"YOUR MEMORIES ARE OUR MEMORIES":
REMEMBERING CULTURE AS RACE IN MALAYSIA
AND K.S. MANIAM’S BETWEEN LIVES*

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Introduction: Remembering Culture as Race

We are often told and we generally accept as true that our past is our heritage, and that we must never forget the past that is our heritage because to forget is not only to deny who we are but also to betray those whom our memory commemorates. Underpinning this imperative to remember is the understanding that memory’s relation to the past is not merely a relation of knowledge, it is more importantly a relation of action. That is, to count as remembering properly, we must not only incorporate this or that narrative of the past into our memory, we must also act in such a way that we always remain faithful to what our memory commemorates. Few would have a problem in accepting this logic if the object of remembrance is, to take an example from K.S. Maniam’s first novel, *The Return (TR)*, the advice of a woman to her grandson prior to her demise, “Never let anything break your spirit” (7). If the latter remembers and acts on the advice, then he would not only benefit from it, he would also be honouring the memory of his late grandmother. What, however, if the object to commit to memory is something as slippery and problematic as ‘culture’? What does it mean to remember ‘our’ cultural roots, and what are the politics and ethics of claiming them as one’s own in a country like Malaysia where cultural characteristics are often represented as biological endowments? This paper is an attempt to think through these questions using Maniam’s novel, *Between Lives (BL)*, as the main point of reference.

To begin, I want to clarify the term ‘culture’ and examine its relation to memory and subjectivity. As we know, it is commonplace to observe

in contemporary academic discourse including postcolonial studies that the culture of an ethnic community is neither internally homogeneous nor bound by clear-cut boundaries that separate it from other cultures, but is rather a contested object discursively constructed and continually reconstructed within a given configuration of power relations. Interestingly, although the concept has become almost banal within much of academia, it does not seem to have much currency in dissuading the majority of individuals on the local level of lived experience from subscribing to what Seyla Benhabib calls “the reductionist sociology of culture” (2002:4), that is, the belief that each culture is naturally and irreducibly unique to an ethnic or racial group. To illustrate this in the Malaysian context: If I were identified as Indian, I would generally be expected to remember the Indian culture as mine, if not also consume, defend and disseminate the ideas, attitudes, symbols, beliefs, religion, dispositions, norms and rules, practices, and language deemed to have originated from and as belonging to my people. Hence if I cannot speak an Indian tongue, or if I do not feel a special affinity toward Indian things (such as the sacred Indian epic, the Ramayana), I should ideally feel contrite and make amends. At the very least I should not deny that they are my roots, otherwise I might be seen as being untrue to myself and my heritage. In extreme moments I might even be assaulted. As reported recently in a Malaysian newspaper, an ‘Indian’ Malaysian woman was scolded all the way to her destination by the Indian driver of a taxi she had boarded because she could not communicate in her ‘own’ Tamil language, the dominant Indian language in Malaysia (“Truly Chinese”, 2004:21). The same woman also had the misfortune of being slapped by another stranger, a drunken Indian man who was incensed that she could neither understand nor reply to his question in Tamil even though she was Indian in his eyes. The newspaper article reveals that the woman did not know Tamil but could speak fluent Cantonese (a Chinese dialect) because she was brought up from birth in the ways of her adoptive Chinese family.1

1 Incidents such as this seem to occur more often than is suggested by the rarity of their reporting in the mainstream media. In a case study published by Aliran (an independent human-rights publication based in Malaysia), a Malay man was reportedly arrested by the Special Branch under Malaysia’s draconian Internal Security Act (ISA) for converting his faith from Islam to Christianity (see Ramakrishnan, 2001). While in detention he was stripped naked, forced to enact the crucifixion of Christ, made to crawl on the floor, and castigated for being a shameless Malay who had the audacity to deviate from his culture by renouncing Islam, the constitutional and ‘natural’ religion