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## Map, Census, Museum: Imaging the Malaysian Nation-State and the Malay Identity

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**MAP, CENSUS, MUSEUM: IMAGINING THE MALAYSIAN NATION-STATE AND  
THE MALAY IDENTITY**

An Honors Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History

Colby College

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of Bachelor of Arts

By

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Waterville, Maine

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## MAP



Map of Southeast Asia, provided by the Nations Online Project

## INTRODUCTION

The nation-state of Malaysia is in the midst of a new dawn in the year 2023. After immense political upheaval in the country, the cabinet of Malaysia's current Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim was formed on December 3, 2022, effectively establishing the first semblance of a "unity government," a form of governance otherwise unfamiliar to the country.<sup>1</sup> The formation of the Ibrahim cabinet, however, followed a period of political upheaval. Prior to the cabinet's formation, Malaysia had experienced a two-year-long political crisis that occurred in the aftermath of the collapse of the Pakatan Harapan (the Alliance for Hope) government in February 2020. The Pakatan Harapan had, two years prior, defeated the Barisan Nasional (the National Front), the coalition that, when amalgamated with its predecessor Parti Perikatan (the Alliance Party), had been in legislative control of the country since its independence in 1957.<sup>2</sup> In doing so, the Pakatan Harapan managed to claim the majority in the Dewan Rakyat, Malaysia's lower house of its federal legislature, in an incredible political upset that effectively unseated the majority party that had ruled Malaysia for the entirety of its existence.<sup>3</sup>

Whilst this political turmoil is certainly demonstrative of the political swings that have occurred in the Malaysian government in recent years, there lies a broader issue at hand. The Barisan Nasional, along with its predecessor, Parti Perikatan, has consistently garnered popular support from the national political parties that represent the interests of the ethnic Malay demographic, particularly the United Malays National Organization (or UMNO). A party predominately predicated around racial identity, UMNO's primary objectives are to uphold the aspirations of Malay nationalism, propagate the racial concept of *Ketuanan Melayu* (Malay

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<sup>1</sup> Meredith L. Weiss, "Malaysia's Changed Electoral Landscape," *S. Rajaratnam School Of International Studies* (2023): 1.

<sup>2</sup> Chin-Huat Wong and Kee Beng Ooi, "Introduction: How Did Malaysia End UMNO's 61 Years of One-Party Rule? What's Next?" *The Round Table* 107, no. 6 (2018): 661.

<sup>3</sup> Weiss, "Malaysia's Changed Electoral Landscape," 1.

supremacy), and further elevate the Malay race, the religion of Islam, and the national territory as privileged identities and markers of nationality. In effect, the party strives to promote Malay culture as the national culture and to further promulgate Islam across Malaysia.<sup>4</sup> With ethnic interest largely driving the political economy of Malaysia over the past fifty years, Malaysian policymaking has largely been focused on addressing inter-ethnic inequality cultivated during colonial-era development.<sup>5</sup> This has precipitated a conflation of ethnicity with nationalism, a trend not unique to Malaysia, especially when considering the importance ethnicity has in most modern nationalisms. Despite this dynamic between ethnicity and the contemporary discourse surrounding nationalisms, the concept of ethnicity has been grappled with substantially in the region long before the emergence of the Malaysian nation-state itself. This begs the question: what is modern nationalism truly constructed around when the national history of a nation-state like Malaysia only dates back about a century? Likewise, how can earlier developments in the region be incorporated into Malaysian national history without invoking ethnic or social division amongst those who live in the nation-state today?

The country that is now widely understood to be Malaysia only emerged as a nation-state in the middle of the twentieth century. Having officially declared itself independent from British colonial rule on August 31, 1957, the then-Federation of Malaya, which previously was mostly composed of the Malay Peninsula, ultimately absorbed Singapore, Sarawak, and Sabah to form the nation-state of Malaysia on September 16, 1963. However, due to substantial alterations to the territorial framing of the region prior to the implementation of colonial and post-colonial boundaries, a diverse range of ethnicities populating the region, and an incomprehensive grasp on the historical development of the region prior to the 15th century, contestation over who can

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<sup>4</sup> Wong and Ooi, "Introduction: How Did Malaysia End UMNO's 61 Years of One-Party Rule?" 661.

<sup>5</sup> Meredith L. Weiss, "Addressing Inequality In Malaysia," *Democracy In Asia* (2022): 83.

lay claim to the Malay national identity has introduced additional questions about how to properly contextualize the historical past and the peoples that have featured in these historical narratives as *Malay*. Thus, this thesis strives to sift through this complex matter, particularly in the wake of colonial constructs.

As the case study of Malaysia demonstrates, defining what a ‘nation’ is remains a complicated matter. Historians have been and remain challenged to provide objective explanations as to what ‘nation-ness’ entails and how the concept of “nation” can be reasonably applied across historical and multicultural landscapes, particularly when the nation in question is a multiethnic state with consistently redrawn boundaries that has only been defined as a nation-state, a term that emerged in the twentieth century, for less than a century, yet refers to a historical past well before its inception. On a similar note, the invocation of national identity - the very proclamation of nationality - remains a difficult concept to grapple with, particularly given that essentially every contemporary nation-state, Malaysia included, is predicated by the people that lay claim to the territory. For that reason, the question of what is a nation and who can derive nationality from what is conceived to be a nation has been engaged significantly, with more contemporary postulations largely revolving around imperial and post-colonial impressions of the geopolitical world. In the case of Malaysia, a multiethnic state with a history muddled with colonialism and territorial fluctuation, all of these debates are pertinent and ongoing.

The predominant issue in reconciling the concept of nation-states with regional histories that predate the given nation-states themselves is that the concept of the nation, in contemporary discourse, is a relatively modern phenomenon. Scholarship has explored the origin of the nation-state substantially, highlighting the promulgation of ideas that emerged in sixteenth-century Europe and continued to develop through a wave of nationalist revolutions in

the eighteenth century as the primary driving force behind the invention of the “nation” as a concept.<sup>6</sup> The Peace of Westphalia in 1648, in particular, elevated these ideas into prominent discourse, largely due to the introduction of Westphalian sovereignty. A principle that considers the sovereignty of the nation-state to be based on territoriality and enshrines the absence of a role for external agents in domestic structures, the rise of Westphalian sovereignty laid the substantial groundwork for the embrace of nation-states as a unitary means to analyze states within the scope of classic liberalism.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, it effectively established a vision for an international system of states, laying the framework for the contemporary geopolitical order.<sup>8</sup> These ideas would be embraced further with the rise of liberalism in the nineteenth century and its evolution into the revised contemporary political movement of neoliberalism in the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> Most scholarship pertaining to Asian and African post-colonial nationalisms focuses attention on the twentieth century as the era of the emergence of nation-states and nationalisms in conjunction with anti-colonial struggles, including the rise of Malaysia in the wake of centuries of colonial presence in the Peninsula.

One of the many who have grappled with these principles of nation-ness and nationalisms was Karl Marx. While Marx did not necessarily offer a finite definition for what he perceived the nation to be, he delved substantially into the notion of nationalism and the role it serves in the broader international system. Theorists of classical liberalism have frequently echoed Marxian interpretations, latching onto particular facets of his work to formulate more concrete definitions for ‘nations,’ which has led most to define the nation as a subgroup of civil society.<sup>10</sup> Economist

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Hill and Kwen Fee Sian, *The Politics of Nation Building and Citizenship in Singapore*, (London: Routledge, 2013): 2.

<sup>7</sup> Leo Gross, “The Peace of Westphalia,” *The American Journal of International Law* 42, no. 1 (1948): 40.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein, “Liberalism and the Legitimation of Nation-States: An Historical Interpretation,” *Social Justice* 19, no. 1 (47) (1992): 22 - 33.

<sup>10</sup> Jesús Huerta de Soto, “A Theory Of Liberal Nationalism,” *Il Politico* 60, no. 4 (175) (1995): 584.

Jesús Huerta de Soto, applying Marx's frameworks, postulated that a nation can be defined as follows: "... a spontaneous and living order of human interactions, which is constituted by a determined series of guided behaviours of a cultural, linguistic, historical, religious and, with much less importance, racial nature."<sup>11</sup> De Soto's definition emphasizes that the predominant facet of national identity is a shared language, which acts as one of the "behavioral habits" that can be used to best summarize the "national essence" of a group of people bound by national identity.<sup>12</sup> The invocation of nationalism became particularly paramount during the era of the Cold War, with nationalism itself being cited as the precipitating factor for the demise of colonial regimes in Asia and Africa, which signaled a powerful rejection of interventionism and centralizing statism. In the context of the modern neoliberal order, the nation has been viewed as an "irreplaceable element of equilibrium to combat the interventionist and [centralizing] trends..."<sup>13</sup>

As demonstrated by the likes of de Soto's scholarship, contemporary liberal impressions of the nation as a concept have been undeniably shaped by Karl Marx. However, Marx's initial theories have been criticized for not precisely conceptualizing nations and nationalities, failing to clearly distinguish between "nations" and "nationalities."<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, Marx's assessments do not distinguish his theoretical frameworks from his tactical pronouncements. Marx and Engel, in their shared publications, largely fail to reconcile the phenomenon of multinational empires, falling into the trap of conflating nationality with the nation itself.<sup>15</sup> Thus, historians have been left to ask the question: how can we understand countries like Malaysia, many of which, in their predecessor states, possess diverse histories prior to their emergence as nation-states when the

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<sup>11</sup> de Soto, "A Theory Of Liberal Nationalism," 584.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 583.

<sup>14</sup> Joseph A. Petrus, "Marx and Engels on the National Question," *The Journal of Politics* 33, no. 3 (1971): 802.

<sup>15</sup> Petrus, "Marx and Engels on the National Question," 802.

predominant definitions of nation-ness and the invoked sense of nationality rely so heavily on the Marxist explanation? Enter Benedict Anderson.

In 1983, in an attempt to analyze nationalism beyond the scope of Marxist or liberal theory, political scientist and historian Benedict Anderson postulated a theory that nations and nationalism are products of modernity, created as a means of attaining particular political and economic ends. Despite acknowledging the difficulty in defining the nation, nationality, and nationalism, Anderson proposed an explanation for the nation, stating it to be, at its core, a socially-constructed community, imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of a group.<sup>16</sup> Anderson explicitly defines a nation as “an imagined political community... imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.”<sup>17</sup> Anderson argues that the nation is “imagined” because, “... the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”<sup>18</sup> Anderson’s framework, arguably a variant of social constructionism, expands upon the “imagined geographies” theory first postulated by Edward Said, particularly in his seminal work *Orientalism*. Anderson’s work is reflective of other modernist scholars of nationalism beyond Said as well, with much of the theory of “imagined communities” aligning with the thinking of Ernest Gellner, who stated the following thesis: “Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist.”<sup>19</sup>

The works of Anderson, Gellner, and Said, when proposed in tandem, reveal the imaginative basis behind the very concept of nations, which opens the door for more critical reflection upon the practicality behind constructing such a unit of analysis, and the pitfalls of

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<sup>16</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006): 3.

<sup>17</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ernest Gellner, *Thought and Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965): 169.



attempting to examine their historical application. Recognizing how prominent the moniker of ‘nation’ has grown in contemporary times, Anderson makes the assertion that ‘nation-ness’ is “the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time.”<sup>20</sup> With nations operating as the most politically substantive measure to which a community could realistically aspire to be distinguished, there remains a deep-rooted focus on defining given territories of people with shared tangible identities as part of a nation. However, as Anderson contends, nation-ness and its inherent imaginative processes of constructing nationalism and nationality remain “cultural artifacts of a particular kind.”<sup>21</sup>

Using Anderson’s concept of “imagined communities” in the context of Malaysia, it can be recognized that Malaysia, like many other nation-states in Southeast Asia, has largely developed based on its inhabitants’ internally and externally perceived relation to a particularly defined Malay identity - albeit a heavily contested identity - and the spatiality invoked through the construction of “nation-ness.” Anderson points to three “institutions of power” to support his thesis, explaining that, despite being invented prior to the mid-nineteenth century, the census, map, and museum were all paramount in the imagination of the nation-state as colonized zones entered into the age of mechanical reproduction. In effect, these three institutions of power facilitated the imagination of national identity and national perception of the territory, who laid claim to it, and how history was to be used to legitimize particular claims of nationalism.<sup>22</sup> This thesis largely strives to apply Anderson’s specific concentration on these three colonial practices to examine how imagined constructions of nationhood and national history have aided in the invention of the ethnic Malay identity that exists at the core of contemporary ethnic and political contestation in the nation today.

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<sup>20</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 3.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 163 - 164.



Figure 1: Borders of Malaysia <sup>23</sup>

As will be further discussed in the following chapters, the territorial parameters of the region that ultimately progressed to become contemporary Malaysia have transformed tremendously. As depicted in Figure 1, contemporary Malaysia is composed of thirteen federated states, eleven of which are located on the Malay Peninsula to the west, while the remaining two, Sabah and Sarawak, are located to the east on the island of Borneo. However, these contemporary boundaries fail to account for the sprawling kingdoms, sultanates, and colonial territories of the past, all of which ultimately shaped Malaysia as smaller portion of the larger Malay world, as a political and cultural area, extends beyond the scope of Malaysia.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Borders of Malaysia. (2021, October 20). In *Wikipedia*. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Borders\\_of\\_Malaysia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Borders_of_Malaysia)

<sup>24</sup> Anthony Milner, *Kerajaan: Malay political culture on the eve of colonial rule*, (Association for Asian Studies, 1982): 112.

While the evolution of territorial demarcation and colonial reshaping of the region was impactful in numerous tangible ways, Malayness also features prominently in the ethnic contestation of the nation-state today, with ethnicity largely seeping into the discourse surrounding what Malay nationalism is defined as. This social stratification has facilitated a persistent contention amongst a handful of Malaysian-born people as to which demographic has the most claim to the Malay identity. The question of which identity is most proximate to the idealized Malay identity remains largely defined by the perception that indigenous identities are most closely connected to the history and culture of the Malay world and how it has evolved territorially. However, as this thesis seeks to uncover, Malay identity has evolved over time in complicated ways. As the following chapters will discuss, there exists substantial contention surrounding the tracing of lineage to a perceived ancestral Malay identity, with those able to trace their lineage back to the *Melayu* population that lived during the Malacca Sultanate, who spoke Malay as a first language, and pledged loyalty to the sultan often being regarded as most closely aligned with the contemporary national identity in Malaysia.<sup>25</sup>

Much of modern understandings of ethnicity and indigeneity in Malaysia is shaped by the histories of the people that first migrated into the territory, known as the *Orang Asal* (Malay for “original people”). One of the most prominent groups discussed in this particular thesis is the *Orang Asli* people, a heterogeneous indigenous population that constitutes a national minority in Malaysia, with a population size of 206,777 in 2020.<sup>26</sup> The *Orang Asli* are considered to be the oldest inhabitants of Peninsular Malaysia.<sup>27</sup> The name *Orang Asli*, which translates aptly to “aborigine,” is, in fact, a collection of indigenous identities, with 18 culturally distinct groups

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<sup>25</sup> Timothy P. Barnard, *Contesting Malayness: Malay identity across boundaries* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2006): 5.

<sup>26</sup> Nicholas, Colin. “Indigenous World 2020: Malaysia.” *IWGIA*.

<sup>27</sup> Kirk Endicott, *Malaysia's Original People: Past, Present and Future of the Orang Asli*, (Singapore: NUS Press, 2015): 1.

being recognized by the Malaysian government.<sup>28</sup> The boundaries between the groups that comprise the *Orang Asli* are not fixed, with substantial overlapping occurring amongst sub-identities, and the *Orang Asli* themselves do not necessarily identify themselves as *Orang Asli* in name, instead using names associated with their specific area or by a local term meaning 'human being'.<sup>29</sup>

In modern times, the *Orang Asli* have broadly been categorized as members of the constitutionally-protected group known as the *Bumiputera*.<sup>30</sup> The term *Bumiputera* translates to “sons (and daughters) of [the] soil,” which heavily denotes the indigenous status of this particular demographic of Malay people.”<sup>31</sup> The categorization, which emerged following independence and reflected state-imposed ethnic categorizations heavily influenced by colonial classification of the Malay people, has effectively become the predominant marker of indigeneity (a term to be used cautiously considering its overtly political implications) in understandings of ethnicity in Malaysia.<sup>32</sup> Although the *Orang Asli* account for less than 1 percent of the population of Malaysia, their assimilation into the broader *Bumiputera* classification demonstrates how demographic categorization itself has proven to be a practice that has both imagined and reimagined what it means to be Malay and, understandably, invoked tension.<sup>33</sup>

With that said, it remains important to delve into the historical presence of the groups that have been grouped within the *Bumiputera* umbrella, as it offers insight into the threads that are traced back to earlier Malay people as a means of reaffirming contemporary Malaysian ancestry and connection to a perceived ‘national’ history that effectively predates the nation-state itself. It

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<sup>28</sup> Endicott, *Malaysia's Original People*, 2.

<sup>29</sup> Leonard Y. Andaya, “Orang Asli And The Melayu In The History Of The Malay Peninsula,” *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 75, no. 1 (282) (2002): 23 - 48.

<sup>30</sup> Barbara Watson Andaya and Leonard Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, Third edition. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017): 5.

<sup>31</sup> Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 415.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>33</sup> Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 5.

is generally understood that the seaborne Malay people have occupied both the islands in the Indonesian archipelago and the coastal regions on the mainland peninsula well before the fifteenth century, a period that is frequently cited as the earliest discernible origin point for Malay history.<sup>34</sup> The region also has an intimate connection with the Buddhist maritime empire of Srivijaya, the first polity to effectively dominate much of western Maritime Southeast Asia.<sup>35</sup> The first chapter of this thesis will expand significantly on the particular histories that feature prominently in the historical narrative of contemporary Malaysia.

There does, however, remain further complicating matters when assessing the ethnic Malay identity and its role in shaping a national identity, as Malayness objectively extends beyond the scope of the national boundaries of Malaysia. There remains a critical need to examine how regions like Indonesia, which function as an extension of the Malay world, have also housed and cultivated Malay identity, especially when considering that Malayness was also extended to include all Malay-speaking Muslims that emigrated or were taken to Batavia (present-day Jakarta) from Sumatra, Borneo, and the Peninsula by the mid-1700s.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, the *Orang Asli* themselves were not the only group to migrate to the region, nor are they the sole people that claim to have Malay heritage; the Malaysian population is also heavily shaped by Chinese and Indian Malay people. Along with the state-defined ethnic Malay identity, Chinese and Indian Malay categorizations function as the other dominant ethnicities that inhabit the nation-state, with significant attention being allotted to the three aforementioned groups in the censuses of both the colonial and contemporary eras. With significant labor reliance on Chinese and Tamil laborers to assist in the growing economic production and trade of leading Malaysian

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<sup>34</sup> Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 6.

<sup>35</sup> Michel Jacq-Hergoualc'h, "Srivijaya Revisited," *The Indonesia Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, edited by Tineke Hellwig and Eric Tagliacozzo, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009): 44.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

commodities like rubber and palm oil, these identities became further central to the expansion of the Malaysian nation-state once it was conceived, albeit in social, political, and economic capacities. Thus, there stands a further complication in the debate of who is deemed Malaysian broadly versus who is solely assigned the imagined Malay classification.

