

A Note on the Names of Places

AFTER more thought than the matter probably merits, I have decided to spell the names of places the way they are pronounced.

Malaysians still say "Penang" (the second syllable rhyming with the English "hang"), rather than "Pinang" (as rhymes with, say, "Minang"). The Penang Malays themselves still use "Tanjung"-the traditional name for Georgetown-in generic reference to their island; to refer to "Pulau Pinang" in everyday conversation seems to many a trifle precious.

As for "Terengganu": I have yet to hear anyone, anywhere, pronounce that first syllable.

"Melaka" it is and always has been: I have always much preferred the crisp traditional rendition to the somewhat effete version of the imperialists. (Two genuflecting little "c"s in place of one stalwart "k", legs akimbo).

"Johor" is Johor: Nothing is lost by shedding the colonials' silent and superfluous tail-end "e".

As for the eternal confusion over "Bahru" or `Bharu" (or even the stammering atrocity "Baharu") as regards Johor, Kota, Kampung or Kuala Kubu-I give up. The spellings seem to vary with every signpost. As far as I'm concerned, they'll all be "baru" plain and simple.

Prologue: the Border

April 25, 1992

"NICE HAT," said the money-changer. "Where did you get it?" It was a broad-brimmed felt fedora, from a streetside vendor in New York's Little Italy. I'd always wanted a hat like that, ever since the first Indiana Jones movie. The money-changer sat in his little barred cubicle, the rust on the bars so deep it looked like paint. An ancient clock arthritically ticked on the wall behind him. Next to it the pages of a calendar, graced with the vapid smile of the inevitable Hong Kong starlet, rustled in the breeze from his table fan. The money-changer was an elegant old Chinese man. He wore a striped shirt and grey trousers. His iron-grey hair was perfectly combed. Despite the noonday sun blasting down upon the railway station, he looked cool and fresh. And quizzical.

"New York," I told him, feeling ineffably discomfited. What manner of person buys a fedora in New York City, then turns up at the Padang Besar border crossing, off the Smugglers' Special from Thailand? He nodded sagely. "You need a hat like that in this weather," he said. He spoke with precision, as befitted a man of his vocation. "You can't get a hat like that here."

"I'm sure you can," I said. "It's just a simple hat." This was in the Padang Besar railway station, a few hundred metres south of the Thai border. I was home, for the first time in years. This was one of my first conversations with a fellow Malaysian on our home soil. We were discussing my hat; or perhaps the utility of hats in general. "It's good for a man to wear a hat," said the money-changer. "It keeps his head cool. It's good to keep your head cool."

"How long have you been here, Uncle?" I asked, happily slipping into the polite honorific of general Malaysian discourse. He chortled.

Longer than you've been alive, I think. Forty years."

"FORTY YEARS!" My surprise was in no way feigned. Forty years in this little cubicle, changing baht to ringgit and back again, a twice-daily business timed to the tidal passage of the Butterworth-Bangkok express. Those bars must have gleamed when he first took his seat behind them.

Apu Murugiah stepped in off the platform and said, "Ah, there you are! My luck is good today. The train got Indian driver today. I can ride in the cab." Apu was a signalman with Malayan Railways. He was thirty-two years old but looked much younger. We'd met four hours earlier on the platform of Haadyai railway station. Apu, toting a small plastic holdall, macho to the point of thuggishness in a red singlet and jeans, was going home after a weekend break in Thailand. "This

time Bangkok. Last time, I went to Chiangmai. I like to travel, see other countries, compare with Malaysia." And being a railway worker, Apu made the most of his eligibility for discounted tickets. But he was growing bolder. "Next time, maybe Indonesia. Can take ferry to Medan. I hear there got many Indian people."

