

What is “Lain-lain”? The Construction of the Other in Contemporary Malaysia

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Abstract

This project aims to look at the ontological construction of the “Others” or “Lain-lain” racial category that exists within the Malaysian census and other forms of administrative documentation. By tracking its evolution over time as well as focusing on its current iteration, this project hopes to examine how individuals who fall under this label come to be defined by others and how they conceptualize their own identity within a racialized society. As racial categories are ascribed upon an individual at birth according to their patrilineal lineage, Malaysians lack the ability to choose which label they would like to claim. Thus, the individuals labelled “Others” may or may not agree with this categorization and there also exist individuals who have been denied this identity by the state.

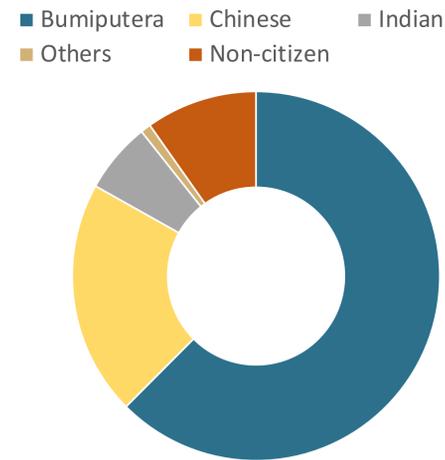
Research Questions

- How do individuals in Malaysia conceptualize and construct ontologies of the racial category “Others”?
- How do individuals labelled “Others” (Malay: *Lain-lain*) navigate and express their identity within a racialized society?
- What are the implications of imposing rigidly defined racial categories on individuals who claim affinity with more than one racial identity?
- How do individuals labelled “Others” feel about their political representation within a system that features race-based political parties?
- What is a “Malaysian” identity and is it a construct that is widely agreed upon?

Methodology

This project makes use of one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling and social media posts. I recruited a total of 30 participants. In order to be eligible to participate in an interview, interlocutors had to fulfill a few criteria, namely they had to be a Malaysian citizen between the ages of 18 and 35 who identified as “Others” or “Lain-lain”.

Population by Ethnic Group



Source: Department of Statistics Malaysia

Research Participant Criteria

- Malaysian citizen
- Between 18 and 35 years old
- Identifies as “Others/Lain-lain”
- or
- Identifies as “mixed race”

Word Cloud of Research Participant’s Ethnicities



Number of Ethnicity Categories in Malaysian Census

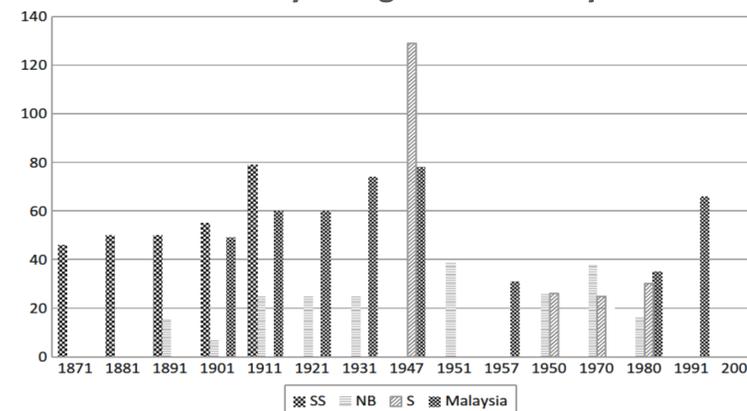


Fig. 8.1 Number of categories measuring ethnicity, various censuses. Notes: Based on Appendix 8.1. SS Straits Settlements, NB North Borneo, S Sarawak, Malaysia – Up till 1980, the geographical region covered by this name is what is today called Peninsular Malaysia, thus being the Federated Malay States until 1911, British Malaya until 1947, and Peninsular Malaysia, 1957–1980. For 1991–2000, the name covers all three regions, Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah (previously North Borneo) and Sarawak

Source: Nagaraj et al. “Counting Ethnicity in Malaysia” (2015)

Participants were provided with an informed consent form that detailed the objectives of the project and what to expect from the interview. After obtaining informed consent, semi-structured interviews were carried out over a video conferencing application (Zoom) and were recorded. Interlocutors were financially compensated for their participation in this project.

Findings

From my interviews, I found that the experiences of my interlocutors largely fell under at least one of three themes:

Exclusion

Interlocutors cited that they occasionally felt excluded when they had to declare their ethnicity on documentation. For documentation purposes in most sectors, like public health, education, and finance, Malaysians are required to declare their ethnicity as either “Malay”, “Chinese”, “Indian”, or “Others”. This limited set of options perpetuates the othering of individuals who do not fall within the categories of Malay, Chinese, or Indian - both literally and figuratively.

Education

Interlocutors felt that they carried the “duty” to educate their peers or other individuals in their lives about the ethnic diversity that exists in Malaysia beyond the scope of Malay, Chinese, or Indian ethnic groups. Almost all interlocutors could relate to the experience of being asked “What are you?” by curious strangers. Rather than take offense, interlocutors took this interaction as a positive education opportunity.

Empowerment

Interlocutors commonly stated that they saw themselves as “Malaysian first”, indicating that their national identity superseded their ethnic identity. By highlighting their inclusion within this macrolevel identity, interlocutors demonstrate their attempt to reframe how they are positioned within a racialised society.

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