The Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra in Postcolonial Context, 1957–2020

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Asian names in the thesis will be given in the Western order: first name followed by family name. Appendix 4 is an exception because all names are direct quotations from the source.

Note regarding quotation of interview transcripts:

Informal speech (such as contractions and colloquialisms) is quoted as they appear in the interview transcripts. Alterations to grammatical errors are bracketed.

Abstract

This thesis focuses on the postcolonial modalities of the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra in the context of present-day Malaysia. I seek to raise postcolonial awareness in the classical music sector in Malaysian urban centers such as Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya by foregrounding the embedded coloniality within Western art music. The central argument of my thesis is that in Malaysia, the practice of Western art music could reinforce a neo-colonial mindset if adopted uncritically. My research shows that racial practices from the British colonial era have impacted the nation's music-cultural identity formation. My lines of inquiry include: To what extent are colonial-era attitudes still in evidence in the Malaysian classical music scene, including in the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra? How do professional Malaysian musicians today reconcile conflicting emotions such as pride and guilt in embracing colonial culture even while aspiring to decolonization? On a broader level, this study problematizes the continued importation of a culture heavily associated with a country's colonial past.

Résumé

Cette thèse porte sur les modalités postcoloniales de l'Orchestre Philharmonique de Malaisie dans le contexte et dans le cadre de la Malaisie moderne. Je cherche à susciter une prise de conscience postcoloniale dans le secteur de la musique classique dans les centres urbains malaisiens tels que Kuala Lumpur et Petaling Jaya, en mettant en avant la colonialité intégrée dans la musique d'art occidentale. L'argument central de ma thèse est qu'en Malaisie, la pratique de la musique d'art occidentale pourrait renforcer une mentalité néo-coloniale, si elle est adoptée sans critique. Ma recherche démontre que les pratiques raciales de l'ère coloniale britannique ont eu un impact sur la formation de l'identité musicale et culturelle de la nation malaisienne. Mes champs d'investigation sont les suivants: Dans quelle mesure les attitudes de l'époque coloniale sont-elles toujours présentes sur la scène musicale classique malaisienne, notamment au sein de l'Orchestre Philharmonique de Malaisie? Comment les musiciens professionnels malaisiens concilient-ils aujourd'hui des émotions contradictoires telles que la fierté et la culpabilité d'embrasser la culture coloniale, tout en aspirant à la décolonisation? À un niveau plus large, cette étude problématise l'importation continue d'une culture fortement associée au passé colonial d'un pays.

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INTRODUCTION

A State in the grip of neo-colonialism is not master of its own destiny

— Kwame Nkrumah

This thesis focuses on the postcolonial modalities of the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra (MPO) in the context of present-day Malaysia.[1] I seek to raise postcolonial awareness in the classical music sector in Malaysian urban centers such as Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya, by foregrounding the embedded coloniality within the practice of Western art music (WAM). The MPO is a Western symphony orchestra established by the Malaysian government in 1998 to perform WAM in Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia. During its opening season, the MPO and the state media marketed the orchestra as "Malaysia's first world-class orchestra."[2] Nevertheless, a closer look at the lineup of its musicians painted a different picture of the MPO. The orchestra belied its label as "Malaysian" because there was only a handful of Malaysian musicians in the orchestra. According to the *New Straits Times*'s coverage of the launch of the MPO's concert hall on August 18, 1998, the "105-piece orchestra included six Malaysian musicians."[3] Why were there so few Malaysian musicians in the MPO when it was first established? Is this still the case presently? What do the orchestra's hiring decisions signify?

Research into these questions uncovered media reports, editorials, and MPO program booklets ranging from 1999 to 2021 which verified that the orchestra has a history of hiring musicians of European ethnic heritage, and that the number of musicians of Malaysian heritage within the orchestra was minimal. Based on my findings, the percentage of Malaysian musicians

[1] For the complete list of abbreviations, see Appendix 1.
[2] Marc Rochester, program notes for Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra, Kees Bakel, conductor, Jean-Jacques Kantorow, violin, April 16–18, 1999, Dewan Filharmonik PETRONAS, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Program booklet.
[3] "Opening of Petronas Philharmonic Hall," *New Straits Times*, August 18, 1998, National, accessed March 20, 2021, https://news.google.com/newspapers?id=tsBhAAAAIBAJ&sjid=yxQEAAAAIBAJ&pg=6748%2C4297537.

in the MPO had increased from 5.7% in 1998 to 9.9% in 2021.[4] This phenomenon warrants scrutiny especially when coupled with the alleged government subsidization of the MPO in the amount of RM 500 million (approximately CAD 157 million) from 1998 to 2008.[5] I believe that the MPO's continuous state endorsement, large-scale hiring of non-Malaysian players, and minimal efforts to recruit locally over the years are linked to postcolonial issues of Eurocentric notions of universalism and cultural ownership. I will argue that the uncritical adoption of WAM – at the institutional level by the Malaysian government and the MPO, and at the individual level by members of the local WAM community – could reinforce a neo-colonial mindset that in turn, disempowers Malaysian musicians. Moreover, my research will show that racial practices from the British colonial era have impacted the nation's music-cultural identity formation. My lines of inquiry include: To what extent are colonial-era attitudes still in evidence in the WAM community, including in the MPO? What do these attitudes signify? Who stands to gain or lose cultural and/or other capital? How do professional Malaysian musicians today reconcile conflicting emotions such as pride and guilt in embracing colonial culture even while aspiring to decolonization?[6] On a broader level, this study problematizes the continued importation of a culture heavily associated with a country's colonial past.

Historical Background of WAM in Malaysia

Malaysia had endured a long history of colonial rule since the sixteenth century before it became an independent nation in 1957 – first in the hands of the Portuguese (1511 to 1641),

[4] The calculation is based on the figure of six Malaysians out of 105 MPO musicians in 1998, according to "Opening of Petronas Philharmonic Hall"; and seven Malaysians out of seventy-one MPO musicians in 2021, according to Saidah Rastam's article "Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra's Downsizing: Does this Mark the Beginning of the End for the Orchestra?" *Options*, Culture, July 29, 2021, https://www.optionstheedge.com/topic/culture/malaysian-philharmonic-orchestra's-downsizing-does-mark-beginning-end-orchestra.

[5] Proarte [pseud.], "Philharmonic Orchestra Nothing But Elitist Extravaganza," *Malaysiakini* (Petaling Jaya), June 6, 2008, letter to the editor, https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/84076.

[6] The use of the term "musicians," or "music" in the thesis relates to WAM, unless otherwise stated.

followed by the Dutch (1641 to 1824), and finally the British from ca. 1771 to 1957. Partly as a result of economic policies practiced by the colonial rulers, the Malaysian population became ethnically diverse. The multiracial nation-state is composed of *Bumiputera* ("sons/daughters of the soil," a modern-day term for the indigenous peoples of Malaya, as the country was known before its independence in 1957) and immigrants that were predominantly imported by the British for reasons of labor beginning in the nineteenth century.[7] *Bumiputera*, a term that was introduced by Prime Minister Abdul Razak Hussein in the 1970s, refers to a category that comprises a majority of Malays and "other numerically small but historically important indigenous groups."[8] These indigenous groups include *Orang Asli* ("original people" or "Aboriginals") in Peninsular Malaysia; Iban, Bidayuh, Melanau, and *Orang Ulu* ("interior peoples") in Sarawak; and Kadazan or Dusun in Sabah.[9] In 2021, the breakdown of Malaysia's population was: *Bumiputera* 69.8%, Chinese 22.4%, Indian 6.8%, and Other 1.0%.[10] The category of "Other" refers to non-*Bumiputera* citizens (other than the Chinese and Indians), including Arabs, Armenians, Eurasians, Filipinos, and numerous others.[11]

Music educator Johami Abdullah has argued that "most of Malaysian music education remains strongly influenced by the colonial legacy of the British."[12] Abdullah has also stated that

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[7] Daniel P. S. Goh and Philip Holden, "Introduction: Postcoloniality, Race, and Multiculturalism," in *Race and Multiculturalism in Malaysia and Singapore*, ed. Daniel P. S. Goh, Matilda Gabrielpillai, Philip Holden, and Gaik Cheng Khoo (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2009), 4–5, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/mcgill/detail.action?docID=439153. The translation for *Bumiputera* is according to Barbara Watson Andaya and Leonard Y. Andaya's *A History of Malaysia*, 3rd ed. (London: Macmillan Education UK, 2016), 2. See Appendix 2 for the glossary of non-English terms.

[8] Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 5–6. For more discussion on non-Malay *Bumiputera*, see Chapter Two.

[9] Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 7.

[10] "Current Population Estimates, Malaysia, 2021," Department of Statistics Malaysia Official Portal, updated February 18, 2022, https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/cthemeByCat&cat=155&bul_id=ZjJOSnpJR21sQWVUcUp6ODRudm5JZz09&menu_id=L0pheU43NWJwRWVSZklWdzQ4TlhUUT09.

[11] Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 6.

[12] Johami Abdullah, "Music Education in Malaysia: An Overview," *The Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (1990): 44, http://www-usr.rider.edu/~vrme/v16n1/visions/win7.

the country's initial exposure to WAM can be traced to early schools such as the Penang Free School, an English-medium school that the British missionaries established in 1816. In these schools, music was either an extracurricular activity; or taught as a part of the language program to facilitate the learning of the English language where children sang nursery rhymes, folksongs and light classical songs in English.[13] According to Abdullah, when the British resumed control of Malaya after World War II (1941–45), the curriculum of large schools with missionary roots in urban areas included recorder ensembles, British-style marching bands, and choirs in the tradition of European-style choral singing. British colonial influence was also evident in school assemblies where children sang the school anthem, the state anthem, and the British national anthem "God Save The Queen."[14]

Since Malaysia's independence, WAM has expanded from essentially missionary school origins to a widespread culture that is proudly embraced by Malaysian elites and middle classes. To date, apart from educational activities for music amateurs, institutions engaging in WAM include the MPO, several other orchestras ranging from semi-professional to professional levels; approximately ten post-secondary, degree-granting music programs founded between the 1960s and 1990s; and various music associations such as the Society of Malaysian Contemporary Composers (established 2013). These entities have yet to be studied even as other aspects of Malaysia's colonial heritage such as educational system, languages, literature, and theatre have come under postcolonial critique.[15]

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[13] Abdullah, "Music Education in Malaysia," 45–6.
[14] Abdullah, "Music Education in Malaysia," 46.
[15] Examples of postcolonial critique on Malaysia's colonial heritage include Kevin Blackburn and ZongLun Wu, *Decolonizing the History Curriculum in Malaysia and Singapore* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2019); E. Dawson Varughese, "Malaysia: Bahasa Manglish(es)," in *Beyond the Postcolonial* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 151–71, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137265234_7; Eddie Tay, *Colony, Nation, and Globalisation: Not at Home in Singaporean and Malaysian Literature* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), http://doi.org/10.5790/hongkong/9789888028740.001.0001; and Jacqueline Lo, *Staging Nation: English Language*

Methodology

My research and analysis are informed by the approaches and writings of postcolonial theorists such as Homi K. Bhabha, Achille Mbembe, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.[16] Although information and data are difficult to come by since official archival data of the MPO is not currently accessible to me, I have amassed a number of primary and secondary sources including MPO program booklets, governmental websites, and newspaper articles. In addition, I collected valuable information from the email correspondence with Z (a consultant involved in the beginning stages of the orchestra) and Proarte (pseudonym of a contributor to *Malaysiakini*, an independent media outlet based in Petaling Jaya); as well as from semi-structured interviews with twelve professional WAM musicians who are Malaysian.[17]

Literature Review

Studies on the practice of WAM in former colonies have revealed problematic power dynamics akin to those of the colonial era operating along the axes of class, ethnicity, and gender. Roe-Min Kok's autoethnographic essay "Music for a Postcolonial Child" offers a rare study on the colonial heritage of WAM and early WAM education in Malaysia.[18] Kok's analysis provides insights into the complicated nature of the colonizer-colonized relationship and the ways it impacts the formation of cultural identity among young children. Assuming the role of

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Theatre in Malaysia and Singapore. Brill's Studies in Language, Cognition, and Culture, Vol. 14 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004), http://muse.jhu.edu/book/5762.

[16] Homi Bhabha, "The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 207–21; Achille Mbembe, "The Colony: Its Guilty Secret and its Accursed Share," in *Terror and the Postcolonial*, ed. Elleke Boehmer and Stephen Morton, Blackwell Concise Companions to Literature and Culture (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 27–54, https://doi-org.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/10.1002/9781444310085.ch1.; and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313.

[17] See Appendix 3 for more details on research participants and interview topics.

[18] Roe-Min Kok, "Music for a Postcolonial Child," in *Learning, Teaching, and Musical Identity: Voice Across Cultures*, ed. Lucy Green (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2011), 73–90.

the informant, Kok problematizes the power imbalance and inherent colonial hierarchies in the transmission of WAM, by foregrounding the complex socio-cultural situation and music-educational needs within postcolonial Malaysia. Kok argues that all actors involved in the transmission in question, including music educators, students and their parents, and the music examination board (Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music), "participated willingly if unwittingly in an ideological process that ultimately reinforced the colonizers' cultural subjugation of the colonized."[19] My work seeks to extend Kok's research by interviewing adult Malaysian musicians and by positioning the MPO as a key actor in the transmission of WAM in Malaysia.

Tina Ramnarine's *Global Perspectives on Orchestras: Collective Creativity and Social Agency* represents the most recent and significant contribution to the discourse on the social agency of orchestras.[20] The third part of Ramnarine's volume contains case studies from postcolonial nations, such as Shzr Ee Tan's study "State Orchestras and Multiculturalism in Singapore." According to Tan, the institutionalization of Singaporean state orchestras (namely Western symphony orchestra, Chinese orchestra, Indian orchestra, and Malay ensemble) are part of the Singaporean government's agenda in socio-cultural engineering.[21] While the abovementioned state orchestras map onto the state rhetoric of multiculturalism and ethnic balance, a comparison of state funding reveals that the Singaporean government prioritizes the Western symphony orchestra over its ethnic counterparts.[22] Although Tan's study relates to the political context of Singapore specifically, there is a parallel between the situation in Singapore

[19] Kok, "Music for a Postcolonial Child," 83.
[20] Tina K. Ramnarine, ed., *Global Perspectives on Orchestras: Collective Creativity and Social Agency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), http://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199352227.001.0001.
[21] Shzr Ee Tan, "State Orchestras and Multiculturalism in Singapore," in *Global Perspectives on Orchestras: Collective Creativity and Social Agency*, ed. Tina K. Ramnarine (Oxford University Press, 2018), 261–81, http://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199352227.003.0015.
[22] Tan, "State Orchestras and Multiculturalism," 277.

and Malaysia, in that state orchestras in both countries play a performative role to serve government agendas. I will apply Tan's comparative analysis in my study by comparing the MPO to other postcolonial orchestras in terms of funding, recruitment, and management.

Sociologists such as Anna Bull and Christina Scharff have underscored issues of inequalities by drawing attention to hierarchies, privileges, and exclusions within the classical music sector.[23] Specifically, Scharff's study "Documenting and Explaining Inequalities in the Classical Music Profession" documents the underrepresentation of women, black, and minority ethnic players, as well as musicians from working-class backgrounds in cultural and creative industries.[24] Although Scharff's data came from the United Kingdom and Germany, her ethnographic study presented concepts, such as intersecting identities, that are vital to my analysis of the WAM sector in Malaysia.

I have also borrowed the idea of embedded coloniality from Dylan Robinson's *Hungry Listening.* As an attempt to decenter the "Whiteness" in music scholarship, Robinson critiques the power dynamics involved when settlers in the US and Canada consume and write about music from Indigenous cultures.[25] His critique is important to my work because it shows that the uncritical adoption of any musical cultures, especially cultures that are not our own, could reinforce hegemony. I will adapt Robinson's ideas to critique the adoption of WAM by

[23] Anna Bull, *Class, Control, and Classical Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), http://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190844356.001.0001; Christina Scharff, *Gender, Subjectivity, and Cultural Work* (London: Routledge, 2017), https://doi.org.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/10.4324/9781315673080.
[24] Christina Scharff, "Documenting and Explaining Inequalities in the Classical Music Profession," in *Gender, Subjectivity, and Cultural Work* (London: Routledge, 2017), 41–84, https://doi.org.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/10.4324/9781315673080; and "Inequalities in the Classical Music Industry: The Role of Subjectivity in Constructions of the 'Ideal Classical Musician,' " in *The Classical Music Industry*, ed. Chris Dromey and Julia Haferkorn (London: Routledge, 2018), 96–111, https://doi-org.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/10.4324/9781315471099.
[25] Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 9; see also Gustavus Stadler, "On Whiteness and Sound Studies," *Sounding Out!* (blog), July 6, 2015, http://soundstudiesblog.com/2015/07/06/on-whiteness-and-sound-studies/, accessed April 15, 2022.

Malaysians: What positions do Malaysian musicians assume, and what power dynamics do they participate in, when they embrace this colonial heritage as the formerly colonized?

In addition, my thesis will engage with issues of Eurocentric notions of cultural superiority and ownership as discussed by scholars such as Taru Leppänen, Mina Yang, and Mari Yoshihara. For instance, Leppänen has recognized that "Western classical music has been and is in many ways connected with Whiteness, despite the rareness of explicit expressions of race and ethnicity in connection with this music culture."[26] His work in 2015 drew attention to subtle racism in the media coverage of the 1995 International Sibelius Violin Competition, of which commentaries on the musicality and interpretation of Asian competitors were colored by racialized narratives. Leppänen extends his argument to challenge the notion of music autonomy in classical music discourse, which places aesthetic judgment of musical performances in a vacuum, seemingly devoid of extramusical phenomena such as gender, nationality, and ethnicity.

Yang and Yoshihara have each written about the colonialist music legacy in East Asia.[27] In "East Meets West in the Concert Hall: Asians and Classical Music in the Century of Imperialism, Post-Colonialism, and Multiculturalism," Yang points out that stereotypes of Asian musicians as "automatons, robots without souls" in the Western imagination are linked to "the essentialist idea that [classical] music by natural right belongs to Europeans," reducing Asian musicians to the role of the reproducer who mimics "Western creative genius."[28] In *Musicians from A Different Shore*, Yoshihara argues that debates over authenticity and aesthetic judgment in classical music become entangled with issues of ethnicity and identity because of the

[26] Taru Leppänen, "The West and the Rest of Classical Music: Asian Musicians in the Finnish Media Coverage of the 1995 Jean Sibelius Violin Competition," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 18, no. 1 (2015): 22, http://doi.org/10.1177/1367549414557804.
[27] Mina Yang, "East Meets West in the Concert Hall: Asians and Classical Music in the Century of Imperialism, Post-Colonialism, and Multiculturalism," *Asian Music* 38, no. 1 (2007): 1–30, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4497039; and Mari Yoshihara, *Musicians from A Different Shore* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007).
[28] Yang, "East Meets West," 14, 16.

insistence on European ownership of Western classical music by Western critics. This latter narrative assumes that Western and European musicians possess an innate authenticity on account of their national or ethnic heritage, one that they share with the Western composers whose music they perform, thereby positioning Asian musicians as "cultural outsiders."[29] My analysis of the reception and the hiring practices of the MPO will intersect with the arguments by Leppänen, Yang, and Yoshihara, reframed in the context of Malaysia's colonial history.

Thesis Structure

Chapter One examines the socio-economic, cultural, and political motivations that underlay the founding and funding of the MPO. The orchestra was created under the directives of a former prime minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohamad, whose delegate hired non-Malaysian consultants to recruit musicians from Western countries to form what was to become the MPO. I aim to understand the explicit and implicit factors that drove this Muslim nation to pour a considerable amount of money into establishing and maintaining a Western orchestra despite the country's colonial past and its continuing efforts to shape a multicultural postcolonial society. My analysis will show that the ongoing state funding of the MPO is influenced by the (unintentional) privileging of an elitist colonial culture. Furthermore, I assert that the MPO's exclusive hiring practices demonstrates a discernible predilection for musicians of European ancestry, potentially perpetuating neo-colonial values within Malaysia's own fledging classical music scene.

Chapter Two investigates Malaysia's postcolonial heritage in the context of contemporary racial and cultural politics to foreground the struggles Malaysians face in music-cultural identity formation. Although the nation-state is touted for its multi-ethnic tolerance in

[29] Yoshihara, *Musicians from A Different Shore*, 199, 223.

the mainstream media, divisive colonial-era racial practices remain entrenched in its political and social structures.[30] I analyze three state policies that were implemented in the 1970s and 1990s, namely the National Economic Policy, the National Culture Policy, and *Bangsa Malaysia* ("Malaysian nation") to tease out the complexities in racial power dynamics in these three decades. I have selected these policies for a couple of reasons: their strong and continued influence, reflected in my primary sources; and because all three arenas (economics, culture, and racial-cultural identity) are implicated in the arts, including music. My analysis will show that from the 1970s on, institutionalized postcolonial racial identities have complicated and continue to muddy the sense of belonging, cultural identity formation, and the process of decolonization in Malaysia.

Chapter Three presents current issues of inequity in the Malaysian classical music sector in relation to class, race, gender, and sexuality. I examine intertwining factors that appear to perpetuate colonial inequities in the WAM sector in Malaysia, including the MPO. Interviewees revealed conflicting emotions ranging from a sense of pride in embracing the colonial heritage of WAM, and an implicit sense of resentment towards the MPO's marginalization of local talents. Moreover, the interview findings will underscore the lack of awareness of embedded coloniality in WAM among research participants. This observation led me to believe that the concept of embedded coloniality has yet to seep into the Malaysian public's consciousness. I argue that as a result of a lack of awareness, Malaysian musicians could be imbibing and perpetuating colonial attitudes that operate as implicit assumptions and expectations among the local WAM community.

[30] Sharmani Patricia Gabriel, "Translating Bangsa Malaysia: Toward a new Cultural Politics of Malaysian-ness," *Critical Asian Studies*, 43, no. 3 (2011): 369, http://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2011.597335.

CHAPTER 1: The Founding of the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra

This chapter examines the socio-economic, cultural, and political motivations that underlay the founding of the MPO. I analyze the orchestra's hiring practices to understand the explicit and implicit factors that led to the hiring of a large majority of musicians with European ancestry. One view, expressed by local arts activist Saidah Rastam, is that the large-scale hiring of non-Malaysians was a pragmatic choice because there were few local musicians who were sufficiently skilled and trained for that capacity at the time of the MPO's founding.[31] Nevertheless, my findings will reveal other factors linked to cultural-hegemonic beliefs. I show that Eurocentric notions of universalism and cultural ownership among the powerful Malaysian elites charged with starting the MPO contributed to and continue to fuel a discernible preference for musicians of European heritage to represent a postcolonial orchestra funded by the Malaysian government.

To date, little has been written on the history and day-to-day operation of the MPO. Because I have no access to the orchestra's official archive, my research draws on alternative sources including MPO program booklets and season brochures, government websites, and newspaper articles. I also collected valuable information via email correspondence with my sources: Z, an expatriate liaison who was directly involved in the start-up of the orchestra from 1996 to 1998; Proarte, a contributor to *Malaysiakini,* a local online news portal; and twelve research participants who are Malaysian musicians.[32] In addition, I rely on secondary literature on postcolonial discourse to theorize my findings.

[31] Rastam, "Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra's Downsizing."
[32] See Appendix 3 for more details on research participants and interview topics.

