+65

VOL. 4
2025

Making Multicultural Singapore

A Journal by the Founders' Memorial on Singapore's Post-Independence History and Society

About the Founders' Memorial

+65 is presented by the Founders' Memorial, an institution of the National Heritage Board. The Founders' Memorial honours independent Singapore's founding values and nation-building journey. Opening at Bay East Garden in end 2028 as an integrated garden and gallery experience, it presents the story of how our founding leaders and generation built independent Singapore, establishing it on values and ideals such as multiculturalism, openness and integrity. The Memorial aims to spur Singaporeans to reflect on our founding values and draw inspiration for Singapore's future.

www.foundersmemorial.gov.sg

Founders' Memorial Singapore
foundersmemorialsg
Founders_Memorial@nhb.gov.sg

Images on cover (clockwise from top of collage)

Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew touring Kampong Kembangan, 24 November 1963. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Chinese ribbon dance performance during an *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat* concert, 4 June 1962. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

National Theatre, mid-20th century. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

View of City Hall during an *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat* concert, 2 June 1963. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Red President transistor radio, 1950s–1960s. Gift of Mrs Lim Geok Ann. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

Minister for Culture S. Rajaratnam opening Hong Lim Park, 23 April 1960. *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

+65

VOL. 4
2025

Publisher
Founders' Memorial
150 Beach Road,
#36-08,
The Gateway West,
Singapore 189720

With special thanks to
Bartley Secondary School
Chua Mia Tee and Dr Chua Yang
Indian Heritage Centre
ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute
Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth
Ministry of Digital Development and Information
National Archives of Singapore
National Gallery Singapore
National Library Board
National Museum of Singapore
National University of Singapore Libraries
Nic Lim
Parliament of Singapore
Raffles Institution
Singapore Art Museum
SPH Media Limited
Sri Warisan Performing Arts Ltd

Every effort has been made to trace the copyright holders and obtain permission to reproduce archival material contained in this journal. Please contact the Founders' Memorial should you have any queries or information relating to material found herein.

ISSN: 27375439

Contents

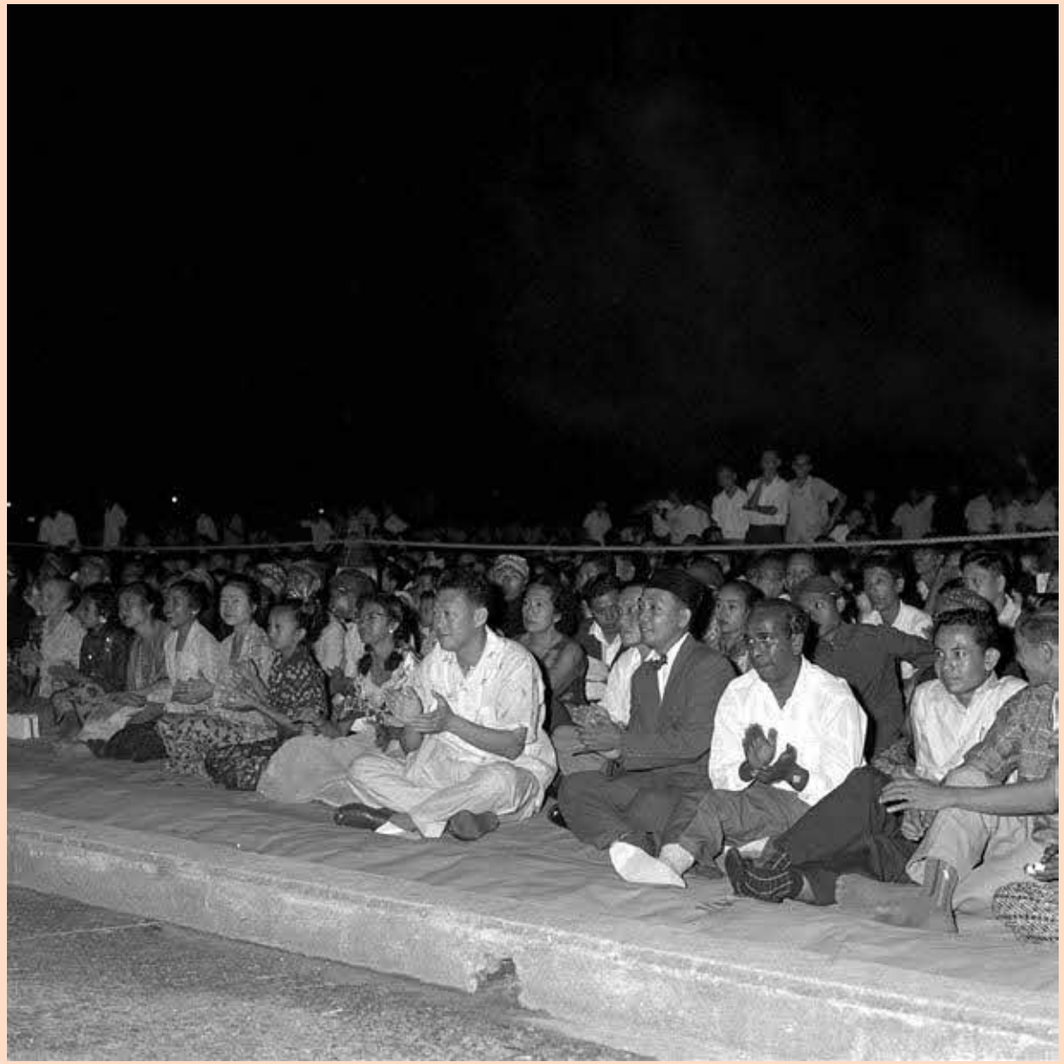
Foreword:
Making Multicultural Singapore

by *+65* Editorial Committee

Welcome to the fourth issue of *+65*, a journal by the Founders' Memorial on Singapore's post-independence history and society.

This issue is a special edition published in conjunction with *Not Mere Spectators: The Makings of Multicultural Singapore*, a Founders' Memorial exhibition presented at the National Gallery Singapore from 31 October 2025 to 29 March 2026.

***+65* builds on the journal's editorial mandate to strengthen interest in Singapore's post-independence history, with a focus on the dilemmas and decisions confronted by our founding leaders and citizens. This fourth issue, however, deep dives into one of independent Singapore's constitutive values: multiculturalism. Bringing together perspectives from thought leaders, curators, community representatives, and student contributors, it offers a survey of the key policies, initiatives, and efforts that help *make multicultural Singapore*. In the process, readers are challenged to reflect on the parallels that connect the heady days of post-war Singapore with the unique challenges of today. If managing a diverse and heterogeneous society involves delicate and deliberate work both then and now, what can we learn from the experiences of Singapore's founding generation?**



↑
Minister for Culture S. Rajaratnam (third from right) with Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew (centre, next to children) watching *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat* from the Padang, 16 August 1959. *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

The issue presents a range of responses to this question across four sections. Section 1, titled "**Not Mere Spectators**", draws on the *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat* (People's Cultural Concerts) of the 1950s and 1960s as an entry point. Curators Siau Ming En and Sarina Anwar first walk readers through the curatorial deliberations behind the *Not Mere Spectators: The Makings of Multicultural Singapore* exhibition. Importantly, this introductory piece also delves into the Memorial's efforts to honour Singapore's multicultural ideals in the exhibition-making process, which involved extensive engagement across different segments of society. A second article by Pearl Wee then takes readers back in time to revel in the spectacular sights and sounds of the *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat* concerts. In doing so, Wee suggests that the concerts, while short-lived, helped make real and visible the idea of a multicultural society in the formative years of self-governing Singapore. Without them, the notion of a multicultural Singapore, where different cultures not only coexist, but cohere and come together on the same stage, may well have remained an abstract concept devoid of life and colour.

↑
An *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat* performance along the City Hall steps, 9 December 1959. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Section 2, titled "**Laying the Foundations for Equality**", continues the narrative by urging readers to consider the conscious and intentional ways in which the foundations for multicultural Singapore were established. Accordingly, it opens with a historical exposition by Joshua Goh on the six-year fight for a multilingual assembly. Spearheaded by the Labour Front government of David Marshall, this multi-year campaign was a concrete and tangible expression of Marshall's earnestly held belief that all races in Singapore deserved a just and equal future. Marshall, however, was not alone in this quest to improve society. He was joined by other like-minded individuals, including the men and women who helped establish and grow the Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO). Set up in 1949, the IRO and its early growth is the subject of the section's next article by Sharifah Afra Alatas, herself an interfaith advocate. Part research article and part personal reflection, Afra's piece demonstrates tangibly that it takes a metaphorical village to *make multicultural Singapore*. The section then concludes with an article by legal scholar Jaclyn Neo that examines the proceedings of the 1966 Wee Chong Jin Constitutional Commission. Established at a time when Singapore's minority groups were uncertain about their place in a newly established nation, the Commission assured them that all Singaporeans—regardless of race, language, or religion—would be accorded equal rights.

↓
Students during a flag raising ceremony, 30 August 1966. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

↑
Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew meeting Goodwill Committee members in the aftermath of the racial riots, 25 July 1964. *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

Section 3, titled "**Voices from the Community**", then turns readers' attention to community leaders and citizens, whose experiences speak to the complex process of fostering a fledgling multicultural nation. It first profiles Singapore's pioneer Malay leaders and the mettle they showed when the fate of our nation hung in the balance in 1964 and 1965. Through Sarina Anwar's poignant account of their ideals and contributions, we see them walking the ground and rallying the community, amid the tensions they had to navigate leading up to Singapore's independence and beyond. Their experiences afford us a glimpse into how we might navigate issues of diversity and inclusion today—a message also conveyed through Jegateesh Gynasigamani's account of Indian community leader Govindasamy Sarangapany. A newspaper editor and social reformer, Sarangapany took it upon himself to help foster a thriving and dynamic Singaporean Indian-Tamil identity. This meant, in part, embracing and embodying multiculturalism, which Sarangapany personally exemplified through his own interracial marriage to Lim Boon Neo. Of course, *making multicultural Singapore* at times also called for sacrifice, accommodation, and mutual respect as different communities traded individual preferences to grow the common space. This process of negotiation is alluded to in the final piece of this section, a frank and eye-opening interview with a former Nanyang University graduate, Ho Tong Wong, by participants of the Student Archivist Project.

In a nod to the ongoing and evolving process of *making multicultural Singapore*, the final section looks to both the past and future. Titled "**Roots and Routes to the Future**", it takes stock of how far we have come, but also asks: where do we go from here? What more needs to be done? Kickstarting the conversation is Professor Wang Gungwu, a scholar whose work lies at the intersection of history, identity, and culture. Reflecting first on his own experience creating EngMalChin, a hybrid form of Malayan poetry, Professor Wang then pivots to musing about Singapore's multi-civilisational future. Fittingly, it is this concern for the future that ultimately binds the issue's last two pieces. Penned respectively by Irene Ng, S. Rajaratnam's authorised biographer, and Daniel PS Goh, Associate Professor at the National University of Singapore, they bring the spotlight back to Rajaratnam, arguably Singapore's foremost proponent of multiculturalism. A man whose ideals were well ahead of his time, Rajaratnam had—amid the ideological battles and conflicts of the 1950s and 1960s—already envisioned a Singapore defined not by race, but by an abiding sense of conviction to a multicultural community. How can his powerful example inspire us to press forward amid the tensions and complexities of today's globalised and fragmented world?

↓
Children of different races creating a *rangoli*, 4 November 2021. *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

Not Mere Spectators

“In their thousands and thousands, they came to join our celebrations. They were not just mere spectators watching something being performed for them. They were participants, each and every one, in a spiritual experience which will bring our people closer together and make them more coherent, and more loyal to each other and the State which belongs to us all.”

Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew addressing the audience during an *Aneka Ragam Ra’ayat* at the City Hall steps, 9 December 1959

→
People of different races heading to an *Aneka Ragam Ra’ayat* at Botanic Gardens, 2 August 1959. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Introducing *Not Mere Spectators: The Makings of Multicultural Singapore*

— Second Pilot Exhibition by the Founders' Memorial

by Siau Ming En and Sarina Anwar

↓
Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew addressing the audience during an *Aneka Rakam Ra'ayat* at the City Hall steps, 9 December 1959. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

On the evening of 9 December 1959, thousands gathered at the Padang for the *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat* (People's Cultural Concerts), which marked the grand finale of Singapore's National Loyalty Week. Many had joined the week-long celebrations, organised to forge a sense of loyalty among the diverse citizens of the new state of Singapore.[1] Founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew stood atop the City Hall steps to address the crowd. They were "not just mere spectators", he observed, but "participants" in building a nation, determined to live together and understand each other's differing cultures, ways of life, and political views.[2] This moment, occurring mere months after Singapore gained full internal self-governance in June 1959, encapsulates Singapore's approach to multiculturalism: intentional, participatory, and ever-evolving.

Today, we are confronted daily with the fragility of social cohesion by news of violent and prolonged global conflicts, racial discrimination, and social media echo chambers. At the same time, recent local headlines on language requirements for citizenship, and the role of online platforms as "safe spaces" for racial dialogue, all serve as stark reminders that maintaining harmony requires more than just peaceful coexistence. It demands active participation, thoughtful engagement, and even uncomfortable conversations.

These contemporary realities form the impetus for our second pilot exhibition, *Not Mere Spectators: The Makings of Multicultural Singapore*, held at the National Gallery Singapore from 31 October 2025 to 29 March 2026. The exhibition explores how multiculturalism was thought about, talked about, and consciously forged through policies, ground-up efforts, and daily choices of ordinary citizens from the 1950s to 1970s. It is our hope that visitors gain a deeper understanding of how Singapore's brand of multiculturalism came to be. Branching from that, may they connect the threads to today and their role in actively shaping multicultural Singapore—still ever in the making.

↑
A design render by exhibition designer FARM of the entrance of the Memorial's second pilot exhibition *Not Mere Spectators: The Makings of Multicultural Singapore*, 2025. Courtesy of National Heritage Board.

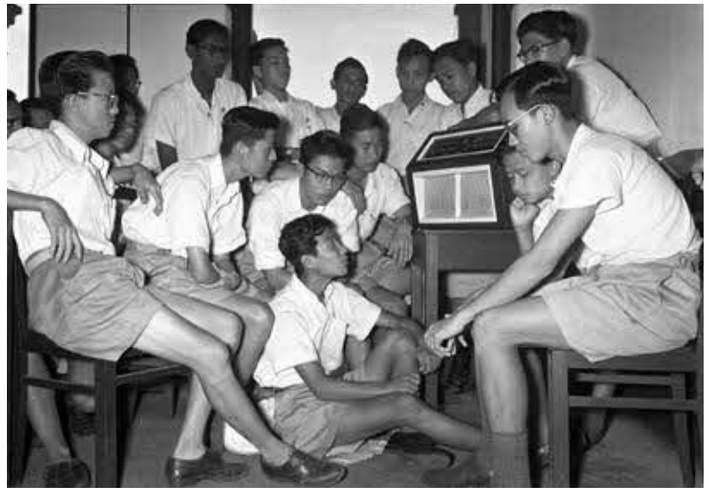
Setting the Stage:
Early Imaginings of a Nation

The exhibition opens with the *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat*. These were free outdoor concerts launched by the newly established Ministry of Culture in 1959 to showcase the cultural expressions of different ethnic groups. Through a commissioned animation by local studio Finding Pictures, visitors embark on a whimsical journey of the reimagined concerts across Singapore. By drawing on archival materials and first-hand accounts from those who organised and attended the concerts, the animation reinterprets their sights and sounds. In so doing, it brings attention to the government's role in forging a national consciousness among diverse communities.

Peeling back the curtains of the *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat*, the exhibition then pulls visitors into the early imaginings of Singapore as a nation. This is explored through the lens of Singapore's first Minister for Culture S. Rajaratnam and his 1957 radio play *A Nation in the Making*, written during his journalism days. The play introduces archetypal characters such as "Optimist" and "Pessimist" who represent opposing viewpoints on what it takes to build a nation. Through the characters' compelling debates, the play presents both Rajaratnam's critiques and his advocacy of the deliberate forging of a "Malayan consciousness". This idea of a Malayan consciousness, of forging a common identity across the territories of Singapore and Malaya, was embraced by different thought leaders as a more viable way to merge Singapore with Malaya. However, the union was short-lived. Singapore's separation from Malaysia in 1965 prompted a rethinking of how to unite diverse communities. This in turn led to Singapore's distinctive approach to multiculturalism, in which the principle of equality for all races is formally enshrined in the National Pledge and Constitution. Though recordings of the radio play have disappeared, we display digital versions of the original typescripts from ISEAS Library.

↑
A design render by exhibition designer FARM of the exhibition's immersive space that reinterprets the sights and sounds of the *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat*, 2025. Courtesy of National Heritage Board.

→
S. Rajaratnam (centre), Yang di-Pertuan Negara Yusof Ishak (right), and Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Culture Lee Khoon Choy (left), 12 November 1960. Yusof Ishak Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



←
Students crowding around to listen to a Radio Malaya broadcast, 11 March 1955. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Rajaratnam explored the key themes of language, race, and national consciousness in his radio play, and these themes thread across three substantive sections in the exhibition. We asked local playwright Kaylene Tan, known for her immersive audio walk *New World's End* (2022–2024) in Jalan Besar, to reimagine these themes through an intimate three-chapter audio play. [3] Following the main character, Arumugam—who is inspired by Rajaratnam himself—each chapter grounds its corresponding exhibition section in pivotal moments in the late 1950s and early 1960s: the promotion of Malay as the National Language, National Loyalty Week, and the construction of the National Theatre. Through Arumugam's conversations with those around him, the idealism and scepticism of the time come alive.

From Ideals to Lived Realities: Multiculturalism in Singapore as an Intentional Work in Progress

We then invite visitors to experience the interplay between imagination, ideals, and the lived experience in the 1950s and 1960s by tuning in to the audio plays and examining select historical artefacts, archival newspapers, and oral history interviews.

Artworks by contemporary and social-realist artists of the 1950s to 1960s create spaces for self-reflection, while contemporary news headlines interspersed in the gallery remind visitors that race relations and multiculturalism remain a work in progress. Thought-provoking and candid questions throughout the exhibition prompt visitors to both look deeper within themselves and reach out to have more intentional conversations about multiculturalism in Singapore. The word "makings" in the exhibition title is a deliberate choice. It speaks to how our founding leaders and generation laid the groundwork in our formative years, and then built on that foundation with evolving policies and social practices that have shaped our distinctive brand of multiculturalism. But "makings" also sets our sights on a potential future state. We ask visitors: how can we continue this ongoing journey of (re)defining and (re)affirming our shared identity and norms?

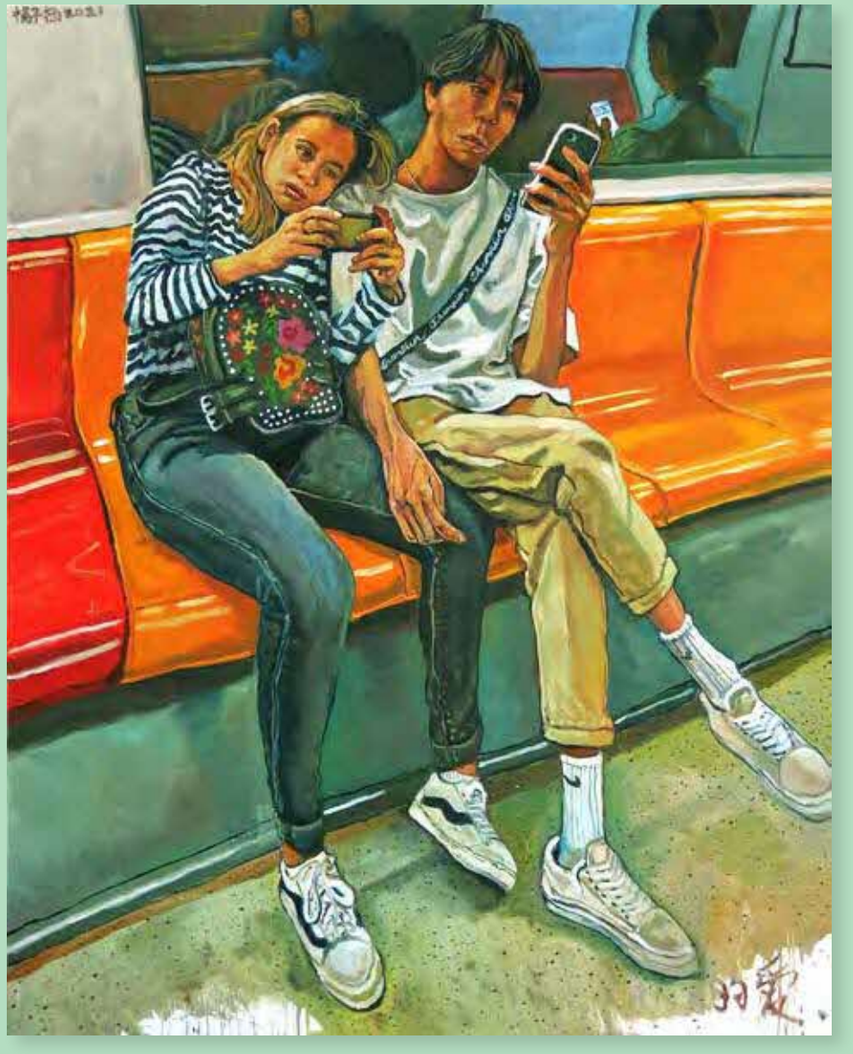
↓
A design render by exhibition designer FARM of the "Connect" section of the exhibition, which explores early attempts to connect a diverse population through Singapore's language policy, 2025. Courtesy of National Heritage Board.

↑
Chua Mia Tee, *Eating on Banana Leaves*, 1979. Oil on canvas, 69 × 81.5 cm. Gift of Times Publishing Limited. Collection of National Gallery Singapore, National Heritage Board.

Beyond a Common Language, the first of three substantive sections in the exhibition, explores early attempts to **connect** a diverse population through Singapore's language policy. Textbooks and learning materials in the four official languages, dating to between the 1950s and 1990s, provide a visual evolution of Singapore's bilingual policy. For visitors accustomed to English as our working language and medium of instruction, confronting subjects like History and Mathematics in mother tongues helps emphasise the accommodations and adjustments made by individuals and different communities during Singapore's language transitions.[4] Chua Mia Tee's *Eating on Banana Leaves* (1979), an oil painting of a multiracial group sharing a meal, prompts visitors to "hear" the language(s) spoken in such everyday scenes. We then ask: **do we need to speak the same language to have a common identity?**

A Life Unbothered by Race? presents more nuanced stories of navigating racial differences in 1950s and 1960s Singapore. Rajaratnam envisioned a society where one's character would not be judged "by the colour of his skin, by the shape of his nose, or the texture of his hair".[5] But on the ground, how did people **relate** to one another? In this section, interactive multimedia storybooks present lesser-known stories: from interracial adoptions and interracial marriages of the period, to accounts of the 1964 racial riots that speak not just of violence, but of protection across racial lines. The stories may have taken place decades ago, and there are now aspirations toward a "post-race" or "race-blind" society. Yet visitors today may still relate, consciously or unconsciously, to similar questions about race and identity. Yeo Tze Yang's *Lovers on a Train* (2021), a painting of a young couple on an MRT train, invites reflection on the presence of racial biases, if any, when one tries to paint a Singaporean. We then ask: are we ***unbothered*** by race, and should we be?

↓
A design render by exhibition designer FARM of the "Relate" section of the exhibition, which explores nuanced stories of navigating racial differences in 1950s and 1960s Singapore, 2025. Courtesy of National Heritage Board



↑
Yeo Tze Yang, *Lovers on a Train*, 2021.
Oil on canvas, 152 × 122 cm. Courtesy of Nic Lim.

National Consciousness Through Common Spaces presents the role of institutional frameworks and individual actions in shaping multicultural experiences. It explores policies such as National Service (introduced 1967) and the Ethnic Integration Policy (introduced 1989), and also ground-up efforts including the Inter-Religious Organisation and Goodwill Committees. Together, both aspects create physical and metaphorical common spaces that bring people of different backgrounds together. These are spaces where Singaporeans **live**, work, study, and play side by side, and connect through shared routines, interactions, and experiences. Jing Quek's photographs, *Singapore Idols – Army Boys* (2006) and *Singapore Idols – Aunties & Uncles* (2009), capture National Servicemen at an outdoor field and seniors at a void deck, respectively. These spaces find their meaning in the people who use them, and in turn, we ask:

↓
Jing Quek, *Singapore Idols – Aunties & Uncles*, 2009. Photograph, 121.92 × 162.56 cm. Collection of Singapore Art Museum, National Heritage Board.

↑
Jing Quek, *Singapore Idols – Army Boys*, 2006. Photograph, 121 × 175 cm. Collection of Singapore Art Museum, National Heritage Board.

how can we connect more deeply and genuinely in these spaces? An interactive picture zone invites visitors to step into a common space of their choice and reflect on this question in an experiential setting.

The exhibition features lilac scaffolding throughout—a visual reminder that multiculturalism is a permanent building project for Singapore. This symbolism culminates in an interactive finale, *Our Multiculturalism Moves*, that takes us back to the words and enduring promise of the National Pledge. Here, visitors are invited to express their commitment to building multicultural Singapore through dance—a nod to the *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat* where the exhibition journey began, and more importantly, a reminder that while we may not **move** the same, it matters more that we **move** together.

↑
A design render by exhibition designer FARM of the "Live" section of the exhibition, which explores how policies and ground-up efforts created physical and metaphorical common spaces for people of different backgrounds, 2025. Courtesy of National Heritage Board.

→
A mock-up by multimedia designer CraveFX of the exhibition's interactive finale, where visitors express their commitment to building multicultural Singapore through dance, 2025. Courtesy of National Heritage Board.

Outside the City Hall Chamber, the *Project Citizens* Wall carries stories of the founding generation. Through student interviews from the Student Archivist Project, visitors learn how eight seniors chose to stay and live out multicultural ideals shortly after Singapore gained independence in 1965. A quote by Rajaratnam from a 1990 interview eloquently captures the heart of these stories: "Being a Singaporean is not a matter of ancestry. It is conviction and choice." [6]

Not Mere Spectators: A Second Pilot Exhibition by the Founders' Memorial

Not Mere Spectators is the Founders' Memorial's second pilot exhibition, ahead of its opening at Bay East Garden in 2028. The first pilot exhibition, *Semangat yang Baru: Forging a New Singapore Spirit*, examined the courage and dynamism of Singapore's early years. This was a time when the leaders and people of Singapore rallied together to build our fledgling nation between the 1950s and 1970s, and were guided by foundational values of multiculturalism, integrity, openness, and resilience. Through *Semangat yang Baru*, we gathered feedback from Singaporeans on how to tell the story of these founding values in a way that resonates across generations. This second exhibition focuses on multiculturalism—a value constitutive and distinctive to the survival and forging of independent Singapore, and one most keenly felt in everyday life. It seeks feedback on the Memorial's use of participatory storytelling approaches to spark conversations around topics—even deeply personal and complex ones such as multiculturalism.

Not Mere Spectators is an initiative under *Project Citizens—The First Million*, the Memorial's tribute to independent Singapore's founding generation launched in conjunction with SG60. Close to 1 million people registered as Singapore's first citizens shortly after it gained independence.

↓
Students from North Vista Secondary School interviewing former radio DJ Rashid Sulaiman as part of the Student Archivist Project, 2025. Courtesy of National Heritage Board.

The Memorial hopes to capture and share stories of their contributions to nation-building, to inspire both present and future generations of Singaporeans. A senior engagement programme, another initiative under the campaign, collects these stories from seniors through intergenerational conversations and facilitated activities. Meanwhile, *Not Mere Spectators* speaks to our youth, inviting them to reflect, converse, and play an active role in shaping multiculturalism in Singapore. Together, these initiatives encourage Singaporeans, young and old, to reflect on the values that connect us as citizens of multicultural Singapore, and our role in shaping our nation's future.

During the near two-year preparation for *Not Mere Spectators*, the Memorial engaged over 200 people across 12 sessions. Participants included members of the Malay-Muslim, Indian, Eurasian, and mixed heritage communities, as well as Harmony Circle leaders. Altogether, they provided important perspectives on Singapore's journey as a diverse nation, both past and present. We particularly sought views from young Singaporeans, whose perspectives made apparent how multiculturalism is both increasingly embedded, and questioned, in contemporary Singapore. One-on-one consultations with sociologist Professor Chua Beng Huat and law academics Professor Kevin Y.L. Tan and Associate Professor Jaclyn Neo provided valuable insights on the evolution of inter-ethnic relations, and constitutional safeguards that protect Singapore's multicultural society. These sessions revealed prevailing attitudes towards the topic—ambivalence, hesitation, scepticism, awkwardness, and discomfort—and how much-needed conversations often stay on the surface, or remain unspoken, as a result. Some see it as a topic for the textbooks or special celebrations such as Racial Harmony Day. Creating this exhibition pushed us to probe deeper, challenge assumptions, and constantly question if our narrative is biased, inclusive, and representative.

←
Seniors and a Founders' Memorial volunteer participating in the senior engagement programme under the Memorial's *Project Citizens* campaign, 2025. Courtesy of National Heritage Board.

In this second pilot, the Memorial is testing new ways to tell stories. Contemporary news headlines from English-language and vernacular mainstream media appear alongside historical narratives to help visitors connect past events with current debates. Art plays a bigger role, with its ability to express complex aspects of multiculturalism that words alone cannot capture, encouraging visitors to pause and contemplate. Carefully crafted prompts provoke thought and participation, while multimedia elements bring otherwise static documents and accounts to life.

To ensure these new elements resonate with our visitors, we conducted two rounds of user testing to gather feedback on the narrative, writing style, visitor journey, and design elements. This included an on-site session at the City Hall Chamber, where participants experienced an almost complete exhibition through temporary and low-fidelity mock-ups. The feedback from these user testing sessions provided valuable insights for us to refine the narrative, presentation, and user interface of the multimedia, as we further developed the exhibition.

↓
A design render by exhibition designer FARM of the "Relate" section showing the contemporary news headlines, interactive features and text panels in the exhibition, 2025. Courtesy of National Heritage Board.

↑
Participants trying out interactive features during a user testing session for the exhibition, 2025. Courtesy of National Heritage Board.

> **Achieving a multiracial nation is not easy. There were many that were against it, but also many that believed in multiculturalism.**
>
> Ng Jun Jie, a youth participant from the Institute of Technical Education College Central, reflecting on his takeaways after visiting the *A Life Unbothered by Race?* section

> **What could I do more, especially as part of the majority race?"**
>
> An unnamed participant reflecting on the key prompts featured in the user testing session

The exhibition extends beyond its physical space through accessible programmes that spark conversation and build bridges among visitors of different social and cultural backgrounds. The popular interactive bus tours, introduced at our first pilot *Semangat yang Baru* exhibition, bring audiences from the heartlands to the museum, ensuring transport and location are no longer barriers to visiting. Inspired by the *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat*, smaller but more participatory indoor concerts invite visitors to join in a multicultural mix of song and dance. *#NoStrangerDanger*, a new programme by the Memorial, encourages visitors to strike conversations with others—even strangers—in the exhibition space. *On the Flipside* brings locals and foreigners together to have open and authentic conversations on multiculturalism, using the exhibition's prompts as starting points.

The Real Stage Beyond the Gallery Walls

Caught in the waves of decolonisation in the 1950s, the people of Singapore had to **gather** to learn about one another's cultures and **imagine** a common identity. Amid differences, they had to experiment with ways to **connect** despite linguistic differences, **relate** across racial and religious lines, and **live** consciously as Singaporeans after independence.

Singapore marks its 60th year of independence amid growing global divisions. *Not Mere Spectators* serves as both historical reflection and contemporary reminder—then as now, the intentionality behind efforts to **move** together must continue. Beyond the gallery walls lies the real stage—the Singapore we call home, shaped by each of our hopes, aspirations, and daily choices. Approaching the topic of multiculturalism is not always easy, but when it comes to shaping multicultural Singapore's future, we are indeed *Not Mere Spectators*. We invite you to take the stage.

Visit the Founders' Memorial's website (https://www.foundersmemorial.gov.sg/) for more information about the exhibition and its programmes.

NOTES

1 "National Loyalty Week", *Singapore Infopedia* (National Library Board), https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/article-detail?cmsuuid=9a91ff4f-5bac-43e1-96a4-a065f1b5628d (accessed 17 August 2025).
2 Lee Kuan Yew, "Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, at 'Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat' at the City Hall Steps" (speech, Singapore, 9 December 1959), National Archives of Singapore, lky19591209.
3 "Kaylene Tan", *Singapore International Festival of Arts* (Arts House Group), https://sifa.sg/sifa-2025/artists/spotlight-details/kaylene-tan (accessed 17 August 2025).
4 Justin Ong, "English Most Spoken at Home for Nearly Half of S'pore Residents: Population Census", *The Straits Times*, 16 June 2021, https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/english-most-spoken-at-home-for-nearly-half-of-spore-residents-population-census (accessed 29 August 2025).
5 *Singapore Legislative Assembly Debates*, Vol. 11, Sitting No. 6, Col. 320, 21 July 1959.
6 S. Rajaratnam, "'Remembering' Ancestral Heritage is Building Ghettos in the Minds of the Community", *The Straits Times*, 9 October 1990, 28.

Siau Ming En is Senior Manager (Curatorial & Engagement) at the Founders' Memorial. A former journalist, she explores ways of weaving contemporary stories with historical narratives.

Sarina Anwar is a former History teacher turned Assistant Curator at the Founders' Memorial. Still teaching—just in different ways.

Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat: Bringing to Life a Multicultural Nation

The *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat*, or People's Cultural Concerts, were intimately linked with Singapore's nascent attempts at forging a multiracial and multicultural society. When then-Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong delivered his 2021 National Day Message, he cited these performances as "an early start to [Singapore's] journey to becoming one people, one nation".[1] Apart from capturing the experimental zeitgeist of a nation in the making, the concerts also breathed life into S. Rajaratnam's idealistic vision of a distinctly Malayan culture, as shaped by cultural fermentation and artistic expression.

This essay explores the expectant optimism shared by those involved in the *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat*—a sentiment driven by an ardent belief in Malaya's (and Singapore's) multicultural future. It pays tribute to leaders like S. Rajaratnam, Lee Khoon Choy, and Lee Siow Mong, as well as citizen performers like Uma Rajan, Vivien Goh, and Som Said, who helped make the concerts a reality. Through their participation in this radical project, these individuals helped make tangible the once abstract notion of a Singaporean Singapore. Deemed by some as too ambitious for its time, the vision which inspired the *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat* nevertheless continues to reverberate each time Singaporeans pledge ourselves as one united people "regardless of race, language, or religion".[2]

↓
Bharatanatyam, a classical Indian dance, being presented at an *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat* on the City Hall steps, 4 June 1962. *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

by Pearl Wee

↑
Minister for Culture S. Rajaratnam delivering a speech at an *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat* in front of City Hall, 2 June 1963. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

A Multicultural Malaya

When Singapore attained self-governance in June 1959, few felt an instinctive sense of attachment to either the city-state, or its wider hinterland of Malaya. With migrants constituting a significant proportion of the population, Singapore found itself divided along racial, cultural, and linguistic lines. As the newly appointed Minister for Culture, Rajaratnam was seized by the need to inculcate a sense of national unity, particularly since colonial policy had hitherto focused on managing society through a policy of "divide and rule".[3] Animated by the possibility of leveraging on culture as a social tool, he found inspiration in the potential of a newly forged Malayan culture which could bind the different races in Singapore and Malaya together. In an August 1959 speech at the University of Malaya titled "Towards a Malayan Culture", Rajaratnam further articulated his vision of "a Malayan culture" that was "national in scope". In his view, this culture "should become the property not of one community but of all communities".[4]

Rajaratnam's aspirations for a new, inclusive culture resonated with many of his generation. As early as January 1950, a young Lee Kuan Yew had mused in a speech to the Malayan Forum in London that "the pre-requisite of Malayan independence is the existence of a Malayan society, not Malay, not Malayan Chinese, not Malayan Indian, not Malayan Eurasian, but Malayan, one that embraces the various races already in the country".[5] Meanwhile, at the University of Malaya in Singapore, Wang Gungwu was pouring his energies into an experimental Malayan form of poetry that grafted Malay and Chinese linguistic elements onto an English base.[6] Indeed, a range of student and artistic groups in the early 1950s were actively discussing pan-Malayan ideals, with discussions often zeroing in on the form and shape this emergent Malayan identity should take.[7] Still, as dismantling colonial rule was the primary focus during those years, incipient differences over the precise contours of this Malayan culture could, at least temporarily, be papered over.

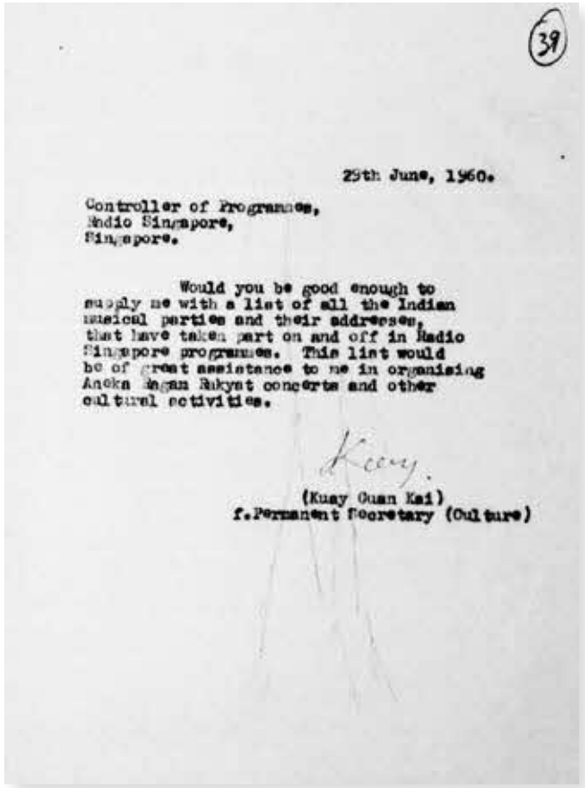
By the middle of the 1950s, post-war constitutional developments that saw Singapore severed from the Malay Peninsula had made the polemics around this issue even more fraught and complex. Notably, by 1957, Malay-majority Malaya had been granted independence, while Chinese-majority Singapore remained a British Crown Colony, albeit enroute to becoming a self-governing state. With the latter's political future up in the air, the atmosphere in Singapore naturally grew more tense and expectant. This uncertain mood was reflected in the debate on the Yang di-Pertuan Negara's address when the newly formed Legislative Assembly convened for the first time after self-governance was granted in June 1959. Rising to speak, the Singapore United Malays National Organisation (SUMNO) Assemblyman for Geylang Serai, Abdul Hamid Jumat, questioned pointedly:

> "Are we to shape the new nation based on the indigenous people of Singapore, that is the Malays, or is it to be based on the Chinese people, or the Indian people who are inhabitants staying in Singapore? I feel that if I were to forget my feelings as a Malay, it would be difficult. Likewise for the Chinese and the Indian people, it would be difficult."[8]

↓
First sitting of the Legislative Assembly, 1 July 1959. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Introducing *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat*

Against such a backdrop, Rajaratnam instantly recognised the role his newly established Ministry of Culture could play to integrate and unite people from different races. Working quickly in the months following the swearing in of the first Cabinet, his core team—comprising Parliamentary Secretary Lee Khoon Choy, Permanent Secretary Lee Siow Mong, and Assistant Secretary S. T. Ratnam—set out planning for a series of multicultural concerts "which would eventually bring about new forms in the arts, [and] which [were] not typical or symbolical of any one but [were] a synthesis of all the many and varied types".[9] Invitation letters to arts and performing groups were sent out, while the manpower and resources of government departments were corralled and mobilised. The police, for example, were put on notice for crowd control, while enquiries were sent to the Social Welfare Department to ascertain if welfare homes would welcome shows on their premises.[10] Correspondence between ministries and agencies flowed fast and furious: Might the Department of Social Welfare be open to purchasing seven projectors and three Land-Rovers? Could the People's Association host the concerts in their community centres?[11]



39

25th June, 1960.

Controller of Programmes,
Radio Singapore,
Singapore.

Would you be good enough to supply me with a list of all the Indian musical parties and their addresses, that have taken part on and off in Radio Singapore programmes. This list would be of great assistance to me in organising Aneka Ragam Rakyat concerts and other cultural activities.

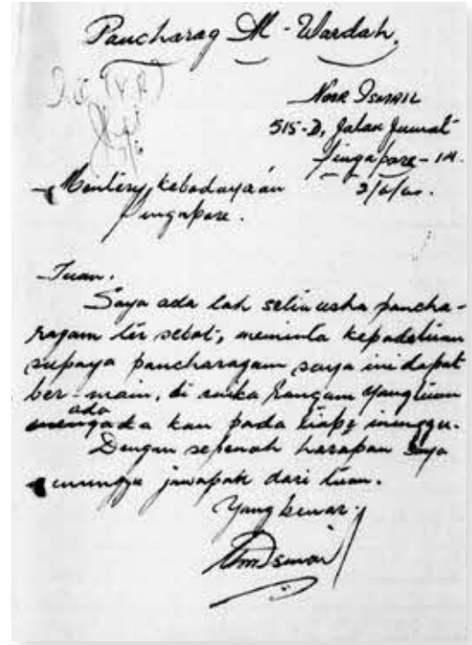
Kuay.

(Kuay Guan Kai)
f.Permanent Secretary (Culture)

↑
A letter from the Ministry of Culture to the Controller of Programmes at Radio Singapore, requesting for a list of Indian musical outfits for forthcoming *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat* concerts, 29 June 1960. Ministry of Culture Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

> **When I approached the performers, I cut straight to the point—we didn't talk about our differences, [but] tried to find similarities. That's how I started organising performances.**[12]
>
> Former Ministry of Culture officer Kuay Guan Kai (Guo Yan Kai) recounting how he convinced artists to perform in the *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat* concerts during a 2025 interview with the Founders' Memorial

Archival records indicate that the response to this novel initiative was overwhelmingly positive. Performers ranging from lion dance troupes to sword-eating strongmen responded enthusiastically, with prominent cultural bodies like Bhaskar's Academy of Dance and Malay Film Productions putting up performances, sometimes even without compensation.[13] School-based groups from Nan Hua Girls' School and the Tao Nan School Old Boys' Association also stepped forward.[14] Most significant of all was the distinctly multicultural way each concert's programme was organised—to cite a specific example, a concert could open with the singing of *Majulah Singapura* by the Alice Wong Boys Choir, followed by a thread-weaving showcase by students from Vasugi Tamil School, and close with a mesmerising "flag dance" by Perpaduan Seni Ra'ayat.[15] At the concerts' inaugural run at the Botanic Gardens on 2 August 1959, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew leaned into this promising vision of an inclusive, multicultural Singapore. Labelling the concerts as "part and parcel of our search for a national identity", he expressed his hope that "under open skies… Malays, Chinese, [and] Indians will discover the materials for a national art and national culture".[16]



Pancharag Al-Wardah,

Noor Ismail
515-2, Jalan Jumal
Singapore-14.
3/6/60.

Tuan.

