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the approach towards the history of scriptural sciences and assertive invitations to fill up some notable lacunae particularly in the study of non-mystical pietism and the metahistorical perspective of *ḥadīth* principles and criticism.

Conversations with Tunku Abdul Rahman. By Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2016, pp. 216, ISBN: 978-981-4634-14-4.

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The late Abdullah Ahmad wrote the book *Conversations with Tunku Abdul Rahman* in 1985 but chose to publish it only in 2016. He passed away, at the age of 79 after battling cancer, in the same year that the book was published. Abdullah had served as the editor-in-chief of the New Straits Times, a member of parliament for Kok Lanas, Kelantan, the Deputy Minister at the Prime Minister Office, the head of Malaysian Special Envoy to the United Nations and a columnist for *Sinar Harian*. However, the career that initiated and shaped the writing of the book was when Abdullah held the position as the political secretary to the then Deputy Prime Minister, Tun Abdul Razak, from 1957 until 1963. He continued to be the political secretary when Tun Razak became the Prime Minister from 1963 to 1974. Abdullah was the nation's first political secretary ever officially appointed. On the section of "A Note from the Author', he narrated that his first meeting with Tunku Abdul Rahman (hereafter Tunku) was in 1957. Even though their meetings became more frequent afterwards, it was only between 1982 and 1984 that the conversations were held with the aim of writing this book. Abdullah had recorded the conversations and used them to assist him in the writing. He wished that the book would be able to transport the readers "to as close as possible to the people, place and events spoken about" (p.7).

In the preface that he wrote in 1985, Abdullah chronicled the major events surrounding the formation of Malaysia in 1963. Among them was the massive opposition ('Konfrontasi') led by Indonesian President, Sukarno, and backed by the Philippines' Macapagal, as well as the

refusal of Brunei to affiliate with Malaysia. Abdullah also recounted the legacies of Tunku, scenarios of Malaysian politics, and the appreciation, or lack of it thereof, of political history among Malaysians. He believed that Malaysia was at a crossroad despite the country at that time was under the premiership of Dr. Mahathir - who actually favored and continued Tun Razak's workable and winning policies and aspirations. The author disclosed this in the preface section, written in 1985, which interestingly had the same air and sentiments as the forewords written by Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, Ooi Kee Beng, Tan Sri Khoo Kay Kim and Tunku Abidin Muhriz - but all of which were written in 2016. The similar notion that the author and the foreword authors had is the fact that in both times, 1985 and 2016, Malaysia was at a cross-road and would be able to benefit very much in its decision-making processes should it look, study and learn from its historical past.

Abdullah introduced Tunku, as a person, in many positive lights, as kind, nice, charismatic, fun-loving, friendly, charming and honest. In fact, the cover of the book captions Tunku's own words about his honest and non-hypocritical personality; "People can say anything about me but none will accuse me of ever having been a hypocrite" (p.31). This self-proclaimed description was supported by Abdullah in his conversations with Tunku. The first prime minister was never shy or secretive about his personal take in practicing Islam and of being a Malay, and this transparent side of him showed a lot of honesty. He had always been open about his westernized lifestyle but also was defensive when accused of not being a practicing Muslim or a good Malay. Tunku was cited as being hurt over that kind of opinions about him as he took pride of his Islamic beliefs and practices as well as his contributions for the Malays. The author described Tunku as having that ideal combination of Malay, Islamic and Western lifestyles. Abdullah, while appeared to be adoring, having the utmost respect to Tunku and praising his amicable and good-nature personality, was also not reserved in probing him over the latter's means in achieving independence for Malaya. Having compromised with the British, the Chinese and other immigrant groups in Malaya had made many Malay nationalists to view him as somebody who favored the "white people" and the Chinese. Both groups had been perceived to have helped Tunku in many personal favors. In clearing the matter out, the author found out that Tunku did in fact produce the agreement towards independence but not without

consulting his party (UMNO), the British, the Chinese, the Indians and the sultans of the Malay states. Tunku was also recorded saying that had he been less of a peacemaker, there would not have been an agreement at all and thus, Malaya would not have achieved its independence as early as 1957. He was also adamant and non-negotiable in making sure that Malaya would achieve its independence without any bloodshed as unfortunately witnessed in Pakistan and India.

