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‘Musealising’ the Registered Postcoloniality:
The Chosen Display-ness of the National Museum, Malaysia

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後殖民情狀的博物館化：
馬來西亞國家博物館的選擇性陳列建構

林家暉

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Abstract

The notion of musealisation usually refers to the transformation of either an activity or a site into a museum of some sort. This paper examines this concept through a rather unusual way around a museum itself. The ‘musealisation’ of this museum—the National Museum, Malaysia—suggests a process not simply of its institutionalisation but more of a registration of Malaysia’s top-down collective nation-building efforts. Attempted to establish an independent ‘nation-state’, Malaysia presents a series of antinomies, for instance, from its multi-racial and multi-cultural existence. With no precedents for Malaysian identity and Malaysian architecture, the opening of the National Museum, Malaysia in 1963 demonstrates an important project to identify its postcolonial condition. It is instrumental in consolidating the cultural hegemony of *Malay Bumiputera* (a Malaysian of indigenous Malay origin) in its national identity construction process. This registers a form of Malaysia’s postcoloniality that has little representation of its multiplicity and instead a ‘Malaysia’ consisted of Malays and Islam. What has been musealised in this case is a top-down collective nation-building, which implies de-colonial (to the British) and neo-colonial (to the ‘Malaysian’) intentions. The Museum has hence presented a form of the chosen display-ness that builds up one image of Malaysia.

摘要

博物館化的概念通常指涉某種活動或是某個地點轉化成博物館形式的過程，但是本研究採用一個與此定義稍有歧異的觀點，將要探討博物館化的主體置於博物館本身。馬來西亞的國家博物館作為本研究之探討案例，可以藉由這樣的觀點來檢視除了博物館其本身在機構化過程中牽涉的議題，還有其所代表之集體性國族建構。馬來西亞在獨立後為了建立其民族國家的形象，在意識形態上出現了與其多元文化以及族群涵構相衝突的一系列矛盾。馬來西亞在獨立後作為一個新興的國家，其認同與建築形式的建構並無先例可循，所以其國家博物館可以說是再現馬來西亞後殖民條件的一個重要指標。馬來西亞的國家博物館在國族建構的意義上尤其重要，因為它在馬來西亞「原住民認同」的意識形態下鞏固了獨立後政府所實施的文化霸權政策。此國家博物館所印記的是其後殖民情狀的一種再現，但它所印記的並非馬來西亞既存的多元性，而是偏向於馬來族群以及伊斯蘭宗教的單一性徵。也就是說，在其中所被博物館化的，首先當然是一個集體性的國族建構，但其後所暗示的，除了是對英國前殖民主的去殖民宣示之外，還有以馬來族群為首的內部殖民意圖。作為本研究的中心論述，馬來西亞國家博物館所博物館化的後殖民情狀是一個對其國族認同意象選擇性的展示與再現，而非普同與自發的民族性再現。

Introduction

The founding of a national museum usually registers intentions, top-down, to centralise a country's national consciousness by ways of highlighting particular glory and achievement, or, bottom-up, to build up broad consensus that how a country's past and collective memories can be historically and visually represented. Therefore, the founding, the management and the presentation of a national museum usually involve a carefully designed mechanism that helps manipulate issues related to intended power and knowledge. In other words, a national museum in many circumstances, including its exhibitions, exhibits, site even its architecture should have chosen, collected and represented particular ideas. These ideas comprise legacies of the past, their influence at the present and their impact on the future that the ruling elites of a country have wanted to promote. These ideas as the representation of a national museum's affiliated nation-building ideologies are by no means cultural-politically innocent. The subject position which stands for the country's dominant ruling elites' interests hence is a vitally important issue that visitors usually perceive in a national museum. As the mediums, memories and histories often are the materials of these chosen ideas; in other words, there must be historical and memorial pieces that have been either showcased or hidden in a national museum ideologically. This fact is based on that all histories and memories, which have already been visualised and reified, are products of particular individuals (Jenkins, 1991). In other words, they belong to the representation of particular subjectivity rather than the essence of authenticity.

This study intends to concentrate on these particular ideas which have been chosen, collected and represented in a national museum through an empirical case study of the National Museum, Malaysia. The methodological contextualisation of the analysis is to unfold the construction of a collective

ideology that has been placed during the process of making the National Museum, Malaysia, i.e. during the Museum's 'musealisation'. The notion about musealisation normally refers to the conversion of non-muséal entities into muséal ones. However, the argument here in this study tries to extend the definition that includes a national museum's establishment process. Based on this argumentation, the National Museum should be able to be comprehended further from its registered/repressed issues that often are complicated in a series of antinomies (contradictions between two beliefs or conclusions that are in themselves reasonable—paradoxes). These antinomies often emerge between pairs of issues such as a coloniser and the colonised, a dominant voice and the marginalised ones, and the existing ruling power and knowledge and the resistance against them. In the study of the National Museum, Malaysia, the theoretical focus will be on its nation-building intentions and discourses which transform the inherited coloniality into postcoloniality after independence. The musealisation of the National Museum, hence, is argued to be a container that visually and presentably showcases the nation-building of Malaysia.

The methodology and theoretical framework of this study

Museums today, as a form of societal and cultural-political representation, have shown a complicated nature when compared to what a museum was defined in the past. Henrietta Lidchi argues that museum curators are no longer regarded as unquestionable groundkeepers of knowledge about museum collections, and museums are also no longer merely esteemed as rooms that accommodate and stimulate knowledge from historic and culturally significant objects (Lidchi, 2003). That is to say, museums today have already embraced a broader context suggesting a wider sense of knowledge production; in many cases, the semiotics and discourse involved in museum work imply an important yet recessive

metaphor for either poetics or politics of display. The poetics of display registers the symbolism of exhibiting, whereas the politics of display represents the power that is epistemologically articulated with the exhibitions in a museum.

This study hence has the attempt to address both the poetics and the politics as key steps while the methodology of the study is to examine the musealisation implication of the National Museum, Malaysia. In order to unveil and get to know better the implication when the National Museum is planned as an institution and presented to the public, the symbolism and the power/knowledge interaction that can be learnt from the Museum in different circumstances are argued and analysed in this study as hints at a specific exhibition context which endeavours to provide the visitors with the most accessible platform for examination of the representational meaning. The symbolic meaning and the institutionalisation of the Museum hence are two vitally important leads when the discourses of the Museum's material culture and methods of display are analysed.

