

Destiny Will Out

The Experiences of a Multicultural Malayan
In White Australia

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*Dedicated to Lesley and Pearl
-for making it possible*

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Part One
Origins

Chapter One

The Bardo of Becoming a Nation

At the end of the Second World War, Australia remained very tightly, and in a most inhumane way, in the grip of its White Australia policy. This policy reflected the unrealistic and indefensible hope of a white nation remaining an outpost of far-away Europe, whilst occupying land stolen from its black owners, even though it is set in a world of predominantly coloured people.

In reality, the land of Australia was seen by its occupants for thousands of years (long before European man became the principal despoilers of planet Earth) as owning them, the people. In reality, too, there are people in White Australia who (apparently) have blood from coloured ancestors they would rather not recognize, as it has become fashionable to regard 'coloured' blood as inferior. But it is quite acceptable, and indeed quite desirable, to have coloured, and therefore inferior, people fight and die in wars to protect the white man's interests.

A parallel exists, in modern times, in what was referred to by an Australian wit (perhaps a half-wit) as "the greatest gang-bang in history". This was when a white-controlled nation sent its predominantly black and Christian armed forces to protect its own interests, and that of a predominantly white and Jewish people, against a brown and Muslim nation (sure, Satanic Saddy had to be controlled before he swallowed his democratic oil-filled neighbour, none of whose troops seemed to have been involved in this 'war').

So, Australians in office quietly forget that the Australian war effort had been supported or aided by coloured people from a variety of countries. Some of these, like the Papua New Guineans, had helped to save Australians from the Japanese. However, the policy makers in Australia were not touched by Shakespeare's, "For he today that sheds his blood with me shall be my brother". Perhaps they had not heard of Shakespeare.

In this post-war period of peace and renewal, Australia expanded its immigration intake substantially. Whilst it took large numbers of white refugees (it really is quite a humanitarian nation) and other white immigrants (mainly as factory fodder), it fastidiously kept out anyone with the slightest tinge of colour. If one child in a large family was coloured, which means darker than (say) the southern European, the whole family was rejected. When, in the post-colonial era, the Anglo-Indians, the Anglo-Burmese, and the Burghers (from Ceylon) sought to move to a country more to their liking, only the very, very lightly coloured were allowed to enter. Thus, Australia wanted even its factory fodder to remain white and, presumably, genetically pure.

This was the country into which arrived a number of young, privately-financed Malaysians. I was one of them. We came to obtain tertiary qualifications for our future back home, and we represented the vanguard of the massive inflow of later years. Most, if not all, of us had no idea of the kind of people we were to deal with, or their prejudices; few of our countrymen had previously chosen Australia for tertiary studies. In fact, racial prejudice was not something we had expected; nor had we experienced any in our country of birth, except from our colonial conquerors. But this was rare because most of us had little personal contact with them.

Some of us were also inadequately prepared for Australia's high standards of education and therefore had difficulties with our studies initially. Without a network of Malaysians already in the

country, many of us were also terribly lonely. We felt isolated in every way, and were very homesick in those early years.

I am a third generation Malayan of Ceylonese ancestry, with a Hindu cultural background. I was sent to Australia in that first wave, carrying a British passport. I was not successful initially in my studies, much to the continued amazement of my people, and became the black sheep of the family. I settled down later, after a short and painful stint back home, where I was very much an outcast to my people. I married an Anglo-Saxon Australian lass (in fact, she returned to Singapore with me for that painful period), and I subsequently completed my studies in Australia the hard way (I completed a four-year course within four years while earning an income by day and studying by night).

Accepted for citizenship while Australia was still officially white, I worked for the Australian government in such interesting fields as ethnic affairs (looking after the settlement needs of migrants); in the screening of foreign investment in Australia (to ensure that it was not against the national interest); the provision of assistance to secondary industry by government (ensuring the continued inability of Australian industry to be competitive globally); and the artistic (but very reasonable) creation of balance of payments statistics. I also made a small contribution to the education system in the national capital (in part by being the foundation chairman of a school board); to career protection in the Australian public service (by leading, for seven years, a trade union sub-committee working on career protection, i.e. improving the equity and efficiency of selection procedures); and involved myself in a couple of other community concerns (including overseas aid and public speaking for school children). Twice a year, the local press is likely to refer to two on-going matters which I initiated. That is, I believe that I integrated into the Australian nation quite successfully and productively, but without losing my cultural identity or without losing sight of myself.

