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BEING PORTUGUESE IN MALACCA: THE POLITICS OF FOLK CULTURE IN MALAYSIA

Margaret Sarkissian

This paper explores what it means to be “Portuguese” in Malacca today and illustrates ways in which the journey has been complicated by issues of class tension, colonial positioning, post-colonial nation building, and modern economic development. The focal point of the analysis is a gala dinner organized by the Malacca Portuguese Eurasian Association in 2002. This constituted a rare moment in which community members made a public political statement. I argue that a detailed reading of the event as a public performance of “Portugueseness” sheds light upon broader politics of cultural identity in Malaysia today. Finally, I suggest that the “Portugueseness” of today is more flexible and multifaceted than in the past and that new transnational and diasporic sensibilities are emerging.

The geographic setting of this paper is one of the most historically and spatially distant parts of the Portuguese diaspora: Malacca.¹ For many modern-day Portuguese, the very word “Malacca” still conjures up echoes of what Kim Holton has called “Portugal’s 16th-century ‘glory days’” (Holton 1998:177): romanticized images of the bustling emporium in which Tomé Pires reported that 84 languages could be heard spoken; of swashbuckling Portuguese seafarers led by Afonso de Albuquerque; of beautiful local maidens who married his *fidalgos* and gave birth to children of mixed race; of *A Famosa*, the Portuguese fortress that guarded the Straits of Malacca; and of St. Francis Xavier, the missionary who brought Catholicism to the East. But if my informal and limited survey of Portuguese college students has any substance, not many young Portuguese know exactly where Malacca is located.² This is, of course, reciprocal. For many Malaccans who call themselves Portuguese descendants, “Portugal” is an imagined place. The word conjures up images that are equally romanticized and glorious yet equally vague geographically. In this paper I will explore what it means to be “Portuguese” in Malacca today and illustrate some ways in which the journey has been complicated by issues of class tension, colonial positioning, post-colonial nation building, and modern economic development.

¹ This is a revised version of a paper presented at the conference “The Politics of Folk Culture: Reflections from the Lusophone World,” March 12-13, 2004, CEAS (ISCTE), Lisbon. I would like to thank João Leal and Andrea Klimt, the conference organizers, for providing such an intellectually stimulating forum. I am especially grateful for insightful comments from Andrea Klimt and Jerry Dennerline as I revised the paper for publication. Finally, I would like to thank Frank Citino and Isabel Cardana for their help with the digital photographs in this article.

² One student volunteered that it might be an island somewhere near China, obviously confusing Malacca with Macau, which remained a Portuguese territory until 1999.

The focal point of my analysis is a single event, a gala dinner organized by the Malacca Portuguese Eurasian Association (MPEA) on September 21, 2002. Billed as a “Dinner, Cultural Show, and Dance” with the theme “Our Roots... Into the Future,” the event attracted about 1500 community members and guests from other parts of Malaysia and Singapore. It was held at Pay Fong High School, a centrally located Chinese school with a large hall that is rented by many local groups for large banquets. I have chosen this particular extra-ordinary event because it was a rare moment in which community members made a public political statement: we are here and this is who we are. I will argue that a detailed reading of this event as a public performance of “Portugueseness” can also shed light upon the broader politics of cultural identity in Malaysia today.

Before engaging in any kind of detailed reading, however, a little background information is needed to put the event into some kind of social and historical context.

The city of Malacca

Known today either by its English-language name or its Malay variant, Melaka (never by the Portuguese Malaca), Malacca is located close to the equator on the west coast of the Malay Peninsula in modern-day Malaysia. At a narrow point in the Straits of Malacca roughly half way between India and China, Malacca’s deep river mouth made it a natural meeting place for traders from east and west dependent on seasonal monsoon winds. Founded in the early 1400s, Malacca was already the seat of a hereditary Malay Sultanate and a bustling center of trade with China by 1509 when the first Portuguese sailing ships appeared in the Straits. It was conquered by the Portuguese in 1511 because of its ideal location and remained a Portuguese outpost until 1641, when the Dutch took control of the city after a protracted siege. Under Dutch rule, Malacca dwindled to little more than a guard post on the way to new Malay and Dutch trading centers in Johor and Batavia (now Jakarta on the island of Java), respectively. Apart from a hiatus during the Napoleonic Wars (1795-1815), the Dutch controlled Malacca until 1824, when they formally ceded it to the British in bilateral attempt to consolidate colonial possessions. The British ruled Malacca as part of the Straits Settlements (except for a period of Japanese occupation during World War II) until 1957, when Malaya (later Malaysia) was granted independence. Though the sea-borne trade has long disappeared, Malacca’s location remains ideal. Half way between Kuala Lumpur and Singapore, it is not only the primary destination for Singaporeans, who leave their city-state in droves every long weekend, but also less than an hour away from Kuala Lumpur’s excellent new international

airport at Sepang. A modern Tomé Pires might hear just as many languages, but now the voices belong to tourists, not traders.

Its demographics

As in the rest of Malaysia, every Malaccan resident over the age of 12 carries an identity card which identifies him/her as belonging to one of four racial categories: *Bumiputra* (literally, “son of the soil,” a euphemism for Malay), Chinese, Indian, or Other. As befit what was once the commercial center of the international spice trade, Malacca boasted a cosmopolitan resident populace by the early 16th century. Portuguese incentives to marry locally or become “Portuguese” through conversion further encouraged the growth of mixed-race communities. The British compounded this nascent diversity by importing large numbers of poor Indian and Chinese laborers to Malaya during the 19th century. With such a past, it is hardly surprising that race and identity play a crucial role in the modern nation. The fact that such categories exist suggests that racial definitions of this sort are straightforward and unproblematic (Kahn 1992: 162). In real life, however, the labels are often used to disguise deeper complexities.³ For instance, they mask an implicit religious classification: there is the assumption that people who are *Bumiputra* are Islamic, and people of other races are not. Furthermore, the labels take no account of the most common complexity: marriage across racial and/or religious lines. Regardless of who one’s parents are, a Malaysian can only have one racial attribution on his/her identity card. Bearing these caveats in mind, the 2001 census shows that the Malaysian population of 24.5 million comprised 65.1% *Bumiputra*, 26.0% Chinese, 7.7% Indian, and 1.2% Other.⁴

It is in this last catch-all category, “Other,” that we find people who are officially classified as “Eurasian.” However, since the category includes,

³ At the broadest level, the labels themselves are misleading, disguising subgroups that may or may not share a language, religion, and/or culture. The standard definition of a Malay, for example – one who is indigenous (*Bumiputra*) and Islamic – does not account adequately for “Malays” who are not *Bumiputra* and/or not Islamic, *Bumiputra* who are not Islamic, or even for Muslims who are neither *Bumiputra* nor “Malay.” Some non-Malay subgroups – like the Baba (Peranakan or Straits-born Chinese) and Chitty Melaka (Straits-born Indian) communities – have resided in Malaysia for so long that their language, dress, food, and many other customs are effectively Malay. There was even a good deal of intermarriage with local women in the early days of these trader communities. The fact that such Straits-born communities are of longer standing than some more recent Islamic immigrants (who are automatically classified as *Bumiputra*) makes the criteria for *Bumiputra* status seem arbitrary at best. And this does not even begin to consider communities lumped together under the label “Other.” Both *Orang asli* (aboriginal peoples) and Eurasians (some of whom trace their Malaysian residency back four centuries), to give just two examples of non-Malay minorities, are considered *Bumiputra* for some purposes but not for others (see Kessler 1992: 139–40 for a full discussion of anomalous population elements).