1.1 Mahathir's Nation-Building Efforts

After Malaysia's independence in 1957, its leaders, including former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad, strove to steer the trajectory of the nation towards economic growth and industrial development. The country was and continues to be active in its advocacy to strengthen the East Asian market, as demonstrated by its role in co-founding the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967. Table 1 lists the names and the years of service of all the prime ministers of Malaysia since its independence.[33]

Table 1: List of Prime Ministers of Malaysia and Years of Service

Name and Life Span	Years of Service
Tunku Abdul Rahman (1903–1990)	1957 to 1970
Abdul Razak Hussein (1922–1976)	1970 to 1976
Hussein Onn (1922–1990)	1976 to 1981
Mahathir Mohamad (b. 1925)	1981 to 2003
Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (b. 1939)	2003 to 2009
Najib Abdul Razak (b. 1953)	2009 to 2018
Mahathir Mohamad (b. 1925)	2018 to 2020
Muhyiddin Yassin (b. 1947)	2020 to 2021
Ismail Sabri Yaakob (b. 1960)	2021 – incumbent

[33] My thesis will refer to these prime ministers by their first name after the first mention (instead of their last name) to be consistent with my primary sources.

My discussion will mainly focus on former Prime Minister Mahathir because of his involvement in the founding of the MPO, as well as his contributions to strengthen the Malay middle class.[34] When Mahathir first came into power in 1981, he was vocal in criticizing the Western hegemonic manipulation of the economies of financially weaker Asian countries. Like his predecessors, he was also relentless in his efforts to establish Malaysia as an important player in regional economics. For instance, he promulgated a so-called "Look East Policy" (1981) to promote a closer economic relationship between the private sectors of Malaysia and other then-rising Asian economic powers, such as Japan, Korea, and Taiwan. The Embassy of Japan in Malaysia recorded a total of 16,631 Malaysian students who were sent to Japan between 1982 and 2017 under Mahathir's "Look East Policy" for educational programs ranging from academic studies to industrial and technical training.[35] The hallmarks of Mahathir's tenure (1981–2003) were his nation-building efforts, most notably *Wawasan 2020* (Vision 2020) that was launched in 1991. Vision 2020 was a long-term goal for Malaysia to become an industrialized and fully developed country by 2020. According to Mahathir in an undated statement, "Malaysia should not be developed only in the economic sense. It must be a nation that is fully developed along all the dimensions: economically, politically, socially, spiritually, psychologically, and culturally."[36] Although Vision 2020's vision statement only mentions cultural development in passing, the founding of the MPO appears to have been a part and parcel of Mahathir's larger nation-building plans.

[34] My thesis will refer to these prime ministers by their first name after the first mention (instead of their last name), to be consistent with my primary sources.
[35] "The Malaysian Look East Policy," Embassy of Japan in Malaysia, accessed February 14, 2022, https://www.my.emb-japan.go.jp/English/JIS/education/LEP.htm.
[36] "The Way Forward," Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia, Vision 2020, The Way Forward, accessed February 1, 2022, https://www.pmo.gov.my/vision-2020/the-way-forward/.

At the official launch of the MPO's concert venue *Dewan Filharmonik PETRONAS* (DFP; in English, PETRONAS Philharmonic Hall) on August 18, 1998, its patron Siti Hasmah Mohamad Ali stated in her speech that the establishment was "indeed an achievement of another Malaysian dream"; and that "we have indeed arrived at another major milestone in our progress towards achieving the cultural agenda set out in Vision 2020."[37] By "another Malaysian dream", she probably was referring to other developments that Vision 2020 had mobilized, including the 1995 construction of Putrajaya, a federal government administrative center; the Multimedia Super Corridor, the Malaysian government's answer to Silicon Valley, inaugurated in 1996; the PETRONAS Twin Towers, recognized as the tallest buildings in the world from 1998 to 2004 and home of the PETRONAS Philharmonic Hall; Kuala Lumpur International Airport, launched in 1998; and Sepang International Circuit where the Formula One Malaysian Grand Prix has been held annually since 1999.

Z revealed that the intention to establish a Western orchestra originated in the offices of Mahathir, who delegated the task to Tan Sri Azizan Zainul Abidin (1935–2004), the chairman of Petroliam Nasional Berhad (better known as PETRONAS, a state-owned petroleum company). Z also disclosed that the start-up team that Azizan had hired were tasked "to find the 'very finest musicians in the world' because the MPO was being created specifically to showcase PETRONAS to fellow members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC)."[38] Z asserted that "Mahathir could never have sanctioned an orchestra for Malaysia itself since Malaysia is officially an Islamic country where Western Classical Music is regarded

[37] "Opening of Petronas Philharmonic Hall." Though it is public knowledge that Siti Hasmah (wife of Mahathir) is a Western classical music enthusiast, details of her appointment as the patron of the MPO, such as who appointed her, were never disclosed to the public.
[38] Z, personal email to author, April 16, 2020.

as 'haram.' "[39] After checking, however, I found that Malaysia has never officially been a member of OPEC despite its substantial net export of crude petroleum.[40] In fact, Mahathir openly criticized OPEC for its inability to stabilize oil prices in 2018. In recent interview with the United States-based financial news network CNBC (formerly known as Consumer News and Business Channel) on November 12, 2018, Mahathir was quoted as saying, "OPEC is not effective. They are always at loggerheads with each other so they cannot make decision."[41] Regardless, Mahathir's vision as reported by Z generally corresponds to the cover notes of the MPO program booklet dated May 3–5, 2002:

> It was a dream of PETRONAS to establish not only Dewan Filharmonik PETRONAS as an internationally-acclaimed [*sic*] concert hall, but also to build an orchestra which would command the respect of the international music community. Today, the MPO is fast realizing that dream. The orchestra is truly world-class [*sic*].[42]

We may conclude that the chief motive for founding the MPO was aspirational cosmopolitanism: to showcase Malaysia's economic power and cultural standing to its peers, much like other previously mentioned developments mobilized by Vision 2020.[43] Mari Yoshihara has written that although it was Western imperialism that brought WAM to Asia in the second half of the nineteenth century, the subsequent development of WAM in Japan, China, and Korea was fueled by the nation-building initiatives of their respective governments.[44] All of

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[39] Z, personal email to author, April 16, 2020. *Haram* in Arabic can be translated as "forbidden," the term is used in relation to something that is proscribed by Islamic law. For the permissibility of music in Islam (and by extension, WAM), see Lois Ibsen al Faruqi, "Music, Musicians and Muslim Law," *Asian Music* 17, no. 1 (1985): 3–36, https://doi.org/10.2307/833739.

[40] "Member Countries," Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, About Us, accessed April 2, 2022, https://www.opec.org/opec_web/en/about_us/25.htm.

[41] Yen Nee Lee, "'OPEC Is Not Effective,' Says Malaysia's Prime Minister," *CNBC*, updated November 13, 2018, 02:40 (EST), sec. Energy, https://www.cnbc.com/2018/11/13/malaysia-prime-minister-mahathir-mohamad-opec-is-not-effective.html.

[42] Marc Rochester, program notes for Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra, Chean See Ooi, conductor, Kun Woo Paik, piano, May 3–5, 2002, Dewan Filharmonik PETRONAS, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Program booklet; also corroborated by Z in personal email to author dated April 16, 2020.

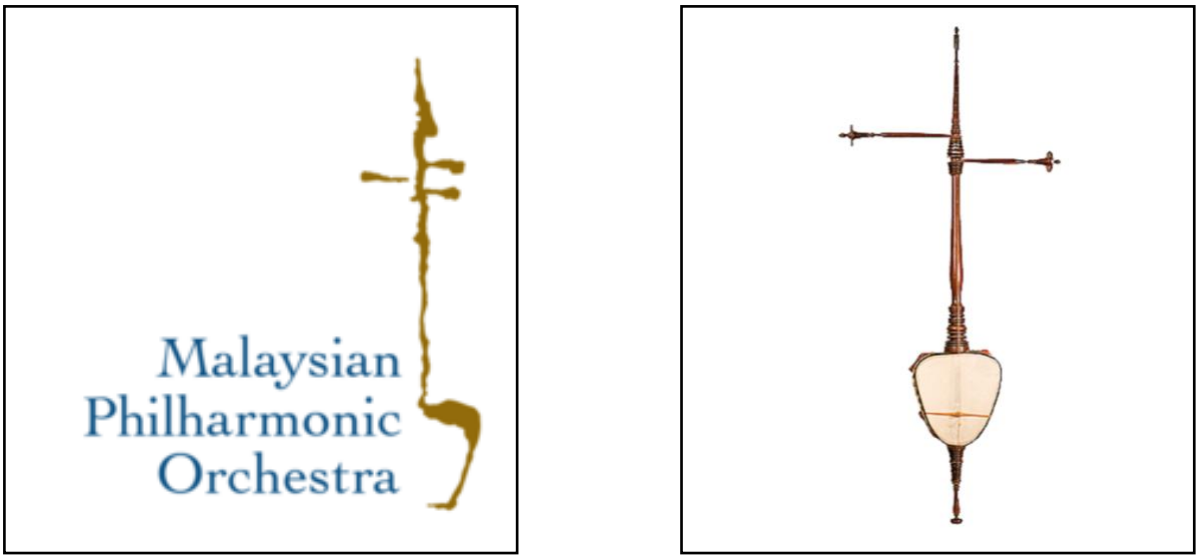
[43] The terminology "aspirational cosmopolitanism" was suggested by Dr. Shzr Ee Tan.

[44] Yoshihara, *Musicians from A Different Shore*, 14, and 18; see also Yang, "East Meets West," 3.

these countries have a distinct historical relationship with the West, yet in each case WAM is regarded as a symbol of modernism and status.[45] It is highly plausible that Mahathir founded the MPO to mirror similar pursuits of modernity in the East Asian region, albeit later than in some other countries. For instance, there were at least 14 Western symphony orchestras in Japan by the time the MPO was established. Tokyo alone had 6 orchestras by 1998, the oldest being Tokyo Philharmonic Orchestra, established in 1911. Other examples include the Taiwanese National Symphony Orchestra (founded 1945), Seoul Philharmonic Orchestra (founded 1948), and the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (founded 1978).

Perhaps for the sake of appearing modernized, the Malaysian government seems to have adopted the Western art tradition without desiring its symbiosis with local culture. On the surface, symbols selectively portrayed a harmonious union between elements from the Western and traditional Malay cultures. For instance, the MPO's logo takes a stylized form of the *rebab*, a bowed chordophone in traditional Malay music (Figure 1).[46]

Figure 1: Logo of MPO (left) and rebab from Javanese Gamelan Kyai Rengga Manis Everist (right)



[45] Yoshihara, *Musicians from A Different Shore*, 15.
[46] Rochester, program notes for Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra, May 3–5, 2002.

Sources: Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra, https://www.mpo.com.my (left); the Beede Gallery at the National Music Museum, University of South Dakota, http://collections.nmmusd.org/Gamelan/9870/Rebab9870.html (right).

In another example of symbolism, the philharmonic hall owns a Klais pipe organ (i.e., German) with a "façade inspired by a traditional Malay musical instrument, the *angklung*" (tuned bamboo idiophone of Indonesian origin).[47] Figure 2 shows the bamboo façade of the pipe organ housed in DFP; while Figure 3 shows two examples of *angklung*.

Figure 2: Klais pipe organ in Dewan Filharmonik PETRONAS

Sources: Dewan Filharmonik PETRONAS, https://www.dfp.com.my/klais-pipe-organ.

[47] Rochester, program notes for Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra, April 16–18, 1999.

Figure 3: Single-pitch angklung (top left) and eight-pitch angklung (bottom right)

Sources: Royalty-free images from Shutterstock, (top left) https://www.shutterstock.com/image-photo/angklung-traditional-sundanese-musical-instrument-made-1390814213; and (bottom right) https://www.shutterstock.com/image-photo/angklung-traditional-instrument-indonesia-isolated-on-1362816062.

The program of the MPO's inaugural concert in 1998, however, belied these token gestures. Works played included Richard Strauss's symphonic poem, *Don Juan*, and Gioachino Rossini's *William Tell Overture*; the concert programmed neither Malaysian folk music, nor compositions by local WAM composers.[48] Yoshihara has argued that the adoption of WAM in many East Asian countries has affected traditional or folk Asian music negatively over time, as the traditional and folk music have come to be considered either as "low class or as a rarefied art form and a legacy of premodern times"; while Western music has come to be regarded as "prestigious" and a form of cultural capital among the educated middle classes across East Asia.[49] This process of devaluing the local may underlie what I view as the lack of local

[48] "Opening of Petronas Philharmonic Hall"; and Rastam, "Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra's Downsizing."
[49] Yoshihara, *Musicians from A Different Shore*, 33, 193.

resistance towards the continuing import and practice of WAM in Malaysia. Any in-depth assimilations between WAM and local music, for example, might even dilute the perceived prestige of this Western artform, depreciating its cultural currency and symbolism in postcolonial Malaysian eyes.

1.2 Controversies in Hiring Practices

In order to show that the MPO's hiring practices are controversial, this section examines the MPO's initial recruitment process in 1997, its funding, outreach programs, and recent hiring trends. My findings will also show that these controversies reflected the first public awareness of the orchestra's alleged monthly expenses as well as local sentiments against the orchestra's hiring practices.

1.2.1 Recruitment Process in 1997

According to the "Timeline of Significant Events" published in an MPO program booklet dated May 3–5, 2002, the idea to establish the MPO was conceived in 1994.[50] The booklet stated that the classical music division of International Management Group (IMG Artists, based in New York) was appointed management and operational consultants for the start-up project in 1996, and that "advertisements [were] placed worldwide announcing auditions to select suitable musicians for the new orchestra" in May 1997.[51] Two years after the MPO was founded, the *South China Morning Post* reported more details concerning the orchestra's recruitment process in 1997. In an article titled "Superior Sounds of Malaysia's Orchestra," journalist Victoria Finlay detailed that IMG Artists sent its experts worldwide to audition six hundred shortlisted musicians

[50] Rochester, program notes for Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra, May 3–5, 2002.
[51] Rochester, program notes for Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra, May 3–5, 2002. The official website of IMG Artists has also mentioned its appointment as operational consultant to PETRONAS for the establishment of the MPO, see "History," IMG Artists, accessed April 1, 2022, https://imgartists.com/history/.

selected from about three thousand applications from various countries.[52] Finlay stated that the resulting orchestra was formed with 105 musicians from twenty-two nations, including "concert masters from Norway and Germany, a co-concert master from Britain and musicians from the United States, Ukraine, Hungary, France, the Netherlands, and Australia."[53] Ian Smallbone, one of the IMG management consultants involved in the project, was quoted as saying:

> The consultants suggested filling the hall with a mix of international performers – and so far have attracted top musicians including Sir Neville Marriner, the late Yehudi Menuhin and José Carreras – with a top international quality resident orchestra.[54]

It appears clear that the MPO's recruitment process had had little local engagement, for IMG mentioned neither local advertising nor nationwide auditions. This bypassing of potential Malaysian players is further corroborated by the program booklet dated March 15–16, 2008, which stated that the "initial search in 1997 for outstanding musicians involved a worldwide audition tour."[55] It remains unclear whether the decision to disregard Malaysian participants stemmed from IMG or PETRONAS, but it is likely that they had joint input in the matter.

There have been varied approaches to establishing a Western symphony orchestra in non-Western states. One approach, for instance, is to build an orchestra from the ground up like what the Western Asian nation of Oman has accomplished. Like Malaysia, Oman is a Muslim nation that had been under British colonial rule (as a British Protectorate from 1891) before gaining independence in 1951. Sultan Qaabos bin Said (1940–2020; sultan of Oman from 1970 to 2020),

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[52] Victoria Finlay, "Superior Sounds of Malaysia's Orchestra," *South China Morning Post*, March 30, 2000, 00:00 (UTC +8), https://www.scmp.com/article/312341/superior-sounds-malaysias-orchestra.
[53] Finlay, "Superior Sounds of Malaysia's Orchestra." Other conflicting accounts claimed 21 nations (Rochester, program notes for Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra, April 16–18, 1999); 24 (Z, personal email to author, April 16, 2020); and 25 ("Meet the MPO," Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra, About Us, accessed December 10, 2021, https://www.mpo.com.my/aboutus).
[54] Finlay, "Superior Sounds of Malaysia's Orchestra."
[55] Marc Rochester, "Stravinsky's Rite of Spring," program notes for Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra, Thierry Fischer, conductor, Andreas Haefliger, piano, March 15–16, 2008, Dewan Filharmonik PETRONAS, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Program booklet.

who led the modernization of the country, once lived in Britain and served briefly in the British army before he ascended the throne.[56] The sultan was passionate about Western classical music and would often fly in British orchestras to the Sultanate to provide entertainment at his palace.[57] His vision for a Western orchestra made up of Omani players was realized when he founded the Royal Oman Symphony Orchestra in 1985. At the inception of the orchestra, young talents were scoured from around the country and nurtured in specialized boarding schools where musical training was provided. These students, most of whom had no prior formal musical training, received instrumental tuition from highly qualified British instructors brought specifically to the Sultanate.[58] "The intention was to prevent the young musicians spending their most impressionable years abroad and thus running the risk of losing touch with their own culture."[59] Today, the Royal Oman Symphony Orchestra is known to perform compositions by local Omani composers who integrate traditional folk music with Western compositional techniques.

Another approach to establishing an orchestra is to sponsor young musicians overseas to further their training, as in the case of the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO, established 1978). The SSO started out as a grassroots orchestra, "formed primarily by local classical music lovers who raised funds individually and through business sponsorship."[60] Since the SSO's founding, the orchestra has provided music scholarships for talented young Singaporeans to be trained overseas so that they can join the SSO upon their return. The first batch of returning SSO scholars who joined the orchestra was in 1982.[61] When the SSO first began, the orchestra

[56] Yaroslav Trofimov, "Oman's Sultan Carries On Crusade of One To Enrich His Nation With Classical Music," *Wall Street Journal*, December 14, 2001, 12:01 (EST), https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB1008280155599632840.
[57] Trofimov, "Oman's Sultan Carries On Crusade."
[58] Trofimov, "Oman's Sultan Carries On Crusade."
[59] "Royal Oman Symphony Orchestra," Arabia Felix, accessed January 31, 2022, https://www.oman.de/en/society/culture/music-dance/the-royal-oman-symphony-orchestra/.
[60] Proarte, "Philharmonic Orchestra Nothing But Elitist Extravaganza."
[61] "40 Years of Great Music," Singapore Symphony Orchestra, About Us, SSO at 40, accessed February 6, 2022, https://www.sso.org.sg/sso40/timeline.

initially held concerts in a humble multipurpose hall for two years. Victoria Concert Hall, refurbished to serve as a concert hall in the 1970s, became their home in 1980, and remains so today. Since the Esplanade Theatres on the Bay opened in 2002, the SSO has also performed a few concerts at the Esplanade Concert Hall each concert season. By contrast, the MPO was created from "top down, with no public consultation, [and] no talks with stakeholders."[62] Housed within PETRONAS, the world's tallest twin towers, the MPO has all the trappings of "Malaysian" modernism and cultural prestige. In a loud, clear statement to Malaysia's peer countries, the orchestra with its European players was designed to fill the opulent PETRONAS Philharmonic Hall, a state-financed venue for WAM that is full of Western trappings such as superior acoustics designed by Kirkegaard & Associates, and a state-of-the-art recording studio modelled after the legendary Abbey Road Studios of the EMI Group.[63]

1.2.2 State Funding

The Malaysian government's backing of the MPO stirred up controversy when the lavish state funding for the orchestra first came to light in 2008 in the lower house of Parliament (*Dewan Rakyat*).[64] Member of Parliament Guan Eng Lim divulged that PETRONAS paid "RM 3.5 million (CAD 1,098,126) [per] month to maintain the [orchestra] musicians" (in comparison, Malaysian GDP per capita in 2008 was CAD 10,798).[65] The news incited a public outcry about the wages of expatriate MPO musicians, as well as the high cost of running the orchestra that were footed by PETRONAS. One critic who wrote in to *Malaysiakini* under the pseudonym of

[62] Rastam, "Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra's Downsizing."
[63] "Dewan Filharmonik PETRONAS at a Glance," Dewan Filharmonik PETRONAS, About Us, accessed February 1, 2022, https://www.dfp.com.my/about-us; and "Sound & Recording Systems," Dewan Filharmonik PETRONAS, The Concert Hall, accessed February 1, 2022, https://www.dfp.com.my/sound-recording-systems.
[64] The MPO's official revenues and expenditure records have never been released to the public.
[65] Fauwaz Abdul Aziz, "Philharmonic Orchestra: The Sound of Wastage," *Malaysiakini* (Petaling Jaya), May 13, 2008, 06:42 (UTC +8), News, https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/82794.

Proarte alleged that PETRONAS had spent RM 500 million (CAD 156,875,150) on the MPO from 1998 to 2008.[66] Proarte also criticized the orchestra's extravagant choices in casting guest performers. According to Proarte, the MPO had flown in the one-hundred-member Melbourne Symphony Orchestra Chorus and four foreign soloists for the performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in 2008. The cost of this undertaking was estimated by Proarte to be RM 700,000 (CAD 210,877), but box office sales could only reach a maximum of RM 120,000 (CAD 36,150).[67]

While the inaccessibility of official sources about MPO's finances means that the above charges are conjectural, a comparison of funding between the MPO and other local symphony orchestras suggests that the Malaysian government prioritized the MPO.[68] Before the founding of the MPO in 1998, another state-supported symphony orchestra was already operating in Kuala Lumpur, albeit under the radar. Only five years earlier in 1993, the Malaysian Ministry of Culture and Tourism (currently known as the Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and Culture) had established the National Symphony Orchestra (NSO) as the resident orchestra of the country's National Theatre.[69] According to a local newspaper, *Malay Mail*, the NSO was formed "to represent Malaysia in the [Western] classical music arena. Its mission includes providing a stage for Malaysians who wanted to become full-time musicians, and promoting local content."[70]

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[66] Proarte, "Philharmonic Orchestra Nothing But Elitist Extravaganza." To date, PETRONAS and the MPO have neither confirmed nor denied these allegations. Without the MPO's official records to countercheck these figures, it may not be possible to ascertain the reliability of these allegations.
[67] Proarte, "Philharmonic Orchestra Nothing But Elitist Extravaganza."
[68] One possible avenue for future research is to analyze the potential neo-colonial impetus behind the founding and institutional support of the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra, as well as to study how this institution came to occupy a "mainstream" position in the arts institution mappings of Hong Kong. I thank Dr. Shzr Ee Tan for this suggestion.
[69] Prior to 1993, the NSO existed under another name as the Youth Symphony Orchestra (established in 1982).
[70] Melanie Chalil, "25 Years On, Malaysia's National Symphony Orchestra Says Not Enough Funds to Hold Concerts," *Malay Mail*, November 13, 2018, 17:32 (MYT) Home, Life, https://www.malaymail.com/news/life/2018/11/13/25-years-on-malaysias-national-symphony-orchestra-says-not-enough-funds-to/1693019.

Journalist Dinesh Kumar Maganathan wrote an article on the NSO in 2018, reporting that the NSO was once led by a Japanese conductor named Teruoki Oguara, and that it had benefited from donations of musical instruments from the Japanese government in its early years.[71] Although Maganathan has not provided further details of the connection between the NSO and Japan, it is possible that the appointment of a Japanese conductor and the instrument donations were linked to the connections established between Malaysia and Japan via the "Look East Policy."