As theoretical references for analyses, semiology and discourse analyses perhaps are the two most direct and practical aspects. Semiotic theory such as Roland Barthes who used different types of signs which present different relationships between the concept the sign represents (the signified) and the form which the sign takes (the signifier) suggests one way of analysing museum exhibition²—his studies of urban fields about Japan (Barthes, 1982) and Paris (Barthes, 1964) are examples. In terms of discourse analysis, Michel Foucault's work provides insight into institutional engagements with power and

² For instance, a symbol's signifier usually does not resemble the signified, an icon's signifier is normally perceived as resembling or imitating the signified, and an index's signifier is directly connected in some way (physically or causally) to the signified. By distinguishing these differences, semiologists usually are able to argue how signs are taken into serious consideration when the meaning of one visual object is examined.

knowledge—some of his theoretical discussion are referentially interrelated (Foucault, 1980, 1989).

However, more cultural studies theories on museums as a matter of fact are also concerned with the interpretation of display, especially for understanding visual images as embedded in the social world. In other words, how the exhibitions in a museum are seriously taken as an ideological image, how this image is articulated with the social conditions and effects of the museum's context, and how this image can be considered by the public are equally important when the National Museum is examined in this study. Gillian Rose in her studies has a series of arguments about how images become significant and the contention that four sites at which the meanings of found visual images are made provides a basic platform that collects a good number of theoretical notions about analysing the display of museum work (Rose, 2016). Rose argues that these sites are respectively production, the object itself, its circulation and its audiencing, and each of these sites could be understood in terms of technology, composition and society that are involved. Technology implies the tools and equipment used to produce and display an image; the composition concerns with the visual construction and reception of an image; and society contextualises all social, economic, political and institutional practices and relations that interpret an image. Most importantly, Rose reminds an important strategy that characterises the nature of museum studies' theorisations—a variety of methods are often mixed in analyses. As an applied science, museum studies in a broader context many often do not limit themselves in terms of making interpretation of display. For example, Benedict Anderson, whose studies have marked a reputable location in the regional studies of Southeast Asia, used not only ways in political sciences but also in historiography to underscore the meaningful display of nationalism. His argument of the 'imagined communities' is one conspicuous example that takes a postcolonial perspective to examine the production of

nationalism placed in Southeast Asia, museum work as one vitally important case was examined by Anderson as a representational form of the institutions of power (Anderson, 1991). As a summary, apart from the symbolism and power/knowledge discourse production, a broader sense of the interpretation of display is also the main focus when the National Museum, Malaysia, is examined in the study.

The Museum and its musealisation

As Henrietta Lidchi suggests, a body of knowledge created in a museum is often attached around the material culture that it produces (Lidchi, 2003), the Museum and the process of this museum's production should be understood first, particularly in terms of its hardware, including the museum architecture itself and the collections.

Initiated by the first prime minister of Malaysia Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj, the present building of the National Museum (Figure 1) was built on the site of the former Selangor Museum (1906 - 1945) in Kuala Lumpur. Tunku Abdul Rahman is widely regarded as Malaysia's founding father—*Bapa Kemerdekaan* (Father of Independence) or *Bapa Malaysia* (Father of Malaysia) –as he dominated the politics of independent Malaya and signed the Independence agreement in 1957 that formed the Federation of Malaya. In 1961, Tunku Abdul Rahman at the Foreign Correspondents Association of Southeast Asia in Singapore proposed a federal constitutional monarchy that groups Malaya, Singapore, Sabah, Sarawak, and Brunei into Malaysia. Although Singapore and Brunei in the end did not become part of the federation, the formation of Malaysia was Tunku Abdul Rahman's greatest achievement.



Figure 1 The National Museum of Malaysia (Source: the author)

The architecture of the museum underlines particularly its formalistic inspiration, as the Museum states officially in its introductory brochure:

The architecture of the museum is a combination of the design of the traditional Malay house and Malay motifs. The façade is adored by two huge murals made of the finest Italian glass mosaic, which highlights the history and craft of Malaysia respectively. (Department of Museums Malaysia, 2018)

The general building form that the National Museum implies is the *Balai Besar* of a Malay palace, literally in English means the great hall, whereas the building mass is made of modern structure and material. That is to say, the main building of the National Museum can be regarded as a Malay-revivalist modern building (Figure 2). From the exterior of the Museum, Malay craftsmanship and architectural members are visually and symbolically represented by the modern replacement, evidential elements are like the

Minangkabau³ style roof, high stilt piles, timber structured building frames and the wall reliefs. In 2015, the main building was formally listed as an item of the national cultural heritage of Malaysia, which suggests the lawful preservation of the current built context of the National Museum. To a certain extent, this implies a symbolic announcement that the built image of the preserved National Museum has been shaped as one top-down and collective identity construction that stands for Malaysia.



Figure 2 The modernist representation of a Malay palace used for the building of the National Museum (Source: the author)

As a part of the museum building complex, a traditional royal Malay residence stands beside the main museum building (Figure 3). The Istana Satu (literally in English, the first palace) was a royal residence in Kuala Terengganu (a state of Malaysia, on the east coast of the Malay Peninsula) in which Sultan of Terengganu erected as his residence in 1884. The building is regarded as a

³ Minangkabau refers to an ethnic group indigenous to the Minangkabau Highlands of West Sumatra.

typical type of traditional Malay house, and rich Malay craftsmanship is evident throughout the palace. In 1974, the palace was restored and relocated to Kuala Lumpur as part of the National Museum. Although the building form of the Istana Satu follows the *Rumah Tiang Dua Belas*, literally in English means the twelve pillars house, which is different to the main museum building's formalistic implication of the great hall of a Malay palace, the category of the traditional Malay royal residence has created a visual and ideological bridge to imply the archi-tectonic⁴ connection from the Istana Satu's traditional and vernacular presentation to the main museum building's modern revival.



