GESS1006 Ethnicity and Nation-Building: Singapore and Malaysia
AY23/24, Y1S2
Notes

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December 3, 2025

Contents

1 Does Ethnicity Matter

1.1 Basic Concepts

- **Ethnicity** is a central topic in the study of nation-building in Singapore and Malaysia.

- Both countries have a **multicultural makeup**.

- The ethnic majorities are different: **Chinese** in Singapore versus **Malays** in Malaysia.

- **Race**: A social construct, often considered fixed on official identification (e.g., NRIC) in Singapore, though one can typically change religion or gender.

- **Social Group**: A collection of individuals who share resources, rights, privileges, obligations, and sanctions.

- **The Social** vs. **The Individual**:

    - **Individual**: Personal troubles and individual biography.

    - **Social**: Public issues, history, global events, and global flows.

2 History, Colonialism and Writing the Past

2.1 The Singapore Story

- Your individual life is greatly affected by history.

- **Lim Chin Siong** (Co-Founder of PAP) was a key figure who later formed Barisan Socialis and was detained under the Internal Security Act (ISA). He is **not well known in history** compared to **Lee Kuan Yew**, who is made the hero of Singapore.

- **Representations of the Past**: The official narrative is "The" Singapore Story, often centered on Lee Kuan Yew and Raffles.

- The narrative describes Singapore's transformation from an **obscure fishing village to an economic powerhouse**.

- Key themes in the narrative:

    - Strong PAP leadership struggling through history.

    - Being **kicked out of Malaysia** (Forced independence).

    - Struggle against Communism, Leftists, and Radicals.

    - The challenge of having **no natural resources**.

- This fuels **Narratives of Anxiety and Paranoia**, promoting **Discipline, productivity and Hard Work**.

2.2   Colonialism and Historical Construction

- **Veneration of British Imperialism** is seen in Singapore, unlike in most Southeast Asian countries where colonialism is painted as evil.

- Singapore had **no major struggle to "decolonise"** like in the US, Malaysia, or Indonesia. The **Japanese are painted as evil** instead in the SG context.

- **Raffles** is used to construct a historical (male) founding figure (e.g., Raffles Institution).

- Historical analysis suggests **Farquhar did more of the heavy lifting**, and Raffles "could have been anyone, was not that amazing."

- **Pre-1819 History** (pre-colonial) is often **lost in time** or deemed unimportant to the "Singapore Study" by the current government.

- In surrounding countries, pre-colonial 1819 was the "Golden Years."

- The **Indigenous Population and Malays** are often presented as "problematic" within the official narrative, which contrasts Singapore with the rest of SEA (e.g., **Ketuanan Melayu / Malay Supremacy** in Malaysia).

2.3   Sources and Appropriations of the Past

- **Sources of the Past**:
    - **Official**: Documents, texts, museums, speeches.
    - **Popular**: Art, documentary, songs, mass media.
    - **Others**: Family stories, excavations.

- **Repetition and Internalisation** of facts leads to their acceptance as commonsense.

- Narratives, such as that of Lim Chin Siong, are often **absent**.

- **Hegemony**: The ability of the dominant ruling class to impose and project a set of ideas, beliefs, values, and norms as natural, legitimate, and universal, which is beneficial for everyone, through **active and willing consent** rather than coercive measures.

- **Nation Building** involves the **National Story**, which requires **remembering** and **forgetting** (selective amnesia).

3 Nation-Building Projects in Plural Societies

3.1 State and Nation

- **State**:
  - **Centralised Unitary Governance**.
  - **Territoriality**: Exclusive control right over all the land.
  - **Sovereignty**: Monopolised control of power and permission to use force (Military).

- **Nation** (Imagined Community):
  - A **mental image of community** even if one has never met every member.
  - Characterized by **Common Culture** and a shared **Past**.
  - Members are considered **Horizontal Equals** (unlike a Vertical unequal Monarchy).
  - Defined by **Finite Borders**, separating members from those outside the community.

- **Nations vs. States**:
  - **Kurdistan** is a **Nation** without a **State**.
  - **Singapore in 1965** was a **State** without a **Nation** or "little sense of common history."
  - Quote: "Singapore was never meant to be a nation, does not have to function as a nation, and might function more efficiently and dynamically if it does not have the ambition of being a nation. There can be a Singapore without Singaporeans."

3.2 Power and Ideology

- **Power**: The ability to achieve one's will and interest, exercised in all social relationships.

- **Ideology**: A set of ideas, beliefs, and values through which societies are organized (e.g., Capitalism, **Meritocracy**, **Multiculturalism**).

3.3 Construction of Identity

- **Symbols** (e.g., Singapore's Flag):
  - **Red**: Brotherhood and Equality of Man.

