“Mixed” Responses to Ethnic Interpellation in Malaysia: An ethnographic study of identity negotiation in a racialized context

Abstract

While ethnicities such as “Malay”, “Indian” and “Chinese” are commonly taken for granted in official discourse as constitutive of the Malaysian social milieu, a growing number of Malaysians today also identify as being “mixed” or “mixed-race”. In the context of Malaysia, concepts such as ethnic identity and “race” hold salient positions in political and social discourse. In particular, the politicisation and institutionalisation of “race” has meant that ethnic and cultural differences are very often at the foreground of Malaysian minds. This paper, however, examines the way in which “mixed” Malaysians negotiate their ethnic identity and if this differs from Malaysians who regard themselves as “pure” Malay, Indian or Chinese, and are therefore less ambiguous. One of the questions it asks is if “mixed” Malaysians attempt to disambiguate their ethnic identity or if they revel in their “mixed”-ness.

The focus on “mixed race” Malaysians is owing to the fact that they have not emerged as an ethnic group or ethnic category unto themselves unlike others in Malaysia such as the Baba Nonya’s or Eurasians. Rather, “mixed” Malaysians traverse purportedly rigid boundaries, and are thus, as Jackson (2010) noted, strategically positioned to counter pose and expose “race” and ethnic identity as reifications. In addition, this paper seeks to contribute to our understanding of identity negotiation amongst individuals of “mixed” and therefore ambiguous identity, as well as to contribute to theoretical questions relating to identity formation. Specifically, it will make use of Althusser and Hall’s concept of interpellation, an expansion of the concept Hage calls mis-interpellation, and Butler’s notion of citationality. Ethnic identities are accordingly treated as state-mediated and inculcated categories that individuals regularly contend with. The nuanced ways in which these categories are dealt with amongst “mixed” Malaysians are the focus of this paper.

Ethnographic methods were employed including a call for participants which was circulated via a dedicated Facebook page that encouraged Malaysians between the ages of 21 to 29 who identified as “mixed” or “mixed-race” to approach the researcher. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant where they were asked a number of questions relating to their ethnic identities. The information collected from these interviews and subsequent qualitative analysis of interview transcripts revealed various ways in which such individuals understand and deploy their ethnic identity. Three of the most common include (1) embodying multiple ethnic identities and shifting regularly between them, (2) attempting to mark one’s self as clearly one “race” over others, and (3) transcending “race” altogether. These strategies of identity negotiation that “mixed” Malaysians employ – whether consciously or unconsciously – suggest a level of subjectivity and agency involved in embodying ethnic identity that challenges commonly held beliefs that ethnicity and ethnic boundaries are natural, stable or immutable.

466 words

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