

"The CM is On the Way": Reflections on Malacca-Portuguese Identity as Malaysia Turns 50¹

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Abstract: An ethnographic account of one day in the life of the life of the Portuguese Settlement in Malacca, Malaysia, as the community prepares for a visit from the Chief Minister of the state of Malacca. The essay describes the day of the Chief Minister's visit (August 14, 2007) as it unfolded in the Portuguese Settlement and reflects on what the events tell us about the village, its residents, and their place in Malaysian society at a landmark moment, the 50th anniversary of Merdeka Independence.

Introduction

On 14 August 2007, Datuk Seri Haji Mohammad Ali Rustam, the Chief Minister (CM) of Malacca embarked on a day-long tour of the state to plant Malaysian flags in preparation for the upcoming 50th National Day (August 31). One of the stops on his itinerary was the Portuguese Settlement, a small fishing village of about 120 houses, located in Ujung Pasir on the outskirts of the city of Malacca.

The Portuguese Settlement is unique in Malaysia. It was created in the mid-1920s, at the tail end of the British colonial period, as a kind of reservation for a people thought to be on the verge of cultural extinction. Its roughly 1200 residents, of mixed European and Asian descent, are a living reminder of Malaysia's colonial past, which began in 1511 when the Portuguese captured Malacca, and ended on 31 August 1957, when the British flag was lowered for the last time. Despite bearing a variety of Portuguese, Dutch, and British

surnames, residents of the Portuguese Settlement call themselves Malaysian-Portuguese, Portuguese-Eurasians, or simply Portuguese descendants. They speak a Portuguese creole, which most people call “Kristang,” and practice the Roman Catholic faith. Their leader is called the Regedor. This was a purely local position until 1984, when the Malaysian government allowed “Eurasians of Portuguese descent” to invest in Amanah Saham Nasional, a lucrative savings bond scheme otherwise only open to ethnic Malays. By having the power to certify ASN applications, the Regedor has become the *de facto* leader of Portuguese Eurasians throughout Malaysia.

This essay describes the day of the Chief Minister’s visit as it unfolded in the Portuguese Settlement and reflects on what the events tell us about the village, its residents, and their place in Malaysian society at a landmark moment (the 50th anniversary of Merdeka, Independence).

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Tuesday, 14 August 2007

The day started out like so many others in the Portuguese Settlement. Number 16 D’Albuquerque Road was quiet around 8:30, so Jerry (my husband) and I ambled over to our favorite breakfast place, Jenny’s coffee shop. To be perfectly honest, “coffee shop” is a bit grand. Far from being some kind of Starbucks-by-the-sea, Jenny’s is actually the second in a row of ten small food stalls on a stretch of reclaimed land overlooking the Straits of Malacca [Fig. 1]. It’s the only one of the stalls that opens in the morning, giving it a morning-after-the-night-before ambience usually compounded by the sight of one or two elderly city employees unhurriedly sweeping away the detritus of the previous night’s revelry. Jenny is Chinese, but even so, she’s a Settlement institution. Her father ran the coffee shop before her, so she has spent her entire life in the Portuguese Settlement. She knows everyone, everything that is going on in the *kampong* [village], and speaks Kristang as well as any Settlement resident. I’ve watched her two daughters grow up and now we witness her grandson take his first unsteady steps. “As usual?” she asks in our general direction as she simultaneously wipes off one of her half dozen tables and shoos away a mangy looking stray dog. Jenny makes the best coffee around and there are just some days when her “half-boiled eggs and toast-bread” are comfort foods craved by stomachs otherwise assaulted by multiple spicy meals a day. After bringing our breakfast, she stands, hand on hip, and contemplates cynically the unusual

activity in the parking lot in front of us: “the Chief Minister is coming today, ah.” “What for?” I ask. “To plant flags-*lah*.” We take a second look at a couple of young men carrying flags, hammers, nails, and ladders. It’s hard to imagine exactly how the Chief Minister could plant any more flags. Every light pole is already bedecked with a Malaysian or Malacca State flag; every house has multiple flags attached to makeshift flag poles tied to its fence; every car has at least one mini flagpole stuck on its roof; and you can barely see the new hotel, Hotel Lisbon, on the other side of the parking lot, for the flags adorning its façade. And we are still over two weeks away from National Day.

By 9:30 we’re back at the house, waiting in the front hall for Idriss bin Haji Shariff, a Malay friend and accordionist extraordinaire, to pick us up. Not that I was expecting anything to happen on time: I know from years of experience that Idriss is usually late or sometimes forgets to come at all. But it is cool and quiet in the front hall, a rare opportunity to catch up on some field notes. I had barely pulled out my notebook when we were joined by Francis Cyparino de Costa, better known as Sub.² Wiping his face, he sat down as if exhausted, and announced: “I’m planting flags. The CM is coming.” Sub is not, by any stretch of the imagination, a “morning person.” As a musician, he works late hours, so the fact that he was up, dressed, and carrying a hammer at 9:30 a.m. highlighted the importance of the impending visit. As a recently appointed member of the Regedor’s Panel (the committee that runs the *kampung*), Sub was taking this very seriously. “What time is he coming?” I asked. “Two-something, I think.”

