Being British in Malaya, 1890–1940

Lynn Hollen Lees

What did it mean to be "British" in Malaya around 1900? Who had a right to that identity as British imperial power was consolidated in that region? Identity was an important topic in colonial Malaya, one affecting livelihoods, legal statuses, political rights, and social standing, as well as individual self-images. The large numbers of people in the region who regularly crossed linguistic, territorial, and cultural borders made classification and self-perception ambiguous and contested. Legal definitions of Britishness clashed with cultural ones, while commonly accepted racial distinctions mattered to some but not to others.[1] It was a concept under negotiation during the years when British authority on the peninsula was being consolidated. This article will explore different constructions of British identity that circulated in the Straits Settlements and the Federated Malay States between 1890 and 1940, by looking at the residents of those two colonies.

I will argue that colonial rule in the cities and towns created significant numbers of men and some women who claimed multiple identities, one of which was being British. Rather like Salman Rushdie in the 1980s, they linked themselves to more than one ethnic category: British Indian, British Malay, Anglo-Chinese.[2] Moreover, empire legitimated transnational ties difficult to maintain in a world of nation-states. Although it seems counterintuitive in our postcolonial world, many Malaysians today look back with nostalgia on the decades before independence, which

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[1] I use Charles Tilly's definition of identity: "an actor's experience of a category, tie, role, network, group or organization, coupled with a public representation of that experience." See Charles Tilly, ed., *Citizenship, Identity, and Social History* (Cambridge, 1996), 7.

[2] Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* (London, 1991), 17.

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they imagine as a time of easy cross-cultural relations, when law guaranteed a rough equality among different ethnic groups. Despite their dislike of colonialism, in their memories British rule was linked to social benefits as well as political constraints. For Asians, Britishness could mean the assertion of social and political equality with their colonial masters. People born within the empire, whatever their skin color or status, were on an equal legal footing in relation to Queen Victoria and her successors: subjects of the monarch owing loyalty to the crown. Ethnicity and religion were technically irrelevant.

Britishness could also have a more essentialist, oppositional meaning and could be constructed in terms of "race" and culture, as was done at the time of the Indian Mutiny or the Jamaica Rebellion of 1866, greatly shrinking the group to which the term could apply. Asian assertions of Britishness were rejected by many people of English ethnicity in Malaya who preferred clear racial hierarchies to ambiguous and fluid social relations. In the years between 1890 and 1940, Britishness was not an ethnic label but a contested concept compatible with multiple social and political claims.

A binary opposition between white Britons and black "Others" is a familiar argument. Linda Colley argues that in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Britons defined themselves in opposition to the Catholic French and colonial peoples whom they considered "manifestly alien in terms of culture, religion, and color."[3] Britishness was compounded from Protestantism, loyalty to the monarch, the English language, and white skin. Catherine Hall recounts how by the 1860s Birmingham voters came to distinguish white "manly citizens" from black colonial subjects, stressing a gap between Britain and its empire, and she argues that a "grammar of difference" was crafted and regularly reworked in order to maintain European claims to superiority.[4] This construction of Britishness was tied to the growth of a self-confident nation-state whose cultural boundaries were drawn narrowly.

The concepts of globalization and cultural hybridity suggest an approach to the issue of Britishness different from that of Colley and Hall, one that allows for multiple, compatible identities. William Dalrymple reminds us that in India the years 1770–1830 were years of "wholesale interracial sexual exploration and surprisingly widespread cultural assimilation and hybridity." Although the multilingual men he studied made their British political identity primary, they put on other cultural styles as easily as they changed their clothes.[5] By the late nineteenth century, far fewer such individuals survived, but they did not disappear. Consider Hubert Berkeley, a police inspector and later district officer in northern Perak between 1886 and 1926. He spoke fluent Malay and often wore Malay dress. He rode elephants around his district, sponsored shadow puppet plays, and left legacies

[3] Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven, CT, 2005), 5.

[4] Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830–1867* (Oxford, 2002), 17–18, 426; some of this language is quoted from Frederick Cooper and Ann Stoler, eds., *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley, 1997), 3–4, 7.

[5] William Dalrymple, *White Mughals: Love and Betrayal in Eighteenth-Century India* (London, 2002), 10.

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to several Malay children, probably his own.[6] Sir Hugh Clifford, governor of the Federated Malay States in 1926–29, sometimes made official visits wearing Malay dress, and he had deep familiarity and a high comfort level with Malay culture and language.[7]

Timothy N. Harper identifies the years between 1850 and 1914 as a time of intense globalization in which diasporic populations adopted plural identities in the cities of European empires. He argues that in places where local cultures met "external homogenizing forces," multilingual individuals learned to "switch codes and styles" rather than to assimilate to one standard identity. Cities such as Singapore became part of a "global public sphere" where people could participate in transnational networks and discussions.[8] His prototypical example, Lim Boon Keng, was a Straits-born, ethnically Chinese medical doctor. He held a British passport and a degree from the University of Edinburgh, and he had been admitted to the Order of the British Empire by the king. Yet he also served as a secretary and personal physician to Sun Yat Sen and held other administrative posts in Beijing during the early years of the Chinese Republic. He was multilingual and published widely in both English and Chinese. Lim strongly defended both his British and his Chinese identities, finding them compatible. Examples of such cross-cultural individuals can also be found in much humbler social circumstances. S. Raja Durai Singam, a man of Ceylonese descent who became a teacher in the small towns of the Federated Malay States early in the twentieth century, published several books on the multicultural heritage of Malayan towns, using their street names as evidence.[9] He stressed the Malay, British, Chinese, and South Asian roots of the colony, urging his readers to look around them for a "civics lesson" on the hybrid society that surrounded them. Pride in his British ties combined easily with his affection for Malaya. He told his students stories of Dick Whittington and his cat and praised the naming of local streets for British worthies. By joining the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, by publishing in English, and by working with English scholars of Malayan folklore and language, he became part of a British information exchange, legitimating British control of the Malayan landscape. The British Empire helped to create the conditions for individuals such as Durai Singam to move beyond their birthplaces and to adapt effectively to multiple cultural styles. Hybridity, rather than homogeneity, marks his and Lim Boon Keng's concepts of identity.

This essay explores the tension among different concepts of British identity as they functioned within British Malaya between 1890 and 1940. This was a period when racial and national classifications took on growing importance, but it was also a time of rapid urbanization and increased international movement, which produced heterogeneous populations. The relationship between these two sets of

[6] J. W. R. Reid, "HB," 22 November 1959, JWR Reid Papers, MSS Ind. Ocn s. 82 (2), Rhodes House, Oxford; John G. Butcher, *The British in Malaya, 1880–1941: The Social History of a European Community in Colonial South-East Asia* (Kuala Lumpur, 1979), 229–32.

[7] A. J. Stockwell, "Clifford, Sir Hugh Charles (1866–1941)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (*DNB*).

[8] Timothy Norman Harper, "Empire, Diaspora, and the Language of Globalism, 1850–1914," in *Globalization in World History*, ed. Anthony G. Hopkins (London, 2002), 142, 146, 152, 156.

[9] S. Raja Durai Singam, *From Port Weld to Kuantan* (Kuala Lumpur, 1939), and *Malayan Place Names*, 2nd ed. (Kuala Lumpur, 1962).

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phenomena needs to be examined. Can one assume that the greater mixing of diverse populations in the towns and cities of the British Empire produced the strongly binary, essentialist concept of Britishness articulated by Colley and Hall, in which lines of separation clearly mark differences? Harper's arguments suggest other alternatives.

I wish to distinguish a subjective definition of identity from one that is performative and related to particular situations. Although it is difficult to find convincing evidence of the former, the latter is well represented in the historical record. Moreover, I accept Peter Sahlins's argument that "national identity is contingent and relational," a socially constructed position rather than an "essential, primordial quality."[10] His research demonstrates that populations could hold multiple identities simultaneously, using them instrumentally in different contexts. Identities could not be changed as easily as costumes, but in multicultural societies it is more appropriate to think of them in terms of performance or context rather than as internalized, consistent ideologies.[11] Individuals could present themselves as British in some places or situations, in an office or a public ceremony, for example, while they chose a different style of self-presentation at home or in a mosque or temple. Identities could not only be multiple but, like coats, could also be thick or thin, difficult or easy to doff according to the season. Britishness could be a cultural style as well as a specific status or political allegiance. It is the slippage between these various registers that sheds light on Malayan social relations.

DEFINITIONS

Legal and administrative definitions of Britishness provide an essential starting point. Common law granted the status of British subject to any person born within the territories ruled by the British crown, and the right extended to residents in areas annexed to the empire by treaty. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, legislation reaffirmed this standard and regularized its results. In the period before 1940, distinctions according to race or regional origin were ignored in favor of universal rules linking nationality to an individual's relationship to the British monarch. The 1914 Nationality and Status of Aliens Act, which stated that "all individuals born within 'His Majesty's dominions and allegiance' automatically acquired British nationality at birth," confirmed this approach.[12]

On the Malay peninsula, the consequences of this approach to British status were complex. Any person born in the colony of the Straits Settlements (Singapore, Penang, Malacca, Province Wellesley, and the Dindings) counted as a British subject, as did newcomers to the Malay peninsula from other parts of the empire. Therefore, hundreds of thousands of Indian and Ceylonese immigrants to British Malaya had an unchanged legal status in relation to the British crown; their children

[10] Peter Sahlins, *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees* (Berkeley, 1989), 272–73.

