



Institute for Culture and Society Occasional Paper Series

ICS Occasional Paper Series

Volume 1, Number 1

<http://doi.org/10.4225/35/57a94f550f198>

Between Nationalism and Transnationalism: Multiculturalism in a Globalising World

Distinguished Professor Ien Ang

Institute for Culture and Society, University of Western Sydney

November 2010

Editors: Professor David Rowe and Dr Reena Dobson

Publisher:
Institute for Culture and Society
University of Western Sydney
Locked Bag 1797, Penrith NSW 2790, Australia

Tel: +61 2 9685 9600 Fax: +61 2 9685 9610
Email: ics@uws.edu.au Web: www.uws.edu.au/ics



Between Nationalism and Transnationalism: Multiculturalism in a Globalising World¹

Ien Ang

Centre for Cultural Research (now incorporated into the Institute for Culture and Society),
University of Western Sydney

Abstract

This paper addresses varying modes of ‘multiculturalism’ as a mode of governmentality in the contemporary globalising world. It juxtaposes the case of the non-Western, postcolonial state of Malaysia and that of the Western, immigration-driven settler society of Australia to describe the convergence of two opposing historical trajectories in the national management of ethnically diverse populations: the former (Malaysian) case guided by the idea of pluralist segregation, the latter (Australian) case by that of assimilation. The juxtaposition highlights the ambivalence inherent in multicultural governmentality. While multiculturalism provides nation-states with the discursive means to square ethno-cultural diversity with national unity by embracing a more open cosmopolitanism and hybrid identity, this is an unstable settlement which, if left unchecked, may threaten to destabilise and transcend the very boundaries of the nation in an increasingly transnational world.

Keywords: multiculturalism, pluralism, Malaysia, Australia, hybridity, cosmopolitanism

I am not at all a specialist in Malaysian Studies. I would therefore like to begin with a disclaimer. As my knowledge of Malaysia is scant, I cannot possibly provide much insight into aspects of internal Malaysian affairs that would require in-depth local research and/or insider knowledge. I write here very much as an outsider, an interested outsider, both professionally and in terms of personal experience. What I would like to offer, however, and what I hope will be useful, is a trans-national perspective which may shed some light on Malaysian culture and society, in ways which may add value to the specialist knowledge that is shared at this conference.

The field of ‘Malaysian Studies’, like any nation-specific field of study, is of necessity affected by global trends, not just trends in the world of scholarship, but also, significantly, in the ‘real’ world of global affairs and development. This has of course always been the case, to the extent that any nation-state always exists within the broader context of the ‘family of nations’ that has come to frame the political organisation of the world since the end of World War Two. But today, in the early twenty-first century, this imbrication of the national within the international is not only more overpowering, but also more unsettling, both to the internal

¹ This paper was originally delivered as the Keynote Address at the *Biennial Malaysian Studies Conference*, Penang, March 2010.

affairs of individual nation-states and of the international frameworks themselves. A key force here, of course, is that of contemporary neoliberal globalisation, which began to sweep across the world from the 1980s onwards and whose transformative impact is likely going to be only more manifest in the coming decades.

The very concept of the world as a 'family of nations', as institutionalised pre-eminently in the United Nations, is being corroded increasingly and unavoidably by the cross-cutting flows of globalisation. The idea of national sovereignty – that is, the claim of a state to be the judge and jury of its own cause, to have supreme, independent authority over its territory – has come under severe pressure as a consequence of the intensifying global mobility of money, technology, information, people, and ideas. However, it is widely recognised that globalisation is not a linear or one-dimensional process, to the extent that it causes the gradual dissolution of the power of the nation-state. Instead, what the era of globalisation has brought about is a reconfiguration of the place and role of the nation-state in the management of the global (dis)order. Thus, nation-states are not bound to disappear or to lose their influence any time soon in an increasingly interdependent and interconnected, transnational world. Rather than being the pinnacle of sovereign nationhood, however, nation-states now operate as nodes of socio-spatial power where the very contradictions of economy and society in a globalised world are being negotiated (Sassen, 2007). As national territories are being traversed by highly contradictory flows of multiple, cross-cutting and intersecting local and transnational forces, they should be conceived as fragmented, disorderly and porous social spaces, not as ordered, bounded totalities. Nevertheless, the very imagination of the nation-state as a bounded entity is part and parcel of the performative work of states in their efforts to secure nation-wide managerial control. Indeed, as I will illuminate later in this paper, representing the nation as a distinct and unique imagined community, as Benedict Anderson (1991) would have it, is perceived by governments as an even more urgent, if increasingly challenging cultural task, precisely in the current age of globalisation. We live in a networked world where the global and the national are so irrevocably entangled, yet where nationalising forces attempt to disentangle our image of the nation from its transnational enmeshment by insisting ever more strongly on drawing its borders and boundaries (Castells, 1996; Paasi, 2003) This paradoxical tension between the national and the transnational is a crucial factor in the shaping of political conduct around the world today.