Since Sub is obviously in no hurry to use his hammer, we start chit-chatting about the new children’s Portuguese dance troupe, *Tropa de Meninu*. The troupe, organized by the Regedor’s Panel, made its debut a few weeks ago at the Settlement’s most important public event, the annual *Festa San Pedro*. Since this was the first new cultural group to emerge in many years, I was eager to hear the full story from Sub. He had been talking about the possibility of starting such a group for years, but for one reason or another it never happened. Sub tells the story, savoring the back-stage gossip and intrigues. He’s in charge of training the musicians, though he doesn’t actually have any musicians yet. They do have a lot of dancers; Marina Danker is in charge of them. Marina is a kindergarten teacher who works in the government kindergarten school around the corner. In her younger days she was a dancer with *Tropa de Malaca*, the longest running of the Settlement troupes. She left the group around the time I first came to the Settlement in 1990. Now also on

the Regedor's Panel, Teacher Marina has hired her husband Dominic, another former Tropa de Malaca dancer, to teach the new dancers. Edgar Ovaree, the third member of the sub-committee, is the one who is in charge of the money. This surprises me, because Uncle Edgar, in his mid-seventies, has no previous experience as a musician or dancer. He has, however, already changed the name of the group to Tropa de Leza Maria. Sub isn't really sure why, perhaps to honor his mother or grandmother. Something like that.

I had more or less given up on Idriss when his old battered white car pulled up outside the front gate at 10:30, late as usual. Sub followed us out and we stood chatting in the now hot mid-morning sun. Idriss and Sub were catching up. I should have known—all the musicians in Malacca know each other. It turns out that Idriss's cousin Bashir is Sub's current bassist. They converse amiably in Malay, extolling the life of the freelance musician. They both agree: as long as they have enough to keep their stomachs full, life is good. They don't miss the stress and headaches of full-time employment. Neither wants to go back to their former job: Idriss as leader of the Malacca City Band, Sub as a grass cutter for the Public Works Department. The conversation is interrupted by a vehicle pulling up to the gate, a dark blue SUV with the Malacca City Council logo on its side. A smartly dressed Malay man gets out of the car and greets both Idriss and Sub. "He's my former boss," Idriss whispers. "He was a very good boss. Every time he sees me, he asks if I will come back to the band." After asking exactly that question of Idriss, the government officer pulls out his clipboard and goes off to inspect the Settlement ahead of the CM's visit. He walks across the road to talk to the Regedor and a couple of other Panel members who are standing by the statue of St. Peter, clinging to even the slightest sliver of shade. Eventually the officer nods, looks at his watch, waves once again at Idriss, and climbs back into his SUV. His driver reverses and they leave the Settlement.

Ignoring the sweat running down all our faces, and with no shade in sight, Sub and Idriss start reminiscing about the old-time musicians they know—Uncle Nat, Cyril Sta. Maria, Uncle Roland—discussing who has passed away, who still lives where, who migrated to Australia. "Yes, we have many friends," said Sub. "We musicians know how to mix around." There was a pause and Sub asked, "Eh, did you know Horace Sta. Maria is here?" "The Tres Amigos one?" asked Idriss. "Yes, I saw him yesterday. Came back from Australia" [Fig. 2]. "For National Day?" I asked, because I knew that the Tres Amigos had been hugely popular in the 1950s and had performed at the first National

Day celebrations. I wondered whether they had been invited to perform for the half century of nationhood. “No, for some Boy Scout Jamboree-*lah*.” The conversation moved on to The Wanderers, a Malacca band active in the 1960s. Knowing all the other names mentioned so far, this one took me by surprise, more so since it comprised Idriss’s father, Haji Shariff, and several of his uncles. They played “oldies,” American and Malay songs (mostly those made famous by P. Ramlee and his wife, Saloma). After so many years of fieldwork in Malacca, how had I missed hearing about this band? I’ve spent hours talking to old musicians—including Haji Shariff—about “those days,” and know a lot about the history of Malacca’s music scene, especially the Eurasian and Straits-born Chinese bands, but a Malay oldies band? That was a surprise. I thought, briefly, about the fieldworkers who spend a month or two here and then go off to write their dissertations and books. I was still shaking my head when Idriss announced, “We’re forming the New Wanderers—me, my brothers, and some cousins. Maybe next month we’ll start playing.” “Ah, reviving the band, eh? Good-*lah*,” said Sub. It was time to get into Idriss’s car. “Want to come?” Idriss asked Sub. “No-*lah*, I have to plant flags. The CM is coming.”

