Producing Localities and Nationhood in a Globalizing Southeast Asian City

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Abstract

This essay discusses social imaginaries and their associated anxieties and varying scales and provenances that overlap and intersect at the site of the “local.” Based on a long-term fieldwork at an urban poor Hindu-Indian “squatter” settlement situated on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), how local survival strategies have morphed alongside the stabilizing imperatives of nation-hood formation are examined. In the case of Malaysia, this has involved perpetuating the colonial categories of “race” and “religion” in tandem with appropriating the newer constructs of “globalization” and the drive to remake Kuala Lumpur into a “World Class City.”
Keywords: Locality, Kuala Lumpur, Squatter Settlement, World Class City, Nationhood

Introduction

Arjun Appadurai (1996) has suggested that both modern nationalism and neighborhoods are contradictory social projects at creating recognizable and stable localities. From the standpoint of the former, a locality is opportunistically regarded as a site that can either generate national level nostalgias, celebrations, and commemorations or as a necessary condition for the production of nationals. In this schema, the locality of “neighborhoods exist principally to incubate and reproduce compliant national subjects and not for the production of local subjects” (Appadurai 1996: 190). Stating it differently, neighborhoods are reterritorialized or governmentalized for the purpose of producing desirable national subjects.

But actually existing neighborhoods are also historically complex social and cultural formations, and they do not always neatly cohere or necessarily mesh with the aforementioned grand aims of state projects. Among others, neighborhood residents characteristically weave together over time an array of localized and idiosyncratic relationships borne out of everyday face-to-face activities; among others, cultivating friendships, networking for business dealings, and participating in a range of
Religious or recreational pursuits which may rub against the grain of state policies or rhetoric. As such, these neighborhoods can “represent anxieties for the nation-state as they usually contain large or residual spaces where the techniques of nationhood are likely to be either weak or contested [and as] a perennial source of entropy and slippage [they] need to be policed as thoroughly as borders” (Ibid.,: 190f.).

The key difference between the social and governmental productions of these two kinds of localities can be characterized in terms of the agency of contexts—while nation-state building is singularly context-driven, neighborhoods are, by comparison, context-generative. For the latter, Appadurai further notes that since neighborhoods are meaningful life-worlds which are “imagined, produced, and maintained against some sort of ground (social, material, environmental), they also require and produce contexts against which their own intelligibility takes shape” (Ibid.,: 184).

In the current milieu of modern globalization, it has become a truism that the contexts of producing recognizable and stable localities, whether at the scale of the nation-state or of local neighborhoods, have to contend with a formidable range of vectors which essentially produce a deterritorialized, diasporic, and transnational world. As Appadurai aptly characterizes it, “the isomorphism of people, territory, and legitimate sovereignty that constitutes the normative charter of the modern
nation-state is itself under threat” (Ibid.,: 191). Rapid movement and circulation create “translocalities.” These fluid and mobile spaces or interconnected zones essentially draw their valence “from the inherent instability of social relationships, the powerful tendencies for nation-states, which sometimes obtain significant revenues from such sites, to erase internal, local dynamics through externally imposed modes of regulation, credentialization, and image production” (Ibid.,: 192).

Appadurai’s insightful multiscalar spatial imagery of “locality” is proposed to conjoin [In this paper] with Charles Taylor’s (2004) notion of “modern social imaginaries” to underscore the historical embeddedness of social practices. While Taylor’s subject of discussion is on the broad sweep of the intellectual history of Western civilization, his central insight on the durability and mutability of social practices through the normalization of the human “imagination” is pertinent to this essay. Taylor argues that rather than solely through intellectual or rational discourse, ordinary people make sense of their surroundings typically through the medium of images, stories, and legends. Social imaginaries are “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them, and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations” (Taylor 2004 : 23).
Only with widespread circulation of these social imaginaries over several decades, if not centuries, do people residing in distant localities eventually develop “a common understanding that makes possible common cultural practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy” (Ibid.: 23). These then become the invisible and widely accepted normative collective unconscious frames of a modern society on which social life and intellectual categories are founded upon.

In this essay, the preceding theoretical insights are brought to bear on the growth and evolution of an urban working class “neighborhood” called Kampung Mariyamman (Mariyamman village). Situated on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of Malaysia, the nature of the dialectical relationship between the “locality of the nation-state” and the “locality of the neighborhood” as played out in this ethnographic setting is explored. In this evolving drama, how the “social imaginary” of global modernity as manifested in the state’s current phase of hyperbuilding a “world class city” is also folded up with other equally modern social imaginaries of “race” and “religion.” Indeed, the current ideological purchase of the “global” over the “local” is not a smooth and linear transaction. Instead, it is striated and inflected by the historically nested contexts of local-level material conditions and older colonial imaginaries.

1) Following academic convention, this is a pseudonym.
Homecoming at a Hindu Temple Festival

Dusk is fast approaching as I turn off from the Federal Highway and into the main road servicing a predominantly working class residential area. Situated close to the industrial belt bordering the administrative borders of Kuala Lumpur and its suburb Petaling Jaya, the evening air is tinged with a slightly pungent odor, a consequence of its proximity to several factories in the vicinity and to a thoroughfare usually clogged with vehicular traffic at most times of the day. My arrival happens to coincide with the sonorous azan reverberating from the numerous elevated powerful loudspeakers of mosques in the locality.

