

## MALAYSIA

SWEENEY, AMIN. *A Full Hearing. Orality and Literacy in the Malay World.* Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988. ix+338 pages. Glossary, bibliography, index. Cloth US\$37.50; ISBN 0-520-05910-7.

In the concluding chapter, the author suggests that his book "may appear to be somewhat diffused in its focus" (303). The impression one gets after reading the book is just that, in spite of the author's claim that the reader, in such a case, "is revealing evidence of prefocussed vision." However, it is to the author's credit that many things which have been in the minds of those who have been working in the fields of Malay oral tradition, language and literature, as well as those who have been dealing with Malay students at the universities in Malaysia since 1970, are now articulated in print.

In fact the author has a mouthful to say on apparently innumerable things, ranging from classical Malay literature, earlier European scholarship of Malay, the orality of traditional Malay culture, socio-cultural change among Malays in the wake of Western colonization, and the introduction of print literature, to a discussion on Malay students at the university. (Perhaps an explanation is required as to why the author chooses to deal with Malay students. These students, mostly from the rural area, made it to the universities in droves after 1970 as a result of a change in policy after *merdeka*, independence from colonial rule. Before that rural Malays had no opportunity whatsoever to attain the tertiary level of education.) In bringing in the students as part of the discussion, the author of *A Full Hearing* apparently relates the characteristics of oral culture, which seems to be the central theme of his book, with the performance of those students, particularly their response to modern Western type education, which is posited as the antithesis of oral culture because it is based on print literacy.

The fact that the book is not focussing on "Malay classical literature" and "Malay folklore" is obvious. Rather, the whole book is a treatise on thought patterns and processes in an oral culture. The author argues the existence of thought patterns embedded in oral culture, which in this case is Malay, and how such patterns continue to persist in the process of change, that is from oral culture to the written print culture brought about by Western colonization. As such, discussions on "Malay classical literature" and "Malay folklore" are incidental to the main theme of the book, although in discussing them many pertinent points are raised. Such points are not only resurrected but given a rather erudite and sometimes novel explanation: the Malay language being the learned tongue for those whose mother tongue was not Malay; the romantic movement, then dominant in Europe influencing the earlier European scholar's view and treatment of classical Malay literature as "dead"; the erroneous assumption of European scholars like Sir Richard Winstedt that the Malay folktale chronologically belonged to the pre-writing period in the history of Malay literature; or that the folktale was not passed on as an oral narrative but as a piece of classical literature, and so on.

The relevance of the author's findings with regard to these matters to the subject of the main discussion in the book does not appear to be great. What I do find relevant is the view that "classical Malay literature" with its manuscripts and "Malay folklore," which are either stylized or non-stylized, have steadfastly retained their oral-communication characteristics after being rendered into writing. A Malay manuscript, for example, although being a text put into writing (*jawi* script), has never been read as a book by an individual for his own knowledge or pleasure, but usually read aloud

to an audience who wants to benefit from the subject and who enjoys listening to the reader's art of delivery. This is particularly true of the religious texts and *syair* (poetry). In the case of the former, the benefit of having the teacher read the text and give his *tafsir* or interpretation and elucidation of the subject is important and required by Malay religious tradition. In such practice the oral characteristics of thought patterns and processes thrive.

This theme is developed further by the author in Chapters 4 (The language of the oral specialist and the effect of writing), 5 (Schematic language in everyday speech), 6 (Write as you speak: Audiences and abstractions), 7 (The adding mode in stylized composition) and 8 (The adding mode: Nonstylized storytelling). In these five chapters the author provides rather detailed data as to what he sees as the set patterns, not only in the use of language but in the thought make-up of "orally oriented areas of Malay society." These set patterns are variously labelled as "formula," "chunks," "wholes," or "topois." A significant observation made by the author to me personally is that Western literacy did not wholly liberate the thought patterns and processes already extant in the orally-oriented mind, mainly because the potentialities that such literacy offers are not fully transmitted and not many of the population are really exposed to them. That is why the great bulk of the Malays in Peninsular Malaysia are still oriented towards oral culture, and Western type education as introduced by their British colonial masters did not help. The author seems to suggest that the British or their present successors should have first attempted to understand the Malays' "oral habits" (308) before they could effectively introduce modern print literacy.

