

Identities, Nations and Ethnicities: A Critical Comparative Study from Southeast Asia

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Abstract: The paper focuses on images of identity in Southeast Asia and argues that it is analytically useful to distinguish these identities and their “modes of representation” at different levels or scales of magnitude. In this regard, it is necessary to examine images of nationhood or the identities expressed and displayed at the national level in interaction with identities at the sub-national level which comprise what are usually referred to as ethnic groups or alternatively “peoples” or “communities”. Identity and its specific expression in “ethnicity” comprises a form of social cleavage and is a means of organizing social and cultural relations and encounters in terms of similarity and difference. It is argued that identity cannot exist apart from the establishment and maintenance of “cultural difference” and the construction and operation of boundaries, and is generated and sustained in relationships, both at the level of ideas and in practice with others who are perceived to be and categorized as “not us” or “other”. In other words, the ways in which identity and ethnicity in particular operate are “relational”. Comparative case-studies are taken from Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand to illustrate these propositions.

Keywords: Identity, nationhood, ethnicity, classification, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand.

What appears to characterize late twentieth century modernity – whether Southeast Asian or Western – is the concern with the issue of cultural identity and difference (Goh 2002a: 21)

Contrary to the will of theorists located in the (ex-)colonial centers, the nations/states in the region are, instead of declining, becoming the most powerful forces to be confronted (Chen 1998: 35).

Issues of national identity have certainly not arisen only in response to post-war globalisation. Yet it seems true to say that in recent decades national identity has become a dominant preoccupation in much of Asia (Vervoorn 2002: 35).

[T]he study of ethnicity in the post-colonial world cannot be divorced from the study of media, public culture and nation building (Postill 2006: 86).

INTRODUCTION: IDENTITY AND ETHNICITY

The paper considers identities in Southeast Asia, specifically with reference to Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand. It argues that it is analytically useful to distinguish identities and their “modes of

representation” at different levels or scales of magnitude. The focus here is on images of nationhood or the identities expressed at the national level as well as identities at the sub-national level which comprise what are usually referred to as ethnicity or ethnic groups. Identity comprises a form of social cleavage and is a means of organizing social and cultural relations in terms of similarity and difference. It is argued that identity cannot exist apart from the establishment and maintenance of “cultural difference” and the formation and operation of boundaries, and is constructed and sustained in relationships, both at the level of ideas and in practice with others who are perceived to be and categorized as “not us” or “other”. In other words, the ways in which identity operates are “relational”.

Classifications of people and the bases on which categories are formulated can also be quite arbitrary and comprise what we might term “folk models”, “stereotypes” or “typifications” (Purushotam 1998a: 19). Identities might be relatively “contingent, fragile and incomplete” (Du Gay, Evans and Redman, 2000a, 2000b: 2), though we must recognize that we can get rather carried away with notions of contingency and fragility, and some identities are more viable and enduring than others. Folk models of identity are relatively straightforward cultural short-hands to facilitate navigation through one’s daily life. However, we should acknowledge that things are not as simple as this and that processes of cultural exchange, intermarriage, physical resettlement and absorption generate hybrid communities which bridge boundaries

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and partake of elements from more than one category or group or they generate multiple identities which co-exist, but which may be invoked according to circumstances. In this connection, it is important to examine the ways in which these mixed communities establish and express their identities and how political elites define and address them in policy and administrative terms for purposes of nation-building (Chua 1995: 1-3). A particular issue in Malaysia, for example, has been whether to include certain hybrid communities, which have some claim to Malay antecedents, in the constitutionally important and politically dominant category of "indigenes" (*bumiputera*: lit. sons of the soil) (Goh 2002a, 2002b; and see 1998).

It is sometimes difficult to anticipate what elements will be given significance in establishing similarity and difference, but the processes of identifying and differentiating are deeply cultural (Kahn 1992: 159). The importance of addressing cultural processes is demonstrated directly and with full force in any analysis of identities. Studies of identity have to examine the criteria which can be used to unite and differentiate people and choose which make sense and are most appropriate and useful in the analysis. These criteria may or may not correspond with those which the people under study themselves use, the so-called "subjective" dimension of identity, though it is unlikely that a serious scholar would ignore the perceptions and views of local people (Nagata 1975: 3). But an outside observer in attempting to construct wider ranging classifications for comparative purposes might well choose to emphasize certain criteria, say language, at the expense of others, or perhaps religion or material culture. In the context of classification, a useful distinction is that between a "category" (which is the ideational or conceptual dimension of identity by which individuals are assigned or assign themselves to a unit within a system of units) and "group" (which pertains to the dimension of social interaction and communication). Categories may not therefore acquire the characteristics of a group in which people actively realize their identity and unite to express and promote it (King 2001; King and Wilder 2003:197).

We should also note that, although, in the context of examining nation-building and national identity, I have chosen to talk about "ethnicity" rather than "race", the distinction between the two concepts is sometimes difficult to make analytically in that the existence of physical differences between people do not in themselves generate racial differences; these are

subject to interpretation and are assigned meanings which in turn usually result in what is termed "racism" or "racialization" (Boulanger 2009). Lian Kwen Fee has also explored these complex issues in his valuable comparative study of race and ethnicity in Malaysia and Singapore (2006; and see 2011). Furthermore, in association with "the cultural distinctiveness of a particular group [people] may invent, or at least exaggerate the prevalence of a 'look' the members of the group allegedly share" (Boulanger 2009: 3). An important way in which ethnic categories and groups can be created and their boundaries fixed is also by linking cultural differences with racial-biological ones and the colonial powers in Southeast Asia tended to talk in terms of modes of cultural behaviour and attitudes rooted in biology and genetic predisposition (Hirschman 1986).

The establishment of identities can also entail a range of active interactions (cultural exchange, social intercourse including possibly intermarriage, trade and commerce, political alliance, and even peaceful assimilation) across the boundaries between different or separate groupings or they may involve processes of exclusion, avoidance, non-recognition or hostility, the latter sometimes resulting in political subjugation, economic exploitation, forced acculturation or in extreme cases genocide. In the case of the construction of national identities, politically dominant groups, or in more abstract terms "the state", attempt to promote, disseminate and sometimes impose on others their notions of identity and what that identity comprises (Lian 2006; Liam and Appudurai 2011). In some inter-group interactions both positive and negative relations may operate simultaneously or one form may replace the other over time.

It was argued some time ago that "essentialist" approaches to the understanding of identity and specifically ethnicity, usually glossed in Clifford Geertz's terms as "primordialism", which emphasize the strong sentiments attached to shared origins, descent and traditions (1963), should be replaced with a perspective, usually referred to as "constructivist" or "instrumentalist", which focuses on the ways in which identities are actively constructed, maintained and transformed, and, at times, used strategically for the accumulation of wealth, status and power (Dentan, 1974, 1975; Nagata 1974; and see Kahn 1992: 170-71, and Mackerras 2003: 12). In this connection Kessler has argued, following Hobsbawm and others (1983), that in a fast-changing and modernizing present, "tradition" or "the past", rather than "an unchanged

residue... becomes a resource now capable of being consciously used to fashion and legitimate a form of life that exists only in a problematic and contingent present" (1992: 134-35). Nevertheless, we should not lose sight of the fact that however fluid and contingent identities are, they take on a real and more solid and fixed quality, and they are made more "natural" and "embedded" than they actually are.