Apu and I had waited for the southbound train together, sitting in the Haadyai station canteen in the early morning. I had flown down from Bangkok the day before; he had taken the overnight train. I bought him a coffee; he bought me sweets. As the train pulled in, Apu reached into his holdall and extracted a new shirt. "See I bought shirt. I bought two. Better wear one. Those UPP buggers so bad." (*UPP: Unit Pencegah Penyeludup*; the Anti-Smuggling Unit.) "They just take people's things and throw." He pulled on the shirt. It was of good heavy denim, liberally appliqued with American Army insignia and a Master Sergeant's stripes on the sleeves. "I bought in Bangkok. Only ten dollars our money. Very cheap, ah? Quite style also." The shirt fit him well. Apu was indeed quite style. In his new shirt, a distinct swagger began to undulate in his bearing

.We sat together on the hour's ride south to the Malaysian border. This was the legendary Smugglers' Special. The morning train out of south Thailand is reputedly filled with Malaysian trippers going home with sacks of cheap rice, bundles of cheap clothing, hoards of cheap anything. Stories abound of inventive illegality on this train. Carriage wall-panels filled with new screwdrivers. Boxes of ballpoint pens wrapped in the bellies of ostensibly pregnant women. As soon as the train suddenly littered with illicit packages tossed out of the windows for collection by accomplices.

But there seemed nothing especially untoward about our fellow passengers on this train that morning, although that may well be the way it is with smugglers. A loud Chinese family occupied the two rows in front of us, apparently determined to eat their way to Malaysia. The floor around them was rapidly hidden beneath mounds of peanut skins, fruit peels, eggshells and plastic wrappers. Further along a Malay couple attempted in vain to quell the squealings of their two infant children. Here a brace of Western backpackers; there a portly middle-aged Indian with a briefcase and a livid razor cut on his cheek from an inadvertently late awakening in Haadyai that morning.

The train rattled past a tract of newly cleared land, where the rudiments of new housing had begun to appear, and our coach was instantly filled with clouds of gritty red dust. There was a rush to bang shut the windows, which only ensured that the dust remained trapped inside the carriage. I remarked on the folly of this to Apu, suggesting we keep our own window open. He agreed, diplomatically, and thereafter kept his eyes gamely squinted against subsequent invasions of dust. By the third such blizzard, I was contrite. "Er, Apu?" I ventured. "Perhaps we should shut the window after all."

"No. You are right. Open window the breeze will blow out the dust. But must take care of eyes," he said, squinting.

Changing the subject, I asked Apu how things went in Malaysia. "Can do, ah. Better than before. Any time better than Thailand. You see these people. Little children working in the fields. Selling mineral water in the train! Little children! Not like back home. We can relax more. Mahathis saying, 2020, all will be good." He was referring to the prime minister's most recent blueprint for development, which postulated a fully developed Malaysia by the third decade of the new millennium.

"But still," said Apu, "depends on the colour of your skin, lah. You know what I am saying." I knew what he was saying, but I wondered if he did. It seemed too glib, too pat. Apu was responding to received wisdom.

Apu lived in the railway's bachelor quarters by the Bukit Mertajam station. He divided his time between there, and his mother's house in Prai, where she was cared for by his sisters. His father died a couple of years ago, but before Murugiah went, he managed to buy that little house for Apu's mother.. "We live in the world must give something back. Take care of wife and family. Money we spend every day. A house. Good."

The train crossed the border, and minutes later pulled into Pandang Besar station. The passengers disembarked and flocked to the Thai immigration booth for their exit stamps. Then they inundated the Malaysian immigration booth for the entry stamps. Apu went in search of a cup of tea to wash the dust from his throat. I stood on the platform between the Thai and the

Malaysian counters, savouring the sensation of being home. It was, after all the years away, a moment of quiet joy, unmarred by the self-conscious posturing of the of the young policemen who stalked about the platform. Uncertainly poised between their conflicting roles—were they to be a reassuring presence for the tourists, or were they to intimidate the potential criminals?—smiles and frowns tousled for ownership of their faces, which were consequently reduced to an indeterminate twitching.