In an interview for the NSO's twenty-fifth anniversary celebration in 2018, music director and chief conductor Datuk Mustafa Fuzer Nawi commented that "the NSO, to some extent, is not as highly visible as Mustafa [i.e., he himself] wants it to be in the mainstream circles," and that "many people don't [*sic*] even know that the NSO exists."[72] At the time, the NSO had forty-one full-time orchestra players who were largely Malaysians. Mustafa added that the orchestra's growth and recruitment process were "confined by red tape," and that "the ministry [of Tourism, Arts, and Culture] has to give artistes under its wings adequate funding and listen to those who have the artistic knowledge and skill set."[73] Mustafa also spoke about the NSO's financial situation:

> Due to the lack of government funding, … the NSO can only perform twelve to fourteen concerts a year compared to other well-funded orchestras which are able to put up at least one concert every other week. For a concert, such as a classical concert, the cost will add up from RM 80,000 to RM 120,000. This cost occurs due to the number of guest musicians that we have to invite to meet the requirement of each performance, as currently the number of NSO musicians is still not complete ... per concert, we need, at

[71] Dinesh Kumar Maganathan, "National Symphony Orchestra Marks 25th Anniversary with Youthful Outlook," *Star*, November 15, 2018, 11:20 (UTC +8), sec. Lifestyle, Arts, https://www.thestar.com.my/lifestyle/culture/2018/11/15/national-symphony-orchestra-istana-budaya-mustafa-fuzer-nawi-classical-pop.
[72] Maganathan, "National Symphony Orchestra Marks 25th Anniversary."
[73] Chalil, "25 Years On."

> least, a strength of sixty to seventy musicians. The problem that we are facing currently is that we don't [*sic*] have fixed cultural funding and sponsorship.[74]

Apart from the NSO, at least four other private symphony orchestras have been established in Malaysia since 2006, with partial government funding. These are the Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre Orchestra (2006), Penang Philharmonic Orchestra and Chorus (2008), Selangor Symphony Orchestra (2015), and Selangor Philharmonic Orchestra (2012). These orchestras are privately funded with the occasional aid of non-renewable state funding; and they rely on ticket sales, private sponsorships, and public donations to stay afloat. In particular, the Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre Orchestra practices profit-sharing between the management, production team, and performers. Local musicians (amateurs and professionals alike) comprise the membership of all the abovementioned orchestras. While some members are undergraduate students, most are freelancers whose livelihoods come from a combination of teaching music and playing gigs, and who are keen to find paid performing opportunities within the niche WAM sector in Malaysia.

1.2.3 Localization Efforts

My findings will demonstrate that there has been marginal growth in the number of locals players in the MPO. Based on my calculation, the percentage of Malaysian musicians had increased from 5.7% in 1998 to 9.9% in 2021.[75] The *New Straits Times* reported in 1998 that there were six Malaysian musicians when the orchestra was first founded; the *South China*

[74] Maganathan, "National Symphony Orchestra Marks 25th Anniversary." The approximate conversion of RM 80,000 to RM 120,000 is CAD 24,295 to CAD 36,442.
[75] The calculation is based on the figure of six Malaysians out of 105 MPO musicians in 1998, according to "Opening of Petronas Philharmonic Hall"; and seven Malaysians out of seventy-one MPO musicians in 2021, according to Rastam's article "Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra's Downsizing."

Morning Post claimed in 2000 that only four Malaysian musicians were hired at the beginning.[76] In 2021, there were seven Malaysians among seventy-one full-time musicians."[77] Intriguingly, the *South China Morning Post* stressed that the Malaysians included in the opening lineup of the MPO have "all … studied overseas."[78]

Various local authors had written to *Malaysiakini* from 2008 to 2017 to voice their concerns about the MPO's exclusionary hiring practices. In 2008, one critic under the pseudonym of Malaysian for Equality called the orchestra "a misnomer" because 95% of its musicians were non-Malaysians.[79] In 2017, journalist and editor P. Gunasegaram expressed that "Petronas has been terribly remiss in terms of getting more Malaysians involved [in the MPO]" in his article titled "PETRONAS' Greatest Localisation Failure."[80] Describing his own experience at a MPO concert that he attended in 2017, Gunasegaram recalled, "when I scanned the members of the MPO [on the stage] from left to right, I saw a sea of white faces peering down at me."[81] Given the huge sum of funding that PETRONAS has invested in the MPO, it is understandable that those writing for the Malaysian public have openly criticized the orchestra's minimal engagement with local talents.

Proarte claimed that "the foreign predominance of the orchestra including the invited soloists and conductors, is a deliberate policy by the Malay powers that be to undermine local Chinese talents."[82] Moreover, Proarte "[saw] a concerted effort by the powers that be to curtail or even stifle [the development of the Malaysian art scene]. [Proarte] believe[d] it is linked to a

[76] "Opening of Petronas Philharmonic Hall"; and Finlay, "Superior Sounds of Malaysia's Orchestra."
[77] Rastam, "Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra's Downsizing."
[78] Finlay, "Superior Sounds of Malaysia's Orchestra."
[79] Malaysian for Equality [pseud.], "MPO Not Making the Right Kind of Music," *Malaysiakini* (Petaling Jaya), April 24, 2008, 03:57 (UTC+8), Letter to the editor. https://www.malaysiakini.com/letters/81872.
[80] P. Gunasegaram, "PETRONAS' Greatest Localisation Failure," *Malaysiakini* (Petaling Jaya), April 13, 2017, 20:01 (UTC +8), Columns, https://www.malaysiakini.com/columns/378976.
[81] Gunasegaram, "PETRONAS' Greatest Localisation Failure."
[82] Proarte, personal email to author, March 14, 2020.

fascist mindset which sees individual artistic or collaborative artistic expression of citizens as a threat to their [i.e., the Malaysian government's] hegemonic control."[83]

In a personal email to author in April 2020, Z conveyed that there was no intention to include Malaysians in the orchestra because the MPO "was never intended to showcase Malaysians but to showcase Malaysia."[84] Interestingly, this information has emerged only through my research; the government's goal of showcasing Malaysia with an orchestra *sans* Malaysians has never been openly articulated and publicized. In the context of postcolonial efforts to unify the multicultural nation, including musically, the MPO appears to be a living contradiction.

An analysis of the orchestra's official publications reveals that the institution has been evasive about the issue since its founding. The program booklet of its opening season introduced the orchestra as a "multi-cultural and international orchestra" and commended the establishment for "contribut[ing] to the richness and diversity of the evolving musical culture of Malaysia."[85] The back cover of the booklet also included a joint acknowledgement from the management of PETRONAS Philharmonic Hall and the MPO:

> The international nature of this project also reflects the very international and *multi-cultural make-up of Malaysia*. It has been said that music crosses all cultural and geographical boundaries and we believe we are already achieving that. Thank you and congratulations to all those involved.[86]

There was no mention of Malaysian players at all in the first eighteen seasons, up until 2016.[87] The 2016 and 2017 seasons brochures claimed that there were seven Malaysians in the

[83] Proarte, personal email to author, May 27, 2020.
[84] Z, personal email to author, April 16, 2020.
[85] Rochester, program notes for Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra, April 16–18, 1999.
[86] Rochester, program notes for Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra, April 16–18, 1999. Emphasis mine.
[87] *Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra at Dewan Filharmonik PETRONAS: 2015/16 Season Concert Calendar* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Filharmonik PETRONAS, 2015), 42, accessed February 11, 2022, https://docplayer.net/44507194-2015-16-malaysian-philharmonic-orchestra.html.

orchestra; the number had dropped to four in 2018.[88] The 2019 and 2020 seasons ceased to specify the exact number of local players altogether, opting for a sweeping phrase that introduced the MPO as "a symphony orchestra made up of musicians from twenty-five nations, *including Malaysians*."[89] Over the years, the rhetoric appeared to steer away from narratives that had (somewhat paradoxically) underscored the lack of Malaysian performers in the orchestra. The word "multicultural" from the opening season was eventually removed, while narratives of globalization and cosmopolitanism were brought into focus by 2002. This is demonstrated by phrases such as: the MPO being "a remarkable harmony of *diverse cultures* and nationalities."[90] More tellingly, the 2013 season brochure replaced "*diverse cultures*" with "*different cultures*," a phrase that remained on its publications until 2020.[91]

Whose culture exactly do these narratives refer to? The diverse cultures of the three main ethnic groups in Malaysia, or the non-Malaysian cultures that the orchestra represents? Arguably, to avoid fanning the flames of their controversial recruitment decisions, the MPO's ambiguous language attempts to draw attention away from current social debates in Malaysia about

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[88] *Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra at Dewan Filharmonik PETRONAS: 2016/17 Season* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Filharmonik PETRONAS, 2016), 45, accessed February 11, 2022, https://issuu.com/mpomalaysia/docs/season_brochure_online; *Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra: 2017/18 Season at Dewan Filharmonik PETRONAS* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Filharmonik PETRONAS, 2017), 38, accessed February 11, 2022, https://issuu.com/mpomalaysia/docs/e-_brochure_2017-2018_pages; *Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra: Anniversary Special Aug–Dec 2018* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Filharmonik PETRONAS, 2018), 34, accessed February 11, 2022, https://issuu.com/mpomalaysia/docs/anniversary_special_brochure_2018_i.

[89] *Dewan Filharmonik PETRONAS: Home of the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra, 2019 Season* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Filharmonik PETRONAS, 2019), 42, accessed February 11, 2022, https://issuu.com/mpomalaysia/docs/2019_season_brochure_online; *Dewan Filharmonik PETRONAS: Home of the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra, 2020 Season* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Filharmonik PETRONAS, 2020), 62, accessed February 11, 2022, https://issuu.com/mpomalaysia/docs/season_brochure_2020_version01. Emphasis mine.

[90] Marc Rochester, "Dmitri Kabalevsky: Overture to *Colas Breugnon*, op. 24a; Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky: Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-flat Minor, op. 23; and Modest Mussorgsky: *Pictures at an Exhibition*," program notes for Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra, Dato' Chean See Ooi, conductor, Vladimir Feltsman, piano, August 25, 2002, Dewan Filharmonik PETRONAS, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Program booklet. Emphasis mine.

[91] *Dewan Filharmonik PETRONAS Featuring the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra: 2013/14 Season Concert Calendar* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Filharmonik PETRONAS, 2013), 8, accessed February 11, 2022, https://pdfslide.net/documents/2013-14-season-brochure.html?page=7; *DFP: Home of the MPO, 2020 Season*, 62. Emphasis mine.

multiculturalism and diversity. It is possible that in response to growing local sentiments, the 2008 exposé on the MPO musicians' salaries led to the modification in the narratives in 2013. Furthermore, the negative publicity from the exposé may have resulted in budget cuts to music sponsored by the government, even though these cuts may not have affected the MPO but did touch another PETRONAS-sponsored organization – the PETRONAS Performing Arts Group (PPAG). PPAG used to promote and perform traditional Malay music and dance at the PETRONAS Philharmonic Hall, but it was disbanded in 2012.[92]

1.2.4 Encounter Program

One factor that may have contributed to the lack of Malaysian musicians in the MPO is its short-sighted outreach programs. Launched since 1999, MPO's Encounter is an education and outreach program with a vision statement to "[reach] beyond the concert platform to develop musical awareness and appreciation through dedicated activities at such diverse venues as schools, colleges, hospitals, and community centres."[93] Currently, the program offers school concerts, pre-concert events, music appreciation events, and open rehearsals to increase the local community's exposure to WAM.

Between 2004 and 2007, the Encounter program launched the MPO Forum for Malaysian Composers. These Forums, a brainchild of then Associate Conductor Kevin Field, provided a competitive platform through which new compositions by Malaysian composers were promoted and premiered.[94] The series was discontinued at the conclusion of the second Forum in 2007 when Field left the MPO. Since then, there have been no new commissions and few collaborations between the MPO and the former participants of the Forum. Once, the NSO was

[92] Rastam, "Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra's Downsizing." For more details on PPAG, see Chapter Three.
[93] *DFP: Home of the MPO, 2020 Season*, 62.
[94] Lena Pek Hung Lie, "Music of the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra (MPO) Forum 2 Finalists: Reflections on Malaysian Multiculturalism," *Wacana Seni* 12 (2013): 57–81, https://mcgill.on.worldcat.org/oclc/5496555041.

invited to perform jointly with the MPO on August 21–22, 2015.[95] Other outreach activities of the MPO include recent choral productions involving the local community such as Kuala Lumpur City Opera (established 2012); and university choirs such as Dithyrambic Singers (established 2005), and UCSI University Chorale. Opportunities for such local participation tend to be special concerts or one-time events.

Thus far, the MPO's most significant outreach effort has been the founding of the Malaysian Philharmonic Youth Orchestra (MPYO) in 2006. The youth orchestra provides performing opportunities and short-term training in the form of music camps held four times each year to Malaysians aged twelve to twenty-eight.[96] Nevertheless, the MPYO's offerings to young Malaysian talents are limited, as scholarships or internships with long-term goals and employment contracts such as those put in place by the SSO have never been offered. Since the MPYO was established, only one former MPYO member is known to be employed as a full-time MPO member. This situation contradicts the orchestra's publication from 2002 that "members of the MPO also have a mission to impart their skills and expertise to Malaysian youth so that the orchestra will be able to grow and sustain itself with *homegrown* talent."[97]

In 2021, Saidah Rastam commented in *The Edge Malaysia* that "knowledge transfer was never a priority" for the orchestra. Rastam cited one of MPO's founding musicians, "I do not think it was ever part of the plan to train Malaysians to be musicians; more to entice major investment to the country by showing it was as good as the West when it came to costly cultural pursuits."[98] Even though the MPO was not obligated to train homegrown talents "any more than

[95] *MPO: 2015/16 Season Concert Calendar*, 8.
[96] "The MPYO is Celebrating its Tenth Anniversary With a Series of Concerts," Going Places, Malaysian Airlines, June 2017, accessed April 22, 2022, https://goingplaces.malaysiaairlines.com/celebrating-a-decade-of-music/.
[97] Rochester, program notes for Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra, May 3–5, 2002. Emphasis mine.
[98] Rastam, "Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra's Downsizing."

Petronas-sponsored Lewis Hamilton should have to coach our young drivers," Rastam questioned if PETRONAS should continue funding the orchestra because it has little Malaysian representation.[99]

Other, less successful past initiatives of MPO's Encounter over the last twenty-three years include the notion of a music academy staffed by MPO players, and educational programs that were never realized, resulting in criticisms that the outreach efforts were half-hearted and mere "publicity stunts."[100] Two research participants, Participants G and L, were able to provide more details about an abandoned educational program of the MPO named Generating Enrichment through Music Awareness (GEMA). They had been responsible for planning a pilot program which involved sending orchestra musicians to five local schools to provide school children with training in basic musicianship and to introduce them to Western music. At the conclusion of the training sessions, the children were supposed to attend the MPO's "Family Fun Day" concerts. One year after planning began, PETRONAS management scrapped the program before the program was launched. Participant G disclosed that the program was "rejected from the top [levels of management]" based on the reason that "world-class musicians" should not be sent "to sit on the floor and teach the children how to clap [in] rhythm." In other words, the highly paid MPO players should reserve their talent for paying audiences in the gilded philharmonic hall, where the musicians (and music) rightly belonged. Tellingly, this incident exposes the gap between the management's rhetoric and its action. This attitude signifies a racially constructed hierarchy and elitist privilege within the organization that may have impacted the effectiveness of their outreach programs.

[99] Rastam, "Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra's Downsizing."
[100] Malaysian for Equality, "MPO Not Making the Right Kind of Music."

1.3 Implications Linked to Cultural Hegemony

Why did this Muslim nation pour so much money into establishing and maintaining the MPO, a Western orchestra that does not appear to prioritize Malaysian WAM musicians? I argue that the issues of globalism, universalism, and cultural proprietorship are contributing factors to the Malaysian government's backing of the MPO as well as PETRONAS's recruitment preferences.

According to Z, the MPO was initially conceived as PETRONAS's resident orchestra for in-house performances, and it had no mandate to open its doors to the Malaysian public.[101] Z felt that "the fundamental misunderstanding of why the MPO was created has led to much unpleasantness which could have been avoided by proper management responses to misinformed criticism."[102] In addition, Z claimed that "Malaysia, rather like Singapore, is blinded by the use of the word 'Western' to describe music" because they misunderstand the word "Western" in this context to mean "an ethnicity with its own distinct culture." Z further explained that what is referred to as "Western music" merely indicates the origins of its musical notation – in this case, the West; before adding that: "Were we to label it 'global' music or even 'universal' music (which it is), such issues would not arise."[103]

These responses imply attitudes and assumptions that can be linked to cultural hegemony, and thus, they need unpacking. If Z's justifications indeed reflect the attitudes of the orchestra's management, this could mean that the MPO might potentially perpetuate neo-colonial values within the sector. First, Z's comments about globalism indicates an expected, uncritical acceptance of what critics and scholars have acknowledged as an ideology entrenched in colonial

[101] Z, personal email to author, April 16, 2020. This corroborated with Finlay's account, that there was no ticket office in the MPO's original plans. See Finlay, "Superior Sounds of Malaysia's Orchestra."
[102] Z, personal email to author, April 16, 2020.
[103] Z, personal email to author, April 16, 2020.

power structures perpetuated by European imperialism.[104] The globalist view of cultural homogeneity is problematic because it can be interpreted as "a form of domination by 'First World' countries over 'Third World' ones, in which individual distinctions of culture and society become erased by an increasingly homogeneous global culture."[105] Second, Z's assumption that WAM is "universal" is also a Eurocentric notion linked to Western imperialism.

Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin have written that "universalism offers a hegemonic view of existence by which the experiences, values, and expectations of a dominant culture are held to be true for all humanity."[106] In other words, this notion neglects to acknowledge cultural diversities but assumes a common humanity across cultures, for example in fields such as English literature, Western science, and Western mathematics. In the latter field, Alan Bishop has debunked the myth that perceives Western mathematics as universal and therefore culturally neutral. He argued that "mathematical ideas are humanly constructed" and hence, a product of cultural history.[107] In music studies, Mina Yang has contended that "the erasure of race in classical music discourses is part and parcel of the Western imperialistic agenda that rendered European high culture universal and all other cultures ethnically marked and thus non-normative."[108]

Notions of globalism and universalism could be two of the implicit factors in PETRONAS's preference for musicians of European heritage to represent an orchestra in a

[104] Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, 3rd ed. (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), "globalization," 127, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/mcgill/detail.action?docID=1244807.
[105] Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies*, "globalization," 128–9; see also Marjorie Ferguson, "The Mythology About Globalization," *European Journal of Communication* 7, no. 1 (1992): 86–8, https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323192007001004.
[106] Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies*, "universalism/universality," 268–70.
[107] Alan Bishop, "Western Mathematics: The Secret Weapon of Cultural Imperialism," *Race and Class* 32, no. 2 (1990): 52, https://doi.org/10.1177/030639689003200204.
[108] Yang, "East Meets West," 23.

postcolonial nation. Sure enough, the rhetoric about the purported globality and universality of WAM is evident within MPO program booklets, such as one from its inaugural 1998 season:

> The MPO was born out of the desire to establish a *world-class concert hall and orchestra* in Kuala Lumpur, similar to those in every other major city in the world… The vision was that this orchestra would not only contribute to the social well-being and development of Malaysia, but would also become a new cultural ambassador for the nation, one that could contribute to a more *global* culture and communicate through the *universal* language of music.[109]

Arguably, Eurocentric notions of cultural superiority and proprietorship could have undermined the perceived desirability of Malaysian musicians to be the face of PETRONAS's "world-class concert hall and orchestra." Yoshihara has written that Asian classical musicians have often received compliments on their performances that are tinged with a pleasant surprise. This shows that their musical "authenticity" is questioned because WAM is "not a part" of their Asian identity, heritage, and culture.[110] Underpinning this anecdote is an essentialist assumption that since cultural traditions are bounded by geography and/or ethnicity, Western musicians possess an innate authenticity on account of their national or ethnic heritage, one that they share with the Western composers whose music they perform, thereby positioning Asian musicians as "cultural outsiders."[111] Agreeing with Yoshihara, Yang states that "old paradigms of cultural proprietorship and political domination still inform aesthetic judgments and can shape the reception of Asian musicians on the international … musical stage."[112] Therefore, it is challenging for Asian musicians, as "outsiders," to be perceived as being on equal footing with Western musicians.

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[109] Rochester, program notes for Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra, April 16–18, 1999. Emphasis mine. Other usages of "universal language," "cultural heritage," and "classical music" can be found from "Education and Outreach," Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra, accessed March 5, 2021, https://www.mpo.com.my/encounter.
[110] Yoshihara, *Musicians from A Different Shore*, 189.
[111] Yoshihara, *Musicians from A Different Shore*, 192, 199, 223.
[112] Yang, "East Meets West," 16.

Yoshihara and Yang's arguments could apply to the WAM scene in Malaysia. The MPO's minimal efforts to recruit locally over the years may reflect a self-inflicted prejudice that Malaysians are "outsiders" in WAM. Evidence from MPO program booklets suggests that the notion of cultural ownership pervades at both the institutional and individual levels. This is demonstrated in MPO's marketing rhetoric and the reception of the orchestra among WAM consumers. The 1999 program booklet cited a review of the MPO from UK-based music and dance critic Hans-Theodor Wohlfart, "It's [*sic*] on the way to becoming – if it isn't [*sic*] already – the best orchestra in Southeast Asia, and that includes Auckland and Melbourne."[113] Meanwhile, the 2008 booklet claimed that "A tribute to the MPO's international stature is the host of truly great musicians who have been attracted to perform with them," including Mstislav Rostropovich, Jiří Bělohlávek, Vadim Repin, Jean-Yves Thibaudet, Kiri Te Kanawa, and Sumi Jo.[114] Similarly, the MPO website prints supportive statements from renowned musicians, many of whom are successful classical musicians from the West. Such statements may be an attempt by the orchestra to legitimize or validate itself to both Malaysians and the world:

> A host of internationally-acclaimed [*sic*] musicians have performed with the MPO including Lorin Maazel, Sir Neville Marriner, Yehudi Menuhin, Joshua Bell, Harry Connick Jr., José Carreras, Andrea Bocelli, Dame Kiri Te Kanawa, Vladimir Ashkenazy, Chris Botti, and Branford Marsalis, many of whom have praised the MPO for its fine musical qualities and vitality.[115]

Despite the irony that the MPO is an orchestra that essentially belies its name, its inaugural season was very well-received among the Malaysian public. The orchestra reportedly experienced full houses, rave reviews, and standing ovations in its opening months. One reviewer wrote, "Audiences have often expressed their delight that they 'can't [*sic*] believe that it

[113] Rochester, program notes for Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra, August 25, 2002.
[114] Rochester, program notes for Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra, March 15–16, 2008.
[115] "Meet the MPO."

is actually real – world-class musicians, world-class music, in a world-class venue right here in Malaysia!' "[116] It is intriguing that enthusiastic accolades were directed to an orchestra that featured few Malaysian players. Thus, it raises questions as to whether the accolades themselves were conceived in racialized terms, and whether the value judgment of the music performances was colored by the fact that these orchestral players were mostly of European ancestry. In hindsight, this ostensible partiality in a postcolonial society towards Western musicians strikes a disturbing chord, for the attribution of cultural superiority to "whiteness" might simply re-inscribe a subaltern complex that disempowers the colonized in the long term.[117]

Interestingly, the orchestra's marketing rhetoric has seemingly indoctrinated the local WAM community over the years, to the extent that phrases mirroring those from the MPO program booklets (such as "world-class musicians") also found their way into my interviewees' responses. For example, Participant D expressed that "the MPO is our only gateway to [a] world-class performance." Participant K, a music academic, justified that the "MPO, they do provide student fee [i.e., ticket price] for just ten *ringgit*, twenty *ringgit*. As long as you're a student, you can enjoy your world-class concert in [*sic*] just ten, twenty bucks." Other participants also used similar phrases, including G, who referred to the orchestra members as "world-class musicians"; as well as L, who described the MPO as an orchestra of "world-class standard." This led me to believe that the Eurocentric notions and ideals that fill the program booklets, may have crept into the subconscious of MPO's patrons as well.