- **White**: Purity and Virtue.
  - **Moon**: Young Nation on the rise.
  - **Five Stars**: Democracy, Peace, Justice, Progress, Equality.
  - The flag **condenses experiences** together.
- **Rituals** (**Collective Experiences**):
  - **NDP** (National Day Parade) is a **Secular Ritual**: a structured, sequential, repetitive, and stylised set of visible acts performed for symbolic value.
  - Displays central values and axioms of the culture and is an expression/performance of state power and hierarchy.
  - Forcibly conveys unity and discipline under a single purposeful authority.
  - The process can lead to negative outcomes such as **Exclusion, Prejudice, Discrimination**, and even **Genocide**.
- **Audience** of the NDP/NE Show:
  - **Locals**: Evoke and solidify feelings of patriotism.
  - **Foreigners**: Demonstration of Military Might and Power.

3.4 Anxiety and Vulnerability in Singapore

- The nation-building process is driven by a discourse of crisis and struggle for survival, stemming from:
  - **Racial Riots** in '64 and '69.
  - **Economic Crises** (Oil Crisis in '73/'74, Recession in '80s, Asian Financial Crisis).
  - **Rivalry** between SG and Malaysia.

4 Multiculturalism and the Management of "Difference"

4.1 Multiculturalism

- Multiculturalism is a **cornerstone of S'pore identity**.
- **Multiracialism** does not require any community to give up its heritage and traditions.
- **Race** is prominent; it is on the NRIC.

- Race is often defined by **patriarchal lineage**, which also defines one's culture and "Mother Tongue."

- There are **Double Barreled Race Classifications** where one still has to choose a dominant race.

- Multiculturalism is sometimes viewed as a form of **social control**.

- The state's role is in managing different practices and traditions, aiming for **Harmony** over mere **Tolerance**.

4.2 State Ideologies and Policies

- State ideologies include **Pragmatism and Survivalism**.

- **Housing Policies**: **Ethnic Quotas** are used to prevent ethnic enclaves within public housing.

- **Educational Policies**:
  - Promotion of **Mother Tongue**.
  - **Racial Harmony Day**.
  - **SAP Schools** (Special Assistance Plan).
  - **Free primary to tertiary education for Malays**.

- **Organisation of Social Welfare**: Charity often goes to one's **own ethnic group**.

- **Political Representation**: Group Representation Constituencies (**GRC Reps**), Parliamentary representation, and Presidential Elections (e.g., President Halimah Yacob).

- The consequence can be **Heightened racial consciousness** and **Stereotypical thinking** among Singaporeans.

5 Meritocracy and "Self-Help"

5.1 Meritocracy

- **Definition**: Social stratification and rewards based on **personal merit**, ignoring race, gender, sexuality, and everything else.

- **Principles**:
  - **Equality of opportunity**.
  - Efficient **resource and talent allocation**.

– **Competition and rewards**.

- **In Singapore**: Demonstrated through high salaries, recruitment, and scholarships.

- **Educational Elitism**: Evident in programs like **SAP** and **GEP** (Gifted Education Programme).

- **Elitism and Difference**: The belief system can lead to dismissing the abilities of those not part of the elite group.

- **Welfare** is often framed around **Self Help**.

6 Indigenous Rights, Affirmative Action and "Bumiputera"

6.1 Indigenous Rights

- **Definition**: Inhabitants that have historical links to a particular territory.

- Indigenous groups have **different cultures and languages**, separate from the dominant society, and need to be **recognized by other groups**.

6.2 Affirmative Action and the New Economic Policy (NEP) in Malaysia

- **Affirmative Action**: Positive discrimination to **equalise starting points** or provide **compensation for past discrimination**.

- The **New Economic Policy** (NEP) was implemented to address:
  – Problems before 1970: Colonization, Poverty, Ethnic Crisis.
  – Policy aims: Reduce poverty and restructure society.

- **Bumiputera** (Sons of the Soil): Defined as those with one parent who is indigenous or ethnic Malay.

- **Bumiputera Policies**:
  – Companies often require **30% Bumiputera ownership**.
  – Discounts for **Bumiputera lots** (housing, etc.).
  – **Disproportionate representation** of Malays in administration and civil service.
  – Existence of **Ethnic Universities**.

- **Consequences**: Institutional and social discrimination, divisive policies, low confidence in national/educational institutions, and lower political support from minority groups.

- LKY famously labelled the Bumiputera policy as "racist," but the counter-argument is that "no one should question the rights of Malays on this land."

7 Survivalism, Security, and State-Control

7.1 The Discourse of Crisis

- The **Nation Building Process** is framed by a **crisis discourse** centered on the struggle for **survival**.

- Key events reinforcing this:

  - **Merger and Separation** (Forced Independence, 1963-1965).

  - **Dependence on the Malay World** for basic necessities.

  - **Konfrontasi** (1963–1966), including the MacDonalds House bombing (Usman Harun).

  - **Communal Riots** (1964 and 1969).

  - **Regional ethnic-nationalist sentiments**.

  - **War on Terror** and non-traditional security threats.

- This enables a **(Racialised) Security Paradigm** to be formed, influencing budget/expenditure, **National Service/Conscription**, and legal laws (ISA, Sedition Act, MRHA).

7.2 Race and Security

- This paradigm creates a **Constructed idea of potentially hostile Malay Muslim States** and a **Fear of the Regional Other**.

- **Immigration Policies** are used to ensure a **Chinese majority persists**.

- **Malay men in the Military**:

  - Historically, **exclusion of Malays in national service** and **no Malays in "Sensitive" positions** (based on earlier policy).

