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Keywords

race, identity, Malaysia, ontologies, semiotics

Disciplines

Anthropology

“OTHERS” (*LAIN-LAIN*):
FALLING BETWEEN RACIAL CATEGORIES IN CONTEMPORARY MALAYSIA

By

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Introduction

In Malaysia, questions about one's race are inescapable. Racializing discourses range from the explicitly stated, for example cases of rental discrimination where landlords blatantly disclose that they will not accept tenants of a particular race, to the implicitly stated, where firms set arbitrary language requirements in order to weed out job applicants of a particular race (see Yuniar 2018; Lee and Muhammad 2016). In addition to this, Malaysians are required to indicate their race for reasons spanning the official to the mundane – from bank loan applications to retail store membership cards. Within this environment where race and its boundaries are reified, it is inevitable that race maintains its presence at the apex of a hierarchy of identity markers in Malaysia. Growing up in this environment, it soon became evident to me that race was a lens by which people viewed others and were viewed through themselves. My unique experience as a product of interethnic marriage certainly helped develop my curiosity surrounding this topic as my very existence as well as my personal experiences and feelings regarding my identity defy the static construction of race held by Malaysian society. This thesis project is animated by a motivation to explore “leaks” (see Sapir 1921) in racial kindredness and between reified racial boundaries that this project was built upon.

Malaysia's population demographics by ethnicity, as reported by Department of Statistic Malaysia (DOSM) in 2020, are the following: 69.6% Bumiputera, 22.6% Chinese, 6.8% Indian, and 1.0% Others. This statistic, when viewed alongside the state narrative of “1Malaysia” of ethnic harmony and national unity, gives a neatly packaged story of four main ethnic groups (Foong 2010). These categories are used not only in the decennial census – they are ubiquitous and assigned at birth, following an individual throughout their lifetime in a variety of contexts (Reddy 2019). However, these categories also work to obscure the heterogeneity present on the ground.

Within each category, many different ethnic subgroups are lumped together. Moreover, the patrilineal nature of racial categories hides the fact that an individual might have a mother of different race – thus, erasing the “mixed” or *rojak* nature of Malaysian society and the reality of interethnic marriages. Following this thread, the most obvious culprit within the semiotic technology of the census that obscures heterogeneity is the *Lain-lain* category. The label *Lain-lain* is glossed in English as “Others,” and functions as a catchall category that includes everyone who does not readily fit into the other three categories. Under this label, there is a literal and figurative othering of a subset of the population.

Situated within this context, my research aims to investigate the ontological construction of the *Lain-lain* or “Others” racial category within the Malaysian census and also other forms of racializing administrative documentation. By tracking this category’s evolution over time as well as focusing on its current iteration, I hope to examine (a) how individuals who inhabit this category come to be defined by others and (b) how they conceptualize their own identity within a racialized society. As mentioned before, assigned racial categories can be inadequate descriptors of individuals’ beliefs about their identities. Thus, the individuals labelled “Others” may or may not agree with their categorization as such, and there also exist individuals who have been unable to formally claim this identity. For this reason, my research focuses on the experiences of individuals who officially fall under the *Lain-lain* label as well as those do not fit squarely within the other categories available, that is, individuals with parents of different ethnic backgrounds, referred to as “mixed race” colloquially.

To carry out this inquiry, I conducted a series of one-on-one semi-structured interviews with thirty interlocutors. Across these interactions, I was able to gain an understanding of how my interlocutors navigated their identities in relation to the racial ontologies that they held personally

and those held by larger society. As a Malaysian with parents of different ethnicities, I also reflected on my own experiences and positionality with regards to this issue. Sharing experiences in common with my interlocutors enabled me to connect with them over our shared background, which facilitated the interview process.

In this paper, I use the terms “race” and “ethnicity” interchangeably – this choice is based on how these terms are understood within a Malaysian context and how they were applied by my interlocutors. I try to keep the terms I use consistent rather than making judgements as to my interlocutor’s word-use.

Growing up in Malaysia, I was aware that race was very salient identity marker and mediated interactions on macro- and micro- levels. On a macro level, the specter of the 1969 racial riots still hangs overhead and is brought up during election cycles to scare the masses into obedience and avoid discourse on “sensitive” topics (Muslim 2021). Discussions on political economy also inevitably include discussions about race, since the socioeconomic status of racial groups is related to a colonial legacy of divide-and-rule policies implemented by the British colonial administration, and the political scene still features race-based political parties (Andaya and Andaya 1982; Hirschman 1986). Malaysia is not exactly the harmoniously multiracial country it is portrayed to be — a segregated education system and residential enclaves create silos where people mainly interact with others of the same race (Raman and Tan 2010). In these environments, individuals end up reproducing and perpetuating essentializing stereotypes of the three “main” races. This then leads to the question of how this plays out for *Lain-lain* category.

It was mentioned earlier that *Lain-lain* may be glossed as “Others”. A more literal translation of this reduplicated word-form, however, is “different different”. Taking this interpretation into account, this label almost seems apt given the diversity of the individuals

encompassed within this category. However, it also seems to be double edged sword – the category seems to be a “catchall” for anyone who is not Malay, Chinese, or Indian but at the same time, the sheer range of ethnic backgrounds included seems to make this category less susceptible to essentialization. This train of thought thus brings me to the original inquiry that started off this research project – what is *Lain-lain* anyway?

Utilizing a sociocultural and semiotic anthropological framework, I hope to answer this question (among others) by examining the *Lain-lain* category from the ground up. There is an abundance of literature on race and racial dynamics in Malaysia, though little of this literature makes use of semiotic anthropological analysis. I seek to contribute to the literature by interrogating the *Lain-lain* category itself, rather than zooming in on the various subgroups within it. My interlocutors reflect a diversity of various “kinds” that fall under this label, and thus their accounts showcase the breadth of experiences that *Lain-lain* individuals might face. Ultimately, I hope to show that despite differences, there is a commonality across their lived experiences.

I make these moves across four sections. First, I provide background context on Malaysia for the reader, offering details about the British colonial administration in Malaysia, and its formation of the racialized demographics that Malaysia has today. Transitioning to current day Malaysia, I examine the present form of the census, and provide a look into the state of race relations today. By doing so, I demonstrate how colonial notions of race and ethnicity propagated by the British still live on.

Next, I present a review of the existing literature on the topics of race and racialization, linguistic anthropology and semiotics, as well as Southeast Asian studies. I address race and racialization by examining how anthropologists have explored the creation and perpetuation of the racialized subject. In particular, I highlight how this process manifests both overtly and covertly

on an institutional level as well as in the everyday. The next body of literature covered is that of linguistic anthropology and semiotics, where I elaborate on concepts such as indices and kindedness (Kockelman 2012), and social personae and enregisterment (Agha 2007), providing an overview of the ideas I will be utilizing for the analysis of my data. Lastly, this literature review will covers Southeast Asian Studies, with a focus on research carried out regarding *Lain-lain* communities in Malaysia. Broadly speaking, this literature can be grouped into two categories: the first focusing on individuals who are the product of interethnic marriages, and the second focusing on individuals belonging to ethnicities that are not Malay, Chinese, or Indian.

This section is followed by a description of the methods and methodology employed during my research. I elaborate on the process of recruiting and selecting my interlocutors, as well as the demographic characteristics of the individuals constituting my final sample. In addition to this, I also expand on the process of conducting semi-structured interviews and my methods of data collection. Moving on to the next section, I present the findings from my data analysis. My findings broadly relate to three themes: (i) national identity and ethnic identity, (ii) grading qualities, and (iii) the (meta)semiotic formulation of the *Lain-lain* label. Using the conceptual laid out in the literature review section of this paper, I present transcribed excerpts from my interviews with interlocutors to support my arguments and observations.

In the conclusion of this thesis, I summarize findings, and make clear the connections between the presented data and the themes touched upon in the literature review section. I also take the space to reflect on my own positionality as a Malaysian and an individual with an interethnic background, and the ways in which it affects my research.

Historical background

From the day they are born, every Malaysian is assigned to a racial category. This assignment is documented in their birth certificate and this label will follow them throughout their lifetime. As they move through different phases of their life, this will remain as an unchanging and unavoidable marker of identity that will be requested on numerous occasions. This label is attached to a racialized mode of personhood, where individuals are presumed to evince phenotypic, linguistic, sartorial, and even behavioral signs of their race. In order to understand this state of affairs in Malaysia, it is necessary to return to the origins of administrative forms of racial classification: the development of the census in colonial Malaya.