The government's positioning of the MPO at the top of the Malaysian cultural institution hierarchy, the attribution of MPO's international status, and the state financial endorsement have

[116] Rochester, program notes for Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra, April 16–18, 1999.
[117] Kok, "Music for a Postcolonial Child," 85.

uncovered the implicit prejudices linked to cultural hegemony.[118] Arguably, the institutionally sanctioned import of the MPO has created far-reaching repercussions because any uncritical adoption of Eurocentric cultural models could inadvertently repeat the colonial-era belief in "the need for the colonized to be 'raised up' through colonial contact."[119] Still, the establishment of the MPO could be interpreted as a form of cultural enrichment to the local community. The orchestra provides classical music entertainment in an exquisite facility and offers training opportunities to budding young musicians via the MPYO and its outreach programs. On the other hand, the orchestra's marketing rhetoric as well as the management's predilection for musicians of European heritage appear to reproduce neo-colonial attitudes and prejudices that destabilize the cultural capital of Malaysian musicians. In terms of economic capital, the continuous financial endorsement of the MPO is inimical to the Malaysian WAM sector, for the funds could be channeled to support local orchestras and nurture Malaysian talents.[120]

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the MPO announced in July 2021 that it will re-evaluate its business model "to explore a strategic way forward to lay the foundation for the long-term sustainability of both the MPO and DFP."[121] At this time, the MPO has provided no further updates on the matter. Though the MPO has been offering virtual concerts throughout the pandemic, it recently removed all information about its members from the official website. There was talk among the local music community that the orchestra might not renew the employment contracts of its non-Malaysians players past their contract expiry date in December 2021.

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[118] For the institutionalization of Singaporean state orchestras as part of the Singaporean government's agenda in socio-cultural engineering, see Tan, "State Orchestras and Multiculturalism," 261–81.
[119] Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies*, "colonial discourse," 51; see also "colonialism," 57; and "race," 221.
[120] More details on the Malaysian WAM sector are provided in Chapter Three.
[121] "The Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra Re-evaluates Business Model," Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra, Announcements, accessed July 20, 2021, https://www.mpo.com.my/announcement; PDF format is available from https://www.mpo.com.my/_files/ugd/991fe6_0fd8a161d96f4e0a9918ffbfa74fc8ca.pdf.

According to Rastam, "word on the street is that fewer than 30 musicians will be kept on, comprising section principals and all seven Malaysians."[122] Which direction the orchestra will take with regards to its operation, programming, and hiring practices remains to be seen.

In order for local WAM musicians to navigate their music-cultural identity in postcolonial Malaysia, it is vital to understand the ways in which postcolonial racial identities have complicated and continue to muddy the formation of cultural identity among Malaysians. The following chapter will show that divisive racial practices that originated in the British colonial era remain entrenched in the political and social structures of Malaysia.

[122] Rastam, "Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra's Downsizing."

CHAPTER 2: Challenges in the Formation of a Unified Cultural Identity

This chapter examines Malaysia's postcolonial heritage in the context of contemporary racial and cultural politics since the 1970s. I focus on three important sets of government policies in effect between 1970s and 1990s because these three decades marked several pivotal moments in Malaysia's nation building. The National Economic Policy (1971) addressed socio-economic inequalities between the three main ethnic groups (Malays, Chinese, Indians). Racial power dynamics lay at the heart of the National Culture Policy (1971–2021). Last, though not least, *Bangsa Malaysia* ("Malaysian nation," 1991) tackled the formation of a unified Malaysian cultural identity. My analysis of these three policies shows that intricate ethnic relations in postcolonial Malaysia have impacted the nation-state's pursuits of a unified cultural identity. I contend that Malaysia's lack of a unified cultural identity was one of the driving factors behind the government's backing of the MPO. Furthermore, I analyze what the MPO represents in the bigger picture of Malaysian politics, and problematize the government's uncritical adoption of WAM in relation to the process of decolonization.

2.1 Institutionalized Colonial Racial Identities and State Policies (1957 to 1969)

Prior to 1971, the main ethnic groups living in Malaysia had already been divided by racial division of labor from the British colonial era. In this section I present evidence in post-independent Malaysia of British-influenced colonial policies for dividing the main ethnic groups. For instance, the Constitution of Malaysia (1957), forged jointly by the incoming Malaysian and outgoing British governments, contains exclusionary terms that were directly implicated in large-scale manifestations of social unrest in 1969, which in turn led to socio-cultural reforms in the 1970s.

Historically, the British "divide and rule" policy was exemplified in the colonial government's management of the migrant labor in British Malaya. Beginning from the 1870s, the British ran programs encouraging Chinese and Indian migrant labor to fill local labor needs. According to Andaya and Andaya:

> Between 1911 and 1931 the [British colonial] government encouraged unrestricted immigration from India, China, and the Netherlands East Indies to provide much-needed workers for the still considerable tin-mining enterprises, and … especially for the booming rubber industry. Only when world prices in tin and rubber fell during the Depression of the early 1930s did the government favour the repatriation of alien labour, and immigration restrictions remained in force until the outbreak of the Second World War.[123]

Sociologist Charles Hirschman has written that the new immigrants, however, were "segregated geographically, economically, and socially from the local [Malay] population."[124] Scholars Daniel P. S. Goh and Philip Holden have stated that from the 1870s onwards, the British overwhelmingly saw Indonesian immigrants and Malays as "indigenous peasant smallholders"; Chinese immigrants as "commercial middlemen aliens"; and Indian immigrants as "municipal and plantation laborers."[125] Goh has also argued that the colonial state of British Malaya played a central role in constructing cultural and socio-economic pluralism that "weakened precolonial interethnic and transethnic cultures, institutions, and identities"; effectively "creating the racial conflicts with its right hand and suppressing them coercively with its left, with the pluralism informing policy in the former and used as legitimating justification in the latter."[126] Over time, this tactic of colonial racialization succeeded in segregating different ethnic groups in Malaya

[123] Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 217.
[124] Charles Hirschman, "The Making of Race in Colonial Malaya: Political Economy and Racial Ideology," *Sociological Forum* 1, no. 2 (1986): 356, https://www.jstor.org/stable/684449.
[125] Goh and Holden, "Introduction: Postcoloniality," 5.
[126] Daniel P. S. Goh, "From Colonial Pluralism to Postcolonial Multiculturalism: Race, State Formation and the Question of Cultural Diversity in Malaysia and Singapore," *Sociology Compass* 2, no.1 (2008): 235, 237. https://onlinelibrary-wiley-com.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/doi/pdfdirect/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2007.00065.x.

and circumscribing them to their own communities. Thus divided, the colonized were prevented from coming together to fight for the country's independence.

These divisions formed the backdrop for negotiations about Malaysians' rights after independence. In 1931, the Chinese and Indians had constituted the majority ethnic groups in British Malaya.[127] As there was no single majority in terms of ethnicity after World War II, the British initially opted for an egalitarian model for the colonial state upon their re-occupation of Malaya in 1945.[128] The population statistics from the 1947 census were as follows: Malays 2.5 million, Chinese 2.5 million, and Indians 0.6 million.[129] When pressured by the Malayan Alliance (a coalition of three ethnicity-based political parties, established in 1946 in Kuala Lumpur) to expedite the transfer of power leading up to the Independence, however, the British "abandoned three key and publicly stated preconditions for independence," one of which was their "commitment to hand over power to a genuinely multiracial movement."[130] An example of this compromise is evident in the special position accorded to the Malays in Article 153 of the 1957 Federal Constitution:

> It shall be the responsibility of the *Yang di-Pertuan Agong* to safeguard the special position of the Malays and natives of any of the States of Sabah and Sarawak and the legitimate interests of other communities in accordance with the provisions of this Article.[131]

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[127] Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 248. According to this source, there were more Chinese (1,709,392) in British Malaya than Malays (1,644,173) in 1931.
[128] Boon Kheng Cheah, "Ethnicity in the Making of Malaysia," in *Nation Building: Five Southeast Asian Histories*, ed. Gungwu Wang (Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute Singapore, 2005), 98, https://doi.org/10.1355/9789812305503-007.
[129] Quoted in Cheah, "Ethnicity in the Making of Malaysia," 98.
[130] Anthony J. Stockwell, "Malaysia: The Making of a New-Colony?" *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 26, no. 2 (1998): 144, https://doi.org/10.1080/03086539808583029. The three political parties in the coalition were the United Malays National Organization, the Malaysian Chinese Association, and the Malaysian Indian Congress.
[131] "Constitution of Malaysia 1957," Commonwealth Legal Information Institute, Databases, Constitution of Malaysia, 1957, Part XII, accessed May 1, 2021, http://www.commonlii.org/my/legis/const/1957/12.html.

Article 153 was put in place by the Reid Commission, an independent commission that oversaw the drafting of the Constitution, to safeguard the interest of the native people of Malaya among proliferating immigrants. This "guarantee of Malay privileges" was demanded by the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), a Malay-dominated political party within Malayan Alliance, in exchange for UMNO's acceptance of the citizenship rights of non-Malays.[132] Hwok-Aun Lee, Senior Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore, has stated that these pro-Malay privileges "stemmed from a bargain in which these Malay-favouring provisions would be instituted to protect the [Malays], while citizenship would be accorded to non-Malays."[133]

From what was reported by the commission in 1957, the commission had "found it difficult" to reconcile the provision in Article 153 against what they thought should be the basis for a "unified Malayan nation":

> Our terms of reference require that provision should be made in the Constitution for the "safeguarding of the special position of the Malays and the legitimate interests of other Communities." In addition, we are asked to provide for a common nationality for the whole of the Federation and to ensure that the Constitution shall guarantee a democratic form of Government. In considering these requirements it seemed to us that a common nationality was the basis upon which a unified Malayan nation was to be created and that under a democratic form of Government it was inherent that all the citizens of Malaya, *irrespective of race, creed or culture* should enjoy certain fundamental rights including equality before the law. *We found it difficult, therefore, to reconcile the terms of reference if the protection of the special position of the Malays signified the granting of special privileges, permanently, to one community only and not to the others*.[134]

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[132] Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 281.
[133] Hwok-Aun Lee, "Majority Affirmative Action in Malaysia: Imperatives, Compromises and Challenges," Accounting for Change in Diverse Societies Publication Series, Global Centre for Pluralism, March 2017, 5, https://www.pluralism.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Malaysia_EN.pdf.
[134] Federation of Malaya Constitutional Commission, *Report of the Federation of Malaya Constitutional Commission, 1957*, Colonial Office No. 330 (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1957), 73, accessed March 15, 2020, http://www.catholiclawyersmalaysia.org/sites/default/files/Reid%20Commission%20Report%201957.pdf. Quotation marks are used here to show the quoted text in the primary source. Emphasis mine.

Despite this, the commission had agreed to the provision because "as a result of the original treaties with the Malay States, reaffirmed from time to time, the special position of the Malays has always been recognised."[135] Still, the commission recommended that these safeguards should be reviewed after fifteen years.

> The special position of the Malays should be recognised with regard to Malay reservations, quotas for admission to the public services, quotas in respect of the issuing of permits or licences and in connection with scholarships, bursaries and other aids for educational purposes…*After fifteen years there should be a review* of the quotas and preferences and the appropriate legislature should then determine *whether to retain, reduce or discontinue them*.[136]

According to Malaysian social activist and former Member of Parliament Kia Soong Kua, the British colonial power gave in to the demands of the Malay rulers and UMNO who had opposed the original recommendation by the Reid Commission.[137] As a result, "no time limit was placed on the matter of Malay special privileges; instead, it was to be periodically reviewed by the Malay head of state."[138] The special constitutional rights of the Malays sowed the seeds for unequal race-relations in the new nation-state. Article 153 also became the justification for the Malay-affirmative action policies in the 1970s.

I shall now discuss the contributing factors to the racially-based social unrest in 1969, which resulted in a major shift in power dynamics that would change the course of state policies. Under the direction of the new nation's first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman from 1957 to 1970, immediately after independence there was *de facto* multi-ethnic partnership in nation-building efforts. During the era immediately preceding and following Malaysian independence in 1957, the three main ethnic groups had been tolerant of each other, motivated by their common

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[135] *Report of the Federation of Malaya Constitutional Commission, 1957*, 73.
[136] *Report of the Federation of Malaya Constitutional Commission, 1957*, 95–6. Emphasis mine.
[137] Kia Soong Kua, "Racial Conflict in Malaysia: Against the Official History," *Race and Class* 49, No. 3 (2008): 37, http://doi.org/10.1177/0306396807085900.
[138] Kua, "Racial Conflict in Malaysia," 37.

interest against external factors such as the British and a confrontation with neighboring Indonesia (1963–66). Nevertheless, ethnic tensions grew when the economic disparity between Malays and Chinese did not improve under Abdul Rahman's *laissez-faire* economic policies during the first decade after independence.[139] The issue of Malay poverty had persisted while foreign and local Chinese entrepreneurship continued to prosper, just as it had done under the British rule. This tension-filled situation was reflected in the publications of *Angkatan Sasterawan 50* ("Literary Generation of 1950"), a Singapore-based Malay literary group, whose social commentary on the "inequities between 'poor Malays' and 'rich Chinese' reawakened deep-seated fears of Chinese economic dominance."[140]

Driven by the belief that an integrated language and educational policy would promote national integration, UMNO (ruling party at the time) implemented several Malay-affirmative policies in language and education in the 1960s. For example, the National Language Act (1963/1967) reinforced the use of the Malay language for official purposes besides English.[141] The Education Act (1961) required Chinese-medium secondary schools to convert to English instruction to qualify for full government aid.[142] These two policies gave rise to concerns of "total submersion by the Malays" among the Chinese community, some of whom feared that the compromise in Chinese-medium education would eventually lead to the loss of their Chinese heritage; while many others perceived that "their culture was being sacrificed at the altar of national unity."[143] On the other hand, Malays felt that the widespread and official use of the Malay language would help them keep up with the nation's rapid economic growth and would

[139] Shanti P. Chakravarty and Abdul-Hakim Roslan, "Ethnic Nationalism and Income Distribution in Malaysia," *European Journal of Development Research* 17, No. 2 (June 2005): 273, http://doi.org/10.1080/09578810500130906.
[140] Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 296. Singapore was part of Malaya/ Malaysia until 1965.
[141] Malay is the national language as per the 1957 Constitution.
[142] Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 295–6.
[143] Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 298.

ensure the preservation of Malay culture. As each ethnic group strove to preserve its own interests, they inadvertently provoked their counterparts. The suppressed resentment towards perceived ethnic injustice culminated in the 1969 race riots that "revealed the depth of the undercurrents of distrust running through various ethnic communities."[144]

Spontaneous riots broke out in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur on May 13, three days following the 1969 General Election. According to the official count, the riots claimed 196 lives and injured 439; foreign and diplomatic sources believed that the number was closer to 800 deaths.[145] Following the violent clashes, the government declared a state of emergency on May 15 and suspended the parliament on June 24. During the emergency rule, the power of the government was transferred to the National Operations Council, a temporary administration, headed by then Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Razak Hussein. Censured by his own political party, Prime Minister Abdul Rahman had to resign in September 1970.[146] When the parliament reconvened in 1971, Abdul Razak was appointed the second prime minister of Malaysia.

According to journalist Nile Bowie's 2019 article titled "Fifty Years On, Fateful Race Riots Still Haunt Malaysia," the National Operations Council "curtailed media reporting and imposed repressive laws" during the emergency rule.[147] Bowie also wrote that the Malaysian government has yet to declassify official documents on the riots, or establish a truth and reconciliation commission despite demands from the Malaysian public. Citing Kua, Bowie wrote that the race riots were "deliberately planned and organized to warrant the declaration of emergency rule that effectively resulted in a coup d'état against then Prime Minister Tunku

[144] Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 304.
[145] "May 13, Never Again: The 1969 Riots that Changed Malaysia," *Malaysiakini*, May 13, 2019, https://pages.malaysiakini.com/may13/en/.
[146] Nile Bowie, "Fifty Years On, Fateful Race Riots Still Haunt Malaysia," *Asia Times*, May 29, 2019, https://asiatimes.com/2019/05/fifty-years-on-fateful-race-riots-still-haunt-malaysia/.
[147] Bowie, "Fifty Years On."

Abdul Rahman in favor of his deputy Abdul Razak Hussein."[148] Kua's book titled *May 13: Declassified Documents on the Malaysian Riots of 1969* is based on confidential dispatches and memoranda from the British High Commission, and Foreign and Commonwealth Office recovered from the Public Records Office in London, UK.[149] This book contains details that challenge the officially sanctioned version of events in the white paper published by the National Operations Council in October, 1969; as well as Abdul Rahman's book titled *May 13: Before and After*, published in the same year.[150]

2.2 Economic and Cultural Reformation in the 1970s

The balance in power dynamics shifted considerably when Prime Minister Abdul Razak took over from 1970 to 1976. Under his leadership and in response to the social unrest in 1969, the ruling party UMNO promulgated two policies: The National Economic Policy (NEP) and the National Culture Policy (NCP). The former targeted social and economic reform while the latter aimed at cultural restructuring. Both policies remain sites of contestation over issues of racial inequalities in present-day Malaysia.

2.2.1 National Economic Policy

The stated goal of the NEP (1971–1990) was to level the socio-economic disparity between different ethnic groups with the ultimate goal of national unity. From the period of 1957–1970, there existed a widening economic gap between the two main ethnic groups in Malaysia, namely the Malays and the Chinese. In 1957, the poverty rate among Malays was 70.5%, compared to 27.4% for Chinese and 35.7% for Indians.[151] The disparity persisted through

[148] Bowie, "Fifty Years On."
[149] Kia Soong Kua, *May 13: Declassified Documents on the Malaysian Riots of 1969* (Petaling Jaya, Selangor: Suaram Komunikasi, 2007).
[150] Bowie, "Fifty Years On."
[151] Lee, "Majority Affirmative Action," 3.

to 1970, the corresponding figures in 1970 were Malays (64.8%), Chinese (26%), and Indians (39.2%).[152] NEP proposed affirmative action to alleviate Malay poverty and to promote upward mobility by 1990, but only for a single ethnic group, the Malays/*Bumiputera*. The policy also consolidated constitutional sanctions that safeguarded *Bumiputera* interests by instigating quotas for *Bumiputera* numbers in public employment, scholarships, ownership and trade licensing, as well as in admissions to public universities.[153]

The ethnically based social engineering that the NEP achieved was remarkable, for it clearly played a major role in altering the socio-economic landscape of Malaysia within two decades. By 1990, these preferential provisions that empower *Bumiputera* in wealth accumulation and urbanization bore fruit. In terms of enterprise management and ownership, *Bumiputera* accounted for 19.3% of total corporate equity in 1990, as compared to 2.4% in 1970.[154] Moreover, the NEP brought about the emergence of a highly educated Malay middle class, a result of abovementioned quotas for *Bumiputera* numbers in their admissions to public universities and in the distribution of scholarships.[155] For instance, *Bumiputera* university enrolment rose from 40% in 1970 to 67% in 1985, as reported in the Fourth Malaysia Plan (1981–1985) and Fifth Malaysia Plan (1986–1990).[156]

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[152] Lee, "Majority Affirmative Action," 3.
[153] For a more detailed study on affirmative action programs, see Lee, "Majority Affirmative Action," and his other work "Affirmative Action Pillars and Programmes: Malaysia," in *Affirmative Action in Malaysia and South Africa: Preference for Parity* (London: Routledge, 2020): 85–106, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315114071.
[154] Hwok-Aun Lee, "Malaysia's New Economic Policy and the 30% *Bumiputera* Equity Target: Time for a Revisit and a Reset," *ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute Perspective* Issue 2021, no. 36 (March 2021): 5, https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ISEAS_Perspective_2021_36.pdf.
[155] For more details on the Malay middle class, see Terence Chong, "The Construction of the Malaysian Malay Middle Class: The Histories, Intricacies and Futures of the Melayu Baru," *Social Identities* 11, no. 6 (2005): 573–87, https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630500449150.
[156] Hwok-Aun Lee, "Affirmative Action Outcomes in Malaysia," in *Affirmative Action in Malaysia and South Africa: Preference for Parity* (London: Routledge, 2020), 146. According to Lee, the practice of reporting *Bumiputera* tertiary-level enrolment stopped abruptly after the Fifth Malaysia Plan, even while preferential allocation of employment and equity ownership continued. Lee also wrote that data on the distribution of scholarships are exceedingly scarce; most of these public disclosures happen through parliamentary proceedings.

Nevertheless, the NEP has arguably created a dependency on government subsidy among *Bumiputera* capitalists, even though Mahathir has denied this dependency. According to anthropologist Patricia Sloane-White,

> Mahathir was uncomfortable with frequent criticism in the national and international press of the lavish and supposedly politically sponsored lifestyles of rich and famous *bumiputera* capitalists. He denied the "subsidy mentality" of Malays that NEP was said to have created, and disavowed the dependency relationship that was said to exist between Malay capitalists and the state.[157]

There are also other counterproductive outcomes that arose from the NEP. *Bumiputera* quotas are regressive because they perpetuate public-private dichotomies. In turn, these dichotomies lead to a dominant *Bumiputera* presence in the public sector (which by definition protects them), with many non-Malays choosing to put their energies and investments into the private sector.[158] In many ways, the resulting split reproduces racial-economic practices begun in the British colonial era.

Studies have shown that the NEP is not equitable to all *Bumiputera,* for the affirmative action has benefited the indigenous groups subsumed under the *Bumiputera* category unequally. Sociologist Abdul Rahman Embong has shed light on the needs of the Peninsular Malaysia's *Orang Asli* ("Aboriginals") who remain one of the most marginalized communities in modern-day Malaysia. In his study titled "The Culture and Practice of Pluralism in Postcolonial Malaysia," Embong argues that "many [*Orang Asli*] still live in the jungle or on its fringes without regular sources of income; while some found employment in urban areas, only a few have managed to join the ranks of the middle class."[159] The destitution and marginalization of the

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[157] Patricia Sloane-White, "The Ethnography of Failure: Middle-Class Malays Producing Capitalism in an 'Asian Miracle' Economy," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 39, no. 3 (2008): 460, http://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463408000362.
[158] Lee, "Majority Affirmative Action," 4, 6.
[159] Abdul Rahman Embong, "The Culture and Practice of Pluralism in Postcolonial Malaysia," in *The Politics of Multiculturalism: Pluralism and Citizenship in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia*, ed. Robert Hefner (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 78, muse.jhu.edu/book/8102.

Orang Asli (who are officially part of the *Bumiputera*) raise questions about whether the NEP intentionally has empowered the Malays, the majority *Bumiputera* group, more than the minority *Bumiputera*.

