Identity Politics of Being and Becoming of the *Chetti Melaka* in Singapore

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to explore identity politics in the representations of the *Chetti Melaka* identity at a one-day symposium entitled *The Lost Tribe of Chetti Melaka – Who Are We?* in Singapore. The paper focusses on three speakers whom we found most engaged in identity politics in their presentation at the symposium. Engaging with Stuart Hall's ideas of "being" and "becoming" and Farish Noor's ideas of "fluid *Peranakan*-ness," we employ discourse analysis to explore the sense of displacement seen at the symposium and *Chetti* identity in Singapore. Our discussion and findings reveal the interesting minoritisation dynamics of the *Chetti Melaka* in terms of ethnic and national identity, particularly in the context of modern, postcolonial, globalised and cosmopolitan Singapore.

Keywords: Chetti Melaka, *Peranakan*, identity politics, discourse, being and becoming

INTRODUCTION

The *Chetti*[1] *Melaka* community, also known as *Peranakan* Indians (the latter phrase meaning locally born or creolised community), are descendants of South Indian merchants and local women of Malay and Chinese ethnic origins. Dating

[1] Sometimes "Chitty" is also used. The founding secretary, David Bok, of The Association of Chetti Melaka (Peranakan Indians) Singapore, explained to us that Chitty is a family name; thus, Chetti has been officially adopted as it more objectively and accurately refers to the community. The sign that stands on the ancestral land of the Chettis in Melaka reads "Kampung Chetti". We will, therefore, in this paper be using Chetti since that is how the community wishes to refer to itself and have officially adopted this term. Chetti is not to be confused with Chettiar, which is another Indian group found in Malaysia and Singapore.

back to the Malacca Sultanate between 1402 and 1511, the community settled in the *Chetti* Village, also known as *Kampung Chetti*, Melaka (Dhoraisingham, 2006). From their initial birthplace in Melaka, members of the community travelled and settled in other parts of Malaysia as well as overseas, including Singapore.

The *Chetti* are a minority group that is under-researched. According to Che Ann Ab. Ghani and Shahrim Ab. Karim (2011, p. 72), "Most Malaysians are unaware of their existence"; we believe this is also the case in Singapore. Samuel S. Dhoraisingam's book, *Peranakan Indians of Singapore and Melaka: Indian Babas and Nonyas – Chitty Melaka*, published in 2006, is so far the only book on the community. According to him, *Peranakan* Indians are "a product of Indian, Malay and Chinese admixture and have traces of Malay, Javanese, Batak and Chinese influences in their distinctive culture" (Dhoraisingam, 2006, p. xi). Referring to this unique heritage mix, Singapore's former president, S. R. Nathan also sounded a note of concern when he described the *Chetti* as a "fascinating and unique minority community whose numbers have diminished with each passing year" (Dhoraisingam, 2006, p. ix). Dhoraisingam (2006) notes that there are only about 50 *Chetti* families numbering about 400 persons in Melaka, and approximately 30 homes in the *Gajah Berang* area. But Ghani and Karim (2011) estimate 50,000 *Chettis* in Malaysia, 2,000 families in Melaka and only 60 remaining in Gajah Berang in 2011. The statistics provided by these two sources are not consistent and it is difficult to ascertain the true numbers of the *Chetti* population as the official census in Malaysia and Singapore categorise them as Indians. Nevertheless, these statistics underline the community's minority status.

More concerns have surfaced in recent years regarding the status of the community. In Melaka, a place vital to *Chettis* in Malaysia and Singapore for its ancestral links, they are an endangered culture. Encroachments on the ancestral village, *Kampung Chetti*, as a result of ongoing development projects, have affected their way of life. When Melaka was accorded UNESCO world heritage status in 2008, *Kampung Chetti*, despite its 600 years of *Chetti Peranakan* existence in Melaka (Dasgupta & Raja, 2012), was excluded from the heritage zone, further exemplifying the lack of official acknowledgement. Such concerns regarding identity recognition and marginalisation appear to have galvanised members of the community into efforts to preserve and sustain the identity of the community. A symposium, jointly organised and attended by the *Chetti* community of Malaysia and Singapore, was one such initiative launched by members of the community to raise awareness and preserve their cultural way of life.