This, of course, has implications for Malaysian studies and for the conception of 'Malaysia' as its object of study. Rather than treating 'Malaysia' as a given entity with a naturalised existence and a taken-for-granted legitimacy, it is important for Malaysianists to keep questioning the ongoing ideological processes at work to constitute 'Malaysia' and 'Malaysianness', even as they need to bracket this deconstructive line of interrogation whenever consideration of internal issues requires the presumption of solid national borders as an epistemological or political prerogative, for example, when analysing and arguing for minority rights within the national formation. Even here, however, considering Malaysia and Malaysian affairs in a global frame would arguably deepen and sharpen our understanding, not just allowing for comparative empirical research but, more fundamentally, because the discourse of minorities and rights is a global one, globally sanctioned and universalised by moral philosophies and legal instruments championed by international bodies such as the United Nations. This global discursive context, formalised for example in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is not simply an inert backdrop, but actively impinges on the shaping of national politics and governance by framing policy agendas, imposing vocabularies of value, and suggesting repertoires of practice.

This brings me to the topic here: multiculturalism and, more specifically, multiculturalism in a global context. ‘Multiculturalism’ is one such term that circulates globally, but it acquires specific meanings which differ in different local circumstances. As Stuart Hall (2000: 210) has noted, ‘Just as there are different multi-cultural societies there are very different “multiculturalisms”’. Yet despite this wide variety what all multi-cultural societies have in common is that they harbour different cultural, racial or ethnic communities who live together in a common polity while maintaining some of their different identities. Multiculturalism generally refers to ‘the strategies and policies adopted to govern or manage the problems of diversity and multiplicity which multi-cultural societies throw up’ (Hall, 2000: 209). In Foucauldian terms, multiculturalism is a mode of governmentality, consisting of particular ensembles of institutions, procedures, analyses, reflections, calculations and tactics (Foucault, 2009: 108), which are aimed at regulating and reconciling the tensions and conflicts raised by cultural, racial or ethnic differences among a population within a territory. In this respect, multiculturalism is a particularly modern technology of government; it is a governmental problematic which has emerged as part and parcel of the management of the modern nation-state. At the same time, wherever it is deployed multiculturalism is a deeply contested idea, whose meaning is never settled and always attracting both passionate proponents and ardent opponents from both left and right, conservative and radical. As Hall asks: ‘Can a concept which means so many different things and so effectively draws the fire of such diverse and contradictory enemies really have anything to say to us?’ (2000: 211). Hall suggests that, yes, its contested status is precisely the value of the term.

Indeed, what I would like to propose here is that contestations over ‘multiculturalism’ are a useful lens through which we can look at Malaysia as a modern nation-state, or more precisely, at the very status of ‘Malaysia’ as a nation-state, not as a taken-for-granted given but as a deeply problematic historical construct. Let me hasten to add that it is not my intention here to question the legitimacy of Malaysia’s existence, far from it. We live in a world system where nation-states are, for the time being, its fundamental building blocks and in this context, Malaysia is just as legitimate as the United States, France, or Australia. My point, rather, is a more general one: it is that through the lens of multiculturalism we can get a sharp focus on the fundamentally problematic nature of *all* nation-states, as it has an unsettling effect on their basic ontological claim, namely, to be a sovereign political entity serving a unique nation in a clearly bounded territorial unit. The fact, as Hall (2000: 212) points out, that what he calls ‘the multi-cultural question’ has intensified and become more salient in the past few decades, taking centre-stage in the field of political contestation throughout the world, is indicative of the shifting configuration of the nation-state in an increasingly globalised world. Discourses of multiculturalism often limit themselves to issues and arrangements *within* a particular nation-state; that is, they tend to be focused inward on a strictly national frame of reference. In this regard, such discourses reproduce a strict methodological nationalism which have been do hegemonic in the social sciences (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002). It is this problematic relationship between multiculturalism and nationalism which I will illuminate here, with a focus on the Malaysian case and a detour through the Australian case. What I will argue is that an exploration of the complexities of this very relationship will shed light on the complex entanglement of the national and the transnational.

Obviously, the politics of multiculturalism is a sensitive and potentially explosive issue in Malaysia. Conventionally, multicultural politics is understood as associated with the management of the relationship between ethnic groups; in the Malaysian case, the relationship between Malays, Chinese and Indians. I do not need to dwell too long here on the

well-known understanding that this relationship between the three largest ethnic groups has been regulated and settled, in post-independence Malaysia, through a series of compromises which, on the one hand, granted Chinese and Indians full citizenship, while on the other hand endowed the Malays with a special position based on their claim to be the indigenous people of the country. This special position came with particular economic and political privileges at the expense of non-Malays, such as affirmative action laws to enhance the socio-economic position of the Malays, but it also legitimated Malay cultural hegemony through the recognition of a certain primacy of Malay culture within the nation. This compromise arrangement is sometimes called the 'Malaysian social contract' (Kessler, 2010), but that it is an unstable one is evident from the ongoing contestations it has received from many sides over the years. It would seem that recent disturbances, such as those around the use of the word 'Allah' for God by Christians and Malay/Muslim protests against it, are manifestations of the instability of that compromise, with some powerful Malay groups fighting to protect their cultural hegemony, while many non-Malay – Chinese or Indian – groups are becoming increasingly impatient with their de facto relegation to a lesser standing within the national formation (Lim, Gomes and Rahman, 2009).