[11] Peter Bailey makes this distinction in "'Will the Real Bill Banks Stand Up?' Towards a Role Analysis of Mid-Victorian Working-Class Respectability," *Journal of Social History* 12, no. 3 (Spring 1979): 338.

[12] Andreas Fahrmeir, *Citizens and Aliens: Foreigners and the Law in Britain and the German States, 1789–1870* (New York, 2000), 43–47, 52; Kathleen Paul, *Whitewashing Britain* (Ithaca, NY, 1997), 10–11; John Mervyn Jones, *British Nationality Law and Practice* (Oxford, 1947).

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inherited British subjecthood too. In contrast, immigrants to the Malay peninsula born in China were not British subjects unless they underwent a naturalization process in the colony. Moreover, Malays, if born in one of the "protected" states on the peninsula, were formally subjects of the sultans who had title to those territories.[13] Yet they also were deemed "British protected persons," having a right to a British passport. Over time, the British Foreign Office tended to merge the status of British subject with that of British protected person, since both were entitled to the same set of privileges and protections when traveling outside the empire. Sir Edward Grey's opinion in 1912 that subjects of the Malay states "should be treated in a similar manner as British subjects" continued to be quoted and used in Foreign Office documents in the early 1920s. Moreover, this principle was stretched to cover merchants of Chinese descent who had been born in the Federated Malay States but were living in China.[14]

The British government used an expansive approach to British subjecthood, one that disregarded race and social position. It did not assume that British subjects shared a cultural identity or that they had a single set of national loyalties. Subjecthood brought few specified rights and privileges, however, other than diplomatic protection and the right of entry into the United Kingdom (but not automatically to other colonies or the dominions). Subjecthood was an overarching status calculatedly compatible with local constructions of national citizenship that emerged during the twentieth century as the dominions became intent upon establishing their political independence and control over immigration. Subjecthood was technically not citizenship, although most subjects also held one of several types of imperial citizenship formally recognized in the British Nationality Act of 1948.[15] Subjecthood, however, was what was on offer within Britain and its colonies until the dissolution of the empire eviscerated this embryonic form of transnational citizenship, which had fuzzy and contested boundaries.

Usage of the term "British" in Malaya reveals a similar fuzziness and much variation in definitions. Its usage could imply claims of nationality as well as the rights of citizenship, loosely construed. Straits-born Chinese proudly proclaimed themselves "British subjects," a status acknowledged by officials and visiting dignitaries.[16] In doing so, they decoupled their cultural identity from their claims of

[13] The Federated Malay States, comprising Perak, Selangor, Negri Sembilan, and Pahang under what was, in effect, British rule, was formed in 1896, and the remaining states of the peninsula (Johore, Kedah, Kelantan, Perlis, and Trengganu) came under British protection between 1909 and 1914.

[14] Arthur Young, "Comments on the Status in China of British Subjects of Chinese Race," 25 September 1912, The National Archives (TNA): Public Records Office (PRO), Colonial Office (CO) 273/383/33127; Laurence Guillemard, "Registration and Protection of British Subjects of Chinese Descent in China," 9 August 1923, TNA: PRO, CO 717/28/45218. See also Ann Dummett and Andrew Nicol, *Subjects, Citizens, Aliens and Others: Nationality and Immigration Law* (London, 1990).

[15] The British Nationality Act of 1948 distinguished citizens of the United Kingdom and colonies, citizens of Commonwealth countries, British subjects without citizenship, and British protected persons, all of whom were "British nationals" in different ways. A separate British citizenship was not defined legally until the British Nationality Act of 1981, when the government acted to uncouple British citizenship from its imperial links and to narrow the group of British subjects who had the rights as citizens to enter and to live in the United Kingdom. See Rieko Karatani, *Defining British Citizenship: Empire, Commonwealth and Modern Britain* (London, 2003), 1, 116.

[16] G. T. Hare, "The Straits Chinese," *Straits Chinese Magazine* 1, no. 1 (1897): 3; Song Ong Siang, "Are the Straits Chinese British Subjects?" *Straits Chinese Magazine* 3, no. 9 (1899): 61.

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political membership within the empire and the Straits Settlements. When the Duke of Connaught visited Singapore in 1907, he told representatives of the Straits Chinese community that it was "a source of great satisfaction . . . to receive an address of welcome from the British subjects of Chinese descent in this Colony and to learn how highly you value the nationality which your place of birth has conferred upon you."[17]

Britishness had quite different definitions, however, in Malaya among writers and officials of English ethnicity. Nicholas B. Dennys's *Descriptive Dictionary of British Malaya*, published in 1894, identified Britishness with governance and particular spaces, distinguishing places with British administrative offices and British-owned plantations from Malay villages and settlements inhabited by Chinese.[18] Dennys's definition was based on institutions and on imperial rule, a common conservative approach to the concept of nationality late in the nineteenth century, according to Peter Mandler.[19] A different approach to the issue was taken by William Evans, whose career in the Malayan Civil Service spanned the years 1882–1913. He used a cultural and racial definition of Britishness that implied essential differences among peoples. His sense of his own British identity was expressed through attendance at Anglican services, appreciation of Gilbert and Sullivan, and evenings at his European-only club. He sharply distinguished himself from any nonwhite populations, and in a letter to his wife in 1893, he announced that "with my consent Joyce [his infant daughter] shall never marry anyone but a white man, Briton for choice."[20] The sense of an impassible cultural divide separating "British" people from "Chinese" regularly surfaced in descriptions of the Straits Chinese written by Englishmen. In an article, "The King's Chinese," published in the *Daily Mail* around 1907, G. E. Raine, who had worked as a lawyer in Singapore, lampooned upwardly mobile Chinese who went from coolie to wealthy merchant to urban dilettante in two generations and, whatever their incomes and education, remained essentially different from their colonial rulers.[21] Many English residents of Malaya viewed the Chinese, whatever their formal status, as profoundly unlike themselves because of religion, dress, moral standards, and imperfect knowledge of English. For men such as Evans and Raine, Britishness rested on race and culture, not citizenship or superficial behavior.

THE SETTING

Confusion over political status was built into the peculiarly complex structure of British Malaya. The Straits Settlements (created a Crown Colony in 1867 from Penang, or Prince of Wales Island; the cities of Singapore and Malacca; and the territories of Province Wellesley and the Dindings, which came under British con-

[17] Song Ong Siang, *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore* (1923; repr., Singapore, 1984), 410.

[18] Nicholas Belfield Dennys, *Descriptive Dictionary of British Malaya* (London, 1894).

[19] Peter Mandler, *The English National Character: The History of an Idea from Edmund Burke to Tony Blair* (New Haven, CT, 2006), 134–36.

[20] William Evans to Tilly Evans, 2 August 1893, Evans Correspondence, PP MS 11, School of Oriental and African Studies Archive, University of London.

[21] Quoted in Siang, *One Hundred Years' History*, 390–91. See also 503–6.

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trol at different dates after 1786) and the Federated Malay States (formed in 1896 from the Protected Malay States of Perak, Selangor, Negri Sembilan, and Pahang, which had moved into British control after 1874) mixed many different ethnic and religious groups, several of which fell under different authorities and operated under somewhat different rules. The Malays were almost a minority within their own land. By 1911, rapid immigration triggered by the tin and rubber booms had produced a population on the peninsula of 53 percent Malay, 35 percent Chinese, 10 percent Indian, and 2 percent "Other," which included all Europeans. Since the British census explicitly divided populations by ethnicity, people were asked to choose for themselves one of the multiple "racial" categories provided. Any simple classification, moreover, fails to capture the ethnic complexity of the place. The official census of the Straits Settlements in 1891 named six different sorts of Chinese, four types of Indian, nine varieties of Malay, and others from the Dutch Indies, and these were only the largest ethnicities.[22] The Malays, many of whom had emigrated from the Netherlands Indies, included substantial numbers of Minangkabau, Mandailing, and Bugis, all identified as foreign and who remained separate in various ways from locally born Malay. Arab populations, including many members of the Sayyid clan from the Hadramut area of what is now Yemen, had resided in the region for generations and had wed Malays while keeping their distinctive names and patterns of marriage. The children of Indian Muslims who had married Malays counted as Jawi Peranakans. Early Chinese migrants had intermarried with Malays, producing the group known as Straits Chinese or Baba Chinese, who resided primarily in Malacca, Singapore, and Penang. Some of this group, as well as newcomers, had intermarried with Thai families and had become part of the ruling elites in the states along the Thai-Malay border.[23] This social environment, where a majority of residents had strong ties to other states, would prove a difficult place in which to create a conventional nationalist movement.

Political power was almost as divided as cultural forms. Direct rule prevailed in the Straits Settlements under a governor and local district officers, but a legislative council with appointed members advised and debated, and municipal councils functioned in Singapore and Malacca. In the Federated Malay States, rule was technically indirect: British resident ministers, assisted by the mostly European Malayan Civil Service, "advised" Malay sultans or rajas on appropriate policies but, in effect, ruled the country. Malay rulers retained independent authority in areas of religion and customary and family law. Protectors of the Chinese and Indian immigration officers had substantial authority over the status and treatment of those two demarcated groups in Malaya. In addition, well into the early twentieth century, British authorities delegated partial control over Chinese populations to unofficially recognized headmen and to those appointed as Capitans China, leaders who helped keep their people in line. Numerous courts rendered decisions in civil and criminal suits, and the lines of jurisdiction between the village headmen (*ketuas* and *penghulus*), *kathi* (Muslim judges), justices of the peace, and district officers

[22] Charles Hirschman, "The Meaning and Measurement of Ethnicity in Malaysia: An Analysis of Census Classifications," *Journal of Asian Studies* 46, no. 2 (August 1987): 571. See also John H. Drabble, *An Economic History of Malaysia, c. 1800–1990* (London, 2000), 90.

