

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

23 Jalan AU5 C/3
Lembah Keramat
Ulu Kelang, Selangor
Malaysia
6 January 1983

BEB-13

Get the Message?

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
Wheelock House
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover NH 03755

Dear Peter,

Plural societies suffer from an uncomfortable dialectic: diversity, the defining characteristic of pluralism, is the antithesis of unity, the essence of nationhood. Though in theory, communal differences are subsumed within the national polity, in fact they remain in opposition. These contradictory forces are often reconciled only at an international level, where the plural society must interact with other societies, other nations. Even here, however, communal linkages can stretch beyond national borders, fracturing national bonds. In the plural society, unity is ephemeral; communal conflict, tension and opposition are the more obvious realities.

The communal barriers that divide plural societies can take many forms. Language, race, religion, ethnicity, history - all are powerful anchors of heterogeneity, difficult to uproot, much less reshape, by governments seeking to meld their disparate citizenries into cohesive wholes. Communal ties can persist long after Independence has been declared, continually rending the modern gossamer of nationalism.

In Malaysia, the archetypal plural society, nationalism's shiny new patchwork has been stitched together over the centuries-old communal divisions of the Malays, Chinese, Indians and Eurasians. The fabric is thin and the divisions often show through. Racial schisms are further deepened by broad, race-specific differences in language, religion and custom, with little inter-marriage to soften the divisions. The races co-exist, but uneasily, casting suspicious glances at one another across the abysses.

History books used to describe British-colonial Malaya as a nation where the Malays were rural, the Chinese urban, and the Indians plantation workers. Today, in Peninsular Malaysia, these divisions remain more or less intact, despite twenty-five years of Independence. Though Malays now constitute a significant portion of the multi-racial middle class, the majority are still rural, agricultural, insular, poor and Muslim. The Chinese, mostly Buddhist-Taoist-Confucists or Christians, remain in self-reliant, urban communities; ethnically inward-looking, communal and enviably successful. They still control the lion's share of the Malaysian retail and service economy. Indians, the smallest Malaysian ethnic community (12% versus 51% and 35% for the Malays and Chinese, respectively,

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plus a 2% smattering of Eurasians and "others"), and consequently wield the least economic and political power. The largest segment, Tamil Hindus and Christians, still retain many of their traditional links with the plantation economy. Punjabis, Malialis, Gujaratis, some Tamils and other Indian ethnic groups are sprinkled throughout the administrative, commercial and educational sectors of the economy.

Change has occurred of course, but despite longstanding government policies of integration and "Malaysianization," conventional communal delineations persist. The official National Culture, in essence, Malay culture elevated to a national level, remains an artificial construct that has yet to be fully accepted by the non-Malay communities, except where economic or political necessity requires. Though the progressive implementation of Bahasa Malaysia over English as the language of administration and education has met with marked success, the National Language only rarely penetrates beyond official and lingua franca communication. In Chinese and Indian homes, vernacular dialects remain vital. Most Chinese can speak at least one or two regional Chinese dialects and many are at least semi-literate with Chinese ideograms. Indians too can usually speak their mother dialect with some degree of fluency, though vernacular literacy is less common. These "private" ethnic languages tend to reinforce the "apartness" of the non-Malays; the government recognizes this but any suggestion of a gradual vernacular primary education phase-out is met with vehement protest.

Malays too, jealously guard their separate identity, a tendency that has yet to be reconciled with the governmental insistence on an all-encompassing National Identity, Malay-based or no. Bahasa Malaysia, once a distinguishing Malay characteristic, has now been lost to the public domain, and thus no longer really suffices as a Malay linguistic ethnic boundary-marker (regional Malay dialects like Kelantanese and Minangkabau, on the other hand, are still sufficiently esoteric to outsiders for regional identification within the Malay community). The resurgence of Jawi—a specialized, Arabic-style, Malay-language script—in posters, magazines and other print media may be, in part, an attempt to assert a special Malay—as opposed to Malaysian—medium of communication. Like Chinese ideograms and Tamil script, Jawi is a public typographic declaration of communal identity and continuing ethnic integrity. Jawi is taught to Malay children in the public schools (though all races have access to such instruction, few non-Malays show interest) and is used as an adjunct to Rumi (romanized script) in many official government publications. Amongst Malay initiates, the Jawi illiterate is an object of pity, and not a little contempt.