Here, I draw from Hirschman's (1987) research analyzing the ontogenesis of census classifications under British colonial rule. According to Hirschman (1987), the census is reflective of British modalities of thought and served to formalize racial ontologies in Malaysia and codify race based on colonial understandings of certain phenotypic and cultural traits. The earliest censuses deployed racial categories that were based on the common knowledge and experiences of British officials at the time since they had no set precedent to follow (Hirschman 1987, 561). Over time, the categories and the terminology used evolved and were refined, demonstrating the shifts in racial ideology and political power (Hirschman 1987, 570).

Nagaraj et al. (2015) provide a contemporary reading of the census and its categories, continuing from where Hirschman left off in the 1980s. Their work shows how the census categories have expanded in terms of the ethnic groups that they identify and also includes an analysis of the development of the census in North Borneo (Sabah) and Sarawak, in addition to colonial Malaya (Peninsular Malaysia). The authors also discuss other contexts where racial classification is needed, such as the registration of births and deaths, registration in educational

institutions, and the measurement of affirmative action policy outcomes (Nagaraj et al. 2015, 156). Through the various iterations of the census that they include in their work, we can observe that while the subgroups included under each category may have increased, ultimately the larger categories that were first introduced by the British, that is “Malay,” “Chinese,” “Indian,” and “Others” have remained unchanged. This is with the exception of the Malay category, which has been restructured to become the politically defined *Bumiputera* category, which includes both Malays and other various indigenous groups in the country. Institutionally, Article 160 (2) of the Malaysian Federal Constitution defines a Malay as: “a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, conforms to Malay custom and — (a) was before Merdeka Day born in the Federation or in Singapore or born of parents one of whom was born in the Federation or in Singapore, or (b) is the issue of such a person.” For the *Bumiputera* category, its definition, as defined by the Ministry of Higher Education according to geographical region, is:

Peninsular Malaysia: ‘If one of the parents are Muslim Malay or Orang Asli as stated in Article 160 (2) Federal Constitution of Malaysia; thus the child is considered as a Bumiputra’

Sabah: ‘If a father is a Muslim Malay or indigenous native of Sabah as stated in Article 160A (6)(a) Federal Constitution of Malaysia; thus his child is considered as a Bumiputra’

Sarawak: ‘If both of the parent are indigenous native of Sarawak as stated in Article 160A (6)(b) Federal Constitution of Malaysia; thus their child is considered as a Bumiputra’

The formation of this category as well as its standardized definition has a significant effect on the individuals who come to fall under this label. The New Economic Policy (NEP) and Article 153 in the Federal Constitution are two forms in which affirmative action policies manifest in Malaysia (Lee 2015). These policies provide a number of advantages in terms of educational, business, and career opportunities to *Bumiputera* individuals (Lee 2015).

Despite the inclusion of diverse subgroups within the census, this information on intra-category diversity is unable to be accessed by the public, including researchers (Nagaraj et al. 2015, 162). This is because the published data on the census that is publicly available only provides statistical information that is broken down only by the larger categories of *Bumiputera* (Malay and non-Malay), “Chinese”, “Indian”, and “Others” (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2010). The use of the umbrella categories of *Bumiputera*, “Chinese”, “Indian”, and “Others” for reasons other than the census is more commonly seen in Peninsular Malaysia. In Sabah and Sarawak, there is more recognition of the diverse ethnic groups in the population so the options available on documentation include indigenous groups such as the Bajaus, the Kadazans, the Melanau, and the Iban (Nagaraj et al. 2015, 159). But in Peninsular Malaysia, sometimes the only options provided on certain forms of documentation are Malay, Chinese, Indians, Others and non-citizens (Nagaraj et al. 2015, 158). In this case, individuals identifying as *Orang Asli* (referring to the indigenous or “original peoples” of Peninsular Malaysia) or *Orang Asal* (referring to the indigenous or “original peoples” of Sabah and Sarawak) would be grouped under the “Others” label as well (Nagaraj et al. 2015, 158).

In Malay, *Lain-lain* is a translation of the prototypical English category “Others.” This category initially encompassed individuals who identified as Arabian, Filipino, Japanese, Singhalese, among other identities (Hirschman 1987, 574). Europeans and Eurasians were not included within this label, instead they were categorized under their own separate categories (Hirschman 1987, 574). Over time, as British political presence waned in the region, Europeans and Eurasians both came to fall under the *Lain-lain* label as well (Hirschman 1987, 578). In its contemporary usage, the *Lain-lain* label has come to act as a catchall term to account for individuals holding racial identities that are not *Bumiputera*, Chinese, or Indian.

Year	Location	Terminology Used	Subgroups falling under “Others”
1947	British Malaya	Other Communities	Ceylon Tamil Sinhalese Other unspecified or indeterminate Ceylon peoples Arab Siamese Burmese Annamese Armenian Filipino Japanese Jew Nepalese Other or indeterminate communities not elsewhere specified Not specified
1957	Federation of Malaya	Others	Eurasian Ceylon Tamil Other Ceylonese Pakistani Thai (Siamese) Other Asian British Other European Others (not European or Asian)
1960	North Borneo	Others	Natives of Sarawak Malay Cocos Islander Indonesian Indian, Pakistani, Ceylonese Native of Philippines Others
	Sarawak	Others	Indian, Pakistani, Ceylonese Indonesian Others
1970	Malaysia	Other	Thai Other Asian European Eurasian

			Other
1980	Malaysia	Other	Thai Vietnamese Other Asian Eurasian European Others
2000	Malaysia	Others	Indonesian Thai Filipino Myanmar Japanese Korean Other Asian Eurasian European Others

Table I: “Others” from 1947-2000 (adapted from Hirschman 1987 and Nagaraj et al. 2015)

Tracing the development of the census chronologically, we can trace the enregisterment (Agha 2007) or discursive conventionalization of different racialized kinds of persons and modes of personhood. In what remains of the historical background, I address how categories of race have been oriented by Malaysians across space and time.

It is well-documented in the existing literature that ethnic divisions in Malaysia stemmed from and were exacerbated by British colonial rule (Hirschman 1986; Alatas 1977; Andaya and Andaya 1982). Colonial-era migration policies served to prop up a colonial capitalist economy that was centered around the export of tin and rubber, and which motivated large inflows of migrant labor from Indonesia, China, and India (Alatas 1977; Hirschman 1986, 336). These trends contributed to the racial demography of Malaysia still present today. It is important to note that these policies were not the only drivers of migration, as pre-colonial Malaya witnessed inflows of

traders from various parts of the world due to its strategic access to key sea lanes. This environment fostered the growth of multiethnic communities (Mandal 2003; Hirschman 1986, 338).

Hirschman (1987) argues that the construction of race in colonial Malaya was influenced by European conceptions of race, as well as the political and economic framework that was facilitated by the divide-and-rule policies of the time. These factors served to magnify the differences between racial groups by instituting a varied structure of constraints and opportunities that was dependent on racial identity (Hirschman 1987, 348). Economically, this manifested in the segregation of economic activity by race, where the Malay peasants mainly engaged in subsistence agriculture, the Chinese laborers in mining, and Indian laborers on rubber or palm oil estates (Hirschman 1986, 350; Alatas 1977, 88-90). The Chinese and Indians were discouraged from engaging in subsistence agriculture through the use of land policies, while the Malays were encouraged to maintain their presence in rural areas (Hirschman 1986, 353). This resulted in a physical and social segregation that prevented meaningful inter-ethnic interaction (Hirschman 1986, 353).

Politically, racial divisions emerged in the form of ethnic politics. *Barisan Nasional* (BN), the coalition that ruled from independence in 1957 until the 14th General Election in 2018, consisted of several race-based parties such as the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). These parties were established to represent and safeguard the interests of the Malays, Chinese, and Indians respectively (Segawa 2017, 65). This communal behavior has also been replicated by other parties such as *Parti Islam Se-Malaysia* (PAS), the Democratic Action Party (DAP), and the Malaysian United Indigenous Party (*Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia, Bersatu*) (Segawa 2017, 65). In Malaysia, the DAP is considered a “Chinese” party due to its pre-dominantly Chinese

membership. However, this is a mischaracterization as they are multiethnic in principle and do not restrict membership on the basis of race (Segawa 2017, 66). In comparison, *Bersatu*, which was recently established in 2016, does have a communal-centric focus as it mentions upholding the religion of Islam as the religion of the Federation and defending the special position of the Bumiputera, as stated in the Constitution (*Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia* 2010). *Bersatu*'s membership is also only open to Bumiputera-identifying individuals, while non-Bumiputera are only eligible to become associate members (Leong 2016).

