

# Aspects of Ethnicity among the Sri Lankan Malays

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	作成者: フサインミヤ, バチャ ミヤ・アブドゥル
	メールアドレス:
	所属:
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# Aspects of Ethnicity among the Sri Lankan Malays\*\*

# Bachamiya Abdul Hussainmiya\*

This paper is concerned with the Malays of Sri Lanka, who as many outsiders have observed is a distinctly identifiable racial group, and has managed to retain its separate ethnic identity against several odds throughout its more than three and half centuries of existence.

This paper reviews some aspects of ethnicity among the Sri Lankan Malays. It is in fact a field well-nigh a prerogative of sociologists and cultural anthropologists whose usage of such cultural anthropological terminology as ethnicity, ethnic identity, and ethnic consciousness in relation to a study of this nature reflects care and scientific precision. This exercise cannot lay claim to such strict methodological inquiry or conceptualization when discussing Sri Lankan Malay 'ethnicity'. However, from the point of view of the members of the community itself, who treats themselves proudly as scions of an Eastern race, it would be appropriate to use such terms freely to highlight their unique ethnicity visà-vis a competing and over-whelming cultural situation.

Ethnicity, in the anthropologist's parlance usually means "a proclamation of identity and worth in opposition to outsiders." [Norton 1983: 191]. It is further described as "an ongoing process, a reaction to categorical ascription by others as well as a reaction to the creation and incorporation of symbols into the collective identity." [STAIANO 1980: 29]. It also involves "the search for identity, the formulation of some symbolic description of self." [STAIANO 1980: 30]. This means in the first place that an analysis of Sri Lankan Malay ethnicity must concern itself with how the group perceives and defines itself. This in fact is a better starting point to understand the question of ethnicity of the present day Malay community. How do we define a "Malay" within the Sri Lankan context.

<sup>\*</sup> University of Brunei Darusalam, Brunei

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Key Words: The Sri Lankan Malays, The South Africa, Creole Malay, Muslims,

キーワード:スリランカ・マレー、南アフリカ、クレオール・マレー、ムスリム、エ スニシティー

#### **CURRENT STATUS**

Currently, Malay is a term commonly used in that part of South East Asia to denote the people who live in the Malaysian Peninsula and the adjoining areas in the archipelago who claim a common Malay ancestry. Malaysian law also requires a Malay to be a Muslim by religion<sup>1)</sup>. However, judging by their ancestry the so-called 'Malays' of Sri Lanka seem to have a greater claim to be called 'Indonesians' or 'Javanese' rather than being labelled as 'Malay' or 'Malaysian'. None the less, the immigrants from the East have been popularly referred to as 'Malays' in the common parlance as well as in the Government statistical literature. [Hussainmya 1990].

The local people know them as Ja Minisu (in Sinhala) and Java Manusar, (in Tamil) names indicative of their one time origin from the island of Java<sup>2</sup>). The Muslim-Moors, their co-religionists, most of whom have intimate knowledge about the Malays, refer to them also as Malai Karar (Malay people). The Malays are of course conscious of both ancestries when they refer to themselves as Orang Java (People of Java) and Orang Melayu (The Malay People).

Despite the statistical categorization of Malays, outsiders may not readily recognise a Malay by any conspicuous physical characteristic, or for that matter distinguish the features of Malay from other Sri Lankans. With rare exceptions, the Sri Lankan Malays are all Muslims by religion. They have lived among the dominant Islamic group, namely the Moor-Muslims of Sri Lanka. The Muslims constitute about 7 to 8 percent of the total Sri Lankan population while the Malays form about 5% of the Muslim population. Through a common religious bondage and intermarriages, both the Moors and Malays have mingled so closely<sup>3)</sup>. This had resulted in the loss of typical Malay features among the offspring of such marriages, and thus it is particularly difficult at times to recognize a Malay from a Tamil speaking Moor-Muslim, a fact which had been noticed as early as the beginning of the 19th century by Percival, a British Military Officer, who remarked that:

"Although they (Malays) intermarry with the Moors and other castes par-

<sup>1)</sup> The Federal (Malaysian) constitution defines a 'Malay' in article 160 (2) as follows: "A Malay is a person who professes the Muslim religion, habitually speak the Malay language, conforms to Malay (adat) custom and is a Malaysian citizen".