Figure 3 The Istana Satu, an original-size old Terengganu timber palace, erected next to the National Museum main building (Source: the author)

Benedict Anderson stated a point to underscore the Scottish political theoretician Tom Nairn's subjective expression about how ancient tongues can be 're-represented' through new models of nation building: 'The new middle-class

⁴ In architecture, suggested by Kenneth Frampton, tectonics represents a concern with the poetics of building construction (Frampton, 1990).

intelligentsia of nationalism had to invite the masses into history; and the invitation-card had to be written in a language they understood' (Anderson, 1991; Nairn, 1977). Architecture as a cultural form that represents a particular sense of arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively can also be treated as a way of construction identity to the public. The architectural images collected and exhibited to comprise the spatial complex of the National Museum bear witness to Anderson's point that a subjective form of identity construction is shown not only in a traditional form but also is more effectively converted into a modern and more public form along with new materials, technologies and a more organised institution. In this case, the intention is extended into interior and the software. The exhibitions, their themes and the exhibits along with the settings and decoration installed in the Museum can be seen as echoes to highlight the display of a branded 'national' idea.

The main museum building contains the majority of the interior exhibitions. Amongst all, there are four permanent exhibitions which are entitled to four allocated galleries—Early History, The Malay Kingdoms, The Colonial Era, and Malaysia Today (Figure 4). The display of the four galleries basically shows a chronological trajectory; the exhibits showcase the pre-historical archaeology, the fourteenth century trade history, the pre-colonial Malacca Sultanate, and the development from the colonial time to independence. From the names given to the galleries, however, an attempt at highlighting the very indigenous people as well as the culture is clear. Apart from the Malay ethnic group, other ethnic members of today's Malaysia are subordinate to historical moments that the Malays have centred. This situation is phenomenal and comparable to the current social order—the Malays who stand for the dominant and elite communities in Malaysia today have discoursed with a particular identity construction that all later immigrations are psychologically non-natives. This ideology has been analysed by a good number of studies in a good variety of aspects. In architecture,

for example, Yat Ming Loo argues that the Chinese community in Malaysia is represented as ‘outsiders’ or ‘foreigners’ in the dominant state’s ideology, and he uses a series of spatial references from buildings to environmental planning to support this argument (Loo, 2013).

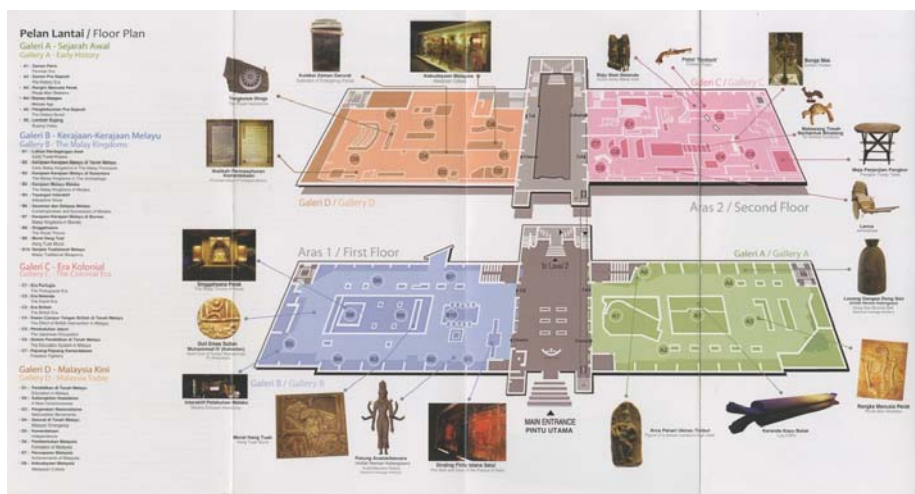


Figure 4 The floor map of the National Museum
(Source: The National Museum, Malaysia)

The exhibits in the four galleries are mostly cultural or historical relics, explanatory texts and images along with visual replicas (Figure 5). Amongst all exhibits, the visual replicas play an important role to create a general ambience of the Museum, as in each gallery, large scaled even one-to-one scaled replicas of the architecture, infrastructure and equipment that are related to the development of Malaysia are positioned attractively to provide the first glance impression when the visitors enter the exhibition gallery. As a presentational strategy, all in four galleries, these replicas are placed not only next to or above the other exhibits but also, usually in the central places of the galleries, as an interior frame, ceiling or gate to let the visitors walk, step, climb or pass over. The often examples used are like buildings, boats, duplicated mining sites or the mining

gears (Figure 6). As part of the exhibitions, these replicas register more exchange value and sign-exchange value since they suggest not use value but being only as part of the exhibitions. In other words, these replicas are functioned more symbolically. At a museum management level, these replicas effectively enclose the exhibits and provide atmospheric hints at what those exhibits are. At a thematic level, these replicas underscore the implication for the notion about Malaysia that how knowledge is operated by power. In different galleries, these replicas in which are placed in the centres of the exhibitions have all implied a relationship of dominance, or, more directly, the relationship between colonisers and the colonised that cultural-politically comprises a main subject set for each gallery. For example, in the gallery of the Early History, the highlighted significance is the development of human civilisation, these replicas provide visual and iconic identification that where and how the primitive civilisation has rooted in the land. Although it is not directly indicated in the exhibition, the origin and legitimacy of the *Orang Asli* (in the Malay language, literally, means the indigenous people) as the beginning of civilisation in Malaysia is sturdily implied.



Figure 5 The Early History gallery (Source: the author)



Figure 6 The mining gears displayed in the exhibition gallery (Source: the author)

Within the four permanent exhibitions, most of the exhibits relate to historically and culturally Malay items (Figure 7). Similar to the replicas, the purpose of exhibiting these items is clearly for the appreciation and enlargement of their exchange value and sign exchange value. For instance, the display of the Malay royal headdresses in the Museum sheds light on this intention. The exhibited headdresses are by no means unique and hence economically valuable as they are only duplicated items; however, the meaning of displaying the headdresses in the exhibition plays a more important role. Situated in a centre place in the last gallery—Malaysia Today—the display of the Malay royal headdresses suggests a hierarchical identity construction that ideologically places the Malay community at the top of the state leadership. Regardless of the multiculturalism and multiethnicity as de facto situations in contemporary Malaysian society, this display in the exhibition arguably suggests marginalisation and repression of the cultures and people that are non-Malay based. This identity construction in the exhibition therefore shows a particular

ideology making, and this ideology is not only built for the Malay community but also intended at a national level as it is registered as a main ideology in the National Museum, Malaysia.