⁴ Interestingly, the 2001 census marks a significant increase in the *Bumiputra* population and a concomitant decrease in other populations. In 1991, the statistics were 57% *Bumiputra*, 32% Chinese, 9% Indian, and 2% Other.

among others, *orang asli* (aboriginal peoples, Malaysia's true indigenous population), ethnic Thais, as well as Eurasians, it is impossible to estimate accurately the size of Malaysia's Eurasian population. We can do a little better if we examine the census figures for Malacca, the third smallest of Malaysia's 13 states. Of its 648,500 population, 2,800 (or 0.43%) are classified as "Other." Since there are no substantial *orang asli*, Thai, or other "Other" minorities in the state, this figure represents a rough head count of Malacca's Eurasian population.⁵

Class tensions: "Eurasians" vs "the poor Portuguese"

Despite being the government-sanctioned racial category, the term "Eurasian," is problematic because, in Malacca especially, it glosses over a crucial complicating factor: class. Etymologically, "Eurasian" identifies people of mixed European and Asian heritage. This is, of course, extremely vague, embracing people who count themselves descendants of Portuguese, Dutch, and/or British progenitors, as well as others whose ancestors were given Portuguese names (in particular) upon religious conversion, and even those who are first-generation offspring of a Caucasian and a Malaysian (of any race). Almost every family classified as "Eurasian" has a mixed bag of ancestors. During British times, Malacca's "Eurasian" population was divided into two distinct social classes defined by wealth, occupation, and education. The upper class (or "Upper Tens," as they were nicknamed; no one knows why, perhaps the "upper ten percent") identified themselves specifically as "Eurasian." They tended to have Dutch or British family names (though some had Portuguese names), were literate, spoke English as a first language, and were mostly employed in white-collar jobs by the British. In contrast, the word "Portuguese" – often paired with "poor" (as in "the poor Portuguese") – was used to refer to a lower class, largely illiterate body of people who spoke a local creolized form of Portuguese called Kristang and mostly worked as fishermen or fishmongers. The majority had Portuguese names, but there were a good number of people in this group who bore Dutch or British family names. This class division was certainly not unique to Malacca; other Eurasian communities under British rule were similarly divided.⁶ There were moments, of course, when their two worlds overlapped (e.g., at church – for

⁵ The state of Malacca is subdivided into three administrative units, based on its three main towns: Melaka Tengah (lit.: central Malacca; i.e., Malacca Town), Alor Gajah, and Jasin. Of the 2,800 "Others" in the entire state, 2,100 live in Melaka Tengah, 300 in Alor Gajah, and 400 in Jasin. If we assume these are all Eurasians (and this is a reasonable assumption), then the percentage of Eurasians in Malacca Town rises to 0.53%.

⁶ See McGilvray 1982: 236 and 244-45 for a description of the same deep social divisions in Sri Lanka.

all were Catholic), but social distance was always maintained. The class distinction was reinforced among women of the two communities. According to Settlement resident Josephine de Costa, the women of Upper Tens families often employed women from the lower class (like her own grandmother) as cooks or domestics (pers. comm., Aug. 2004). In such cases, what little Kristang members of the Upper Tens knew was learned from their servants.

The social divisions were reinforced by geographic segregation. During British times, the Upper Tens lived in two main locations (see Fig. 1). The wealthier Upper Tens lived in Tranquerah, an area along the coast just north of the town center and south of Klebang, where the Europeans and wealthiest Chinese merchants lived. The less wealthy Upper Tens lived along the coast to the south of the town center in a more modest area called Bandar Hilir. The majority of the “poor Portuguese” fisherfolk lived at the edge of the sea in a crowded, ethnically mixed neighborhood (*kampung*), off Praya Lane in Bandar Hilir. Their living conditions were so miserable that in 1926 the parish priests of the French and Portuguese Missions (Frs. François and Coroado, respectively) put forward the idea of creating a new *kampung* on the outskirts of



Fig. 1 – Malacca Town and environs

Malacca to which they could relocate these poor fisherfolk. This new “Settlement” – a combination of the colonial imagination and Upper Tens charitable largesse – was a kind of reservation aimed at rescuing the “poor Portuguese” from what the creators feared was certain oblivion, total assimilation into the surrounding community. It was (and remains) the only village of its kind in Malaysia. The site chosen for the new reservation was a mangrove swamp located another kilometer further south along the coast in the area known as Ujung Pasir. It took the public works department several years to clear and drain the land sufficiently for habitation. Although the first families moved from the Praya Lane area in 1935, it was not until after World War II that the Portuguese Settlement began to expand and cohere as a community.

Colonial (re)positioning

As a moderately affluent, educated, English-speaking colonial elite, the Upper Tens created a social world that closely mirrored that of their British employers. Organized sports (hockey, netball, and badminton for the girls; football and cricket for the boys), music lessons, concerts, balls, and vaudeville-type variety shows were all part of this social world during the inter-war years. However, by the early 1950s, a new national independence movement had begun to gain momentum. Instead of joining this movement, as a number of British-educated Peranakan (Straits-born Chinese) intellectuals did, the Eurasians found themselves in an increasingly difficult position: their long association with the British was fast becoming more of a liability than an asset. They found an imaginative solution to their dilemma, thanks to a serendipitous visit in May 1952 by the Portuguese Minister for Overseas Territories. The Minister’s arrival, on board the sailing ship *Gonçalo Velho*, once again linked Malacca to a wider Portuguese world with a romantic and adventurous past. Suddenly “being Portuguese” became politically expedient for the Upper Tens. The stigma lessened and it became acceptable – even fashionable – for upper-class Eurasians, regardless of their last names, to identify themselves as “Portuguese.” In addition to giving them a European, but pointedly non-British, authority, it also associated them with a disadvantaged local minority, the “poor Portuguese.”