International scholarship on multiculturalism tends to be rather Eurocentric, taking the assumptions of Western liberalism for granted as a universal regime of value. Indeed, as scholars such as Robert Hefner (2001) and Steve Fenton (2003) have argued, it is unfortunate that most writers still take Western industrialised societies as the privileged point of entry to discussions related to multiculturalism, citizenship and democracy. From a non-Western perspective, eg that of Malaysia and Southeast Asia more broadly, this dominance of Euro-American models is problematic because Malaysian multiculturalism is obviously very different from Western forms, not just in its historical constitution but also in its present institutional arrangements. According to Fenton (2003), Western multiculturalism is too culturalist for a proper understanding of Malaysian ethnic relations. The task for postcolonial Malaysia was not so much one of recognising cultural difference and valuing cultural diversity within an already existing liberal nation-state (Taylor, 1993; Kymlicka, 1996), but the more urgent one of creating a workable new nation-state out of a plural multi-ethnic society which was the legacy of colonial British rule. As colonial Malaya was created as an ethnicised state, in the sense that ethnic difference was rigidly institutionalised into separate ethnic communal organisations and ways of life, postcolonial Malaysia perpetuated this social apartheid along ethnic lines by building the national political order upon it. From this perspective, unlike in the context of Western multicultural societies, ethnic or cultural otherness was never conceived as the problem to be solved in the Malaysian context, but as the preordained foundational bedrock of the newly independent nation-state. Ethnic or cultural diversity was not so much something to be 'valued' – as promoted in Western multicultural discourse through liberal notions of tolerance and respect – but treated as a pre-given structure, whose grid-like compartmentalisation of society into separate ethnic groups was seen as a precondition for the construction of a viable postcolonial nation-state. In this sense, as Daniel Goh, Mathilda Gabrielpillai, Phillip Holden and Gaik Cheng Khoo (2009) have argued, making the distinction between liberal multiculturalism, Western style, and postcolonial multiculturalism, as institutionalised in Malaysia and Singapore, is crucial. While in most Western nation-states policies of multiculturalism have been the result of the impact of immigration on an established national culture and society, postcolonial nations such as Malaysia and Singapore had to accommodate the transformative impact of large-scale immigration which had taken place long *before* they became independent nation-states.

From this point of view, the difference between Malaysian and, say, Australian approaches to ethnic and cultural diversity is indeed profound. Historically and philosophically, they can even be put on opposing ends of a continuum: the continuum from segregation to assimilation. F. S. Furnivall's famous concept of 'plural society' can be excavated here to describe the original design of the Malaysian political settlement. Furnivall described a 'plural society' as comprising 'two or more elements or social orders which live side by side, yet without intermingling, in one political unit' (1944: 446, quoted in Hefner, 2001: 4). What is invoked here is the image of a segregated society where difference is deemed absolute and unerasable, and where there is no shared sense of identity, or as Furnivall put it, no 'common social will' (in Hefner, *ibid.*). This kind of society operates without a sense of being a singular 'imagined community', that is, without the symbolic glue of a unifying cultural nationalism. Of course, actual Malaysian society is and has always been more complex than this ideal-typical model, and a collective, if not necessarily shared, sense of Malaysianness has evolved since it has become an independent nation-state. Mundane interactions across ethnic and other divides within the national space work to create an inevitable sense of everyday and lived nationness as time passes by, while official representations of the Malaysian nation-state on the global stage cumulatively reflect an image of real nationness back onto the domestic population. The idea of a Bangsa Malaysia, or the current OneMalaysia, as promoted by successive governments in recent times, is also an indication that the entrenched plural society model is now considered deficient for the country's self-understanding. I shall return to this.

First, however, let me detour to Australia's history of multiculturalism, whose contrast with Malaysia's could not be greater. The establishment of the Australian nation-state in 1901 was accompanied by a resolutely assimilationist mindset, epitomised by the infamous White Australia Policy. What this policy principle proposed was that the entire new nation would be culturally and racially homogeneous: that the whole Australian citizenry would be an undifferentiated collective body, characterised by white sameness. It was this ideal of absolute national homogeneity that motivated the state's attempt to eradicate indigenous Aboriginal culture and people, on the one hand, and to expulse or keep non-white, non-Anglo immigrants – mostly Asians – from entering into the country. Needless to say, this pure 'white nation' ideal, into which all who did not conform needed to be assimilated if they could not be eliminated, was never really achieved or even ever achievable. (Stratton and Ang, 1997; Hage, 1998; Stratton, 1998). Over time, the very ideal itself had to be officially discarded, as it became increasingly clear that it no longer matched the real world on the ground. Actual Australian society was always more messy, more diverse, and more mixed up than the white nation ideal would have it, but its increasing diversity in ethnic and cultural terms became an unavoidable reality as the government adopted assertive immigration policies after World War Two. Migrants started to arrive in large numbers not just from the 'white' nations of the UK and northern Europe, but from less white parts of the world, such as southern and eastern Europe, Turkey, and later, Asia as well as, to a lesser extent, Africa and Latin America. Despite the ethnic and racial diversification this process inevitably produced, however, the state initially continued to pursue an aggressive assimilation policy – declaring these migrants 'new Australians' and expecting them to adopt 'the Australian way of life', to speak English, and so on. In other words, the ideal of homogeneous whiteness was no so much given up, but diluted by an insistence on the *cultural* homogenisation of all newcomers, their absorption into a unified, national imagined community. Articulated here is a culturalist form of assimilationism that is a mirror image of the racist segregationism that we have seen at work in the Malaysian case in its postcolonial moment. While the latter