Figure 7 The Malay royal headdresses displayed in the exhibition (Source: the author)

As a general description, the buildings in the Museum are culturally and ethnically particular, and the exhibits of the Museum are not specifically valuable for uniqueness and costs but to their social and cultural-political status. The architecture, exhibitions and exhibits carefully designed and displayed in the physical and ideological contexts of the National Museum have suggested a characteristic of ambience making, which is in a particular sense of secularity and producibility. This atmosphere can be seen comparably in some other museums in Malaysia that were founded under similar purposes, such as the Islamic Arts Museum, Malaysia (Figure 8).



Figure 8 The exhibits in the Islamic Arts Museum, Malaysia (Source: the author)

In the Islamic Arts Museum, where Islam is set as a central idea, is being applied a similar strategy for the design and management of its exhibitions. The majority of the exhibits in the museum comprises duplicated cultural and historical items that are relevant to the cultures, trajectories and meaning of Islam. Interestingly similar, large scaled replicas of Islamic architectural pieces and a good number of mosque models play a vitally important role to reify the ideology that is designated for the Islamic Arts Museum, no matter whether in terms of the locations in which they are placed in the museum or the imagery they have created for the museum. This strategy is evenly clear in the presentation of the National Museum. To a certain extent, this reification registers the subjectivation⁵ of the National Museum's institutionalisation. Most

⁵ Subjectivation, coined and suggested by Michel Foucault, is a way in which people are invited or incited to recognise their moral obligations (Foucault, 1983). In other words, subjectivation is a process that

importantly, this subjectivation represents the musealisation of the National Museum in which has been purposed on Malaysia's nation-building.

The nation-building and identity construction imagery

The articulation of pre-existing discourses often is incorporated and constructed to appropriate and display objects in a museum, and the museum hence becomes an arbiter of meaning since the institutional position allows it to articulate and reinforce the discursive formations through the methods of display (Lidchi, 2003). This intention can also be seen in the National Museum. During the colonial period, the British colonial government employed an agency politics to manage the control over the colony British Malaya, and this colonial deed has caused obvious impact on the construction of the ethnic difference in Malaysia after independence. Under this agency colonisation strategy, three main ethnic groups in Malaysia today, at that time, therefore were geopolitically allocated in three different geographic settings: the Chinese in an urban setting, the Malays in a rural setting and the Indians in a plantation setting. The neighbourhood of today's Jalan Petaling (Petaling Street) in the city centre of Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia today, and its history shed light on this matter.

As a governing tactic, the British colonial government politically allocated three major ethnic groups in then British Malaya in dissimilar locative characters, and Kuala Lumpur was carefully planned by using Klang River as an indicator to form the 'city' area. Underlined by the involvement of the Chinese merchant Ah Loy Yap who serviced as Kapitan Cina (the Chinese leader) of Kuala Lumpur during the colonial period, the East side of the Klang River in the Kuala Lumpur city centre was developed and hence settled by the Chinese community. The

people transform themselves into a subject and hence to highlight a particular subjectivity.

West side of the River, where was occupied by the governmental institutions and buildings, represents not only the city centre but also the political centre of the colonial government. The Malay community at that time, however, was not particularly included in this city planning arrangement.

This arrangement of colonisation suggests the British colonial government's ruling strategy of separating three central racial groups in distinctive places. The immigrant Chinese was seen by the British as people whom could assist the colonial management as an agent in terms of the capability of sustaining profitable connection with China of the time. The immigrant Chinese's investment in then British Malaya to help develop the colony was also one main consideration that the British colonial government gave the autonomy to the immigrant Chinese no matter whether in terms of granting them to form congregations or to develop urban settlements. As a matter of fact, not only in British Malaya, in the colonial Indo-China the immigrant Chinese were also granted quasi-official authorities as a colonial strategy to help control over the colony and her people (Barrett, 2012), and thus the role of the Chinese being an agent in the colonial hierarchy is obvious.

As for the Malays and the Indians, there were politically prearranged for epitomisation of suburban areas and the plantation farms. This ethnic segregation policy set during the British colonial period was a catalyst of Malaysia's racial differentiation fact. The Malays, since this ethnic group came into power of governance after independence in 1957, have endeavoured to culturally, religiously and spatially reidentify themselves top-down through state apparatus. This is to further enhance the dominance. Amongst many measures, a highlight of identity differentiation within the people of Malaysia was the most potent move. The term *Bumiputera* (literally 'son of the soil', suggesting a Malaysian of indigenous Malay origin) has been created to allude to the Peninsular *Orang Asli*,

the indigenous people in East Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak), and, most importantly, the Malay people.

Therefore, the created idea of *Bumiputera*, as a political deed after independence has strengthened the race factor in all aspects in Malaysia and it has set the dividing nature of the differentiation of *Bumiputera* and *Non-Bumiputera* amongst the people of this country (Loo, 2013). This division, significantly, also made the non-Malay communities in Malaysia feel degraded to second class citizens (Kua, 1987). That is to say, the Malays, particularly the ruling elites, employ the Malay language and culture as the mediums for building up a Malay-centred race-nation. As a consequence, from a top-down ideological perspective, the usage of the Malay language and cultural symbols becomes dominant when Malaysia's national representation and unity are examined (Loo, 2013). Malay nationalism and Malay culture, therefore, have been imposed as both forms of nation-building hegemony and postcoloniality in Malaysia.

Malaysia as a new county after her independence faced not only the problematics of nation-building but also identity construction, because there are no precedents for Malaysia in all aspects. That is to say, no matter whether Malaysia that is regarded as a country or as an identity, it by no means can be traced in history. The term Malaysia was created to identify a federal constitutional monarchy that groups Malaya, Singapore, Sabah, Sarawak, and Brunei, which ultimately the country did not embrace Singapore and Brunei. The ruling Malay elites, who are the successors of the British leading the governance, can be seen expectedly to internalise the colonial hierarchy and to position the Malay-ness at the top of the hierarchy as both Malaysia's central nation-building and identity construction.