The Upper Tens effected this remarkable transformation through the politically expedient manipulation of cultural symbols: music, dance, and costume. A group of church-going young upper-class Eurasians learned some Portuguese folk songs and dances, partially from Fr. Pintado (a newly arrived Portuguese-born parish priest) and partially from a book, *Folk Dances of Portugal*, written by Lucile Armstrong, an English folk dance collector (Arms-

trong 1948). Their costumes were copied from illustrations in her book (Armstrong 1948). The folk songs and dances were presented to the Minister at a “Tea Entertainment,” a quaintly British social event held in the center of Malacca at the Capitol Dance Hall (see Fig. 2). I have discussed this performance at length elsewhere (Sarkissian 2000: 52-56); suffice it to say here that as the first modern occasion at which the political significance of claiming “Portugueseness” was publicly demonstrated, the Tea Entertainment was thus a clear precursor of the MPEA gala dinner discussed below. In this case, “Eurasians” were co-opting “Portuguese” cultural identity in a public forum. The Upper Tens’ public display did nothing to ease the tension between classes: while the guest list included Eurasians from Malacca and further afield, local civic dignitaries, and leaders of the Malay, Chinese, and Indian communities, their “poor Portuguese” neighbors were only represented by three young boys who were dressed up to sing for the Minister. Significantly, although the music, dances, and costumes were copied from Continental Portugal, the language used in the speeches was the local creole, Kristang. Kristang was the everyday patois of the “poor Portuguese,” but few of the British-oriented upper class spoke it fluently.

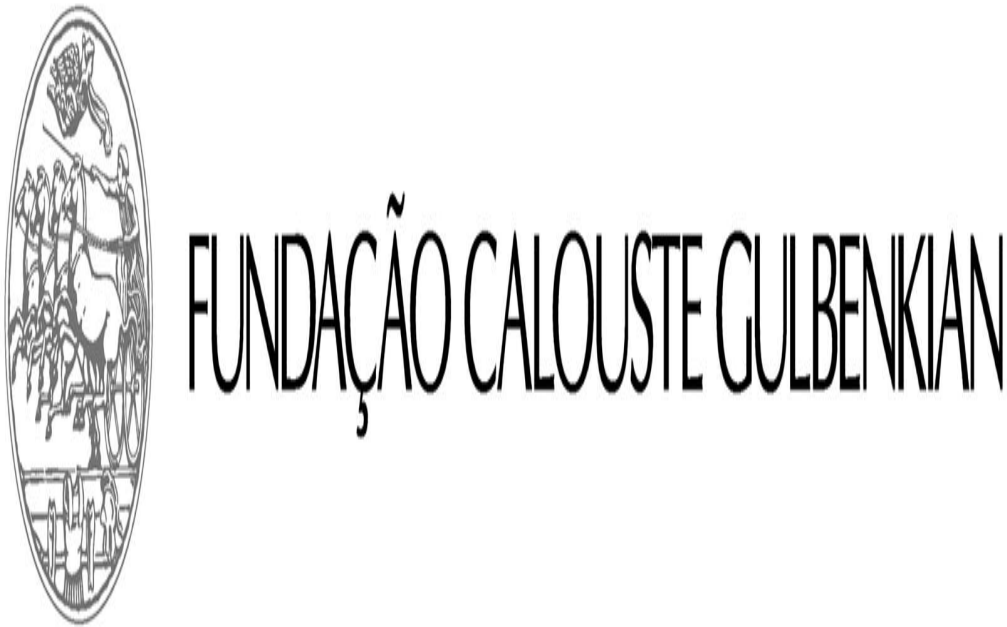


Fig. 2 – Group photograph from the Capitol Dance Hall Tea Entertainment, May 19, 1952. Source: Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino do Instituto de Investigação Científica Tropical, Lisbon

Post-colonial community building

In the years following independence, a large percentage of the Upper Tens community left Malaysia. Like colonial elites from other parts of the former British Empire, the majority emigrated to Australia (mostly to Perth) or Singapore and a few families settled in England; no one, to the best of my knowledge, “returned home” to Portugal.

As the Upper Tens declined in numbers, church-going youngsters from the expanding Portuguese Settlement were taught the songs and dances that had been learned for the Minister’s visit. This new dance group soon became not only an acceptable social activity (leading to several marriages between dancers), but also a means of generating community solidarity. Over time, it became a living tradition, passed down orally from one generation of musicians and dancers to the next. The once-imported songs and dances were augmented by locally composed material and juxtaposed with pre-existing songs and dances from their pre-Settlement days. This latter material (especially the social dance known as *branyo* in Kristang and *joget* in Malay), clearly linked Settlement residents, not to far-off Portugal, but to their multiracial Malaysian neighbors. These local roots were emphasized in the late 1960s and early 1970s as inter-ethnic tension at the national level (mainly between Malays and Chinese) ensured that no minority group wanted to stand out. Through the public presentation of music and dance, Settlement residents were able to show not only that they were a distinct community, but also that they were Malaysians of long standing.

Modern economic development

The Portuguese Settlement economy began to improve dramatically in 1983, when the Malacca state government identified tourism as a major growth industry. With no natural resources (sandy beaches, spectacular scenery, or exotic fauna) to compete with other Malaysian states, the state government cleverly constructed a successful tourist industry around Malacca’s twin assets: history and heritage. Savvy state officials began marketing Malacca as “Malaysia’s Historic City” and “Historical Malacca: The Place Where It All Began.” The Portuguese connection, an important (and unique within Malaysia) part of this package, was formalized in January 1984 when Malacca signed a twin city accord with Lisbon. Once again, the romanticized image of Portugal’s “glory days” was invoked and residents of the Portuguese Settlement were tapped as colorful living proof. In 1985 Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad himself even tried to help the community by building a “Portuguese Square” in the middle of the Settlement to facilitate tourism.

Now, not only was there a ready-made place to which tourists could be taken, but – thanks to the dance groups – there was also entertainment for them when they got there.

Co-opted by the state government as a tourist site, the Portuguese Settlement was finally designated a “historical monument” in 1991. More often than not, it was depicted as a vestigial slice of living history inhabited by the direct descendants of 16th-century Portuguese seafarers.⁷ During the 1990s it was virtually impossible to read promotional literature about Malacca without coming across the image of smiling Portuguese dancers.⁸ They became one of the visual symbols associated with Malacca, as demonstrated by Fig. 3, a t-shirt designed by local artist (and t-shirt entrepreneur) Charles Cham. The shirt juxtaposes a number of symbols associated with the city.⁹ Although the shirt’s design attempts to be inclusive both in terms of religion (the oldest Chinese temple, Malay mosque, and Dutch church) and of colonial pasts (the Malay Sultanate Palace, the Santiago Gate of the Portuguese fortress, the Dutch town hall, and the Clock Tower, built by a Straits-born Chinese in honor of Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee), it is noticeable that the only representation of Malacca’s human resources are the two Portuguese dancers in the top row. The image of smiling Portuguese dancers is, of course, a romanticized ideal. In reality, residents are a heterogeneous mix combining at different historical moments Portuguese, Dutch, and British genes with (among others) those of Goanese and African sailors or local Chi-

⁷ This is not to say that there have not been struggles. In fact, there has been an on-going land dispute for decades and the coastal location is frequently under threat from land developers. The massive commercial reclamation project planned in the early 1990s was fortuitously abandoned during the economic downturn of the late 1990s. However, a recent government “community development” scheme has led to the reclamation of land for a playing field, food stalls, and a small hotel. As of August 2004, two portions of land had been reclaimed. The first portion had already been converted into a field bordered by a pleasant walking path (that doubles as a sea wall) and a children’s playground at the farthest end. Temporary food stalls have been erected at the edge of a large parking lot (also on reclaimed land) abutting the field. To call the field a “playing field” is a bit optimistic: the ground is so uneven that it is impossible to run without risking a broken ankle. The second portion of reclaimed land remained empty, apart from a small Chinese shrine to the land deity. According to the plans, this is where the hotel and the permanent food stalls will be located. Whether this development will ultimately benefit the community or whether it is the thin end of the wedge for further reclamation remains to be seen.

