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Zeitschrift für Politik • Kultur • Dialog

3 | 2024, English, Interviews, Malaysia,
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Postcolonial identities in Malaysia



“Postcolonial identity does not mean renouncing history but rather acknowledging how deeply colonial histories affect our modern realities,“ says Amrita Malhi. © UN Women/Lin Joe Yin

Malaysia: Historian Amrita Malhi explores how colonial influence and the legacy of resistance movements shape society and cultural discourse.

Malaysia’s cultures, religions and ethnic groups are strongly influenced by its colonial history and the search for a postcolonial identity. After gaining independence in 1957, the Malaysian state faced the challenge of reconciling the interests of its three largest ethnic groups: Malays, Chinese-Malaysians and Indian-Malaysians.

At the same time, it promoted a national identity based on Malay culture and the Islamic religion.

Key measures were the emphasis on the Malay language as the national idiom and Islam as official religion (for Malays). This was further reinforced through political measures such as the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1971, which aimed to improve the socio economic position of the Malays (*bumiputera = "sons of the soil"*)

There is no ONE postcolonial identity in Malaysia. Each ethnic group fosters its own cultural and religious practices. This results in a multicultural, but sometimes fragmented national identity. Amritha Malhi discusses how historical narratives shape present-day debates about cultural identity, the revival of traditional practices, and the risks of nationalist interpretations of history. Dr. Malhi's insights bridge Malaysia's colonial past and its complex present, offering a critical perspective on the challenges and possibilities of a truly inclusive postcolonial identity.

südostasien: How do you understand postcolonial identity and cultural heritage in Malaysia?

Our interview partner:



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Dr. Amrita Malhi is based at Murdoch and Flinders and the Australian National University. Currently she is a Visiting Fellow at the ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore. As a historian she specializes in colonial Malaya and anticolonial uprisings. Her current work include a book project on the 1928 uprising in Terengganu and publications on current Malay politics.

Amrita Malhi: Since UMNO ["United Malays National Organisation", former ruling party, editor's note] was ousted from the centre of Malaysian politics in 2018, a lively debate has emerged about postcolonial identity and cultural heritage. Before, UMNO's dominance heavily shaped these discussions. Now, new, sometimes polarizing views are filling the void.

Some historians argue that non-Malay or non-Muslim influences in Malaysia are legacies of British colonialism and must be suppressed to achieve true decolonisation. Others argue that Malaysian society should embrace interdependencies between Malay-Muslim culture and other influences.

This debate reflects broader global challenges, such as climate change, geopolitical conflicts, and Covid-19's socio-economic impacts. These issues demand collaboration across Malaysia's diverse cultural and historical landscapes.

How would you describe your own cultural identity?

I was born in Malaysia and have lived in Australia since I was a child. In the late 1990s I chose to study South and Southeast Asian Studies. I completed an Asian Studies degree alongside a Bachelor of Arts and a PhD in Asian History.



Election campaign of the Malay-oriented UMNO party. © Charlotte Mei Yee Chin, all rights reserved

Living between two cultures has influenced my perspective. The „Asian Studies“ field in Australia during the late 1990s, dominated by a white, enthusiastic narrative, felt alien to me. My perspective has always been shaped by viewing Asia from within, and the intertwining of Asian and Australian identity.

I engage critically with both Orientalism and cultural nationalism, which tend to oversimplify postcolonial discourse, especially in the diasporic context. While some decolonial approaches focus on nostalgia and cultural nationalism, they can also serve populist agendas. My work aims to recognize Asia’s complexities without romanticizing its past, and seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of postcolonial issues.

What role do colonial influences play in your perception of cultural identity?

People like me exist because colonial and neocolonial powers reshaped the region. These influences are internalized; they’ve shaped who we are today. Postcolonial identity isn’t about rejecting the past but recognizing how deeply colonial histories continue to shape our present realities.

Inequality and global injustice are deeply rooted in colonial structures. Therefore, it is crucial to understand these historical influences for building a more equitable future. We can’t simply purge these influences; we must come to terms with how they continue to affect our identity and society, in order to shape a new future together.

How have colonial influences affected Malaysian society and its cultural identity?

Colonialism introduced the concept of „race,“ a notion that continues to dominate Malaysian public

life. Racial categories were used to divide people and shape societal roles, behaviours, and expectations. These constructs have remained in place and continue to influence how Malaysians relate to one another.



The Sultan Abdul Samad Building, a former symbol of british colonial power, today it is a Malaysian landmark. © Charlotte Mei Yee Chin, all rights reserved

While many Malaysians embrace the nation's diversity and reject rigid racial divides, others perpetuate colonial racial ideologies, disguised as „decolonization". Films like *Mat Kilau* promote the idea that anti-colonial resistance was solely the domain of Malay Muslims, ignoring the contributions of other communities. This narrative reproduces colonial-era divisions, showing how difficult it is to dismantle British race theory without reproducing it in new forms.

What traditional practices or rituals have been revived or reinterpreted in the postcolonial era?

Films like *Mat Kilau*, Malaysia's highest-grossing film, have sparked cultural revivals, such as the wearing of the *tanjak* (headgear). While this practice isn't inherently chauvinistic, it has become increasingly associated with nationalist agendas.

The revival of these cultural practices, often tied to anti-colonial sentiment, can both strengthen cultural identity or contribute to exclusionary ideas of who belongs to Malaysia. This is evident in the selective depiction of historical figures and events by certain nationalist narratives to support their agenda. The challenge is to critically engage with these movements to ensure that they don't marginalize other cultural contributions.

My work on the uprisings in Terengganu and Pahang illustrates how temporary coalitions formed to drive them, challenging simplistic nationalist interpretations. These uprisings were complicated interactions between many varied interest groups, and drew on many sources. Their stories are often misrepresented in nationalist narratives.

How do you see the future development of Malaysia's cultural identity in the context of global and postcolonial challenges?



Colonial legacy – Peranakan houses in Penang bear witness to British influence and Chinese-Malay cultural fusion. © Charlotte Mei Yee Chin, all rights reserved

Malaysia faces many critical questions about its cultural identity, especially in light of Asia's rise and the increasing geopolitical tensions in the region. A key question that arises is: What is the value of deconstructing colonial knowledge? And perhaps more importantly, what should replace it?

At what point does Malaysia move beyond these colonial frameworks and constructs, allowing for a more inclusive and progressive identity to emerge? The country can only develop a fair cultural identity through inclusive approaches.

Interview by Charlotte Mei Yee Chin

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Charlotte Mei Yee Chin

Charlotte Mei Yee Chin ist wissenschaftliche Mitarbeiterin am Institut für Islamische Theologie der Universität Osnabrück. In ihrer Promotion erforscht sie, wie sich Radikalisierungsprozesse von Frauen auf den Philippinen in militant-islamistischen Kontexten vollziehen. In ihrer Arbeit verbindet sie ethnografische Feldforschung, kritische Südostasienexpertise und intersektionale Analyse. Ihr Interesse gilt den Schnittstellen von Religion, Gender und postkolonialen Machtverhältnissen


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