One chapter sees Abdullah probing Tunku on Brunei's decision not to join Malaysia in the last minute, precisely in December 1962. While surprised at the decision of the then Sultan Brunei not to join the Federation of Malaysia, Tunku was not entirely upset over it. According to him, a true disaster would have been if Sarawak or Sabah, or both, not joining the Federation. Tunku also predicted that the Shell Oil company had a major intervening role in changing the decision of Brunei. In another chapter, which is rather controversial, the conversation of the two revolved around the Indonesia-Malaysia Confrontation. Tunku perceived that Indonesia in the 1950s and 60s, was unfit to become the regional leader, as dreamed by Sukarno, due to its weak economy. In fact, he did not shy away in undermining Indonesia's ambition to be a superpower in Southeast Asia "unless it changes dramatically for the better" (p.63). Tunku also accused Sukarno of starting the confrontation not because he wanted Sabah and Sarawak from Malaysia, but because he feared that Sumatra would want to be a part of Malaysia. Other than that, Tunku also believed that the confrontation was fueled mostly out of jealousy of the progress of Malaysia. Abdullah outlined what differed the undeniably great and incomparable Sukarno to Tunku in the fact that the former was not paying enough attention to the economy, welfare and well-being of the generality of Indonesians. Sukarno was very much obsessed with creating an impressive reputation to Indonesia by focusing on having reputable weapons, submarines and fancy monumental buildings, all that served the purpose of having a prestigious image rather than creating enough jobs and education opportunities to the people, let alone helping the economy of Indonesia as a whole.

Tunku was convinced that Malaysia possessed the ability to play a bigger role in international affairs but hindered by its weakness of being a divided nation due to racial heterogeneity. He predicted that when the people of Malaysia become truly Malaysians rather than racially divided, only then Malaysia would be stronger. In line with this theme,

one chapter is dedicated in discussing the colonial root causes of the racial disintegration in Malaysia. Tunku was candid in disclosing that it was not the British who asked for Lee Kuan Yew and his People's Action Party to join Malaysia, but it was Lee himself "who had begged for Singapore to be admitted into Malaysia" (p.84); and Tunku was not at all pressurized by the British, whom he appeared to be very protective in the conversation. Tunku seemed to be defensive and very much fond of the British. In his own words, he described the British as "very correct people" (p.92) and "real gentlemen" (p.95). He also admitted that the decision to separate Singapore is entirely his as he was no longer amused with Lee's dream to be the Prime Minister of Malaysia. It was reiterated over and over by Tunku that he was only interested in Sarawak and North Borneo (Sabah and Brunei) in the formation of Malaysia, but had to accept Singapore as the British feared Singapore would harbor communism if granted independence. Hence the reason that it was fairly easy for Tunku to later let go of Singapore in 1965.

Other than a few other topics such as the neutralization of Southeast Asia, the country's unique monarchical system and the period of communist insurgency, the author also asked Tunku's opinions about some of his comrades such as Onn Jaafar, Abdul Razak, Hussein Onn, Dr. Ismail, Ghafar Baba and Harun Idris, among a few others. Some he talked passionately and fondly about, others with some reservations and criticisms.

The book gives an insight for many young Malaysians today to get to know the country's founding father as well as the decisions he took, both favorable and controversial, as the Chief Minister of Malaya and the Prime Minister of Malaysia. From the preface and throughout the eight chapters until the epilogue, Abdullah wrote not only articulately but as well captivating, which is not surprising given he had always been an eloquent journalist-writer, a potent government adviser and an academic. Abdullah had written a persuasive, interesting and page-turning read with "Conversations with Tunku Abdul Rahman." Both the up-close and personal insights about Tunku as well as the author's coherent writing style make the book a fascinating unputdownable read.