Saya ada lah selia usha pancha-ragam ber sebut; meminta kepadatuan supaya pancharagam saya ini dapat ber-main, di anika Ragam yang tuan ada anjurkan pada hapir minggu.

Dengan sebenah harapan saya menunga jawapan dari tuan.

Yang benar,

Noor Ismail

↑
A handwritten letter in Malay from Mr Noor Ismail of the Al-Wardah Music Party to the Minister for Culture, requesting permission to participate in the *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat* concerts, 2 June 1960. Ministry of Culture Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

→
Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew speaking during the opening of *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat* at Singapore Botanic Gardens, 2 August 1959. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

With public support for the concerts gaining traction, the *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat* wound its way across Singapore and its outlying islands, reaching locations as far-flung as Ama Keng, Changi, Pulau Bukom Kechil, and even the penal settlement of Pulau Senang.[17] Oftentimes, the setup was simple and rudimentary, with a makeshift wooden stage complemented by an awning to provide shelter from the elements. The public, however, was undeterred. Thousands flocked to attend these open-air shows, often after a hard day at work in the farms, factories, offices, and kitchens.[18] Vivien Goh, a pioneering violinist, music teacher, and impresario, who performed at an *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat* concert at Katong Park, recalled that the concerts were "… something new. [They were a] different kind of entertainment. There [was] not much going on in Singapore at that time. It was free.

↑
An *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat* performance on the penal settlement of Pulau Senang, 16 October 1960. *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

I [thought it was] a fantastic idea for people to get together in an informal way. It was very primitive. Open air, no acoustics".[19]

For the disparate performers who gathered to showcase their diverse crafts, the concerts were an opportunity to engage with a wider audience, as well as to mingle with like-minded arts practitioners. Dr Uma Rajan, an avid classical Indian musician and dancer who would later become Director of the School Health Service at the Ministry of Health, was one such performer. In a 2025 interview with the Founders' Memorial, she connected her experience at these concerts with her ability to identify as a Singaporean: "The concerts brought me closer to all these cultures, made me appreciate these cultures more, understand them more, and even practise some of them… We knew each other, and we could draw on [each other's] talents, and advice, and get [each other] to perform at events… So I think *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat* is what made me a Singaporean in the [truest] sense."[20]

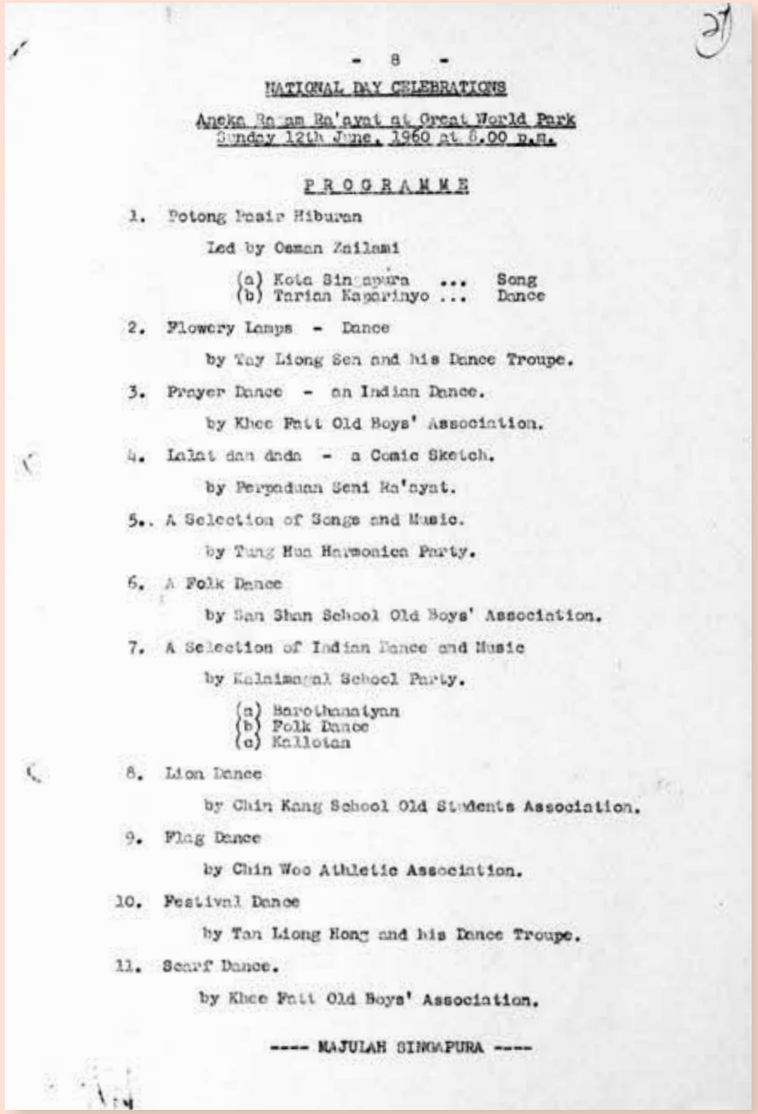
Evaluating *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat*

The enthusiasm and popularity of the concerts notwithstanding, one may argue that the *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat* did not in fact fully realise its lofty goals of creating "new and progressive [art] forms", given that the permanent synthesis of different cultural outputs did not ultimately take root.[21] Nevertheless, concert programme records reveal evidence suggesting organic, ground-up cross-cultural experimentation as artists interacted, worked, and learnt from one another.

→
An *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat* showcase at Bukit Panjang Community Centre, 24 January 1960. *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

↓

Programme for an *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat* show at Great World Park, 12 June 1960. Ministry of Culture Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



- 8 -

NATIONAL DAY CELEBRATIONS

Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat at Great World Park
Sunday 12th June, 1960 at 8.00 P.M.

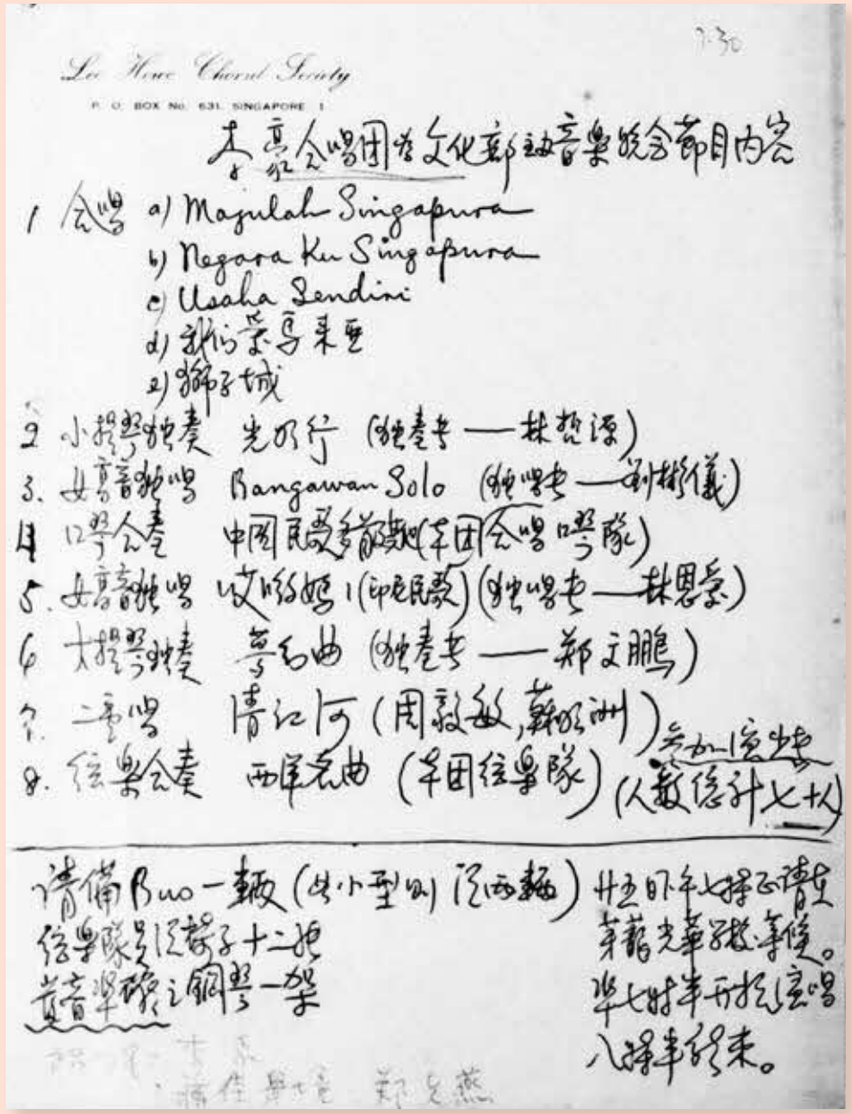
PROGRAMME

1. Potong Pasir Hiburan
   Led by Osman Zailami
   (a) Kota Singapura ... Song
   (b) Tarian Kaparinyo ... Dance
2. Flowery Lamps - Dance
   by Tay Liong Sen and his Dance Troupe.
3. Prayer Dance - an Indian Dance.
   by Khee Patt Old Boys' Association.
4. Lalat dan dndn - a Comic Sketch.
   by Perpaduan Seni Ra'ayat.
5. A Selection of Songs and Music.
   by Tung Hua Harmonica Party.
6. A Folk Dance
   by San Shan School Old Boys' Association.
7. A Selection of Indian Dance and Music
   by Kalaimagal School Party.
   (a) Karothannaiyan
   (b) Folk Dance
   (c) Kallotan
8. Lion Dance
   by Chin Kang School Old Students Association.
9. Flag Dance
   by Chin Woo Athletic Association.
10. Festival Dance
    by Tan Liong Hong and his Dance Troupe.
11. Scarf Dance.
    by Khee Patt Old Boys' Association.

---- MAJULAH SINGAPURA ----

↓

Handwritten programme by Lee Howe Choral Society, denoting a list of songs for an upcoming *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat* concert, c1960. Ministry of Culture Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



Lee Howe Choral Society

P. O. BOX No. 631, SINGAPORE 1

a) Majulah Singapura
b) Negara Ku Singapura
c) Usaha Sendiri
d)
e) 獅子城

Rangawan Solo

For example, in one instance in 1964, a Malay-based cultural outfit piloted a collaborative dance performance, *Bersanding Suite*, which "interpreted [a] traditional Malay wedding ceremony in a mixture of multicultural dance forms".[22] In another case, a singing troupe known as the Suara Singapura Singers took a leap to organise a multiracial choir—an initiative unusual at a time when monocultural art forms were prevalent.[23] These aside, there were the perennial crowd favourites—strongmen acts, balancing and juggling routines, and fire-eating showcases—whose appeal cut across racial divides.[24] While these outfits may not have systematically integrated different cultural elements into a coherent whole, these examples suggest that the *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat* had at least served to get people to come to "know and appreciate through the arts the ways of thinking and living of one another".[25]

> **I was so new, [I was] just about to learn dance, Malay dance. Just learning *asli*, *inang*, *ronggeng*, that kind of thing. And suddenly [after performing], [we would] see Chin Woo [Athletic Association]. Then we [would] make friends with Chin Woo, you know. Chin Woo Lion Dance. It's behind the scenes that we created [a sense of] togetherness.[26]**
>
> Som Said, pioneering Malay dance choreographer and *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat* performer, in a 2025 interview with the Founders' Memorial

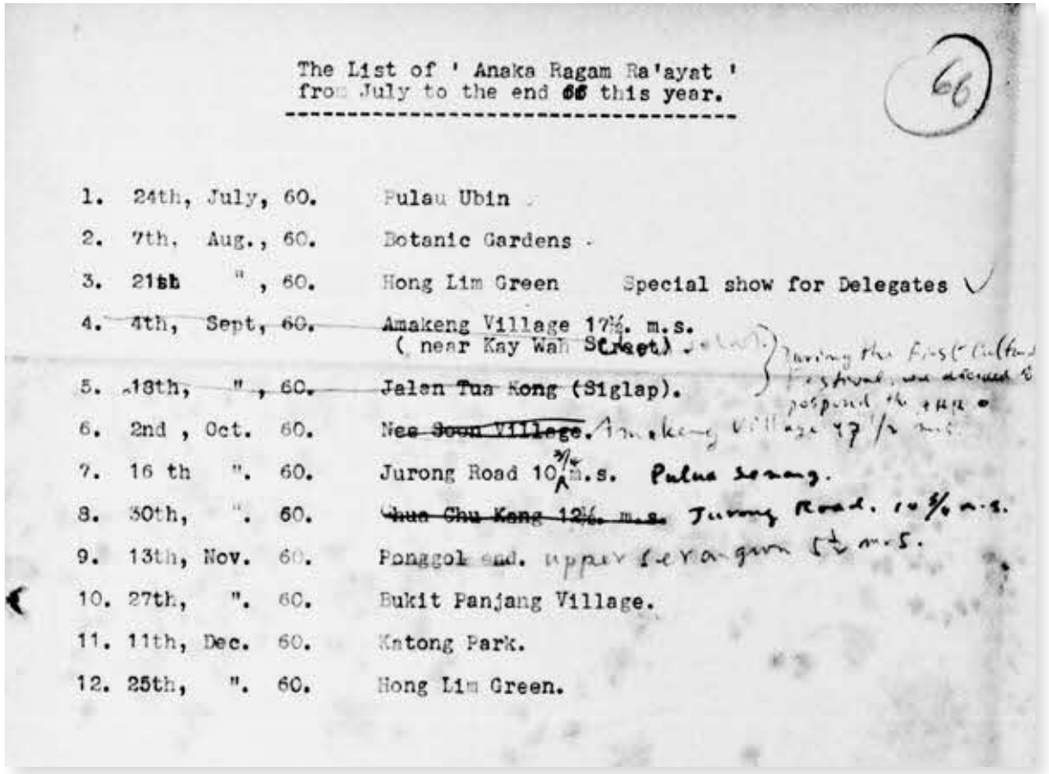
←
An acrobatic troupe at the *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat* at Hong Lim Green, 6 February 1963. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

↑
Audience enjoying an *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat* performance on Pulau Bukom Kechil, 25 October 1959. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

However, as the 1960s rolled on, it soon became apparent that cultural appreciation and intermixing—as lauded a goal as it was—could only be the first step in building a multicultural society. This was especially apparent as race relations frayed under the strain of Singapore's entry into the Federation of Malaysia, catapulting the sober realities of racial politics, sectarian interests, and communal violence into the national consciousness. When independence was thrust abruptly on Singapore on 9 August 1965, the lofty goal of creating a unified Malayan culture—one requiring time, patience, and a dose of idealism—had to take a temporary backseat. Rajaratnam himself would subsequently reflect on the difficulties of creating a singular national culture during a speech in 1974:

> "It would be nice and convenient, of course, if a Singapore culture could be created overnight. There was a time when some of us thought it could be but the upsurge of tribalism, racial revolts, and religious fanaticism… is to us a warning that communal cultures tend to become more stubborn and violently assertive if attempts are made to destroy them from the outside."[27]

↓
List of locations for *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat* shows from July to December 1960. Ministry of Culture Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



The List of ' Anaka Ragam Ra'ayat '
from July to the end of this year.

66

1. 24th, July, 60. Pulau Ubin
2. 7th, Aug., 60. Botanic Gardens
3. 21st " , 60. Hong Lim Green Special show for Delegates
4. 4th, Sept, 60. Amakeng Village 17½. m.s. (near Kay Wah Street)
5. 18th, " , 60. Jalan Tua Kong (Siglap).
6. 2nd , Oct. 60. Nee Soon Village.
7. 16 th ". 60. Jurong Road 10 m.s. Pulau Seraya.
8. 30th, ". 60. Chua Chu Kang 12½. m.s. Jurong Road. 10 ½ m.s.
9. 13th, Nov. 60. Ponggol 2nd. Upper Serangoon (± m.s.
10. 27th, ". 60. Bukit Panjang Village.
11. 11th, Dec. 60. Katong Park.
12. 25th, ". 60. Hong Lim Green.

Beyond *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat*

While the *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat* performances gradually faded away during Singapore's first decade post-independence, its cultural legacy was continued by organisations like the People's Association (PA), which had been formed in 1960, and whose community centres had played host to many *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat* concerts. Tasked with promoting community involvement in social, cultural, educational, and sporting activities, the PA has worked with an array of grassroots cultural organisations to promote cross-cultural appreciation over the years. Today, this network has expanded to include groups such as Perkumpulan Seni Singapura, which seeks to preserve traditional Malay culture, Er Woo Amateur Musical and Dramatic Association, which promotes Chinese Han music and opera, and the Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society, which actively organises music and dance concerts by local and visiting performers.[28] More significantly, since the 1970s, the PA has played a central role in organising and promoting Chingay—currently billed as Singapore's "largest street performance and float parade". Originally a festival associated primarily with Chinese New Year, Chingay has since evolved into a colourful epitome of Singapore's multicultural society, with annual performances bringing together troupes from different communities, ethnicities, and cultures.[29]

The PA's work in continuing to promote cross-cultural appreciation, even after *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat* wound down, was especially significant given widespread fears in the 1970s that the blind embrace of Western culture would lead Singaporeans to forsake their Asian identities. By this time, Jek Yeun Thong had taken over as Minister for Culture, leading the Ministry in a new direction which emphasised the preservation of "ethnic and folk culture as a cultural ballast against alienation and Westernisation".[30] While there was, for a time, a stronger policy focus on promoting cultural forms deemed "proper and desirable", in the long run, as Jun Zubillaga-Pow describes, "the vision of

← People's Association publication No. 1, 1960. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

S. Rajaratnam was not lost", especially since the Ministry continued its efforts to "preserve and develop [Singapore's] cultural heritage derived from the main streams of the Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Western civilisations".[31] When the Member of Parliament for Aljunied Wan Hussin Haji Zoohri delivered his Parliamentary speech on a Bill to establish a National Arts Council in 1991, one could still make out the long-cast shadow of the early *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat* in Wan's eloquent homage to Singapore's cultural identity:

> "The dictionary explains 'potpourri' as a mixture of flowers or petals, herbs and spices, kept and used for scent or fragrance... It means that the different components of the flowers and the herbs in the potpourri can still retain their own properties, but together they contribute to the fragrance they exude. Using the same analogy, Singapore's evolving culture and arts must be a potpourri or a mixture of the various ethnic cultures and arts with a strong strand of Western cultural tapestry woven into it. Such a mixture would bring forth a cultural fragrance which is distinctly Singaporean."[32]

The Singapore Multi-Ethnic Dance Ensemble

Started by Som Said, Yan Choong Lian, and Neila Sathyalingam in 1985, the Singapore Multi-Ethnic Dance Ensemble is a ground-up effort exploring the idea of a multicultural Singapore through dance. It is a powerful example of how the *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat*'s legacy continues, well after the concerts were discontinued in the mid-1960s. By cross-training students in Malay, Chinese, and Indian dance, the ensemble brings together Singapore's colourful and varied traditions, offering audiences a visual spectacle of unity in diversity.

↑ Singapore Multi-Ethnic Dance Ensemble performing at Zhenghua Primary School for Racial Harmony Day, 2024. Courtesy of Sri Warisan Performing Arts Ltd.

← Scan this QR code to watch a *Lianhe Zaobao* production featuring the founders of the Ensemble, and their troupe in action.

Postscript

> "In the old days, we had *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat* in the 1960s. Those of you who are old enough will remember—people went to different community gathering points to watch multiracial performances.... We can't go back to those old days. But we can find new ways to now deepen our multiculturalism, encourage more criss-crossing—more collaboration between artists of our different cultures, and more individuals and groups crossing into each other's cultures."[33]
>
> — President Tharman Shanmugaratnam at the Spring Reception organised by the Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations and the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre, 2024

Today, Singapore boasts a vibrant and pulsating arts scene. Diverse arts and performing groups continue to proliferate, and Singaporeans are engaging more intensely than before in events and festivals of various shades.[34] While the sophistication and complexity of today's arts landscape may seem a far cry from the makeshift stages of the *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat*, the latter is worth holding up as an exemplar of the bold vision of our early leaders. At a time when resources were scarce and the future uncertain, their very conception of a multicultural concert was a daring and radical act—one that brought the ideals and values of a newly emergent state into tangible, visceral, and visible form. Without their resolve and determination, the dream of a multicultural Singapore may well have remained just an abstract ideal, devoid of the life, colour, and energy that the *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat* first ushered in.

→ Stills from Finding Pictures' animated short film *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat*, commissioned by the Founders' Memorial and on display in *Not Mere Spectators: The Makings of Multicultural Singapore*, 2025. Stills by Finding Pictures, courtesy of National Heritage Board.

↑
Crowd at *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat* concert at Hong Lim Green, 6 February 1963. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

NOTES

1 Lee Hsien Loong, "Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's National Day Message 2021", *The Straits Times*, 8 August 2021, https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/politics/prime-minister-lee-hsien-loongs-national-day-message-2021-read-his-speech-in-full (accessed 7 August 2025).
2 Singapore National Pledge.
3 Norman Vasu, "Locating S Rajaratnam's Multiculturalism", in *S Rajaratnam on Singapore: From Ideas to Reality*, edited by Kwa Chong Guan (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2006), 130.
4 S. Rajaratnam, "Text of a Talk 'Towards a Malayan Culture' at the University of Malaya", *S. Rajaratnam Private Papers*, ISEAS Library, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, SR.001.005.
5 Lee Kuan Yew, "Talk on 'The Returned Student' Given to the Malayan Forum at Malaya Hall London" (speech, United Kingdom, 28 January 1950), National Archives of Singapore, Iky19500128.
6 Lee Tong King, "A Plethora of Tongues: Multilingualism in 1950s Malayan Writing", *Biblioasia* (National Library Board), April–June 2024, https://biblioasia.nlb.gov.sg/vol-20/issue-1/apr-jun-2024/multilingual-languages-malayan-writing-sg/ (accessed 7 August 2025).
7 "Students Party to be Formed", *The Straits Times*, 20 January 1950, 7.
8 *Singapore Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 11, Sitting No. 3, Col. 133, 16 July 1959.
9 S. T. Ratnam to Permanent Secretary, 23 July 1959, *Outdoor Cultural Shows Organised by the Ministry*, National Archives of Singapore, MC 91-59 (hereafter cited as MC 91-59).
10 Permanent Secretary (Health) to Permanent Secretary (Culture), 19 December 1959, MC 91-59; Permanent Secretary (Culture) to Commissioner of Police, 8 September 1959, MC 91-59.
11 Notes on the meeting held in the Conference Room of the Ministry of Culture on introducing scheme for weekly entertainment in Community Centres and Youth Clubs in Singapore, 12 August 1959, MC 91-59.
12 Guo Yan Kai, interview by Founders' Memorial, 5 June 2025.
13 *Singapore Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 11, Sitting No. 17, Col. 1095, 13 December 1959; Jun Zubillaga-Pow, "Government Policies on Music", in *Singapore Soundscape: Musical Renaissance of a Global City,* edited by Jun Zubillaga-Pow and Ho Chee Kong (Singapore: National Library Board, 2014), 204.
14 "18th Presentation of the Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat by the Ministry of Culture to be Held at Ama Keng Village", 2 October 1960, *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat General Correspondence*, National Archives of Singapore, 865/59 (hereafter cited as NAS 865/59).
15 "17th Presentation of the Aneka Ragam Raayat by the Ministry of Culture to be Held at Hong Lim Green Regional Theatre", 21 August 1960, NAS 865/59.
16 "Lee: We'll Breed New Strain of Culture", *The Straits Times*, 3 August 1959, 4.
17 "Lee: We'll Breed New Strain of Culture".
18 "Concerts for Culture", *The Singapore Free Press*, 4 June 1960, 7.
19 Vivien Goh, interview by Founders' Memorial, 15 November 2024.
20 Uma Rajan, interview by Founders' Memorial, 5 December 2024.
21 S. T. Ratnam to Permanent Secretary, 23 July 1959, MC 91-59.
22 Programme for Solidarity Night Concert for the National Solidarity Week Rally at the National Theatre on 17 November 1964, *Report on Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat and Other Concerts*, National Archives of Singapore, 119/64.
23 "Cultural Show in Honour of his Excellency The President of the Republic of Italy at the Istana", 1 October 1967, *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat General Correspondence*, National Archives of Singapore, 865/59PT.4.
24 Programme for Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat at Geylang Serai, 4 June 1960, NAS 865/59.
25 S. T. Ratnam to Permanent Secretary, 23 July 1959, MC 91-59.
26 Som Said, interview by Founders' Memorial, 17 October 2024.
27 S. Rajaratnam, "Speech at the Symposium on 'Singapore Culture – Indian Contribution' Organised by the Indian Fine Art Society of Singapore at Chinese Chamber of Commerce" (speech, Singapore, 28 July 1974), *S. Rajaratnam Private Papers*, ISEAS Library, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, SR.016.008.
28 "Member Organisations", People's Association, https://www.pa.gov.sg/our-network/member-organisations/ (accessed 7 August 2025).
29 "The Chingay Story", *Chingay Parade Singapore* (People's Association), https://www.chingay.gov.sg/about-us/the-chingay-story (accessed 30 December 2022).
30 Terence Chong, "The Bureaucratic Imagination of the Arts", in *The State and The Arts in Singapore: Policies and Institutions*, edited by Terence Chong (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2019), xxiv.
31 *Singapore Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 40, Sitting No. 14, Col. 1196, 25 March 1981; Zubillaga-Pow, "Government Policies on Music", 210.
32 *Singapore Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 58, Sitting No. 2, Col. 151, 28 June 1991.
33 "'Deepening Our Multiculturalism': Transcript of Remarks by President Tharman Shanmugaratnam at the Spring Reception 2024", Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre, https://singaporeccc.org.sg/media_room/deepening-our-multiculturalism-transcript-of-remarks-by-president-tharman-shanmugaratnam-at-the-spring-reception-2024/ (accessed 7 August 2025).
34 Clement Yong, "8 in 10 Singaporeans Proud of Local Arts Scene: NAC Survey", *The Straits Times*, 2 December 2022, https://www.straitstimes.com/life/arts/8-in-10-singaporeans-proud-of-local-arts-scene-nac-survey (accessed 7 August 2025).

Pearl Wee is Manager (Education and Interpretation) at the Founders' Memorial. She oversees education programmes and works to develop interpretive content. In her free time, she enjoys travelling and reading.

Laying the Foundations for Equality

"We have outlined and laid the foundation for a decent future for Singapore: a foundation that shows you our sincerity and our integrity... our earnest desire that there shall be in this country justice for all human beings, of whatever race. Equality for all human beings and mutual respect between all races."

Chief Minister David Marshall in a speech under the "apple tree" at Empress Place, 21 March 1956

←
Chief Minister David Marshall preparing to depart Paya Lebar Airport for the Merdeka talks in London, 14 April 1956. *The Straits Times* © Singapore Press Holdings. Permission required for reproduction.

“I Did Not Say That!”[1] The Six-Year Fight for a Multilingual Assembly, 1954–1959

Today, Members of Singapore’s Parliament (MPs) may rise to speak in English, Mandarin, Malay, or Tamil. Through a wired headset, they can also follow the Chamber’s proceedings in any one of these four official languages. However, this parliamentary convention had not always been the norm. In fact, just 70 years ago, it was the subject of a six-year public debate described by *The Straits Times* as “the most protracted… Singapore had ever seen”.[2]

Uncovering this lesser-known episode in Singapore’s history is significant for several reasons. As this article will explore, the use of the vernacular in Singapore’s top legislative body was intimately bound up with post-war discussions on race, decolonisation, and citizenship. In the words of Chief Minister David Marshall, at its heart lay the sacrosanct principle of “equal justice for all races”—one that had to prevail both “now and forever”.[3]

←
Yap Pheng Geck (with microphone) and David Marshall (second from right) campaigning for multilingualism at Empress Place, 12 March 1955. *The Straits Budget* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

by Joshua Goh

←
A meeting of the Rendel Commission at Victoria Memorial Hall, 11 November 1953. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

The First Salvo

> "Although strong pleas have been put forward that various other languages besides English should be given an official status, we have come to the conclusion that it would not be practicable to adopt any multilingual system and that English should therefore not only remain the official language of the Colony but also be the only language to be used in the Legislative Assembly and the City and Island Council."[4]
>
> — Report of the Rendel Commission, 1954

The above recommendation, issued by the Rendel Commission in 1954, marked the opening salvo in the post-war debate on Singapore's official languages. It was, however, only one part of a broader roadmap designed by the Commission to take Singapore towards nationhood. In the immediate term, this roadmap also included plans for polls in 1955 to fill 25 elected seats in a new Legislative Assembly, and for voters to be registered automatically for the first time. This meant that large swathes of Singapore's politically apathetic sojourner population would now have a stake in the colony's governance.

Against this backdrop, the Commission's decision to impose a ban on non-English-speaking lawmakers raised eyebrows. For some, this move contravened the fundamental tenets of democracy, as it created a situation in which some electors could not be elected to office. For others, like the newly established People's Action Party (PAP), it revealed the hubris of an English-speaking elite which "had no roots in the people".[5] This brewing unhappiness ultimately came to a head when C. R. Dasaratha Raj, the Labour Member for Rochore, rose in the Legislative Council to attack the Rendel Commission's recommendation for an English-based Assembly. Dismissing the Commission as a "glamorous puppet show", Raj argued that "multilingualism… [was] at least worthy of a trial", regardless of the "cost [and] practicability" of such a scheme.[6] However, when a division was called in the Chamber on 29 January 1955, Raj's motion was defeated by a vote of thirteen to five.[7]

"Obsessed with Babelism"[8]

> "Any step towards the introduction of multilingualism (with its consequent confusion) into the Assembly debates would be a great disservice to the community. No problem will be made easier of solution by babelising the discussion."[9]
>
> — A 1955 letter to *The Straits Times*, titled "The first evil of Babel", and written under the pen name "Anti-Babel"

> "The suggestion that the removal of the language qualification would immediately turn our Legislative Assembly into a pandemonium with a babel of tongues is an unmitigated insult to our electorate… and the people of Singapore."[10]
>
> — An undated statement from Vice-President of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce Yap Pheng Geck, responding to the charge of babelism

While Raj's advocacy had failed to lift the "language ban", his actions—aided by sensational reports from the pro-colonial *Straits Times*—had galvanised a wide spectrum of Singapore society. The Chinese Chamber of Commerce, in particular, took up the cudgel.[11] For them, an English-only assembly called to mind the stringent language requirements which barred non-English speaking migrants from attaining citizenship.[12] The Chamber's Vice-President—the indefatigable Yap Pheng Geck—sought to mobilise public opinion through a series of articles in the local press. In these pieces, he argued that a multilingual assembly would "[help] instil in the people a sense of common participation and responsibility of their self-government".[13] This, in turn, would ensure that the new nation was not marred by "bitter divisions" and "pent-up antagonisms" between the English and non-English speaking.[14]

↓
Chief Minister Lim Yew Hock (second from right) with members of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce during a visit to the citizenship registration centre at Fort Canning, 1 November 1957. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

YAP WILL MEET BABEL CRITICS

Lunch hour debate arranged

MR. YAP PHENG GECK, champion of multi-lingualism in the Singapore Legislative Assembly ... rally at Empress Place at 1.30

'BABELISM': I'M SURE IT'LL WORK—YAP

... yesterday from a conference in India where ...

Babelism: 'This idiocy

WE HAVE been told that the one-language system is unpopular because it precludes certain members of the intelligentsia who happen to be ill... rate in English, fr... taking part in gover... ment.

... be unable to learn because he could not speak English. He knew what it was to be "gagged mat" for it.

Capt. Richards then in... a Malay speaker to ...

... vously have had previous ... ed political meetings.

I feel the leaders of ... MTUC should not interfere ... the political leanings of ... affiliates, for ... to ... and ... development ... the evolution.

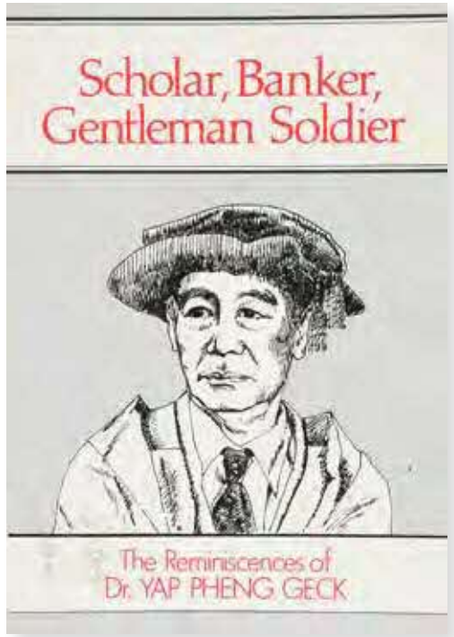
The first evil of Babel

THE curse of multi-lingualism inflicted on the builders of the tower of Babel was by far the worst evil man...

↑
Press reports from *The Straits Times* deriding the campaign for multilingualism as babelism, 1955. The term "babelism" was an allusion to the Tower of Babel in the Bible. *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

Yap's advocacy sparked a spirited debate on the benefits and drawbacks of multilingualism. However, the English press deliberately amplified the voices of those who denounced this attempt as "break[ing] the unity of the Malayan people".[15] These critics termed the proponents of multilingualism "babelists", referencing the Biblical story of Babel as a cautionary tale of a society split asunder by a multiplicity of tongues.[16] Even more alarmingly, they cautioned that without English serving as a neutral glue, "the majority would make itself the only voice by force of numbers", thereby eliminating minorities "in the field of politics [and] every other walk of life".[17] Multilingualism was thus nothing but a "mistress to communalism" in a different guise.[18] As one C. A. Koh put it in a letter in *The Straits Times* titled "Babelism: 'This Idiocy'":

> "When jealousy, suspicion, and mistrust still lurk among the races it is unwise to help widen the breach by the introduction of such idiocy as multilingualism."[19]



Eighteen years later, Yap would recall the vitriolic campaign waged against him in a 1973 interview with the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. To him, the charge of being "obsessed with babelism" was a red herring that deliberately distorted the Chamber's main objectives:

> "The Chamber's objection was the division of citizens into two classes, the first class citizens or ruling class, consisting of the English-speaking with full rights to vote and be voted [into office], and second class citizen[s], the governed class, consisting of the non-English speaking with limited rights to vote, but not to be voted [into office]—[i.e.] to stand for election. It was the English press which twisted our case... for multilingualism [into] babelism as they [had] first labelled it in derision."[20]

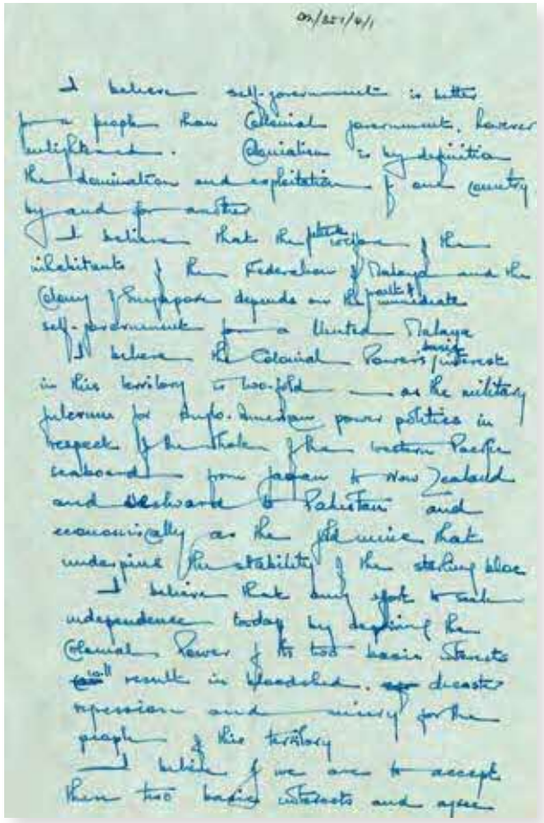
Justice and Equality for All Races

> "To live fully—to be free—there must be an end to all racial domination. All races must be equal partners in the nation... In this plural society of ours, if we seek justice for all, we must reject monolingualism and we must give equal respect to as many of the major languages as meets the needs of the people."[21]
>
> **— Chief Minister David Marshall in the Debate on Multilingualism in the Legislative Assembly, 8 February 1956**

As the 1955 election approached, the debate on multilingualism intensified. By this time, Yap had found an ally in David Marshall of the Labour Front, who would lead his party to win a plurality of seats in the new Assembly. Marshall had not commented publicly on multilingualism previously, but he now came out strongly in support of Yap's cause. Both men soon appeared together on the election trail, with Marshall even inviting Yap to speak at his rallies under the "apple tree" at Empress Place.[22] In his own speeches, Marshall displayed an idealistic faith in the power of one's convictions to overcome any practical challenges. On one occasion, he commented that "even if we have nine Ministers and all nine are non-English speaking, all we need is nine interpreters".[23]

For Marshall, the fight for a multilingual assembly was an expression of his earnest belief that "justice [should be sought] for all races" as the "black pall" of colonialism was gradually lifted.[24] In a speech to the Legislative Assembly on 8 February 1956, he argued that failure to act on this issue would result in "the resentment of groups denied justice explod[ing] like a grenade".[25] However, Marshall also took pains to address fears that multilingualism would "lead to [the minorities] being swamped by the Chinese". To him, "although democracy meant majority rule, it also required absolute respect for minority rights, and not steam-roller tactics

↓
A billboard informing voters about the upcoming Legislative Assembly elections, 3 February 1955. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



↑
David Marshall's draft election speech, titled "I Believe", 1955. The speech opens with, "I believe self-government is better for a people than Colonial government, however enlightened". The next paragaph goes on to declare, "I believe that the future welfare of the inhabitants of the Federation of Malaya and Colony of Singapore depends upon the grant of immediate self-government for a United Malaya". David Marshall Private Papers, courtesy of ISEAS Library, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore.

by the majority".[26] Notably, Yap had also made this same commitment during the election campaign, when he pledged that he would "fight the Chinese if they want[ed] to dominate this country for their own good".[27] In a sign that the winds of change were unassailable, Marshall's motion calling for House debates to be conducted in English, Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil was passed unanimously after just two days of deliberations.[28] Given the fractious political climate of the 1950s, this was a moment of remarkable unity—the first instance, *The Straits Times* noted, "that all elected and nominated members [of the Assembly] found themselves behind a motion of importance".[29]

Lending their support for the motion, the PAP's Lee Kuan Yew framed multilingualism as "the first step" towards "help[ing] Singapore preserve all her languages and cultures".[30] The Alliance, represented by Abdul Haji Jumat of the Singapore United Malays National Organisation (SUMNO), offered their unqualified support as well—a stance that notably deviated from their counterparts in Malaya who had championed a bilingual system of Malay and English.[31] Even the sole elected European in the House, John Ede of the Liberal Socialist Party, rose in support of the motion to allay fears that multilingualism would encourage racial antagonism. For him, "the opposite" might well "prove to be true", as "spontaneous translation" would allow the people of Singapore "to be drawn closer to the thoughts and outlook[s] of those from whom [they had previously been] shut off from communication".[32]

↓
Speaker and Members of Singapore's First Legislative Assembly, 22 April 1955. Gift of Mrs Anita Benson. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

Nuts and Bolts

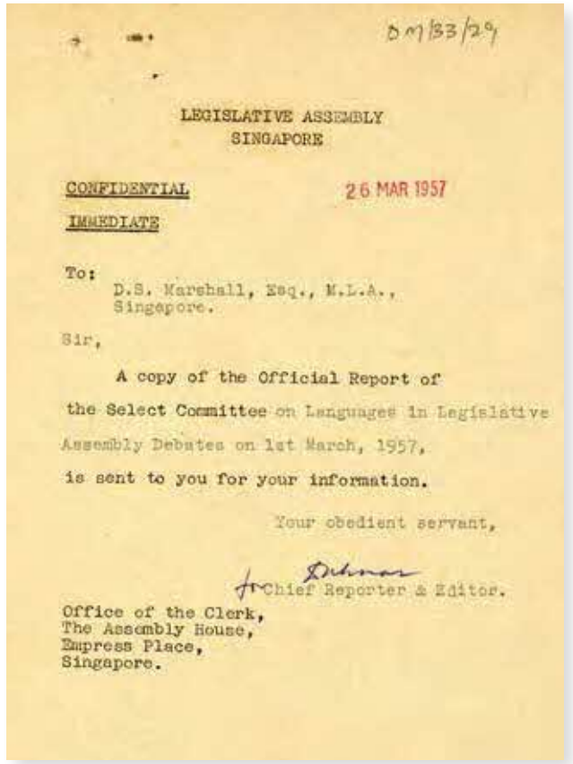
"Perhaps I can quote an example: 'Colonialism is like the scraggy hand of death touching at the wheels of progress.' How will that come out in Chinese? Is 'scraggy' a word which is capable of translation into Chinese?"[33]

— Minister for Communications and Works Francis Thomas in the Select Committee on Languages in the Legislative Assembly, 10 April 1957

"I have mentioned in my memorandum that even students fresh from secondary English schools, with Grade I and distinction in both English and Malay, would not be able to do the job unless they have done it for some time and gained experience. I think even University students without the necessary experience would not be equal to the task."[34]

— Tuan Haji Zainal-Abidin, Head of the Department of Malay Studies at the University of Malaya, in response to questions from the Select Committee on Languages in the Legislative Assembly, 10 April 1957

With the motion approved, a Select Committee to examine the mechanics of a multilingual Chamber was then formed. It immediately set out making enquiries, but its work came to a premature halt when Marshall resigned as Chief Minister in June 1956. Seized with glee, the editors of *The Straits Times* pronounced that "Marshall's Tower of Babel [had fallen] down like a pack of cards". Nonetheless, a second Committee was soon empanelled in December 1956.[35] In total, both Committees issued three reports, and questioned more than 15 expert witnesses. Among the witnesses were linguists from the University of Malaya, editors from the Department of Broadcasting, and parliamentary counterparts from fraternal legislatures in the Commonwealth.[36]


D M/33/29

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
SINGAPORE

CONFIDENTIAL 26 MAR 1957

IMMEDIATE

To:
D.S. Marshall, Esq., M.L.A.,
Singapore.

Sir,

A copy of the Official Report of the Select Committee on Languages in Legislative Assembly Debates on 1st March, 1957, is sent to you for your information.

Your obedient servant,

for Chief Reporter & Editor.

Office of the Clerk,
The Assembly House,
Empress Place,
Singapore.

↑
Memo from the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly to David Marshall, regarding the Select Committee on Languages in Legislative Assembly Debates, 26 March 1957. David Marshall Private Papers, courtesy of ISEAS Library, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore.

With no comparable precedent to guide them, the two Committees wrestled with the logistical and technical challenges of this herculean project. Under the leadership of Speaker Sir George Oehlers, they toyed with two possible interpretation modalities. The first modality, consecutive interpretation, was quickly found to be impractical given that each speech would have to be read a further three times following its initial delivery.[37] The second modality, simultaneous interpretation, better suited the cut and thrust of House debates, but even then the challenges seemed insurmountable.[38] Would there be a substantial time lag when speeches in Tamil and Mandarin were translated? How could Members be assured that translations were error-free, and would nuances embedded in figures of speech be adequately expressed? Pondering these questions, the Committee first drilled deep into complex issues of syntax, grammar, and phraseology. They then tackled the practical issue of remuneration, questioning witnesses about salary scales and how to benchmark interpreters' wages competitively.[39]

↓
List of individuals who responded to the Select Committee's call for interpreters, as tabled at its meeting, 10 April 1957. David Marshall Private Papers, courtesy of ISEAS Library, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore.