The First Peranakan Indian Symposium: *The Lost Tribe of Chetti Melaka – Who Are We?*

On 4 Orctober, 2014, the first *Peranakan* Indian symposium was held at the Ngee Ann Auditorium of the Asian Civilisations Museum in Singapore. The title of

the symposium, The *Lost Tribe of the Chetti Melaka – Who are We?*, quite poignantly captured and exemplified their marginalisation. The one-day event comprised these presentations: 'Challenge of Diaspora Communities: The Chinese Peranakan' by Lee Su Kim; 'Challenge of the Diaspora Communities: The Jawi Peranakan' by Farish Noor; 'Challenge of the Diaspora Communities: Overseas Indians' by V. P. Nair; 'History of the Chetti – Continuity versus Change' by Ryna Mahindapala; 'The Chetti Melaka – Who are We?' by Gerald F. Pillay; 'Panel Facilitator: Challenge of Diaspora Communities and Chetti Melaka' chaired by K. Narayanasamy; 'Chetti Melaka Wedding' by Jennifer Rathabai Kunciram; and 'Community Heritage Conservation' by Pierpaolo De Giosa.

This event brought together members of the *Chetti* community from Melaka, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore, among other places. A deep sense of displacement emerged in addition to the varied presentations and ideas of being *Peranakan*. Assistant Curator of The Peranakan Museum (Singapore), Maria Khoo Joseph, in a conversation, noted that 30 years ago, the *Peranakan* Chinese had experienced a similar displacement.

These observations stimulated our curiosity and led us to further investigate the identity politics displayed at the symposium. We hope our analysis will further open the discussion on identity and minoritisation, particularly *Peranakan* identity, that is unique to this region.

Chetti Melaka and the Problem of Identity in Singapore

In *Reframing Singapore*, historian Wang Gungwu (2009, p. 9) described the island-city of Singapore as "a migrant multicultural state"; therefore, it does not have a racially homogeneous but rather, a heterogeneous population. In the same volume, Derek Heng and Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied (2009) note the limited nature of officially acknowledged ethnic groups that do not take into account the many different ethnic groups to be encountered in the nation-state. Thus, discussing identity in Singapore against such a cultural and racial backdrop is complex.

According to Heng and Aljunied (2009, pp. 11–12), there is no better word than "paradox" to describe Singapore and its migrant population, which "contribute to the hybrid cultural mosaic of modern Singapore," which has "the policy of attracting 'foreign talent' to stimulate a trans-regional trading framework" that continues today. Therefore, hybrid cultures and identities are very much part of Singapore.

Another relevant reality pertains to the issue of the "sinicisation" of Singapore since the 1980s (Yang, 2014, p. 411). Until 1965, Singapore was part of Malaysia; since Singapore's separation from Malaysia, Singapore has maintained a dominant Chinese population of about 70%. This dominance has been maintained through the continually large influx of Chinese immigrants (Yang, 2014). The apparent reluctance of the government

to release such sensitive information makes it impossible to know exactly what proportion of foreign talent comes from the People's Republic of China (Yang, 2014).

Heng and Aljunied (2009, p. 14) also wrote that "Singapore's attainment of a globally renowned cosmopolitan outlook has been primarily attributed to the postcolonial project of capitalist modernity." In this light, Yang (2014) also observed that Singapore's remarkable economic success relied on international trade and global flows of capital, knowledge and people, which acted as a double-edged sword that also challenged the state's efforts in symbolic and cultural nation-building. He showed how Chinese foreign sports professionals and foreign students were a threat to Singapore's national identity, as many, particularly the students, may treat Singapore as a "stepping stone" to somewhere they consider better (Yang, 2014, p. 425).