[23] Jennifer W. Cushman, *Family and State: The Formation of a Sino-Thai Tin-Mining Dynasty, 1797–1932*, ed. Craig J. Reynolds (Singapore, 1990); Khoo Joo Ee, *The Straits Chinese: A Cultural History* (Amsterdam, 1996).

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remained fuzzy. These multiple venues and authorities gave individuals choices about the appropriate authority to whom to appeal and the best identity to assume, allowing them some room for negotiation. In fact, resident ministers had an interest in blurred rather than sharp boundaries around categories and entitlements.

The colonial state and its army kept a low profile in the villages, the mines, the plantations, and the small towns. Although police constables patrolled and colonial administrators circulated within their districts, they received significant disciplinary help from a wide array of people with local authority who had an interest in the maintenance of social order. The British in Malay used "soft" means to camouflage the hard edges of colonial military power. Moreover, the lack of a local equivalent of the Indian Mutiny or the Amritsar Massacre gave Malayans greater freedom to try out a British identity in appropriate settings and to experiment with its cultural vocabularies than their counterparts in South Asia.

URBAN MODERNITY

The best arenas for learning the rudiments of a British identity were cities and towns because of their diverse populations and imperial institutions. British Malaya had a comparatively large urban sector. In 1911, the census counted 60 percent of the residents of the Straits Settlements and 22 percent of those in the Federated Malay States as town dwellers.[24] By 1911, Singapore reached a population of 303,000, and it had grown to over 500,000 by 1931—by then the largest town in Southeast Asia. The rubber and tin booms had led to the creation of a network of small market towns in Province Wellesley and the states on the west coast of the Malay peninsula. Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh, and Taiping grew to be substantial commercial centers, and they were surrounded by towns that had several thousand inhabitants and were gateways to transnational networks of exchange and communications. All relatively new places, they attracted immigrants from multiple ethnic groups and exposed them to an international array of consumer goods and cultural styles. The towns gave residents a taste of the technologies and messages of modernity.

By 1910, economic development and the colonial Department of Public Works transformed territory originally pictured by the British as "jungle" into a region of well-policed settlements with brick buildings, piped water, and street lighting in their central areas. Railways, good roads, motorcars, and bicycles made travel much easier than it had been in the nineteenth century, and steamboats linked riverside settlements with Penang and Singapore. Along town roads could be found garages, gas stations, telegraph offices, and bookstores. Christian missions ran English-language schools as well as schools in Malay, various Chinese dialects, and Tamil. Mission presses translated English classics into Malay and printed Malay and Tamil schoolbooks, using British models. Chinese communities founded Anglo-Chinese schools as well as schools to teach Mandarin so that the various migrant groups could work effectively with the British and could communicate more easily

[24] Hayes Marriott, *Report on the Census of the Colony of the Straits Settlements Taken on 10 March 1911* (Singapore, 1911); Julius Ernest Nathan, *The Census of British Malaya, 1921* (London, 1922). Compare the figures for the Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States with the 1850 and 1910 levels of urbanization for Europe as a whole—19 percent and 40 percent.

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among themselves and with China. By 1900, twenty-four English-language schools operated in the Federated Malay States, producing a relatively large English-speaking contingent among Asian town residents. Virtually the entire Eurasian population of the peninsula, as well as substantial numbers of South Asians and Chinese, were literate in English. By the 1930s, many more English-language and vernacular schools had opened, including several girls' schools. Those who passed the Senior Cambridge examination administered from England had the qualifications for further education in Britain.[25] The towns attracted the literate of every group and drew them into a print culture nourished by the many newspapers printed in English, Malay, and Chinese in Singapore, Penang, and, by the 1890s, Ipoh, Taiping, and Kuala Lumpur.[26] In the period between the late nineteenth century and the Second World War, the urban population of British Malaya was drawn into the orbit of the British colonial state through the print media and the integrating impact of roads, railways, telegraphs, schools, and material culture. The state, through its institutions and representations of the empire, helped draw residents into an imperial "imagined community."[27]

Along with modern communications and print culture, towns introduced inhabitants to an international range of consumer goods and cultural products. An Englishwoman who sometimes shopped in Parit Buntar in Perak during the later 1930s stressed its multicultural character and cultural variety: "The town . . . consisted of three short streets of semi-Chinese style two storeyed houses, washed azure, viridian green, and cream. The shops below were just open rooms or tunnels under the dark arches of the five-foot way: Japanese photographers, Chinese carpenters, a tinsmith and a rattan basketmaker, several Indian silk and cotton stores, goldsmiths and a pawnbroker, and a Japanese hairdresser, Chinese and Indian food shops and petrol stores and Malay coffee shops. There was an open market near the river with food stalls and portable kitchens."[28] By the turn of the century, Chinese shops in Malayan towns sold tennis rackets and Scotch whisky. Indian and Chinese tailors could produce clothes in any style. Cabinetmakers took orders for European- or Asian-style furniture, and some Asian homes had clocks and electric chandeliers. Motorcars and bicycles could be seen on town streets. Theaters showed films from Bombay, Hollywood, and Britain, and traveling actors drew upon European, Middle Eastern, Chinese, and South Asian classic literature for plots and performances. The result was an urban cultural potpourri that introduced

[25] Ernest Cranfield Hicks, *History of English Schools in Perak* (Ipoh, 1958); H. R. Cheeseman, "Education in Malaya, 1900–1941," *Malayan Historical Journal* 11, no. 31 (1955): 30–47; Shih Toong Siong, *The Foochows of Sitiawan: A Historical Perspective* (Sitiawan, 2004), 128–58; William R. Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*, 2nd ed. (Kuala Lumpur, 1994), 43–55. Literacy rates varied greatly among the towns, but about half of the Singapore population in 1921 claimed literacy in English or another language; about 12 percent of that city's male population claimed literacy in English at that date. Between one-third and one-half of the Chinese population in the larger towns of the Federated Malay States were counted as literate in 1921. See Nathan, *Census of British Malaya*, Tables XL, XLVII.

[26] Ernest W. Birch, "The Vernacular Press in the Straits," *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 4 (December 1879): 51–55.

[27] See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London, 1983); and Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870–1914* (Stanford, CA, 1976).

[28] Katherine Sim, *Malayan Landscape* (Singapore, 1969), 28–29. Parit Buntar had around 2,400 residents in 1920.

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town dwellers to an international consumer culture and to multiple forms of entertainment. British Malaya was a hybrid space where at least the educated and more affluent town dwellers crossed cultural borders in their daily life.

Towns functioned as multilingual, multiethnic spaces. Government offices operated through Asian personnel. Every court, police station, and administrative department had its staff of Chinese, Tamil, and Malays who turned British laws and regulations, codified in English, into understandable prose in other languages. A small army of clerks, competent in English and at least one Asian language, copied letters, took information, and placed orders. Trained in mission or government schools, they moved into the towns for an education and stayed on to work, becoming a locally rooted, modernized middle class of sorts.

While the Straits Chinese were the most aggressively transnational group in the colony, by the early twentieth century a sizable number of educated Malays had moved out of their villages into a more cosmopolitan town life. Haji Abdul Majid bin Zainuddin was the son of a Minangkabau trader who sent him to an English-language school in Kuala Lumpur, and he later won a place in the new Malay College in Kuala Kangsar, where he remained as a teacher of Malay. In 1918, he became the first Malay assistant inspector of schools and later the principal of the Malay Teachers' Training College in Matang. Also serving as a Malay pilgrimage officer, he spent several months a year on the Arabian peninsula, making Arab friends and eventually marrying a woman of Egyptian ancestry from Mecca. He ate Malayan, European, and Arabian foods. Among the entertainments he relished were Bangsawan theater, Quasida recitations, and football matches.[29] As an adult, he wrote for the Malay press, and he funneled Kuala Kangsar news to the English-language papers in Ipoh and Penang. His textbooks—*Malay Self Taught* for English speakers and his English grammar and other schoolbooks for Malays—went through multiple editions. Haji Abdul Majid's circle of friends extended far beyond the small group of upwardly mobile Malays like himself. When his daughter married, guests included Chinese, Indians, and Europeans as well as Malays, and he belonged to the Ellerton Club in Kuala Kangsar, organized for lower-ranking colonial officials and clerks from various ethnic groups. While one of his social roles was that of British civil servant, he also presented himself as a devout Muslim and a proud Malay.[30]

Some English and Scottish settlers also ought to be considered as part of the urban multicultural population in Malaya. Entry into the Malayan Civil Service was contingent upon passing rigorous language exams. Administrators posted to outlying parts of the peninsula, particularly in the period before 1900, lived for years in the midst of Malays with little sustained contact with any Europeans. The most adept functioned happily and successfully in Malay society, whether court or villages. Two men stand out in this regard: Frank Swettenham, who served in the Malayan Civil Service from 1871 to 1904, becoming resident in the states of

[29] Roff, *Origins of Malay Nationalism*, 30–31, 94, 128–31, 143, 150; [Haji Abdul Majid bin Zainuddin], *The Malays in Malaya: By One of Them* (Singapore, 1928), 102–4. Bangsawan theater is a hybrid form of musical comedy with lyrics in Malay and librettos drawn from foreign literature, usually Shakespeare or the *Arabian Nights*. Quasida is a classic form of Arabic poetry, recited or sung.