Proud to be an Australian (as this is the country where the ordinary man, woman and child has great personal dignity), I still find myself defending my choice of home with many of my relatives (I believe that they see me as the idiot of the clan). Most of my relatives have chosen to remain in our country of birth, even those who have spent years studying in other countries, and are living very well.

After the first few years in Australia, the lives of Asian students became far more tolerable. After all, it is quite disconcerting to be attacked in public simply because of one's colour. The terrible prejudice which I and my fellow students had encountered diminished substantially over the years, and life became far more comfortable than it used to be. There is no evil without its advantages, is solace offered by some Indian sage. However, discreet discrimination against one's ethnicity, including religion and colour, continue – but not discernibly so. And even a former senior politician recently conceded that Australia remains a racist nation.

Indeed, many Australians still respond to skin colour (it's their first perception of us, as my narrative will bring out), and it's not always favourable. Regretfully, the Aussie (in the main) remains unable to discard his perception of a coloured person as not only different, but inferior, and therefore not to be liked over-much. This, in my view, reflects his antipathy to the Aborigines, his prejudice increasing with the darkness of the skin. This attitude, I suspect, colours government policy too, especially immigration policy.

In any event, today's students from Malaysia and Singapore would not feel threatened (as we did at times) by the whims of immigration officials (who thought they were our guardians), security agents and their on-campus professorial spies, and others, particularly the landladies. These students, and those settling in as immigrants, would also now hold more realistic

expectations about their career prospects in Australian bureaucratic structures, in both the public and private sectors. That is, we now know how far to reach. And there is a Chinese proverb which says it well: only he that has travelled the road knows where the holes are deep.

It is against this background that I tell my story. It is neither an autobiography (at times it may read like one), nor an attempted history. It is a record of the early, traumatic cultural impacts of White Australia on an impressionable young Malayan in the immediate post-war period. It might, hopefully, lend support to the Malay adage that it is the fate of the coconut to float and for the stone to sink (after centuries of colonial domination, have we not established our destiny as akin to that of the coconut?)

This record is offered for the elucidation of my younger relatives who have sought to understand my early days in Australia, especially my failure, and my reasons for breaking the mould by making Australia my home. It therefore contains, reluctantly, some personal details which may not be of direct relevance to the multicultural and integration aspects of my narrative. Such details do, however, touch upon the question of destiny – was I pushed or did I fall? Were the decisions by others reasonably well-based but used as vehicles by the stars to achieve their own objectives? Were the objectives karmic objectives, so that my mother, my sisters and I were merely paying a debt (or penalty)? Or was the whole experience one of learning? If so, had we chosen that lesson, as today's New Agers claim, *before* being born? What a horrible thought!

My record might hopefully be of some interest too to the thousands of youths from Malaysia and a host of other nations who are studying in Australia, and also to the increasing number of Asians who are now settling into the country. It is offered, again in the spirit of a Malay proverb, which says that a piece of incense may be as large as the knee but unless burnt emits no fragrance. These students and settlers might be surprised at our initial reception by Australians, and pleased by the changes that our cultural impacts have wrought. It is my claim that the early arrivals from Asia brought Australia some way into the real world (with the support of civilised Australians). Even an ant hole may collapse an embankment, as some perceptive Japanese remarked. This narrative might also have some relevance against recent pressure by some Australians to push Australia into Asia by claiming that Australia is part of Asia geopolitically and economically. One can only hope that Asian nations will allow this country to participate in the region's development (and in its own). These politicians also hope that the increasing numbers of East Asian businessmen with residence status in Australia will aid the nation's acceptance in Asia.

I have therefore included my own settlement and work experiences in parts of the economic sector (together with some observations) as well as in the area of assistance to migrants. My position as an Asian migrant in these bureaucratic structures was unusual, if not unique, and (at least) part of my experiences there reflect the response of white Australians to that situation.