Over the course of the past centuries, Malaysia became intertwined with foreign states through trade, with the spice exchange drawing cultural intersection between Malaysia, China, and India, among others.<sup>37</sup> The maritime trade success that became a staple of the region drew European interest, which led to several colonial projects being launched into Southeast Asia, namely by the Portuguese, the Dutch, and the British, beginning with the Portuguese capturing the port of Malacca and establishing a colonial presence in the region in 1511.<sup>38</sup> Malay unity would simultaneously be challenged in the northern region by Thai border disputes, with varying degrees of suzerainty emerging in the area in conjunction with European intrusion.<sup>39</sup> European intervention in the region continually occurred over the next few centuries, with Dutch traders ousting the Portuguese in 1641 and implementing their own colonial practices to regulate Malaysian autonomy, albeit without ever having full control of the area, only to be displaced by the British in the 1780s, who established the regional colony of British Malaya, which functioned under British occupation from the late 18th into the mid-20th century. The Federated Malay States would be established in 1896 as means of introducing state-like structuring to the British-occupied protectorates, which began to set British Malaya on a path toward attaining state integration.

Further complicating matters in the twentieth century, the installation of a centralized government by the British was disrupted by the 1942 Japanese invasion to uproot colonial rule,

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<sup>37</sup> Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 42.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 64.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 71.

with Britain largely abandoning efforts to form a Malay union, instead accepting the Federation of Malaya Agreement, which effectively preserved the special position of Malays as indigenous peoples and strengthened their economic position through privileging measures.<sup>40</sup> The special privileges granted to the *Bumiputera* include legislated economic subsidies, education scholarships, and job training programs.<sup>41</sup> Conversely, new qualifications for citizenship were introduced, further marginalizing the non-Malays and even denying domiciled Malays citizenship altogether.<sup>42</sup> British control was ultimately relinquished with the granting of independence in 1957 and the subsequent establishment of the Malaysian Federal Constitution, which, in turn, codified deep-rooted social and political hierarchical structures oriented around racial differentiation.<sup>43</sup>

Although not the sole confounding factor in identity construction and national semblance, the concept of Malayness was prominently influenced by the arrival of Western trading powers, with perceptions of what being Malay entailed being further shaped by Western ideas of ethnicity and racial categorization, as well as cartographic boundary development in previously undefined regions, imparted upon the Malay people by an increasingly ethnically and geopolitically competitive world.<sup>44</sup> This was significantly exacerbated in the 1930s and 1940s, with Malay nationalism being influenced by English and Chinese concepts of ethnic nationalism.<sup>45</sup> In effect, the conflux between colonial influence and local constructions of ethnic and racial classifications amalgamated into the establishment of a hegemonic Malay identity, effectively constructing an “other” counterpart in foreign-descended Malays, therefore cementing the ethnic base of the state

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<sup>40</sup> Jaclyn Ling-Chien Neo, “Malay Nationalism, Islamic Supremacy and the Constitutional Bargain in the Multi-Ethnic Composition of Malaysia,” *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 13, no. 1 (2006): 98.

<sup>41</sup> Calvin W. Floyd, “Sons of The Soil: The Past, Present, and Future of Malaysia’s Bumiputera,” *Perspectives on Business and Economics* 37 (2019): 97.

<sup>42</sup> Neo, “Malay Nationalism,” 98.

<sup>43</sup> Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 298.

<sup>44</sup> Barnard, *Contesting Malayness*, 13.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 16 - 17.

for the years to come.<sup>46</sup> Aided by a heightened concentration on the practice of collecting, preserving, and exhibiting cultural heritage to document and project a national story of sorts, these three colonial “institutions of power” operate to continually develop and emphasize a particular kind of history, one rooted in highlighting the cultural evolution of a defined Malay national identity, in the confines of a defined Malay territory, with the conscious omission of identities that lay beyond the empowered.

These colonial legacies ultimately bled into the state embracing of the aforementioned practices, which only further imagined Malaysia as a particular nation with a national history and nationalist identity to correlate. The 1957 Constitution has largely dictated the state of ethnic and religious power dynamics, with explicit parameters of what can be considered Malay and what cannot be outlined in the text. Article 160 of the Federal Constitution defines a Malay as a person who professes the Muslim religion, habitually speaks the Malay language, and conforms to Malay customs and traditions. Although this appears to offer somewhat of a fluid definition as to the requisites one must possess to be considered Malay, there remains ample evidence to suggest that, in practice, this document has perpetuated a hierarchy rooted in ethnic nationalist sentiments, persistent for decades. Additionally, ethnic and religious identity is legally merged for Malay-Muslims, irrespective of personal choice.<sup>47</sup> As observed in the implementation of such a document, the multi-religious and multiracial state fails to avoid conflating racial and religious characteristics with the political sphere, cultural expressions, and societal norms.<sup>48</sup> The 1957 Constitution and the subsequent legislative efforts of the 1970s effectively codified racial hierarchies into law, allowing the Malaysian government to privilege and disadvantage ethnic

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<sup>46</sup> Barnard, *Contesting Malayness*, 26 - 27.

<sup>47</sup> Neo, “Malay Nationalism,” 96.

<sup>48</sup> Zawawi Ibrahim and Imran Mohd Rasid, “Malaysia: A secular constitution under siege?” In *Routledge Handbook on the Governance of Religious Diversity* (London: Routledge, 2020): 288.



groups on the basis of ensuring the protection of a privileged position for indigenous Malays in contemporary Malaysian society, despite the “otherizing” it inhibits towards non-indigenous Malay people.

These particular notions of identity and territoriality cannot be adequately assessed without also examining who has been ascribed proximity to “Malayness” and which previous regions have been incorporated into contemporary Malaysia. However, due to the nascence of the nation-state of Malaysia not necessarily correlating with how the Malay territory has shifted over the past centuries, the question of who is truly ‘Malay’ has been difficult to answer, which has, in turn, precipitated ethnonationalism and consequential marginalization of those who are deemed as “other,” namely the Chinese and Indian Malay minority populations that account for nearly half of the contemporary population.<sup>49</sup> What this thesis largely seeks to understand is the territorial, ethnic, and historical connotations of Malayness, and how those connotations have impacted nation-building and nationalism in turn.

Through examining the historical developments within the Malay Peninsula, accounting for the imaginative constructions that have emerged in the age of maps, censuses, and museums in the region, one can begin to observe deliberate tailoring of what is defined as Malay: the nation, the people, and the history, albeit in regard to a specifically-bounded nation, a specific group of people, and a specific account of the history that ties the two together. Recognizing that the imagination of nation-ness, nationality, and nationalism are all inherently political mechanisms, this thesis seeks to contextualize the histories that have been prominently conveyed, the specific role of the colonial “institutions of power” in this given narrative construction, and the contemporary embrace (and, in some cases, rejection) of these colonial legacies in Malaysia today.

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<sup>49</sup> Barnard, *Contesting Malayness*, 3.

## CHAPTER I

### *Elucidating Malay(sia): A National History Beyond the Nation-State*

Before attempting to elucidate how colonial artifacts have effectively shaped Malaysian nationhood and national identity, one must first examine the history of the region in question. Like any other multiethnic conglomerate impacted by several different colonial interventions, Malaysia's historical development is muddled and chock full of paradigm shifts. With this in mind, it is critical to understand that the particular - emphasis on the particular - narrative that this thesis presents is heavily shaped by the colonial presence of the Portuguese, Dutch, and British, and their legacies remain intrinsically connected to the nation and the national memory to this day. With that said, the colonial narrative is not the sole narrative; it is simply the historical narrative that has dominated historical memory. This thesis's centering of the colonially-effected history of Malaysia, a state undeniably diverse in developments and composition beyond the scope of colonial involvement, is merely for the sake of being able to analyze the impacts that the colonial powers have had on the region and the entity's internal absorption of particular Westernized ideas of identity and nation-ness. For that reason, this chapter will attempt to tread lightly as it examines the historical underpinnings of the contemporary national identity and construction of the nation itself.

Although the process of tracing a historical chronology may seem fairly straightforward to some, the relative nascence of Malaysia as a country, with its borders only being finalized in 1965, presents significant challenges to examining a "national" history that predates the nation itself.<sup>50</sup> What is now recognized as *Malaysia* has only been a sovereign nation-state for nearly three-quarters of a century. As evidenced by Chinese, Indian, and Arab sources, however, the

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<sup>50</sup> Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 10.

Malay Peninsula has been a hub of interaction, development, conflict, and exchange for centuries.<sup>51</sup> Although the early history of the Malay region remains partially obstructed by limited documentation and linguistic barriers, accounts of several critical historical moments that are considered part of Malaysian cultural heritage have been corroborated and discussed as viable instances of a historical past.<sup>52</sup> These accounts, many of which stem from foreign authors from the time period and later Malay texts that recount historical traditions, allow scholars to piece together abbreviated narratives to formulate postulations about these otherwise finitely-documented windows of time. Amalgamating these earlier histories with the well-documented colonial and post-colonial era knowledge, a discernible national past, at least in application, is able to be identified. This chapter specifically examines this amalgamation as a preface to elucidating how the imaginative constructs of the colonial period effectively employed perceptions of the past to validate the implementation of colonial institutions and, in consequence, impacted the state of politics and identity in Malaysia into contemporary times.

Contemporary archaeological theory suggests a connection between the earliest people that inhabited the region and contemporary ethnic groups, such as the heterogenous composite of the *Orang Asli* people. The *Orang Asli*, which roughly translates to “aboriginal people” in Malay, are largely considered to be descendants of the earliest inhabitants of the Malay Peninsula. Although the 2010 national census reports indicate that the population of those classified as *Orang Asli* had steadily grown from 98,431 to 160,993 over the course of a decade, the *Orang Asli* still only constitute less than 1 percent of Malaysia’s total population.<sup>53</sup> Traditionally having lived on the fringes of the forest, primarily for access to sources of food and

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<sup>51</sup> Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 11.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 8.

agricultural purposes, around 40 percent of the *Orang Asli* now live in lowlands and coastal areas, presumably due to over-logging and urbanization.<sup>54</sup>

Researchers have largely been able to draw connections between the *Orang Asli* people of today and the ancestral people of Malaysia through analysis of linguistic origin and phonological comparison. Much of the study surrounding the origins of the Malay language have drawn upon the introduction of the speakers of languages in the Austronesian language family, which the Malay language is considered a member of. Contemporary descendants of these Austronesian language-speakers number more than 380 million people, distributed throughout Island Southeast Asia (including Taiwan) and Oceania (excluding Australia and interior New Guinea), with extensions westwards to southern Vietnam, Peninsular Malaysia and Madagascar.<sup>55</sup> These ancestral Austronesian language-speakers ultimately traveled to and populated the bulk of Southeast Asia, in a long series of migrations between 2500 and 1500 BC.<sup>56</sup> The arrival of Austronesian-speaking people in what is now Taiwan from southern China kicked off the presumed preliminary embarking into the Malay archipelago, which broadly includes Brunei, East Timor, Indonesia, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Singapore, Christmas Island, and Cocos Islands. Some two-thousand years later, some of the groups that had established themselves in the region migrated outward, into what is now the Philippines, as well as to the northern half of Borneo, Sulawesi, Central Java, and, finally, into eastern Indonesia. Subsequent migrations carried into the southern part of Borneo, then the western parts of Java, followed by expansion into Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 8.

<sup>55</sup> Peter Bellwood, Geoffrey Chambers, Malcolm Ross, and Hsiao-chun Hung, "Are 'Cultures' Inherited? Multidisciplinary Perspectives on the Origins and Migrations of Austronesian-Speaking Peoples Prior to 1000 BC," In *Investing Archaeological Cultures*, edited by Benjamin W. Roberts and Marc Vander Linden, (New York: Springer, 2011): 321.

<sup>56</sup> Bellwood, Chambers, Ross, and Hung. "Are 'Cultures' Inherited?," 322.

<sup>57</sup> Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 14.

It is generally accepted that ‘Proto-Malayic,’ the parent language from which the Malay language evolved, originated in south-western Borneo during this period of migration. Interaction between those migrating and the sea-dwelling Aslian-speaking groups (the southernmost branch of Austroasiatic languages spoken on the Malay Peninsula) cultivated the formulation of the emerging Malay language. This specific intersection of languages would result in virtually all Orang Asli in the southern states of Johor and Pahang speaking Malay dialects. Although the more northern-situated groups retained Aslian dialects, the general porous nature of the ethnic and linguistic boundaries of the region made did not force distinctions to be drawn between societies, making a true indigenous core ancestor still widely undiscernible.<sup>58</sup>

The geographic environment has been undeniably fundamental in manipulating the historical experiences of the peninsular inhabitants, as evidenced by the migratory patterns and operationalization of the land and sea by the indigenous communities of the past. In attempting to better understand these former people and the territories they existed within, archaeological research has furthered contemporary understandings of Malaysia’s early civilizations. Unfortunately, due to the tropical climate, many materials that would have likely expanded contemporary knowledge about Malaysia and its prehistoric self have decayed, with only the most durable source materials, like those of stone and metal, having survived.<sup>59</sup> With that said, there have been accidental discoveries of written evidence that provides glimpses into the location of early settlements, such as the 1970 findings of Sungai Mas in south Kedah, which became an important excavation site for archaeologists following the unearthing of a tablet dating back to the fifth century construction of an irrigation canal.<sup>60</sup> Despite these exciting finds, it is quite evident that many artifacts have been destroyed or permanently lost over time, with

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<sup>58</sup> Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 14.

<sup>59</sup> Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 11.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

geological and environmental change bearing some responsibility.<sup>61</sup> Alluvial deposits have transformed the shape of the Malaysian coastline over the past two thousand years, as evidenced by the remains of boats being found in remote parts of the jungle or in creeks heavily by river silting, both of which are functionally inaccessible.<sup>62</sup> With that said, Malay classical texts that were written centuries after the fact have also offered insight into the potential origins of these early Malay people, albeit with the preface that they are not direct-hand accounts of prior histories.<sup>63</sup>

In a concerted effort to reconstruct the early history of the Malay region, scholars have pivoted away from these later Malay sources and have turned to accounts written by foreign travelers from states with a more expansive breadth of archival documents, namely from China and India. Historians have been perhaps most successful in sifting through Malaysian prehistory with the help of Chinese imperial dynastic chronicles.<sup>64</sup> These chronicles, which included descriptions by Buddhist pilgrims of their voyages to India, navigational guides for mariners, and other Chinese traveler documentation, often incorporated a section that focused on foreign countries, some of which prominently featured detailed descriptions of the Malay Peninsula. While evidently proving the existence and prominence of the Malay region, these sources also offer a glimpse into the historical external perceptions of the region from earlier periods.<sup>65</sup> However, many of these accounts were compiled years after the observational windows they recounted, meaning they are still rife full of errors.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 11.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Abdul Mutalib Embong, Juhari Sham Jusoh, Juliani Hussein, and Razita Mohammad. "Tracing the Malays in the Malay Land." *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 219, no. 1 (2016): 236.

<sup>64</sup> Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 11.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

Regardless, these sources offer insight into another prominent aspect of prehistory in Malaysia: the diasporic migrations of Indian and Chinese people into the Malay Peninsula. By virtue of trade engagements and frequent cultural exchange, foreign influence permeated down the peninsula and into the broader Malay diaspora. One major symptom of this phenomenon was the introduction of religions like Buddhism and Hinduism, in a process commonly referred to as 'Indianization.' The process, which entailed Indian cultural traditions and practices being disseminated widely across the Southeast Asian diaspora, occurred largely during the 1st century and carried into the centuries immediately following.<sup>67</sup>

With the advancement of Indianization, the dominant religions, particularly Hinduism, introduced the establishment of caste systems, and the application of hierarchies became a more widely practiced endeavor in Southeast Asia. The introduction of religious doctrines highlighted social standing substantially, which further integrated a sense of justification in the rule of those in power. Figureheads, often religiously affiliated, cemented their power through the propagation of the idea of a divine kingship - the belief that the king serves as a mediator between the people and the gods.<sup>68</sup> Further, rituals and symbols became centrally important in regard to monarchies in maintaining social order and ensuring the prosperity of the state. Although it is evident that Indian culture was not the sole influence impacting Malaysia during the times that preceded the Sultanates, as other foreign cultures remained rampant and influential, Indian culture's influence in the region also seems to have further solidified the indigenous culture that preceded its introduction. Richard Winstedt's "onion" theory of Malay culture, which explains cultural development in Southeast Asia to consist of different layers of external influences that have

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<sup>67</sup> I. W. Mabbett, "The 'Indianization' of Southeast Asia: Reflections on the Prehistoric Sources," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 8, no. 1 (1977): 1.

<sup>68</sup> Robert Heine-Geldern, "Conceptions of State and Kingship in Southeast Asia," *The Far Eastern Quarterly* 2, no. 1 (1942): 23.

interacted with and influenced an underlying core, perfectly encapsulates the role that diasporic engagements played in cultivating a defined Malayness in the earlier history of the region.<sup>69</sup> The centuries following would bear witness to a continuation of this trend, albeit in different iterations and to different extents.

Beyond the scope of corroborated diasporic movements, these accounts of the spread of Hinduism and Buddhism, as well as Chinese and Indian cultural practices and traditions broadly, into the Malay region ultimately posits one particular predecessor state into the narrative of Malaysian prehistory: the Kingdom of Srivijaya. Srivijaya, at its peak, controlled parts of the regions now known as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand.<sup>70</sup> Despite substantial debate in regard to its localization and power structure, more modern archaeological and epigraphic research has revealed several key findings about this former Southeast Asian force. Srivijaya is believed to have been founded in 670 at Palembang, which is situated in the Malay-speaking southeast Sumatra.<sup>71</sup> The kingdom itself was a product of several earlier autonomous proto-historic polities merging to be controlled by a central city-state.<sup>72</sup> The kingdom of Srivijaya became a hub of wealth, having taken control of both the emerging markets for Sumatran aromatic resins and gold, as well as the maritime trading networks of the Indian Ocean and South China Sea, which allowed the economy of Srivijaya to thrive for centuries. Srivijaya also became a renowned zone for learning Buddhist teachings. After moving its capital to Jambi in the late eleventh century, Srivijaya's power began to wane as its grip on maritime trade began to crumble in competition with unified Indian and Chinese dynasties. Srivijaya would ultimately collapse in the thirteenth

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<sup>69</sup> John K. Whitmore, "The Position of the Native Regents," In *Southeast Asian History: Essential Readings*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 2006): 23.

<sup>70</sup> Pierre-Yves Manguin, "Srivijaya, Kingdom of." In *The Encyclopedia of Empire*, edited by John M. MacKenzie, Nigel Dalziel, Nicholas Doumanis, and Michael W. Charney (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2016): 1.

<sup>71</sup> Manguin, "Srivijaya, Kingdom of," 1.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.



century.<sup>73</sup> Although Srivijaya has become a fixture of cultural heritage, it does remain partially shrouded in uncertainty with its existence prior to the fifteenth century making it extremely difficult to uncover complete historical records for full descriptive effect.<sup>74</sup>

Recognizing the brevity of depth in analyzing prehistory in the context of a “national” historical origin point, concentration on the post-1400s developments offers substantively more to the discussion. Although there were known and complex trading networks operating throughout the Malay Archipelago for hundreds of years prior, the foundation of the Sultanate of Malacca around 1400 served as the first major political formation in the region.<sup>75</sup> For that reason, much of what is defined as the history of the *nation* of Malaysia tends to have a marked point of origin in the 1400s with the rise of the entrepôt, Malacca, on the west coast of the Malay Peninsula. Thus, identifying Malacca as the point of origin has, therefore, posited the rise of Malacca as the beginning of Malaysia’s ‘national’ history.<sup>76</sup> Unlike Srivijaya, the Sultanate of Malacca existed on the Peninsula, making it innately more accessible to those who aspire to position it as an ancestral origin from which Malaysian nationalism can be derived.

