Introduction: Ethnic Identity in Malaysia and Singapore

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Two of the best known contributions to the understanding of ethnicity in Malaysia and Singapore are Nagata's "What is a Malay?" and Benjamin's "The Cultural Logic of Singapore's 'Multiracialism'" published in 1974 and 1976 respectively. Inspired by Barth's (1969) view that boundary construction and maintenance are fundamental to ethnic processes and identity-formation, Nagata argues that in the case of a plural society in which there is no clear dominant or neutral culture, oscillation of ethnic status is an accepted form of interaction. The boundaries are more permeable between ethnic communities which share "indigenous" status but they are more impervious between such groups and immigrant minorities in this region, largely because of religious barriers. Groups who possess a hybrid identity such as the Eurasians, the Baba, and even the Malayalees — as it will be revealed in the following contributions — find themselves at a strategic advantage in a situation in which ethnic identities are often relativized. At the same time these groups are marginalized in the sense that they are caught in between the majority and the dominant minority: in the case of Malaysia, the Malays and the Chinese, and in Singapore, the Chinese and the Malays respectively. Hence, such marginal minorities find themselves having to maximize whatever advantage they can by activating appropriate attributes of their hybrid identity; and they are also constantly negotiating their identities to push existing ethnic boundaries to their limits.

The Eurasians, Pereira notes, were quite content with maintaining an "ethnic-neutral" identity in the years following separation from Malaysia in the mid-1960s. The PAP Government, somewhat relieved from the years of acrimonious relations with the federal government over Sino-Malay equity, was preoccupied with the economics of survival in this period. It therefore chose to promote a multiracial Singaporean identity, and avoided emphasizing the ethnic origins of its citizens. However, when it embarked on a policy of ethnic revitalization in the 1980s as part of its "Asian values" programme, the Eurasians found themselves further marginalized. They did not possess an "authentic" culture which other ethnic groups could claim to have because their culture, ironically, was Singaporean and inclusive of elements from the other three major communities — Chinese, Malays and Indians. As part of their effort in the collective management of ethnic identity, the Eurasians promoted Eurasian cuisine, patois, dance and dress as distinctly their own. The Eurasian experience clearly depicts Gans's "symbolic ethnicity" (1979), which proposes that individuals and groups select elements from their ethnic heritage to construct their personal and collective identities without necessarily having deep emotional commitment to them. What the studies by Pereira, Gomez, on the Malayalees, and
Tan, on the Baba Chinese, demonstrate is that marginal minorities are more instrumentally-oriented in ethnic processes simply because they are not in a position to influence the balance of power between the majority and the dominant minority.

Fifteen years ago, in a special issue of this journal on "Ethnicity in Southeast Asia", King and Wilder (1982:4) suggested that ethnicity balances delicately between society and the lack of society. With reference to Taylor's notion of "stateless nations", whether societies have strong or weak states has direct consequences for both ethnic group formation and ethnic relations. Both Malaysia and Singapore have strong states, the latter more so. This is most illustrative in the state-sponsored ideology of multiracialism which designates the population as having one of four identities — Chinese, Malays, Indians, and Others — a practice which Taylor (1982:7) describes as ascriptive ethnicity. The assumption behind the classification, Benjamin (1976:118) states, is the Government's view that the relationship between society, culture, race, ethnicity, and the individual is solidary — to this may be added language and community. The effect of this classification is to essentialize the day-to-day common-sense perceptions of ethnicity, to the extent that ethnic responses have been institutionalized in government-sponsored as well as voluntary associations. The contributions of Pereira and Gomez attest to this. While the theoretical articulation of the state within the sociology of ethnic relations has yet to be attempted, Benjamin's work draws attention to how a strong state can influence the everyday interactions and collective responses of a society where ethnic differences dominate the social landscape.

In light of the contributions in this volume, I want to suggest a conceptual understanding of ethnic responses and identities within the modern nation-state. Both Malaysia and Singapore are the constructions of a departing colonial power. The former was granted independence in 1957 and the latter given limited self-government in 1959 by the British. Singapore was later incorporated into an expanded Malaysian Federation which included Sabah and Sarawak in 1963, and gained independence reluctantly on expulsion from Malaysia in 1965. A colonial-educated and Westernized elite found themselves inheriting a state but not a nation; hence they were forced to create a national identity urgently. The path each took to facilitate ethnic integration diverged. Singapore chose the model of cultural pluralism, committing itself to one nation, many peoples and many cultures. Malaysia pursued the model of dominant conformity, stridently after the Sino-Malay riots of May 1969, believing that a dominant ethnic identity, Malay, could constitute the basis of national identity.

The imperatives of nation-building require the state to essentialize and totalize (Chun, 1996:70). To essentialize means to reduce something to its supposed pure form and to treat it as if it exists in reality. Newly independent states in Southeast Asia often essentialize ethnicity by assuming that ethnic groups possess inherently different cultural or behavioural characteristics; these are then used to distinguish them for the purpose of government. The state essentializes "Chineseness" in Singapore as much as "Malayness" in Malaysia. To totalize is to apply such essentialist categories to as many of the local population as possible in order to facilitate government. In this way, the nation-state homogenizes, categorizes, and absorbs in order to eliminate ambiguity (Bauman, 1990:165-66). If physical borders separate states spatially and are zealously maintained in order to assert the identity