⁸ This has changed slightly in recent years, as tourism has become more niche oriented. Portuguese dancers are certainly still used in promotional literature aimed at the European, Australian, and American markets. However, great effort is being put into increasing the number of tourists from China. For this market, Portugal is irrelevant. Instead, Chinese tourists are being lured by what we might call “Cheng-Ho tourism.” Malacca is marketed as one of the important sites visited by the early 15th-century Chinese hero/eunuch Admiral Zheng He (in *pinyin*; the older Wade-Gilles transliteration, Cheng Ho, is used consistently in Malacca). New Cheng Ho sites (a statue, a museum, etc.) are now starting to pop up all over Malacca. Other targeted groups also bypass Malacca: Korean and Japanese businessmen head straight for five-star hotels with golf courses, while tourists from Middle Eastern countries tend to head for Muslim-friendly beach resorts.

⁹ Top row: Chinatown house, Portuguese Dancers, Clock Tower, Sang Kancil [the mouse deer, a folk tale hero and mascot of Malacca]; second row: Trishaw, Sultanate Palace, Christ Church; third row: The Stadthuys, Porta de Santiago, Malay Kris [traditional sword], Malacca River; bottom row: Tranquerah Mosque, Cheng Hoon Temple, Bullock Cart.



Fig. 3 – Malacca t-shirt designed by Charles Cham

nese, Indian, and even Malay Catholic converts. People don't walk around the Settlement wearing stylized Continental Portuguese folk dance costumes. While the oldest women still wear their own distinctive style of *sarong kebaya*, young adults wear western-style clothes at work and play. The children, influenced by current trends in global pop culture, mix the sartorial style of the American ghetto with their favorite soccer shirts.¹⁰

¹⁰ For example, after the blockbuster movie *Titanic* came out in Malaysia, children and adults alike wore cheap, mass-produced t-shirts with images from the movie. For Malaysian boys of all races, football (soccer) shirts are an important wardrobe element. English football is covered extensively in Malaysian newspapers and the major Premier League teams have lucrative local fan clubs that attract avid (male and female) supporters of all races. Within the Portuguese Settlement, however, the 2002 World Cup (won by Brazil) and the recent Euro 2004 tournament (held in Portugal) led to a sudden efflorescence of Brazilian and Portuguese national team shirts. While these shirts have by no means displaced the Manchester United, Arsenal, Liverpool, and other favorite English team shirts, they do mark wearers as Portuguese descendants rather than as Malaysians more generally. While Settlement residents vocally support Portugal and Brazil in international football tournaments, few are knowledgeable about club teams in either country. Aside from star players at the national level (Ronaldo, Figo, etc.), whose names appear on the back of their shirts, few Settlement residents can name Portuguese or Brazilian players other than those who play in the English league.

The performance of Portuguese folk music and dance has thus become something of a cottage industry in the Settlement. In fact, “Portuguese dancers” from Malacca have become a staple of cultural shows and a familiar part of the national landscape. As the cultural show has become an increasingly important vehicle for safely demonstrating diversity within the multiracial nation, Settlement residents have taken advantage of this to generate a measure of cultural and political visibility that far outweighs their actual numbers and economic status. The crucial point here is that Portuguese folk song and dance (or, to be more accurate, the Portuguese Settlement’s version of Portuguese folk song and dance) exist only within the context of the cultural show, a bounded, framed performance that has become the primary vehicle in Malaysia for exhibiting cultural difference. Generally speaking, Settlement residents do not participate in “Portuguese dances” at their own celebrations. Instead, trained musicians and dancers are paid to perform cultural shows for tourists, both foreign and domestic.¹¹

The Malacca Portuguese Eurasian Association

The Malacca Portuguese Eurasian Association was founded in 1997 and, at the outset, encountered a good deal of local opposition and distrust, especially from the Portuguese Settlement community. The new organization was initially seen as a threat: a platform for a small group of mostly non-Settlement residents with perceived Upper Tens’ attitudes to co-opt once again the “authentic” culture of the Settlement for their own political purposes. From the Settlement perspective, it was the use of the word “Eurasian” that was most problematic, because it revived all the old class-based sensibilities and signified yet another hijacking of their “Portuguese” culture by outsiders who considered themselves superior. Association organizers, perhaps predictably, saw the matter differently: by combining “Portuguese” and “Eurasian” in their name, they simultaneously embraced all of Malacca’s Eurasians (in the government-sanctioned use of the term) whether they lived in the Settlement or not, whether they were of Portuguese descent or not, *and* reached out to other Eurasian Associations around the country, none of which qualified themselves with the adjective “Portuguese.” The MPEA organizers wanted to address issues that were wider than the interests of the Portuguese Settlement and its residents.

¹¹ I have examined the content of these cultural shows elsewhere (see Sarkissian 1997, 2000, and 2003); suffice it to say here that the repertory – like the people themselves – is an eclectic accretion of songs and dances drawn from all over the Portuguese diaspora, funneled into Malacca, and combined with locally created songs and dances. Although each performance unconsciously brings together music and dance of the Portuguese diaspora, I have argued that it is a diaspora domesticated, a heteroglot mixture that is in the process of being shaped into something uniquely local.

As a result of the vocal opposition from the Portuguese Settlement community, the MPEA was able to do little in its early days. For a while it was effectively moribund, being a registered organization in name only. New life was infused into the Association when it was taken over by two members of the younger generation, Michael Singho (President) and Joseph Sta. Maria (Vice President/Youth Leader). Both in their 40s, the two men are quite different: Singho, whose mother lives in the Portuguese Settlement, is a businessman based in the Kuala Lumpur area who supplies offices with electronic equipment (phone systems, fax and photocopying machines, security systems, etc.); Sta. Maria, who lives in Malacca but outside the Settlement, works in real estate, was a Democratic Action Party activist (until he resigned from the party in early 2004), and now runs a small convenience store at the entrance to the Settlement.¹² In an attempt to reach out to the Portuguese Settlement, the current and previous *regedores* (headmen) were invited to join the Association's management committee, the former as an ex-officio member, the latter as an advisor.