As we drove off, Idriss mumbled something about knowing Gerard very well. “Which Gerard?” I asked, confused, because there are a lot of musicians called Gerard in the Portuguese Settlement. “The one we were just talking to.” “But that’s Sub—ah, Francis.” “Really?” Idriss sounded surprised. “Well, I know him very well. He knows my family, my cousins. I know him, but the name I don’t remember. He calls me ‘Datuk’ [a Malay title], but that doesn’t matter. The first thing is that you recognize your friend. You show you’re friendly. Names we put aside. We can sit together at one table, eat together. But the name? No matter!” We spent the rest of the morning at Idriss’s house, about 20 minutes away, catching up on all his news. He had just got back from two weeks in Shanghai, where he played *asli* (traditional Malay) music in a big hotel as part of a “Visit Malaysia Year 2007” tourist ministry promotion. The group, three musicians and a female singer, performed each evening in the international hotel’s coffee shop. The audience was mainly westerners, but there were a lot of Arabs as well, he noticed. Idriss was rather pleased with himself, because in addition to playing the accordion, he had persuaded the hotel carpenter to rig up a contraption that enabled him to play tambourine with his left leg and gong with a foot pedal operated by his right foot [Fig. 3]. He didn’t really enjoy the food though. Although they were allowed to eat in the hotel restaurant, he stuck to vegetarian food the whole time: “you

can never be sure the meat is *balal* in China," he said. Next month he's off to Argentina, or maybe Stockholm, for a similar gig. We talked more about The Wanderers and its latest incarnation. It took quite some time to get all the names and relationships of both groups' members straight. Haji Shariff is going to be the new group's advisor, and so far they have seven members, all brothers or cousins. The old group made many albums, and Idriss hopes that his brother Salman, who works as a music producer in Kuala Lumpur, can help them make one of their own. "I hope so, but it is not easy," he says, wistfully. As we sat on the floor around a simple bamboo mat, eating the delicious Malay food Idriss's wife had prepared for us while we were talking, I reflected on the transient careers of musicians like Idriss and Sub. They play constantly and are well-known faces around Malacca, yet without recordings to their names they leave no physical trace. Like so many of the other local musicians I study, in years to come they will exist only in the memories of those who heard their live performances.

Idriss dropped us back at the Settlement around 2:30. The place was beginning to buzz in anticipation of the CM's visit. Sub was holding a ladder while someone else fixed yet more flags to a light pole. I looked around with my seasoned field worker's eye and calculated that there was still plenty of time for a nap. We were roused at 4:00 by Auntie 'Phine's loud voice announcing that Wendy (her granddaughter and member of the children's dance group) was about to dance for the CM. I hurried into the front yard, video camera at the ready, to see Wendy and another equally diminutive Settlement girl in full Portuguese costume walking in the afternoon heat to the outdoor stage, accompanied by Sub, who was also dressed to perform. The fact that he wasn't carrying his guitar suggested that they weren't actually intending to dance, merely to be decorative and provide the CM with a photo opportunity. My theory was reinforced by Uncle Edgar, who puffed along behind them wearing a faux-Portuguese waistcoat and a hat that didn't quite hide his long gray pony tail. Turning around, I noticed the Regedor and several Panel members sitting at Mofo's, a food stall in the next-door-neighbor's front yard. We went over and joined Martin Carvalho, a Panel member who also happens to be on the CM's staff. I figured if anyone knew when the CM would arrive, it would be Martin.

As we sat down, Martin introduced us to an unfamiliar Malay man sitting beside him, Datuk Syed Ahmad. His business card, which had a lot of important-looking letters after his name, identified him as "Penulis Buku / Book Writer." Datuk Syed told us that he was writing a book about minority

communities; he didn't seem particularly interested when Martin told him that I had already written a book about this particular minority community. Our introduction proved to be merely a lull in their ongoing conversation. Soon Martin was back in full flow on one of his favorite subjects: Mt. Ophir. He is convinced not only that Malacca's Mt. Ophir is the very same mountain mentioned in the Bible as the source of Solomon's gold, but also that the Portuguese knew about this when they conquered Malacca in 1511. Like an enthusiastic schoolboy, he summoned up one piece of "evidence" after another: the word "*ophir*" is of *orang asli* [indigenous] origin; there once was a gold mine in the vicinity; de Albuquerque had amassed gold from the mines and was removing it when his ship, the *Flor de la Mar*, sank; the wreck—with all its gold—has never been found; he had personally met an old Malay man who lived near the mountain and who showed him a family heirloom, an old Portuguese soldier's helmet. Gradually other people joined our table including Sub, who had given up waiting with the small girls, and Joseph Sta. Maria, Panel member and local activist. As usual, Joseph and Martin were soon interrupting each other with competing stories of Ophir and the Portuguese connection.