  - The policy has evolved, leading to comments from Malay senior commanders like, "I am here because of my own merit, not my race."

- The ethno-nationalist strategic culture of PAP can lead to **resentment from Malay countries**.

7.3 Geopolitical Stance

- Singapore adopts the image of **"The Great and Powerful Patron"**.

- **Reliance on the US and Israel** for security.

- Positioning as being **in the region, but not of the region** with a **Pro-Western security stance** to enhance status as a foreign investment site.

8 Ethnic "Tension" and "Conflict"

8.1 Defining Ethnic Conflict

- **Violence**: Use of physical force resulting in injury, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation.

- **Ethnic Conflict is NOT**:
  - Fuelled by age-old loyalties or cultural differences.
  - Spurred by primordial ancient hatreds.
  - Irrational Violence.

- **Ethnic Conflict IS**:
  - A consequence of the **State acting as an umpire** to control access to resources.
  - The group that **controls the state controls the resources**.
  - Politics involves **competition and exercise of power** between ethnic groups for control of resources.

8.2 Historical Conflicts in Singapore

- **Anti-Catholic Riots** (1851): 5 days of rioting by secret societies.

- **Nadra Riots** (1950): Over the court outcome of a Dutch/Malay girl (Maria Hertogh) custody case.

- **Race Riots** (1964): July (Muhammad's birthday) and September (Malay Trishaw rider killed).

- **Race Riots** (1969): Spillover from China vs. Malay conflict in Malaysia.

8.3 Competing Memories and Implications

- **Official Memory**:
  - Reconstruction through private or public institutions.
  - Focus on the **centrality of the state** and political events.
  - A **Linear Narrative** of National Transition, expulsion, and the PAP's struggle for a non-communal Malaysia against the backdrop of racial riots.

- **Popular Memory**: Often includes details like different ethnic groups helping each other in **kampongs** during the riots.

- **Legal Deterrence**: The riots' memory sustains the **spectre of ethnic riots** and justifies laws:
  - **ISA** (Internal Security Act): Preemptive powers against prejudice to security and social order, specifically agitation of racial and religious discord.
  - **Sedition Act**: Against any tendency to bring hatred/contempt against the government or hostility between different races.
  - **Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA)**: Actions against religious leaders who cause ill feelings or promote a political/subversive cause under the guise of religion.

- The discourse constructs Singapore as a **safe haven, absent of ethnic violence**, yet **still in danger**, which **forecloses debate and dialogue** in favor of state control and the **manufacture of consent**.

9 Islam and the Politics of "Secularisation"

9.1 Secularisation

- **Definition**: Society gives less regard to religious values, implying a **separation of state and religion**.

- The state adopts a **neutral stance** concerning religion (as long as it doesn't contradict state values) and ensures freedom of individuals to practice their own beliefs.

9.2 Singapore's Stance

- Singapore is **Secular but not atheistic**.

- **Religion and Politics are not separate spheres**; religion is a potent force of **social control** and a vehicle of traditional values and potential social conflict (Vineeta Sinha).

- **Religious tolerance** is a crucial imperative to prevent polarization and sectarian strife.

- **Arenas of Contestation**: E.g., Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), Madrasah, Tudung, Alternative Muslim Leadership.

- **Government vs. Religious Leaders**: The government built **Integrated Resorts** despite opposition from all religious leaders.

- **Legal Boundaries**: Laws like the MRHA and the Societies Act (used in the Marxist Conspiracy case) raise questions about infringing the constitutional guarantee of religious freedom and the line between legitimate evangelising and subversive activity.

10 Key Factors: Why Singapore is a "Frightened Country"

10.1 Geopolitical Factors

- **Region**: Singapore is seen as "Israel in a Muslim Sea," facing a **Chinese vs. Muslim** dichotomy.

- **Military Anxiety**: Malaysia/Indonesia military exercises near borders.

- **Resources**: **Lack of Resources** and insecurity regarding Food, Water, Land, Oil, and Energy.

- **Supply Chain**: Vulnerability due to dependence on global supply chain networks (e.g., exemplified in COVID-19).

10.2 Historical Factors

- **Forced Independence** (Separation, 1963-1965), different from traditional independence via uprisings/wars.

- **Competing ideologies** between Malay Malaysia and Malaysian Malaysia.

- **Konfrontasi** (1963-1966) and the MacDonalds House bombing.

- **Communal Riots** (1964 and 1969).

- **Nadra/Maria Hertogh Riots** (1950).

10.3 Contemporary Factors

- **Non-Traditional Security Threats**: War on Terror, **Self Radicalisation**.

- **Global Crises**: Climate Change, Population Crisis, Health Pandemics, Financial Crisis.

10.4   State Response and Implications

- The "frightened country" narrative **enables a (Racialised) Security paradigm** to be formed.
- This supports:
  - High budget/expenditure on **Defense and Security**.
  - **National Service/Conscription**.
  - **Strong bilateral relationships** with the US (Superpower) and Israel, often interpreted as "uncritical support to US."
  - **Legal Laws** like the ISA, Penal Code, and MRHA.