

University of Groningen

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Published in:
 Measuring Mixedness

DOI:
[10.1007/978-3-030-22874-3_34](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-22874-3_34)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
 Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
 2020

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Reddy, G., & Selvanathan, H. P. (2020). Multiracial in Malaysia: Categories, Classification, and Campur in Contemporary Everyday Life. In Z. L. Rocha, & P. J. Aspinall (Eds.), *Measuring Mixedness: Counting and classifying mixed race and mixed ethnic identity around the world* (pp. 649-668). Palgrave MacMillan.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-22874-3_34

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Multiracial in Malaysia: Categories, Classification, and *Campur* in Contemporary Everyday Life

Geetha Reddy and Hema Preya Selvanathan

Introduction

Individuals who identify with different racial identities have not always been able to capture their multiple racial identities within census classification frameworks. The acknowledgement of multiplicity in racial identities has been a more recent phenomenon in many countries (Morning 2008). In Malaysia however, multiracial individuals continue to be unable to declare, and have recognized their multiple racial identities within official government documentation and categorization. Racial categories used in Malaysian censuses have been a product of prevailing political agendas changing through time (Hirschman 1987). This chapter adds to the scholarship that disrupts the predominant narrative that racial categorizations in Malaysia are reflective of natural and objective differences in the population (cf. Manickam 2014; Nah 2008). By investigating the historical process of classification in the country, this chapter sheds light on the ways in which multiple racial identities shape the contemporary lives of Malaysians.

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On 31 August 1957, Malaya became an independent self-governing nation within the British Commonwealth, amidst issues of dismantling the colonial system and establishing a new nation in its place (Abraham 1997). The 1957 Federation Constitution declared the special position of Malays, the establishment of Malay as the national language, and recognition of Islam as the religion of the Federation. These criteria were agreed upon by political leaders who represented different racial groups in Malaya. In 1964, the Malaysian Federation was established to include Malaya (what is now Peninsular Malaysia or West Malaysia), Sabah and Sarawak (what is now East Malaysia), and Singapore. However, Singapore formed its own independent country in 1965. The separation between Malaysia and Singapore was based on differences in political ideologies, amidst a climate of racial tension and conflict, primarily between Chinese and Malay communities in both regions. Racial categorization and classification frameworks were and still are key to social policies in Singapore and influence multiracial individuals' identification at the government level (Reddy 2016; Rocha and Yeoh, this volume). Meritocracy is central in Singapore, where a Singaporean Singapore was envisioned by then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew.

In contrast, the governance of Malaysia is defined by political primacy for Malays. Non-Malays, instead of enjoying formal racial equality, recognize Malay primacy in exchange for equal citizenship rights (Goh 2008). Thus, in Malaysia, the compromise was to grant full citizenship to non-Malays. In return, non-Malays must acknowledge the 'social contract' (also known as the *Bumiputera* policy) that stipulates special privileges of Malays as *Bumiputera*, or 'sons of the soil' (Ibrahim 2007). The *Bumiputera* policy outlines the special privileges of Indigenous and Malay communities across different aspects of everyday life such as housing, jobs, and education. In this ethnocracy, Malay identity development becomes crucial to the existence of the Malaysian state (Wade 2014). Malay and Malaysian thus became synonymous categories. Non-Malays are driven to identify themselves with their racial groups so as to differentiate themselves from the 'default' identity. They are also frequently reminded of their place in this hierarchical social structure. As a result, people's everyday experiences are heavily influenced by politics that drives the multicultural (or clearer still, multiracial) ideology in the country.

Race is thus the primary means of cultural and social classification in Malaysia. While ethnicity is the term used today in census forms and reports to describe these classifications, the conceptualization of these categories still falls back on colonial categories of race. Census classifications today refer to broad categories of *Bumiputera*, Indian, Chinese, and Others. While the

Bumiputera category accounts for diversity within the group, the other categories are simplified, not reflecting the large diversity within individual groups. In census documents, *Bumiputera* is further divided into Malays and Other *Bumiputera* (Department of Statistics 2000). The Other *Bumiputera* category combines multiple indigenous tribes. Today, the *Bumiputeras* make up 68.8% of the Malaysian population, and Chinese and Indians are minorities constituting 23.2% and 7.0% respectively (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2017). *Orang Asli*, meaning ‘original people’ in Malay language and referring to the indigenous population, are enumerated in a separate census, where recommendations are often made to increase progress for indigenous communities that face significant economic disadvantages (Department of Statistics 2000; Kamaruddin & Jusoh 2008). What this chapter seeks to show is that the categories within the census classifications do not account for the multiplicity of Malaysian racial identities.

