

Nationality, Identity and Culture: A Personal Reflection

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Son of the British Empire (1937 to 1942)

I was born in Singapore in 1937. Singapore was then a British colony, part of the mighty British Empire. My father worked in the private sector and my mother was a home-maker. I had two younger brothers.

What do I remember about colonial Singapore?

First, I remember that colonial Singapore was both racist and hierarchical. The whites were first-class citizens. The Eurasians were second-class citizens. The rest of us were third-class citizens. The only Asians allowed to enter the premises of prestigious clubs, like the Cricket Club and the Tanglin Club, were their servants.

Second, colonial Singapore was not a democratic society. The un-elected British governor had absolute power. The senior civil servants and the senior police officers were white men. The citizens were afraid of them. Anyone suspected of being disloyal to or critical of the British would be punished. The worst form of punishment was banishment to the country of the offending person's land of birth.

Third, we were taught to be loyal to the British crown. We had to learn to sing *God Save The King*. Most of us sang the British national anthem without conviction. There was, however, a minority, consisting mostly of Eurasians and Peranakans, who accepted the British narrative. Most of the residents of Singapore were loyal to their ancestral homes. I was too young to have any political aspirations.

Son of the Japanese Empire (1942 to 1945)

The British had repeatedly assured the people of Singapore that they had nothing to fear. We were told that Singapore was an "impregnable fortress." We believed in the British propaganda. The city was in a state of shock when the British surrendered to the Japanese on 15 February 1942.

Overnight, I had become a son of the Japanese Empire. Instead of *God Save the King*, we sang a new national anthem, *Kimigayo*. The island was renamed Syonan-to, meaning "Light of the South". The time in Singapore was moved forward to Tokyo time. English was replaced by Nippon-go.

Although the Japanese narrative was that they had come to liberate us from the British, the reality was quite different. I remember the Japanese rule of Singapore as a reign of terror. Slapping, torture and death were the punishments meted out to those who crossed them.

The Japanese Occupation was also a period of deprivation. We had to grow our own food. Instead of rice, we ate mostly tapioca and sweet potatoes. I will never forget going at night with my uncle Yean to catch eels from the monsoon drains for food. Because of malnutrition, my beloved grandmother died of beriberi.

Looking back on the 44 months of my life as a son of the Japanese empire, I must say that I never developed any loyalty for the Japanese Emperor. The Japanese rulers did not try to win the hearts and minds of the people they ruled. We were all relieved when the Japanese surrendered to the British in September 1945.

Back to the British Empire (1945 to 1963)

The lesser of two evils, the British, returned to rule Singapore in 1945. The people of Singapore no longer feared the British in the way they did before the war. Having been defeated by the Japanese, they had lost their charisma and superiority.

Gradually, the people of Singapore agitated for change. The British introduced elections, first, at the municipal level and, later, at the national level. In 1959, British granted Singapore self-government. This was also the year in which the People's Action Party first gained power in Singapore.

In the summer of 1963, when I went to study in the United States, I carried a British passport.

Citizen of Malaysia (1963 to 1965)

In September 1963, Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak joined the Federation of Malaya to form a new country called Malaysia.

I had to go to the Malaysian Embassy in Washington, DC, to change my British passport for a Malaysian passport.

The period when Singapore was part of Malaysia was too short for us to transit from being Singaporeans to being Malaysians. I was very pleased when the separation was announced on 9 August 1965 because I had opposed merger on the ground that

the fundamental differences in values between us would make merger unworkable. History has vindicated my position.

Citizen of Singapore

In 1965, I exchanged my Malaysian passport for a Singapore passport. I am proud to be a Singaporean. What makes me a Singaporean? My love for the land of my birth and for the people of Singapore.

We may be a small country but we have built one of the world's most prosperous and competitive economies. We are a living example that multiculturalism can work. The culture of Singapore is a unique blend of the British, Chinese, Malay and Indian civilisations. The British had left us with a rich legacy and we should acknowledge this during our bicentennial year. We inherited from the British a free port, free trade, an open economy, the English language, the rule of law, the civil service, town planning, low-cost housing and much more.

We are also united by certain shared values such as racial equality, religious tolerance, the rule of law, no corruption, our strong work ethic and our can-do and indomitable spirit. We have built on the legacies of those who came before us—whether British or Asian—and created a success story which has surpassed the wildest dreams of Raffles. □