"Eh, do you know what the words *livro* and *kaneka* mean?" boomed a loud voice from the Regedor's table behind us. It was Georgie Alcantra, another Panel member and Settlement "heavyweight." Now in his late sixties or early seventies, Georgie has long been a powerful voice in the Portuguese Settlement. Although he seems to be mellowing out these days, there was a time when he intimidated one half of the kampong and employed the other half. He used to run the *Restoran de Lisbon* inside the Portuguese Square, where his "boys" would lay in wait by the entrance and "escort" unwary tourists to his restaurant. Georgie repeated the question to Martin and Joseph. Taking their silence for ignorance, he continued, "Eh, you two don't know anything about Kristang." Then he turned his attention to Datuk Syed and me. "Have you got my book?" he demanded. "How many Portuguese words do you think are in Malay? They're all in my book." I admitted that I didn't have a copy of his book. "Well, you can't have it now. I've had it reprinted five times, 2000 copies each time, and there are no more left." "Hey, Georgie, are *alamak* and *aiyo* Kristang words?" Joseph asks, hoping for a reaction. "Joan Marbeck says in the newspaper that they're Kristang words, but that's ridiculous-*lah*," he continues. After a lot of shouting by everyone within earshot of the question, there's general agreement around the table that the two most commonly used Malay expressions of surprise/frustration are not Kristang

at all. Maybe *alamak* is a literal Malay translation of “Mai de Deus,” Martin suggests.

A lengthy, spirited, conversation about vocabulary follows, touching particularly on the word “Kristang” and Joan Marbeck’s recent use of it. Joseph feels very strongly about this and, being a former politician, starts orating, occasionally thumping the table to emphasize a point. “The word ‘Kristang’ literally means ‘Christian.’ It’s used in reference to our religion and our language, though our language is really a Portuguese patois. But as for the people of the community, we are known as Malaysian Portuguese or ‘Kaum Portugis’ in Malay. We are not called [thump] ‘Kaum Kristang.’ That’s ridiculous; it would literally mean ‘Christian community,’ and that could be applied to anyone who is a Christian, whatever their race.³ That’s a big [thump] mistake. Even the government recognizes this and calls us ‘Kaum Portugis.’” When Joseph suggests that Joan calls herself “Kristang” to avoid using the word *Portuguese*, he is giving voice to a long-standing tension between Settlement residents and upper-class Eurasians. Another voice behind me adds, “Yeah, they call themselves ‘Eurasian,’ but they still want to buy Amanah Saham,” referring to the government savings bond scheme only open to Malays and one or two specially designated minorities like the Portuguese. Of course, now that she is a certified “Amazing Malaysian” and dubbed “the Kristang Poet of Malacca” (both thanks to a cell phone company’s scheme to promote “heritage” within the nation), Joan has become the public face of the “Kristang” people, whether Settlement residents like it or not. Many residents simply choose to ignore her, but Joseph feels personally compelled to publicly correct every piece of misinformation attributed to her: “She says there are 200,000 Kristang in Malacca! That’s impossible; there aren’t more than 1,200 in the kampong. Two thousand in all Malacca, maybe.” I start to worry about his blood pressure.

By now it’s 5:30. “Eh, Martin, when’s the CM coming?” someone shouts from the street. Martin pulls out his hand phone again and calls Chok, the state assemblyman, trying to find out anything about the CM’s progress. “He’s on the way,” Martin shouts back. Sub says he can’t wait any longer. “I’ve got to go to work.” He has a function at the Equatorial Hotel tonight. Chances are, he says, the CM will be there for dinner, so I’ll see him anyway. “I know all the Datuks,” he boasts. “They like my singing, so they all carry their hand [wave] when I walk by. They all know me.” He left to bathe and change. Datuk Syed also looked at his watch and took the opportunity to make a quick getaway. I

wondered what he would take away from the afternoon's conversation for his book. After some more phone calls, Martin sheepishly admits that "He's on the way" is code used by the CM's staff when he's running late, which is most of the time. By 5:45 Martin has established that the CM is at the Equatorial, meeting with some unspecified union members. Who knows how long that will take? We went back to bathe, having already canceled our regular Tuesday night tandoori date with Victor Yeo, a Peranakan (Straits-born Chinese) bandleader with whom I have been working. We're still hoping to meet up with him later at the Peranakan club house, for their regular Tuesday-night old-folks' sing-along.