Multiracial, Mixed Race, and *Campur*

Multiracial¹ individuals are a growing population in Malaysia. We know this by extrapolating from the number of births that are registered from interethnic marriages, which are on the rise in the country,² and not using any formal figures from the Malaysian census which does not record the number of individuals that belong to multiple racial groups (Nagaraj 2009). This is because Malaysians are required to state only one racial identity when they register the birth of their children. Those that do not select *Bumiputera*, Chinese, or Indian are relegated to the ‘Other’ racial category. Primarily, policy dictates that multiracial individuals follow the racial identity of the father, although *Bumiputera* identity is often ascribed to the child as long as one parent is categorized as *Bumiputera*. This ruling seems to be arbitrary, with differences among the states of Sabah, Sarawak, and the states of West Malaysia (Wong 2009). Some Malaysians also claim multiracial identities even when both their parents have been categorized with the same racial identity. In Reddy’s doctoral research, Malaysian participants would often maintain that there had been some *campur*³ in their family that they could trace based on oral family histories (Reddy 2018b). Multiracial Malaysians are therefore not always visible in census reports, but very much a part of the social fabric.

While the hybridity of the population may be hidden from an institutional perspective, recognizing ‘mixedness’ continues to be important to multiracial individuals. Race, as a social representation and identity, is both an imperative and a contractual obligation (Duveen 2001). In Malaysia, race is automatically

assumed in the visibility of the categorization policies (imperative) and can also be chosen by a person in social situations (contractual) to some extent. Whether one has a choice or not, there is no avoiding race in the daily lives of Malaysians. Indeed, as Reicher et al. (2010) discuss, individuals organize people into categories because this is how they are organized in the real world. As individuals are placed into neat categories by government bodies, society often ascribes these same categories to individuals that they interact with in their daily lives. This can at times be problematic for multiracial Malaysians who may have been incorrectly categorized by both the state and society. In particular, state recognition is viewed as important by multiracial Malaysians (Reddy 2018a). Yet, as we will see in this chapter, it is challenging to place multiracial Malaysians into existing categories not only because these racial categories have always limited individual racial identification at the government level to one category only, but also because these racial categories hold arbitrary meanings that have changed over the years.

Historical Underpinnings of Contemporary Classification System

The enumeration and categorization of populations were an important part of the colonial project. Classification was executed by colonial administrators so as to exert power in colonized areas (Anderson 1991; Appadurai 1993), and to tame and render the area knowable (Manickam 2014). Multiracial social formation in Malaya, as it was seen during the period it was colonized by the British, was born out of colonial capitalism (Brennan 1982). A plural society that ‘mixed but did not combine’ (Furnivall 1948 as quoted in Brennan 1982) was artificially created based on a dim awareness of the diversity of the people who inhabited what was named British Malaya, underpinned by the desire to create a racial and ethnic division of labour. Under British rule, many Chinese were businessmen and served as tax collectors for the colonial government, Malays were exploited as rural food producers, and Indians as menial labourers in rubber and tin plantations (Andaya and Andaya 2001).

The hybridity of the population has continually been overlooked by census classifications since the first colonial census reports were drawn up in 1871 by British colonial administrators. This was in part due to an internal struggle between different administrators as to how the diverse population should be categorized. Whilst the 1902 Census does not report on the construction of racial categories and called for nationality to be replaced by race in future

censuses, it uses the term 'race' in a number of sections within the census report. For example, on page two, Hare (1902) states:

Very great difficulty was experienced in engaging qualified Supervisors for Census purposes. In the case of both Enumerators and Supervisors this was partly due to the actual scarcity of full qualified persons of any **race** in the country.

And again in page four,

In the Straits and Federated Malay States it is the difficulty of an English-speaking Government dealing with so many **races** speaking different tongues that makes the taking of a Census so much more troublesome than in Western countries.