The Dinner, Cultural Show, and Dance

The Dinner, Cultural Show, and Dance of September 2002 was the first large-scale event organized by the new MPEA management committee. While there are obvious resonances with the 1952 Tea Entertainment, there was one important difference: this time there was no catalyst of a visiting Portuguese Minister. Instead, the event was intended as a fundraiser for three primary goals: a) finding a home for the Association; b) facilitating educational programs; and c) setting up an "Academy of Culture and Arts." At the same time, the event had the less tangible goals of "renewing cultural spirits," strengthening community solidarity, and increasing interaction with other Eurasian Associations from Malaysia and Singapore. Tickets were priced at RM\$30 (Malaysian Ringgit; about \$8 US) or RM\$130 per table. According to Joseph Sta. Maria, after paying all their expenses, the MPEA made about RM\$20,000 on the evening (pers. comm.). While this was a substantial amount, it was far short of Singho's target of RM\$50,000. Although a respectable number of Settlement residents and other members of the broader Malacca Portuguese community attended the event, there were large numbers of guests from out of town. In particular, there were substantial delega-

¹² The DAP is one of the main opposition parties in Malaysia. Joseph is the youngest brother of the late Bernard Sta. Maria, a Bandar Hilir resident who was the only Portuguese Eurasian elected to the Malacca State Assembly. Joseph has spent much of his life trying to walk in Bernard's footsteps, especially in his dedication to preserving the Portuguese Settlement and its community. Another brother, Tony, lives in the Portuguese Settlement.

tions from Singapore and from the Negri Sembilan and Selangor and Federal Territory Eurasian Associations.¹³

At this juncture, I would like to examine the event as a public performance of “Portugueseness” from two perspectives. The first is through a careful reading of the 40-page souvenir program, for it is, in effect, a document, a public statement from the MPEA organizers of their vision of the event and their understanding of the community they purport to represent. The second is through a discussion of the actual performance of the event. For this I am relying on a VCD of the performance provided by Joseph Sta. Maria and on subsequent conversations with organizers, participants, and guests.¹⁴

The souvenir program

The first thing one notices about the souvenir program is its glossy cover. It presents a fascinating visual representation of the organizing committee’s view of the community (see Fig. 4). The cover is framed by a small circular MPEA logo at the top and by the words “Our Roots... Into The Future” in old English font at the bottom. The logo is particularly interesting: a circle of stylized yellow people (like a string of paper cutouts) holding hands around a red Portuguese sailing ship that has the letters MPEA on its foremost sail, all on a green background. It represents an ideal MPEA cosmos: a united community with Portugal at its core. Color choices strengthen this bond: the red, yellow, and green of the logo are the main colors of the Portuguese national flag. Yet by placing its own acronym on the ship’s sails, the Association symbolically lays claim to the cultural power of Portugal, locating itself as the authoritative voice of Portugal (the ship) at the core of the community (the human circle).

In between these two framing devices are three photographs superimposed upon each other that clearly allude to the perceived progression from “our roots” to “the future.” At the top, we have the faintest of the three images, an old black-and-white photograph of four women wearing traditional formal dress, *kebaya kompridu*. The presence of a violin and a gong suggest that the women are ready to accompany *mata kantiga*, a hybrid Malay-Kristang song duel that was once the real traditional music of the “poor Portuguese.” In the middle ground are three contemporary women. The two younger women are also wearing *kebaya kompridu*; the third woman, who is

¹³ Negri Sembilan is the state sandwiched between Malacca and Selangor; its main city, Seremban, has a large Portuguese Eurasian population. The Selangor and Federal Territory Eurasian Association draws its membership from Kuala Lumpur and its environs.

¹⁴ Although I did not attend the event myself, I have worked with the Portuguese Settlement community for the past 15 years.

