

## Culture



# Judith NAGATA, *The Reflowering Of Malaysian Islam: Modern Radicals And Their Roots*, Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 1984. 282 pages, \$32 (cloth)

Louise E. Sweet

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ménages, la composition par âge et par sexe, le lieu de naissance, l'origine ethnique et la religion des Saguenayens. S'il rend compte dans l'ensemble de leur homogénéité culturelle « depuis les toutes premières années de la colonisation jusqu'en 1961 » (p. 333), il permet aussi, par voie de comparaison, de prendre conscience de la diversité culturelle qui existait au Québec au milieu du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. On notera ici des indications judicieuses sur la place prédominante des garçons de moins de 15 ans au sein de la population saguenayenne qui atteste, jusqu'en 1961, de sa fécondité vigoureuse.

L'examen de la situation démographique récente et future (1961-1976; 2001) que nous propose le dernier chapitre illustre bien les changements et la vitesse selon laquelle ils sont apparus dans les courbes de natalité, les mouvements migratoires, le nombre de décès de cette population. La manière suivant laquelle les municipalités et les comtés se sont restructurés, par le biais d'émigrations massives vers l'extérieur du Saguenay ou par l'accroissement de certains villages parfois supérieur à celui des villes, constitue une démonstration éloquente de la redistribution de la population du Saguenay. De plus, les projections proprement statistiques nous permettent de suivre avec intérêt les modifications de la structure des classes d'âge où les personnes âgées occuperont une place importante, mais aussi où les jeunes, d'ici la fin du siècle, pourront espérer trouver du travail chez eux.

Cette *Introduction à l'histoire des populations du Saguenay du XVI<sup>e</sup> au XX<sup>e</sup> siècles* marque un point tournant dans les études humaines touchant le Québec. Nous avons maintenant, pour de nombreux groupes distribués sur un large territoire, une perspective synchronique et comparative pour asseoir des études de terrain minutieuses et moins limitées. De plus, l'œuvre donne à la démographie historique et sociale une crédibilité qui, loin de se confiner aux universitaires, peut prétendre s'étendre jusqu'aux populations dont elle s'est préoccupée. En somme, un ouvrage dont on ne pourra plus se passer quand on voudra parler non seulement du Saguenay mais du Québec tout entier.

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By Louise E. Sweet  
University of Manitoba

Until the 1979 Iranian "revolution", most Asian area historians and social scientists who actively cultivated their positions in the main streams of academia disregarded the "resurgence of Islam" as a significant political factor, ignored it almost entirely, or even denied categorically its potential in effecting social or political "change". After 1979, however, the academic world has pursued the Islamic resurgence avidly and found a whole new arena in which to exercise its analytical powers, its judgmental evaluations, its descriptive skills and its various "theoretical" orientations.

Dr. Judith Nagata's *The Reflowering of Malaysian Islam* is an example. This contribution is primarily concerned with the several Islamic "dakwah" movements in Malaysia, especially ABIM, Darul Anqam, and Jemaat Tabligh, and especially during the 1970's. Dr. Nagata's conclusions seem to regard these movements as essentially variations on the use of a religious idiom to create and to intensify Malay ethnic "identity" and, in the polyethnic society of Malaysia, to deepen that religious and ethnic polarization which has overtaken the country and which now rivals the once secular if authoritarian direction of development. She ends her account with ruminations on the conflict between these two "tendencies toward absolutism": "The immediate future of the country will depend much on which of these two traditions is able to set the tone of society and stamp its seal most deeply on the institutions and peoples of the country as a whole." (p. 241)

If the summarizing paragraph above seems more pretentiously floral in phrasing than substantial in content, that is my impression of the whole book: it is very difficult to learn what happens and is happening in Malaysia from this book. The academic verbiage covers history with a graceful and impenetrable density of ambivalences, generalizations, alternating labels, and name-dropping. This seems to me to be characteristic of the literature concerned with that idealistic arena of "identity" problems, whether "personal" or "ethnic": it is unreal.