Tabled at meeting on 10th April, 1957.

L.A. COM. 9/56/Pt.II

Summary of Replies to the Advertisement (4.3.1957) for Ascertaining availability of Multi-lingual Interpreters

Serial No.	Folio No.	Name	Age	Qualifications	Experience	Languages
1	(16)	[redacted]		Passed Senior Cambridge with Credit in Tamil, 1950.	Translator, Fed. of Malaya Police Force since 1952. Passed Certificated Interpreters (Tamil) Examination, 1953.	English/Tamil/ English
2	(17)	[redacted]	59	B.A. (History & Economics) Madras, 1922. Licentiate in Teaching Degree, Madras, 1925.	Has specialised in Tamil up to Matriculation Standard, Madras, 1916. Translated sermons in Church, 1930 to date. Supervisor of Tamil Schools, Singapore, 1937-40; 1949-1956. Lecturer in Tamil, Trinity College, Singapore, 1956-57.	English/Tamil/ English
3	(18)	[redacted]	21	Sat for Senior Cambridge with Tamil as on subject, 1956. Studied up to Senior Intermediate Class, University of Madras with Tamil as second language.		English/Tamil/ English
4	(19)	[redacted]	26	Passed Junior Middle III, Yuk Choy Chinese High School, Ipoh, 1948. Passed Cambridge School Certificate, Grade III 1950 with Credits (among other subjects) in English and Chinese.	Temporary Translator, Perak Police Department for six years to date.	English/ Mandarin/ English

.../2

↑
Speaker Sir George Oehlers (right) in conversation with Parliamentary Secretary for Culture Lee Khoon Choy and Minister for Culture S. Rajaratnam, 4 June 1960. *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

Sir George Oehlers: The First Speaker

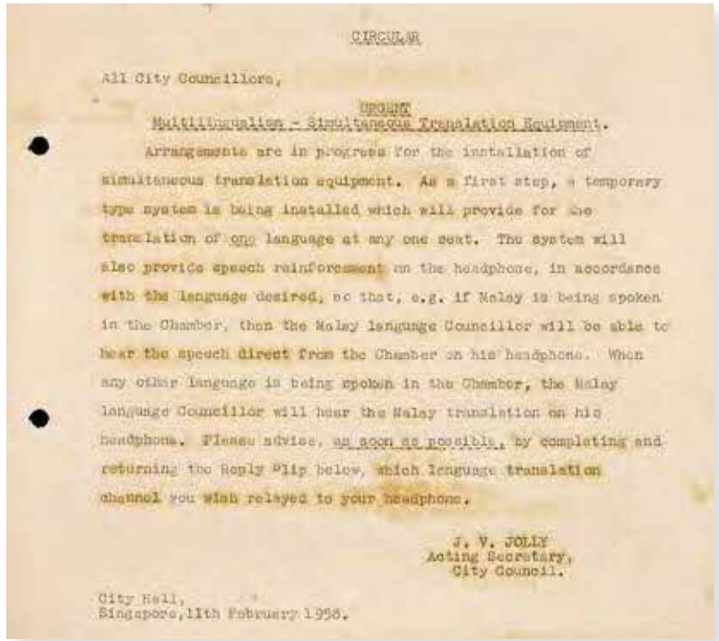
Sir George Oehlers was the first Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of Singapore. He served from 1955 to 1963, before becoming the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of Sabah. In 1963, he was also appointed Chairman of the Public Utilities Board. Beyond his official duties, Oehlers was actively involved in the Eurasian Association, the Singapore Recreation Club, and the Raffles Museum and Library Committee. He also contributed widely to a range of other civic, sporting, and charitable causes.

"Many Tongues Do Not Make for Speedy Business"[40]

> "'But I didn't say that!' has been so increasingly heard in the multilingual debates of the Singapore City Council that its staunchest supporters are having their doubts."
>
> "The 'casualties' have been heaviest amongst Tamil interpreters. The first interpreter resigned because he could not hear the speeches clearly... In the course of the marathon debate, [the second interpreter] and a Tamil Councillor had a little side debate of their own on the accuracy of his translation."[41]
>
> — A *Straits Times* report on the implementation of multilingualism in the City Council, 9 February 1958

After much deliberation, the Committee came to a decision. A relay system would be adopted, which meant that speeches in Mandarin, Malay, or Tamil would first be translated to a pivot language, English, and then simultaneously into the remaining two.[42] Initially, Marshall had objected to this scheme as it elevated English to a position of primacy, but he relented when the Committee's witnesses confirmed the dearth of competent Mandarin-Tamil or Mandarin-Malay interpreters.[43] In total, the relay system would require three interpretation booths, and cost the Assembly between $566 and $1240 per month for each full-time interpreter employed.[44]

The issuance of the Committee's final report in October 1957 reflected an emerging consensus that multilingualism, no matter how costly, was necessary for the unity of the new nation. In that year, a second Constitutional Mission to London led by Chief Minister Lim Yew Hock won concessions for Singapore to be granted even more autonomy from the British to run its own internal affairs. Polls would be held in 1959 for an expanded 51-seat Legislative Assembly, but in the meantime, the multilingual experiment would first be piloted in the municipal-based City Council.



CIRCULAR

All City Councillors,

URGENT

Multilingualism - Simultaneous Translation Equipment.

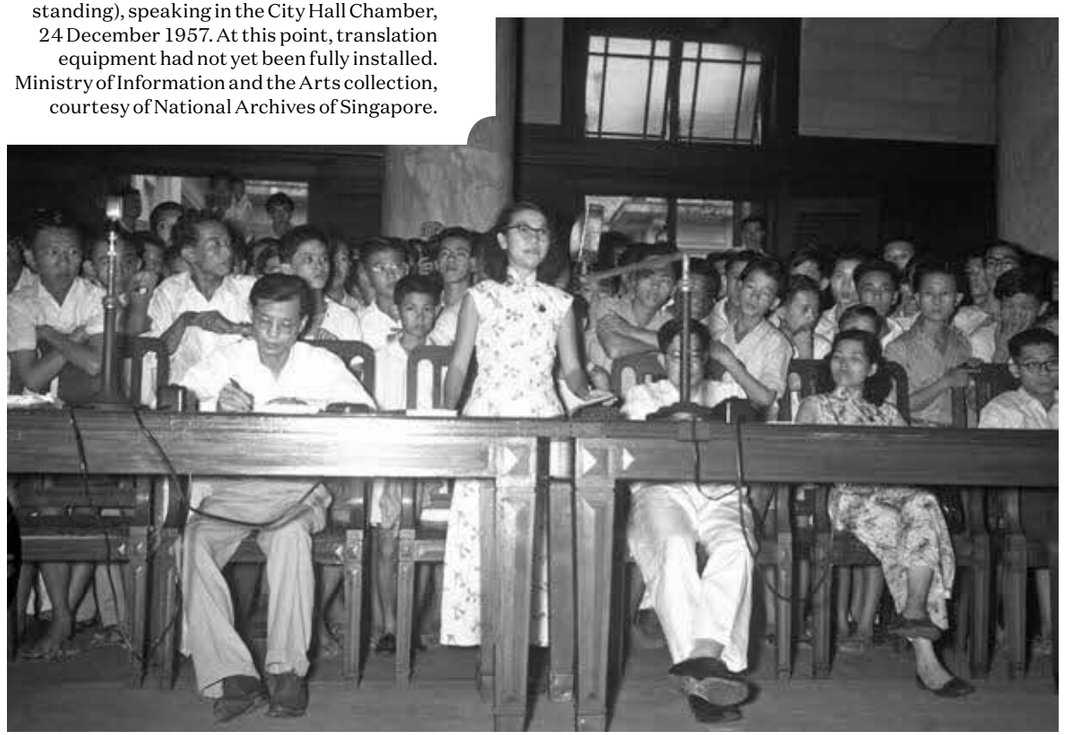
Arrangements are in progress for the installation of simultaneous translation equipment. As a first step, a temporary type system is being installed which will provide for the translation of one language at any one seat. The system will also provide speech reinforcement on the headphone, in accordance with the language desired, so that, e.g. if Malay is being spoken in the Chamber, then the Malay language Councillor will be able to hear the speech direct from the Chamber on his headphone. When any other language is being spoken in the Chamber, the Malay language Councillor will hear the Malay translation on his headphone. Please advise, as soon as possible, by completing and returning the Reply Slip below, which language translation channel you wish relayed to your headphone.

J. V. JOLLY
Acting Secretary,
City Council.

City Hall,
Singapore, 11th February 1958.

← Circular to all City Councillors regarding the installation of translation equipment in the City Hall Chamber, 11 February 1958. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

By 28 February 1958, microphones, earpieces, and other translation equipment had been installed around the imposing City Hall Chamber in preparation for a regular sitting of the 32-member Council.[45] A set of warning lights were also placed at Mayor Ong Eng Guan's table, enabling him to pause proceedings should interpreters not be able keep up with the pace of the discussion.[46] Not unexpectedly, the messy reality of conducting debate in four languages did present itself. One Malay interpreter "gave up after three hours", and it was not until staff from *Tamil Murasu* were summoned that accurate Tamil interpretation was assured.[47] These teething problems notwithstanding, the vaunted goal of a multilingual assembly was fast becoming a reality.



→↓ Felice Leon-Soh, Liberal Socialist Councillor for Mountbatten (right, standing), and Chan Choy Siong, PAP Councillor for Delta (below, standing), speaking in the City Hall Chamber, 24 December 1957. At this point, translation equipment had not yet been fully installed. Ministry of Information and the Arts collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Final Lap

The final touches to prepare the Legislative Assembly for multilingual debate took place across three months, from May to July 1959.[48] When the Assembly finally convened on 7 July 1959, members of the public could be seen with headsets donned, listening intently to speeches translated in real time.[49] Significantly, the opening address was delivered in Malay by none other than the former Governor William Goode, now standing in as interim Yang di-Pertuan Negara.[50] In the years to come, multilingual debate would enable Members to better convey the viewpoints of Singapore's diverse communities, bridge divides, and connect with the ground. For example, when the Women's Charter Bill was debated in 1961, three female PAP Members of Parliament spoke in Mandarin—a move that enabled them to speak directly to working women whose lives were shaped by quotidian acts of gender inequality.[51] After Independence, when the Constitutional Commission's Report on Minority Rights was tabled, Members contributed their views in all four of Singapore's official languages, giving substance and meaning to the idea of a multicultural nation.[52]

↓
Members of the public, in the gallery of the Legislative Assembly, listening to simultaneous translations of proceedings via headsets, 1 July 1959. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

←
Spouses of office holders, with some listening to simultaneous translations of Legislative Assembly proceedings via earpieces, 27 March 1963. They include Puan Noor Aishah (left), wife of Yang-di Pertuan Negara Yusof Ishak, and Madam Kwa Geok Choo (second from left), wife of Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

↑
Legislative Assemblymen and other officials listening to simultaneous translations of proceedings via headsets, 27 March 1963. They include Political Secretary for Culture Rahim Ishak (leftmost), Permanent Secretary in the Prime Minister's Office Stanley Stewart (second from left), and Political Secretary to the Prime Minister Jek Yeun Thong (rightmost). Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Where the debate over a multilingual assembly was concerned, however, the final coda to the story would unfold in 1962 when sensitive negotiations regarding Merger were underway. As issues of culture, language, and identity were once again publicly discussed, some questioned if Singapore's Legislative Assembly should adopt the practice of the Federal Dewan Rakyat (Malaya's House of Representatives), which conducted its parliamentary affairs in Malay and English only. It took the leadership of Malay leaders like Buang Omar Junid to explain that "abolish[ing] multilingualism would mean that certain sections of the community in Singapore would suffer a setback".[53] As a result of their efforts, the Legislative Assembly continued to remain multilingual in the merger years, a convention that then carried over to independent Singapore's Parliament in August 1965.

Postscript

> "Multilingualism in the Councils will help break the monopoly which has all along been enjoyed by a section of society which is fluent in English."[54]
>
> — Jean Batchelor, 16 years old

> "The adoption of multilingualism in the Singapore Legislative Assembly is a very important step towards the improvement of racial relationship[s] and the development of a democratic government. What is more important is the assurance it gives to all races that their share in the government is recognised and their individual culture respected."[55]
>
> — Wong Chan Wah, 18 years old

In 1956, at the height of the public debate over multilingualism, *The Straits Times* organised an essay contest for youth from all over Malaya to provide their views on the issue.[56] The above quotes—taken from submissions by Singaporean youth—recognise that justice and equality are integral to upholding Singapore's multicultural fabric. In doing so, they echo the principles held dear by David Marshall and other community leaders, who fought hard for Singapore's top legislative body to be multilingual. Like these pioneering leaders, do we have the courage to speak up for the ideals and principles we believe in, and to leave a legacy for future generations?

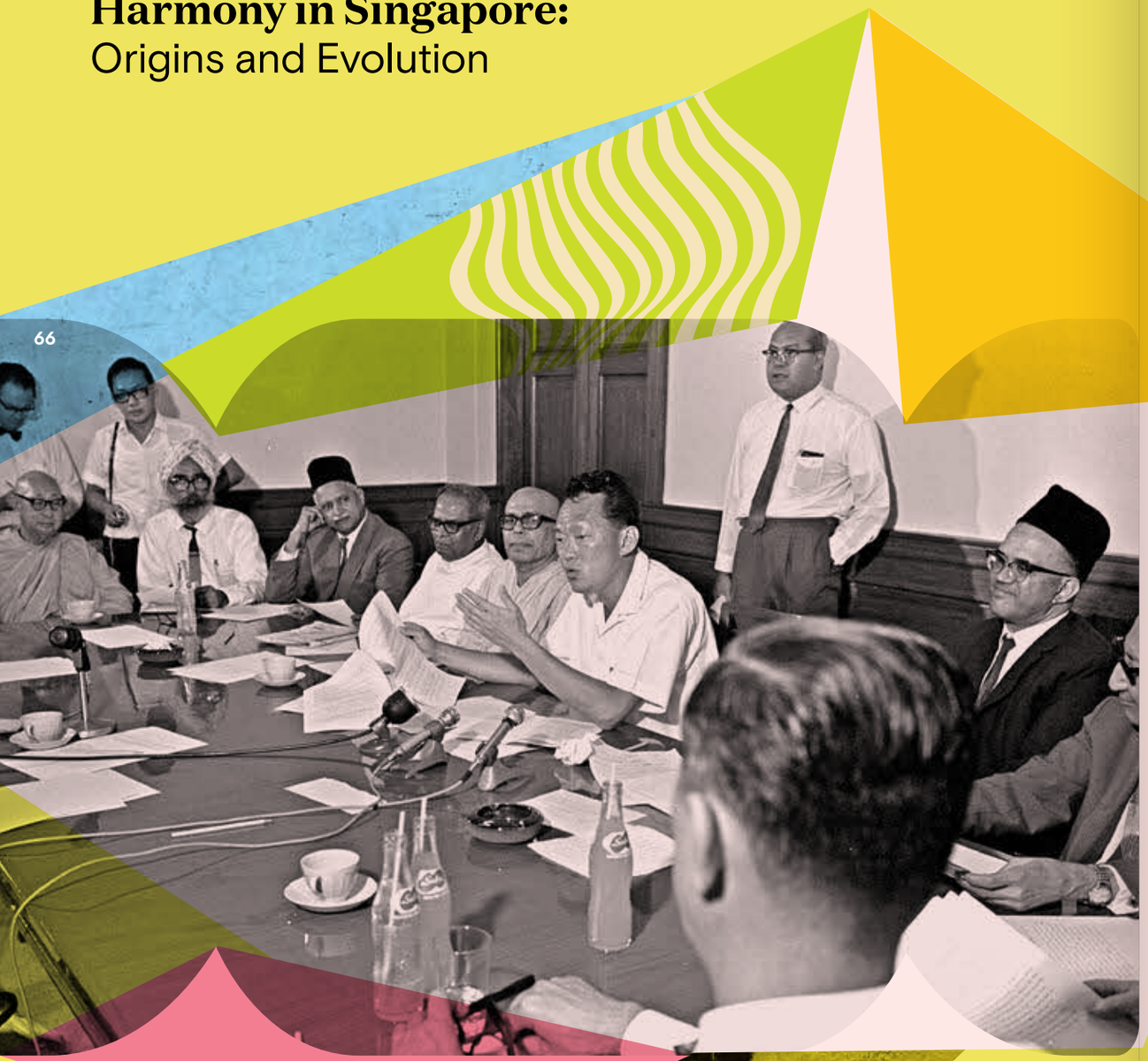
← Parliament House, 2025. *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

NOTES

1 "'I Did Not Say That'—The Cry Now at Council Debates", *The Straits Times,* 9 February 1958, 5.
2 "The Great Language Debate", *The Straits Times,* 29 January 1955, 4.
3 *Singapore Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 1, Sitting No. 24, Col. 1494, 8 February 1956.
4 *Report of the Constitutional Commission* (Singapore, 1954), 4.
5 "Vernacular Languages Important, They Say", *The Straits Times,* 4 November 1954, 5. In parliamentary procedure, a division is a method of taking a vote that physically counts members voting.
6 "A Many-Tongued Council 'Absurd and Impracticable'", *The Straits Times,* 14 February 1955, 6; "'Must Preserve Democracy at All Costs'—Raj", *Singapore Standard,* 29 January 1955, 2.
7 "Council Says 'No' to Babel", *The Straits Times,* 29 January 1955, 1.
8 "Life With the Yaps—A Bit of Babel", *The Straits Budget,* 17 March 1955, 14.
9 "The First Evil of Babel", *The Straits Times,* 18 April 1955, 10.
10 Yap Pheng Geck, "Statement on Problems Arising During the Transition from Colonial Government to Self-Government, In Particular, the Difficulties of Multilingual Assemblies", *David Marshall Private Papers*, ISEAS Library, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, DM.351.024.
11 "Scrap English Barrier", *The Straits Times,* 2 November 1954, 7.
12 "Scrap English Barrier".
13 "Multi-Lingual Legislature: Practical Difficulties Analysed", *Indian Daily Mail,* 29 November 1954, 2.
14 "Should Only English Knowing People Govern?", *Indian Daily Mail,* 21 November 1954, 1.
15 "Multilingualism: Is It an Attempt to Break Unity?", *The Straits Times,* 16 February 1955, 6.
16 "'Babel'—Progressives Oppose It", *The Straits Times,* 17 March 1955, 5.
17 "Multilingualism: Is It an Attempt to Break Unity?".
18 "The Language Debate", *The Straits Times,* 1 February 1955, 6.
19 "Babelism: 'This Idiocy'", *The Straits Times,* 19 March 1955, 12.
20 Yap Pheng Geck, interview by Lim Yoon Lin, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Accession No. OH_1973_001, April 1973.
21 *Singapore Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 1, Sitting No. 24, Col. 1494, 8 February 1956.
22 "Yap Will Meet Babel Critics", *The Straits Times,* 10 March 1955, 5.
23 "Life With the Yaps—A Bit of Babel".
24 "The Choice: Extinction or Four Tongues—Mr Marshall Pleads for Justice for All Races", *The Straits Times,* 9 February 1956, 2.
25 "The Choice: Extinction or Four Tongues—Mr Marshall Pleads for Justice for All Races".
26 "Four Tongues—Not One Voice Against It", *The Straits Times,* 10 February 1956, 2.
27 "Life With the Yaps—A Bit of Babel".
28 "Multi-lingualism", *The Straits Times,* 10 February 1956, 6.
29 "Multi-lingualism".
30 "Four Tongues—Not One Voice Against It".
31 "Multilingualism—Not A Sino-Malay Issue", *Indian Daily Mail,* 17 February 1955, 2.
32 "Four Tongues—Not One Voice Against It".
33 Singapore Legislative Assembly, *Report from the Select Committee on Languages in Legislative Assembly Debates* (Singapore, 24 October 1957), 51.
34 *Report from the Select Committee on Languages in Legislative Assembly Debates*, 52.
35 "Marshall's Tower of Babel Falls Down Like a Pack of Cards", *The Straits Times,* 29 July 1956, 11.
36 *Report from the Select Committee on Languages in Legislative Assembly Debates*, 1-2.
37 *Report from the Select Committee on Languages in Legislative Assembly Debates*, 2.
38 *Report from the Select Committee on Languages in Legislative Assembly Debates*, 3.
39 *Report from the Select Committee on Languages in Legislative Assembly Debates*, 75-80.
40 "'I Did Not Say That'—The Cry Now at Council Debates".
41 "'I Did Not Say That'—The Cry Now at Council Debates".
42 "The Non-English Speaking Assemblyman is Doomed to Be a Backbencher", *The Straits Times,* 19 December 1957, 8.
43 *Report from the Select Committee on Languages in Legislative Assembly Debates*, 29.
44 "A Multilingual Start: Many Tongues Equipment Being Installed", *The Straits Times,* 11 May 1959, 4.
45 "First Big Problem for the Council", *The Straits Times,* 22 November 1957, 4.
46 "Mayor's Speech System Goes Into Action", *The Straits Times,* 1 March 1958, 9.
47 "'I Did Not Say That'—The Cry Now at Council Debates".
48 "A Multilingual Start: Many Tongues Equipment Being Installed".
49 First Fully Elected Singapore Legislative Assembly, 1 July 1959, photograph, National Archives of Singapore, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/photographs/record-details/b7bbc438-1161-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad (accessed 5 September 2025).
50 *Singapore Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 11, Sitting No. 1, Col. 6, 1 July 1959.
51 *Singapore Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 14, Sitting No. 16, Col. 1199, 1209, 22 March 1961.
52 *Singapore Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 25, Sitting No. 14, Col. 1051, 1058, 21 December 1966.
53 "S'pore's Multi-Lingualism to Stay", *The Straits Times,* 8 February 1962, 16.
54 "Multi-lingualism in the Councils: The Winning Essays", *The Straits Times,* 9 April 1956, 5.
55 "Multi-lingualism in the Councils: The Winning Essays".
56 "Multilingualism in the Councils: Youth Essay Contest", *The Straits Times,* 5 March 1956, 6.

Joshua Goh is Assistant Curator at the Founders' Memorial. Outside work, his specialisation is in sociocultural history, with a particular focus on leisure and food.

Perspectives on Religious Harmony in Singapore:
Origins and Evolution



← Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew (middle) meeting with IRO council members, 30 September 1965. Permanent Secretary in the Prime Minister's Office Stanley Stewart (standing in background) and Attorney-General Ahmad Ibrahim (right, in black jacket) are seen in this photograph as well. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

"Actually, I don't see why we need to do this." These were the words of a fellow undergraduate who had approached me for advice on designing an inter-religious dialogue session that his student society was planning to organise. As an active advocate of interfaith work, this comment has stayed with me despite having left university for several years. It has prompted me to reflect on why some may not understand, or see, the need for such conversations.

From my experience and observations, one reason may be that Singaporeans are more aware of the state's role in fostering racial harmony, as compared to similar efforts where religious harmony is concerned. After all, racial harmony initiatives are at the forefront of our lived experiences. These include occasions such as Racial Harmony Day, and policies like the Ethnic Integration Policy which ensures a balanced mix of different ethnic communities in our Housing and Development Board (HDB) towns.

Although lesser-known, efforts to promote and maintain religious harmony have in fact existed in Singapore as early as our pre-independence years. This is significant given that no more than a third of Singapore's population follows any one religion today, resulting in a diversity described by the Pew Research Centre as "remarkable on a global scale".[1] While policies and laws often take centre stage, civil society has played its own part, with the 1949 formation of the Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO) being one pivotal moment in this decades-long endeavour to foster peace, tolerance, and mutual understanding. How have both the government and society played complementary roles in the period leading up to and after Singapore's independence? How has the nature of their efforts changed over the years?

by Sharifah Afra Alatas

The Formation of the Inter-Religious Organisation

Civil society efforts to promote religious harmony came to prominence in Singapore in the years following the end of World War II. This was a time of socio-political turbulence, when disagreements among different communities often spilled over into conflict.[2] Conscious of the need to foster goodwill among religious leaders, the President of the All-Malaya Muslim Missionary Society (AMMS, known today as Jamiyah Singapore), Syed Ibrahim Alsagoff, invited 40 guests of varying religious affiliations to lunch in January 1949. The lunch was held in honour of Maulana Mohamed Abdul Aleem Siddiqui, an esteemed Muslim scholar and missionary from Pakistan who had earlier helped found the AMMS in 1932, but Sir Malcolm MacDonald, British Commissioner-General for Southeast Asia, was also among the guests present.[3] According to a compilation of the IRO's early speeches, *The Contribution of Religion to Peace*, it was at this lunch that the idea of forming a "board of religious leaders" was first broached.[4]

At a second meeting held on 4 February 1949, this idea began taking concrete shape. Here, the Maulana proposed the formation of an association comprising the leaders and laymen of all religions of Malaya.[5] This organisation, he hoped, would "create a spirit of brotherhood" that could help "spread the moral virtues" of members' religions.[6] A further flurry of four meetings later, the Inter-Religious Organisation of Singapore and Johor Bahru was officially born, with a constitution that provided for six religions—Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Sikhism—to be represented among its founding members. Zoroastrianism was added to this list in 1961, followed by Taoism and the Baha'i faith in 1996, and Jainism in 2006.[7]

Two months after its constitution was promulgated, the IRO held its first public meeting at Victoria Memorial Hall on 18 March 1949, with a crowd of 2,000 people in attendance.[8] In his opening remarks at the event, Commissioner-General MacDonald—now the IRO's inaugural Patron—commended the "bold movement of religious leaders in Singapore and Johor", and expressed gratitude for "their sincerity and their courage, their tolerance and vision".[9] This gesture was significant as it represented the colonial administration's endorsement of the IRO's grassroots effort, thus laying the ground for the government and society to forge closer partnerships in the future. Importantly, other speeches made during this meeting also clarified that inter-religious dialogue did not preclude one's continued belief in one's own faith.[10] Rather, the IRO was meant to strengthen individual religious convictions—to "make men follow their religions strictly"—and was thus framed as encouraging a "spiritual revival" in the community.[11]

↓

Postage stamp issued on the 50th anniversary of the IRO, 1999. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

↓

A *Straits Times* report on the IRO's first public meeting which took place a day earlier, 19 March 1949. *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

Emergent Years

Barely two years after its founding, the IRO found itself in the spotlight after riots broke out in Singapore on 11 December 1950. This crisis was triggered by a custody battle over a 13-year-old Dutch-Eurasian girl, Maria Hertogh, who had been raised as a Muslim by her Malay foster mother during the Japanese Occupation, but was subsequently returned to her Catholic birth parents by order of the courts. The case was highly publicised and became a flashpoint for violent clashes which left 18 dead and more than 170 injured.[12]

In the aftermath of the riots, the IRO issued a public statement on 11 January 1951 at Commissioner-General MacDonald's request. Signed by council members of various religious affiliations, the statement read:

> "We repudiate and condemn mob violence and political terror...We pledge ourselves and summon all people of goodwill to further the cause of men living in freedom and righteousness according to the Law of God; and to this end to advance and protect those lawful associations in which men grow to freedom and justice—the family, the school, the occupational association or union, the nation, the religious community."[13]

↑
Demonstrators protesting outside the Supreme Court during the Maria Hertogh riots, 11 December 1950. Kenneth Chia Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

To some contemporary observers, the IRO's statement—issued a month after the riots—was a case of too little and too late.[14] However, when race riots broke out 14 years later in 1964, the IRO swung into action quickly, recording broadcasts to calm tensions in riot-stricken areas such as Geylang Serai.[15] In a 1985 interview with the National Archives of Singapore, Mehervan Singh, a former Secretary of the IRO, recalled the dangers council members faced driving around Singapore to publicise the IRO's statement:

> "During [the] curfew, I drove in my car with the draft statement to St Andrew's School. The statement was cut on a stencil and duplicated. The principal of the school was in our Council, Francis Thomas. He suggested [to Government officials at City Hall] that we be given labels for our cars. [However, I was sure that] somebody driving away in a car with the label [would invite] brickbats. So, all of us rejected labels for our cars."[16]

↓
Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew (centre of table) and Minister for Finance Dr Goh Keng Swee (right) meeting with IRO representatives at the height of the racial riots, 25 July 1964. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

The issuance of statements aside, the early work of the IRO was at times marred by financial constraints, a lack of meeting spaces, and disagreements between council members.[17] Even so, the IRO steadily but surely left its imprint on Singapore's public landscape. For example, in the mid-1950s, the IRO proposed for all government schools to offer compulsory religious education.[18] This would later lead to a 1960 collaboration with the Ministry of Education, which introduced a "Right Conduct" course in the primary school syllabus, based on ethics and religious knowledge.[19] The IRO's credibility also received a boost when its representatives were called upon by Chief Minister Lim Yew Hock to pronounce a benediction for the opening of the Merdeka Bridge and Nicoll Highway in 1956.[20] This practice of having religious leaders grace national events with their blessings would subsequently become a common sight during occasions such as the installation of Singapore's first Malayan-born Yang di-Pertuan Negara in December 1959, Singapore Armed Forces Training Institute commissioning ceremonies, and even early National Day celebrations.[21] While symbolic, the prayers nevertheless serve as a visible reminder of the peace and harmony that exists among different religions in Singapore.

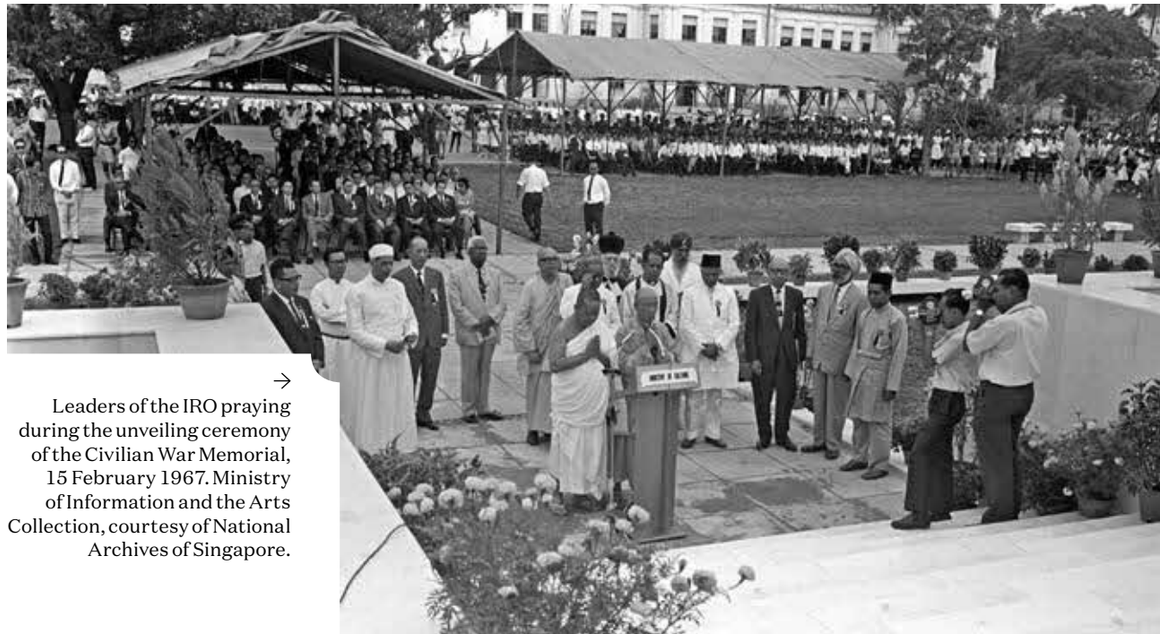
↑
Entrance to Merdeka Bridge and Nicoll Highway, 1960s. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

Trusted Partner

By the time Singapore was thrust out of the Federation of Malaysia in August 1965, the IRO had become a trusted partner to a fledgling nation-state determined to treat all religions even-handedly. Its Council—referred to in government statements as the Inter-Religious Council—was often called upon by Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew to help defuse tensions and mediate between opposing viewpoints. In one instance in September 1965, troublemakers attempted to stir up tensions between Christians and Muslims by alleging that some religious adherents had been proselytising in an inappropriate manner. Recognising the danger such "synthetic froth" could pose, Lee summoned the Council for a meeting. He emphasised the "multiracial, multilingual, multireligious" nature of Singapore society, and stated firmly that "tolerance between racial groups, linguistic groups and religious groups" was "of the essence for [Singapore's] survival".[22] To assure Singaporeans of their commitment to this fundamental principle, IRO leaders then quickly responded with a statement condemning "unfair or unethical methods [...] in the propagation of religion".[23]

In another anecdote related by Prime Minister Lee during the parliamentary debate on the 1966 Constitutional Commission Report, the Council's mediation helped foster a compromise among different religious groups seeking to publicly broadcast their sermons or calls to worship. After a "sober but... trying exploration of compromise proposals", all groups agreed to confine their loudspeakers and electronic aids to within their premises.[24] This, Lee noted, sent a clear message that the government would approach such matters delicately and sensitively, and not favour any religious denominations above others.[25]

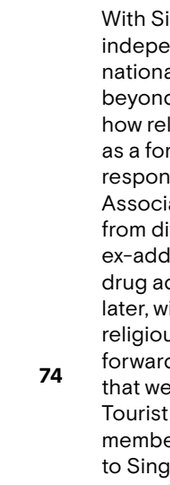
One further episode from the late 1960s showcased the IRO's role as a neutral arbiter in situations involving complex religious sensitivities. In this instance, the Chinese Chamber of Commerce had initially planned to cremate remains that had been exhumed from World War II massacre sites in Siglap. When it emerged that some remains could possibly have belonged to Muslim soldiers of the former Straits Settlement Volunteer Corps, Prime Minister Lee and the IRO intervened, persuading the Chamber to leave them intact instead.[26] These remains were eventually interred in urns beneath the Civilian War Memorial, which was consecrated by representatives of the IRO during a dedication service on 15 February 1967.[27]



→
Leaders of the IRO praying during the unveiling ceremony of the Civilian War Memorial, 15 February 1967. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Force For Good

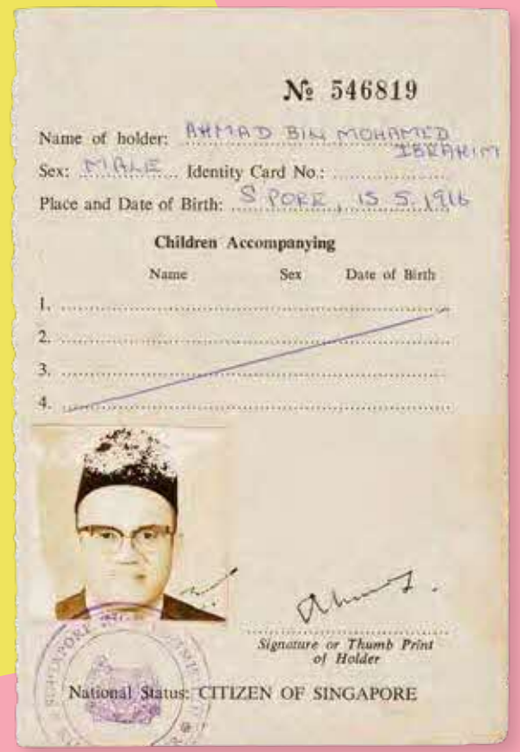
With Singapore developing rapidly post-independence, the IRO continued to partner national institutions in promoting causes beyond the field of religion, demonstrating how religious groups can be mobilised as a force for good. In 1977, the IRO responded to the Singapore Anti-Narcotics Association's (SANA) call for representatives from different religious groups to care for ex-addicts amid growing concern about drug addiction among youth.[28] Two years later, with rising number of tourists visiting religious institutions, the IRO stepped forward to draw up etiquette guidelines that were forwarded to the then-Singapore Tourist Promotion Board.[29] IRO council members also contributed in their own ways to Singapore's broader development. For example, D. D. Chelliah and Francis Thomas both served on the Presidential Council of Minority Rights, while Ahmad Ibrahim served with distinction as independent Singapore's first Attorney-General.



Ahmad Mohamed Ibrahim, Singapore's Top Legal Officer

A lawyer by training, Ahmad Ibrahim helped draft the IRO's constitution as one of its founding members.[30] During the Maria Hertogh crisis, he represented Mansoor Adabi, who had wedded Nadra (or Maria) under Muslim law, in court.[31] He later served as Singapore's State Advocate-General from 1959 to 1965, and independent Singapore's Attorney-General from 1965 to 1967. As Singapore's top legal officer, he contributed to the 1961 Women's Charter, weighed in on sensitive deliberations relating to Merger, and formulated the 1966 Administration of Muslim Law Act.[32] According to Dr Goh Keng Swee, Ahmad Ibrahim was a man of "tremendous breadth and depth of intellect, whose ability as a legal draftsman [was] unsurpassed in this country".[33]

→
Lawyer's wig, passport, and passport annex page belonging to State Advocate-General (later Attorney-General) Ahmad Ibrahim, 1950s–1970s. Gift of the family of Ahmad Mohamed Ibrahim. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.



Adapting to Developments in the Religious Landscape

Even as the IRO continued its good work, by the late 1980s, developments in post-independent Singapore's religious landscape would prompt a shift in the government's approach to safeguarding religious harmony. This turn by the government towards a more proactive, hands-on stance was signalled by President Wee Kim Wee when he addressed Parliament during its opening on 9 January 1989. In his speech, Wee highlighted the need for "ground rules" to guide the maintenance of religious harmony, the importance of tolerance and moderation, as well as the need to keep religion and politics separate.[34]

By the end of that year, a White Paper on the Maintenance of Religious Harmony was presented in Parliament. Two IRO members—Reverend Dr Anne Johnson, representing the Presbyterian community, and the Mufti of Singapore Syed Isa Semait, representing the Muslim community—provided oral and written submissions to a Parliamentary Select Committee, and the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA) subsequently came into effect on 31 March 1992.[35] The Act sought to "prevent religious tensions and conflict caused by insensitive and provocative acts, and to promote understanding, moderation, tolerance and respect for other religions".[36] It also created the Presidential Council for Religious Harmony as an advisory body to oversee matters affecting the maintenance of religious harmony in Singapore.[37]

While the state has never had to invoke its powers under the MRHA, safeguarding religious harmony in Singapore remains a work in progress, especially with a rapidly evolving global situation. The MRHA was updated on 7 October 2019 to help the government respond effectively to incidents of religious disharmony and strengthen our safeguards against foreign influence.[38]

Disagreeing Better

Fast forward to today, and the blossoming of civil society in Singapore has resulted in renewed energy, vigour, and purpose in the field of religious harmony. While the IRO continues to remain active in the inter-religious space, it now partners with a growing array of national and community organisations to strengthen Singapore's broader social fabric. For example, since 2002, the IRO has contributed its voice to the National Steering Committee on Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles (IRCCs).[39] Now known as Harmony Circles, these networks foster social cohesion by building trust and confidence among different communities both in times of peace and crisis.[40] The IRO's partnership and perspectives have also helped co-create initiatives such as the Harmony in Diversity Gallery at Maxwell Road, a 2016 initiative spearheaded by the Ministry of Home Affairs to promote deeper understanding of different faith communities.[41]

Established voices like the IRO aside, newer outfits such as Roses of Peace (2012), Interfaith Youth Circle (2015), hash.peace (2015), and Dialogue Centre (2022) have further enriched and enlivened inter-religious discourse in Singapore. In a 2023 interview with *The Peak,* Mohamed Irshad, Roses of Peace's founder, shared that the initiative was born at a time when news of Charlie Hebdo's caricatures of Prophet Muhammad was gaining traction in the press.[42] Not content with inaction, Irshad led a group of Singapore Management University (SMU) undergraduates to hand out roses and messages of peace from different religions to members of the public—a gesture they found meaningful.[43] In a separate 2020 podcast hosted on *Tatler Asia*, Noor Mastura, the founder of Interfaith Youth Circle, similarly cited the simple desire to "change the world—one world at a time" as a powerful source of motivation. To her, the goal of dialogue may not even be to get participants to agree to disagree, but rather, to simply "disagree better".[44]

→
Practitioners of various faiths at an inter-religious dialogue titled "Common Senses for Common Spaces", 8 August 2021. *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

Conclusion: A Personal Perspective

I joined the Interfaith Society when I was an undergraduate at the National University of Singapore (NUS) between 2014 and 2018. During those years, I participated in fortnightly dialogues with fellow university students, attended events organised by the IRO, and helped in outreach to the general public. Through my involvement in inter-religious dialogue, I have learnt that getting involved is important no matter what stage of life one may be at. While exposure to other faith practices may be eye-opening for those without friends of a different religious background, it may also be refreshing for those who simply wish to better understand different perspectives.

For me, what was particularly meaningful was being invited to the events of other religious groups, such as the NUS Buddhist Society, and learning about their beliefs and practices even at events which were not inter-religious in nature. Until today, I still remember sitting in a room, in awe of the deep chanting in Pali while witnessing everyone in their moment of devotion. So long as such experiences take place in a respectful atmosphere, I think they should feature regularly in our lives, as we can then better appreciate the beauty of the diversity that we all share in Singapore.

↑
IRO representatives conducting prayers during an annual National Day observance ceremony at the Fullerton Hotel, 19 August 2025. *Lianhe Zaobao* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

Over the years, I have also seen the nature of dialogue evolve. While people may naturally be more comfortable talking about similarities across religions and emphasising the importance of mutual tolerance, more are recognising that conversations about differences, when done in a respectful way, can help foster deeper understanding and cross-cultural appreciation. This shows how our approach towards inter-religious dialogue has matured over time as well.

Postscript

Since the establishment of the IRO in 1949, efforts to promote and maintain religious harmony in Singapore have kept pace with changing political and socio-historical contexts. With the ever-evolving global religious landscape, the threats to Singapore's religious harmony will also continue to intensify. If the history of the IRO is any guide, it is only through the persistent efforts of all—both the government and society—that genuine inter-religious understanding, tolerance, and appreciation can continue to be fostered.

