiastic start, it faced a few problems along the way; its workings were particularly affected by the economic meltdown experienced throughout the Southeast Asian region in the 1997-1998 period. In fact, this had a dampening effect on many cultural activities, including the Malay studies project in South Africa. Its establishment in South Africa was, *inter alia*, to contribute to the dissemination of images of Southeast Asia, the construction of commercial and cultural relations, and the teaching of Bahasa Melayu as a foreign language.

CONSTRUCTS: IMAGININGS, IMPRESSIONS AND INSIGHTS

With the connections forged and strengthened via regular interactions between Cape Malays and Malaysians, certain images constructed prior to the visits were reformed through concrete interactions. Insights were gained and brought back to their respective communities. Perhaps, a good starting point for discussion would be to share ideas about how Cape Malays constructed images about Malaysia and Malaysians, and about the impressions that became embedded in their minds.

THE CAPE MALAYS: FROM THEIR ROMANTIC NOTIONS TO AUTHENTIC INSIGHTS

When glancing through the statistics of the South African Tourism sector, one is surprised by the startling number of tourists moving to and from Malaysia. However, the figures do not indicate how many are Cape Malays as opposed to other racial groups in South Africa. Be that as it may, it should be instructive to take random opinions from Cape Malays who, prior to their maiden trip, held a particular perspective of Malaysia and its society.

Among Cape Malays, there is what we may term “a romantic picture” of Malaysia. This presents Malaysia as a moderate Muslim country with a homogenous society; a country that is different from conservative Saudi Arabia and from those of Muslim Arabs whose behavior they questioned in general. This image was undoubtedly constructed from hearsay and from texts that they had read. Some Cape Malay impressions of Malaysians were in fact formed during pilgrimages made prior to the forging of formal links in the 1990s. The impact that Malaysians made on Cape Malays were orally transmitted upon the latter’s return. They were taken in by the way Malaysians behaved throughout this

spiritual and uplifting journey. These experiences were etched in their memories, and were used facilitate connections with Malaysians. The Cape Malays, therefore, had an “ideal picture” lodged in their minds.

The leadership that Malaysia offered to the Muslim world, in general, and the diasporic Muslim communities, in particular, further boosted these thoughts and impressions. The Cape Malays admired the former Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamed, as well as his former deputy, Anwar Ibrahim. These two figures were respected for the way they were leading their country and the manner in which they dealt with international affairs, particularly in standing up to the arrogance of the USA as well as the Zionist Jews’ inhumane treatment of the Palestinians. These are but among the few things that they could identify with and were attracted to. Given this romantic picture the Cape Malays cultivated their keen desire to travel to Malaysia, and, if possible, work there or maybe settle there. They were happy and contented with the “moderate” Islam portrayed by Malaysia’s leaders and organizations.

However, the day Cape Malays land at Kuala Lumpur International, they literally experience “a cultural shock”. The romantic picture that they entertained in the minds is immediately shattered. We then need to ask: What shock do they experience? Well, they were not fully informed about the extent of integration of Chinese and Indians into Malaysian society. They were unaware of the degree of influence exercised by these ethnic communities. They were oblivious of the fact that sizeable portions of the Malaysian population belonged to other religious traditions and were amazed at the number of temples and churches they saw. These vivid scenarios were something they were not told about and thus could not easily relate to. They were only able to overcome these initial shocks when they began slowly to mingle with the people and got to know the extent of the socialization of the different ethnic/racial communities, and when they came to understand the past social history of the Malays and the bitter struggles that the Malays faced until (and even after) independence. It was only then that they gained a more positive impression and a deeper insight into the social structure of Malaysian society.

With these positive thoughts, they visited the *kampungs*, and also got to know more about the status of the Bumiputras and the Orang Asli. They partook in the cuisine, donned the dresses and socialized to dispel the preconceived ideas they held and the superficial impressions that had accompanied them. They generally underwent a learning process, which they never envisaged prior to their visit. The increased flow of Cape Malays to Malaysia and vice versa have gradually contributed towards the formation of authentic insights. These movements led to a fair number finding employment in Malaysia, which in turn gave rise to these individuals marrying Malaysians. Others found opportunities to study at the Islamic International University of Malaysia and other institutions in the country. All of these developments were thus instrumental in dispelling romantic notions and replacing them with authentic experiences. In fact, after a

decade of increased interaction between Cape Malays and Malaysians, the former's impressions and insights have radically changed. We may describe this change in attitude and approach as of maturity as opposed to one of pure naivety and ignorance. This change has also given rise to a better understanding of one another and the development of a more healthy and mature relationship.

THE MALAYSIANS: THEIR IMPRESSIONS OF THE OTHER

Now that we have given a glimpse of how Cape Malays at one point in time saw Malaysia and Malaysians, we need to shift attention to how the Malaysians perceived the Cape Malays. Since the reconnection in April 1993, the same year when Malaysian Airlines signed an agreement with South Africa authorities to fly to Johannesburg and Cape Town en route to Argentine, many Malaysians have visited the Cape. Some have literally fallen in love with the city and the country and moved here. Others have come on annual visits, whilst others have encouraged family members and friends to come to the Cape. The attraction has not only been the presence of the Cape Malays, but also the beautiful environment and scenery.

