

Sacrificing Vernacular Cosmopolitanism for the Postcolonial Nation

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Abstract

Colonized territories tended to be populated by voluntary or involuntary immigrants, including convicts and indentured labour, self-motivated individuals in search of economic opportunities and, of course, small bands of colonial administrators. The multi-ethnic and multicultural composition was conducive to the cultural development of what could be called a “vernacular cosmopolitanism,” i.e. an understanding and acceptance of cultural differences derived from mundane, routine social interactions across ethnic-cultural boundaries in everyday life. As the migrants saw the colonized space exclusively in instrumental economic terms and their stay in this space as temporary, they developed scant affective investment for it. It was only after decolonization and the establishment of the new nation that the colonized space was transformed into a place for affective investment by the migrants turned citizen-subjects. And yet the dismantling and replacement of the colonial social order by a national political order often resulted in the marginalization of non-indigenous peoples long settled in the new nation. With few exceptions, in most postcolonial Asian nation-states, these conditions still prevail.

Keywords: indigenous, Malaysia, multiculturalism, nation-state, Singapore, postcolonialism, vernacular cosmopolitanism

Introduction

With the exception of Thailand, which was not colonized but instead suffered semi-colonial subjugation under first a French and then a British colonial regime, South and Southeast Asia consists of a series of postcolonial nation states. Until the Second World War, Burma and Malaya (including Singapore) were British colonies; Indochina was colonized by France; Indonesia, by Holland; and the Philippines, by Spain and subsequently, by the United States. Like all European colonies in Asia and Africa, vast number of people from elsewhere were imported into the colonized territories to fill the colonial state's need for labour power—slaves, convicts and indentured labour as well as voluntary migrants in search of economic opportunities. The colonized territories thus became multi-ethnic and multicultural spaces in which different migrant groups co-existed, policed by surprisingly small groups of European administrators from the metropolitan centres who were assisted by indigenous or migrant civil servants, police officers and members of the armed forces.

In these territories, the socio-economic hierarchy was generally ethnically or racially stratified in a rigid manner. There was a small European population at the pinnacle and, more often than not, an indigenous population at the bottom, with different groups of immigrants in between. Often one particular immigrant group would be selected and privileged to act as the comprador on behalf of the colonizers in the economic exploitation of the indigenous population. In colonized Indonesia, for example, this was the role of the Chinese; in colonized Ceylon, this role was performed by the Tamils. A representative example of this multi-ethnic and economically-stratified society was classically labelled a “plural society,” a concept coined by the Burmese-based British colonial administrator J.S. Furnivall (1948).¹ In a plural society, supposedly different groups lived within their diasporic communities, side by side—and yet without mixing and without concern for each other, beyond the routine transactions in the market place. Such a view of the colonial society could only issue from members of the European colonizing community. They were either insulated from the other migrant communities or, as colonial administrative officers, were

charged with policing and managing the social and political tensions among the colonized groups; it was these tensions that would occupy centre stage after decolonization and the subsequent nascent postcolonial nation-state formation. Under such conditions, the colonial regime permitted the different immigrant groups to engage freely in their respective economic pursuits but made no attempts to secure permanent residential rights for migrants within the territory. Thus, the colonized territory did not constitute a space for immigrants to invest emotionally in a “local” identity, including for the colonial administrators themselves. Practically speaking, everyone thought of himself as a sojourner, a short-term temporary resident. As a consequence, each diasporic community oriented emotionally and politically to events in its respective homeland. Nevertheless, migration and sojourn in a foreign land, with its mixing of people from elsewhere, inevitably imparted to the immigrant-inhabitant a necessary openness to others of different origins and cultures and a basic acceptance of difference derived from their mundane routine or everyday social interactions across ethnic-cultural boundaries. Such an openness and acceptance came to constitute a form of “vernacular cosmopolitanism”: an openness and acceptance which did not forgo narrow ethnic identification for a sense of the universal human and one that was limited in that it did not necessarily seek a deeper understanding of cultural others but was instead merely adequate for the everyday survival of colonized migrants and other marginal individuals.²

With the initiation of the decolonization struggle for political independence, the social and political conditions of the colonized space changed radically. The prospect of becoming a full member of an independent nation provided the material and ideological space for the emotional investment of the self, which initiated a different type of subject formation as a “citizen.” This was true not only for those who could claim to be indigenous before the historical fact of colonization, but also for those immigrants who had long resided in the territory and especially for their locally-born descendants. Unsurprisingly, alongside members of the indigenous peoples, these long-term residents and their local-born offspring were frequently active participants in the decolonization struggle, making the

similar necessary sacrifices for the sake of the newly-born nation. Unfortunately, after political independence, these sacrifices often went unrecognized and unacknowledged—and their aspirations for citizenship went correspondingly unrealized. In the new postcolonial nation, the indigenous population, having long suffered under the yoke of colonialism and often occupying the bottom rung in the economic hierarchy, emerged to claim their position as rightful owners of the state. In staking out such a position, the indigenous people and their leaders would not necessarily accept the claims of the immigrants and their descendants for full citizenship. This was particularly true in those cases where the immigrant groups had been complicit with the colonial regime in the exploitation of indigenous people. The rise of indigenous ethno-nationalism in the new nation marks the beginning of the politics of race and racism, directed not only at the minority races already in the country through a differentiated set of citizenship criteria—but also towards new immigrant arrivals, who experienced a different form of xenophobia. In many postcolonial nation-states in Asia and Africa today, fifty or sixty years after independence, the social and political consequences of ethno-nationalism continue to unfold.