Taming Babel: Language in the Making of Malaysia. By Rachel Leow. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, pp. 281. ISBN 978-1-107-14853-6.

Reviewer: Khairil Izamin Ahmad, Department of Political Science, International Islamic University Malaysia. E-mail: ikhairil@iium.edu.my

One of the features of the modern state is its insistence on managing the diversity that is to be found within its territory. Today, a scientific assumption of the modern state in the social sciences is that it is the institution through which all elements that exist within its territory are organised. As Foucault would put it, such understanding of the state is our *regime of truth*, the hegemonic conception from where our thinking about society must depart. In an age where we readily accept the *fact of pluralism* (to borrow from Rawls) within our societies, we at the same time expect that this plurality is managed by the state, so as not to allow it to be the cause of conflict and instability. In addition, in spite of our differences, the state is seen as the fount of national unity.

Of course, the above is not the full story. For any hegemonic conception is subject to contestation and critique. Rachel Leow's *Taming Babel: Language in the Making of Malaysia* puts forward such a critique. *Taming Babel* is a critical study of how language is managed in a polyglottic context, against the background of the modern government's anxiety over the confusion that plurilingualism may cause to its practices of governance. Invoking the story of Babel and its many interpretations (the story of the modern state is akin to the classical interpretation, that pluralingualism is a tragedy), Leow problematises the modern state's insistence on taming the plurality of languages within its bounded territories. Specifically, Leow critically examines the conditions that have allowed for the possibility of the emergence of the concepts of *Cina* (Chineseness) and *Melayu* (Malayness) in colonial and postcolonial Malaysia. They are concepts which emergence has subsumed deeper diversities, pluralities, and multitudes within the communities that are defined as inhabiting either domain. In discussing language, rather than talk about physical or political borders, Leow talks about mental borders, through which those racialised labels are erected. As such, the book shows that language plays an important role in affecting changes in identities and cultural practices.

In the context of Malaysia (and other postcolonial states), colonial history plays a major role in defining the postcolonial dynamics and discourses. This continuity is a running theme of *Taming Babel*,

influencing how its three parts are arranged. In Malaysia (i.e. the Babel that needs to be tamed), communal relations have long been constructed along the insider/outsider dialectic (*Melayu* vs. *Cina*), and this is reflected across its social and political practices and institutions. However, in place of well-rehearsed analyses that focus on formal practices and institutions, Leow highlights the dynamics of language practices and their discursive role in shaping those racial categories. Languages are fluid, diverse, and constantly evolving. They escape the technocratic gaze of the modern state. If state-centred narratives have thus far been seen as the ultimate normative and institutional demarcator of what is acceptable and unacceptable, Leow shows the contingency and historicity of such stories. In using the term plurilingualism instead of multilingualism, Leow invites us to think about the *political* power of language, rather than about its institutional form.

In Part I (which contains Chapters 1 and 2), Leow examines how the monoglot British colonial state governed polyglot societies. The story is one of difficulty. Essentially, the British saw plurilingual British Malaya as an obstacle to effective governance. Here, Leow shows how language exposed the chaos and incompetence of the colonial administration, despite the latter's deployment of a modern civil service in British Malaya. Chapter 1 demonstrates the British inability to understand fully the languages of the various Chinese speaking communities, which were very much influenced by the complexities of the diaspora communities. The variety of ways language and dialects were spoken, for example, was influenced by the cultural intersectionalities that occurred as a result of the interactions of these communities with local Malayan cultures, in addition to their regional connections to China. While there may have been 'experts' who mastered the Chinese languages, there was a distinct lack of sensitivity to how shifting contexts influenced how those languages were spoken. At the heart of the British administration's approach to the Chinese languages in Malaya was the belief that their diversity posed a great danger to the colonial administration. This diversity had to be tamed and managed through a language technocracy, which served the British linguistic needs through bureaucratic governance. Further, Chapter 2 shows that while the theme of taming was also essential in the administration of the Malay language, the strategy that was deployed by the British colonial administration differed, with an approach that was more "developmental" (p. 57). In part, the Malay language was

subjected to an orthographic transformation. Crucial in this process was the formalisation of the language, by which the transition from the Arabic to Romanised script played a basic role. Alongside this development was the shift from manuscript to print, through which dictionaries were developed in order to control the development of the Malay language. These strategies in taming the Chinese and Malay languages managed to establish a lasting impact on the socio-political configuration of British Malaya, one that was underpinned by resentment to one another from both the *Cina* and *Melayu* sides.