[30] Haji Abdul Majid bin Zainuddin, *The Wandering Thoughts of a Dying Man: The Life and Times of Haji Abdul Majid bin Zainuddin*, ed. William R. Roff (Kuala Lumpur, 1978), viii–x, 69, 98, 146–47.

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Perak and Selangor and, later, resident general of the Federated Malay States and governor of the Straits Settlements; and Hugh Clifford, whose years in Malaya stretched from 1883 to 1901, when he lived in Perak and Pahang, and again from 1926 to 1929, when he was governor of the colony. Both men pictured themselves as being deeply familiar with Malaya and Malays. Clifford wrote, "For months at a time during more than a decade I saw no white face and spoke no word of my own language," and he claims "a full appreciation of the native point of view, and of a people for whom I entertain much affection and sympathy."[31] Both took pride in their familiarity with Malay culture.

British Malaya produced culturally hybrid people, many of whom were British subjects. No single definition of Britishness dominated in the colony, and this was one of the tensions created by colonial rule in a time of high racial sensibility.

PERFORMATIVE BRITISHNESS

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the multiethnic, multicultural town populations of Malaya gradually learned the forms and language of British identity, which spread well beyond the small, British-born population. Conferences, holidays, and state ceremonies exposed residents to the symbolism of the British Empire. Using the examples of celebrations of royal jubilees and coronations within the Straits Settlements and in the state of Perak, Federated Malay States, I want to argue that the performance of British identity spread widely between the 1880s and 1940. British ceremonial occasions gave Malayan town populations the chance to learn the language of British allegiance and to use it publicly. Over time, the enthusiasm, the extent, and the complexity of these performances grew substantially, encouraging the local expression of British patriotism and loyalty to the British monarch. These ritualized performances of a British identity functioned to link together thousands of urban immigrants, many of whom were long-distance migrants who would never return to their country of birth. State activities and institutions, as Benedict Anderson has suggested, helped to draw town residents in Malaya into an imagined British community.[32]

A outline of this imagined community in Malaya was drawn at the time of Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee. The governor of the Straits Settlements proclaimed 27 and 28 June 1887 to be public holidays when there would be Thanksgiving services, parades, cannon salutes, and fireworks. Soon a Singapore Jubilee Committee, which included high-status Europeans, Chinese, South Asians, Arabs, and Malays, began planning local events that involved local schoolchildren and included a state ball attended by leading Chinese, Malay, and Arab-Malay men.[33]

Outside Singapore, celebrations seem to have been limited, and the formal expressions of loyalty indicated a distant embrace, at best, of a British identity by

[31] For biographical details, see H. S. Barlow, "Swettenham, Sir Frank Athelstane (1850–1946)"; and Stockwell, "Clifford, Sir Hugh Charles," *DNB*. Hugh Clifford, *In a Corner of Asia* (New York, 1926), 7, and *The Further Side of Silence* (Garden City, NJ, 1920), vii–viii.

[32] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

[33] "The Coming Jubilee," *Straits Times*, 27 May 1887; "Jubilee Sports, Taiping," *Straits Times*, 8 June 1887; "Jubilee Celebration, Singapore," *Straits Times*, 24 June 1887; "The Programme," *Straits Times*, 30 June 1887.

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non-Europeans. William Evans, newly appointed as collector of land revenue in Malacca and the second assistant protector of Chinese in the Straits Settlements, wrote to his brother in Bradford in 1887 about the Jubilee of "the great, good, and glorious Queen and Empress." He attended a celebratory Anglican church service in Malacca and proudly stood during the playing of "God Save the Queen." He complained that local people had been badly informed about the occasion and that they had refused to write and sign a congratulatory address because "there was no knowing what the government would do with [it]." Evans adds that "his spirit rose in anger," and he claims to have denounced them as foolish, "rebellious children" with ridiculous suspicions.[34] After his tirade, they agreed to produce the required statement of congratulation, which was formally transmitted to the government to be sent on to London. Given Evans's job, the reluctant local worthies were most likely Straits Chinese in Malacca—British subjects by birth and men of wealth and relative sophistication who benefited directly from British rule in the region.

The Jubilee was also observed in the state of Perak, where three addresses, written in Jawi, were sent to Queen Victoria from Malay commoners and tradesmen who were probably residents of the town of Ipoh. Using flowery, ritualized expressions of loyalty similar to those directed to Malay rajas, they offered prayers to the "incomparable" queen and her family and praised her wise administration, good rule, and fairness, telling her that her "brightness shone all over the world."[35] Chinese merchants from Perak sent finely calligraphed scrolls to Queen Victoria, presented in the name of the Chinese Emperor, their "August Master," announcing their gratitude for the "friendly relations" existing between the two empires and for the "well-being of that very large proportion of the human race which it has pleased Heaven to confide to the High Keeping of Your Majesties."[36] While they affirmed admiration for the queen and her rule, a British identity was not claimed. The form and content of Perak participation in the Jubilee linked residents more closely to their Malay and Chinese roots than to their new colonial home. It seems reasonable to conclude that in 1887 identification with the British Empire had not spread widely in the Federated Malay States among the Asian urban residents.

By 1897, a larger group of people were drawn into the celebrations of Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. Multiple events took place not only in Singapore and Penang but also in several Perak towns. Local committees planned church services, parades, sports days, illuminations, fireworks, and treats, giving residents several days of public celebrations, using the model of the 1887 events. The 1897 Diamond Jubilee brought subjects of all nationalities together at local recreation grounds to see the ceremonies, to acquire one of the Jubilee medals, cups, or flags, and to sing "God Save the Queen." A parade in Kuala Lumpur included representations

[34] William Evans to Samuel Evans, 20 June 1887, box 2, PP MS 11, School of Oriental and African Studies Archive, University of London.

[35] "Jubilee addresses to Queen Victoria," *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 18 (1887): 366–71. I want to thank Mohd Taib bin Mohamed for his translation of the Jawi text.

[36] Wrapped in yellow silk, these scrolls survive in the National Archive at Kew, London. The translation of the Chinese text was appended to the scroll. See "Jubilee Addresses of Tradesmen in Perak to Queen Victoria," 1887, TNA: PRO, PP 1/222.

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of St. George and the Dragon, and the See Yeh temple flew the royal standard.[37] Exactly how spectators interpreted these images is unclear, but local English-language newspapers mentioned large, happy crowds and buildings draped with Union Jacks. At the very least, observers were exposed to representations and symbols of Britishness, and they learned some of the rituals of public patriotism.

Exactly what ought to be done in the towns in 1897 and its cost were contentious issues, however, signaling some degree of discomfort with the celebration. In Taiping, a Jubilee committee of locally prominent men met in March of 1897 to plan the loyalty addresses and amusements. They added, however, that the central government should pay for it, a point that various letter writers to the *Perak Pioneer* agreed with completely. Someone who announced himself as "A Struggling Subordinate" suggested that the most appropriate celebration that would "make a lasting impression" on public servants would be to increase their pay by 20 percent. Another correspondent, identified as "In the Hands of the Chetty," called for letting Jubilee mean the "freedom from debt and difficulty" by negotiating with the moneylenders to burn all personal promissory notes. (Needless to say, nothing came of either of those two suggestions.) People disagreed too on the issue of permanent memorials. The organizing committee in Taiping, possibly thinking of their own sons, wanted scholarship money to be raised to send local boys to Singapore schools, so that they could become competitive candidates for scholarships to British universities. This plan had many backers but was vetoed by the Perak resident, Frank Swettenham.[38] By June, wealthier citizens had agreed to donate funds for the celebrations and to support projects that benefited local residents, such as public parks or children's hospitals.

Eventually, local town committees worked out the details of the late June celebrations, most of which seemed quite similar. Each of the major ethnic groups in the larger settlements helped to plan local events for its own community and for a general audience. European clubs sponsored formal dances and dinners, flower shows, and horse races, which drew large crowds of mixed ethnicity. The Chinese mounted evening lantern parades and fireworks; Malays organized wayang theater performances, processions, and sports events. Food for all tastes was in evidence. In Ipoh, children who attended received Chinese cakes, Malay kabobs, *nasi lemak*, and lemonade. The celebrations mixed familiar entertainments overlaid with British ceremony and signs. The audience for the Jubilee was far wider than Europeans. In the small town of Kampar, which had only one resident British man, several thousand people from the district came for fireworks and various evening shows, which had been "arranged gratis to suit the tastes of the native population." The district officer, Mr. Nutt, was identified as the person responsible for the events and decoration of the town, although he got help from Lam Yen, a wealthy Chinese resident who invited his male Chinese friends to dinner and offered a toast to

[37] "The Diamond Jubilee Celebration," *Perak Pioneer*, 26 June 1897; "The Diamond Jubilee in Selangor," *Perak Pioneer*, 3 July 1897.