Next to a small Indian-Muslim mosque, I turn my motorcycle into a bumpy earth track that winds its way into a “clearing.” Here, the religious soundscape becomes mixed as the vocally sung azan is entangled with the quick tempo devotional music emanating from a compact disc player housed in a modest-sized Hindu kovil (temple)—the solitary building structure standing in the “clearing”—situated beneath a majestic banyan tree (vata). It

2) Situated some 15 kms south of the capital city, the core of suburban Petaling Jaya was conceived and built in the 1950s as a satellite township in order to relieve the population pressure in Kuala Lumpur. By June 2006, the township had expanded and developed substantially to be granted city status. In 2010, Petaling Jaya City had a total population of around 638,000 spread over an area of 97.2 sq. km. and was the most prosperous city in the highly industrialized state of Selangor.

3) The azan is the call to prayer for the Muslim faithful. There are five such azans in a day.
is the Friday of the first weekend of June and once again as it is time for the annual temple festival (*thiruvila*) honoring its patron goddess, Mariyamman, a beehive of activity animates the temple grounds.

A group of young adult Indian men and male teenagers, totaling around 20 or so, are boisterously making preparations for the *thiruvila*. Taking leave from their respective places of work, most of them have been there since the morning. Well-honed by years of habitual repetition, they perform their tasks with almost clockwork harmony and precision. Nathan and his small team sit and skillfully weave young coconut leaves into geometrically patterned *thoranam* whilst exchanging light banter with each other. They have learned their skills from their elders by watching them and making the *thoranam* not only for the *thiruvila* but also for other festive occasions like weddings and birthdays.

A smaller team is tasked with cutting off stems of *veppalei* (margosa leaves) from several large branches that have been transported in from elsewhere and bunching them together with strings. Muthu periodically collects both items and hangs them in alternate patterns with the aid of nylon strings. As the goddess Mariyamman is believed to enjoy the aroma of *veppalei*, he makes sure that these items are generously strung up around the temple grounds.
Squatting next to the adjoining shrine of Muniandy, the guardian deity, Nathan prepares the kalasam, an important ritual item symbolizing the presence and power of the goddess throughout the next 3 days. His teenaged son watches him as he fills the metal pot with saffron infused water together with a few coins and then carefully shapes its crown with veppalei leaves and a trident placed in the middle. Nathan tells me that he has learned the art of assembling this item through observing the elders of the village. Through a simple ceremony inside the temple later on, the goddess Mariyamman will select the individual who will be privileged to carry the kalasam whenever there is a procession for the next 3 days. For the last few years, Nathan has been the favored person.

Nearby, the ever jovial Arumugam and his two assistants are completing the final touches to a makeshift structure erected in front of the Mariyamman kovil that will shade the priests when they conduct the homa (fire) ceremony early the next morning.
The boys are assigned to sweep and wash the cemented portions of the temple grounds. In between short bouts of work, they frolic by tossing buckets of water at each other, inviting the occasional half-hearted reprimands of the elderly temple priest Krishnan.

By contrast, the stern-faced Muthu, who is of mixed Chinese-Indian ancestry and the only professionally trained electrician among them, quietly sees to the wiring of the lighting system that will temporarily illuminate the temple grounds for the next two nights. The next day (Saturday), he will attend to the equally important task of lighting up the wooden chariot (ratnam) with hundreds of tiny bulbs that will be used to transport the goddess for a night procession around the locality. Lasting several hours and late into the night, the highly public procession will take the goddess far beyond the immediate premises of the temple and deep into the neighboring modern housing estates comprised mostly of Malay-Muslims residents. The itinerary of the procession has been carefully plotted to allow as many Hindu homes found scattered throughout these housing estates to pay homage to the goddess before returning back to the temple.4)

4) See Yeoh SG (2001) for a discussion on the significance of the chariot procession in relation to intra- and interethnic relations in the neighborhood and locality.
Meanwhile, James, a key temple leader, supervises the final touches to the decorations and seating arrangements fronting the concert stage that has been set up on one corner of the “clearing.” A few days earlier, this portion of the “clearing” has been freshly tarred over at his own financial expense to create a foundation for the stage and chairs. Through the help of one of his influential contacts, the stage has been provided free-of-charge from Kuala Lumpur City Hall. Several local Indian artistes and performing troupes have been hired including a Michael Jackson impersonator to sing, dance, and crack jokes to an anticipated crowd of several hundreds drawn from around the locality. The concert will begin once the temple puja (worship) is completed and will last late into the night. For several weeks, James and his temple committee members have been selling raffles tickets to raise funds for the temple-building fund. The prizes comprise of food hampers and household
electrical items that have been donated by benefactors, some of whom are the employers of the temple committee members. Although he is ambivalent about it, James has also decided to invite a few local political dignitaries to grace the occasion, among them, the elected state assembly representative for the area, who for the first time, hails from the opposition coalition *Pakatan Rakyat* (People’s Pact) rather than the usual ruling *Barisan Nasional* (National Front) as a consequence of the unexpected polling results of the General Elections in March 2008.5)

Later in the night, nearing the end of the concert, a long trailer truck will arrive. Driven by the burly Naga (more popularly known by his nickname “General”), the trailer will carry a solitary item, a 25-30 foot long crownless betel nut tree stump. In the following 2 days, Naga will supervise his small team in laboriously scrapping off its tough outer bark and then smearing the entire stump with slippery grease. One end of the stump will then be topped with the prize—a couple of Guinness Stout bottles and cigarette cartons. Late on Sunday morning, the final day of the *thiruvila*, the stump will be erected for a

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5) In the March 2008 General Elections, although the *Barisan Nasional* (National Front) won in a first-past-the-post electoral system, it was significantly denied a two-thirds majority in Parliament, hitherto a staple performance for half a century. Only 85 out of 165 parliamentary seats went to *Barisan Nasional*. Moreover, it lost 5 out of 13 states to the opposition coalition (*Pakatan Rakyat*), including the commercially important state of Selangor and the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur.
competition that will draw in several teams of Tamil youths from around the locality. This competition has formed an integral part of the thiruvila festivities in this particular Mariyamman temple for more than two decades and never fails to bring much mirth and merriment to the spectators at the sight of high pitched masculine bravado floundering to reach the prize.