(emphasis in bold by authors)

Race is used to highlight the difficulties in enumerating the diverse local population, yet enumeration was based on nationality as can be seen in the naming of categories as 'Europeans and Americans', 'Eurasians', 'Malays and Other Natives of the Archipelago', 'Chinese', 'Tamils and Other natives of India', and 'Other races (Africans, Annamese, Arabs, etc.)' (Hare 1902, p. 22). Interestingly, language as a marker in these broad categories was used only in the case of the Indian population. However, recommendations for future reports were made so as to clarify ambiguities in the current report such as those described below.

The preliminary House Lists provide that the number of the houses, the names of the head occupant and the race should be furnished. In the next Census, this form should be amended by adding the word 'language' in an extra column. If a person now writes he is 'Chinese', it is hard to say to which race of Chinese he belongs. (p. 6)

Embedded within these sentences is the idea that there are multiple Chinese races, each further subdivided by linguistic differences, yet not present in the actual categories that were used in the 1902 Census report.

From 1921, the six categories used to describe the Malayan population were Europeans, Eurasians, Malays, Chinese, Indians, and Others. J.E. Nathan acknowledged that 'no less than 28 races were enumerated' and that each racial division was an aggregation but not really 'one race' (Nathan 1922, p. 70). Yet, in 1931, 70 sub-groups continued to be classified under these 6 main categories, blurring the boundaries between race, religion, and

nationality (PuruShotam 1998, p. 61). It was in the 1931 Census that there were some critical explanations of the rationale in using the term 'race' to classify the population.

It is, in fact, impossible to define the sense in which the term 'Race' is used in census purposes; it is, in reality, a judicious blend, for practical ends, of the ideas of geographic and ethnographic origin, political allegiance, and racial and social affinities and sympathies. The difficulty of achieving anything like a scientific or logically consistent classification is enhanced by the fact that most Oriental peoples have themselves no clear conception of race, and commonly regard religion as the most important, if not the determinant, element. (Vieland 1932, p. 73)

Vieland's comments indicate how multiple components of what would be considered nationality, ethnicity, and culture today have been collapsed into an all-encompassing classification of race, no matter how inadequate he perceived it to be. Thus, the contents of the category of race used in British colonial census have changed over the years (Hirschman 1987, see also Christopher, this volume). In reality, race was a concept introduced to the Malay archipelago by Dutch and British colonial administrators (Mandal 2004) as will be explained further. These racial categories were arbitrary and strategic boxes that colonial administrators constructed and reconstructed to enumerate the population. Early immigrants and local populations were far from the homogenous community that British colonialists categorized them to be (Shamsul 2001).

Malay, like other racial categories mentioned above, was a broad category created by the British for people considered indigenous to the land. Malays were reported to be the first politically organized indigenous people in Malaya, but they were not a homogenous group. In fact, the concept of a Malay race or ethnicity is difficult to apply because *Orang Melayu* (Malay people) came about due to an association of the diaspora of people who belonged to a geographic location and a kingdom north of Srivijaya (Milner 2003). Malays were a divided people and allegiance to different rulers marked divisions within Malay communities (Kim 1974). In the 1921 Census, individuals classified as Malay came from different districts in Sumatra and Peninsular Malaya, yet this same principle was not applied in 1932 by Vieland.

In a book titled *Some notes on the government services in British Malaya*, Harrison (1929, p. 49) went to great lengths to describe what he considered the local Malay population by contrasting them with the Burmese, Siamese, Japanese, and Chinese because he knew not the origins of the Malay race—

only that 'it colonised Java, Sumatra, Borneo, the Malay Peninsular, the Philippine islands and the Malay archipelago'. Even though administrators such as Vieland acknowledged the controversial nature of questioning the origin of the Malay race, they continued to use the category Malay to classify the diverse Malayan population as they were seen to be native to the land. They were more interested in distinguishing between indigenous communities that were from the Malay Peninsular and archipelago but not from British Malaya. They did so by classifying the former as 'Malaysian', while reserving the term 'Malay' for Malays from British Malaya. Sabah and Sarawak were parts of the Brunei Sultanate before coming under foreign administration during the nineteenth century (Brennan 1982), which meant that individuals from those states would have been classified as Malaysian rather than Malay had census reports been carried out then.