[38] "A Committee Meeting," *Perak Pioneer*, 27 March 1897; A Struggling Subordinate, "The Diamond Jubilee," *Perak Pioneer*, 31 March 1897; In the Hands of the Chetty, "The Diamond Jubilee," *Perak Pioneer*, 3 April 1897; "The Diamond Jubilee," *Perak Pioneer*, 2 June 1897.

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Queen Victoria.[39] The Jubilee produced widespread expressions of British patriotism, although it is hard to judge its depth and sustainability.

During the events of 1897, a discourse of loyalty was developed among several ethnic groups who identified themselves as the queen's subjects. They were exposed to multiple symbols of British identity. Crowds saw countless Union Jacks flying from ceremonial gateways while military bands played "God Save the Queen" in the background. In Ipoh, Chinese, Malays, South Asians, and "nearly every one of the European community" showed up for the school sports day arranged by the Reverend Mr. Horley, a leading Methodist cleric. The Jubilee gave both colonial officials and the resident population the chance to agree on appropriate patriotic messages and forms that proclaimed joint devotion to the empire and the queen.

One staple of these imperial celebrations was the congratulatory address. Groups of local citizens self-defined by religion, place of origin, and sometimes occupation produced formal statements of allegiance, which were read by their authors to colonial officials and assembled crowds.[40] Simultaneous translations into English and Malay were offered for key statements, and written copies went to London. Authors, whatever their ethnicity, usually identified themselves as humble or loyal subjects of the queen. These same phrases were used by the European, Eurasian, and Chinese residents in Singapore; by the governor of the Straits Settlements on behalf of all citizens there; by the Chinese and the Hindus of Penang; and by the Eurasians, Europeans, Ceylon Tamils, Bengalis, and South Indians of Perak. They then outdid one another in singing royal praises: "The whole of Your Majesty's Empire, which is ever watched by the sun, is celebrating today with one heart this unique and auspicious occasion and we (the Bengalis of Taiping, Perak) join them from this remote part of the national chorus."[41]

While loyalty and imperial unity were key themes, so was the assertion of equality. Taiping Bengalis praised the crown's "impartiality . . . uniformly indistinctive of caste, creed, color, and religion." South Indians in Perak and Singapore Chettiars mentioned "equity of justice," and the former group applauded the use of competitive exams for Crown Colony civil services so that they could compete for positions. Singapore Chinese said that "we, as [Her] Majesty's Chinese subjects, . . . were given the very same privilege as those enjoyed by Englishmen." Singapore Jews thanked Victoria for "the removal of the political disabilities of our race and their admission on terms of equality to social privileges."[42] Praise for imperial rule came in tandem with declarations of equality. Britishness, therefore, brought rights as well as duties, and its meaning for some people went far beyond the expression of loyalty to the British crown.

[39] "The Diamond Jubilee Celebration," *Perak Pioneer*, 26 June 1897; "The Diamond Jubilee Celebration," *Perak Pioneer*, 30 June 1897; "The Diamond Jubilee in Kinta," *Perak Pioneer*, 3 July 1897.

[40] In Penang, foreign consuls, Europeans and Eurasians, Muslims, the Chinese Town Hall, the Chinese Literary Association, the Chinese Club, Tamil Hindus, Chettiars, and Indians from the northwest province wrote such addresses. "The Jubilee Celebration," *Straits Observer*, 25 June 1897.

[41] "Presentation of Addresses at the Town Hall," *Singapore Free Press*, 23 June 1897; "The Queen's Diamond Jubilee: Celebration in Penang," *Pinang Gazette*, 22 June 1897; "The Diamond Jubilee Celebration," *Perak Pioneer*, 26 June 1897.

[42] "The Diamond Jubilee Celebration," *Perak Pioneer*, 26 June 1897; "The Diamond Jubilee Week in the Straits and Malaya," *Straits Budget*, 29 June 1897.

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By the next Jubilee year, 1936, when King George V celebrated twenty-five years on the throne, more elaborate and extravagant expressions of British loyalty could be found in many more places in Perak and other parts of the Federated Malay States than had been the case forty years earlier. An Ipoh primary-school teacher, Sangara Pillai Rajaratnam, recorded the Jubilee in Perak, publishing an official account under the pseudonym "Loyalty."[43] His friends around the state gave encouragement and sent him newspaper clippings and photographs, which permitted him to chronicle how "every town, hamlet, and kampong in the State did something to celebrate the memorable day."

The events in Kampar illustrate the extent of the change in participation. At that time, the chief colonial administrator was a Muslim man, Syed Noordin. His planning committee of fifteen men was predominantly Chinese, although it included three Englishmen and one Tamil Chettiar. All the local schools participated in a sports day and football match, while businesses and shops closed to give everyone a holiday. Town mosques held celebratory services, Chinese residents decorated and illuminated a park, and local clubs sponsored lion shows, Malay dances, band concerts, and Chinese plays. Rajaratnam claimed that Union Jacks and banners were displayed by most houses. In the evening, twenty-nine clubs, guilds, and schools (including the Public Chinese Girls' School) joined in a lantern procession through the streets. Town residents donated the necessary funding. Official photos of the organizers show an ethnically diverse group of men, mostly but not all in Western dress, staring proudly at the camera.

BRITISHNESS ABSORBED AND DEFINED

Rajaratnam maintained that all peoples of the peninsula had lifted themselves above "colour, creed, language, custom or religion" to participate in the Jubilee as subjects of the British king. His statement had two important components. First, it highlighted a message of political equality among all ethnic and social groups. Second, he claimed that the Malayan population had recognized this primary loyalty during Victoria's Jubilee and had acted accordingly.

Rajaratnam made similar arguments in other writings, which were marked by an early Malay nationalism but also by the defense of British subjecthood as overriding divisions of class and ethnicity to guarantee equality of political status. The empire was a "federation of free nations" whose members agreed to stand together out of fellowship and self-interest, and he gave equal weight and importance to their multiple religions, traditions, and literatures. He wrote in 1926:

> The poorest and the weakest are the children of the Empire just as much as the richest and the strongest. Whether we come from the interior villages and Kampongs or from the towns, whether we live in the humble attap sheds in a far away Ulu or in high, stone-walled mansions in the pecan, whether we walk about on foot or drive about in thick cushioned and balloon tyred cars, whether in the train of life we are passengers

[43] Rajaratnam is a good example of a border-crossing British citizen. Born in Ceylon, he was brought to Perak as a child, where he attended local English-language schools. After graduating from a teacher-training college, he made his career teaching in English-language secondary schools in Perak. One of his major projects was the development of a public library in Ipoh, Perak, with the aid of the local Rotary Club. He was also a justice of the peace. See Hicks, *History of English Schools in Perak*, v–vi.

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> in the third class or first class, we are proud sons and daughters of the British Empire, which fact brings us to the same level after all.[44]

His comments asserted social equality within Malaya, challenging local elites as well as British overlords on the issue of status. These were radical claims in the context of colonial Malaya in 1926 as well as in 1897, in a region where imperial rule was based upon hierarchy and ethnic differences.

Other commentators asserted less radical claims of equality. The official messages of royal jubilees and coronations celebrated a multicultural Malaya solidly tied to the British monarch. At the joint Anglican/Presbyterian Thanksgiving service in Teluk Anson in 1897, the Reverend Hamilton Aiken told his audience, which included parishioners who were ethnic Chinese, Tamils, and Europeans, that they were all "citizens of the Empire." Such speeches reached wide audiences because, even if they were given in English in official ceremonies, they were translated simultaneously into Malay, Tamil, and various Chinese dialects. Although the concept of citizenship was being used loosely as metaphor rather than legal term, this language of Britishness not only asserted commonality but also implied that equal political rights applied to multiple ethnic groups. Speakers used the occasion of celebration to elevate the status of British subject to that of citizen, blurring the distinction between the two terms. Within the rhetoric of the Jubilee and the coronation, Malayans were depicted as part of a vast empire whose residents were equal in their relationship to the British crown. The cheering crowds were then left free to construct their own definitions of that relationship.

Nevertheless, it is important to ask how large a group joined in these public expressions of Britishness. The strongest evidence of exposure to representations of Britishness can be found for the male, urban population of the colony. Newspaper accounts identify Jubilee organizers as socially prominent men drawn from the British, Chinese, Malay, and South Asian "communities," although schoolchildren, town residents, and local villagers attended the events. Most of the active participants were men and boys drawn from various communal groups, clubs, schools, and occupations. Although Malay and Chinese schoolgirls sometimes joined in children's sporting contests or parades, they were a small minority, and, during the 1897 Jubilee, Asian women seem not to have attended the many teas and balls organized by the British colonial government for the colony's upper crust. While dozens of European women danced, prayed, and dined in public to celebrate royal longevity, Asian women, for the most part, did not. Nevertheless, the large crowds that flocked to see fireworks and many free entertainments seem to have included women and family groups, who walked from their homes to the ceremonies in familiar urban public spaces. How such spectators interpreted these events is not known, but they were content to participate and to be counted among the celebrants.

By the early twentieth century, Straits Chinese women married to wealthy, English-speaking Chinese men moved into public life on the fringes of British society, and they adopted the pro-British stance of their husbands. Lady Helen Song, wife of the barrister Lord Song Ong Siang, joined other Chinese women in Singapore during World War I to raise the money for an air fighter, which they presented

[44] Sangara Rajaratnam, "The Significance of the British Empire: Thoughts on Empire Day for School Children," *Pedagogue* 1, no. 1 (1926): 27–30.