NOTES

1 William Miner, "In Singapore, Religious Diversity and Tolerance Go Hand in Hand", Pew Research Center, 6 October 2023, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/10/06/in-singapore-religious-diversity-and-tolerance-go-hand-in-hand/ (accessed 29 August 2025).
2 Nathene Chua, "Public Efforts or Private Pursuit? An Early History of the Inter-Religious Organisation in Singapore, 1949-1965" (B.A. thesis, National University of Singapore, 2018), 13, 17.
3 "Muslim Divine for Colony", *The Straits Times*, 14 December 1948, 4. "Maulana" is an honorific title used mostly in South Asia to address respected Muslim religious scholars.
4 H. B. Amstutz and Ahmad bin Mohamed Ibrahim, eds., *The Contribution of Religion to Peace* (Singapore: Malaya Publishing House Limited, 1949), 9-10.
5 "A Brief History of IRO", Inter-Religious Organisation Singapore, https://iro.sg/history/ (accessed 28 August 2025).
6 Amstutz and Ahmad, *Contribution of Religion to Peace*, 3.
7 Lai Ah Eng, "The Inter-Religious Organisation of Singapore", in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, edited by Lai Ah Eng (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2008), 608.
8 Amstutz and Ahmad, *Contribution of Religion to Peace*, 3.
9 *IRO-40: Inter-Religious Organisation Singapore 40th Anniversary Commemorative Book* (Singapore: Inter-Religious Organisation, 1990), 4.
10 Amstutz and Ahmad, *Contribution of Religion to Peace*, 8-10.
11 "We Need These Qualities — Black", *The Straits Times*, 26 May 1956, 5.
12 Khairudin Aljunied, *Colonialism, Violence and Muslims in Southeast Asia: The Maria Hertogh Controversy and its Aftermath* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 22.
13 "Religious Bodies Condemn Riots", *The Straits Times*, 12 January 1951, 7.
14 "A Creed for All Men", *The Straits Times*, 24 December 1950, 10.
15 "Appeal by Council of Inter-Religious Organisations of Singapore Following Disturbances in the Geylang Serai Area" (radio broadcast, Singapore, 9 September 1964), National Archives of Singapore, Accession No. 2006002268.
16 Mehervan Singh, interview by Pitt Kuan Wah, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, Accession No. A000553, Reel 34, 12 July 1985.
17 Lai, "The Inter-Religious Organisation of Singapore", 608.
18 A. K. Isaac, "Hon. Secretary's Report", 10 October 1955, *Inter-Religious Organization (Singapore and Johore Bahru)*, National Archives of Singapore, 471-55 (hereafter cited as NAS 471-55); IRO, "Minutes of General Meeting", 5 August 1955, NAS 471-55.
19 *IRO-40*, 41.
20 IRO, "Minutes of Council Meeting", 13 July 1956, NAS 471-55; IRO, "Minutes of General Meeting", 16 August 1956, NAS 471-55.
21 George K. Seow for the Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Culture to the Secretary of IRO, 19 October 1959, *Inter Religious Organization*, National Archives of Singapore, 92-59; "Prayers by All for State of S'pore", *The Straits Times*, 3 June 1960, 4; Lai, "The Inter-Religious Organisation of Singapore", 615.
22 Lee Kuan Yew, "Transcript of the Prime Minister's Statement to Religious Representatives and Members of the Inter-Religious Council at His Office in City Hall" (speech, Singapore, 30 September 1965), National Archives of Singapore, lky19650930a.
23 Lee, "Transcript of the Prime Minister's Statement to Religious Representatives and Members of the Inter-Religious Council at His Office in City Hall"; Lai, "The Inter-Religious Organisation of Singapore", 611.
24 *Singapore Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 25, Sitting No. 18, Col. 1285-1286, 15 March 1967.
25 *Singapore Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 25, Sitting No. 18, Col. 1285-1286, 15 March 1967.
26 Singh, interview, Reel 34.
27 "War Memorial is Unveiled", *The Straits Times*, 16 February 1967, 17.
28 *IRO-40*, 42.
29 Lai, "The Inter-Religious Organisation of Singapore", 614.
30 Lai, "The Inter-Religious Organisation of Singapore", 622.
31 Ahmad Nizam Abbas, "Ahmad Ibrahim's Role in Shaping Islamic Laws in Singapore — From Colonial to Post-Colonial", in *Beyond Bicentennial: Perspectives on Malays*, edited by Zainul Abidin Rasheed, Wan Hussin Zoohri, and Norshahril Saat (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2020), 568.
32 Ahmad Nizam, "Ahmad Ibrahim's Role in Shaping Islamic Laws in Singapore", 565.
33 Ahmad Nizam, "Ahmad Ibrahim's Role in Shaping Islamic Laws in Singapore", 573.
34 White Paper on the Maintenance of Religious Harmony, 1989, Cmd. 21.
35 Lai, "The Inter-Religious Organisation of Singapore", 612; Jean Lim, "Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill", *Singapore Infopedia* (National Library Board), https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/article-detail?cmsuuid=3edc3e5f-7333-4ae9-ba2d-7c355c4a1cee (accessed 29 August 2025).
36 Lim, "Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill".
37 Ministry of Information and the Arts, *The Need for the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act* (Singapore: Resource Centre, Publicity Division, Ministry of Information and the Arts, 1992), 4.
38 Grace Ho, "Parliament: Updates to Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act Timely Given External Environment, Says Shanmugam", *The Straits Times*, 7 October 2019, https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/parliament-updates-to-maintenance-of-religious-harmony-act-timely-given-external (accessed 29 August 2025).
39 Lai, "The Inter-Religious Organisation of Singapore", 615.
40 "Racial and Religious Harmony Circle", Ministry of Culture, Community & Youth, 27 May 2025, https://www.mccy.gov.sg/sectors/community/racial-and-religious-harmony-circle (accessed 29 August 2025).
41 "About the Gallery", *Harmony In Diversity Gallery* (Ministry of Home Affairs), https://www.harmonyindiversitygallery.gov.sg/about/ (accessed 29 August 2025).
42 Charlie Hebdo is a French satirical magazine that published cartoons depicting Prophet Muhammad, which Islam generally prohibits.
43 Reeta Raman, "The Peak Power List 2023: Roses of Peace Founder Mohamed Irshad Plans to Change the Minds of Youth, One Interfaith Conversation at a Time", *The Peak*, 23 October 2023, https://www.thepeakmagazine.com.sg/people/mohamed-irshad-the-peak-power-list-2023 (accessed 29 August 2025).
44 Lee Williamson, "Noor Mastura—Empowering Communities to Make Change", *Tatler*, 29 July 2020, https://www.tatlerasia.com/gen-t/leadership/crazy-smart-asia-noor-masturaempowering-communities-to-make-change (accessed 29 August 2025).

Sharifah Afra Alatas is Senior Research Officer at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, where she does research on socioreligious and sociopolitical issues among Muslim societies in Southeast Asia, with a particular focus on Malaysia. Beyond her day job, she conducts sharing sessions about Arab heritage in Singapore.

Multiculturalism by Design: The Legacy of the 1966 Wee Chong Jin Constitutional Commission

←
A Commission hearing at the Supreme Court, 1 March 1966. Ministry of Information and the Arts collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

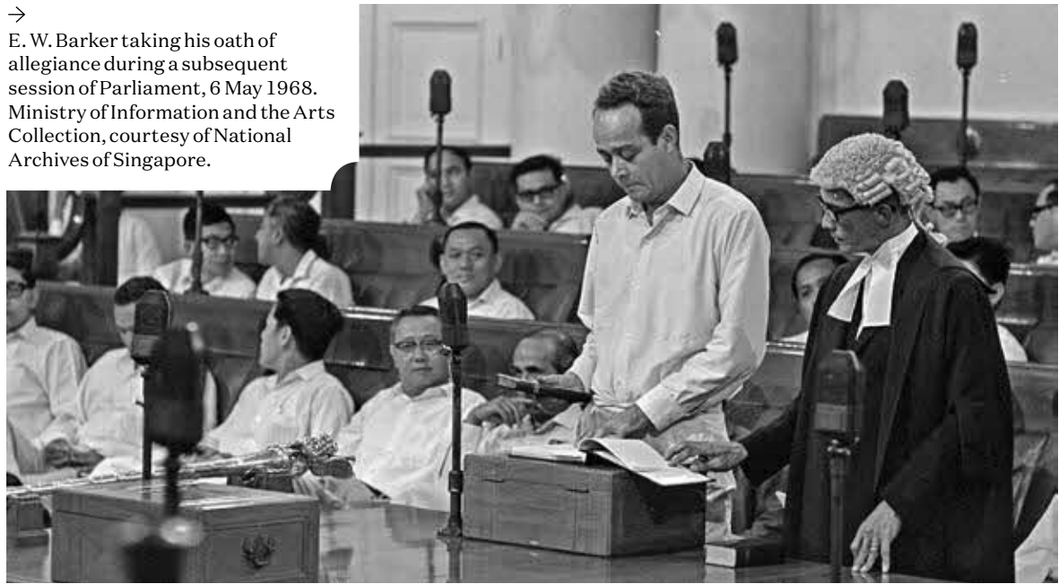
On 9 August 1965, Singapore stood at the crossroads of turmoil and promise. Social tensions were high after a brief but turbulent merger with Malaysia.[1] The Federal government had emphasised Malay dominance in the peninsula, but Singapore yearned for a more inclusive, multicultural state.[2] With Separation, Singapore had a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to construct a nation based on this forward-looking vision. In a nationally televised press conference, Prime Minister (PM) Lee Kuan Yew declared that Singapore was to be a multiracial nation—not a Malay, Chinese, or Indian nation, but a country where everyone would have an equal place, regardless of race, language, religion, or culture.[3]

Convinced that majoritarianism should not take root in Singapore, the government took immediate steps to assure minority communities that their rights would be safeguarded. At the very first sitting of Parliament in December 1965, Minister for Law and National Development E. W. Barker announced the formation of a Constitutional Commission, chaired by Chief Justice Wee Chong Jin, to deliberate on this matter.[4] The Commission would go on to seek the views of a broad spectrum of Singapore society, but it eventually resolved that Singapore's approach towards protecting its minorities lay in upholding individual liberties for all, as opposed to enshrining minority rights. Minister for Foreign Affairs S. Rajaratnam summarised the nub of the issue during the March 1967 parliamentary debate on the Commission's report:

"Once a community, either based on race, language or religion, confers special rights on itself and if it happens to be a minority, then in no time the majority will say, 'Well, since you can ask for special rights, I too will vote special rights for myself.'"[5]

by Jaclyn Neo

→
E. W. Barker taking his oath of allegiance during a subsequent session of Parliament, 6 May 1968. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



The Formation and Mandate of the Wee Commission

The formation of the Wee Commission was a significant milestone for independent Singapore as the newly sovereign nation-state had no ready-made Constitution to turn to. Instead, the Singapore Constitution was initially an amalgamation of parts of the Malaysian Federal Constitution with the 1963 State of Singapore Constitution and the 1965 Republic of Singapore Independence Act. Some constituent parts of this "makeshift Constitution" already contained clauses pertaining to equal protection and non-discrimination. For example, Article 12, which was taken from Article 8 of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia, expressly provided for equal treatment for all persons before the law. In addition, Article 89(1) from the State of Singapore Constitution spelt out "the responsibility of the Government constantly to care for the interests of the racial and religious minorities" in Singapore.[6] Article 89(2) further emphasised the "special position of the Malays, who are the indigenous people of [Singapore]" and "the responsibility of the Government to protect, safeguard, support, foster and promote their political, educational religious, economic, social and cultural interests and the Malay language."[7]

It thus fell on the Wee Commission to consider these texts holistically, guided by the following terms of reference:

a) to receive and consider representations on how the rights of the racial, linguistic and religious minorities can be adequately safeguarded in the Constitution;

b) to consider what provisions should be made to ensure that no discriminatory legislation would be enacted before adequate opportunities have been given for representation from parties likely to be aggrieved;

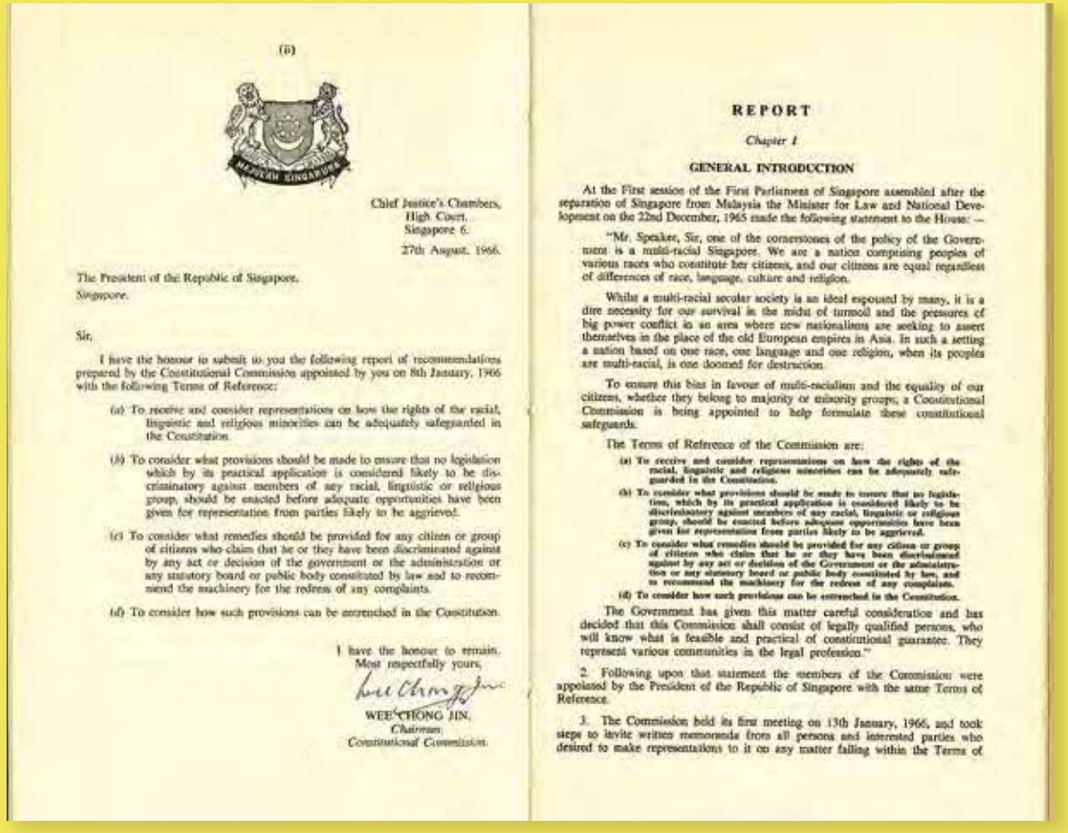
c) to consider what remedies should be provided for any citizen or group of citizens who claim to have been discriminated against and to recommend the machinery for the redress of any complaints;

d) to consider how such provisions can be entrenched in the Constitution.[8]

Before the Commission could get to work, its composition first had to be determined. According to Wee's oral history recollections, PM Lee began by drawing up a preliminary list of names, to which Wee gave his input.[9] In the end, the Commission settled on a list of 11 "eminent legal persons" which included the Speaker of Parliament A. P. Rajah, former Progressive Party Commissioner Cuthbert Ess, Muslim Advisory Board member Mohamed Javad Namazie, and Secretary-General of the Singapore United Malays National Organisation (SUMNO) Syed Esa Almenoar, among others.[10] PM Lee would later make special note of how the existence of such an esteemed multiracial panel could provide "deep, psychological assurance" to Singapore's minorities:

> "The very fact that there is almost no minority group in Singapore that can say that they are not represented by someone in this Constitutional Commission who understands some part of their life and practices makes its findings all that much more valuable."[11]

↓
Opening page of the Wee Commission's report, 1966. Courtesy of National Library Board, Singapore.



(ii)

MALAYAN SINGAPORE

Chief Justice's Chambers,
High Court,
Singapore 6.

27th August, 1966.

The President of the Republic of Singapore,
Singapore.

Sir,

I have the honour to submit to you the following report of recommendations prepared by the Constitutional Commission appointed by you on 8th January, 1966 with the following Terms of Reference:

(a) To receive and consider representations on how the rights of the racial, linguistic and religious minorities can be adequately safeguarded in the Constitution.

(b) To consider what provisions should be made to ensure that no legislation which by its practical application is considered likely to be discriminatory against members of any racial, linguistic or religious group, should be enacted before adequate opportunities have been given for representation from parties likely to be aggrieved.

(c) To consider what remedies should be provided for any citizen or group of citizens who claim that he or they have been discriminated against by any act or decision of the government or the administration or any statutory board or public body constituted by law and to recommend the machinery for the redress of any complaints.

(d) To consider how such provisions can be entrenched in the Constitution.

I have the honour to remain,
Most respectfully yours,

WEE CHONG JIN,
Chairman,
Constitutional Commission.

REPORT

Chapter 1

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

At the First session of the First Parliament of Singapore assembled after the separation of Singapore from Malaysia the Minister for Law and National Development on the 22nd December, 1965 made the following statement to the House: —

"Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the cornerstones of the policy of the Government is a multi-racial Singapore. We are a nation comprising peoples of various races who constitute her citizens, and our citizens are equal regardless of differences of race, language, culture and religion.

While a multi-racial secular society is an ideal espoused by many, it is a dire necessity for our survival in the midst of turmoil and the pressures of big power conflict in an area where new nationalisms are seeking to assert themselves in the place of the old European empires in Asia. In such a setting a nation based on one race, one language and one religion, when its peoples are multi-racial, is one doomed for destruction.

To ensure this bias in favour of multi-racialism and the equality of our citizens, whether they belong to majority or minority groups, a Constitutional Commission is being appointed to help formulate these constitutional safeguards.

The Terms of Reference of the Commission are:

(a) To receive and consider representations on how the rights of the racial, linguistic and religious minorities can be adequately safeguarded in the Constitution.

(b) To consider what provisions should be made to ensure that no legislation, which by its practical application is considered likely to be discriminatory against members of any racial, linguistic or religious group, should be enacted before adequate opportunities have been given for representation from parties likely to be aggrieved.

(c) To consider what remedies should be provided for any citizen or group of citizens who claim that he or they have been discriminated against by any act or decision of the Government or the administration or any statutory board or public body constituted by law, and to recommend the machinery for the redress of any complaints.

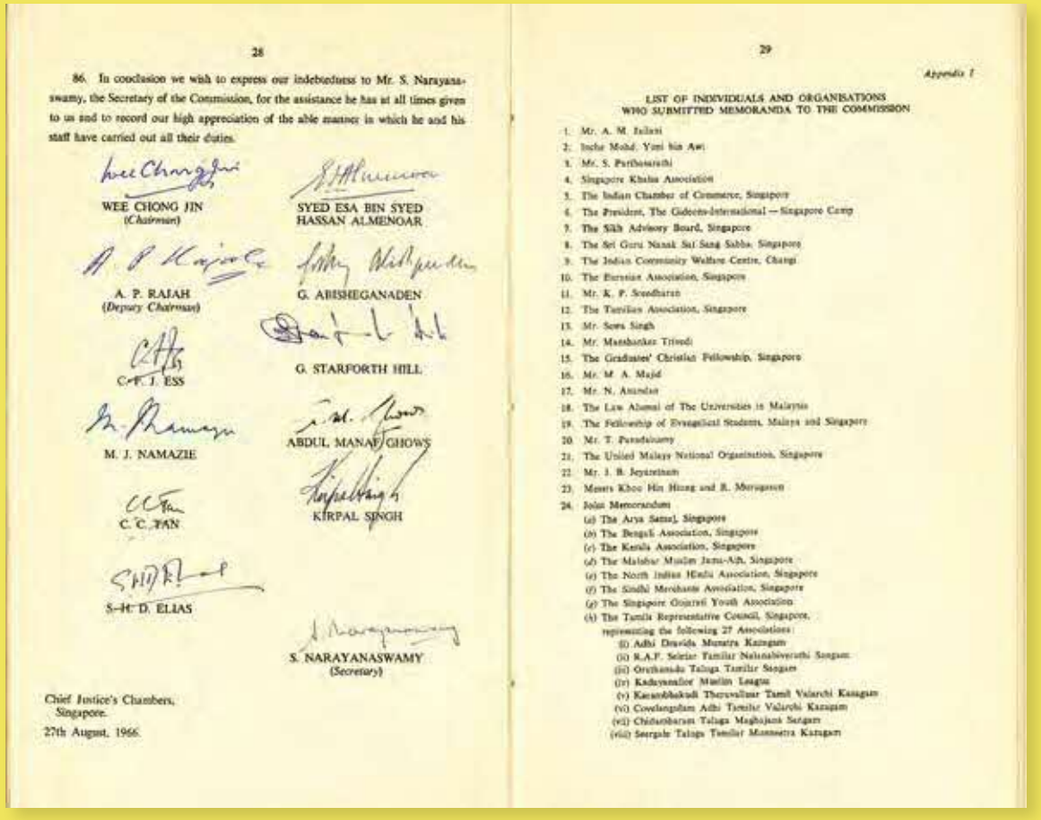
(d) To consider how such provisions can be entrenched in the Constitution.

The Government has given this matter careful consideration and has decided that this Commission shall consist of legally qualified persons, who will know what is feasible and practical of constitutional guarantee. They represent various communities in the legal profession."

2. Following upon that statement the members of the Commission were appointed by the President of the Republic of Singapore with the same Terms of Reference.

3. The Commission held its first meeting on 13th January, 1966, and took steps to invite written memoranda from all persons and interested parties who desired to make representations to it on any matter falling within the Terms of

↓
Signatory page of the Wee Commission's report, 1966.
Courtesy of National Library Board, Singapore.



28

86. In conclusion we wish to express our indebtedness to Mr. S. Narayanaswamy, the Secretary of the Commission, for the assistance he has at all times given to us and to record our high appreciation of the able manner in which he and his staff have carried out all their duties.

WEE CHONG JIN
(*Chairman*)

SYED ESA BIN SYED HASSAN ALMENOAR

A. P. RAJAH
(*Deputy Chairman*)

G. ABISHEGANADEN

C. F. J. ESS

G. STARFORTH HILL

M. J. NAMAZIE

ABDUL MANAF GHOWS

C. C. TAN

KIRPAL SINGH

S. H. D. ELIAS

S. NARAYANASWAMY
(*Secretary*)

Chief Justice's Chambers,
Singapore.
27th August, 1966.

29

Appendix I

LIST OF INDIVIDUALS AND ORGANISATIONS WHO SUBMITTED MEMORANDA TO THE COMMISSION

1. Mr. A. M. Ialani
2. Inche Mohd. Yusi bin Awi
3. Mr. S. Parthasarathi
4. Singapore Khalsa Association
5. The Indian Chamber of Commerce, Singapore
6. The President, The Gideons International — Singapore Camp
7. The Sikh Advisory Board, Singapore
8. The Sri Guru Nanak Sat Sang Sabha, Singapore
9. The Indian Community Welfare Centre, Changi
10. The Eurasian Association, Singapore
11. Mr. K. P. Soodharan
12. The Tamilian Association, Singapore
13. Mr. Sawa Singh
14. Mr. Manharlaxi Trivedi
15. The Graduates' Christian Fellowship, Singapore
16. Mr. M. A. Majid
17. Mr. N. Anandan
18. The Law Alumni of The Universities in Malaysia
19. The Fellowship of Evangelical Students, Malaya and Singapore
20. Mr. T. Pavadaisamy
21. The United Malays National Organisation, Singapore
22. Mr. J. B. Jeyaretnam
23. Messrs Khoo Hin Hiang and R. Murugesan
24. Joint Memorandum
    (a) The Arya Samaj, Singapore
    (b) The Bengali Association, Singapore
    (c) The Kerala Association, Singapore
    (d) The Malabar Muslim Jama-Ath, Singapore
    (e) The North Indian Hindu Association, Singapore
    (f) The Sindhi Merchants Association, Singapore
    (g) The Singapore Gujarati Youth Association
    (h) The Tamils Representative Council, Singapore,
    representing the following 27 Associations:
    (i) Adhi Dravida Munetra Kazagam
    (ii) K.A.F. Seletar Tamilar Nalnanbiverutht Sangam
    (iii) Orchanadu Talaga Tamilar Sangam
    (iv) Kadayanallur Muslim League
    (v) Kanambhakudi Theruvalluar Tamil Valarchi Kazagam
    (vi) Covelangalam Adhi Tamilar Valarchi Kazagam
    (vii) Chidambaram Talaga Maghajana Sangam
    (viii) Seergale Talaga Tamilar Munnetra Kazagam

←
Speaker of Parliament, A. P. Rajah, welcoming President Yusof Ishak to Parliament House during Parliament's first sitting, 8 December 1965. Yusof Ishak Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Members and Secretary of the 1966 Wee Chong Jin Constitutional Commission

- Wee Chong Jin (Chairman)
- A. P. Rajah (Deputy Chairman)
- Abdul Manaf Ghows
- Cuthbert Francis Joseph Ess
- Geoffrey Abisheganaden
- Graham Starforth Hill
- Kirpal Singh
- Mohamed Javad Namazie
- S. H. D. Elias
- Syed Esa Almenoar
- Tan Chye Cheng
- S. Narayanaswamy (Secretary)

My job was to represent the European community... One of the main problems we had to deal with was how to protect minorities in Singapore, because with the Chinese majority, the other minorities could get left out in the cold.[12]

Graham Starforth Hill, a member of the 1966 Constitutional Commission, in a 2011 interview with the National Archives of Singapore

The Commission's composition aside, public participation was key to its efforts and legitimacy. By January 1966, calls for representations to the Commission were published in major newspapers, with clear instructions on how they could be submitted (i.e. directly to the Chief Justice's chambers in the Supreme Court building).[13] Within just one month, the Commission received some 40 memoranda and held 10 public hearings.[14] Groups that participated included SUMNO, the Tamil Association of Singapore, various Sikh and Indian organisations, and the Council of Churches of Malaysia and Singapore.[15]

Curiously, the Chinese community did not participate substantively in the public hearings that were organised, and mainstream Chinese newspapers did not report widely on the Commission's work. The fact that the Commission was tasked specifically with looking at minority rights in its Terms of Reference was also noted by some Members of Parliament (MPs) when it debated the Commission's recommendations in 1967. The MP for Changi, Sim Boon Woo, opined that the Commission had gone beyond its remit by enmeshing minority rights within other broader Constitutional provisions, even though the Commission had asserted that both were fundamentally intertwined:

> "Sir, this House is supposed to have a Report on minority rights, but it has become a Report of the whole Constitution, as the very title itself shows. Mr Speaker, Sir, with the greatest respect to the legal luminaries who signed the Constitution[al] [Report], I say that the correct title should be 'The Report of the Constitutional Commission on Minority Rights'. I repeat, Sir, '... on Minority Rights' alone."[16]

↓
The Commission led by Chief Justice Wee Chong Jin (centre, in the Chair) presiding over hearings, 2 March 1966. Wee was the first Asian and Singaporean to head the Judiciary when he was appointed Chief Justice in 1963. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Public Participation: Key Concerns of Minority Communities

After submissions were heard in March 1966, the Commission spent the following six months deliberating the memoranda. While the Commission's internal notes—perhaps owing to confidentiality concerns—are not publicly accessible, newspaper reports on the hearings provide a flavour of the diverse views deliberated, and the specific concerns of Singapore's minority communities. These fell into four broad categories.

A. Citizenship and Immigration

Citizenship was the top priority for the Indian community. At the time of independence, many Indians who had arrived in post-war Singapore still had not attained formal citizenship.[17] In addition, many had not initially been able to bring along their families due to financial constraints. By the time they were able to, restrictive immigration laws prohibited their spouses from entering Singapore, because they had lived separately from their husbands for more than five years, and their children were above six years old.[18] The Indian representatives, led by individuals from the Bengali, Kerala, Gujarati, Sikh, Tamil, and Sindhi Associations, thus passionately asked for these laws to be reformed so that citizens would not have their loyalty "divided by [their] wife and children living in another country".[19]

B. Socioeconomic Uplift and Privileges

The Malay community, on the other hand, were concerned about their economic conditions. SUMNO positioned themselves as the community's representatives, and called for educational support (from primary to university level), job opportunities, government assistance in entering business and industry, and even designating areas for Malay settlements.[20] In doing so, they alluded to Article 89(2) of the Constitution, contending that "citizens of Singapore from various races would fully understand and be sympathetic with all the ways and means to give aid to Malays who are the indigenous people of Singapore so that they can live on equal standing with the other races who have come into this country".[21] While the Commission, and subsequently Parliament, affirmed the necessity of retaining Article 89(2), some ethnically Malay People's Action Party (PAP) MPs felt that it was equally important to reference the higher "ideals of democracy, justice and fair play".[22] Rahim Ishak, Minister of State for Education and MP for Siglap, was one of those who expressed concerns:

> "The special position of the Malays can be written into the Constitution a million times, but there will be no progress if realisation and the correct mental attitude towards this special position and what it offers is not exploited."[23]

Indians to draw up safeguards

SINGAPORE, Sun. — Representatives of all Indian organisations in Singapore will meet on Feb. 12 to approve a memorandum to be submitted to the constitutional commission set up to safeguard minority rights.

They will also discuss the question of Singapore citizenship and work permits for non-citizens.

This was announced by Mr. John Jacobs, president of the Malaysian Indian Congress, after an emergency meeting of its executive committee yesterday.

He told the executives at their Race Course Road headquarters that a memorandum would be drawn up and submitted to the Government.

Rejected

Mr. Jacobs also said that the Feb. 12 meeting would discuss, among other things, the citizenship issue and the work permit.

He said: "Many Indians are gravely concerned over this."

He said that many Indians who had applied for Singapore citizenship, were still awaiting for an official reply. Some of them, he said, have had their applications rejected.

"Those who want to apply now cannot do so because no application forms are issued," he added.

←
A *Straits Times* report on the Indian community's concerns, 31 January 1966. *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

C. Cultural Identity and Language

The realm of culture invited equally passionate proposals. Several groups, including those from the Indian community, expressed their desire for vernacular languages like Tamil and Punjabi to be accorded greater recognition by the government.[24] The most earnest representations in this regard came from the Malay community, as they grappled with the transition from majority to minority status in the new state.[25] SUMNO representatives gathered before the Commission advocated for the Constitution to affirm the Malays as "the indigenous people" of Singapore, and to define a Malay person as someone "who professes the Islamic religion, speaks the Malay language and adopts Malay customs and traditions".[26] They also argued that this intertwining of race and religion was essential, noting that "if a Malay did not profess Islam, it was difficult for the Malay community to accept him".[27]

SUMNO's submissions notwithstanding, there were certainly other representors who disagreed with entrenching cultural differences. The Law Alumni of the Universities in Malaysia (the Singapore section) argued that the perpetuation of religious, racial, and linguistic features of each minority group would lead to a fragmented society. Instead, they envisaged a future Singapore where "awareness of differences in race, language and religion can eventually be subordinated to greater urges of nationalism like patriotism and good citizenship".[28]

D. Religious Freedom, Electoral Representation and Political Voice, and Everyday Challenges of Minorities

Besides submissions relating to the above-mentioned areas, the Commission also heard representations on a range of other concerns. Some religious and civic groups, for example, took issue with Article 11 of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia, which prohibited religious proselytising to Muslims, and which had been imported wholesale via the 1965 Republic of Singapore

MARCH 4, 1966

Constitutional Commission: Third day

HOW OTHER RACES CAN ALSO BE MALAYS: Umno

INCHE TAFF

A MALAY need not be a Malay by race, according to the chairman of Umno Singapore, Inche Ahmad Haji Taft.

He appeared today with five other Umno Singapore leaders before the Constitutional Commission.

MR. JUSTICE WEE ... wanted a definition of a Malay

SINGAPORE, Thurs.

Definition

The basis

Fairplay

Tengku leads 44 in golf holiday

Moneylender is sued

35 - 40 m.p.g.

↑
A *Straits Times* report on SUMNO's submissions to the Commission, 4 March 1966. *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

Independence Act.[29] The Commission would later recommend that this part of the Article (now Article 15) be left out of Singapore's constitutional framework, given that "singling out a particular religion" for special treatment was "inconsistent" with a "democratic secular state".[30]

On the political front, proposals ranging from a system of proportional representation to a separate Upper House or Senate were also discussed, as minority groups sought guarantees that they would be represented in the legislative process.[31] Last but not least, the Commission also heard from smaller groups like the Seventh-day Adventists on specific laws that could unintentionally penalise religious practices outside the mainstream.[32]

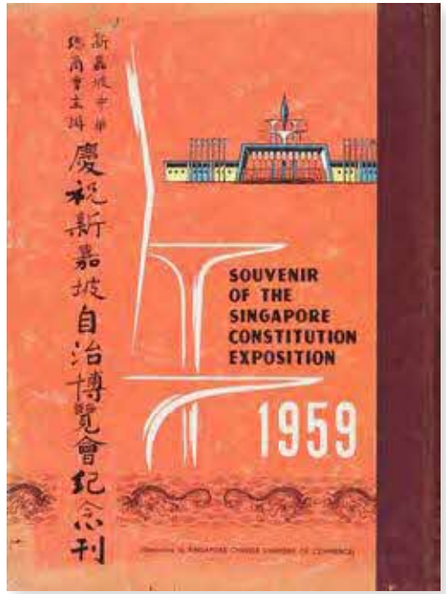
Parliament Debates the Commission's Recommendations

Faced with these diverse submissions, the Wee Commission crafted a carefully balanced and unanimous report that members of the House would variously praise as "exquisite" and "one of the best".[33] Parliamentary debate on the Commission's recommendations was spirited and robust, taking place across four days in March 1967. More than 20 members addressed the House in Singapore's four official languages, with PM Lee, Minister for Foreign Affairs S. Rajaratnam, and Malay-Muslim MPs Rahim Ishak and Ariff Suradi speaking most extensively. Central to their deliberations was the main issue that had earlier confronted the Commission: how could the fabric of a diverse nation be held together, even amid divergent and potentially competing interests?[34]

↓
A group making its representation to the Commission, 14 March 1966. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

At its core, Parliament agreed with the Commission's recommendation that protecting Singapore's minorities begins with respecting individual rights. This meant entrenching in the Constitution "the fundamental rights of both the individual and the citizen (which would include prohibition against discriminatory treatment on the ground only of race, descent, place of origin or religion)".[35] Notably, this approach shifted the focus from group-based privileges to equal rights and dignity for each person. In commending this approach to multiracialism to the House, Rajaratnam astutely noted:

> "Once minority communalists turn to communal politics as the only solution, then the majority community is also free to go in for uninhibited communal politics themselves.... [Rather], the best guarantee against communalism by the majority is the emergence and consolidation of multiracial parties. Only through multiracial parties can the minorities get the majority to reach accommodation with them, by compelling the majority to pay regard to the interests of all, the majority as well as the minorities."[36]



↑
Souvenir booklet of the Singapore Constitution Exposition, 1959. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

Thus, Parliament agreed with the Wee Commission's affirmation of Article 89 of the Singapore State Constitution as fundamental and vital.[37] This is now Article 152 of the Singapore Constitution. It imposes a state duty, rather than grant a right that citizens can enforce in court. Nonetheless, the MP for Kampong Kembangan Ariff Suradi noted that the Government had, since coming to power in 1959, already implemented the provisions of the Article. In so doing, it had committed itself to "protecting, safeguarding, supporting, fostering and promoting the economic, religious, social and cultural interests of the Malays and the Malay language".[38]

Connected to the discussion on Article 89 was the Commission's refusal to recommend a prescriptive approach towards defining the Malay community, which it felt would be both over- and under-inclusive. Parliament endorsed the Commission's recommendations, declining to constitutionally and legally define Malays by their use of the Malay language, adherence to Malay customs, and as Muslims. Such a definition would be over-inclusive as certain citizens who are not of Malay descent, or not born in Singapore, could fall within the definition and thereby claim a "special position" under the Constitution. The definition was also under-inclusive as it would exclude persons who consider themselves Malay but not Muslim.[39] In the words of the MP for Kampong Kapor Mahmud Awang, the proposal—surfaced by SUMNO—was "confusing and misleading".[40] The rejection of such a provision further affirmed the religious freedom of ethnic Malays to choose their religion.[41] This was very much in line with the Wee Commission's refusal to retain restrictions on religious propagation under the religious freedom clause (now Article 15).

Notably, in 1988, the Singapore Constitution under Article 39A(4) would define a person belonging to the Malay community as one "whether of the Malay race or otherwise, who considers himself to be a member of the Malay community and who is generally accepted as a member of the Malay community by that community".[42] Legal scholars Kevin Tan and Thio Li-ann have noted how this provision "avoids definitional entanglements", by "blend[ing] the subjective element of self-identification with an objective element of community recognition".[43]

The Wee Commission's most concrete institutional legacy lies in its recommendation to establish an oversight body that ensures discriminatory legislation would be flagged before it passes into law.[44] While this proposal for a Council of State initially received a lukewarm response from Parliament, with some MPs criticising its unelected nature and associated costs, it was eventually constituted in modified form as the Presidential Council in 1970.[45] This was renamed the Presidential Council for Minority Rights in 1973, and its early members included Council Member of the Inter-Religious Organisation D. D. Chelliah, former Chief Minister David Marshall, and educator Francis Thomas.[46]

↓
Members of the newly formed Presidential Council, including (front row, from left) Chief Justice Wee Chong Jin, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Labour S. Rajaratnam, former Chief Minister David Marshall, educator Francis Thomas, President of Muslim Religious Council Haji Ismail bin Abdul Aziz, and Attorney-General Tan Boon Teik, waiting to take their oath of office at the Istana, 2 May 1970. Yusof Ishak Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Conclusion: The Legacy of the Wee Commission

While not all of the Commission's proposals were ultimately incorporated into the final Constitution, the consultation process itself was deeply meaningful. It provided a platform for minority communities to have a voice during a crucial moment in Singapore's history, and helped foster a shared sense of ownership over the nation's future. Studies show that it is ultimately the act of participation that is most important for it can "engender public support for a constitution regardless of the extent to which it has an impact on the constitutional text and that the appearance of a fair process is the link between participation and legitimacy".[47]

The Commission's recommendations reflected careful design choices that continue to reverberate in Singapore's constitutional approach. In avoiding entrenching a system with built-in special legal entitlements for minority groups, it constructed a constitutional order that emphasised equal citizenship, freedom of religion, political engagement, and inclusive policies over permanent legal distinctions and adversarial rights. It was a model that balanced difference and commonality, protection and equality—and in doing so, laid the foundation for a resilient and inclusive multicultural Singapore.

↑
President Yusof Ishak being presented with a copy of the Wee Commission's report, 27 August 1966. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

NOTES

1 Memorandum Setting Out Heads of Agreement for a Merger Between the Federation of Malaya and Singapore, 1961, Cmd. 33.
2 Albert Lau, *A Moment of Anguish: Singapore in Malaysia and the Politics of Disengagement* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1998), 101.
3 Lee Kuan Yew, "Transcript of a Press Conference Given by the Prime Minister of Singapore, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, at Broadcasting House" (speech, Singapore, 9 August 1965), National Archives of Singapore, lky19650809b.
4 *Singapore Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 24, Sitting No. 9, Col. 429, 22 December 1965.
5 *Singapore Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 25, Sitting No. 19, Col. 1359, 16 March 1967.
6 Kevin YL Tan, "The Legal and Institutional Framework and Issues of Multiculturalism in Singapore", in *Beyond Rituals and Riots: Ethnic Pluralism and Social Cohesion in Singapore,* edited by Lai Ah Eng (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2004), 100–102.
7 Tan, "The Legal and Institutional Framework and Issues of Multiculturalism in Singapore", 102–104.
8 *Singapore Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 25, Sitting No. 14, Col. 1051–1052, 21 December 1966.
9 Wee Chong Jin, "The First Local Chief Justice", interview by Elisabeth Eber-Chan, November 1994, in *Speaking Truth to Power: Singapore's Pioneer Public Servants*, edited by Loke Hoe Yeong (Singapore: World Scientific, 2019), 26–27.
10 *Singapore Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 25, Sitting No. 14, Col. 1051, 21 December 1966; Report of the Constitutional Commission 1966, 1966, Cmd. 29.
11 *Singapore Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 25, Sitting No. 18, Col. 1291, 15 March 1967.
12 Graham Starforth Hill, interview by Singapore Academy of Law, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, Accession No. E0000054, Reel 6, 19 September 2011.
13 "Minority Rights: A Call for Memos", *The Straits Times*, 14 January 1966, 6; "Constitutional Commission, 1966", *The Straits Times*, 16 January 1966, 13; "Surohanjaya Perlembagaan, 1966", *Berita Harian*, 16 January 1966, 10.
14 For a list of names of individuals and organisations who submitted memoranda, see Appendix I in Report of the Constitutional Commission 1966, 1966, Cmd. 29.
15 "Problem of Another Man's Sabbath", *The Straits Times*, 15 March 1966, 7.
16 *Singapore Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 25, Sitting No. 19, Col. 1346, 16 March 1967.
17 "Indians to Draw Up Safeguards", *The Straits Times*, 31 January 1966, 56.
18 "Indians Ask for Seven Basic Rights in S'pore Charter", *The Straits Times*, 3 March 1966, 5.
19 "Indians Ask for Seven Basic Rights in S'pore Charter".
20 "How Other Races Can Also be Malays: Umno", *The Straits Times*, 4 March 1966, 5.
21 "How Other Races Can Also be Malays"; "Privileges Not For Ever, Says Umno Chairman", *The Straits Times*, 11 March 1966, 11.
22 *Singapore Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 25, Sitting No. 19, Col. 1333, 16 March 1967.
23 *Singapore Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 25, Sitting No. 19, Col. 1337, 16 March 1967.
24 "Minority Groups Seek Safeguards", *The Straits Budget*, 9 March 1966, 10.
25 "Badan2 Melayu S'pura tidak mahu kaum-nya jadi puak 'minoriti'", *Berita Harian*, 17 June 1966, 2.
26 "How Other Races Can Also be Malays".
27 "Privileges Not For Ever, Says Umno Chairman". At least one person objected to this proposal to include a definition of Malay in the Constitution during oral representations, noting that being Malay and practising Malay customs does not equate to being a Muslim; see "The Right to Choose One's Religion — By a Padre", *The Straits Times*, 9 March 1966, 6.
28 "The Right to Choose One's Religion".
29 "The Right to Choose One's Religion". Another group that spoke up on religious freedom was the Singapore Hindu Sabai.
30 Kevin YL Tan and Thio Li-ann, *Singapore: 50 Constitutional Moments that Defined a Nation* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2015), 52.
31 This was specifically proposed by UMNO and the Tamilian Association; see "Umno Wants Test in N-language for Citizenship Rule", *The Straits Times*, 5 March 1966, 14, and "Minority Groups Seek Safeguards".
32 "Problem of Another Man's Sabbath".
33 *Singapore Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 25, Sitting No. 18, Col. 1278, 15 March 1967.
34 *Singapore Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 25, Sitting No. 14, Col. 1051, 1058, 21 December 1966. Member of Parliament Suradi noted that the Report was "a very significant document in the annals of Singapore" particularly since even the presence of the UMNO Secretary-General did not preclude a unanimous report; see *Singapore Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 25, Sitting No. 19, Col. 1329, 1395, 16 March 1967.
35 See paragraph 11 in "Report of the Constitutional Commission 1966", in Kevin YL Tan and Thio Li-ann, *Constitutional Law in Malaysia & Singapore*, 2nd ed. (Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong: Butterworths, 1997), 1021. See especially Articles 12 and 16.
36 *Singapore Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 25, Sitting No. 19, Col. 1370, 16 March 1967.
37 See paragraph 78 in "Report of the Constitutional Commission 1966", in Tan and Thio, *Constitutional Law*, 1033.
38 *Singapore Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 25, Sitting No. 20, Col. 1396, 17 March 1967.
39 See "Report of the Constitutional Commission 1966", in Tan and Thio, *Constitutional Law*, 1024–1025.
40 *Singapore Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 25, Sitting No. 20, Col. 1403, 17 March 1967.
41 Jaclyn Neo, "The Constitution and the Protection of Minorities: A Judicious Balance?", in *Evolution of a Revolution: Forty Years of the Singapore Constitution*, edited by Thio Li-ann and Kevin YL Tan (London and New York: Routledge-Cavendish, 2008), 234–259.
42 Constitution of the Republic of Singapore (2020 rev. ed.) Article 39.
43 Tan and Thio, *Singapore: 50 Constitutional Moments*, 55.
44 Constitution of the Republic of Singapore (2020 rev. ed.) Article 68.
45 *Singapore Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 25, Sitting No. 20, Col. 1407, 17 March 1967.
46 *Singapore Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 29, Sitting No. 2, Col. 61, 12 June 1969. See also paragraph 16 in "Report of the Constitutional Commission 1966", in Tan and Thio, *Constitutional Law*, 1021–1022.
47 Ran Hirschl and Alexander Hudson, "A Fair Process Matters: The Relationship between Public Participation and Constitutional Legitimacy", *Law & Social Inquiry* 49, no. 4 (2024): 2074.