Even in the 1970s in Southeast Asia anthropologists were examining the ways in which identities are not straightforwardly carried unchanging from the past and anchored reassuringly in some distant ancestral time and space, but they are instead constructed. Indeed, as a cultural resource they can be switched, manipulated, deployed and changed, and many anthropological studies in the region focused on the fluid and strategic ways in which communities adopt and discard identities, and the role-playing and behaviour associated with them, according to circumstances, needs and interests (Leach 1954; Nagata 1975, 1979). Individuals can also carry multiple identities and deploy these as different situations and encounters demand (Dentan 1976: 78). This is especially so in situations where minority populations come to terms with more powerful majorities as in the case of the minority Semai and the majority, politically dominant Malay in Malaysia (Dentan 1975). Well before this important work on minorities in Southeast Asia Edmund Leach had already developed the argument that identity had to be examined as a historical process; he demonstrated this in the interactions between the Kachin and Shan of Highland Burma and the fact that social forms and identities of the upland-dwelling Kachin were forged and transformed in relation to the valley-dwelling Shan who were organized into hierarchical states. Kachin socio-political organization and identities were therefore unstable and subject to change (1954). This gave rise to a series of studies on the relations between upland and lowland populations in Southeast Asia and the ways in which identities were developed and transformed. Creating "otherness" is a crucial process in the study of identity, and it is an activity in which anthropologists, in constructing "other cultures", have developed particular skills (Béteille 1990: 8-11).

NATIONAL IDENTITIES

Returning to the theme of national identities, these are constructed and presented by those in power in independent, politically and territorially defined units which we refer to as "nation-states". As Thongchai says,

[I]t is generally supposed that a nation is a collective body to which individuals must belong... that...[it]... has essential traits commonly imbued in its members, who, moreover, have the same national interest. Patriotism, loyalty, and other affiliations in terms of ideas, sentiments, and practices appear to be natural relationships (1994: 1).

However, nations are constructed or imagined. Political elites engage in nation-building to promote collective solidarity, unity and cohesion and hopefully to maintain political stability and promote economic and social development. Political leaders are usually assisted in this myth-making enterprise to "make" citizens and "construct" a national community by senior bureaucrats and intellectuals (Barr and Skrbiš 2008: 41; Lian 2006). Indeed, as a sense of national identity becomes embedded it is frequently intellectuals, artists of various kinds and more generally cultural intermediaries who continuously contest, re-produce and re-negotiate national culture and convert cultural products into forms which can be disseminated and consumed by the populace (Zawawi Ibrahim 2009: 2-3). Therefore, despite the forces and pressures of globalization, states are still vitally important units in the organization of people and space. Territories, though in some sense constructed, are real; lines drawn on maps and what is contained within them usually matter and have consequences for those who are considered on the one hand to belong to the state (they are "citizens" or recognized "legal residents") and those on the other who must secure permission to reside or work there for a period (Clammer 2002: 22; Vervoorn 2002: 38-40). Territoriality is "the most concrete feature, the most solid foundation, literally and connotatively, of nationhood as a whole" (Thongchai 1994: 17).

However difficult it might be in a mobile, globalized world, governments attempt to police and monitor their borders, allowing some people entry under certain conditions and excluding or deporting others. The political leaders' vision of what defines a state is backed by "agents of law enforcement" who exercise control within a territory (Purushotam 1998a: 5). The building of a state and a nation with specific borders also requires the development of a physical infrastructure – housing, schools, industrial estates, and a communication network along with national monuments and public buildings – which serves to underpin the process of constructing national identity among the citizenry (Barr and Skrbiš 2008: 39-41).

Interestingly in addition to the realities imposed by territorial boundaries, some observers have noted that there is a “realness” even in the “imagined” realms of national identity. In the late 1990s Kahn for example, although he suggested that the relationship between state and nation (or the “blood-territory equation of classical nationalist... movements”) was at that time becoming attenuated, indeed “breaking down” under the impact of globalization, he nevertheless, recognized “the very real power” of the beliefs which underpin nationalism (1998a: 17-26; and see Smith 1986).

A state claims identity, separateness and autonomy on the basis of defined boundaries which separate it from like units and within which its citizens are assumed, encouraged or coerced to share a common nationhood which comprises such cultural elements as language, history, and origins, expressed in symbolic terms in anthems, flags and national rituals (Thongchai 1994: 1-19; Smith 1986, 1991). Ethnic designations are often conflated with the concept of the nation so that the boundaries of the state are seen as coterminous with the ethnically-defined nation (Evans 1999: 7; Smith 1986). This modern cartographic device framing a shared ethnicity is very different from the pre-European, religiously-based conceptions of a polity as part of a cosmic or celestial order, identified with a ruler who was divine or semi-divine, in which there were spheres of influence and domains of sacred space which were not precisely defined in territorial terms (Thongchai 1994: 20-36, 55,133-35). In political terms boundaries were rather zones, corridors or margins which were “not determined or sanctioned by the central authority”. Importantly in a colonial context the constituents of a dependent state and those who governed and were governed were also often framed and conceptualized in terms of racial difference (Purushotam 1998a: 6-7). However, it is this very notion of a “nation”, a realization and acceptance of oneness, rather than that of an objectively defined and legally and territorially recognized “state” which usually requires construction and continuous reinforcement through state action and its use of the media and national educational systems (Postill 2006). An important arena of construction is that of language and language use in relation to identity and what language or languages are privileged in the formation and socialization of a nation (Purushotam 1998a: 8-9).

Arising in part from the cultural diversity of Southeast Asia which the colonial powers had to address and which, in some respects, they

exacerbated, the post-war creation of nation-states was rendered exceedingly problematical during the insecure and fragile period of decolonization. It is not surprising, therefore, that the notion of nations as “imagined communities” and their deliberate invention should emerge in scholarly debates about the character and trajectory of the newly-independent countries of the region. Colonial and indigenous legacies were subject to constant reformulation prior to independence; they were not handed down unchanged and pristine, and this process of connecting the past with the present and re-working the past in the present has intensified in the post-independence period. Benedict Anderson’s analysis of the construction or invention of nations with reference to Southeast Asian and other cases focused on the role of various devices used by political elites to realize national consciousness; these included the print media, displays in museums, mapping and boundary-making, census-taking and ethnic categorization, and the adoption and development of a national language and educational system (1991).

I have been particularly attracted to Brown’s ambitious comparative studies of the relations between the state and ethnicity and the analytical framework which he develops (1994, 2000; but also see Smith 1986, 1991; and Guibernau 2004). It is an approach which Barr and Skrbiš have elaborated in their examination of the construction of the Singapore nation (2008: 3-5). Using Brown’s conceptual categories, Barr and Skrbiš arrange the nation-building strategies of Southeast Asian governments on a continuum from “ethno-culturalism” in Myanmar, based on lowland Buddhist-Burman identity, then to a lesser extent Thailand with its emphasis on lowland Thai language, religion and kingship as the core of nationhood, to “multiculturalism” in Malaysia, though with non-Malay and non-Muslim communities excluded from “full identification with the aspirational nation”; then to a multicultural and “civic” Singapore, combining “a modern concept of citizenship” but with an emphasis on racial categorization and racial harmony and equality, and finally to the other “civic” end of the spectrum with Indonesian nationalism based on “thoroughly modern concepts of citizenship” in which race and ethnicity are not recognized “as legitimate forms of identification” and the national language is not the language of the majority population, the Javanese (2008: 3-5; and see Smith 1986). These analytical categories should not disguise the fact that government policies change and that they may be based on shifting combinations of modern/secular/civic and traditional/primordial/ethno-religious ideologies. We

should also acknowledge that globalization, as well as having homogenizing influence on cultures has also led to fragmentation, hybridization and heterogeneity in identities.

However, in whatever form national images and ideologies are constructed, these do not eliminate or override regional and local ethnicities. In a compendium on ethnicity in Asia Mackerras and his colleagues, like Brown before them, explore the various strategies which political elites have used to build the nation and the interactions between politically dominant populations and subject minorities. The attempts to construct nationhood by “essentializing” the identity of the majority and the responses to this on the part of various of the constituent communities has been termed “ethno-nationalism”; there is then a political contestation over identities and what should be given precedence and what should be marginalized, reconfigured or eliminated. Struggles also turn on human rights issues, injustice and inequality (Mackerras 2003: 3-7; and see Gomes 1994).