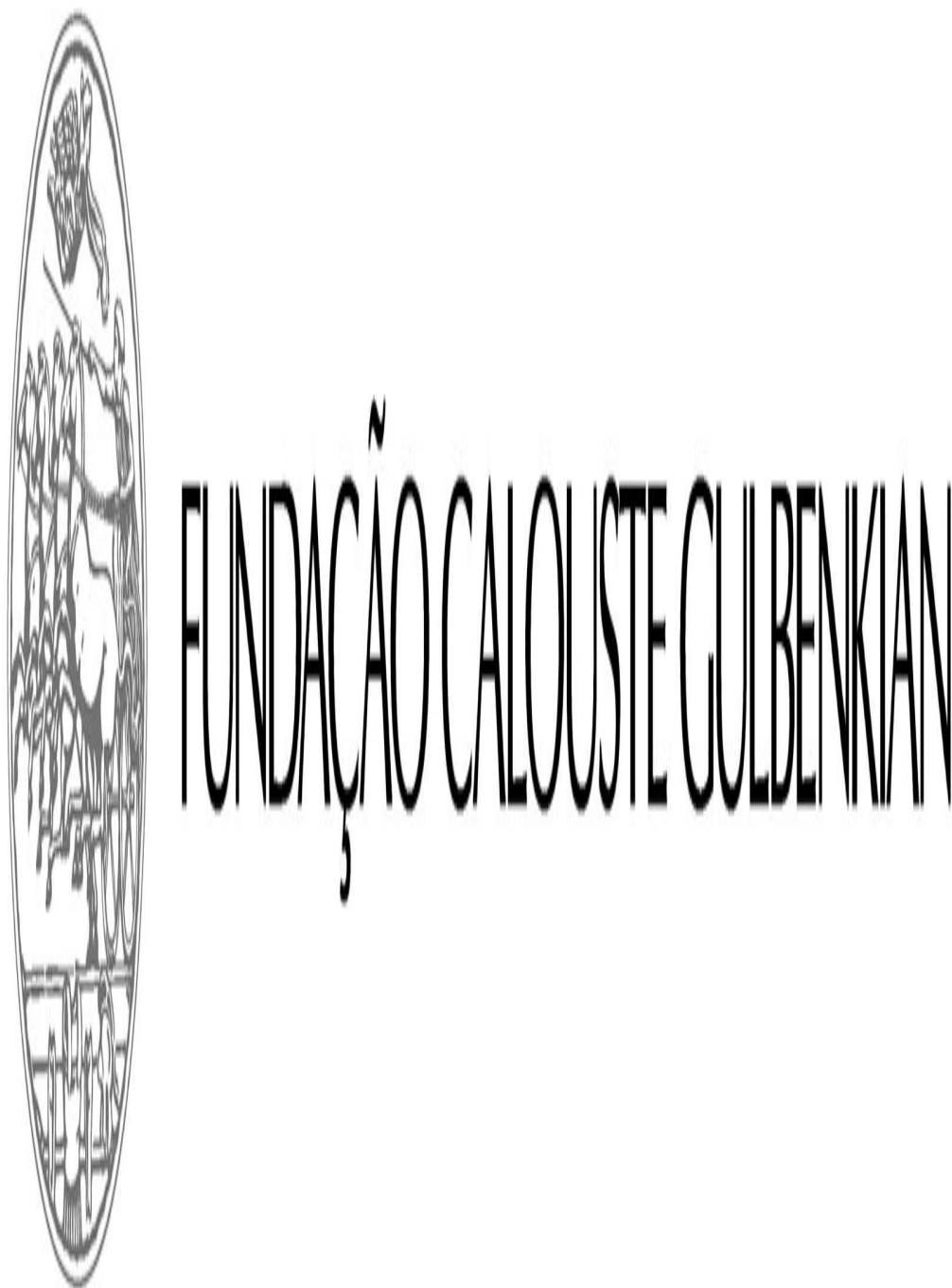


Fig. 4 – MPEA Dinner, Cultural Show, and Dance souvenir program

older, wears *sarong kebaya*, the everyday dress still worn by older Settlement women.¹⁵ Although the *sarong kebaya* is Mary Danker's regular clothing, the *kebaya kompridu* worn by the two 40-something women are stage costumes put on for the occasion.¹⁶ Neither would wear *kebaya kompridu* at weddings or other formal events today. At the bottom of the page, in sharpest relief, is a photograph of dancers in motion. The dancers, from Noel Felix's Tropa de Malaca cultural group, are wearing local approximations of Continental Portuguese folk dance costumes.¹⁷ The camera-carrying tourist just visible behind them reinforces the staged nature of their dance. What does the whole collage tell us? As a statement of "who we are," it is deliciously ambiguous. The *kebaya kompridu* and *sarong kebaya* link the women of the Settlement not with Continental Portugal, but with other Malaysian women of various races. The young men and women of the dance group are linked to Continental Portugal by their costumes, but are simultaneously marked as a spectacle to be captured by a lone tourist's camera. The juxtaposition raises important questions: Are the dancers, visibly younger and more active, "our future"? Or are they "our roots"? How did we get from the "Malaysian-Portuguese" women of the olden days to the "Portuguese" youth of the present?

The printed portion of the program begins with some words of address from the Chief Minister (CM) of Malacca, Datuk Seri Haji Mohd Ali Bin Rustam. The only portion of the program in Malay (rather than in English), the CM offers congratulations on the occasion of the MPEA's dinner and observes that efforts such as the MPEA's proposed Academy of Culture and Arts are in perfect accord with the state government's desire to promote Malacca as the nation's premier tourist destination. He mentions a recent government infusion of RM\$20 million in development funds "to raise the Portuguese Settlement's profile as a tourist destination in Malacca." Clearly, for the CM, broader outreaching goals of the MPEA are irrelevant: the Portuguese Settlement *is* the public face of the community and its prime function is to be a key tourist attraction for the state. He ends with the state's current advertising slogan in capital letters: "Melawat Melaka Bersejarah Bererti Melawat Malaysia" ("to visit Historical Malacca is to visit Malaysia").

¹⁵ The difference between the two forms of dress lies in the blouse. *Kebaya* (Malay: "blouse") *kompridu* (Kristang: "long") is exactly that, a three-quarter-length blouse; the blouse used in *sarong kebaya*, in contrast, is short. Both blouses are fastened with a set of three gold pins (*kerungsang*) and are worn over Malay style full-length wraparound skirts called *sarong*. Both forms of dress are clearly local (Malaysian rather than Continental Portuguese) and link the women of the Portuguese Settlement to their neighbors. One can find similar clothes worn by Malay, Nyonya (Straits-born Chinese), and Chitty Melaka (Straits-born Indian) women. Subtle differences in cut and design distinguish the *kebaya* of one group from that of another.

¹⁶ Mary Danker passed away in November, 2004.

¹⁷ The girls' costumes were donated several years ago by an organization in Macau; the boys' were locally made. Tropa de Malaca makes conscious use of the Portuguese spelling, Malaca.

The CM's address is followed in the program by a one-page message from MPEA president, Michael Singho. In addition to reiterating the Association's goals described above, Singho responds to the CM's words by adding another set of goals: "to further the community's role and contributions in the Tourism industry, to work towards our revered Prime Minister's ideals of Vision 2020 and Bangsa Malaysia, and contribute positively towards the development of Malacca." Here we see politics at work: if the CM supports the community because of its usefulness to the tourist industry, then the MPEA can, by publicly supporting his position (and throwing in references to their good citizenship), use it as a vehicle for raising issues that lie closer to home. Singho completes the thought thus: "[the MPEA] is also initiating [sic] to contain or reverse the current erosional trend that is dissipating our language and diluting our cultural elements." His closing comment reinforces this political agility.

It can be rest assured [sic] that this "DINNER, DANCE, and CULTURAL SHOW" is only the first of a series of functions and projects that we at MPEA plan to undertake not only for the enhancement and enrichment of our community and CULTURAL HERITAGE but also for the reflection of Malaysia as a rich multi-cultural society (Singho 2002: 3; emphasis in original).

The rest of the program is divided equally between advertisements and short features. The advertisements appear in a standard frame (a page, a half page, or a quarter page in size) offering "best compliments from" followed by the individual advertisement. While a few were placed by well-wishing community members, most were placed by local Eurasian or Chinese businesses.¹⁸ The short features can be divided into two categories: first, articles about significant individuals (an appreciation of Michael Young, *regedor* from 1974-1998, who was to be presented with the MPEA's inaugural Award of Merit; testimonials to the late politician Bernard Sta. Maria and the late parish priest Fr. Pintado, who served from 1948 to 1994; a photograph of the MPEA management committee members; and short profiles of three Settlement girls who had just finished high school and had been accepted into courses at the local Multimedia University). Second, short articles that focus on the past historical significance of the community. These include "Famous Quotations" (a compilation of random comments about Malacca – mostly by Portuguese

¹⁸ The only advertisements that did not utilize the standard format were those on the other three glossy sides of the cover. The most interesting of these, an ad placed by Ang Kee Ann Enterprises, appeared on the inside front cover. Although the company advertised itself as a retailer of various decorative items "for Christmas, Chinese New Year, Hari Raya Aidilfitri, and Deepavali" (i.e., for the main celebrations of all four major ethnic/religious groups), the glossy color illustration was clearly tailored for the audience at hand: an artificial Christmas tree, ten Father Christmas figures in various poses, and two decorative fairies.

writers or British colonial officers – and line drawings of Albuquerque, his fortress, St. Francis Xavier, and Manuel Godinho de Eredia, etc.); “Quotations from national and community leaders” (mostly on the subject of the community’s cultural distinctiveness and its need to be protected); and finally a three-page series of numbered paragraphs by Michael Singho entitled, “Our culture, its past, evolution, contributions and identification,” which presents the community’s history from the perspective of an insider rather than a scholar. The program ends with two pages of traditional local recipes and a page of acknowledgements.