Inside the temple, a much more serious task is taking place. Krishna, a young trainee priest from another temple has been specially recommended for the occasion. He is close to dressing up and applying facial cosmetics to a small portable bronze statue of Mariyamman. Krishna also closely attends to her bodily stance and mudra (hand gestures) which Mariyamman would take for the night’s worship. Through an ingenious
interplay of movable metal portions of arms and legs tied to the bronze torso and subsequently camouflaged with donated expensive silk *sari*, devotees would only see in effect the public face of Mariyamman assuming different appearances in the next three days that the temple *thiruvila* unfolds. He is keenly aware that as the goddess is the honored guest of the celebrations and would be much sought after by her devotees for *darsan* (“auspicious sight”), it is both his heavy responsibility and honor to see that she would look her radiant and exuberant best.

By the time Krishna finishes his task the sun has set for nearly an hour. Under the bright glow of a full moon, a thick crowd of expectant devotees comprised mostly of women, female teenagers, and children dressed in their finery has already congregated as the temple bell is vigorously rung by the temple assistant to signal that the time for *puja* (worship) has arrived. Others will continue to stream in late as the ceremonies proceed for another hour or so.

Quite a large number of these devotees currently live in the high rise low-cost flats located nearby. But a significant portion has also come from further afield, from other parts of Petaling Jaya, Kuala Lumpur, and even further beyond. Many tell me that they make it a special effort to return to the *thiruvila* of Mariyamman temple even if they now regularly worship in temples closer to their current places of abode. Indeed, not so long ago before they were all scattered all over the city and state,
these devotees were once neighbors in Kampung Mariyamman (Mariyamman village).

Remembering Kampung Mariyamman

In the mid-1990s, when I first commenced fieldwork, the “clearing” where the activities described in the foregoing section unfolded was not “empty.” Instead, it was the site of Kampung Mariyamman, a “squatter settlement” densely packed with modest single-story houses constructed from an assortment of building materials—wooden planks, bricks, cement, corrugated zinc and scavenged materials like used advertising banners,

6) The common practice of “squatting” can be traced to the origins of Kuala Lumpur as a Chinese mining settlement in the mid-19th century. Their numbers have fluctuated according to periods of economic boom or bust but arguably the largest influx of “squatters” into the Kuala Lumpur was during “The Emergency” in the post-Second World War period. Rural dwellers (predominantly ethnic Chinese) wishing to escape being forcibly resettled to secured hamlets (euphemistically called “new villages”) started by the British Administration as a spatial strategy to undermine support (forced or voluntary) for the insurgent Communist Party migrated to the city. Another wave of predominantly rural estate Indian migrants to Kuala Lumpur occurred in the post-1969 period when the new requirement of work permits for non-citizens saw them retrenched in large numbers. While many of those affected chose to return to India, a significant number also migrated to urban areas to become petty traders as the self-employed were exempted from this piece of legislation (Manjit Singh Sidhu 1978: 64). In the early 1990s, civil society groups began to discursively contest the colonial legalist category of “squatters.” The phrase “urban settlers” or “urban pioneers” (peneroka bandar in Malay) was invoked as a more apt description of self-help housing efforts in the face of the lack of affordable and suitable housing in cities and to harken back to indigenous land tenure practices.
chain link wires, and metal gate grilles.\textsuperscript{7)}

For a neophyte ethnographer who was more familiar with the spatial aesthetics of geometrically gridded modern residential estates, the settlement’s “chaotic” and “illegible” sprawl coupled with the cramped conditions of the houses was rather disorientating and disconcerting. Moreover, before embarking on fieldwork, I had read with relish the fascinating literature on South Asian and Sanskritic Hindu house-building geomantic requirements. Here, in Kampung Mariyamman, it was quickly evident that these textbook ideals were routinely confounded or could not be strictly adhered to simply because of spatial constraints and the need to secure everyday necessities. Except for the houses that faced each other on both sides of the narrow track that wound its way to the temple from the main road, all the others were haphazardly arranged with no clear geometric pattern in sight. The front door of a house might, for instance, face the side or, worse still, the rear of another dwelling because of spatial necessity.\textsuperscript{8)} Similarly, the risks of everyday pollution, both in terms of tangible health sanitation and intangible ritual

\textsuperscript{7)} By the time I had started fieldwork, the land on which Kampung Mariyamman and the adjoining squatter settlements stood was already bought over by a private developer for a proposed large mixed commercial and residential development. However, because of the crippling effects of the Asian financial crisis, the eviction of all the residents in Kampung Mariyamman was stalled until the mid-2000s. The Mariyamman temple, however, was left undisturbed because no satisfactory compensation arrangement was reached at that stage. Many of the residents were offered discounted high rise flats within walking distance from the temple.