strived to maintain absolute difference, the former insisted on achieving absolute sameness, at least in cultural terms.

However, the social and cultural dynamics of a society being changed rapidly by immigration flows made the ideology of assimilation impossible to maintain. By the 1970s, the growing presence and visibility of migrants and their descendants, and the persistence of their older attachments, habits and languages, had created such tensions with mainstream Australian society that the government felt the need to respond with a loosening up of its assimilationist drive and to accommodate some of the needs and demands of these migrants. This is where we can locate the strategic origins of Australia's policy of multiculturalism. Australian multiculturalism was a response to the realisation that the pursuit of a fully assimilated population was impossible to achieve in the face of mounting and unprecedented diversification. Hence, ethnic identities and communities were given due recognition, and tailored government support was provided, for example by supplying ethno-specific social assistance and offering multilingual media services. In the process, Australia began to redescribe itself as an explicitly multicultural society, characterised by racial, ethnic and cultural diversity rather than uniformity and homogeneity.

What is important to stress, however, is that this model of multicultural society is not the same as the plural society Malaysian style, as first described by Furnivall. That is, in no way is Australian multicultural society envisaged to be segregated along ethnic lines, where different groups 'live side by side, yet without intermingling'. Indeed, in the West, including Australia, where multiculturalism has gained ground as a template for managing diversity, the idea of ethnic segregation is generally abhorred, and opponents of multiculturalism have always seized on the spectre of 'ethnic ghettos' to criticise what they see as the divisive effects of multiculturalism. The rightwing politician Pauline Hanson, for example, who briefly and famously rose to political notoriety in Australia in the mid-1990s on an anti-immigration and anti-multiculturalism platform, argued that Asians were bad for Australia because 'they formed ghettos' (Hanson, 1997). Against this attack, proponents tend to argue that multicultural policies are in fact contributors to national integration, rather than national division, because they are instrumental for the more effective inclusion of migrants into mainstream society. The official National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia, for example, launched in 1989, states clearly that 'multicultural policies are based upon the premise that all Australians should have an overriding and unifying commitment to Australia, to its interests and future first and foremost', and that 'multicultural policies require all Australians to accept the basic structures and principles of Australian society' (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 1989: website). In other words, although Australian multiculturalism gives migrant minorities the right to express their own identity, culture and beliefs, they are simultaneously obliged to subsume themselves within the pre-existing Australian imagined community. Nevertheless, fears or suspicions of separatism on the part of migrant groups are never far away, and they always invoke assimilationist calls for control. In this sense, throughout the Western world we have seen an increased governmental focus on putting limits to multiculturalism in favour of a greater emphasis on integration and loyal citizenship (Joppke, 2004). This has become more entrenched in the past decade as concern about the lack of integration of Muslims in Western societies – that is, their perceived unassimilability – has risen sharply in the wake of the terrorist attacks September 11, 2001.

The difference between Malaysian pluralism and Australian multiculturalism can perhaps be summarised as follows. In the Malaysian context, peaceful co-existence is assumed to depend on keeping ethnic group identities distinct and their respective rights clearly demarcated, with

the continuing central authority and symbolic dominance of the Malays explicitly sanctioned and unchallenged. In the Australian context, peaceful co-existence is assumed to depend on the idea of equal respect and recognition for all ethno-cultural groups, while the cultural hegemony of the Anglo-Western majority remains uncontested and implicitly uncontested, even disavowed, based on the (false) belief that the Australian multicultural nation is a level playing field for all ethnicities, harmoniously living together as 'one nation'. Interestingly, 'One Nation' was the name of the political party which Pauline Hanson established, reflecting her anxiety about what she felt needed to be defended: the 'oneness' of the nation. And while Hanson's extreme and clumsy pronouncements never gained mainstream traction in Australia, the idea that Australia should remain 'one' certainly did resonate; indeed, it was part of respectable opinion. In this respect multiculturalism was and is a controversial and contested scheme, because its strategic recognition of other cultures risks contributing to the fracturing rather than the unifying of the nation. Nevertheless, it is important to stress that the introduction of multiculturalism was motivated precisely in order to secure, through the inclusion and (limited) recognition of internal difference and diversity, the continuing integrity of Australia as a nation. Yet the idea of the unified multicultural nation – united in diversity – is an inherently ambiguous and paradoxical concept. The tension between unity and diversity can never be resolved.