At 6:15, bathed and ready to head out for "choir practice," I notice a crowd starting to form by the entrance to the Portuguese Settlement. Standing under the arch, with the face of the Prime Minister looking benignly down at them, are Uncle Edgar in blue jeans and sequined waistcoat; Teacher Marina, with three or four small children in tow; Wendy and her friend, still in their dance costumes, drooping a little as they listlessly wave flags that are as big as themselves; Georgie, Martin, Joseph, and the Regedor, summoning people: "Come on, come on. He's coming!" I look up the long connector to the main road. There's nothing to be seen, just the normal evening traffic flowing in and out of the Settlement. Suddenly three police motorbikes turn the corner, lights flashing, and the sound of Malaysian patriotic music wafts down the road towards us. The motorbikes precede the dark blue SUV we saw earlier in the day, the one with the City Council's logo on its side. Next comes a flag-bedecked white SUV with two large megaphones attached to its roof, from which the patriotic music is now blaring. "Mer-de-ka, Mer-de-ka, Mer—De—Ka" sounds more like an advertising jingle than the famous call for freedom and the signature tune for this year's National Day celebration. As the white SUV pauses in front of the arch, we finally see what's behind it: a red, open-top, London Transport double-decker bus. A huge Malaysian flag is being waved from the top deck. Behind the first bus is another double-decker bus, this one with an enclosed top [Figure 4]. It strikes me as odd that both buses have London Transport logos displayed prominently on their sides when we are celebrating the 50th anniversary of independence from Great Britain. No one else seems to notice. Both buses stop and a large group of government officials, politicians, women in Malay dress with headscarves, photographers, and cameramen emerge. The Chief Minister is not among them. In fact, the only person I recognize in the entire entourage is Idriss's former boss, the City Council officer.

As the two buses make a complex ballet of turning around in the narrow street, there seems to be some discussion going on between the visitors, the Regedor, and Martin over what to do next. The girls wave their flags hopefully. Finally, Wendy presents her flag to a young Malaysian-Chinese man, who appears to be standing in for the CM [Fig. 5]. "Who is he?" I ask a resident standing beside me. "Don't know-*lah*." Whoever he is, he sticks the flag unceremoniously into the ground next to the open drain. The party continues walking into the Settlement. Every few feet flags are handed to the girls, who hand them to the CM-substitute, who sticks them into the ground. When they get to Number 16, the last house in the row, they pause to shake hands with Noel Felix, Gerard de Costa, and other members of Tropa de Malaca, who are standing outside the gate in full costume. This looks like a staged photo opportunity, but in truth it's accidental. The members of Tropa de Malaca are gathering in front of Gerard's house to leave for a performance at a local hotel. However, the image of Gerard and Noel standing in front of a Malaysian flag, dressed smartly in their Portuguese costumes, certainly looks patriotic, and does not escape the photographers [Fig. 6]. The procession continues to the inner arch by the statue of St. Peter and the CM-substitute plants one last flag. As he is applauded by the girls and Uncle Edgar, a Malay woman in a red *baju kurung* (long dress) and headscarf hands a gaudy paper bag with a gift of some sort to another member of the entourage, who presents it to the Regedor. The gift-giving is followed by much handshaking and the return of the entourage to the London buses, which, having turned around, were now idling by the entrance arch. The whole event took less than 15 minutes from start to finish and there was no Chief Minister in sight.

REFLECTIONS

Although this single "day in the life" of the Portuguese Settlement is infinitely rich in ethnographic detail, I would like to reflect on the three aspects I highlighted at the outset: the village, its residents, and their place in Malaysian society as the nation turns 50.

The Village

The Portuguese Settlement itself is a study in contradictions. Placed in 1990 under the protection of the Malacca Preservation and Conservation of Historical and Cultural Heritage Enactment of 1988, it is simultaneously a historical

monument and a modern-day living space. On the one hand, the historical monument is an officially promoted tourist site. The federal and state governments have respectively built the Portuguese Square (1985) and Hotel Lisbon (2007) in an attempt to make the Settlement look more “Portuguese” and thus increase its appeal to tourists [Figs. 7 and 8]. The hotel, parking lot, and row of “temporary” food stalls (including Jenny’s coffee shop, Fig. 1) stand on land reclaimed by the government since 2001. The food stalls attract hundreds of people—locals, Singaporeans, and foreign tourists—who come out to eat, especially on weekends and public holidays. Although the food stalls are run and staffed by Settlement residents, the hotel (a project promoted heavily by the CM), is managed by outsiders and employs Malays with a few token Settlement workers. Food stalls built into the hotel’s ground floor were supposed to replace the ten “temporary” stalls, but the contractor built eighteen extra-small units in the same amount of space. The rents are too high, the units too small, and the management’s strict rules (*halal* food and no alcohol) make it undesirable for Settlement food stall owners to move across the parking lot.⁴

On the other hand, the modern-day living space is also a regular neighborhood: women gossip while they buy vegetables, fish, and meat each morning from a trader who sets up a rickety table in an empty front yard; children play in the parking lot and on the outdoor stage when they get back from school; old folks pray to statues of St. Peter or the Virgin Mary at the end of the day. Many families have rebuilt their homes over the past decade, often with money made from Amanah Saham investments. Many of the uniformly quaint wooden, termite-ridden houses built in British times have now been replaced by new concrete structures that, in one or two cases, are of super-sized proportions. Some women who live in older houses have set up makeshift food stalls in their front yards that are patronized by friends and neighbors. Even the Regedor’s wife currently has such a stall, a lean-to structure hidden on a side street, behind the kindergarten school.