Aside from the opening messages from the CM and Singho and the commercial advertisements, the bulk of the souvenir program points to the past: to the “glory days” of Portugal, to the vicissitudes of the Portuguese Settlement community, and to the lives of three notable community figures (only one of whom was from the Settlement itself). The past is used cleverly to contextualize the present event (the Dinner, Cultural Show, and Dance) and to authenticate the MPEA as the voice of both the broader Malacca Eurasian population and the Portuguese Settlement.

The Cultural Show and Dance

The performances at the dinner were equally illuminating. Two “cultural showcases” were sandwiched between speeches, the presentation of a merit award to Michael Young, and the presentation of “lucky draw” prizes (an invariable feature of any Malaysian dinner-dance). After a welcome address by Michael Singho, the invited dignitary (Datuk Amid bin Nordin, the speaker of the State Assembly) and Joseph Sta. Maria both made short speeches. Ever the political activist, Joseph took the opportunity to call publicly on the government to create a new ministry for minority communities:

Association vice-president Joseph Sta Maria said such a ministry would be able to look into the welfare of minority communities and protect their rights. “The ministry will be entrusted to formulate plans to protect the rights and welfare of all minority communities, so they would not lag behind other communities (...). Presently, there is insufficient safeguard in the Federal Constitution to protect the rights of the minority communities like the Portuguese and the Eurasians,” he said (*New Straits Times*, September 24, 2002).

Both “cultural showcases” juxtaposed cultural groups (the local Tropa de Malaca and a visiting dance group from Singapore)¹⁹ with Os Pombos, a

¹⁹ This was the Singaporean cultural group’s debut in Malacca. The dancers (mostly female) were considerably older than the current Tropa de Malaca dancers. Joseph Sta. Maria admitted to me that he was “shocked” by excellent quality of their performance (pers. comm.); he was not the only audience member to be so surprised. Trained by dancers from

nationally known country-western band comprising musicians from the Settlement. Moments when the audience watched cultural group presentations of “Portuguese dance” were interspersed with moments in which the audience participated in social dancing. (As at any other Malaysian dinner-dance, the preferred social dances are the local *joget/branyo*, American country-western-style line dancing, and cha-cha. Line dancing, in particular, is a current craze among Malaysians of all ages and races; one of the most popular line dance songs is Billy Ray Cyrus’s “Achy Breaky Heart”).²⁰ Thus, although the general rule – that Settlement residents do not participate in “Portuguese dances themselves, but leave such performances to specially trained musicians and dancers – was observed, the boundaries were slightly blurred on this particular occasion. Dancers from the cultural groups, in their Continental Portuguese folk costumes, appeared among the social dancers on the dance floor; musicians from Os Pombos joined Noel Felix and his Tropa de Malaca musicians to accompany the cultural dances (although some were clearly reading some kind of notation); and musicians, costumed dancers, and dancing audience members all joined together as Noel Felix sang a mixture of Kristang *branyo* and Malay *joget* lyrics.

There was one item on the evening’s program that I found particularly intriguing: the “Cultural Showcase Theme Song.” The song framed the entire evening: the first “cultural showcase” began with Noel Felix singing it as he was trundled through the hall in a trishaw and the second concluded with another rendition. It was intriguing first because it is not normal practice to have a “theme song” at such functions, and second, because of the particular song selected. If they wanted a “theme song,” the organizers could have used something already emblematic of the community: either a local

Macau, the Singaporeans’ movements were noticeably crisper (more “Portuguese”) than those of Tropa de Malaca’s dancers, who have domesticated their movements over the years. As I describe in my book, this process of domestication was made very clear to me, when I witnessed an older dancer come back to dance with one of the other Settlement groups. “He was invited to the practice, but his movements no longer ‘fit’: his turns were too fast, his hands were held too high above his head, his wrists were too tense, and his changes of direction were too sudden. The other dancers made smooth turns, the boys held their arms at ear height, their wrists were held in a limp relaxed fashion, and their changes of direction involved a gradual slowing down before the actual turn. Circular running movements caused the most chaos: each time the other dancers slowed into a turn, the old dancer (who turned on a dime) crashed into the girl following him. The juxtaposition of an old dancer with a more recent group clearly showed that changes had occurred, despite the fact that the intervening generations of dancers thought they were transmitting the movements exactly as they had learned them. These changes are evidence not only of domestication but also of hybridization. One of the girls described the old dancer’s movements with a Malay word: they were too *kasar*, too ‘rough.’ Without realizing it, Settlement dancers have gradually introduced the more *alus* (‘refined’) movements characteristic of Malay dance. In keeping with their mixed heritage, Portuguese dances performed by Settlement dancers have over time become ‘smooth’ and infinitesimally more gracefully Malay” (Sarkissian 2000: 107).

²⁰ In Malacca, Chinese clan associations even hold special “line dance nights” for their members. I also witnessed (then) Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad’s wife, Datin Sri Siti Hasmah, line dancing at a function in Malacca in August 2003. I have yet to come up with a theory to explain the enormous popularity of line dancing in Malaysia. I suspect that part of the appeal may lie in the fact that, like *joget* (the Malay version of *branyo*), line dancing requires no touching of a partner.

branyo tune or one of the now well-known Portuguese folk dance tunes. The *branyo*, a flirtatious social dance in which couples advance and retreat but never touch, is the true traditional music of the Settlement. The most famous *branyo*, called “Jinkly Nona,” is the favorite dance of Settlement residents of all ages. It is uniquely theirs, yet, like them, it has a foot in both Portuguese and Malaysian worlds. On one hand, quatrains for “Jinkly Nona” have been collected as far apart as Goa and Macau, thus linking the Settlement to a vast Portuguese cultural diaspora (Jackson 1990: 5-6; Sarkissian 1995-96). On the other, the connection between *branyo* and the Malay social dance, *joget*, has resulted in “Jinkly Nona” being considered a national song by the Malaysian general public. Furthermore, Settlement musicians frequently use popular *joget* melodies (with original Malay or substituted Kristang lyrics) to accompany *branyo* dances, as Noel Felix did on this occasion. Of the Portuguese dance tunes, they could have chosen “Ti’ Anika,” a dance introduced by the Upper Tens in 1953 and now the best known of the imported folk repertory. In fact, “Ti’ Anika” has become something of an anthem for the Settlement (see Sarkissian 1995-96).