What comes into clear view here is the complex and contradictory, but also mutually constitutive relationship between multiculturalism and nationalism. To put it differently, multiculturalism, in the Australian model, can be seen as a mode of negotiating the symbolic requirements of nationalism, namely, the need to have a unifying narrative for the nation as a whole to counterpose and contain the centrifugal pressures presented by internal ethnic and racial diversification. The National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia makes this pragmatic rationale soberingly explicit: it states that multiculturalism is 'a *necessary response* to the reality of Australia's cultural diversity' (my emphasis). Rather than working against nationalism, then, multiculturalism here is a governmental attempt to construct a *more effective nationalism*, one that can accommodate the increasingly complex heterogeneous reality of late 20th century society.

Seen from this perspective, the current situation in Malaysia bears more resemblance with the Australian counterpart than is originally apparent. While aspects of the static 'plural society' blueprint still hold sway, not least constitutionally, a more integrative vision of the Malaysian nation has been proposed over time to respond to changes in society as Malaysia inserts itself in an increasingly globalised capitalist modernity. A milestone here was former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's vision for a *Bangsa Malaysia*, introduced in 1991. Mahathir defined *Bangsa Malaysia* as 'an inclusive national identity for all inhabitants of Malaysia [...] of all colours and creeds' (quoted in Gabriel, forthcoming). He elaborated: 'This must be a nation at peace with itself, territorially and ethnically integrated, living in harmony and full and fair partnership, made up of one "Bangsa Malaysia" with political loyalty and dedication to the nation' (Mahathir, 1991: 2-3). This vision is in many ways remarkably similar, in symbolic terms at least, to the idea of a unified multicultural Australia, as promoted by Australian governments. This is a society where, as the 1989 National Agenda put it, 'those who are "culturally different" have the same freedom as other Australians, that they have equal access to government programs and services, and that their skills, talents and abilities are effectively and efficiently utilised for the benefit of Australia' (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 1989: website).

What these two visions share are a range of interrelated stated ideals: inclusiveness, integration, interethnic harmony, social justice, a stronger national identity. Why this convergence? Why have such policy ideals become a common concern for many national governments by the late 1990s, not just in the West but also in the rest of the world? I want to suggest that the contemporary salience of these governmental ideals – whether they are articulated under the label of ‘multiculturalism’ or not – can be seen as a reflection of the growing challenges nation-states face in maintaining their cultural integrity as they experience the increasingly disruptive effects of the forces of globalisation. In other words, in the age of globalisation the problematic of squaring cultural diversity with national unity has become central to the nationalist project, a project whose urgency has intensified rather than diminished for both political and economic reasons (Calhoun, 1997).

The idea of *Bangsa Malaysia*, then, contained an acknowledgement that Malaysian nationalism is unfinished business: that the model of the segregated plural society, of insulated parallel lives within one polity, is no longer sufficient to convey a unitary Malaysia to all Malaysians. That this integrative nationalising theme has a persistent resonance in Malaysian politics is evidenced by the recurrence of related ideas which occupy the same discursive register as *Bangsa Malaysia*, such as the older ‘Malaysian Malaysia’ and the most recent invention, *1Malaysia*, introduced by Prime Minister Najib Razak in January 2010 as a key plank of his Government Transformation Programme. It is notable that here again, the theme of ‘one nation’ is evoked: ‘Achieving national unity has been and will continue to be the most important mission for Malaysia and Malaysians. It is an ongoing and perhaps never-ending mission requiring significant commitment. *1Malaysia* has provided a renewed sense of direction and purpose, a new breath of inspiration and a heightened aspiration.’ (*1Malaysia GTP Roadmap*, 2010, p. 86) The main ingredients for achieving this *1Malaysia* are the usual mantras: unity in diversity, inclusiveness, integration, fairness and social harmony, and so on.

Many commentators have complained that the *Bangsa Malaysia* concept lacks clear definition. Yet despite, but perhaps precisely because of its lack of semiotic clarity, it has operated as a floating signifier drawing continuous fierce debate. As Sharmani Gabriel remarks, ‘there is perhaps no other concept in Malaysian Studies that has set off as much excitement and euphoria as well as controversy and confusion as *Bangsa Malaysia*’ (Gabriel, forthcoming). I would suggest that this is not surprising, because this idea, in all its necessary vagueness, promises to deliver a new, mature and modern, thoroughly multicultural formulation of Malaysian national identity – and hence, give substance and distinctiveness to the intellectual project of Malaysian Studies. What, however, as many scholars in Malaysian Studies have already extensively explored, can *Bangsa Malaysia* mean? And how can the social change contained within the idea be assessed, if not realised?