Jaclyn Neo is Associate Professor of Law at the National University of Singapore.

Voices from the Community

“In a multiracial society one soon learns that no one people has a monopoly of wisdom and that one’s own culture is not without flaws. This not only breeds tolerance for different viewpoints but also a readiness to learn and borrow from the accumulated wisdom of other people. These are, we have discovered, attitudes of mind essential for the smooth and constructive development of a multiracial and multicultural society.”

Minister for Foreign Affairs S. Rajaratnam in a speech marking Singapore’s accession to the United Nations General Assembly, 21 September 1965

→
Deputy Prime Minister Dr Toh Chin Chye and Minister for Culture S. Rajaratnam meeting with residents and members of a Citizens’ Consultative Committee during their tour of Kampong Glam and Rochor in the aftermath of the racial riots, 24 July 1964. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Navigating Diversity and Inclusion: Experiences of Singapore's Pioneer Malay Leaders, 1950s–1970s

Election campaign posters smeared with excrement. Accusations of being a "*kafir*" (infidel) and "*pembelot*" (traitor) to the Malay community. Even death threats.[1] These were the vicious hostilities faced by early Malay leaders who chose broad-based representation over communal interests as Singapore moved towards merger with Malaya and eventual independence. What drove their convictions and how did these shape their experiences as leaders in a diverse, multiracial society?

←
Othman Wok (extreme right) and Haji Ya'acob Mohamed (extreme left) distributing foodstuffs to Southern Islanders to mark the start of fasting month, 8 December 1966. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

by Sarina Anwar

A Racialised Political Landscape (1950s–Early 1960s)

The years leading up to Singapore's independence in 1965 were fraught with racial tensions. Colonial rule had left deep socioeconomic inequalities between races. In 1950, Singapore experienced a harrowing instance of unrest that exposed deep-seated racial and religious fault lines—the Maria Hertogh riots catalysed by the custody battle between Maria's adoptive Malay family and her Eurasian parents. Events such as these deepened racial fractures and entrenched the perception that race was a volatile issue.[2] In this charged atmosphere, navigating racial diversity proved complex.

In the decades after World War II, Singapore United Malays National Organisation (Singapore UMNO, or simply SUMNO) had positioned itself as the champion of Malay minority rights and interests, becoming the default political party for many Malays.[3] Originally an extension of UMNO Johore, SUMNO established its independent operations in Singapore in 1954. Nonetheless, it remained ideologically aligned with its parent organisation. Central to this alignment was the concept of *Tanah Melayu* (Land of the Malays). While this vision had emerged in Malaya's anti-colonial struggle calling for the return of land to Malays, it took on a different character in Singapore where Malays comprised 13% of the population.[4] Here, SUMNO adapted its original mandate into one of protecting Malay rights from perceived oppression by a non-Malay majority.

With the expansion of the franchise and the introduction of competitive electoral politics following the promulgation of the Rendel Constitution in 1955, SUMNO's reach and influence grew. From 1955 to 1959, SUMNO flexed its political muscle in Malay-majority areas, namely the Southern Islands, Geylang Serai, and Kampong Kembangan. As former SUMNO member Rahmat Kenap succinctly described the political landscape of the period, "*orang Melayu waktu itu menganggap UMNO itu Melayu. Melayu itu UMNO*" (the Malays at that time believed that UMNO is Malay. Malay is UMNO).[5]

Beyond Communal Politics

SUMNO's communal mission was, however, at odds with the lived experience of Malays who interacted daily with different races. In fact, many Malays in Singapore comfortably straddled different cultures, having been exposed to them from a young age. Nowhere is this as evident as in the life story of Othman Wok, who would eventually become Minister for Social Affairs in 1963. Growing up in pre-World War II Singapore, Othman Wok was educated in English-medium schools, at a time when these institutions were viewed suspiciously by many Malays as seeking to convert Muslims to Christianity. Indeed, it was at Raffles Institution that he rubbed shoulders with students of different races, including future Minister for Law E. W. Barker. When the People's Action Party (PAP) was formed in 1954, he joined within days, drawn to its vision of racial equality. For Othman Wok, SUMNO's Malay-centric politics held little appeal compared to the promise of a truly multiracial Singapore.[6]

Othman Wok's path was followed by another Raffles Institution alumnus: the future Minister of State for Education and Foreign Affairs Rahim Ishak. In 1959, Rahim joined the PAP after meeting Lee Kuan Yew through his brother Yusof Ishak (who would later become the first Malayan-born Head of State and Singapore's first President). Described as a "bookish person" with an interest in socialism, Rahim was attracted to PAP's manifesto of equality.[7] He envisioned a future where Malays could maintain their identity while thriving in Singapore's "modern, multiracial, multicultural, secular community", free from outdated ways of thinking and able to compete on equal footing with the rest of the population.[8] Like Othman Wok, he believed that true protection for minorities lay not in communal politics but in building a genuinely multiracial society where all communities could progress together.[9]

↓
Crowds awaiting the arrival of Tunku Abdul Rahman to open UMNO House at Changi Road, 14 February 1965. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Progress for All

Away from the political limelight, trade union leaders from Singapore's largely working-class Malay community also embraced this vision of progress for all and of class solidarity regardless of race. UMNO's priorities in Malaya in reinstating the Malay monarchy had little relevance to the daily struggles of the Malay working class in Singapore. SUMNO leaders also did little to address the practical, on-the-ground needs of Singapore's Malays. As trade unionist and PAP founding member Mofradi Haji Mohamed Noor recalled, when Singapore General Hospital workers needed legal support in 1953, it was non-Malay lawyers Lee Kuan Yew and Kenneth Michael Byrne who stepped forward, and not SUMNO leaders.[10]

Rahmat Kenap, originally a trade unionist in SUMNO, was particularly disappointed when SUMNO leader Abdul Hamid Jumat actively declined his requests for assistance during the 1957 Singapore Telephone Board Workers' Union strike.[11]

In 1957, he quit SUMNO before joining the PAP two years later. His motivations for joining the latter, however, went beyond mere frustration with SUMNO leadership. He recognised that Singapore's demographic reality—80% Chinese and roughly 6% Eurasian and Indian—meant that effective political representation needed to transcend communal interests. Significantly, he emphasised how the PAP leadership "*berjiwa kaum buruh*" (held a pro-worker stance).[12] In Rahmat Kenap's political calculations, the PAP offered a more promising path for advancing workers' rights for all, including the Malays.

↑
Rahim Ishak (second from left) being sworn in as a Member of the Legislative Assembly, with his brother Yang di-Pertuan Negara Yusof Ishak (second from right) and Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew (extreme left) witnessing, 19 October 1963. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Malay Trade Union Leaders

The bulk of the PAP's early pre-independence Malay leaders were trade union leaders. They included Baharuddin Mohamed Ariff and Ahmad Ibrahim, both of whom were very popular across racial lines. During the 1959 Legislative Assembly General Elections, Baharuddin won the seat of Anson. Ahmad was nominated by his union to contest in Sembawang, winning as an independent candidate before openly aligning with the PAP.[13] He would subsequently serve as Minister for Health (1959–1961) and Minister for Labour (1961–1962).

Other trade unionists include Othman Wok, Ariff Suradi, Mahmud Awang, Rahmat Kenap, and Ismail Rahim.


LAPORAN KHAS

Cebisan sejarah yang perlu diketahui ramai

↑
Rahmat Kenap, Ariff Suradi, and Haji Ya'acob Mohamed (clockwise from top) in a *Berita Harian* article featuring the roles of Malay political leaders in Singapore's road to independence, 18 July 1988. *Berita Harian* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

A Test of Resolve

Rahmat Kenap's defection was part of a larger exodus from SUMNO to the PAP in 1959, the year in which Singapore gained full internal self-government. Led by the charismatic Haji Ya'acob Mohamed, 31 SUMNO leaders made the switch overnight early in that year, prompted in large part by UMNO Kuala Lumpur's refusal to focus on Singapore's independence.[14] The defectors—including influential figures Buang Omar Junid, Ariff Suradi, and Sahorah Ahmat—joined their multiracial PAP colleagues to contest in the 1959 General Elections. The Malay leaders helped the PAP to win the Malay ground, resulting in sweeping victories across the country, with the PAP winning 43 out of 51 seats in the Legislative Assembly. This signalled a new direction for Malay political leadership in a diverse and multiracial city-state.

While electorally significant, the PAP's hold of the Malay ground in the wake of the 1959 elections nevertheless remained tenuous and hotly contested. The dust had barely settled before issues pertaining to land, citizenship, and the Malay language were stirred up against the backdrop of sensitive negotiations between the Singapore and Federal governments over Merger.[15] With the 1963 General Elections looming ahead, UMNO doubled down on their resistance against the PAP and aggressively fought to tighten their influence over Singapore's Malay community.

Branded as traitors to their community, the Malay PAP leaders faced constant derision for joining what critics had mockingly called "Party Anak Peking" (child of Beijing) before the pro-Communist Chinese elements splintered from the party in 1961.[16] Even a *songkok* offered little protection; Rahmat Kenap, often seen wearing this traditional Malay headpiece, found himself labelled as "Chinese" by some Malays.[17]

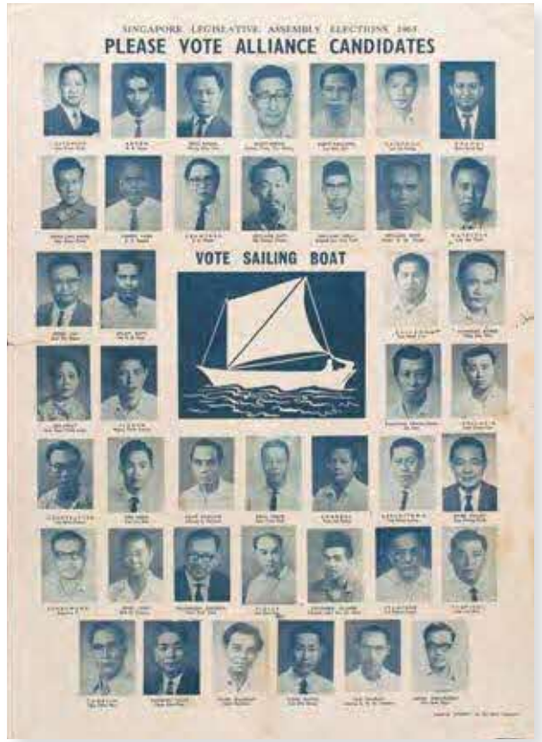
For Othman Wok, the 1963 elections were the ultimate test of his courage and determination. Earlier, in 1959, he had already endured taunts and provocations while mounting his debut electoral campaign in the Kampong Kembangan ward:

> "*Pergi balik kampunglah!*
> (Go back to your village!)
> *Apa ini masuk China punya parti! Ingat boleh menangkah? Ini UMNO punya tempat.*
> (Why did you join a Chinese party? Do you think you can win? This is UMNO's territory.)"[18]

His biography recounts the looming threat of violence which he stared down unflinchingly:

> "They took my leaflets and threw them away right in front of me. I just walked. I didn't care... Some of my posters were smeared with human excreta. But that did not dampen my spirit when I was walking alone distributing leaflets all over Kampong Melayu, Kampong Batak, and Kampong Kembangan, even though I was scared that I might be hammered."[19]

The brewing atmosphere of hostility ultimately reached its peak during the July 1964 racial riots, when UMNO systematically worked to turn the Malay community against PAP's Malay leaders, particularly targeting Othman Wok and founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. This was in spite of the PAP already securing decisive victories in the September 1963 elections, winning in the UMNO strongholds of the Southern Islands, Geylang Serai, and Kampong Kembangan. Dissatisfied by their inability to win over Singapore Malays, UMNO leaders turned to inflammatory rhetoric. During one particularly fiery speech at Othman Wok's constituency of Pasir Panjang on 12 July 1964, UMNO leader Syed Jaafar Albar whipped the crowd into a frenzy by declaring, in no uncertain terms: "We finish them off... kill him, kill him. Othman Wok and Lee Kuan Yew."[20] Barely two weeks later, race riots broke out on 21 July between Malays and Chinese.



→
Singapore Alliance's poster for the Singapore General Elections, 1963. SUMNO was a constituent member of the Singapore Alliance. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

←
Voters casting their ballots in the 1959 General Elections, 30 May 1959. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

↓
Syed Jaafar Albar speaking at a mass rally at SUMNO's Kampong Ubi branch, 27 September 1963. *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

Undaunted, the leaders stood firm, working closely with communities of different races through the Jawatankuasa Muhibbah (Goodwill Committees). Together, they toured troubled areas to speak with community leaders and residents to appeal for calm and to rebuild trust.[21] This resolve, in turn, earned the leaders high praise from Lee Kuan Yew. In a speech at his 75th birthday dinner in 1998, Lee paid tribute to them:

> "Othman, I remember your staunch support and loyalty during those troubled days when we were in Malaysia and the tensions were most severe immediately before and following the bloody riots in July 1964... **Because of the courage and leadership you showed, not a single Malay PAP leader wavered (in 1965)... That made the difference to Singapore."**[22]

↓
Othman Wok with Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew during a tour to restore peace and instil confidence during the racial riots, 1964. *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

Seen and Heard in

NOT MERE SPECTATORS
THE MAKINGS OF MULTICULTURAL SINGAPORE

1964 Racial Riots

Singapore merged with Malaya, Sabah, and Sarawak to form Malaysia on 16 September 1963. Beneath this political union, racial tensions simmered, manifesting in heated exchanges between Singapore's ruling People's Action Party and the United Malays National Organisation on Malay rights and community issues.

All this came to a boiling point in July 1964.

At a procession to celebrate the Prophet Muhammad's birthday on 21 July, clashes erupted between Malay participants and Chinese bystanders. It escalated into riots across the island. When the curfew was finally lifted on 7 August, 23 people had died and 454 others were injured.

During the riots, shields like the one below were a frequent sight on the streets. They were part of policemen's riot gear, used to maintain order as violence spread.

←
Police shield, 1960s. Gift of Police Headquarters. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

→
Staff attending to victims of the racial riots at Singapore General Hospital, 23 July 1964. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Separation and Beyond... The Work Continues

When Singapore separated from Malaysia in 1965, each Singapore Malay leader responded differently, but they remained united in their convictions of a truly multiracial Singapore where all communities could progress together. On one hand, Lee Kuan Yew had called aside then-Minister for Social Affairs Othman Wok, concerned that the separation might affect him as a Malay.[23] Othman Wok, exhausted by two years of racial tensions and the resultant riots, and threats on his life, signed the Separation Agreement without hesitation. "Separation to me meant less pressure. As a Malay PAP Minister, I had been in a difficult position. With the separation, I thought that it would be much easier for me and everyone else to get on with the job," he would later muse.[24] Meanwhile, Mahmud Awang, true to his trade union roots, worried about how workers would fare in Singapore's smaller economy. This came at a real personal cost to him—relatives across the Causeway now viewed him as "a foreigner".[25]

Haji Ya'acob was deeply disappointed over the separation, but looked towards the future. He would later reflect with poignancy in a 1987 interview with the National Archives of Singapore:

> "*Nasi dah jadi bubur. Terpaksalah bubur tu saya olahkan. Masukkan sikit santan kelapa, gula, kacau jadikan dodol, wajik dan apalah supaya tak terbiar begitu saja. Inilah tugas saya.*"[26]
>
> "The rice has turned into porridge. I had no choice but to work with this porridge. Add some coconut milk, sugar, stir it to make *dodol*, *wajik*, and whatever else, so that it would not go to waste. This was my duty."

Making the best of changed circumstances, Haji Ya'acob focused on his responsibilities to "help advance the Malay community in all fields".[27] In Parliament on 15 December 1965, he delivered a speech that would be broadcast three times on the radio at

↑
Mahmud Awang (top) and Ariff Suradi (bottom) in their People's Defence Force uniforms, 19 March 1966. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Lee Kuan Yew's request. This was in response to Malaysian Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman's invitation to Singapore Malays to migrate to Malaysia, with offers of land parcels as a form of enticement. Haji Ya'acob spoke firmly to assert Malays' rightful place in Singapore: "We Malays have never migrated. I consider that the spirit of migration is a cowardly spirit. The various races must live in peace and understanding."[28] For him, separation represented the beginnings of Singapore as an independent, sovereign, and multiracial nation-state where Malays belonged, while also emphasising that any problems faced by Malays needed to be resolved as national issues.

To be sure, independent Singapore's Malay leaders walked a fine line between safeguarding Malay rights and promoting multiracialism. In 1966, leaders like Othman Wok worked alongside civil servants and community figures such as Attorney-General Ahmad Ibrahim to get the Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA) passed in Parliament. AMLA provides a centralised administration of Muslim life in Singapore, while fitting within Singapore's broader legal system.[29]

> **"Beyond the political leadership, we also had community leadership. People like the late Ridzwan Dzafir, Yusof Ahmad, and Yatim Dohon were known for their penchant for working together with the Malay community to build a community of excellence and strength.[30]**
>
> Former Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Information and the Arts Yatiman Yusof in an interview with the Founders' Memorial, 2022

→
State Advocate-General (later Attorney-General) Ahmad Ibrahim inspecting the 26th Gan Eng Seng scout group during the opening of the school's annual exhibition, 1964. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Haji Ya'acob exemplified this delicate approach to minority rights. While he had advocated for the special position of Malays in Singapore to be recognised in the Constitution, and the Constitution did indeed recognise "the special position of the Malays, who are the indigenous people of Singapore", Haji Ya'acob had opposed similar positions for Malays in Malaya.[31] As he later explained when recounting his experiences in post-independence Singapore, "I help the Malays not because they are Malays, but because they are a community who is the least advanced in Singapore."[32]

Notably, these leaders also played a crucial role in shaping Malay values to align with larger national ones, urging Malays to progress alongside other races. They were not afraid to question issues within their own community. Rahmat Kenap, for example, called out untrustworthy *haj* (pilgrimage) leaders in Singapore, encouraging them to improve their practices. Even before Independence, Haji Ya'acob had supported the establishment of Sang Nila Utama Secondary School in 1961, Singapore's first Malay-medium secondary school which attracted students from around the region to its curriculum focusing on mathematics and science. True to his commitment to forging a progressive Malay community, in the 1970s, he railed against "*amalan-amalan karut*" (superstitious practices) and challenged anti-science attitudes espoused by some Islamic scholars.[33]

Read more about Article 152 of the Singapore Constitution, on minorities and the special position of Malays, on page 78 of this issue.

↓
Member of Parliament for Geylang Serai, Rahmat Kenap, giving a speech at a Goodwill Committee meeting with his trademark *songkok*, 1960s. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Haji Ya'acob Mohamed, A Voice for Justice and Equality

Among the pioneer batch of Malay leaders, Haji Ya'acob stands out for his political acumen and unwavering commitment to justice and equality. A powerful orator, he won in the Chinese-majority constituency of Bukit Timah in 1959 before clinching the SUMNO stronghold of the Southern Islands in 1963. Known for his fierce criticism of opponents and willingness to question his own allies, Ya'acob embodied the spirit of democratic leadership. He stated, "Every citizen in a country which practises a democratic system has the right to criticise government policies if a mistake has been made or to give constructive views."[34] After Independence, Ya'acob held several political offices, eventually rising to the position of Senior Minister of State in the Prime Minister's Office. He stepped down from Parliament in 1980.

↑
Haji Ya'acob delivering a speech at Ulu Pandan, 11 September 1963. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Conclusion

> "*Beralah bukan mengalah. Beralah untuk hidup sama-sama dalam masyarakat ini, kita sudah terima. Tetapi harus ada keadilan.*"[35]
>
> "To compromise is not to give in. To compromise in order to live together in this society, we have accepted that. But there must be justice."
>
> — **Haji Ya'acob Mohamed, in a 1986 interview with the National Archives of Singapore**

Singapore's Malay leaders rose to the occasion at a time when the fate of our nation hung in the balance. They proved their mettle in a nascent democracy, balancing communal interests with larger national ones, with each equally committed to the ideal of a Singapore for all, "regardless of race, language or religion".[36]

Their legacy extends beyond their era. As Singapore continues to evolve, the beliefs and principles these leaders fought for—such as how Malays could maintain their identity while thriving in Singapore's multiracial society—remain relevant. The journey of these Malay leaders in the 1950s to 1970s shaped Singapore's path to becoming a multiracial nation and continues to inform conversations about navigating diversity and inclusion in contemporary society.

Sahorah Ahmat, the First Elected Female Malay Assemblywoman

Sahorah Ahmat broke ground as not just a Malay leader but also a woman in politics. She is most remembered for her dramatic entry into the Legislative Assembly chamber. Gravely ill, she was carried in on a stretcher to cast the decisive vote in the 1961 motion of confidence which saved the PAP government from pro-communist elements. It was not out of political loyalty, but from her faith in her Chinese colleague Chan Chee Seng—a testament to the cross-racial bond between them.[37] Yet her legacy runs deeper. A champion of women's rights, she advocated stronger protections for Muslim women within Islamic law.[38]

Nearly four decades would pass before another Malay woman, Halimah Yacob, was elected into Parliament.[39]

↑
Sahorah Ahmat (front, right) with fellow Assemblywomen Chan Choy Siong (front, left) and Hoe Puay Choo (back, centre), 5 June 1959. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

←
Othman Wok reflecting on his political career, 2017. *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

NOTES

1 "Eulogy by PM Lee Hsien Loong at Memorial Service of the late Othman Wok", Prime Minister's Office Singapore, 19 April 2017, https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/eulogy-pm-lee-hsien-loong-memorial-service-late-othman-wok (accessed 11 August 2025); Sonny Yap, Richard Lim, and Leong Weng Kam, "Malay Heroes Who Changed History", in *Men in White: The Untold Story of Singapore's Ruling Political Party* (Singapore: Straits Times Press, 2010), 284.
2 See Norman Vasu and Juhi Ahuja, *Singapore Chronicles: Multiracialism* (Singapore: Straits Time Press, 2018).
3 SUMNO served as the Singapore branch of UMNO. Founded in 1946 by Malay nationalist Dato' Onn Jaafar, UMNO championed Malaya as a "Malay country to be ruled by Malay leaders". After Singapore's Independence, SUMNO was officially renamed Pertubuhan Kebangsaan Melayu Singapura (PKMS) in 1967. See "UMNO History", UMNO Malaysia, https://umno.org.my/language/en/sejarah/ (accessed 11 August 2025); "Singapore Malay National Organisation is Formed", *Singapore Infopedia* (National Library Board), https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/article-detail?cmsuuid=183c4002-a13d-4e58-9219-1a7bccd0ac41 (accessed 11 August 2025).
4 S. C. Chua, "Report on the Census of Population 1957", *Papers Presented to Parliament*, Cmd. 19 of 1964, 4 August 1964, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/government_records/record-details/fbe1162a-0b80-11e8-a2a9-001a4a5ba61b (accessed 12 August 2025).
5 Rahmat Kenap, interview by Mohd Yussoff Ahmad, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, Accession No. 000121, Reel 10, 16 December 1981.
6 Zuraidah Ibrahim, "The Malay Mobilisers: Ahmad Ibrahim, Othman Wok, Yaacob Mohamed & Rahim Ishak", in *Lee's Lieutenants: Singapore's Old Guard*, edited by Kevin YL Tan and Lam Peng Er (Singapore: Straits Times Press, 2018), 215–216.
7 Zuraidah, "The Malay Mobilisers", 227.
8 "Malays Will be Malays: Pledge by Rahim Ishak", *The Straits Times*, 12 February 1967, 7.
9 Zuraidah, "The Malay Mobilisers", 228.
10 Yap, Lim, and Leong, "Malay Heroes Who Changed History", 286.
11 Rahmat Kenap, interview by Mohd Yussoff Ahmad, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, Accession No. 000121, Reel 6, 27 October 1981; "STB Strike: Jumat to Step In?", *Singapore Standard*, 11 July 1957, 3.
12 Rahmat, interview, Reel 6; "STB Strike".
13 "1959 Legislative Assembly General Election Results", Elections Department Singapore, https://www.eld.gov.sg/elections_past_parliamentary1959.html (accessed 11 August 2025).
14 Zuraidah, "The Malay Mobilisers", 223.
15 "Pendudok-pendudok enggan turut perentah keluar", *Berita Harian*, 14 April 1963, 1.
16 Yap, Lim, and Leong, "Malay Heroes Who Changed History", 284; Zuraidah, "The Malay Mobilisers", 216.
17 Rahmat, interview, Reel 6.
18 Othman Wok, *Never in My Wildest Dreams* (Singapore: Raffles, 2000), 128.
19 Othman, *Never in My Wildest Dreams*, 128.
20 Cheong Suk-Wai, "Remembering Othman Wok: A Champion of Multi-Culturalism", *The Straits Times*, 18 April 2017, https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/remembering-othman-wok-a-champion-of-multi-culturalism (accessed 14 August 2025).
21 "Calls for Goodwill, Harmony by Union Bodies", *The Straits Times*, 28 July 1964, 4.
22 "Eulogy by PM Lee Hsien Loong at Memorial Service of the late Othman Wok".
23 Zuraidah, "The Malay Mobilisers", 219.
24 Othman, *Never in My Wildest Dreams*, 186.
25 Mahmud Awang, "Mahmud Awang: The Trade Union Leader", in *We Also Served: Reflections of Singapore's Former PAP MPs*, edited by Chiang Hai Ding and Rohan Kamis (Singapore: Straits Times Press, 2014), 67.
26 Ya'acob bin Mohamed, interview by Mohd Yussoff Ahmad, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, Accession No. 000747, Reel 18, 7 January 1987.
27 Ya'acob, interview, Reel 18.
28 *Singapore Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 24, Sitting No. 4, Col. 177, 15 December 1965.
29 "Administration of Muslim Law Act 1966", *Singapore Infopedia* (National Library Board), https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/article-detail?cmsuuid=c5f54cb7-86c4-4e0a-a518-3e2bd8e234ad (accessed 26 August 2025).
30 Yatiman Yusof, interview by Founders' Memorial, 28 February 2022.
31 Kevin Y. L. Tan, "The Legal and Institutional Framework and Issues of Multiculturalism in Singapore", in *Beyond Rituals and Riots: Ethnic Pluralism and Social Cohesion in Singapore,* edited by Lai Ah Eng (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2004), 102–104.
32 Sulaiman Jeem and Abdul Ghani Hamid, *Ya'acob Mohamed (dalam API, PKMM, UMNO, PAP)* (Singapore: Penerbitan Wisma, 1990), 135.
33 "Amalan-amalan karut tak dapat bantu mencapai", *Berita Harian*, 31 August 1974, 2; "Para ulamak perlu ubah sikap dan ikut arus kemajuan", *Berita Harian*, 11 July 1975, 4.
34 "Haji Ya'acob Agrees Raja's Words Were Ill-Chosen", *The Straits Times*, 14 December 1986, 2.
35 Ya'acob bin Mohamed, interview by Mohd Yussoff Ahmad, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, Accession No. 000747, Reel 3, 15 November 1986.
36 Singapore National Pledge.
37 Chan Chee Seng, interview by Audrey Lee-Koh Mei Chen, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, Accession No. 003320, Reel 7, 26 August 1980.
38 Suhail Yazid, "A Malay Woman in the House: Recovering Sahorah Ahmat's Legacy in Singapore's History", in *Beyond Bicentennial: Perspectives on Malays*, edited by Norshahril Saat, Wan Hussin Zoohri, and Zainul Abidin Rasheed (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2020), 613–637.
39 "Halimah Yacob: First Woman President of Singapore", Singapore Women's Hall of Fame, https://www.swhf.sg/profiles/halimah-yacob/ (accessed 10 August 2025).

Sarina Anwar is a former History teacher turned Assistant Curator at the Founders' Memorial. Still teaching—just in different ways.

I am Singaporean Indian: Govindasamy Sarangapany and the Evolution of the Singaporean Indian-Tamil Identity[1]

←
G. Sarangapany (rightmost in front row) with Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, mid-20th century. Gift of Ms Rajam Sarangapany. Collection of Indian Heritage Centre, National Heritage Board.

For Singapore's Indian community, the decades after World War II were marked by upheaval and change. In 1947, British rule in the Indian subcontinent came to an end, and two independent dominions—India and Pakistan—were born. Even as the fledgling Republic of India was finding its feet, a Dravidian nationalism movement was brewing in its south.[2] This separatist movement called for the Telugus, Tamils, Kannadigas, and Malayalees to be granted their own homeland, given the cultural and ethnolinguistic differences between north and south.

As turmoil raged in the subcontinent, some Indians in Singapore felt a desire to return, to contribute to India's development. Others, like the Straits-born Tamils, had sunk roots in Malaya and Singapore, and wished to remain. The situation was made more complex by the fact that post-war Singapore's Indian community was far from homogeneous. In fact, the 70,000 to 125,000 Indians present in early 1950s Singapore were divided by class and geographical origin.[3] "Higher caste" Chettiar moneylenders plied their trade and lived at Market Street and Chulia Street, while "base caste" Adi Dravida labourers dwelled in areas such as Lorong Lalat (otherwise known as the Lane of Flies) in Jalan Besar.[4] Altogether, about four in five Indians in Singapore then were South Indians, with Tamils from the Coromandel Coast region making up 60% of the Indian population.

Against this backdrop, Govindasamy Sarangapany (also known as G. Sarangapany) saw the potential for an empowered, unified, and progressive Singaporean Tamil community to be forged. A newspaper editor and publisher by trade, Sarangapany dreamed of a community undivided by caste mores and prejudices, and interwoven within the multicultural fabric of their new home. His leadership and activism during Singapore's early nation-building years would prove critical to the creation of a diverse, confident, and resilient Singaporean Indian-Tamil identity—one that continues to draw inspiration from his legacy even today.[5]

by Jegateesh Gynasigamani

Early Ideas and Influences

Born in 1903, Sarangapany grew up in Thiruvarur, Tamil Nadu, India. As a youth, he became inspired by Erode Venkatappa Ramasamy (E. V. R.) Periyar's Self-Respect Movement. The movement opposed Brahmin hegemony, and sought to establish a casteless Indian society. It also envisioned a modern Adi Dravida community not bogged down by derelict traditions and superstitions.[6]

When Sarangapany migrated to Singapore in 1924 at the age of 21, he brought along the influences and beliefs that had shaped his early life. Not content with inaction, he imported and circulated *Kudi Arasu* ("Self-Rule"), the publication of the Self-Respect Movement, across Singapore and Malaya.[7] In the process, he also helped contextualise the Self-Respect Movement's goals of social equality to Singapore's context by penning pamphlets and notes that he personally distributed.

After Periyar visited Malaya and Singapore in 1929 and 1930, Sarangapany swung into action by forming the Tamils Reform Association (TRA) in 1932 with contemporaries O. Ramasamy Nadar, A. C. Suppiah, and other community leaders.[8] While the TRA was not the first organisation of its kind, it provided for a systematic way to address social injustices, and to advocate for Tamil unity. One way the TRA sought to promote its reformist views was by establishing a newspaper, *Tamil Murasu,* in 1935.[9] Sarangapany, who was then also serving as the TRA's Secretary, became the newspaper's first Editor.[10]

← *Tamil Murasu* advertisement, 20th century. It reads, "*Tamil Murasu*—delivering hot, fresh news all across Malaya on the very same day." Gift of Ms Rajam Sarangapany. Collection of Indian Heritage Centre, National Heritage Board.

Tamil Murasu

Tamil Murasu's origins dates back to 1935. It was established by the TRA to propagate the association's reformist views.

The term *murasu* refers to a ceremonial drum typically beaten by the Adi Dravidas during the funeral processions of their "higher caste" peers. In taking on this role, Adi Dravidas were stereotyped as "untouchables" and "impure".[11]

In a moment of poetic justice, the first edition of *Tamil Murasu* contained a verse penned by the revolutionary Tamil poet Bharathiyar, which reads as "let the drum beat unity" when translated into English. It symbolically transformed a historically divisive tradition into a new, empowering, and unifying drumbeat.

To this day, *Tamil Murasu* continues to provide a platform to represent the needs and interests of the Singapore Tamil community.

← *Tamil Murasu* issue, 21 November 1953. Gift of Mrs Malai Arasi d/o Srinivasan and Mr V. Kalaichelvan. Collection of Indian Heritage Centre, National Heritage Board.

Championing Citizenship

After World War II, Singapore's Indian-Tamil community found itself caught up in the Colony-wide movement towards decolonisation, self-governance, and independent statehood. Driven by a desire to play his part, Sarangapany briefly entered politics in 1950 as one of the Vice-Presidents and the election campaign organiser of the short-lived Singapore Labour Party (SLP).[12] However, it was in the second half of the decade that he made his mark advocating for the Tamil community to take up Singapore citizenship. At this time, the 1957 Singapore Citizenship Ordinance had just been passed, allowing those residing in Singapore for at least eight years to become citizens.[13]

Sarangapany rolled up his sleeves as he wanted the Indian-Tamil community to be recognised as an essential part of Singapore's multicultural fabric. He firmly believed that citizenship status would not only uplift the community's self-perception, but also elevate its position in society. As Operation Franchise—the nationwide drive to register citizens—gained traction, he went door to door, assuaging the community's fears that citizenship would not affect their ability to visit relatives in India.[14] According to Vaidyanathan Thirunavukkarasu (or V. T. Arasu), then a journalist for *Tamil Murasu,* the TRA office at 125 Serangoon Road was even converted into a citizenship registration centre for a month.[15] There, Sarangapany arranged for Tamil-speaking citizenship officers as they could both oversee the swearing of oaths and calm the nerves of registrants.

Sarangapany's efforts, together with those of other volunteers, helped boost the number of citizenship registrations from the Indian-Tamil community. In a 1991 oral history interview with the National Archives of Singapore, actor and director S. Varathan estimated that up to 70% of the Indian community stepped forward to register for citizenship then.[16] V. T. Arasu, on the other hand, recalled that the TRA office's itself processed close to 20,000 registrants.[17] Radio Singapore host Natesan Palanivelu was one of those who registered for Singapore citizenship and in fact, did so upon the advice of his friend, Sarangapany. Later in his life, he recalled playing patriotic songs on the airwaves to mark the occasion—the first time he could proudly wear the status of a "Singaporean Indian".[18]

↓
G. Sarangapany's Citizenship Registration certificate, 1957. Gift of Ms Rajam Sarangapany. Collection of Indian Heritage Centre, National Heritage Board.


DUPLICATE

Form E

276372

THE SINGAPORE CITIZENSHIP ORDINANCE, 1957

CITIZENSHIP OF SINGAPORE

Certificate of Registration

(Initial Registration)

Certified that

GOVINDASAMY SARANGAPANY.

is, pursuant to the provisions of the Singapore Citizenship Ordinance, 1957, registered as a Citizen of Singapore.

Given at Singapore
By authority of the Minister

Registrar of Citizens
Singapore

26 SEP 1957

Operation Franchise

Operation Franchise was the name given to the nationwide campaign to promote citizenship. It kicked off in November 1957 after the Singapore Citizenship Ordinance came into effect, and concluded in January 1958. Besides Sarangapany and the TRA, university graduates, retired public servants, and a range of other civic groups also played their part to advocate for Singapore Citizenship. In total, about 320,000 took on Singapore citizenship during the three-month drive.[19]

←
Citizenship registration at Fort Canning, 1 November 1957. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Strengthening the Voice of the Tamil Community

Even as Sarangapany encouraged Singapore's Tamil community to sink roots in the new nation, he recognised that more could be done to strengthen its voice. One problem, he noted, was the lack of funding and support for Tamil schools from the colonial authorities.[20] In the 1940s and early 1950s, these schools were staffed mainly by volunteers who were paid sums of as low as $70 a month.[21] More broadly, Sarangapany felt that colonial prejudices had sullied Tamil as the inferior tongue of the "coolie class".[22] As a result, the language held little cultural capital in Singaporean and Malayan society.

To remedy the situation, Sarangapany fought hard to improve Tamil-based education. As early as 1948, he formed the Tamil Education Society to centralise the administration of Tamil schools.[23] In speeches, he also called for the establishment of an Indian Studies Department at the then-University of Malaya, and for Tamil to be used as the primary medium of instruction there.[24] Circumstances were challenging, but by the time the 1956 *Report of the All-Party Committee of the Singapore Legislative Assembly on Chinese Education* was issued, Sarangapany's ardent advocacy was beginning to pay off. With English, Chinese, Malay, and Tamil education now given parity, government aid flowed more readily to institutions such as St George's Road Tamil School.[25] The Teachers' Training College also began formal training for Tamil teachers, which helped raise standards of the Tamil curriculum.[26]

The other major prong in Sarangapany's drive to elevate Tamil culture and language was the Tamils Festival or *Tamilar Thirunaal,* first organised on 13 January 1952.[27] Held annually, it sought to "foster unity among Tamils" through a carnival-like series of events and competitions promoting Tamil literature, education, arts, and sports.[28] While the festival's core purpose was to uplift Tamil identity and heritage, later editions would also incorporate cultural displays from non-Indian communities, thereby attracting a multicultural audience.[29]

In fact, on a few occasions, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew himself appeared alongside Sarangapany at *Tamilar Thirunaal* events.[30] More than just a symbolic gesture, it was a form of public acknowledgement that the Tamil community was an integral part of the Singaporean nation.

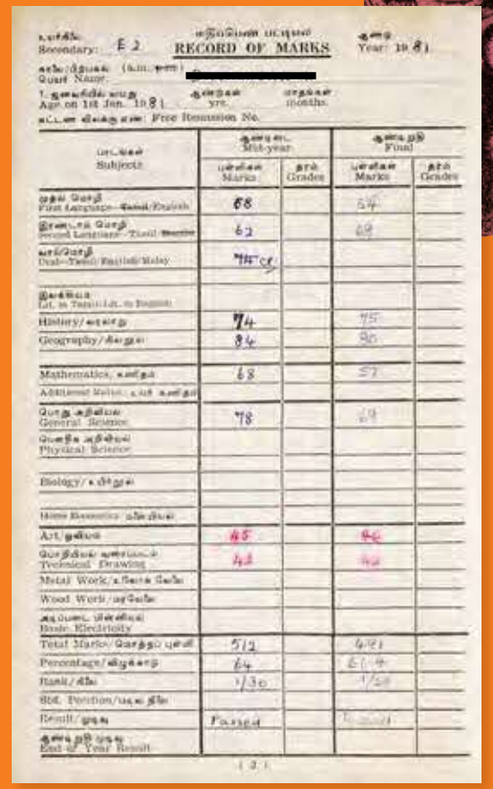
↑
Performance at Nagammaiyar Tamil School during a visit by President Yusof Ishak and Puan Noor Aishah, 16 July 1967. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

→
Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew giving a speech at the Lorong Lalat Tamils Festival, 1960s. Courtesy of Mrs Malai Arasi d/o Srinivasan.

→
Tamils Festival booklet, 1974. Gift of Mrs Malai Arasi d/o Srinivasan and Mr V. Kalaichelvan. Collection of Indian Heritage Centre, National Heritage Board.

Umar Pulavar Tamil High School

The origins of Umar Pulavar Tamil High School (UPTHS) can be traced to 1946, when the Singapore Kadayanallur Muslim League founded Umar Pulavar Tamil School (UPTS). With Sarangapany's support and lobbying, UPTS was later re-established as UPTHS in 1960—the first and only Tamil-medium high school in Singapore. In subsequent decades, enrolment in Tamil vernacular schools gradually declined, as high-quality Tamil education became available in English-medium schools. Following UPTHS's closure in 1982, the school's name has been preserved through the renaming of St George's Road Tamil Language Centre to Umar Pulavar Tamil Language Centre in 1983.[31]



RECORD OF MARKS

Year: 1981

Name:

Age on 1st Jan. 1981 yrs months

Free Remission No.

Subjects	Mid-year Marks	Mid-year Grades	Final Marks	Final Grades
First Language — Tamil/English	68		64	
Second Language — Tamil	62		69	
Third Language — Tamil/English/Malay	Absent			
History	74		75	
Geography	84		86	
Mathematics	68		57	
Additional Mathematics				
General Science	78		69	
Physical Science				
Biology				
Home Economics				
Art	45		46	
Technical Drawing	42		42	
Metal Work				
Wood Work				
Basic Electricity				
Total Marks	513		491	
Percentage	64		61.4	
Rank	1/30		1/28	
Std. Position				
Result	Passed		Passed	
End-of-Year Result				

(21)

↑
Page from an Umar Pulavar Tamil High School report book, 1981. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

Navigating Difficult Moments

While Sarangapany is remembered today for his astute and visionary leadership, his journey as a community champion involved its fair share of trials and tribulations. For example, when *Tamil Murasu* was first launched, Sarangapany had to bear the paper's financial losses himself to keep it affordable for working class Tamils.[32] The paper also faced stiff competition from other publications such as the Kuala-Lumpur based *Tamil Nesan.*[33] It was only through Sarangapany's sheer persistence and hard work that *Tamil Murasu* could, over the years, continue fulfilling its role as a unifying voice for the community.

One other example of how Sarangapany held fast to his convictions—even at the expense of ruffling feathers—concerned his promotion of *seerthirutham* or *suyamariyathai thirumanam* (reform or self-respect marriages). These marriages, conducted without Brahminic rituals or a Brahmin priest, initially raised eyebrows among traditionalists as they had only been practised by smaller Adi Dravida villages in Tamil Nadu.[34] However, the TRA under Sarangapany's leadership remained undeterred, and solemnised many such marriages across the 1950s in a bid to cast out prejudices and encourage inter-caste unions.[35] Sarangapany was even known to provide his blessings personally at these weddings.[36] In doing so, he walked the talk, lending his weight to the pursuit of a more equitable and less segregated Tamil society in Singapore.

←
G. Sarangapany and his wife, Lim Boon Neo, mid-20th century. Gift of Ms Rajam Sarangapany. Collection of Indian Heritage Centre, National Heritage Board.

