

## The Invention of Nature and Culture in the Late Colonial Raffles Museum

In the summer of 2019, the AKPIA Travel Grant supported my archival work in Singapore, where I spent two months researching the archives of the Raffles Museum, today's National Museum of Singapore. The archival research forms the center of my master's thesis, which is an investigation of the formation of "culture" in late colonial Singapore.

The National Museum of Singapore as it stands today has been described as a "repository of national heritage" by Christopher Hooi, former Curator of Anthropology and Director of the museum, whose life and career intersected with the late colonial moment and first decades of independence. Hooi was among the first locals to be employed as senior museum staff, a career trajectory that was shaped by the "Malayanisation" scheme, that is, the political demand for inclusion of locals in the civil service. Hooi's perception of the museum reflects the strong imaginative category of the "nation." His idea of the museum also asserts the idea of the institution's ability to serve as "a mirror of a nation's soul."

However, the centrality of the museum to the new nation's notion of culture was not always evident; it was not obvious that a somewhat "backwater" colonial museum – at least as of the late 1950s – directed by a couple of eccentric British officers – many of whom were amateurs in their professional fields of expertise – should become a site for the formation of "nature," "culture," and finally, "heritage." Pushing back against the idea of museums as centralized institutions capable of broadcasting "culture" to a "public," the thesis suggests that the Raffles Museum was not a crucial visual platform of imaginaries of a nation in the late colonial moment – as it has become today. It was, however, one of many sites where concepts of "nature," "culture," and later "heritage" were invented and cemented.

The investigation of the invention of "culture" requires an understanding of the concept's chronology and the various actors that have created "culture." "Culture" emerged from the colonial constructions of a Malayan "nature," a category that conflated climate, ethnography, and natural history. During the 1950s, "culture" was born from nationalist and anti-colonial endeavors of self-determination. The shift from "nature" to "culture" was followed by the introduction of "heritage," which arrived to Singapore by way of the United Nations.

Other "chronologies" are worth keeping in mind. The geographic affiliation of Singapore also shifted during the late colonial period. In the early nineteenth century, British officers conceived of Singapore as part of British Malaya; during decolonization, local politicians imagined Singapore as part of independent Malaya and later Malaysia. Singapore was also contextualized within the region of Southeast Asia. Finally, Singapore emerged as a unit of its own; the new nation was a creation from a larger Malayan world yet separation from Malaysia cemented the notion of a "lone" Chinese city-state in a Malay sea.

Based on my archival work, the thesis examines how "culture" was invented in the context of the postcolonial moment in Singapore in relation to the museum institution. The thesis demonstrates that the British invented a "Malayan" nature, a climate and region that was displayed, photographed, and collected in the museum. This natural history was later transformed into a culture of "Malaya", a heritage of Southeast Asia, and an identity of Singapore. Thus, the thesis traces a shift from nature to culture, where the materials that once constituted "nature" were used to create a "culture." Indeed, nature was transformed into culture: ethnography was conflated with natural history and the natural environment was defined with the same exhibits that later defined "culture."

During the late colonial moment, "history" was left behind in order for a new modern Singapore to take over and replaced by the notion of a "past," a construct that evoked civilizational origins in broad terms. However, history as a political tool gained increasing

attention and by the late 1980s, the People's Action Party consolidated an official historical narrative, the so-called "Singapore Story." In this context, museums became means to reflect government messages. This strengthening of a national history continued into the 1990s, which coincided with the expansion of the heritage sector and the establishment of numerous museums.

Literature on "culture" and museums in the Malay world often take the existence of a "culture" for granted and assume that museums were closely aligned and associated with nation-building from the moment of independence. Quite in contrary, the transformation of museums into heritage institutions and the creation of a cultural sector span decades – and many years of uncertainty. Little attention has been given to the coming-into-being of this new sector, which remained indeterminant for a long period. Conventionally, literature examines colonial museum collections from the founding of Singapore in 1819 to the World War II and then jumps to the late 1970s, when the idea of heritage more systematically was turned into a political tool. While heritage today has become an important notion in Singapore, heritage and its predecessor "culture" held an ambivalent position in a nation that equally was not the nation it came to be.

Rather than presenting independence as a moment of rupture, the thesis reveals that late colonialism spilled into the period of decolonization and continued by way of nationalism, in particular through the policies of the People's Action Party. For instance, it underlines that British colonial constructions of cultural identity were adopted by nationalist political agendas. Indeed, the late colonial period created the nature of nationalism with its regional understanding of culture that served administrative purposes in the colonial government. As the colonial specificity of the region grew "thicker," so did the claim to national distinction. The examination of the invention of culture emphasizes that decolonization is not a "before" and "after" but a longer period with transitions, simultaneity, and continuity. Indeed, nationalist appropriations of colonizing structures questions the meaning of "decolonization."