What is clear is that in certain cases government-constructed images of the nation do manage to assert and maintain themselves whilst in others they are more unstable and subject to dispute and reformulation. The Singapore government, for example, has been rather more successful in convincing its citizens of the appropriateness of its image of the nation than say Malaysia (where *bumiputera* privilege and the role and position of Islam, the Malay language and the sultans have been the subject of dispute) (Lian 2006). On the other hand, Thailand was not subject to colonialism, and, on that basis, did not have to construct a national culture in opposition to alien dominance or to build a viable identity in a state created and bequeathed by foreigners. But even for the Thai political elite their nationalism was framed by colonialism and the modern nation-state was progressively constructed from the encounter with the British and the French from the mid-nineteenth century. In all cases and irrespective of specific historical circumstances the relevance of the nation-state continues to be strongly felt, not just by the political elite but also by large sections of the citizenry of these countries. The comparison undertaken here recognizes the shared political history of Singapore and Malaysia, but documents the different trajectories that the two independent countries took; Thailand has been chosen as a country for comparative purposes which was not subject to European control, but nevertheless adopted nation-building strategies which have a resonance with Singapore and Malaysia.

SINGAPORE

Governments in Southeast Asia have tried various means to build nationhood from the dominance of a majority ethnic group and ethno-culturalism to multiculturalism or multiracialism and then to more secular and civic-oriented national ideologies. But what they must do is address cross-cultural interaction and cultural hybridization. One of the most obvious examples in Southeast Asia to regularize and simplify ethnic complexity is Singapore where, as Chua argues, “the cultural activities promoted by the Singapore state are inclined to deepen divisions through either using existing differences or creating new ones” (1995: 4; and see 2003a). We should also note that probably nowhere else in Southeast Asia has nation-building been so meticulously micro-managed and elite-created and -driven (Barr and Skrbis 2008: 8-9).

Paradoxically in building a sense of national identity and in developing a modern society and economy governments such as Singapore have chosen to emphasize and institutionalize primordialism and the divisions or differences between ethnic categories and groups, or in Singapore terms “races”, rather than attempt to reduce or eliminate them (Clammer 1982). Purushotam refers to this process, following Foucault (1977), as “disciplining differences” (1995, 1998a, 1998b; and see Chua 1995, 1997, 1998a, 1999b, 2003a). In other words, differences are constructed in political discourses and realized in particular economic configurations. The rationalization of ethnic complexity serves to locate people firmly and unequivocally, at least at the level of state ideology, in specific political and economic spaces in a nation-state. In this regard I am not convinced by Velayutham’s claim that there has been “little attempt in the literature on Singapore to think about national identity as a product of a globalized modernity” (2007: 43). Neither am I persuaded by his argument that “historians have never considered envisioning Singapore’s past as always interconnected with the rest of the world” (2007: 44). Nevertheless, he is right in pointing to the contradictions between creating and maintaining a nation-state and operating in a globalized world as an international, cosmopolitan and multicultural city.

It is no coincidence that both Singapore and Malaysia, the former rather more than the latter, have substantial populations which originate from other parts of Asia and are primarily relatively recent arrivals during the colonial period (Lian 2006). These live alongside communities indigenous to the region,

though not necessarily to the particular territory in which they currently reside. Part of the problem for Singapore in attempting to build a post-independent nation which is workable and acceptable within and outside the state arises from the fact that the ethnic Chinese are in the majority. It would have been very unlikely that the neighbouring, mainly Malay-Indonesian-speaking majorities who controlled the national governments in Malaysia and Indonesia, would have accepted "a Chinese nation in their midst with equanimity" (Chua 1995: 6). Nor did the English-educated, conservative, primarily Chinese political elite want to emphasize their Chinese credentials and an identity associated with mainland communist China (Barr and Skrbiš 2008: 43-44). The local minority Malay-Muslim population in Singapore, demographically small, and economically and politically marginal, was not in a position to govern, nor was the Indian minority.

To address this conundrum the Singapore elite under Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew promoted a multiracial, multicultural and multilingual policy which presented a nation comprising equal, harmonious, racially(ethnically)-defined Asian communities which, in a meritocratic environment would in theory at least enjoy equal opportunities to succeed without favour being given to one or the other (Chua 1998b: 191-192; 1997, 2003a; and see Clammer 1982). What it also did was to draw attention away from increasing social inequality and class divisions - indeed the social hierarchies which Lee Kuan Yew's elitism and his education-driven meritocracy served to generate - and towards a national Singaporean-Asian identity, and a set of constituent ethnic or "racial" identities which cut across social classes (Velayutham 2007).

This seemed to be the only viable alternative when Singapore was forced to leave the Federation of Malaysia in 1965 and establish an independent republic; it faced a difficult and uncertain future as a small, territorially confined city-state, primarily Chinese, surrounded by larger potentially threatening neighbours, with no significant internal market for goods and services, and without natural resources or even its own adequate domestic water supply. As Barr and Skrbiš indicate, after the departure from Malaysia, not only was Singapore in a relatively weak position, but "[t]here were no idealised histories to recount, no indigenous heroic figures to mobilise the populace, and no autochthonous literary works that would lend themselves to nation building" (2008: 43). However, what this vulnerability and a sense of crisis and

foreboding provided were a breathing space for the government. It ensured that the political elite's imperative that Singapore must survive as an independent state against all odds meant that most of its citizens were prepared to accept national policies and the nation-building agenda with little protest (Velayutham 2007).

For the brief period that Singapore was a constituent state of the Federation of Malaysia from 1963 to 1965 Lee Kuan Yew and his senior colleagues had argued against a "Malay Malaysia", which entailed the introduction and acceptance of Malay as the national language and preferential treatment given to the Malays and to the symbols of Malayness, including Islam, and they pressed for a "Malaysian Malaysia" in which the opportunity to learn and improve in English was open to all provided one's mother tongue was preserved and which did not discriminate culturally, economically, linguistically and politically in favour of one particular ethnic community at the expense of others (Purushotam 1998a: 11). The Singapore elite also integrated its cultural policies into a national ideology which encouraged, indeed required its citizenry to embrace global capitalism: to work and study hard, to acquire new knowledge and skills, to compete, be disciplined, and thereby to improve their material prosperity (Chua 1998a: 29-34). Lee Kuan Yew was also convinced of the importance of developing and sustaining a gene pool which enabled the country to "reproduce" talented and energetic individuals in the interest of national development and "perpetual improvement"; it was in the attempt to institute a form of genetic engineering through state policies that the government met resistance from a usually quiescent citizenry (Barr and Skrbiš 2008: 47, 65). Although this national ideology is shot through with contradictions, particularly between the twin themes of modernity-individualism and tradition-communalism, it was designed to bring them into some form of harmonious and complementary combination. Nevertheless, at bottom the "racial" categories of Chinese, Indian and Malay, which are in effect ethnic categories, are also ranked in a hierarchy of achievement and importance (Barr and Skrbiš 2008: 10-11).