Yang (2014) further explained Singapore's paradoxical position as a catch-22. Because of the country's constitutive cultural hybridity, the Singapore state emphasises a national identity that is more pragmatic than cultural; however, when authentic cultural traditions are invoked, they seldom promise to create the common identity that all Singaporeans can comfortably assume. Rather, they pose the danger of further entrenching ethnic and cultural divisions among the multiracial population. Put simply, the problem is the lack of a uniquely "Singaporean" cultural authenticity. According to Heng and Aljunied (2009, p. 14), "It has often been said that Singapore is a place without an identity, and that Singaporeans do not possess any real sense of belonging to their homeland."

The *Chetti* community in Singapore is an offspring from the *Chetti Melaka*. Many moved to Singapore when the British developed Singapore. In Malaysia,[2] it is difficult to establish the numbers of the *Chetti* population as they are classified as Indians. However, we think it is more difficult in postcolonial Singapore to establish its number and negotiate its identity as there is no *Kampung Chetti* or ancestral land where the *Chetti* community is concentrated; rather, they are scattered and more fragmented in Singapore.

Such a context clarifies the remark made by the Assistant Curator of The Peranakan Museum about the *Chetti* community experiencing a similar displacement as the *Peranakan* Chinese 30 years ago. While the Association of Chetti Melaka Singapore was formed in 2008, the *Chetti* community is still not very visible. The association estimates the *Chetti*

[2] Both Malaysia and Singapore inherited the British colonial system, whereby the official national census was categorised according to the main races found in the Straits Settlements − Malay, Chinese, Indian and Other. It does not accommodate variations outside of these categories such as *Peranakan*; therefore, the *Peranakan* are classified under one of the three races (*Baba-Nyonya* under Chinese; *Chetti* under Indian; and *Jawi Peranakan* under Malay). This does not capture the reality of Malaysia and Singapore when miscegenation is a reality in both these countries.

population to be approximately 1000 in Singapore.[3] It is currently leveraging on the revival of *Peranakan* Chinese culture that is particularly strong in Singapore; they have attended, used *Peranakan* events and also published in *The Peranakan* magazine in the last few years to gain publicity.

Identity Politics of Being and Becoming

Stuart Hall's article, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" explored and provided some interesting insights into the phenomenon of identity and diaspora. According to him, practices of representation or positions of enunciation are crucial to the idea of cultural identity. Hall (1990, p. 222) expounded that "who speaks, and the subject who is spoken of, are never identical, never exactly in the same place. Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think…" This is apparent in our discussion of the speakers at the symposium later. Hall argued that we should see identity as a "production" that is never complete, always in process and constituted from within representation.

Farish Noor was one of the invited speakers focussing on the *Jawi Peranakan*. He controversially opened his address with, "I don't really have much to say because there's nothing to talk about…" He qualified and explained this by the fact that there is "no ostensible definition" of *Peranakan* and that it is a hybrid culture. According to Noor, *Peranakan* cultures are about "fluid borders and overlapping communities" and the "coming into being of a *Peranakan*

in itself was an aberration." *Peranakan* culture is a product of colonialism. He cautioned, instead, against any attempts to characterise and essentialise the *Peranakan* identity, an exercise that he referred to as "museumisation" of the culture. At the same time, he raised a pertinent question regarding current socio-political realities that have led to this need. Noor's address and position at the symposium essentially articulated the complexities and paradoxes of Hall's ideas of Being and Becoming in the *Peranakan* context.

Snyder's (2012) views suggest some concurrence with Noor's ideas when he pointed to the central role of political ideology in identity politics. He asserted that issues of identity politics signalled a context where dominant hegemonic forces marginalised and repressed less powerful communities. In such a context, minorities struggled to challenge dominance and repression.