There exists a few accounts as to how Malacca emerged, with scholars often acknowledging two prominent texts to detail its rise: the *Suma Oriental* and the *Sejarah Melayu*.<sup>77</sup> Both texts offer differing perspectives, with the *Suma Oriental* entailing the accounts of Portuguese apothecary Tomé Pires in his two year stint observing and absorbing cultural history in the Portuguese-controlled Malacca in the 1510s, whilst the *Sejarah Melayu* elucidates the geneologies of the rulers known as the Malay *rajas*, encapsulating riveting episodes of each *raja*’s respective reign. While both texts offer insight into the prior cultural traditions and

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<sup>73</sup> Manguin, "Srivijaya, Kingdom of," 1.

<sup>74</sup> Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 10.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>77</sup> Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 37.

mythologies, they do not provide a typical strict chronology akin to Western historical documents. They do, however, introduce a mutual comprehension of the explicable foundation of Malacca.<sup>78</sup>

According to Pires, Malacca rose to become an almost unparalleled hub of success and prosperity in the fifteenth century.<sup>79</sup> Externally prominent by virtue of being a trading hub, Malacca also emerged as a notable center largely due to its centering of Malay culture, with the Malay language and the Islamic faith becoming intrinsically connected to statecraft.<sup>80</sup> Although it would ultimately fall in 1511 when conquered by the Portuguese, the stature of Malacca was evidently large enough to distinguish the then world-famous city as a spectacle of cultural brilliance, serving as an inspiration of Malay achievement for centuries to follow.<sup>81</sup> Constructions of the political and religious traditions in the Malaccan Sultanate became emblematic of the modern nation in the 1970s and 1980s. Images of the Sultanate, of colonial rule, and of Malaysian nationalism became intrinsically connected to ethnic Malay heritage, indigenising other descendents of Malaccan inhabitants, such as the Portuguese Eurasians or the Peranakan, while ignoring the Chinese immigrants that migrated in the years following.<sup>82</sup>

Despite the much-celebrated notoriety of Malacca, there remains a shadow of sorts that descends over the history of the people that existed in the entrêpot, as the focus of Malaysian history shifted to account for the colonial encroachment into the region. Unfortunately, most accounts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the Straits are predominately European sources, leaving out critical perspectives from the Malay people themselves. Blips of historical acknowledgement of indigenous groups like *Orang Asli* people, as well as the *Orang Laut*, and

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<sup>78</sup> Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 38.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 42.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Nigel Worden, “‘Where it all Began’: the representation of Malaysian heritage in Melaka,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 7, no. 3 (2001): 199.

are speckled across the eighteenth century, but a general shift in historical documentation leans heavily into the colonial perspectives of the time period, leaving considerable gaps that complicate any attempts to trace historical ties to the Malay people of the time to modern descendants.<sup>83</sup> Rather, colonial leaders of the period, keen on imposing specific practices, like cartographic mapping of the region, census-making, and the eventual creation of museums to document regional and historical happenings, dramatically altered the landscape of how the region was defined and who was able to define themselves as truly Malay.<sup>84</sup>

Colonial projects largely dominate the discourse surrounding Malaysian history from the 1500s onward, beginning with the Portuguese in 1511. The Dutch eventually entered into the equation, with the formation of the Dutch East India Company in 1602 and its later establishment of Batavia (now modern-day Jakarta) as its landing base in Asia in 1619. The Dutch would go on to capture Malacca from the Portuguese in 1641, further instigating colonial rule over the people of Malacca and the expanded Malay World.<sup>85</sup> The British would ultimately enter into the equation as well, with substantial conflict between the British and Dutch persisting as both imperial powers sought to grab further power and control in Southeast Asia. The British established a firm dominance in the region by the nineteenth century with their new settlement on the island of Singapore.

While the history itself is one of many twists and turns, the geographic evolution of the region is equally as mind-boggling. From a territorial perspective, the Malay region has historically been a fluid spatial projection. Geographically-speaking, contemporary Malaysia is defined by the Peninsula, which extends southwards from Thailand and is bordered by the Strait

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 84.

<sup>84</sup> Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 43.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

of Malacca and the Indian Ocean on one side and the South China Sea on the other.<sup>86</sup> Situated across the South China Sea are the states of Sabah and Sarawak, which were absorbed into Malaysia in 1963. Sabah and Sarawak cover most of the northwest Borneo, which encircles the independent state of Brunei.<sup>87</sup> Brunei, despite longstanding ties to the Malay cultural world, remained independent, rather than joining the Malay Peninsula.<sup>88</sup> The Malaysian territory would expand further to include the island of Labuan, previously a territory under Sabah, which became a federal territory in 1984.<sup>89</sup> From a territorial vantage point, what is now recognized as Malaysia is a byproduct of colonial introduction of geopolitical boundaries, which will be further elaborated upon in the subsequent chapter on cartography and its role in the imagination of the Malaysian nation-state. The contemporary political boundaries of the nation-state effectively traverse through zones that were once linked and culturally unified.<sup>90</sup> Efforts to shape the nation-state by effectively redrawing the territorial boundaries immediately invoked complications. The introduction of a boundary line traveling directly down the Straits of Malacca emerging in 1824 to divide Malaysia from Indonesia failed to account for the east coast of Sumatra having been categorized as a member of the Malay cultural world. Similarly, the establishment of the Thai-Malaysia boundary, which was implemented in 1909, effectively excised ethnic Malays of southern Thailand from the then British Malaya.<sup>91</sup> Likewise, the island city-state of Singapore, located at the Peninsular's southern tip, was merged into Malaysia as a former British colony, but left two years later.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*., 11.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

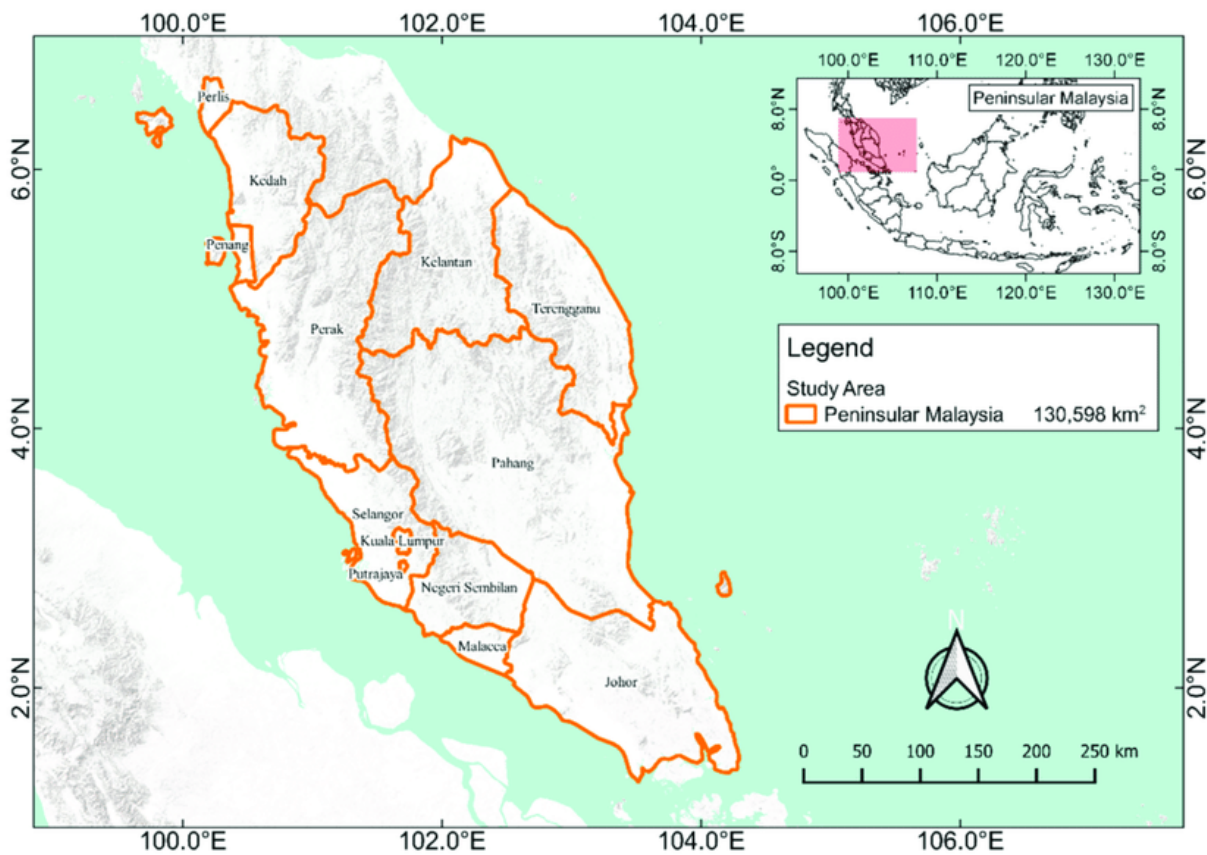


Figure 2: Map of Contemporary States of Malaysia <sup>93</sup>

In its current composition, the Malay Peninsula is divided into eleven states: Johor, Kedah, Kelantan, Malacca, Negeri Sembilan, Pahang, Penang, Perak, Perlis, Selangor, and Terengganu.<sup>94</sup> Nine of these states are each ruled over by a constitutional head, either a Sultan, a Raja, or a Grand Ruler, with Malacca and Penang being led by a head of state known as Yang di-Pertua Negeri (“He Who is Made Leader of the Land” in Malay).<sup>95</sup> Many of these rulers trace their genealogies back to the fifteenth century or earlier, exemplifying the tendency to trace

<sup>93</sup> Fatchurrachman, Rudiyanto, Norhidayah Che Soh, Ramisah Mohd Shah, Sunny Goh Eng Giap, Budi Indra Setiawan, and Budiman Minasny, “High-Resolution Mapping of Paddy Rice Extent and Growth Stages across Peninsular Malaysia Using a Fusion of Sentinel-1 and 2 Time Series Data in Google Earth Engine,” *Remote Sensing* 14, no. 1875 (2022): 3.

<sup>94</sup> Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 2.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

lineage back to the times of the Malacca Sultanate to affirm Malayness.<sup>96</sup> Thus, a national history is elicited, albeit without complete determination as to how the people of contemporary Malaysia are realistically able to determine who can ascribe to the imagined sense of being part of a national legacy that started forming before the nation itself was even conceptualized.

While following a historical chronology for the narrative of the people that inhabited what is now Malaysia is a tricky task due to the limitations of the source material, there remains ample investigation into the ethnographic composition of the nation-state. Over time, three ethnic identities emerged as the most consistently acknowledged in Malaysia: the Malay people, who are considered indigenous to Malaysia, as well as the Chinese and Indian Malays, two groups that stemmed from economic migrants under British colonial rule. According to the most recent national census, indigenous Malays constitute 54 percent of the population, whilst the foreign-originating minority ethnicities constitute 25 percent and 8 percent, respectively. The other minority populations account for the remaining 12 percent, which amounts to around 2.1 million people.<sup>97</sup> The contemporary demographical composition of Malaysia consists of a dominant ethnic Malay group, which, in 2010, comprised 54.6 percent of the total population, of which 61 percent resided in Peninsular Malaysia.<sup>98</sup> The Malay identity ultimately developed to be “coterminous with *Bumiputera*, the ‘sons (and daughters) of [the] soil.’ As previously discussed, the category of *Bumiputera* in Peninsular Malaysia includes other numerically small but historically important indigenous groups, including the *Orang Asli*. However, the term *Bumiputera* is a new concept, having been coined during the 1950s, which, as discussed in the forthcoming pages, played a large role in ethnic classification and nationalist constructions.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 2.

<sup>97</sup> Neo, “Malay Nationalism,” 96.

<sup>98</sup> Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 5.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 8..

Now, how does Anderson's framework fit into this particular narrative? As this paper discusses in the forthcoming chapters, the map, census, and museum function as tools of empire, employed at various points in the colonial era and remain influential in contemporary Malaysia. Each have been uniquely relevant actors, emerging to tailor particular imaginations of the territory, its people, and the solidification of collective memory as nationally-formative, both from within the region and as part of the external perception of the nation-state on the world stage. Rather than follow Anderson's alphabetized analysis, this paper will first examine the territory establishment of nation-ness and the Malayness derived from particular conceptualizations of the land and how it cultivates (or destroys) claims to national identity.

## CHAPTER II

### *Map: The Cartographical Structuring of the Nation, from Malacca to Malaysia*

The imagining of the nation-state, intrinsically connected to the construction of national identity, relies upon several different facets, one of which is perhaps the most easily understood from a visual vantage point: the geopolitical outlining of a given region to distinguish it as distinct from the surrounding area. The concept of territoriality and how land is both possessed and divided is a complicated matter, especially when attempting to understand the allocation of territory in conjunction with the formation of national identities. When reconciling with how the contemporary system of nation-states has been constructed over time, it is evident that the imagination of boundaries has been paramount to the assignment of territory, especially in the case of Malaysia.

The modern conceptualization of boundaries in the nation-state model, which has been applied to Malaysia, is intrinsically intertwined with colonial European understandings of territoriality and land occupation. Legalistic in nature, these conceptualized boundaries serve to define states in territorial terms and ensure that sovereignty resides in the totality of the national territory.<sup>100</sup> Confronted by unobserved systems of governance and unfamiliar power structures upon their arrival in Southeast Asia, the initial colonial arrivals, namely the Portuguese in the 15th century, followed by the Dutch and the British in the 17th and 19th centuries, respectively, imposed boundary systems that they themselves were better accustomed to, opting to reconstruct polities into stringently-shaped states rather than adapt to the pre-existing spheres of influence.<sup>101</sup> This application of colonial borders differs from the historical spatial approach to understanding territory in Southeast Asian states that predates colonial intervention.

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<sup>100</sup> Robert L. Solomon, "Boundary Concepts and Practices in Southeast Asia." *World Politics* 23, no. 1 (1970): v.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.



While seemingly mundane in their functional application, maps are not simply two-dimensional representations of three-dimensional realities. Rather, they serve as an encapsulation of a time-sensitive understanding of the geographical boundaries established by the powers that control the aforementioned topographical region.<sup>102</sup> What can be best teased out from the maps of Malaysia is the colonial narrative they transmit. One can identify the territorial aspirations of several colonial powers, including the Portuguese, Dutch, and British, all of whom constructed maps to aid in their respective engagement with the land and the people that inhabited it. These maps served to promulgate knowledge about the region that the colonial powers sought to inject into discourse as mainstream understandings of the region, and its people. The intention of updating maps to depict the most ‘accurate’ version of the world became paramount to European cartographers as the colonial powers began to expand beyond their respective imperial metropolises as naval vessels advanced to be able to endure voyages beyond the Mediterranean.<sup>103</sup> These maps depicted evolving municipalities of influence, alliances, conflicts, and an eventual revolutionary movement that would bear witness to a direct reaction to the imposed structures of identity and nationhood by the Malay people themselves. In doing so, maps were intrinsically connected to the emergence of Malaysia as a nation.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Frédéric Durand, “Maps of Malaya and Borneo: Discovery, Statehood, and Progress,” (France: Editions Didier Millet, 2013): 14.

<sup>103</sup> Durand, “Maps of Malaya and Borneo: Discovery, Statehood, and Progress,” 27.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, 14.

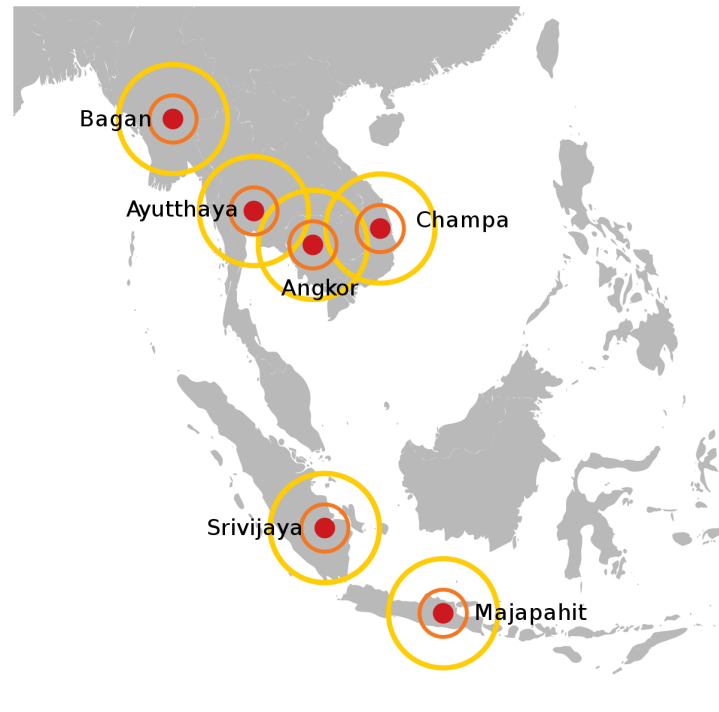


Figure 3: Mandala polities of Southeast Asia (c. 5th to 15th century) <sup>105</sup>

Diverging from what Europeans understood territoriality to be, Southeast Asian countries are known to have functioned in what British historian O.W. Wolters, a scholar who Anderson derives argument-supporting concepts from in *Imagined Communities*, coined as ‘mandala’ polities. The concept was not Wolters’ invention, but rather a coining of a patterned approach to territoriality that had existed in Southeast Asian states that had historically practiced Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, as depicted in Figure 3. The model, taking its name from the Sanskrit term for the word ‘circle,’ refers to a particular pattern of distributing political power amongst principalities, with local power being more important than central leadership.<sup>106</sup> Defining these sectors as polities have allowed historians to distinguish between the pre-nation-state and post-nation-state functions of the region beyond the restrictiveness of contemporary boundaries.

<sup>105</sup> Mandala (political model). (2023, March 5). In *Wikipedia*.  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mandala\\_\(political\\_model\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mandala_(political_model))

<sup>106</sup> Milan Shaky, "Basic concepts of mandala," *Voice of History* 15, no. 1 (2000): 81.

The pre-colonial diversity of Southeast Asian countries like modern-day Malaysia has been expounded upon significantly, especially in works of comparative scholarship on the agrarian and non-state societies like that of historian James C. Scott. Southeast Asia, as evidenced in Scott's writings, was built on tiny self-governed communities that lacked a nationalistic identity until much more recent history. Nationalism, a nascent concept like the nation-state itself, did not become an essential aspect of Southeast Asian history until the various emerging nation-states began seeking independence from the European powers that occupied their land and meddled in their governance. Thus, in the era of mandala polities, many of these regions largely lacked broad nationalistic sentiment amongst the people that resided in the polities.

As elucidated in Scott's writings, the valleys and mountains across Southeast Asia formed different peoples and societies with clear cultural differentiation between them. Scott claimed that the valley people lived more sedentary lives, fostering societies that were based heavily on agriculture. This reliance on agriculture was significant for communities that saw more long-term success as they dominated more "dispersed and less numerous hill people." While 'hill' people foraged and gathered in the mountainous forests for survival, they possessed a distinct diversity that was considerably less prevalent amongst the valley-based peoples. For example, 'hill' people lived in close proximity to one another and often spoke four to five languages, further outlining the diverse nature of these hill-dwelling people.<sup>107</sup>

While Southeast Asia's diversity as a whole was important for its early development, it proved detrimental to the creation of modern states, coming into direct conflict with the colonial frameworks as the emergent system of nation-states swept the globe over the last few centuries.