Significantly, however, a different trajectory might unfold where the demographic and economic compositions necessitated a sharing of political power between the indigenous people and the localized immigrant communities in order to constitute a multi-ethnic nation. In these cases, nationalism had to be developed from the ground up as a new form of solidarity. Here, nationalism was placed structurally above the different groups but without necessarily subverting their ethnic solidarities. These two different types of trajectories for the political development of the postcolonial nation can be nicely illustrated by the respective examples of contemporary Malaysia and Singapore.

Malaya and Singapore were two geographically contiguous locations whose administrations were intentionally kept apart by the British colonial regime. Throughout the colonial period, this separation both suited and served Britain's economic and military interests. Immediately after the end of the Japanese Occupation, but for a brief time, the decolonization struggle of independence might be said to have united

the people of the two locations in one common cause. Although some of the essential historical details will be reserved for later, for now let it suffice to say that, in accordance with the background machinations of the British colonial office in London, Singapore, along with the two small British colonial territories of Sarawak and North Borneo (subsequently renamed Sabah), were combined with Peninsula Malaya to constitute the Federation of Malaysia in 1963.³ However, Singapore's membership was not to last: it separated from Malaysia in 1965. The primary reason for this separation turned on the different definitions and understandings of what constituted the Malaysian nation. With respect to its multi-ethnic population, the difference between the definition of a "Malay Malaysia" adopted by the federal government in Kuala Lumpur and that of a "Malaysian Malaysia" espoused by the People's Action Party (PAP) political leaders in Singapore contributed to a parting of the ways. These opposed definitions serve as illustrative examples of what might be considered the two developmental paths of the concept of nationalism in a postcolonial nation.

Colonial Singapore

2019 is the bicentennial of the establishment of a trading post for the English East India Company on the island of Singapore in 1819. To get the post established, Stamford Raffles, a Company officer, had first to install Husain, a son of the Sultan of the Johor-Riau Empire who had lost the contest to inherit the Sultanate, as the "Sultan of Singapore." Raffles executed this act with no other legitimacy than imperialist hubris. In 1824, the third British Resident, John Crawfurd, made the Sultan bankrupt by withholding the monthly stipend due to him, forcing the latter to cede the entire island to the control of the Company, in exchange for a fixed annual stipend.⁴ In this way, the Sultan was reduced to total political irrelevance. (Parenthetically, this leaves open the question of the legitimacy of the occupation of the island by the colonial regime and by extension, even of the present-day government.)

The establishment of the trading post as a free port revived the fortunes of what was once a vibrant emporium where traders from

Arabia, South and Southeast Asia, and China met, between the fourteenth and the seventeenth century.⁵ By the eighteenth century, the trade has shifted to neighbouring Riau. With the establishment of the British trading post, trade shifted back again to Singapore.⁶ In addition, many different types of migrant, some forced or indentured, others voluntarily seeking economic opportunities, arrived from China, South Asia, the islands in the Southeast Asian archipelago, from Arabia, Britain and the other European countries. In this historical context, the migrant Chinese quickly came to constitute the majority population on the island. In 1876, the administration of the island was formally transferred from the East India Company to the British Colonial Office, making Singapore a Crown Colony. The multi-ethnic composition of the population, but with an overwhelming ethnic Chinese majority, remains true today.

Vernacular Cosmopolitanism

Singapore was a quintessential colonially pluralist society where the different ethnic groups had to engage with each other across ethnic-cultural boundaries in their routine transactions. Such mundane engagements engendered a mode of “vernacular cosmopolitanism” that recognized and accepted cultural differences, without much serious or studied interest in knowing and understanding the cultures of the others. An important public sphere where vernacular cosmopolitanism was evident is in the use of a “common” language. With a multi-ethnic population that spoke mutually incomprehensible languages, the issue of precisely which language could serve as the shared medium of communication in routine transactions became a practical matter. Significantly, the language that was adopted for inter-ethnic communication was neither English, the language of the colonizer, nor Chinese, the language of the ethnic majority. Instead, it was “bazaar” Malay—the Malay language as the *lingua franca* of the archipelago of Southeast Asia. This was a legacy of the pre-colonial days, stretching back centuries, when various pidginised versions of Malay were used among traders, from Arabia through India to China, to communicate and conduct their transactions in Singapore. In order to train colonial

administrators in the early days of colonization, both dictionaries and grammar books on bazaar Malay were published.⁷ Nonetheless, having only marginal competency in the Malay language, speakers of bazaar Malay invariably would insert words and phrases from their own ethnic languages to facilitate communication. Not surprisingly, humorous complications might then result. For example, the expression “police inspector” is, for reasons unknown, rendered in Hokkien as *tau kow*, which literally means “big dog”; a Hokkien speaker speaking to a Malay but not knowing the Malay or English word for “police inspector” might literally translate it as *anjing besar*, which is the Malay for “big dog.” Such bilingual malapropisms make for some gentle local humour.