According to Hall, there are two positions of "cultural identity," with one in terms of a shared culture, history and ancestry. This cultural identity reflects common historical experiences and shared cultural codes, which provide "stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history" and it is this core identity or Being that the "…diaspora must discover, excavate, bring to light and express…" (Hall, 1990, p. 223). Hall's (1990) second view of cultural identity was based on "*difference*" (nuancing Jacques Derrida);

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[3] In consultation with researchers, the founding secretary, David Bok, made this estimation.

hence, "what we really are" and "what we have become," which encompasses the inevitability of ruptures and discontinuities. Therefore, cultural identity in this second sense is a matter of Becoming that belongs to the future as much as it belongs to the past and is subject to the play of history, culture and power, far from being grounded in the mere recovery of the past. Identity encompasses imagination and histories, and Hall (1990, pp. 231–232) invokes Edward Said's ideas of "imaginative geography and history," calling up Benedict Anderson's idea of "an imagined community" that involves the real, material and symbolic effects, constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth.

Cultural identities, according to Hall, are unstable points of identification and sutured within the discourses of history and culture, not an essence but a positioning, which we think is evident in our discussion of the problem of identity in Singapore above. It involves similarity and continuity, difference and rupture, a dialogic relationship between these two axes, which Hall (1990, pp. 225–228) called the "cultural play" of "doubleness." He profoundly stated that "meaning is never finished or completed, but keeps on moving to encompass other, additional or supplementary meanings…" that it continues to unfold (Hall, 1990, pp. 229–230). Within these complex dynamics, Hall (1990, pp. 233–235) spoke of the "ambivalence of desire" and the profound splitting and doubling that occurs in relation to the Other, referring to Homi Bhaba's "ambivalent identifications of the racist world…the 'otherness' of the self inscribed in the perverse palimpsest of colonial identity"; this dialogue of power and resistance, refusal and recognition, which he profoundly said was "always-already fused," "syncretized" and "creolized," the act of "remembering" by first "forgetting," is seen in our later analysis. Hall's (1990, p. 235) comment on the diaspora experience is interesting; he defined it not by essence or purity but by a necessary heterogeneity and diversity, by a conception of identity that is founded on difference and hybridity, explaining, "Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference." We think this is very apparent in the above discussion of Singapore.

In this paper, we will engage with Hall (1990) and Noor's conception of identity and diaspora with regards to *Peranakan* culture. We assess and analyse *Chetti* identity at the symposium through the means of language, centring on *Chetti* as an empty signifier of identity (Laclau & Mouffe, 2005). Our interest is in the manner in which this identity is interpreted and understood through the means of the language of particular speakers.

METHODOLOGY

Our purpose in this paper is to qualitatively examine the ethnic minority identity of the *Chetti* community as represented by particular speakers at the symposium. We focus on two Singaporean presenters

and an academic: the President of The Association of Chetti Melaka Singapore, Ponnosamy Kalastree, who delivered the opening speech; Gerald F. Pillay, an elder of the community, who presented "The Chetti Melaka – Who are We?"; and Farish Noor, a Malaysian political scientist and historian who is currently the head of the doctorate programme at the Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. The other speakers at the symposium presented topics such as the *Chetti Melaka* wedding, history, issues of development and ideas of "*Peranakan*"; but for the purposes of this examination, the three speakers mentioned were chosen as their talks dealt directly with issues of identity politics. Therefore, their presentations allowed us to explore issues of identity and displacement apparent to the hybrid community of the *Chetti*.

In terms of theoretical framework, we engage with Stuart Hall's perspectives of identity and Farish Noor's ideas of "*Peranakan*-ness" (presented at the symposium) using the discourse approach. Hall (1990), in particular, noted that the creation and recreation of identities are ongoing processes in particular socio-political contexts. One of the ways in which identity may be constructed is through the social practice of discourse by means of which group identity, belonging and membership may be established. It is also noted that this identity construction also entails the creation of an 'Us' versus 'Them' distinctiveness (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001). Such differences may be expressed in specific references to social actors as well as in the collectivised references such as the use of the first person plural, 'we'.