The two worlds co-exist uneasily at the best of times. Residents can never forget that their living space is also a tourist site, because there are visual reminders everywhere. Apart from the two arches (one at the entrance to the Settlement, the other inside, leading to the Portuguese Square, Figs. 4 and Fig. 9), the public space is dotted with back-lit billboards decorated with larger-than-life images of Joe Lazaroo (leader of Rancho Folclórico San Pedro) strumming his guitar, Noel Felix (leader of Tropa de Malaca) singing into a microphone, and their swirling dancers [Figs. 4, 7, and 10]. Visitors are left in

no doubt that Portuguese folk music and dance is the primary emblem of the community. The crosspieces of both arches are changed seasonally. The images of decorated boats that had welcomed visitors to the Festa San Pedro (the feast of St. Peter, patron saint of fishermen and of the Settlement) in late June had just been replaced with patriotic images celebrating Independence—the current and former prime ministers, the flag, and key national monuments (the Petronas Building and the KL Tower in Kuala Lumpur)—sandwiched, of course, by advertisements for Tiger and Carlsburg beers, sponsors of all the Settlement billboards.

The People

With the exception of a few non-Portuguese Eurasian spouses and their mixed-race children, the Settlement is a relatively homogeneous ethnic enclave. That does not mean to say that there are no divisions within the community. There are significant differences in levels of education and socio-economic status. There are also profound class divisions between residents who are, or are children of, fishermen and thus consider themselves “true” Settlement residents, and those who are considered upper-class outsiders. This division has a long history that dates back to British times. The Upper Tens, as the upper class were nicknamed, identified closely with the British and had much in common with colonial elites elsewhere in the British Empire. Many of the wealthier families left Malacca after independence, a few for England, but the majority for Perth, Australia, or Singapore. Other middle-class families stayed on in Malacca, but moved out to newer suburbs; a few even moved into the Portuguese Settlement.

Of the characters we have met so far, Sub best epitomizes the true Settlement resident, even though he no longer lives in the Settlement himself. Like many others who have moved out of impossibly crowded extended family situations, Sub rents an apartment nearby for his nuclear family but spends much of his spare time hanging out with friends and relatives in the Settlement. He is the son of a fisherman and, though he worked for a while as a grass cutter for the Public Works Department, he prefers the precarious life of a freelance musician. He never manages to get ahead financially, has never had any spare cash to invest in Amanah Saham, and, typical of his generation, cannot read or write. He is, nevertheless, an extremely effective networker with a tremendous memory for song texts, an encyclopedic knowledge of his community, and an informed opinion on just about everything. In this last regard, he is unusual among Settlement residents. The majority go about their everyday lives, not

necessarily quietly, but steadfastly doing their best to stay out of community politics. Gossip spreads fast, opinions even faster, but few residents will make the effort to turn out and cheer the CM when he comes to plant flags in their kampong. In fact, when there is a breach of the status quo—as there was just two weeks before the CM's visit—it is often precipitated by vocal “activists” from outside the Settlement. In that particular case, a small group of non-Settlement Portuguese-Eurasians orchestrated a campaign for a new Regedor. While their public “election” made the inside pages of national newspapers, it did not result in any immediate change within the kampong.

This leads us to a category of people we might call “partial outsiders”: Malacca Portuguese-Eurasians who do not live in the Settlement and may (or may not) have upper-class antecedents, but who are deeply concerned with its survival. Some, like the activists mentioned above, try to force radical change on the community. These “outside-insiders” are usually unsuccessful and attract only disaffected Settlement residents; the majority simply ignores them. Others, like Joseph Sta. Maria and Martin Carvalho, have concluded that the best way to effect lasting change on the community is from within and so have made conscious efforts to become “inside-outsiders.” Joseph is the youngest brother of the late Bernard Sta. Maria, the only Portuguese-Eurasian ever elected to the Malacca State Assembly. For many years Joseph tried to follow in his brother's footsteps, but eventually gave up politics and joined the Regedor's Panel. Martin Carvalho, a journalist, is currently on the CM's staff.⁵ His father, Andrew, came from an Upper Tens family and was an original member of Horace Sta. Maria's *Tres Amigos* and later a clerk with the education department. Both Joseph and Martin are passionate advocates for the community, have an avid interest in local history, and bring an intellectual and politically savvy dimension to the Panel. Though they are not completely accepted by all Settlement residents, there is a general recognition that their hearts are in the right place.