In order to legitimise this intention, the Malay-based government underscores the consideration of easing racial confrontation that might occur

against the ruling Malay elites' ideological nation-building, and hence the concept of *Bangsa Malaysia* (literally, Malaysian Race) was introduced. This concept was later transcribed into a programme called *Satu Malaysia*, or One Malaysia. The *Satu Malaysia* programme was designed by then the Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak in 2009 in order to promote ethnic harmony, national unity, and efficient governance, and this programme included a variety of public services and non-governmental organisations. In other words, the *Satu Malaysia* programme to a certain extent represents the pragmatism of the ruling Malay elites' ideological nation-building. This top-down strategy to nurture unity amongst Malaysia's de facto multiethnicity, on the one hand, purports to create collectivity of nation-building for independent Malaysia which has no precedents, yet on the other hand, it also phenomenologically brackets struggles between the identification of multiculturalism. That is to say, this form of nation-building pragmatically emphasises the intentional placement of a particular nationalistic ideology in order to either accommodate or control over the multiethnic and multifaith nation of Malaysia where the racist issues can be identified in present-day Malaysia (Lin, 2017). Therefore, the cultural-political intention of *Satu Malaysia* showcases a neo-colonialist replacement that derives from a seemingly decolonisation ideology.

The *Satu Malaysia* programme can be seen as a way of branding nationalism that is argued as 'official nationalism' by Anderson (Anderson, 1991). Benedict Anderson argues that various forms of nationalism can be sorted diachronically into four different waves: the first is established by the creolisation⁶ as a consequence of resistance to colonisation; the second is

⁶ The notion stands for the process that hints at an assortment of indigeneity from which Creole cultures emerged. The idea was originally formed to refer to persons of mixed European and black descent, especially in the Caribbean, nowadays the meaning is often extended to represent those external cultures which have been converted in a particular context into as native ones.

triggered by what he called print capitalism that reproduces the emergent forces of the populace who have been empowered from the rise of democracy and commercialism; the last wave is a supplementary response to imperialism that Anderson used colonial nationalism to address. The so-called official nationalism is the third wave argued by Anderson, it imposes a top-down and imperial thought. The *Satu Malaysia* programme which was created and promoted by Najib to advertise one particular ideology hold by the dominant community in current Malaysia is a typical representation of official national, and the National Museum's building form that adopts a strong Malay cultural sense suggests the same conceptualisation.

Although, since 2018, the *Satu Malaysia* programme is no longer encouraged officially when Mahathir Mohamad was re-elected as the Prime Minister of Malaysia for the second time due to the questioning of the former Prime Minister Najib's corruption, the ideological intention of promoting *Satu Malaysia* has already been rooted in the Malay community and been possessed by this dominant ethnic group in Malaysia as a form of nation-building which is hardly to be overturned in a short term. Arguably, the National Museum can be examined as one form that represents this pragmatism of Malaysia's collective nation-building, which registers not exactly pervasive and consensual public opinions but a particular chosen ideology from the ruling elites. The Museum as the visual representation is the isomorphism explicating *Satu Malaysia*, and the adoption of the Malay house image is a rather biased but timely built symbol of Malaysia's national identity construction since no precedents can be traced in history.

Institutionalisation and reification

As Benedict Anderson suggested, museums and the musealising

imagination (*museumising* was the word that Anderson originally used) are both profoundly political (Anderson, 1991). In the cases of Malaysia and her National Museum that were both founded under no precedents, the situation particular echoes Anderson's argumentation that museums in a new 'nation-state' imply a general process of political inheriting at work (Anderson, 1991). Foucauldian perspectives analyse the power/knowledge interrelation in discourse by incorporating a theory of visibility (Lidchi, 2003), i.e. the phenomenon of 'being seen' was linked to what power and knowledge guide one to see, and it relied on one's being 'given to be seen' (Rajchman, 1988). Furthermore, the connection between visibility and power is concentrated most undeniable when one deliberates human subjects and in particular the great spectacles of the colonial period (Lidchi, 2003). The institutionalisation and musealisation of the National Museum showcase the reification and execution of colonial education in a broader sense. Colonial (museum) education in this context is strongly cultural-political and Orientalist.⁷ In other words, it is even a form created against colonial modernity. The use of the Malay house as a formalistic and visual reference can be seen as evidence. If Malay culture and architecture are treated as signal elements to highlight ruling elites' ideological nation-building, they are considered to be forms of historical and cultural authenticity – by applying Anderson's edition, this is the purpose of colonial education that highlights archaeological restorations. This education is aimed at creating dominant knowledge through power and ideological manipulations. These kinds of restorations represent the formal ideological programme of the reconstructions

⁷ As Edward Said suggests, Orientalism is a discourse created through a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient (Said, 1978). Therefore, the notion about Orientalism has the implication of representing power and knowledge through ideological manipulations. In a broader sense, being Orientalist in the case of examining the National Museum, Malaysia, is to underscore the imposition of Malay-ness as a particular form of nation-building in the multiracial and multicultural contexts of Malaysia.

which place the builders of the monuments and the colonial natives in a certain hierarchy (Anderson, 1991). In the case of the National Museum, the Malays stand for the monuments, and the Malaysians stand for the colonial natives. The central hall of the Museum that links to the four galleries (Figure 9) has suggested this hierarchy which the sublime Malay tradition and Islamic representation lead the spatial ambience.



Figure 9 The central hall of the National Museum (Source: the author)

Noticeably, certain details that reflect the institutionalisation of the Museum have suggested implication in reification through musealisation. The text indicators in the Museum are evident—the signs that guide visitors to the four galleries are the most direct examples (Figure 10). At the grand staircase in the main hall, two signs which indicate the directions of the upstairs two galleries look symbolically like an implied statement of the nation-building constructed by the Museum. The indicators are written in merely two languages – *Bahasa Melayu* and English. The use of these two languages looks legitimate and neutral as *Bahasa Melayu* refers to the Malay language, which represents the major

ethnic group's language use in Malaysia, and English goes without saying is the most active and recognised second language. However, the argument here pays attention to the hidden implication of using *Bahasa Melayu* in a national museum that is contextualised by the notion about 'Malaysia'. The official language of Malaysia is Malaysian. Malaysian is supposed to be referred to the formation of *Bahasa Malaysia* which literally means the Malaysian language. Furthermore, the notion about Malaysia, as it is analysed above in the study, suggests a federal constitutional monarchy that comprises not only the Malays but also other ethnic groups who use languages other than Malay, such as the very common use of Chinese and Tamil. The use of *Bahasa Melayu* instead of *Bahasa Malaysia* as the indicative language in the National Museum hence interestingly becomes suggestive.