In addition, the indigenous people of Sarawak and Sabah were more ethnically heterogeneous than people in Peninsular Malaya. They were largely non-Muslims, though a few groups, namely the Kedayans, Bisayas, Melanaus (a sizable portion), Bajaus, Bruneis, Sulus, and Illanuns, were Muslim. Most Malay migrants from neighbouring islands were assimilated into the existing Malay population facilitated by cultural similarities seen through linguistic and religious associations. In fact, many Sumatran were said to conceal their Sumatran identity (and thus would have been classified as Malaysian immigrants), instead choosing to identify as Malay so as to avoid being discriminated against by Peninsular Malays (Vieland 1932). Aboriginal people (or Sakai) were placed into a different category to Malay based on anthropological ideas of race and as part of a political project by the British to ensure a stable Malay population (Manickam 2014). However, Sakai who converted to Islam were seen to have assimilated and were returned as Malay in the same census document. Thus, while the category of Malay was internally heterogeneous, it was subjected to changing colonial ideologies that were intent on projecting a picture of homogeneity (Kahn 2006). The boundaries between Malay and Malaysian categories were often blurred because of individuals who crossed these boundaries.

What is perhaps less clear is the presence of multiracial individuals in the census reports. A reluctance to acknowledge these individuals can be seen in multiple instances in the early census documents. 'Mixture of blood' as described by Vieland (1932, p. 9) was thought of as uncommon, only because interracial marriage was conceptualized as (not) taking place between new migrants such as the Europeans, Indians, and the local Malays. Eurasians were seen as an existing community with 'little increase by new mixtures' and intermarriage was also reported as low among 'Muhammadan Indians' even though

religion was no longer a barrier. Yet, the same census document indicates a recognition of individuals who crossed racial boundaries, as described by colonial administrators. Jawi-Pekans were described as a community of Indians who intermarried with Malays, Babas (Chinese Peranakans) were considered modern representatives of Hokkien people, and Malays were reported to often claim Arab ancestry (Vieland 1932). In another British colonial document, Jawi-Pekans are reported to identify themselves as Malay, speaking the Malay language and not Tamil or Telugu, which were the main Indian languages spoken in British Malaya during the colonial rule (Harrison 1929). Census takers are also reported to have classified individuals according to their own self-identifications, and 'borderline cases' such as a 'Chinese convert to Islam who describes himself as Malay' were classified as Malay (Del Tufo 1949, p. 71 as cited in Hirschman 1987). The people of Malaya possessed multiple racial identities (as conceptualized by the colonial administrators) but were still ascribed one identity and enumerated as such.

What is important to note is that the reification of boundaries between racial identities and the concept of distinct racial identities were part of the greater colonial strategy in ruling Malaya. It is true that the presence of Chinese and Indian migrants in Malaya increased during British colonial rule. Yet before British presence was established in the region, Chinese and Indians had long developed trading routes and family roots in the Archipelago. Indian trade has been recorded in the Archipelago at the start of the Christian Era and Chitti Melakans (or Peranakan Indians) have been reported to have assisted Portuguese trade envoys in 1509 (Dhoraisingham 2006 as cited in Nagaraj 2009). In other parts of Malaya, Hindu administrative and ceremonial institutions and concepts of kingship became so deeply entrenched within Malayan court that they continued (and still continue today) some of these practices (Arasaratnam 1970). Sanskrit influenced the development of the Malay language from the seventh century (Herbert and Milner 1989). The first Chinese immigrants arrived in the Malay Archipelago in the tenth century (West 2010) and Peranakan Chinese were an important part of the society before British rule. This is not to paint a picture of a utopian diverse society, but rather to highlight that 'mixedness' was very much a salient aspect of pre-colonial Malayan society. As eloquently put by Hirschman (1986, p. 337), ethnocentrism was probably ubiquitous prior to British rule, but a 'racial ideology of inherent differences' was less likely, showing that colonial ideologies of race divided the Malayan population and established racial hierarchies. However, independence from colonial masters did not mean that the new government overthrew the simplistic racial divisions within its diverse society.