<sup>2)</sup> By comparison, the term Jawi or Jawa used by both the Cambodians and Arabs shows it is a generic term meant to refer to Muslims in South-East Asia.

<sup>3)</sup> The early Dutch Tombos or Head-Registers maintained by the Dutch Government (1656-1796) in Sri Lanka refer to a number of such marriages. Similarly I have found documentary evidence of mixed marriages in the *Kadutams*, marriage registers maintained by Sri Lankan Moor Khatibs (Some are in my possession).

ticularly in Ceylon and by this means acquire a much darker colour than is natural to a Malay; still their characteristic features are so striking predominant." [Percival 1803: 115].

However, at present even such characteristic features of a Malay have become a thing of the past (although physical anthropologist may not always agree to the the type -casting of physiological features of a given race). One might as well quote a statement from the late Malaysian Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman who had some close friends among the Malays in Sri Lanka<sup>4)</sup>.

"This is also the case with Ceylon. The only difference is that their (Malay) features have changed. They look more like Indians (the Kelings) than Malays and their language is strongly influenced by the Indian dialect. What is more they have lost touch with the Malay adat and custom, but still they call themselves Malays..."

"But these (Malay) soldiers who went there without their womenfolk married into the family of the Indian Muslims. These Muslims were known as the Moors and after generations of intermarriages, it is hard to pick one from the other, Malays or the Moors, except when they themselves announce their racial identity".

# THE CONTEMPORARY LOCAL MALAY CULTURE

In their culture too there exist little signs which can be characterized as distinctly "Malay". As Tunku Abdul Rahman once stated, Malay customs and traditions (as practiced in the Malay Peninsula) are almost entirely absent in the daily life of the local Malay people. Instead one finds that the dominant customs and traditions of the local Moor-Muslims have pervaded their cultural practices. In their mode of dress and food, for example, they follow the pattern set by their countrymen, especially the Moors. Malay women invariably dress in Sari<sup>5</sup>) instead of the traditional Malay Baju and Kurung and the men wear trousers depending on their social status, and on occasion a coat, while the

<sup>4)</sup> Former Malaysian Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman had many friends to count among the Sri Lankan Malay community. In fact during his early trips to London while he was a law student, he used to stay as a guest of a distinguished Malay family of late Dr. M. P. Drahman; as several other Malay dignitaries did in the early 20th. century. Even with his intimate knowledge of the Malays, he made this remark in his regular column of writing in (Malaysian) newspaper Star of 1st June 1981.

<sup>5)</sup> During the time when Malays from Malaysia visited Sri Lanka to attend the 2nd Malay World Symposium held from 5-11 August 1985, they felt aghast to see large number of Sri Lankan Malay women clad in Sari. Malaysians were rather unhappy that their Sri Lankan cousins have adopted an Indian cultural symbol in their form of dress. Nevertheless Sari is more of a national dress in Sri Lanka for women.

ordinary Malay adopted the sarong and shirt. Similarly the food habits of the Malays too are more akin to those of any other Lankan family which invariably means rice and curry for main meals. Occasionally, however, Malays make traditional food preparations such as nasi goreng (fried rice) satay, and Malay kueh (cakes puddings) but they are turned to only a very rare and that too only among the well-to-do and fashionable Malay families. Likewise, in their wedding ceremonies there is occasional evidence of following Malay customs such as bersanding (the sitting together of the groom and the bride on the bridal couch) etc., by some conscientious Malay families, but these are more of exceptions than the rule. Some Malay families who are particularly conscious of Malay-Indonesian heritage take pride in having retained versions of 'Malay/Indonesian' surnames such as Weerabangsa, Nalawangsa, Singa Laxana, Bongso, Tumarto, Bangsa Jaya, Cuttilan, Cuncheer, etc, while a good number of Malays also bear the usual Muslim names (common to the Moors) and on this account too they cannot be distinguished from the personal names adopted by their fellow Muslim-Moors<sup>6</sup>). Until recent past, many Malay men of Sri Lanka wore 'Tuan' as part of their personal name, but now the practice seems to have gone out of fashion.

Thus the change away from traditional 'Malay' cultural patterns has been so marked that relying on any obvious cultural indicator to identify the local Malays may become misleading and irrelevant. Therefore, within the Sri Lankan context, one has to refrain from any attempt to define Malay on the basis of any racial, legal or social criteria. In this context the need to settle the question of Malay identity should rest largely' on the basis of what we may call a self-social identification. It means that a Malay in Sri Lanka is one who considers himself or herself a Malay, functions as a member of and identifies oneself with the Malay society.