Part II traces the development of a more politicised moment in the governance of language in British Malaya. In Chapter 3, Leow examines the context of the immediate aftermath of World War II. Considering the impact of the war, including the Japanese occupation on polyglot societies and vernacular communities in British Malaya (as well as Indonesia), this was a period of turbulence. This was also a period during which there was a proliferation of politically enlightened political movements which were starting to agitate against colonialism, including contesting colonial vocabularies in the vernacular languages. Against this background we see the rise of lexical innovations in the Malay language that were politically charged. This profoundly impacted the colonial administration, as it tried to regain an upper hand in the contestations, through the deployment of the conservative means of control (i.e. the taming strategy) as were used previously. Chapter 4 adds a further layer to these discursive developments, by way of tracing the development of propaganda and public relations to bridge the disconnect between the government and the people. Of specific importance is the context of the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960). Moving away from well-rehearsed narratives about the Emergency era – "the high political and counterinsurgency" and the "militant triumphalist" approaches (p. 135) – Leow demonstrates the challenges that the colonial government faced, in the presence of people with whom it could no longer speak directly. This scramble resulted in the innovation of new technologies of communication, which were ineffective because of the lack of communicators. From here, Leow shows us why the communist insurgency managed to make an impact on the population against the (un)influential colonial state, to the extent that the latter had to resort to adopting the method of communist communication to get its message across.

Part III, which consists of Chapter 5, takes us to the context of postcolonial Malaya/Malaysia. Malay, or *Melayu* identity is carried by various vectors, but in the postcolonial context (minus Singapore today), it is the Malay language that oscillates between acting as a source of linguistic unity of all citizens and a means of expression of the *Melayu* hegemony over others. According to Leow, the latter is shaped by "(a) mentality of crisis" (p. 180), indicating a reproduction of colonial patronage of the *Melayu* identity, which was nurtured politically through the recognition of its special position in British Malaya. To demonstrate this, Leow examines the role of the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP), the state-sponsored agency tasked with administering the Malay language in postcolonial Malaya/Malaysia. DBP, against the pluriethnic and plurilingual reality of the population, worked in the name of the state to push through a monolingual policy (against other possible alternatives). Today, in the absence of the official recognition of the importance of other languages in Malaysia, the cost has been racial harmony, as well a society that truly embraces the spirit of pluralism.

In the presence of such modern governmentality in Malaysia, does it mean that all hope is lost? The proliferation of alternatives – "creoles, pidgins, languages, dialects, and codes" (p. 19) – beneath the threshold of language policing suggests the negative. And this proliferation is for the most part the discursive effect of governance and policing themselves. As such, limits and frontiers that have been erected by the modern state are, in the Lacanian sense, a *fantasy*. They are means to pretend fullness, to cover over the contingencies of social reality. Leow's rich analysis has shown that forces below the threshold of recognition continue to push the limits that define the fantasies of the modern state. And, as she has discussed in her Postscript, these forces tend to affect real change. Leow alludes to the gains that were made in Malaysia's twelfth general elections in 2008 (which she wrongly calls the thirteenth [p. 216]), which, including the thirteenth in 2013, sent the message to the long ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) government that the taming strategy may no longer work. *Taming Babel* was published before the fourteenth general elections in May 2018, which has seen BN fall for the first time in 61 years. Malaysia now heads into an exciting, if yet uncertain future. In place of tired narratives that reproduce problematic racialised and ethnicised categories, Leow uncovers and shows us

the insurgent potential of language in constructing alternative social, cultural and political visions for our society.

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