Contemporary Classification System

The colonial ‘plural society’ framework of race and society based on a division of labour and institutionally imposed domination-subordination relationships (Furnivall 1944 as cited in Gabriel 2014) became the foundation for the contemporary classification system and multicultural ideology in Malaysia post-independence. *Bangsa* and *kaum*, which refers to groups that make up the ‘nation’ and ‘citizens’ respectively, were introduced into the Malay lexicon because of the racialized world created by colonial rule (Mandal 2004), as *bangsa* is also a term that is used to describe race. A shift in the use of race in census was seen in the 1970 Census, when individuals were asked ‘To what community do you belong?’ (Department of Statistics 1977, p. 52 as cited in Hirschman 1987). The 1980 Census is seen to show more sensitivity with using the term ‘ethnicity’ instead (Hirschman 1987), yet ethnic group, community, and language are all captured with the same question as shown in below (Fig. 34.1).

Census categories have changed in naming convention (from ‘nationality’ to ‘race’ to ‘ethnicity/community/dialect’), category content, and in number from 1871 as comprehensively noted by Hirschman (1987). While current census questionnaires use the term ‘ethnicity’, this term comes loaded with questions on citizenship, father’s ethnic category (especially for multiracial individuals), and religion, as will be explained further (Nagaraj et al. 2015). Sixty-seven categories were found in the 2000 Census, yet information that is publicly available shows only *Bumiputera*, Chinese, Indian, and Other categories. What is strikingly clear is that even in the change of terms from ‘race’ to ‘ethnicity’, colonial racial ideology is still very much present. Even Malaysian media uses the term race when reporting on national policies and national

10. Ethnic Group, Community or Dialect of Head of Household

	1	2								
	0	1	2	3						
1	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
2	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9

Fig. 34.1 Question on ethnicity in 1980 Census questionnaire (World Bank 2019)

integration, reserving ethnicity for discussions involving East Malaysians and cultural issues (Nakamura 2015).

Policies have depended on the racial classification of Malaysians. The myth of the lazy native saw the birth of *Bumiputera* policies where it was believed that Malays needed a 'leg up' to compete with non-Malays (Alatas 1977). Interestingly, the Malaysian Constitution does not include definitions for Indian, Chinese, or other racial groups but has clear guidelines on who can be considered Malay. Seen as integral to the understanding of special privileges of Malays in the country, the comprehensive definition of a Malay is a person who speaks the Malay language, is a Malaysian citizen, conforms to Malay custom, and professes the religion of Islam (Lee 2004). As part of the *Bumiputera* policy, government regulations secure a percentage of all new housing developments for Malays, as well as provide them with discounts and loans to encourage home ownership among the Malay population. Within this particular ideology of multiculturalism, racial discrimination is replaced by meritocracy for the Chinese, freedom of religious practice for the Indians, and a challenge to the privilege system in place for the Malays in theory (Fee and Appudurai 2011). Yet Malaysians struggle with achieving this because the *Bumiputera* policy and its resultant effects on the non-Malay population puts race relations in a precarious position. Enforcing affirmative action in the interest of Malays has institutionalized racial boundaries between Malays and non-Malays (Gabriel 2015). The New Economic Policy (NEP) introduced in 1971 aimed to address income inequalities regardless of race and eliminate the identification of occupation of race (Fee and Appudurai 2011). However, the policy operationalization has strayed from its initial objectives and this has meant that government contracts to build economic zones are now awarded based on race quotas (Montlake 2008; Cheong, Nagaraj and Lee 2009). Such race-based policies explicitly outline how each racial group has access to housing, education, second language acquisition, and political party representation. Being classified as *Bumiputera* is indeed beneficial for multiracial Malaysians within this policy framework but since it forces clear racial divisions within the society, it is less constructive when seen in the light of multiracial self-identification.

Politics has also been important in determining census classifications (Nagaraj et al. 2015). Nagaraj and colleagues outlined how changes in political parties have changed the number of categories used in census reports. The reasoning for this becomes clearer when we understand that Malaysia has been ruled by a coalition of racially-based political parties since its independence from British in 1957, and each party claims to serve the interests of an ethno-racial group (Ambikaipaker 2013). Malaysians are expected to vote

along racial lines, for example Malays are urged to back the Malay-led *Barisan Nasional* (National Front) coalition (Montlake 2008). *Barisan Nasional* is a coalition of prominent race-based political parties such as the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), which are heavily influenced by communalism and protection of their own racial communities to win votes. Malays hold most of the high-level political positions in the country and the perpetuation of race-based voting has kept political power concentrated in the hands of Malays. Racialized discourse such as *Ketuanan Melayu* (Malay Supremacy) dominates politics and has gained widespread support (Mandal 2004). We see how racialization of politics in Malaysia has allowed majority Malays to remain in power, and Chinese and Indian minorities to be entrenched in political subordination (Fee and Appudurai 2011). This leaves little to be said about individuals who identify with multiple racial identities. How would a Malaysian who identifies as both Chinese and Indian be expected to vote based on this ideology?