In comparison, the political scene in Sabah and Sarawak in East Malaysia is pivoted more toward the issue of state rights and autonomy from the federal government despite there still being an ethnic dimension (Ong 2015, 26). At this current moment of writing, the Sabah state legislature is controlled by the *Gabungan Rakyat Sabah* (GRS) coalition that comprises of two Peninsular-based political parties, which are UMNO and *Bersatu*, and two local parties which are *Parti Bersatu Sabah* (PBS) and *Parti Solidariti Tanah Airku Rakyat Sabah* (STAR) (Kumar 2021). In Sarawak, the ruling coalition is the *Gabungan Parti Sarawak* (GPS), which is made up of four local parties that were formerly affiliated with BN (Ling and Ogilvy 2018).

From the discussion in the preceding paragraphs, it becomes clear that there the historical trajectory of Malaysia and its resultant institutions and structures combine to form an architecture of racialization, whereby racialized identities have come to be associated with their own indices or diacritics. Notably, while “Malay,” “Chinese,” and “Indian” appear to be more stable, the label *Lain-lain* indexes a kind of ambiguity in the racial imagination of Malaysians. This can be succinctly shown by the image below, tweeted by the official handle of the Malaysian national soccer team. It is this aspect of the *Lain-lain* category that I explore moving forward.



Figure I: Illustration of personified racial kinds in Malaysia, which are Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Others (taken from the Twitter user @harimaumalaya7, tweet dated Mar 8 2020)

Literature Review

This literature review focuses on the (i) semiotic anthropology, (ii) race and racialization, and (iii) Southeast Asian studies.

Semiotic Anthropology

Semiotic anthropology is the study of signs in society (Parmentier 2016; Mertz 2007). The intellectual beginnings of semiotic anthropology stem from the ideas of Charles S. Peirce, an American scientist and mathematician, and Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist. In his text, “Man’s Glassy Essence”, Milton Singer (1984) calls for the use of the term “semiotic anthropology”, and provides a comparative take on both Peircean and Saussurean frameworks on signs and meaning.

The Peircean and Saussurean frameworks differ in that the former is a formal approach based on a triadic relationship between sign, the object, and the interpretant, while the latter is an informal approach that is based on a dyadic relationship between the “signifier” and the “signified” (Boroch 2018, 213). Under his framework, Peirce defines the sign as something that stands for or represents an object, and an interpretant as whatever a sign gives rise to so long as it is taken to stand for something. Peirce explains:

“A sign endeavors to represent, in part at least, an Object, which is therefore in a sense the cause, or determinant, of the sign even if the sign represents its object falsely. But to say that it represents its Object implies that it affects a mind, and so affects it as, in some respect, to determine in that mind something that is mediately due to the Object. That determination of which the immediate cause, or determinant, is the Sign, and of which the mediate cause is the Object may be termed the Interpretant.” (Peirce CP 6.347) (as cited in Parmentier 2016, 4)

The connection between a sign and an object can take on three different types of “standing for” relationships: iconic, indexical, and symbolic (Mertz 2007, 338). An iconic connection between a

sign and an object is where the sign shares some kind of inherent similarity with the object, for example a drawing of a triangle (qua sign) and a pyramid (qua object). An indexical connection is when a sign is “spatially or temporally contiguous” with an object (e.g., smoke standing for fire), while a symbolic connection would be when an object is related to a sign through code or convention (e.g. language) (Parmentier 2016, 4; Mertz 2007, 339).

In comparison, Saussure’s framework posits that the linguistic sign is a combination of the “signifier” or sound-image “signified” or mental concept (Boroch 2018, 213). Saussure considers that the relationship between the “signifier” and the “signified” can be represented by a spectrum that ranges from the purely arbitrary to the relatively motivated (Parmentier 2016, 5). While there are quite a number of differences between these two frameworks, they actually complementary, as semiotic anthropologist Richard Parmentier explains (2016, 5).

In anthropology, Peirce’s concept of an indexical “standing for” relationship between a sign and an object has proven to be a particularly useful for analysis. In his “Shifters, Linguistic Categories, and Cultural Description”, Michael Silverstein (1976) highlights the contrast between the “decontextualized, referential value of linguistic signs” on the one hand, and the “contextualized, indexical, or pragmatic mode of meaningfulness” on the other, the latter of which is central to the relationship between speech acts and social life. Kockelman (2012) expands on this concept of indexicality by relating to questions of kindedness. His “semiotic ontological” framework involves the following components: index, kind, agent, individual, ontology (2012). According to Kockelman (2012, 5; 2013, 151), an index is any perceivable sign (e.g. a uniform), a kind is the projected propensity to exhibit particular indices, an agent is an entity that can perceive indices and project kindedness, an individual is an entity that can demonstrate or “show” indices

and therefore be a site to project kindedness, and an ontology is the set of assumptions that an agent has about the indices, kinds, and individuals that make up a world.

This understanding of indices and kindedness has been deployed within ethnographies of Malaysia. Carruthers' (2017a, 2017b) work on Bugis undocumented migrants in East Malaysia uses this framework in order to examine (i) how state agents have their own ontologies of what signs or indices are evinced by the "illegal immigrant," and (ii) how these ontologies shape their identification of undocumented immigrants. Within the context of East Malaysia, it can be difficult to distinguish a Malay-speaking Bugis migrant from a local Malaysian as both individuals show the same phenotypic, linguistic, and cultural indices (Carruthers 2017b, 235). Thus, authorities rely on other indices to make judgements as to the kindedness on these individuals. Carruthers' (2017b, 236) article explains that both state agents and regular people look for "wrinkles of difference" between migrants and locals by relying on the modality of hearing and listening. He goes on to illustrate the various speech features that index "Bugisness", such as word choice, pronunciation, as well as pitch and intonation (Carruthers 2017b).

Ethnographic work has also been done on non-linguistic indices that constitute kindedness as well, such as food choice. In Karrabaek's (2014) article where she studies primary school children in Denmark, she finds that eating certain foods is indexical of certain assumptions of kindedness. Specifically, she sees that within the school environment, eating rye bread is indexical of a good schoolchild with "moral behaviour, intelligence, and 'good' family background" (Karrabaek 2014, 25). Conversely, not eating rye bread is associated with being an inappropriate schoolchild. Karrabaek (2014) draws from Agha's notions of register and enregisterment in order to clarify the scenarios through which rye bread became emblematic of the "good student" within an ontology of kinds of students. Her works shows us that there can be simultaneously layered types of

indexicality, in this case the typification of food items under linguistic categories, like “healthy” or “gross,” that are in turn subject to moral evaluation (Karrabaek 2014, 19).

Agha’s (2007) notion of registers is helpful in this discussion of indices and kindedness. According to Agha (2007, 145), registers are “cultural models of action that link diverse behavioral signs to enactable effects, including images of persona, interpersonal relationship, and type of conduct”. Register models not only encompass linguistic signs but also a wide range of other non-linguistic signs. Agha (2007, 147) notes that most individuals can recognize more registers than they can perform and that they are linked to distinct spheres of social life. Thus, it follows that registers are associated with social domains populated by different kinds of social types or *social personae* (Agha 2007, 169).

Agha (2007, 165) states that individuals are able to “inhabit distinct register-mediated social personae” in their interactions with other individuals and their ability to do so is dependent on the range of registers which they are competent in using. These characterological figures linked to distinct registers act to encourage behaviors of role alignment while performing a register for interactions at all scales of social life (Agha 2007, 177). In his book, he considers how the ethnometapragmatic terms *alus* ‘refined, polite’ and *kasar* ‘coarse’ are used to typify behavioral norms of demeanor by the Javanese elite and the associated stereotypes (Agha 2007, 182; Poedjosoedarmo 1968; see Errington 1988). The terms *alus* and *kasar* encompass wide range of linguistic and non-linguistic signs such as word choice, speech tempo and volume, gesture, posture, and dress (Agha 2007, 183). The felicitous performance of these registers is linked to characterological assumptions like well-manneredness or vulgarity, for *alus* and *kasar* respectively (Agha 2007, 182; Poedjosoedarmo 1968).

Social personae are also related to Agha's notion of emblems. Emblems are diacritics to which social personae are attached, and when this emblem is widely recognized it is called an enregistered emblem (Agha 2007, 235). This is not too far from Kockelman's notions of kindedness and the indices that are taken as signs of an individual's membership in a particular kind. Thus, both Agha (2007) and Kockelman (2012) provide helpful tools for considering the situation in Malaysia, where racial kindedness is linked to an individual's public display of certain indices.