As should be becoming clear, the Portuguese Settlement is full of strong-minded individuals who are proud of their Portuguese heritage but who spend so much time arguing among themselves about the details that they have a hard time unifying around larger issues. This lack of unity allows a third type of outsider the opportunity to claim authority to represent and preserve their “culture” and “traditions.” Joan Marbeck, the subject of the heated discussion at Mofo's, is a good example of such an outsider to the community. A retired Malacca school teacher from an Upper Tens family, Marbeck now resides in Seremban, a city in the neighboring state of Negri Sembilan. Being better edu-

cated, more articulate, and better connected to the Portuguese world outside Malaysia than Settlement residents (or even Joseph and Martin), Joan has used her cultural capital to create a unique niche for herself. She has published two books on the heritage and language of the community, both with financial support from the Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon and moral support from international scholars who have not worked in the Portuguese Settlement. This kind of visibility led to her being selected by the Malaysian cell phone company DiGi as one of its five “Amazing Malaysians” of 2007. Since 2005, this company has given financial and logistical support to individuals deemed able to “help create awareness of their own heritage and the significance of preserving these traditions.” While her work is interesting in its own right and presents a distinctly different middle-class voice, the problem lies in its interface with the Portuguese Settlement community. Many residents distrust her motives; some argue that her use of the term “Kristang” erases their Portuguese identity and reinforces the old Upper Tens aversion to being associated with the “poor Portuguese.” Joan herself has publicly referred to this tension: “some challenged me to appear in the Portuguese Settlement and would have thrown tomatoes at me because I, so to speak, was giving a wrong impression of the Kristang Language” (*New Straits Times* 16 May 2007).

Their Place in Malaysian Society as the Nation Turns 50

If my reflections on the first two aspects highlight some of the internal stresses and strains of the community, this third aspect presents a quite different picture. The day of the Chief Minister’s visit shows us a minority community expressing its identity by plastering itself with flags—Malaysian flags, not Portuguese flags. The leaders of the village turn out to greet the Chief Minister, a representative of the Islamic Malay majority, who appears on the surface, at least, to be sympathetic to their issues. The ordinary residents are less convinced of this. Although they love their country and their flag, the government is the government; it always wants something from the people. Apart from the Panel and its hardcore supporters, only the young, the curious, the deranged, and the resident fieldworkers turn out to greet the CM when he doesn’t arrive. Everyone else decorates their bicycles, cars, and fences, but otherwise goes about their normal everyday business unperturbed by all the fuss.

We see a community that has been stereotyped by image makers. The dance costumes have become the primary visual symbol of the Portuguese Settlement’s ethnic distinctiveness and “heritage.” Yet these costumes are not “traditional

dress” by any stretch of the imagination. They are copies of twentieth-century Portuguese *rancho folclórico* costumes that have no tangible connection to the Settlement community’s sixteenth-century Portuguese ancestors. Even so, they have become so symbolic of the community that even the CM wants to be photographed in their presence as proof of his ethnic inclusivity. Music, too, is part of this ethnic distinctiveness, but we see clearly that, for the musicians themselves, “Portuguese music” is only one part of their musical personae. Sub and the other musicians of the community play “Portuguese music” for tourists and anyone else who hires them. But they also play other music—American “golden oldies” and Malay standards—at weddings, at clubs and eating places, and at private functions. Musicians are more widely known than other people in the community because their jobs regularly put them in the path of power brokers in the political and business worlds. They, more than most Settlement residents, “know how to mix around.” They play with musicians of other races, hang out together, and form longstanding friendships based on affinity for music, rather than on race, religion, or other such dividers. Idriss’s casual observation that “we can sit together at one table, eat together” is particularly poignant in light of a long story that another musician, Gerard de Costa, told me about an interaction with a Malay friend at his working place. Reflecting a common fear village Malays have of Portuguese-Eurasians, the Malay boy’s mother warned her son not to eat or drink with Gerard: “you be careful when you join a Christian boy—he might give you Holy Water to drink!”

Even after fifty years of nationhood, all Malaysians are defined by a primary ethnic/racial identity: one is Malay, Chinese, Indian, Eurasian, or something else. Furthermore, ethnicity/race is confused and conflated in complex ways with religion. Although Malaysia is a multi-racial nation, there is an assumption that one’s race determines one’s religion: in this generalized view, all Malays are Muslim; Chinese are Buddhist/Daoist (or Christian); Indians are Hindu (or Christian); and Eurasians are Christian (generally Catholic). This kind of essentialism, of course, hides myriad complexities, but is understood in Malaysia as a powerful rule of thumb. For most adults, at least, there is no *Malaysian* identity.⁶ As one Straits-born Chinese friend, who gave us a ride home after “choir practice” on the night of the CM’s visit sadly observed, “After fifty years we’re all still hyphenated. It’s a pity, but there are no unhyphenated Malaysians.” Minorities like the Portuguese-Eurasians still tread a fine line between expressing themselves as a unique, vibrant part of the Malaysian mosaic and striving not to be marginalized as unpatriotic. And yet there are

certain things that unite everyone. To be Malaysian is to love the flag, regardless of what one feels about "the management." Another retired Straits-born Chinese friend, speaking at a Merdeka dinner a few nights earlier, said "It's not that I love the government, I love my flag." Whether the CM arrived or not was ultimately unimportant; it was the act of planting flags that connected the people of the Portuguese Settlement to the nation on its 50th birthday.