In promoting this national vision and the social, cultural and economic policies which were required to realize it the government was able to raise itself above the complexities of ethnicity (or "race" in Singaporean terms) as a neutral arbiter. The government also neutralized any potential opposition by espousing

pragmatic policies formulated and implemented in the interest not of ideology, but rather efficiency and rationality. For Lee Kuan Yew, government depended on an educated, proficient, paternalistic, altruistic, motivated, moral leadership which was not identified with any specific sectional interests and was committed to the service of the nation-state, though we should not forget the importance of “personal power...privilege and connections” (2008: 81). The elite is selected and reproduced through rigorous education, streaming, selection, examining, training and sponsoring, through special or elite schools, National Service, the Civil Service College, and exclusive clubs (2008: 112-123). Lee Kuan Yew’s cohesive and well-organized political elite therefore did not explicitly identify itself with the Chinese majority, though most of the senior politicians in Singapore are Chinese with a scattering of individuals from other “racial groups”. But, as Barr and Skrbis suggest, in spite of its apparent modern, civic, inclusive, rational model of citizenship, from the late 1970s and early 1980s the government did move increasingly to one in which Chinese ethnicity, education, language and Confucian values assumed “increasingly important roles”, disguised in a discourse of Asian values and identities and a more general process of Asianization (2008: 5). Therefore, what seems on the surface to be an even-handed multiracialism is in fact “a methodical and pervasive sensitivity for things racial that asserts the Chinese character of Singapore multiracialism” (2008: 11, 92-97; Chua, 1998b: 197-198, 2003a). Barr and Skrbis even argue that government has implemented a policy of “incomplete assimilation” of the minority communities, encouraging the maintenance of certain distinctive cultural markers whilst expecting the minorities, particularly the Malays “to mimic generic aspects of the dominant group” (2008: 99).

Nevertheless, Chua argues that this discourse of “race” in nation-building, this combination of the “modern” with the “primordial”, provided the state with “a high degree of relative autonomy in its exercise of power” (1995: 13; 1998b: 191, 2003a). Each race was defined in terms of their separate origins and descent and their distinctive language (or more specifically “mother tongue”) and culture. Race encapsulated ethnicity and culture. In other words, races were homogenized, essentialized, and exclusively demarcated and were made responsible (and empowered) for their performance in realizing the objectives and priorities of the state (Chua 2003b: 76-9; Velayutham 2007). Moreover “officially one’s race is

defined strictly by patriarchal descent” (Chua 1998a: 35), and ethnic characteristics, such as culture, language and religion are “inborn, unchanging and unchangeable” (Barr and Skrbis 2008: 51). The boundaries between the racial groups were also monitored and maintained through the use of legal, educational, bureaucratic and other state mechanisms. Various racially-based community and self-help organizations were encouraged and established, in particular to encourage the attainment of the government’s objectives of continued self-improvement to ensure that economic growth would be sustained (Chua 1998a: 36-9).

We should note that the Singaporean constituent races within an overarching Asian national identity were constructed by the Singapore government, building on a process of “racial” rationalization and simplification which had been instigated by the British colonial authorities (Purushotam 1998a: 23). The British perceived Singapore as comprised of several races defined in terms of their origins, which in turn were associated with certain character traits which helped explain their general modes of primordial behaviour and their suitability for the pursuit of certain kinds of occupation and livelihood (1998a: 30-1). The British began their attempts to come to grips with a plural society by devising a broad categorization by “nationalities” (Europeans, Americans, Malays and Other Natives of the Archipelago, Chinese, Tamils and Other Natives of India) which were then subdivided into “races” (for example, in the Chinese case these comprised Cantonese, Hokkien, Hailam, Teochew, Hakka, Straits born/Baba Chinese and so on) (Purushotam 1998a: 32-3; 1998b: 55-87).

This Orientalist discourse provided a straightforward short-hand device to arrange and administer the diversity of Singapore’s population into a few major categories, and it was this stereotyped and abbreviated racial framework that was adopted by Singapore’s post-independence political elite in its “neo-Orientalist” discourse (Purushotam 1995: 3; 1998b: 54-5; and see Said 1979). However, Lee Kuan Yew and his senior colleagues translated the colonial system into one which was even more vigorously pared down to a few cultural markers: the diversity of languages and religions which the British to some extent preserved in their classification system of nationalities and races was collapsed subsequently by government edict into four racial categories: Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others (CMIO) (Benjamin, 1976; Siddique 1989). Purushotam suggests that these in turn were defined

by origin, but more particularly by language, and a few other elements of culture (1998a: 19; Chua 1998a: 35-6): Mandarin for the numerous Chinese dialects, with the addition among other cultural elements of Chinese New Year and Confucianism; Tamil for the complex of Indian settlers and the Hindu religion and annual festivals, though the issue of language for the Indians was left comparatively open (with Hindi, Punjabi and Bengali also permitted); and the Malay language and the Islamic faith and its associated celebrations for the diverse local communities which settled in Singapore from the Malayan Peninsula and the Indonesian islands.

Chua also draws our attention to other ethnic or racial markers: for Chinese women of a certain age and social station the re-introduction of the *cheongsam*; for Malays the covering of the female body with the tunic-like *baju kurung*, *sarong* and head-scarf; and for Indian women the continued use of the *sari* (2003b: 76-92, 143). In regard to cuisine there was a similar association of certain kinds of food with the major racial categories, although here hybridization of dishes is as much in evidence as separation (2003b: 93-117). Three clearly defined super-categories were therefore founded comprising the Chinese, Indian and Malay races, and a residual category (styled rather dismissively as Other) of presumably non-racial character which lumped together hybrid and other minority communities particularly the Eurasians, Europeans, Arabs and other Asians. The efforts required to depict "others" in positive cultural terms obviously demand a high degree of bureaucratic manipulation and sleight of hand (Purushotam 1995: 2-4). Nevertheless, Singaporeans are slotted or shuffled into one or another racial category, though, in their everyday lives, there are inevitable cross-cultural encounters and hybridization (Chua, 1998b: 186-88).

Language policy and language instruction, pursued through the requirement that every school child has to learn English and a second language of origin, have been especially important mechanisms in the embedding of racial distinctions in the Singapore psyche, but also in attempting to balance the demands of a modern, globalizing economy with the need to sustain an Asian identity. Purushotam says "The population is exhorted to learn English language, (in order to contribute to and enjoy the fruits of economic development), and. a 'mother tongue' language (to ensure social and cultural ballast to the people and thereby the nation)" (1998a: 75). To be sure in any state there are people who will attempt to resist what

government policy requires or encourages them to do, but Purushotam, though drawing attention to some of her own misgivings and minor resistances, suggests that the Singapore elite has enjoyed a considerable level of success in their multiracial mission (1998a: 77-9; 1998b: 87-92). Singapore also has its own official version of its history – "the Singapore Story" – provided in educational materials and in Lee Kuan Yew's autobiography and other writings which are part of the armoury of socialization deployed to make "new" Singaporeans in the image of the political elite (Barr and Skrbiš 2008: 18-38). Furthermore, the use of English and the embracing of science and technology and the other baggage of Western-derived modernity are essential to Singapore's success, but not at the expense of the loss of an imagined Asian identity. The government's response has been to emphasize the values of a reconstructed Asian tradition, drawing primarily on Confucian elements, which provides the means to unite the racial groups. In this regard Chua refers to "the Asianization of Singaporean identity" (1998a: 45; and see Velayutham 2007).

This Asian values complex in turn lends legitimacy to the Singapore state in that its political leaders have claimed that it puts into practice precisely those positive values which both explain and sustain economic success and political stability. Clearly the explanation of economic growth and success in terms of certain virtuous Asian values began to lose its gloss in the financial crisis of 1997-98 and there is certainly evidence of opposition to some of the policies of the Singapore government (see, for example, Rodan, 1992, 1993, 1996a, 1996b, 1997). Nevertheless, Chua claims that in Singapore it has retained a degree of resonance through the strenuous efforts of the political elite. Indeed, "By the mid-1990s, many Singaporeans across class lines, generational divides and educational levels were apparently willing to adopt an 'Asian' identity and be subject to the constraints that such an identity would impose" (2003b: 78).

Most certainly there is evidence of dissonance and discontent among sections of the Singapore population about the government's national ideology and its policy of elitism and racialism. Nevertheless, its citizens are unlikely to break ranks and seek an alternative system of government and administration in the foreseeable future (Barr and Skrbiš 2008:167). The Singapore elite has managed to construct, and it continues to construct a reasonably viable national project which, though not embraced with overwhelming enthusiasm, appears to have been accepted as the best that is currently

available. But the national discourse, which is strictly about ethnic differences, is one which has been phrased in racial terms.