Traces of this vernacular cosmopolitanism can still be found in everyday Singaporean culture; the most prominent examples being provided by what is now considered “typical” Singaporean hawker food. Selling itinerant street food was once a means of making a living among the early immigrants. The foods they cooked were more often a reflection of their creativity in mixing the locally available ingredients rather than a sign of the supposedly “traditional” food they had brought with them on their migration. An intriguing example is *Indian mee goreng*, which is ubiquitous in hawker food centres throughout the island as well as on peninsular Malaya. *Mee* is the Hokkien Chinese dialect word for noodle, a staple for the Chinese but not a conventional Indian food ingredient; *goreng* is the Malay word meaning “to fry.” The dish is cooked—fried in a large Chinese wok—and sold by Indian hawkers, distinguished from a wide range of fried noodles dishes available in a hawker centre by its distinctive red colouring, the result of the profuse use of ketchup in its preparation. Like *Indian mee goreng*, many items of what are now considered “Singaporean cuisine” were developed *in situ* as a consequence of an openness to the cultural practices of the other peoples among the early resident immigrants.⁸ At a general societal level, the tendency towards the cultural mixing, or hybridity, of multi-ethnic cultural elements in the mundane cultural practices of Singaporeans—such as the presence of Malay words in everyday Chinese conversation—is often referred to locally as “*rojak* culture”—a street food salad of vegetables and fruits, the composition of which varies according to the

vendors' taste, a symbolic representation of vernacular multiculturalism in practice.⁹

A Space That Supports Regional Political Development

The singular focus on financial interest by the colonial regime was accompanied by an indifference and/or neglect of the cultural and political interests of the different ethnic communities. Ironically, this provided much free room for these communities to develop an independent culture and politics. Nonetheless, seeing themselves as sojourners in Singapore, migrant interest was oriented mostly towards their respective homelands. For example, the history of the collective financial contributions and personal sacrifices of the Chinese in Singapore to the republican revolution in China is now memorialized in Singapore: the house in which the founding father of the Kuomintang spent no more than two nights, during one of his fund-raising travels through Southeast Asia (Nanyang), has been monumentalized as the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall.¹⁰

At the same time, Singapore was a place through which intellectuals and political activists from Indonesia and Malaya passed, gathered and/or hid in temporary exile from the Dutch and British colonial governments, respectively. It was a place where political ideas of decolonization and modernity were exchanged, propagated and disseminated throughout the regional Malay/Muslim world. Kampong Glam, which is still a Malay-Islamic enclave, was then the centre of Malay publishing.¹¹ In addition to being a space of intellectual fervour, Singapore was also a place from which regional anti-colonial independence movements could receive material support. Given its geographical contiguity with Indonesia, Indonesians in Singapore constituted an important mass support base for the independence movement. Indonesians successfully organized strikes against their Dutch employers, boycotting the loading and unloading of Dutch ships that called at the harbour, harassed the small Dutch military contingent based in Singapore, and organized the smuggling of arms and other necessities in support of the Republican army.¹² Significantly and

conceptually, as a space without a nation, a colonized space was one from which multiple externally-oriented nationalist movements could be ideologically and materially accommodated and hence flourish. This is the diametrical opposite of the situation in which weak national spaces are used as proxy spaces by larger, stronger nations in order to fight out their conflicts, as in the contemporary Middle East.

The Decolonization Period

The struggle for decolonization and political independence in colonized Asia and Africa began with the end of the Second World War. In Malaya and Singapore, the embarrassingly speedy defeat of the colonial military by the Japanese invaders had permanently discredited the colonial regime's image of invincibility, that had been seldom questioned before the surrender of British troops. In 1945, the British colonial regime returned after the war, only to be confronted by rising local nationalist sentiments. It almost immediately proposed a Malayan Union to unite all the states in peninsular Malaya as a single colonized entity under a British governor; Singapore was to be kept apart and continue to operate as a crown colony. The Union was to enjoy relatively generous provisions, granting citizenship not only to all local born but also to those who had lived in Malaya and Singapore for 10 out of the previous 15 years, regardless of origin or race. The citizenship provision was one of the issues which triggered immediate and massive objections from the Malays to the proposal, marking the emergence of Malay ethno-nationalism on the peninsula.¹³ This led to the formation of the United Malay National Organization (UMNO) in early 1946, to spearhead the protest through non-participation in all government activities and the boycotting of all official events. Faced with this resistance, the Malayan Union was scrapped in 1948 and replaced by the Federation of Malaya. Meanwhile, the colonial regime had to confront resistance from another front, an insurgent guerrilla war led by the Malayan Communist Party. Nevertheless, a general election was held in 1955. It was won by an alliance of the United Malay National Organization, the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC); the Alliance

formed the first parliament. With the defeat of the Malayan Communist Party after a protracted, ten-year anti-insurgency campaign, Malaya was granted independence in 1957. Citizenship was granted to all who had been born there. Singapore, however, was retained by Britain as a crown colony in order to maintain its military presence, especially its naval base, in the Far East.

This left Singapore to fight for its own independence, a situation which was to have serious consequences for the nationalist aspirations of the Singaporeans. Here, the primary focus was the role of the Chinese majority. Anyone familiar with modern Singapore history would have read much about the left-leaning political activism of Chinese middle school students in the decolonization struggle. This left-wing activism was arguably the result of their “modernist” education in Mandarin schools. Due to colonial neglect, the Chinese took care of the education of their children; every Chinese residential community, including those in the “squatter” areas beyond the colonial city limits, had its own primary school. Secondary schools were less ubiquitous and drew students from a wider catchment area. After the Chinese republican revolution of 1911, Mandarin was adopted as the language of instruction, with school textbooks imported either from mainland China or from Taiwan. The language and content of the books reflected the progressive, modernist political and cultural sentiments of the time, making the students highly conscious of the discrimination they faced under the British colonial regime. Thus, when the colonial government proposed conscripting the students into its army to crush the insurgent Malayan Communist Party, which had a predominantly Chinese membership, the students revolted. They joined together with the emerging radical labour unions which were fighting against not only poor working conditions but also generalized social injustice to grow into a mass political movement against colonization.¹⁴