Language, of course, is only one type of ethnic boundary-marker. Art, music and dance also reinforce communal delineations, while food and clothing, particularly when religiously oriented, become rock-solid barriers to integration: Muslims can't eat pork, Hindus won't eat beef and Chinese eat most anything edible; thus, they rarely eat together. Malays in particular seldom venture beyond their own kitchens and restaurants unless assured the food is halal (religiously pure). Similarly, religio-cultural dress codes, such as the prescriptions and proscriptions of Islam and Sikhism (the religion of the Indian Punjabi community), tend to reinforce traditional modes of attire.

Visual symbols assert yet another level of ethnic identity. As in other nations, Malaysians use visual symbols as adjuncts to, and occasional replacements for, verbal language. Cultural, commercial, political and institutional symbols inform and regulate human activities. Logos, trademarks, emblems, badges and coats-of-arms identify businesses, corporations, clubs, societies and the State itself.

Signage regulates traffic, directs pedestrian flow, provides warning and other information. Such prosaic communication, however, is not without underlying levels of cultural meaning, esoteric perhaps, to the outsider, but quite comprehensible to Malay, Chinese and Indian initiates. Malaysian visual symbols, almost without exception, communicate some form of identity, either communal or, in the urban arena, western and international. Malaysian designers and other visual communicators, aspiring to appeal to a particular segment of the population, take care to include the proper visual codes in their signage and logos. Malaysian consumers, sensitive to such ethnic messages, respond.

Malaysian business signs provide a plethora of ethnic information for potential customers as a matter of course, whether in the village or city. Communal imagery is particularly important in restaurants and foodstores, where Islamic and Hindu dietary prohibitions come into play. A restaurant sign incorporating the star-and-crescent informs the potential customer that the owner is Muslim and that thus, the food is halal. Green, an auspicious Islamic color, reinforces this message, as does Jawi script. Such visual cues, or the phrase "ditanggung halal" (guaranteed kosher) are pragmatic necessities where Muslim food is concerned. Conversely, Chinese ideograms, whatever their verbal message, connote, for Muslims, a ritually unclean, religiously proscribed eating establishment, as pork is probably served within. The same ideograms, read by a Chinese consumer, provide a comprehensible verbal message and, at a more subliminal level, non-verbal, color-based communication. Red, gold and yellow are auspicious Chinese colors, indicating prosperity, wealth and good fortune and are almost always included in Chinese visual imagery (see BEB-1). Hindu



1. Islamic restaurant sign in green and yellow; Ulu Kelang.



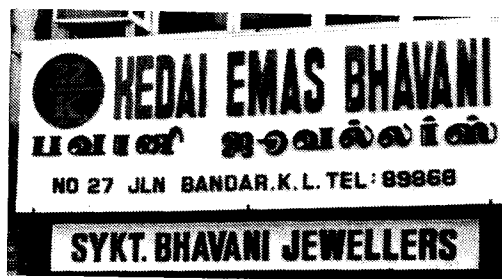
2. Islamic restaurant sign; green crescent, red letters, white field; Kuala Lumpur.



3. Indian general goods store with (top to bottom) Jawi, Tamil and Rumi lettering. The typically Indian name "Jayanthi" and the large Tamil typography help to identify this as an Indian enterprise.



4. A Chinese goldsmith. Do you search the sign for the comprehensible typography? Malaysians do the same.



5. An Indian goldsmith. Note the relatively large Tamil type and lack of Chinese ideograms. Like Kedai Gemini above, this shop is on Leboh Ampang, a street with many goldsmiths. This sign, however, seeks a more select audience than the Chinese competition.

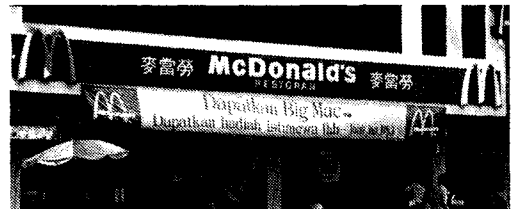
businesses, on the other hand, often employ religious pictorial imagery (representations of Shiva, Vishnu, Ganesha and other Hindu gods) to support verbal communication. The Sanskrit or Tamil characters of "om," an auspicious Hindu phoneme, are also occasionally employed. For a non-exclusive message, entrepreneurs usually include English and Malay typography (Jawi or Rumi), Chinese ideograms and to a lesser extent, Tamil script.