# THE LANGUAGE OF THE MALAYS

This self-social identification as Malays, and of alignment with a Malay social system is reinforced by the continued use in the Sri Lanka Malay households of a kind of 'Malay' colloquial. The 'Malay' spoken in Sri Lanka is an offshoot of a 'Bazaar Malay' dialect introduced to the island along with the early Malay settlers. The local Malays take great pride in the fact that they still speak their own language which they call 'Malay' (Bahasa Melayu), although it is widely divergent from the standard language currently spoken in

<sup>6)</sup> The now defunct Ceylon Malay Research organization (CEMRO) headed by Mr. Murad Jayah had the names of the following Malay office bearers in 1970. Messieurs Murad Jayah, M. A. Sourjah, T. A. Dole, N. B. Saman, M. S. M. Akbar, T. H. Ismail, K. Girsy, T. G. Hamid, B. M. B. Bangsajayah, M. N. Weerabangsa CEMRO (News Bulletin) vol. 5, No. 40, Nov/Dec. 1970, p. 10.

either Malaysia or Indonesia. This variety of Sri Lankan "Malay' language is widely spoken in Malay homes. [Hussainmiya 1986].

To a very great extent, it is on the basis of this Malay Creole, not to mention the Malays' emotional link with the countries of their origin in the East, that the Malay people of Sri Lanka continue to treat themselves as members of an exclusive racial community and inheritors of a common Malay heritage. In this respect they have much more claim for continuous affinity with their counterparts in the Malay world, unlike the 'Malays' in South Africa who have origins identical to the Sri Lanka Malays<sup>7)</sup>.

#### THE SRI LANKAN MALAYS AND THE SOUTH AFRICAN MALAYS

It may be useful at this juncture to compare the present status of these two groups of people as Malays in order to illustrate the degree of their relative self-identities. The Cape Malays are an ethnologically mixed people found mainly in the Cape Peninisula in South Africa. Their identity is based on mainly on their following of the religion of Islam. Of the 360,000 Muslim population in South Africa, who are categorized as colured or Asian, the Cape Malays form a sub-group whose number stands today at nearly 182,000 [DU PLESSIS 1972: 145]. Originally the Cape Malays are said to have belonged to the Javanese and Balinese groups among the early migrants.

While the Sri Lankan Malays continue to take pride in, and emphasize their Malay heritage, the Malays in South Africa are for various reasons now in the process of shedding their Malay identity. Both groups had identical beginnings. They hailed from almost the areas in the then Dutch East Indies and were introduced for almost the same reasons by the Dutch Colonial authorities. Despite this commonality, a major difference exists between these two groups in the degree of continuing their special identity as Malays.

The Malays of Sri Lanka still speak their own language however remote may be their variety of language from the standard Malay spoken in the Malay world. By contrast, Malays of South Africa have ceased to speak their own language for quite sometime in the past [Mason 1861: 23]. The language of the latter is Afrikaans which is common to the other Muslim immigrants settled in Africa. So much so, they are more often referred to by their religious identity i.e. as 'Muslims' or 'Mohammedans'. Furthermore, it appears that their rate of mixture with the other local races seems much more complete so that it is more natural to treat them as members of the Muslim group, i.e. as a religious group rather than as a racial group. As du Plessis [1972: 145], on the Cape Malays mentions 'At the Cape they become much diluted with other races,

<sup>7)</sup> This is true only until the end of the Dutch rule in Sri Lanka at the end of the 18th century. Subsequently, new blood from Malaysian Peninsula was added to the Malay population in Sri Lanka.

among them the indigenous people of South Africa and also Arabs, Indians, Chinese and Whites.'

If not for this linguistic factor it is almost certain that the fate which befell the Cape Malay community would have extended to the small community of Malays in Sri Lanka and led to the decline of their self-identity.