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to the British government. Singapore English-language newspapers pictured her as a skilled hostess and sportswoman, comfortable at Government House receptions and British official dinners. She and her husband were active in a Presbyterian congregation, and they named their home in Singapore for his Cambridge college.[45] While few other Chinese women were as accepted in the British elite as Helen Song, many others learned the forms and language of Britishness through family examples, schools, and churches. In the larger towns of the Straits Settlements, wealthy Chinese women positioned themselves on the fringes of European society, identifying themselves as subjects of the queen.

British patriotic performance widened socially during the 1920s and 1930s, both in terms of class and gender. The Jubilee parade in the town of Teluk Anson in 1936 included wharf laborers, forest laborers, and small shopkeepers, as well as people of higher social status. A local Malay club, an Indian association, several Chinese clubs, and a convent that taught Chinese and Malay girls were illuminated alongside government buildings and schools.[46] As education became more widely available and the celebration of events such as Empire Day spread, more girls were exposed to the language and symbols of Britishness. Jubilee speakers urged loyalty in girls as well as boys as they praised King George V and his "wise government." In the small Perak town of Batu Gajah, girls from a Chinese school sang and danced as part of a celebratory Jubilee show. In Kampar, Mrs. C. P. Lee and Madam Lee Soon Ho of the Public Chinese Girls' School helped to plan the official sports day, and the former was photographed with the Kampar Jubilee Executive Committee.[47] By the mid-1930s, Asian females had taken on a larger part in official ceremonies; Lady Chulan, wife of the heir to the Perak sultanate, gave prizes at a Jubilee celebration sports day in the town of Grik.[48] Mrs. Tan Chay Yan, the owner of rubber estates in Malacca and Johore, was awarded a Silver Jubilee medal in 1935 and was profiled in Malacca's royal coronation souvenir booklet in 1937 as a patron of girls' education and of the Portuguese Church in Malacca. She chose to educate her son in England.[49]

Also, the colony's schools spread the vocabulary and forms of Britishness through their books, extracurricular activities, and ceremonies. Associations of teachers in Perak, Selangor, and the Straits Settlements proudly proclaimed their mission of educating the children of the empire, and some sent delegates to an Imperial Education Conference in 1923. Leaders of these groups—men who were Chinese, South Asian, Sinhalese, and Eurasian—represented the most important schools in the colony. The teachers' magazine the *Pedagogue* called on association members to give moral training for citizenship in service of the state and the empire.[50] Their schools celebrated Empire Day and participated actively in the

[45] "Lady Helen Song," *Straits Times*, 24 July 1936; "Interested in Child Welfare," *Straits Times*, 20 February 1936, women's supplement; "Lady Helen Song," *Straits Times Weekly Supplement*, 23 January 1936.

[46] Loyalty [Sangara Rajaratnam], *Jubilee Anniversary Book* (Ipoh, 1936), 88.

[47] Ibid., 70, 74, 76–77.

[48] Ibid., 38.

[49] P. V. Gopalan, *The Coronation Souvenir of the Settlement of Malacca Undertaken with a View to Foster an Everlasting Inter-racial Harmony and Amity among the Heterogeneous Folks of This Ancient Historic Settlement* (Kuala Lumpur, 1937), 166.

[50] Sangara Rajaratnam, "The Teachers' Association of Perak," *Pedagogue* 1, no. 1 (1926): 3–4, 10–12.

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ceremonies marking the 1936 Jubilee and 1937 coronation. Troops of Boy Scouts operated in many Malay as well as English-language schools. Operating under the patronage of the king and having a royal charter, they tied their multiethnic crew of boys into a resolutely British imperial framework.[51] Both state institutions and private organizations acted to draw individuals into an "imagined community" of the British.[52]

In 1937, a Tamil headmaster of an English-language school in Malacca defined Britishness, finding it compatible with ethnic diversity and with the equality of races. His pamphlet, *The Coronation Souvenir of the Settlement of Malacca Undertaken with a View to Foster an Everlasting Inter-racial Harmony and Amity among the Heterogeneous Folks of This Ancient Historic Settlement*, included a set of biographies of prominent Malaccans notable for their wealth and local leadership. Most were well-educated, professional men of Chinese, South Asian, or Malay ethnicity, many of whom had studied in Britain or had worked as colonial administrators. Their political loyalties to the empire were part of their daily lives. Some belonged to groups such as the Royal Empire Society or the Royal Geographic Society. Others served in Malayan Volunteer Companies, which were called to military action during World War I. But to these affiliations they added membership in dozens of ethnic, clan, and non-Christian religious associations. (The few British-born mentioned had less interesting pedigrees and far fewer local connections; they were portrayed, in fact, as minor partners in the coronation events.) As presented by one of their own, the Malaccan elite was proudly Asian and British simultaneously.[53] In Kampar at the Jubilee, the British flag was displayed next to the flag of Perak and the Chinese National Sunshine Flag, to indicate multiple loyalties. The rajas of the Federated Malay States sent an address to George V in which they proclaimed themselves Malays as well as His "Majesty's subjects." By the early twentieth century, Britishness was a capacious identity that drew together many groups residing in the Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States. Some of those who embraced it openly challenged prevailing assumptions of difference based on both class and race. But others contested these provocative claims.

BRITISHNESS CHALLENGED

However expansive their public rhetoric, English diplomats and police in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century sometimes indicated doubts about the British status of Asian residents of Malaya. The Malayans who most aggressively asserted their British subjecthood were Anglo-Chinese who traveled outside the colony and found themselves at risk because Chinese laws held that Chinese nationality was permanent and inheritable and superceded other allegiances. Claims by Straits-born Chinese for protection as British subjects when living in China arose as early as 1851 and continued into the early twentieth century. Periodically, Anglo-Chinese merchants and shipowners ran into trouble with some Chinese

[51] F. G. H. Parry, "Scouting in Perak," *Roda: Monthly Magazine of the Rotary Clubs of Malaya and Siam* 5 (November 1935): 300–302.

[52] Anderson, *Imagined Communities.*

[53] Gopalan, *Coronation Souvenir of the Settlement of Malacca.*

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authorities who chose not to recognize their assertion of British status.[54] British officials, who were willing to defend the group's rights but were confused when asked to identify particular individuals, launched elaborate discussions within the Foreign Office and the Colonial Office about rules governing British status and legal help. The position that they reached was a discriminatory one. To establish their rights, Anglo-Chinese had to accept restrictions and produce evidence of their status that went well beyond those levied on other residents of the Straits Settlements. A Costume Regulation issued in 1867 required that Chinese claiming British citizenship in China dress differently from Chinese subjects, although no consensus was ever reached on an acceptable dress code. Should they adopt European dress, or cut their queues, or wear a badge? All had connotations that were unacceptable to some.[55] After 1882, passports granted in the colonies of residence served as proof of British citizenship, and a clumsy registration system in China that required birth certificates and local interviews was developed to make sure that British consuls in Chinese treaty ports knew the group for whom they were responsible.[56]

By the late nineteenth century, the Straits Chinese routinely and actively proclaimed their British status in many contexts. In 1899, the *Straits Chinese Magazine* answered the question "Are the Straits Chinese British Subjects?" with a resounding yes, basing their opinion on several centuries of English common law. "Civis Britannicus" was the pseudonym of one of their number who wrote in 1902 a strongly patriotic, pro-imperialist account of the South African War and the impending coronation of Edward VII.[57] Leaders of the Straits Chinese community demanded the right to serve in the local military, the Straits Volunteers, by asserting not only their loyalty but also their status as British citizens, which required equal treatment and opportunities.[58] Whenever possible on public occasions, leaders of the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and the Straits Chinese British Association affirmed their patriotism and their British nationality.

The Straits Chinese complained not only about discriminatory treatment but

[54] A. E. H. Hanson, "Protection of Chinese subjects who have become British subjects (by birth or naturalization) especially ship owners," 22 October 1877, TNA: PRO, CO 273/91/12692. See also Claude McDonald, "Imprisonment of a Chinese British subject at Swatow," 2 November 1897, TNA: PRO, CO 273/232/27691. A Straits-born man from Singapore was murdered in Amoy in 1851 while in Chinese custody, despite attempts by the British consul to claim authority over him. Less serious disputes over legal protection and status continued through the 1860s and 1870s.

[55] Lo Yuen Lew et al., "Petition of the undersigned British subjects of Chinese descent resident in Shanghai," 23 November 1868, TNA: PRO, CO 23/34/5509; Sir J. Pauncefote et al., "Papers respecting British protection to Anglo-Chinese in China," 22 July 1899, TNA: PRO, CO 273/253/19245.

[56] Regulations issued in 1867 and recognized by the Chinese government entitled Anglo-Chinese—people who were (1) residents in Hong Kong or Kowloon when it was ceded to Britain and their children, (2) naturalized British subjects of Chinese origin and their children, (3) ethnic Chinese born in a British possession and their children, and (4) children born out of wedlock to British fathers and Chinese mothers—to different levels of British protection. Naturalized Chinese, the British-born children of Chinese subjects, although legally British, could not claim that status in China. Mixed-race children born out of wedlock were not entitled to the rights of British citizenship in China unless their parents subsequently married and they wore European dress.