In her first three chapters Dr. Nagata intends to lay out the historical and social contexts of the

“dakwah” movements. There is not much of either history or social process, and the residue is essentially an identity of Malay with Islam, and the importance of the rural Ulama in the perpetuation of Islamic ideology. Dr. Nagata’s “pluralist” orientation does not serve her or her readers well: in these early chapters there is no indication that Malays are by no means the overwhelming demographic majority in Malaysia, nor that Islam is not the only universal religion practised in Malaysia. But more serious are the very weak conceptualizations of the state and of class conflicts. British colonial strategy of favoring Malays and creating the strategy of communalism, which the present independent state pursues in the interests of the Malaysian ruling class (*both* Malaysian and Chinese bourgeoisie), is scarcely discussed at all. This weakness is probably a source of the ambiguities of Dr. Nagata’s mode of discussion. Without a firm infrastructure her account is simply full of anecdotes, individuals conceived as “types” (cf. sections on WOMEN), and allusions to key events (such as the 1974 Baling incident) without adequate description and analysis. One can at best conclude that these three “movements” (as well as the small Aliran) are preoccupations of the petty bourgeois Malays, perhaps especially the new petty bourgeoisie of the universities, civil service, army and police, and their alienated children studying abroad. What significance they have *seems* minimal, from Dr. Nagata’s account.

In Chapter 4 Dr. Nagata discusses the *dakwah* organizations or movements which are the reason for the book: all are urban, all are “independent” (i.e., not state supported), and all are certainly “middle class” Malay in membership and leadership. But the extent to which any can or could mobilize a significant portion of the population seems doubtful. Dr. Nagata reports very little working class interest. The organization and activities of the three movements differ so extensively that it is curious that Dr. Nagata gives little attention to this, and instead seeks similarities in sociological abstractions of small group organizational units, etc. ABIM is distinctive for its organization and rigid discipline of Malaysian students overseas (at least one non-Muslim Malaysian student has commented to me on their militancy in the United States). But both the other movements, *Darul Arqam* and *Jemaat Tabligh* are quite different from ABIM. The first in its commune organization, its economic activities (workshops, marketing network), etc. bears comparison to some traditional Islamic brotherhoods, for example, the Senussi of North Africa. Dr. Nagata has not noted

this. *Jemaat Tabligh*, of Indian origin and with its center of origin still a place of pilgrimage for its adherents, is equally reminiscent of other traditional brotherhoods. None of these three seems to me as convincingly Malay ethnocentric as Dr. Nagata would suggest. But all are clearly opposed to Western imperialism and those practices and values (including “Science”) associated with Western Capitalism.

In the fifth chapter, “The Medium is the Message: Modes of Transmission of Dakwah in Malay-Muslim Society”, Dr. Nagata seems to reduce these “social movements” to individuals, peer groups, and cliques and in doing so leaves herself incapable of developing or using an effective concept of *social movement* in fact. The final three chapters cover impressionistically the *dakwah* movements, the extent to which Islam is used to protect the favored status of the Malays and the secondary status of converts to Islam (Chapter 7), and finally, the question of the “radicalism” of the *dakwah* Muslim fundamentalists on such issues as “social justice”. None of these topics is clearly addressed; gossip and rumor about where the *dakwah* stand is purveyed, along with extended and allusive ruminations. One ends up chin deep in lather, and not on a weight-bearing ledge from which one can see what the Muslims of Malaysia are really up to in their polyethnic, neocolonial, dependent capitalist Third World country.

There are some minor problems that a wise editor could have solved. The book needs at least a map of Malaysia. It is my understanding that the kings or sultans of the various states are elected periodically: is this really a “royalty”? There are a considerable number of important terms from Arabic that are very strangely transliterated, without explanation: *Shari’ah* is spelled as *Syarieh*, *Shaafi* as *Syafie*, *Sheikhs* as *Syeikhs*, and *Shaitan* as *Syiatan*. Finally I think Talal Asad is a British Anthropologist teaching at Hull University, not a Kuwaiti, and that Hasan al Banna, who was indeed an Egyptian, was better known as the founder of the Society of the Muslim Brothers than as an Islamic scholar.