In 1954, the leaders of the students and union in turn joined hands with a group of British university-educated professionals to form the People’s Action Party (PAP), on the eve of the first limited-franchise local legislative elections. It was a partnership built as much on shared desires for decolonization as on political expediency; the former needed the

cover of the participation of professionals against possible proscription by the colonial regime, while the professionals needed the left to deliver mass electoral support. Such a partnership was destined to break apart once they had to reckon with their ideological differences. To cut a long story short, after the split, the radicals formed a new political party, *Barisan Sosialis*, and were immediately subjected to severe political repression. The most ignominious event, dubbed “Operation Cold Store” in 1963, occurred when more than one hundred left-wing leaders were arrested and detained without trial, some for more than a decade, for allegedly being members of the Communist Party and engaging in politically subversive activities, at the hands of their erstwhile PAP political partners under the leadership of Lee Kuan Yew.¹⁵ The history of this period continues to inspire critical examination by present-day artists, historians and political commentators. The exact nature of what transpired is unlikely to be settled without some kind of “truth and reconciliation” process in which the present inheritors of the PAP accept and apologise for the excessive use of the label “communist” to tar many innocent individuals at the time, causing great suffering for the affected individuals and their families.

Regardless of factionalism and other conflicts, the leadership across the entire political spectrum in Singapore was convinced that a small independent island-nation could not become a viable political and economic entity. Instead the independence of Singapore was seen as contingent upon its re-unification with Peninsula Malaya. From this angle, the decimation of the left, suspected of being a communist front, was a non-negotiable condition for the merger imposed by the Malaysian Prime Minister, Tengku Abudul Rahman.¹⁶ With the left destroyed, in 1963, Singapore, along with the small British colonial territories—Sarawak and North Borneo (Sabah)—on the large island of Borneo (Kalimantan, in Indonesian), joined with Malaya to constitute the federation of Malaysia. However, this hard-bargained partnership was not to last. Singapore left Malaysia in 1965 and became the previously unimaginable independent island city-state, which its political leaders had desperately wanted to avoid before.

Two Paradigmatic Paths for the Postcolonial Nation

Although a colonized society can be constituted by a mix of local indigenous people and a multi-ethnic population drawn from elsewhere, nationalism, as an emergent political force, could potentially embrace the entire population, regardless of origin. Nationalism thus provided the ideological and discursive space for the hitherto homeland-oriented immigrant communities, especially the descendants of the original migrants, to invest affectively in the land where they reside. The role of the Alliance of Malay, Chinese and Indian political parties in securing Malaya's independence serves as a demonstration of this type of postcolonial nationalism. We will take up the narrative of nationalism from the point where Singapore left the federation to become an independent island-nation.

Among the principal causes of Singapore's separation from Malaysia was the economic failure of a common market for its nascent industries, something Singapore was hoping to obtain from the merger. The second cause was political failure. There emerged a fundamental difference between the leaders of peninsular Malaya, now known as West Malaysia, and those of Singapore on the ethnic definition of the new nation. The difference first manifested itself when UMNO made an incursion in the 1963 Singapore general election. UNMO's Singapore branch, SUMNO, decided to contest the election in constituencies with a large Malay vote. During the campaign, SUMNO aggressively played up the issue of ethnicity, claiming that the PAP government had systematically discriminated against the Malay citizens of Singapore, including evicting the Malays from their village settlements [*kampong*] and forcing them to resettle in high-rise public housing estates. SUMNO's hope of winning these Malay votes were dashed when it lost each of the four contested seats to the People's Action Party. In retaliation, the PAP decided to contest the elections in Kuala Lumpur during the 1964 Malaysian federal elections, apparently breaking an earlier agreement that it would not do so, thus incurring the wrath of UMNO. During the election campaign, the PAP argued that the Malays, like other Malaysians, should be helped with education and training to improve their economic position, instead of being given greater access to economic opportunities, such as

government contracts, than other groups. It won only one seat out of the four it contested.

In the Malaysian federal government in Kuala Lumpur, the PAP was placed in opposition to the Alliance government. This development provided the political space for the PAP to establish common cause with the other opposition parties, forming the Malaysian Solidarity Convention, which emphasized the formal equality of all the citizens of the nation-state by invoking a “Malaysian Malaysia.” This slogan, which drove home the PAP’s 1964 stance against awarding privileges to the Malay population, directly contradicted and challenged the idea of a “Malay Malaysia,” the insistence of the UMNO that Malaysia will always be the homeland of the Malays. The idea of Malaysia as the homeland of the Malays was inscribed ideologically in the concept of Malays as “sons of the soil” [*bumiputra*], i.e. the indigenous inhabitants and the owners of the land, and in the concept of “Malay dominance” or “Malay supremacy” [*ketuanan Malayu*]. These ideas constituted the ideological fundament of a postcolonial Malay ethno-nationalism. In 1964, the differences between the two conceptions of Malaysia were extensively articulated in the federal parliament by Lee Kuan Yew, who was then serving as the leader of the opposition.¹⁷ As a result of this ideological dispute, the PAP was constantly castigated as “enemies” to the political stability of Malaysia. The racial overtones were unmistakable. Dr Mohamad Mahathir, who was to become the longest-serving Prime Minister of Malaysia (1981-2003; 2018-2020), suggested that the Chinese and their leaders in Singapore were “not accustomed to Malay rule” and “couldn’t bear the idea that the people they have so long kept under their heels should now be in a position to rule them,” making reference to the apparent disparities in wealth between the Chinese and the Malays.¹⁸ Other UMNO leaders urged Lee to secede from Malaysia if he could not stomach Malay rule. Meanwhile, the racial tensions roused by the elections in 1964 became so elevated that it ignited outbreaks of ethnic violence in Singapore. The explosion of racial violence was probably the last straw contributing to the final separation of Singapore from Malaysia in 1965.