Taking a tripartite structure, my thesis investigates three strands that co-existed within and outside the museum during the late 1950s at a point when there was no centralized institution or political administration that governed the new nation's cultural framework. The first chapter overviews the history of decolonization and the late colonial moment. It examines the People's Action Party and its adoption of a "Malayan" culture and identity from the British. The chapter also examines the emergence of the new Ministry of Culture and the politicization of the Raffles Museum in the service of anti-colonial and nationalist interests. The second chapter overviews early colonial history and traces the invention of a "Malayan" nature back to British natural history. The chapter examines the museum's institutional history and museum literature, thus reviewing the genealogy of the infrastructure that became Singapore's cultural sector. The third and final chapter examines the shift from nature and culture towards heritage with the arrival of the United Nations' development schemes. The chapter also investigates the construction of the "tropics" and the emergence of the region of "Southeast Asia."

The thesis looks at a moment when Singapore was on its way to museumize its own culture informed by both colonial natural history, nationalist anti-colonial political agendas, and the UN framework of development. As the thesis moves in and out of the Raffles Museum, it demonstrates that no single political movement nor ideology monopolized notions of "nature," "culture," and "heritage." Further, it suggests that these concepts were invented by small-scale bureaucracies headed by a handful of individuals rather than a centralized agency that advanced an intentional policy; the museum functioned by way of idiosyncrasies. While museums often are framed as highly visible institutions of politicized images of power, power within the museum did not reside in a political entity and did not exclusively manifest itself as a visible nationalist project.

The question of “culture” also urges questions on the constructions of race and ethnicity. The creation of nationalist, racial, and ethnic cultures across the British empire emerged from the question of how to read and govern people. The artificial constructs codified peoples and areas, turning them into legible categories; by synthetically defining a “Malay” subject and a “Malay” culture, the colonized became visible, manageable, governable, and readable. On the one hand, the post-war split between Singapore and Malaya can be read as a non-success of the monolithic “Malaya” and a “Malayan” culture. On the other hand, increasing attention in the museum to “local” arts and crafts can be seen as the success of a “Malayan” culture. Indeed, the museum space allowed for endless reflections of “cultures” (Indian, Malayan, British, European etc.); in the display space the cultural constructs were mirrored and reinforced by one another. The invention of culture by both colonizer and colonized was intimately tied to empire and later the nation state.

The Raffles Museum accommodated a shift from taxonomy to preservation. The museum collected objects which served to “thicken” the distinctiveness of local nature and conserve an “authentic” nature. The Raffles Museum contributed to the invention of and conservation of this invention of its surrounding hinterland, “Malaya.” This preservation mode through research, collection, and description was later adopted by nationalist notions that sought to differentiate “Singapore” from its surrounding territories. The museum also accommodated a shift from nature to culture where the natural history collections came to define the culture of Malaya and later Singapore. In contrast to other colonial collections-turned-national museums, the path towards integration into the nationalist cultural canon was not immediate but spanned decades of indeterminacy and uncertainty. Nevertheless, the colonial institution contributed to the imagination of a distinct nature and culture that constituted Malaya, which later fitted the imagination of nationalism.

Colonial officers framed Malaya in terms of richness; it was an unlimited source of natural resources. However, with the separation of Singapore from its Malayan “hinterland,” local politicians struggled to imagine Singapore as a site of (natural) plenitude. Curiously, what was lost in bountiful nature was regained in cultural fecundity. The natural history collection served to underline the abundant, cosmopolitan “culture” of Singapore. Natural history as a colonial resource was transferred to the new nation as a resource of culture. The shift from nature, culture, and finally heritage thus announced a shift in actors and discourses – from colonialism to nationalism and internationalism. Importantly, the thesis’ investigation of the invention of nature and culture in late colonial Singapore foregrounds that both actors, concepts, and ideologies overlap with blurred lines.

With the emergence of a new internationalist language of preservation, “culture” was replaced by “heritage.” The arrival of internationalism under the shadow of UNESCO heritage experts brought with them a standardization of heritage as well as new geographical conceptions that framed Malaya as part of the Southeast Asian region – rather than British Malaya or Malaya. This language, like that of the colonial officers and nationalist politicians, reinforced the colonial distinctiveness of the region and also operated by way of the infrastructures cemented by colonialism. While heritage replaced concepts of nature and culture, heritage was nevertheless constituted by the very same collections and buildings as had comprised nature and culture. As “culture” was replaced by “heritage,” so was “Malaya” replaced by “Singapore” and the nation of Singapore was integrated into the region of Southeast Asia. Further, “Southeast Asia” like “Malaya” was not entirely a foreign product but co-created by colonial officials and locals.

The thesis demonstrates that colonial officers contributed to the invention of a “Malaya” and that their definition of a distinct climate and territory resulted in the advocacy of the preservation of this invented territory in the wake of independence and modernization. The museum reflected a Malayan hinterland and contributed to the construction of a “nature”

that subsequently was adopted by nationalist pursuits of a Malayan “culture.” Despite its colonial origins, “Malaya” as an identity gained popularity in Singapore post-World War II among local politicians. The notion of a “Malayan” consciousness was initially developed by the colonial administration, subsequently adopted by nationalists to unify a people against colonial powers, and finally used to consolidate the PAP’s power and to denounce its opposition as “anti-national.” This political, historical, and cultural kinship has today for the most part been abandoned and been replaced with a “Singaporean” identity.