Embong's arguments are corroborated by the statistics published by the Centre for Public Policy Analysis in 2006. Statistics show that out of 1,393 *Bumiputera* who held top managerial positions in the civil service in June 2005, 1,370 were Malays (98.35%); only 23 were non-Malay *Bumiputera* (1.65%).[160] The Malaysian census in 2000 reported 81.98% of the total number of *Bumiputera* citizens to be Malay; 18.02% to be non-Malay.[161] Table 2 shows the ethnic composition of *Bumiputera* employees in the Malaysian civil service in June 2005. A comparison between the percentage of Malay *Bumiputera* and non-Malay *Bumiputera* employees in relation to their proportion among the population reveals that Malay *Bumiputera* were overrepresented, while non-Malay *Bumiputera* were underrepresented across all positions in the civil service.

[160] Centre for Public Policy Analysis, *Towards a More Representative and World Class Civil Service* (Kuala Lumpur: Centre for Public Policy Analysis, 2006), 3, http://cpps.org.my/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Malaysian-Civil-Service-9MP-Recommendations.pdf.

[161] *Population and Housing Census 2000: Population Distribution and Basic Demographic Characteristics* (Putrajaya: Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2000) 5, https://www.mycensus.gov.my/index.php/census-product/publication/census-2000/650-population-distribution-and-basic-demographic-characteristics-2000. According to this source, the total number of *Bumiputera* citizens in 2000 was 14,248,179; of which 11,680,421 were Malays (81.98%); 2,567,758 were non-Malays (18.02%).

Table 2: Ethnic Composition of Bumiputera Employees in the Malaysian Civil Service, June 2005

	Top Management Group		Management and Professional Group		Support Group		Total	
Ethnic Group	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Malays	1,370	98.35	155,871	96.20	535,495	89.38	692,736	90.84
Non-Malays	23	1.65	6,156	3.80	63,649	10.62	69,828	9.16
Total *Bumiputera*	1,393	100	162,027	100	599,144	100	762,564	100

Source: Data from Centre for Public Policy Analysis, *Towards a More Representative and World Class Civil Service* (Kuala Lumpur: Centre for Public Policy Analysis, 2006), 3, http://cpps.org.my/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Malaysian-Civil-Service-9MP-Recommendations.pdf.

At the time it was launched, the NEP's proposed time frame was supposed to extend from 1971 to 1990. Still, there have been no plans since to roll back on affirmative action. In Hwok-Aun Lee's study "Majority Affirmative Action in Malaysia: Imperatives, Compromises, and Challenges," he recommended the scaling back of NEP's affirmative action, and the transition to other need-based or merit-based policies that are more equitable to all citizens.[162] Lee's study underscores that there are no legislative checks to prevent affirmative action from overreaching, although the constitutional provisions for *Bumiputera* deriving from Article 153 are contingent on necessity, as stipulated by the Reid Commission's recommendations. According to Lee,

> the [Malaysian] Constitution provides no explicit safeguard against affirmative action overreach – that is, against infringements of the principles of equity or fairness. No legislative path or judicial recourse exists for affirmative action non-beneficiaries to contest denial of opportunity.[163]

[162] Lee, "Majority Affirmative Action," 19–20.
[163] Lee, "Majority Affirmative Action," 6.

Although more recent economic policies such as the New Economic Model (2011–2020) appeared to be more inclusive, their effectiveness has been debatable. For example, Prime Minister Najib Razak (2009–2018) articulated a modified paradigm in the New Economic Model (2011–2020), a policy launched during his tenure as prime minister. The modified paradigm claims that "the affirmative action approach will *shift from ethnicity* to low-income households and individuals on the basis of *needs and merit*."[164] Yet, existing *Bumiputera* provisions that undercut the stated approach based on necessity and meritocracy remain. The lack of gatekeeping to prevent an overreach of affirmative action is thus concerning because this could lead to the indefinite enrichment of the Bumiputera elite at the expense of other groups.

2.2.2 National Culture Policy

A second policy that has shaped racial relationships at the heart of Malaysian society and culture is the NCP (1971–2021). Initiated to promote national unity after the race riots in 1969, the NCP was a synthesis of the proceedings of the National Culture Congress held in August 1971, where fifty-two papers on arts and culture in Malaysia were presented. The meeting brought together nearly a thousand delegates (mainly of Malay descent), among which were arts practitioners, academics, professionals, civil servants, politicians, etc.[165] The ensuing NCP was based on three principles:

(1) The national culture must be based on the indigenous culture of this region;
(2) Suitable elements from the other culture [*sic*] may be accepted as part of the national culture;
(3) Islam is an important component in the formulation of the national culture.[166]

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[164] *New Economic Model for Malaysia. Part I: Strategic Policy Directions* (Putrajaya: National Economic Advisory Council, 2011), 96, https://www.pmo.gov.my/dokumenattached/NEM_Report_I.pdf. Emphasis mine. The rhetoric of "needs" and "merit" are reiterated in the report; see pages 117, 122, and 177.
[165] Given the characteristics of this Congress, I suspect it was an invitation-only event, although no further information is publicly available.
[166] "National Culture Policy," Jabatan Kebudayaan & Kesenian Negara, accessed May 6, 2021, http://www.jkkn.gov.my/en/national-culture-policy.

The stated objectives of the NCP include:

> (1) To strengthen national unity through culture;
> (2) To foster and preserve national identity created through national culture;
> (3) To enrich and enhance the quality of human life in equilibrium with socio-economic development.[167]

According to Historian Sumit K. Mandal, the NCP was "an attempt to explore across artistic and cultural forms the significance as well as the means of developing a national identity in a country that possessed historical inequalities experienced along ethnic and linguistic lines."[168] Mandal has critiqued the NCP as "counterproductive" and imbued with "racialized nationalism," because the Malay cultural leadership in 1971 "envisioned a national identity solely in its own image" and neglected to "consider the experience of the once colonized population as a whole."[169] Mandal also argued that the synthesis of the 1971 proceedings may have been "considered policy by ministerial dictate and its implementation rushed with the possible aim of avoiding consultation altogether because it was politically contentious."[170]

For the past five decades, the NCP had served as a guide to shape and maintain the cultural identity of Malaysia as envisioned by the government up until October 2021, when a new policy, *Dasar Kebudayaan Negara* (DAKEN 2021; in English, National Culture Policy) was launched by the Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and Culture. According to Tourism, Arts and Culture Minister Nancy Shukri, DAKEN 2021 was "formulated [by] taking into account the

[167] "National Culture Policy."
[168] Sumit K. Mandal, "The National Culture Policy and Contestation over Malaysian Identity," in *Globalization and National Autonomy: The Experience of Malaysia*, ed. Nelson et al. (ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2008), 274, muse.jhu.edu/book/18309.
[169] Mandal, "National Culture Policy and Contestation," 274.
[170] Mandal, "National Culture Policy and Contestation," 279.

aspiration and core elements as contained in the National Cultural Policy (1971)."[171] The seven core thrusts underscored in DAKEN 2021 are:

(1) A culture of high values;
(2) Harmony of society;
(3) The preservation and conservation of cultural heritage;
(4) Cultural development and expansion;
(5) Cultural empowerment;
(6) Generation of cultural economy;
(7) Cultural excellence.[172]

These tenets are decidedly vague, for they do not specify which cultures DAKEN 2021 strives to conserve, develop, and empower. On that account, DAKEN 2021 appears to build on existing ideals of an exclusive, dominant Malay culture, sidestepping the issue of systemic racially motivated inequalities embedded in the original NCP.

Returning to the NCP, I argue that cultural restructuring in the 1970s was entrenched with nationalistic ideals from *Ketuanan Melayu* ("Malay supremacy," or "Malay sovereignty") and *Ketuanan Islam* ("Islam supremacy"). *Ketuanan Melayu* and *Ketuanan Islam* are linked to "the idea that a 'social contract' was formulated in the days before independence, guaranteeing the special position of Malays and Islam as the official religion in return for allowing non-Malays to become citizens."[173] This ideology has been invoked by conservative Malay nationalists to uphold Malay dominance in Malaysia's legal and political developments, causing inter-ethnic distrust.[174] Scholars such as Goh and Holden have also identified this ideology

[171] "Daken 2021 Set to Drive Nation's Arts and Culture Industry – Nancy," *Sun Daily*, April 29, 2021, 18:31 (UTC +8), Local, https://www.thesundaily.my/local/daken-2021-set-to-drive-nation-s-arts-and-culture-industry-nancy-DL7805036.
[172] Hana Naz Harun, "Ismail Sabri: Daken 2021 to Uplift Nation's Arts, Culture, Heritage," *New Straits Times*, October 26, 2021, 09:45 (UTC +8), Nation, https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2021/10/739930/ismail-sabri-daken-2021-uplift-nations-arts-culture-heritage.
[173] Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 366.
[174] Jaclyn Ling-Chien Neo, "Malay Nationalism, Islamic Supremacy and the Constitutional Bargain in the Multi-Ethnic Composition of Malaysia," *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 13, no. 1 (2006): 96, https://doi.org/10.1163/157181106777069950.

underpinning the affirmative action of NEP. According to Goh and Holden, while racialized discourse of Malay primacy toned down directly before and after independence to accommodate large numbers of Chinese and Indian immigrants, the rhetoric resurfaced in the political discourse among the Malay elites after the 1969 riots.[175]

I argue that there was an unmistakable undercurrent of ethno-religious nationalism embedded in the NCP that alluded to the ideology of *Ketuanan Melayu*. First, the equation of the indigenous culture and the Islam religion with national culture was essentialist and exclusivist.[176] Second, the policy was vague in defining concrete terms for elements from other cultures to be deemed "suitable" and be accepted as part of the national culture:

> The formulation and implementation of the National Culture Policy is needed in Malaysia as a developing country with multi-racial and multi-cultural society; … only with awareness can the national culture be differentiated from ethnic culture… *to transcend the boundaries of race and religion* in creating a dignified Malaysian race.[177]

Inclusionary clauses that sought "to transcend the boundaries of race and religion" were inserted into the policy but they apparently failed to address issues of multiracialism meaningfully during the fifty years it was in effect (from 1971 to 2021).

Scholar Sharmani Patricia Gabriel has claimed that the NCP "evade[d] engagement with boundary crossings and blurrings through its principle of fixed identities and its attendant assertion of the existence of clearly demarcated boundaries between cultures."[178] In addition, the NCP could be interpreted as a containment strategy that attempted to "regulate" non-Malay cultures; in that non-Malay cultures were permitted to exist, though only within the limited

[175] Goh and Holden, "Introduction: Postcoloniality," 7.
[176] The Malay is by definition also Muslim as per Article 160 of the Constitution.
[177] "National Culture Policy." Emphasis mine.
[178] Gabriel, "Translating Bangsa Malaysia," 356, 358.

racialized grids defined by the state.[179] The NCP's rigid outlook was especially problematic as it did not account for transracial or interracial groups such as the *Peranakan*, for example.[180] Lee maintained that the language and cultural policies in Malaysia thus far "reveal various hallmarks of assimilation" into Malay language and culture; and that the NCP's "assertion for a Malay-centric national identity… reveal[ed] a general ambivalence toward cultural diversity, which [was] treated more as a matter of mutual appeasement than of collective enrichment."[181]

Today, the government's official, Malay-centric definition of a Malaysian national identity arguably remains the prevalent factor to unresolved issues and conflicts centering on ethnicity, even as the country continues to engage in nation building decades after independence.

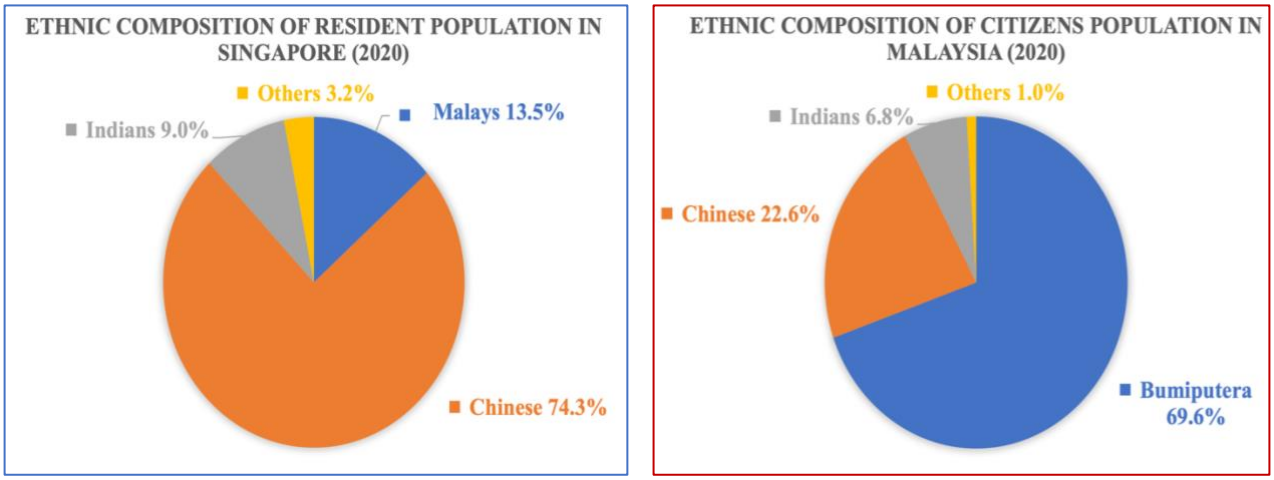
2.3 *Bangsa Malaysia* and Identity Politics in the 1990s

In postcolonial countries in Southeast Asia, the overarching discourse on multiculturalism has presented two basic models. For instance, Singapore has chosen to craft a national identity based on multiculturalism since 1965.[182] Malaysia, on the other hand, has asserted a national identity essentially based on a single ethnicity. Although Singapore shares a colonial past with Malaysia (the island was part of Malaysia until 1965), Singapore has prioritized a globalist political outlook and advocated for secularist and meritocratic policies since its independence from Malaysia. According to sociologist Beng Huat Chua in 2003, an increasing number of Singaporeans aged thirty and under "see themselves in 'nationalist' rather

[179] Gabriel, "Translating Bangsa Malaysia," 356–7. Homi Bhabha spoke about the creation of cultural diversity and the containment of cultural difference in "The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 208.
[180] The *Peranakan* are descendants of immigrants who settled in the Malay Archipelago and married local Malay women; numerous Peranakan cultures include Peranakan Hindu (also known as the Chetti), Peranakan Jawi, Peranakan Serani (Kristang or Eurasian Peranakan), and Peranakan Chinese.
[181] Lee, "Majority Affirmative Action," 16–7.
[182] Beng Huat Chua, "Multiculturalism in Singapore: An Instrument of Social Control," *Race and Class* 44, no. 3 (2003): 60, https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396803044003025.

than racial terms; … young Singaporeans identify themselves as Singaporeans first, not by race."[183] It is worth noting that the racial makeup of Singapore differs significantly from that of its northern neighbor Malaysia. In Singapore, the breakdown is Chinese 74.3%, Malays 13.5%, Indians 9.0%, and Others 3.2%.[184] Table 3 compares the ethnic composition of Singapore and Malaysia in 2020.

Table 3: Ethnic Composition of Singapore and Malaysia in 2020



Sources: See footnote.[185]

Despite the Chinese majority, the Singaporean government also celebrates cultural diversities, as evident from its official recognition of "Malay, Mandarin Chinese, Tamil, and English" to be the "four official languages" according to the Singaporean Constitution (1965).[186] Arguably if perhaps ironically for a postcolonial nation, the nationwide use of English as a *lingua franca* is both pragmatic and strategic in bridging ethnic differences. By such means, it

[183] Chua, "Multiculturalism in Singapore," 76.
[184] *Population Trends 2020* (Department of Statistics Singapore, September 2020), 5, https://www.singstat.gov.sg/-/media/files/publications/population/population2020.pdf.
[185] Sources from Population Trends 2020 (Department of Statistics Singapore, September 2020), 5, https://www.singstat.gov.sg/-/media/files/publications/population/population2020.pdf; and "Current Population Estimates, Malaysia, 2021," Department of Statistics Malaysia Official Portal, updated February 18, 2022, https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/cthemeByCat&cat=155&bul_id=ZjJOSnpJR21sQWVUcUp6ODRudm5JZz09&menu_id=L0pheU43NWJwRWVSZklWdzQ4TlhUUT09.
[186] Note that the Singaporean Constitution of 1965 had declared only one national language, Malay. See "Constitution of the Republic of Singapore," Singapore Statues Online, updated February 26, 2022, https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/CONS1963?ProvIds=P113-#pr153A-.

seems that Singapore has been relatively effective in managing ethnic diversity by "set[ting] itself structurally above race, as the neutral umpire that oversees and maintains racial peace and racial equality."[187] This in effect destabilizes the centrality of ethnicity in dictating the criteria for inclusion, because the qualifier for inclusion lies in one's citizenship regardless of ethnicity and religion.

Boon Kheng Cheah, former history professor at University Sains Malaysia, has maintained that Malaysia's first four prime ministers (Mahathir included) have "reinvented themselves into multi-ethnic nationalists" despite their Malay-nationalist political roots; and manipulated these two opposing ideals against one another by making compromises to placate both sides.[188] In the 1990s, for example, Prime Minister Mahathir and his administration were eager to promote a unification of cultural identity that could engage national participation to advance Malaysia's economic and industrial development. Nevertheless, the nation's longstanding racial inequalities, which have affected its cultural identity formation, have also compromised this vision of national unity.

In 1991, under Mahathir's *Wawasan 2020*, the state introduced the concept of *Bangsa Malaysia*. *Bangsa Malaysia* was cast as one of the challenges that the nation had to overcome to achieve the status of a fully developed nation by 2020. It entailed the establishment of

> … A united Malaysian nation with a sense of common and shared destiny. This must be a nation at peace with itself, territorially and ethnically integrated, living in harmony and full and fair partnership, made up of one "*Bangsa Malaysia*" with political loyalty and dedication to the nation.[189]

This notion of nationhood was accompanied by a vision of:

[187] Chua, "Multiculturalism in Singapore," 61.
[188] Cheah, "Ethnicity in the Making of Malaysia," 105.
[189] "The Way Forward."

> … A matured, liberal and tolerant society in which Malaysians of all colours and creeds are free to practise and profess their customs, cultures and religious beliefs and yet feeling that they belong to one nation.[190]

The duality in the definition of "*bangsa*" opened up interesting opportunities to re-articulate the construct of national identity. "*Bangsa*" can be translated to mean either "nation," or "race." As the former, one *Bangsa Malaysia* in its context above denoted "a united Malaysian nation."[191] Whereas as the latter, the same phrase was equivalent to "one Malaysian race," a rhetoric that was previously used in the NCP. Gabriel has recognized the potential of this "new racial category" in displacing a national identity based on "indigeneity" and ethnicity, on which state policies had been predicated.[192] "One Malaysian race" offered a more radical interpretation, one that challenged Malaysia's Malay-centric construct of identity and nation.

In hindsight, the progressive rhetoric of *Bangsa Malaysia* appeared to be notional as the reconceptualization was never formulated in concrete terms to gain traction.[193] The following analysis of Mahathir's interview in January 2021 will demonstrate that this rhetoric was merely a new packaging of old ideals. When asked about which structural issues had remained now that *Wawasan 2020* has drawn to a close, the former prime minister admitted that "feeling of racism is still very strong because there is no intermarriage" between the Malays and other ethnic groups due to the law requiring pre-marital conversion to Islam. Apart from religion, he attributed the unrealized *Bangsa Malaysia* to the issue of language, because the Chinese in Malaysia "still regard Chinese as their mother tongue, not Malay." Citing examples of the Chinese in Indonesia who speak exclusively in Indonesian Malay and the Chinese in the Philippines who speak Tagalog, Mahathir felt that "they [i.e., Indonesians and Filipinos] are

[190] Mahathir, "The Way Forward."
[191] Mahathir, "The Way Forward."
[192] Gabriel, "Translating Bangsa Malaysia," 369.
[193] Gabriel, "Translating Bangsa Malaysia," 351.

willing to give up many things to become identified with the country"; seemingly implying that the Chinese in Malaysia are not willing to do the same.[194]

When asked to clarify if non-Malays should give up their identity to create a *Bangsa Malaysia*, he explained that "*Bangsa Malaysia* is not actually Malay. It's [*sic*] an adoption of some of the original culture and language of the country."[195] Nevertheless, the religion of Islam and the Malay language are not representative of all cultures in Malaysia; and it remains unclear if Mahathir took "the original culture and language of the country" to include any of the non-Malay indigenous cultures, let alone the diversity of these cultures. For instance, the *Orang Asli* in Peninsular Malaysia consist of nineteen culturally and linguistically distinct subgroups; while the indigenous peoples in the state of Sabah alone consist of forty-two different ethnic groups who speak fifty distinct indigenous languages as well as around eighty dialects. Their religions include Islam and Christianity.[196]

Scholars such as Mandal and Gabriel have analyzed the concept of *Bangsa Malaysia* and demonstrated that the "cultural heritage" mentioned in the concept was largely invoked to maintain Malay privilege.[197] Gabriel has contended that heritage is not merely a received narrative but a construct that is invoked purposefully: "What is at stake and who is empowered when heritage is invoked? Whose past is complicit with which politics? Whose past gets to count

[194] Cindy Yeap and Kathy Fong, "Vision 2020: Mission Unrealised: Dr M: Race and Religion Got in the Way of Bangsa Malaysia Under Vision 2020." *Edge Malaysia*, January 12, 2021, 14:00 (UTC +8), Edge Weekly, https://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/vision-2020-mission-unrealised-dr-m-race-and-religion-got-way-bangsa-malaysia-under-vision.
[195] Yeap and Fong, "Vision 2020."
[196] Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 5–8.
[197] Mandal, "National Culture Policy and Contestation," 274.

as 'Malaysian heritage?' "[198] In this case, the construct of "indigenous heritage" in Malaysia has been highly politicized to prioritize the language and culture of Malay *Bumiputera*.

Furthermore, one common thread in Mahathir's interview responses was that Malaysians still "distinguish themselves as being Malays, Chinese, Indians," and that makes *Bangsa Malay*sia unattainable.[199] Mahathir's vision of a "united Malaysian nation" that was "ethnically integrated" appeared to refer to a homogenous Malay *Bumiputera* culture.[200] Mahathir's requisites for integration, including the conversion to Islam in the case of abovementioned interracial marriage and the adoption of indigenous language and culture, would essentially require a non-Malay *Bumiputera* to renounce their own cultural heritage. These requisites mirror the exclusionary nature of the NCP and allude to acculturation. On this account, they refute the proclaimed freedom for diverse peoples "to practise and profess their [own] customs, cultures and religious beliefs and yet feeling that they belong to one nation."[201] Therefore, despite its stated aims, *Bangsa Malaysia* failed to narrow the polarity between the state's construct of cultural identity and the individual sense of belonging as well as social realities because the government did not commit to a "full and fair partnership," given all the compromises were non-reciprocatory.[202]

2.4 Long-Term Impact

Policies such as NEP, NCP, and *Bangsa Malaysia* that preserve the interests of a single ethnic-cultural group are inequitable and particularly problematic in a multiracial society such as

[198] Sharmani Patricia Gabriel, "Postcolonialising Heritage and the Idea of 'Malaysia,' " in *Making Heritage in Malaysia*, ed. Sharmani Patricia Gabriel (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2020), 8, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-1494-4_1.
[199] Yeap and Fong, "Vision 2020."
[200] Mahathir, "The Way Forward."
[201] Mahathir, "The Way Forward."
[202] Mahathir, "The Way Forward."

Malaysia. Since the 1970s, the continued divisive nature of these abovementioned policies has impacted the sense of national unity and national belonging. The following examples show that non-*Bumiputera* feel like "second-class citizens" in Malaysia, a sentiment which is also reflected in local WAM musicians' experiences (the interviews are detailed in Chapter 3).