On a personal level, Sarangapany himself embodied Singapore's multicultural ideals through his 1937 marriage to Lim Boon Neo, who was of Chinese Peranakan heritage.[37] This union was revolutionary for its time, as marriages across caste and ethnolinguistic boundaries within the Indian community were rare to begin with.[38] Sarangapany's uncanny ability to reach across divides was also evident in the way he struck up friendships with those who held different views. For example, while the TRA occasionally crossed swords with a fellow Tamil organisation, the Singapore Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (SDMK), Sarangapany always approached his peers with mutual respect. One SDMK member, Vinaitheerthan s/o Govindasamy, recalled how Sarangapany would playfully tease him when both were working to promote the 1957 Singapore Citizenship Ordinance.[39] Another SDMK member, P. T. Rasan, even recalled turning to Sarangapany—a man he regarded as a highly-esteemed community leader—for advice and counsel.[40]

The Legacy of G. Sarangapany

Today, the vibrant culture of Singapore's Indian-Tamil community forms an indispensable part of Singapore's multicultural fabric. Tamil is also recognised in the Constitution as one of Singapore's four official languages, alongside English, Mandarin, and Malay. This is in no small part the result of Sarangapany's tireless advocacy. A reformer at heart, he worked assiduously to forge a multicultural Singaporean Tamil identity when our nation was finding its footing. As both Singapore and the profile of its Indian community continue to evolve, how can Sarangapany's example motivate us to serve our community, society, and nation?

↑
G. Sarangapany, with his wife, Lim Boon Neo, and their children, mid-20th century. Gift of Ms Rajam Sarangapany. Collection of Indian Heritage Centre, National Heritage Board.

NOTES

1 N. Palanivelu, interview by Daniel Chew, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, Accession No. 000588, Reel 13, 9 December 1985.
2 John Solomon, *A Subaltern History of the Indian Diaspora in Singapore: The Gradual Disappearance of Untouchability 1872–1965* (London: Routledge, 2016), 141.
3 Makeswary Periasamy, "Indian Migration into Malaya and Singapore During the British Period", *Biblioasia* (National Library Board), October 2007, https://biblioasia.nlb.gov.sg/vol-3/issue3/oct-2007/indian-migration-british-malaya-singapore/ (accessed 14 September 2025); K. S. Sandhu and A. Mani, eds., *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006), 777; "The History of Tamil and its Use in Singapore", *Tamil inSITE!*, https://ullnokam.tripod.com/history.htm (accessed 30 December 2024).
4 Solomon, *A Subaltern History of the Indian Diaspora in Singapore*, 84; Krishnan Kolamgare, interview by Rajandran Supramaniam, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, Accession No. 001252, Reel 2, 7 February 1991; John Solomon, "Untouchables: The Persistence of Prejudice", in *Sojourners to Settlers: Tamils in Singapore*, edited by Arun Mahizhnan and Nalina Gopal (Singapore: Indian Heritage Centre and Institute of Policy Studies, 2019), 111–126.
5 Periasamy, "Indian Migration into Malaya and Singapore During the British Period"; Sandhu and Mani, *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia*, 777; "The History of Tamil and its Use in Singapore".
6 *They Made a Difference*, "G. Serangapany", Television Corporation of Singapore, aired 4 December 1997.
7 *They Made a Difference*, "G. Serangapany".
8 Solomon, *A Subaltern History of the Indian Diaspora in Singapore*, 122; Jaime Koh, "Tamil Community", *Singapore Infopedia* (National Library Board), https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/article-detail?cmsuuid=7cf8b115-d8bd-492a-825b-8aa47235dadd (accessed 30 December 2024).
9 Solomon, *A Subaltern History of the Indian Diaspora in Singapore*, 122.
10 Solomon, *A Subaltern History of the Indian Diaspora in Singapore*, 122.
11 *They Made a Difference*, "G. Serangapany".
12 Sharon Teng, "Singapore Labour Party", *Singapore Infopedia* (National Library Board), https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/article-detail?cmsuuid=28bc0cb7-9775-48bb-8d79-af711aa3b429 (accessed 30 December 2024); "Sarangapany Quizzed by Progressive", *Singapore Standard*, 29 November 1950, 5.
13 Mervin Ang, "Singapore Citizenship Ordinance of 1957", *Singapore Infopedia* (National Library Board), https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/article-detail?cmsuuid=fdd9ca3e-c31c-48c9-9a22-f73127ea6065 (accessed 30 December 2024).
14 John Solomon, "Citizens at the End of the Empire", *Southeast Asian Studies* 12, no. 3 (December 2023): 429–461.
15 V. T. Arasu, interview by Jason Lim, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, Accession No. 002307, Reel 9, 13 July 2000.
16 S. Varathan, interview by Daniel Chew, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, Accession No. 001000, Reel 5, 13 March 1991.
17 Arasu, interview, Reel 9.
18 Palanivelu, interview, Reel 13.
19 Ben Kong, "'Operation Franchise'—Singapore Citizenship Ordinance 1957", *Singapore Memories* (National Library Board), https://www.singaporememories.gov.sg/Contribute/NewDescribe?formatId=1&subcatId=11&contributeId=3641 (accessed 10 August 2025).
20 S. A. Muthiah, interview by S. Varathan, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, Accession No. 001540, Reel 2, 27 July 1994.
21 Muthiah, interview, Reel 2.
22 Pravin Prakash, "Dravidian-Tamil-Indian: Morphing of Multiple Identities", in *Sojourners to Settlers: Tamils in Singapore*, edited by Arun Mahizhnan and Nalina Gopal (Singapore: Indian Heritage Centre and Institute of Policy Studies, 2019), 141–154; Govindasamy Sarangapany, Purpose of Tamils Festival (Singapore: Star Press, 1952), 8.
23 S. Gopinathan, Seetha Lakshmi, and Vanithamani Saravanan, "Tamil Language Education: Responses to New Education", in *Sojourners to Settlers: Tamils in Singapore*, edited by Arun Mahizhnan and Nalina Gopal (Singapore: Indian Heritage Centre and Institute of Policy Studies, 2019), 155–170.
24 *They Made a Difference*, "G. Serangapany".
25 Gopinathan, Lakshmi, and Saravanan, "Tamil Language Education", 155–170; "Report of the All-Party Committee on Chinese Education", *Singapore Infopedia* (National Library Board), https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/article-detail?cmsuuid=6c72d8e5-4087-4dcb-a008-7fb8616e2429 (accessed 30 December 2024).
26 Gopinathan, Lakshmi, and Saravanan, "Tamil Language Education", 155–170; "Report of the All-Party Committee on Chinese Education".
27 "'Tamils Festival—Its Significance'", *Indian Daily Mail*, 13 January 1952, 6.
28 Sarangapany, Purpose of Tamils Festival, 2–3; "Tamils Festival Celebration Unprecedented Scale", *Indian Daily Mail*, 17 January 1954, 1.
29 "Malay Who Worked for Tamils Festival", *Indian Daily Mail*, 26 January 1955, 3.
30 Malai Arasi, interview by Indian Heritage Centre, undated.
31 Liviniyah P., "Umar Pulavar Tamil School", *Singapore Infopedia* (National Library Board), https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/article-detail?cmsuuid=85403035-ccb4-494e-8a8e-18307f5bba82 (accessed 10 August 2025).
32 *They Made a Difference*, "G. Serangapany".
33 Dinesh Sathisan, "Power of Print: Agent of Reform", in *Sojourners to Settlers: Tamils in Singapore*, edited by Arun Mahizhnan and Nalina Gopal (Singapore: Indian Heritage Centre and Institute of Policy Studies, 2019), 127–140; Ganesan Shanmugavelu, "A Short History of Tamil Newspapers in Malaya (Malaysia), 1875–1960", Global Research Forum on Diaspora and Transnationalism, https://grfdt.com/PublicationDetails.aspx?Type=Articles&TabId=8076 (accessed 30 December 2024).
34 S. Varathan, interview by Daniel Chew, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, Accession No. 001000, Reel 6, 15 March 1990; V. T. Arasu, interview by Jason Lim, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, Accession No. 002307, Reel 4, 9 June 2000.
35 Varathan, interview, Reel 6.
36 Varathan, interview, Reel 6.
37 Kartini Saparudin, "The Way We Were: Evolution of the Singapore Family", *Biblioasia* (National Library Board), July–September 2013, https://biblioasia.nlb.gov.sg/vol-9/issue-2/jul-sep-2013/singapore-family-evolution/ (accessed 10 August 2025).
38 Saparudin, "The Way We Were".
39 Vinaitheerthan s/o Govindasamy, interview by Indian Heritage Centre, undated.
40 P. T. Rasan, interview by Indian Heritage Centre, undated.

Jegateesh Gynasigamani is Assistant Curator at the Indian Heritage Centre. His research interests lie in the South Asian diaspora of maritime Southeast Asia.

Growing Pains: An Intergenerational Conversation on Language and Change

The Student Archivist Project, organised in turns by the Founders' Memorial and the National Museum of Singapore, provides students an opportunity to engage in intergenerational conversations with senior interviewees on historical topics. The following interview, undertaken by a team from Raffles Institution in 2024, delves into the lived experience of the Chinese-educated as post-independence Singapore sought to foster multicultural unity amid the daunting threat of racial strife.

Frank, authentic, and deeply personal, this piece sheds light on the choices and challenges confronting Singapore's ethnic majority in the aftermath of Separation—all from the vantage point of a young man caught in the crosswinds of change. From enrolling in an integrated school to grappling with a new language during National Service (NS), it highlights the everyday realities involved in forging a common space—a process demanding goodwill, mutual understanding, and at times, sacrifice.

This interview has been edited for clarity.

←
Mr Ho Tong Wong and the Raffles Institution student team in conversation, June 2025. Courtesy of National Heritage Board.

by Ethan Ong, Ryan Ho, Liu Binrui, and Shawn Soh

Could you tell us more about your family and educational background?

My name is Ho Tong Wong. I was born in 1953, and I studied first in Min Sheng School (民生学校), a public primary school in Balestier, from 1959 to 1965. Later, I attended Kim Keat Vocational School, First Toa Payoh Secondary School (FTPSS), and then Thomson Secondary School for Pre-University. After completing NS in 1974, I enrolled in Nanyang University, popularly known as Nantah.

As for [my] family background, my parents were illiterate. My father was Hainanese and my mother was from Chaozhou, so we communicated at home in Hainanese or Teochew. In those days, most Chinese families communicated in dialect at home, irrespective of whether they hailed from Chinese schools or English schools.

What was the medium of instruction when you were in primary school?

At Min Sheng School, Chinese was the medium of instruction. Still, it wasn't straightforward as there are variants in the expression of Mandarin Chinese. Take for example, the Chinese term for garbage (垃圾). In those days, my teacher would pronounce the term as *lese*, but when I visited mainland China a few years later, they did not understand me. Today, we have adopted the standard Chinese pronunciation of *laji*. However, I think people in Taiwan still pronounce this term as *lese*.

In primary school, every subject except English was taught in Chinese. History, Geography, and even the fiction books we read were all in Chinese. The content of these books, which included *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *Journey to the West*, naturally influenced us. It's the same for your generation. Many of you enjoy all kinds of contemporary comics, and their stories will probably influence you, though in a different way as compared to my time.

What you've described about the education landscape in the 1960s seems to be the exact opposite of the situation today—since all our lessons, apart from Mother Tongue, are now conducted in English. Was there a change in the medium of instruction by the time you attended secondary school in the late 1960s?

Yes and no, as FTPSS was an integrated school. It was formed from Kim Keat Vocational School and Thomson Secondary School. That was the first time in my life that I went to a school that used two teaching mediums. The school was divided into the English stream and Chinese stream. The English stream had students from Malay and Indian households, and that was the first time I interacted with them. I attended the Chinese stream, so we didn't attend the same classes, but we participated in common activities such as sports.

→
Façade of FTPSS, c1970s–1980s. FTPSS has since merged into Bartley Secondary School. Courtesy of National Library Board.

In a way, attending an integrated school broadened my worldview and outlook. I started to feel that I may not have liked the way someone behaved because of our different educational backgrounds. Personally, I felt that the students from the English stream were more westernised. They tended to talk about partying, whereas we in the Chinese stream were more conservative. Partly, this may have been because I was brought up in a traditional Chinese household, where partying and kissing girls at a young age were frowned upon. In FTPSS, we found that students from the English stream did not see such acts as out of the ordinary. They would go out on dates, and it would not be unusual.

That's interesting! It's hard to believe that different mediums of instruction were used within the same school. Were there any other barriers separating the students of different streams?

Initially, yes. Even where sport was concerned, the intermixing was less perfect than envisioned. For example, I was in the school's basketball team. I would say 100% of the players were Chinese students who were Chinese-educated. On the other hand, games like soccer and softball were dominated by the English stream. Same school, but English stream. Athletics and badminton were a better mix, where we had both Chinese and English stream students. For me, I didn't see a problem then, because my teammates were all from the Chinese stream.

↓
FTPSS staff photographs reflecting their assignment to either the Chinese or English stream, 1970. The images reveal that classes were ordered from A to F in both streams. Courtesy of National Library Board.

Integrated Schools

> We have inherited four streams of education, not one, and all four are at different stages of development. It is necessary now to integrate these four into something that has a common content, purpose and loyalty.[1]
>
> Minister for Education Yong Nyuk Lin at Happy World Stadium to celebrate National Loyalty Week, 9 December 1959

From 1960 onwards, integrated schools were set up across Singapore to bring together schools of different language mediums. While students and teachers shared the same school campus and took part in sports and other extra-curricular activities together, lessons continued to be held apart in their respective language streams. The first two integrated schools were Bukit Panjang Government High School and Serangoon Garden Government High School, each enrolling 1,200 students. By 1970, 106 out of a total of 526 schools in Singapore were integrated schools, with a combined enrolment of 166,000 out of a student population of 514,000.[2]

↑ Deputy Prime Minister Dr Toh Chin Chye unveiling the plaque for Selegie Integrated Primary School, with text in English, Chinese, Malay, and Tamil, 19 January 1963. Selegie Integrated Primary School has since merged into Stamford Primary School. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Why do you think different families chose to have their children enrolled in different streams, and how did opting for Chinese-medium education affect you later in life?

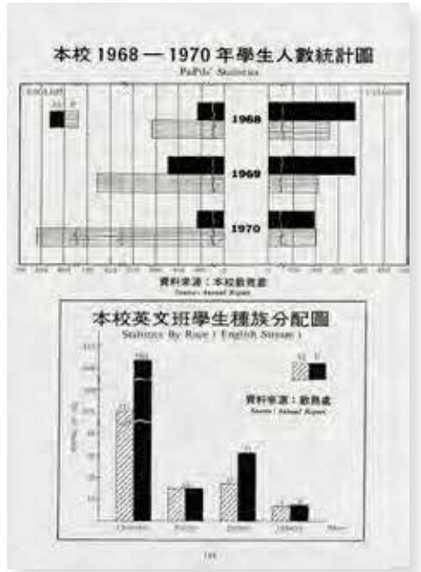
The mix of students in the English stream mirrored the ethnic makeup of our population, with 60–70% of students being Chinese. While Chinese families initially preferred to send their students to the Chinese stream, there was a break-even point during my time in school, when the number of Chinese stream and English stream students were on par with each other. Thereafter, enrolment in the English stream overtook that of the Chinese stream as more parents opted for their children to receive their formal education in English.

My mother had initially registered me in an English-medium primary school as she took a practical view and felt that this would afford me better job prospects. Being educated in English was also seen as more prestigious. However, my father came home and was very annoyed. He stopped her and enrolled me in a Chinese-medium school. As a first-generation immigrant, he felt that our roots were still in China, and that we should not forget our own culture and language.

As for me, I did feel that the English stream students were ahead of us. Imagine if you were sent to a Chinese university and were forced to use Chinese as a learning medium. You would probably lose out to Chinese stream students! Later, during NS, I found that the students from the English stream probably had more exposure to leadership opportunities. They had the advantage of language.

In fact, it was during NS that I had to brush up my standard of English. I started off as a recruit at 6th Singapore Infantry Regiment in Tuas. I then became an instructor at the School of Artillery in Taman Jurong Camp. We were taught to fire rifles, mortars, and various kinds of equipment—all in English. So, we were compelled to learn. While I could use a dictionary to search for the correct meaning of certain words, I still found it difficult to understand certain technical terms such as "anchoring device" or "mortar director".

Here's an example of how bad my English was: I was told by my instructor to draw a ladder out from the store and, to be honest, I didn't even know which object he was referring to. I went to the store and simply said, "Sir, I want to draw a ladder." The officer-in-charge just pointed at the ladder and said, "Over there." I said, "Where?" He said, "Are you blind? Don't you see the big ladder there?" It was then that I told myself that I have to pick up another language. Otherwise, I would be in trouble.



↑ Page from FTPSS' 1970 yearbook showing (1) the shift in number of pupils enrolled in the English and Chinese streams, and (2) the racial mix of students in the English stream, 1968–1970. Courtesy of National Library Board.

↑
Minister for Interior and Defence Dr Goh Keng Swee opening the School of Artillery at Singapore Armed Forces Training Institute at Pasir Laba, 1 August 1967. The school later moved to Taman Jurong Camp, where Mr Ho served. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

As we will all be enlisting for NS in a few years' time, we find it particularly interesting hearing you share about your experiences. How else did NS shape you?

One formative experience was reciting the National Pledge in English. In school, we used to recite it in Chinese. But during NS, we had to say it in English. For those who could not, the instructor made us write out the sentences 100 times, so that it would be drilled into us: "We, the citizens of Singapore, pledge ourselves as one united people…" So, it was quite a big change.

This was also the first time I had to interact with other races so closely. Growing up, I never had to work with peers from the Indian or Malay communities. It was only during NS that I had to face them; I had to understand them. I didn't even speak very fluent English. Although I understood what they said, communication was still quite a difficult task for me.

Honestly, I think NS was good for us, even though I thought it was a waste of time then. Whether you are rich or poor, whether you are Indian, Malay, or Chinese, you come to a common place. You sleep and train together, so the cohesiveness was there. During training, when you try to survive and win a battle, you won't see any difference between a Malay, Chinese, or Indian. To use an army phrase, we tried not to *sabo* (colloquial for sabotage) each other. That brought us together.

↑
Mr Ho's Nanyang University Graduates Yearbook, 1976–1977. He graduated from the Industrial and Business Management degree programme. Courtesy of Ho Tong Wong.

Later, we understand you joined Nanyang University in 1974, at a time when changes were afoot to switch the medium of instruction from Chinese to English.

That was a big change for me. I studied for a degree in Industrial and Business Management, and we were learning about the term "line and staff" in an organisational context. My English-Chinese dictionary only provided a very literal translation of what these two words meant, *zhixian* 直线 and *muliao* 幕僚 (literally "straight line" and "an assistant"). This made no sense to us students.

For those who were two or three years younger than me, such as my wife, the switch from Chinese to English occurred during secondary school. So, that created a big uproar. Imagine if you have always been studying History in Chinese, but all of a sudden, the teacher is asked to teach it in English. It was an almost impossible task for them.

Looking back, however, I fully agree there was a need to have one language to unite people together. When I started working for a statutory board, I had to interact with people from all walks of life. So, I saw the value, the advantage, of mastering another language, and for English to serve as the common medium of communication in Singapore.

↑
Mr Ho and his future wife outside the main building of Nanyang University, 1977. Courtesy of Ho Tong Wong.

←
Mr Ho's English-Chinese dictionary, which was purchased from Shanghai Book Company on North Bridge Road, 1974. Courtesy of Ho Tong Wong.

We understand that the cohorts after you were affected by another big change: the merger of Nanyang University with the University of Singapore. As an alumnus of Nantah, did this affect you in any way?

For me, I had already graduated, I was working. I felt that Nantah had already fulfilled its historical mission. It had catered to the needs of thousands of Chinese students, fulfilling the goals set out by its founders. Times had changed by the late 1970s. Many parents were already sending their children to English schools. That was probably the time Nantah had to change. So, we had to rebuild Nantah into a university that catered to people from different streams. In a sense, I think it was a change for the better that Nantah was transformed from an academic university into a technical university where students could learn more advanced knowledge to help build the nation.

Years after the closure of Nantah, I think we can all agree that it is the Nantah spirit that lives on and is representative of the wider Singapore spirit. It is a spirit which places the interests and well-being of the community at its heart. Without government support, the community identified a need for education in the Chinese community, and proceeded to raise funds, mobilise people, and set a common goal, all with the objective of uniting people together. When the university was declared open, it was said that the traffic jam stretched all the way from Jurong to Bukit Timah. The response from the community really moved me.

↑
Roof tile from Nanyang University. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

↓
Chief Minister David Marshall, Tan Lark Sye, Lien Ying Chow, and Colonial Secretary Alan Lennox-Boyd surveying the upcoming Nanyang University Campus, 21 August 1955. *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

With these changes in education and language policy, was there any point when you felt that Chinese culture was being eroded or lost?

During my time, English stream students still maintained a strong connection with Chinese culture. Many still spoke Chinese dialects at home, so Chinese cultural values continued to be passed down to them. These days, with your parents likely having been educated in English, society has become very westernised. My concern is that the younger generation may lose touch with their cultural roots.

Having experienced the ups and downs of Singapore's nation-building firsthand, what would you say are the most important qualities our generation should cultivate in order for us to continue being a strong and prosperous nation?

I'm probably biased, but it would have to be qualities related to the Nantah spirit for me. That sense of care for future generations, coupled with a "never-say-die" mentality. In fact, these values are not exclusive to the Chinese community. After all, our forefathers came from all over the world: China, India, and the Malay Archipelago. They each made their mark by working hard, inspired by a desire to improve the lives of their children. I would encourage the younger generation to uphold these values, and to give back to society.

Scan this QR code to view other submissions to the 2024 Student Archivist Project.

Students' Reflections

Aqil (left) and Shawn (right), 2025. Courtesy of Raffles Institution.

Shawn

In our multicultural society, we must be tolerant and accommodating towards one another. I learnt this firsthand when staying at my school's boarding complex for a few weeks in 2024. As my stay coincided with the holy month of Ramadan, my Malay-Muslim roommate, Aqil, had to wake up especially early to take his pre-dawn meal each day. While his early alarm initially bothered me, it led me to better understand his religious practices and the value of cross-cultural understanding. Aqil, on the other hand, switched to a gentler alarm ringtone to minimise disturbing my sleep. These small but significant acts of mutual goodwill demonstrate how we can each play our part to promote racial and religious harmony.

Ryan

Mr Ho's experience of NS highlights the fact that, beyond being necessary for national defence, NS continues to bring together young men from diverse linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds. While it was common for recruits in the 1960s and 1970s to face communication barriers, by overcoming shared challenges, they eventually forged bonds transcending these differences.

Personally, I can see some parallels between NS and the Outward Bound Singapore (OBS) experience that is mandatory for all Secondary 3 students. Working with my assigned watchmates during the week-long camp was initially a struggle as we had never met before. However, with perseverance and cooperation, we were ultimately able to complete tasks such as rope courses, a rafting expedition, and making our own dinner from food rations. As Mr Ho said, we were also careful not to *sabo* one another! Such shared experiences form the basis of our common Singaporean identity.

Students participating in an OBS kayaking activity, 2024. Courtesy of Raffles Institution.

Organisers of *Raffles Dialect*, a student-led initiative, conducting a programme, 2022. Courtesy of Raffles Institution.

Ethan

Mr Ho mentioned that dialects were a ubiquitous part of Singapore's linguistic landscape when he was growing up. Unfortunately, the ability to understand and speak dialects has become much less common these days, especially among my generation. When I was younger, I used to speak Hokkien with my relatives. My kindergarten teachers also taught me as much as I could learn. However, I later studied abroad for two years when my dad was posted overseas. By the time I returned to Singapore, I had forgotten almost everything. Although I can still understand basic conversations in Hokkien, it is a painful reminder that I have lost a big part of my cultural heritage. Thankfully, there are youth who are working to preserve dialects and other languages which used to be widely spoken. Some seniors in my school even conduct Hokkien and Teochew lessons for interested students.

Binrui

To me, the Nantah spirit reveals itself most powerfully in small, everyday gestures. My school principal often reminds us that "small things matter", and I try to live by that. Whether it's a smile or a simple greeting, these acts can brighten someone's day more than we realise. I also contribute through Values in Action initiatives whenever possible. One especially meaningful experience took place during last year's December holidays, when my schoolmates and I told stories in Chinese for a children's programme at Jurong Regional Library. When I saw the children's faces light up, I felt really comforted and gratified for being given the opportunity to bring joy to others. I also hope that they walked away with a deeper appreciation for the Chinese language. While I may not be changing lives on a grand scale, I've come to see that small, sincere efforts can have a lasting impact on others. The fulfillment they bring is something no material reward could ever match.

Binrui (left) engaging with a child during a Values in Action programme at Jurong Regional Library, 2024. Courtesy of Raffles Institution.

Ethan Ong, Ryan Ho, Liu Binrui, and Shawn Soh are Year 4 students (2025) at Raffles Institution. This piece would not have been possible without the advice and mentorship of their teacher-in-charge, Mr Tan Shengli.

NOTES

1 "The Role of Teachers—By Lee", *The Straits Times*, 9 December 1959, 20.
2 "The Paradox of Integration", *The Straits Times*, 19 April 1970, 10.

Roots and Routes to the Future

"A Singaporean is: a person who either by birth and upbringing or residence in Singapore feels committed to upholding this society as it is—multiracial, tolerant, accommodating, forward-looking—and prepared to stake his life for this community."

Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew at a speech to the St Andrew's Old Boys' Association, 7 September 1968

←
Students from Westwood Primary School celebrating Racial Harmony Day, 22 July 2019. *The Straits Times* © Singapore Press Holdings. Permission required for reproduction.

Finding the Pulse of Singapore's Identity: From EngMalChin to Multi-Civilisational

An Interview with Professor Wang Gungwu

Before becoming a renowned historian of the Chinese diaspora, Professor Wang Gungwu was a young poet searching for a literary voice that could capture the emerging Malayan consciousness.

As a student at the University of Malaya from 1949 to 1955, he met peers who believed that Malaya should have its own literature, written in a common language.[1] Their interest in poetry grew first from seeing Malaya as their country, which then opened their eyes to the rich diversity of Malayan life and landscape.[2] Their answer, after some trial and error, was EngMalChin—a portmanteau of "English", "Malay", and "Chinese". This was a new literary language largely based on English, but mixed with Malay and Chinese phrases used in Malaya.[3]

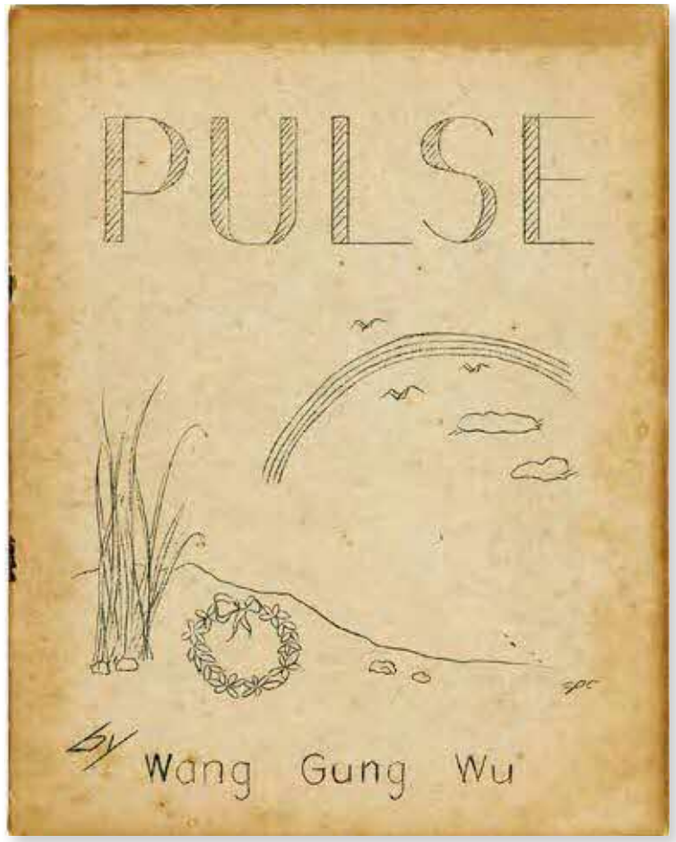
Professor Wang's early experiments with EngMalChin were captured in *Pulse*, a collection of 12 of his poems published when he was 19 years old in April 1950. This modest booklet was regarded as the first book of poetry published in Singapore and would later be hailed as the beginning of a Singaporean/Malayan style of poetry.[4] The EngMalChin experiment, however, proved short-lived, and Professor Wang stopped his literary writings soon after.

He eventually turned to history, exploring questions of identity through a different lens. Today, Professor Wang is a University Professor at the National University of Singapore (NUS), and Advisor to the Social Science Research Council. Among his numerous appointments, he has served as Director of the East Asian Institute at NUS from 1997 to 2007, and then as Chairman until 2018. His latest book, *Living with Civilisations: Reflections on Southeast Asia's Local and National Cultures*, was published in 2023.

In this edited interview with the Founders' Memorial, Professor Wang reflects on his early literary endeavours and his generation's quest for a Malayan identity. Drawing from decades of research into ancient civilisations, he describes Singapore as "multi-civilisational"—a society that inherited the region's long-standing practice of adopting and adapting values from other civilisations.

←
Professor Wang Gungwu, 2015.
Courtesy of Wang Gungwu.

by Siau Ming En



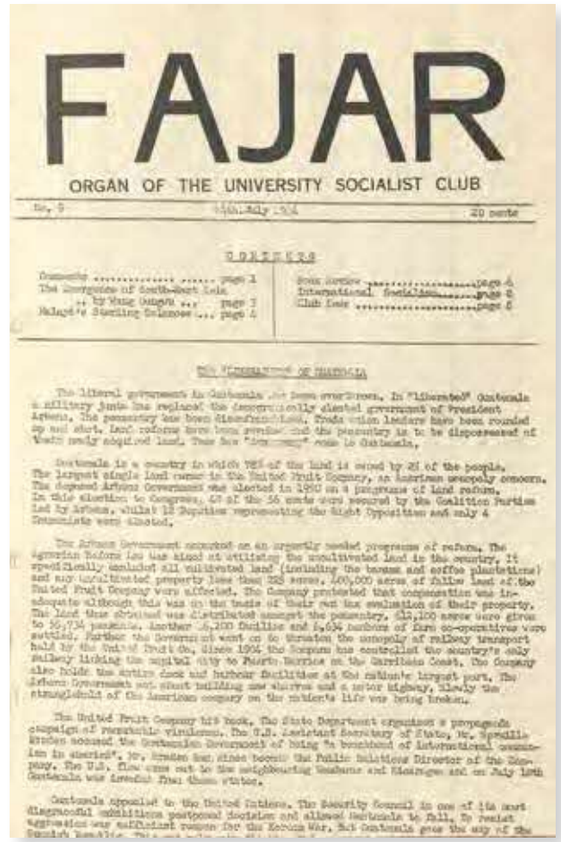
←
Cover page of *Pulse*, a compilation of poems by Wang Gungwu, 1950. Courtesy of Wang Gungwu.

You were a student at the emergent University of Malaya when decolonisation and the building of a new nation were hotly discussed. Spirited bouts of student activism, which led to events like the Fajar trial, also made the headlines during this time. Could you tell us more about this period of your life, which coincided with post-war Malaya's search for a new future? What kind of activities were you involved in and what drew you to them?

Coming from Ipoh, I stayed two years in the dormitories on Bukit Timah campus (occupied by the National University of Singapore's Law Faculty from 2006 to 2025), and then for three years at Dunearn Road Hostels. That enabled me to participate conveniently in any activity that I found of interest. I was active in the Students' Union from my freshman year, and in the Raffles Society (a cultural and literary society). I also edited *The Malayan Undergrad*, acted in several plays, and enjoyed social and musical evenings organised by various other societies. In the dormitories at mealtimes and in the canteen between classes, most of our conversations were about Malaya—then still a British protectorate.

We were all conscious of the ongoing anti-communist Malayan Emergency and, in 1951, many of my close friends were detained for several months or longer. Those not arrested continued to ask for the right to organise a political club, on the grounds that we should be better prepared for the various nation-building tasks that we were being educated for. Finally, in 1953, we received permission to establish one: we called it the University Socialist Club. Although I was about to graduate, I agreed to start it off as its first president. Soon after, I left the club in the hands of a younger team to concentrate on my Master's degree.

Outside of campus, I worked part-time in various jobs, including—most enjoyably and memorably—for Radio Malaya.


FAJAR

ORGAN OF THE UNIVERSITY SOCIALIST CLUB

No. 9 16th July 1954 20 cents

CONTENTS

Comment ..... page 1
The Emergence of South-East Asia
... by Wang Gungwu ... page 3
Malaya's Sterling Balances ... page 4
Book Review ..... page 6
International Socialism ..... page 6
Club Page ..... page 6

THE EMERGENCE OF GUATEMALA

The liberal government in Guatemala has been overthrown. In "liberated" Guatemala a military junta has replaced the democratically elected government of President Arbenz. The peasantry has been disenfranchised, trade union leaders have been rounded up and shot, land reforms have been annulled and the peasantry is to be dispossessed of their newly acquired land. These are "democratic" aims in Guatemala.

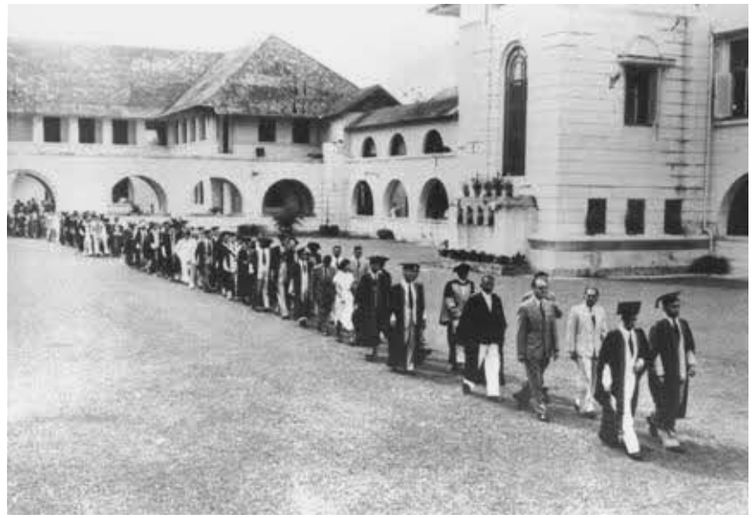
Guatemala is a country in which 72% of the land is owned by 2% of the people. The largest single land owner is the United Fruit Company, an American monopoly concern. The deposed Arbenz Government was elected in 1950 on a programme of land reform. In the election to Congress, 49 of the 56 seats were secured by the Coalition Parties led by Arbenz, whilst 12 Deputies representing the Right Opposition and only 4 Communists were elected.

The Arbenz Government commenced on an urgently needed programme of reform. The Agrarian Reform Law was aimed at utilising the uncultivated land in the country. It specifically excluded all cultivated land (including the banana and coffee plantations) and any uncultivated property less than 223 acres. 400,000 acres of fallow land of the United Fruit Company were affected. The Company protested that compensation was inadequate although this was on the basis of their own tax evaluation of their property. The land that obtained was distributed amongst the peasantry. 81,100 acres were given to 36,734 peasants. Another 6,200 families and 3,634 members of ten co-operatives were settled. Further the Government went on to threaten the monopoly of railway transport held by the United Fruit Co. Since 1904 the Company has controlled the country's only railway linking the capital city to Puerto Barrios on the Caribbean Coast. The Company also holds the entire dock and harbour facilities of the nation's largest port. The Arbenz Government was about building new electric and a motor highway, thereby the stranglehold of the American company on the nation's life was being broken.

The United Fruit Company has been. The State Department organised a propaganda campaign of remarkable virulence. The U.S. Assistant Secretary of State, Mr. Spruille Braden accused the Guatemalan Government of being "a beachhead of international communism in America", Mr. Braden has since become the Public Relations Director of the Company. The U.S. flew arms out to the neighbouring Honduras and Nicaragua and on July 18th Guatemala was invaded. Fleet Admiral Nimitz retired.

Guatemala appealed to the United Nations. The Security Council in one of its most disgraceful exhibitions postponed decision and allowed Guatemala to fall, to realise aggression was sufficient reason for the Korean War, but Guatemala gave the lie to the Spanish Republic.

Issue 9 of *Fajar*, the *Organ of the University of the Socialist Club*, with an article titled "The Emergence of South-East Asia" by Wang Gungwu listed among its contents, July 1954. Reproduced by Special Collections, National University of Singapore Libraries.



←
A convocation procession taking place across the grounds of the University of Malaya, 1951. Raffles College Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

You and your university peers created EngMalChin in the 1950s. As one of its creators, how would you define it?

Defining it is not easy because I don't think we had any clear idea what it was.

Our generation was the first to face the question of nation-building. Until 1945, this region consisted of colonies mostly under Western powers. After World War II, they learnt there should be no more empires—every country should be a nation-state, sovereign and equal, regardless of size.

For the first generation in Malaya, this was mind-boggling. What does being a nation-state mean? How does one build a nation when it wasn't one before? This kept my friends and colleagues excited, debating how we could prepare for the postcolonial country called "Malaya". One of the first things that emerged was that a nation must have its own identity, which comes from what you write. If the nation has its own literature, that can be identifiable as a Malayan future.

That was how we started, though we were not very clear about what we were doing. Although it's EngMalChin, it was basically "Eng". The base was English because all of us at the University of Malaya were from English schools. The literature we knew was all in English. We didn't have the imagination to think of anything else, except that English was the common language among students from the region. Yet we wanted to acknowledge that this Malayan nation must have Malay, Chinese, and other languages to reflect our mixed population.

Could you tell us more about your literary background and influences during this period?

My reading was very mixed up because of the Japanese Occupation—for three and a half years, I wandered around and could not go to school. I had no proper training in English literature except what I learnt, funnily enough, at the Department of Foreign Languages at National Central University in Nanjing which I attended from 1947 to 1948. The Chinese students taught me English literature through translations.

At the University of Malaya, we were excited to use English literature as a starting point, creating our own literature by incorporating local concepts, words, ideas, and customs to capture a Malayan spirit. The Romantics particularly captured our young imagination. The metaphysical poets interested me, except when they were very Christian, which didn't appeal to us as none of us were religious.

Such literary influences helped us choose words to express this sense of nationhood in EngMalChin. We drew upon vernacular terms, played with Malay and Chinese words, and used what we today call Singlish. We tried to mix it all up and treat it not as weird but normal.

Did you have any doubts about whether it would take off?

Pulse came out in April 1950, but by the end of the year, I was having doubts.

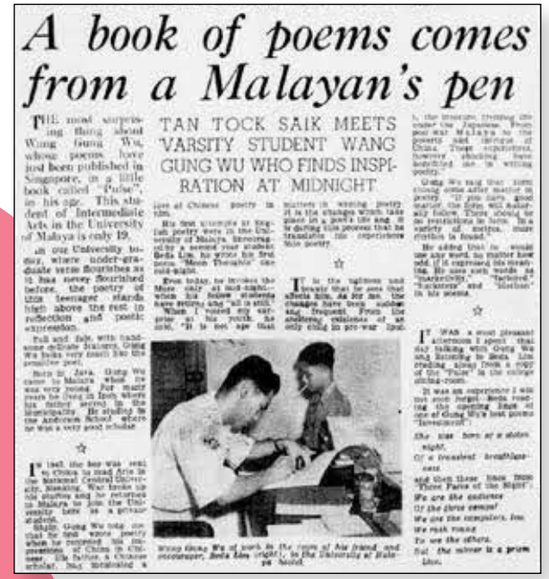
At a Rockefeller Foundation writers' course in Manila (1950), I was the only one from Malaya among the Southeast Asian guests. The Indonesians were certain and proud they had to write in Bahasa Indonesia, their national language, as it represented the independence they had fought hard for. The Filipinos debated between English, Spanish, and their own language—particularly Tagalog.

They turned to me: "You're from Malaya but you don't write in Malay. What's wrong with you?" I became conscious and started questioning whether we were on the right track. I realised the language of the national literature must be indigenous to that region. That's when I realised we couldn't use English, that EngMalChin mustn't be based on English. Though I continued to write in English with Malay and Chinese words, I knew this was not the future.

← Wang Gungwu and his wife, Margaret, on the occasion of their graduation from the University of Malaya, 1953. Reproduced from *Wang Gungwu: Junzi: Scholar-Gentleman in Conversation with Asad-ul Iqbal Latif* (2010) with the gracious consent of the publisher, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.

"Consider, as an extreme case, a young poet in Malaya… Though he knows Chinese and Indonesian, he writes by preference in English; what he really is, neither he nor anyone else knows. He is not a citizen of Indonesia, where he was born, nor of China, where his parents were born. He is not a citizen of Malaya, where he lives, nor can he, because of his race, become one. His passport says he is a 'British-protected person.' Actually he is a citizen of nowhere, the spokesman of nobody, the classic uprooted Asian intellectual, flotsam in the crack-up of empires, writing in a language not his own for an audience that he cannot conceive.[5]

Description of Wang Gungwu by American novelist Wallace Stegner in a 1951 issue of *The Pacific Spectator*. Stegner conducted the 1950 Rockefeller Foundation writers' course which Wang attended.



A book of poems comes from a Malayan's pen

TAN TOCK SAIK MEETS 'VARSITY STUDENT WANG GUNG WU WHO FINDS INSPIRATION AT MIDNIGHT

THE most surprising thing about Wang Gung Wu, whose poems have just been published in Singapore, in a little book called "Pulse", is his age. This student of Intermediate Arts in the University of Malaya is only 19.

In our University history, where under-graduate verse flourishes as it has never flourished before, the poetry of this teenager stands high above the rest in reflection and poetic expression.

Tall and fair, with handsome delicate features, Gung Wu looks very much like the romantic poet.

Born in Java, Gung Wu came to Malaya when he was very young. For many years he lived in Ipoh where his father, an old Chinese scholar, is practising as an herbalist. He studied in the Anderson School there and he was a very good scholar.

In 1947, the boy was sent to China to read Arts in the National Central University, Nanking. War broke up his studies and he returned to Malaya to join the Chinese Department of the University here as a private student.

Much, Gung Wu says, remains to be said about poetry when he completed his impressions of China in Chinese. His father, a Chinese scholar, has translated a number of Chinese poetry in Malay.

His own attempts at English poetry were in the University of Malaya Chronicle and in a second year student Straits Lit. he wrote his first poem, "Moon Thoughts" one cold night.

From today, he invokes the Muse only at mid-night when his house is asleep and "all is still."

"When I started my writing at the early hours of the morning," he said, "it is not age that only clings to pre-war ideas."

It is the tightness and silence that he says that affects him. As for him, the changes have been sudden and frequent. From the sheltering existence of an only child in pre-war Ipoh, to the University, finishing his studies under the Japanese. From poor war Malaya to the poverty and intrigue of China. These experiences, however shocking, have benefitted him in writing poetry.

Gung Wu says that some young artist after another in poetry. "If you have a good teacher the force will naturally follow. There should be no restrictions in form. In a variety of subjects, more emotion is found."

He added that he would use any form, no matter how old, if it expressed his meaning. He uses such words as "barbarities", "tortured", "blackness" and "broken" in his poems.

IT WAS a most pleasant afternoon I spent that day talking with Gung Wu and listening to Beda Lim reading aloud from a copy of the "Pulse" in the college sitting-room.

It was an experience I will not soon forget. Beda reading the opening lines of one of Gung Wu's best poems "Investment".