The author's examination of classical Malay literary manuscripts, the oral narratives or folktales, the *wayang* (theatrical) performances by the *dalang* (narrators/performers), modern literary pieces like novels, and finally the essays and compositions of Malay undergraduates at the universities, convincingly indicate that they do contain characteristics of an orally-oriented culture. In chapter 4 he shows that much of Malay culture is embedded in formulaic sayings, but at the same time these also give rise to similar thought patterns and processes. In fact the whole culture is so orally-oriented that writing, even in modern times, has not changed that very much ("the difference between the schematic composition of an oral society and the modern 'literary' composition of a print culture is one of degree, not of kind" 139).

In those places where the author cites examples from the Malay texts, *wayang* performances and language expression (mainly in chapters 7 and 8), his postulations (for example: "adding style" [207], usage of *maka* or *lalu* [231], "dependence by association" and use of subordinate construction [214], openers and closers, "frame phrases" [219], "codified copiousness" [234] etc.) that the Malay literary and linguistic styles emanate from thought patterns and processes dominant in oral culture are at best hypotheses which can be examined further by others. At least the author has put all his examples in print, and therefore has offered his findings and views to be further tested by other Malay scholars. However, in places where he cites personal experiences (his postulation of "plot pattern" shaping Malay thought process is exemplified by the tale told to him by a *haji* without realising that the author was actually the subject of the tale [146-147]) or his observation of others (students asking "Mak Cik, ada sastra lisan?" [258]) to support his views, the data appear too anecdotal to be accepted as sociological pronouncements.

Where the author relates his views of the oral character of the Malay culture to the language of the university students who came mostly from a rural background (chapter 9: Oral orientations in written composition), and although the account may not amount to a sociological postulation, it nevertheless is an eye-opener, and therefore

should be read and studied by those who are concerned with the educational development of the Malays. By doing so, they will not repeat the "mistakes" of the colonial education system. The author suggests that the key to modern Malay literacy (as opposed to orality) lies in the understanding that the right approach is not to impose Western concepts of literacy, but rather by starting from the point of understanding the oral background of the Malays and proceeding from there. From personal experience I have found that Western-style education is not well understood by some Malay graduates. At least one of them wrote in reply to my article on university education that a student would be better off if he was plied with as much knowledge as possible while he was in the university.

*A Full Hearing* is not a book on a specific subject like folklore, literature, or language, yet it contains useful views and findings on many aspects of Malay Studies. Although a little diffuse, one can still see the common thread that is woven through a tapestry of many things the authors has to say: that the oral thought patterns and processes are still retained by the Malay, even if literacy exists in his culture and the modern form is being propagated widely. The book is thought-provoking, nevertheless, and the scholar of Malay Studies will be the poorer if he misses it.

Mohd. Taib OSMAN  
University of Malaya  
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

TAN CHEE BENG. *The Baba of Melaka: Culture and Identity of a Chinese Peranakan Community in Malaysia*. 46300 Petaling Jaya, Malaysia: Pelanduk Publications, 1988. xxi+297 pages. Plates, charts, appendices, bibliography, index. Paperback, US\$29.00, ISBN 967-978-155-0, Hardcover ISBN 967-978-219-0.

The publication of a serious monograph on Malaysian Peranakan Chinese by a local-born Chinese anthropologist is good news, not only for anthropologists whose field of specialization is Malaysia, but also for those many readers who have an interest in acculturation and the study of comparative culture. This publication is based on the work submitted for his degree by Dr. Tan at Cornell University. His description and analysis is based on information gathered through his own fieldwork (continuing from the latter part of the 1970s and into the early 1980s), all the more reliable given the author's proficiency in the native Baba language. In addition, the author's solid research framework and his careful use of reference materials make the resulting work most rewarding.

Melaka, the area studied by Tan, is the area formerly occupied by the Malacca Kingdom. Later, as part of the Straits Settlement under British colonization, it was one of the areas in which there was early settlement by Chinese immigrants. The children and descendants of the offspring of Chinese immigrants and local Malay women are called "Peranakan" in Malay. "Baba" refers to the Chinese descendants among the Peranakan who have not maintained the use of the Chinese language. (However, descendants of Chinese immigrants from the third generation on who do not speak Chinese are also referred to as Baba.) Baba speak Baba Malay, and many are also fluent in English. Although their knowledge of the Chinese language is very limited (many are descended from immigrants from the province of Fujian), they are proud of their "Chinese heritage." Thus "Baba" is a label which refers more to