Two New Nations: Two Different Trajectories

The history of the uncomfortable three-year alliance is theoretically instructive for the analysis of the postcolonial politics of new nations. The rival definitions of “Malaysia” serve as paradigmatic paths to postcolonial state formation. The first takes as non-negotiable the ethno-nationalist claims of the indigenous people, whereby their political ownership of the nation, along with all the privileges that this implies, serves to relegate other groups to a secondary form of citizenship. In the second definition, citizenship represents a bundle of rights which the state can deploy on a flexible basis to privilege the legal and political rights of select groups or individuals or to discriminate against particular groups or individuals.¹⁹ In the worst case scenario, of course, these groups or individuals might be denied the rights of citizenship altogether and continue to be treated as immigrants who are allowed to remain in the new nation only through the leniency of the new government. At its most inclusive, the second definition recognizes the postcolonial nation as constituted by a multi-ethnic population and adopts the civic republican conception of nationhood which extends to its people equal rights to citizenship. The choice to adopt one or other of the paths seems to turn on the ethno-demographic composition of the population at the moment of political independence. The former path tends to be preferred where the indigenous people constitutes the majority of the population, whereas the latter path tends to be chosen by settler societies where the descendants of immigrant stock are the demographic majority. The cases of Malaysia and Singapore provide paradigmatic illustrations of these divergent paths.

A Malay Malaysia

The British had governed peninsular Malaya largely through a divisive form of indirect rule, retaining the local Sultanate as the symbolic political centre. As mentioned earlier, the Malay Union proposal, which attempted to develop a “united” Malaya as a single colony, met with resistance because of its apparently “generous” policy of granting citizenship to non-indigenous, migrant peoples. Upon independence,

however, citizenship was granted to all local-born individuals and to those individuals who had resided in the country continuously for ten or more years. At the time, Malays constituted a slight majority of the population and the Malay nationalists consequently accepted, out of necessity, a partnership in government with the Chinese and local Indian populations, through the three ethnic-based parties of UMNO, MCA and MIC, known as the Alliance. After the formation of Malaysia, the other indigenous peoples in East Malaysia were added to the concept of “sons of the soil” [*bumiputra*], the indigenous people. Nevertheless, the Malays in West Malaysia remained the primary claimants of the new nation.

In the aftermath of the general election of 10 May 1969 in West Malaysia, the issue of Malay political dominance re-emerged. The multi-ethnic political parties, *Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia* (Gerakan) and the Democratic Action Party (DAP), which campaigned explicitly against the idea of indigenous privileges, made very significant parliamentary gains and thereby deprived the Alliance of its constitutionally-significant two-thirds majority in parliament for the first time since independence in 1957. During the UMNO victory rally on 13 May, three days after the election, a full-scale racial riot broke out, with deaths estimated in the hundreds. A state of emergency was thereupon declared.²⁰ Parliament was reconvened in September 1970 with very significant changes in the political and economic landscape. The Alliance expanded into a new *Barisan Nasional* (BN/National Front), incorporating several smaller political parties, with UMNO as the dominant partner. An economic affirmative action plan, the New Economic Policy (NEP), was introduced, aiming at increasing the share of the Malays in the public sector in view of the economically dominant position of the ethnic Chinese in the private-sector economy.²¹ The NEP quickly became an institution of political and economic patronage, in which individuals with political connections made massive financial gains, corrupting the original intention of wealth redistribution among the Malays.

After the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, the political reaction against UMNO and BN, intensified. A call for political and economic reform, led by the Ousted Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim, brought all oppositional elements, including many NGOs, to coalesce into a

Reformasi Movement.²² A new multi-ethnic political party, *Parti Keadilan* (Justice Party), Drs Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, the wife of Deputy Prime Minister Anwar, was established, and quickly became the primary party of opposition. Since then, the UMNO/BN government has seen massive protests at every election calling for a “clean” vote.²³ Finally, in 2018, largely as a consequence of widespread anger against the massive corruption scandal surrounding the incumbent Prime Minister, Najib Razak, a coalition of opposition parties known as the *Pakatan Harapan* (PH), under the leadership of former Prime Minister Mohamad Mahathir, who was prompted by the scandal to come out of retirement, disposed of the UMNO/BN government, terminating UMNO’s sixty-year dominance in Malaysian politics.