In the cities, particularly Kuala Lumpur, Western/international messages take precedence, overriding traditional communal imagery. In multi-racial business areas of the city, particularly shopping malls, firms try to reduce associations with tradition and often employ Western typographic criteria to support verbal communication. Vivaldi script or hand-written calligraphy are popular indications of snob appeal and "class"; helvetica light sans serif type is popular for a high-tech, corporate or disco/high fashion look. Metallic lettering (high-gloss bronze or brushed aluminum) reinforces this urban hauteur and is particularly popular with international corporations. Still, even in the urban arena, properly auspicious Chinese ideograms and green star-and-crescents are prevalent (Malay-language typography is required by municipal law in KL). At McDonald's, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Pizza Hut and other fast food joints where the appeal is overwhelmingly Western, but the clientele is multi-racial, ditanggung halal reassurances and red or yellow Chinese typography are virtual imperatives.

Islamic crescents, Chinese ideograms, Sanskrit letters and other communal images reinforce pre-existing concepts of race, religion and culture. Likewise, international symbolism draws on a veritable cornucopia of Western stereotypes and other imagery. National symbols, on the other hand, must be manufactured. National Identity, Racial Harmony and Malaysian Culture are artificial concepts based on ideals, not history. Loyalty to the State competes with antecedent loyal-



6. Krishna Silk Store doubles as a Center for devotees of Sai Baba, an Indian cult figure said to be an incarnation of Shiva and a reincarnation of an earlier Sai Baba. Both Sai Babas are shown on the sign (the modern edition on the left). The small neon sign incorporates symbols from a variety of belief systems.



7. McDonald's Kuala Lumpur. The banner reads "Get a Big Mac; Get a Special Prize." Type is yellow and red.



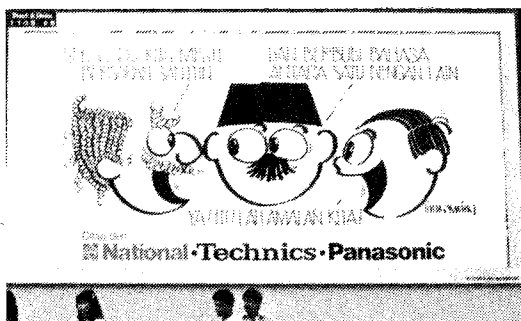
8. McDonald's Kuala Lumpur, entrance-way sign.



9. The Kancil (Mousedeer) an exclusive Kuala Lumpur restaurant. The sign employs bronze calligraphy on a dark brown field.



10. A reminder from the Kelantanese state government in the Kota Baru esplanade: "Guard Your Self Respect, Stay Away From Sin." Included is the Kelantanese state crest with flanking kijang (barking deer).



11. This downtown Kuala Lumpur billboard is part of the ongoing Malaysian "courtesy campaign." The cartoon characters (from a popular local strip) say: "Now we must be polite and courteous; and be well-mannered with each other; yes! That is what we must do!"



12. This sign, in green and yellow, can be found in front of many of Malaysia's roadside mosques, particularly in Perak state. The rather ominous admonition reminds travelers to "Pray Before You Are Prayed For," that is, pray before you die. Happy motoring!

ties to religion, village and family. Thus, national symbols must be continually reinforced, with both subliminal nuance and sledehammer blows.

Malaysian symbol creation is a small cottage industry, yearly churning out the same nationalistic messages, in new verbal and visual forms. Verbal symbols, like the national pledge, Rukunegara, and national anthem, Negara Ku, have long been standard components of the Federal symbolic vocabulary. The latter is broadcast nightly on Malaysian TV and radio. Additionally, national themes and mottos are plentiful and proliferating, integral parts of the yearly Independence Day celebrations. Nationalistic songs and government reminders urging discipline, harmony and unity spice the airwaves. Verbal interpretations thereof pepper the highways.