Figure 10 The gallery indicators (Source: the author)

In the end, the choice of using *Bahasa Melayu* and English has registered an ideological intention. The use of English of course addresses the most active and recognised second language and is purposed to the majority of the foreign

visitors who might be able to recognise most. The use of *Bahasa Melayu*, nevertheless, hints at an inclination towards to the Malay community, who occupies the majority of the Malaysian population as well as her governmental leadership. Arguably, all the non-Malay Malaysians in the National Museum are treated as the ‘Other’.⁸ The identification of the ‘Other’ is always not in the centre as the ‘Self’ (the Malays) is.

Texts inscribed along with the exhibitions are consistent with this intention. All the texts in the description form in the Museum are annotated in *Bahasa Melayu* and English only. In the Malaysia Today gallery, an exhibit that shows the present Malaysian territory, for example, demonstrates an ironic situation from its annotations which are characteristic of being in Malay and English only (Figure 11). Entitled ‘*Malaysia Tanah Airku*’ and subtitled ‘Malaysia My Motherland’, the mapped territory below these annotations actually contains Malaysian citizens who speak at least 137 living languages (Simons and Fennig, 2018). Countries that comprise conspicuous and active multi-linguistic native dwellers, such as in New Zealand and Singapore,⁹ usually enclose this fact as part of the nation-building and this enclosure usually is reflected and reified in public text annotations by underscoring at least two native languages, or, in English only. In the early days after independence, Malaysia used to endorse this logic and exercised four main languages, i.e. Malay, English, Chinese and Tamil, in official public text annotations such as in road signs. But in recent years, most of the official text annotations have been amended and the inclusion of

⁸ The concept of the ‘Other’ is usually used in conjunction with the ‘Self’ to highlight different subject positions in one same context. Here in the study, the ‘Other’ is positioned as a contradictory to the subject, the Malays.

⁹ In each case, there indeed involves more complicated power-knowledge manipulation to deal with the use of multi-language. For example, in Singapore, the street naming has been amended in numbers in order to address the racial difference and confrontation. However, to centralise one language and marginalise others in public and domestic presentation is usually an extreme case.

representative languages have been reduced to be in Malay and English only. Even in some areas, Malay is the only chosen language for the official public text annotations. This situation, particularly amongst geographic areas in which are multiracial and multi-linguistic, is usually triggered by power-knowledge manipulation. This manipulation mostly reflects intentions of either anti-colonialism or neo-colonialism in a broader sense. Apart from the case of Malaysia, Macao is another instance that the official public text annotations have been gradually amended in order to efface existing usage on purpose of anti-cultural-colonisation.¹⁰ The once Portuguese signs in public official text annotations that are gradually reduced in size as a portion, or even disappear, on the sign plates bear witness. Both cases in Malaysia and Macao evidence a postcolonial intention through top-down power and knowledge manipulation.

¹⁰ The notion about cultural colonisation refers, in a broader sense, to the influence of values and perceptions through cultural means in a colony by her coloniser. Cultural colonisation usually continues to impact the colony even if the political control of the coloniser has been dismissed when the colony gains independence. In certain cases, cultural colonisation happens internally amongst ethnic or cultural groups, and the distinction usually suggests the cultural-political dominance in a geographic context. Therefore, cultural colonisation is usually challenged in a postcolonial condition reflecting either the determination of anti-colonialism or the emergence of neo-colonialism. In the case of Malaysia, the anti-cultural-colonisation refers to the latter situation that the Malays attempt to consolidate themselves in the postcolonial hierarchy in term of the cultural politics of the newly established Malaysia.



Figure 11 The territorial map of Malaysia exhibit (Source: the author)

In the National Museum, texts inscribed for signs that functionally indicate the movement circulation and the lavatory directions are even more detailed in representing this intention (Figure 12). For the English and the foreign visitors' annotations, the Museum adopts a template which is commonly used worldly by showing the term 'exit' and the toilet icons of a male and a female. However, interestingly, there is a customised and noticeable text annotation which is placed above the English annotation, and this piece of annotation comprises only in *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay)—the representative written forms are the Latin script (*Rumi*) and an Arabic script (*Jawi*). *Jawi* is not even the official system used in Malaysia, but it appears instead of Chinese and Tamil, as *Jawi* since the announcement of *Rumi*, which is the romanisation of oral Malay, has been used to stress religious, cultural and some administrative purposes that are related to the Malays.



Figure 12 The access and lavatory indicators (Source: the author)

In a visual aspect, the emplacement of Malaysia's multiple races and multiculturalism is interestingly also conspicuous in specific areas of the Museum, as recognisable items amongst exhibitions are extremely identifiable from the number of exhibits when compared to Malay related items. The area that comprises three introductory boards which showcase three main ethnic groups in Malaysia is one instance (Figure 13). Located in the Malaysia Today gallery which is placed at the end of the visiting route, two panels that introduce Malaysia's Chinese and Indian communities are accompanied by the first panel which introduces the Malay community. Expectedly, apart from English, Malay is the only language represented on the panels even for the Chinese and Indian panels.



Figure 13 The exhibition panels that introduce three main ethnic groups in Malaysia.
(Source: the author)

The exit imagery of the Malaysia Today gallery in which is created and concluded by the displayed cardboard cut-outs of ethnic groups in Malaysia along with an image projection is another case (Figure 14). Following the three introductory panels that talk about three main ethnic groups, these cardboard cut-outs symbolically represent both the present situation in Malaysia and the end of the visiting journey in the Museum amongst four permanent exhibitions. While the cardboard cut-outs imply all the people in today's Malaysia, a screen in the background of these cardboard cut-outs is being projected a Malay look female child and Malaysia's national flag. Besides, the majority of the people identified in the cardboard cut-outs still suggests the Malays, including the Peninsular *Orang Asli* and the indigenous people in Sabah and Sarawak. The Chinese and Indian males and females who wear *Han* clothing and a Sari are visually iconic amongst not only these cardboard cut-outs but also all the exhibits in the National Museum.