Instead of either of these options, the organizers chose “Kantu Sen Fazé Fabor,” a song composed by Noel Felix (the leader of Tropa de Malaca) in the late 1960s. The song is a slow love song in compound duple (6/8) time with simple Kristang lyrics:²¹

Yo buská ku bos	I’m looking for you
Yo buská ku bos	I’m looking for you
Yo buská ku bos	I’m looking for you
Teng kántu sen ké faze fabor	Got a few cents to please you
Onti ja bai, la la la	Yesterday I went out, la la la
Yo nungka olá	I didn’t see you
Kansadu ku buská	I got tired of looking
Sinór teng nalá	But you were there
Ozi sã dia	Today is
Bos teng fortuna	Your lucky day
Beng nus juntadu	Let’s both
Bebé, alegrá	Drink and be happy

The message seems clear: “Jinkly Nona” would have marked them as Malaysian, “Ti’ Anika” as Portuguese wannabes, but “Kantu Sen Fazé Fabor” says, “we are neither Malaysian nor Portuguese; we are uniquely Kristang.”

²¹ An unaccompanied version of the song, performed by Noel Felix, appears as Track 21 on the compact disc *Malaca: Kantiga di Padri-sã Chang* (Sarkissian 1998).

This was not the end of the evening by any means. Os Pombos and other special guests continued to play for another hour or more, until midnight. One special guest deserves particular mention here, Malacca's own Elvis Presley, Ronnie Ong. In addition to singing "Blue Suede Shoes" in full "old Elvis" costume, Ronnie came down into the crowd to greet, serenade, and dance with audience members. "Elvis's" presence, and the evident delight of young and old audience members, is a reminder that Malacca's Portuguese Eurasian community may indeed be distinct, but it is still embedded in a broader culture that is simultaneously global yet shaped by its British colonial past. The repertoire performed by Os Pombos and the guest bands confirm this. With the exception of *branyo* selections, the bands dispensed a mixture of "oldies," American country music, and currently popular Top 40 songs.

Concluding thoughts

It seems clear that while a few remaining heirs of the Upper Tens still look to Portugal as a locus of authority and political power, the Settlement people and the new generation of MPEA leaders are more firmly grounded in their identity as Portuguese Malaysians. Although proud of their Portuguese heritage, very few Settlement residents have visited Portugal. One, Gerry Fermandis, actually studied in Lisbon for 2+ years (1987-89),²² but came away disillusioned. "I felt very isolated and lonely there. Even though I had a Portuguese name, I was considered 'Malay' and not really accepted there... Our local people don't know anything about Portugal. It's just a dream, like baying at the moon. Maybe they want to go there to die, but that's about all" (pers. comm., July 24, 2003). As travel becomes easier and Settlement residents become more socially mobile, they are seeing more of the world, but they choose to go to Australia, Germany, England, places where they have relatives, not "home" to Portugal.

The new generation skillfully uses its cultural identity as a means of creating a place for themselves in the modern Malaysian nation. For them, their identity embraces hybridized Malaysian-Portuguese elements (*branyo* and *mata kantiga*, *sarong kebaya* and *kebaya kompridu*); imported Portuguese folk costumes, song, and dance; as well as home-grown country-western bands, Elvis impersonators, and children who dance to the latest American hits. Together this adds up to something uniquely "Kristang." As Joseph Sta. Maria explained, "We are Portuguese Malaysians, proud of our own culture. We

²² Although his father had legal training and belonged to the Upper Tens, the family moved into the Settlement after Independence. Gerry's younger brother, Anselm, followed their father into the legal profession, left Malacca, and rarely returns to visit. Gerry, on the other hand, continues to live in the Settlement and supports himself as a musician.

don't have relatives in Portugal. We have been assimilated in the sense of race/country, but we still maintain our identity: Catholicism, cultural heritage (our original *branyo* and *mata kantiga*, and Portuguese dance from the 1950s), and *sarong kebaya*. The modern Portuguese dances add color" (pers. comm., August 9, 2003). He shared two dreams with me: first, "I would like to take a Malacca group to Portugal – dancers, musicians, cooks, politicians, say 50 people – to share our culture with the Portuguese" and second, "I am thinking of organizing a World Conference of Portuguese descendants and organizations around the globe. The state government is very supportive of this kind of event. I am trying to organize it through the Malacca Portuguese Eurasian Association."

Joseph Sta. Maria is clearly trying to formulate a Malaysian Portuguese identity that is transnational. Although Portugal is no longer the locus of authority for him, as it was for the Upper Tens, it remains the common denominator. Meanwhile, something quite different is happening in the Portuguese Settlement. Residents are embracing transnational identities of their own shaped, not by Portugal, but by their rapidly changing present circumstances. For example, some older residents are leaving the Settlement to join their children who are making new lives in Perth's growing Malaysian Portuguese community. Most notable among the recent departures are former *regedor* Michael Young and his wife, Theresa, who left for Australia on 7 August 2004. Noel Felix (the leader of *Tropa de Malaca* and the MPEA's "voice" of the Portuguese Settlement) spends three months of the year in Germany with his daughter, German son-in-law, and two grandchildren. Cyril de Mello and two other young Settlement men work for a Dutch company as chief chefs on oil rigs in the Gulf of Mexico. They work every other month, earning huge salaries by Settlement standards: Cyril has a brand new Toyota SUV parked in front of his newly renovated house.²³ Bertie Sta. Maria, who drives a truck for the electric company, sends me an e-mail telling me to check out a Portuguese restaurant in Ludlow, Massachusetts, he found on the Internet. Gerard de Costa (Josephine's son and Cyril's brother-in-law) is one of the most sought-after singers in the community. Not only is he the best *branyo* singer of the younger generation, but he also does the best "Achy Breaky Heart" in Malacca.

The coexistence of these different versions of transnational identity further demonstrates the blurring of boundaries evident in the MPEA Dinner, Dance, and Cultural Show. The "Portugueseness" of the past was about the politics of cultural identity in Malaysia in the immediate post-colonial period. The "Portugueseness" of today is far more flexible and multifaceted.

²³ In an attempt to protect the Malaysian auto industry, there is a heavy tax on imported cars. Japanese cars, in particular, can cost more in Malaysia than in the United States.

It remains to be seen how it will play out politically in a 21st-century globally oriented world.

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Margaret Sarkissian

SER PORTUGUÊS EM MALACA: POLÍTICAS DA CULTURA POPULAR NA MALÁSIA

Explorando o que significa ser "português" em Malaca nos dias de hoje, o artigo ilustra casos em que o processo se complicou em função de tensões de classe, de atitudes perante o colonialismo, da construção pós-colonial da nação e do desenvolvimento económico moderno. A análise centra-se no jantar de gala organizado em 2002 pela Malacca Portuguese Eurasian Association, momento raro em que os membros da comunidade assumiram uma posição política publicamente. A autora defende que uma leitura atenta do acontecimento enquanto manifestação pública da "portugalidade" contribui para a compreensão de políticas da identidade cultural com um âmbito mais vasto na Malásia actual. Por fim, sugere que a "portugalidade" de hoje é mais flexível e multifacetada do que no passado e que estão a surgir novas sensibilidades transnacionais e diaspóricas.

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