MALAYSIA

Whilst the Singapore government set itself the task of constructing racial categories and neutralizing them in the interest of a greater national-Asian identity, the Malaysian government, though it too operates with clearly ideologically defined racial (or more properly ethnic) categories, not altogether dissimilar from those we find in Singapore, privileges those who are categorized as “indigenes” (*bumiputera*). This category and its attributes are specified in constitutional terms. The special recognition and privileges attached to indigenous status and the more general claims of equality of citizenship irrespective of ethnic identity were at the heart of the dispute between political leaders in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore from 1963 when Malaysia was formed and which led to Singapore’s abrupt departure from the Federation in 1965.

The broad racial categories (but more accurately ethnic categories) which were constructed in Malaysia are also found in Singapore (that is the Malays, Chinese and Indians), but Malaysia has a more diffuse category of indigenes embracing Malays and the native Dayak populations of Malaysian Borneo as well as the constitutionally problematical category of *orang asli* [aborigines], the “original population” of Peninsular Malaysia. As Kessler has indicated ethnic identities are rather more problematical and untidy in Malaysia and cannot easily be shoehorned into the major government-generated racial categories; this is not to say that they are not problematical in Singapore. But this is what makes ethnic and cultural politics in Malaysia particularly complex. Although they appear relatively straightforward to delimit, the politically dominant Malays, defined primarily in terms of religion, language and custom and their claim to be indigenous, are a case in point in illustrating this untidiness. Kessler notes, for example, that if one takes two criteria (that is, being Muslim and being *bumiputera*) which are used to define the Malays, then one confronts populations which are “anomalous” (1992: 139). These comprise Muslims who are neither Malay nor *bumiputera*; Malays who are neither Muslims nor *bumiputera*; Malay *bumiputera* who are not Muslims; Muslim Malays who are not *bumiputera*; *bumiputera* Muslims who are not Malays; and *bumiputera* who are neither Malays nor Muslims. There are also Malaysians who are neither

Malays nor Muslims, nor *bumiputera* but because of hybridization with Malay culture and society make claims for *bumiputera* status. Kahn makes the point that it is “impossible, particularly in the modern world, to define discrete cultures except in a totally arbitrary way” (1992:161). This does not, of course, deter governments from constructing cultures and identities, and in Southeast Asia “races”, to shape and define the nation-state.

The post-independence policy of rationalization and simplification in Malaysia, as in Singapore, carried forward the processes which were initiated during the colonial period, though prior to independence the states which came together eventually to form Malaysia contained a much more complex ethnic mosaic, complicated, in political terms, by the coincidence or overlapping nature of ethnic identity, social class, wealth, occupational position and residential location (Brown 1994: 213). Malaysia unlike Singapore, which was very much a colonial creation, also had historical antecedents which, though transformed by the British, particularly in a process of the ceremonialization of royalty in the Malay states, were not eliminated; these were embodied in the sultans and their symbolic expression of Malay identity and its privileged status (Kessler 1992: 143-46). Moreover, leading Malay nationalists, intellectuals, and journalists, in the process of creating the Malaysian nation-state, projected a particular image of the Malays in contrast to the Chinese and Indians which confirmed and reinforced the compartmentalized racial-occupational and cultural-psychological stereotypes which were created by the British (Kahn 2006: 57-71). This interpretation of ethnic or racial types and particularly the distinction and contrast between the values, attitudes, perspectives, psychologies and biologies of the Malays and Chinese was expressed most forcefully, popularly and politically in Mahathir Mohamad’s *The Malay Dilemma* (1970). In sharp contrast to the mainly urban-based, aggressive, hard-working, resilient and entrepreneurial Chinese the Malays were depicted as a rural-based, contented, easy-going, non-risk-taking, less economically developed, communalistic, spiritually- and aesthetically-motivated, subsistence-oriented peasantry, an image which deliberately marginalized the more dynamic, migratory, entrepreneurial elements of what came to be defined as Malay society, or in Kahn’s terms “the other Malays” (2006). This stereotype emerged from the colonial experience in the Straits Settlements and the Malay States and the creation of a plural society, but it was subsequently used in rather different

circumstances to help justify a set of post-colonial policies which needed to address what was for the young Malaysian nation-state a most traumatic event.

The Chinese-Malay "race riots" of 1969 marked a watershed in Malaysian post-colonial history. These and the implementation and consequences of the twenty-year New Economic Policy (NEP) from 1970 which was a forceful response to the problems raised by racial/ethnic disharmony and the economic inequalities between the Malays and the Chinese, have been amply debated, dissected and analysed. Although it must be noted that, following the declaration of a state of emergency, an affirmative action policy was formulated by the Malay-dominated government and instituted by the then Deputy Prime Minister, Tun Abdul Razak (Crouch 1992: 21-43, 1996; Khoo 1992: 44-76; Loh and Kahn 1992: 1-17). Along with this a National Ideology (*rukunegara*) was formulated and a Malay-centred National Cultural Policy. The NEP was designed through state-led development and targeted government support, particularly in education and training, the government takeover of companies (on behalf of the Malays) and the promotion of Malay-owned and managed firms to bring a rapidly increasing number of Malays into the urban-based, modern sector as businesspeople and professionals; in effect, to create a Malay urban-based middle class (Gomez and Jomo 1999; Saravanamuttu 1987).

Prime Minister Mahathir's view at that time was designed not to perpetuate traditionalism through protection and subsidy but to help encourage the emergence of what came to be referred to popularly and in academic analysis as "new Malays" (*Melayu baru*). Mahathir recognized the dangers of the development of a welfare mentality and over-dependence on government and argued for the need for Malays not only to embrace new values and ways of thinking, but to do this through hard work, self-reliance and confidence and the sustained development of these desirable characteristics. His vision also saw a major role for Islam but one which was closely integrated into and supportive of economic development, modernization and resilience, reminiscent of Max Weber's thesis on the relations between the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism (Khoo, 1992: 58-59). Mahathir wanted then a new, Asian-based modernity.

The primordial image of a more economically backward sector requiring protection and support and the intervention of government to address this unequal

system served Malay political leaders well, providing a very direct means of garnering and sustaining the political support of the Malays, many of them still rural-based when the NEP was implemented, who were in receipt of state assistance and support and who benefited from government largesse. The dominant Malay party UMNO (United Malays National Organization) depended especially on the support of the rural Malays and those who had felt themselves marginalized economically in their own homelands. It was inevitable that the pattern of politics in the Federation of Malaya from 1957, and then, despite the greater ethnic complexity in Sarawak and Sabah (formerly British North Borneo) in the wider Malaysia from 1963, would be one of primarily ethnic-based political parties. This political configuration and the incessant analysis in ethnic terms of Malaysian social, economic, and cultural life and of the historical development of Malaysia served to further cement and emphasize ethnic differences.

However, the NEP, if it was to work as the government intended, required an ever-closer relationship between politics and business. The old pre-1969 arrangement in which government kept private capital and business at arm's length and provided some assistance, largely piecemeal and uncoordinated, to the Malays was abandoned in favour of direct and comprehensive planned state intervention in the control, ownership, management, financing and development of business (Khoo 1992: 49-50; Gomez 1990). It is not surprising that, with the development of an increasingly politically determined and controlled economy, patronage and "money politics" flourished with the developing relations between Malay political leaders and senior bureaucrats and newly-created Malay businesspeople. This also came to characterize the operations of other ethnic groups, though perhaps less noticeably so, given that the Malays were politically dominant; the Chinese, Malays and Dayaks were also drawn into this highly politicized and ethnically defined economy (Loh and Kahn 1992: 2; Gomez 1990; Gomez and Jomo 1999).