From my limited survey of the literature (see e.g. Ooi, 2005) it is clear that what the emergence of *Bangsa Malaysia* and related terms has established is not a fully-formed blueprint for a new Malaysian multiculturalism, but it opened up a discursive space within the Malaysian public sphere, where contestation of the idea ranged from its embrace as ‘visionary’ to its dismissal as ‘spin’ (Ooi, 2005). On the one hand, it had empowering effects for those Malaysians who have been barred from defining themselves as culturally Malaysian, as belonging fully to the Malaysian nation, despite their legal citizenship status. For them, the discourse of *Bangsa Malaysia* is an opportunity to shed their positioning as foreign immigrants and to *claim* fully-fledged Malaysianness. At the same time, political debate has raged to this day about whether, or to which extent, the idea of *Bangsa Malaysia* would, or should, involve a dismantling of the special position of the Malay vis-a-vis non-

Malays in the definition of Malaysian identity (Ong, 2009). The fact that this controversy shows no sign of finding a political resolution, suggests that the legacy of ethnic division has formidable persistence, creating a paralysing impasse, an inability to reach consensus on a new national identity that transcends conflicting positions and interests and is acceptable and satisfactory to all. So where to from here?

For many critical scholars, the need to break through the stifling 'plural society' paradigm is paramount. This is a difficult task because, as Goh et al. have remarked, in their introduction to the recent book *Race and Multiculturalism in Malaysia and Singapore* (2009), this paradigm has 'institutionalized colonial racial identities and woven them into the fabric of political and social life to the extent that they constitute a common sense through which people conceive identities of themselves and others'. They ask a key postcolonial question: 'can we think beyond the terms and categories set by the white colonialists to know, conquer and rule the "natives", to understand ourselves and the societies in which we live?' (Goh et al., 2009: 3) In short, how can the deeply ingrained segregation in the mind be overcome?

A common analytical move in this context is the mobilisation of concepts of hybridity and hybridisation, emphasising the fluidity and multiplicity of identities, intercultural mixture and cultural translation. The valuation of hybridity ties in with a more cosmopolitan understanding of multiculturalism and cultural diversity, against a more traditional, pluralist one. David Hollinger (1995) has eloquently articulated the tension between these two opposing tendencies in the idea of multiculturalism, which surely resonates with the Malaysian situation:

Multiculturalism is rent by an increasingly acute but rarely acknowledged tension between cosmopolitan and pluralist programs for the defense of cultural diversity. Pluralism respects inherited boundaries and locates individuals within one or another of a series of ethno-racial groups to be protected and preserved. Cosmopolitanism is more wary of traditional enclosures and favors voluntary affiliations. Cosmopolitanism promotes multiple identities, emphasizes the dynamic and changing character of many groups, and is responsive to the potential for creating new cultural combinations. Pluralism sees in cosmopolitanism a threat to identity, while cosmopolitanism sees in pluralism a provincial unwillingness to engage the complex dilemmas and opportunities actually presented by contemporary life (Hollinger, 1995: 3-4).

Indeed, notions of cosmopolitan hybridity often strike an increasingly easy chord in descriptions of everyday life and ordinary social experience, where rigid ethnic categories are routinely transcended in the turbulent maelstrom of 21st century postmodern society. There is no doubt that interactions of people of different ethnicities have proliferated in modern multiethnic Malaysia (Rahman Embong, 2001), while the fluid character of Sarawak's multiculturalism is often held up in contrast with the more compartmentalised pluralism of Peninsular Malaysia (Zawawi, 2008). But it remains difficult to elevate this social truism of spontaneous hybridity and everyday cosmopolitanism to the level of purposeful and transformative political discourse. Still, some scholars see in the Bangsa Malaysia or OneMalaysia concept an affirmation of hybridisation in Malaysian political discourse (Ooi, 2009). Gabriel (forthcoming) interprets Bangsa Malaysia as 'a new and distinct hybrid formulation of Malaysianness' and advances a conception of it as decidedly 'champor-champor, mixed, rojak'.

These are vital critical interventions, but it is important, as I have argued elsewhere (Ang, 2001), not to take the critical purchase of the concept of hybridity for granted, and to

consider the limits of the interrogative potential of the cosmopolitan ethos. For example, it is well-known that the image of Malaysia as a hybrid multicultural nation has been marshalled unabashedly by Tourism Malaysia in its highly successful 'Malaysia – Truly Asia' campaign. As it boasts:

There is only one place where all the colours, flavours, sounds and sights of Asia come together – Malaysia. No other country has Asia's three major races, Malay, Chinese, Indian, plus various other ethnic groups in large numbers. Nowhere is there such exciting diversity of cultures, festivals, traditions and customs, offering myriad experiences. No other country is "Truly Asia" as Malaysia.

http://www.tourism.gov.my/corporate/trade.asp?page=malaysia_truly&subpage=history