Award-winning novelist Preeta Samarasan, now based in France, revealed that the status quo in Malaysian politics has weakened her sense of national belonging. Writing for a feature in *The Culture Review Mag* in 2020, Samarasan recounted her experience of "how systemic racism [in her home country of Malaysia] drove her to move abroad and how she still mourns the loss of the nation which never quite accepted her."[203] A third-generation Malaysian, born into an Indian immigrant family, Samarasan thought that "[her] family had been a fairly typical example of the rapid social mobility that was possible in Malaya and then Malaysia in those early years [around the time of Malaysia's independence]."[204] Her great-grandmother had arrived in Malaya in the late-1800s, and her grandfather had dropped out of school in his early teens to work and support his siblings. Despite this, Samarasan's grandfather worked his way up from a postal clerk to become the Postmaster General in the Malayan Postal Service, and his children ascended from a family of working-class roots to enter the middle- and upper-middle classes of Malaysia within five decades. Samarasan's immediate family, however, fell upon hard times during her childhood and her parents "knew that as non-Malays, [they] would always be *second-class citizens* under the New Economic Policy (NEP)… because everything was about race, from the highest administrative positions down to children in primary schools."[205] For this reason, her mother had

[203] Preeta Samarasan, "Malaysian Writer Preeta Samarasan on How Her Country's Systemic Racism Forced Her to Move Abroad and How She Still Mourns the Loss of the Nation Which Never Quite Accepted Her," *Culture Review Mag*, April 23, 2020, https://theculturereviewmag.com/2020/04/23/malaysian-writer-preeta-samarasan-on-her-countrys-systemic-racism-why-she-moved-abroad-and-how-she-still-mourns-the-loss-of-her-country-who-never-quite-accepted-her/.
[204] Samarasan, "Malaysian Writer."
[205] Samarasan, "Malaysian Writer." Emphasis mine.

drilled this harsh reality into her early on, given their circumstances as a non-Malay, low-income minority; she would have to win scholarships "to get the education she deserved" abroad; and that she "would have to be at least twice as good as anyone else to make it [i.e., succeed]."[206]

Samarasan's sentiment about "second-class citizens" is supported by anthropologist Timothy P. Daniels's findings from his empirical study in the southern state of Malacca from 1998 to 2000. Daniels's fieldwork revealed a strong notion of "second-class citizenship" among his non-Malay participants. One participant of Gujarati descent expressed that " 'there [are] two citizenships,' *Bumiputera* and non-*Bumiputera*, … in which the *Bumiputera* citizens have more power and rights."[207] Despite testimonies of discontent toward institutionalized bias and Malay privilege, non-*Bumiputera* are keen to form inter-ethnic solidarity "out of feelings of exclusion and second-class citizenship… Some of their deepest aspirations are that Malaysians of all races and religions work and live together in harmony and peace; and that they will eventually enjoy the same rights of citizenship."[208]

While non-*Bumiputera* appear largely undeterred to negotiate their own sense of belonging and to maintain racial rapprochement, existing fissures in ethnic relations are still present, albeit suppressed and contained. Additionally, there is a shared perception in public discourses that "it is 'tolerance' that binds together Malaysia's delicate social fabric."[209] This situation is evident in Embong's interview with a Malay social activist in Kuala Lumpur. According to this participant, "people are taught to tolerate the system, and tolerate each other, but under our breath, we sometimes say racist remarks."[210] Another Chinese participant claimed

[206] Samarasan, "Malaysian Writer."
[207] Timothy P. Daniels, *Building Cultural Nationalism in Malaysia* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 177–8, https://doi-org.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/10.4324/9780203310564.
[208] Daniels, *Building Cultural Nationalism*, 172.
[209] Gabriel, "Translating Bangsa Malaysia," 369, footnotes.
[210] Embong, "Culture and Practice of Pluralism," 77.

that "the unity Malaysia currently enjoys is born 'out of necessity… it is unity for survival,' unity that is 'instrumental, calculative, and artificial,' and not 'unity of the heart.' "[211] These interview responses show that the manifold impacts of racialized policies that began during British colonial rule and continued by successive Malaysian governments have permeated contemporary Malaysian society.

Moreover, Lee has observed the "phenomenon of large numbers of minority-group students leaving Malaysia for overseas education, at high cost to self-funding families."[212] Some of these students never return, possibly due to limited opportunities for advancement. Despite this, many non-Malays have managed to find a silver lining in their circumstances away from home, for there is an undisputed sense of resilience among the marginalized that is discernible from their accomplishments, be it local or abroad. This describes the situation of many acclaimed non-*Bumiputera* WAM musicians who have chosen to develop their careers outside Malaysia, including Mei Yi Foo, Bobby Chen, Harish Shankar, and Kah-Ming Ng.[213] Tellingly, more than eighty percent of my research participants are trained abroad. The fact that most local WAM musicians pursue their studies abroad speaks to non-*Bumiputera*'s realization that their talents may be more accepted and recognized outside Malaysia. In the local arts sector, Mandal has indicated that the lack of state sponsorships in non-*Bumiputera* endeavors has driven art

[211] Embong, "Culture and Practice of Pluralism," 77.
[212] Lee, "Majority Affirmative Action," 10.
[213] Mei Yi Foo is a UK-based pianist who studied at the Royal College of Music and the Royal Academy of Music (UK). Bobby Chen is a UK-based pianist who attended the Yehudin Menuhin School (a boarding school in the UK) for six years before joining the Royal Academy of Music (UK) on a scholarship from the ABRSM. Harish Shankar is a Germany-based conductor who graduated from Weimar Conservatoire (Germany). Kah-Ming Ng is a UK-based harpsichordist-musicologist who received an award from *Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst* (the German Academic Exchange Service) to study at the Frankfurt State Academy of Music (Germany); he was also the recipient of Chevening Scholarship funded by the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office during his PhD studies at Oxford University (UK).

practitioners to excel in order to secure private funding. This in turn subjects them to "more exacting professional standards" to maintain their skills and production values.[214]

My analysis has shown that complex ethnic relations and unresolved issues in minority cultural legitimacy have hindered Malaysia's ostensible pursuits of a unified cultural identity, and by extension, the nation's musical identity. Since its independence, the nation-state has focused on industrial and economic development; but relatively, it has accomplished little to wean itself from dependence on certain aspects of colonial culture, such as WAM. This situation is proof that a colony's political independence does not invariably equate its cultural independence, as Kok's study has shown.[215] Interestingly, while the government of Malaysia has exhibited little substantive engagement in nurturing the local WAM industry, it has welcomed WAM with open arms. For instance, the government's warm reception towards WAM is evident from its participation in administering graded theory examinations for the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM) via the Ministry of Education.[216] Excepting the MPO, most WAM establishments in both public and private sectors are left to their own devices; state support for even the NSO, a state orchestra operating under the Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and Culture, is hardly comparable to the sustained financial endorsement the MPO receives.

The reason for the state's commitment to the MPO appears to be twofold. True to the mentality across Asia identified by Yoshihara, a Western symphony orchestra signifies the modernization and globalization of the nation on a global level. At the national level, the MPO arguably provides a quick, easy solution to Malaysia's lack of a unified music-cultural identity. By populating the MPO primarily with Caucasian musicians playing WAM, the Malaysian state

[214] Quoted in Mandal, "National Culture Policy and Contestation," 282.
[215] Kok, "Music for a Postcolonial Child," 81.
[216] Paul Cutts, "Eastern Promise." ABRSM, Libretto Magazine, Archive, September 2011, accessed December 4, 2021, https://gb.abrsm.org/en/about-us/news/libretto-magazine/archive/?abrsm[newsId]=70069.

has sidestepped sensitive issues regarding cultural inequities within the multiethnic, multicultural nation, instead upholding a globally recognized segment of colonial culture. The state has adopted a *modus operandi* that seeks to placate the stakeholders in Malaysian society without effecting real reforms.

Yoshihara has contended that although the initial interest in WAM in East Asia was driven by its association with modernity, Asian governments, and the intellectual and cultural elites used Western music to promote their own agendas as they gained more agency in defining the connotations of WAM for themselves.[217] In this sense, the MPO unilaterally represents an alternative, non-nationally representative cultural identity that aligns with the Malaysian state's construct of post-independence nationhood. The government's recourse to white colonial heritage is telling, for invoking a shared cultural heritage that truly represents all ethnic groups in Malaysia would necessitate the de-centering of Malay-centric cultural hierarchy. A Western elitist artform, on the other hand, would seem to be an option that is culturally (and ethnically) benign, particularly given the uncritical acceptance in postcolonial societies that WAM is the "universal" language of music. Unmistakably, the state's underlying intention is to adopt a "universal" culture that is seemingly neutral, at least in the Malaysian context, to bind a nation that is in reality divided by unequal laws and rights. The state's uncritical adoption of WAM and its privileging of colonial heritage, I argue, also hinder the processes of decolonization and nation building.

Chapter 3 will reveal that subtle traces of cultural hegemony have filtered down from WAM institutions such as the MPO to local musicians, several of whom still think that a Western music education holds more prestige than a local one. As Yang puts it, "it is still the

[217] Yoshihara, *Musicians from A Different Shore*, 47.

common belief that studying overseas in the West is a prerequisite for a musical career in Asia."[218] My research shows that Malaysian musicians, too, continue to cling on to this belief and may have a long way to go in order to decenter hegemonic hierarchies embedded within the local WAM sector.

[218] Yang, "East Meets West," 16.

CHAPTER 3: Embedded Coloniality and Inequalities in Malaysian Classical Music Sector

This chapter examines the postcolonial reception of WAM and the MPO among professional Malaysian musicians. Since economics, culture, and racial-cultural identity are implicated in the arts, including music, it is crucial to understand the complex interconnections between Malaysia's colonial history, socio-political structures, and the MPO. These were covered in the previous chapters. As a Malaysian music educator, I am personally invested in understanding how local musicians today perceive the British colonial legacy of WAM, and which intertwining factors appear to perpetuate colonial inequities within the Malaysian classical music sector.

The overarching framework of my study is drawn from cultural studies, sociology, and postcolonial studies. My research enquiries include: To what extent are colonial-era attitudes still discernible in the local WAM community, including in the MPO? What do these attitudes signify? How do professional Malaysian musicians today position themselves in a profession that is still largely perceived as a "white" profession?[219] Who stands to gain or lose cultural and/or other capital when the MPO's workforce remains dominated by non-Malaysians? As it stands, published information and critical literature about issues of ethnicity, social class, gender, and sexuality in the Malaysian classical music scene are scarce.[220] Seeking more data, I interviewed twelve adult Malaysians about their experiences with WAM in professional contexts and for

[219] Leppänen, "The West and the Rest of Classical Music," 22.

[220] The only study to date remains Kok, "Music for a Postcolonial Child," 89–104. Music educators have produced some literature about traditional Malay music, Malaysian film music, and Malaysian popular music. These literature include Patricia Ann Matusky and Sooi Beng Tan, *The Music of Malaysia: The Classical, Folk and Syncretic Traditions*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2017), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315223025; Sooi Beng Tan, "Malay Women Singers of Colonial Malaya: Voicing Alternative Gender Identity and Modernity," in *Vamping the Stage: Female Voices of Asian Modernities*, ed. Andrew N. Weintraub and Bart Barendregt (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2017), 83–106, https://doi.org/10.1515/9780824874193-004; and Adil Johan, *Cosmopolitan Intimacies: Malay Film Music of the Independence Era* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2018), https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/mcgill/detail.action?docID=5718139. Nevertheless, most of the abovementioned literature does not cover the WAM scene and/or the orchestra sector in Malaysia.

their opinions about the MPO.[221] Research findings reveal traces of a neo-colonial mindset including the unconscious privileging of elitist colonial-era culture among local musicians.

To contextualize my interview findings, I will provide more background information on WAM education in Malaysia. We begin with the publicly funded system. In 1983, the Malaysian educational system instituted music as a core subject in primary schools (elementary schools), but the curriculum for music differed between vernacular schools depending on funding, and the varied levels of training of the music teachers.[222] To this day, music is not a core subject in public secondary schools (high schools). Thus, the most common ways for Malaysians to learn WAM are through private instrumental tuition and group music classes (for younger children especially). In addition to private tuition, Malaysian students may be introduced to WAM via music-related extra-curricular activities in secondary schools in the forms of marching band, choir, and various ensembles such as the harmonica band. A smaller number of students who attend private international schools such as the International School of Kuala Lumpur learn music as part of the international school curricula, for example in International Baccalaureate programs.[223] To date, private WAM education in Malaysia has produced many more performers (including conductors), music educators, and composers, than music academics (musicologists, music theorists, etc.). While local programs offering tertiary music education are becoming more

[221] See Appendix 3 for more details on research participants and interview topics.
[222] Abdullah, "Music Education in Malaysia," 46. Vernacular schools were introduced by the British as part of the colonial government's educational policies. For more on the history and development of education under the colonial government, see Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 230–47. Currently, public schools can be divided into: Malay-, Chinese-, and Tamil-medium schools at primary level; and Malay- or Chinese-medium schools at secondary level.
[223] Besides private international schools, there are also private "independent Chinese schools" formed by the once Chinese-medium public secondary schools that had refused to switch to the Malay medium following the country's independence despite financial incentives from the government. These private Chinese schools are managed by The United Chinese School Committees' Association of Malaysia.

popular, the professional WAM community in Malaysia is still largely made up of musicians who received post-secondary musical training abroad, funded by private means.

3.1 Embedded Coloniality in Western Art Music

Recent critical literature about Western orchestras has shed light on interconnected elements of embedded coloniality that persisted beyond the colonial era, including "elitism, universalism, Eurocentricity (and attendant implications of aesthetic, technical, and philosophical superiority), hierarchical structures, classism, gender bias, and racism."[224] In *Hungry Listening,* Dylan Robinson has written about critical positionality in the perception, listening, and consumption of Indigenous music.[225] Robinson problematizes the power dynamics involved when settlers in the US and Canada form their understanding of indigenous musical cultures based on Western epistemology.[226] His critique shows that the uncritical adoption of musical cultures that are not our own could reinforce hegemony. The concept that coloniality could become embedded in the participation of a foreign musical culture is both intriguing and meaningful, when applied to the context of Malaysia. What positions do Malaysian musicians assume, and what power dynamics do they participate in, when they embrace this British/Western colonial heritage?

I asked research participants to describe their personal encounters with or significant exposure to Western influences within postcolonial Malaysia, and how these experiences impacted them personally or professionally. Participants mentioned WAM as part of the Western influences they encountered, along with other influences such as Western media, American

[224] Soraya Peerbaye and Parmela Attariwala, "Re-sounding the Orchestra: Relationships between Canadian Orchestras, Indigenous Peoples, and People of Colour," research paper commissioned by Orchestras Canada, 2018, https://oc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Re-sounding-the-Orchestra-EN-June-5.pdf.
[225] Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 9.
[226] Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 9.

popular music culture, the English language, missionary schools, and contact with white expatriates in the state of Penang in particular.

The following accounts from natives of Penang Island show a strong Western presence and a discernible expatriate culture in this former colonial port. For instance, growing up, Participants B and F played in amateur orchestras led by either expatriate British conductors, or local conductors who had studied in Britain. Furthermore, F had the opportunity to work with German musicians who offered instrumental tutoring during a two-week summer music camp in 1978 that was organized by Malaysia's Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Sports (now known as Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and Culture) in collaboration with the German Embassy. The program was active for five summers before it was eventually discontinued in the 1980s. Participant G, another native of Penang, recalled that the Penang Arts Council used to organize annual opera productions and music camps in the 1990s. This council was a private association that worked closely with the Penang state government. G participated in choral productions of Mozart's *Requiem* and Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*, which were led by conductors from Singapore, the Philippines, and Austria.

Aside from WAM, interview responses show that some participants regarded the English language as their main source of exposure to Western influences. Participants of Chinese descent such as Participants L and D grew up speaking English almost exclusively and attributed this as their main exposure to Western culture in Malaysia. L's father attended a missionary school followed by the Royal Military College. L explained,

> my brothers and I grew up on English … Maybe my dad like many other parents of the time who had this mission [*sic*] education, they probably felt that this is where it would be important to be familiar with Western culture, with English; because [the English] were the economic and political powers at the time, in the [19]70s, [19]80s, and [19]90s. We all spoke English, we were quite westernized, I would say. I felt this difference whenever I went to visit my dad's family hometown in Muar. Because his siblings all

> went to Chinese school, so all their children spoke mainly Chinese – mainly Teochew and Mandarin. So, I always felt that my brother and I were a bit different.

Participant D's grandmother worked in a British expatriate household in Penang in the 1950s and 1960s, and D's father who attended a missionary school had spent time in that English-speaking household as a child. D spoke no Mandarin at all at home prior to kindergarten: "My parents sent my siblings and I to Chinese school [i.e., kindergarten], but it felt a bit strange for me… Growing up, my Mandarin was horrible, there was [*sic*] no Chinese books at all [at home]. Everything was very English and Western."

Next, we turn to music as a Western influence. Participant A had attended a private Chinese school and was exposed to WAM via their school band in the 1980s.[227] But Participant A did not regard themselves to be affiliated with Western culture, because they had not grown up in an English-speaking environment:

> I don't think I have any Western culture, affiliation, or experiences, or encounters whatsoever; because I went to Chinese school [from kindergarten to secondary school]. I couldn't speak a word of English.

A's school band experience mirrors that of seven other Chinese-educated participants who were also active in marching bands or choirs in their secondary schools.[228] According to Participant G, a music director, Chinese vernacular schools have remained proactive in promoting and securing private sponsorships for extra-curricular music activities despite the lack of government funding. It was through these music activities that the Chinese-educated participants began to develop their skills in WAM.

Intriguingly, research participants spoke about their exposure to Western influences without directly addressing issues of Eurocentricity, elitism, or embedded coloniality. The

[227] I use non-binary pronouns (they/them/theirs) when referring to all research participants to protect their anonymity.
[228] Four of these Chinese-educated participants attended private Chinese schools.

closest links to these issues surface in L's comment about feeling "different" from members of L's extended family who attended Chinese-language school; and D's observation that speaking English was an indicator of "Western-ness." Only two participants learned their respective native musical traditions while growing up. Participant K played the *yangqin* (Chinese dulcimer) in a Chinese orchestra for six years in secondary school. As a child, Participant J took lessons in Carnatic singing (traditional music from southern India). J started taking piano lessons because of peer pressure and dropped out of Carnatic music training after two years; even though the latter was "very important" to J's parents. A professional musician specializing in WAM today, J regretted not pursuing music of their Indian cultural heritage: "it would be so incredible if I had more grounded, founded knowledge of two cultural traditions, rather than just one."

Participant J was the only participant who analyzed the social impact of the abovementioned Western influences with an awareness of the historical roots of these influences. J, who has spent most of their adulthood studying and working in Europe, pointed out: "There is a kind of cultural hegemony in Malaysia that is obviously linked to our colonial past; starting with the very fact that it feels natural for us to be speaking to each other in English rather than Malay, which is a fact that I personally regret." J also regarded Western pop culture and Western media to be "the biggest insidious influence from the West to the East," because these assert their influences in "[ways] we think of as 'cool.' " J elaborated,

> you know, having watched Friends and Ally McBeal as a kid is going to have a much, much, much bigger influence on your personal outlook than how many times you went to a M*ak Yong* concert.[229]

The lack of awareness of the embedded coloniality of WAM practice among most of my interviewees is not surprising, perhaps, given Malaysia's long history of exposure to WAM since

[229] *Mak Yong* is a traditional Malay theatrical artform from Kelantan, a northern state of Malaysia.

the British colonial era. We may hypothesize that this practice has become normalized (unlike native musical traditions) over the years among the educated middle classes, to the extent that it is no longer perceived as an imported colonial culture. Another factor to consider is the presence of foreign WAM institutions that have played a significant part in cultivating the Malaysian interest in and appetite for WAM. While motivations and causes are difficult to pin down, it seems clear that over time, WAM's mode of pedagogical delivery via private music tuition has created a market ripe for British music examination boards' certification activities, and concomitantly, a demand for teachers as well as teacher training. The first Trinity College London music examinations took place in Malaysia as early as 1921.[230] The ABRSM music examinations began in 1948 and remain popular today. According to the September 2011 issue of ABRSM magazine *Libretto*, Malaysia was the organization's third largest international market in 2011, gaining ground on leaders Hong Kong and Singapore.[231]

Moreover, the Malaysian government appears to have welcomed and endorsed the pedagogical products offered by British music examination organizations. For instance, as mentioned briefly in Chapter 2, ABRSM examinations in music theory are administered by the Malaysian Ministry of Education. As Paul Cutts writes in *Libretto*,

> much of ABRSM's ongoing success in Malaysia can be put down to the *special status* it enjoys in government circles: the organisation is represented locally by the Malaysian Ministry of Education (Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia). The department that oversees arrangements for ABRSM exam[ination]s is the Malaysian Examinations Syndicate and comprises an external and professional exam[ination]s unit in every state.[232]

In the same article, Tim Arnold, ABRSM's Executive Director of Global Operations, agreed that their partnership with the ministry gave them "a kudos that no other exam[ination] body has";

[230] "Malaysia," Trinity College London, Your Local Trinity, accessed February 3, 2022, https://www.trinitycollege.com/local-trinity/malaysia
[231] Cutts, "Eastern Promise."
[232] Cutts, "Eastern Promise." Emphasis mine.

but was "quick to dispute suggestions that ABRSM's presence is some form of new cultural colonialism."[233] Arnold is quoted as saying,

> we're [*sic*] not in Malaysia to promote a specific form of music at the expense of indigenous musical traditions. We're [*sic*] catering for an interest that is already there. We really have no right to examine music of a particular country when we lack a tradition in that music.[234]

One may speculate that in this partnership, the Malaysian Ministry of Education receives at least part of the fees paid by the significant number of Malaysian examinees who register for ABRSM examinations. Arnold's observation about "an interest that is already there" facilely bypasses the issues engendered by British colonial rule and its cultural ramifications in postcolonial Malaysia. In fact, the link between the colonial legacy of WAM and cultural hegemony has been established in recent postcolonial literature. For example, Shzr Ee Tan has identified WAM as the "overarching cultural hegemon" in the context of institutionalized music-making in Singapore, where Western orchestras are positioned at the top of the cultural institution hierarchy above other ethnic ensembles and orchestras.[235] Roe-Min Kok's forthcoming article underscores that ABRSM's colonial music endeavors in South Asia "transmit[ted] Victoria-era values, practices, and gendered behaviors associated with European music across the British Empire, mirroring other *missions civilisatrice* such as Church-sponsored schools."[236] Furthermore, Kok's earlier essay also articulated the implications of Western instrumental instruction as a colonizing force in Malaysia.[237] Nevertheless, David Wright, the author of an institutional history of the ABRSM, whose work was endorsed by the Board from

[233] Cutts, "Eastern Promise."
[234] Cutts, "Eastern Promise."
[235] Tan. "State Orchestras and Multiculturalism," 277.
[236] Kok, "Imperial Music Examinations in South Asia: Colonial Imaginaries, Anticolonial Realities," *Postcolonial Studies*, forthcoming.
[237] Kok, "Music for a Postcolonial Child," 80–3.

its inception, disagrees with Kok's case study on Malaysia and regarded it as a "sinister post-colonial interpretations of cultural power."[238] According to Wright, reports sent back to the ABRSM by those hired to develop the overseas market in the 1980s and 1990s "quickly dispel any perception that the Board was continuing to operate as of right, as it were, or in a heavy-handed, residually colonialist manner."[239] Wright failed to note that these reports were written by British musicians who visited the Far East and interacted only briefly with local musicians via seminars and auditions.[240] The absence of critical local input in these reports thus projects a rather one-sided account of the matter.