We also see fortification of racial differences within the education system in Malaysia. Education through different languages is practised where schools are labelled as Malay, Chinese, or Tamil-medium schools and each school is mainly seen as monolingual. Before the Second World War, there was no uniformity in educational policy, with different racial groups (and by extension, different language-based schools) determining the requirements and aims of the education that was to be provided to all students within each school. Primary education remained segregated post-war by mediums of instruction (English, Malay, Chinese, and Tamil) and secondary education would be conducted in English (Abraham 1997). Realizing the disparity across different types of schools, the establishment of the Vision School (*Sekolah Wawasan*) was suggested by then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad to enhance interaction between students of various ethnic groups (Ibrahim 2007). A bilingual education policy was implemented in 2003 (Tan 2005), where the teaching of science and mathematics was conducted in English rather than the Malay language so as not to lose competitive advantage in the global arena. Thus, classification into different racial categories has had serious consequences on language acquisition and literacy levels since the colonial administration, particularly for multiracial Malaysians who would have to prioritize studying one language within the school system.

As Noor and Leong (2013) have described, Malaysia's model of multiculturalism focuses on managing interracial tensions and social justice as a result of past interracial clashes. The visible promotion of a multiracial society as the real Malaysian image has significance beyond ensuring interracial harmony. It

has also been exploited to increase tourism, for example through slogans such as 'Malaysia Truly Asia' which attempts to reflect the country's unique diversity. We also see that individual cultural differences are highlighted in the public realm but only superficially. Ethnic peculiarities such as diverse local traditional dances, ceremonies, and rituals are magnified and projected nationwide and overseas (Oo 1991) all while maintaining homogeneity in racial classification systems that determine daily life choices. The multiracial society is flaunted, but multiracial individuals remain hidden.

Clear divisions between racial identities also spill over to religious identities. Malay and Muslim identities have been constructed alongside each other since British colonial rule. This continues in contemporary understanding of racial boundaries. Yet what is perhaps more worrying for multiracial Malaysians is the policing of Muslim identity by the *Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia* (Malaysian Islamic Development Department), better known as *Jakim*, which oversees all Islamic issues in the country. Because of the assumption that Malay equals to Muslim, and the fact that many multiracial Malaysians who have Chinese and Indian parents are often misidentified as Malay, non-Muslim multiracial Malaysians have been arrested by the *Jakim* for not adhering to Islamic fasting practices (Reddy 2018b). Overlooking the multiplicity of racial identities can thus have potentially damaging psychological and physical consequences for multiracial Malaysians (Pue and Sulaiman 2013). Rather than change the current classification system of race to acknowledge multiple racial identities, interracial marriages are actively discouraged and viewed as taboo in public discourse. Such marriages are especially challenging when they involve religious conversion (Jo-Pei et al. 2008; Lindenberg 2009). Malaysian law prevents conversion from Islam but enforces conversion into Islam when one party is Muslim. This also creates a legal tension between the applicability of Islamic religious laws (by the *Syariah* Courts), which has jurisdiction over Muslims, and federal civil courts that run in parallel to enforce family laws for non-Muslims (Hak 2012).

So while diversity is celebrated and conceptualized as distinct groups co-existing in a multicultural society, there is little room for diversity to be acknowledged *within* any one individual in the current classification system. Boundary making continues to be an important project for the current social and political framework. This then becomes problematic for multiracial individuals when dealing with institutions that reinforce singular racial identification (Reddy 2018b). There is little room for measurement of 'mixedness' within such a system that polices boundaries between each racial group. General purpose surveys such as those that monitor NEP progress or other public policies, social surveys, application for jobs within the civil service, and

utilization of public health services all require ethnic identification, yet only allow single categories to be ticked (Nagaraj et al. 2015). Even public opinion surveys fail to capture the multiplicity of people's racial identification. Analyses typically focus on the divide between *Bumiputera*, Chinese, and Indian groups, leaving no place for the perspective of multiracial individuals (Lee 2017). In light of this issue, some multiracial Malaysians have publicly expressed a desire for deleting questions regarding one's racial identity from government forms (Daniele 2014).