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<sup>107</sup> James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009): 18.

Scott offers insight into the rejection of states that was evidenced in Southeast Asia, challenging the idea that state formation and the development of state centers are indicative of progression in the greater scheme of human development. Scott elaborates on how the traditional narrative of statehood being an objectively positive aspiration for all ‘developing’ polities stigmatizes the formerly un-colonized peoples of Southeast Asia by failing to consider that different groups of people in regions like contemporary Malaysia made the choice to evade state formation or remove themselves from state centers.<sup>108</sup> In doing so, Scott emphasizes the fluidity of identity in Southeast Asia, with respect to language, culture, religion and belief systems, agricultural practices, and more. Scott’s understanding of the indigenous way of life prior to colonial intervention aids in the understanding of how the imposition of imagined boundaries, specifically in regards to cartographically defining Malaysia to fit the mold of European preferences of statehood, ignores the successful operation of the multi-faceted indigenous communities that flourished in the region without centralized governance beforehand.

Although objectively different from earlier iterations, the eleven component states the comprise the contemporary Malay Peninsula, have functioned as political entities, albeit not necessarily fully-realized states, for hundreds of years. These polities, often merely collections of thinly-populated centers at river mouths, were bound together by a variety of factors, including, but not limited to: “trade, kinship; shared ceremonial or religious practices; various forms of clientship and dependency; violence and intimidation; and possibly language.”<sup>109</sup> They varied in shape and structure, ranging from islands, river mouths, stretches of coastline, shoals, reefs, and parts of the surface of the sea.<sup>110</sup> Notable examples of polities of prominence included

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<sup>108</sup> Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, 11.

<sup>109</sup> Carl A. Trocki, “Borders and the Mapping of the Malay World,” *Association of Asian Studies Annual Meeting*, (2000): 4..

<sup>110</sup> Trocki, “Borders and the Mapping of the Malay World,” 5.

Johor-Riau, Sulu, Brunei, Palembang-Jambi, Siak, Mindanao, Pontianak, Sambas, Aceh, the states of the Malay Peninsula, and many other principalities in the Southeast Asian island region.<sup>111</sup>

All of these locales functioned as what Wolters classified as mandala polities, with a center and an emanating sphere of influence, rather than traditional boundaries to designate who existed in the region and who they were to be distinguished from. The delineation of borders to the region remains a fairly nascent development, having only been pertinent for just over a century. Malaysia, unlike European polities that have long been assigned clearly defined borders, has been more akin to its neighboring Asian nation-states, being defined instead by centers of established governance and said governing center's sphere of influence beyond the center itself.<sup>112</sup> Aided by its tropical terrain, particularly with jungles, mountain ranges, and rivers, and the tendency of Malay leaders to situate the core of their respective regional polities in coastal locations, borders have been generally inapplicable to the ever-shifting territorial make-up of Malaysia.<sup>113</sup>

Maps of antiquity demonstrate the fluid nature of the territory prior to imposed boundaries of statehood, with Ptolemy's world map being the first of critical examination. Considered a power player in the development of cartography, famed Roman geographer Claudius Ptolemy is often cited as the architect of contemporary map-making practices, with his treatise *Geographia* from the 2nd century heavily promulgating then-geographical knowledge of the world and cartographic traditions that would be employed in maps for centuries to follow.<sup>114</sup> His work, which is presumed to have initially included maps that have since been lost and were

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<sup>111</sup> Trocki, "Borders and the Mapping of the Malay World," 4.

<sup>112</sup> Durand, "Maps of Malaya and Borneo," 18.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Leo Bagrow, *History of Cartography*, (London: Routledge, 2017): 34.

only adapted from the coordinates offered in his writings by Byzantine monks in the 13th century, effectively introduced a global coordinate system. As seen in Figure 4, Ptolemy's mapping of the globe managed to capture both East and Southeast Asia, beginning a longstanding history of foreign actors mapping the region.

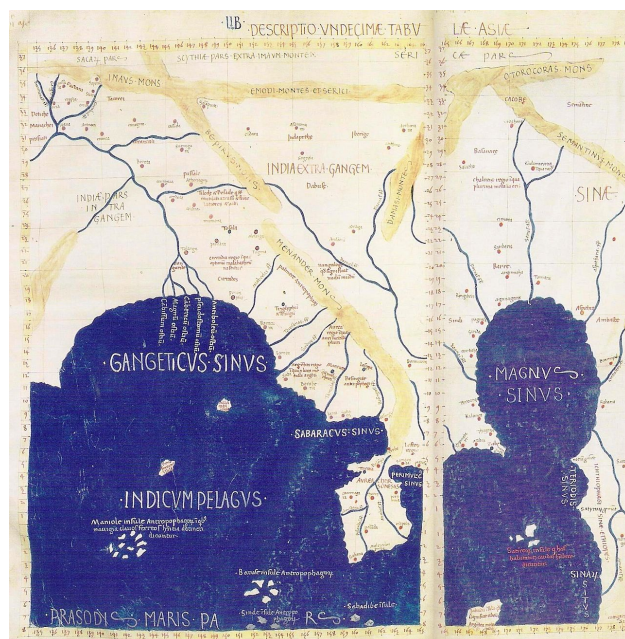


Figure 4: Ptolemy's map <sup>115</sup>



Figure 5: The Golden Chersonese <sup>116</sup>

In the context of Malaysia, Ptolemy's map is the earliest surviving to offer a cartographic capturing of the Golden Chersonese, which was the name used for the now-Malay Peninsula by Greek and Roman geographers in classical antiquity. Ptolemy's work would ultimately inspire European cartographers in the centuries that followed, with the likes of Nicholaus Germanus replicating the project of mapping the world. Germanus, a German cartographer who modernized Ptolemy's Geography in 1467 by applying new imaginative projections and expanding the mapped territories to include additional regions, is noted for also capturing the Golden

<sup>115</sup> Ptolemy's world map. (2023, January 19). In *Wikipedia*. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ptolemy%27s\\_world\\_map](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ptolemy%27s_world_map)

<sup>116</sup> Golden Chersonese. (2023, February 11). In *Wikipedia*. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden\\_Chersonese](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden_Chersonese)



Chersonese, a region displayed by his predecessor, but further legitimized in appearance here, as displayed in Figure 5.



Figure 6: Sebastian Münster, *Map of Malay Peninsula*, 1542 <sup>117</sup>

The arrival of the Portuguese in Malacca would reignite European interest in the cartographic structuring of the Southeast Asian region, with many maps emerging as a mechanism to better understand trade routes and regions other unbeknownst to the broader European contingency, including the work of German Sebastian Münster in 1542 depicted in Figure 6. A depiction of Asia that spans from the Caspian Sea to the Pacific Ocean, the most prominent feature of the Münster map is its depiction of an archipelago of 7,448 islands. This

<sup>117</sup> 1542 map of Asia by Sebastian Münster. (2020, March 31). In *Wikimedia*.  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1542\\_map\\_of\\_Asia\\_by\\_Sebastian\\_M%C3%BCnster.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1542_map_of_Asia_by_Sebastian_M%C3%BCnster.jpg)

particular depiction, intended to be a reflection of Ptolemy's work, incorporates a few notable Portuguese discoveries, namely the outlining of the Indian subcontinent and the presentation of "Zaylon" (now known as Sri Lanka). More applicable to Malaysia, the depiction of Java Minor and Major, Porne (now Borneo), Molucca (Malacca), and other islands emerge as geographic fixtures of importance. Trading ports pop up as notable locales, with "Malaqua," which had, by then, fallen under Portuguese control. Likewise, the polity of "Taprobana" is also monikered "Sumatra," alluding to separate developments in Indonesia precipitated by external boundary divisions being established by foreign entities.

As colonial powers began to compete to colonize particular regions of Southeast Asia, the urgency to establish boundaries agreed upon by competing states increased. Thus, the system of colonial boundaries in Southeast Asia was created to regulate power structures without a significant commitment to resources. This system served to respond to colonial needs, rather than those of the local populations that had been existing in the newly-bordered territories and preserved imperial power over local managements, which further complicated the political structures of many Southeast Asian polities. Maps, along with conflict-addressing treaties and documentation of explicitly-defined borders, have precipitated a permeation of a Westernized territorial framework of borders across the continent and directly aided in the colonial dismantling of polities, the subsequent establishment of boundary-determined nation-states, and the simultaneous tailoring of identity group on the basis of imagined borders.

Just as they have examined notions of territoriality and the pre-existing societies of the region prior to colonial engagement, scholars of Southeast Asia have also explored the aftermath of colonial boundary creation. Historian Thongchai Winichakul has done so with then-Siam's transition into Thailand and the cartographical influence on perceptions of territoriality as the



state progressed towards its modern-day constitutional monarchy, Winichakul's book, *Siam Mapped*, explores the cartographic perspective of the development of the modern Thai state, with maps being utilized to demonstrate how the nation evolved from polities of blurred boundaries to a structured conglomerate unified under a militaristic national identity. As Winichakul observes, maps are, in essence, imagined perceptions of territoriality, rooted in how the beholder perceives the land they are attempting to depict: "In terms of most communication theories and common sense, a map is a scientific abstraction of reality. A map merely represents something which already exists objectively 'there.'"<sup>118</sup> Winichakul is able to elucidate the magnitude of impact that maps had on the state-building process by analyzing the gradual conflict over sovereignty as Siam moved away from its historical roots of polities. Chapter 4 of the book, appropriately entitled "Sovereignty," deals with the evolution of the contemporary boundaries of Siam and its *muang* (in a Thai-Lao language, *muang* translates to city, town, or network of administrative units), exploring the contested sovereignty of the polities within its sphere of influence of the modern Thai state. Winichakul frames the premodern Siam through a lens that emphasizes the hierarchical designations that epitomized the general function of polities within the region.

In dissecting interstate relations of the region, Winichakul is able to tease out the importance of hierarchy in both the Siamese and the broader Southeast Asia order, articulating that there existed a rationale behind the social order. Winichakul contends that the general understanding was that there was a "necessity of a weaker state to seek protection from a more powerful one as security against the greed of another overlord."<sup>119</sup> This dynamic was inferred to have been a reciprocal relationship as the inferior states would be accepting of the benevolence of the superior state and were expected to engage in the gift exchange and resource supply.

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<sup>118</sup> Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of the Nation*. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994): 310.

<sup>119</sup> Winichakul, *Siam Mapped*, 310.

However, as Winichakul astutely observes, this relationship was never truly reciprocal, as the feigned agency given to the overpowered states made their secession to the overlords “unavoidably compulsory rather than voluntary.”<sup>120</sup> This dynamic became even more complex once contending powers began engaging with tributaries that were already in submissive relationships with other powers in the region. In effect, this invoked a paradox of multiple submissions, with tributaries doing so to save their “independence.” As Winichakul points out, “the protection was unwelcome oppression and yet it was an alternative to the oppression at the same time.”<sup>121</sup>

Winichakul utilizes this historical context of hierarchy to expand upon the complexity of the historical narrative, driving home the point that the differing perspectives in the narrative reveal skewed cultural understandings between those in power and those impacted by power. Specifically, Winichakul is able to point to the dynamic between the Chinese and the Siamese in their overlapping engagement with tributaries, with their dynamic indicating a differing of historical recollection of gift exchange dynamics in tributary relationships with hegemonic powers. As Winichakul points out, “the tribute mission to the Chinese emperor has been explained by most modern scholars of Thailand as a profit-making enterprise, not a sign of submission,” while the “paradoxically the tribute, the gold and silver trees in particular, from an inferior state to Siam was always regarded as evidence of submission.”<sup>122</sup> Thus, it becomes evident that the relative construction of interstate relationships is multi-faceted and requires nuanced observance to adequately recount them in a narrative.

Likewise, Winichakul states that sovereignty, beyond the context of Southeast Asia, was a fairly stringent definition for Europeans, specifically the British and French, which did not

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<sup>120</sup> Winichakul, *Siam Mapped*, 310.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid, 315.

mesh with the ambiguous nature of the tributary relationships seen in the region. Unable to posit the tributary relationships in their limited definition of what sovereignty entailed, the Europeans floundered to properly contextualize it in their engagements with the region, which, once again, speaks to a larger issue of the historical narrative representing a contention between those in power and those impacted by power. Winichakul astutely recognizes that, as the history of Siam and its transition towards nation-statehood suggests, the misrepresentations intrinsic to both European cultural and cartographic assessments of Siam only reinforce the concept that maps are rooted in imagination and lend themselves entirely to the perspective of the producer, not necessarily the subject.

Winichakul emphasizes that maps themselves create the defined territories they are often mistakenly believed to document the natural form of, explaining the following: “In the history I have described, this relationship was reversed. A map anticipated spatial reality, not vice versa. In other words, a map was a model for, rather than a model of, what it purported to represent... It had become a real instrument to concretize projections on the earth’s surface. A map was now necessary for the new administrative mechanisms and for the troops to back up their claims.... The discourse of mapping was the paradigm which both administrative and military operations worked within and served.”<sup>123</sup> Utilizing Winichakul’s framework about the paradigm-shifting nature of borders in contemporary Southeast Asia, an area accustomed to the likes of mandala polities, one can posit much of the findings into the Malay example, albeit with significant colonial influence on the shifting notions of territoriality and the identities cultivated in spaces imagined to conform to Western understandings of spatiality and sovereignty.

The Europeans were well aware of their interloper status in the tropical regions of Southeast Asia but remained intent on sourcing from their preconceived notions of legal

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<sup>123</sup> Winichakul, *Siam Mapped*, 310.

inheritance and transferability of geographic space to legitimize their own power as they sought to inherit the sovereignty of indigenous leaders they drove out in their colonial conquests. In doing so, the European colonists set themselves up to reimagine the history of the territory they now laid claim to, employing historical maps to define places like Malaysia as having existed for years with specific, tightly bounded territorial units, rather than having functioned in the historically-accurate polity structures. This facilitated the adoption of a narrative that reinforced colonial boundaries, taking an imagined vision for the region and passing it off as the historical standard, cementing Malaysia on a path towards nation-statehood.<sup>124</sup>

Maps of Malaysia, including all areas that have been, at any given time, considered part of the Malay Archipelago, date back to antiquity, with the oldest maps documented dating back to nearly 2,000 years prior to the modern day.<sup>125</sup> However, much of the understanding of the shift from polities to nation-states that transpired in the region lies in what had been mapped in the colonial era, more specifically in regard to what had been left out from the cartography itself. The mapping of the outline of Southeast Asia emerged as a prominent initiative to be undertaken by the Europeans during the Portuguese Age of Discovery.<sup>126</sup> Initially, these maps sought to survey the region for what was observed, with preliminary maps of the peninsula depicting the aforementioned coastal seats of power at play. Efforts to map these centers of power aimed to display an estimated range of influence each polity had.<sup>127</sup> However, European attempts to map polities failed miserably at aligning with how the resident Southeast Asians actually viewed them.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 174 - 175.

<sup>125</sup> Durand, "Maps of Malaya and Borneo," 14.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid, 18.

<sup>128</sup> Trocki, "Borders and the Mapping of the Malay World," 3.

What these early maps and the emergence of maps with imagined boundaries demonstrated was that the most inadequately illustrated aspect of these polities and the Southeast Asian structure of ‘states’ was the influence exercised over the people that lived in the areas in question. Who was dependent on who was of paramount importance to these polities and the dynamics between said polities could not be properly examined without registering their potential to overlap, expand into one another, or even contract away from one another. The dependency of chiefs of subordinate centers upon more powerful leaders in dominant centers, as Winichakul heavily focused upon, was at play in pre-colonial Malaysia. However, these considerations were largely omitted from European maps, which often resorted to connecting political structures that lacked much connectedness, if any.<sup>129</sup>

By in large, the cartographic efforts of the Europeans in the colonial period suggest that multi-centered states, like those typical to Southeast Asia, were viewed as ephemeral by the average European observer.<sup>130</sup> It was through the rejection of the mandala polity understanding that the Europeans became infatuated with developing a model that would effectively impose their notions of boundaries upon previously uninfluenced regions like Malaysia. The Mercatorian map, named after the 16th century Gerardus Mercator cartographer, became the leading model for European colonizers to shape their imagined vision of Southeast Asia.<sup>131</sup> These Mercatorian maps were instrumental in identity construction within the constructs of state-building, as they “worked on the basis of a totalizing classification, and led their bureaucratic producers and consumers towards policies with revolutionary consequences.”<sup>132</sup> Likewise, they served to implement continent-wide demarcations of territory, solidifying nation-states to easily

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<sup>129</sup> Trocki, “Borders and the Mapping of the Malay World,” 5.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>131</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 171.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid, 173.

distinguish between, albeit by ignoring the geographical compositions of the region, as well as the functional operation of the people that resides in the polities impacted. As Winichakul suggests, borders of regions like Thailand and Malaysia were colonially determined, whether through direct colonial intervention or through a domino effect from colonial developments beyond the nation-state itself.<sup>133</sup>

Maps also became significant tools of empire at critical junctions of change in Malaysia, particularly as colonial powers sought to redistribute territory amongst themselves. State borders were first conceptualized and mapped in the late 17th century, albeit with significant variation of territory in contrast with the contemporary nation-state of Malaysia. More solidified borders would emerge a century later, as Western conceptions of territorial control were applied to the cartographic illustrations of the region. The specific inclusion of borders became more common and refined as the British began to intervene in affairs in the peninsula, including in Penang (in 1786), Malacca (1824), and Perak (1874).

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<sup>133</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 171.



This treaty, which served to settle disputes between the British and Dutch following the Napoleonic Wars, effectively divided the Malay world down the Straits of Malacca and legitimized British control of Singapore.<sup>136</sup> The Anglo-Dutch Treaty gave Sumatra and the islands to the south of the Straits of Singapore to the Dutch, allocating the Malay Peninsula and Singapore Island to the British, despite neither imperial power having significant territorial possession at the time. For that reason, the treaty truly only granted the British and the Dutch the right to influence, write additional treaties, and exercise some minor opportunities for governance, such as suppressing piracy. Otherwise, the British and Dutch remained unable to be recognized as possessing or governing the land they had assigned to agree to impart upon one another.<sup>137</sup>

Perhaps the most important aspect of the treaty was the way in which the imperial powers chose to distinguish the land they allocated to each other. As evidenced by the distribution of territory, the Dutch and British both saw the division in terms of defined boundary lines, rather than in terms of spherical influence like the previous mappings of the mandala polities.<sup>138</sup> Graham Irwin, in his historical investigation into the state-building of Borneo, points to one of the Dutch signatories, A. R. Falck, to support this claim, noting the following assertion: "...their respective possessions in the East Indies are divided by a 'line of demarcation', beginning at the entrance of the Straits of Malacca at the parallel of Kedah (the 6th degree North Latitude) and terminating at the end of the Singapore Straits." This particular demarcation would set the precedent for the division of Borneo into British and Dutch territories, separating Sabah and Sarawak from the Indonesian territory Kalimantan. This border line would ultimately expand northward to segment off Natuna and the Anambas Islands into Dutch and, eventually,

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<sup>136</sup> Trocki, "Borders and the Mapping of the Malay World," 1.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid, 2.