Notes

¹ I have conducted fieldwork in the Portuguese Settlement regularly since 1990. This research has resulted in a PhD dissertation (1993), a book (*D'Albuquerque's Children: Performing Tradition in Malaysia's Portuguese Settlement*, U of Chicago P, 2000), and many articles. I have returned to the Settlement almost every year since 1990 and have been lucky enough to witness and document the process of change over time. I have now worked in this single village for two decades, long enough to see an entire generation grow up in a rapidly changing world.

² The source of this nickname is clouded in mystery and there are many theories. Suffice it to say that Francis de Costa is universally known as Sub or perhaps Sap. Since he never writes his name, there is no "correct" spelling but the sound is halfway between Sub and Sap.

³ This same argument is now being applied to "Kristang" as the name for the local language. Whereas most Settlement people have traditionally called their language "Kristang," a significantly vocal number are now rejecting the word in the wake of Marbeck's appropriation of it. The problem is there is no good alternative. Their language is clearly not "Português" or even "Português antigo" [old Portuguese], it is a patios in its own right.

⁴ In December 2008 a new Medan Selera (Malay: food court) was opened behind and at right angles to the row of temporary food stalls. This area, nicknamed "Coconut Island" by Settlement residents because of the coconut trees planted by the developer, had originally been intended as a soccer field for the Settlement, but the ground was too hard and uneven for the purpose. The field has been bricked over into a patio and the attractive row of stalls, designed (once again) to look "Portuguese," now face the Straits of Malacca instead of the parking lot and Hotel Lisbon. All ten businesses in the temporary stalls, including Jenny's coffee shop, moved to the new location.

⁵ Martin has since resigned from the CM's staff and gone back to being a journalist. He is now Malacca bureau chief for *The Star*, one of Malaysia's two nationally circulated English-language newspapers.

⁶ A new government initiative called *1Malaysia* is attempting to solve this problem. The *1Malaysia* policy is closely linked to the new Prime Minister, Najib Tun Razak, who succeeded Abdullah Ahmad Badawi in April 2009.

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Figure 1. Jenny's coffee shop, second from the right under the sign "Selamat Datang ke Medan Selera" ("Welcome to the Food Court").






Figure 2. From left to right: Francis ("Sub") de Costa, Horace Sta. Maria, and the author. Sub is holding a Tres Amigos compact disc that Horace had just autographed.



Figure 3. Idriss bin Haji Shariff and his Malay ensemble performing at a Shanghai hotel. Idriss is at the far right, playing accordion.






Figure 4. Two London Transport buses approaching the Settlement and turning around in front of the entrance arch. The columns of the arch are permanently decorated with images of Portuguese musicians and dancers. The crosspiece, changed seasonally, displays images of the Prime Minister and Kuala Lumpur skyscrapers. The slogan reads: "The people are resolutely united: 50 years of Independence."



Figure 5. Wendy de Costa (left) and friend waiting to present flags to the CM's representative as Edgar stands behind them.



Figure 6. Gerard de Costa (left) and Noel Felix (right) standing in front of No. 16 Jalan D'Albuquerque. No. 14, Mofo's, is visible in the background.






Figure 7. Entrance to the Portuguese Square (built in 1985). Notice the Tiger Beer advertising billboards, with images of Portuguese musicians and dancers in the foreground. In the background are images of the Santiago Gate (the only remaining part of the old Portuguese fortress) and boats decorated for Festa San Pedro.



Figure 8. Façade of the Hotel Lisbon (completed in 2007). The flags on the left decorate the Canossian convent school fence.



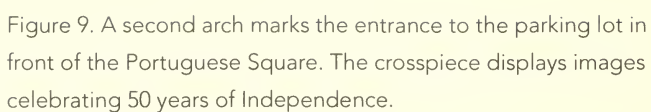


Figure 9. A second arch marks the entrance to the parking lot in front of the Portuguese Square. The crosspiece displays images celebrating 50 years of Independence.



Figure. 10. A billboard displaying images of Noel Felix, Joe Lazaro (with guitar) in the foreground and the Santiago Gate and a decorated boat in the background.