Race and Racialization

In this section, I draw attention to the important work done by raciolinguistics. Approaching the issue of race and language semiotically, we can argue that language is a sign system that has a "powerful constitutive function" with respect to race as another sign system, facilitating its naturalization as a category of classification (Dick and Wirtz 2011, E3). Scholars have interrogated the co-naturalization of race and language (Rosa and Flores 2017, 622). In their article, Rosa and Flores (2017, 621) employ a raciolinguistic perspective with an emphasis on the following components: "historical and contemporary colonial co-naturalizations of race and language, perceptions of racial and linguistic difference, regimentations of racial and linguistic categories, racial and linguistic intersections and assemblages and lastly, contestations of racial and linguistic power formations".

Looking specifically at their section on the regimentation of racial and linguistic categories, Rosa and Flores (2017, 631) draw on Agha's (2007) concept of enregisterment to explain this process. They argue that the co-naturalization of language and race can be framed as raciolinguistic enregisterment. This perspective aims to combine previous outlooks on language varieties and racial categories and the factors that affect their continued propagation. Rosa and Flores (2017, 631) state that a raciolinguistic perspective allows us to analyze the "dynamic patterns in linguistic

form, as well as social personae associated with those forms”. In particular, they are interested in how linguistic features are emblemized as signs of racialized models of personhood through the process of raciolinguistic enregisterment within a particular historical, social, and economic context (Rosa and Flores 2017, 632). Here, they refer to a breadth of sociolinguistic research that demonstrates cases where language features become emblems of racialized social personae, for example ‘Mock Spanish’ (Hill 2008), and ‘Mock Asian’ (Chun 2004).

Complementing this work, Dick and Wirtz (2011, E5) consider how covert racializing discourse works to reproduce and mobilize racialized social imaginaries. A key point that they highlight is that this kind of discourse relies on “misrecognition and deniability”, thus it is able to obscure harmful aspects of particular race or language ideologies (Dick and Wirtz 2011, E5). They refer to the case of Mock Spanish as an example, where this register is used by mainstream White America as a racist speech practice (Dick and Wirtz 2011, E5). It is important to note that not all speakers are aware of the function of covert racializing discourse as a form of social indexicality (Dick and Wirtz 2011, E6). We see this in the split between White speakers and people of color speakers, where White speakers are unaware and reluctant to acknowledge the reality of the racializing effects of discourse (Dick and Wirtz 2011, E6). In comparison, people of color are extremely cognizant of this fact and thus, they are unlikely to buy into the ‘color-blind’ rhetoric that denies the salience of race as a marker of difference (Dick and Wirtz 2011, E6).

Dick and Wirtz (2011, E4) argue that the focus should be on the “processes by which people become marked as exemplars of racial imaginaries” rather than static labels and groupings of people. By paying attention to this processual aspect of race, we are able to better interrogate the enduring status of race as a “‘natural’ marker of difference” that has a material reality (Dick and Wirtz 2011, E4).

The construction and propagation of racialized modes of personhood can also occur at an institutional level. By taking the institution as an actor, Rosa and Díaz (2020, 121) examine how it participates in processes that have an effect on the construal of particular racialized indices that individuals evince. Their analysis also demonstrates how this institutional mode of participation works in tandem with racially constituted ontologies of bodies and practices (Rosa and Díaz 2020, 121). Rosa and Díaz (2020, 123) use examples of fatal police brutality enacted upon Black individuals, noting how the police officer at fault recounts the event to illustrate how “institutionalized perceptions of racialized persons transform ... ontologies” and result in the authorization and justification of extreme, and ultimately fatal, measures. In doing so, they highlight the ability of these instances, along with other historical moments and forms of knowledge dissemination, to make perceivable the various institutional structures that systemically (re)produce these raciontologies (Rosa and Diaz 2020, 128).

As mentioned earlier, raciolinguistic enregisterment unfolds within a particular historical, social, and economic context. In contrast, Wirtz’s (2014, 3) work on Afro-Cuba invokes themes of universality and timelessness when interrogating covert racialization, where her book looks at how racialization in the present-day is shaped by the performance of historical narratives for ritual or entertainment purposes. She notes that people in the current moment choose which past they would like to bring to life and while some narratives may have a monopoly on a particular event, “histories are heterogeneously conceived, being active creations in and of each moment in the present” (Wirtz 2014, 4). Thus, in the context of Cuban folkloric performances, Wirtz (2014, 8) considers how these contemporary performances draw from established tropes or portray themselves as continuing a prevailing tradition. In doing this, the performances play a role in (re)producing racialized modes of personhood.

Southeast Asian Studies

By “Southeast Asian studies,” I refer to work steeped in historical and ethnographic particulars of the region referred to (at least since World War II) as “Southeast Asia,” and attend here to work conducted by researchers who are not only Southeast Asianists but also Southeast Asians. This section of the literature review will focus on studies that have taken issues of race, ethnicity, identity, and citizenship seriously within a Malaysian context.

As we learned in the historical overview, the issue of race in the Malaysian context as it is discussed today is tightly intertwined with the colonial era. There is a large body of literature that examines race as a colonial construct shaped by prominent colonial European ideas of race (Hirschman 1986; Abraham 1983). Manickam’s (2009) work contributes to this body of literature by examining the genealogy of colonial knowledge on race and interrogating the ways in which the colonized might have been implicated in the production of this knowledge. She expands the framework of race knowledge by tracing the genealogy of ideas from Europe and also from within the Malay Archipelago (Manickam 2009). In doing so, her work complicates the narrative of colonized as the victim only and provides a more nuanced take on how race can be employed as a strategy, particularly by the “Malay identified colonized intellectual” (Manickam 2009, 595).

Another legacy of the colonial era is the essentialized qualities of different racial groups that endure and remain relevant in racializing discourse today. In his well-known book, “The Myth of the Lazy Native”, Alatas (1977) discusses the characterization of “the native” as indolent and lazy in colonial ideology, and how this characterization was utilized to justify European colonial conquest and rule. He highlights how the machinery of colonial capitalism ran on the basis that Western intervention is needed to modernize and civilize these backwards societies (Alatas 1977,

7). This narrative downplays the proficiencies of individuals in these societies and is facilitated through the myth of the lazy native (Alatas 1977, 7).

Shamsul A.B (2001, 357) touches upon the disconnect between the different social realities that the process of identity formation can take place in and uses this to critique the construction of the Malay identity under an Orientalizing colonial framework. He outlines the two kinds of social realities, namely, “authority-defined” reality and the “everyday-defined” reality (A.B 2001, 365). The authority-defined reality is “the reality that is authoritatively defined by people who are part of the dominant power structure” and the everyday-defined reality is the reality “experienced by the people in their daily life” (A.B 2001, 365). He notes that the authority-defined reality mainly incorporates observation and interpretation while the everyday-defined reality is experienced (A.B 2001, 365). These internally heterogenous perspectives simultaneously exist and need to be considered in relation to one another (A.B 2001, 365).

Even in contemporary Malaysia, colonial constructions of racial identity continue to persist and feature in racializing discourse – validating Alatas’ concerns about the need to address the harms of colonial ideology. Reddy and Gleib’s (2019) research, which involves participants from Malaysia and Singapore who were located in both their respective home countries and the UK, demonstrated the enduring nature of colonial construction of racial identity over time and geographical location. They conducted a number of focus group discussions examining how participants engaged in the co-construction of racial identities with regards to their own racial identity and that of other races (Reddy and Gleib 2019, 5). In their results, they lists the various qualities that the participants have assigned to the racial identities of Malay, Chinese, and Indian. Within this list, can see that racial identity construction by individuals belonging to a particular race is more heterogenous than construction by individuals *not* belonging to that race. They

observe that participants still include colonial-era essentializations such as the “lazy” Malay, the “greedy” Chinese, and the “drunkard” Indian (Reddy and Gleib 2019, 8).

Historically, political parties have been part of the racializing institutional architecture of Malaysia. Xia, Lee, and Ab. Halim (2019) analyze the history and origin of ethnic politics in Malaysia through a series of oral interviews with elites in Malaysia. They conclude that ethnic politics stemmed from the British colonial era, where the British implemented ‘divide-and-rule’ policies that socially segregated the various racial groups (Xia, Lee, and Ab. Halim 2019). These policies reinforced divisions between racial groups, which eventually encouraged the formation of political parties along communal lines (Xia, Lee, and Ab. Halim 2019, 170). These political parties were formed on the basis of safeguarding the interests of their respective racial group and their membership bases consisted exclusively of individuals from the same racial group. This analysis is mostly applied to the situation in Peninsular Malaysia. In comparison, political parties in Sabah and Sarawak mainly concern themselves with the political issues of state rights and interference in state affairs by the federal government (Ong 2016, 26). There is still an ethnic component of political competition, but it is secondary compared to the overall campaign for the previously stated political issues.