Indonesian jurisdiction. This modified line was arbitrarily decided upon in 1891 to settle border disputes between the British and Dutch, but would not be officially enforced until 1912. Thus, the year 1824 marked a pivotal moment in the history of the Malay World, as European powers had begun to place specific lines of demarcation to map colonially-imposed borders, disrupting the previous internal understandings of regional difference that had existed during the age of the mandala polities.

The imposition of this line not only constitutes the current border between Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore, but also introduces further reinforcement of the borders between Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines.<sup>139</sup> Unprecedented in regards to pre-border territoriality in Southeast Asia, this new imagined boundary also arbitrarily divided bodies of water and groups of islands that had existed without borders and had even been considered united political territories at one time. One such example is the ancient kingdom of Johor-Riau, the successor to the Ur-Malay principality of Malacca to the west. Following the ratification of the Anglo-Dutch treaty, Johor-Rush was split from its eastern peer polities Brunei and Sulu, which abrogated the centuries-old indigenous political dynamics of the region and caused Johor-Riau to effectively cease to exist, both cartographically and functionally.<sup>140</sup> Simply put, the demarcation of this border essentially entailed several European power players, all of whom had never visited the Straits of Malacca, determining a reconfigured conceptualization of the islands of Southeast Asia from the comfort of the metropole, eternally altering the region with colonially-imposed borders that were never once a part of the region's history before.<sup>141</sup>

While there is evidence of intentional colonially-influenced restructuring of the nation-state that ultimately became Malaysia, there remain similar problems with the

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<sup>139</sup> Trocki, "Borders and the Mapping of the Malay World," 3.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

development of a national identity on the basis of defined territoriality. It is of significant importance to note that the cartographical examination of Malaysia has historically been riddled with errors and egregious oversights. There were a plethora of reasons why earlier maps of what is now understood to be Malaysia were deemed inaccurate. First and foremost, cartographers initially did not travel to the locations they mapped, relying instead upon the accounts of surveyors that had traveled to the region, many of whom used primitive techniques to perform their cartographic work. Likewise, Europeans lacked the ability to accurately calculate longitude until the late 18th century. There was also a financial obstacle when it came to the creation of maps, as changing printing plates to update maps proved expensive and often discouraged cartographers from correcting or modifying their work.<sup>142</sup> Retrospectively-identified inaccuracies in ancient maps do not merely demonstrate the author's unfamiliarity with the territory that could be explained by a lack of technical skill to properly map said territory; they also serve to express variation in how any given territory is conceptualized in different windows of history.<sup>143</sup> Similarly, contrasting Western maps with those of non-Western cartographers, particularly from Chinese, Arab, and other Southeast-Asian cartographers, epitomizes how spatiality can be interpreted with a distinct difference, depending on the vantage point at which it is applied.<sup>144</sup>

With the historical understandings that scholars like O.W. Wolters, James Scott, and Thongchai Winichakul have offered in the discourse about Southeast Asian state-building and contemporaneous identity construction in mind, this chapter has sought to recognize how territorial understandings of pre-colonial Malaysia largely denoted to the functioning of mandala polities, the subsequent imposition of colonial frameworks of boundaries to facilitate nation-state establishment, and the reinforcing role maps played in this colonial paradigm shift. Recognizing

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<sup>142</sup> Durand, "Maps of Malaya and Borneo," 16.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

that traditionally defined borders were not essential to the original polities that existed in Malaysia, this chapter seeks to promulgate the idea that contemporary Malaysian statehood and the identity construction that has occurred within colonially-imposed boundaries would not have occurred without such a drastic, Western-driven alteration to both internal and external understandings of territory. Likewise, maps, as a tool of empire, were not the sole mechanism of aiding and abetting in the colonial aspirations of constructing states to mirror European standards but were undeniably instrumental in enshrining particular perceptions of territoriality in Malaysia that would permanently alter the spatial reality of the region altogether, while also completely shifting definitions of the identities of the demographics of indigenous populations that existed in the polities prior to colonial intervention.

The contemporary boundaries of the Malay Peninsula were not merely drawn overnight; they have evolved over the course of centuries of cartographic interpretation and reinterpretation.<sup>145</sup> Just as older maps are riddled with partiality in regard to the agendas they illustrate, contemporary maps remain as vessels to understand the economic and political interests of those aiding in the construction of the modern nation-state. Whether it be marking boundaries to demarcate regions or groups of people, promoting power hierarchies, or endorsing the concept of *faits accomplis* to maintain stringent understandings of the status quo, modern maps elucidate the intentions of those powerful enough to harness the power of the map to dictate the function of the nation-state and the people subservient to the imposition of the nation-state as an institution.<sup>146</sup> Maps, in a sense, are effectively used to create a reality that then becomes a functional operation once the newly constructed ideas of territoriality are socialized and reproduced until they are widely accepted as reality. Thus, the map remains a pivotal

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<sup>145</sup> Durand, "Maps of Malaya and Borneo," 16.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid, 14.

institution of power in constructing a nation in finite terms. In the case of Malaysia, the construction of the nation-state in its modern practice requires a stringent devotion to the boundary-driven spatial structuring of the land, with the invocation of national identity relying on the presumption of Malayness emanating from the region as it is now defined. However, given the alterations that have occurred over time, which have tailored and retailed the very definition of Malayness through the mapped territory, one can observe the imagination required to posit an unaffected “national” history.

### CHAPTER III

#### *Boundaries of Ethnicity: The Census and its Precipitation of Ethnic Striation in Malaysia*

When attempting to understand identity construction in the process of forming a nation-state, one can extrapolate that defined geopolitical boundaries, as best displayed in efforts to map particular regions and define what exists within and what exists beyond the nation-state in question, are of paramount importance. However, the imagination of nation-states cannot solely rely upon the deployment of borders to adequately understand how identities bound to a given nation-state arise, especially when analyzing areas heavily impacted by transitive migration patterns like Malaysia. Thus, we must turn to other mechanisms to understand how identities were introduced, vanquished, accepted, rejected, supported, suppressed, and, most fittingly, imagined. In attempting to elucidate the specific history behind the construction of ethnic identities in Malaysia and the amalgamation of said ethnicities into a broader definition of who is Malay and who is otherized, particularly in the wake of colonial imposition, censuses provide ample opportunity to trace historical categorizations. In effect, the census “delineates boundaries no less than a map or border wall does.”<sup>147</sup> In the scope of Southeast Asia, the census served as means for census compilers to impose boundaries of belonging, with officials working to imagine particular demographics within the scope of national identity and convince the people that had been categorized that said categorizations were legitimate.

While some may perceive censuses to be nothing more than merely quantitative evaluations of populations, their historical importance has denoted a more complicated function. Just as maps seek to delineate territory for political purposes, censuses have, “by a sort of

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<sup>147</sup> Andrew Whitby, *The Sum of the People: How the Census Has Shaped Nations, from the Ancient World to the Modern Age*, (New York: Basic Books, 2020): 4.

demographic triangulation... filled in politically the formal topography of the map.”<sup>148</sup> In other words, the census itself has constructed imagined boundaries, not of land necessarily, but of the people that abide within. Tangentially, censuses have to reconcile with concepts of citizenship, nationality, ethnicity, and race. Although citizenship is arguably the most easily discernible of the aforementioned categorizations, the other categories become significantly more muddled when incorporating shared history, culture, and ancestry.<sup>149</sup>

Scholars have devoted significant attention to analyzing the census and its employment in Southeast Asia as a tool of the empire during the colonial period. British Malaya, in particular, has been a case study of sorts for understanding the census’ application in the region, with scholars noting how initial efforts to categorize the population in what is now contemporary Malaysia impacted the subsequent processes of state-building and identity construction drastically. Charles Hirschman, the scholar Benedict Anderson derives much of his discussion in *Imagined Communities* about censuses from, has focused much of the scholarship pertaining to census-making on Malaysia and its cultivation of ethnicities heavily shaped around colonial legacies. Hirschman’s work predominately highlights patterns within the ‘identity categories’ of successive censuses from the late nineteenth century through contemporary versions, demonstrating a rapid development of fairly arbitrary categories that are “continuously agglomerated, disaggregated, recombined, intermixed, and reordered.”<sup>150</sup> Hirschman notes that a staple of the Malaysian censuses of the nineteenth century is the consistent presence of a singular dominant identity category: the ethnic Malay people, simultaneously observing that, while evidently the most populous identity category, the group itself also happens to also be the most

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<sup>148</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 174.

<sup>149</sup> Whitby, *The Sum of the People*, 14.

<sup>150</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 164.

politically powerful.<sup>151</sup> In an attempt to detail the magnitude of power that exists within the census, Hirschman presents the following claims about the institutionalization of censuses as tools of empire: ethnic groups, in order to persist as concepts, must encounter some semblance of social and or institutional reinforcement to legitimize specific identities and heighten division between said identities.<sup>152</sup>

Much of Hirschman's approach to dissecting ethnicities through the lens of colonial social constructions is informed by Michel Foucault's conceptualization of census as a facilitator of identity construction. Foucault states, "Complete enumeration, and the possibility of assigning at each point the necessary connection with the next, permits an absolutely certain knowledge of identities and differences."<sup>153</sup> Foucault, in asserting that enumerating practices, such as census-taking, assigns value to the unique comparisons authors of censuses highlight when contrasting the categories they opt to include in their quantitative report. In applying Foucault's line of thinking to the overarching Malaysian example, one can recognize that the knowledge of the identities, specifically ethnic identities, most heavily referred to in colonial censuses persists for generations, further solidifying the notion that the supposed difference between the particular groups accounted for in the census is reality and that the value of the difference is intrinsically connected to how national identity itself is constructed. This ultimately aids in the overarching state-building process by cementing a hierarchical structures in which to shape nationalism around.

The undeniable capability of the census that Hirschman posits is supported quite well by scholarship pertaining to the application of the census in other regions of the world during the

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<sup>151</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 164.

<sup>152</sup> Charles Hirschman, "The Meaning and Measurement of Ethnicity in Malaysia: An Analysis of Census Classifications," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 46, no. 3 (1987): 557.

<sup>153</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An archaeology of the human sciences*, (London: Routledge, 1989): 102.

colonial era, including work from anthropologists like Bernard Cohn. In some of his most notable work, Cohn alludes to how, unlike the indigenous African and American peoples impacted by the development of the New World who were largely being physically uprooted and relocated, the people of Southeast Asia were more indirectly affected by Western imposition and forced cultural transformation.<sup>154</sup> Pointing to the Bengali intellectuals of the nineteenth century and the educated class of Indians In the twentieth century, Cohn makes the following claim: “Not only have the colonial peoples begun to think of themselves in different terms, not only are they changing the content of their culture, but the way that they think about their culture has changed as well.”<sup>155</sup> By being able to “stand back and look at themselves, their ideas, their symbols and culture and see it as an entity,” the Southeast Asians impacted by colonial imposition, in the views of Cohn, are have subconsciously embraced the colonial perspective as an objective determinant of their own historical narrative.<sup>156</sup>

The work of Cohn is tangentially strengthened in argument by the work of Soviet historian Francine Hirsch, particularly in his examination of census-taking in the Soviet Union. Drawing upon scholarship like that of Cohn and Anderson, Hirsch is able to make several pertinent observations that reflect similar models in Malaysia. Challenges arose in ethnographic efforts in Central Asia that would be observed in Southeast Asia, with particular difficulty presenting itself when surveyors attempted to categorize the indigenous peoples of Siberia under categories that had been applied the ‘European Russia.’<sup>157</sup> The Soviets constructed their own

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<sup>154</sup> Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and its forms of knowledge: The British in India*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996): 228.

<sup>155</sup> Cohn, *Colonialism and its forms of knowledge: The British in India*, 228.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Francine Hirsch, “Towards a Soviet Order of Things: The 1926 Census and the Making of the Soviet Union,” In *Categories and Contexts: Anthropological and Historical Studies in Critical Demography*, edited by Simon Szreter, Hania Sholkamy, and A. Dharmalingam, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004): 129.



categories of socially-stratified categories to group their population, which offers many similarities to the Malaysian case study.

Just like the Malaysian version, the Soviet census also featured an “other” category, referred to as *inorodtsy*.<sup>158</sup> Likewise, as Hirsch divulges, the Soviets also categorized their own people in the census using religion and native language as distinguishing features, two prominent features in the Malaysian censuses.<sup>159</sup> The central stance in Hirsch’s argumentation is that nationality categories became meaningful at the intersection of official policies, expert input, and local initiatives.<sup>160</sup> Hirsch specifically cites Cohn and his seminal study of British census-taking in India to articulate that the colonial approach to constructing categories for the census reflected the colonizer’s belief that census categories mirrored sociological truth.<sup>161</sup>

Hirsch, in observing Soviet reconciliation with census-making, contends that census classifications of particular populations on the basis of nationality, when met with policies that assigned specific nationalities to particular territories, often spurred a reaffirmation of identity on the basis of ‘national’ terms.<sup>162</sup> Thus, as Hirsch points out, the coalescing of census-taking and border-making proved to be identity-transforming processes throughout the Soviet Union, as it would be in Malaysia under similar conditions.<sup>163</sup> Ethnographers and statisticians responsible for the early Soviet censuses were, thus, in the quest to determine the exact quantity of people that ‘belonged’ to the emerging national identity, directly aiding with the national identity formation process, a notion that paralleled the socially-regulatory role of the census in Malaysia.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> Hirsch, “Towards a Soviet Order of Things: The 1926 Census and the Making of the Soviet Union,” 129.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid, 128.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid, 126.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid, 127.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid, 127.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid, 139.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid, 143.

Incorporating the work of the aforementioned scholars into the overarching narrative of identity construction and state-building, this chapter sets out to center the census as a paradigm-shifting mechanism. Exploring the census as a tool of empire, the historical role it played in the colonial encroachment by European colonizers in Malaysia and Southeast Asia broadly, and the preservative powers it harbors in regard to preserving colonial legacies of identity, this chapter seeks to examine how the census effectively imagined and cemented particular identities as Malaysian, but, ultimately, served the purpose of demarcating a particular Malay identity and several “other” categorizations. In parsing through the historical development of who is defined as Malay and who is categorized as “other,” this chapter seeks to utilize history to demonstrate the ramifications of the colonial census on the contemporary multi-ethnic nation-state we understand to be Malaysia.

The census has evidently been utilized, in Malaysia and beyond, for a variety of purposes over time. It can primarily be traced back to administrative measures undertaken by despots, but gradually became an integral part of developing democracies. As nations and empires formed, the census became a mechanism to define and affirm their prowess.<sup>165</sup> Understanding the colonial importance of the census is quite simple, considering that the census itself coalesced into its current form during the colonial period and has been primarily employed to strengthen hierarchy and effectively construct new realities, realities that persist into contemporary times. The census, as a fully-conceptualized process, developed gradually and has continually incorporated ideas from various cultural applications. For example, the notion that people should be counted as individuals and not as anonymous members of a household is a Scandinavian concept, whereas the testing of census accuracy was largely adopted because of Indian procedures.<sup>166</sup> Broadly, the

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<sup>165</sup> Whitby, *The Sum of the People*,: 4.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid, 18.

census, or at least the process of counting populations, initially emerged in other colonial locales, predominately as a means of collecting systematic information, such as documenting tax collection in India.<sup>167</sup>

Prior to the introduction of the census to Malaysia, enumeration was a practice in the broader Southeast Asian region, albeit in a different iteration entirely and heavily influenced by the European powers occupying particular states. In fact, the practice of imagining the colonial state through the lens of enumeration predated the first census of the 1870s, making the contemporary model of the census a relatively novel concept to begin with.<sup>168</sup> In the scope of Malaysian history, however, the use of a census first appeared in British Malaya in 1871, documenting the Straits Settlements, which included the port cities of Malacca, Penang, and Singapore. Subsequent population censuses were carried out in the Straits Settlements on a decennial basis, being conducted again in 1881, 1891, 1901, 1911, and so forth. Between 1871 and 1957 when independence was declared, around 14 censuses were conducted by the colonial government of Malaya.<sup>169</sup> Analyzing these particular documents reveals substantial evidence of the colonial hand in influencing identity construction through the lens of enumeration practices like census compiling.

In pluralistic societies like Malaysia, there is significant ambiguity in how ethnic boundaries and ethnicity as a concept is defined.<sup>170</sup> Unlike defining ethnicity, quantifying the number of people that fall within a census population does not require the invention of particular classifications, so long as there is some kind of precedent of how ethnicities have historically

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<sup>167</sup> Cohn, *Colonialism and its forms of knowledge: The British in India*, 231.

<sup>168</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 166.

<sup>169</sup> Kiran Sagoo, "Colonial construction of Malayness: the influence of population size and composition," (East-West Center Working Paper No. 27, *International Graduate Student Conference Series*, Honolulu, Hawaii, February 2006): 3.

<sup>170</sup> Hirschman, "The Meaning and Measurement of Ethnicity in Malaysia," 555.

been differentiated.<sup>171</sup> With that said, a pattern most discernible over the course of the colonial period is the significant racialization of the census categories.<sup>172</sup> In Peninsular Malaysia, the historically-applied ethnic divisions have largely been the following four categorizations: “Malay,” “Chinese,” “Indian,” and “Other.”<sup>173</sup> However, these categorizations were not always the identified demographics. The term ‘Malaysian’ did not appear until the 1931 British census and did not re-emerge until the 1947 iteration. Within the context of these two documents, the term ‘Malaysian’ referred to the indigenous Malay ethnicities, rather than to the overarching nationality as it’s presently used today. As can be observed over the stretch of time between the first census and contemporary versions, language and categorizing practices play a substantial role in shaping specific identities, as well as cultivating the contestation between them.

Before the decennial census in 1871 was first conducted, which invoked ethnic constructs of the homogenized ethnic categories that currently separate the Malaysian population, the basis of both Malay identity and consciousness were largely subethnicities.<sup>174</sup> The people of then Malaya, rather than distinguish themselves as ‘Malay,’ ‘Chinese,’ ‘Indian,’ or ‘Other,’ would typically identify as Javanese, Sumatran, Rawa, Achenes, Minangkabau, Bugis, and so on.<sup>175</sup> These imagined, distilled categorizations, based on the census-constructed ethnic categories, became increasingly more socialized with the implementation of specific legal codes and enactments by the colonial government.<sup>176</sup> As they gradually became institutionalized, these

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<sup>171</sup> Hirschman, “The Meaning and Measurement of Ethnicity in Malaysia,” 555.

<sup>172</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 164.

<sup>173</sup> Hirschman, “The Meaning and Measurement of Ethnicity in Malaysia,” 555.

<sup>174</sup> A. B. Shamsul, “Bureaucratic Management of Identity in a Modern State: ‘Malayness’ in Postwar Malaysia.” In *Making Majorities: Constituting the Nation in Japan, Korea, China, Malaysia, Fiji, Turkey, and the United States*, edited by Dru C. Gladney, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998): 136 - 137.