During the interviews I conducted, participants were asked to comment on the presence and popularity of foreign music examination boards including Trinity College London and ABRSM in Malaysia. Most research participants agreed that the examination boards provide a "benchmark" and create "job opportunities" for Malaysians. Participants pointed out that graded examinations can be a "good starting point" because the syllabi are "structured" and they make Western classical music "more approachable." That said, several also noted that Malaysian candidates for British music boards are mostly motivated by the acquisition of certificates (the paperchase aspect); and that these students and their parents have somehow formed their own understandings of WAM, perhaps even a subculture around this music. As Participant G elaborated,

> the society now has become very much examination-oriented, or competition-oriented. They think that if I study music, I must have a certification [*sic*] from examination; or I must go for competition to get award [*sic*], then I can call myself a good musician.

[238] David Wright, *The Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music: A Social and Cultural History* (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, Incorporated, 2013), 205, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/mcgill/detail.action?docID=1106838.
[239] Wright, *Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music*, 204.
[240] Wright, *Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music*, 203–4.

Speaking from personal experience, Participant J felt that these music examinations may help with learning the notes, but certainly not with interpreting the music:

> These foreign music examination boards have done a lot to standardize our understanding of [the] Western classical canon. And by standardize, I mean to put it [i.e., the music] into a strait jacket…It seems to be tied into the Malaysian psyche that you need to go through [music] exam[ination]s, and you need to have a little shiny trophy [i.e., certificate] to prove that you're worthy.

Further critiques show that a majority of my interview participants had similar concerns about the unhealthy culture of chasing paper qualifications among the local community. Some participants admitted that they have stopped entering students for yearly graded examinations. As Participant F, an instrument repair specialist, explained:

> It is unhealthy because we have seen students that prepare themselves to take grade eight exam[ination], and one whole year through they are just playing [those] three pieces, that is not healthy.

Participant B, an associate professor in music, reasoned that the prestige of British music examination boards such as Trinity College London or ABRSM is assumed and readily accepted among the populace because even after independence, the Malaysian public educational system continued to model itself upon the British educational system. B observed,

> We've always had this British-centric hold and so when you have a British examination board, it therefore has the legacy that connects to your public education[al] system. It provides validity, a sense of an international[ly] respected standard that we already understand.

B also observed that Malaysian students are influenced by the mindset in public schools that revolves around rote-learning and memorization. In relation to music interpretation, B thought:

> This [mindset] has somehow also impacted the music examinations in a way that the music [boards] never intended. It has twisted the perception not through the design of the music boards but some other influence from the public school system that is entirely memorization-based.

British music examinations in Malaysia appear to be a double-edged sword. In the Malaysian postcolonial context, what was designed to serve as a benchmark of skill have now become the be-all and end-all in teaching and learning WAM. While British certificates and their acquisition have led to teaching jobs and other professional pathways for Malaysian musicians, the acquisition of certificates may have created an unhealthy music-ecosystem built on chasing paper qualifications. Moreover, the interest in music examinations could also be driven by an underlying conception of white cultural power. This was voiced by Participant C. When discussing whether and why foreign music examination boards strengthen or legitimize local musicians, C stressed that:

> I would say it does strengthen and legitimize [local musicians], because going back to whether this is a "white" profession, it is! If you're teaching "white" music, you want "white" people to say that you have done well. So, the certificate comes from the UK.

This view underlines correlations between the warm reception of WAM by the Malaysian government, the popularity of British music examinations among locals, and leftover attitudes from the colonial era such as the assumption of white superiority in WAM that remain unacknowledged and unaddressed among the WAM community. The issue of cultural elitism will be further discussed in Section 3.2.3 at the end of this chapter.

3.2 Inequalities in the Classical Music Sector

Christina Scharff has argued that constructions of the "ideal classical musician" are classed, gendered, and racialized.[241] In collaboration with Anna Bull, Scharff also highlights the ways in which inequalities within the classical music sector manifest themselves in the interplay

[241] Scharff, "Inequalities in the Classical Music Industry," 96–111.

of cultural production and consumption in the UK.[242] In order to scrutinize social inequalities within the Malaysian classical music sector, I asked research participants if they thought social class, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality have impacted or might impact career opportunities and professional advancement among local musicians.

3.2.1 Gender and Sexuality

On the issue of gender, there was a consensus among all participants that the Malaysian WAM sector is "fairly equitable when it comes to gender." Among the male participants, three out of eight acknowledged that they were speaking from a position of privilege when discussing gender inequality. Participant H, a female orchestra musician, asserted: "Personally I have never ever felt [that] as [an] Asian lady, I don't get equal chance as a white male." All other female participants insisted that they have never experienced any gender-based disadvantages in their career in both public and private sectors, contrary to Scharff's findings regarding gendered challenges faced by female musicians in the context of the classical music industries in the UK and Germany.[243] The gender breakdown within the MPO, however, presents a different reality, one that contradicts these accounts. The MPO's official website in 2021 showed that among its seventy-one full-time orchestra members, less than 30% were female.[244] There were only three women out of eleven woodwind players while the entire brass section was all male. More tellingly, there was no female representation in leadership positions for musicians. All sectional leaders were male musicians. In fact, there has never been a local or female music director and concertmaster, except for Penang born Chean See Ooi, the resident conductor from 1998 to 2006

[242] Anna Bull and Christina Scharff, " 'McDonald's Music' Versus 'Serious Music': How Production and Consumption Practices Help to Reproduce Class Inequality in the Classical Music Profession," *Cultural Sociology* 11, no. 3 (2017): 283–301, https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975517711045.
[243] Scharff, "Documenting and Explaining Inequalities," 41–84.
[244] "Meet the MPO."

– the only Malaysian female resident conductor that the MPO has ever hired in its twenty-four-year history. Or as Participant B put it, the "token Malaysian" within the MPO.

As is well known, gender inequality in orchestras is not unique. Recent articles and studies have shown that gender inequality remains an issue in orchestras in the West. Journalist Farah Nayeri's article in the *New York Times* reported that in 2019, "fifteen of the Vienna Philharmonic's 145 permanent members [were] women, with four more going through the statutory transition period to becoming full members."[245] The statistics of female orchestra musicians in Desmond Charles Sergeant and Evangelos Himonides's study "Orchestrated Sex: The Representation of Male and Female Musicians in World-Class Symphony Orchestras" appear to be more promising. Sergeant and Himonides's research findings of gender representation in forty symphony orchestras in Europe and North America in 2019 revealed that 44% of British orchestra members were women, while the corresponding statistics from Europe and North America were 36.6% and 40.1%.[246]

Overall, the interview responses I received revealed that most Malaysian participants appeared to be uncomfortable in elaborating their views on the issues of gender and sexuality. For instance, when invited to clarify on this matter or to offer a general observation, a few participants gave brief responses such as: "I've never found these to be relevant [and] problematical in my music career"; "I don't see so much from gender side"; or "maybe I am not so sensitive towards all these gender issues." Most skirted the topic and also did not address sexuality. The exceptions were two participants who identified themselves as non-heterosexuals,

[245] Farah Nayeri, "When an Orchestra Was No Place for a Woman," *New York Times*, December 23, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/23/arts/music/women-vienna-philharmonic.html.
[246] Desmond Charles Sergeant and Evangelos Himonides, "Orchestrated Sex: The Representation of Male and Female Musicians in World-Class Symphony Orchestras," *Frontiers in Psychology* 10 (August 16, 2019): 4, http://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.01760.

one of whom reflected that: "If I were a bit more camp and flamboyant, I would definitely have problems in Malaysia. But I don't currently because I can sort of pass for [being] straight." Studies have shown that gender and sexuality remain a "social taboo" in Malaysia, a conservative and patriarchal Muslim country; and that "unsanctioned sexual expressions and preferences are demonized and persecuted" for religious reasons.[247] This larger social setting could explain my interviewees' reluctance to discuss the issue of sexuality in depth because "cultural and religious sensitivities have made it embarrassing or undesirable for [issues on sexuality] to be raised."[248]

3.2.2 Ethnicity

On the issue of ethnicity, almost all participants asserted that they have not experienced any racial discrimination in their respective careers. Nevertheless, two participants of Chinese descent felt that they had been unfairly treated within the government sector. Participant C encountered obstacles during C's full-time employment with the government-funded National Symphony Orchestra, specifically when C's application for a leave of absence was rejected repeatedly without reasons. Participant E recalled that they had been recruited to collaborate with the MPO at short notice in the past, but had not been accorded professional courtesy and respect by the orchestra's administrators. On one occasion, E auditioned for a leadership role within the orchestra and had advanced to the third round of audition, including the accompanying interview. After an extended waiting period, however, E was unofficially informed that the DFP

[247] Maznah Mohamad, Cecilia Ng, and Beng Hui Tan, "Querying the Forbidden Discourse: Sexuality, Power and Dominance in Malaysia," in *Feminism and the Women's Movement in Malaysia: An Unsung (R)evolution* (London: Routledge, 2006), 131, 134, http://doi.org/10.4324/9780203099315. See also, Khartini Slamah, "The Struggle to be Ourselves, neither Men nor Women*: Mak Nyahs* in Malaysia," in *Sexuality, Gender and Rights: Exploring Theory and Practice in South and Southeast Asia*, ed. Geetanjali Misra and Radhika Chandiramani (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005), 98–112.
[248] Mohamad, Ng, and Tan, "Querying the Forbidden Discourse," 133.

management had decided not to fill the position with a local candidate.[249] E felt that the decision was racially motivated because they later discovered that one of their fellow finalists, of Malay descent, was offered another position within the organization. Possibly, E's experience could be linked to the notion of "second-class citizenship" discussed in the previous chapter, where non-*Bumiputera* feel that they are being treated unequally because they are "second-class citizens."

There was unanimous agreement among all research participants that the Malaysian WAM sector has always been dominated by musicians of Chinese descent. When asked for their opinions on the reason for this phenomenon, Participant M explained that Islam is the main factor that contributes to the lack of Malay participation. M elaborated that music is a cultural and religious issue for the Malays – who are Muslims by definition: "Some section [*sic*] of the more fundamentalist religious group, they say that music is *haram*, music is forbidden." M encountered this dilemma personally in the past and believed that such religious views have discouraged fellow Malays from pursuing music professionally. According to M, however, Western popular music is "acceptable" on the grounds that it is considered "light entertainment." M also observed that there are more Chinese than Malay patrons attending MPO concerts: "Not the Malays, they are not exposed to [Western] classical music, so they don't really go to classical music concert."

There are other possible reasons for the Chinese dominance. For example, Kok has explained that the discipline and dedication required in instrumental learning (the piano particularly) align with Confucian concepts (Confucian teachings are deeply rooted in Chinese ways of life).[250] Echoing this finding, Wright wrote that the "cultural value that Chinese communities traditionally place on systematic educational achievement" could have contributed

[249] See Appendix 4 for the organizational structure of the MPO and DFP.
[250] Kok, "Music for a Postcolonial Child," 78, footnotes.

to the appeal of both the ABRSM practical and theory examinations in Malaysia and Singapore.[251]

Participant D stated that among the Malaysian Chinese, economic means is the main contributor to the interest in WAM: "Western classical music is very much dominated by Chinese, but that's only because we had an early head start due to our economic advantage. So Chinese were first to pick up an instrument." While D did not provide evidence, they were probably referring to the economic advantage that the Chinese enjoyed before the Malaysian government implemented pro-Malay affirmative action under the NEP; which led to the rise of the so-called new Malay Middle Class. Data from the Department of Statistics Malaysia in 2019 shows that as a group, the Chinese still recorded the highest median and mean monthly household gross income and disposable income in 2019 when compared to other ethnic categories.[252] For their part, Participant D emphasized their belief that social class, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality do not impact career opportunities and professional advancement within the private sector:

> As far as I know, I haven't seen any yet. It's very fair so far. Anyone can become a musician, I've never seen any inequality, there's no prejudice at all. In this sense, it's very healthy.

It is worth noting that 75% of the research participants in this project are of Chinese descent. In my search for interview participants, I came across only a handful of Malay and Indian practitioners of WAM, most of whom turned down my invitation to participate in this project. The relative lack of ethnic diversity within the private sector could explain the

[251] Wright, *Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music*, 205.
[252] *The Key Findings: Income, Poverty, Inequality, Expenditure, Basic Amenities, 2019* (Putrajaya: Department of Statistics Malaysia, July 2020) 88, 94, https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/cthemeByCat&cat=323&bul_id=c3JpRzRqeTNPamMxL1FpTkNBNUVBQT09&menu_id=amVoWU54UTl0a21NWmdhMjFMMWcyZz09.

homogenous interview responses and the occasionally dismissive opinions on issues of inequality within the industry. Moreover, the high concentration of Chinese musicians (in terms of number and talent) in the local WAM sector is potentially problematic for the MPO's localization efforts. If the MPO were to hire Malaysian musicians exclusively, the orchestra's workforce could end up dominated by a single ethnic minority, i.e., the Chinese, albeit Chinese who are born and bred Malaysians, and whose families have been entrenched in the country for generations.[253] From the perspective of the Malaysian government, a Chinese-dominated national orchestra is understandably an awkward representation of Malaysia given the politics described in Chapter 2. This issue could also explain the low number of local musicians within the MPO all these years.

3.2.3 Social Class

Regarding the role of social class and potential discrimination in the local music scene, almost all participants agreed that WAM education can be expensive, and that the cost of musical instruments on top of fees for music lessons and examinations could potentially exclude the participation of lower-income families.[254] Three participants felt that MPO tickets are not expensive, whereas one participant acknowledged the high cost of attending MPO concerts. Commenting on MPO ticket prices, Participant H admitted that they are expensive and "it's meant for higher class people to appreciate music."

[253] For instance, all seven full-time Malaysian MPO players in the 2020/21 season are of Chinese descent.
[254] Household income classification in Malaysia: Bottom 40% constitutes 16% of total household income, they earned less than RM 4,850 per month in 2019; Middle 40% = 37.2% total household income (monthly gross income between RM4,850 to RM10,959); Top 20% = 46.8% total household income (monthly gross income > RM10,960). See *Household Income and Basic Amenities Survey Report 2019* (Putrajaya: Department of Statistics Malaysia, July 2020), 126, https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/cthemeByCat&cat=120&bul_id=TU00TmRhQ1N5TUxHVWN0T2VjbXJYZz09&menu_id=amVoWU54UTl0a21NWmdhMjFMMWcyZz09.

A closer look into the MPO's ticket pricing in the 2019–2020 season demonstrates that lower-income patrons were being excluded. The MPO performed twenty-three "Classics" concerts in the 2019–2020 season. This concert series offered a single ticket at two price categories: twenty concerts were priced between RM 56 and RM 141 (average price RM 98.50); whereas the remaining three concerts ranged from RM 94 to RM 188.[255] The "Specials" concert series was the most expensive, with individual tickets ranging from RM 141 to RM 358. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia, the median monthly disposable household income in Kuala Lumpur, where the MPO is located, was RM 8,834 in 2019. Selangor, the neighboring state, had a median monthly disposable household income of RM 6,837 (the average of both figures is RM 7,835.50).[256] A two-person household spent 5.1% of their monthly consumption expenditure (5.1% of RM 7,835.50 is roughly RM 400) on "recreation services and culture," including cable tv subscription, cinema tickets, newspaper, etc.[257] That means that a single ticket at the average ticket price from the lower category (RM 98.50) would represent roughly 24.6% of the two-person household's entire budget for recreation. If both the household members attended the concert, they would be spending almost 50% of their monthly recreation budget on a pair of "Classics" concert tickets.

I shall compare this scenario with that in Singapore, using the ticket prices of the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO). 8.8% of the monthly expenditure for a two-person household in Singapore was spent on recreation and culture in 2017/2018, and the average budget in this category amounted to SGD 303.60.[258] In 2019, twenty out of thirty-five concerts

[255] Ticket prices from 2019/2020 season as printed in *DFP: Home of the MPO, 2019 Season*, 11–37.
[256] *Household Income and Basic Amenities Survey Report 2019*, 77.
[257] *The Key Findings: Income, Poverty, Inequality, Expenditure, Basic Amenities, 2019*, 109, 113.
[258] "Average Monthly Household Expenditure Among Resident Households," Department of Statistics Singapore, updated September 9, 2019, https://tablebuilder.singstat.gov.sg/table/CT/16631#. Note that 2017/2018 is the last available data at this time because the household expenditure survey in Singapore is conducted quinquennially.

that the SSO performed in 2019 were categorized under "Subscription Concerts" series. Single ticket prices for these concerts were priced between SGD 15 and SGD 88 (average price SGD 51.50).[259] The average single ticket price of SGD 51.50 amounted to only 17.0% of a two-person household budget for recreation as compared to its Malaysian counterpart of 24.6%. Thus it is not unreasonable to conclude that the MPO's ticket prices exclude patrons from the lower-middle classes and below. Table 4 shows the ticket prices of the abovementioned MPO and SSO concerts.

Table 4: Comparison of Ticket Prices Between the MPO and the SSO in 2019–2020 Season

	MPO	**SSO**
Concert type	Classics	Subscription Concerts
Ticket price range in local currency	RM 56–141 (CAD 16.40–41.20)	SGD 15–88 (CAD 13.90–81.60)
Average ticket price in local currency	RM 98.50 (CAD 28.80)	SGD 51.50 (CAD 47.80)

Those writing on behalf of the Malaysian public have also voiced concerns about the MPO's exclusionary practices. Among the latter, the orchestra's *avant garde* concert programs have come under criticism. Proarte questioned the MPO's programming of *avant garde* concerts that were "poorly attended"; he claimed that it is unjustifiable that the "Malaysian Philharmonic

[259] *Singapore Symphony Orchestra: 2019/20 Season* (Singapore: Singapore Symphony Orchestra, 2019), 60–1, accessed Mar 13, 2022, https://issuu.com/ssogroup/docs/sso_brochure_1920_english_issuu__1_.

is funding and performing such unpopular music with no local resonance or relevance on a regular basis."[260] On the other hand, Participants H and L reminded me that the MPO has diversified its programming over the years to feature music by local composers. The orchestra has also added "Family Fun Days" concerts for younger audiences, and played Malay popular music "to reach out to more audience and connect with people" to be "more accessible." Participant J saw the potential of a Western symphony orchestra like the MPO to be a "conduit for cultural inclusivity rather than elitism," based on J's own experience of working in an El Sistema project in Peru. Nevertheless, in my estimation, the MPO's outreach program has a long way to go before it could affect the same changes as El Sistema.

For traces of Western-style elitism remain, likely inherited from practices of British colonials' classed society. In the MPO, these traces include the dress code for attending concerts, stated in fully capitalized letters on its website in 2022: "strictly no torn jeans, shorts, collarless T-shirts and sweatshirts, singlets, sports attire, slippers, and flip flops at any time."[261] The current dress code is considered an improvement on its counterpart during the first decade of MPO's existence, when patrons were required to dressed more formally. Commenting on the MPO's dress code back in 2008, Proarte wrote:

> The ridiculous notion that one has to wear a suit or formal dress to attend the evening concerts betrays this elitist and exclusive mindset. It is so far removed from the ideals, humanity and spirituality in the music of the great composers they [i.e., the MPO] play.[262]

Participant M felt that the current dress code is more rigid and more formal when compared to the dress code for concerts in the UK, where classical concertgoers may be dressed more

[260] Proarte, "Philharmonic Orchestra Nothing But Elitist Extravaganza."
[261] "General Information," Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra, Your Visit, accessed February 22, 2022, https://www.mpo.com.my/booking-general-info.
[262] Proarte, "Philharmonic Orchestra Nothing But Elitist Extravaganza."

casually. Reflecting on the former dress code for MPO's evening concerts, M thought that it was "ridiculous," because there was a time when male patrons were required to wear a tie.

> And if you don't wear a tie or something, they go to the closet to get a tie for you, a suit for you even. That is kind of ridiculous because they have to look at the community base here. Are they going to encourage the community to come, or not? Even in the UK now, there is some flexibility; you can just wear a casual t-shirt to go and watch [concerts].[263]

Three out of four participants who commented on the MPO dress code disagreed that the dress code reflects signs of elitism. Participant D believed that the perceived elitism is a personal issue that has "nothing to do with the classical music, musicians, or the venue." According to D,

> people see classical musicians in suits, in bow ties, then that's the way it is. I mean you have a choice, if you like it [i.e., Western classical music] you can learn about it. The concert hall, the environment, the venue … it makes one feel uppity; but it doesn't discriminate who can appreciate, who can come to the concert hall. There's no prejudice in that. I think it's nice to see musicians dress up properly because it is an event. Anyone is welcome to enjoy it. I don't see the elitism in that. Social inequality, I can't relate to that. Western classical music doesn't discriminate, so anyone can learn to appreciate and learn about it. If the packaging makes one feel uncomfortable, it's something very personal. It's nothing to do with the classical music, musicians, or the venue.

Participant A felt that the MPO's formal dress code was necessary in the early stages,

> because in Malaysia, a lot of people still do not dress in a presentable way or do not know how to carry themselves in public places. Especially when you listen to art music in such a prestigious concert hall. But eventually, there have been a lot of criticisms [*sic*] on that, and they [i.e., MPO management] changed the policy.

This statement carries overtones of embedded colonialist attitudes towards WAM, an issue that is acknowledged by Participant M, who spent around fifteen years studying and working abroad. M believed that the link between WAM and cultural elitism is tied to Malaysians' perceived notion of white superiority, due to the country's British colonial past. M pointed out:

> We are [*sic*] being colonized for so many years as a country – especially Malaysia, so we have this perception of the people from [the] UK, or white people, become superior

[263] According to the 2013/2014 season brochure, the dress code for gala concert was "long-sleeved batik or lounge suit"; while the dress code for all other performances was "smart casual," see *MPO: 2013/14 Season Concert Calendar*, 51. The requirement for long-sleeved batik shirt or a lounge suit persisted till the end of the 2015/2016 season, before it was abolished from the 2016/2017 season onwards, see *MPO: 2016/17 Season*, 52.

> automatically… There's a perception already, without being in contact or anything… I know how people in Malaysia treat the white people; they [i.e., Malaysians] have this certain feel of inferior [*sic*] talking with more respect, and so on. Actually, they [i.e., white people] are just the same. We haven't overcome in terms of our colonial outlook, we cannot break it down yet. Especially for people who are not exposed to the international outlook of music and orchestra, especially. You have to go and see the exposure [*sic*] of it, then you'll realize.

3.3 Classical Music – A "White" Profession?

Scharff and Yang have contended that Western classical music is still largely a "white" profession, despite the long history of participation by visible minorities.[264] This argument is supported by Javier Hernández's recent article in the *New York Times* that details testimonials from professional musicians of East Asian descent in the US, foregrounding their experience of racism in an industry that has long been resistant to change. According to Hernández, Asian artists are "accused of besmirching cultural traditions that aren't [*sic*] theirs and have become targets of online harassment and racial slurs."[265] These artists are stereotyped as being "technically precise yet artistically vacuous," or being "cold and reserved" in their playing.[266] Hernández wrote that casual racism affected even leading artists like Yuja Wang, who occasionally "felt like an outsider in the industry, including when others mispronounce her name or do not appear to take her seriously."[267] As reported by Hernández, David Kim, a violist at the San Francisco Symphony, is convinced that change will only come when classical music, or as Kim called it – " 'racism disguised as art,' reckons with its legacy of intolerance."[268]

In line with Scharff and Yang's argument, my research focuses on how professional Malaysian musicians today position themselves in an occupation that is still largely perceived as

[264] Scharff, "Inequalities in the Classical Music Industry," 105–8; Yang, "East Meets West," 1–30.
[265] Javier C. Hernández, "Asians Are Represented in Classical Music. But Are They Seen?" *The New York Times*, updated July 30, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/21/arts/music/asians-classical-music.html.
[266] Hernández, "Asians Are Represented in Classical Music."
[267] Hernández, "Asians Are Represented in Classical Music."
[268] Hernández, "Asians Are Represented in Classical Music."