UMNO/BN’s defeat by a coalition of multi-ethnic political parties raised the red flag for ethnic Malay and Muslim leaders, who feared the demise of Malay dominance in their own homeland, along with the waning of Islam as the common religion of the Malays. This has led to UMNO joining hands with the leading Islamic party, *Parti Si-Islam Malaysia* (PAS), to form a united Malay-Muslim political force aiming at maintaining Malay political dominance. Malay political supremacy has thus taken on an additional religious element and morphed into a form of Malay ethno-religious nationalism. Meanwhile, in addition to significantly reduced access to higher education, civil service jobs and government contracts, the Malaysian-Chinese and Malaysian-Indian populations have had to endure extremist Malays occasionally taunting them to “return to where they came from.” In general, the taken-for-granted vernacular cosmopolitanism of the colonial period has all but disappeared. Fortunately, the ethno-demographic composition and its spatial distribution still requires the Malay-centred political parties to work with the ethnic Chinese population if they want to form a national government. For example, in a crucial by-election in November 2019, the UMNO-PAS coalition fielded an ethnic Chinese candidate from the MCA, and decisively beat the incumbent government candidate.²⁴ However, all aspirations for a “post-racial,” multi-ethnic Malaysia seem to be more remote now than in the immediate years of political independence; such a vision now appears to be an ever-receding political horizon.

What is more, such ethno-religious nationalist developments can be found elsewhere in Asia. Unlike the until-now peaceful tensions evident in the Malaysian situation, many of these other instances are marked by violence, including the ethnic cleansing of entire districts. Three prominent instances of ethno-religious nationalist violence may be cited: first, the emergence of Sinhalese-Buddhist ethno-religious nationalism in Sri Lanka which led to a violent civil war between the Sinhalese and the Tamils, concentrated in the northeast of the island-nation; second, the campaign of genocidal violence undertaken by the Burmese Buddhist nationalists against the Tamil-Muslim Rohingya, concentrated in the Rakhine province of Myanmar, which has created hundreds of thousands of refugees; and finally, the rise of Hindu nationalism in India, purportedly the world's largest democracy and one that is intensely proud of its liberal constitution, which likewise targets a Muslim minority.²⁵ That all these instances of the rise of ethno-religious nationalism, directed against the nation-state's own ethnic and religious minorities, are happening decades after political independence serves to underscore that such pernicious nationalist sentiments can lay dormant for years under the surface of an apparently hard-earned multi-ethnic political and social consensus.

Singapore: A Multi-Racial Settler Nation

The other strategy of postcolonial state formation is that of a settler nation, such as Singapore. Singapore differs from the European settler nations of Australia, Canada and the United States of America in several ways. First, settlement in Singapore did not involve the decimation of the indigenous people. Nor are the descendants of the indigenous people confined on reservations, even though the Malay population remains relatively economically disadvantaged in comparison with the dominant Chinese population. Second, the Chinese demographic majority in the postcolonial nation are not descendants of the colonizing Europeans but are instead themselves formerly colonized subjects of immigrant stock. Third, there is no policy that has obliged the minorities to assimilate into the majority culture of the Chinese. Arguments regarding the

“sinicization” of minorities are misplaced since they misrecognize the demand for the inculcation of competitive capitalist attitudes and values as essentially “Singaporean-Chinese.” The political constitution of the postcolonial Singapore nation-state is complicated by these issues.

Being of immigrant stock, the majority ethnic Chinese population had no proprietary rights to the land; thus, they could not legitimately establish a new ethno-Chinese nation. Furthermore, being geographically a part of the Malay World, the neighbouring nations would not have accepted an ethno-Chinese nation in their midst with equanimity. In deference to their regional origins, the Malays in Singapore were constitutionally recognized as the indigenous people, accorded certain privileges as well as a guarantee that the independent government would pay particular attention to the Malay community’s welfare. For their part, the Malays were a demographic minority and unable to form a government. The potential conundrum of a politics of Chinese dominance over a subordinate Malay people, fraught with potential political racial tensions, was avoided by the presence of a small but not insignificant South Asian population, who were generically labelled, in an act of political expediency, “Indians.” Their presence enabled the new nation to be constituted as a “multiracial” nation, with the equality among the races constitutionally enshrined. The PAP government had ideologically transformed geopolitical necessity into the national virtues of multiracialism, multiculturalism and multi-religiosity. By constitutionally guaranteeing the equality of each racial group, the Singapore government was able to insulate itself from the racially-specific claims of each group by structurally placing itself above them, to better police any manifestation of racial politics. Since the state has not been captured by any particular racial group, it can make claims to act “equitably” as the independent umpire in the distribution of material and immaterial resources and adjudicate disputes among the three visible races fairly, regardless of their relative demographic strength.²⁶

With many Singaporean public policies based on equality of race—such as an equal number of ethnic-cum-religious public holidays and “mother-tongue” language requirements for all primary and secondary students—one might expect that the vernacular cosmopolitanism of

the colonial era could be preserved and perpetuated in the new nation. Indeed, traces of the embedded aspects of vernacular cosmopolitanism, such as the hybridity of hawker foods previously mentioned, have continued to be practiced. Ironically, and unfortunately, however, the formalization of multiracialism has had the unintended effect of explicitly emphasising racial differences, which are moreover compounded by religious differences, thereby widening social distances between the three visible racial groups. Official multiracialism has arguably hardened the boundaries between the races and amplified their cultural differences, at the expense of the cultural interactions associated with vernacular multiculturalism and its cosmopolitan tendencies.