<sup>175</sup> Shamsul, “Bureaucratic Management of Identity in a Modern State: ‘Malayness’ in Postwar Malaysia,” 137.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

categorizations and the newfound predilection toward this form of enumeration began to precipitate a trend of minority and majority discourse across what would become Malaysia.<sup>177</sup>

Analyzing demographic patterns across the following census reports allows historians to reflect on such shifts that exacerbate both social and economic change.<sup>178</sup> In 1911, a moment that had been preceded by fairly rapid population, much of which can be attributed to immigration to aid in the development of industrial labor in Malaya, growth due to steady immigration in the decades prior, the population of Peninsular Malaysia totaled about 2.3 million. Over the course of 36 years, the population nearly doubled, totaling around 4.9 million.<sup>179</sup> As the population doubled in size, the ethnic groups themselves all remained proportionally the same, beyond the Malay proportion increasing from 49 to 53 percent and the Chinese proportion decreasing from 38 to 35 percent. This shift predominately demonstrated a natural increase within the Malay population, while also highlighting a rise in Chinese out-migration. Indians still comprised around 10 percent of the population, while the ‘other’ identity rounded out at about 1 percent of the population.<sup>180</sup>

Earlier employment of the census made it particularly easy for the Chinese and Indian populations to be identified as sojourner communities, linking them more closely with their foreign homelands than Malaysia. However, as the census evolved, it became increasingly more difficult to generalize individuals that came from generations of Malaysian residents under the same categorization as recent immigrants. Eventually, it became virtually impossible to identify any census that did not reveal permanent settlements for every ethnic community measured in Peninsular Malaysia.<sup>181</sup> With that said, there remained rampant contention being invoked by the

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<sup>177</sup> Shamsul, “Bureaucratic Management of Identity in a Modern State: ‘Malayness’ in Postwar Malaysia,” 137.

<sup>178</sup> Charles Hirschman, “Demographic Trends in Peninsular Malaysia, 1947-75,” *Population and Development Review* 6, no. 1 (1980): 104.

<sup>179</sup> Hirschman, “Demographic Trends in Peninsular Malaysia, 1947-75,” 104.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid*, 110.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid*, 112.

employment of these particular monikers and categorizations, particularly as the Chinese and Indian Malay populations burgeoned in size in the following years.

The 1921 census, in particular, has been cited as the basis for modern political and electoral contestation pertaining to majority versus minority populations in Malaysia, when the Malay people were faced with the fact that the Chinese and Indian populations that had immigrated to Malaysia had grown to outnumber the group that claimed Malaysia as their “motherland,” effectively making the ethnic Malay group the minority population.<sup>182</sup> Subsequent legislative efforts to enshrine the ethnic Malay population as a protected minority would occur in the years to follow, manifesting with the explicit definition of citizenship on the basis of Malayness in the 1957 Malaysian Federal Constitution. According to the 1957 Malaysian Constitution, a Malay person is defined as “a person who was born locally, habitually speaks Malay, follows Malay custom, and professes Islam.”<sup>183</sup> As will be discussed further in Chapter 5, there is a discernible thread to be traced from these initial grapplings with indigeneity and the ethnic Malay population’s political power.

Prior to World War II, there existed a schism of sorts between the traditional villages in the rural countryside and the merged group of “foreign-dominated export enclaves” and western urban coastal areas.<sup>184</sup> In Colonial Malaya, there was minimal interaction between ethnic communities beyond the marketplace and amongst the English-educated, with Malays, Chinese, and Indians all existing in separate residences and workplaces, speaking different languages, and being part of distinct social organizations. The colonial rule did little to promote ethnic integration, thus maintaining these divisions.<sup>185</sup> It remains possible for ethnic groups, especially

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<sup>182</sup> Shamsul, “Bureaucratic Management of Identity in a Modern State: ‘Malayness’ in Postwar Malaysia,” 137.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>184</sup> Hirschman, “Demographic Trends in Peninsular Malaysia, 1947-75,” 103.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

minority ethnic groups, to be settled in a country and possess strong local connections and yet still be categorized separately socially and culturally.<sup>186</sup>

With the two World Wars came globalization, which ushered in new and influential political, economic, and social institutions that promulgated sentiments of populist-driven political independence, socio-economic development, and equality amongst ethnic groups and social classes in regard to the distribution of economic benefits. As these ideals were being introduced to Malaysian society, major demographic shifts were occurring in the country. The population had been expanding rapidly throughout the entirety of the first half of the twentieth century, with high labor demands and a heavy influx of immigration from poorer regions in Asia, namely China, India, and the Dutch East Indies coinciding to bolster the population numbers significantly.<sup>187</sup>

The 1947 Census of Malaya sheds light upon the prominent influx of immigration factoring into increased ethnic striation and accentuated boundaries for the singular Malay identity. Examining the sixteen years between the 1931 iteration and the census in question, the 1947 version highlights the jump in population in the Colony of Singapore, observing the nearly 940,000 people, around 729,000 of whom are identified as Chinese, that account for a 65 percent increase in population. The census also analyzes the population change in the Malayan Federation, which acknowledges a 27.8 percent population increase, noticeably lower than the colony. However, the increase entailed the defined ‘Malay’ group having increased by 27.1 percent (from 1,891,000 to 2,403,000), the ‘Chinese’ having increased 46.2 percent (from 1,288,000 to 1,883,000), and the ‘Indian’ category having decreased 6.8 percent (from 573,000 to 534,000). (1947 59). The census also noted that a comparatively small portion of the

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<sup>186</sup> Hirschman, “Demographic Trends in Peninsular Malaysia, 1947-75,” 112.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid, 103.

population is considered to be a settled population, with the moniker of “indigenous” being minuscule.<sup>188</sup>

Even in 1947, the majority of Malaysian Chinese and Indians in Peninsular Malaysia were considered to be “locally born.”<sup>189</sup> The ten-year period between the 1947 and 1957 census conductions in Malaysia bore witness to sharp increases in the urban populations, with the proportion of the population in towns above 1,000 people rising from 26 to 42 percent. Much of this resettlement can be attributed to the “Malayan Emergency.” The Malayan Emergency refers to the conflict between the colonial government and communist insurgents of predominately Malaysian-Chinese people that happened between 1948 and 1960. As a result of the conflict, the Malay-Chinese urbanization gap narrowed slightly during the 1960s.<sup>190</sup>

This shift in focus towards more stringently defined ethnic categorizations in the colonial census coincided with social developments that reflected the broader socialization of the ethnic striation. The twentieth century bore witness to a significant shift in Malaysian history, largely due to a rising contention between ethnicities as the Malaysian state became increasingly more globalized. Following the Japanese Occupation during World War II, a push to reconcile with the economic, political, and social ramifications of colonial rule over the region became utterly unavoidable. Although the British were able to maintain control for a little over a decade, political instability spurred by class divides and ethnic conflicts during the postwar era became insurmountable to quell, making revolution and the reshaping of Malaysian society inevitable.<sup>191</sup>

Much of contemporary understanding as to who and what can be classified as ‘Malay’ has been severely impacted by Orientalist models imposed by colonial administrator-scholars

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<sup>188</sup> C. A. Vlieland, “The 1947 Census of Malaya,” *Pacific Affairs* 22, no. 1 (1949): 59.

<sup>189</sup> Hirschman, “Demographic Trends in Peninsular Malaysia, 1947-75,” 112.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid, 120.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid, 103.



and subsequently reproduced by contemporary Malay studies scholars. The classification and categories evoked in the colonial census have been embraced wholeheartedly by politicians, bureaucrats, and administrators to formulate policy and legislation. In defining ‘Malayness’ as a combination of both national and ethnic identities through these parameters derived from previously established census categories, other imagined proximal identities, such as ‘Chinese-ness,’ ‘Indian-ness,’ ‘Kadazan-ness,’ ‘Iban-ness,’ or ‘Asli-ness,’ have been further accentuated and defined as monikers of otherness. Despite efforts to employ Marxist, functionalist, or post-modernist notions and terminology to scholarship pertinent to defining ‘Malayness,’ there remains a penchant for scholars to operate within the framework of ethnicized knowledge founded on notions invented in the colonial application of the census.<sup>192</sup>

Returning to both Hirsch and Hirschman’s frameworks, this explicit definition of the Malay identity in the foundational document of Malaysian statehood is illustrative of the critical role of policy reinforcement to truly cultivated an imagined national identity. The Chinese and Indian categories extend to the descendants of immigrants from China and the Indian subcontinent, whereas the “Other” category functions as a catchall group, encompassing a small number of Eurasians, Thais, Europeans, and any other identities that cannot be classified under the parameters of the three primary categories.<sup>193</sup> There exists considerable heterogeneity within these three ethnic categories, with the Indian population including Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Christians, as well as individuals that speak Indian, Pakistani, and Sri Lankan mother tongues. The Chinese category is defined similarly by religion and language.<sup>194</sup> Where the lines begin to blur is when interethnic couples have children.<sup>195</sup> The selection of which

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<sup>192</sup> A. B. Shamsul, “A History of an Identity, an Identity of a History: The Idea and Practice of ‘Malayness’ in Malaysia Reconsidered,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 32, no. 3 (2001): 356.

<sup>193</sup> Hirschman, “The Meaning and Measurement of Ethnicity in Malaysia,” 555.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

categories are defined and the criteria being used to differentiate between said categories are critical components to consider when analyzing the society being assessed.<sup>196</sup> Likewise, changes in how ethnicity has been measured to reflect shifts in both ideology and the political economy within the society itself.<sup>197</sup> Ethnic divisions are often viewed as rigid, yet comparative evaluations of censuses and the ethnic categorizations featured reflect a more fluid iteration of ethnic boundaries.<sup>198</sup> With considerable measurement error a staple in conducting census data, historians can recognize that the census is defined by the arbitrary nature of ethnic classification, as well as the unavoidable conflict with the individuals that straddle ethnic boundaries.<sup>199</sup> Regardless of the arbitrary nature of ethnic classification, however, the political ramifications evidenced in contemporary Malaysian discourse about ethnicity indicate the magnitude of the impact of colonial censuses. While it may not be easily argued that colonial imposition would have impacted the way categorization occurred in the country following independence, there is an insurmountable amount of evidence that colonial meddling in identity construction during the colonial period is reflected in the politicization of the ethnic Malay identity, further complicating the ethno-nationalist state of Malaysia today.

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<sup>196</sup> Hirschman, "The Meaning and Measurement of Ethnicity in Malaysia," 557.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER IV

### *Solidifying Boundaries in the Historical Narrative: The Museum and its Colonial Legacies*

The map imagines the nation through the imposition of boundaries and the distinguishing of a particular territory from the surrounding region, effectively cultivating an identity about who can be anchored to the designated land. In the context of Malaysia, these boundaries have been drawn and redrawn to section off the Malay Archipelago in a handful of distinct ways. The census, although not imposing physical boundaries to topographically shape the nation, imagines its own iteration of boundaries, ones that demand the construction of particular identities on arbitrary terms and distinguishes them from one another as a means of privileging particular groups. In the privileging of others, striated claims to a constructed national identity are thus paradoxically cultivated by virtue of establishing identity boundaries, which has pruned the Malay identity to be devoid of particular groups of Malaysian ethnic and religious identities. In the grand scheme of state-building, these colonial artifacts incorporated the colonially-influenced imagining of nationhood and national identity into the historiographic understanding of Malaysia and its acknowledged history. The final crux of Anderson's trifecta of power institutions epitomizes this sort of imaginative construction of the nation itself and furthers it through utilizing cultural memory to reinforce historical understandings as history itself. Thus, the museum enters into the equation of state-building in Malaysia.

Just like maps and censuses, the institution of museums derives its power from its infinite reproducibility. Museums, particularly in Malaysia, have functioned quite effectively as a product of colonialism, while remaining equally as valuable to the intentions of the contemporary state. Offering the ability to effectively define Malaysia in accordance to the histories that are chosen to be displayed (and conversely, omitting those that are viewed as

irrelevant to encapsulating the historical landscape of the region), museums have been operationalized to cater to the institutional and legal agendas of those with the authority to hand-select what falls under the purview of the historical narrative. Since independence, museums have been wholeheartedly embraced to serve the needs of the state, aligning with nationalist sentiments in the embrace and reproduction of a conceptualized national story. Museums are capable of legitimizing particular ideas, like categorizations and hierarchical supremacy (or inferiority), and integrating them into socialized conceptions of identity and statehood, with persistent reminders of those two very concepts and how they have been imagined.

In another sense, national museums, the contemporary iterative of the colonial museum, encourage those examining the presented narrative to consider the nation from a spatial perspective, as well as from a historical and ethnological vantage point. They function as “cultural organs” of the nation-state, playing pivotal roles in establishing a particular order nationally, politically, and culturally, through education, media, and other institutions that disseminate information.<sup>200</sup> By employing certain images, objects, and narratives to illustrate where, what, and when the nation is, the national museum effectively imagines the nation with “symbolic substance.”<sup>201</sup> Made possible by the reproduction of imagery and documentation of tailored glimpses into history, the institution of museum constantly re-imagines the national narrative, centering the empowered perspective in the discourse of national identity by constantly inundating the general population with reminders of the relevance of preserved artifacts to the contemporary cultural core of the nation-state.<sup>202</sup> Museums “construct a certain view about

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<sup>200</sup> Eric C. Thompson, “The World beyond the Nation in Southeast Asian Museums,” *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 27, no. 1 (2012): 78.

<sup>201</sup> Thompson, “The World beyond the Nation in Southeast Asian Museums,” 54.

<sup>202</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 182.

history and culture, present a story, and produce resources of learning...’’<sup>203</sup> Every museum differs in how it acknowledges national history, ethnology, and origin stories, which bodes well for fruitful discourse in regard to the derivations of nation-ness that arise.<sup>204</sup>

Anderson speaks directly to the concept of museumizing imagination, assigning significant importance to the power of national memory in the state-building process and elucidating it to be an intrinsic aspect of weaponizing the institution of museums as a tool of empire.<sup>205</sup> By virtue of regulating national memory to articulate particular histories as the ‘national’ history, museums and the museumizing process are innately political.<sup>206</sup> According to Anderson, the very establishment of museums across Southeast Asia in contemporary times speaks to their political nature as subsisting reminders of imaginative state-building and identity construction.<sup>207</sup> In effect, museums became a mechanism for colonial powers to legitimate their authority by linking and connecting themselves to this ancestral past through the invocation of tradition to construct universal bonds and through the appropriation of antiquity to bolster particular facets of the colonial narrative.

Scholarship on the matter has largely echoed the sentiments Anderson has expressed. Mackenzie broadly surveys the development of museums in concordance with the growth of the British Empire, offering a comparative historical analysis that postulates that the proliferation of museums in the nineteenth century, as evidenced by their initial arbitrary structuring, largely reflected a desire by the colonizers to maintain social hierarchy. Mackenzie observes that this is done by centering narratives in which particular groups, especially the colonizers and the identities that aided in their power accumulation and maintenance, are highlighted substantially

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<sup>203</sup> Abu Talib Ahmad, *Museums, History, and Culture in Malaysia*, (Singapore: NUS Press, 2014): 2.

<sup>204</sup> Thompson, “The World beyond the Nation in Southeast Asian Museums,” 62.

<sup>205</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 178.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

more than other identities across the nation in question. MacKenzie makes the assertion that “[the museum] was a central part of the process of ordering the world, familiarizing and naturalizing the unknown as the known, bringing the remote and unfamiliar into concordance with the zone of prior knowledge, both geographically and intellectually.”<sup>208</sup> As Mackenzie understood it to be, “Museums are understood to be implicated in imperialism, but also imperial in their own right.”<sup>209</sup>

So how does this pertain to Malaysia and the state-building, identity-constructing imaginative process? Broadly speaking, since the introduction of colonial museums to the region, museums have played a substantial role in shaping the national history that has best bolsters Malay nationalism, which, in a cyclical manner, serves to reaffirm Malay national identity and a deeper connection to the nation-ness of Malaysia. Examining the historical presence of museums in the region provides an idea of this self-serving reinforcement structure.

Up until the introduction of novel nineteenth-century archaeology, the colonial rulers that held power in Southeast Asia were generally uninterested in examining the personal histories of the civilizations they had conquered.<sup>210</sup> Prior to and leading into the early 1800s, Malaysia bore witness to the rise of proto-foundational institutions, predominately conceived by private religious and educational societies.<sup>211</sup> The institutions that remained operational eventually refocused their attention on collecting and documenting resources of the colony, highlighting the specific historical juncture at which it existed as a colonized state.<sup>212</sup> As the colonies themselves began to garner increased economic acumen during the mid-nineteenth century, museums began

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<sup>208</sup> John M. Mackenzie, *Museums and empire: Natural History, Human Cultures and Colonial Identities*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009): 8.

<sup>209</sup> Mackenzie, *Museums and empire*, 71.

<sup>210</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 179.

<sup>211</sup> Shelley Ruth Butler, "John M. Mackenzie, *Museums and Empire: Natural history, human cultures and colonial identities*," *Museum and Society* 8, no. 3 (2010): 217.

<sup>212</sup> Butler, "John M. Mackenzie, *Museums and Empires*," 217.

to gain greater support from the state and were increasingly linked with local education institutions.<sup>213</sup> The period from the 1860s until the inter-war period was deemed a “pre-modern phase” by MacKenzie.<sup>214</sup> Entities like the Colonial Archaeological Services accumulated enough power and prestige to begin interweaving the museumizing imagination with educational programming, further imparting particular national histories to highlight history with an agenda of how and through whom Malaysia could be defined.<sup>215</sup>

As archaeological historicization progressed through the age of mechanical reproduction, the practice became increasingly more politically profound, so much so that the personnel of the state, who largely consisted of indigenous-identifying peoples, became unconscious of the intentional imaginative constructions of race and identity.<sup>216</sup> This was not anomalous to Malaysia, as much of Southeast Asia experienced similar museumizing periods of adopting colonial museums and furthering the mechanical reproduction of history into contemporary instruction of local historical recollection.<sup>217</sup> In the words of Anderson, “It was precisely the infinite quotidian reproducibility of its regalia that revealed the real power of the state.”<sup>218</sup> The efficacy of this political museumizing is best demonstrated by the continuation of the practice generations later, with museumizing as an instrument of power consolidation persisting into the post-independence state of Malaysia. In effect, the state has managed to continue the work of its colonially-occupied predecessor polity.<sup>219</sup>

The heightened archaeological work of the era coincided with rising political contention over educational policies.<sup>220</sup> As progressive advocacy for investment in schooling programs

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<sup>213</sup> Butler, "John M. Mackenzie, Museums and Empires," 217.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid..

<sup>215</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 179.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid, 182 - 183.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid, 183.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid..

<sup>220</sup> Ibid, 180.

arose, so did reactionary counterarguments from conservatives, who regurgitated colonial hierarchical argumentation that groups identified as the definitive image of the national identity should remain identifiably native to the nation-state and, thus, merit being most prominently featured in the historical narrative. In effect, the archaeological restorations, such as the state sponsoring of printed editions of traditional literary texts, were demonstrative of how the conservative museumization efforts echoed the work of colonial map-makers and census-makers to impose boundaries around who and what is considered Malay.<sup>221</sup>

Maps become centerfold features of national museums in Southeast Asia, weaponized to orient and instruct those engaging with the museum exhibits.<sup>222</sup> As alluded to in the previous chapter pertinent to the subject matter, maps function as a means of enframing the nation and, in doing so, represent a world beyond the nation itself. In other words, these maps produce a visual representation of the otherwise abstract notion of a national geo-body as a territorial bordered nation-state.<sup>223</sup> Likewise, these maps situate the nation-state in a broader global context. Thus, the employment of maps as exhibits within national museums serves to both symbolically represent the nation-state, while simultaneously establishing a narrative of geographic and ethnographic order tangential to the nation-state.<sup>224</sup> Tangentially, the colonial museum was, in a cyclical demonstration of the relationship between the colonial artifacts that help imagine the Malay nation and the national identity, aided by the power institutions of maps and census, with the plotting of museums as sites of value in maps. Anderson describes this process as a “kind of necrological census.”<sup>225</sup>

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<sup>221</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 181.