The Future of Racial Classification in a New Malaysia

Prominent Malaysian leaders like Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad have expressed a desire to move towards a nation-building ideology of *Bangsa Malaysia* ('Malaysian Nation') by 2020, where groups in Malaysia are 'ethnically integrated, living in harmony with full and fair partnership ... with political loyalty and dedication to the nation' (Mahathir, in Lee 2004). The *Bangsa Malaysia* ideology was meant to replace *Bangsa Cina*, *Bangsa Melayu*, and *Bangsa India* (Ambikaipaker 2008) and this vision was also maintained by Mahathir's successor Najib Razak's national campaign called 1Malaysia, which aimed to promote interracial harmony. Mahathir's recent re-election as prime minister during the 14th General Election on 9 May 2018 has been viewed as the start of a 'New Malaysia', one that reflects a change in the consciousness of Malaysian society away from race-based communalism and racialized politics. The election was historic because for the first time in the nation's history, the ruling coalition, *Barisan Nasional* (National Front) lost to the opposition coalition, *Pakatan Harapan* (Coalition of Hope).⁴ In sharp contrast to its predecessor, the *Pakatan* government is built on a multiracial platform and advances a manifesto focusing on inclusivity, democratization, and institutional reform. While Mahathir has led this effort, Mahathir's own 'mixedness', due to having Indian heritage, was used by political rivals to tarnish his image in an attempt to reduce his support from the Malay community. In response, Mahathir has repeatedly reminded Malaysians that he is, in fact, 'pure Malay' (Palansamy 2018), thereby playing into the homogenized views of race that a New Malaysia was thought to dismantle.

Even though social and political change seems more possible today under the new government than before, there is little talk of changing or overthrowing classifications of race inherited from the colonial era. Working within the system, efforts towards interracial solidarity are still based on rigid racial

categories. Yet, there is some evidence that racialized categorizations are being challenged, especially by the younger generation. Embedded within *Bersih*, a national electoral reform movement meaning ‘clean’ in Malay language, is the overarching demand for clean and fair elections in Malaysia, which reflects a desire for a needs-based rather than race-based politics (Höller-Fam 2015). *Bersih* mass protest events have been shown to promote empowerment and subsequent support for reforms among Malaysians from diverse racial backgrounds (Selvanathan and Lickel 2018). The National Transformation 2050 programme,⁵ a government effort to include citizen perspectives in building a vision for year 2050, saw suggestions that included doing away with the *lain-lain* (‘Other’) categorization of race on all official documents. Another suggestion was to abolish the race question altogether (Hamid and Perimbanayagam 2018). However, colonial symbols such as the racial categorization system are present not only in census but also in the minds of Malaysians (Reddy and Gleibs 2019). This begs the question if abolishing race in official documents would result in a change in perceptions of race rigidity in the country. On the contrary, the *lain-lain* (‘Other’) category for race was dropped recently in Sabah and Sarawak, East Malaysian states that have long criticized this categorization because it fails to account for the diversity of indigenous ethnic tribes (Chan 2015). For the first time, East Malaysians were able to state their own ethnic group, rather than indicating ‘Other’ on official documentations. Still, since people are expected to report only one ethnicity, it is unclear what these changes will mean for multiracial individuals.

It is clear, however, that the problem of how to appropriately represent and include multiracial individuals within official classification systems is part of a broader problem of how to measure race in a pluralistic society. As different racial groups in Malaysia continue to integrate, mixed marriages are projected to become more common (Nagaraj 2009). One important consequence of mixed marriages is that the Malaysian government will face the critical question of how to accurately categorize its population, when individuals may identify with multiple racial identities. In fact, public debate on multiracial individuals have often surfaced when children with mixed parentage face legal issues due to the classification ‘problems’ that they pose (Pue and Sulaiman 2013). Since at present Malaysians can only officially identify with one race, multiracial individuals are forced to select one of their parents’ races or the ‘Others’ category that lumps together many different groups that do not fit the Malay, Chinese, and Indian framework. A step forward is to perhaps first and foremost do away with such an essentialized thinking of race, and recognize, at the institutional level, the reality that individuals *can* and *do* belong to more than one race. On census classifications, allowing individuals to self-

identify as more than one race is an important step towards more accurately capturing the true diversity of multiracial heritages in the Malaysian population (Nagaraj et al. 2015). Such a system would also challenge the government's policies with regard to race-based quotas and *Bumiputera* policies, because it in effect also threatens the homogenized definitions of the Malay race that began in the colonial era and have shaped Malaysian politics since independence.