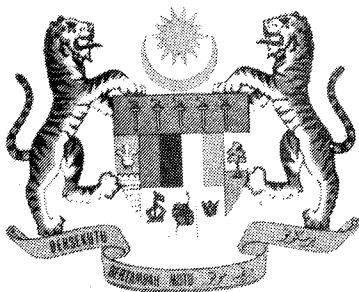
Visual symbols have long played a high-profile role in the assertion of the government-conceived National Identity. Cognizant of Malaysian communal sensitization, the government has encouraged the construction of monuments, buildings and architectural renovation that reflects the Malay-based National Identity. Such environmental symbols become irrevocable official stamps on the cities, towns and highways, permanent assertions of Malay power. Less obvious, but even more pervasive, are official graphics and signage. Such graphic symbolism draws almost exclusively on Malay heraldry, handicraft, myth, folklore and related Islamic imagery for inspiration, perpetuating the official Malay image in government letterheads, logos, promotional graphics and related media. During the past year I have collected a variety of official National, State and Municipal logos, all of which include some form of Malay/Islamic imagery. A sampling are included on pages 8 & 9.

Flags are the ultimate national symbols, graphic embodiments of the ideals of State. The Malaysian flag is no exception. Similar in design to the banners of the United States and Liberia, the Malaysian flag has a field of fourteen alternating red and white horizontal stripes, one for each of the thirteen Malaysian states and

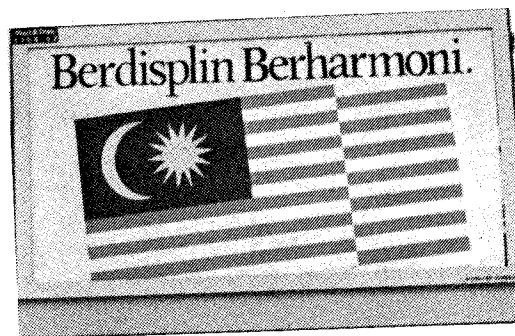
and a single stripe for the Federal Government. A blue, rectangular canton on the left-hand side of the flag over the fifth red stripe symbolizes the unity of the Malaysian people, while the yellow crescent moon within represents Islam. The fourteen-pointed star, also yellow, reasserts the state-and-Federation symbolism of the stripes. Yellow is the color of Malaysian royalty. This symbolism has changed with time. Originally, the stripes and star stood for the fourteen states of Malaysia; until 1965, Singapore was part of the Federation. After Singapore became an independent republic, however, the fourteenth star-point and stripe were altered, symbolically, to represent the Government, as it was considered inappropriate (or perhaps unlucky) to remove them.

The symbolism of the Malaysian coat-of-arms has proved equally flexible. Flanked by the tigers of the former Federated Malay States and topped by the yellow star-and-crescent of state, Malaysia's national ensign is divided into ten panels, five for the former Un-federated Malay States and eight for the two* former Straits Settlements and the six Federated Malay States. The tenth panel, once occupied by Singapore's emblem now displays a hibiscus, the national flower, symbol of the Federal Government. The national motto, in Jawi and Rumi, Bersekutu Bertambah Mutu (Unity Is Strength) forms the base of the crest.

Heraldry is a long-standing tradition in Malaysia, derived directly from British antecedents. All Malaysian states have their own coats-of-arms, similar to the National model. So do the royal families, universities, most government



13. The Malaysian crest.



14. The Malaysian flag, as displayed on a downtown Kuala Lumpur billboard with the 1982 motto: "Discipline and Harmony."



15. A recently issued Malaysian stamp with wayang kulit characters.



16. A recently issued stamp showing traditional Malay songket cloth.

*Malacca and Penang. Singapore was the third Straits Settlement

bodies, some secondary schools and not a few businesses. These days, however, ensigns and crests are declass ; clean, designy logos are the rage, no doubt part of the national drive to break free from hoary British tradition. Bank Rakyat (People's Bank) is one of the largest semi-government institutions to switch from heraldry to high-tech. As part of a recent top-to-bottom reorganization of the Bank, Johan Design Associates was commissioned to redesign the Bank crest along more modern lines. The new logo is based on a pattern derived from the tikar, the traditional Malay woven pandanus leaf mats.