<sup>222</sup> Thompson, “The World beyond the Nation in Southeast Asian Museums,” 59.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

<sup>225</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 180.



In tandem, the increase in archaeological work placed those constructing the historical narrative through monument-building and artifact preservation in a position to place themselves atop hierarchical structures.<sup>226</sup> This largely occurred as European presence increasingly encroached upon Southeast Asia and Europeans themselves began reproducing and taking up homesteads in the region.<sup>227</sup> As tourism grew as an industry, so did monumental archaeology, which facilitated a means by which the state could present itself as a guardian of tradition.<sup>228</sup> As Anderson observes, the placement of monuments, as particular markers of both history and hierarchy, serves the purpose of distinguishing the architects and curators as history-makers, othering those who cannot aid in the construction of the cultural memory and, by virtue, the imagination of the past of the Malay people as a particular demographic.<sup>229</sup> This othering disadvantages those who, without institutional power, cannot lay claim to the national identity that is effectively cultivated through the process of museumization, leaving them as distinct outliers.

Circumstance determines the influence of national history significantly. In the case of Malaysia, both iterations of museums - colonial and national - centralize a focus on the nation's positionality as having existed within the Commonwealth of Nations. Thus, the British colonial empire's legacy remains consistently fundamental to the national recollection of history. By positioning Malaysia as a "nation among other nations," the museum effectively distinguishes the nation and its proximity to the colonial empires of the Portuguese, Dutch, and British as paramount in Malaysian national history.<sup>230</sup> That is not to suggest that this history is incorrectly recounted as having happened, as it is objectively a critical juncture in the history of the region.

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<sup>226</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 181.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

<sup>230</sup> Thompson, "The World beyond the Nation in Southeast Asian Museums," 74.

However, as demonstrated by the prominence of the colonial era in the national museum, it remains so widely disseminated as a core aspect of Malaysian national history that it projects colonial involvement with the region as the undeniable history of Malaysia, rather than a facet that does not necessarily fully encompass the broader historical developments that occurred in the Straits of Malacca at the time.

What the institution of the museum also offers is an opportunity to construct alternate legitimacies. In other words, the museumizing power wielded by those in control of the historical narrative, who heavily influence conceptions of national identity, can be bastardized to re-imagine history in a way that promotes a given perspective, rather than a holistic web of histories more customary to a region as diverse as Malaysia. Just as colonial regimes aligned themselves with antiquity in map-making as a mechanism of shrouding their historical exercising of conquest, those constructing the colonial museums actively sought to harness historical memory to reconstruct national comprehension of the history of the region itself.<sup>231</sup> In effect, these museums in colonial Malaysia were composite artifacts, amalgamating colonial ideologies with indigenous cosmologies.<sup>232</sup>

As the historical narrative of museums gradually trickled into modern times, specifically in the later half of the twentieth century, Malaysia consolidated as both an ethnological and territorial entity.<sup>233</sup> What emerged was a “nearly universal ‘seamless’ shift” towards ethnography, which entailed problematic practices like the exchange of human skeletal remains.<sup>234</sup> As the modern era came to fruition, the colonial museum evolved into a more professionalized and democratized iteration of its former self.<sup>235</sup> While much of Anderson’s assessment pertains to the

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<sup>231</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 181.

<sup>232</sup> Dellios, “The Museum as Artefact, Made in Malaysia,” iii.

<sup>233</sup> Thompson, “The World beyond the Nation in Southeast Asian Museums,” 74.

<sup>234</sup> Butler, “John M. Mackenzie, Museums and Empire,” 217.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

colonial museum, contemporary museums have continued to aid in imagining the nation in the postcolonial era.<sup>236</sup> As historian Wang Gungwu notes, the process of nation-building is a never-ending one, with an entire generation of postcolonial nationals being reevaluated with transnational, multinational, multiethnic, and multicultural ideologies, albeit without a conclusive definition of national identity.<sup>237</sup> Nation-building has remained a contested endeavor in Southeast Asian countries like Malaysia, and museums are no exception to institutions that frequently played a role in facilitating particular directional progress in the nation-building process.<sup>238</sup>

Examining the ramifications of the colonial museum, one must turn to the development of national museums as exemplifying the levels of imagination inherent in nation-building and the intrinsically-connected national historical narrative.<sup>239</sup> National museums typically follow a predictable pattern in presentation. Their historical narratives, often conveyed chronologically, gradually focus less and less on regional culture, trade, and social interactions with a transnational framework in the picture. As the focus sharpens, the borders of the modern nation-state seemingly harden. Thus, the national geo-body becomes the focal point of interest, as demonstrated by the maps, texts, and other representations that emerge as exhibit centerpieces.<sup>240</sup> With the advent of modern forms of technology and ways of disseminating information, national museums have effectively overtaken the role of the colonial museum in imagining communities and identity groups under the umbrella of the development of the nation-state, albeit with different objectives.<sup>241</sup> While national museums have continued the practice of producing imagined representations of the nation, they have also sought to frame the

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<sup>236</sup> Thompson, "The World beyond the Nation in Southeast Asian Museums," 55.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid, 56.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

<sup>239</sup> Thompson, "The World beyond the Nation in Southeast Asian Museums," 54.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid, 69.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid, 54.

respective nation in contrast with the surrounding world, imposing particular international and regional orientations upon the people that inhabit the nation-state.<sup>242</sup> Southeast Asia in particular has been employed as an enframing device, especially when considering that the very notion of Southeast Asia as a region is an imagined construction, considering the diversity of cultures that existed prior to a Western grouping of the contemporary nation-states as sharing a social past.<sup>243</sup>

Preliminary museums in Asia were particularly oriented around local aesthetics, rather than natural history.<sup>244</sup> What is most evidently clear about the aftermath of the colonial museum is the formation of Asian elite identities, rather than distinguished white imperial identities.<sup>245</sup> In the case of Malaysia, the hyper-fixation on ethnicity in imagining the national Malay identity has largely spurred a heavy concentration on recounting the historical legacies to which the Malay ethnic group can be attached to. While colonial presence remains a well-documented and displayed aspect of the national history, no imperial identities occupy much space in the museum-propagated historical narrative, with a greater focus being granted to the Malay people in broad strokes.

Where national museums are arguably the most ineffective in their pronouncement of nationalism is accounting for the migratory tendencies of human populations.<sup>246</sup> Prehistoric migration has been a fixture of virtually all Malaysian museums, albeit in a limited capacity in the grand scheme of things. The National History Museum of Malaysia, when in operation, displayed fossils, artifacts, and mapped prehistoric migration routes, demonstrating the migratory behavior witnessed through the Malay Peninsula and Indo-Philippine archipelago. Despite these movements occurring without any semblance of the boundaries associated with contemporary

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<sup>242</sup> Thompson, "The World beyond the Nation in Southeast Asian Museums," 54.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid

<sup>244</sup> Butler, "John M. Mackenzie, Museums and Empire," 217.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid.

<sup>246</sup> Thompson, "The World beyond the Nation in Southeast Asian Museums," 62.

nation-states, the focus of the migrating people documented suggests preferential attention to those now perceived as most proximate to a national Malay identity, rather than a wide-ranging, boundary-defying broader Malaysian identity. The two lines of movement - the first traveling through the Malay Peninsula and the second from contemporary Taiwan across the Philippine-Indonesian archipelago - effectively tracing the journeys of the “proto-Malay” people, a name choice invocative of the centering of the Malay ethnic group and its surmised ancestors. This analysis of the museum’s tunnel-visioned propagation of this imagined national history is further corroborated by the fact the exhibit made no reference to similar patterns of migration from China and India, a reflection of the foreign-born ethnicities being incomparable to their Malay counterparts in the national history being told through the museum. In 2007, the National History Museum shuttered, with its exhibits transferred into the National Museum, which was subsequently renovated and upgraded to incorporate its predecessor’s showcases.<sup>247</sup> In an updated iteration of the aforementioned exhibit in 2011, newer exhibits still failed to display Chinese and Indian migrations but remained hyper-fixated on recounting the ancient Malay journeys.<sup>248</sup>

In a similar manner of expounding upon the imaginative nature of cartography by displaying maps as exhibit items, national museums also represent the broader world, beyond the scope of the nation, through ethnographical representations of people both within and outside the nation.<sup>249</sup> In incorporating a world beyond the nation as a facet of central importance to the national museum, the institution manages to both imagine the nation and construct an imagined national order.<sup>250</sup> The National Museum in Kuala Lumpur follows this model of situating

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<sup>247</sup> Thompson, “The World beyond the Nation in Southeast Asian Museums,” 57.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid, 62.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid, 61.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid, 56.

Malaysia in a global context, employing maps and narrative to incorporate Malaysia into a broader historical narrative, which more readily supplants external colonial legacies into the imagination of Malaysia as a nation-state and the Malay people as a group distinct from the likes of foreign classifications of global citizens.<sup>251</sup>

Akin to many historical narratives of national museums across Southeast Asia, the National Museum of Malaysia follows a pattern: offering an experience to visitors of an unfolding narrative, largely centered around how the nation emerged and growing sharper in focus as the exhibits are traveled through.<sup>252</sup> Although the Malaysian national museums could have solely focused on the explicit narrative of the nation-state and its formative years, the displays and textual narrative of the museums extend beyond simply the scope of the emerging nation-state, instead discussing the world beyond the nation extensively.<sup>253</sup> By representing the world beyond the nation-state, national museums like the National Museum of Malaysia construct symbolic representations of “others,” which, in turn, facilitates the assembling of a national consciousness surrounding the territory and the people that have a claim to said territory.<sup>254</sup> In drawing boundaries around subjects and nations, a sense of order is established from an internal and external standpoint, with the internal pertaining to the nation and the external pertaining to international relations. Both are produced simultaneously through the narratives and visual representations that make up national museums.<sup>255</sup>

A walk through today’s National Museum of Malaysia reveals the inescapable historical agendas innately interwoven with the museum as both a colonial product and a state-sponsored institution. In the National Museum of Malaysia, there are four exhibit halls, each devoted to its

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<sup>251</sup> Thompson, “The World beyond the Nation in Southeast Asian Museums,” 61.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid, 65.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid, 55.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid, 77

<sup>255</sup> Ibid, 58.

own particular facet of history. The first offers a broad picture of the prehistoric Malay Peninsula, focusing on the geological developments, the tools of the era, and the nomadic peoples that began to populate the region. The second explores the dynastic eras of the Malacca Sultanate. The third offers insight into the colonial era, with specific attention given to the fall of Malacca in the aftermath of Portuguese conquests, the subsequent Dutch and British colonial rules, and the Japanese Occupation, which resulted in the British being expelled from Malay. The colonial period exhibit ultimately bleeds into the final displays of contemporary Malaysian history following the independence movement.<sup>256</sup> The structure of the museum ultimately conveys a story, in which prehistory intersects with the cultural heritage of Malacca, only to be confronted with colonialism, which is then shaken off by Malaysian independence.

The aspect of cultural heritage is one that recalls Malacca as a point of national pride, albeit while existing as somewhat of an anachronism when considering the distance in time between the 15th and 20th centuries. A collection of maps in the now-defunct History Museum in Malaysia portrayed Srivijaya and the Malacca Sultanate as precursors to the modern nation-state of Malaysia. The maps project the spheres of influence of Srivijaya and Malacca well beyond the contemporary boundaries, therefore staking an implicit claim that these polities enjoyed broader territorial sovereignty than Malaysia does today. A revamped exhibit in 2011 did not highlight as substantial of a territorial reach for either polity, but did narrate at great lengths the esteem of the Malay Kingdoms as discernible points of heritage.<sup>257</sup> Regardless, by placing importance upon the Malacca Sultanate, the Malaysian National Museum manages to give the nation-state a prehistory to attach meaning to, with the intertwining of the historical narrative

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<sup>256</sup> Thompson, "The World beyond the Nation in Southeast Asian Museums," 70.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid, 72 - 73

with maps of ever-shifting territoriality to articulate a vision for how the national geo-body came to exist.<sup>258</sup>

The role of the museum does not solely remain confined to the sites we typically envision, chock full of exhibits and artifacts. The museumizing process extends beyond these ornamental buildings, with the education system largely propagating the narratives the museum constructs. The progression of the process of museumizing is discernible when examining the various vehicles employed. Preliminary archaeological reports serve as a fundamental basis for colonial reference to a particular historical past, with photography and documentation of relics preserving the supposed meanings of monuments and landmarks to the cultural narrative. This narrative is then projected further and more widespread, entering into literature that is widely produced and consumed by the general populace, who in turn absorb and reproduce the narrative conveyed by this tailored history. Anderson specifically highlights how “print capitalism” functions as a “pictorial census of the state’s patrimony,” which is subsequently made widely accessible to the people of the nation-state at the bequest of the state, with meager items such as postage stamps and schoolbooks continually upholding these imagined recollections of the past. It is through these recollections of the past that historical understandings of identity are cultivated and persist as iterations conceptualized by the colonial powers.<sup>259</sup>

The musuemizing process and invocation of national history were also not exclusively bound to museums defined as historical museums. Art museums, also derived from Westernized models, arrived in the wake of secularization and modernization. In the case of contemporary Malaysia, the National Art Gallery was established in August 1958, the year following the country’s achievement of independence. The colonial British government did not believe there to

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<sup>258</sup> Thompson, “The World beyond the Nation in Southeast Asian Museums,” 71.

<sup>259</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 182.



be any useful political role for art in Malaysia and, thus, never officially encouraged the cultivation of art and its further celebration in art museums. The formation of the National Art Gallery in 1958 in the wake of the new nationalist government forming effectively signalled a “self-conscious declaration that the notion of the modern in the visual arts had arisen in the national consciousness.”

There remains a stratification in which identities have been and continue to be represented ethnologically in both the former National History Museum of Malaysia and the current National Museum. Due to the ethnological focus of both the former National History Museum of Malaysia and the current National Museum being primarily on representing the history of the ethnic Malay people, attention is given to the history of the Malay Sultanates, their leaders, and Malay culture, with references to Chinese, Indian, and other Malay identities being marginal at best, despite accounting for nearly half of the country’s population.<sup>260</sup> This extends to confounding histories beyond the nation as well, with connections to Southern China being generally repressed, whilst Islamization and the connections between the Malay Peninsula and the Islamic world are heavily acknowledged.<sup>261</sup>

There do exist some counterpoints to this format of museums in Malaysia. One such example is the Malay World Ethnography Museum. The Malay World Ethnography Museum, situated about a minute's walk away from the National Museum, upholds the existence of a broad, ethnonational Malay identity, one that extends beyond the boundaries of contemporary Malaysia. This serves as a departure point from the traditional museumized account of national identity, which classifies ethnic groups as minorities within the scope of the contemporary territory.<sup>262</sup>

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<sup>260</sup> Thompson, “The World beyond the Nation in Southeast Asian Museums,” 62.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid, 63.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid, 65

Museums capture the past, but ultimately operate on a plane that is constantly responding to the happenings of the present. In the case of Malaysia, where identity, ethnicity, and nationalism all remain contested in contemporary political discourse, museums have continually responded to the imagined concepts of who and what the nation has been and what it is imagined as today. Despite the immense focus allocated to the ethnic Malay identities, the rising attention given to other groups, specifically the Chinese and Indian Malay populations, bodes well for a continued endeavor to expand the boundaries of the definition of Malay.

## CHAPTER V

### *Becoming Malay: A Historical Culmination of an Imagined National Identity*

With the three most prominent colonial artifacts having now been understood to have played substantial roles in the imagination of the nation-state of Malaysia and the Malay identity, a few questions remain. How have the ramifications of these colonial practices amalgamated to construct the contemporary perception of Malaysia and the Malay people? Where are these colonial legacies most heavily observed? How are these imagined concepts continually replicated today? And, perhaps most important, how do the people of Malaysia embrace (or reject) these colonial frameworks in the modern day? Where Malay studies scholars have largely attempted to answer the bulk of these questions lies in examining the idea of *Melayu*.

In Malay, there exists a term to describe the process of assimilating and acculturating into Malayness: *masuk melayu*. *Masuk melayu* in its literal translation refers to “embracing Malayness.”<sup>263</sup> The process is often understood to involve the cultural acquisition or imposition of particular facets of Malayness, most specifically Islam and the Malay language. In historical application, the process has largely been employed to draw in a wide range of indigenous peoples into the Malay-speaking Muslim polities. In practice, and with the knowledge set forth in the previous chapters, historians can recognize that the construction of Malayness has largely skewed to meld ethnicity with nationalism. Thus, a further examination of Malayness as a political process must be further explored to begin to discern where these colonially-influenced constructs have reared their heads most in contemporary Malaysian political dynamics.

Scholarship in Malay studies has frequently attempted to tackle the question of what it means to be Malay and, conversely, what it does not. Timothy Barnard and Hendrik Maier, in

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<sup>263</sup> Sharon Siddique, “Some Aspects of Malay-Muslim Ethnicity in Peninsular Malaysia,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 3, no. 1 (1981): 78.

their discussion of Malayness and its contestation, acknowledge that defining people or places as Malay (or not) is contingent upon positionality, with competing interests and differing circumstances lending to who is assigned the identity and who is omitted from the classification.<sup>264</sup> Barnard and Maier postulate that the "nature or essence of Malayness" remains problematic - one of the most challenging and confusing terms in the world of Southeast Asia."<sup>265</sup>

The work of Barnard and Maier has been succeeded by further research, with the likes of Leonard Andaya and Joel Kahn venturing into the field of Malay studies to begin to reconcile with the difficulty in defining Malayness. Pursuing a line of inquiry, Andaya's work specifically explores the origins of the word '*Melayu*,' which he observes to date back to the seventh century. Following a thread from the aforementioned origin point into the late nineteenth century, Andaya is able to demonstrate the evolution of Malayness as a cultural phenomenon. Andaya examines how trade relationships and state formation influenced the making (and unmaking) of the Malay identity, emphasizing the ethnicization of particular groups like the Minangkabau, the Acehnese, the Batak, the Orang Asal, and the Orang Laut communities, all Austronesian language speakers that first migrated into Southeast Asia in ancient times.<sup>266</sup> Tangentially, Kahn examines particular historical developments in Malaya and Singapore between the 1920s and the 1950s that refute any suggestion of a homogenous Malay identity.<sup>267</sup> In doing so, Kahn is able to trace the rise of a hegemonic, nationalist, and racialized discourse, which permeated across the Malaya Peninsula and cultivated interpretations of how Malayness can truly be defined.<sup>268</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> *Melayu: The Politics, Poetics and Paradoxes of Malayness*, edited by Maznah Mohamad and Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied, (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013): xii.

<sup>265</sup> *Melayu: The Politics, Poetics and Paradoxes of Malayness*, xii

<sup>266</sup> Ibid.

<sup>267</sup> Joel S. Kahn, "The making and unmaking (?) of a Malay race," *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Anthropology* 49, no. 2. (2006): 164.