Beyond institutional changes, it is also important to recognize how everyday citizens have questioned racial categories in their lived experiences. Interracial marriages have led to the development of new informal labels for multiracial people (Ang and Shik 2013; Chong 2009). For example, marriages between Chinese and Indians are common in West Malaysia and have resulted in their children being popularly referred to as 'Chindians'. The identity label of 'Chindian'⁶ is also adopted by multiracial individuals of Chinese and Indian parents to celebrate both heritages (Chandran 2016). In East Malaysia, frequent intermarriages between individuals from indigenous tribes and the Chinese community have also led to distinguishing labels: a mix between Iban and Chinese are referred to as 'Chibans'; Chinese and Kadazans are called 'Sino-Kadazans'. These new labels effectively capture the unique cultural identities of 'mixedness'. In a country where there is state-sanctioned control over racial categorization, the popular use and embodiment of these labels may be viewed as efforts of 'everyday resistance' that disrupt rigid racial boundaries. In contrast to visible forms of rebellion and social movements that typically garner widespread attention (and repression) from the regime, the more subtle, hidden, and unplanned forms of resistance that occur in daily life are noteworthy in how they allow people to exercise agency (Scott 1985).

In fact, the experience of 'mixedness' in Malaysia is reflected in everyday ways that go uncategorized and therefore defy official categorizations altogether. The intermingling of English, Malay, Chinese, and Tamil languages form Manglish, an unofficial English-based creole that is widely spoken in the country. Malaysian cuisine is an amalgamation of cooking methods and recipes that were passed down from generations across different cultures that make up the population. While the Malaysian Constitution outlines what makes a Malay, an emergent group of 'modern Malays', mostly highly educated and secular city-dwellers, are adapting the traditional Malay identity by adhering less to strict religious and cultural values. Hybridity within different minoritized communities in Malaysia (such as Portuguese Eurasians of Melaka, Indian Peranakans of Melaka, and Chinese Peranakans of Terengganu) highlight how many minorities are increasingly assimilating Malay identity

and would like to be categorized as *Bumiputera* (Pillai 2015). Thus, through daily practices of race, we can observe its social construction and reconstruction more clearly, and by extension, we can also observe the shortcomings of the official classification systems currently in place. Perhaps acknowledging that everyone is *campur*, everyone is somewhat mixed in Malaysia, should be the first step.

Notes

1. In line with other social scientists who adopt the term 'multiracial' instead of 'mixed race' (Root 1996; Ali 2003), this chapter will maintain the use of the term 'multiracial' to capture the experiences of individuals for whom possessing different racial identities often means a combination of individual races ('mixed') at times, and being a single race at other times.
2. Based on a 2% sample of the 2000 Census, Nagaraj found that the percentage of intermarriages was 4.6%, and this was a 0.5% increase from 1974 (Pue and Sulaiman 2013).
3. *Campur* means mix in Malay, in this context referring to having ancestors belonging to different cultures.
4. Mahathir was previously the prime minister from 1981 to 2003 and was a leader of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). In 2016, Mahathir formed his own political party, *Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia* (Malaysian United Indigenous Party), in opposition to UMNO primarily due to UMNO's continued support for the then Prime Minister Najib Razak, who was embroiled in corruption scandals. Mahathir went on to become the opposition coalition's (*Pakatan Harapan*) candidate for prime minister in the 2018 general election.
5. The programme was introduced by Najib Razak in early 2017 to gain feedback from the younger generation, and the current government has announced plans to continue its implementation.
6. The adoption of the term 'Chindian' by multiracial individuals of Chinese and Indian heritage is also seen in Singapore, as outlined in Reddy (2012).

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