\textsuperscript{8)} For more details, refer to Yeoh 2006.
pollution, were high. Open drainage ditches were often filled with stagnant water, spilling its putrid contents especially after heavy rains as the terrain had not been contoured prior to the construction of the individual houses. Nevertheless, my informants said that they tried as far as possible to observe a minimalist core set of rituals to “cleanse” the site before they embarked on house construction and before moving to reside at the completed structure. Subsequently, for completed Hindu houses, everyday domestic spaces were organized in a manner that repels malevolent evil forces and attracts the beneficent blessings of gods and goddesses. This included practices like hanging a string of mango or margosa leaves together with an image of a Hindu guardian deity on the door lintel and embedding horseshoes in the floor of the rear entrance. Additionally, certain proscriptions, like not sweeping the floor at night or washing the feet before entering the house, were generally adhered to in order to avoid attracting uninvited supra-human guests and ill fortune into the home.

Kampung Mariyamman, however, was not a homogeneous Hindu settlement. While the dwelling houses that congregated around the Mariyamman temple were predominantly inhabited by low-ranking caste Tamil-Hindus, there was also a smaller population of other ethnic Indians like Malayalis, Telegus, and Punjabis scattered throughout the settlement. A number of them were adherents of Christianity (Roman Catholicism and
Protestantism) and Sikhism. Moreover, as one traverses further away from the temple, arguably the “heart” of the settlement, Kampung Mariyamman itself was closely surrounded by non-Indian houses that were considered part of other squatter settlements. On the only tarred access road leading into these settlements from the Federal Highway, various signboards (usually sponsored by local branches of the competing political parties) proclaimed their existence in terms of their geographical origins from other states in the country, aspirations for the fledging settlement or the names of the settlements’ founding pioneers or patrons. However, once inside these settlements and traversing on the narrow serpentine earth tracks between the houses, it became unclear, certainly to an outsider, where the actual boundaries between the settlements were. Indeed, everyday public spaces would appear at first sight to be porous, fluid and undifferentiated.

As the rest of the essay will show, however, this is not the case despite its apparent truism at an existential level. Instead, there existed several overlapping layers of real and imagined localities invested with contesting claims (and its associated anxieties) which have morphed over time. For instance, my key informants often claimed that Kampung Mariyamman was historically among the earliest settlements to be set up in the locality in the early 1960s. When the pioneers of Kampung Mariyamman first arrived as migrants from rural plantations
seeking a better life in Kuala Lumpur, the core of the yet nascent village comprised only a row of weathered coolie barracks. The barracks were a relic of a tin mining company that had been granted a lease to dredge the land continuously for decades. When mining activities began to wind down in the 1950s, what remained was a mixture of marshy and sandy terrain almost devoid of vegetation. These pioneering settlers were not alone in claiming the vast expanse of vacant land for inhabitation. They were quickly joined by others of different ethnic ancestries - among others, Chinese, Punjabis, Malays, Sumatrans, and Javanese. Many who arrived at the locality were alerted by kin, friends, and work colleagues who had settled there earlier. Others also discovered the place on their own through word-of-mouth when they were evicted from the Kuala Lumpur city center because of urban redevelopment in the mid-1960s onwards (more of this later). Apart from the severe lack of affordable private and public modern housing, a key motivation for domiciling in this specific location was its comparative proximity to places of employment in Petaling Jaya, particularly in the shape of factories, many of which belonged to multinational companies in the suburb’s industrial belt. Other settlers, particularly ethnic Chinese and Bengalis, also pragmatically utilized parcels of land situated close to the river.

9) Archival records indicate that before tin mining became the norm in the locality from the 1920s onwards, there were cash crop plantations owned by Europeans around the turn of the twentieth century.
to earn a living either through small-scale animal husbandry (like poultry, goat, pig, or cow rearing) or refertilizing the sandy and depleted soil to grow a range of vegetables for sale in the nearby markets.

For companionship and security reasons, many of these arriving settlers tried to build their homes close to relatives and friends. An alternative strategy was to cluster near to the homes of residents bearing similar religious and ethnic ancestries as far as possible. This option was easier to execute when vacant land was more available but became almost impossible later on as the settlements rapidly morphed into places densely packed with houses. Apart from fulfilling spiritual needs and religious obligations, the Mariyamman temple was also a significant public space for inculcating an array of social relations and initiating new friendships particularly among women and children and new arrivals to the settlement. Built in the late 1960s by one of the pioneer settlers, the temple was originally a modest structure placed at the base of a large tree and close to the barracks. As the nascent settlement grew in numbers, settlers pooled together their resources to incrementally enlarge the temple and expand the pantheon of deities. Arising from this mix of amoebic and loosely coordinated efforts, several microneighborhoods with their respective overlapping ties and spheres of support networks were formed and thickened over time among some of their residents. Interpersonal relations were not, however,
always convivial nor reciprocal. As I will elaborate in the next section, the inchoate tensions, rivalries, and quarrels that arose were usually aroused by the keen contestation for status and resources under difficult material and economic conditions especially when Kampung Mariyamman (and the surrounding settlements) grew more crowded with waves of new migrant residents.

When asked to recall what it was like before, a recurring trope of elderly residents related how everyday life in Kampung Mariyamman (in the mid-1990s) had changed substantially from the “old days.” The difficulties centered on the absence of the provision of basic infrastructure, like piped water and main electricity, the frequent occurrence of flooding during thunderstorms, and the ubiquitous mosquitoes emanating from the numerous stagnant mining ponds in the area. For their daily water consumption, settlers resorted to constructing wells and collecting rainwater. At night, kerosene or oil lamps provided illumination. When finances permitted, car batteries were occasionally used as alternative power sources to operate small electrical appliances like lights, fans, and television. As the spatial distances between these wooden houses shrank and became more compact with more arrivals to the settlements, the threat of fire breaking out from oil or kerosene lamps became more palpable as indicated by frequent media reports of other squatter settlements being razed to the ground in various parts
of Kuala Lumpur. Additionally, disease and ill-health were the other recurring threats that residents faced on a daily basis because of the unhygienic conditions described earlier.