“Where you from?” asked the uniformed officer who suddenly appeared before me. He spoke English. He was tall, paunchy and moustached. He wore the uniform of a customs official: black trousers, white shirt with epaulettes and silver buttons. His name tag read: SHAFIE. His tone was not unfriendly.

“Taiping,” I said.

“oh, our people, ya?” he said, breaking into Malay and a simultaneous smile. “Had a good time in Haddyai?” Ah yes the infamous fleshpots of that southern Thai town...

I was only there one night.”

“A night is all it takes. A guffaw.

“ I have no idea what you are talking about. I came down from Bangkokj...”

“Even worse.”

“And before that from Hong Kong. I’ve been away for a long time.”

“And now you’ve come home,” said Shafie.

“Now I’ve come home.”

“That’s good. This is a good country.

“I know.”

“Where are you going?”

“I don’t know. I want to wander around, see the place again., talk to people, see how my homeland is these days.”

“That’s good. What sort of people?”

“People like you.”

He laughed. “I can’t tell you much!” But he clearly didn’t mind the prospect. “So you going to wait around here for a while? I have to attend to my duties..”

“What sort of duties?”

“Just looking at people’s bags twice a day. It ‘s a really boring job, but there is lots of free time I’ll see you after the train goes.”

“Sure. I have no other plans. But I have to change some money.”

No problem, “ said Shafie, “The money-changer’s over there, near the canteen. He’s Chinese, but he gives good rates.

And he did. “The Malaysian ringgit is growing stronger and stronger, “ said the money-changer. “Every day, one or two cents up.” But he let me have five cents extra on the baht.. I was folding the Malaysian currency into my wallet—and even the sight of notes amplified the thrill of being home—when Apu reappeared, bearing a plastic bag of tea and the news that the train driver was Indian and therefore a friend and confidante, which meant he could ride up front for the rest of the trip to Butterworth. “Hey, nice meeting you man,” said Apu, transferring the bag of tea to his left hand and extending the right to me. “If you come to Bukit Mertajam you come see me, okay? You can stay my house. just go to the railway station and ask for Apu Murugiah. Everyone knows. You come, okay?”

And off he went, loping up the platform in his sergeant's shirt, swinging up into the engine cab with practised ease. Apu Murugiah, the engine driver, the American soldier, the world traveller, the Signalman: “If not for me the trains all go crazy.”

The train whistle blew-I was certain I knew who pulled the cord-and the engine revved, spitting a plume of black smoke into the sky. The carriages jerked forward in a clatter of couplings; the train pulled out of Padang Besar. Silence washed over the station. A cock crowed. Distant trees rustled in the hot afternoon breeze. Dust-devils swirled briefly over the construction site across the tracks, where an impressive new immigration office was being built. I remembered Padang Besar as it had been five years before: huge raintrees on either side of the tracks; a rusty iron pedestrian

bridge linking the Thai and Malaysian sides of the border. Now there was a wide expanse of levelled orange earth, upon which backhoes and bulldozers lumbered hither and yon.

I went to the station canteen for a glass of iced-coffee. I was still deep in the thrill of being home in Malaysia, in the so familiar surroundings of a small-town railway station. The worn wooden benches, the faded schedules on the wall, the signs advising patrons not to spit in any of four languages. And there in its eternal corner: the canteen, with its glass jars of biscuits and sweets, its cardboard panels of packeted peanuts, its dangling bags of crackers, its Chinese-starlet calendar, its rattling old refrigerator, its smell of kerosene and charcoal and tea on endless brew.

Shafie came in, duties done, shirt unbuttoned. He folded his gangly frame onto a stool beside me and gruffly ordered a cup of tea from the Chinese proprietor. The man gruffly delivered it. Their mutual irascibility seemed well practised; part of the theatre of their daily routine. One was a Chinese shopkeeper, and the other a Malay government officer. They were not unfriendly towards each other, but that didn't mean they might ever be friends.