The time here at a stolen night.
Of a thousand breathless ease
and then these lines from "Three Faces of the Night":
We are the audience
Of the dark venue!
We are the computers, too.
We mark moods
To see the others.
But the winner is a prism
Man.

Wang Gung Wu at work in the room of his friend and encourager, Beda Lim (right), in the University of Malaya Hostel.

A feature on Wang Gungwu, the poet, in the *Singapore Free Press*, 13 May 1950. *Singapore Free Press* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

You acknowledged in a 1958 essay that EngMalChin was a failed literary experiment.[6] Why do you think this was so?

EngMalChin was neither a cause nor a kind of slogan. It did stimulate discussion and debate, and that might have inspired and influenced later aspiring poets. But besides our small group, others couldn't care less. The Chinese- and Malay-educated majority probably thought we were using English while pretending to be Malayan.

The English-educated and non-Malays were the only ones who used "Malaya", while the Malays always used "Tanah Melayu". Even today, it is seen as an English word created by the British. If you start with the land of the Malays, unless English becomes the language of the people, EngMalChin didn't make sense.

Where we went wrong was being too self-conscious about nation-building and identity. Poetry was one of the things we were playing with to understand nation-building, thinking words would help us shape our identity. But we were not facing the crucial problem: the quality of the poetry. Edwin Thumboo was an exception, representing what it was like to write good poetry and letting the language take care of itself. We failed because we started the wrong way round.

If good poetry captures what Singaporeans are thinking as normal and natural, it doesn't matter what those words are, big or small. Over time, language will eventually mature, represent Singapore, and capture the Singaporean sense of itself without being conscious of it.

I eventually gave EngMalChin up, realising this was not the way to go. I was not a natural poet, I did not set out to be one, and I still am not. Poetry was, in a way, an accident inspired by this idea of nation-building, which took us in the wrong direction.

EngMalChin may not have worked out. How else should we think about Singapore's multicultural makeup?

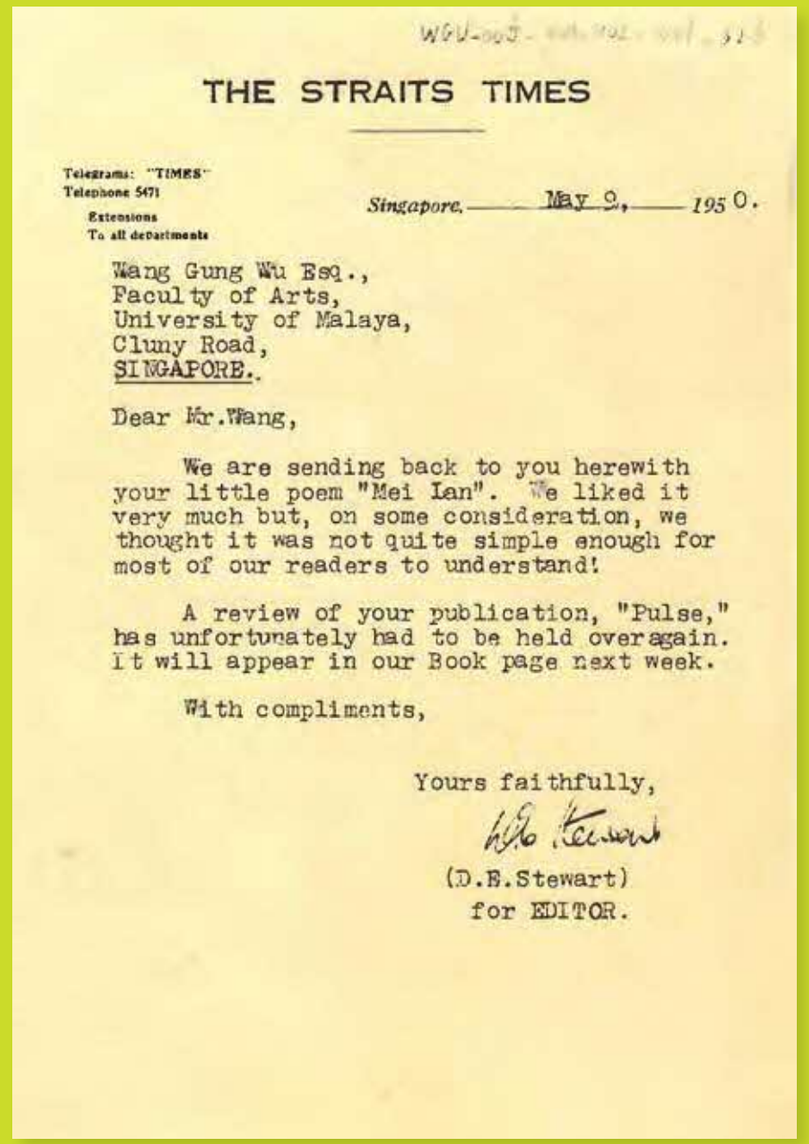
I would use the word "multi-civilisational" instead of "multicultural". In "cultures" everyone thinks their culture is the best. But in "civilisations", values can be borrowed across borders. If one culture emphasises compassion and the other doesn't, the latter can choose to borrow and make the value their own. That is a civilisational transfer, because values like compassion are universal and not limited to one culture or race.

Southeast Asia never had a civilisation of its own; people accepted what they thought was attractive from other civilisations. This is important—they didn't just copy; they chose that part of the civilisation that appealed to them or suited their needs. This took place for thousand-odd years and became the culture of Southeast Asia; fluid, and based on the choices people made.

Singapore inherited this tradition of choosing from other civilisations because it didn't have its own national culture. When Singapore became independent in 1965, it had to think about being a nation with people from different civilisations, and how they could live with and respect one another. The "multicultural" aspect of Singapore is actually "multi-civilisational", drawn from different civilisations. The national culture of Singapore consists of different civilisations kept alive by people who are bearers of that civilisation, living and behaving as Singaporeans.

↓

A letter from *The Straits Times*' editor, rejecting one of Wang Gungwu's poems titled "Mei Lan", 9 May 1950. Wang Gungwu Private Papers, courtesy of ISEAS Library, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore.



THE STRAITS TIMES

Telegrams: "TIMES"
Telephone 5471
Extensions
To all departments

Singapore, May 9, 1950.

Wang Gung Wu Esq.,
Faculty of Arts,
University of Malaya,
Cluny Road,
SINGAPORE.

Dear Mr.Wang,

We are sending back to you herewith your little poem "Mei Lan". We liked it very much but, on some consideration, we thought it was not quite simple enough for most of our readers to understand!

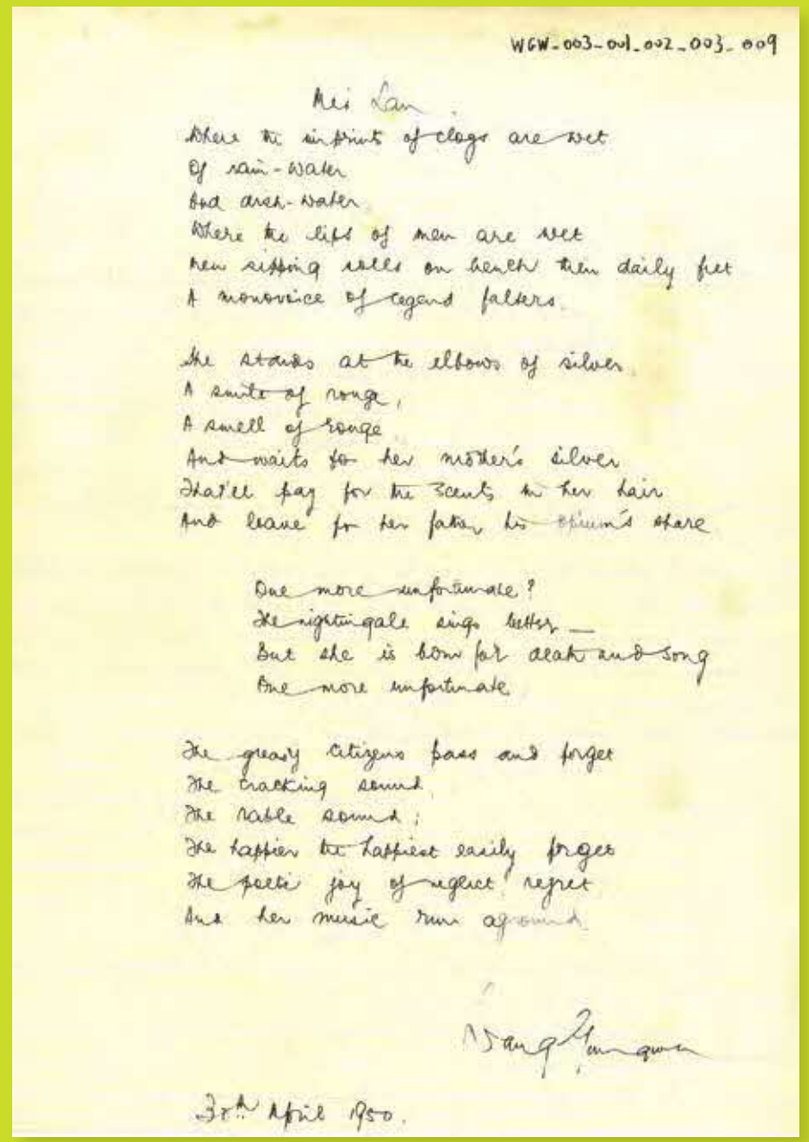
A review of your publication, "Pulse," has unfortunately had to be held overagain. It will appear in our Book page next week.

With compliments,

Yours faithfully,
D.E. Stewart
(D.E.Stewart)
for EDITOR.

↓

Handwritten draft of "Mei Lan", which was rejected by *The Straits Times*, 30 April 1950. Wang Gungwu Private Papers, courtesy of ISEAS Library, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore.



WGW-003-001_002_003_009

Mei Lan

Where the imprint of clogs are wet
Of rain-water
And dish-water
Where the life of men are set
Men sitting idle on bench then daily fret
A monotonice of regard falters

She stands at the elbows of silver
A suite of rouge,
A smell of rouge
And waits for her mother's silver
That'll pay for the scents in her hair
And leave for her father his opium's share

One more unfortunate?
The nightingale sings better, —
But she is born for death and song
One more unfortunate

The weary citizens pass and forget
The cracking sound
The table round;
The happier the happiest easily forget
The poetic joy of neglect regret
And her music runs aground

Wang Gungwu

30th April 1950.

↑

Chua Mia Tee, *KK Fresh Food Market*, 1979. Oil on canvas, 68.8 × 81.2 cm. The painting captures the idea of Singapore as being made up of people from different civilisations—all of whom have learnt to live with and respect one another. Donated by Times Publishing Limited. Collection of Singapore Art Museum, National Heritage Board.

You have described Singapore as "multi-civilisational". How will this shape Singapore's identity as an open and global city?

As you can imagine, it is a very delicate operation.

Singapore cannot survive without being global and searching for talent from elsewhere. It needs new migrants because our population is declining. Without people, Singapore cannot achieve its ambitions as a modern, progressive nation. To react to global events, Singapore needs diverse and the best talent in active industries and enterprises.

Singapore struggles with this and ends up creating its own class system. Some are given citizenship readily if they are very talented or invest significantly. Others come in as migrant workers. The government emphasises social harmony and cohesion, knowing how delicate it is to balance locals and foreigners. Yet this is necessary to create the Singapore identity. Singapore may never have a stable national culture in the way other countries do because it is a global city dependent on people's mobility.

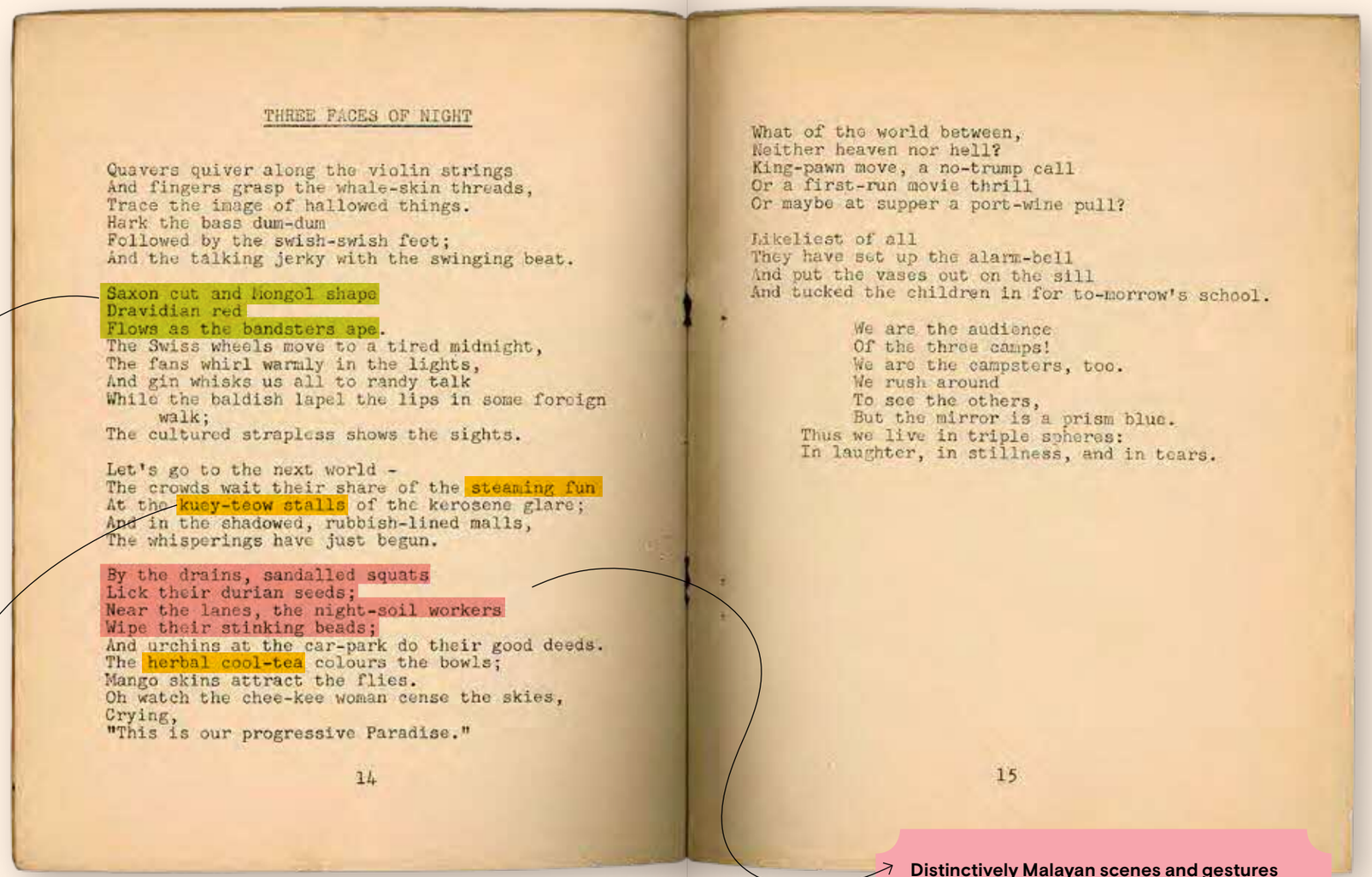
There are also tensions among the three civilisations linked to Singapore: the dominant majority Chinese in Singapore, the Muslim neighbourhood, and the dominant Western political culture. Today, the United States-China relationship represents a civilisational struggle. The Americans stand for the Western world and what they think is universal civilisation, while the Chinese stand for a civilisation they believe is necessary for survival. Meanwhile, the Muslim world is aroused by events like the situation in Gaza, which can be traced to the 1,500-year struggle between Christians and Muslims in the Mediterranean world.

The civilisational struggle in Singapore can be very intense because it is small. Phrases like "Chinese privilege" emerge because of the Chinese majority. It raises questions about Singapore's relationship with China, which others watch carefully. Our Islamic neighbours are linked to one of the most insoluble, intractable problems of a long war and violent history. Even though the Christians are a minority in Southeast Asia, the region is affected because Muslims see even the non-Christians as part of the Western modern civilisation led by the United States and the Western Europeans, who represent the crusaders of the past.

Singapore has to be global to remain as Singapore. It doesn't belong to any one country, culture, or civilisation. It is a mixture of civilisations within a small national set of borders, where a distinctive Singapore culture is drawn from all these civilisations. It tries to be useful to everybody in the world without taking sides. But it is not easy. I'm sorry to be so depressing in the end but I think one has to be fairly realistic about what Singapore faces.

Illustration by Julia Liu

"Three Faces of Night" takes readers through three distinct spaces, situated in what is likely pre-1950 Malaya: a dance hall, a city street, and a domestic space. At its core is a protagonist who searches for a reflection of his identity in a plural society.[7] The poem is one of Professor Wang's more distinctive EngMalChin pieces, in which he blends English with Malay and Chinese dialects to capture the realities of Malayan life.[8,9]



THREE FACES OF NIGHT

Quavers quiver along the violin strings
And fingers grasp the whale-skin threads,
Trace the image of hallowed things.
Hark the bass dum-dum
Followed by the swish-swish feet;
And the talking jerky with the swinging beat.

Saxon cut and Mongol shape
Dravidian red
Flows as the bandsters ape.
The Swiss wheels move to a tired midnight,
The fans whirl warmly in the lights,
And gin whisks us all to randy talk
While the baldish lapel the lips in some foreign
walk;
The cultured strapless shows the sights.

Let's go to the next world -
The crowds wait their share of the steaming fun
At the kuey-teow stalls of the kerosene glare;
And in the shadowed, rubbish-lined malls,
The whisperings have just begun.

By the drains, sandalled squats
Lick their durian seeds;
Near the lanes, the night-soil workers
Wipe their stinking beads;
And urchins at the car-park do their good deeds.
The herbal cool-tea colours the bowls;
Mango skins attract the flies.
Oh watch the chee-kee woman cense the skies,
Crying,
"This is our progressive Paradise."

14

What of the world between,
Neither heaven nor hell?
King-pawn move, a no-trump call
Or a first-run movie thrill
Or maybe at supper a port-wine pull?

Likeliest of all
They have set up the alarm-bell
And put the vases out on the sill
And tucked the children in for to-morrow's school.

We are the audience
Of the three camps!
We are the campsters, too.
We rush around
To see the others,
But the mirror is a prism blue.
Thus we live in triple spheres:
In laughter, in stillness, and in tears.

15

Mix of cultural influences found in Malaya
An example of Chinese, Indian, and British cultural influences. "Saxon cut and Mongol shape, Dravidian red" describe the *qipao* worn by the dancer. The *qipao*'s collar and fastening are wrongly referred to as "Mongol"; its cut refers to a tight-fitting Western dress and its bright colour is influenced by South Indian culture.[10]

Mix of local languages and dialects in an English verse
"*Fun*" and "*kuey-teow*" are transliterations of types of rice noodles in the Cantonese and Hokkien dialects. "Cool-tea" is a literal translation of the Chinese term for herbal tea (*liangcha*).[11]

Distinctively Malayan scenes and gestures
References to common scenes of people squatting by the road to eat alongside workers collecting human waste at night.

NOTES

1 Wang Gungwu, *Home is Where We Are* (Singapore: Ridge Books, 2021), 35.
2 Wang Gungwu, "Trial and Error in Malayan Poetry", *The Malayan Undergrad* 9 (1958): 6.
3 Lee Tong King, "A Plethora of Tongues: Multilingualism in 1950s Malayan Writing", *Biblioasia* (National Library Board), April–June 2024, https://biblioasia.nlb.gov.sg/vol-20/issue-1/apr-jun-2024/multilingual-languages-malayan-writing-sg/ (accessed 7 August 2025).
4 Wang, *Home is Where We Are*, 53; Gracie Lee, "The Pulse of Malayan Literature", *Biblioasia* (National Library Board), 31 January 2016, https://biblioasia.nlb.gov.sg/vol-11/issue-4/jan-mar-2016/pulse-malayan-literature-wang-gung-wu/ (accessed 7 August 2025).
5 Wallace Stegner, "Literary Lessons Out of Asia", *The Pacific Spectator* 5, no. 4 (1951): 416.
6 Wang, "Trial and Error in Malayan Poetry", 6.
7 Philip Holden, "Interrogating Diaspora: Wang Gungwu's *Pulse*", *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 33, no. 3-4 (2002): 125.
8 Jonathan Chan, "Wang Gungwu (b. 1930)", *poetry.sg*, 11 June 2021, https://www.poetry.sg/wang-gungwu-intro (accessed 7 August 2025).
9 Wang Gungwu, *Pulse* (Singapore: Beda Lim at the University of Malaya, 1950), 14–15.
10 Holden, "Interrogating Diaspora", 121.
11 Holden, "Interrogating Diaspora", 120.

Siau Ming En is Senior Manager (Curatorial & Engagement) at the Founders' Memorial. A former journalist, she explores ways of weaving contemporary stories with historical narratives.

S. Rajaratnam: Keeper of the Multiracial Flame

Among Singapore's founding leaders, S. Rajaratnam stood out for his revolutionary conception of multiracialism. From the very beginning, it was he who drove the bold experiment to inculcate in the diverse peoples a sense of national consciousness that transcended the boundaries of race, language, and religion. His crusade, which went against the political currents at the time, set the ideological trajectory that left the most lasting mark on the nation.

While the other first-generation leaders subscribed to this ideal, none could be said to be as ardent or as audacious as Rajaratnam in seeking to entrench it into the nation's core and to live up to its full rigour.

He was an iconoclast who confronted the deep divisions between the different races and challenged all sorts of traditional assumptions about race, culture, and language.

From the outset as Singapore's first Minister for Culture in 1959, he set out to achieve this vision: Singapore would not be a nation divided by communal pulls and communal politics. It would be a nation united by a common national identity and a common purpose: to build a fair and just society, regardless of race, language, or religion.

←
S. Rajaratnam with a lion dance troupe at Kampong Glam Community Centre, 11 June 1967. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

by Irene Ng

In his first address to the Legislative Assembly on 21 July 1959, Rajaratnam, known as the ideologue in the founding Cabinet, spelt out the underlying basis of his non-communal vision: that "the shape of a man's nose, the cut of his eyes, the colour or the texture of his hair, are not a sound basis on which to build a political or an economic philosophy. Neither can political and economic problems be solved by reference to something which we just got through the accident of birth—our skin, our colour, and the shape of our eyes."[1]

In other words, in politics and economics, racial considerations do not enter. It does not matter where you were born, which culture you came from, the colour of your skin. What matters is that your first and last loyalty is to the country.

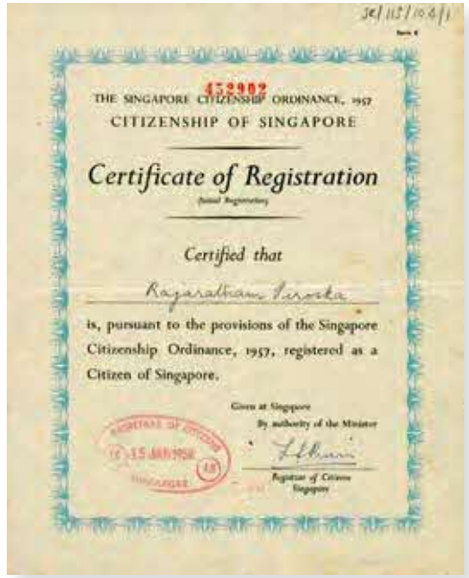
The objective elements of the national identity—clothing and food, for example—were to him secondary matters. The subjective elements—the dominant will and the moral aspects—are primary and even more than that, paramount. It requires an act of faith, and a deliberate act of will.

At the heart of this vision is a distinctly Singaporean brew of multiculturalism. It is not about multiple ethnic groups coexisting with each other on the island. Rather, it is about them sharing a common national identity to which all give their primary loyalty.

When first introduced, that was a truly revolutionary idea, one that went against the experiences and mindsets of the general public. Most of the inhabitants were new immigrants, from China, India, and other parts of the region. Their loyalties were fiercely to their kin, clan, and motherland. Racial stereotypes were rife, as were prejudices.

In demanding that the people change their communal worldview and acknowledge each other's humanity and equality, Rajaratnam disrupted the status quo. For the people at the time, it was an entirely new way of viewing the country's reality and their future in it.


THE SINGAPORE CITIZENSHIP ORDINANCE, 1957
CITIZENSHIP OF SINGAPORE
Certificate of Registration
Certified that
SINNATHAMBY RAJARATNAM
is, pursuant to the provisions of the Singapore Citizenship Ordinance, 1957, registered as a Citizen of Singapore.
Given at Singapore
By authority of the Minister
Registrar of Citizens
Singapore
4 JAN 1958


THE SINGAPORE CITIZENSHIP ORDINANCE, 1957
CITIZENSHIP OF SINGAPORE
Certificate of Registration
Certified that
Rajaratnam Piroska
is, pursuant to the provisions of the Singapore Citizenship Ordinance, 1957, registered as a Citizen of Singapore.
Given at Singapore
By authority of the Minister
Registrar of Citizens
Singapore
15 JAN 1958

↑
Citizenship Registration certificates issued to S. Rajaratnam and his wife Piroska Rajaratnam, 1958. S. Rajaratnam Private Papers, courtesy of ISEAS Library, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore.

The most fundamental problem, at least as far as Rajaratnam was concerned, was the deep-seated communal tensions and inequalities left behind by the British divide-and-rule policy.

As he warned in September 1959: "With the transfer of political power from the British, there is the ever-present danger of the struggle for political and economic power degenerating into communal rivalry, and, if uncontrolled, unto communal conflict."[2] He thus made it the primary task of the Ministry of Culture "to instil in our people of all races the will to be a nation".

Not merely a cultural policy, it was an ideology for national survival. He was convinced that a shared national identity was the only effective defence against communal conflict, which would all but destroy Singapore.

From all conceivable angles, shaping a non-communal Singapore was a delicate affair. Arrayed against it were, as Rajaratnam once put it, "oily-tongued communal demagogues" out to stir up age-old communal prejudices and fears among the people, pitting race against race for political power.[3]

Despite the scale of the challenge, Rajaratnam firmly believed that people *can* be taught to identify themselves with Singapore first and last. After all, racial consciousness was not in the blood, but in the culture: "In fact, a child has to be tutored into believing that he is a Chinese, Malay, or Indian."[4] Thus, with the right education policy and sociocultural environment, children can be taught to instead identify with the nation first, and emerge as Singaporeans. His hope, as always, lay with the younger and future generations.

He also had faith in the power of reason. Rather than encouraging people to see race/ethnic groups as fixed and definitive categories, they should be made to understand and accept the ways in which the different cultures affected and modified each other. Just as there was no such thing as a pure race with ceaseless migrations of people since pre-historic times, there were no pure cultures, unmixed with others. If people would only realise this, they would know it was senseless to fight among themselves as if the race/culture categories were absolutes, eternal, or sacred.

→
S. Rajaratnam speaking at a People's Action Party (PAP) rally at Chinatown, 26 April 1959. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

The basic premise underpinning his vision of multiracialism is that race, culture, and language were man-made constructs. So were political, social, and economic problems, which could therefore be unmade and overridden by men.

In private, Prime Minister (PM) Lee Kuan Yew, who himself believed that differences of race were primordial and genetic and therefore hard to overcome, nursed doubts about how realistic Rajaratnam's self-defined mission was. But publicly, PM Lee went along with his Culture Minister's position. He said later: "He believed in it and took that line. So we acquiesced."[5]

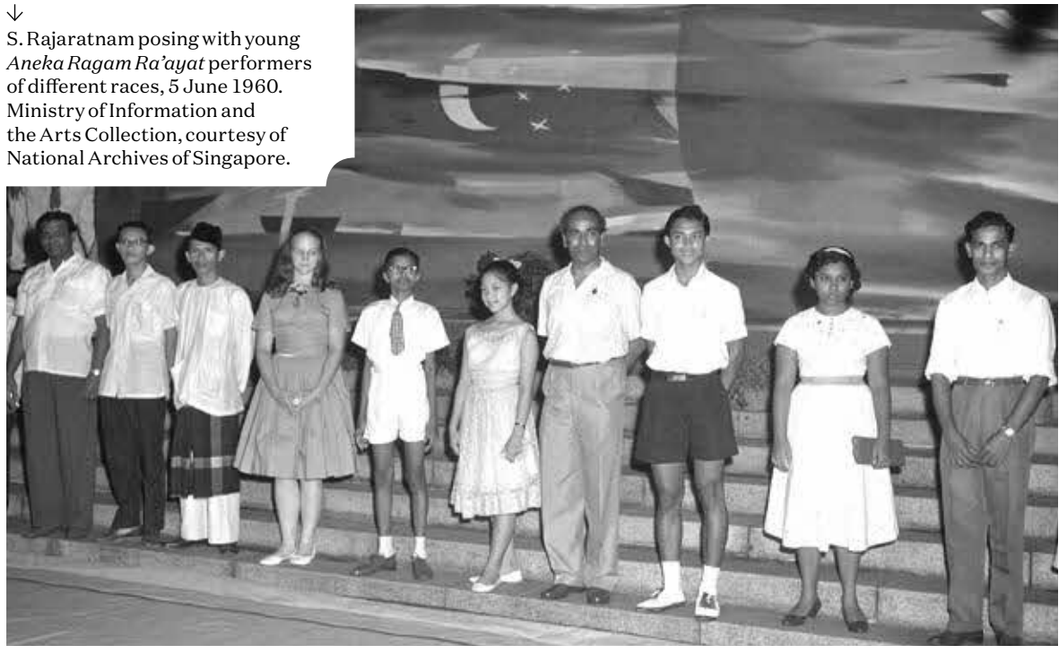
It is important to be clear, however, that by seeking to create a non-communal nation, Rajaratnam did not mean that he wanted to destroy the people's cultural traditions, or to erase their cultural heritage. What he fought against were racial/cultural chauvinism, racial politics, and the idea that people should draw their primary identity from their ethnic roots or their ancestral origins.

His multicultural model in fact celebrates the diversity of the various cultures, but gives precedence to the shared national identity over other affiliations and to national interest over communal interests.

Given the urgent imperative of uniting the people, Rajaratnam had pursued a policy of "laying stress on those things which unite the races rather than those which divide them".[6] This came to the fore in the first major nation-building exercise that he masterminded in December 1959: the historic National Loyalty Week.

Rajaratnam described the collective experience this way: during that period, the people "forgot" that they were Malays, Chinese, Indians, and Eurasians. "We experienced for the first time on a mass scale that we were one people, bound together by a common destiny. For the first time in our history, we understood what it means to say 'my country, my people'", he said.[7] In retrospect, the moment probably represented the first

↓
S. Rajaratnam posing with young *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat* performers of different races, 5 June 1960. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



flickering of a national consciousness. Yet how fragile that sense of unity was. This was demonstrated by the seeming ease with which racial sentiments could be whipped up to incite riots—as it did in 1964 when Singapore was part of Malaysia.

As the race riots raged, Rajaratnam could not help but fear for his core vision of a non-communal system. As he revealed later, "during the riots, I thought it would all collapse". It is important to remember that fear, that desperation.[8]

When that battle resulted in Singapore's expulsion from Malaysia in 1965—forcing it to become independent on its own—it boded

↑
S. Rajaratnam and PM Lee Kuan Yew meeting with other representatives of the Malaysian Solidarity Convention, 10 August 1965. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

↓
S. Rajaratnam assuring Muslims taking refuge in Sultan Mosque as he toured the riot-stricken areas of Kampong Glam with Dr Toh Chin Chye on 24 July 1964. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

↑
Malaysian Solidarity Convention booklet, 1965. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

ill for the PAP's non-communal vision when the Chinese began demanding dominance in language and culture. Meanwhile, Malay ultras from the Federation clamoured for special rights for Malays in Singapore.

The choice before the founding leaders was stark: give in to the communal pressures, or use that pivotal moment to bolster national solidarity. It took strength and courage to choose the latter and persist in the face of opposition, problems, and disaster.

Original Role Model

Regardless of race, language, or religion. For Rajaratnam, that phrase was not an abstract political philosophy, or a distant national ideal. It was a way of life.

This was demonstrated most clearly in his choice of wife—a white European woman named Piroska Feher, whom he married in 1943. Their interracial union defied the era's social norms and challenged deeply ingrained prejudices in Malaya and Singapore.

Their relationship crossed deep cultural divides. Ceylon-born Rajaratnam was raised as a Hindu in a strict caste-conscious Jaffa Tamil household in Seremban, and spoke English, Tamil, and Malay. Piroska was raised as a Lutheran in Hungary, where she was born, and spoke Hungarian, German, and English.

They had met in London in 1938 in socialist circles. He was a law undergraduate, and she was a refugee working as an au pair. When they tied the knot in the midst of World War II, he was 28; she 31.

Their union suffered ostracism, prejudice, and gossip from Rajaratnam's family and the wider Jaffa Tamil community after they returned to Malaya in 1947. Arranged marriages within the clan was the norm; marrying outside one's race and faith was a taboo.

The couple also had to cope with political threats and pressures from communal chauvinists after Rajaratnam joined politics in 1959 and championed his non-communal vision for the nation. Even up to the 1990s, he continued to receive hate mail from bigots mocking him for marrying a white woman. Piroska suffered too, such as the time in 1959 when Chinese-educated conservative forces whipped up anti-West sentiments, forcing her to leave Singapore for a few months.

Despite all the trials, the couple shared a deep and enduring love that testified to their ability to transcend ethnic boundaries. If ever there was a founding leader who embodied the very essence of Singapore's multiracial creed, it was Rajaratnam. He was the original role model.

↑
S. Rajaratnam and his wife, Piroska Rajaratnam in London, 1940s. S. Rajaratnam Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Although shattered by the Separation, Rajaratnam appeared at the United Nations as Singapore's founding Foreign Minister a month later, in September 1965, with a bold narrative of the country's multiracial vision: "We think of ourselves not as an exclusively Chinese, Indian or a Malay society, but as a little United Nations in the making."[9] Singapore, he added, would "bring to the United Nations the attitudes and approaches of a multiracial nation aware that independence and interdependence of peoples and nations are not incompatible goals to pursue".[10] It was a historic speech that set the tone and template for the country's foreign policy as well as its national ideology.

Mere months later, in February 1966, he embedded this ideology into the Singapore Pledge that he drafted. As Lee Kuan Yew confessed later, the Pledge was something that he would not have been able to "even conceive of" at the time. "Given the mood of the people in Singapore at that time," he observed, "only Raja had the conviction and optimism to express those long-term aspirations in that pledge."[11]

Although Rajaratnam's multiracial vision appeared overly idealistic to some, his was not an airy-fairy, pie-in-the-sky model. It was a muscular, gritty one based on a tough appreciation of the dangers of racial politics and the evils of racial ideologies. As he reminded the Legislative Assembly in 1961, as long as "old suspicions and fears" were alive, so too was the danger of communalism. "It is like a wild and hungry beast pacing impatiently behind the bars of a cage. We who bear no hatred against races and creeds intend that this wild beast remains locked in its cage so that eventually it will waste away and die." The price of racial peace, he said, is "eternal vigilance".[12]

→
S. Rajaratnam and Dr Toh Chin Chye representing Singapore for the first time at the United Nations, September 1965. Toh Chin Chye Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.


MEMORANDUM

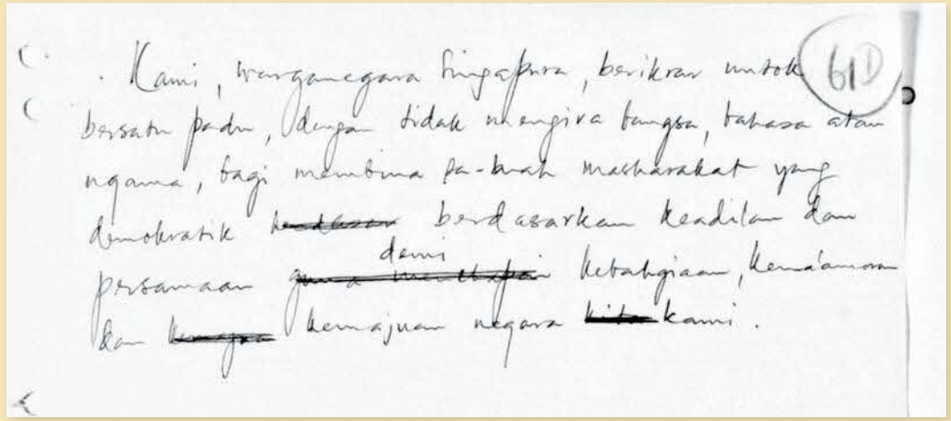
From

Minister for Education, Singapore

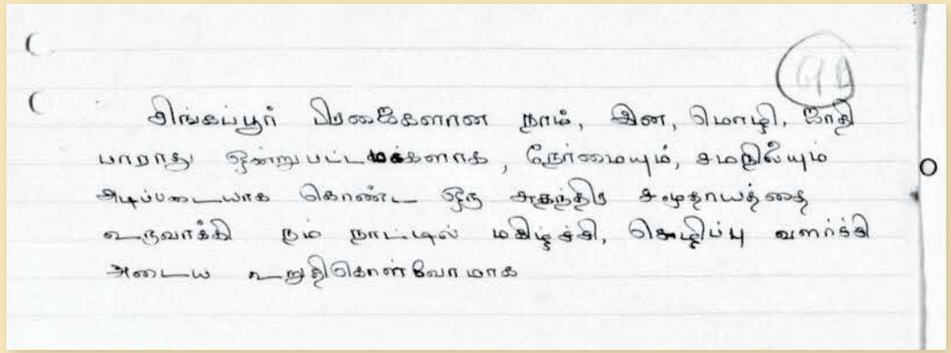
To

(T)

Eighth version at (B)


Kami, warganegara Singapura, berikrar untuk bersatu padu, dengan tidak mengira bangsa, bahasa atau agama, bagi membina pasukan masyarakat yang demokratik berdasarkan keadilan dan persamaan dalam kebahagiaan, kemakmuran dan kemajuan negara kami.

61D


சிங்கப்பூர் பிரஜைகளான நாம், இன, மொழி, சமய பாரபட்சமின்றி, நல்லிணக்கமும், சமநிலையும் அடிப்படையாக கொண்ட ஒரு சனநாயக சமுதாயத்தை உருவாக்கி நம் நாட்டில் ஐக்கியத்தை, கெளரவ வளர்ச்சி அடைய உறுதிகொள்வோமாக

71

← Initial handwritten translations of the National Pledge into Chinese, Malay, and Tamil, 1966. Ministry of Education Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Rajaratnam would not hesitate to nip in the bud manifestations of ethnic nationalism, whether under the guise of religious freedom, promotion of ethnic culture, or concern for one's ancestral roots. For this, the Internal Security Act (ISA), which allows detention without trial, was an effective tool. As he said in 1987, "As one who has been associated with the government since 1959, I am absolutely convinced that without ISA, it would be virtually impossible to preserve a multiracial and multireligious society against the danger of tribal wars."[13]

The painful reality—one that obsessed the Foreign Minister—was that Singapore's multiracial and multilingual fault lines could be its Achilles heel. For him, there were few nightmare scenarios worse than ethnic bloodshed and anarchy: what if, under the external and domestic pressures, the people in Singapore responded not as Singaporeans, but as Malays, Chinese, Indians, and others?

In 1987, he warned that tribal politics could emerge in Singapore if the "popular mood changes and you have a weak-kneed government prepared to go along with the popular tide"—or worse, groups and political parties that deliberately created a political and psychological climate conducive to sparking tribal wars.[14]

To navigate these global shifts, he believed what was required was a greater, not lesser, role for the government in formulating and promoting policies that strengthened Singapore's national identity. And, as ever, eternal vigilance.

Seen and Heard in

NOT MERE SPECTATORS

THE MAKINGS OF MULTICULTURAL SINGAPORE

Exchange of Letters on The National Pledge

Six months after Independence, Minister for Education Ong Pang Boon wrote to Minister for Foreign Affairs S. Rajaratnam to seek his views on two versions of a pledge for school flag-raising ceremonies. The pledge was part of broader efforts to nurture national consciousness and patriotism among students then.

Two weeks later, Rajaratnam replied to Ong with his version, re-writing it almost entirely. His draft changed the entire premise of the pledge from the individual "I" to the collective "we", and emphasised a multiculturalism that disregards the differences of race, language, and religion. This version most resembles the National Pledge that Singaporeans recite today.

S. RAJARATNAM

↓ →

Correspondence between Ong Pang Boon and S. Rajaratnam on a Pledge for flag-raising ceremonies in schools, 1966. Ministry of Education collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

(51)

2nd February 1966.

Mr. S. Rajaratnam,
Minister for Foreign Affairs,
Singapore.

Dear Raja,

Flag Raising Ceremony

As part of the programme to inculcate national consciousness and patriotism, it has been decided that schools should have a Flag Raising Ceremony accompanied by the National Anthem. However, many schools do not have a large enough playing field or assembly hall for this purpose and even those that have such facilities would not be able to carry out this ceremony daily because of the tight curriculum. As a compromise it has been decided that, wherever possible, schools should at least have a mass assembly once a week to be supplemented by a simple ceremony daily in the classrooms. In the case of the latter, in place of the singing of the National Anthem to the accompaniment of brass band there will be a loyalty pledge to be taken by the students. 2 versions of the students' pledge have been suggested as follows:-

(1) "I pledge / reaffirm my allegiance / loyalty to the Flag of Singapore, and to the country for which it stands: one sovereign nation of many freedom-loving peoples of one heart, one mind and one spirit, dedicated to a just and equal society."

(2) "I proudly and wholeheartedly pledge my loyalty to our flag of Singapore and to the honour and independence of our Republic whose banner it is. We come from different races, religions and cultures, but we are now united in mind and heart as one nation, and one people, dedicated to build by democratic means a more just and equal society."

The 2nd version would appear to be too long but does convey to a certain extent the multi-racial character of our country. I shall be pleased to have your comment and whatever amendments that you wish to suggest.

Yours sincerely,

Sd. ONG PANG BOON

(Ong Pang Boon)

M.F.A. Minister would like your comments on above pl. Mod 18/2 PA/A.

Minister, The 2nd version is not only too long, but too abstract - "loyalty to our flag", "united in mind & heart".

Mr Rajaratnam's is more realistic & down to earth. I prefer Raja's pledge.

OKT 19.2.66.

FA 3—W 4155

(52)

Cable Address:
Telephone:
MFA. 072:380/3/1

MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS,
SINGAPORE.

18th February, 1966.

Dear Pang Boon,

Sorry for the delay in replying to your letter of 2nd February, 1966. Herewith my suggestion for the pledge for your Flag Raising Ceremony:-

"We, as citizens of Singapore, pledge ourselves to forget differences of race, language and religion and become one united people; to build a democratic society where justice and equality will prevail and where we will seek happiness and progress by helping one another."

Yours sincerely,

(S. Rajaratnam)

Mr. Ong Pang Boon,
Minister for Education,
Singapore.