Hall's (1990) theories of identity are operationalised through a micro-level examination of the discourse of three presenters at the symposium. The micro-level examination focusses on the reference to representations of social actors as well as the use of modality in representing the *Chetti* identity.

In examining social actors, inclusive references such as "we" as well as van Leeuwen's (2008) sociosemantic categories were employed to note the means by which the dichotomy of 'Us' versus 'Them' was constructed. In referring to social actors, van Leeuwen (2008) notes the role allocation of social actors in utterances, their assimilation as well as nomination and categorisation. In particular, the framework takes note of the means by which social actors are referenced in excluded or included roles in statements. Also, the framework considers the positioning of social actors in the extracts of the speeches, whether in an activated, foregrounded role showing dynamism or in a passivated, backgrounded role as a less powerful actor. In the speeches, such references were noted to examine how the community was positioned in relation to the Other.

Modality is another means by which positioning is established. In particular, this positioning in representing social practices as a certainty was of interest in this study. This may be represented in the use of the simple present tense that Fairclough

(2003, p. 152) referred to as the "timeless present." In a later text, Fairclough (2006) referred to such constructions to represent a high level of truth or factuality as epistemic argumentation.

CHETTI IDENTITY

The dynamics of both Being as well as Becoming (Hall, 1990) are evident in the linguistic analysis below of the said speakers at the symposium seen in the references to social actors as well as the legitimation strategies employed.

How Should They See Us?

The opening remarks of the symposium suggest external motivations being significant in the need to fix a community identity. In these remarks by the President of the association (Kalastree), references were made to the attitudes of ethnic Indian communities to the *Chetti* identity when he stated:

> *"Among other Indian communities, we are not accepted easily..."*
>
> *"Among our Indian friends, we are always different, perhaps even outcastes."*
>
> *"It was a dilemma for us while growing up, not knowing our heritage."*
>
> *"This is one of the reasons for our association."*

The self referential "we" is countered with "other Indians," thus representing the dichotomy of Us versus Them. The construction of these sentences foreground the external social forces such as "other Indians" and "our Indian friends," placing them in activated roles as powerful actors while the *Chetti* community as an assimilated social actor is depicted in passivated roles, at the mercy of the Indian community. The foregrounded reference to Indians rather than Singaporeans as the identity is interesting. This foregrounding suggests that the need for identity is being driven by the need for integration. This exemplifies the "doubleness" and ambivalence of desire that Hall (1990) spoke about in regard to the diaspora experience. At the same time, it is this denial of integration by the Indian community that appears to drive the need for recognition of the *Chettis* as a unique grouping. In this context, the qualification of 'other' in "other Indians" suggests that the *Chetti* identity is being considered a sub-ethnic category of the ethnic Indian category. However, this assimilated identification is not possible or complete on account of the lack of acceptance mentioned from ethnic Indians.

In his speech, the President raised a question: "Why do we call ourselves *Chetti Melaka*?" and a little later, "We are actually Tamilians." The use of a rhetorical question shows the hybrid, paradoxical and third space of *Chetti* identity, the idea of remembering by first forgetting. However, the response to the President's question appeared to be answered in his statement about the lack of acceptance of the community by the Indian community,

presumably of Singaporean origin. The formation of the association seems to be attributed to this lack of acceptance by the external grouping, Indians.

Later in the day as part of the panel discussion, the President represented *Chetti* identity as being more welcoming of other cultures and races, stating, "We are more welcoming of other races, as a result of our varied identity." The use of the assimilated "we" represents a homogeneity in hospitality, intended as a possible identifying mark of the community. The implication here in "more welcoming" also appeared to suggest a mark of difference from other communities that have been less welcoming. This presents a positive representation of *Chetti* community characteristics while making an implied comment on the negative reception of other communities. At the same time, the unique feature of the community was stressed in the phrasing "our varied identity" as a crucial depiction of the *Chetti* identity. The use of the present tense underlined this to be a given fact, without exception.