I have also attempted to compare, both directly and indirectly, the multicultural scenes in Malaya and Australia, as they were in those early days, and subsequently to see what changes have taken place over my forty-five or more years of integrating into Australian society. I have also optimistically attempted to foreshadow the future of multiculturalism in my countries of origin and of settlement.

I have done this because recent policies by the Australian government on multiculturalism appear to represent contradictory directions to many. To an apparently homogeneous people, the concept of multiculturalism can be threatening. Multicultural policies, by empowering migrant communities in their host nation, can also divide the nation. They can, in addition, generate a mendicant attitude in the new arrivals who, both by definition and by intent, are thrusting and

self-sufficient survivors. Ethnic vote-buying by governments, with no planning other than to stay in power, will (in all probability) result in plural service-delivery structures, thereby taking multiculturalism onto the wrong tracks. Current multicultural policies also involve governments in an arena which is best left to the forces of evolution.

In this context, the experiences of an early arrival from Asia, quietly observing, and yet involved in a substantial manner in the mainstream community and in ethnic affairs matters (especially in his employment) can also be interesting to non-Asians. Hopefully, my observations that this country of three or more nations can become truly integrated into one nation someday, through the effects of unplanned multiculturalism, will make a small contribution to unification-with-equality. That will, of course, require the re-education of some politicians, including the professional ethnic ones.

More importantly, at least for the benefit of future generations, the contribution that I and other non-Christian Asian migrants have made to Australia's spiritual growth will enable or assist people of diverse origins and ethnicity (including mainstream host peoples) to merge one with the other, again as equals, at the spiritual level. This will not be easy, with some die-hard members of the priestly class holding their arms firmly across their narrow doors to God. But I do believe that future generations will increasingly pay less attention to any power-hungry priests and, instead, apply their inherited spirituality in recognition of that bond between humans which will not, eventually, be denied.

Underlying my story is my preoccupation with the question of destiny. As a Hindu, I know that I have free will within the constraints of my past actions and the limiting influences of natural and human forces, including the cosmological. Yet I have felt my hands more tied than I had expected in the things I have tried to do. To my knowledge, my feet (and modern transport) brought me to Australia, which delivered a sharp lesson to my ego; after all, there is no greater chasm than that vast gulf between great expectations and small achievements. I cannot accept (for metaphysical reasons) that I myself chose this life which, initially, was most painful, psychologically and spiritually. A Turkish saying seems to support this view: a man does not seek his luck; luck seeks its man. Yet a mediumistic clairvoyant channelled a message from an uncle (dead years ago) that a great effort had gone into getting me to Australia. (By whom, when, and why, are the obvious questions to which I would like answers.)

So, what forces are at work upon us? In this context, I find comfort in my belief that modern cosmological theories are becoming congruent with my philosophical heritage. Can we expect therefore some further insights into my question from the philosopher-scientists, with perhaps increasing support for the metaphysics of my spiritual ancestors? Their explanatory system of belief (and belief does have its own logic) lays the responsibility for our lives, not on some external power on earth or elsewhere, but on our individual selves. Our freedom to act is of course subject to the constraints that we had set up previously, together with the impacts of natural and cosmological forces (which are normally beyond our control).

My story is thus one of hope, if not ambition, about human freedom and spirituality. But, will the stars give us reasonable rein? That depends, in part (I guess), upon whether human actions influence the stars, i.e. cosmological forces. Some modern physicists seem to think that they might. If so, is that part of our destiny which influences the stars also predicated by our earlier actions and thoughts?

I look to the Upanishads (of the Hindu faith and philosophy), as have some great Western philosophers and scientists, for guidance. We are told that in each of us the Self is the innermost essence; that the Self is "not someone other than you." We are also told that the Self is not

different from the Ultimate Reality called God or the Creator, and that all of life is one. This means that, whether white, black or brindle, whether Christian, Hindu or whatever, we are bonded one to the other; that our salvation has to come from within ourselves, and that we look inwards in our search for experiencing our Creator. Does that mean that I cannot blame something or someone out there for my mishaps and sins? How unfair!