The boundaries between races have been reified in Malaysia. Mandal (2003) explores this aspect of contemporary Malaysia by bringing to attention transethnic cultural and social solidarities, which have been masked by racialization over time. He highlights the role of state machinery in structurally and ideologically erasing the reality of transethnic solidarities in pre-colonial and post-colonial Malaysia (Mandal 2003). Reddy and Selvanathan (2020) contribute to work that questions the rigidity of these racial categories with their work on multiracial individuals in Malaysia. They discuss individuals who identify as inhabiting multiple racial categories and

how this “mixedness” is obscured from an institutional perspective, as individuals are only allowed to identify as one race for documentation purposes (Reddy and Selvanathan 2020). In a similar vein, and approaching the issue of multiple racial identities from an individual level, Lim’s (2017) article focuses on how ‘mixed’ individuals negotiate their racial identity in Malaysia under the interpellative force of society and various institutions. Her findings show that ‘mixed’ Malaysians employ three methods to negotiate their identities, which are: situational or unstable ethnic identities, stable ethnic identities, and trans-ethnic identities (Lim 2017, 118).

Research methods and Methodology

My research makes use of one-on-one semi-structured interviews. For this project, I had a sample of thirty interlocutors that I recruited through the use of snowball sampling and flyers on social media. I also made use of existing networks of friends and acquaintances to source for willing participants. While these were effective methods to recruit the participants I needed, they also might have resulted in a self-selected sample that might not necessarily be representative of the larger population. As such, my findings only represent the views and experiences of a subset of people, and I try to examine the nuances present within their responses and how they relate to the foregoing larger debates or concepts.

Interlocutors had to fulfill a few criteria in order to be eligible research participants, namely, they had to be Malaysian citizens between the ages of 18 and 35, and had to identify as *Lain-lain* or have an interethnic background. During the recruitment process, eligible participants were presented with an informed consent form, which they had to sign, and which detailed the aims of my research and what to expect for their involvement prior to the interview where they had sufficient time to go over it. My interlocutors were also financially compensated for their time.

Within my sample of interlocutors, I ensured that I had a balanced gender ratio as well as an even distribution of ages. I imposed a restriction on the age range of my interlocutors as I was interested in hearing about the experiences of youths in Malaysia. In my attempt to obtain a balanced sample, I also tried to ensure there was some geographic diversity in terms of where my participants were from. While ultimately a majority of them were from the Klang Valley (an area that encompasses Kuala Lumpur, the nation's capital, as well as adjoining cities and towns in the state of Selangor), about 1/3 of them were from East Malaysia or had extended family residing there (i.e. parent's hometown). I also tried to ensure that I interview individuals from a range of

ethnicities and cultural backgrounds, as part of my attempt to capture many varied facets of life experiences of potential interlocutors – trying to find the common threads that bind together people within this subset of larger Malaysian population.

My interviews with interlocutors were conducted in a mixture of in-person and online interviews. Since I was based in the Klang Valley for about four months, I was able to meet my interlocutors who were in the area in person while other interviews were conducted over Zoom. In-person interviews were conducted in various coffee shops in locations mutually agreed upon by myself and my interlocutor. I started off the interviews with a brief rundown of my research project and gave them the opportunity to ask any questions before we began. These interviews comprised of a number of pre-determined questions as well as additional threads of inquiry that organically emerged from my conversation with interlocutors. Depending on the flow of the conversation and the information revealed to me during the course of each interview, I did not feel the need to get through all of my pre-determined questions.

Broadly speaking, my pre-determined questions covered major themes of identity and identification. Due to the semi-structured nature of the interview, interlocutors were also able to introduce themes that they found relevant to the conversation. In some cases, these were themes that I had not considered or had overlooked. In this way, the interview became more of a collaborative process rather than an extractive one. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and excerpts of these transcriptions serve as my main unit of analysis for the next section.

Data and Analysis

Ordinal identities

Across my interactions with interlocutors, a question that emerged early in the conversation was: what labels would you use to identify yourself to others? I received a wide range of responses; however, a trend could be observed among the observed responses: interlocutors would enumerate (or “rank”) their identities, seen in the use of the phrase “Malaysian first”, followed by some kind of racial identity label. Additionally, individuals who grew up in East Malaysia would identify themselves as “Bornean first” instead or have strong state identity i.e. Sarawakian or Sabahan. This subsection will touch upon each type of response.

National identity

The following responses pertain to my interlocutors’ rankings of the identities that they hold:

First, I would say I’m Malaysian, then I would say I’m Eurasian and then Chinese and then half-Irish. Well, when I was growing up, I would have very much insisted that people call me Chinese and nothing but, especially because I went to a Chinese school and everything. ... The older I got, the more I realized I’m not the stereotypical sort of Chinese people would come across and there’s no other real group that I fit into so I’d say Malaysian is the best label that I can do. That’s the only part of Malaysia that I identify most strongly with - the collective.

(Transcription SC010M)

I think I would say I'm Malaysian first, yeah. Oh - or maybe then I'll ask what state are you from. ... I don't think it's [my racial identity] that important compared to my Malaysian identity. Like I rarely think about my race. I think about myself as a Malaysian more than I think of myself as Chinese. (Transcription ML009F)

From these responses, we can observe that interlocutors are able to hold multiple identities and rank them according to senses of personal salience. These excerpts from transcriptions SC010M and ML009F show us that the national identity is ranked first among other aspects of identity, superseding them in a way. My interlocutors' reasoning for their ranking is that that is the identity that they feel describes them best. However, this is not true of all participants. The following subsection looks at responses from interlocutors who are from East Malaysia, in comparison to the previous responses that were from interlocutors who live in Peninsular Malaysia.

Bornean identity

The following responses are from individuals from East Malaysia, who have a *Melanau* and *Bidayuh* ethnic background respectively:

I feel being Sarawakian gives me more identity rather than just Malaysian. Because I feel like Malaysian is very generalized - I don't feel anything special, I don't feel anything connecting me as being Malaysian. Especially as what the media portrays as Malaysian. (Transcription MB029F)

When they portray Sarawak, they use the *Iban* costume that's like the difference they put out. There's a lot more other races. I think Sabahans would feel the same way. ... When they talk about diversity and they bring up Sarawak, Sabah, it's not really showcased anything different between the people in Sarawak, Sabah - It's just Sarawak as 1 person and Sabah as 1 person. (Transcription MB029F)

At times, I feel that in order to be Malaysian I have to fit in to this hegemonic Malaysian identity, you know loving nasi lemak and all of these typical Malaysian foods, celebrating *Hari Merdeka* (Independence Day) even though it's not really applicable. (Transcription JJ020M)

These transcriptions illustrate that Malaysians from Sabah and Sarawak may have different rankings of the multiple identities that they hold (vis-à-vis interlocutors in Peninsular Malaysia). These individuals hold less affinity to the national identity and thus, they would rather rank their state or regional (Bornean) identity first. In one case, an interlocutor even states that identifying as Sarawakian gives her “more” identity. To understand this choice of ranking, we need to consider various factors such as Sabah and Sarawak’s colonial history, and process of achieving independence, their geographical distance from Peninsular Malaysia, the extraction of natural resources, the divide between federal and state political dynamics, infrastructure development, and access to public goods, as well as racial demographics in light of the narrative of *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy) (Chin 2015).

These interlocutors cite lack of representation or forms of tokenistic representation in the media as a reason why they would rather see themselves as “Bornean first”. Sabah and Sarawak combined have over 71 different indigenous ethnic groups (SUHAKAM). However, many

Malaysians are not aware of this diversity as it glossed over in the public education system or not portrayed sufficiently in the media (Alagappan, David, and Gan 2010). Visually, advertisements or stock images that portray a “harmonious” Malaysian society with taglines like “Malaysia Truly Asia” or “1Malaysia” show happy children or smiling youth that follow specific formula. This imagery is meant to signify that races in Malaysia have discrete cultural practices, in other words, each race is associated with a set of perceivable qualities that do not overlap (Gabriel 2015, 796). They usually portray one Malay individual, one Chinese individual, and one Indian individual who are all dressed in traditional garb, along with two other individuals meant to represent the states of Sabah and Sarawak.