Another external agency that the President mentioned was the National Heritage Board: "The National Heritage Board should recognise us." Similarly, he stated that the community "should be identified as Singaporean." Both statements underlined external forces and the need for external socio-political acknowledgement and affirmation. In both situations, the community was shown to be in passivated roles, ostensibly at the mercy of more

powerful forces that decide its recognition and survival. While in the first instance the activated social actor, "National Heritage Board" was specifically identified, in the latter statement about being considered Singaporean, the state actor was excluded. However in the latter case, it is apparent that the state and its agents were intended in the recognition being required. These references point to socio-political motivations that may underline the quest for fixing of identities.

The quest for identification is further underlined in the comparison with ethnic Indians. When it comes to the "[d]ifferent ethnic groups among the Indians," the "national authority recognises them, but does not recognise us." The justification for identification is expressed through comparison with the larger ethnic Indian community, with the implication of the community not being accorded the same acknowledgement and space on the socio-political landscape.

A prescriptive note was apparent in the comments of the President during the panel discussion. The need to maintain a separate and distinct identity was seen in the reference to his sister. "My sister is a Tamil school teacher...I have to force her to wear a *kebaya*." The desire to establish a clear and bounded identity that is marked in dress was stressed here: "We are proud of what we are, whether we like it or not...so that we can be recognised." The objective of such emphasis on appearance is made clear in the purpose clause "so that we can be recognised."

The comments above serve to underline the role of external actors crucial to the establishment of *Chetti* identity. The activated roles allocated to the Indian community as well as to the state actors suggest possible causal factors for seeking to fix *Chetti* identity. At the same time, the call for official acknowledgement of this identity was articulated through reference to state agencies. The specific mention of the National Heritage Board stressed the community's history and rootedness in the land, which is, similarly, not recognised in Melaka.

Noor noted the postcolonial condition of minorities in search of identity. An urgent note struck here was the obligations that were being placed on state actors for the recognition of the community. In the context of Singapore, such recognition would help to provide the means for acquiring some benefits.

How Should We See Ourselves?

Our other focus is a community elder (Pillay), who addressed the main question posed by the symposium, "Chetti Melaka: Who are We?" The objective of his talk was to present what he referred to as "core DNA" or characteristics of the community in order to clear up any confusion that members of the community may have regarding their identity. The speaker stated at the start that his task was to "form a consensus" regarding *Chetti* identity. Such an objective announced at the outset of the presentation was indicative of the prescriptive nature of the message. It also

suggested a perspective of identity as a stable set of markers, recalling Stuart Hall's reference to Being.

In keeping with the prescriptive orientation, the first part of the speaker's presentation stressed the basis for considering an individual a *Chetti Melaka*. As noted by the speaker:

> *"A person is a Chetti Melaka because he or she is born a Chetti Melaka, that is he or she is born into a Chetti Melaka family and that family is in turn a member of the Chetti Melaka community or as we say in Malay, kaum Chetti Melaka."*

Firstly, he referred to the right to claim the identity by being born a *Chetti* into a *Chetti* family and being part of the *Chetti* community. He also went on to two further ways in which such an identity is acquired: through marriage or by being adopted into a *Chetti* family. These are seen as what Hall called positions of enunciation and practices of representation and are interesting for the references to who and how they are spoken.

As with the opening remarks of the President, these statements regarding primordial ties were represented as factual and indisputable with high epistemic certainty as seen in the use of the simple present tense indicating a "timeless present" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 152) employed for positive representation of conditions described. In the present case, the use of the present tense also suggested that the conditions being laid out for a *Chetti* identity were indisputable.

