

Abstract:

Translocal Soundscapes and Strategic Positionings: Navigating a Sense of Belonging in Multiethnic Multireligious Malaysia

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To maintain power, the British employed the strategy of divide and rule in its colonies such as Malaya, India, Sri Lanka, Fiji, and many others. The tactic of privileging an ethnic group over others created divisions among the diverse colonial subjects and ensured that they did not form alliances to oppose colonial rule. After Independence, ethnonationalist rulers continued to use ethnocentric approaches in the implementation of political, economic, and cultural policies for their own national affirmation. These policies perpetuated racial polarization and the marginalization of minority and Indigenous communities in postcolonial countries. How do ethnic minorities and Indigenous peoples navigate the complexities of ethnocentrism and sense of home in their daily lives?

Using multiethnic multireligious Malaysia as a case study and a reflexive approach, I show that the local communities of diverse ethnic backgrounds articulate flexible and shifting positionings to manoeuvre these complexities (Chua and Idrus 2022). These positionings intersect with factors such as citizenship and cultural rights, land entitlements, religious beliefs as well as the need to earn a living. I examine the various performance soundscapes that cross geographical, ethnic, and cultural borders in the colonial and postcolonial periods in Malaysia to highlight that on the ground, performers of various ethnicities practice a kind of strategic hybridity (*kacukan* in Malay), the aesthetic of ‘mixing’ that has been embedded in the popular imaginations of the people in Maritime Southeast Asia (Andaya 2019). Performers strategically mix elements from the different traditions and soundscapes so that they can appeal to multiethnic audiences, earn an income, receive blessings from the different gods, and create a sense of belonging.

Although this presentation focuses on Malaysia, similar situations can be found in other former British colonies. Instead of focusing on discourses about essentialized cultures of minorities and indigenous communities that are divisive, it is critical for researchers to foreground translocal connections and intercultural blending that have been misremembered in ethnonationalist nation-state narratives. Recovering the collective memories about interethnic connections can be empowering for peacebuilding and reconciliation (Sykes 2018; Tan 2018, 2019).