[57] Siang, "Are the Straits Chinese British Subjects?" 61–66; Civis Britannicus, "The King and the Empire," *Straits Chinese Magazine* 6, no. 23 (1902): 106–13.

[58] Song Ong Siang, *The Straits Chinese and a Local Patriotic League* (Singapore, 1915).

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also about ineffectual protection in conflicts with Chinese authorities. For example, in 1898 Khung Yiong, a Straits-born Chinese, was imprisoned in Amoy, but the British consul there refused to recognize his nationality because he was not wearing Western dress.[59] Straits-Chinese barristers and members of the Legislative Council objected strongly to the British government over this and similar cases, but with little effect.[60] Around 1907, some Straits Chinese traveling in the Netherlands Indies found that their Britishness was denied by Dutch officials. In that colony, a strong distinction was drawn between those who could receive "European" privileges and could live among Europeans and those who could not. The Dutch government set the requirement that those so recognized had to follow "Western" family and inheritance law. Rather than defend British passport holders as Europeans, one British consul in the Netherlands Indies demanded that Straits-born Chinese be prepared to produce their parents' marriage licenses to have their British status recognized. Infuriated, the Straits Chinese British Association protested to the Straits government, demanding protection and an end to "diplomatic uncertainty" through "the issue of unqualified British passports, [for] every Chinese born in the Colony because he is a natural-born British subject, whether traveling to China or elsewhere."[61]

The British Foreign Office accepted the claims of the Anglo-Chinese in China to be given "all the rights" of British subjects, reaffirming this position in 1912 and 1923, although changes in Chinese governments and local instability hindered renegotiation of this policy with Chinese authorities.[62] Their defense of the Anglo-Chinese, however, had its limits. Married women took on the nationality of their husbands rather than that of the land of their birth; illegitimate children did not acquire their father's citizenship unless their parents married subsequent to the child's birth; and cultural styles as well as behavior influenced the willingness of British officials to defend particular people. To be protected, Anglo-Chinese had to have colonial certificates of nationality, be registered as British citizens, and annually renew passports for travel in China. In the 1898 case of Khung Yiong, whose birth in the Straits Settlements was acknowledged, the British consul in Peking, Sir Claude MacDonald, ordered the British consul in Amoy not to protect him on the grounds that "I consider his to be a particularly flagrant case of a British subject of Chinese race enjoying all the privileges of a Chinese subject by concealing his British nationality until he found it expedient to take advantage of it in order to obtain immunity from offenses committed by him." This decision was protested by the governor of the Straits Settlements, who championed the letter of the law over character issues, but his position was overruled by the Foreign Office, the Prime Minister Lord Salisbury, and Joseph Chamberlain, who asserted the conditionality of British protection abroad for the Anglo-Chinese, suggesting

[59] Claude McDonald, "Correspondence relating to the case of Khung Yiong," 16 December 1897, TNA: PRO, CO 273/243/3395; see also "British Subjects of Chinese Descent," *Straits Chinese Magazine* 1, no. 3 (1897): 156.

[60] Siang, "Are the Straits Chinese British Subjects?" 64–65, and *One Hundred Years' History*, 370, 549.

[61] Ibid., 489–90.

[62] Guillemard, "Protection of British Subjects," TNA: PRO, CO 717/28/45218.

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that the Straits Settlements should "exercise great care" in issuing such passports to "prevent as far as possible [their] improper use."[63]

The passport issue was only one of several areas in which the legal rights of British subjects in Malaya were adjusted on racial grounds in the early twentieth century. Beginning in 1904, the right of "natural born British subjects" to take the qualifying exam for the Malayan Civil Service and to serve in the Straits Settlements or Federated Malay States police force was withdrawn for those of "non-European" descent. Straits Chinese organizations branded this a "colour bar" and protested immediately to no avail. Also in 1904, the state railway tried to segregate first-class carriages on the railway by barring non-Europeans on cultural grounds. (Allegedly dirty bodies and clothing and rude behavior were said to offend traveling European women.) Wealthy Chinese, South Asians, and Malays—furious that their elite status might not be recognized and that they might have to ride alongside their poorer compatriots—protested and forced the railways to drop the policy, but by 1914 new restrictions on access to station platforms and ticket offices increased racial segregation on the trains.[64] In several ways, therefore, the colonial government used race and class differences to justify infringements on the supposedly equal status of British subjects.

BRITISHNESS DENIED

Englishmen in Malaya also constructed the identities of the Asians around them in ways that stressed differences rather than similarities. Close contact did not necessarily produce a sense of commonality. In a discussion of racial attitudes in British Malaya, A. J. Stockwell has written that "dismissive generalizations about the oriental were a part of the mental furniture of even the most experienced Europeans, at least at the end of a trying day." He used the term "white tribalism" to describe the racially exclusive habits of the vast majority who worked to maintain ethnic boundaries rather than to overcome them.[65] His account fits men in the civil service, such as William Evans, who pictured the Chinese and the Malay as profoundly different from themselves. If the term "British" had to be accepted for its political reinforcement of empire, they could embrace a notion of Englishness to support their sense of superiority.[66]

Sir Hugh Clifford, who entered the Malayan Civil Service in 1883 and lived in the colony for over twenty years, becoming its governor in 1926, published multiple books and short stories considering the interaction of Europeans and Asians and commenting on Malay society. His conservative, Roman Catholic education and his family ties to the English peerage made him sensitive to issues of class and social hierarchy, which helped to shape his fiction. Despite his great affection for Malays and Malaya, he consistently depicted the people as essentially different

[63] Claude McDonald, "Imprisonment of a Chinese British Subject," 11 January 1898, TNA: PRO, CO 273/243/818.

[64] Butcher, *British in Malaya*, 97–101.

[65] A. J. Stockwell, "The White Man's Burden and Brown Humanity: Colonialism and Ethnicity in British Malaya," *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 10, no. 1 (1982): 44–68.

[66] Mandler explores the many constructions of these two terms in his recent book, *English National Character*.

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from Europeans in terms of character, morality, and talents. His stories about Saleh, a Malay prince educated in England who became a colonial administrator, made this point clearly. The tale, which ended in tragedy, was written to caution against the evils of uprooting Malays and trying to modernize them. The combination of a public school and a true British home were supposed to make Saleh British, so that he could rule his people properly and support the empire. The results were disastrous, however, because the changes in his character were only superficial. Saleh never learned to be sufficiently industrious, disciplined, and sexually repressed to make the grade. The narrator of the story pronounced: "A Malay hasn't got the rudiments of the Englishman in him; there aren't the materials there with which to effect the transformation; all you can do is make of him an imitation, a sham, a fraud!" Both his attempt to win the love of a middle-class English girl and his later efforts to succeed as a district administrator failed miserably. His awareness of his own shortcomings were so severe that he intentionally provoked British soldiers into killing him by running amok and threatening the life of a colonial official.[67]

Clifford made a similar argument in the novel, *A Free Lance of Today*, in which Maurice Curzon, an expat businessman turned gunrunner, learned to appreciate his Englishness and his difference from the Malays and the Achenese. "Gradually, but with inexorable force, the conviction of the hopeless limitations of the brown people had been brought home to his mind. Their moral and mental inferiority revealed itself at every turn."[68] For Clifford, the subjects of the empire were "alien folk" incapable of following the moral rules of the English and therefore inferior. Those of high social status could move toward assimilation, but they could not quite achieve it. While he used the word "English" to denote the state of grace they never acquired, his denials of equality seem to me to block Malays from sharing a British identity too. Not only did he use a consistently binary vocabulary of difference, but he set his fiction in places and periods where British cultural influences were minimal. His choice to write about a rural, exotic, archaic Malaya allowed him to ignore the colony's urban, transnational population who had claimed a British identity and learned its cultural forms and vocabulary. Although his writings on the region circulated widely and helped to shape representations within the United Kingdom, Clifford's conservative, Catholic opinions conflicted with others in circulation in Malaya during the 1920s. Constructions of national as well as racial character were contested among the English and varied according to the politics of their authors. The racial attitudes of other Englishmen in the area were considerably softer, and there was clearly much individual variation. Richard Winstedt, who became a prolific scholar of Malay language and culture during his thirty-three years of government service in the region between 1902 and 1935, pictured the differences between English and Malay in terms of social behavior, and the Europeans came off by far the worst. He found their ignorance and brusqueness offensive in comparison to the "perfect manners" of the Malay, whom he described as his "brown brothers."[69] Racial categories could therefore

[67] Hugh Clifford, *Saleh: A Prince of Malaya* (Edinburgh, 1926), 96.

[68] Hugh Clifford, *A Free Lance of Today* (London, 1928), 160.

[69] Sir Richard Winstedt, *Start from Alif, Count from One: An Autobiographical Memoir* (Kuala Lumpur, 1969), 87, 112.

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be imagined in very different ways, and, in some discussions, "race" carried cultural rather than biological connotations.[70] Difference rather than similarity, however, often dominated the accounts of English-born Malayans when they described the people around them.