While the timeless present indicates a high level of certainty about identity, its use also suggested a limit to the identity discussion and a desire to fix this identity in stable terms. In so doing, the definitions regarding ethnic identities do not venture to unpack further the influences such as Malay, Chinese, Indian, Portuguese and other indigenous roots that have been responsible in the forging of this identity, particularly in the context of the present day. For if this line of thinking could be explored further, the question that may arise as to the reason why a person of such a mixed heritage should foreground the *Chetti* identity over other ethnic identities. Also, in the context of Malaysia and Singapore, intermarriage between Chinese, Malays and Indians is a reality. In terms of heritage, it would appear that these 'transgressions' of fixed ethnic borders may raise questions as to whether offspring of such unions may also be considered *Chetti* or whether they are, as it would appear to be the norm in present-day Malaysia and Singapore, to be identified according to the ethnic origins of the father. Discussion regarding these identity influences and their implications on the *Chetti* identity appeared to be curtailed by the use of the timeless present as well as the silence in relation to the multiple identities of *Chetti*, producing, instead, a boundedness for the *Chetti* identity.

The speaker then proceeded to present the "core features" or the "DNA" of the community. These are again presented as stable features of the community that the presenter suggested were invariable. These included being of Tamil ancestry and having mixed blood, initially of a Malay matrilineal lineage, but later with Chinese and other ethnic mixes as well. In addition, the birthplace of the community or the land of origin being Melaka was also noted. Added to these invariable features, other core features that were subject to change over time were also mentioned. The variable core features mentioned included the practice of the Hindu faith, the role of Malay as the mother tongue and distinct cultural practices.

In a written draft of the speech, the writer provided further information that may throw light on his reference to the variable core features. He noted that the Association of Chetti Melaka Singapore offers full membership to all Singaporeans of *Chetti* origin regardless of race and religion and an associate membership to non-*Peranakan* Indians. However, membership to the Association of Chetti Melaka is restricted to *Chettis* of Melaka of the Hindu faith. The talk appeared to focus on this area of contention in referring to the dynamic nature of the variable core features. This is also to accommodate *Peranakans* in Singapore who have converted to Christianity or have other religious persuasion.

Nevertheless, the presenter referred to these as the six DNA characteristics of the community. He called on the audience to write it down and to check all identities against it to establish their right to assert their *Chetti* identity. In concluding his

presentation, he presented a statement to the audience and asked all *Chetti* members of the audience to read it out as an oath to assert this identity further:

> *"...we say that we who are of the Chetti Melaka family proudly claim that we are a living community who possesses a unique set of core features or DNA, which nobody else has, which identifies our community as originating in Melaka some 600 years ago and deriving from Tamil, Malay and Chinese and other ancestry, with a long history of adherence to the Hindu Faith, strong social customs of their own, and a continuous history up to today."*

In the discussion of the core features, the use of the "timeless present" served to underline the essentialism in *Chetti* identity. In particular, this was seen in the reference to the invariable core features of ancestry and land of origin. The terms were sufficiently broad in nature in this description, particularly in the references to "mixed blood." The generic reference to the community as an assimilated actor removed all individual differences and portrayed the community as a homogenised community. These stated characteristics of the community leave little room for any possible deviation from the norm. In presenting the variable core features, the speaker stressed the view of identity as unstable and dynamic. In particular, this change was ascribed to the generational differences. Thus, the changes in mother

tongue, religion as well as social and cultural practices represent some of the areas where this dynamism is expected.

Overall, this address appeared to be an attempt to boost confidence regarding *Chetti* identity while dispelling doubt regarding how this identity is to be defined. For this process, the presenter proposed specific measures for establishing the boundaries of this identity. The language employed in the use of modality as well as the reference to the social actors served to indicate that the identity that was established was naturalised as stable, as "the way things are" (van Leeuwen, 2008). The views represented here of essentialised and stable identities struck a discordant note when considering views expressed by Noor earlier in the symposium. The latter referred to the notion of *Peranakanness* as a construct with "fluid borders and overlapping identities." Noor further noted the practice of the colonial census that required identities to be drawn in inflexible ways for ease of census-taking. In his view, this led to the postcolonial preoccupation of regarding identity as a rigid and boxed-in construct.