Of necessity, the government became increasingly authoritarian in style, particularly under Mahathir, because the need to engineer greater ethnic equality through redistribution, and to ensure that there would be no more racial/ethnic conflict, required close control of the political process and very swift action against any actual or potential opposition and dissent (Crouch 1992: 21-41; 1996; Jesudason 1996; Khoo 2001). Clearly this set of policies also accentuated the

divisions between the different ethnic or racial groups in that, for example, quotas were placed on certain kinds of employment by ethnicity, non-Malay companies had to restructure their shareholding to include the required proportion of Malay-owned shares, various forms of joint venture and contracting and licensing systems were deployed to include Malay participation, companies opened up their boardrooms to senior Malay bureaucrats and retired politicians, and government support through scholarships and quotas in higher education favoured *bumiputera* students (Crouch 1996; Searle 1999; Gomez and Jomo 1999).

In Southeast Asia considerable attention is paid to minority populations in debates about ethnicity in that these usually have to develop and defend their identities in response to and in interaction with the majority communities; as those defined as “others” they shape their identities in opposition to the majority. However, it needs to be kept in mind that all identities are forged in contexts of social interaction and, as Gladney proposes, majorities are just as much constructed as are minorities (1998). The Malays, or more precisely the overlapping category of *bumiputera* in Malaysia as currently constituted, are the majority, politically dominant population but they have been gradually distilled as a definable category from a set of political, social, cultural and economic processes and discourses which began to be set in train from the second half of the nineteenth century (Milner 1998; Shamsul 1998).

Be that as it may, since the implementation of the NEP the Malay political elite have worked at translating elements of Malay identity into something which stands for the nation as well. In Singapore, it was CMIO and a pan-Asian identity, expressed in terms of invented Asian values contrasted with Western ones. In Malaysia the emphasis on the autochthonous Malays and more broadly the *bumiputera* as the rightful heirs of the amalgam of territories which were carved out of “the Malay world” by the British, symbolized at least for the Malays in such institutions as the sultanates and in the position accorded their customs and Islam meant that a political ideology based on balanced and equal multiracialism and multiculturalism and on an ethnically neutral meritocracy were unlikely policy paths for the Malay political elite to take. Instead Malay culture had to be given a privileged position in the development of a national identity and, as Kessler notes, Islam is an especially effective mechanism for maintaining boundaries because of its various restrictions placed

on such matters as food and gender relations (1992: 139).

There were attempts to introduce a Malay-derived National Cultural Policy from the early 1970s; this met with considerable resistance from representatives of other ethnic groups and has not been wholly successful (Goh 2002a: 40, 2002b; Loh and Kahn 1992: 13). It is not unexpected that the efforts both to maintain a Malay-defined political realm underpinned by the fact that, as Kessler argues, Malay culture is “inherently political” and increasingly Muslim, and at least to address the fact that culture exists side-by-side with other non-Malay, non-Muslim cultures in Malaysia have produced all kinds of tensions and contradictions (1992: 136-38). Nevertheless, the main ingredients of national identity, at least those which are presented in the international arena and for certain domestic purposes, are Muslim-Malay (in language, religion, history, and political institutions).

We should note, however, that even in Malay circles these elements of ethnic and national identity do not go unchallenged; they are even more subject to dispute and opposition from members of the non-Malay middle class and those who make a claim to *bumiputera* status because of the problems of drawing boundaries in practice around the category (Crouch 1992: 40-1). Kahn's and Loh's volume pointed to a fragmentation of Malaysian images and visions and it drew attention to processes of socio-economic differentiation and the emergence of new cultural activities as long ago as the early 1990s and the process within the Malay community of re-working elements of Malay ethnic identity (1992; Loh and Kahn, 1992: 14-15). The fracturing of the Malay political community and the emergence of a relatively strong Malay opposition during the 1980s also made it important for the pool of Malay supporters to be increased and this was done by drawing selected minorities like the Portuguese-Eurasians into the category *bumiputera* (Goh 2002a: 134-137). Malay identity became a focus of debate and disagreement. For example, debates have been taking place among the Malays on matters to do with the position, role and character of Islam in Malaysia and whether or not an Islamic state should be introduced and “a more universalistic conception of Muslim brotherhood/sisterhood”; the relationships between a narrow conception of Malay nationalism and Islam has also been the subject of disputation; similarly the status of the Malay language and the need to improve proficiency in English have also generated heated discussions. There is also the debate about the

importance of Islam in defining the Malays as against shared history and tradition (Goh 2002a: 45, 133-37; Hussin 1990; Jomo and Ahmad 1992).

What should be noted here are the ways in which traditional images of Malayness rather than an Islamic identity, which are derived from a pre-colonial village and feudal order are resurrected and contested in the attempts of elements of the middle class to address modernity and the place of the Malays within this process in a multi-ethnic society (Kahn 1992: 133-55; Goh, 2002a; 45-6). As Kessler indicates, with reference to Kahn's work, "As the former ('traditional') Malay peasant cultural order declines or is eroded, the Malay middle class becomes increasingly involved in and committed to what is now seen as 'traditional Malay culture': a simulacrum, a hyper-realization even, of Malay tradition that, since it goes far beyond whatever existed in the past, is nothing if not modern" (Kessler, 1992: 146). Another arena of this debate is the relationship between the post-colonial and post-modern consumer and citizen in Malaysia, particularly with the rise of a relatively affluent middle class, and the colonial past and its classification of its dependent subjects (Watson 1996; Lee 1992).

The differences of view over culture and identity have emerged much more obviously and vigorously since the 1980s, and the espousal of different visions for Malaysia and what it means to be Malay. These have been primarily the result of profound changes in social and economic structures, associated with changing lifestyles, resulting in the creation of a wealthy Malay business or capitalist class, a grouping of middle and small businesspeople dependent on state patronage, and an educated middle class of urban-based professionals, administrators and technocrats, many of them exposed to the West through their pursuit of higher education overseas and their interaction with the globalized media (Crouch 1992: 31-2, 40-1; Khoo 1992: 62-3; Searle 1999: 58-102). These social and other changes also signalled shifts in government policy away from the NEP, which, though it had not achieved everything expected of it, provided substantial benefits for the Malays. Malaysia had enjoyed significant economic growth in the 1980s. Ethnic preoccupations and affirmative action at the heart of the NEP were softened from 1991 and replaced by the New Development Plan (NDP) and Vision 2020 (*Wawasan 2020*) which were directed to achieving fully developed and industrialized status for Malaysia within a twenty-year time frame (Goh 2002a: 42). The focus was on addressing hard-core poverty,

developing an industrial community, including a substantial component of *bumiputera*, relying more on private sector involvement, embracing technological development, and building a Malaysian rather than a Malay-Malaysian nation, based on cultural and moral excellence. Government propaganda in the 1990s was designed to enliven the resolve and commitment of the Malaysian citizenry to work towards national goals, to instil in them a growing sense of national pride and to warn them against the perils of adopting undesirable Western values. What is demanded is an Asian, specifically a Malaysian modernity, arising from local culture, tradition and Islam. Expressions of this modernity were to be seen in the urban landscapes of Malaysia, especially in the high-rise buildings, expanding infrastructure and post-modern icons of Kuala Lumpur. But this was combined with a concern for local heritage with the conservation of vernacular buildings and the inclusion of local cultural and architectural elements in new buildings. The political dominance of Muslim-Malays, nation-building and disruptive and painful processes of modernization and urbanization in Malaysia have led to arenas of intense cultural debate, which have enlivened and characterized post-independence politics in Malaysia, and which provides an interesting comparative contrast with Singapore.