BRIDGING THE GAP

An alternative construction of identities—racially egalitarian and culturally hybrid—surfaced in the leading towns of the peninsula around 1928. It was well suited to the sort of border-crossing, urban, professional men to whom it appealed. Founded in Chicago in 1905, the Rotary movement spread within a few years to Canada, to Europe, and then to the towns of the British Empire. Rebaptized Rotary International in 1921, it attracted a growing number of affluent, middle-class men who pledged to advance "understanding, goodwill, and international peace through a world fellowship of business and professional men united in the Rotary ideal of Service." When the group used the term "race," it was to challenge it as a category of difference. Spokesmen used the rhetoric of "the essential brotherhood of all men" and of a "League of Races" to push their agenda of cross-cultural sociability and local engagement.[71] Members represented occupational niches, not ethnic communities, and they pledged to participate equally in club activities and service projects. Since they all were of relatively high status, the group could safely ignore social differences.

The Kuala Lumpur club grew out of discussions among rich businessmen with leading civil servants about the need for more interracial social contact. They opted to join Rotary International, which functioned through quite structured lunch or dinner meetings, rather than to organize their own social club, where the possibility of wives' attendance would confront members with ethnic differences in gender norms. The Kuala Lumpur club began in 1928, inaugurated by J. W. Davidson, a former U.S. diplomat who had lived in China for several years before he became an enthusiastic Rotarian in Canada and traveled during the 1920s to expand Rotary International in the South Pacific and Southeast Asia. Its first group of directors included English and Malay civil servants, Indian merchants, and wealthy Chinese tin mine owners, many of whom were politically active in the Federated Malay States. It was an elite crew of men, all of whom were prominent in their ethnic communities and who had international ties and experience. By 1932, around 500 similar men had joined Rotary clubs in the larger towns of the peninsula. Around 60 percent of the members self-identified as Europeans, 19 percent as Chinese, 9 percent as Indian, 6 percent as Malay, and 6 percent as Eurasian and other Asian groups.[72] Between 1929 and 1940, the Ipoh Rotary club admitted a total of 192 men, about 75 percent of whom were European, 12 percent Chinese, 8 percent

[70] George W. Stocking Jr., *Race, Culture, and Evolution* (New York, 1968).

[71] Victoria De Grazia, *Irresistible Empire* (Cambridge, MA, 2005), 26–27, 36; "The Six Objects," *Roda* 3, no. 2 (1933): 3; F. Cooray, "The Rotary Movement in Malaya," *British Malaya* 4 (1929–30): 214.

[72] Butcher, *British in Malaya*, 188–90; Cooray, "The Rotary Movement," 214–16.

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Malay, and 5 percent South Asian or other Asian groups.[73] For the most part, its clientele were upwardly mobile urbanites thrown together in the new towns of the peninsula, where they jostled one another in their efforts to build careers and line their pockets.

Even though the ethos of Rotary rested on a recognizably American blend of optimistic goodwill coupled with respect for moneymaking, a strong aura of Britishness ringed the Malayan clubs. At the inaugural dinner in Kuala Lumpur, dozens of men in dinner jackets and bow ties posed in front of a British flag. At the tables sat the British resident of Selangor, James Lornie, and the chief secretary of the government, Sir William Peel, as well as several other members of the Malayan Civil Service. Hugh Clifford, high commissioner to the Federated Malay States, had agreed to become an honorary member of the club. Speeches in English and toasts to the king confirmed a British tone and style. Those who joined were Anglophone, Anglophile British subjects who regularly affirmed their loyalty to the British crown, whatever their individual ethnic and religious heritage. The group's announced aim was to move beyond snobbish claims of superiority and inferiority to "a common platform," where members were "really good friends" who could overcome prejudices and misunderstandings. Members of different ethnicities sat next to one another, gave speeches, and served as officers. Rotary offered its members a multicultural way of being British that brought with it social ties to other elite men within their city and region.

One atypical member still remembered today for his service and social prominence, Datoh Dr. Haji Mohamed Eusoff bin Mohamed Eusoff (1895–1957), illustrates the way Britishness could be balanced with other identities. Eusoff (called Haji by his Rotary friends until he inherited the title of Panglima Kinta in 1952) worked during the 1930s in the Malayan Civil Service as a land registrar and assistant registrar of cooperative societies. Although his father was a rich Malay territorial chief and major landlord, Eusoff was one of many sons and the child of a secondary, estranged wife, so he was expected to work for a living. Educated in the best boys' school in Ipoh, he grew up in the company of the sons of high-status European and Chinese families, all of whom spoke English. For photos he wore three-piece British-style suits, tight collars, and neckties. His daughter described him as "very English," an enthusiastic Rotarian, and an avid international traveler. But he had strong sense of himself as a Malay too, and during the 1930s he gave several well-publicized speeches to Rotarians on the need for them to understand and sympathize with the problems of Malay farmers and villagers. His oblique references to the injustices of colonial rule and the not-endless patience of the Malays ought to be seen as an expression of early Malay nationalism. Moreover, he was a strong supporter of racial equality, and he used his Rotary platform to argue against English racial and social prejudices.[74]

[73] Rotary Club of Ipoh membership book, 1929–58. I want to thank the secretary of the Rotary Club of Ipoh for allowing me to see this private record of the club's early days. Because the European members tended to be more transient than Asian ones, at any given date, the European dominance was less than these figures imply.

[74] Datoh Haji Mohamed Eusoff, "The Charm of Malay Life," *Roda* 8 (May 1937): 236–37, and "The Malay Peasant," *Roda* 10 (October 1938): 121–24; Datin Ragayah Eusoff, *Lord of Kinta: The Biography of Dato Panglima Kinta Eusoff* (Petaling Jaya, 1995). Haji Mohamed Eusoff spoke Malay at home, had two wives with separate households, and took on the duties in adulthood of Malay territorial chief.

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Rotary speakers nudged members to become more modern and reform-minded in their social attitudes. A talk by Margaret Sanger in 1936 on the subject of birth control got full and approving coverage in the *Roda*, which circulated throughout Thailand and Malaya. The magazine also publicized calls for women's education, for marriage law reform, and for better treatment of Chinese office staff.[75] Despite the group's rather light, chummy style, it was used as a forum occasionally for more strident messages with a social bite. Rotarians in Malaya saw themselves as cosmopolitan urbanites with a mission to fight against cultural prejudices and local social problems. In contrast to the message sent by Hugh Clifford, the Rotary brand of Britishness rejected racial essentialism in favor of egalitarian individualism.[76]

CONCLUSION

In multiple settings in Malaya before 1940, Malays, Tamils, and Chinese who learned the language, rhetoric, and style of Britishness in the schools, churches, clubs, and public ceremonies of the peninsula regularly represented themselves as British. To be sure, there were instrumental reasons for doing so, but individuals also chose to identify themselves as British for cultural and political reasons. British subjecthood created transnational ties and moved people away from ethnically exclusive cultural worlds. They could assert their modernity and sophistication by adopting the English language and Western dress. Moreover, the link of Britishness to traditions of political liberalism legitimated the rights claims of British subjects. While the Chinese asserted these claims most stridently, other ethnic groups also joined the chorus.

When viewed through the assumptions of a postcolonial world, this embrace of Britishness seems inappropriate and conservative. Yet it is important to remember that Malaya before the Japanese invasion in 1941 was a multicultural environment of weak nationalisms and strong global ties. Anthony Milner argues that on the Malay peninsula before 1941 "concepts of 'the nation' . . . were . . . enunciated only in the most limited and hesitant way."[77] His statement points to the power of alternatives to nationalism in a society where local ethnic tensions made difficult the building of a wide anticolonial movement and a unified state. Moreover, Britishness was only one of many competing political identities that multilingual and multicultural individuals in Malaya could and did adopt. In the 1920s and 1930s, writers in Malaya publicized pan-Islamic movements, transregional Malay loyalties, Chinese republicanism, and Indian nationalism as well as British patriotism.[78] Transnational modes of conceptualizing identities in the interwar period trumped conventional nationalist ones.

[75] "Margaret Sanger on Birth Control," *Roda* 7 (July 1936): 9–11; G. K. Kiat, "Do We Treat Our Clerks Fairly?" *Roda* 11 (December 1938): 194.

[76] To be sure, the individuals were carefully selected, but the group made clear through its choice of officers and service projects that individual competence rather than ethnicity or title was of central importance.

[77] Anthony C. Milner, *The Invention of Colonial Malaya: Contesting Nationalism and the Expansion of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, 1995), 282.

[78] Ibrahim bin Abu Bakar, *Islamic Modernism in Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur, 1994); Roff, *Origins of Malay Nationalism*, 254–56.

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Malay nationalism, as it took shape after 1945, developed under the umbrella of British military power and colonial policies that strengthened the political control of elite Malays during the time of the Chinese-led Communist insurrection. Emergency rule, in force from 1948 to 1960, reshaped the political forces that shaped the establishment of Malaya (later Malaysia) in 1957.[79] The renunciation of British political control did not sever the multiple networks that linked the peninsula to London. The new state maintained strong British ties through membership in the Commonwealth, the economic dominance of British-owned businesses, the use of English as a second language, and the personal networks of leading political figures. Lost, however, was the commitment to multiracial community inherent in the idea of Britishness as it was used in the public discourse of the empire before 1940. Identity politics bolstered by rhetorics of communalism defeated more inclusive, alternative formations and imaginings, resulting in a state organized around ethnic categories. Continued friction over the meaning of citizenship and of equal rights not only recalls earlier debates but also accounts for nostalgia toward a colonial era when nationalism had not yet replaced transnational loyalties and undermined cross-cultural cooperation. At that time and place, Britishness was a capacious identity with wide appeal.

[79] Timothy Norman Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya* (Cambridge, 1999).

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