We were joined by a third man: short, rotund, clad in a tee shirt and jeans low beneath his belly and bagging at the crotch, aviator sunglasses ostentatiously dangling from his collar. Shafie introduced him as Osman, of the UPP "Oh, you're one of those guys who throws stuff from the trains," I joked. Osman laughed, mirthlessly. "Just doing my duty," he said, and said nothing else thereafter.

But Shafie wanted to talk. Things were going well in this country, he said. "Mahathir's mellowed. He really is a good administrator. He has the long view." He talked about commodities and industry; about Malaysians abroad and whether they knew what was going on back home. We talked about politics and corruption-but it was a conversation that merely mentioned these words. Shafie seemed not to have a personal sense of such matters; he was content to mirror the views of the establishment of which he was a loyal servant. I could not hold this against him. "The economy has grown well," said Shafie, "and now the Bumiputras are well off. This was the point of it. We had to take care of the Bumiputras, the Malays, so that everyone can look forward to a better future."

"We seem to have become optimists," I said.

"Now is the time for optimism," Shafie said. "Inflation may be a problem, but the stronger ringgit is something we can be proud of, don't you think? Now foreigners won't think our country is worthless."

Shafie was an earnest man. At thirty-eight, he could measure Malaysia today against what it had been two decades or more ago, and recognize that he owed his entire life to the preferential policies that had come to define him. But he was not dismissive of the non-Malay communities; it troubled him that they were troubled by the need for Malay preference and political supremacy. But the difficult years were over, he was sure. The country was rich now, and all Malaysians had a bigger share of the national wealth. "They understand us better now," said Shafie.

I wished he had said: We understand each other better now. But it was still, in this Malaysia I had not seen for so long, in the Malaysia of this hot and sunny April afternoon in 1992, a matter of "us" and "them". Perhaps it truly would take another thirty years to bridge that gulf.

The money-changer locked up his desk and lowered the grille. He stepped out of his cubicle and carefully bolted its ancient wooden door. "That's it for the day?" I asked. He nodded. "So what do you do the rest of the time?"

"Other things," he shrugged. "Sit at home. Plant vegetables. A simple life," he said. "This is the answer. Don't say you're Number One. Say you're last. You'll be happy."

"I agree," I said. "All my troubles began when I said I was Number One."

"That was when you were foolish," he said, turning to go.

He paused, cast me a glance, granted me the hint of a smile.

"Welcome home," he said. "Watch out you don't lose your hat."

DURING THE YEARS OF EXILE, my thoughts of Malaysia were memories of night .
 ... the soft, moist, fluid Malaysian night; the darkness that draped in velvet folds upon the land; the levelling, blanketing, unifying night. I would recall its sensuality, and its silence, and I would come to think of it as the single most enduring backdrop to everything I knew of my homeland. The Malaysian night held for me promises and secrets, assignations, encounters, illicit liaisons. Forever my thoughts would be illuminated by the soft yellow glow of carbide lamps in curbside stalls, or of sodium streetlamps in the distance, or of the moon

This is to romanticize, of course, but perhaps not unconscionably; for I thought of Malaysia a very great deal during those years. There were few greater pleasures than to discover, in a musty old bookstore in London or Madras, some obscure tome that shed some wan imperial light on the longgone people and events that had, to greater or lesser degrees, shaped the land of my birth. London was, of course, the richer lode for such prospecting. There I discovered, in a nondescript building south of the Thames, in a room sibilant with librarians, on parchment brittle with age, in careful copperplate calligraphy, ink almost illegibly faded, the original treaties signed by the original Malay sultans with the original British.

I diligently copied some of those passages into my notebooks, which would have been the appropriate pretence of the scholar I fancied myself to be, but all too often the sheer weight of their history would leave me awed and reverential, and I would merely gaze at them, run my fingers gently over their vellum and inhale the sweet, unearthly fragrance of paper two centuries old. Besides, there were always comprehensive transcriptions of these documents in the standard texts.