The growing presence of these sprawling settlements along a major thoroughfare did not go unheeded by concerned residents of suburban Petaling Jaya. While some stereotypically viewed them as places of danger and criminality, others nevertheless saw them as sites of neglect needing succor and intervention. Throughout the years, a number of local churches and community groups had thus organized projects like regular donations of food and clothing, remedial tuition classes, visiting health clinics, and sewing classes for housewives and unemployed single women. They also helped to secure important state instruments of recognition like birth certificates and identity cards for newborn babies and young teenagers respectively for illiterate parents, and encouraged voter registration for eligible adults.\(^{10}\) Compared to the interventions of the state authorities and their local representatives as well as aspiring leaders of contesting local political groups found in these settlements (see following section), these voluntary groups arguably operated on a different calculus, privileging philanthropic ideals and the

\(^{10}\) Churches had similarly played a significant role in helping to alleviate human suffering in the “new villages” during “The Emergency” (1948-60). For a discussion of the pioneering work of an ecumenical group in the locality of Kampung Mariyamman, see Yeoh 2010.
enfranchisement of citizenship rights.

**Producing Ethnicized Localities**

As noted earlier, Kampung Mariyamman was not the only neighborhood that came into being in the locality. Migrants of a variety of ethnic ancestries and religious affiliations gravitated to different parts of the expansive abandoned tin-mining area to stake a claim (albeit illegally) and build their homes. At this early stage, the locality resembled an open frontier that saw minimal intervention by the state, and the difficult living conditions was a commonly shared experience of the different ethnic and religious groups residing in the locality. This was to change from the early 1970s onwards as nation-building became a more challenging and agonizing project.

Elderly residents of Kampung Mariyamman remembered that ethnic Chinese, although a demographic minority, were already present in the locality throughout the 1960s. This ethnoscape changed radically in the aftermath of the “race riots” of May 13, 1969 that, although primarily unfolding in the Kuala Lumpur city center, had also spilled over to other areas, including an adjoining squatter settlement near Kampung Mariyamman.11)

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11) The “May 13 riots” occurred when the 1969 General Elections results showed that the Alliance Party (the forerunner to Barisan Nasional) had lost a significant number of seats to opposition parties including the state of Selangor where Kuala Lumpur was situated.
Chinese-owned shops were looted and a number of Chinese-occupied houses, including those of some Indian families, were torched to the ground at the hands of a Malay mob wearing “red headbands” believed to come from outside the settlements. Local vigilante groups were quickly formed before the arrival of the military to restore calm. In the months ahead, when Chinese residents who had fled for fear of their lives did not return to the locality, other migrants of non-Chinese ethnic origins, primarily Malays and Indians, took over their vacated lots.

On a broader scale, in comparison to the early milieu of *laissez faire* growth, the period following the “racial” disturbances of May 1969 saw a more planned transformation of urban squatter settlements found within Kuala Lumpur administrative limits and later on for those situated in Petaling Jaya. A contemporary account gives a sense of the anxieties of this milieu:

> Since the riot in May 1969, the government has been intent upon solving its urban squatter problem by relocation. In early 1970, it began clearing out the 500 families from the Central Business District. Only 20 percent of the families moved had the income and the desire to live in the multistoried housing supplied by the government. It is assumed that the other 80 percent resorted to squatting again. Since squatters composed 30 percent of Kuala Lumpur, the problem of finding adequate living space and sound living conditions became a primary issue.\(^ {12} \)

\(^ {12} \) See the Selangor UIM Committee Report to Third East Asian Christian Conference Meeting in Kyoto dated August 7, 1970.
According to official diagnosis, the root cause of the “race riots” was the legacy of British colonial capitalist rule which had resulted in interracial economic inequality with foreigners and local Chinese comprador capitalists monopolizing much of the country’s wealth. Moreover, many of the protagonists involved in the “riots” were believed recruited from criminal elements living in urban squatter settlements. The New Economic Policy (1971-90) that was subsequently formulated after a two-year suspension of Parliament was aimed primarily at uplifting Malays through affirmative and preferential treatment. Moreover, since the 1969 General Election results saw the state of Selangor (where Kuala Lumpur is situated) falling out of the control of the Alliance Party for the first time, two trajectories ensued.\(^{13}\) The first involved a keen awareness of spatial politics with the creation of a Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur from Selangor and placing it under the direct jurisdiction of the Prime Minister’s Department. Equally prescient, the second was framed in terms of the politics of demographic numbers. Rural ethnic Malays were encouraged to “modernize” by migrating to the capital city of Kuala Lumpur in order to avail themselves of higher education, more lucrative business prospects, and better employment opportunities. By doing so, the objective was

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\(^{13}\) In 1973, the *Alliance Party* was reconstituted as *Barisan Nasional* with more component party members joining its ranks in addition to *United Malay Nationalist Organisation* (UMNO), *Malaysian Chinese Association* (MCA), and *Malaysian Indian Congress* (MIC).
ostensibly to dissolve the colonial legacy of a spatial divide between the traditional Malay royal courts and rural kampung on the one hand and the predominantly non-Malay urban centers where private and public enterprises flourished on the other.