While language remains a most portent symbol of the ethnic identity of the Sri Lankan Malays, there are other equally important factors which have influenced and reinforced their self-perception and feeling of belonging as members of a Malay race. Referring to Fijian Indians, for example, Chandra Jayawardena stated "the medium through which an ethnic group or ethnic identity exists is the consciousness of sharing a common culture derived from a set of traditions attributed to a common homeland. This homeland is not necessarily a fixed geographical identity. It is periodically redefined by historical events and present developments, so that for e.g. the creation of Pakistan and Bangladesh need not affect emigrant consciousness of India." [JAYAWARDENA 1980: 43]. This applies to the case of the Sri Lankan Malays as well. The creation of Indonesia, Singapore, Brunei, or Malaysia which once belonged to a single Malay world, have no relevance to their understanding of their past origins, unless the point of reference is to a larger Melayu Raya. In reality, they share their ancestry from all these countries, despite the fact that the 'Indonesian' element had been preponderant among the very early migrants.

# THE ORIGINS

When the Dutch colonial government introduced the Eastern nationalities to Ceylon, almost all major Indonesian racial groups were represented among them such as Javanese, Bandanese, Bugis, Amboinese, Minangkabaus, Balinese, Tidorese, Madurese, Sundanese, and not the least the Malays themselves. Most early arrivals hailed from the city of Batavia (the present Jakarta) which was built under the Dutch colonial administration since 1619. All the above-mentioned national groups had moved into the city, and formed their own Kampongs outside the Dutch fort [DE HAAN 1922: 474]. They shared the benefits of colonial trading and subsidiary economic activities of the Dutch colonial establishment. During wars and emergencies faced by the Dutch in other parts of Asia, chiefly in Sri Lanka, the native settlers of Batavia were recruited in large numbers to fight the Dutch wars or to garrison Dutch coastal cities. The Batavians also supplied the most-needed manpower in Dutch colonial territories. It appears, however, that the early Indonesian migrants, drawn from such varied eastern races had shed their different identities even before they were introduced to Sri Lanka, and had evolved into a single identity through the use of the Malay language, which served in uniting all these different national groups.

In Sri Lanka, during nearly one and half centuries of Dutch rule from the middle of the 17th to the end of the 18th century, the Malay 'identity' can be said to have firmly evolved. In an entirely alien soil, confronted by strange religious and communal surroundings, the early Malay settlers had forged among themselves a strong unity, not only by the ties of a common language but also by their firm adherence to the religion of Islam. As far as Islam was concerned, they had the fortune to live side by side with the Tamil speaking community of Moors (whose history in Sri Lanka goes back to almost the same period when Islam became an official religion in the Malay/Indonesian region). However, the Malay ethnic-consciousness came into sharp focus particularly when the Muslim-Malays tried to assert their individuality vis-à-vis the numerically superior Muslim-Moor community.

By the time the British took control of the maritime provinces of the island by defeating the Dutch rulers in 1796, the local Malay community had taken a true Sri Lankan identity. This is clearly borne out by the fact that the British documents of the early period clearly refer to the community only by the appellation of Malays, perhaps reflecting the true nature of their new identity. Robert Percival, an early British writer who wrote a descriptive account of Ceylon in 1803, for instance, devoted several valuable pages of his book to a description of the Ceylon Malays, alongside his description of the other major Sri Lankan native communities, such as the Sinhalese, Tamils, and Moors [Persival 1803].

With the establishment of the British rule, a further element of Malays from abroad did join the already well-established Malay community in Sri Lanka. This time they originated from the Malay Peninsula itself. As the British continued the services of the Ceylon Malay Regiment, first established by the Dutch, there was a big need for further recruitment of Malay military personnel. The local Malay population was not considered sufficient to fulfill this need. Furthermore, Frederick North (1798-1805), the first British Governor in Sri Lanka, formulated a deliberate colonial policy to increase the Malay population in the island, so that it could serve as a nursery for future prospective recruits to the military. He, therefore, sent special recruiting missions to the East, especially to the British Straits Settlements in Singapore, Malacca and the then Prince of Wales Island (Penang) to bring not only Malay men, but also Malay women and children to accompany them for permanent settlement in the island. He encouraged their arrivals by offering cash and remuneration for each and every Malay who was willing to make Sri Lanka their new home. It is said that the Sultan of Kedah also sent a good number of his subjects to be settled in Sri Lanka in deference to the British wishes. Until about the 1850s Malays from all over the Malay Peninsula, though not in large numbers, had settled in Sri Lanka through the special recruiting depots set up first in Penang and later in Singapore in 1840<sup>8)</sup>. The Sri Lankan Malay community thus constitute an interesting and fascinating conglomeration of people of Malay descent who hailed from right across the Indonesian Archipelago to the Malay Peninsula, whose claim to a common Malay ancestry therefore is indeed a strong one from the point of view of their broad origins from the Malay-Nusantara region in the East.