No, I was no scholar, but a wanderer, an explorer; a young Malaysian on a long journey, itinerary uncertain and duration unknown, determined only by circumstances beyond myself. Occasionally, as in the archives of the East India Company in London, or in Higginbotham's splendidly anachronistic bookstore in Madras, I would be rewarded with some recorded glimpse of the journey my country had itself taken, and I would add yet another mouldy old silverfished and wormholed book to my collection. They never cost very much, for these were records and accounts and polemics that had been destined to vanish into the swirl of changing times, their authors unremarked and soon forgotten. Eventually they would resurface on humble wooden shelves in Long Acre or Tottenham Court Road or Delhi, upon the clearance of someone's attic of some adventurous life's accumulated exotica and debris. To me, however, they were like faint voices from unmarked graves, urging me to continue as they had, heedless of the likelihood that my own passions and efforts would ultimately meet much the same fate as theirs.

For here was indeed a story: a story of a place, a crescent of land at the south-eastern extremity of the planet's vastest continent, a slender appendage leading to a scattering of islands at the confluence of oceans and hemispheres; a peripheral sort of place, at the furthest outposts of sprawling empires; an incidental place, where in the beginning only outlaws and adventurers had ever roamed, but where lives had been lived and a nation had been born and was being, even as I wandered, assiduously built.

It was, to my mind, a nation unlike any other. This uniqueness, this singularity, seemed to me all the stranger as I wandered about a world in which history seemed so often to have functioned as a production-line, a factory, a mill; first of exploration, then of conquest, then of empires, then of upheaval, then of nationalism. Each stage drew from the one that preceded it and inexorably gave rise to the one following. There was a grand inevitability about the process; one sensed that the things that happened *bad* to have happened, given what had preceded them, and that what ensued could not have happened differently. History seemed to me to have functioned like a mass producer, making an utter mockery of the conceit of "free will", filling the world with cookie-cutter nations differing only in texture and flavour, in the elements of their raw material. And for this we should cherish "nationalism"? Absurd!

The country that had come to call itself Malaysia was no different-it too had been flung free into the world as an orphan of Empire and left to fend for itself as best it could, picking through the

rubble of its colonial identity in search of clothes that might still fit, or the material with which to fashion new ones-yet, it *was* different. There was something special about its ingredients; something unusual in the clay which the potter's wheel of history would spin into so apparently familiar a form

.As a young journalist in Kuala Lumpur, I had believed it simple to see what was special about Malaysia: it was multi-racial, multi-cultural, multilingual, what could be clearer than that? But then, as I was to learn, so was virtually every where else. Salman Rushdie had written, and I was to quote him often: "The immigrant is the central figure of our time." This had indeed been the anthem of the 20th Century: the sound of ships' horns and jet engines, the susurrus of arrival halls and departure lounges; the great discordant chorale of commingled humanity. Rivers of people, adventurers and refugees, flowing to and fro, rushing swollen with hope or shrunken in despair, breaking their banks and spilling over borders and boundaries, endlessly seeding new lands or inundating old ones, irrevocably reshaping their human geographies, raising again and again the conflict of old and new, "here" and "there", "us" and "them", imposing on ancient lands new realities, new social orders It had become a hybrid, grafted, cross-fertilized world, and diversity alone explained little.

But gradually Malaysia's peculiarly distinctive mosaic pieced itself together for me, and the picture pulled into focus. I had been born into a nation that, upon the withdrawal of one imposed overlay of identity, had not been immediately subsumed beneath another. Something in Malaysia resisted too pat an imposition of a post-colonial New Order, insistently making of it something more. Malaysia had greeted Independence as a nation *equally divided* between Indigene and Immigrant, and this had made all the difference.

There was in Malaysia, as nowhere else, a *balance* between these two great defining icons of the 20th Century. The Indigene had not been hounded to the brink of cultural extinction by the Immigrant, as he had been in Australia or America. Nor had the Immigrant been bludgeoned into capitulation by the Indigene, as in Indonesia, or swallowed whole, digested and absorbed, as in the Philippines and Thailand.