This tokenistic representation, where the two individuals are most commonly in *Iban* and *Kadazan* traditional attire, has become emblemized as the image of Sabah and Sarawak to a Peninsular Malaysian audience. In this scenario, drawing from Agha’s (2007, 235) concept of emblems, the diacritic of wearing such traditional attire has become widely recognized as indexical of the social personae of “Sabahan” or “Sarawakian”. In this way, mass media has enregistered this emblem through its function as a speech chain network with one ‘speaker’ and many ‘hearers’ (Agha 2007, 67). Viewed differently, we can also argue that this portrayal implicitly says that *not* identifying as Malay, Chinese, or Indian, is indexical of being a Sabahan or Sarawakian. Figure II below shows an example of one such stock image.



Figure II: Stock image of racial harmony in Malaysia (taken from <https://sites.google.com/site/baimalaysianfood/home/sabahanfood>)

Racial identity

As mentioned earlier, interlocutors also described themselves through recourse to their racial or ethnic identities. There were two ways in which they did this: by tracing their genealogy or by delineating the percentages or fractions of their ethnic backgrounds. Below are examples that illustrate my point:

In terms of race, obviously I'm mixed. And I'm like $\frac{5}{8}$ Chinese, $\frac{1}{4}$ Indian, and $\frac{1}{8}$ Malay (Transcription DA006M).

So, to strangers normally I would say I'm Malay. But then a lot of people will ask like "*Oh Melayu saje?*" (Just/Only Malay?). The closest to me is I would say *Mamak* (Indian-Muslim). So, if people ask further, I just say *Mamak*, since it's the easiest for them to understand. ... I wouldn't label myself as one race. How I divide myself is by $\frac{3}{4}$ Indian and $\frac{1}{4}$ Chinese because my dad is actually $\frac{1}{2}$ *Mamak* $\frac{1}{2}$ Malay and my mum is $\frac{1}{2}$ *Chindian* (of Chinese and Indian parentage) $\frac{1}{2}$ Thai. But then, the Malay part and the Thai part is quite small to add up to what I am, but because

my dad's official race on his birth cert is *Melayu*, I'm *Melayu* as well.

(Transcription KZ012F)

Both interlocutors have very varied ethnic backgrounds. However, this facet of their identity is obscured whenever they are required to fill up any documentation, as they both must check off the box that is labelled “Malay” or “*Bumiputera*”. From these two examples alone, it is clear that there is a degree of heterogeneity within the categories of “Malay” or “*Bumiputera*”. In this sense, their lived experiences of Malayness that features elements of hybridity differs from the authority-defined reality imposed upon them through administrative documentation practices (A.B 2001, 365).

Despite the broadness of the “Malay” or “*Bumiputera*”, category, ultimately my interlocutors are only allowed to check off one box when disclosing their racial identity. As one of them mentions, they wouldn't “label themselves as one race” if they had a choice to do so. Thus, under the patrilineal conventions of assigning race at birth, my interlocutors are unable to claim a multiracial identity at an institutional level. As Reddy and Selvanathan (2020, 660) state, this results in a society where “there is little room for diversity to be acknowledged *within* any one individual”. As interracial marriages are expected to become less of a rarity as time passes, the current system of categorization will need to account for this change (Reddy and Selvanathan 2020, 662; Nagaraj 2009).

Another notable point is that the way in which interlocutors describe their racial background demonstrates that the racial ontologies they hold include a genealogical component. That is, for someone to be able to claim membership within a particular ethnic group, they should have the corresponding ancestry. Song and Gutierrez's (2015, 690) research on multiracial parents

in the UK shows that the issue of “reduced blood quantum and racial fractions” was brought up when they consider notions of ethnic ‘dilution’ over generations. This finding highlights how multiracial parents conceived of both their own and their children’s identities in terms of genealogy and genetic make-up (Song and Gutierrez 2015, 691).

Situational identities and gatekeeping

In my conversations with interlocutors, it also appeared that the issue of situational identities and gatekeeping was relevant. Some interlocutors who had multiple racial identities mentioned that there were instances where they modulated their behavior in order to seem more like a particular race. This choice needs to be examined in terms of the racial ontologies that my interlocutors have and how interlocutors strategically display the indices that are indexical of a particular racial kind depending on the social setting. Despite this effort, sometimes interlocutors are not accepted by other individuals who also have that racial identity.

Situational identities

In the following interaction, my interlocutor explains to me the different identities that he inhabits and the reasoning behind the decision as to which racial identity to inhabit depending on the particularities of the social situation. This interlocutor has a multiracial identity where his father is Ceylonese Tamil and his mother is Chinese.

N: When you meet different people, you’ll be wearing a different hat. Meaning you will cater towards that person’s personality. So, if let’s say you’re meeting like a group of Chinese people, you’d be a slighter more Chinese that day. You’d speak with more ‘*lah*’s you know? A little bit more. Just to accommodate towards that

environment if that makes sense. So even when you're speaking with Indians you wear another hat. I'll wear another hat. "*cha, macha, dei, dei*".

A: So, all these hats right – would you say that you have a hat that's Chinese-Ceylonese or *Chindian*? A hybrid hat?

N: Uh, I feel like the hybrid hat is right now I'm speaking with you. But a little bit more formal *la*. But in essence, I feel I speak like this. Day to day. I do not really – I mix the '*lah*'s whatever and also the '*dei*'s together so it's more like a mix. I mix it all together, but I speak decent English. So this, in my sense, is what I think is my hybrid hat.

A: So, when does this come out mostly?

N: Oh. When I speak to a person who can relate with me and who speaks really good English. Example, yourself (A).

A: Would you say that you have any friends who are in your situation? Friends who are "mixed" who you can wear your hybrid hat around.

N: Honestly, I do not know many *Chindian Chindian* friends that are close to me. I know there are *Chindians* out there for sure and there are plenty of them – there are really a lot of them these days. But I'm not close to one specific one. But if I'm being honest, *Chindians* also they tend to be friends with one side. Either their Chinese side or their Indian side. (Transcription NY003M)

In this dialogue, my interlocutor explains how he has different “hats” that he can wear depending on the social setting and the people he is interacting with. These “hats” each correspond to an enregistered racialized social personae (Agha 2007). By putting on a “hat”, my interlocutor demonstrates that he is aware of the perceivable (and enactable) signs that stand for membership across distinct racial kinds in Malaysia, showing that he is able to evince those traits in order to better pass as a token of a type. From his description, he mainly cites the modulation of linguistic signs as a means to inhabit a racial identity.

Recall how this notion of “situational or unstable ethnic identities” is discussed by Lim (2017) in her work on “mixed” Malaysians and how they negotiate their identity within a racialized society. According to Lim (2017, 119), an individual’s racial identity is contextual and depends on factors such as “external expectations, their own perceptions of others, and the potential risks or benefits of being perceived as one or another ethnicity”. In this case, my interlocutor chooses to display the linguistic signs that are indexical of either a Chinese, Indian, or hybrid *Chindian* identity depending on the situation.

We can also see that this interlocutor mentions that multiracial individuals tend to be closer to one side of their racial heritage, when he states that *Chindians* “tend to be friends with one side”. Similar to the discussion of ordinal identities in the previous subsection, this indicates that individuals may engage in valuations of their racial identities, indicating that they may feel more affinity with certain facets of one identity more than others. This sentiment is echoed by another interlocutor with a Eurasian and Indian racial identity in the following quote:

I guess I lean a bit more towards the Indian side because I have more Indian friends and I'm closer to my mom's side than I am to my dad's side. But not far off.

(Transcription SN008F)

This quote demonstrates how interlocutors can also engage in grading by using degree morphemes such as *-er*, *more*, or *less* (Carruthers 2017a, 134). Drawing from Sapir's notion of grading, Carruthers (2017a) uses this framework to analyze how relative intensities of particular qualities are indexical of Bugis-ness in Sabah. The process of grading refers to judgements such as "John is taller than Alice" or "Lily is more active than Sam" (Carruthers 2017a, 134). When individuals make such judgements, they are doing so by grading an entity along some dimension of comparison in relation to some norm that is centered on this continuum (Carruthers 2017a, 134; Kockelman 2016). This can be rephrased by saying that a figure (the entity whose dimension is being measured) is compared against a ground (an origin point or norm) along a particular dimension in some direction (Kockelman 2016).

Using this framework, we can interpret my interlocutor's quote to indicate that she is comparing herself to some norm on a continuum between Eurasian and Indian identities, implying that she holds both identities commensurable to one another and that being more Indian (by moving towards one end of the spectrum) is to be less Eurasian and vice versa.

Gatekeeping

A common experience that my interlocutors shared was not feeling like they were 'enough' of a race. Returning the previous interlocutor, she also shares with me her experience of not feeling Indian enough or Eurasian enough.