During the greater part of the 19th century, the Malay identity had remained very strong in the island. The Malays had maintained continuous links with the other parts of the Malay world, especially with the British Straits Settlements. On the one hand, new Malays from Peninsular Malaya joined the community due to British incentives. On the other hand, those members of the Sri Lanka-born Malay community on military service did enjoy the opportunity of visiting Penang, Malacca and Singapore and forged new links. Thus there was continuous interaction between the local Malays and their compatriots in the proper 'Malay world'.

The British administration periodically sent recruiting parties of Sri Lankan-born Malays to these areas with a view to encourage the overseas Malays to come and join the military regiment. In fact, some members of such recruiting missions stayed long enough in the peninsula, at times more than two to three years at a stretch, to bring back not only new developments in Malay culture, but also Malay literary texts and manuscripts to be distributed among their kith and kin<sup>9</sup>. Such cultural contacts by which extra-territorial links could be maintained with their homeland, the Malays need not have feared about the extinction of their identity. In a way, even after the disbandment of the Ceylon Rifle Regiment in 1873, which had effectively put a stop to direct links with the peninsula, determined efforts by some members of traditional Malay elites in Sri Lanka, such as Baba Ounus Saldin (1838–1906) prolonged some form of cultural links with Malayan archipelago until the very late part of the 19th century. His newspaper called Wajah Selong published in Colombo for instance, was in circulation in Batavia, Malacca, and Singapore, while he imported Malay books, journals and newspapers for Malay readership at home<sup>10)</sup>.

<sup>8)</sup> Since Singapore was made the administrative center of the Straits Settlements in 1840, the recruitment Depot operating in Penang since 1800 was transferred there. Sri Lanka National Archives (S.L.N.A.) 7/536 Chief Secretary to Assistant Military Secretary No. 14 of 10th. January, 1840.

<sup>9)</sup> Kapitan Samsudin of Sri Lanka, sent on Military duty to Singapore in 1840s, completed copying several Malay manuscripts including Hikayat Inderaputera made available to him in Kampung Gelam, Singapore. Similarly Kapitan Sumarie who went to do garrison in duties in Pulau Labuan in 1869/70 brought back some valuable manuscripts.

<sup>10)</sup> His newspapers Alamat Langkapuri (1869/70) and Wajah Selong (1895/99) contain many references to such import of Malay books. Some issues of Wajah Selong also give names of his sales agents in Singapore, Malacca and Sumatra.

During the period dominated by the traditional Malay elites, that is when a vigourous Malay classical literary tradition was still alive (until the end of the 19th century), the Malays in Sri Lanka can be said to have been very much conscious of their places of immediate origin. Thus for example, Baba Ounus Saldin often took pride in emphasizing that his family had originated from Sumenap in the island of Madura in the East. Similarly, obituary notices inserted in the local press always mentioned the country of origin of the dead persons. For instance, an obituary notice which appeared in the local newspaper the Ceylon Independent of 18th August 1910 referred to the late Subedar Tuan Assen as a native of Trengganu. Also the same newspaper of 11 August 1911 gave the origin of the late Jemidar (lieutenant) Tuan Rahim Cuttilan as Minangkabau. Thus, although the local Malays had been long naturalized in Sri Lanka, the country of their adoption, the memory of their birth places exercised a strong influence in their national identity with the motherland. In other words, the first and second generation of Malays in Sri Lanka always treated themselves a part of their original national identity.

The situation began to change with the emergence of a new generation of Malays, educated and nurtured in the local and western traditions. Their memory began to fade fast, so that despite their consciousness of Malay ethnicity, they could not really focus precisely on the real areas of their origin, as their predecessors did<sup>11)</sup>. On the other hand it is not only the community, but also their political social and cultural environment in the country had begun to change drastically, which required continuous adjustment with the Sri Lankan socio-political reality on the part of the new generation of Malays.