No: in Malaysia, Indigene and Immigrant were more evenly matched than anywhere else in the world-it was, when the British went home in 1957, literally a 50:50 split. Being in balance they resisted each other's defences, and each was compelled to recognize the other as an inescapable, ineradicable element of his own reality. This was what had made Malaysia special. Here was the truest of all confluences: of hemispheres, oceans, monsoon winds, and equally of histories, cultures, and destinies.

Great streams of history, and of peoples, had for centuries met at that spit of land at Asia's south-eastern extremity. Sometimes they merged; often they clashed. But always they would move from then on *together*, whether they liked it or not, and something new and wonderful would emerge as they did so. They would be transformed, these immiscible partners and uneasy bedfellows, this chalk and cheese, oil and water, this Tiger and Dragon, this Yin and Yang, into something neither could ever have been without the other and nothing would be destroyed in either but their ignorance of each other, and all that was good and great in both would survive, and thrive.

It was, to the young journalist in Kuala Lumpur, a beautiful and heartening theory to contemplate, and I consequently saw evidence for it everywhere, in everything. I was aware that there had been a price to pay for it, but I believed the price had been paid a generation earlier. In this, of course, I was foolish, and naive, and very young. And that is why, during the years of exile, my thoughts were of night.

It was at night, often over frothy tumblers of Indian tea, that the more lasting revelations had made themselves clear to me, and talk would distill down to essences and immutable truths. In the smallest hours between midnight and dawn, when our conflicts would melt into irrelevance, and the beat policeman would join the worn-out thug at the curbside stall for a tumbler of Indian tea, and each would recognize enough of himself in the other to make no matter of their differences. The night would unite and enfold us, and that is why I chose to have the night define my memories of home.

And for another reason: they came at night when they wanted to take us away; sliding through the darkness like thieves to suddenly appear at our gates in their nylon jackets and jogging shoes, with their weapons and arrest warrants, using the night, and our vulnerability within its narrow, shadowed confines, to attend to the wider view only they could clearly see. The Malaysian night: beguiling, seductive, treacherous. And so I became an exile. I left the night behind as I winged out over the world, now here, now there, breathing for many years a rarefied and alien air, laden with strange fragrances. I worked for a time in Hong Kong, then lived for a year in Bermuda. I visited Britain and America, India, the Philippines and China. I watched my country from varying distances, from condominiums in Hong Kong and mountaintops in Maharashtra and a sliver of coralline limestone in the middle of the Atlantic, paying for my passage with my writing. There were times when I wished I could see myself as less of an exile, or more-whatever it might have taken for the endless motion, the restlessness and impermanence, to abate. But then, always, would come a moment of stillness and silence, and within it I would see the sodium-yellow light of a carbide lamp or the moon, and sense on every quarter of my skin the moist caress of the Malaysian night, and in my exile I would dream of home.

I grew older, the years of my thirties falling away, and I wondered if I had not been impetuous in my departure. Perhaps it would have been better if I had stayed and rolled with the blows, retreating perhaps, momentarily, but remaining a present element of my country's turbulent quest for identity. Perhaps.

In the fourth year of my exile I began to realize that what I had truly done was to freeze a frame of my Malaysian journey, the better to allow myself the passage of a few years before hopefully re-introducing myself to the scene. I had hoped that time would grant me a new clarity of vision. I had wanted to shed my youth, a moulting of sorts, and during the interim I would trim my sails to the winds of circumstance, trusting to time the exculpation of youth's inadequacies-the impotent rage and humiliation that had clouded its spectacular, evanescent joys.

But as I grew older the frame stayed frozen. It was a frame of the Malaysian night, and within it was everything I cherished, and everything I feared. When the time came to go home, then, it seemed appropriate that I should want to do so in shadow, slipping back across the border self-effacing as a thief.