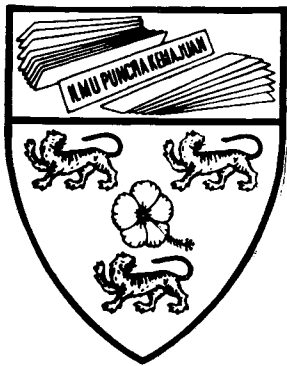
Johan Design Associates has produced logos and corporate identification systems for many of Malaysia's largest businesses and semi-government organizations. The firm is Malaysia's only major design house and probably one of the best in South-east Asia; certainly it is the only graphic/advertising company in the region associated with London's prestigious Pentagram Design. Johan Arrif, founder and managing director, undertakes virtually all logo design himself. He has incorporated traditional Malay imagery in a number of his designs for quasi-government organizations. His Bank Bumiputra logo, for example, is based on the tampang, an archaic form of money once used in Pahang state. His design for Petronas (Petroleum Nasional, the national oil company), on the other hand, is what Johan likes to call an alphaglyph, a picture-letter. Here, a stylized oil droplet is appended to a triangular motif, the latter an alleged representation of Malaysia's three constituent races. The composite image forms an abstracted letter "P"-for Petronas. Triangles are a Johan favorite: his logos for Malaysian Tobacco, Malaysian Mining and, as already described, Bank Rakyat, all employ a variation of the triangular theme.

Other designers employ other imagery, but when the logo is for the government, that imagery is Malay. MAS, the Malaysian Airline System uses a stylized wau (Kelantanese kite) for their logo (additionally, "mas" is the Malay word for gold, another good sign). The Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (Language and Literature Authority) logo incorporates a palm-leaf, symbol of Malay books of yore. Universiti Malaya uses an archaic palm-leaf books in their traditionally-styled crest. The Arkib Negara (National Archives) employs a graphic representation of modern documents and Jawi. Bank Simpanan Nasional (National Savings Bank), like Bank Bumiputra, relies on archaic Malay money for their image, this time the Kelantanese pohon keneri money tree. Bank Negara went to Kelantan for their imagery as well. The kijang barking deer, an animal once used on Kelantanese coins is now the bank's logo. Malaysia's TDC (Tourist Development Corporation) has delved into Malay mythology for their image, the Burung Patalawati, a magical bird. Most traditional of all, however, is the logo of Amanah Saham Nasional (National Unit Trust), Jawi calligraphy, stylized and abstracted as in the Koran, indicating this organization's links with the Malay proletariat.

Symbols such as these are meant for both a Malaysian and international audience, visual representations of Malay political power and implied Malay cultural omnipotence. Chinese and Indians, whatever their contributions to Malaysian society, are absent from this symbolic realm. No wonder then, that, denied cultural representation at a national level, so many non-Malays continue to retreat within their own communities for succor and identity or turn outwards, to the West. No wonder, too, that Malays, faced with this seeming obstinence and rejection of their culture insist all the more on its validity and historical vindication. No wonder that reconciliation between the ideal and reality of a unifying Malaysian culture seems only slightly less distant today than it did on Independence Day, a quarter century ago.

Sincerely,


Bryn Barnard



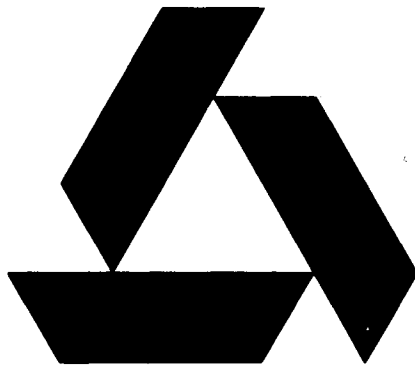
17. Universiti Malaya
crest with motto:
"Knowledge Is The
Basis of Development."