Under changing socio-political circumstances in Sri Lanka during the 20th century, the cultural survival of the local Malay people depended not so much on a consciousness of a common origin as to consciously develop an aura of ethnicity. One needs to understand similar issues of ethnic consciousness as evolved among the people of Indian origin in Guyana and Fiji. The former, having been cut off totally from their Indian homeland have lost their separate ethnic identity, whereas the Fijian Indians, through their continuous interaction with the Indian sub-continent managed to retain their own identity in a multi-racial environment. Thus in the case of the Fiji Indians their Indian identity is said to be routine feature of their daily lives. They still adhere to their Indian marriage patterns, some distinctive form of religious worship and the retention (though teetering on the brink of extinction) of Tamil and Telugu as domestic languages. Comparatively the Indo-Guyanese community, did lose or abandoned all but the most rudimentary aspects of traditional Indian culture. The Sri Lankan Malays are in this respect to be compared more with

<sup>11)</sup> Mas Jury Weerabangsa who wrote down his family tree in 1924 confuses, for example the location of Macassar and Sumenap in Madura. I intend to devote a separate study on the myth-making among the Malays based on Weerabangsa family tree.

the Guyanese Indians, and can be said to have evolved an ethnicity in a multiracial country while also managing to maintain their ethnic identity.

#### PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE

Very recently there appears to be a sudden upsurge in the ethnic awareness of the community. Firstly, there are the recent political developments following the 1983 ethnic riots in Sri Lanka. Secondly, there is the awareness and pride injected among the younger members of the community through the knowledge of a vigourous cultural past of their forefathers, especially their contributions to a written Malay literary tradition. Thirdly, there is the sucessfully concluded 2<sup>nd</sup> Malay World Symposium held in Sri Lanka in August 1985, which brought to Sri Lanka a comparatively large number of Malaysian litrary and academic personalities. The Malays in Sri Lanka, as a result, feel very encouraged to believe that they are a part of a larger Malay world and can still reach for help and understanding from among their Malay compatriots elsewhere to strengthen their own cultural life and revive their traditions. Several important resolutions were passed during the above mentioned symposium urging the Sri Lankan Government to help preserve the cultural identity of the Malays, while appeal was made to the Malay Governments abroad to help them to revive their language and culture.

Hitherto, some individuals especially from the Moor community who belonged to partial Malay ancestry felt ambivalent to identify themselves fully with the community. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Malay World Symposium seems to have wiped out such doubts, and now a pride has overtaken them to emphasise more profoundly their Malay roots. To that extent Gapena (The Malaysian Writers' Federation) and its leader, Professor Datuk Ismail Hussein, must take some credit to have brought in this new consciousness and pride to the community, which gratefully endowed him the title Pendita during the symposium.

The future appears bright for the Sri Lankan Malays. If they can revive their language, culture and traditions while maintaining links with the Malay world as in the past their ethnic identity can last for many more years to come. The Sri Lankan Government and people do not grudge them this new found links and identity, because history has shown that the Sinhalese people have learnt to live and respect if not encourage individual entities of other ethnic groups. On the other hand, Malay Governments and Malay communities abroad also feel happy that they have rediscovered their long lost cousins in the island paradise of Sri Lanka.

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# スリランカ・マレーにおけるエスニシティの諸相

# バチャミヤ・アブドゥル・フサインミヤ

本稿はスリランカのマレー系住民について論じたものである。マレー系住民は、ほかの多くの外来者と同様に、ことなった民族集団とみなされ、ほかの人びととの関係で、みずからのエスニック・アイデンティティを保持し続けなければならなかった。

本稿では、スリランカ・マレー社会におけるエスニック・アイデンティティのさまざまな側面について論じている。エスニシティ、エスニック・アイデンティティ、民族意識などの問題は、とくに社会学、文化人類学などで厳密な概念規定などが行われてきている。しかし、ここでのスリランカ・マレーの「エスニシティ」の概念は、こうした方法論上の厳密な規定や概念化にたいしてなんらかの主張をするためというよりも、むしろその競争的、圧倒的な文化状況の中での、その独自のエスニシティに光をあてるためにゆるやかにもちいている。

スリランカのマレー人は、一般にマレー半島出身と見られることがおおいが、じっさいには、インドネシア、とくにジャワ起源と考えられ、また、人びとの移動に際しては、王権が媒介になっていたと考えられている。しかし、スリランカのマレー系住民は、全人口の1パーセントにもみたない圧倒的に少数派なので、スリランカのマレー系以外のムスリムとの関係が深い。こうした状況のなかで、スリランカ・マレーは、家庭内でのマレー語の使用や、みずからの出自への強い意識などを通じて、マレー人としてのエスニシティを強く主張しながら、しかも周囲と調和的に生活しているのである。