Sharing much of the same motivating reasons as the residents of Kampung Mariyamman, many of the successive waves of rural Malays who arrived in Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya from the 1970s onwards chose to build their homes in existing Malay squatter settlements or set up new ones usually near established settlements in order to access basic amenities more easily. Through periodic censuses carried out, the increasing proportion of ethnic Malays comprising the Kuala Lumpur squatter population began to alarm the authorities. Although a more comprehensive “anti-squatter policy” was spelled out by the late 1970s to contain the rapid growth of new squatter settlements, authorities were ambivalent toward an uncompromising implementation for fear of political repercussions in the General Elections. The federal government thus began to set aside more funds in providing public or subsidized housing for the urban poor but these targets were often underachieved because of the large scale of rural-urban migration flow. At the same time, for many aspiring and entrepreneurial politicians (especially those belonging to the newly reconstituted ruling coalition), the vulnerability of squatters was opportunistically seized for
soliciting political loyalty in exchange for promises of nondemolition and the provision of basic infrastructure to the settlements. Although this strategy was at odds with the state’s public assertion of a British-inherited legalist understanding of land tenure (vis-à-vis traditional land practices favoring usufruct principles) which underscored privative land ownership and denouncing squatting as a criminal activity, it was still possible to execute because of the comparatively slow pace of development at this stage.

However, this changed substantially from the mid-1980s onwards under the bullish neoliberal economic policies of the Mahathir Administration. Malaysia generally underwent constant rapid growth until the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s momentarily retarded the speed of change. At the official termination of the New Economic Policy in 1990, Mahathir Mohamad announced the commencement of a New Development Policy and the Wawasan 2020 (“Vision 2020”), an ambitious plan that stretches over 30 years. The ultimate goal is to transform Malaysia into a “fully developed nation” both in material-economic and socio-psychological terms. As part of this trajectory, several major infrastructural and megaconstruction projects were embarked upon. This included transforming the Kuala Lumpur skyline to have a distinctive (post)modernist architectural signature and globally recognizable look in order to competitively attract liquid capital looking for a spatial fix. Built
at the “heart” of the commercial district, the Petronas Twin Towers was conceived and built as an exemplar of this bundle of objectives in worlding Kuala Lumpur amidst the pantheon of other capital cities in the world (cf. Roy and Ong 2011).

Simultaneously, there was a greater incentive in definitively getting rid of the pockets of “squatter settlements” still found within the city administrative limits. This push was rationalized and legitimized via an older medicalized discourse on squatter settlements as “eyesores,” “health hazards,” and “seedbed for breeding criminals” conjoining with the proposition that having a “squatter free” city is a developmental prerequisite for becoming a reputable world class city. The “squatter free” slogan was aggressively promoted through the mainstream media with the hope of reshaping the social imaginary of Malaysian urban dwellers in terms of desirable housing practices. This campaign, however, did not go uncontested. During this period, several civil society groups lamented of the frequency and speed of large-scale forced evictions of numerous “squatter” villages throughout Kuala Lumpur with scant regard for international human rights standards and consultative processes. Opposition political parties also decried these demolitions as symptomatic of the members of the ruling coalition succumbing to capitalistic dictates and neglecting the urban poor constituency. Characteristically, for them the antidote lies in voting out the Barisan Nasional as the ruling government in order to rid
oppressive laws and practices. For most squatters caught in the thick of these unrelenting waves of destruction of their homes, their immediate relief lay in taking flight and migrating to places just outside Kuala Lumpur’s administrative borders, like Petaling Jaya, for safety.

These aforementioned multiscalar developments of the past three decades have similarly spectrally transformed neighborhoods like Kampung Mariyamman. By the time I set foot to conduct fieldwork in the mid-1990s, the transformation was visually intriguing. On one side of a long main road bisecting the locality into two unequal halves lay an orderly, geometric grid of modern brick-and-cement houses (rumah batu) with wide service roads and public facilities. On the other side, where Kampung Mariyamman was situated, lay a complex maze of wooden squatter houses (rumah setinggan or rumah papan) served by narrow serpentine tracks. The “developed” portion of the locality comprised of a sprawling housing estate (taman) of compact double-story dwelling houses that were constructed by state authorities, replacing the many squatter kampungs gathered there. Former residents of these settlements who found the way to finance the purchase of these houses returned to the locality after a few years living in interim housing structures resembling coolie lines called rumah panjang (long houses). In contrast to the remembered past when both Malays and Indians shared difficult material conditions, Kampung Mariyamman
residents now perceive the material benefits of the taman to be enjoyed mainly by ethnic Malay-Muslims. This ethno-religious dominance is further underscored by the presence of several large mosques with powerful elevated loudspeakers broadcasting daily the azans and retexturing the soundscapes of the locality. Their admittedly racialized reading of the locality has to be contextualized against a broader national political frame. Since political independence, the Alliance Party’s and subsequently, Barisan Nasional’s formula for nation-building has been firmly premised on an ethnic-based elite consociationalism. In the mid-1990s when I commenced fieldwork, this particular social imaginary had undergone more than two decades of pervasive institutionalization, panoptic surveillance, and widespread popularization. Its rhetoric has pervasively massaged the imaginations of younger Malaysian citizens whereas for old-timers, by contrast, the nature of interethnic and interfaith relations in the milieu prior to 1971 has acquired a nostalgic tint. Discursively, the “May 13 race riots” has become a signifier of the volatility of racial sensitivities, and its ideological function has been to produce national subjects founded on the proposition that the interests of the Malaysian citizenry are best represented and mediated by politicians hailing from one of its key component parties, viz. the United Malay Nationalist Organization (UMNO), Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), and Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). Departing from this tried and
tested formula, it is intimated, would be a recipe for political chaos and national disaster.