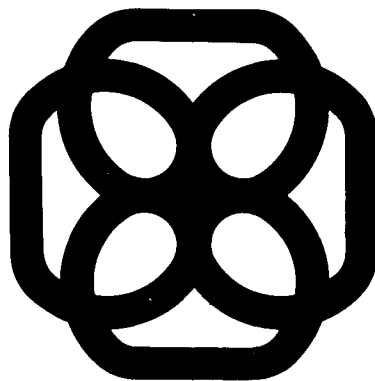
20. Bank Negara logo



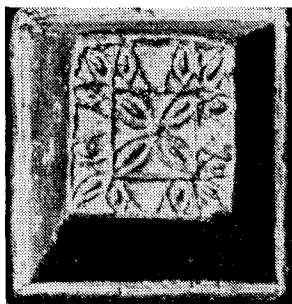
23. Kelantanese kijang
coin.



18. Malaysian Mining logo
(stylized tin bars).



21. Bank Bumiputra logo



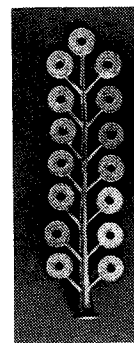
24. Pahang tampang
money.



19. Bank Rakyat logo.



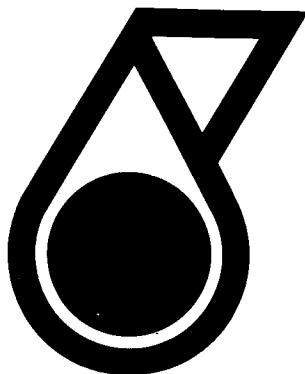
22. Bank Simpanan Na-
sional logo.



25. Kelantanese pohon keneri
money tree.



26. Malayan Railways logo with tiger, national star-and-crescent and the letters "KTM," for "Keretapi Tanah Melayu," literally, "Land of the Malays Railway."



27. PETRONAS logo



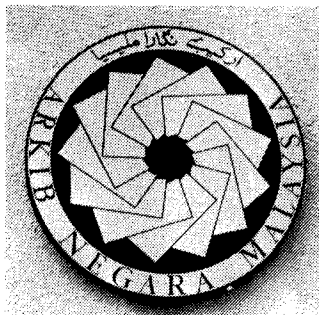
28. Kuala Lumpur logo with symbols for the nation, science and technology plus the motto "Kuala Lumpur, Success and Prosperity."



29. MAS logo



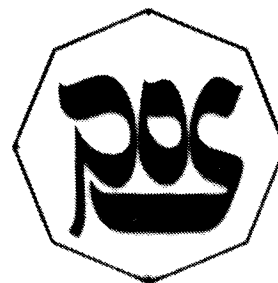
30. Amanah Saham Nasional logo.



31. Arkib Negara logo



32. Tourist Development Corporation logo



33. National Postal System logo in "Jawified" Rumi script.



34. United Malayan Banking Corporation logo with English, Jawi and Chinese characters and a map of Peninsular Malaysia.



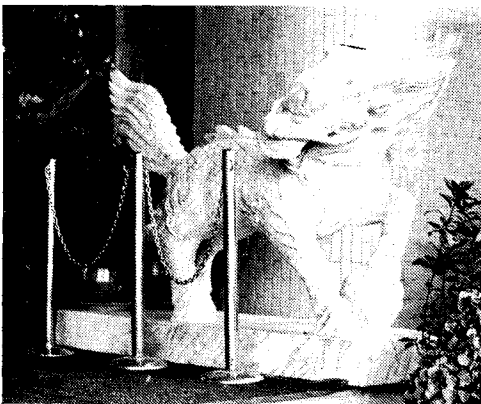
35. Overseas Chinese Banking Corporation's logo is, appropriately enough, a Chinese junk.



36. PEMADAM, the national anti-narcotics agency uses no Malay imagery, but instead symbols of solidarit strength, nation (a five ponted star for the Ruku-negara's five-principled pledge) and the motto "From The People, For The People." Pemadam is not only an acronym but also the Malay word for "extinguisher."



37. Berita Book Store logo, a stylized butterfly (popular in Malaysian imagery) and a double-B "alphaglyph."



39. Wisma MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association), a Kuala Lumpur office building and symbol of Chinese political power, displays classical Chinese lions in the foyer.



38. Sate Ria, A Malay-owned fast food chain, employs a logo with a stylized representation of the grillwork commonly found over doorways in traditional Malay homes.

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5. Kedai Emas Bhavani sign, Kuala Lumpur; BEB
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