Malaysia's cosmopolitan hybridity is being fetishised and commodified here to *brand* the nation to position it favourably for the promotion of international tourism, one of the most significant industries in the global capitalist economy. What this shows is that hybridity and multicultural diversity can be used for *nationalist* purposes in the era of globalisation. This, I would argue, is *also* the import of Bangsa Malaysia: the cosmopolitan redescription of Malaysia and Malaysianness to suit the nation-state's interests in the globalised 21st century (Bunnell, 2002). In today's interconnected world, there is a distinct advantage for societies to be, and see themselves as, cosmopolitan, both in terms of attitudes towards internal differences, and in terms of openness to the world beyond. In this sense, the 'Malaysia-Truly Asia' slogan is brilliant because it appropriates 'Asia' to represent Malaysia as an exceptionally transnational nation with a pan-Asian cultural identity. This cultural transnationalism is of course a product of the colonial history of transnational migration that brought Chinese and Indian migrants into Malaya. As we have seen, it was precisely this colonial legacy that created such major tensions in the establishment of the postcolonial nation-state, but which now, fifty years later, provides the cultural materials to assemble a new, cosmopolitan image for the postmodern nation-state of the 21st century. In this representation a magical resolution is achieved for the tensions between past and present, between ethnic pluralism and flexible hybrid identities, between the national and the transnational, between the nation-state as a bounded entity and its unbound global context. But this imaginary harmonisation of profoundly conflicting tendencies can only be a temporary and limited moment in the larger continuing flux of convergences and contestations that make up the dynamic realities of contemporary society.

And this takes me back to the question of multicultural governmentality as a more effective nationalism in the age of globalisation. As I said earlier, multiculturalism in the Australian context was (and is) a necessary response to the realities of increasing diversity. In declaring Australia a 'multicultural nation', Australian governments pursue a decidedly nationalist search for a more effective national identity: it is an attempt at refashioning the nation by embracing internal hybridity and cosmopolitanism while simultaneously redrawing the nation's imagined external boundaries. This multicultural nationalism is more effective than the older, assimilationist nationalism because it allows for greater flexibility and porosity in the relationship between the nation-state and its global context. However, it is also more risky because it is intrinsically contradictory, making it more challenging for the nation-state to keep its boundaries intact. Hence, it is not surprising that in the past decade, as the global context has become more daunting, Western nation-states, including Australia, have progressively put more limits to their multicultural arrangements, effectively harking back to older, more assimilationist designs for governing the nation (Galligan and Roberts, 2008). In this regard, multicultural imaginings of the nation have not disappeared but are taking a backseat, in favour of more brazenly Anglo-Celtic renditions of Australianness, generally

with a nod to Aboriginal culture, positioned as socially marginal, yet symbolically central (Stallybrass and White, 1986), as a sign for the virtuous white settler nation of the 21st century. The recent blockbuster film *Australia* is a case in point, as is the branding of Australia by Tourism Australia (it is very interesting to compare it with the Malaysia-Truly Asia campaign).

This Australian narrative may provide us with some insights about the Malaysian situation, too. There is of course a major disjuncture between 'Bangsa Malaysia' as a site of struggle for transethnic citizenship and equality on the one hand, and 'Malaysia – Truly Asia' as a rich repository for cosmopolitan consumer capitalism on the other. Nevertheless, it is useful to juxtapose the two because together they highlight the ambivalence inherent in multicultural governmentality. While multiculturalism provides nation-states with the discursive means to square cultural diversity with national unity by embracing a more open cosmopolitanism and hybrid identity, this is an unstable settlement which, if left unchecked, may threaten to destabilise and transcend the very boundaries of the nation. This points to the Janus-faced nature of the discourse of multiculturalism, a sign that the nation-state is between a rock and a hard place. It can neither hold on to the rigidities of fixed national identity, either in its assimilationist or segregationist (or pluralist) form, nor can it afford taking the hybridising effect of the cosmopolitan drive to its full conclusion, leading to a complete erasure of borders and boundaries, a virtual subsumption of the delimited national into the open field of the transnational.

Gabriel (forthcoming) proposes just such a radical image in her rendering of fully deterritorialised Bangsa Malaysia, without any fixed time-space coordinates. She wishes to see *Bangsa Malaysia* as 'an itinerary rather than a bounded site, a narrative without any authentic or originary past, a space of non-hierarchical movements of signs that makes untenable any claim to the inherent "originality" or, as in the Malaysian case, "indigeneity" of cultures'. Such an image of trans-ethnic cosmopolitan freedom articulates a yearning that will remain utopian as long as the nation-state of Malaysia exists. In this sense, Bangsa Malaysia, or 1Malaysia or any slogan to connote the same problematic, is more likely to remain a site for political contestation of competing designs for 'Malaysia' and 'Malaysianness'. In this regard, the constant reinforcement of ethnic divisions despite a rhetoric of national unity is a disheartening trend, fuelled as it is by an insistent discourse of Bumiputra indigenism that tends to harden, rather than blur, ethnic boundaries and continues to relegate others to the periphery of the nationalist cultural imaginary, thus underlining the persistence of the 'plural society' mindset. This leaves many Malaysians stranded between a rock and a hard place, in the uneasy space between the inhospitable national and the uninhabitable transnational, at the same time that the nation-state becomes more internally complex and fluid, and its cultural boundaries increasingly porous.