Within the locality itself, this particular political configuration and calculus has been localized in how squatter residents of different ethnic backgrounds have routinely learned to seek relief for a range of everyday concerns. For instance, even if their homes were situated physically close to one another, rather than attempt to forge collective cross-ethnic horizontal solidarities to tackle these shared problems, compartmentalized pathways to ethnic-based political parties were counseled by local leaders. Coupled with the presence of criminal elements within these settlements, many residents pragmatically adopted a range of risk-avoidance strategies by retreating into the safety of the familiar. The dominant nature of interethnic relations between Tamil-Hindu and Malay-Muslim residents in the locality thus appeared discordant with National Day celebratory portrayals of a vibrantly harmonious multiracial and multicultural country.

While my elderly informants could not remember any incidence of interethnic violence in the locality since 1969, there were worrying signs from an outsider’s point of view. Residents seldom acknowledged each other’s presence when they passed each other on the narrow footpaths in the settlements, preferring to avert their gazes. The local youth gangs were overwhelmingly monoethnic in complexion. In football fields and playgrounds, teenagers and children seldom breached the ethnic
divide and played in segregated areas. Many of my informants also admitted of not knowing the names of their Malay-Muslim neighbors despite having resided for many years in the locality, let alone being invited to each other’s homes during the religious festivals of Hinduism and Islam as often portrayed in the Malaysian media. In short, despite living in proximity to one another and sharing the same public spaces, residents carved out segmented and stable neighborhoods that were not always mutually intelligible to each other.

Producing Religious Localities

Beginning from the 1970s, as elsewhere in many parts of the world, the impact of a globalized Islamic revivalism emanating from the Middle East reached Malaysian shores. Arguably, the affirmative action policies of the NEP (National Economic Policy) and similar ones like the National Cultural Policy described earlier also fomented the economic and social conditions for a plethora of nascent and disparate Islamic dakwah (missionary) groups to grow and consolidate among the local Malay-Muslim population. Many of these new groups imbibed theologies and practices that were not always consonant with those sanctioned by the state. However, it was only during the premiership of Mahathir Mohamad beginning in the mid-1980s that these potent spiritual energies were seized as opportunities for strengthening
UMNO’s right to rule vis-à-vis its political nemesis, PAS (*Parti Islam Se Malaysia*; Islamic Party of Malaysia).

Since its inception, PAS’s consistent rallying cry has been the formation of a theocratic Islamic state in Malaysia in order to promote an Islamic polity. This contrasted with UMNO’s public support for the constitutional status quo of a secular state with Islam afforded a special position as the “official religion” of the country. As PAS and other Islamic *dakwah* groups were assessed to be making strong inroads among the Malay-Muslim populace in the country, the Mahathir Administration adopted the twin political strategy of coercion and accommodation by “fighting Islam with more Islam... and absorbing Islam in government institutions and centralizing power over it” (Maznah 2010: 71). In 1988, the Mahathir Administration pushed through a key amendment to the Federal Constitution that radically altered the legal landscape. It removed the jurisdiction of the civil courts over matters deemed to be Islamic and has in effect created two disjointed spheres of jurisdiction between the civil and syariah courts.

Consequently, the particular texture of “Islamization” that has unfolded in Malaysia over the past three decades has fostered a social imaginary of Malay-Muslim exceptionalism that is legally buttressed by syariah law and enforced by a burgeoning state Islamic bureaucracy to discipline Muslim citizens. The key objective, according to Maznah Mohamad
(2010: 70), is the creation of “a sacred Muslim majority immune from the adjudication of secular laws or given exceptions whenever Islamic supremacy is invoked. The jurisdiction of the syariah is then ring-fenced around this majority, making it a legal majority and legitimizing Ketuanan Islam (the supremacy of Islam) as the ideological construct of the authoritarian state.”

Additionally, despite official proclamations of the desirability of fostering a united and cohesive Bangsa Malaysia (Malaysian race or Malaysian nation) by Mahathir Mohamad in his Wawasan 2020 pronunciation (in 1991) to address agonistic interethnic relations exacerbated by the NEP, the situation has not substantially improved. Indeed, according to an array of local human rights and civil society groups, the situation has deteriorated considerably with more frequent and intense occurrences of altercations (mediated more widely through social media) on a number of fractious issues primarily revolving around the contested areas of religious jurisdiction and the infringement of religious sensitivities (e.g., see Annual Suaram Human Rights Reports; Yeoh 2005; 2011).