Figure 14 The cardboard cut-outs of all ethnic groups in Malaysia. (Source: the author)

Arguably, all these details are carefully ‘musealised’; in other words, they are being intended to register a particular ideology, and this registration represents the reification of independent Malaysia’s neo-colonisation, or internal colonisation. This kind of colonisation, of course, is dissimilar to its previous form, which is British rule over the Malays. The internalisation of the relationship of dominance is characterised by ‘less and less openly brutal talk about right of conquest, and more and more effect to create alternative legitimacies’ (Anderson, 1991), which is the creation of a brand new ‘nation state’ – Malaysia. Expectedly, all these carefully placed details by no means are purely functional but more ideological. They, in other words, most of the time showcase a particular sign rather than neutral instrumentality. As Benedict Anderson has reminded: ‘Musealised (*museumised* was the original term he used) this way, they (the Malays, their culture, language and intended nation-building in the case of this study) were repositioned (in the Museum and its seemingly normal and unquestionable environment) as regalia for a secular colonial state’ (Anderson, 1991).

Malaysia's postcoloniality and her chosen displayness

What Benedict Anderson argues is a form of profane state apparatus. According to Anderson, a very powerful characteristic of this profane state apparatus is its infinite reproducibility (Anderson, 1991). That is to say, the musealisation of the National Museum is reified from an internal ideology; this ideology can be regarded as the postcoloniality that was born along with the independence and the founding of Malaysia. This postcoloniality is carefully designed as a prototype that can be translated in many ways. This argumentation is supported when the National Museum is examined along with the Islamic Arts Museum as within one same muséal category. In this category, exhibits in a museum are dissimilar to those exhibits that can be found in traditional museums, such as ones in the British Museum. The exchange or sign-exchange value (i.e. ideological commodification or branded social status) of the exhibits in the National Museum and the Islamic Arts Museum has been particularly highlighted. In other words, the National Museum, including its architecture, its exhibitions and exhibits, implies a profaning process and logoisation¹¹ through printcapitalism that advertises a discourse which is generated from the use of purposed proliferation of a capitalist marketplace (Anderson, 1991). Of course, the term capitalist here refers particularly to the meaning of being dominant, powerful, top-down nationalist or colonial in a broader sense of power and knowledge manipulation that runs state apparatus to proliferate the particular nation-building.

This postcoloniality hence represents the historicity¹² of a particular ethnic

¹¹ Logoisation is referred to the logo making process.

¹² Historicity usually refers to a phenomenological attempt of understanding historical authenticity. Historicity therefore is regarded as the representation of the nature of historical reality, which should be differentiated from the nature of historical discourse making.

marker which inherited the former coloniser's role and has been selected by the dominating elites as the registration of newly independent Malaysia's nation-building, especially in terms of its visual and ideological construction (Figure 15). This form of postcoloniality is argued in the study as the chosen displayness that is represented and reified in the Museum; the national image making of the Museum and the actual visit to the museum enrich the sense of this postcoloniality.

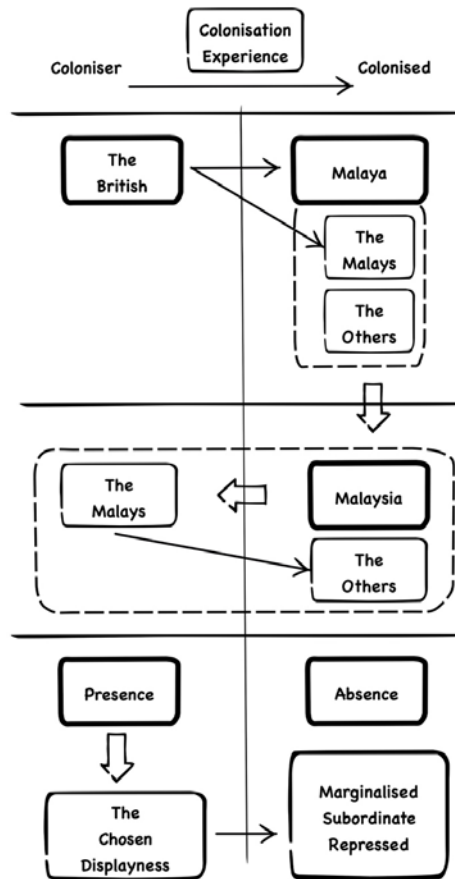


Figure 15 The transition of colonisation experience in Malaysia (Source: the author)

This chosen displayness registers a transition of colonisation experience that reflects the postcolonial condition of Malaysia. Malaysia, as an independent country, is characteristic of an internal colonisation, and the institutionalisation of the National Museum not only regulates this transition but also reifies it in a visual and spatial way. This transition of colonisation experience can be seen in a broader relationship between a coloniser and the colonised. The once colonisation experience was straightforward—the British who colonised Malaya controlled over the colony, and the colony has a long-standing and consolidated cultural-political hierarchy that the Malays sit at the highest position when compared to the other ethnic groups. The Malays are considered the major and the most native people amongst all local ethnic communities, no matter whether in the British colonial time or after independence. The reason lies in a fact that the Malays comprise the biggest indigenous ethnic group in the British colonial period, and it continues to be the biggest and becomes even bigger by merging other indigenous ethnic groups in the territory of Malaysia through definition formality. After independence, the situation turns internally, and the social and cultural-political relationship of dominance becomes complicated. The once coloniser, the British, has left. It seems that the colonisation experience was ended, yet it, as a matter of fact, is internalised. The Malays become the successor and shift the once position from the colonised to the coloniser, based on the de facto scenario of being both the country's major and most powerful community. The Malays hence continue to maintain the relationship of dominance against the other ethnic groups in the country.