On the whole, vernacular cosmopolitanism has waned as Singapore has progressively embedded itself into global capitalism. To enable both industrialization and economic growth, English was retained by the postcolonial state as the language of public administration and commerce. While this decision helped speed up the building of primary and secondary schools with English as the primary medium of instruction, the economic advantages of an English education has caused parents to abandon other language schools. By the mid-1970s, the vast network of Mandarin schools had been severely reduced and the Malay and Tamil schools all but disappeared. A standardized English-medium national school system was established, with the ethnic languages taught as “mother-tongues” or rather as second languages. Marginalized in the economy and the schools, these ethnic languages have been progressively replaced by English in Singaporean homes also, to the point where it has been suggested that English should now itself be considered a Singaporean mother-tongue.²⁷ As modern capitalist consumerism and its invented festivals and celebrations take hold of the increasingly affluent and globally-exposed English-educated Singaporeans, ethnic cultural practices are becoming increasingly alien to them. This is illustrated by the strange re-naming of Chinese festivals such as the “Hungry Ghost Festival Month,” the “Moon Cake Festival,” and the “Dragon Boat Festival,” in which the historical and cultural meanings of each of these Chinese festivals have in effect been erased. Significantly, it should be noted that Muslim and Hindu festivals have not been subjected to the

same demeaning form of re-naming.

In the place of local vernacular cosmopolitanism, a new meaning for cosmopolitanism has emerged. This new cosmopolitanism is embraced by, especially, the English-educated, politically-liberal, globally-travelled and globally-marketable Singaporeans, a cosmopolitanism that is unanchored to its own ethnic cultures but is more open to the world, one that transcends local values to embrace “universal” human values as reflected in their championing of liberal human rights. In the local context, these new cosmopolitans are identified, often disparagingly, as the most “Westernised” Singaporeans. Indeed, the government has identified and contrasted these emergent cosmopolitans with the “rest” of its citizens, namely the working class, as domestic “heartlanders.”²⁸

One consequence of this expanding “modernist” cosmopolitanism is the elevation of Singaporean citizenship over ethnic identity. In a 2013 survey, 79% of the 4000 respondents identified themselves as Singaporeans first rather than as members of a particular racial group.²⁹ Indeed, in recent years, there is now a palpable sense of antagonism from Singaporeans in the public sphere towards new immigrant arrivals, regardless of their ethnic cultural affinities. With economic expansion, there have been larger-than-usual waves of economic migrants, largely from the rest of Asia but also from the West. There is also a palpable divide between the local Chinese and new Chinese immigrants as well as one between the local Indians and new Indian arrivals.³⁰ Furthermore, there is a tendency for Singaporeans to close ranks and show their national solidarity against the apparent “misbehaviour” of the new immigrants whenever the latter are seen to differ from local cultural practices. For example, it was reported that when a new Chinese immigrant objected to his Singaporean-Indian neighbour’s cooking of curry, a group of Singaporeans responded by initiating a national “share-a-curry-day.” The outcry of Singaporean citizens against a female ethnic Chinese-Australian citizen’s disparaging remarks regarding noise from a local Malay wedding in her residential neighbourhood resulted in her being fired by her employer, the National Trades Union Congress, where she was an executive officer. Obviously, with the emergence of a Singaporean identity, in these and other instances that

pit Singaporean citizens against non-citizens, the concept of citizenship will trump all other identity markers, thus reducing room for the concept of multiculturalism and its cosmopolitan entailments. In these same instances, the new middle-class liberal cosmopolitans may be said to have failed in their foundational cosmopolitan values, which can be traced to Kant who, according to Cheah, was “the true inaugurator of modern cosmopolitanism,” in urging hospitality and kindness to strangers.³¹

Conclusion

This essay has sought to demonstrate two paradigmatic trajectories of postcolonial nation-state formation and their negative effects on cosmopolitanism. Colonial territories were spaces in which migrants from different points of the globe gathered to pursue their individual economic interests. The migrants saw themselves as sojourners whose intention was to return eventually to their homeland, after making good financially. Although formally a space that accommodated all arrivals, the colonial territory was not a place for affective investment and subject formation; i.e. the colonial space could never become a true “place” for its residents. The mixing of the different peoples in the daily, mundane transactions across ethnic and cultural boundaries engendered among the residents what might be called a “vernacular cosmopolitanism,” i.e. an openness towards and acceptance of difference that was not accompanied by any deep interest in the culture of the other. With decolonization and political independence, this colonial space came, for all its residents, indigenous and migrant alike, to possess the potential as an object for their emotional investment as citizen-subjects. However, emergent nationalism tended to be destructive of this vernacular cosmopolitanism in two paradigmatic ways. First, the indigenous people who (re)claimed the postcolonial nation as their own were inclined to exclude the non-indigenous peoples in their midst from full citizenship through the ideology of ethno-nationalism, intensified by religious solidarity where and when indigenous ethnicity coincided with religious practice. Second, even when multiculturalism of the colonial era was apparently preserved, the emergent nationalism tended to elevate

a narrow definition of citizenship above cosmopolitan dispositions among the postcolonial citizens of new nation-states towards the groups of newly arrived others, engendering varying degrees of xenophobic reaction. Postcolonial Malaysia and postcolonial Singapore afford us paradigmatic examples of the possible evolutions of plural societies of the colonial period possessing vernacular cosmopolitan cultures in two quite different postcolonial nation-states where rising nationalism, accompanied by the privileging of citizenship, have effectively displaced the vernacular cosmopolitanism of the past.

Notes

¹ See J.S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948).

² For the first point, see Homi K. Bhabha, "Unsatisfied: Notes on Vernacular Cosmopolitanism", in *Text and Nation*, eds. Laura Garcia-Morena and Peter C. Pfeifer (London: Camden House 1996), 191-207; for the second, see Prina Werbner, "Vernacular Cosmopolitanism," *Theory, Culture and Society* 23, no. 2-3 (2005): 496-98.