The Dynamics of Being and Becoming

It is possible to state that from the remarks of the community elder that a deep sense of alienation and displacement was discernible. Primarily, these remarks as well as the opening remarks by the President suggest that the search for identity is motivated by the need to belong to a community as well as a perception of a

lack of recognition from other communities and institutions, socially and politically. The question that Noor raised in relation to the socio-political context being an important consideration in the search for identity could be significant here, underscoring the nature of identity as Becoming.

Overall, the tone of the presentation of the community elder was highly prescriptive, focussing on the nature of *Chetti* identity, providing measures that members of the community may employ to identify themselves as *Chetti*. It provided the measures of a *Chetti* identity. The speaker, in fact, announced this intention and objective at the start of his presentation when he referred to people's confusion regarding their identity. Addressing the audience, he asserted, "You are not a remnant of history." He also noted that once he had given them the means for self-identification, that identity was their "birthright" to be held "in perpetuity." They were then told that they had "the right to transmit the lineage to your descendants and they to theirs."

Aside from appearing to address possible confusion regarding *Chetti* identity, the presentation also appeared to address some perceived inadequacies regarding identity that may possibly be found among the *Chetti* community or in the perception of outsiders. The outsiders in this case may also refer to ethnic Indians whose negative perception regarding *Chetti* identity was mentioned by the President in his opening remarks. It could also refer to

comments by Noor at the same symposium when he cautioned against museumisation of cultures, among other matters.

As we can see, identity is complex. There are no clear linear trajectories of Being or Becoming; in fact, they are imbricated and often both are happening at the same time as seen in how the *Chettis* were articulating (being and becoming) their identity at a one-day symposium. In a way, we think that the *Chettis* in Singapore are further displaced, moving away from their ancestral land/village, with many having even given up their Hindu faith that the *Chetti Melaka* in Malacca hold to dearly and strongly.

CONCLUSION

This paper explored the identity politics of Being and Becoming of the endangered culture and community of the *Chetti Melaka* in modern, postcolonial, globalised and cosmopolitan Singapore in one public event, the first *Peranakan* Indian symposium entitled *The Lost Tribe of the Chetti Melaka – Who are We?*. As noted at the start of this paper, this community is facing minoritisation on many levels. It is a small, minority group to begin with, and has experienced dwindling numbers. The preceding discussion highlighted the perception of their marginalisation from ethnic Indians, despite being frequently considered under that category in official matters. At the same time, the lack of official acknowledgement of such a culture unique to this region should be a concern to the community as well as to the nation.

This qualitative examination of identity in the content of two significant speeches offers some understanding, albeit limited, of the current concerns of such marginalised communities in the identity formation of nation-states. Snyder (2012) stated that such expressions of concern by marginalised groups are struggles that seek to challenge a dominant cultural order.

But more importantly, although Singapore is a "migrant," "settler country" that touts multiculturalism, it does not create nor does it allow much space to negotiate and recognise the *Chetti Melaka* community. An example of this is seen in the President's lament that the National Heritage Board should recognise them. While Singapore is said to lack a common identity, it might be worthwhile to ask if the state's apparent emphasis on "sinicisation" (Yang, 2014; p.411) raises obstacles in recognising marginal ethnic groups.

Singapore in the last half century has achieved developed world status with its rapid development and modernisation. Its population has doubled, and as mentioned, only 60% of its 5.4 million population are citizens, with an ever increasing number of immigrants and foreign talent. With the multiplicity of identities, the questioning, development and its assertion, therefore, become more apparent and urgent. In such a setting, a small but unique minority that is the *Chettis* face the very real threat of disruption and disappearance, and their quest for preservation and survival is a concern for all.

The *Chetti Melaka* community is an extremely fascinating and under-researched area. We have simply explored a miniscule aspect of a topic that holds huge potential to understand the nature of identity, "*Peranakan*-ness" and perhaps even Southeast Asia. We hope that our meagre effort here will generate more and further studies.

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