THAILAND

Thailand provides one further interesting comparative case. In contrast to Singapore and Malaysia the absence of a colonial power in Thailand has meant not that the Thai political elite has been able to ignore issues of national identity but rather that they have had the time and space to be more selective and less self-conscious about the development, adjustment and maintenance of that identity (Van Esterik 2000: 95-6). Indeed, rather than having their culture transformed by colonial Europeans they have modernized on their own terms in their encounter with the West. Again, in contrast to the former British dependencies where the issue of forging a national identity from radically plural societies had to be addressed, in Thailand there appears to be a long-established culturally homogeneous nation (*chat Thai*) where the vast majority of the population subscribes to a set of primary shared symbols referred to as "Thainess" (*khwampenthai*) (Thongchai 1994: 3). Nevertheless, as Keyes demonstrates, this strong national identity is of quite recent origin; it has been subject to periodic reformulation and is a product of the modernization of the Thai state from the latter part of the nineteenth

century (1987: 3-5, 44-67). When we probe below the surface of nation-building in Thailand we find a much more complex reality and the status of the core institutions of the nation-state (monarchy, Buddhism, *sangha*, and the concept of "Thai") have been subject to intense debate and disagreement. Indeed, since the second half of the nineteenth century "various interpretations of Thainess are advanced from time to time" (Thongchai 1994: 3).

Therefore, we must recognize that the concept "Thai" (like that of "Malay" in Malaysia and "CMIO" in Singapore) is a relatively recent discursive construct in contrast to official histories which focus on the longevity of the monarchy, the continuity of Thai Buddhism and the resilience of traditional institutions usually associated with rural society. Although most citizens of Thailand are Tai-speakers and are able to speak the national language - standard Thai- which is in effect the language of the Siamese or Central Thai (who trace their descent from the kingdoms of Ayutthaya, Thonburi and Bangkok [from 1350]), there are very distinct regional ethno-linguistic groups within the Tai language family. They comprise speakers of Northern Thai (*Khon Muang* or in its written form *Yuan*), North-eastern Thai (*Khon Isan*, which is closer to the Lao language) and Southern Thai (*Pak Tai*). There are also other smaller groups of Tai-speakers in Thailand (including Shan and Phu Thai). This complexity is compounded by the presence of Austroasiatic speakers (the Mons and Khmers), Austronesian-speakers (the Malays in the southern provinces), immigrant Chinese, some of whom have mixed with Thais to form a hybrid Sino-Thai community mainly residing in Bangkok and the Central Plain, Vietnamese, Indians, and a host of tribal highlanders (*chao khao*) in the north and west (Karen, Hmong [or Meo/Mio], Yao [or Mien], Akha, Lahu and Lisu) (Keyes 1987: 15-22). As in other parts of Southeast Asia ethnolinguistic groups are also divided by political borders, and speakers of Tai languages are found not only in Thailand but in neighbouring Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam and China. Nevertheless, within Thailand the nationalization of the language of Central Thai was aided enormously by the absence of a colonial power which in other parts of the region served to deflect educated people from their local language to the imported language of an alien administration.

The core of the Thai nation was the founding and growth of Tai-speaking states in north and north-central Thailand and the emergence of what was to become the foundation of the Thai Buddhist polity and culture in

Sukhothai in the Yom Valley from the mid-thirteenth century. Thai language and culture were embodied in King Ramkhamhaeng who ruled from 1279 to 1299. Sukhothai was "founded on personal loyalty to a paternalistic ruler who protected his people, promoted their welfare, and settled disputes in accordance with his sense of justice" (Girling 1985: 37). This tradition was carried forward by Uthong or Ramathibodi who founded the Tai kingdom of Ayutthaya in 1350, although personal rule came increasingly to be combined with "an elaborate civil law and a large and increasingly complex bureaucracy" (1985: 37). The development of the culture and organization of these two Thai kingdoms were important stages in the deliberate construction of what came to be Thai identity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, though it is interesting and entirely in the spirit of cultural and identity construction that Uthong may have been of Chinese or part-Chinese descent and his royal bride a Mon (Girling, 1985: 20-4, 27).

Of course, Siam, as it was called prior to 1939, did enjoy a politico-cultural continuity which was denied their neighbours. Nevertheless, from the second half of the nineteenth century the Thai monarchy found itself under increasing pressure from the British and the French, and it was not long before then in 1767 that they had suffered defeat at the hands of their age-old enemies, the Burmese, the loss of their capital, Ayutthaya, and the humiliation of their king and members of the royal family who were taken into captivity. Sustaining and building an identity and instilling a sense of belonging and cultural pride and resilience in this hostile environment were essential, particularly when King Mongkut [Rama IV] and King Chulalongkorn [Rama V] (1868-1910) embarked upon a radical process of social and economic modernization and the building of a modern nation with its associated symbols of nationhood (Thongchai 1994: 171). Siam was increasingly opened to the expanding global economy and the commercialization of important areas of the economy such as rice production. To assist in this process of transformation foreign advisors were brought to the Bangkok court to promote reforms in the administrative, taxation and military system, the development of infrastructure, and the introduction of Western science, technology and education (Keyes 1987: 49-54; Vella 1955).

The prospect of Thailand's transformation demanded that a robust national identity be put in place because the country's definition in territorial terms was "the product of the colonial period even though

Thailand was never itself a colonial dependency" (Keyes 1987: 27). As Thongchai demonstrates, Thailand, or, in his terms, its "geo-body", comprising a bounded territory which is controlled, policed, defended and given an identity, is "merely an effect of modern geographical discourse whose prime technology is a map" (1994: 17). This discourse increased in importance in Thailand from the 1870s when modern geography and the concept of the earth's surface divided into "governed (or occupied) territories" or "material space" with clearly defined boundaries began to take hold (1994: 49, 55, 116-27). Thailand, in its encounter with the British and the French, had its first map of a bounded territory by 1893, though this was adjusted through several boundary treaties with the two European powers through to 1907. It was this process that saw Siam, as the territory which was left following these negotiations, incorporate, within defined borders, several foreign tributaries and provinces, including significant Lao-speaking populations in the north-east and Malay communities in the south. (1994: 131, 165). Following the creation of the Siamese "geo-body" then conceptions, understandings and narratives of the past had to be adjusted to fit with this emerging territorial/spatial reality (1994: 138-39). Nation-building begins in earnest and with it the notion that the geo-body existed prior to, though with the loss of territories to the British and French, not coincident with the more recently created nation (1994: 140-63). In this historical device and the re-writing of history the voices and interests of the incorporated minorities were suppressed; they became citizens of Siam/Thailand politically and culturally dominated by the central Thais. Of vital importance was the progressive "integration of outlying regions under centralized authority" (Girling 1985: 55).

Fortunately the central Thais had a closely integrated politico-cultural complex with which considerable numbers of people within and beyond the core populations could identify: the Theravada Buddhist religion (*satsana*), the institution of the monarch (*phra maha Kasat*), the monkhood (*sangha*) under royal patronage, which served to coordinate communities at both the state and local levels, the symbolic association of the king and the image of the Buddha, and the civilian and military bureaucracies as the "servants of the crown" (*kharatchakan*) (Keyes 1987: 3). Of great significance for wider integration was that Buddhism penetrated to the rural communities and both in the past and today large numbers of young men, from all walks of life, entered the monkhood, if

only for three months during the Lenten period (Keyes 1971; Girling 1985: 32-7). Van Esterik has said pertinently "there is no doubt about the importance of Buddhism as a fundamental part of Thai national identity" and its close association with the king, his acts of public piety, including the undertaking of pilgrimage, sponsoring new religious buildings, and performing court rituals, and his patronage of the *sangha* (2000: 95; Keyes 1971, 1987: 56-7; 201-2). Beginning in Mongkut's reign there was a progressive reformation of Buddhism which served to transform it into a unified religion, and the *sangha* with its supreme patriarch, appointed by the king, became a national institution. These reforms also distinguished Thai Buddhism from the Buddhisms of other neighbouring peoples. During Chulalongkorn's reign the king also adopted a much more public and national presence rather than remaining as a remote godlike figure; the late King Bhumipol also managed to install himself as "a central pillar of the modern nation-state" (Keyes 1987: 201, 208, 210). Having said this and notwithstanding the king's ability to serve as the father of all his citizens the non-Buddhist, non-Tai-speaking minorities, including the Malays and the upland tribal populations, are virtually excluded from national politics and unable "to achieve positive national recognition" (1987: 204).