PAS/A, Get a clearer translation to see how it reads. See (55) OKT 21/2

In Cabinet, Rajaratnam provided a powerful countervailing influence which checked any impulse to revert to ethnic-based policies. When the idea for the first self-help group, the Council on Education for Muslim Children (or MENDAKI) was mooted in Cabinet in 1981, he argued that it should be presented as a multiracial effort.[15] PM Lee did take this line when he addressed the first MENDAKI Congress in 1982.[16]

In the 1990s, after Rajaratnam left politics, there was a changing of the guard. Ever watchful, he became concerned with policies which encouraged Singaporeans to assert their ethnic identities. Other ethnic self-help groups were formed with the backing of the government: Singapore Indian Development Association (SINDA) and the Chinese Development Assistance Council (CDAC).[17]

The trend worried him. Time and again, Rajaratnam had argued that minority groups would ultimately lose out should they go in for such communal-based policies, for it would only invite and encourage the majority community, the Chinese, to do the same.

He warned in 1983: "Once the minorities do this, they would relieve the majority community of the responsibility of being equally responsible for the welfare of the minority communities as they are for the majority community."[18]

He was also disturbed by the increasing emphasis placed on the Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others (CMIO) categorisation in one's Identity Card (IC) for policy implementation. These categories are rooted in a rigid conception of races as objective and fixed. He feared that such perspectives, which freeze racial differences, would set back the progress towards an ever-evolving Singaporean Singapore.

Rajaratnam had long considered the racial category in the IC as a mere bureaucratic technicality inherited from the British, and largely irrelevant to daily life in independent Singapore. He himself did not place much store on his artificial—and incorrect—classification as an "Indian". He was in fact Ceylon Tamil, not Indian.

→
A front page report in *Berita Harian* on S. Rajaratnam's support for MENDAKI with a $10,000 donation from his constituency Kampong Glam to signal a national and multiracial approach, 20 August 1982. *Berita Harian* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

Sumbangan $10,000 untuk Mendaki

JAWATANKUASA Perundingan Rakyat (CCC) Kampong Glam dan Jawatankuasa Perayaan Hari Kebangsaan kawasanundi itu telah memberikan sumbangan wang berjumlah $10,000 kepada Majlis Pendidikan Anak-Anak Islam (Mendaki), Rabu malam.

Sumbangan tersebut dipercayai sebagai sumbangan terbesar yang diterima dari sebuah CCC kawasanundi dan merupakan CCC pertama yang memberikan sumbangannya kepada Majlis itu.

Cek bernilai $10,000 itu telah disampaikan oleh Timbalan Kedua Perdana Menteri (Halehwal Luar Negeri), Encik S Rajaratnam yang juga Anggota Parlimen (Kampong Glam) kepada wakil Mendaki, Setiausaha Parlimen (Perdagangan dan Perusahaan merangkap Hal-Ehwal Masyarakat), Haji Sidek Saniff.

Penyampaian itu dilakukan dalam satu upacara ringkas sempena majlis jamuan malam Hari Kebangsaan kawasanundi itu.

Haji Sidek memberitahu *Berita Harian* bahawa beliau merasa bangga atas sumbangan yang diberikan oleh kawasanundi Kampong Glam itu yang menyokong usaha-usaha Mendaki untuk meninggikan taraf pendidikan anak-anak Islam di sini.

Besar ertinya

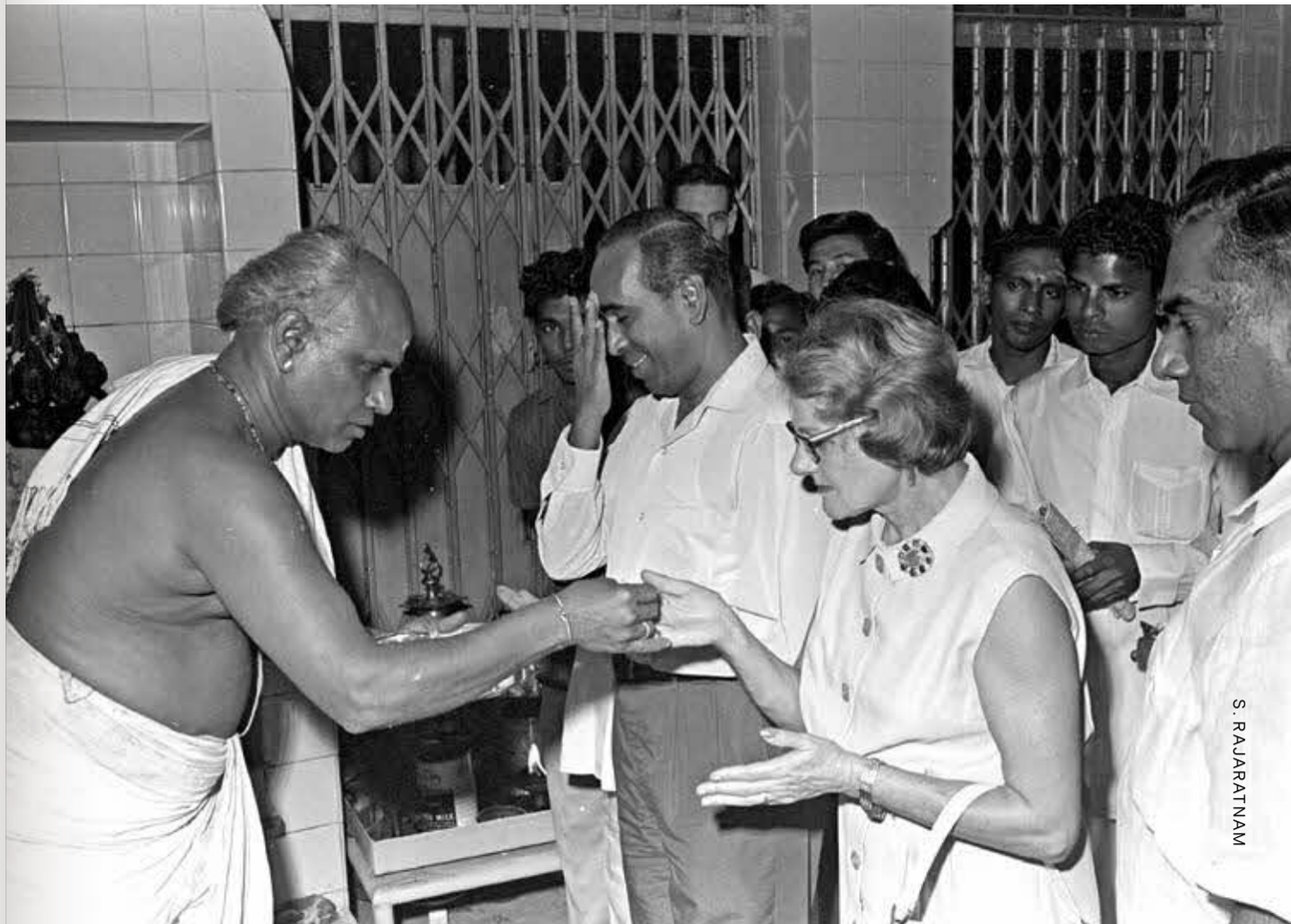
"Ini merupakan satu sumbangan yang besar ertinya kepada Mendaki, apalagi dalam usaha untuk sama-sama meninggikan lagi taraf pendidikan anak-anak Islam di Republik ini," kata beliau.

Haji Sidek juga menerangkan bahawa beberapa buah kawasanundi juga dijangka akan turut memberikan sumbangan kepada Mendaki.

Ultimately, forging a united multiracial nation was for him a moral project. As he said later: "On my IC, it says my race is Indian. But I don't care if you call me an Indian or an Eskimo. What is important is whether you consider me a good man."[19] In other words, being Singaporean transcends racial categories and geographical boundaries.

In essence, it is about shared values and a sense of fellow feeling towards others, regardless of their race, language, or religion, in a world in which nations are becoming increasingly interconnected as one global community.

↓
S. Rajaratnam and Piroska Rajaratnam attending Thaipusam celebrations at Sri Thendayuthapani Temple, 18 January 1965. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



S. RAJARATNAM

Right to the end of his life, Rajaratnam was championing his vision of a Singaporean Singapore. As he reiterated in 1990, two years after he retired from politics: "Being Singaporean is not a matter of ancestry. It is conviction and choice."[20] His vision never changed; his will never wavered. For as long as he lived, he was the keeper of the multiracial faith.

The last time I interviewed him in the 1990s—when he was in his 80s—I saw that the flame still burned, because he believed it could not be allowed to go out. A series of minor strokes had slowed him down and his voice was quiet. But his eyes gleamed when he spoke about the progress made in building a successful, multiracial Singapore. He considered it the foundation stone of Singapore. Destroy this foundation stone, and Singapore crumbles into anarchy and ruin.

So let it be understood that, for Rajaratnam, it is not a matter of merely reciting the National Pledge. Most important is instead the emotions and moral imperative that go with it, the experience that it is present and real—and the conviction, the faith that it will be upheld for future generations.

←
S. Rajaratnam and the author, Irene Ng, at his house in Chancery Lane, 1997. Courtesy of Irene Ng.

NOTES

1 *Singapore Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 11, Sitting No. 6, Col. 321–322, 21 July 1959.
2 "Malayan Culture: A Reply to Sceptics", *Sunday Mail*, 27 September 1959, 1.
3 "PAP Pledge to Stamp Out Communal Fires", *Singapore Standard*, 20 April 1959, 5. Rajaratnam expounded on the dangers of communal-based parties and communal leaders in pre-election rallies in 1959 where he outlined the PAP's plans to stamp out communalism.
4 S. Rajaratnam, "Speech titled 'Ethnicity and Singaporean Singapore' delivered at National University of Singapore Society" (speech, Singapore, 14 June 1990), *S. Rajaratnam Private Papers*, ISEAS Library, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, SR.094.012.
5 Irene Ng, *S. Rajaratnam, The Authorised Biography (Volume 1): The Singapore Lion* (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2010).
6 "Literature Can be Common Link to Bind Various Races—Mr. R", *The Straits Times*, 23 November 1959, 4.
7 "Keep Up the Spirit of Loyalty and Unity—Mr. R", *The Straits Times*, 10 December 1959, 4.
8 The Singapore government's hands were tied as, under the Merger agreement, internal security was under the Central government in Kuala Lumpur.
9 United Nations General Assembly Official Records, 20th Session, 1332nd Plenary Meeting, 21 September 1965.
10 For a fuller account, see Irene Ng, *S. Rajaratnam, The Authorised Biography (Volume 2): The Lion's Roar* (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2024), Chapter 10.
11 Ng, *The Singapore Lion*, xiii.
12 *Singapore Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 14, Sitting No. 12, Col. 945–946, 11 January 1961.
13 S. Rajaratnam, "Speech at the Opening of the Seminar on 'Tamil Language and Tamil Society' at the National University of Singapore" (speech, Singapore, 18 July 1987), National Archives of Singapore, SR19870718s.
14 S. Rajaratnam, "Speech at the Opening of the Seminar on 'Tamil Language and Tamil Society' at the National University of Singapore".
15 Yayasan MENDAKI is also known as the Council for the Development of the Singapore Malay/Muslim Community today. Rajaratnam supported the formation of MENDAKI as a task force formed to look into measures to improve the educational level of the Malays in Singapore. Most Malays had low education levels, which in turn affected their occupational status and standard of living. Rajaratnam himself had been concerned with this problem for some time, which he put down largely to the historical circumstances of the Malays from the British colonial days. What he resisted was taking a narrow communal approach towards it. See Ng, *The Lion's Roar*, 672.
16 Lee Kuan Yew, "Address at the Opening Ceremony of the Congress of the Council on Education for Muslim Children (Mendaki) held at Singapore Conference Hall" (speech, Singapore, 28 May 1983), National Archives of Singapore, lky19820528b.
17 In Singapore's official records, race and ethnicity are conflated, with each individual assigned a race and a mother tongue.
18 S. Rajaratnam, "Speech at the Opening of the Taman Bacaan Youth Leadership Course held at the National Youth Leadership Training Institute" (speech, Singapore, 29 April 1983), National Archives of Singapore, 19830429_0001.
19 "There's No Racism in Singapore, Says Raja", *The Straits Times: Weekly Overseas Edition*, 15 September 1990, 3.
20 "'Remembering' Ancestral Heritage is Building Ghettos in the Minds of the Community", *The Straits Times*, 9 October 1990, 28.

+

Irene Ng is the authorised biographer of S. Rajaratnam. She wrote his two-part biography *The Singapore Lion* and *The Lion's Roar*, and compiled the anthology *The Short Stories and Radio Plays of S. Rajaratnam*.

She was formerly a journalist and a Member of Parliament. She is now a full-time writer.

Radio Malaya: The Enduring Tensions of S. Rajaratnam's Play on Culture

Tucked away in the corner of the National University of Singapore (NUS), hidden behind the University Cultural Centre, is the veritable NUS Museum, an art institution founded in 1955. NUS Museum is a microcosm of Singapore's complex, multi-stranded cultural legacies. The four collections—South and Southeast Asian Collection, Lee Kong Chian Collection of Chinese art and contemporary Singaporean art, Ng Eng Teng Collection, and the Straits Chinese Collection—defy coherent interpretations and challenges any attempts to cultivate a shared heritage.

In 2017, the museum curators innovated a dynamic frame to understand the diverse collections, using S. Rajaratnam's six-part radio play, *A Nation in the Making*, which was read and broadcast by Radio Malaya between July and August 1957. Juxtaposing items from the collections with text from the radio play, *Radio Malaya: Abridged Conversations About Art* sought to provoke contemplations of "connections and disruptions, allowing conceptions of the Malayan to interweave and contrast—in their effervescence, reticence and ambivalence."[1]

1957 was an important year. The City Council election in December saw the fledgling People's Action Party (PAP) capture the most seats among all contesting parties. It was a sign of things to come. Rajaratnam's radio play was aired just months before the election. The play made the case that "a Malayan nation can be built, provided the people want it", thus punctuating the didactic dialogue with an appeal to the will of the people to cast the die: "I know it must come. What I do not know is whether it will come soon or late, by cooperation or by conflict."[2]

↖
Engineering Division at Radio Malaya, 1957. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

←
"Bell" Radio, 1950s. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

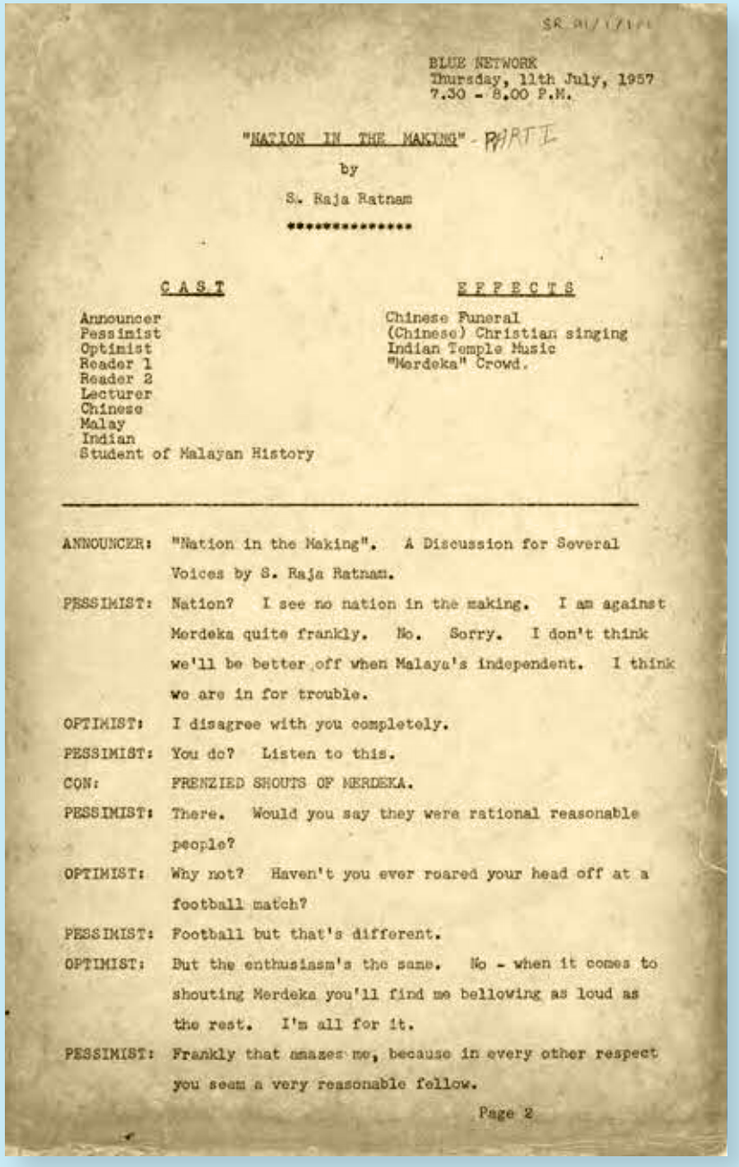
by Daniel PS Goh

↑
A Labour Front rally held in the lead up to the City Council elections, 1957. The election was contested by the Labour Front, the Liberal Socialist Party, the People's Action Party, and other political groups. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

Radio Play

A Nation in the Making was bold for its time. The first act is centred on a dialogue between an optimist and a pessimist discussing race, religion, culture, and the possibility for a Malayan nation. The optimist and pessimist are not the protagonist and the antagonist; both are openly debating each other with reason and logic. It was didactic, interjected by the shrill voice of an Indian shouting to get the smallest minority to fight for their rights, a Chinese calling for unity to defend Chinese culture, and a Malay rallying their own to push back against the other races as aliens. It concludes with a student of Malayan history espousing materialist dialectics—colonialism brought modern capitalist economy to Malaya, and a free enterprise economy would only develop further with free political institutions, making Merdeka inevitable.

↓
Original typescript of *A Nation in the Making*, 1957. S. Rajaratnam Private Papers, courtesy of ISEAS Library, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore.



BLUE NETWORK
Thursday, 11th July, 1957
7.30 - 8.00 P.M.

"NATION IN THE MAKING" - PART I

by

S. Raja Ratnam

****

CAST

Announcer
Pessimist
Optimist
Reader 1
Reader 2
Lecturer
Chinese
Malay
Indian
Student of Malayan History

EFFECTS

Chinese Funeral
(Chinese) Christian singing
Indian Temple Music
"Merdeka" Crowd.

ANNOUNCER: "Nation in the Making". A Discussion for Several Voices by S. Raja Ratnam.

PESSIMIST: Nation? I see no nation in the making. I am against Merdeka quite frankly. No. Sorry. I don't think we'll be better off when Malaya's independent. I think we are in for trouble.

OPTIMIST: I disagree with you completely.

PESSIMIST: You do? Listen to this.

CON: FRENZIED SHOUTS OF MERDEKA.

PESSIMIST: There. Would you say they were rational reasonable people?

OPTIMIST: Why not? Haven't you ever roared your head off at a football match?

PESSIMIST: Football but that's different.

OPTIMIST: But the enthusiasm's the same. No - when it comes to shouting Merdeka you'll find me bellowing as loud as the rest. I'm all for it.

PESSIMIST: Frankly that amazes me, because in every other respect you seem a very reasonable fellow.

Page 2

The second to fourth acts continue the dialogue between the optimist and the pessimist, mirroring the political debates in Singapore, and reflecting the internal tensions—effervescence versus reticence—squaring off in each voter's mind. In the second act, the student of Malayan history morphs into the Malayan who engages both the optimist and the pessimist and seeks the will of the people to build the nation. A communalist speaks in Malay to blame the other races for the impoverishment of marginalised Malays, countered by an economist who speaks for the common situation shared by members in each socioeconomic class, regardless of race and religion.

In the third and fourth acts, the student of Malayan history who became the Malayan is now the Spirit of History assisted by Ptolemy. Malaya is placed in the broad sweep of world history from the birth of civilisation to the rise of Melaka, trade between China and India, and then European colonialisms. Merdeka is again inevitable, this time in the syntheses of ideas leading to nationalist consciousness. The philosophical methods of Marx and Hegel translated for the layperson aside, what was critical for the radio-listening public was Rajaratnam's play on culture.

Optimist It looks as if some Malays have found common cause with non-Malays. This must mean that the sense of group solidarity is not based on race at all. If it were—there would be no need for all these anxious calls for communal unity. So what I wish to stress is that what keeps the communities apart is not race but culture.

Pessimist Now what do you mean by culture?

Optimist I am using the word loosely to include language, food, music, drama and the whole social and economic environment we live in.

Pessimist All right. But what's the difference? So it's not race

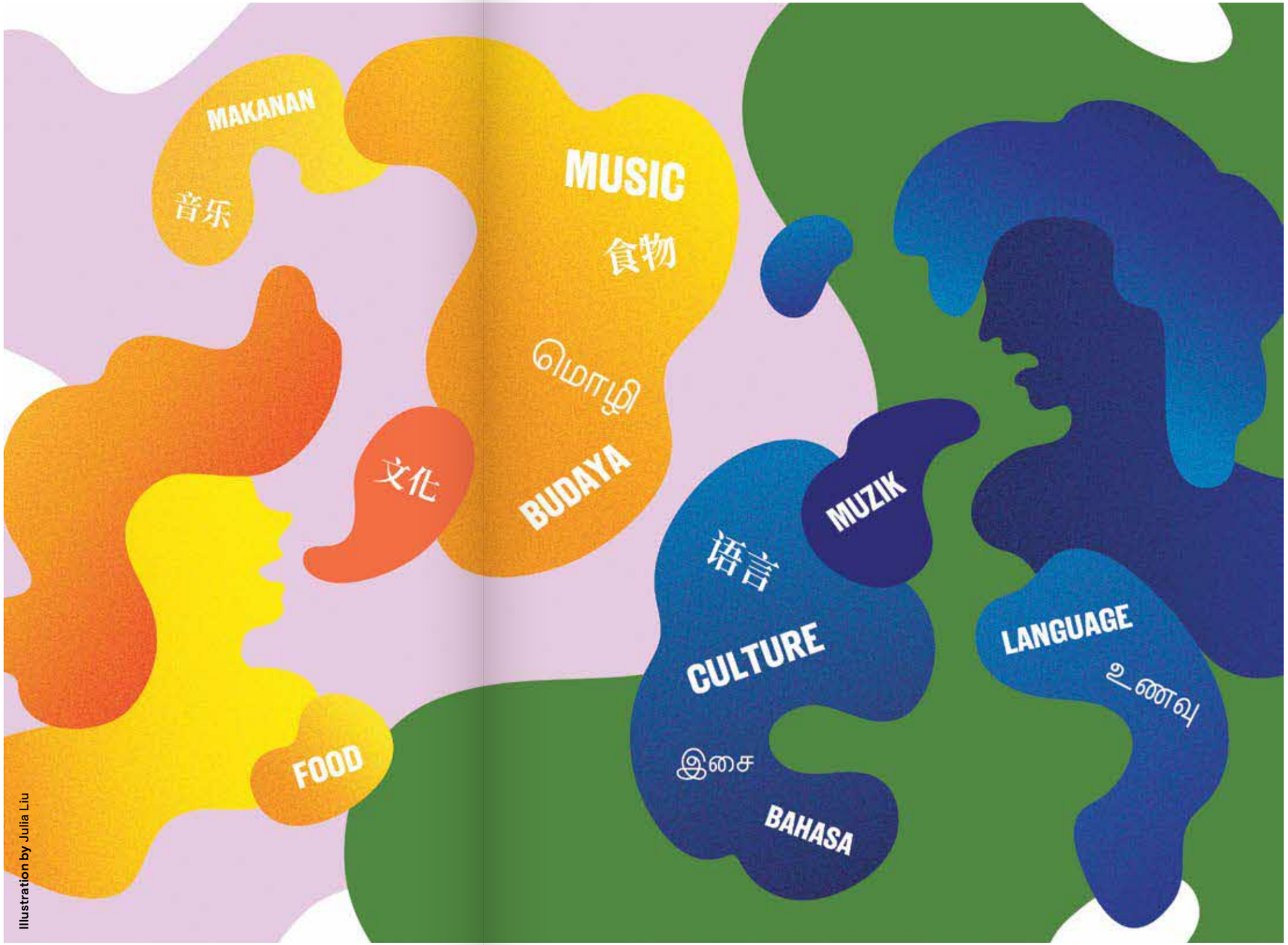


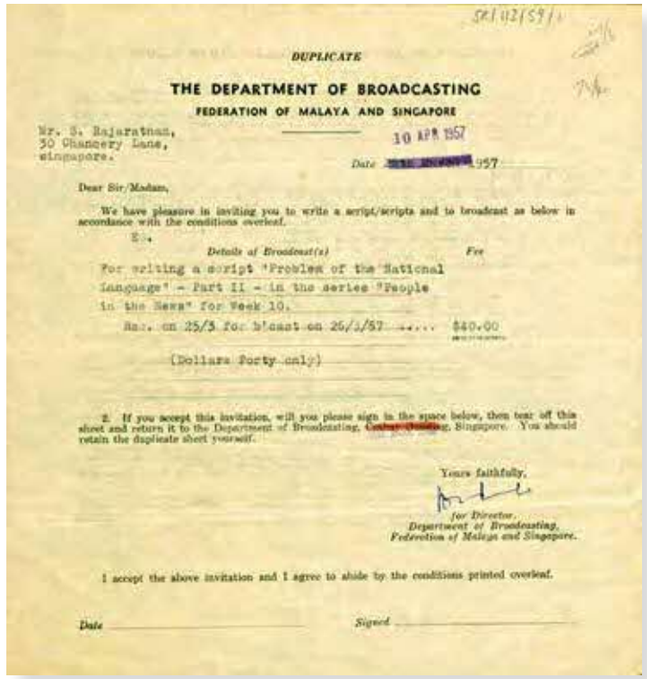
Illustration by Julia Liu

that unites people—and divides Malaya. It's culture. So what?... The problem of creating a Malayan nation is just the same. Malays won't give up their food, music or religion in favour of Malayan religion or Malayan food or music. And the Chinese are certainly not going to give up their language and literature in favour of a Malayan language and literature. So what on earth are you going to found your Malayan nation on?[3]

The optimist's answer lies in the modernising social and economic environment, as the conditions of labour in the capitalist system create the shared lifeworlds that portend a common culture, which a nationalist consciousness could consolidate to close the loop. Multiculturalism was both a danger and an asset, presenting the substance for communalism as well as the opportunity of materials for making the nation.

The optimist and the pessimist are gone in the two final acts. In the fifth act, *A Nation in the Making* tackles the tensions of multiculturalism in the question of the Malayan language. It begins with the political rally speech by Silver Tongue who leads the crowd with shouts of "*Merdeka*!" He attacks communalism and calls for the unity and brotherhood of all races in becoming one people, regardless of race. The play then turns to a discussion in the rally crowd between two persons as Silver Tongue continues his speech in the background. They don't disagree with Silver Tongue's view but find it ironic that his points are lost on the multiracial crowd because he delivered them in English. Since only the Indians and the Chinese speak their own languages, while most non-Malays speak some Malay, the Malayan language should be Malay. But wouldn't this make it a Malay language rather than Malayan, to which one of the interlocutors answers, "something very exciting and unexpected and full of hope" will happen, "Malay will become Malayanised".[4]

Illustration by Julia Liu



DUPLICATE

THE DEPARTMENT OF BROADCASTING

FEDERATION OF MALAYA AND SINGAPORE

Mr. S. Rajaratnam,
30 Chancery Lane,
Singapore.

10 APR 1957

Date [redacted] 1957

Dear Sir/Madam,

We have pleasure in inviting you to write a script/scripts and to broadcast as below in accordance with the conditions overleaf.

No.	Details of Broadcast(s)	Fee
	For writing a script 'Problem of the National Language' - Part II - in the series 'People in the News' for Week 10.	
	Rm. on 25/3 for b'cast on 26/3/57	$40.00
	(Dollars Forty only)	

2. If you accept this invitation, will you please sign in the space below, then tear off this sheet and return it to the Department of Broadcasting, [redacted], Singapore. You should retain the duplicate sheet yourself.

Yours faithfully,

for Director,
Department of Broadcasting,
Federation of Malaya and Singapore.

I accept the above invitation and I agree to abide by the conditions printed overleaf.

Date _____ Signed _____

←
Besides *A Nation in the Making*, S. Rajaratnam also wrote broadcast scripts and presented for Radio Malaya on a range of topics. Invitation from the Department of Broadcasting to S. Rajaratnam to write a script titled "Problem of a National Language", 10 April 1957. S. Rajaratnam Private Papers, courtesy of ISEAS Library, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore.

At this point, a Malay apologises for interrupting and asks what Malayanising the Malay language means. The exegesis turns to the centuries-long making of the English language from disparate native and migrant tongues in Britain. Likewise Chinese, Indian, and Malay writers, poets, and dramatists will do the same with the Malay language, with the process hastened into decades by the advent of mass media and mass education. And here Rajaratnam makes the boldest assertion, that the only way to foster a Malayan culture is to base it on the Malayanising Malay language. Multiculturalism was reframed: "It is… nonsensical to talk of a fusion of cultures. It would be more correct to talk of an infusion of cultures into the Malay language."[5]

The infusion is to be an open-ended one, with the learning of English to keep Malaya in touch with the world, and the continuous use of Indian, Chinese, and Malay languages to connect Malaya to the rest of Asia. Silver Tongue, his name already signalling a brilliant speaker without substance, is not just out of touch with the people and their multi-cultures, but also the very opposite of the communalist he denigrates—the communalist has "too much" culture, but he is a deracinated empty vessel.

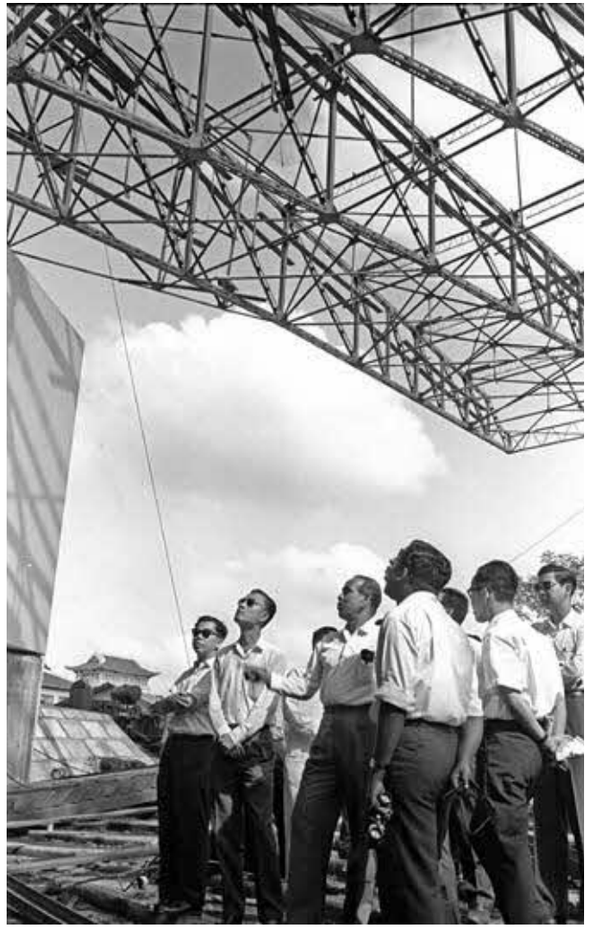
The last act is almost absurdist. A politically apathetic husband and wife fail to switch off Radio Malaya, which is featuring a boring talk by a professor on the merits of democracy, and become the last listeners before the station cancels the talk for a pop music programme. Radio Malaya knows this because it has a "populometer" that not only tracks how many radio sets are tuning in, but which radio sets. The professor is brought to the couple's home by the apologetic radio producer and a dialogue ensues. It leads to the awakening of the couple from political apathy and the realisation by the professor that he must do better to converse in the common people's tongue to transmit his wisdom.

Illustration by Julia Liu

By Cooperation or By Conflict

1957 was also a significant year because the Federation of Malaya was founded on 31 August, just two weeks after the sixth act of *A Nation in the Making* was aired. Singapore was excluded from the Federation and the PAP was developing its campaign for Merdeka and Merger. The exclusion was deemed artificial and Rajaratnam's play on culture staked a strong claim for Singapore's belonging to the movement to forge the new Malayan nation.

After the PAP won the 1959 General Election, Rajaratnam went to work as the Minister for Culture. Malay was officially made the National Language and students took to learning it. One of the most popular programmes staged by Rajaratnam's Ministry of Culture was the *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat* (People's Cultural Concerts), open air concerts which drew thousands of Singaporeans to watch performances from all ethnic groups, many of which were recorded and broadcast by Radio Malaya's successor, Radio Singapore. It inspired the building of the National Theatre, which



↑
S. Rajaratnam visiting the National Theatre construction site, 1964. The Theatre opened on 8 August 1963, despite being partially completed. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

←
Malay instructional booklet in Mandarin titled *National Language Lessons, Standard One*, published by the Institute of National Language and Culture, 1962. Collection of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

opened in August 1963, showcasing local performances as well as visiting shows from around the world.

Rajaratnam was putting his tensions into productive play. Culture divides and unites. Thus, in a multicultural situation, culture cannot be left alone to the uses of the literati and the abuses of politicians. The state needs to foster a national culture springing forth from multiculturalism—without strangling the communal cultures that feed its continued evolution—all while keeping Malaya connected to dynamic worlding influences but inoculated against deracination.

Rajaratnam was prescient in understanding that multiculturalism could unfold by cooperation or by conflict, but this and the efforts of the Ministry of Culture were not

The Many Names of Radio Malaya

In the decades following World War II, radio broadcasting served an important role in disseminating government information and entertaining the masses in Singapore. Radio Malaya was established in 1946 and moved its operations from the Cathay Building to Broadcasting House on Caldecott Hill in 1951. After the Federation of Malaya gained independence in 1957, the network split into Radio Malaya and Radio Singapura/Singapore, reuniting as Radio & TV Malaysia after the formation of Malaysia in 1963 and the introduction of television into the region. The Singapore branch of Radio & TV Malaysia was again renamed Radio & TV Singapura following Singapore's eventual separation from Malaysia in 1965.

↖
Badges worn by the film crew at Radio & TV Malaysia and Radio & TV Singapura, 1960s. Courtesy of Mun Chor Seng.

enough to forestall the historic breakdown of race relations as Kuala Lumpur and Singapore quarrelled over the terms of multiculturalism in the new Federation of Malaysia. Today, we remember the day riots began after fights broke out between Chinese and Malays during Prophet Muhammad's birthday procession on 21 July 1964 as Racial Harmony Day. It reminds us that culture divides and, without continuously working to find common ground by cooperation, things could very quickly descend into conflict.

The Global City

After Separation in 1965, Rajaratnam's vision for a new Malayan culture was not diminished; it was transposed to a new Singaporean culture. But there was a significant tonal shift. Rajaratnam became Singapore's Minister for Foreign Affairs, which was a role that was not needed until now. Previously, in *A Nation in the Making*, he located and positioned Malaya in the sweep of world history. Now, he had to do the same with Singapore—a small city-state in the march of material progress and civilisational consciousness—in a world increasingly marked by the Cold War and the urgency of economic development across the postcolonial Third World.

At the Singapore Press Club in February 1972, Rajaratnam doubled down on keeping the city-state connected to worlding cultures, as it sought the world as its hinterland. Urging the gathered journalists

↑
Interfaith dialogue session organised for migrant workers on Racial Harmony Day, 2024. *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

to help shape the minds of the people so that they would embrace openness, technology, and urbanisation in positive ways, Rajaratnam said,

> "[Singapore] is transforming itself into a new kind of city—the Global City. It is a new form of human organisation and settlement that has, as the historian Arnold Toynbee says, no precedent in mankind's past history. People have become aware of this new type of city only very recently. They have found a name for this distinctive type of city. They call it Ecumenopolis—the world embracing city...
>
> ...But the Global City, now in its infancy, is the child of modern technology. It is the city that electronic communications, supersonic planes, giant tankers and modern economic and industrial organisation have made inevitable. Whether the Global City would be a happier place than the megalopolis out of whose crumbling ruins it is emerging will depend on how wisely and boldly we shape its direction and growth."[6]

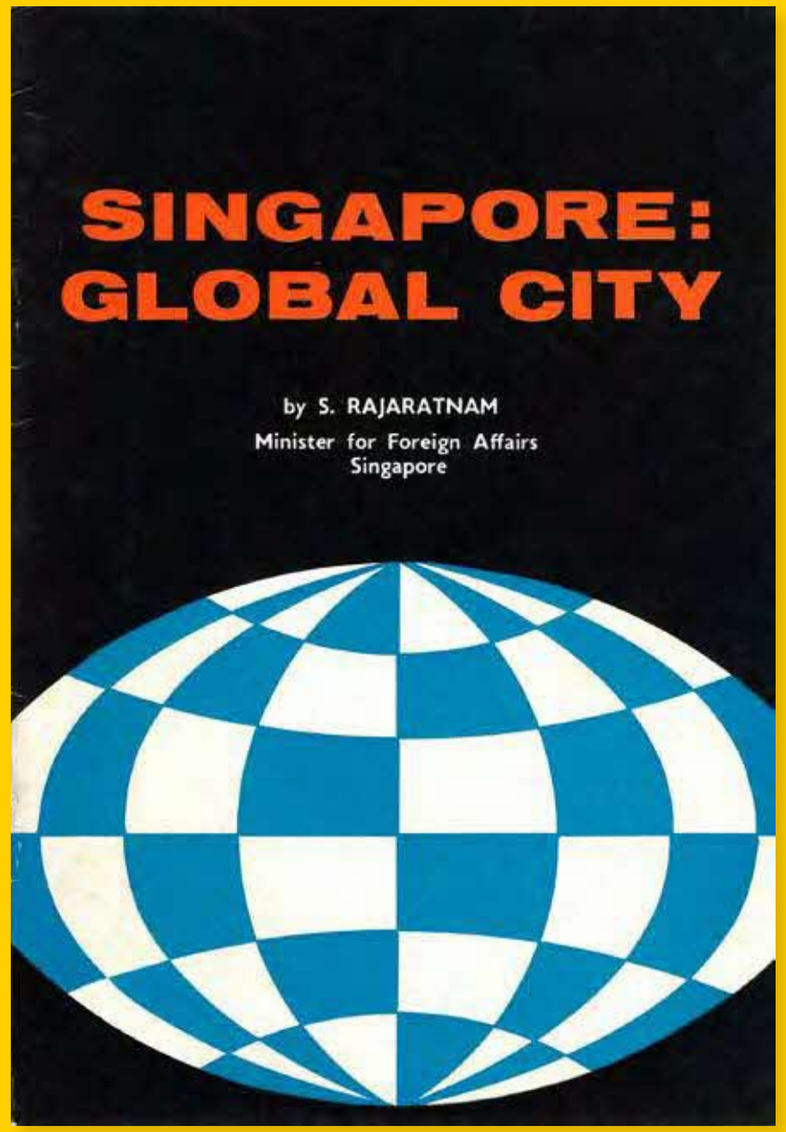
Rajaratnam was again prescient. Culture was going to be more important with Singapore independent of Malaysia, even more so with globalisation. He saw the main tension as keeping the nation connected to worlding cultures but buffeted from its uprooting effects. It was inevitable for the nation to become the global city; worlding connections would now have to be utter openness to the world. It could still go either way: cooperation or conflict. The onus was on the intelligentsia to mediate the worlding influences and shape the volatile multiculturalism.

Radio Malaya and Rajaratnam's play on culture performed a critical role in the 1950s to mould the unfolding of multiculturalism in Singapore. Today, in the 2020s, social media has replaced the radio and the democratisation of the play on culture has created a volatile landscape of competing ideas and values. Reading Rajaratnam's Global City speech with his radio play points to new enduring tensions and a possible way forward. The tensions are shaping up to be polarised positions between global communalisms and the international community, national identities and global citizenships, and xenophobic nativism and migrant nationalism.

The question is not how open Singapore should be, as there is no choice here. The question is neither how much the city can absorb foreign cultures and bodies. The Ecumenopolis is precisely an imagination of a thoroughly urbanised world, not just the world city, but the world as a city, where the urban condition pervades the whole society. This is what Singapore has become.

The tensions arise when religious and civilisational ideologies clash here in our urban public square, for example, when Christian fundamentalism and Islamic radicalism knock heads with left-liberal woke politics over sexual identities. At the same time, imported culture wars are crisscrossed by the proclamation of "born-and-bred-here" Singaporean identities against migrants who are co-creating new shared lifeworlds of the Ecumenopolis and a new cosmopolitan consciousness.

The knowing professor in the sixth act of the radio play has long retired, democracy is already old, and we are now all journalists (on the Internet) being addressed by Rajaratnam. This is the possible way forward: recognise our own agency in the mediation of worlding influences to shape our multiculturalism. How wisely and boldly would we shape the direction and growth of Global City Singapore?



↑
Cover of S. Rajaratnam's Global City speech, 1972.
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

'Global city' success for S'pore: Raja

Raja

SINGAPORE, Sunday

SINGAPORE is transforming itself into a global city with the world as its hinterland.

This growth, according to Foreign Minister Mr. S. Rajaratnam, is the secret of Singapore's economic success since independence, and consequently of its political and social stability.

Mr. Rajaratnam, who was speaking at a Singapore Press Club dinner at the Dragon Palace Restaurant of Cockpit Hotel tonight, said that global cities, unlike earlier cities, were linked intimately with one another, forming a chain of cities which shaped and directed, in varying degrees of importance, a worldwide system of economics.

He said: "It is my contention that Singapore is becoming a component of that system—not a major component but a growingly important one."

Prosperous

The Minister said that it was Singapore's growth as a global city which disproved professional mourners, first after its separation from Malaysia, then when the British announced the liquidation of their bases and more re-

↑
A *Straits Times* article reporting on S. Rajaratnam's speech at the Singapore Press Club, 7 February 1972. *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.

NOTES

1 NUS Museum, *Radio Malaya: Abridged Conversations About Art* (Singapore: NUS Museum, 2016), 10. Brochure published in conjunction with an exhibition of the same title.
2 S. Rajaratnam, "A Nation in the Making (Part II)", in *The Short Stories and Radio Plays of S. Rajaratnam*, edited by Irene Ng (Singapore: Epigram Books, 2011 [1957]), 118.
3 Rajaratnam, "A Nation in the Making (Part I)", in *The Short Stories and Radio Plays of S. Rajaratnam*, 83–84.
4 Rajaratnam, "A Nation in the Making (Part V): A Malayan Language", in *The Short Stories and Radio Plays of S. Rajaratnam*, 180.
5 Rajaratnam, "A Nation in the Making (Part V): A Malayan Language", 188.
6 S. Rajaratnam, "Singapore: Global City", in *S. Rajaratnam on Singapore: From Ideas to Reality*, edited by Kwa Chong Guan (Singapore: World Scientific, 2006), 229–230.

Daniel PS Goh is Associate Professor of Sociology at the National University of Singapore. He has published widely on race and multiculturalism in Malaysia and Singapore, religious pluralism and conflict in Southeast Asia, and urbanisms and cultural politics in Asia.

NOTES

NOTES

NOTES

Access the digital version of the journal via the QR code above or via this link: **https://go.gov.sg/65**

Any comments, feedback, or suggestions for upcoming issues? Drop us an email at **Founders_Memorial@nhb.gov.sg** to get involved.

PUBLISHED BY

FOUNDERS' MEMORIAL

AN INSTITUTION OF

National Heritage Board