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, increasing occurrences of religious talks and texts disparaging the perceived polytheistic belief system of Hinduism or the atavistic practices of Hindus visible in large scale public religious events like Thaipusam have been regularly highlighted by Hindu activist groups. They have also brought to the attention of the general Hindu populace in
Malaysia (and beyond the country through the communicative powers of the Internet) the wanton and hasty demolitions of decades-old Hindu temples and shrines found in rubber and palm oil plantations after being acquired for commercial redevelopment to feed speculative land hunger in the Kuala Lumpur metropolitan area. In November 2007, hitherto inchoate Tamil-Hindu disaffections with the state were effectively galvanized and harnessed by a nongovernmental organization, Hindraf (Hindu Rights Action Front), to stage a street protest in the Central Business District of Kuala Lumpur. An estimated 30,000 Indian demonstrators faced-off with the anti-riot police for several hours in the vicinity around the Petronas Twin Towers. The scenes of Indian protestors courageously carrying placards bearing the image of Gandhi being repeatedly sprayed with chemically-laced water cannons and tear gas canisters, only to regroup elsewhere to advance again, were captured not only by the international media but also by a multitude of hand phones and video cameras, and then disseminated virally in the Internet.14) Together with similar street protests and marches led by other civil societies that year (namely, Bersih and the Bar Council), the cumulative political effect of these disparate speculator performances of civil disobedience was to lead to historic and unanticipated results in the March 2008 General

14) For an account and analysis of the repercussion of this incident, see Yeoh 2009.
Elections, aptly billed by the local media as the “political tsunami.” The *Barisan Nasional* was denied a two-thirds majority in Parliament, an electoral feat that was not seen for nearly forty years since May 1969. Moreover, five of the thirteen states, including Kuala Lumpur and the state of Selangor, fell to *Pakatan Raykat*, the opposition coalition.

As elsewhere throughout Malaysia, the affective and political repercussions of these distant, translocal and mobile political events in recent times have filtered down to ethnically-mixed working class neighborhoods like Kampung Mariyamman. Both in Kuala Lumpur and the state of Selangor (where Petaling Jaya is embedded), the displacement and destruction of Hindu places of worship are now conducted with more circumspection and not without prior consultation. Special state-level committees have been set up solely for this purpose. Compared to the milieu before the “political tsunami,” many of the rank-and-file political leaders coming from both sides of the divide (*Pakatan Rakyat* and *Barisan Nasional*) have refined their public relations skills to better deal with religious matters at their respective constituencies. Although they might not share the same ethnic or religious backgrounds, politicians from these competing coalitions have discernibly worked harder to attend an array of small-scale religious festivities organized at local communities in order to build better rapport and generate a greater stock of interethnic and interreligious conviviality.
On a broader political landscape, the electoral choices of young and urbane Malay-Muslims, especially among the burgeoning middle class, living in culturally complex urban centers like Kuala Lumpur have become less manageable and predictable than before given their increasing political sophistication and desire for a more cosmopolitan Malaysia. These individuals contrast sharply with the stance of right wing Malay ethno-nationalist groups like Perkasa that have been newly formed in the face of these perceived destabilizing ground shifts since March 2008. Their characteristic battle cry is to vociferously remind Malaysian citizens of the exceptional and un-negotiable position and privilege of Malay-Muslims in the country.

**Conclusion**

The potentially epoch-changing significance of these shifts and contestations were not lost to many of my Tamil-Hindu informants in Kampung Mariyamman, especially the new and younger generation leaders of the Mariyamman kovil. Thus, compared to my fieldwork in the mid-1990s, there is now discernably a greater sense of cohesive purpose and self-consciousness of their political strength as voters and citizens despite their minority demographic position. In the distant past, their key political subject formation was framed in
terms of having to make substantive personal and collective sacrifices because of their poverty and political vulnerability in order to obtain basic concessions from the powers-that-be. As a consequence of a measure of upward economic mobility, the ripple effects of the sequence of events between November 2007 (Hindraf rally) and March 2008 (political tsunami), and, even ironically, the erasure of the squatter kampung as a socio-spatial entity, former residents of the now ghostly Kampung Mariyamman have become more critical of the dominant social imaginary of nationhood as framed by Barisan Nasional. While they appreciate the past sacrifices of their elders to secure basic living necessities for the kampung, they also typify these kinds of servile actions as not substantive enough in order to guarantee their rightful place as bona fide citizens of the country. This sense of destiny has been further buttressed by the well-known communicative powers of new media in providing contesting translocal social imaginaries to interrogate the veracity of the contrived rhetoric of Bangsa Malaysia vis-à-vis everyday lived experiences.

In closing, I return to Arjun Appadurai’s insight on the “anxieties” engendered by the residual spaces of neighborhoods in juxtaposition to the array of imaginative and disciplinary techniques for nationhood. In my portrayal of Kampung Mariyamman as simultaneously both “present” and “absent” entities, I have discussed where these spectral anxieties might
stem from and how they have intensified and mutated over time in terms of the simultaneous production of different kinds of “localities.” At a cursory level, they are generated from immediate or parochial contexts although they can also flow from translocal provenances as well. In this essay, I have given prominence to the separate projects of Kuala Lumpur’s “world-city” aspirations and of Malaysia’s “nation-building” with social categories inherited from the colonial past but given a different inflexion in the postcolonial present in the milieu of competitive “globalization.” Equally significant, it is important to pay attention to the malleability of the imaginative dimension of social practices or what Charles Taylor has called “the modern social imaginary.” While historically contingent and mutable over time, social practices also show themselves to be remarkably durable even if the original material conditions for their creation in the first place have long passed. Partly, this can be attributed to their institutionalized ideological perpetuation by powerful entities like the nation-state. But one should not rule out change as animated by the potency of emotional or affective investments by a range of competing social actors. In the locality comprising the neighborhood of Kampung Mariyamman, this is exemplified by the younger generation of leaders and devotees who no longer physically live in the demolished settlement but who are also now free to remember and imagine an idealized urban village of their past. Conversely, in a locality at the scale of
a nation-state, the parochial social imaginary of Malay-Muslim exceptionalism that has been cultivated for the last three or four decades is increasingly under siege as they are interrogated and undermined by a diverse array of globalizing and cosmopolitan ideas of world-city building in more recent times.

Bibliography


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