References

- Anderson, Benedict (1991) *Imagined Communities*, London: Verso.
- Ang, Ien (2001) *On Not Speaking Chinese. Living Between Asia and the West*, London: Routledge.
- Bunnell, Tim (2002) '(Re)positioning Malaysia: High-Tech Networks and the Multicultural Rescripting of National Identity', *Political Geography*, 21(1): 105-124.
- Calhoun, Craig (1997) *Nationalism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Castells, Manuel (1996) *The Rise of the Network Society*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Department of Immigration and Citizenship (1989) *National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia*, Accessed from:
<http://www.immi.gov.au/media/publications/multicultural/agenda/agenda89/toc.htm>
- Embong, Abdul Rahman (2005) 'The Culture and Practice of Pluralism in Postcolonial Malaysia', in, Hefner, Robert (ed.), *The Politics of Multiculturalism: Pluralism and Citizenship in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, pp. 59-85.
- Fenton, Steve (2003) *Ethnicity*, Cambridge: Polity.
- Foucault, Michel (2009) *Security, Territory, Population. Lectures at the College de France, 1977-1978*, New York: Picador.
- Gabriel, Sharmani (forthcoming) 'Translating "Race", Nation, and *Bangsa Malaysia*: Towards a New Cultural Politics of Malaysianness', *Modern Asian Studies*.
- Galligan, Brion and Roberts, Winsome (2008) 'The Rise and Demise of Australian Multiculturalism', in, Levey, Geoffrey Brahm (ed.), *Political Theory and Australian Multiculturalism*, New York: Berghahn Books, pp. 209-224.
- Goh, Daniel P.S.; Gabrielpillai, Matilda; Holden, Philip and Khoo, Gaik Cheng (eds) (2009) *Race and Multiculturalism in Malaysia and Singapore*, Milton Park, Abingdon: Routledge.
- Hage, Ghassan (1998) *White Nation*, Sydney: Pluto Press.
- Hall, Stuart (2000) 'Conclusion: The Multi-Cultural Question', in, Hesse, Barnor (ed.), *Unsettled Multiculturalisms*, London: Zed Books, pp. 209-241.
- Hanson, Pauline (1997) Parliamentary Speech, 3 September.
- Hefner, Robert (ed.) (2005) *The Politics of Multiculturalism. Pluralism and Citizenship in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Hollinger, David A. (1995) *Postethnic America. Beyond Multiculturalism*, New York: Basic Books.

Joppke, Christian (2004) 'The Retreat of Multiculturalism in the Liberal State: Theory and Policy', *British Journal of Sociology*, 55(2): 237-257.

Kessler, Clive (2010) 'The Confidence Game: The (Still Rumbling) Ideas of *Ketuanan Melayu* and "The Malaysian Social Contract" – Their Origins, Uses and Public Career', *Off the Edge*, 62: 50-57.

Kymlicka, Will (1996) *Multicultural Citizenship*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lim, Teck Ghee; Gomes, Alberto and Rahman, Azly (eds) (2009), *Multiethnic Malaysia. Past, Present and Future*, Pealing Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre.

Mahathir Mohamad (1991) *The Way Forward: Vision 2020*, Accessed from: <http://www.wawasan2020.com/vision/index.html>

1Malaysia Government Transformation Programme Roadmap (2010) Accessed from: www.transformation.gov.my

Ong, Puay Liu (2009) 'Identity Matters: Ethnic Perceptions and Concerns', in, Lim, Teck Ghee; Gomes, Alberto and Rahman, Azly (eds), *Multiethnic Malaysia. Past, Present and Future*, Pealing Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, pp. 463-482.

Ooi, Kee Beng (2005) 'Bangsa Malaysia: Vision or spin?', in, Swee-Hock, Saw and Kesavapany, K. (eds), *Malaysia: Recent Trends and Challenges*, Singapore: ISEAS, pp. 47-72.

----- (2009) 'Beyond Ethnocentrism: Malaysia and the Affirmation of Hybridisation', in, Lim, Teck Ghee; Gomes, Alberto and Rahman, Azly (eds), *Multiethnic Malaysia. Past, Present and Future*, Pealing Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, pp. 447-462.

Paasi, Anssi (2003) 'Boundaries in a Globalizing World', in, Anderson, Kay; Domosh, Mona; Pile, Steve and Thrift, Nigel (eds), *Handbook of Cultural Geography*, London: Sage, pp. 462-472.

Sassen, Saskia (2007) *A Sociology of Globalization*, New York: Norton.

Stallybrass, Peter and Allon White (1986) *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Stratton, Jon (1998) *Race Daze*, Sydney: Pluto Press.

Stratton, Jon and Ang, Ien (1997) 'Multicultural Imagined Communities: Cultural Difference and National Identity in the USA and Australia', in, Bennett, David (ed.), *Multicultural States: Rethinking Difference and Identity*, London: Routledge, pp. 135-162.

Taylor, Charles (1992) *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Wimmer, Andreas and Nina Glick Schiller (2002), 'Methodological Nationalism and Beyond: Nation-State Building, Migration and the Social Sciences', *Global Networks*, 2(4): 301-334.

Zawawi, Ibrahim (ed.) (2008) *Representation, Identity and Multiculturalism in Sarawak*, Kuching: Dayak Cultural Foundation/Kajang: Persatuan Sains Social Malaysia.