<sup>268</sup> *Melayu: The Politics, Poetics and Paradoxes of Malayness*, xii

Anthony Milner pursues a similar inquiry to the likes of Barnard, Maier, Kahn, and Andaya, with an approach one might consider more “poststructuralist.”<sup>269</sup> Rather than trace Malayness from an ethnicity standpoint, Milner traces Malayness as a measure of “civilization.” Milner further problematizes the matter, pushing scholarship beyond simply viewing the pursuit of Malayness as a simple group of people contesting over power, instead defining it as an increasingly complicated paradigm. Despite his evident departure from the likes of his contemporaries, Milner’s work fits neatly into the overarching mission to study the historical, borderline arcane Malay identity as it has been understood.<sup>270</sup>

Scholarship has also sought to challenge the very fallacy of only examining national identity from an ethnic lens, with Rogers Brubaker lamenting that the ethnic collectivism that frequently emerges in discussions of *Melayu* largely makes the mistake of misrepresenting these groups as a “multi-chrome mosaic of monochrome ethnic, racial, or cultural blocks.”<sup>271</sup> For that reason, Brubaker suggests instead attempting to introduce frameworks that operate beyond the scope of ethnicity as the fundamental core of Malayness, instead pointing to other instances of shared identity facets, such as cultural idioms or political projects.<sup>272</sup> Maznah Mohamad and Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied expand upon this suggestion of going beyond ethnicity when dissecting the concept of *Melayu*, suggesting that “places, languages, families, communities, nation-states, cultural symbols, events, texts, collectives, political parties, and religious beliefs” must also be assessed to fully understand the concept in function.<sup>273</sup>

As the aforementioned scholarship suggests, Malayness manifests in no singular way, with discourse on the subject demanding immense nuance in the elaboration of the concept.

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<sup>269</sup> *Melayu: The Politics, Poetics and Paradoxes of Malayness*, xii

<sup>270</sup> Ibid.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid, xiv.

Thus, in attempting to elucidate the colonial methodologies of imagining the nation and the subsequent construction of national identity, the crux that seems to best bridge the gap between colonial and state-driven construction lies in the political evolution of Malayness in the aftermath of colonialism. While the census, the map, and the museum all remain critical artifacts to examine what colonial institutions have largely assisted in the imagining of the Malaysian nation-state and the Malay identity, there remains others factors to assess, predominately the political climate of the post-independence nation-state of Malaysia and its demonstration of the consequence of colonialism in contemporary nationalism in the nation-state.

In the late 1950s, Bruhanuddin Al-Helmy, a founding member of the Malay Nationalist and Islamic Parties in pre-independent Malaya, proposed the idea of the *kebangsaan Melayu* (meaning Malay as nationality) as the basis for citizenships in the emerging post-colonial nation-state.<sup>274</sup> Al-Helmy was the first to propose the use of the ethnic category *Melayu*, a categorization that encompassed all residents of the Malay states, including the Chinese and Indian Malay immigrant populations.<sup>275</sup> The *Melayu* category was derived from the inclusive concept of *bangsa*, the Malay term for nation.<sup>276</sup> Under *bangsa*, both people and territories could be bound together through a unifying identity.<sup>277</sup> This practice bore witness to the condition of *berkebangsaan Melayu*, which roughly referred to the political attributes of the nationalized Malay identity.<sup>278</sup> Thus, the Malay identity became one of political value, rather than cultural.<sup>279</sup> Despite the aspirational propounding of the *Melayu* identity, the project of “nationalizing the Malay” ultimately failed.<sup>280</sup>

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<sup>274</sup> *Melayu: The Politics, Poetics and Paradoxes of Malayness*, x.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid.

Although Malaysia has, since its inception, been a multiethnic state, it was ultimately named and designed with the ethnic Malay people at the forefront of concern. Much of this was attributed to their symbolic primacy and the perceived need to recognize it. Thus, efforts of nation-building largely centered around the construction of a Malay majority, both population-wise and politically.<sup>281</sup> Although all Malaysians share equal legal rights to citizenship, there are certain provisions within the Malaysian Federal Constitution that allocate “special rights” (*hak istimewa*) to the ethnic Malay people, most notably in Article 153. These rights extend to national emblems and rituals of kingship.<sup>282</sup> It was through this endeavor to construct a Malay majority in two capacities that spurred the creation of the *Bumiputera* policy, which enshrined particular rights to those deemed most proximate to the indigenous identity of contemporary Malaysia, privileging these particular Malays over others.

Defining the populations of a plural society as distinct members of an emerging nation-state is quite the tall task when hybrid ethnic identities are rampant in the populations themselves. The ratification of the Federal Constitution in 1957, in the aftermath of a period of ideological gestation, as well as political conflicts and a diminished European colonial presence in the region, attempted to effectively do so by broadening the parameters of what was understood to be Malay. The three parameters that emerged and were eventually codified were as follows: speaking the Malay language, adhering to Malay customs, and observing Islam. Rather, the requisites to becoming Malay, all of which are cultural and adoptable by anyone. These three facets uniquely expanded (or tightened) the boundaries of who was considered Malay, with the long-standing usage of the Malay language across the Malay world expanding

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<sup>281</sup> Judith Nagata. “Boundaries of Malayness: We Have Made Malaysia: Now It is Time to (Re)Make the Malays but Who Interprets the History?” In *Melayu: The Politics, Poetics and Paradoxes of Malayness*, edited by Maznah Mohamad and Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied, (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013): 22.

<sup>282</sup> Nagata. “Boundaries of Malayness, 22.

the scope to a wider variety of multi-national identities, whereas the requisite of being Muslim demanded that one devote themselves to one faith and one faith only.<sup>283</sup>

In effect, rather than making the concept of *Melayu* a nationalizing practice, the Malaysian government introduced a political program keen on racializing the Malay people, sowing further division rather than creating a unified national identity with the implementation of the *Bumiputera* policy.<sup>284</sup> This enforcement of affirmative action, which intended to protect the indigenous people of Malaysia, sought to re-center the minority populations of Malaysia, such as the *Orang Asli*, but has been exploited to bolster the political stature of the ethnic Malay people of Malaysia. Along with the Peranakan Chinese, Filipinos, and the Indonesian Riau, the *Orang Asli* people are, in effect, walking paradoxes of Malayness. They epitomize the Malay territory, the proto-nation, and high culture, yet remain confined to the margins in contemporary discourse on *Melayu*.<sup>285</sup> While the Malay people are consistently recognized as indigenous, predominately by politicians who espouse an exclusionary iteration of the doctrine of *Melayu*, there remains a tendency to underscore the identities that fall underneath the categorized “Other.”

The *Orang Asli* have, in recent times, fallen victim to this construction of the “other” quite consistently, with some scholars arguing that there is evidenced political motivation at play with the differentiating between the ethnic Malay people and the *Bumiputera* identity umbrella. It has been postulated that Malay political leaders view it advantageous to distinguish between the ethnic Malay people and the *Orang Asli*. By maintaining the ethnic Malay people’s claims to indigeneity by frequently classifying them as amongst the *Bumiputera*, while broadening the definition of *Orang Asli* to instead be “one of several communities,” Malay leaders have effectively stripped any opportunity for the *Orang Asli* to continue to ascribe importance in

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<sup>283</sup> Nagata. “Boundaries of Malayness, 20.

<sup>284</sup> *Melayu: The Politics, Poetics and Paradoxes of Malayness*, xi.

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid*, xix.



Malaysian cultural heritage to themselves, making it increasingly difficult for the *Orang Asli* people to lay claim to being the first settlers. Likewise, this makes it increasingly more challenging for “non-Malay” to be able to challenge Malay claims to indigeneity.<sup>286</sup> In a reversal of what previous scholarship has suggested, the

Any hope for a Malay civilization that spans the extent of Southeast Asia has wavered completely, largely due to the establishment of post-colonial nation-states and sub-regional parochialism.<sup>287</sup> This resurgence of sorts of ethnic striation, politicized religious polarization, resource competition, and increased identity consciousness coincided with the rise of globalization and late capitalism in the twentieth century.<sup>288</sup> The politicization of identity in Malaysia by state and non-state institutions like political parties, media, and civil society groups have heavily influenced the construction and deconstruction of Malayness. This extends beyond simply state and governmental agencies, reverberating into contestations amongst everyday people over who is entitled to claim the Malay identity and effectively determine the boundaries of Malayness.<sup>289</sup>

What appears to be the largest point of contention articulated by Malay constituents against a “racialist brand of politics,” is that employing a principle of selective indigeneity to aid in the promulgation of racialized preferential policies has produced increasingly more instances of diminished returns.<sup>290</sup> What further diminishes the legitimacy of this practice is that constructions of Malayness have largely occurred preceding a state of crisis, therefore making it seem as though *Melayu* is solely elicited in moments of crisis, rather than in continuous and arbitrary ways.<sup>291</sup> In contemporary times, it has come to be understood that the modern *Melayu* is

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<sup>286</sup> *Melayu: The Politics, Poetics and Paradoxes of Malayness*, xvi.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid, xv.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid, xvi

<sup>291</sup> Ibid.

entirely centered around politics and acrimony, rather than linguistic heritage or divine monarchical rule.<sup>292</sup>

Malayness has blossomed to entail both specific ties to both a nationalist identity and an ethnicity, as well as the general institution of how this facet of identity as an institution is continually replicated and transmitted. Ahmad refers to particular “portals of Malayness,” in which there exists a “permissive bilateral kinship system,” which is generally defined by an absence of structural barriers that for those outsiders who can elevate themselves through fictive kin or by marriage.<sup>293</sup> Essentially, as Ahmad postulates it, there exists many ways to become Malay, or pursue *mesak melayu*. A “portal” outlined by Ahmad is the lack of familial authority, with no ancestral surnames, genealogies, or restrictive inheritance rules hindering ones ability to ‘access’ Malayness. Likewise, the Malay language being a critical aspect of Malayness allows for those who can pick up the language, particularly those who have interacted with speakers of the Malay language and are capable of gaining enough linguistic knowledge to assimilate. Lastly, the final avenue to which Malayness can be pursued is through the normative practices of Islam. Simply by embracing the universalizing principles of Islam, one can garner acceptance as an outsider into Malayness.<sup>294</sup>

Thus, Malayness has come to be defined as more than simply proximity to a national identity or national citizenship; it now encompasses one’s proximity to power, albeit with significant challenge to this particular notion arising with the near-defeat of UMNO, the dominant Malay-based party, in the 2008 elections.<sup>295</sup>

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<sup>292</sup> *Melayu: The Politics, Poetics and Paradoxes of Malayness*, xvi.

<sup>293</sup> Nagata, “Boundaries of Malayness,” 14.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid.

<sup>295</sup> *Melayu: The Politics, Poetics and Paradoxes of Malayness*, xi.

However, *Melayu* has remained a functional concept persistently, with an actualized social identity being derived from it.<sup>296</sup> *Melayu*, in effect, has been the basis of how culture has been imagined and attributed to peoples and communities.<sup>297</sup> It has been both assigned and denied to some, and both embraced and rejected in similar capacities, further complicating objective national identity definitions.<sup>298</sup> The construction of territorial, legal, and moral boundaries within the imagination of *Melayu* has facilitated the inclusion and exclusion of peoples and places in the wide definition of Malay.<sup>299</sup> Racial categorization, in the scope of measuring Malayness, has extended well beyond the simple classification acts of enumeration and population management, with the politicization of these categorizations influencing governance and perceptions of who merits holding authority. Malayness now serves to advance hegemonic reasoning, with a structuring of society around celebrated identities, with those who fall beyond that given classification failing to reap the same political benefits.<sup>300</sup> Similarly, Malayness has also emerged in direct competition with Islam.<sup>301</sup>

Just like the Malaysian identity, these conflicts and contestations extend beyond the scope of Malaysia today, with Malayness rearing its head in locales independent from Malaysia, but with a undeniable connection to Malay culture, albeit in other sovereign regions like Singapore and Indonesia. Malayness in other Southeast Asian countries, notably Singapore, remains widely embraced by those who seek cultural capital, with claims to indigeneity being made to protect oneself from the state, a tactic antithetical to the way the state has been acknowledged and responded to in Malaysia.<sup>302</sup>

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<sup>296</sup> *Melayu: The Politics, Poetics and Paradoxes of Malayness*, xiii.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid.

<sup>298</sup> Ibid.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid, xv.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid, xii.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid, xi.

## EPILOGUE

*What does the future hold for state-building and identity construction in Malaysia?*

While this paper's exploration into Malaysian history and the state-building developments of the past century or so is certainly informative of the past, it also presents an opportunity to utilize this history to contextualize political happenings in Malaysia today. Through the lens of maps, censuses, and museums, this paper has navigated how Malayness has been cultivated and contested over time. But where does it stand today? How are these colonial artifacts still palpable in contemporary political life in Malaysia?

It has been almost exactly 60 years since the formation of the Federation of Malaysia in 1963. Since then, elections have been marked by politicians directing their electoral campaigns toward particular ethnic groups, a broader indication of the conflation between national and ethnic identities in regard to the ethnic Malay demographic that persists to this day and remain ingrained in the political structures of the nation-state.<sup>303</sup> Despite a historical intolerance for opposition from the Malaysian government, the economic performance of the country, particularly in the realm of palm oil and rubber production, has precipitated a relative ambivalency towards restructuring the current system as is. However, as the country continues to progress forward, global economic crises have stoked fear and distrust that Malaysia will be able to maintain its positive growth streak. Tangentially, public criticism and outcry, namely from external or foreign entities, has raised significant questions about the political and social direction the country seems to be heading. Thus, contemporary leaders of Malaysia are left to be assessed on how they meet popular demands of how to govern, especially in regard to how they respect the rights of minority groups while still effectively reconciling with the competing ethnic

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<sup>303</sup> Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 8.

demands for equitable distribution of resources and equal ability to participate in political life broadly.<sup>304</sup>

With all things considered, there have been some extreme social and political strides made in the past few decades. However, despite political rhetoric that suggests otherwise, ethnic difference remains at the center of contemporary contestation in Malaysian society. Although there has not been a recapitulation of the ethnic riots of May 1969 and Malaysia remains devoid of religious and racially-charged violence, there remains undeniable underlying contention and inequities across the Malay diaspora. Mass migration from the country, including the two million skilled non-Malay Malaysians that had left the country by 2014, poses a concern to the maintained productivity and success of the country, a concern that remains critical to Malaysian leadership to consider in their political work.<sup>305</sup>

There is one particular case study that offers insight into the realized political consequences of the contention over who is deemed ‘Malay’ and who is not: the 2018 anti-ICERD rally. The rally itself, advocating against agreeing to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, entailed the collective protest by far-right political parties in opposition to the convention. The ICERD is a United Nations convention that commits its members to the elimination of racial discrimination and promotes mutual understanding amongst racial groups. Malaysia, in 2018, was one of only eighteen countries in the world to refuse to ratify the convention, with the anti-ICERD rally reflecting a culminating rejection of the convention altogether. This rejection was largely due to the incongruence between the ICERD and the Malaysian Federal Constitution, with both far-right political parties and the Malaysian government rejecting the convention on the basis of how it failed to protect

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<sup>304</sup> Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 9.

<sup>305</sup> Ibid, 8.

the privileges and special treatment of the indigenous Malay, Muslim, and *Bumiputera* populations in the country that are explicitly outlined in the Constitution.

The rejection of the ICERD largely entailed previously established political networks and functionaries operating against the removal of privileges for the ethnic groups that were bolstered by constitutional policies. The rally was spearheaded by UMNO and PAS political leaders and civil society groups, aligning to argue that ratifying the ICERD convention would curtail the enshrined role of Islam in the Constitution and greater Malaysian society, while also diminishing the sanctity of the institution of the Malay rulers, who ruled on the basis of power being vested in the privileged populations advocating against anti-discrimination policy.<sup>306</sup> The rally itself incorporated a fifty-thousand person prayer at the National Mosque, with the intention of calling upon officials to maintain the rights of ethnic Malays and preserve Islam as the national religion.<sup>307</sup> The protest itself appears symptomatic of Malay political elites viewing themselves as ‘protectors’ of the Malay and Muslim populations, therefore entitling them to control state resources as they see fit, including for their own personal benefit.<sup>308</sup> All in all, the anti-ICERD rally, when considering the historical context of the question of Malay identity and the political harnessing of power around indigenous identity, is demonstrative of the general inability of contemporary Malaysian politicians to agree to any form of anti-discrimination convention, as the selection of what is Malay and what is not is both fundamental to Malaysian hierarchical structures and critical to maintaining their grasp on power.

With this history in mind, the state of Malaysia remains unclear. 2018 marked a monumental year for the evaluation of racial, ethnic, and religious tension in Malaysia, with the

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<sup>306</sup> Ibrahim and Rasid, "Malaysia: A secular constitution under siege?," 290.

<sup>307</sup> Ross Tapsell, "Malaysia in 2019: A Change of Government without Regime Change," *Southeast Asian Affairs* (2020): 198.

<sup>308</sup> Bridget Welsh, "Malaysia's Political Polarization: Race, Religion, and Reform," In *Political Polarization in South and Southeast Asia: Old Divisions, New Dangers*, edited by Thomas Carothers and Andrew O'Donohue. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2020): 42.

country witnessing Mahathir Mohamad's return to power as prime minister of Malaysia, where he spearheaded the destruction of the alliance he had once been a strong proponent of. (Pakium 207). Mohamad even campaigned to move away from centering race in the political discourse, which put into question whether the constitutionally enshrined *Bumiputera* policy that privileges the country's Malay and the indigenous majority would be reviewed.<sup>309</sup> With legitimate efforts to examine how to ameliorate the harm caused by ethnic Malay affirmative action policies, Malaysia seemed to be reaching a turning point. However, there remain concerns that Malaysia is on a path toward greater ethnic and religious tensions in the future.<sup>310</sup> These concerns were reiterated with the organization of the "Malay Dignity Congress," where ideas associated with Malay racial supremacy were articulated in demands to abolish vernacular schools and reserve top government posts for Malays.<sup>311</sup> Progress appears bleak, as polarization has proven to be a crux of Malaysian politics, with electoral strategy relying upon stoking ethnic tensions to maintain elite power structures.<sup>312</sup> Additionally, international pressure to implement commissions to evaluate human rights violations has proven ineffective, with Malaysia's commission being highly government-centered and disinterested in outlining a role for civil society organizations to ameliorate the violations at hand.<sup>313</sup>

However, solely assuming the worst is yet to come does not truly encapsulate the complete picture. Returning to how this thesis opens, there is a path forward, one of uncharted pathways. With the federal legislature composed in a way that has never occurred in the entirety of Malaysia's existence, there are an infinite number of directions in which Malaysia, as a

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<sup>309</sup> Oxford Analytica. "Race will again be central in Malaysian politics." *Emerald Expert Briefings* oxan-db.

<sup>310</sup> Tapsell, "Malaysia in 2019," 198.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid.

<sup>312</sup> Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer, "Overcoming Polarization," *Journal of Democracy* 32, no. 1 (2021): 10.

<sup>313</sup> Maznah Mohamad, "Towards a Human Rights Regime in Southeast Asia: Charting the Course of State Commitment," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 24, no. 2 (2002): 240.

country, could be heading.<sup>314</sup> Predicting the future, although tangible in some regards, is not a realistic endeavor. Rather, a return to history, as this thesis has aspired to do, to reconcile with the past, how it has been reproduced, the institutions that have been constructed, and the agendas behind these given constructions, allows for the application of history to occur. By examining the artifacts of colonial era, their influence on the imagined boundaries of territoriality, identity, and history itself, and the internal and external evaluations of Malayness as a concept, the political now can be better assessed for what is it. Ultimately, this work is affirming that understandings of the past can be used to aid in present-day grapplings with complex social matters like ethnic contestation and nationalist movements, allowing historians - or anyone for that matter - to be exponentially more equipped to reconcile with Malaysia's problems of today.

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<sup>314</sup> Weiss, "Malaysia's Changed Electoral Landscape," 1.



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