A: Have there been situations where someone says you're not Indian enough or not Eurasian enough?

S: Yeah. More of the Indian part. That you're not Indian enough to be considered Indian. I would feel like that also sometimes. So when I was dating an Indian person, I had more Indian friends and I would think that I was not Indian enough to be associated with them. So I tried to become more Indian - like the things I say, the things I talk about, and just like Indian culture, I don't know, slang. Yeah, not Indian enough, not Eurasian enough. Not Eurasian enough, I don't think people catch on to that like the whole Eurasian is a culture. But also because I don't have much Eurasian friends so no one's going to tell me I'm not Eurasian enough. Maybe they might say because my mum's Indian you're not "Eurasian Eurasian" - not fully Eurasian. Actually yeah - I've met someone like that before. Actually yeah, when I go to the Portuguese Settlement in Melaka, I will feel like an inferior Eurasian because they're super Eurasian there. (Transcription SN008F)

Another example of this is shared by another interlocutor who identifies as *Kedayan*, which is an indigenous group in Sabah.

Sometimes, my relatives would make fun that I'm no longer a *Kedayan* and I'm trying to become more Malay. I get that it's a joke and they're just teasing, but I feel a bit hurt also because I realize how separated I am from them so I'm trying my best to go back in. My mum's side is in Labuan, Sabah and my immediate

family is living in Peninsular Selangor. So, I feel both geographically isolated and emotionally isolated because I tend to have the mannerisms of Malays and I would speak Malay. And then sometimes when I go back to my *kampung* (village), I can't really understand their dialect because they speak so fast. (Transcription AT016F)

In both of these cases, my interlocutors feel insecure or upset about not being seen as “enough” of a particular race. For the first interlocutor, she states that she “tried to become more Indian” when she was in a relationship with an Indian-identifying individual and did so by attempting to modulate her perceivable qualities to fit the mold dictated by the racial ontology of a Malaysian Indian. This is similar to the other interlocutor's display of a situational identity and his analogy of “wearing different hats”.

She also mentions that she feels “not Eurasian enough” in the presence of other Eurasians from the Portuguese Settlement in Melaka. The second interlocutor says that she feels “not *Kedayan* enough” in the presence of her extended family who all still live in Sabah. Both interlocutors feel like they are not “enough” when they are in the presence of other individuals who serve as the ground against which they grade themselves. In some scenarios, my interlocutors express doubt over their capacity to perform all the associated indices that are indexical of a Eurasian or *Kedayan* respectively. As such, they are unable to inhabit this social persona fully as they are only performing it in a fragmentary manner (Agha 2007, 165). Rather than performance conveying some form of legitimacy upon the speaker, as Agha (2007) examines in some examples, this fragmentary quality only exposes the interlocutors as “outsiders”.

Chandran (2017) analyzes this phenomenon in relation to the *Chindian* community in Malaysia and the strategies of identity work that they employ. Her work looks at the ways in which

Chindians (individuals with Indian and Chinese parentage) are accepted or rejected by the Indian and Chinese reference communities (Chandran 2017). Chandran (2017, 137) finds that there are two main categories followed by both the Indian and Chinese communities: conditional acceptance and unconditional acceptance. The experiences of my interlocutors align more closely with Chandran's (2007) characterization of conditional acceptance, that is they are required to fulfill certain conditions, in this case display the indices associated with a specific racial ontology, in order to be considered as part of an in-group. Another more explicit example of this phenomenon is from an interlocutor who has a Japanese father and an Indian mother. However, in this case, she is subjected to the judgement of genetic and phenotypic traits, which mark her as inherently ineligible to inhabit the Indian identity.

On my mother's side, when I was younger, there was a lot of ,like, gatekeeping. They were like "you don't speak Tamil, you don't look Indian". So, I look exactly like my [paternal] grandma. So, my mum's family, they would always be like "oh you're a Japanese person" so I was never Indian or Malaysian around them.
(Transcription AK021F)

These instances of interlocutors not feeling "enough" are not only restricted to cases of racial identities, but also include the national identity. The quote below is from an interlocutor who phenotypically presents as European but has a multiracial identity of Irish and Chinese, and has grown up in Malaysia.

There's a specific way that people treat foreigners different, you know. Like, uh, for example, I went to Teluk Intan the other day with some friends, and we ordered just like a bit of food - like a couple of *teh ais* (iced tea) and whatnot. And then the bill came, and they tried to charge us like more than RM100. ... Obviously, me and my friends were like "excuse me, we don't think this is right", so then they were like "huh? are you sure?" And then, we started speaking to them in Chinese and whatnot, being like "ah yeah we didn't order beers actually". Then they brought the bill back *la*, and then there was like RM30 or something like that. They were like "sorry sorry wrong table", but I suspect it had nothing to do with it being the wrong table. (Transcription SC010M)

Like the previous example, this interlocutor's national identity was assessed on the phenotypic indices that he evinces to others. In this case, since he evinced phenotypic signs of "foreignness," the restaurant employees treated him as one by trying to charge him and his friends an extremely inflated price. This is but one of many examples that he shared with me over the course of our interview. Other examples include being stared at, or explicitly being called an *ang moh* (foreigner). To him, these actions committed by strangers are a denial of his "Malaysianess". However, in the above scenario, he was able to challenge this evaluation and reframe his identity by displaying a trait that a local would have, which is the ability to speak in Chinese. Like the other interlocutors mentioned in this subsection, he is also displaying a situational identity.

Questions of (Mis)identification

In my interviews, another topic that emerged was the issue of being misidentified as Malay. Some of my interlocutors appeared to be racially ambiguous by Malaysian standards. In these cases, they were assumed to be Malay by others, unwillingly interpellated into this identity. The following quotes are examples of situations where interlocutors were mistaken as Malay and received judgements from bystanders on the way that they dressed. The first interlocutor is of an Indian and Thai racial background, the second is of a Chinese and *Kelabit* background, and the third is of an Indian and Filipino background.

People assume I'm Malay. So, most of the time they leave it at that. They assume I'm Malay or Sabahan, I guess Filipino sometimes. And I don't really correct them ... And it's also because I don't like when I tell people I'm "mixed", they kinda wanna know like how they fetishize mixed people like "oh so exotic". So, I generally just don't like talking about it. ... Yeah because I come off as Malay, so sometimes I get policed the way that they police Malay Muslim women and like during *Ramadan* (fasting month) sometimes, I get a lot of dirty looks like if I'm wearing a short skirt and I go certain places I get dirty looks. I didn't really notice that until I was dating my ex and he was like "damn all these Malay aunties and uncles really giving you the side eye" and I'm like "oh I didn't really notice that".
(Transcription RM001F)

They first assume that I'm Malay, but then they look at how I dress and then they're like "oh, she can't be Malay". So, then they go "maybe she's *Chindian*" and then I

think they ask for my name and they're like "ok she's not *Chindian*". And then that's when they ask me "actually what are you?". (Transcription JM026F)

Most times they think I'm Malay. I kind of like it sometimes - being ambiguous means people can't stereotype you or like assume anything about you. Being mistaken for Malay sometimes is like slightly disturbing. Sometimes when they make comments like – ok so when I went to PLKN (Malaysian National Service Training program) for instance. So in PLKN, all the Malay girls have to wear *tudung* (headscarf). So many people were very confused as to why I wasn't in the line to get the *tudung* and why I went back to the dorms and still didn't have a *tudung*. They were finally like "oh you're not a Malay, that makes sense – you're not wearing a *tudung*". (Transcription AL028F)

Despite their differences in race, all three interlocutors had a somewhat similar experience regarding the judgements made about them due to their phenotypic traits. From their accounts, we can see that they have repeatedly been misidentified as Malay on the basis of their racially ambiguous physical features. In all three instances, there was an evaluation made on the appropriateness of dress given the assumption that they were Malay. It is also important to note that this form of policing has a gendered and religious element as it my interlocutors are being policed as Malay Muslim *women*.

In Malaysia, to be Malay is to be Muslim. Based on this constitutional definition, we can say that practicing Islam is indexical of Malay identity. Given that the indexical relationship between practicing Islam and Malayness is widely accepted, it is understandable why my

interlocutors were assessed on the appropriateness of their attire. In Islam, women are encouraged to dress modestly, where this rule can be interpreted in many different ways (Cornell University Library). Muslim women in Malaysia who dress modestly tend to do so by wearing the *tudung* (headscarf) and generally abiding by a number of religious requirements (Mohammad Ahmad 2014). Malay Muslim women are subject to moral policing in many aspects of their life, such as their manner of dress and male-female interaction that occur on both an institutional and interpersonal level (Rahman and Mohd Khalib 2016; Anuar 2016). Thus, when my interlocutors were assumed to be Malay Muslim women, they were also subjected to the same kind of moral policing.