This shift of position in the relationship of dominance is one of a kind, as in this transition of colonisation experience there have no precedents to be referenced, and hence a new 'nation state' called Malaysia represents a new creation based on a new coloniser's cultural-political ideology. The name Malaysia in relation to the Malays who occupy the ruling elite groups is just as

British Malaya in relation to its creator and operator—the British. Both Malaysia and Malaya are containers that accommodate the colonised population, and these containers naturally are shaped after the correlated colonisers' ideological ruling intention. In the National Museum, this ideological ruling intention was testified and regulated, its exhibitions and architecture have musealised this intention, through the untouchable institutionalisation, and finally this intention has its reification. Furthermore, as a representation of print capitalism, according to Anderson, the promotion of the Museum in the mass media in Malaysia implies the nation-building ideology constructed and well perceived both from the promotion of the national image-making and the Museum's actual visit sources. In an online article published by the local Malaysian paper *The Star* recorded an interview with the governmental supervisor of the Museum and the Museum's staff about its exhibition, management and visit, some interesting phenomena are worth digesting. In the interview, the director-general of the Department of Museums in Malaysia Datuk Ibrahim's worry about the National Museum is underlined at the very beginning of the article—'People visit once, and they don't come back. We want to change that' (Lim, 2010), and as an immediate reaction towards this worry, the article quotes and highlights the increase of the number of local and foreign visitors from 556,694 in 2000 to 961,149, almost the double in 2009. This is such a strong confirmation that the museum's intention of promoting Malaysia has met a great success; however, at the end of the article which mention the actual visit of the Museum in reality shows the perception of this ideological reification by the local Malaysians. 'Strangely enough, neither Zahara (a volunteer guide in the Museum) nor I have ever brought a Malaysian around before', said by another volunteer guide in the Museum Chrissy Lioe, 'they're just not interested. It's quite sad because they think they know a lot about their own history. But, really, it's all about having an interest in the way you live, being proud of your own heritage' (Lim, 2010). In other words, the

Malaysia people and this chosen displayness which has been reified in the National Museum of Malaysia have an obvious gap of recognition.

The reification therefore stands for the presence of ruling power and knowledge and for it mainly, whereas those being ruled suggest a status of absence. The presence of ruling power and knowledge is particular by means of its subjectivation; the representation of it which is musealised in the National Museum hence stands for a particular form of the chosen displayness. This displayness is to be conspicuous enough in order to showcase the nation-building under a particular ideology. It, on the other hand, is also to be prominent enough to cover and decentralise the attention paid onto those ideologies which have been marginalised, subordinated and repressed by this power-knowledge ideology. This displayness has no right or wrong in essence; however, it does suggest a transition of the dominant relationship when Malaysia was emerged in a way without precedent. The chosen displayness hence is a form of historicity that conditions Malaysia's postcoloniality.

Conclusion

An idea for musealisation normally suggests the conversion of either an event or a place into a kind of museum. However, from an architectural perspective, built objects which play as sorts of exhibits in order to showcase particular representation of nation-building or identity construction further elaborate this definition. In this sense, musealisation through the examination of architecture alludes to a process of enlarging a form of the chosen displayness that visually, formalistically, ideologically or institutionally represents a relationship of dominance. Musealisation in architecture therefore does not necessarily exclude objects that are originally or have already become museums before the conversion process.

The argumentation here is that a form of the chosen displayness musealises the represented built object based on a particular discourse making purpose, and this discourse made is heteroglossic to the historicity of the building's social, historical and cultural-political contexts. That is to say, this chosen displayness can either be faithful to the building's background, historic and stylistic meaning, or it can be irrelevant even contradictory to all these concerns. What the essential matter of this chosen displayness is to produce a visible culture, which allows the epistemological production to be subjected to the scrutiny of power.

The notion about the chosen displayness argued in this study from the analysis of the National Museum, Malaysia, does not intend to promote a binary judgement that whether the musealisation of a national museum in this way is correct or incorrect, nor to criticise neo-colonialism that restores former external colonialism internally to consolidate political dominance, but to underscore a phenomenon that musealisation is a powerful and strategic tool of ideological discourse making. As a conclusion of this study, this phenomenon can be summarised in some aspects. First, as a thought that theorises postcolonial criticism, musealisation indicates a fact that colonialism is never a thing of the past when the postcolonial condition is examined. Postcoloniality helps people see connections amongst all the domains of human experience; it does not suggest that the relationship of dominance is dismissed after a departure of one colonial rule. The musealisation of the National Museum has suggested that even the British left, the nation-building of the newly independent Malaysia is still referenced clearly from the power-knowledge structure in the postcolonial stage. Second, architecturally, musealisation represents a process of conversion that turns invisible and internal ideology in discourses into visual and formalistic identification. The musealisation of the National Museum shows an important example that how nation-building can be strategically created when there are no precedents that can be referenced. Finally, in terms of display, musealisation as a

notion it provides a medium that a particular intention, ideology or force can be contained and showcased through not only software but hardware. The founding and existing of the National Museum witness the power-knowledge discourse making that the Malays have imposed into Malaysian society. Most importantly, this form of cultural-political monophony would never be unveiled from the general understanding of Malaysia advertised in a context of multi-culturalism, if it was not emerged from the scrutinisation of musealisation.

The musealisation that is observed through the examination of the National Museum, Malaysia, registers the chosen displayness that is particularly political; however, this political intention is reified to become normal and everyday which showcases a strategy of using state apparatus. This apparatus reinforces the infinite quotidian reproducibility which many post-independence countries that display noticeable power-knowledge continuities with their colonial predecessors. Most importantly, this apparatus is efficiently identified through the cultural-political musealisation. The National Museum is an example, and the Islamic Arts Museum can be regarded as its kind. In a broader sense, the site of Angkor Wat that was restored by the French Empire and became a cultural-political symbol of internal colonisation later after independence is also phenomenal. As a conclusion, the notion about musealisation in this study indeed shows an explanation of colonial culture that is formed through a process of ideological, identical and manipulating knowledge making. This chosen displayness through musealisation essentially approximates homology of different relationships of dominance which former Western colonialism invariably used. The only difference is that the once brutal execution is repositioned internally for a secular ambience created in postcolonial society as a strategy of nation-building, which not merely aspire to build up, in a controlling way, a landscape of complete visibility but to place this landscape in everything that everyone can barely notice before the goal is met.

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