"white-dominated." My findings corroborate what Scharff noted in the interviews that she conducted between 2012 and 2013. Scharff found a "persistence of racialized hierarchies in relation to who qualifies as musical, artistic, and creative" among her research participants.[269] Much of this mindset was also apparent from the choice of words in the interview responses I received. Some participants agreed that classical music is undeniably a "white" profession. Participant D accepted it as a matter of fact: "I don't see any issue in this. Rightly so, it's Western music, it's Western culture." Participant H focused on the issue of cultural heritage: "People who appreciate this kind of music are also mostly white. It's in their culture, it's in their blood so naturally that's just how it is." H added: "If I want to study Western classical music, I want to go to the roots." Other participants contended that white dominance might have been the case in the past, but on the surface at least, it is less obvious today due to globalization. Several participants cited examples of prominent Asian musicians including Lang Lang, Yuja Wang, and Ray Chen to prove that Asians have a foothold in the global classical music scene, even though these may be instances of exceptionalism.

When asked to comment on MPO's large-scale hiring of white non-Malaysians, Participant F justified: "It had to be done, to bring the orchestra to a world standard. We cannot just engage half of them from very good musicians [from abroad], and you have half of them of your local players." Participant D was convinced that it is a question of meritocracy:

> As far as I know, the MPO seeks to get the best candidate, period. Based on merit purely. If you're talking about a Malaysian applying for a job, yes, you can apply. Many Malaysians have tried applying, but you're competing with so many musicians from all around the world. If you're not the best candidate, you don't get that position. I think that it's as simple as that … They do look for the best they can find. If we think that there are still not enough Malaysians there, it's not their fault.

[269] Scharff, "Inequalities in the Classical Music Industry," 106.

These responses reflect sentiments among interview participants that seem to suggest local musicians are not fully qualified for MPO positions. At the same time, are Malaysian musicians truly below the par for the MPO's grand vision of a "world-class symphony orchestra?"[270] What other factors may have deterred the hiring of local musicians? Participant K, the music academic, reasoned that the audiences' preferences may have influenced the MPO's hiring decisions: "Because psychologically, a lot of Asians will feel that if that concert is played by whites [*sic*], then it must be a good concert." K felt that much of the bias is self-inflicted: "From the eyes of our fellow Malaysians who have not been abroad, we thought that all whites must know their music." This led the participant to conjecture that the hiring process was/is affected by the management's assumption that "they need to show more white faces" to sell tickets. The abovementioned responses signal the existence of an internalized, essentialized construct of musical merit that is uncritically associated with whiteness.

Participant J felt that the MPO's recruitment of predominantly musicians of European ethnic heritage is problematic, because it can be interpreted as "a palpable symbol of hegemony." To J, this issue is also emblematic of "this long tradition of idolizing everything that comes from Europe and not really cherishing [any]thing that comes from Malaysia." In 2021, there were seven Malaysian musicians out of seventy-one full-time orchestra members.[271] Apparently, the orchestra's management has claimed that "[this] is because few Malaysians auditioned and, out of those, fewer still were sufficiently skilled."[272] According to Participant M, the MPO's management believes that "Malaysian[s] are not good enough even though they have won international awards." M's claim corroborates with that by an anonymous critic, who argued in

[270] This was the wording used in the 2002 program booklet. Rochester, program notes for Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra, August 25, 2002.
[271] Rastam, "Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra's Downsizing."
[272] Rastam, "Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra's Downsizing."

2008 that the MPO's "overall artistic planning and direction [are] controlled by Europeans who have a vested interest in telling PETRONAS that there is no talent in Malaysia; and the ignorant management of PETRONAS are happy to maintain the status quo."[273] Participant K remarked that it seems like "the MPYO is the highest standard where one local musician can go up to"; while Participant L did not regard the MPO as a realistic career prospect for local musicians. Their responses reflect a perceived glass ceiling for local musicians where the MPO is concerned, despite the existence of high-quality local talent, as indicated in opinions such as "Malaysian talent is usually recognized overseas and not in Malaysia."[274]

Furthermore, the interview responses reveal an implicit sense of resentment against the perceived exclusionary hiring practices of the MPO. Understandably, there might not have been many qualified local musicians when the MPO started in the late 1990s, but Malaysians are still underrepresented today, twenty-three years on. In an article that examines the relevance of the orchestra in 2021, Saidah Rastam pointed out that PETRONAS has been prioritizing WAM over local traditional music and dance for years. For instance, "young MPO members were being paid nearly ten times what senior PETRONAS Performing Arts Group (PPAG) musicians received."[275] Rastam added that even though PPAG, a group that specialized in traditional Malay music and theatre, was disbanded in 2012, PETRONAS continued funding the MPO. From this information we may conclude that the musical prestige that the MPO's management perceived in an orchestra filled with imported talents is hurting local musicians, be it within the WAM or

[273] Malaysian for Equality, "MPO Not Making the Right Kind of Music."
[274] Malaysian for Equality, "MPO Not Making the Right Kind of Music."
[275] Rastam, "Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra's Downsizing."

traditional Malay music industries. These are the stakeholders who stand to lose capital – cultural as well as financial – if the situation continues.[276]

As my findings have shown, the challenges local WAM professionals (including performers, composers, educators, etc.) face in the Malaysian classical music scene are manifold. First, they must navigate their musical and racial identities in a profession that is historically and widely riddled with ingrained hierarchies and prejudices against non-white "cultural outsiders."[277] Second, they must grapple with the MPO, a main player in the local sector that appears to reproduce neo-colonial inequities in its philosophy, hiring practices, and artistic and operational decisions. To the unsuspecting public, the MPO's neo-colonial attitudes project a rhetoric that arguably undermines the status and skills of local WAM musicians. Moreover, the privileging of elite WAM by the MPO management above and beyond local music and musicians, and the Malaysian government's complicity with and reliance on non-Malaysian agents (IMG Artists, European artistic directors) may be reinscribing a form of neo-colonialism that is filtering down to the WAM community at large.[278]

While some participants were less vocal than others in discussing inequalities in the sector, many demonstrated a clear stance of where they stand. Few participants gave guarded responses when they voiced their opinions against British music examination boards and/or the MPO; even if they have benefited from either establishment in the form of musical training, collaboration opportunities, and financial sponsorships. Conflicting emotions that I detected among the interviewees include a sense of resignation among those who justified why local

[276] Cultural capital as discussed by Pierre Bourdieu, in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste.* Translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984.
[277] Yoshihara, *Musicians from a Different Shore,* 189. For more details on Yoshihara's argument, see Chapter One.
[278] For more details on neo-colonialism, see Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies*, "Neo-colonialism/neo-imperialism," 177–80.

talents have been side-lined by the MPO. Some respondents even displayed a sense of insecurity in their discussion of perceived white musical prestige within the MPO, and the idolization of Westerners and their cultural practices among the WAM community. More intriguingly, there was a pervasive sense of pride among the responses, albeit to varying degrees. Some participants were proud to be part of the WAM community, while others displayed satisfaction at being associated specifically with the MPO. Notwithstanding the range of responses, the interviewees' overall lack of awareness of the embedded coloniality of WAM practices appears to me concerning, for these musicians are also educators responsible for teaching future generations of musicians. It is possible that in the Malaysian post-colonial context, inequities are being perpetuated in the production and consumption of classical music on a subconscious level simply because of a general lack of critical awareness.

There are limits to my findings because of the relatively small number of interviewees and the lack of ethnic diversity among my research participants. Although all four official ethnic groups are represented, 75% of these participants are of Chinese descent. In terms of the professional training of the participants, there are two academics and one composer among the interviewees, while a majority of them are performers, educators, and/or music entrepreneurs. One avenue for future research might be to interview a more representative sample of WAM musicians in Malaysia, including more contemporary Malaysian composers and university level academics, whose opinions may add to or even change some of my results.

CONCLUSION

Kwame Nkrumah, a former president of Ghana, once said that "a state in the grip of neo-colonialism is not master of its own destiny." If the postcolonial nation-state of Malaysia has "institutionalized colonial racial identities and woven them into the fabric of [Malaysian] political and social life[,] to the extent that they constitute a common sense through which people conceive identities of themselves and others"; how can Malaysians reframe their understanding of their own postcolonial identities beyond the grip of neo-colonialism?[279]

In "The Colony: Its Guilty Secret and its Accursed Share," Achille Mbembe interrogates the ways in which the colony inscribes itself into the contemporary African imagination. Mbembe argues,

> It is vital to connect multiple significations of colonial statues and monuments … with *structures of power and domination*… It is known that a *long-lasting domination* must not only inscribe itself onto the bodies of its subjects, but must also leave its *marks* upon the space they inhabit, as well as leaving *indelible traces in their imaginary*. This domination must envelop the subjugated people and hold them in a more or less permanent state of trance, intoxication, and convulsion – *incapable of thinking for themselves with any perspicacity*. This is the kind of domination that it took to bring them to think, act, and behave as though they were *perpetually caught in an unbreakable spell.*[280]

In many ways, Mbembe's words ring true when applied to the power dynamics of the WAM sector in Malaysia. Malaysia's leaders should not forget the country's historical relationship with colonialism, of which WAM is part. The state's prioritizing of WAM and continued endorsement of the MPO at the expense of its own ethnic musical traditions, could suggest a form of "self-subjugation" to the British colonizer's cultural domination.[281]

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[279] Goh and Holden, "Introduction: Postcoloniality," 3.
[280] Achille Mbembe, "The Colony: Its Guilty Secret and its Accursed Share," in *Terror and the Postcolonial*, ed. Elleke Boehmer and Stephen Morton, Blackwell Concise Companions to Literature and Culture (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 42, https://doi-org.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/10.1002/9781444310085.ch1. Emphasis mine.
[281] Mbembe, "The Colony: Its Guilty Secret," 34, 42; see also Kok, "Music for a Postcolonial Child," 83.

At the same time, the MPO could be interpreted as the symbolic power of the "colonial potentate" with Malaysian musicians as the "colonized." The cultural hegemony linked to the MPO's controversial hiring practices (previously discussed in Chapter One) could represent the potentate's "long-lasting domination" that leaves "indelible traces in [the] imaginary [of the colonized].[282] Possibly, these traces manifest themselves as a "cultural-outsider" complex in the psyche of local Malaysian musicians. For instance, Participant C remarked that local musicians might not "churn out the numbers" [i.e., show up], even if the MPO were to start conducting blind auditions. C recounted that:

> When there's an announcement of an audition [at the MPO], I would ask all the Malaysian string players with whom I was in active conversation at least six or seven years ago why they were not auditioning. And they'd say, "there's no point, *we are not good enough*." They feel that the *barrier* is already too high for them to even try to participate.

The orchestra's precedence of excluding the "cultural outsider" in their hiring practices may have contributed to this perceived "barrier" among the string players in C's anecdote. Evidently, sentiments of inadequacy, signaled by phrases such as "there is no point, we are not good enough," have discouraged local musicians from attempting to claim their rightful place in the MPO.

We can now understand why Mbembe stresses the importance to connect "significations of colonial statues and monuments … with colonial structures of power and domination." By consciously looking out for both the physical "marks" and the rhetorical "traces" of a long-lasting domination, the "subjects" could then prevent themselves from becoming "incapable of thinking for themselves with any perspicacity… as though they were perpetually caught in an unbreakable spell."[283] To answer the question I posed at the beginning of the Conclusion,

[282] Mbembe, "The Colony: Its Guilty Secret," 42.
[283] Mbembe, "The Colony: Its Guilty Secret," 42.

postcolonial awareness is key in enabling Malaysians to reframe their understanding of their own postcolonial identities beyond the grip of neo-colonialism. Based on my analysis of research participants' answers, I believe that the concept of embedded coloniality has yet to seep into the Malaysian public's consciousness. I argue that as a result of a lack of awareness, Malaysian musicians could be imbibing and perpetuating colonial attitudes which operate as implicit assumptions and expectations in the local WAM community. I hope that the results of my research will inform those in the Malaysian WAM sector and help them reflect critically on the situation of the local classical music scene, as they move towards possibly changing and diversifying the field of WAM in Malaysia. Aspects of my work may also apply to WAM in other postcolonial locations, especially outside the West.

The recently announced re-evaluation of the MPO's business model offers an excellent opportunity for its decisionmakers to consider the global orchestra sector and its current directions. For example, in the interest of social justice, orchestras in the West are taking actions in concert programming and hiring practices to reflect their commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion. Efforts have been ongoing for the past decade. The combined total of pieces by women and composers of color in the concert programs of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, for instance, rose from 1% in the 2015–2016 season to 9.7% in the 2019–2020 season; and the percentage will increase to 41% in 2021–2022.[284] In 2020, top UK orchestras including the BBC Symphony Orchestra and the Royal Philharmonic signed up for a diversity monitoring program "I'm In," the first diversity audit tool for the music industry.[285]

[284] Tom Jacobs, "America's Orchestras Get Serious About Diversity," Classical Voice, August 10, 2021, https://www.sfcv.org/articles/feature/americas-orchestras-get-serious-about-diversity.
[285] Rachael Burford, "I'm In: Orchestras Sign Up to Diversity Audit to Include More Black and Asian Musicians," *Evening Standard*, Culture, July 29, 2020, https://www.standard.co.uk/culture/orchestras-black-and-asian-musicians-im-in-diversity-audit-a4511261.html.

Moreover, non-profit organizations including Orchestras Canada and League of American Orchestras have taken proactive steps to redress longstanding inequities in the WAM sector, and to develop long-term strategies for a more equitable orchestra sector. Specifically, Orchestras Canada commissioned and published a report in 2018 that examined Canadian orchestras' engagement with indigenous artists and artists of color.[286] UK-based Chineke! Foundation supports up-and-coming Black and ethnically diverse classical musicians in the UK and Europe via the foundation's variegated ensembles and mentoring programs.[287] Chineke!'s counterpart in the US is the Sphinx Organization, based in Detroit. Sphinx offers programs in education, artist development, and leadership training to support African American and LatinX musicians, as well as cultural entrepreneurs specializing in WAM.[288]

Speaking with the *New York Times* in 2020 regarding the effectiveness of blind auditions in making orchestral hiring more equitable, Max Raimi, a violist in the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, questioned: "Is the role of an orchestra to play music at the highest level possible? Or is it to be an engine for societal change?"[289] In response to Raimi's questions, I contend that these two roles are not mutually exclusive. When positioned as a dichotomy, Raimi's questions seem to imply that being an engine for societal change necessarily means a compromise in performance quality. Could the MPO play both of these roles concurrently? Moving forward, these are consequential questions for the orchestra's management. Today, at a time when other orchestras in the West are calling for change, it is arguably time for the MPO to rethink itself in

[286] Peerbaye and Attariwala, "Re-sounding the Orchestra."
[287] "Our Mission," Chineke! Foundation, accessed May 22, 2022, https://www.chineke.org/our-mission.
[288] "Our Vision and Mission," Sphinx, accessed May 22, 2022, https://www.sphinxmusic.org.
[289] Zachary Woolfe and Joshua Barone, "Musicians on How to Bring Racial Equity to Auditions," *New York Times*, September 10, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/10/arts/music/diversity-orchestra-auditions.html.

the context of Malaysian society. As Participant B put it, “If it was going to be the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra, let it really be for Malaysians.”

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Abbreviations

ABRSM – Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music
ASEAN – Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CAD – Canadian Dollar
DAKEN – *Dasar Kebudayaan Negara* (National Culture Policy)
DFP – *Dewan Filharmonik PETRONAS*
IMG – International Management Group
MPO – Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra
MPYO – Malaysian Philharmonic Youth Orchestra
NEP – National Economic Plan
NCP – National Culture Policy
NSO – National Symphony Orchestra, Malaysia
OPEC – Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries
PETRONAS – Petroliam Nasional Berhad (National Petroleum Limited), the state oil and gas company of Malaysia
PPAG – PETRONAS Performing Arts Group
RM – *Ringgit* Malaysia
SGD – Singapore Dollar
SSO – Singapore Symphony Orchestra
UMNO – United Malays National Organization, political party in Malaysia
WAM – Western art music

Appendix 2: Glossary of Non-English Terms

Angkatan Sasterawan 50 – Literary Generation of 1950
Angklung – tuned bamboo idiophone of Indonesian origin
Bangsa Malaysia – "Malaysian nation," or "Malaysian race"
Bumiputera – "sons of the soil"
Dasar Kebudayaan Negara – National Culture Policy
Datuk – civilian honor conferred by either *Yang di-Pertuan Agong* (the monarch), or the Sultan (the head of state)
Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst – German Academic Exchange Service
Dewan Filharmonik PETRONAS – PETRONAS Philharmonic Hall
Dewan Rakyat – the lower house of Parliament
Haram – "forbidden," the term is used in relation to something that is proscribed by Islamic law
Ketuanan Melayu – "Malay supremacy"
Ketuanan Islam – "Islam supremacy"
Kuala Lumpur – the capital of Malaysia
Mak Yong – a traditional Malay theatrical artform from Kelantan, a northern state of Malaysia.
Malaya – what Malaysia was known before its independence in 1957
Orang Asli – "original people"
Orang Ulu – "interior peoples"
Peranakan – descendants of immigrants who settled in the Malay Archipelago and married local Malay women
Petaling Jaya – urban center in the state of Selangor in Malaysia
Rebab – a traditional Malay bowed string instrument
Tun – highest civilian honor conferred by *Yang di-Pertuan Agong*
Tunku – title for Malay princes
Wawasan 2020 – Vision 2020
Yang di-Pertuan Agong – "Supreme Ruler," the constitutional monarch of Malaysia
Yangqin – Chinese dulcimer

Appendix 3: Research Participants and Interview Topics

Between May and June in 2021, I conducted semi-structured interviews with the approval of my university's Research Ethics Board. I interviewed twelve adult Malaysian musicians (labelled as Participants A to M; the letter "I" was omitted for purposes of clarity) about their experiences with WAM in professional contexts as well as for their opinions about the MPO. All interviews were held in English via video conferencing, and I followed up with few research participants via email when I needed additional clarification. The pool of research participants came from recommendations made by members of the music community in Malaysia, based on their familiarity with the Malaysian classical music scene and/or the MPO.

Out of the twenty-four participants that I approached, four female and eight male participants agreed to participate, a 50% response rate. Four ethnicities were represented.[290] They ranged between thirty and seventy years old.[291] Having a group of participants of a wide age range was important to my study because they represented different generations of local musicians who were able to shed light on the development of the local classical scene from the 1970s through to present day. All are Malaysian musicians currently employed in full-time jobs who may also engage in freelance work in both public and private sectors, locally and internationally. Their employers include orchestras, music schools, conservatories, and universities.

Furthermore, most of the research participants held multiple, overlapping roles within the music profession (as performers including conductors, composers, instrument repairers, WAM

[290] According to the ethnic categories used in the Malaysian government registry and national census, the ethnic classification of the participants is as follows: one participant of Malay descent, nine of Chinese descent, one of Indian descent, and one that belonged to the classification of "Other."
[291] Participants in their thirties=3, forties=7, fifties=1, and sixties=1.

event coordinators, academics, educators, and entrepreneurs). Not only are these participants familiar with the local classical music scene, several have also had direct professional engagements with the ABRSM and/or the MPO. All spent their formative years in Malaysia, where they received their formal education locally up to secondary level (equivalent of grades eight to twelve in North American educational system). Ten participants have studied abroad (in countries within Asia, Australia, Europe, and North America) at some point in their careers.

Research Interview Topics

1. What is your current profession and job capacity?

2. Briefly describe your general education background (primary/secondary/tertiary level, private/public/international, language/s of instruction, etc.). If you were educated outside of Malaysia, please indicate which country, type of institution/s, and when.

3. Describe any personal encounter or significant exposure to Western cultures within Malaysia. How has any of these Western cultures influenced you personally and professionally? (These encounters can be direct or indirect interactions, be it social, cultural, religious, extra-curricular, education, sports, or other contexts beyond these examples).
4. I am interested in understanding whether and how social class, or ethnicity, or gender, or sexuality (and/or any combination of these) impact career opportunities and professional advancement among professional musicians like yourself. Have you any thoughts to share?

5. Some scholars have argued that Western classical music is still largely a "white" profession, despite the long history of participation by visible minorities (i.e., non-whites), for example. What are your opinions on this?

6. (a) Foreign music examination boards (ABRSM, ANZCA, Trinity College London, etc.) are popular in Malaysia and have been established for some time. What do you think they contribute to Malaysian understanding of Western classical music?

   (b) The institutions in question 6(a) have created teaching jobs and other professional pathways for Malaysian musicians. Do you think these pathway function to strengthen and/or legitimize local musicians? If so, in what ways?

7. The Malaysia Philharmonic Orchestra (MPO) has been criticized for hiring a large majority of non-Malaysian musicians. I am happy to hear your thoughts about this situation especially in the context of the local musical community.

8. Scholars have criticized Western classical orchestras as conduits for cultural elitism and social inequalities. Do you have any experience and/or knowledge about this topic, either with regards to the MPO or other Western orchestras?

Appendix 4: Organizational Structure of the MPO and DFP (1999)[292]

THE MALAYSIAN PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

Patron
Dato Seri Dr Siti Hasmah binti Haji Mohd Ali

Chief Executive Officer
Abdul Hamid Abu Bakar

General Manager
John Duffy

Orchestra Administrator
Sally Rogers

Librarian
Anna Hawkins

Assistant Orchestra Administrator
Norman Ismail

Assistant Librarian
Abdul Manan Yang Kamardin

DEWAN FILHARMONIK PETRONAS

Chief Executive Officer
Abdul Hamid Abu Bakar

Marketing Manager
Hamili Hamid

Operations Manager
Mazlan Zabha

Technical Operations Manager
Kamaruddin Shahid

Finance Manager
Ismed Darwis Bahatiar

Education & Outreach Manager
Hew Siew Chin

Concert & Events Manager
Julia Hall

Box Office Manager
Clive Gray

Stage Manager
John Chaplin

Assistant Marketing Manager
Tan Lae-Hoon

Business Development Executive
Zamira Yasmin

Communications Executive
Ariff Ahmad

Subscriptions Executive
Wan Shera Othman

Finance Executive
Azira Azizan

Research Executive
Surina Osman Khan

Promotions Executive
Richard Ng

Senior Concert & Events Executive
Meera Vijayendra

Concert & Events Executive
Aran Abdul Rahman

Front of House Executive
Mariena Malek

Education & Outreach Executives
Chan Su Yin
Soraya Mansor

Assistant Stage Manager
Andrew Warren

Sound & Acoustic Master
Wong Wing Thim

Lighting & Audio Visual Master
Philip Bowman

Technical Supervisor
Johan M Noh

[292] Note that the list of job titles and the order of names are as they appear in Rochester, program notes for Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra, April 16–18, 1999.