Now, we should attend to the reason why my interlocutors were assumed to be Malay. The second interlocutor describes her experience of being mistaken as a Malay as kind of “process of elimination where they tried to figure out what I was”. This assumption might have come about owing to the racially ambiguous phenotypic traits that my interlocutors have. Since the phenotypic traits associated with the referential prototype of Chinese and Indian identifying individuals in Peninsular Malaysia are more stable and distinct, it is easier to rule out those labels when attempting to categorize my interlocutors as tokens of a specific racial kind. The other remaining category is Malay, which is very labile, and thus it would not be a stretch for individuals to assume that the interlocutors belonged in that category (Carruthers 2018, 11).

Reddy and Selvanathan (2020) bring up this issue in their work on the multiracial nature of Malaysian society. They note that being misidentified as Malay is a relatively common experience for most multiracial individuals who have Chinese and Indian parents (individuals otherwise known as *Chindians*) (Reddy and Selvanathan 2020, 660). This misidentification subjects them to institutional religious policing by the *Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia*

(Malaysian Islamic Development Department, JAKIM) as a result of the intertwined nature of the Malay and Muslim identity (Reddy and Selvanathan 2020, 660). As a religious authority in Malaysia that operates on a federal level, JAKIM has arrested non-Muslim individuals that have been misidentified as Malay for not fasting during the month of Ramadan (Reddy and Selvanathan 2020, 660; Mohd Razif 2020, 332). Thus, in these examples we can see that gatekeeping and misidentification work in tandem to deny individuals the ability to inhabit the racial identity of their choosing.

Conclusion: on being between categories

This work has sought to show that despite the wide variety of racial identities with which my interlocutors identify, there are commonalities across their lived experiences. In this sense, they are *sama, tapi berbeza*, the “same, but different,” drawing from Carruthers’ (2017a, 126; 2017b) discussion of contrastive commonality and “different samenesses” among Bugis migrants and local Sabahans. The individuals discussed within this thesis are the ‘same’ in that they all share certain commonalities that I will recap here. Yet, they are all different insofar as their experiences are all highly particular.

Summing up the findings from the previous section, we may observe that there are broadly three categories of experiences that my interlocutors face in their everyday reality. The first of which is that they engage in the ranking of the different identity positions that they hold (referred to here as “ordinal identities”). From the responses I received, interlocutors seemed to prioritize either their national or state identity over their racial identity, and they indicated this by using terms such as “Malaysian first” or “Bornean first”. By doing so, they show that they have a higher affinity for these identity labels over others.

Some of the interlocutors talked about their multiracial identity in a specific manner. That is, they referenced their genealogy and the different fractions of their ancestry that corresponded to different racial identities. This can be interpreted reflection of their understanding of race.

Another experience that interlocutors faced is the employment of a situational identity and the gatekeeping of a racial identity by other individuals. The interlocutors were able to modulate the perceivable qualities that they evinced in order to present themselves as a token of a racial kind, based on widely recognized racial ontology. By doing this, interlocutors were able to shift between different racial identities. Multiracial interlocutors who engaged in this also state that they

are also able to inhabit a “hybrid” identity in this manner, however this is only done in the presence of individuals who understand and acknowledge this privately constructed identity (Reddy 2019, 336).

As for experiences of gatekeeping, this refers to instances where interlocutors felt that they were not “enough” of a particular racial identity that they were trying to inhabit. This feeling of insecurity is compounded by their rejection by individuals of the racial group that they are trying to identify as. I argue that this rejection occurs because these individuals perceive the interlocutors as insufficiently displaying the indices that constitute a racial kind.

Lastly, interlocutors also reported cases of themselves being misidentified as Malay due to their racially ambiguous phenotypic features. This example was primarily shared by female interlocutors, demonstrating the gendered nature of religious moral policing in Malaysia. As they were assumed to be Malay Muslim women, they were judged for not adhering to modest standards of dressing as required by Islam. This would include wearing a *tudung* (headscarf) as well as items of clothing that cover the arms and legs.

As alluded to in the introduction, this project holds a personal significance to me. This project was a decision to critically explore a subject position that I could personally identify with and stemmed from a desire to better understand my own racial identity. In her essay, Kirmani (2018) states that personal journeys and motivations influence the eventual direction of one’s research, however this reality is seldom acknowledged. By elaborating on my positionality, I hope to openly address this unspoken actuality.

Throughout my life, I have grown up straddling the boundaries of Chinese and Indian identities – simultaneously identifying as both and neither. Over time, I even came to construct a hybrid *Chindian* identity that better embodied my everyday reality (A.B 2001; Reddy 2019;

Chandran 2017). Institutionally, however, only my Indian identity is recognized by the state – denying my claims to Chinese identity. Given my positionality as a Malaysian who fell between racial categories, I was able to empathize with some of my interlocutors over their experiences as I, too, had been in similar scenarios.

While this did provide me with a kind of “insider” or emic perspective on this topic, it has also led to moments where I would second-guess my ability to analyze the responses of my interlocutors accurately. This tension that I encountered in my work is not novel and is part of the long-running argument in the field of anthropology that concerns the implications of conducting research as a “native” anthropologist (Jackson 2004, 34). “Native” anthropologists are presumed to have a more intimate understanding of the population that they are studying, however, this insight comes at the expense of their ability to produce the “kind of objective detachment needed to properly interpret the emic etically” (Jackson 2004, 34).

Thus, I would instead like to invoke Narayan’s argument against the dichotomies of insider-outside or native-non-native with regards to anthropologists (1993). In her work titled “How Native is a ‘Native’ Anthropologist?”, she advances the idea that we should abandon the essentializing label of “native” anthropologist as “the loc[us] along which we are aligned with or set apart from those whom we study are multiple and in flux” (Narayan 1993, 671). As such, this requires that anthropologists engage in the “enactment of hybridity”, where anthropologists are understood to inhabit both “personal and professional worlds” (Narayan 1993, 681).

The label “native” anthropologist presumes that this anthropologist is able to assume the viewpoint of a native and that this viewpoint is homogenous and interchangeable. This premise is clearly not applicable in the case of my work as I have shown throughout this paper that the

category of *Lain-lain* is varied and heterogenous. As such, I differ from my interlocutors and my interlocutors differ from each other in many ways despite having some shared experiences.

Another binary that I reflected upon during the completion of this research is that of the field and the home (Kirmani 2018). Last summer, I returned to Malaysia to conduct these interviews. Unlike a researcher who studies an area foreign to them, the boundaries of the field and home were blurred for me as they were both one and the same. As I conducted research in the ‘field’, I ended each day by returning to my childhood bedroom.

Looking at the broader implications of this work, I would argue that it encourages a reassessment of the racial categories in use by institutions in Malaysia. Through the responses of my interlocutors as well as taking into account a wide body of existing academic literature, it is evident that there is a high degree of intra-categorial variation – especially so for the *Lain-lain* label. However, this heterogeneity is obscured by the rigid racial ontologies that most of Malaysian society subscribes to, as well as the patrilineal assignment of racial categories at birth (Reddy 2019, 331). On an individual level, this has the effect of denying individuals the option to have more than one racial identity recognized by the state (Reddy 2019, 337). As Reddy and Selvanathan (2020, 660) note, these categories do not allow for “diversity to be acknowledged within any one individual”. Having these categories also propagates the notion of race as distinct and discrete categories that one inhabits, erasing the fluid nature of these constructions of identity. In this way, we order things and come to be reflexively ordered by things (Manning 2012).

Institutionally, the heterogeneity within these categories might reduce their effectiveness as tools to assess the effects of policy outcomes on different racial groups in Malaysia. The diversity within a category might make it harder to identify trends or other such indicators when looking at economic, public health, education, or political issues. This is especially so if the

observed trends or outcomes are dependent upon racial identity. As interracial marriages become more common in Malaysia, this raises a pertinent question on the efficacy of these labels to describe the demographics of Malaysian society (Nagaraj 2009). We even might go so far as to ask whether these labels should continue to exist given these concerns. Considering this, policymakers should be aware of the implications of using these categories given that they do not fully map onto the lived experiences of individuals. Ultimately, this work hopes to contribute to answering these questions by interrogating racial categories in Malaysia and the ontologies that are associated with them, highlighting the disconnect between everyday-defined reality and the authority-defined reality of race in Malaysia (A.B 2001).

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