Prior to the historical visit of the delegation to the Cape, Ismail Hussein and Samaon Ahmad organized a pre-visit seminar at UKM's IBKMM on the 1st April 1993. Their purpose was to inform intended members of the delegation and other interested individuals about the knowledge they had gained on their maiden voyage in October 1992 and their regular contacts with members of the Cape Malay community. The theme of the seminar was *Kebudayaan Melayu Cape Town 1993*. Subsequent to this visit, a spate of lectures by members of the Malay delegation as well as invited members of the Cape Malay community was given at institutions around the country, and their lectures were complimented by newspaper articles written by journalists such as Dino SS and Yazid Othman in the *Berita Harian* and *Utusan Malaysia* respectively. Here, we provide a few samples of lectures that gave insights in the life of the Cape Malays: Wan Hashim Wan Teh & Farid Onn presented an IBKMM seminar, which was reported by Salbiah Ani in her *Berita Harian* article entitled "Melayu Afrika bertuankan Melayu" (30 Mei 1993). At the 10th *Hari Sastera* in Shah Alam, a special panel with three members from the Cape Malay community, namely Muhammed Haron, Ismail Peteren and Irfaan Rakiép, chaired by Wan Hashiem Wan Teh, discussed in some detail the ideas and practices of this diasporic community. On 5th July 1993, Ismail Petersen, who had been in regular contact with the officials at the Public Library of Kedah in Alor Setar, gave a lecture entitled "Hubungan Afrika Selatan dengan Dunia Melayu".

Many articles have been written in Bahasa Melayu to inform Malaysians about the community and the environment in which they lived. There was no culture shock among Malaysian visitors to South Africa comparable to that

witnessed among Cape Malays visiting Malaysia. In fact, when the delegation of 55 came to Cape Town in April 1993, they were overawed by the beauty and hospitality. The event led to the publication of a series of articles in the *Berita Harian* and *Utusan Malaysia* by correspondents and journalists, such as Dino SS who were part of the delegation. These newspapers did a great deal in disseminating information about *Afrika Selatan* and Cape Malays. During 1996, it was also planned by GAPENA, SMA and RTM to have a documentary series that would give attention to the Malay World. The series was to be titled *Rumpun Melayu*, which would involve important players, such as Ismail Hussein, as advisors and key informants. Articles on Cape Malays have increased at a rapid pace since April 1993, and are too numerous to refer to in this article; we therefore only wish to make reference to one set of articles penned by Nurul Liza Mohd Najib who works at Nortiers Rooibos Museum in Shah Alam and who looks, in particular, after the Cape Malay section that has been created within the museum; the idea, incidentally, was apparently that of the museum's Chinese director, James Tan.

Nurul Liza M. Najib went on a visit to the Cape during the early part of 2001, and gave her impressions and insights in a few articles that appeared in different newspapers and magazines. In these, she captured the lived experiences of the community and penned the community's participation in civil society. On 20th November 2001 her article entitled "Adat Perkahwinan Melayu Cape Town" provided a fair overview and insight into the wedding ceremony in the *Harian Metro* (p. 22A). In the same issue, another article entitled "Cape Town Bandar Indah dengan Alam Semula Jadi", she sketched her visit to the city and other cultural places of interest. In the *Bacaria Edisi* of the 8th Disember 2001 she wrote an article, which later also appeared in *SeriDewi & Keluarga* (pp. 156-158) during January 2002 with a slightly different title, "Pengalaman indah bumi Cape Town," which looked specifically at the numerous museums in and around the city. On 16th Disember 2001 the article "Budaya Melayu Cape Masih Utuh" appeared in the *Berita Minggu*. Her contributions are but some of many examples that have helped Malaysians respond to Cape Malay culture. The fact that she wrote these illustrated articles and had them distributed in different publications clearly indicated that she wanted to share her memorable experiences with a wide readership. It also reflected the great extent to which the society and sites had impressed her.

As a public relations officer at the Nortier's Rooibos Museum, Nurul Liza has been able to combine her duties well with her other activities, which include overseeing and taking charge of the small Cape Malay display/exhibition at the museum. Her lived experience of and writings about the Cape Malays thus place her in a very good position at the museum, where she has the chance to inform and disseminate her views and impressions about this distantly located community to her fellow Malaysians. The exhibition, which is of a permanent nature and was officially opened by Hashim Salie of the SA Melayu Society, has

a wide variety of artifacts that give us an idea of what Cape Malays wrote about, what type of clothes they wore during the earlier part of the 20th century, and the kind of professions they used to be and are currently involved in. Among the many items, are a full embroidered wedding dress, a set of wooden *keparings* (sandals), photographs that capture the faces of a few early Cape Malays, and copies of handwritten manuscripts that are still extant. Whilst the exhibition, despite the small number of artifacts on display, contributes substantially towards forming an impression of who the Cape Malays were, Nurul Liza's articles and many other similar writings have helped us understand what the Cape Malays have become.

CONCLUSION

The making of cultural connections and the strengthening of bonds are always challenging. These do not only stimulate the imagination, but also leave lasting impressions, made either through printed or electronic media or through lived experiences. This article demonstrates that the face of international relations had changed radically by the end of the 20th century. It shows what NGOs such as GAPENA achieved without any support or interference from the government sector. This proves that non-state actors, particularly those with specific cultural objectives, can play a crucial role in cementing relations with communities in other parts of the world.

Initial efforts made by Ismail Hussein and GAPENA on the side of the Malaysians and that of Ismail Petersen on behalf of the Cape Malays have blossomed into strong cultural and religious relations that will probably grow with time. Both sides have been able to gain insights into how the issue of identity was negotiated and mediated within the respective communities, not only during the past decade, but also during the very early years. The ties that have thus far been established have had its ups-and-downs and constant hiccups because of the changing socio-political and economic conditions in Malaysia and South Africa. However, these have not affected the links that GAPENA forged with the Cape Malays. In fact, in both instances, lasting impressions were left; evidence of this are noted in the number of articles that have appeared in the news media and in academic publications of the respective countries.

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