³ See Tan Tai Yong, *Creating Greater Malaysia: Decolonization and the Politics of Merger* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies Press, 2008) and Albert Lau, *A Moment of Anguish: Singapore in Malaysia and Politics of Disengagement* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1998).

⁴ See Mushi Abdullah, *The Hikayat Abdullah* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1970).

⁵ Kwa Chong Guan et al., *Seven Hundred Years: A History of Singapore* (Singapore: National Library Board, 2019).

⁶ Imran Tajudeen, "From Riau to Singapore 1700-1870: Trade Ports and Urban Histories," in *Singapore Dreaming: Mapping Utopia*, eds. H. Koon Wee and J. Chia (Singapore: Asian Urban Lab, 2016), 102-26.

⁷ I owe this insight to Nala Lim, my colleague, in the Department of English Language and Literature, at the National University of Singapore.

⁸ Chua Beng Huat and Ananda Rajah, "Hybridity, Ethnicity and Food in Singapore," in *Changing Chinese Foodways in Asia*, eds. David Y.H. Wu and Tan Chee Beng (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2001), 161-200.

⁹ Chua Beng Huat, "Culture, Multiracialism and National Identity," in *Trajectories: Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, ed. Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1998), 186-205.

¹⁰ Hong Lysa and Huang Jianli, "Imagining a Big Singapore: Positioning the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall," in *The Scripting of a National History: Singapore and its Pasts* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008), 181-204.

¹¹ See Syed Muhd Kairudin Aljunied, *Radicals: Resistance and Protest in Colonial Malaya* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2015) and Timothy Barnard and Jan van der Putten, "Malay Cosmopolitan Activism in Post-war Singapore," in *Paths Not Taken: Political Pluralism in Post-war Singapore*, eds. Michael D. Barr and Carl A. Trocki (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2008), 132-53.

¹² Yong Mun Cheong, *The Indonesian Revolution and the Singapore Connection: 1945-1949* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003).

¹³ See William R. Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism* (Singapore: University of Malaya Press, 1967) and Ariffin Omar, *Bangsa Melayu: Malay Concepts of Democracy and Community, 1945-1950* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1993).

¹⁴ M. Fernandez and Loh Kah Seng, "The Left-Wing Trade Unions in Singapore: 1945-1970," in *Paths Not Taken: Political Pluralism in Post-War Singapore*, eds. Michael Barr and Carl A. Trocki (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2008), 206-27.

¹⁵ Poh Soo Kai, Tan Kok Fang and Hong Lysa, eds., *The 1963 Operation Coldstore in Singapore: Commemorating 50 Years* (Kuala Lumpur: Strategic Information and Development Centre, 2013).

¹⁶ Tan Tai Yong, *The Idea of Singapore: Smallness Unconstrained* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2020), 134.

¹⁷ See Lee Kuan Yew, *The Battle for a Malaysian Malaysia* (Singapore: Ministry of Culture, 1964).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 20

¹⁹ Aihwa Ong, "Flexible Citizenship among Chinese Cosmopolitans," in *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation*, eds. Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1998), 134-62.

²⁰ See Goh Cheng Teck, *The May 13 Incident and Democracy in Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1971).

²¹ Terence Gomez and Johan Savaranamuttu, *The New Economic Policy in Malaysia: Affirmative Action, Ethnic Inequalities and Social Justice* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2013).

²² Khoo Boo Teik, *Beyond Mahathir: Malaysia Politics and its Discontents* (London: Zed Books, 2003).

²³ Joanne B.Y. Lim, "Enduring Civil Resistance: Social Media and Mob Tactics in Malaysia," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 20, no. 2 (2017): 209-27.

²⁴ See the account in Shannon Teoh, "Crushing By-Election Defeat Piles Pressure on Mahathir," *Straits Times*, November 18, 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/crushing-by-election-defeat-piles-pressure-on-mahathir>.

²⁵ Ramesh Thankur, "Modi's project to make a Hindu India," *East Asia Forum*, December 30, 2019, accessed January 6, 2020, https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2019/12/30/modis-project-to-make-a-hindu-india/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=newsletter2020-01-05.

²⁶ Chua Beng Huat, "Governing Race: Multiracialism and Social Stability," in

Liberalism Disavowed: Communitarianism and State Capitalism in Singapore (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press and Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017), 123-56.

²⁷ Margaret Chan, "English, Mother Tongue and the Singapore Identity," *Straits Times*, January 2, 2020, accessed January 22, 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/english-mother-tongue-and-the-spore-identity>.

²⁸ Goh Chok Tong, "National Rally Speech," *Singapore Government Press Release*, August 22, 1999, accessed January 6, 2020, <https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdffdoc/1999082202.htm>.

²⁹ Mathew Mathews, "The State and Implication of Our Differences: Insights from the IPS Survey on Race, Religion and Language," in *Singapore Perspectives 2014: Differences*, eds. Mathew Mathews, Christopher Gee and Chiang Wai Fong (Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies, 2014), 109.

³⁰ Chan Heng Chee and Sharon Siddique, *Singapore's Multiculturalism: Evolving Diversity* (London: Routledge, 2019).

³¹ Cheah Pheng, "Cosmopolitanism," *Theory, Culture and Society* 22, no. 2-3 (2005): 487.

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