Although the status of kingship changed after the coup of 1932 which replaced an absolute with a constitutional monarchy, and following this change has had to come to terms with both anti- and pro-royalist governments, it remains a central symbol of the Thai nation and the basis of the legitimacy of the state and its senior offices (Keyes 1987: 3). However, there was no requirement on the part of the political elite to foster or mobilize a mass anti-colonial nationalism, nor has there been much need to use excessive force to ensure that the political centre in Bangkok holds sway, though there have been moments of intense conflict and violence, and ongoing intra-elite struggles for power, most recently expressed in the open conflicts between the "red shirts" and "yellow shirts", the re-introduction of military rule and the suspension of democratic institutions. Legitimacy was assured through state level cultural institutions and the continuity in patron-client relations between the elite and the populace. Indeed, the coming to power of a military-bureaucratic elite from 1932 and their desire to create a nation in their own image and one which served to legitimize their rule further intensified the push towards the creation of a Thai nation and its associated symbols and institutions, although now it

was such institutions as the military, particularly the army, which began to play a commanding role in embodying and symbolizing the nation. The concept of the “bureaucratic polity” formulated in the analysis of Thai politics and society captured several elements which together characterized and served to integrate the country: bureaucratic policy-making, hierarchy, and patronage, underpinned symbolically by the monarchy and Buddhism (Riggs 1966; Girling, 1981, 1985).

What the British and French achieved in their negotiations with the Siamese elite and in marking out the boundaries of their own possessions in mainland Southeast Asia was to demarcate and create a Siamese territory within which its national institutions could function and be clearly recognized (Keyes 1987: 27). What happened was the superimposition of a Western concept of territory on a Thai concept of a personalized and sacred political space expressed in court rituals which presented the king as the embodiment of the nation. Therefore, the person of the king came to embody this partly externally imposed territory (Thongchai 1994:133-4; Keyes 1987: 31). We should also note, as Anderson argues, that rather than seeing this process purely in modern, nation-building terms, we should recognize the specifically patrimonial and dynastic characteristics of these transformations in Thailand (1978). This nation-building process, associated with a progressively centralizing politico-administrative system focused on the monarch, the political elite, the military and on central Thai culture, was given further momentum in the reign of King Vajiravudh [Rama VI] (1910-25) and his expression of “Thainess” in terms of racial factors, particularly in relation to his “othering” of such immigrant communities as the Chinese and his reference to them as “the Jews of the East” (Skinner 1957: 163-4; Van Esterik, 2000: 98-9). And this, in spite of the fact that there had been considerable intermarriage and cultural exchange between some segments of the local Thai and the Chinese population.

Van Esterik draws our attention to another dimension of the study of Thai nationalism and that is the relative neglect of gender, which in part derives from the preoccupation with the position, status and role of male monarchy in that identity (2000: 98; Reynolds 1991). Nevertheless, this is somewhat surprising given the ways in which Rama VI and, following the replacement of the monarchy in 1932, Prime Minister Phibun Songkhram (1938-44 and 1948-57) acted to modernize Thai identity by elevating the status of women through their appearance, demeanour

and dress, their role in instilling national values in their family, and emphasizing the importance of the active development and resilience of Thai culture (Van Esterik, 2000: 100-1). These national policies were based on the notion that Thai identity would be strengthened by presenting it as civilized and, among these attributes of civilization was the status of women. Women became increasingly “the public embodiment of Thai culture” (2000: 103).

Phibun also passed a law in 1939 “requiring people to eat Thai food, wear Thai clothes, purchase Thai products and support public activities to build Thai national identity” (2000: 102). References were increasingly made to the “Thai race” (Thongchai 1994: 150). In the same year the country’s name was officially changed from Siam to Thailand; “Thai” meaning “free” was deployed as “an ethnically exclusive name” and one which identified a culturally and historically defined population (Van Esterik 2000: 106). It was an attempt not only to promote a wider cultural unity extending beyond the Siamese of Central Thailand and bringing an ethnic referent together with the name of a nation-state, but also to embrace all Tai-speaking peoples whether they lived in Thailand or in neighbouring states (Evans 1999: 5; Thongchai, 1994: 150). As Keyes emphasizes what Phibun sought to do was infuse the concept of being Thai with an unequivocal meaning; to be Thai one had “not only to speak a Tai language and be born of parents who were also Thai but also to be Buddhist” (1987: 68). Following the Pacific War and the military coup of 1947 which ushered in another Phibun premiership along with the emergence of General, later Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat and General Phao Sriyanonda as powerful political figures, it was the military and the bureaucracy (as national institutions) which determined the character and shape of the nation (Riggs 1966). However, increasingly they did this whilst securing their legitimacy through the support and blessing of the king (Keyes 1987: 68-82). The role and status of the king as the symbol, arbiter and authority of the nation were to increase further as Thai politics and society became more complex and uncertain with the emergence of other bases of power outside the bureaucracy; through business, the middle class and civil society (1987: 77-9, 82-4). Despite the post-war turmoil in Thailand’s political life, the military coups, frequent changes of government and the violence, the central props of Thai nationhood have persisted. King Vajiravudh’s slogan of “Nation, Religion, King” which he coined shortly after his accession to the throne in 1910 has been

constantly reaffirmed in the post-Second World War period. As Girling says appositely

The veneer of an idealized past covers up or transforms (depending on one's point of view) the reality of rule by military-bureaucratic cliques, maintained by the occasional use of force. Yet despite its appeal to the Thai past, the slogan also encapsulates attitudes and ideas imported from the West. Even from a conservative standpoint, the words 'Nation', 'Religion' and 'King' are open to a range of interpretations spanning the old and the new (1985: 140).

However, what the Chakri dynasty did and what later political leaders carried forward, some more energetically than others, was to designate and create a Thai heritage and history which comprised selected elements of the cultural and natural landscape, and gave it a sacred and primordial character (Peleggi 1994, 1996; and see Fong 2009). These include the ancient Thai capital of Sukhothai, the later capital of Ayutthaya and such national parks as Khao Yai, all of which have been designated as UNESCO World Heritage Sites, and which comprise central symbols of Thai national identity.

CONCLUSIONS

Thailand as with Singapore and Malaysia are the consequences of a process of political and cultural construction in which the colonial powers played a formative part. The carving out and the cartographic situating of precisely demarcated territories required a "filling in" of these spaces with identified nation-states. However, by its very nature "the definition and domain of nationhood are not given... [rather they are] ... always unfixed, ambiguous, self-contradictory, too restricted, yet too extensive" (Thongchai 1994: 173). Although Singapore and Malaysia were both part of a British colonial project, they adopted different post-independent national trajectories in the ways in which they conceptualized national identity and sub-national ethnicities. The major difference between them was decisions about which ethnicities should be prioritized and the ways in which inter-ethnic relations were conceived and managed. In the case of Thailand, there was also an impulse to identify a set of core culturally defined elements which served to incorporate sub-national identities into an overall national project.

What this paper has attempted to do, in a comparative study, is to demonstrate that there are different trajectories on the path to the building of nation-states, but in all cases identities, ethnicities and nations are constructed, and as constructions, they are subject to contestation and transformation. These processes are, in turn, on-going, but, in all cases, they are part of discourses embedded in political and economic contexts and focused on the creation, maintenance and adjustment of classifications and boundaries designed to establish identities. What is also of comparative interest is that in these three different Southeast Asian cases, ethnic identities have been racialized by political elites, and by this means given greater substance and fixity than they deserve, and national identities have been infused with notions of ethnicity.

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