

Singapore Bicentennial

# Whither the Singapore identity?

The concept of identity has evolved over the centuries as the country's fortunes waxed and waned within larger entities. Today, as it marks its 54th year of independence, the search for identity is taking on a more bottom-up dimension.

**Albert Lau**

For *The Straits Times*

Singapore's commemoration of the bicentennial of Sir Stamford Raffles' arrival offers a timely occasion for stocktaking – not just to refresh our understanding of our nation's 200-year history but also to explore how our past formed us.

Over the past two decades, research into Singapore's history using fresh sources has revised the earlier notion that the historical trajectory of "modern" Singapore began in 1819, upon the arrival of Raffles.

While 1819 is indeed a significant and momentous milestone in the island's history, the story of Singapore actually began some 500 years earlier, according to these new findings. In this revised narrative, a fuller appreciation of Singapore's past must take into account the longue duree and view the island's history from a broader canvas covering some 700 years.

A perspective that extends deep into the past offers sufficient latitude for yet another mode of historical investigation, one that is of topical interest to Singapore as it co-celebrates its 54th year of independent statehood this year – an exploration of our national identity and the part our 700-year history plays in its making.

An examination of national identity must begin with an investigation of the question of identity. At the individual level, "identity" can be understood as an attribute of a person's "cognitive map" that relates one's notion of "self" to the social world.

To take the dictionary formulation, it is simply, "who a person is, or the qualities and attitudes of a person or group that make them different from others". Sometimes, identity relies on differentiating the "self" from various "others", in the sense that to know something is also to know what it is not. We know what we are through what we are not.

The human need for identity is obvious as basic human functioning depends on having a relatively clear notion of self. A sense of identity not only affects the way we feel about ourselves but also how we would behave in challenging settings. It is not surprising that political communities, too, aspire to fashion a similar "cognitive map" to embody their group identity for political, psychological and social reasons, and to differentiate themselves from "other" polities.

In Singapore's case, we now know with greater precision that in the 500 years before the arrival of Raffles, the island's history was not really "of antiquarian interest

only", as one notable scholar, without the benefit of the new data, mistakenly concluded in 1969.

Revealed in the historical records as Temasek and Singapura, Singapore in fact stood out as a thriving and moderately prosperous port-polity engaged in regional and international trade and was, for a time, even a strategically located naval base serving the Melaka and successor Johor sultanates.

It was not exactly the sleepy fishing village where nothing much appeared to have happened. However, the records also show that, for most of this pre-modern period, Singapore was not an autonomous polity but an appendage of the prevailing regional powers of the day, its fortunes rising and falling with the changing fates of its successive overlords.

With the decline of the Johor sultanate at the end of the 17th century, Singapore entered its dark ages for most of the 18th century, as trade shifted to other regional centres. Our historical survey suggests that, while an economic identity based on open trade and commerce was emerging for Singapore in this pre-modern period, the fashioning of a sustained, overarching political identity was still a non-starter due to the strong impediment of the polity being reduced to an almost perpetual state of vassalage.

**SINGAPORE IDENTITY AFTER 1819**

The 144 years after the "founding" by Raffles in 1819 were transformative for Singapore. Under the security umbrella of British rule and the reach of the British empire, Singapore not only regained its economic place but surpassed its trading achievements, plugging itself into global trade for the first time.

As a British colony, its administrative ambit also expanded after it was included as one of three Straits Settlements. Outperforming both Penang and Melaka, Singapore soon became their capital.

Following the political construction of "British Malaya" from the last quarter of the 19th century, Singapore served as its premier port, while entrepot trade complemented the economy of its agricultural hinterland, binding in the process both territories through ties of geography, economics, history and a common colonial experience.

Before long, the colony's exceptionalism and geostrategic location enabled it to occupy a unique status within Malaya, a position that ironically also sets it apart from the "other" constituent units of the Malayan mainland.

Singapore had by now become not only the administrative capital of the entire Malayan polity but also, by the early decades of the 20th century, the key British naval



base in the region.

Its economic vitality, social progressivism and urban cosmopolitanism, on the other hand, made it an attractive destination for overseas immigrants, especially from China, transforming the island socially from a Malay-dominant to a Chinese-majority polity.

But despite its growing self-awareness, Singapore could experience but only a scintilla of identity during this period. Subjected to British rule, and blended with Malaya, the colony

could not have its own autonomous political identity. Its heterogeneous peoples still looked to their countries of origin for political and cultural inspiration.

**A TERRITORIAL-BASED IDENTITY**

A perceptible change occurred only after the tumult of the Second World War discredited British colonialism and catalysed simmering anti-colonial stirrings into overt nationalist revivalism, helped in no small part by the colony's political detachment from Malaya in 1946 as part of British

plans to overhaul their broken political system and advance their post-war imperial ambitions.

Singapore was separated primarily because the inclusion of its majority Chinese population would have made the Chinese the dominant community in Malaya and increased Malay resistance to Britain's controversial scheme to annex the Malay states and merge them, with Penang and Melaka, in a Malayan Union.

Singapore's detachment, however, made it now possible for a territorially based,

Singapore-directed nationalism to arise. Practically all the island's nationalist forces, however, chose to rely on a Malayan, rather than the unknown prospects of a still nascent Singaporean, nationalism in their fight for freedom.

Their efforts saw Singapore achieving self-government in 1959 and attaining independence through merger with the new state of Malaysia in 1963, only to leave the Malaysian Federation over fundamental differences on Aug 9, 1965 to become an independent and sovereign nation-state.

**TOWARDS A SINGAPOREAN IDENTITY**

If a nascent Singaporean nationalism was emerging in post-war Singapore, and contributed in no small measure to the difficulties of its Malaysian enterprise, it was arguably only from its separation from Malaysia that the onset of cultivating a distinctly Singapore-oriented "national" identity could be said to have come into its own.

In the 54 years since, a national identity has been pragmatically shaped and carefully calibrated to ensure the long-term survival, social harmony, security and prosperity of Singapore. Many recognisable "Singaporean" traits have also emerged.

The political longevity of the ruling People's Action Party Government has so far enabled it to lead the search for a Singapore identity.

But ordinary Singaporeans, too, have been increasingly active in this search for identity, especially when they feel that their interests or lifestyles have been affected. The meaning of Singaporean-ness, and the fear that it was being diluted, was at the heart of the disquiet over the rapid influx of new immigrants and their impact on public infrastructure, competition for jobs and social integration.

In this grassroots search for authenticity, potentially "subversive" Singaporean peculiarities such as kiasuism and Singlish have also been feted instead as badges of identity, distinguishing Singaporeans even from their closest neighbours, the Malaysians.

A bottom-up search could not be discounted as Singapore's political community matures and Singaporeans re-imagine the "national" boundaries of their global city-state amid the challenges of a rapidly changing world.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• Albert Lau is Associate Professor, Department of History at the National University of Singapore Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences.