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James Puthucheary, Afro-Asianism and the National Question on the Malayan Left, 1950-1965

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Citation

Brophy, C. (2021). *James Puthucheary, Afro-Asianism and the National Question on the Malayan Left, 1950-1965*.

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

**James Puthucheary, Afro-Asianism and the National Question on the Malayan Left,
1950-1965**

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Word Count: 17,987

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Acknowledgments

Thanks to Carolien Stolte for her supervision of this thesis and for her valuable feedback and comments on an earlier draft. Thanks also to Lydia Walker for acting as a second reader.

This thesis was written during the Covid-19 pandemic, and I would like to particularly thank those librarians who went out of their way in providing research materials – not all of which could be utilised in the writing of this thesis. Tim Yap Fuan of NUS Library. Fujica Azura Fesal of Perpustakaan Hamzah Sendut, Universiti Sains Malaysia. Leah Teo of ISEAS—Yusof Ishak Institute. As well as the staff of the International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, the University of New South Wales, Canberra, Australia, and Arkib Negara Malaysia.

List of Abbreviations

ABL	Anti-British League
AAPSO	Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity Organization
AAPSOM	Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity Organization in Malaysia
Comintern	Communist International
GPMS	Gabungan Pelajar-Pelajar Melayu Semenanjung (Peninsular Malay Students' Union)
MCP/CMP	Malayan Communist Party/Communist Party of Malaya
MDU	Malayan Democratic Union
MNP	Malay Nationalist Party (Parti Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya, PKMM)
UMNO	United Malays National Organisation
PAP	People's Action Party
AMCJA-PUTERA	All-Malayan Council of Joint Action—Pusat Tenaga Rakyat
CJA	Council of Joint Action (Singapore, 1950s)
INA	Indian National Army
MPAJA	Malayan Peoples' Anti-Japanese Army
SEATO	Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation
SCMSSU	Singapore Chinese Middle School Students' Union
SFSWU	Singapore Factory and Shop Workers' Union
ICFTU	International Confederation of Trade Unions
UMSU	University of Malaya Students' Union



Figure 1: Map of the Malay Peninsula in 1949.

“For a large part of this century it was believed that the association of national liberation movements with the ideology of socialism could achieve not only the completion of the national revolution but also the worldwide consolidation of the struggle against capital and the establishment of a socialist internationalism. The experience of the last three decades has shown that the task is far more difficult than the founding fathers of socialism had visualised.”

Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, (1986), p. 170.

Introduction

Born in Kerala, India but moving at a young age to Johor in British Malaya, between 1943-1965 James Puthucheary was caught up in a regional wave of anti-colonialism. In 1943 in Singapore, he would join the Indian National Army (INA) under Subhas Chandra Bose and on his return to Malaya¹ in 1948 he would soon join the communist-aligned Anti-British League. He would go on to enter student politics in Singapore, enter into the trade union movement and contribute to the formation of Singapore's People's Action Party (PAP). After a period in detention between 1956-59 he would work in the PAP government before joining the left-wing Barisan Sosialis party. He was detained again during Operation Coldstore in 1963 by the PAP government and banished to Kuala Lumpur where he went on to represent Malaysia as part of the Malaysian Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity Organisation at Winneba, Ghana and at the aborted Second Afro-Asian Conference in Algiers.²

There remains only a limited scholarly literature on James Puthucheary, particularly in reference to his politics in the 1950s and 60s,³ yet Puthucheary's biography represents a series of important themes: he was an anti-colonial activist, a trade unionist, a socialist, an intellectual and a figure linked to global anti-colonial networks – through his membership of the INA and his work with the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organisation in Malaysia. His biography can offer then an example of engagement with regional and global networks of decolonisation and of the "multiple modes of internationalism" highlighted by the Afro-Asian Networks Research Collective.⁴ Puthucheary notably played an important role in the radical left-wing trade union and student movement which scholars such as Sunil Amrith, Tim Harper

¹ In this thesis, Malaya will refer to the entirety of the Malayan Peninsula, including Singapore (see Figure 1). The Federation of Malaya will be used to refer to the political unit which excluded Singapore. Whilst many of the events this thesis will study took place in Singapore, it is important to note that the actors often thought in Malayan terms, centred around a belief in the necessity of merger between Singapore and the Federation.

² Dominic Puthucheary, "James Puthucheary, His Friends and His Times" in Jomo K.S. and Dominic Puthucheary (eds), *No Cowardly Past: James Puthucheary – Writings, Poems, Commentaries*, (Petaling Jaya: SIRD, 2010) 3-38.

³ Khoo Boo Teik, "Flows and Fallacies: James J. Puthucheary on Race, Class and State" in Caroline S. Hau and Kasian Tejapira (eds.) *Travelling Nation-Makers: Transnational Flows and Movements in the Making of Modern Southeast Asia*, (Singapore: NUS Press, 2011) 209-233; Seng Guo-quan, "'How I wished that it could have worked': James Puthucheary's Political-Economic Thought and the Myth of Singapore's Developmental Model" in Loh Kah Seng, PJ Thum and Jack Chia eds., *Living with Myths in Singapore* (Singapore: Ethos, 2017), 93-102.

⁴ Afro-Asian Networks Research Collective, "Manifesto: Networks of Decolonization in Asia and Africa" *Radical History Review* 2018 (131): 178.

and Gareth Curless have seen as central to an “internationalist impulse” in Singapore’s politics in the 1950s.⁵ This was a movement centred around an identification with Afro-Asia and what Amrith sees as an “everyday cosmopolitanism” in which anti-colonial struggles across the Afro-Asian world came to be reflected upon, and served as inspiration for, anti-colonial politics in Singapore.⁶

Yet Puthuchery’s life was not the “triumphal narrative of postcolonial autonomy and assertion” that Christopher Lee has highlighted in narratives of anti-colonialism,⁷ nor was it an example of an uncritical cosmopolitanism or internationalism of the kind highlighted by Amrith in 1950s and 60s Singapore. The biography of Puthuchery expresses, instead, a series of contradictions and transformations which offer a more complicated narrative of his anti-colonial, his Afro-Asian and his socialist activism. He was an Indian nationalist but one who in India felt more Malayan than Indian. He was English-educated but in the Chinese-dominated trade union movement worked together with Chinese-educated leaders. He saw himself as a revolutionary and earlier a communist, but one who through the 1950s moved towards social democracy – yet without fully breaking from Marxism. He was an anti-colonialist but one who in Malaya believed that the anti-colonial struggle wasn’t necessarily the principal struggle for the Left. He was regularly aligned with the left-wing of the PAP (later the Barisan Sosialis) around Lim Chin Siong but in some ways felt himself politically closer to the moderates in the party around Lee Kuan Yew. He was a member of the English-educated colonial elite but gave particular emphasis to the plight of the Malay peasantry and to the Malay language. His biography is particularly transnational, yet he would think of his Malayan nationalism in more local and fixed forms, often eschewing wider internationalist solidarities.

Yet how can such local and international contradictions and transformations be situated within the politics of decolonisation in Malaya, and particularly in Singapore, where Puthuchery was based between 1950-63? The historiography of Singapore has given

⁵ Sunil Amrith, “Internationalism and Political Pluralism in Singapore 1950-1963” in Carl Trocki & Michael Barr, *Paths Not Taken: Political Pluralism in Post-war Singapore*, (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008) 38; Sunil Amrith, “Asian internationalism: Bandung’s echo in a colonial metropolis”, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 6, no. 4 (2005): 557-569; Gareth Curless, “‘The people need civil liberties’: trade unions and contested decolonisation in Singapore”, *Labor History*, 57 no. 1 (2016): 53–70.

⁶ Amrith, “Internationalism and Political Pluralism in Singapore”.

⁷ Christopher Lee, “Between a Moment and an Era: The Origins and Afterlives of Bandung Making a World after Empire” in Christopher Lee (ed.) *Making a World After Empire: The Bandung Moment and Its Political Afterlives*, (Ohio University Press, 2019) 3-4

particular emphasis to the divide between Lee Kuan Yew, leader of the PAP (and of the more moderate, statist, wing of the PAP), and Lim Chin Siong, the leader of the radical left-wing of the party and of the trade union and student movement.⁸ A more traditional historiography has emphasised this divide in relation to communist and anti-communist politics in Singapore, yet a more revisionist approach has emphasised the more complex debates over decolonisation, civil liberties and nation building taking place.⁹ Building upon such scholarship Sunil Amrith has outlined the important role internationalism played in Singapore politics, highlighting a divide between two competing forms of internationalism, one, a left-wing form of internationalism centred on “a language of global citizenship and rights” and the second, a statist programme, which saw the “international system as a source of strength and support for state sovereignty, and state-directed programmes of national development”.¹⁰ This helps to situate Singapore within the global development of anti-colonialism, as well as of the post-colonial developmental state.¹¹

Amrith’s framing of such divisions on the Singaporean Left can usefully map onto broader framings of post-war decolonisation. Dipesh Chakrabarty has highlighted a difference between two languages of decolonisation, one pedagogic, centred on the leadership of the masses and the other dialogic centred on a global conversation on cultural diversity.¹² Ratna Kapur has emphasised the way in which Bandung’s claim to equality for all contrasted with its claim to civilisational and cultural difference, which reproduced across the Third World a politics of identity and belonging.¹³ Cyra Akila Choudhury has emphasised the distinction

⁸ T.N. Harper, “Lim Chin Siong and the ‘Singapore Story’” in Poh Soo Kai (ed.) *Comet in Our Sky: Lim Chin Siong in History* (Petaling Jaya: SIRD, 2015) 3-56; Sunil Amrith, “Internationalism and Political Pluralism in Singapore 1950-1963”.

⁹ Harper, “Lim Chin Siong and the ‘Singapore Story’”; Curless, “The people need civil liberties”; Loh Kah Seng, Edgar Liao, Lim Cheng Tju & Seng Guo-Quan, *The University Socialist Club and the Contest for Malaya: Tangled Strands of Modernity* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013); Thum Ping Tjin, “The Malayan vision of Lim Chin Siong: unity, non-violence, and popular sovereignty”, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 18, no. 3 (2017): 391-413.

¹⁰ Amrith, “Internationalism and Political Pluralism”, 557.

¹¹ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Post-Colonial Histories*, (Princeton University Press, 1993), chap. 10. Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Legacies of Bandung: Decolonization and the Politics of Culture” in Christopher Lee (ed.) *Making a World After Empire: The Bandung Moment and Its Political Afterlives*, (Ohio University Press, 2019) 45-68.

¹² Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Legacies of Bandung: Decolonization and the Politics of Culture” in Christopher Lee (ed.) *Making a World After Empire: The Bandung Moment and Its Political Afterlives*, (Ohio University Press, 2019) 45-68.

¹³ Ratna Kapur, “The Colonial Debris of Bandung: Equality and Facilitating the Rise of the Hindu Right in India” in L. Eslava, M. Fakhri, & V. Nesiah (eds.), *Bandung, Global History, and International Law: Critical Past and Pending Futures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) 311-321.

between Bandung's concern with self-determination and the reality of internal post-colonial politics which produced "a tension between statist ideals of sovereignty and the liberation (or self-determination) of people within the state".¹⁴

Yet, building upon Christopher Lee's call to move beyond more linear accounts of decolonisation and to "restore the competing strategies and complex visions"¹⁵ of the period this thesis will follow the political connections and political thought of James Puthuchearry to complicate the narratives of decolonisation and internationalism in post-war Malaya.¹⁶ Seng Guo-quan has already situated Puthuchearry as a figure who can offer a perspective which goes beyond the more traditional divisions in the PAP in the 1950s and 60s.¹⁷ Yet Seng's work gives particular emphasis to Puthuchearry's thought on developmental economics. Building upon Puthuchearry's engagement with Afro-Asia, anti-colonial politics, global socialist thought and the post-colonial developmental state, this thesis uses Puthuchearry as a lens to highlight, from a more global perspective, the complex history through which the Malayan Left engaged with networks and ideas of anti-colonialism, internationalism and radical politics.

Puthuchearry wasn't, however, alone. Puthuchearry formed part of a group who have been given less attention in the historiography of decolonisation in Singapore. This is a group of English-educated radicals, earlier considered communists and Marxists, who fit neither with the moderate English-educated elite of the PAP, nor with the radical Chinese-educated left-wing, with whom they worked. These are figures around Puthuchearry such as A. Samad

¹⁴ Cyra Akila Choudhury, "Bandung 1955 to Bangladesh 1971: Postcolonial Self-Determination and Third World Failures in South Asia" in *Ibid.*, 322-336.

¹⁵ Lee, "Between a Moment and an Era", 9

¹⁶ For a similar approach in the case of Abdullah Maik in Pakistan see, Ali Raza, "Dispatches from Havana: The Cold War, Afro-Asian Solidarities, and Culture Wars in Pakistan," *Journal of World History* 30, no. 1 (2019): 223-246.

¹⁷ Seng Guo-quan. "How I wished that it could have worked': James Puthuchearry's Political-Economic Thought and the Myth of Singapore's Developmental Model", in Loh Kah Seng, PJ Thum and Jack Chia eds., *Living with Myths in Singapore*, (Singapore: Ethos, 2017), 93-102.

Ismail,¹⁸ Sidney Woodhull,¹⁹ Devan Nair²⁰ and Abdullah Majid²¹ – figures whose biographies also highlight engagement with broader networks of decolonisation and socialist thought, yet an engagement which diverged from that of the radical and moderate wings of the PAP.

Central to this was the concern of James Puthuchery, and the other English-educated radicals with the “national question”.²² This took the form of debates over the kind of nation Malayan socialists should pursue and, most importantly, how socialists should respond to the communal divisions between Malaya’s three major communities: Malays, Chinese and Indians. This formed part of broader debates on the Malayan Left over ideas of nationalism and nation-formation, which in Malaya proved particularly difficult to solve.²³ These left-wing debates have been given limited scholarly attention,²⁴ particularly in the history of internationalism on the Malaya Left, and the role of Puthuchery and others around him in these debates has been largely overlooked. Nevertheless, this thesis argues that these discussions on the national question on the Malayan Left linked up with broader networks of decolonisation and with more global debates over socialism and nationalism outside of Malaya.

¹⁸ A journalist who had strong connections with Indonesian nationalists, who was part of the AMCJA-PUTERA movement in the 1940s, joined the Anti-British League and was detained alongside James Puthuchery. He was a founding member of the PAP who was a go-between between Lee Kuan Yew & Lim Chin Siong, he attended Bandung on behalf of the PAP and co-organised the Afro-Asian Journalists meeting. He went on to leave the PAP and join the right-wing UMNO party. Cheah Boon Keng, *A. Samad Ismail: Journalism and Politics* (Kuala Lumpur: Singmal, 1987) xv-xxiv.

¹⁹ Also spelled Sydney Woodhull, known also as Sandra Woodhull, short for Sandrasegaran Woodhull. A founding member of the University Socialist Club in Singapore, a trade unionist, detained alongside Puthuchery in 1956, co-founded the Barisan Sosialis in the 1960s and played an important role before detention in Operation Coldstore and banishment to Kuala Lumpur. Dominic Puthuchery, “James Puthuchery, His Friends and His Times”.

²⁰ A childhood friend of Puthuchery who joined the Anti-British League, joined the trade union movement, was detained alongside Puthuchery between 1956-59, but aligned with the moderate-wing of the party in the 1960s. “Devan Nair”, *Singapore Infopedia*, National Library Board Singapore, at: https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_594_2004-12-23.html

²¹ A close friend of Puthuchery’s in the University of Malaya and the trade union movement. Studied in the UK and travelled through the Soviet Union and China in the mid-1950s. Dominic Puthuchery, “James Puthuchery, His Friends and His Times”.

²² See Oleksa Drachewych and Ian McKay, *Left Transnationalism: The Communist International and the National, Colonial, and Racial Questions* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2020).

²³ Muhammad Ikmal Said, “Ethnic Perspectives of the Left in Malaysia”, in Joel S. Kahn and Francis Loh *Fragmented Vision: Culture and Politics in Contemporary Malaysia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992) 254-282.

²⁴ R. K. Vasil, *Politics in a Plural Society: A Study of Non-communal Political Parties in West Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1971); Muhammad Ikmal Said, “Ethnic Perspectives of the Left in Malaysia”. Xie Kankan, *Contesting Equality: A History Of The Malayan People’s Socialist Front, 1957-1965*, Unpublished Masters Thesis, Cornell University, at: <https://ecommons.cornell.edu/bitstream/handle/1813/31454/kx36.pdf>

Here, concern with the national question highlights an emphasis on a different mode of internationalism, one which came from the national and colonial questions of the Comintern, and the broader approaches to anti-colonial nationalism this inspired. It also served as a basis for complicating discussions around anti-colonialism in Malaya – problematising the very nation, or classes within the nation, who were to struggle for independence. Existing historiography on the Malayan Left has looked at debates over the national question from the perspective of nationalist historiography, particularly through the lens of ethnicity, and as driven by the politics of communalism in Malaya.²⁵ Yet by situating debates over the national question as part of interactions between different forms of internationalism, and by giving focus to the more complex ways in which people moved between internationalism and nationalism “in a manner that defies scholarly obsession with this supposed dichotomy”²⁶ this thesis aims to highlight the more complex dynamics which informed engagement with Afro-Asian networks and thinking around anti-colonialism and nationalism.

In doing so this thesis will challenge Sunil Amrith’s division of internationalism on the Singapore Left, between a rights-based internationalism and a statist internationalism. Whilst this division helps animate many of the divisions on the Malayan Left in the 1950s & 60s, and in the decades after, it also obscures other conversations over internationalism and nationalism which were ongoing in the period. Conversations which can’t be so neatly divided. Highlighting figures like Puthuchery, this thesis argues, can bring attention not only to the more complex political trajectories in Singapore but also the different modes of internationalism, different interactions between internationalism and nationalism and the more complex intellectual histories of Afro-Asianism and socialism on the Malayan Left. This broadens the intellectual history of the Malayan Left, but it can also contribute towards a more complex history of Afro-Asian networks.

²⁵ Vasil, *Politics in a Plural Society*; Muhammad Ikmal Said, “Ethnic Perspectives of the Left in Malaysia”.

²⁶ Afro-Asian Networks Research Collective, “Manifesto: Networks of Decolonization in Asia and Africa”, 178.

Methodology

The approach of this thesis emphasises both global networks and intellectual debates on the Malayan Left. In doing so it emphasises individual biography and connections – both local and transnational – whilst also tracing intellectual debates through the interrogation of key texts and a focus on political language. In doing so this thesis looks to connect the intellectual history of the Malayan Left with networks of decolonisation, and to highlight what this intellectual and connective history can tell us about the Left in the period.

In tracing connections this thesis builds upon biographical accounts of key individuals (Puthuchery, but also in a more limited way A. Samad Ismail, Sidney Woodhull, Devan Nair and Abdullah Majid), oral histories recorded by the Singapore National Archives and, where possible, international archives of Afro-Asian networks and trade union and socialist networks. As the Afro-Asian Networks Research Collective suggests, this moves away from diplomatic and interstate histories to situate the “networks created and maintained by actors that are harder to identify in the archive”.²⁷

At the same time this thesis looks to show how these connections were part of broader intellectual debates on the Malayan Left over anti-colonialism, socialism and nationalism/internationalism. In doing so it gives focus to the history of political thought in Malaya. In the case of colonial Malaya, such an approach has been taken by Anthony Milner in his *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya*, which builds upon J.G.A. Pocock and the Cambridge School’s approach to political language, to trace ideas of modern politics and nationalism by following the development of political language across key texts.²⁸ Importantly Milner looks to trace the development of these political ideas in their process of being formed, allowing him to highlight the more contextual and complex development of political thought in Malaya, particularly what he terms the “movement” and “ideological commotion” of the period, as well as the alternative possibilities which tend to be ignored in more linear, retrospective, accounts.²⁹

²⁷ Afro-Asian Networks Research Collective, “Manifesto: Networks of Decolonization in Asia and Africa”, 178.

²⁸ Anthony Milner, *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya: Contesting Nationalism and the Expansion of the Public Sphere*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995)

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 4-6.

Building upon this approach, this thesis looks to trace the development of debates over anti-colonialism, nationalism and socialism, contained within the “national question” in the 1950s and 60s. Following Milner and Pocock it gives emphasis to reading key texts published in left-wing journals notably *Fajar*, the journal of the University Socialist Club, and *Petir*, the journal of the PAP, as well as records of debates and speeches in the popular press and published correspondence. This debate was however rarely direct and explicit, and this thesis therefore looks to trace key vocabularies around which the Malayan Left diverged, notably around questions of “nation building”, “the peasantry”, “democracy” and “Bandung”. In tracing such terms, the aim will be to highlight the development of different positions taken on the national question on the Left, and the different forms of political engagement this implied, whilst remaining attentive to the shifting nature of these positions over time.

Yet emphasis on the national question and political language can also to help us trace a global circulation of ideas. Erez Manela has traced the way in which “the language of self-determination” was mobilised by diverse global groups who “adopted the language of self-determination to varying extents and adapted it to varying circumstances”.³⁰ This is evident too in Oleksa Drachewych & Ian McKay’s concern with the “wider cultural and intellectual significance” of the discourse on the national, colonial and racial questions on anti-colonial nationalism which allowed it to be mobilised by different groups in diverse ways.³¹ This thesis will then underscore the global nature of this intellectual history and the way in which debates on the Malayan Left relied upon broader ideas taken from Bandung, from the Communist International and from other anti-colonial movements, yet in ways which often modified and localised these ideas within the context of Malayan anti-colonial politics.

Outline

This thesis proceeds in four parts. In chapter 1 it addresses the emergence of new left-wing activism in 1950s Singapore and the different approaches to anti-colonialism, socialism and nationalism this entailed. In chapter 2 it looks at how this activism came to intersect with the rise of Afro-Asia through the Bandung Conference in 1955 and the Asian-African Students’

³⁰ Erez Manela. *The Wilsonian Moment: Self Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism*. (Oxford University Press, 2007). 7.

³¹ Oleksa Drachewych and Ian McKay, *Left Transnationalism: The Communist International and the National, Colonial, and Racial Questions*, (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2020).

Conference in 1956. Chapter 3 looks at a growing critique of this left-wing movement, emphasising a growing division between anti-colonialism and nation-building, giving focus to a series of texts by James Puthucheary, whilst chapter 4 looks at how these arguments came to intersect with debates over Merger between Singapore and the Federation of Malaya, and the different political alliances and forms of international politics this produced.

Chapter 1: Thinking Socialism and the Nation (1930-1954)

Oleksa Drachewych and Ian McKay have recently highlighted how approaches to national liberation and anti-imperialism derived from the Third International (Comintern), influenced nationalist and anti-colonial leaders in the Third World.¹ In doing so they look to move beyond more monolithic accounts of Communist organising and ideology to emphasise “the ways in which a set of precepts about nations, colonies, and races were set to work in specific contexts”.² In doing so they criticise the “Moscow Rules” thesis or the “transition belt model”, which sees orders and ideas from Moscow being received on the periphery.³ Rather they emphasise: the conflicting interpretations of Marxist thought between the centre and the periphery; the more diffuse ways in which the Comintern operated; innovations from below amongst Communist cadres; and finally, “the wider cultural and intellectual significance of the Comintern” and the way in which “particular takes on ‘nation’ and ‘colonialism’ and ‘race’ found their way into wider discourses and networks”.⁴ Here they highlight figures like Jawaharlal Nehru and Nelson Mandela whose milieus were influenced by Comintern debates on nationalism, colonialism and race, yet without being derivative of them.

The National Question in the 1930s & 40s

Left-wing thinking on the national question emerged in Malaya with the formation of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) in 1930. As Anna Belogurova and Fujio Hara trace, one of the earliest problems for the MCP was the national basis on which the party should be formed.⁵ Belogurova highlights in early party documents the interchangeability of terms like “Nanyang”,⁶ “Malay”, “Malayan” and “nation” often without clear definition. Like Drachewych and McKay, Belogurova locates the MCPs thinking on nationalism as part of a hybridity which brought together Bolshevik, Chinese nationalist and Malayan concerns.⁷ For

¹ Drachewych and McKay, *Left Transnationalism*.

² *Ibid.*, 4

³ *Ibid.*, 5-6

⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵ Anna Belogurova, *The Nanyang Revolution: The Comintern and Chinese Networks in Southeast Asia, 1890–1957*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Fujio Hara, *The Malayan Communist Party as Recorded in the Comintern files*, (Petaling Jaya: SIRD, 2017).

⁶ A Chinese term denoting the area of maritime Southeast Asia.

⁷ Belogurova, *The Nanyang Revolution*, 12.

the MCP this meant thinking the Malayan nation within a transnational communist and anti-colonial space, moving beyond a dichotomy between nationalism and internationalism.⁸

This thinking arrived in Malaya through connections with the Far Eastern Bureau of the Comintern and their agents like Nguyen Ai Quoc (later Ho Chi Minh) who sought to establish a regional communist base in Malaya.⁹ Emphasising the MCP's overseas Chinese connections, the Party's early formulation that "Each native people should organise a national party" assumed that different Communist parties would be formed for the colony's different racial groups, organising separate Chinese, Indian and Malay parties.¹⁰ Yet this formulation was criticised by the Comintern for its divergence from the principle that each state should have a single communist party.¹¹ So too was the MCP criticised for its failure to indigenise its struggle, remaining a largely Overseas Chinese party without integrating the other races of Malaya.¹² Over the 1930s the Party came then to stress an anti-colonial communist movement centred on an idea of Malaya as a multi-national nation-state.¹³

Central to this was the Leninist argument for the building of anti-imperialist united fronts in the colonial world. This emphasised both intra-class coalitions and multi-ethnic and multi-national coalitions premised upon ridding anti-imperialist and communist movements of forms of national and ethnic chauvinism through an emphasis on the democratic freedom of culture, education, language and a right to self-determination for all peoples.¹⁴ Thus in an early statement the MCP called for the "Self-determination by Malay peoples, establishment of federated republican state on the basis of equality among peoples",¹⁵ mirroring the Soviet Union's approach to its own nationalities problem, promoted through the Comintern. By the late-1930s advocacy for the language rights of each community became an important part of

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid. 52.

¹⁰ Ibid., 55.

¹¹ "Resolutions adopted at the Third Congress of Malaya Party" in Hara, *The Malayan Communist Party*, 38.

¹² Belogurova, *The Nanyang Revolution*, 65-66

¹³ Ibid., 136.

¹⁴ "Theses on the national and colonial question" in Comintern, *Second Congress of the Communist International. Minutes of the Proceedings*, vol. 1 & 2, New York: New Park Publications, 1977 & John Riddell, *Toward the United Front: Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, 1922*, Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012.

¹⁵ "Resolutions adopted at the Third Congress of Malaya Party", 39

the Party's platform, particularly in reference to vernacular education.¹⁶ This reflected Comintern approaches to language rights derived from the Soviet Union, but also as applied to multilingual nations like India.¹⁷ Yet as Belogurova suggests, such assumptions were also indebted to Chinese thinking on *minzu* nationalism, which since Sun Yat Sen had accepted the idea of the nation as the unity of different ethnic groups within a single nationalist struggle.¹⁸ Such connections placed the multi-national Malayan nation being imagined by the MCP within the internationalism of the inter-war period.¹⁹

By the 1940s the Party's thinking on the colonial and national questions came to be replaced by Mao's concept of "New Democracy" which continued to emphasise the multi-national nature of Malaya's struggle.²⁰ In a party statement of August 1945, the party called for the formation of a "Malayan Democratic polity" through universal suffrage for all nationalities, a democratic education system based on vernacular languages and popular economic struggles.²¹

Yet with the move away from armed struggle in 1945, and towards united front politics, the MCP came to work with nationalist parties: the Malayan Democratic Union (MDU) and the Malay Nationalist Party (MNP), which in turn came to emphasise different visions for a future Malayan nation. The MNP emphasised a *Melayu* (Malay) nation, yet one premised upon a non-ethnic and inclusive understanding of Malayness and based on the party's republican, socialist and internationalist principles.²² The MDU emphasised a Malayan nationalism derived from pre-war thinking, which emphasised the transcending of racial

¹⁶ "Ten-point Programme of the MCP", in Hara, *The Malayan Communist Party*, 108. "A system of universal education, using our national language for each nation." As Hara writes, "This meant that Malay students should be taught in Malay, Chinese in Chinese (Mandarin), and Indians in Tamil."

¹⁷ Andrea Graziosi, "India and the Soviet Model: The Linguistic State Reorganization and the Problem of Hindi," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 35, no. 1/4 (2017): 443-71; Gene D. Overstreet & Marshall Windmiller, *Communism in India*, (California: University of California Press, 1959) 487-508

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 58. For the broader influence on such ideas of *Minzu* nationalism in Malaya see Tan Liok Ee, *The Rhetoric of Bangsa and Minzu: Community and Nation in Tension. the Malay Peninsula. 1900-1955*. Working Paper, Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1988.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Cheah Boon Kheng, *Red Star Over Malaya: Resistance and Social Conflict During and After the Japanese Occupation of Malaya, 1941-46*, Singapore: NUS Press, 2012, 306-311; Douglas Howland, "The Dialectics of Chauvinism: Minority Nationalities and Territorial Sovereignty in Mao Zedong's New Democracy", *Modern China*, 37, no. 2 (2011): 170-201.

²¹ "Statement of the Selangor State Committee: The Communist Party of Malaya, dated 27 Aug. 1945" in Cheah, *Red Star Over Malaya*, 306-311.

²² Ariffin Omar, *Bangsa Melayu: Malay Concepts of Democracy and Community, 1945-50*, (Petaling Jaya: SIRD, 2015)

differences and the formation of a united Malayan identity based on Fabian socialism.²³ The result of this divergent thinking was the *People's Constitutional Proposals* of 1948.²⁴ This document, which envisaged self-government for Malaya, advocated a Malay nationality over Malayan nationality,²⁵ sought to defend the Malay Rulers, emphasised the role of the Malay language as the national language and established constitutional protections for the Malays.²⁶ This was a concession to right-wing Malay public opinion which through the United Malays National Organisation²⁷ advocated a culturally and politically Malay-centric Malaya. Yet despite such concessions, the *People's Constitutional Proposals* formed part of a broader anti-colonial compromise to secure unity in the name of national independence. Nevertheless, with the turn to the Emergency in 1948, the Constitutional Proposals became sidelined and with the return to armed struggle the MCP returned to its earlier approach to the national question, emphasising the equality of the nationalities and the multi-national and multi-lingual basis of the anti-colonial struggle.²⁸

By the 1950s questions of anti-colonial struggle re-emerged in Singapore as new forms of underground struggle developed, particularly through the Anti-British League. This was tied to the growth of a new generation of left-wing activists, who came to represent more diverse relations between communist, nationalist, internationalist and anti-colonial thought.

²³ Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Wars: The End of Britain's Asian Empire*, London: Penguin, 2008; Chua Ai Lin, "Imperial Subjects, Straits Citizens: Anglophone Asians and the Struggle for Political Rights in Inter-War Singapore" in Michael Barr & Carl Trocki (eds.) *Paths Not Taken: Political Pluralism in Post-war Singapore* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008) 16-36.

²⁴ The *Proposals* were in reaction to the British's Federation Proposals which sought to establish a Federation of Malaya in Alliance with the Malay sultans and aristocratic Malay elites, on terms which restricted citizenship qualifications and provided only a limited basis for self-rule.

²⁵ This rooted the identity of within a secular and inclusive cultural Malayness.

²⁶ AMCJA-PUTERA, *The People's Constitutional Proposals*, (Petaling Jaya: SIRD, 2017 [1947]).

²⁷ UMNO was formed in 1946 in the face of the Malayan Union proposals which sought to turn the sultanates and colonies which made up Malaya into a single economic and political unit, challenging the role of the Malay rulers and the traditional Malay aristocracy. The party successfully mobilised large parts of the Malay community against the proposals and behind a more traditionalist and conservative politics centred on the protection of the Malay ethnicity.

²⁸ "Strategic Problems of the Malayan Revolutionary War" in Gene Hanarahan, *The Communist Struggle in Malaya*, (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1954) 171. Charles Mclane, *Soviet Strategies in Southeast Asia: An Exploration of Eastern Policy Under Lenin and Stalin*, (Princeton University Press, 1966) 390-1.

Lim Chin Siong & *Minzu* Nationalism

One avenue for left-wing anti-colonial struggle was the Chinese schools in Singapore where the influence of anti-colonialism, the MCP, and the victory of the Chinese communists generated a new wave of anti-colonial activism, particularly around issues of Chinese education.²⁹ Prominent was Lim Chin Siong, a figure who would go on to lead the radical student and trade union movement and play a prominent role in the People's Action Party, before leading the break-away Barisan Sosialis after 1961. Lim was born in 1933 during the Great Depression and came of age in the turbulence of the post-War years, being influenced by diverse trends of nationalist, socialist and anti-colonial thought in Malaya. At school he would recall sitting in front of a portrait of Sun Yat-Sen as they would sing Sun's "The Principles of the People", principles of *minzu* (civic nationalism), *minquan* (democracy), and *minsheng* (welfare).³⁰ A political turning point for Lim was in the years 1949 with the victory of the communists in China. Lim would recall 1949 and 1950 as "historic years", "The Afro-Asian anti-colonial movement swept across the world. On 1 October 1949, the People's Republic of China came into existence. The school went into ecstasies. Everyone was talking about it and singing away. With tears of joy, they welcomed the dawn of the new history of mankind."³¹

Whilst the British saw the Chinese schools in Singapore as hotbeds of communism, Lim's understanding of communism would underscore its role as a Third World ideology, which differed from membership of a communist party, and which entailed for Lim ideas of anti-colonialism, national liberation and popular struggles against exploitation. As he would argue:

Communism was one of the two main ideologies in the 1950s. It was extremely popular and generally accepted by the third-world countries. In Malaya (including Singapore), the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) was the political party having the longest history, and it took the staunchest position in opposing British colonialism.

²⁹ Richard Clutterbuck, *Conflict and Violence in Singapore and Malaysia, 1945-1983*, (London: Routledge, 2019 [1985]), chap. 4.

³⁰ "Part of Lim Chin Siong's Q&A Posthumous Manuscript", trans. Ang Pei Shan, Yong Siew Lee and Chai Chean Nee, *Sahabat Rakyat Malaysia*, 5 February 2016, at: <https://sahabatrakyatmy.blogspot.com/2016/02/part-of-lim-chin-siongs-q-posthumous.html>

³¹ *Ibid.*

Before the emergence of numerous political parties with strong nationalistic inclination, a large number of patriotic sons and daughters of this country had joined [the] CPM in its struggle for freeing the nation from the shackles of the British rule.³²

Lim's association with communism was then dominated by anti-colonial nationalism. The nation to which Lim subscribed to in the early 1950s was the Malayan *minzu* nationalism of the kind being imagined by the MCP, and the nationalism he would highlight was centred on popular anti-colonial struggles from below ("If a nation or the people wish to be free, the most oppressed and the most exploited must rise and be united, and struggle till the end.")³³ Yet Lim's invocation of Afro-Asia and the Third World also underscored the way in which he saw these struggles as part of a far wider struggle against colonialism. Tim Harper has argued that Lim's politics was defined by youth and internationalism, a "politics of culture" which sought to develop an anti-colonial culture in Singapore, one which transcended Malaya's ethnic divisions by drawing on a broader idea of Afro-Asia. So too does Harper challenge the idea of Lim's thinking as derivative of Chinese communism, suggesting him to be a spokesman for a "local radical tradition that pitted the popular will against colonial power", as a believer in freedom from extra-legal state power which mirrored an "old radical argument in the English revolutionary tradition".³⁴ This emphasised a discourse of rights which became evident in struggles over the Emergency Regulations and national service.³⁵ PJ Thum has argued that Lim's politics was a vision of unity, non-violence and popular sovereignty, premised upon uniting the people of the colony around anti-colonial struggles.³⁶ Cheng Yinghong has highlighted the Maoist influences in Lim's speeches, which mirrored many themes of the New Democracy, with its focus on the formation of a mass-based, democratic and national anti-colonial culture.³⁷ As a national vision such political positions didn't

³² "Part of Lim Chin Siong's Q&A Posthumous Manuscript"

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Harper, "Lim Chin Siong and the 'Singapore Story'"

³⁵ As Lim would argue in a speech in 1954 in reference to identity cards, "Why should we carry identity cards? ... We are not dogs. Dogs carry licenses or otherwise they will be shot as strays". A. Samad Ismail, "Lim Chin Siong: Some Memories".

³⁶ Thum Ping Tjin, "The Malayan vision of Lim Chin Siong: unity, non-violence, and popular sovereignty", *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 18, no. 3 (2017): 391-413.

³⁷ Cheng Yinghong, "The Chinese Cultural Revolution and the Decline of the Left in Singapore" *Journal of Chinese Overseas*, 7 no. 2 (2011): 211-246.

emphasise the production of a Malayan nation from above but through the popular struggle of all exploited groups in the colony against colonialism.

These themes were evident in the struggles over education in which Lim would participate. In 1951 Lim was studying in Chinese High School and took part in the boycott of the examinations alongside Fong Swee Suan,³⁸ subsequently being expelled from school by the Ministry of Education. Lim and Fong “wrote pamphlets, made speeches condemning colonialism and advocating fair and equal treatment for Chinese schools and students, and demanded social justice, freedom and independence from colonial rule.”³⁹ Soon after Lim came to lead the Singapore Factory and Shop Workers’ Union, yet his trade unionism continued to emphasise education struggles, as well as student struggles against national service.⁴⁰ Such activism linked a series of issues: colonial exploitation, colonial repression of Chinese students, the unemployment and economic hardship faced by Chinese students, arguments for a right to mother tongue language education and a multi-lingual and multi-national imagining of the Malayan nation. In doing so they linked together ideas of anti-colonialism and socialism with more internationalist arguments around fundamental human rights. In 1955 in response to the formation of an All-Party Committee on Chinese Education in the Legislative Assembly Lim would emphasise the “evils of the colonial system under which the provision of Chinese schools had been left entirely to the Chinese community” and “called upon the Government to discard the old policies and ordinances, and to announce a new policy in keeping with the United Nations Charter which, he claimed, asserted the right of all races to develop education in their own mother tongue”.⁴¹ He would make similar arguments in a speech in the Singapore Legislative Assembly in 1955.⁴² Discursively this linked him with other Chinese educationists who also turned to the United Nations Charter in support of a right to mother tongue education.⁴³ Yet Lim alongside other students also came to emphasise

³⁸ Fong Swee Suan would go on to work closely alongside Lim in the trade union movement, the PAP and the Barisan Sosialis. He was detained alongside Lim, Puthuchery, Woodhull and Devan Nair from 1956-59.

³⁹ Tan Jing Quee, “Lim Chin Siong—A Political Life” in Poh Soo Kai (ed.) *Comet in Our Sky: Lim Chin Siong in History* (Petaling Jaya: SIRD, 2015) 62

⁴⁰ As George L.P. Weaver argued in a memo to the ICFTU: the unemployment of graduates from Chinese schools helped to link educational and trade union struggles. George L. P. Weaver, “Report on the Singapore Labour Movement”, ICFTU File, #3772-3775, IISH, Netherlands

⁴¹ Harold Wilson, *Social Engineering in Singapore: Educational Policies and Social Change, 1819-1972*, (Singapore University Press, 1978), 197-198.

⁴² *Singapore Legislative Assembly Debates*, vol. 1, 27 April 1955.

⁴³ “Chinese teachers appeal to Mrs. Pandit”, *The Straits Times*, 16 August 1954; Linda Chen, “Language is not a Unifying Factor of a Nation” in *Pan-Malayan Students’ Federation: Second Annual Conference, A Souvenir Issue*,

the learning of the Malay language in the formation of national solidarity, though a solidarity which would still support rights to cultural and linguistic difference.⁴⁴

Radicalising the English-Educated

Outside of the Chinese-educated, another avenue in which ideas of communism, anti-colonialism and nationalism were developing was amongst the English-educated Left who were increasingly radicalised by the Emergency.⁴⁵ One figure caught up in this process was James Puthuchery whose biography highlights the particularly diverse intellectual trajectories through which the English-educated became politically radicalised.

Puthuchery left Malaya in 1943 to fight for the Indian National Army (INA) on the Burma-India border.⁴⁶ Here he differed from his childhood friend Devan Nair. Nair had experienced the plight of the estate workers in Johor at the hands of the Japanese and chose not to join the INA but rather the Communist-led Malayan Peoples' Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA).⁴⁷ Unlike Nair, however, Puthuchery saw himself as an Indian nationalist first and foremost, one influenced by the thought of Subhas Chandra Bose.⁴⁸ Yet whilst he went to India as an Indian nationalist, it was in India he came to recognise that he was not an Indian and that living in Malaya he had been "deculturalised almost completely".⁴⁹ Whilst politically he identified with India, he longed to return to Johor Bahru in Malaya. In particular, Puthuchery felt himself to be "modern", and was an atheist and not a Hindu, which created, for him, a "great gulf" between himself and Indian friends.⁵⁰

(Singapore: Pan-Malayan Students' Union, 1955), 22. This built upon Chinese ideas of *minzu* nationalism, as building a Malayan nation out of a unity of different ethnic groups, Tan Liok Ee, *The Rhetoric of Bangsa and Minzu*.

⁴⁴ Lim Huan Boon, "My Recollections of Learning Malay", (trans. Edgar Liao Bolum) in Tan Jing Quee, Tan Kok Chiang and Hong Lysa (eds), *The May 13 Generation: The Chinese Middle Schools Student Movement and Singapore Politics in the 1950s*, (Petaling Jaya: SIRD, 2011).

⁴⁵ Yeo Kim Wah, "Joining the Communist Underground: The Conversion of English-Educated Radicals to Communism in Singapore, June 1948-January 1951" *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 67, no. 1 (266) (1994): 29-59.

⁴⁶ Dominic Puthuchery, "James Puthuchery, His Friends and His Times".

⁴⁷ Devan Nair, Oral History, Reel 7.

⁴⁸ On the influence of Bose in war-time Malaya see Nilanjana Sengupta, *A Gentleman's Word: The Legacy of Subhas Chandra Bose in Southeast Asia*, Singapore: ISEAS, 2012.

⁴⁹ Puthuchery, Oral History, Reel 1.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*; Puthuchery's atheism would be a constant point of reference throughout his life and was clearly important to his intellectual development. see Daniel Regan, *Intellectuals, Religion & Politics In a Divided Society: Malaysia*, Unpublished PhD. Thesis, Yale University, 1977, 16.

Yet, it was also during his time in India that he would be introduced to Marxism and the communism of the Indian Communist Party – whose dedication he would come to admire.⁵¹ Nevertheless, Puthuchery was aware that his discovery of Marxism, with its internationalist outlook, was also in tension with his sense of Malayan and Indian identity. When a Malayan member of the MCP attended the Southeast Asia Youth Conference in Calcutta in 1947 Puthuchery remembered being opposed to the conference and didn't attend. For Puthuchery, at this time, he perceived a contradiction between his national identity and what he saw as the cosmopolitan thought of the Communists.

I [was] still uninformed in my ideas... torn between my primary preoccupation with National Independence and the Communists', almost cosmopolitan ideology. That of course is a bad word in Communist language. "Cosmopolitan" is a bad word.⁵²

Choosing in 1948 to return to Malaya he joined figures like Devan Nair, A. Samad Ismail and Abdullah Majid in the communist-aligned Anti-British League, formed after the MCP went underground.⁵³ Devan Nair had played a role in the MPAJA during the Japanese Occupation and in the post-war trade union movement through the Pan-Malayan Teachers' Federation. He described in detail how he was introduced to Marxism by PV Sarma.⁵⁴ A. Samad Ismail was a former member of the MNP and GERAM, the Malay student movement. During the war he had been particularly close to Indonesian nationalist networks where he learned of concepts like class struggle and socialism, and of the struggles between the Alimin and Tan Malaka communist factions in Indonesia.⁵⁵ In the aftermath of the Emergency he was also introduced to Marxism by Sarma. M.K. Rajakumar would recall that whilst Samad Ismail was a "Marxist theoretician", Devan Nair was a "Marxist man of action".⁵⁶

Yet as Yeo Kim Wah emphasises of the English-educated in the ABL more generally, an introduction to Marxism and an engagement with the politics of the Emergency didn't imply a complete identification with political communism. He argues that the "English-educated

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Yeo, "Joining the Communist Underground".

⁵⁴ Devan Nair, Oral History, Disc 9.

⁵⁵ Tan Jing Quee, "The Enigma of Samad Ismail", <https://s-pores.com/2009/02/enigma/>

⁵⁶ M.K. Rajakumar, "Malaysia's Jean-Paul Sartre" in Cheah Boon Keng (ed.) *A. Samad Ismail: Journalism & Politics*, (Kuala Lumpur: Utusan Publications & Distributors, 2000) 40

radicals had not accepted communism in the sense that they did not aim to establish a Communist Malaya. What dominated their mind at this time was an independent Malayan nation in which they intended to implement major socialist reforms.”⁵⁷ This suggests an opposition between the political goals of the MCP, and the radical left-wing anti-colonialism of the English-educated. This was a view that James Puthuicheary would later echo in a letter to Lee Kuan Yew: identifying himself in the early 1950s as a communist, yet emphasising his alliance with the Communists for their radical anti-colonialism, without a complete identification with the MCP’s programme.⁵⁸ On Puthuicheary’s part he would see himself as critical of the Communist’s “regimentation” but was unable “to reject their *Weltenshaung* [*sic*] [worldview]”.⁵⁹ As he would argue in 1957: “I have quite often in the past described myself as a ‘Nennian’ socialist,⁶⁰ that is whatever my differences with them [the Communists], and however great my fundamental objections, I was not opposed to them. I continued to be a Marxist and I am still a Marxist in the sense that I accept the Marxian analytical equipment and a great many of the conclusions derived from the use of the equipment as a first hypothesis for my own thinking.”⁶¹ If Puthuicheary and the other English-educated radicals represented, then, the echoes of global communist thought highlighted by Drachewych and McKay, they were not derivative of communist doctrine. Whilst they drew from Marxist thought and communist politics, their politics drew also from broader concerns around socialism and anti-colonial nationalism.

This was evident in the role Puthuicheary played in campus politics in his attempt to radicalise the normally more placid English-educated students, particularly by gaining control of campus societies and publications.⁶² Puthuicheary saw himself at this time as a revolutionary,⁶³ yet his thinking remained closer to the programme of the earlier MDU with its focus on transcending communal divisions in building a Malayan nation. Central to this was

⁵⁷ Yeo, “Joining the Communist Underground”,

⁵⁸ Puthuicheary, “Statement of Political Belief”, 190; Regan, *Intellectuals, Religion & Politics In a Divided Society*, 15; “Conversation with James Puthuicheary at University of Malaya on Wednesday 20th September 1961”, Papers of Peter Hastings, MSS 374, series 2, folder 1, Special Collections, UNSW Canberra

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ The reference is to Pietro Nenni a member of the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) who was willing to work with the Italian Communists.

⁶¹ Ibid. 191

⁶² Yeo Kim Wah, “Student Politics in University of Malaya, 1949-51,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 23, no. 2 (1992): 346-80.

⁶³ Regan, *Intellectuals, Religion & Politics in a Divided Society*, 15-16.

debates around the national language and the national education system as a means of nation-building.⁶⁴ So too did they emphasise the way in which the uneven development of the colonial economy had led to communal divisions, particularly through the exclusion of the Malay peasantry, which required economic rebalancing.⁶⁵ Former MDU leaders like John Eber would visit campus and lecture students on the importance of the Malay language, James Puthuchery and his brother George were known to advocate for Malay language primary school education as a means of nation-building. At the same time students debated how a Malayan identity should be produced out of existing communal identities, central to which was, as with the earlier MDU, the role of the Malay peasantry.⁶⁶ As M.K. Rajakumar would later recall:

The preoccupation of the non-Malay left-wing intellectuals in the university was how to identify themselves with the Malay peasantry. They spoke to each other in English about the need to have Malay as the common language and exploded with rage at the fashionable explanation for poverty that the Malay peasants were lazy. ... I listened, enraptured, as one of the Puthuchery brothers told me he would marry a Malay to show his level of commitment.⁶⁷

This political commitment centred on the English-educated students' commitment to the building of a Malayan nation beyond communalism. Yet it also formed part of what Loh et al. have called the "modernity project" in post-War Singapore – a project premised upon "high modernism" and an attempt to transform society on the basis of "scientific-rational principles".⁶⁸ One premised also upon the role of the engineer and the planner in restructuring society and in the overcoming of existing social divisions through progressive social development.⁶⁹ This high modernism drew upon often totalising categories of class, ethnic community and nation, themes evident in Puthuchery's writings in the period. In a piece in 1949, "The University and Student in Society" he would argue that Malaya's students

⁶⁴ Bayly and Harper, *Forgotten Wars*, 201.

⁶⁵ AMCJA-PUTERA, "Analysis of the Communal Question in Relation to the Constitutional Issue" [1947] quoted in Ian Morrison, "Aspects of the Racial Problem in Malaya," *Pacific Affairs* 22, no. 3 (1949): 239-53. John Eber, "The Malay Peasant", *The Straits Times*, 1 March 1948.

⁶⁶ Yeo, "Student Politics in University of Malaya, 1949-51".

⁶⁷ Rajakumar, "Malaysia's Jean-Paul Sartre", 40

⁶⁸ Loh et al. *The University Socialist Club*, 27

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*; Chakrabarty, "Legacies of Bandung".

had a crucial role to play to “set the pace for the progress and development” of Malaya and to “collect and crystalize, give shape and form to the conscious and unconscious yearnings of the people”. That is, to help shape a Malayan nation from above by turning its people into a united “national will” and a “common culture”.⁷⁰ This also expressed a particularly historical and developmental mode of thought, one expressed in A. Samad Ismail’s writings on the future development of the Malay language in 1953.⁷¹

Whilst Puthuchery was detained in 1951 by the British under the Emergency Regulations, alongside the other English-educated radicals, this concern with modernist nation-building continued with the formation of the University Socialist Club in 1953. Yet the club represented different socialist strands. Sidney Woodhull, who had been influenced by Gandhi and Nehru but who had turned to Marxism-Leninism for a politics which transcended racial divisions, represented a more radical approach.⁷² Others represented a more moderate social democratic platform. Yet if approaches diverged, central to the club were the earlier concerns with socialism and nationalism which had emerged out of the MDU. The founding statement of the society declared “Today a new danger threatens Malaya, Communalism”, and the theme of communal divisions, as well as the plight of the Malay peasantry were important themes in the Club’s journal, *Fajar*.⁷³ This emphasised questions of communal relations, class divisions and economic development, which expressed a more historical and developmentalist form of thought.

Yet beyond discussions of a future Malayan nation, the journal also displayed the radical engagement of the English-educated with more international anti-colonial and socialist thought. This was evident in *Fajar*’s lead piece in February 1954 “Aggression in Asia”, co-written by James Puthuchery, which would criticise the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) and identify with colonial struggles across Africa and Asia: “We are therefore comrades of the African struggling for the most elementary human rights, of the Indo-Chinese fighting for his freedom. Our enemies are those who would deny us these

⁷⁰ Puthuchery, “The University and the Student in Society”, 200-203.

⁷¹ A. Samad Ismail, “The Future of the Malay Language” [1953] in Cheah Boon Keng (ed.) *A. Samad Ismail: Journalism & Politics*, Kuala Lumpur: Utusan Publications & Distributors, 2000.

⁷² Woodhull, Oral History, Reel 1.

⁷³ Loh et al., *The University Socialist Club and the Contest for Malaya*, chap. 2 & 4.

rights.”⁷⁴ Puthucheary in particular would write on the situation in British Guyana, a colony whose plantation system and racial division of labour, he argued, mirrored those of Malaya. With the rise of Cheddi Jagan, himself at the intersection of anti-colonialism and international communism, and his subsequent suppression by the British, Puthucheary came to highlight the limitations of a more reformist path to post-colonial independence,

Whatever the future holds ... we are faced with a theoretic[al] question. What is the law of social change? Is it possible without bloodshed and war? Will colonialism and its economic order pass away peacefully when the majority of people of any area will it? ... Fundamental social changes seem not possible within the framework of democracy as practiced, particularly so when metropolitan powers are experimenting with it in their colonies. If this is true SOCIALISTS ALL OVER THE WORLD MUST START THINKING IN NEW TERMS.⁷⁵

So too would Puthucheary, in a public letter addressed to Alex Josey in *Fajar*, express his opposition to the more moderate socialists within the Asian Socialist Conference.⁷⁶ Against this social democratic path Puthucheary’s vision took the form of a radically anti-colonial nationalism, which engaged with global socialist and communist thought.

Conclusion

Engaging with earlier communist and socialist thinking on the national question, left-wing positions in early-1950s Singapore developed through two different, yet connected, tendencies. The Chinese-educated through figures like Lim Chin Siong came to emphasise earlier multi-national and multi-lingual ideas of Malayan nationalism, socialist struggles against exploitation, ideas of popular anti-colonialism, ideas of Afro-Asianism and internationalist human rights which linked up Malayan struggles against the British with broader struggles across the Third World. This emphasised the unity of different groups in Malaya against British colonial rule. The English-educated, on the other hand, came to emphasise a more programmatic approach to questions of nationalism and political development in Malaya. Influenced by Marxist social thought they were radically anti-

⁷⁴ “Aggression in Asia”, *Fajar*, no. 7, 10 May 1954.

⁷⁵ James Puthucheary, “Diabetic Democracy in British Guiana”, *Fajar*, no. 3, 2 October 1953; “What Next?”, *Fajar*, no. 4, 8 December 1953.

⁷⁶ James Puthucheary, “Letters To The Editor”, *Fajar*, no. 5, 10 March 1954.

colonial, and engaged with struggles across the Third World, yet were concerned too with questions of nation-building, referencing more modernist concerns with social and historical development and with categories of class, nation and communalism. If the discourse of the Chinese-Left was particularly voluntarist⁷⁷ the English-educated evidenced broader developmentalist concerns. Yet these concerns with nation-building drew upon broader international ideas of anti-colonialism and socialism. As this thesis will highlight in Chapter 3 these divergent approaches became the subject of debates on the national question in the late-1950s, yet from 1954 the Left in Singapore became preoccupied not with the national question but with engagement with broader Afro-Asian networks, in which both groups played a role.

⁷⁷ Julia Lovell has argued that Maoism was particularly voluntarist ideology, emphasising the importance of popular will over material and economic conditions. Julia Lovell, *Maoism: A Global History*, London: Random House, 2019.

Chapter 2: Engaging Afro-Asia (1954-56)

The meeting of both streams became particularly evident over 1954: in the struggles over the National Service Ordinance, which saw the students of the University Socialist Club supporting the protests of the Chinese students, and the Chinese students supporting the University Socialist Club during the *Fajar* trial.¹ At the same time prominent English-educated students like James Puthuchery, Sidney Woodhull and Jamit Singh would join the Chinese-dominated union movement in Singapore, with Puthuchery joining the Singapore Factory and Shop Workers' Union led by Lim Chin Siong. These forms of cooperation emphasised struggles against colonial rule in Malaya, as well as opposition to the Emergency Regulations and the repression of Chinese students and workers.² This in turn linked the *minzu* nationalism of the radical Chinese-educated with the concern of the radical English-educated to see that "all cultural trends flourished" in opposition to colonialism.³ With the founding of the People's Action Party (PAP) in November 1954 these groups joined with the English-educated professionals around the Council of Joint Action – figures such as Lee Kuan Yew, Goh Keng Swee, S. Rajaratnam – to found a new party which emphasised opposition to British colonial rule.⁴

In this movement the radical English-educated played an important role. Students of the University Socialist Club were said to have made opposition to the Emergency Regulations central to the party's platform (something key to recruiting the Chinese-educated), with James Puthuchery having a "leading voice" in the shaping of the PAP manifesto.⁵ Figures like A. Samad Ismail, James Puthuchery and Sidney Woodhull were seen as intermediaries between the student and trade union movement and the party elite.⁶ Beyond the party's

¹ Loh et al., *The University Socialist Club*, 61-64.

² An account by George L.P. Weaver, a representative of the ICFTU of the SFSWU gives an important account of the innerworkings of the SSFWU and of Puthuchery (identified as James Pondicherry) and Lim Chin Siong. Weaver, "Report on the Singapore Labour Movement".

³ Woodhull, Oral History, Disc 4.

⁴ S. Rajaratnam, "PAP's First Ten Years (1964)" in Chan Heng Chee and Obaid Ul Haq (eds.) *The Prophetic and the Political: Selected Speeches and Writings of S. Rajaratnam*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987, 26-30.

⁵ A. Samad Ismail, "Our James" in Puthuchery & Jomo, *No Cowardly Past*, 59.

⁶ Samad Ismail argued that Lee used him as a "a sort of telephone operator to get in touch with the Chinese Left", which often produced misunderstandings between both sides. But through this he produced a strong friendship with Lim Chin Siong. James R. Rush, "Abdul Samad Ismail" in *The Ramon Magsaysay Awards 1994–1995* (Manila: Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation, 2003), 120.

approach to the Emergency Regulations, the PAP also supported issues which reflected the anti-colonialism of the Chinese-educated radical left: championing the causes of vernacular education, a multilingual Legislative Assembly and trade union rights.

In doing so, the more complex questions of nationalism and nation-building in Malaya came to take a backseat. This was evident in the writings of James Puthuchery on the trade union movement over 1954-55. Writings which emphasised the role of workers' unity and trade unionism in the anti-colonial struggle, but which placed no emphasis upon Malayan nationalism or the question of communalism that the English-educated socialists had earlier emphasised.⁷ This was also evident in the early platform of the PAP which was premised upon the idea that "the ending of colonial rule would automatically bring about the emergence of a united Malayan society".⁸ Yet this de-problematisation of questions of nationalism and communalism was also linked to a more internationalist focus on anti-colonialism, one which connected the party with broader Afro-Asian trends.

"Bandung's echo in a colonial metropolis"⁹

As Sunil Amrith has argued, central to the internationalist focus of the Singaporean Left in the 1950s was the emergence of Afro-Asianism and the Afro-Asian Conference held in Bandung, Indonesia in 1955.¹⁰ The immediate context for the conference was two meetings in 1954 by Indonesia, Burma, Ceylon, India and Pakistan, known as the Colombo Powers, who proposed an Asian-African conference in response to the founding of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO).¹¹ Beyond the immediate diplomatic context, the Conference grew out of longer traditions of international anti-imperialist networks and thought. Sukarno would root the conference in the League Against Imperialism and Colonialism of the 1920s, others referenced the Asian Relations Conference in Delhi in 1948.¹² The Conference was also key in expanding visions of a post-imperial world order. As Christopher Lee has argued, the Conference, "represented a coalition of new nations that possessed the autonomy to enact a

⁷ James Puthuchery, "The Growth and Development of the Trade Union Movement after the Elections" [1955] and "The Struggle for Unity" [1956] in *No Cowardly Past*.

⁸ Rajaratnam, "PAP's First Ten Years (1964)", 29; "The Tasks Ahead", *Petir*, vol. 1, no. 3&4, Aug/Sept 1956.

⁹ Amrith, "Asian internationalism: Bandung's echo in a colonial metropolis"

¹⁰ Amrith, "Internationalism and Political Pluralism in Singapore 1950-1963"

¹¹ Lee, "Between a Moment and an Era", 10.

¹² Chakrabarty, "Legacies of Bandung", 51.

novel world order committed to human rights, self-determination, and world peace. It set the stage for a new historical agency, to envision and make the world anew.”¹³

Singapore was itself not an official representative of the conference, but both the PAP and the Labour Front sent their own delegations,¹⁴ with the PAP declaring the Conference "a milestone on the road back to self-respect for millions of Asians and Africans".¹⁵ The PAP's representatives, Samad Ismail and Woodhull, came from the radical wing of the party.¹⁶ Samad Ismail was well connected in Indonesia from his meetings with Indonesian exiles in the 1940s and his friendship with Adam Malik,¹⁷ and at the conference Samad would further expand his networks, helping to organise the Afro-Asian Journalists Association.¹⁸ Other representatives also attended from Malaya. Burhanuddin Al-Helmy who had retreated from politics in the early 1950s re-emerged to represent the Kongres Pemuda Melayu (Malay Youths Congress) a group of Malay political parties, union groups and cultural societies. Burhanuddin's presence at the conference referenced his own internationalist connections, and upon his return he would situate his presence at Bandung on behalf of the now defunct PUTERA, the proscribed MNP, as a representative of the "1947 Malayan delegation of the Delhi Conference", and the Kongres Pemuda Melayu.¹⁹ Others such as John Eber and Abdullah Majid,²⁰ then based in London, also sought to attend as representatives of the Malayan Forum,²¹ John Eber would soon become the secretary general of the Movement for Colonial Freedom in London.

As Amrith notes, the conference itself coincided "almost to the week, with the inauguration of democratic politics" in Singapore, through the Rendel Constitution.²² Yet as

¹³ Lee, "Between a Moment and an Era", 15

¹⁴ For the context see Nicholas Tarling, "'Ah-Ah': Britain and the Bandung Conference of 1955," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 23, no. 1 (1992): 74-111.

¹⁵ "Three Malaysians Off to Bandung ...And Two Are PAP Men", *Singapore Standard*, 16 April 1955.

¹⁶ Woodhull, Oral History, Disc 3, A. Samad Ismail & S. Woodhull, "Statement Issued by Malayan Representatives Attending the Afro-Asian Conference at Bandoeng, Indonesia", 19 April 1955, Stanford Auxiliary Library, DS33.3 .A87 1955B F.

¹⁷ A noted Indonesian nationalist, founder of the Murba Party, in the 1950s the head of ANTARA, the national news agency, and future Foreign Minister of Indonesia.

¹⁸ *Asian-African Conference Bulletin*, no. 9, 24 April 1955.

¹⁹ "Burhanuddin Talks of his Bandung Trip", *The Straits Times*, 20 June 1955.

²⁰ "Eber to Attend Bandoeng Talks", *The Singapore Free Press*, 21 March 1955.

²¹ A Malayan student organisation based in London, which formed a space for progressive students largely influenced by Fabian socialism, to discuss Malaya's political future.

²² Amrith, "Internationalism and Political Pluralism in Singapore 1950-1963", 37-38.

he highlights this temporal overlap was also reflected in the ideas of anti-colonialism being pursued in both Singapore and at Bandung, and the way in which Singapore's trade union and student movement, with its attacks on the Emergency Regulations, on the discrimination against vernacular education and against SEATO, identified with the values of the Conference.²³ As Amrith notes, the Chinese student organisations sought to request the conference to "intercede on their behalf... to give them freedom of organisation",²⁴ whilst Lim Chin Siong would argue in the Legislative Assembly in the same period for the equal treatment of all vernacular language groups in a way which, Amrith argues, "embraced the possibilities of Bandung, seeing in the language of Afro-Asianism a reflection of their own local concerns".²⁵ Here, the values of self-determination and human rights reflected at Bandung came to justify arguments for educational rights and multi-racial solidarity in Singapore, whilst so too did calls for multi-racial solidarity in Singapore come to form part of a broader solidarity across Afro-Asia. This would be evident in the impact that Bandung would have on progressive Malay writers in Singapore. Usman Awang would pen, after the conference, a poem entitled "*Khabar Dari Asia*" [News from Asia] in which he would invoke the vision of Afro-Asia, "A new life begins, brilliantly illuminated/Two continents united in a single heart:/Afro-Asia—our devotion is to you", and would see in its central message values of equality, "The sun spreads giant wings of light/Human beings are equal, whatever their colour/Black skins, white faces, equal all".²⁶

Such overlaps were reflected in Sukarno's own speech to the conference. It was a speech which emphasised voluntarism and the importance of "struggle and activity", in which ideas of self-determination weren't only the provenance of nation-states but also of people's control over the societies in which they live.²⁷ So too did it emphasise values of unity and solidarity. Differences based on culture, race, skin colour or religion didn't, he would argue, divide. What divided was a variety of desires, but the peoples of the conference were united

²³ Ibid. 39.

²⁴ Ibid., 40.

²⁵ Ibid., 41.

²⁶ Usman Awang, "Khabar Dari Asia: Persidangan Afro-Asia," [1955] [News From Asia: Afro-Asian Conference] in Oliver Rice and Abdullah Majid (ed. & trans.) *Modern Malay Verse 1946-61*, (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1963), 2-3.

²⁷ George Kahin, *The Asian-African Conference: Bandung, Indonesia, April 1955*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1956) 42.

in their detestation of colonialism and racialism, and united in a will to promote peace.²⁸ This unity in diversity also came in Sukarno's speech to overlap unity within the nation with broader Afro-Asian solidarity. Indonesia was, Sukarno argued, made up of many faiths and ethnic groups, but its belief in toleration and its motto of "Unity in Diversity" held the nation together and served as a model for broader co-operation beyond its borders. Such themes were also reflected in the final communique of the Conference, with its "Respect for fundamental human rights" and the United Nations Charter and its "Recognition of the equality of all races and of the equality of all nations big and small."²⁹ We see in this voluntarist focus on anti-colonial struggle, unity in diversity and on the language of international rights and equality an intersection with Lim's own thought around unity, non-violence and popular sovereignty in the early 1950s.³⁰

Such an intersection between Malayan anti-colonial thought and Afro-Asia was also evident in the statement issued by the PAP at the conference, signed by the party's representatives Samad Ismail and Sidney Woodhull.³¹ It emphasised the central tenets of anti-colonialism in Singapore: opposition to the Emergency Regulations, opposition to the anti-communist war in Malaya, and condemnation of the "paramilitary force" now ruling Malaya. So too did they attack the education policy of the British and its discrimination against vernacular languages, as well as recalling the National Service agitations. Finally, they emphasised the internationalist-tenor of their politics, calling on other Afro-Asian countries to work for the end of the war in Malaya, to help establish a provisional government in Malaya "under responsible international supervision" before free and fair elections could be held, and to seek the withdrawal of all troops.³²

As Amrith notes, reports of Bandung back in Singapore were significant, and formed part of an ongoing engagement with Afro-Asia on the Left.³³ Yet it is also important to note that Bandung sparked a resurgence of anti-colonialism above the causeway. A figure like Burhanuddin Al-Helmy, who had introduced his own proposals to the conference would be

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 49

³⁰ Thum Ping Tjin, "The Malayan vision of Lim Chin Siong".

³¹ A. Samad Ismail & S. Woodhull, "Statement Issued by Malayan Representatives Attending the Afro-Asian Conference at Bandoeng, Indonesia", 19 April 1955, Stanford Auxiliary Library, DS33.3 .A87 1955B F.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Amrith, "Internationalism and Political Pluralism in Singapore 1950-1963", 39-40.

lifted aloft at the airport upon his return to chants of “*merdeka*” (independence) and would later tour the country spreading the message of Bandung.³⁴ For Burhanuddin, as Amrith highlights in Singapore, the message of Bandung directly related to the situation in Malaya, calling for Malaysians to “forget racialism and all kinds of ‘isms’ and give primary concern to the achievement of complete independence”.³⁵ Soon after a new left-wing Malay nationalist party, Parti Rakyat was founded, building upon the old legacy of the MNP, and emphasising a radical anti-colonial vision, one, like Lim Chin Siong, influenced by Malaya’s inclusion within a broader Afro-Asian movement. Burhanuddin’s speech to the Party’s conference would reference his trip to Bandung.³⁶

The Student Movement

This internationalist turn on the Malayan Left was also reflected in student engagement with Afro-Asia, particularly through the Asian-African Students’ Conference held in Bandung in 1956.³⁷ As Loh et al. suggest, this period was one of broader internationalist engagement by student groups in Singapore. Students around the University Socialist Club would visit the All-India Students’ Federation in India and send delegates to the International Students Conference (ISC) in 1953 and 1955 before moving towards co-operation with the left-wing International Union of Students (IUS).³⁸ The contingent to the Asian-African conference was made up of students from the different educational streams: the moderate University of Malaya Students’ Union (UMSU) whose student paper would reference the conference as part of the rise of a new Asia and Africa “imbued with the spirit of mutual cooperation and friendship”,³⁹ the Gabungan Pelajar-Pelajar Melayu Semenanjung (Peninsular Malay Students’ Union, GPMS), the Singapore Chinese Middle School Student’s Union (SCMSSU) whose delegation was led by Soon Loh Boon⁴⁰ who had been particularly involved with student and workers protests and the Nanyang University Student Union delegation led by

³⁴ “Independence: It is certain”, *The Straits Times*, 15 June 1955

³⁵ “Burhanuddin Talks of his Bandoeng Trip”

³⁶ Burhanuddin Al-Helmy, “Pidato Tiga di Kongres Parti Rakyat” [1956], in Kamaruddin Jaffar (ed.) *Dr. Burhanuddin Al-Helmy: Politik Melayu Dan Islam*, (Yayasan Anda, 1980) 129-144.

³⁷ Wildan Sena Utama, “A Forgotten Bandung: The Afro-Asian Students’ Conference and the Call for Decolonisation” in Carolien Stolte and Su Lin Lewis (eds.), *The Lives of Cold War Afro-Asianism* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2022), chap 11. Forthcoming.

³⁸ Loh et al. *The University Socialist Club*, 110-111.

³⁹ “45 Countries will be Represented at Bandung”, *The Malayan Undergrad*, 20 May 1956.

⁴⁰ Soon Loh Boon was a prominent student activist who was alleged to have communist connections. He would be detained by the British between 1956-64.

Lim Huan Boon⁴¹ who was also engaged with radical student activism.⁴² Tan Kok Chiang, a student at Nanyang University, has described how over 1956 he joined the delegation of the Conference followed by “various activities in support of workers’ strikes, protests against the arrests and detentions of workers and students, the efforts to appeal the banning of the student union and others”.⁴³ Attempts by the local press to denounce the Conference as communist dominated would be rejected by members of the University Socialist Club in *Fajar*, declaring that it was an “ingenious attempt” to push the government into “preventing our students from meeting their brethren in Asia and Africa” in criticising colonial rule.⁴⁴

As Wildan Sena Utama notes, the idea for the conference developed out of a meeting at the Federation of Indonesian University Student Organisations in 1952, which proposed an international meeting of students to discuss common problems faced by colonialism. Later discussions in 1953 proposed an Asian-Arab Students’ Conference, building upon connections between Indonesian and Arab students, before expanding into the Prague Statement issued by the Indonesian, Indian, Iranian, Burmese and Lebanese delegations of the World Student Congress in Warsaw in 1953, a conference sponsored by the IUS. The statement argued that students could play an important role in the struggle for national independence, in promoting the national cultures of Asian peoples and in challenging the oppressive conditions under which students’ studied – a legacy of colonial rule. Inspired by the example of Bandung the students came to expand the geographical horizon of the conference to include students from across Africa and Asia.⁴⁵

In total the Malaysians sent 5 delegates and 35 observers, and student engagement at the Conference contributed towards the anti-colonial activism of the Left. The students argued that, beyond unifying Malayan students with Afro-Asia, the conference would also allow the attendees of Chinese, Malay and English schools to build a friendship between Malaya’s races, overlapping local and global forms of Afro-Asian solidarity.⁴⁶ In advance of the

⁴¹ Lim Huan Boon would go on to play a prominent role in the Barisan Sosialis.

⁴² Lim Chin Joo, “The Singapore Chinese Middle School Students’ Union: A Lost Echo of an Era” trans. Melissa Gay in Huay Leng Lee, et al. *Education-at-Large: Student Life and Activities in Singapore 1945-1965*. (Singapore: World Scientific, 2013) 241.

⁴³ Tan Kok Chiang, *My Nantah Story: The Rise and Demise of the People’s University*, (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2017) 29.

⁴⁴ “Malicious English Press”, *Fajar*, no. 31, 28 June 1956.

⁴⁵ Wildan Sena Utama, “A Forgotten Bandung”, Forthcoming.

⁴⁶ Amrith, “Internationalism and Political Pluralism in Singapore 1950-1963”, 41-42.

event, at a meeting to commemorate the May 13 event,⁴⁷ middle school students called for the SCMSSU to “present a memorandum to the forthcoming Afro-Asian Students’ Conference and complaints about the plight of students under colonial rule” and “authorising the SCMSSU to establish amicable relations with Asian and African middle school students”.⁴⁸ At the conference the SCMSSU would highlight the “plight of the Chinese schools’ students in Singapore, their struggle in the face of oppression by the colonial government and the pursuit of equal treatment for vernacular education”.⁴⁹ Whilst the students emphasised the need, in common with other Afro-Asian countries, to develop their national culture, advocating the role of Malay as the national language yet alongside the right of other communities to their cultures and education systems.⁵⁰ As a national vision this emphasised the need to build in Malaya a united Malayan nationality, yet one which continued to respect Malaya’s cultural and linguistic diversity.

Support for minority vernacular education wasn’t however a theme which dominated the conference. The Communique would give emphasis only to education in national (non-European) languages,⁵¹ highlighting in particular the cases of Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco where national languages and culture had been suppressed.⁵² This built upon the argument at Bandung, and repeated at the conference, that colonialism had suppressed the development of national cultures and languages, which now required empowering.⁵³ Yet this said nothing of the right of national minorities to mother tongue education in multi-cultural and multi-lingual societies. It is notable that in Indonesia emphasis had already been given to Bahasa Indonesia as the unifying language of education, whilst in 1956 debates were ongoing in Ceylon over the “Sinhalese Only” policy and in India over the issue of linguistic states, which made the question of minority languages particularly politicised. This came to overlook the appeals that Malayan activists were making to an international right to vernacular education.

⁴⁷ Denoting 13 May 1954 when Chinese students resisted the imposition of national service.

⁴⁸ Lim Chin Joo, “The Singapore Chinese Middle School Students’ Union”, 241.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 243.

⁵⁰ *The Asian-African Students’ Conference* (Indonesian National Preparatory Committee for the Asian-African Students’ Conference, 1956) 109.

⁵¹ “Keputusan-Keputusan KMAA (KMAA Decisions)”, *Harian Rakyat*, 9 June 1956

⁵² *Asian African Students’ Conference*, (Prague: International Union of Students, 1957), 3, 14

⁵³ “From A-A Conf Final Comunique”, *Harian Rakyat*, 29 May 1956

Nevertheless, the Conference did address themes of cultural pluralism, principally in its call for cultural cooperation between students across Afro-Asia,⁵⁴ as well as its attack on racial discrimination and segregation in education.⁵⁵ So too did Sukarno address the conference, again emphasising the cultural and racial divisions between the students but arguing that this didn't diminish what they had in common.⁵⁶ Such themes were also evident in the coverage of the Conference by the *Harian Rakyat*, the newspaper of the Indonesian Communist Party which supported Sukarno's agenda, and which extensively covered the conference in English and Indonesian. The speeches of the conference were all delivered, the *Harian Rakyat* argued, in the spirit of "unity and cooperation". "This is the Asian-African language" one which they argued was not derived from mere courtesy but from the "deep roots" of the common problems that Asian and African countries faced, principally the common experience of colonialism, which could act as the source of unity.⁵⁷

This was highlighted in the multi-cultural nature of Indonesia's own Revolution, as well as in the unity of classes it had relied upon.⁵⁸ When a peasant delegation entered the student conference to "convey their solidarity and friendship by offering fruits" the chairmen of the delegations "expressed their gratitude and feelings of emotion and stated that they did not have the slightest idea that the AASC would resound to the villages. This [is] a concrete effort of preserving unity and we are very happy with it, they said".⁵⁹ This, again, echoed the radicalism of the student and trade union movement in Singapore, with its emphasis upon anti-colonial struggles from below, transcending class and communal divisions.

Afro-Asian Divisions in Singapore

The conference itself ended by more directly opposing colonialism, and supporting the struggles of the Algerian and Kenyan peoples, the application of the UN Charter of Human Rights to all peoples, and invoked the Bandung Spirit as a basis for Afro-Asian cooperation.⁶⁰ As Amrith then highlights, both the Student Conference and the earlier Bandung Conference

⁵⁴ *Asian African Students' Conference*, 15

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 16

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 23

⁵⁷ "The Asian African Language", *Harian Rakyat*, 31 May 1956.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ "Colonialism Condemned Strongly, Bandung Peasants Offered Fruits", *Harian Rakyat*, 4 June 1956

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

continued to form a dominant point of reference on the Malayan Left into the 1960s – a tendency expressed in student support for Algerian independence⁶¹ and in the mass protests condemning the death of Patrice Lumumba, which brought together students, workers, as well as hawkers,⁶² the role of hawkers mirroring in many ways the Afro-Asian solidarity of the peasants of Bandung. Such movements evidenced a popular internationalist tendency in Singapore, one also identified by Curless in the trade union movement in Singapore⁶³ and by Harper in the speeches of Lim Chin Siong, framed in Afro-Asian terms and which related local events to those across Afro-Asia.⁶⁴ This tendency emphasised the commonality of anti-colonial struggles, solidarity with Afro-Asia and sought to transcend local ethnic and class divisions in the name of popular anti-colonialism.⁶⁵ This formed what Amrith has termed an “everyday cosmopolitanism” which moved anti-colonialism beyond a narrow, elite-oriented, nationalist frame and towards forms of international solidarity from below. It also overlapped international forms of Afro-Asian solidarity with inter-communal forms of solidarity within Malaya.⁶⁶

Yet if these connections emphasised the “moral economy of Afro-Asianism” on the Singapore Left, Amrith goes on to highlight the divergent receptions of Bandung in Singapore.⁶⁷ If for the radical Left around Lim Chin Siong Bandung entailed a language of anti-colonial struggle, popular unity, international solidarity from below and a global language of rights, for the leadership of the PAP around Lee Kuan Yew it came to constitute a vision of post-colonial state sovereignty and economic development. For Amrith this marks the two different faces of Bandung and marks two distinct approaches to politics on the Singapore Left, one centred on unity and popular sovereignty, and the other centred on the power of the post-colonial developmental state. on the management of ethnic communities as fixed categories and on planning. This resonates with broader approaches to decolonisation which

⁶¹ “Abbas Thanks Students”, *The Malayan Undergrad* 12, no. 5, February 1961.

⁶² *Fajar* ran a special issue on Lumumba’s death, see “Lumumba is Dead—Murdered!”, *Fajar*, Special Lumumba issue, 21 February 1961.

⁶³ Curless, ““The people need civil liberties””, 54.

⁶⁴ Harper, “Lim Chin Siong and the ‘Singapore Story’”, 16

⁶⁵ Amrith, “Internationalism and Political Pluralism in Singapore 1950-1963”, 45.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 40.

have emphasised the ways in which more internationalist, pluralist and horizontal forms of politics came to be marginalised by political elites and nation-states.⁶⁸

Yet as subsequent chapters will show, relations between different political and internationalist tendencies in Singapore and the Federation were more diverse and relied upon broader intellectual legacies than have been acknowledged. James Puthucheary and those other English-educated radicals around him were central to this process.

⁶⁸ Chakrabarty, "Legacies of Bandung"; Vijay Prasad, *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World* (New York: The New Press, 2008)

Chapter 3: Reassessing Anti-Colonialism in Malaya (1956-60)

The Chinese middle school riots in 1956 resulted in the detention in Changi Prison Camp of many students and many of the Middle Road trade unionists on the PAP Left. Detained from 1956 to 1959 were Lim Chin Siong, Fong Swee Suan, Sidney Woodhull, James Puthuachery and Devan Nair, as well as Soon Loh Boon of the SCMSU.¹ It was during this period that the detainees would start to reassess the earlier wave of anti-colonial struggle to which they had been central. This was particularly evident amongst the English-educated detainees: James Puthuachery, Sidney Woodhull and Devan Nair.

Such a reassessment was necessitated by new developments both globally and locally. The first was the repression of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution by the Soviets, which reached the left-wing detainees in Singapore. Puthuachery would describe how himself, Woodhull and Devan Nair were enthusiastic about the student revolt and the development of communism with a human face in Hungary² and in a letter to Lee Kuan Yew, how Hungary had helped in “the sweeping away of some of my illusions and made re-assessment less difficult”.³ Whilst Puthuachery had certainly broken with the Malayan Communist Party in 1951, what was at stake for the detainees was the idea of world socialism. For Woodhull, the earlier denouncement of Stalin at the 20th Party Congress was “psychologically... a very, very damaging experience” and the “first rude shock ideologically”. The invasion of Hungary too was a “shattering experience” which began to induce a “serious disillusionment and disenchantment with the Marxist cause”, generating debates amongst the detainees over “the very basis of Marxist tenets”.⁴

Yet aside from Hungary three other issues proved central. The first was the progress of the Federation of Malaya towards independence without Singapore over 1957. This was an event which transformed the Malayan anti-colonial struggle from one which sought to mobilise all Malaysians against the British, to one which had to acknowledge the difference between a colonial-controlled Singapore and a Federation governed by a popularly elected,

¹ “Who’s Who—The Top 15 Names”, *The Straits Times*, 28 October 1956.

² Puthuachery, Oral History, Reel 10.

³ Puthuachery, “Statement of Political Belief”, 191.

⁴ Woodhull, Oral History, Reel 5.

yet right-wing, government. The second, and related issue, was the question, earlier repressed by the Singapore Left,⁵ of communalism in the anti-colonial struggle, and the argument, growing amongst the detainees, around the overly Chinese focus of the left in Singapore and in the Federation, at the expense of the Malays of the Peninsula.⁶ With independence for the Federation, it would be argued, this sense of communal bias would then challenge the basis for a united, socialist and independent Malaya. So too was there the argument amongst the detainees, particularly Devan Nair and, according to Nair, James Puthuchery, that the earlier wave of protests and strikes had been too aggressive and had forced the British to intervene, necessitating a less radical approach to anti-colonialism in Singapore.⁷ These three points came to challenge the radicalism and assumptions of the student and trade union-Left in the early 1950s, so too did it challenge the more internationalist assumptions which linked Malaya's anti-colonial struggle with those across Afro-Asia.

Such views were being expressed in September 1957, weeks after Malaya's Independence, in a statement signed by the detainees, and co-drafted by James Puthuchery, "The Road to Socialism in an Independent Malaya".⁸ With the independence of the Federation all justification was removed, they argued, for the armed struggle of the MCP against colonialism in the Federation. To continue the struggle would be to fight against a popularly elected government. Moreover, the fact that the support for the MCP remained significantly Chinese, and the support for the Federal government, significantly Malay, meant that continued struggle would only exacerbate existing communal tensions. At the same time they would attack "infantile Left-wing elements in Singapore" who by ignoring the national basis of socialist struggle and emphasising anti-colonialism via independence for Singapore were said to be "join[ing] forces with communal Right-wing groups" and "surrendering the interests of the indivisible unity of Malayan nationalism to communal prejudices and suspicions."⁹ Beyond anti-colonialism there lay the question of nationalism and beyond nationalism there lay the historical unity of Malaya: "It is just as intelligent to ask for an independent Singapore

⁵ Woodhull, Oral History, Reel 5.

⁶ Nair, Oral History, Reel 14. Puthuchery, "On the Future of Socialism in Malaya", 184.

⁷ Nair, Oral History, Reel 14.

⁸ "The Road to Socialism in an Independent Malaya" in Lee, *The Battle for Merger*, 190-196. For information on drafting see: Nair, Oral History, Reel 17

⁹ "The Road to Socialism in an Independent Malaya" 194.

as it would be for a man's right hand to ask for independence from the rest of his body". The two territories were, they argued, "organically linked".¹⁰

These national visions relied upon the earlier ideas of Malayan nationalism on the English-educated Left, yet they also expressed a reassessment of the relationship between socialist thought and nationalism in Malaya, important to which was the thought of James Puthukey. This was reflected in his output whilst in prison between 1956-59: "The Road to Socialism in an Independent Malaya", co-signed by the other detainees; a letter he would write to Lee Kuan Yew in September 1957, later republished in Lee's *Battle for Merger* as his "Statement of Political Belief";¹¹ a letter to his friend Wang Gungwu in 1958 setting out his "revisionist views";¹² as well as a series of writings on socialist economic thought in Malaya, most notably in his *Ownership and Control in the Malayan Economy* which interrogated the role of foreign capital in the Malayan economy and its political effects.¹³ These views were also expressed in a speech he would give on his release in 1959 to the University Socialist Club, entitled "Socialism in a Multi-Racial Society", also republished in *Petir* the journal of the People's Action Party¹⁴ and a later talk "Socialism Yesterday and Today" given to the University Socialist Club in 1960.¹⁵ What is common to all of these texts is an argument that the situation in Malaya entailed a need to reevaluate socialist ideas of anti-colonial struggle. This highlighted, on the one hand, Puthukey's engagement with other internationalist forms, namely global communist and socialist thought, and on the other, a position which suggested that anti-colonialism and socialism in Malaya differed from other experiences across the Third World, highlighting differences with anti-colonial struggles across Afro-Asia.

This was most clearly outlined in a letter to Wang Gungwu in 1958, "On the Future of Socialism in Malaya". The letter, which set out his "revisionist views"¹⁶ on socialism in Malaya,

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Puthukey, "Statement of Political Belief". Lee Kuan Yew requested from Puthukey to republish the letter in *Battle for Merger* in 1962, a book in which Lee detailed the communist conspiracy in Singapore. Puthukey agreed because he was willing to stand by what he wrote. See "James Puthukey's Statement of Political Belief" in Lee, *Battle for Merger*, 196-203. Puthukey, Oral History, Disc 10.

¹² Puthukey, "On the Future of Socialism in Malaya".

¹³ James Puthukey, *Ownership and Control in the Malayan Economy: A Study of the Structure of Ownership and Control and Its Effects on the Development of Secondary Industries and Economic Growth in Malaya and Singapore*, (Petaling Jaya: INSAN, 2004 [1960]).

¹⁴ Puthukey, "Socialism in a Multi-Racial Society"; see *Petir*, vol. 3, no. 3, 18 September 1959, 6-7.

¹⁵ James Puthukey, "Puthukey on Socialism Yesterday and Today", *Fajar*, vol. 2, no. 9, June-July 1960

¹⁶ Puthukey, "On the Future of Socialism in Malaya", 187.

argued that traditional socialist thought was inadequate to grasp the national and communal dimensions of the Malayan struggle. The traditional socialist position formed what Puthuchery would term the “classical scheme of things”¹⁷, which, in the context of the domination of territories by foreign capital, argued that socialists should “rally all classes and peoples against foreign capital, and in the process achieve independence”.¹⁸ This model had been successful, he would suggest, in the case of India and China and such a thesis “has been the core of socialist thinking in Malaya for both communists and democratic socialists”, yet in Malaya Puthuchery would now see this thesis as problematic.¹⁹

Central to this was the question of unity within the anti-colonial struggle, which brought Puthuchery to the relationship between socialism and nationalism. Whilst from the Third International onwards nationalism in the colonial world had been mobilised as a means to unify progressive forces against colonialism, in Malaya Puthuchery saw the basis of national unity as elusive. As he would emphasise in “On the Future of Socialism in Malaya”, and also later in “Socialism in a Multi-Racial Society”, movements in China and India relied on forms of historical and economic unity which provided a foundation for nationalist politics, but such foundations were absent in Malaya. Rather, in Malaya, with its pattern of uneven economic development and its racialised division of labour – particularly between the Chinese trader and Malay peasant – there were active forces of disunity which pulled the different groups apart and fostered communal sentiments.²⁰

This fact required, for Puthuchery, a reassessment of the role of communalism in the socialist struggle, suggesting that communal identities were far more significant than earlier socialists had understood:

For a long time, we Socialists have assumed that the major obstruction to unity in Malaya comes from the British and right-wing chauvinists. We assumed that if we would somehow explain to the people that we must all unite to fight the British for independence, everything would be all right. The more sophisticated of us assumed

¹⁷ Ibid. 173.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 176.

that exploitation is the basis of disunity and once the British exploitation is ended, there would be unity.²¹

This position was the position of the MCP, but also the position of the earlier AMCJA-PUTERA and the early policy statements of the PAP. Puthuchery by 1957 was, however, suggesting that communal divisions were far more politically significant than earlier socialists had understood. Firstly, because British exploitation of the economy was uneven: concentrated particularly in the urban and plantation sectors, centred around Chinese and Indian workers, but absent in rural smallholdings (predominantly Malay) meaning that a category like “colonial exploitation” didn’t apply to all communities evenly.²² Then, secondly, because categories like ‘economic exploitation’ or ‘colonial exploitation’ were not the only categories which could mobilise people politically, so too could group loyalties and communal identities mobilise people.²³ For Puthuchery’s Marxism this was to bring into question the idea that economic categories could determine politics, a reality he saw in the Indian-Muslim peasant’s support for Pakistan,²⁴ as well as in his own experiences of trade union politics in the 1950s.²⁵ There he argued that the removal of relations of exploitation between workers didn’t generate national unity, but saw communal and cultural divisions perpetuate.²⁶ So too would he see this reality in the countryside where the attempts of socialists to mobilise Malay peasants against poverty and the British colonial state ran up against communal sentiments.²⁷

In such arguments it is likely that Puthuchery was influenced by his time in India, during a period in which the issue of Pakistan was particularly prominent. Yet he would argue that the problem was part of a more global problem for socialists: the need to think through national and communal issues – a problem which often led them to endorse, consciously or unconsciously majoritarian national or communal identities (“great-nation chauvinism”), a reality he highlighted in Eastern Europe.²⁸ This was true also in Malaya. As Puthuchery would

²¹ Puthuchery, “Socialism in a Multi-Racial Society”, 169.

²² Puthuchery, “On the Future of Socialism in Malaya”, 174-5.

²³ *Ibid.* 181.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 178.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 181.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 181.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 178.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 179. As he would note:

... has the very structure and history of socialism made it inevitable that socialists would be preoccupied with the problems of the Chinese and Indian communities? I know that it is an unforgivable heresy to say that socialist ideas in Malaya seem to have a communal bias. But no

argue, whilst socialists had sought to mobilise all groups oppressed and exploited by the British irrespective of community, they had ended up allied to the group most susceptible to socialist slogans, the Chinese, which gave the movement (itself naturally opposed to communalism) a communal bias, limiting its struggle. This was particularly evident for Puthuchery in the failure of the MCP to mobilise the Malay peasantry, yet it was also becoming evident in the left-wing movement in Singapore and in the development of the Labour Party in the Peninsula in the 1950s, both of which relied upon significant Chinese electoral support.

This suggestion of an unconscious endorsement of communal sentiments was particularly evident in Puthuchery's reflection on the struggles of Chinese educationists in 1958 in support of Chinese-language schools – a position which also implied a criticism of the education struggles led by Lim Chin Siong and other leftists in Singapore in the early 1950s. Whilst left-wing groups continued to argue for a democratic right to maintain mother tongue education and to prevent communal discrimination, in supporting a Chinese issue which antagonised Malay political sensibilities over the centrality of the national language socialists were, he would argue, acting opportunistically, looking for an “opportunity to embarrass the Alliance²⁹ and to gather a few right-wing communal votes in the elections”.³⁰ If for left-wing groups mobilisation around issues of education challenged colonial maltreatment, for Puthuchery, in the long term, such a politics would only continue to emphasise communal divisions making the united mobilisation of Malays and Chinese more difficult.

This was evident too in debates over the concept of “cultural autonomy” which Puthuchery highlighted on the Malayan Left, debates also referenced by Sidney Woodhull.³¹ This formed part of a broader left-wing heritage in Malaya emerging out of debates over

socialist can afford to believe that thinking by Socialists always necessarily excludes communalism. To do that would be to use doctrinal blinkers and exclude the lessons that should be derived from the troubles in East European countries. Chauvinism and particularly great-nation chauvinism, seems to have even been a weakness of communists who owe national loyalties.

²⁹ The Alliance Party was a coalition of right-wing communal parties, UMNO, Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) and Malayan Indian Congress (MIC). It ruled Malay(si)a until it expanded to become the Barisan Nasional in 1973.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 184

³¹ *Ibid.* 179-80; See Sidney Woodhull, “Towards a Concept”, *Petir*, vol. 3, no. 4, 1 December 1959, “The question immediately hits on the old controversy of cultural autonomy. Marxists have always upheld the need of such autonomy being fundamental and socialists have parroted it in this part of the world without sufficient reflection upon its implications. In fact, Marxist thought on the subject has been misunderstood”.

language and nationalities policy in the Soviet Union and the Comintern – debates taken up by Malayan socialists particularly through the MCP. The concept, particularly prominent amongst Chinese socialists, continued to be evidenced in a piece in *Fajar*, translated from the Nanyang Political Science Society, titled “Problems of National Unity”. It argued in communist terminology against the concept of “forced assimilation” and for “equality and mutual respect” between the nationalities, based upon their equality of oppression under colonialism, their fundamental democratic rights, and argued for their rights to linguistic and cultural difference.³² Yet, for Puthuachery, such an idea of a right to cultural difference or a multi-lingual nation was based upon a misunderstanding of the approach of the Soviet Union “in solving her nationalities problem”.³³

One has to only read the polemics of Stalin against the Bundists who had advocated the theory of cultural autonomy to realize the fallacy of the theoretical assumptions of the local ‘Marxists’ who accept cultural autonomy as an unquestionable truth.³⁴

Such debates had a wider import. In 1956 Puthuachery’s friend Abdullah Majid would present a paper at the Third Congress of Malay Language and Literature on the Malay language which echoed many of Stalin’s arguments in *Marxism at the Problem of Linguistics* (1950) around the relationship between language and nationalism – emphasising the need for a common national language.³⁵ Yet in discussions on the national question Puthuachery built upon his own reading of Soviet debates to suggest that rather than autonomy making for just relations between the nationalities, and therefore unity, such autonomy would lead only to fragmentation, making it harder to mobilise the people.

³² Mah Lien Hwah, “Problems of National Unity”, *Fajar*, vol. 3, no. 6, August-September, 1961, 13-16

³³ Puthuachery, “On the Future of Socialism in Malaya”, 179-80.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Abdullah Majid, “Bahasa Melayu Sebagai Bahasa Sehari-hari Di Kalangan Kaum Buruh Semua Bangsa” in *Memoranda: Kumpulan tulisan Angkatan Sasterawan '50 dengan lampiran rumusan Kongress Bahasa dan Persuratan Melayu Ketiga*, (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1962) 206-230. Majid was sent to the conference by Lim Chin Siong as a representative of the SFSWU. See A. Samad Ismail, “Lim Chin Siong: Some Memories” in Poh, *Comet in Our Sky*, 170-171. Majid had earlier travelled around the Soviet Union and China as part of a delegation of the International Union of Students headquartered in Czechoslovakia. “A Red Student’s Life is so Rosy—Malayan”, *The Straits Times*, 8 August 1955.

Cultural autonomy, meaning that diverse communities should be allowed to maintain and perpetuate cultural and linguistic differences, is pernicious because it seeks to perpetuate communal fragmentation of a country.³⁶

Moreover, he would suggest that this left-wing argument for different anti-colonial cultural groups maintaining their cultural difference through the anti-colonial struggle confused class and cultural categories. In an article in *Petir* titled “Are the English-Educated a Reactionary Class?” Puthuchery would contrast the belief of Chinese socialists in the Chinese as a “proletarian class” and as a “revolutionary class” to their belief that the English-educated were a reactionary class allied to colonialism.³⁷ Yet, as he would argue, both cultural groups were in fact stratified by class divisions, in the English-educated’s case, *growing* class divisions, and a focus on cultural groups as radical or conservative tended to obscure these class antagonisms. This suggested that a focus by the Left on cultural struggles could endorse the kind of “great-nation chauvinism” that he had earlier diagnosed as a weakness of global socialist thought.

Puthuchery’s wasn’t however the only reassessment in detention. Lim Chin Siong also came to reflect upon the importance of national unity in Malayan socialist and anti-colonial politics particularly through the learning of the Malay language and the mobilisation of the Malay peasantry in the Federation – making a fuller study of the Malay language and culture in detention.³⁸ Yet if Lim’s emphasis on unity was still to still emphasise unity within diversity as providing a basis for democratic equality between communities, Puthuchery would emphasise a different approach. The nature of communal divisions required for Puthuchery a more concerted effort at nation-building, one which would confront both the economic and cultural differences between Malaya’s communities. This necessitated both equitable economic development, addressing communal inequalities, and cultural unification.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Puthuchery, “Are the English Educated a Reactionary Class?” *Petir*, vol. 3, no. 4, 1 December 1959.

³⁸ Lim Chin Joo, “An Extract from Lim Chin Siong’s Posthumous Manuscripts”, in Poh, *Comet in Our Sky*, 186-187; “Conversation with Lim Chin Siong on Tuesday 19th September 1961”, Papers of Peter Hastings, MSS 374, series 2, folder 1, Special Collections, UNSW Canberra.

This required, firstly, the continuation of Malaya's historical development, central to which was the category of capitalism.

Marx once said that capitalism is the greatest destroyer of nationalities. It breaks up old national groups to meet the requirements of its extensive production apparatus, but in the same process, lays the foundations of new nationalities. This is exactly what capitalism has done in Malaya. ... It has broken up nationalities and set the stage for the growth of a new nationality – a Malayan nationality.³⁹

Yet if it had set the stage for a Malayan nationality, its arrival was being frustrated by politicians of left and right who continued to uphold the old identities. "It is no use", he would argue, "our hankering back and seeking identification with the nationalities of which our fathers were a part. We can with great effort and considerable chauvinism pretend that nothing much has changed. But the fact remains that the broken bits have all been mixed and when they are put together, the product will be different." Cultural autonomy, which sought to maintain existing communities was for Puthuicheary an "anti-historical attitude" which was preventing the progressive movement of historical development.⁴⁰

It would therefore be wrong for socialists to sit by and "wait for history and time to weld our people into a nation". It would be "criminal" to build a Malayan nation by "trial and error" which in other counties had led to "civil war, famine and the domination of one community over another".⁴¹ Rather it was for socialists to begin the job of welding these communities into a nation from above. What this entailed was not only an argument for nationalism but for nation-building as a project of social engineering through the mobilisation of the post-colonial state and economic and social planning.⁴²

In Puthuicheary's *Ownership and Control* – a critique of the domination of British colonial capital over the Malayan economy – this process was to be through a programme of state-led development which would accelerate the process of industrial development (and the kind of social upheavals which broke up old nationalities) and "overflow into the

³⁹ Puthuicheary, "Socialism in a Multi-Racial Society", 168.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 169.

⁴² On the post-colonial state and planning in the Indian case see: Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Post-Colonial Histories*, (Princeton University Press, 1993) chap. 10.

countryside and solve the poverty of the Malays".⁴³ This gave particular focus to the role of economic development in uplifting the peasantry, significantly Malay, as a class most excluded by the colonial economy. Yet in "Socialism in a Multi-Racial Society" Puthucheary would emphasise the language question: using Malay as a common language and looking towards common schooling in the Malay language as a means of nation building. Here cultural and educational policy would engineer a new national consciousness.⁴⁴

This line of argument opposed to the national focus of the radical left a programme of state-led planning to bring a united Malayan nation beyond communal divisions into being. This focus on planning saw Puthucheary's politics transition upon his release, moving from radical trade unionism towards economic planning. During his detention he would co-author a series of articles on the PAP's economic policy in *Petir* in 1959,⁴⁵ and publish *Ownership and Control* which emphasised Malaya's need for industrialisation,⁴⁶ whilst he would join the Industrial Promotion Board upon his release. Intellectually this was a shift towards a more democratic socialist approach. As he would argue in an article on trade unionism in *Petir*, now that the PAP was in power the left-wing trade unions should moderate their approach.⁴⁷ So too would he write on the Singapore four-year plan.⁴⁸ Whilst an article on population control highlighted Puthucheary's mindset as a planner.⁴⁹

Yet in his focus on nation-building Puthucheary was part of broader conversations ongoing in the PAP. S. Rajaratnam would write on the development of Malayan culture in multiple issues of *Petir* emphasising the importance of cultural nation-building and the overcoming of communal divisions.⁵⁰ Ahmad Ibrahim would write on the approach of socialists to the communal question,⁵¹ others would debate the future role of Nanyang

⁴³ Puthucheary, *Ownership and Control*, 180.

⁴⁴ Puthucheary, "Socialism in a Multi-Racial Society", 171.

⁴⁵ A series of five articles titled "Towards an Economic Policy" published in *Petir* over 1958-1959, at the end of Puthucheary's detention. The articles were co-authored by two unnamed economics graduates. For Puthucheary's authorship see, Puthucheary, Oral History, Disc. 10.

⁴⁶ Puthucheary, *Ownership and Control*.

⁴⁷ James Puthucheary, "Political Role of the Trade Union", *Petir*, vol. 3, no. 6, 4 January 1960.

⁴⁸ James Puthucheary, "Problems that the S'Pore 4-Year Plan Seeks to Solve", *Petir*, vol. 4, no. 1, 17 June 1961.

⁴⁹ James Puthucheary, "Some Political Aspects of Population Control", *Petir*, vol. 3, no. 18, 26 January 1961

⁵⁰ S. Rajaratnam, "Malayan Culture in the Making", *Petir* 3, no. 13 & "The Cultural Approach to Politics", *Petir.*, vol. 3, no. 15, 8 October 1960.

⁵¹ Ahmad Ibrahim, "Problems of Communalism in Malaya", *Petir* vol. 3, no. 13, 15 November 1960.

University, a Chinese language university in an independent Malaya.⁵² Sidney Woodhull would suggest that the Chinese language couldn't become a language of Malayan culture, an opinion which resonated with Puthuchery's views on multi-lingualism.⁵³ This question was also approached in a debate at Nanyang University where Devan Nair would support the role of the Chinese language in building a united Malayan nation, whilst Puthuchery's friend, Abdullah Majid argued that Chinese would naturally diminish.⁵⁴ In a different way A. Samad Ismail who had left the PAP in 1957 would write on the failure of the socialist movement to address the needs of the "feudal" Malay peasantry which, for Samad Ismail, would leave them in the hands of UMNO for years to come.⁵⁵ Similarly above the causeway in the Federation debates were taking place within the Socialist Front about the questions of language, education and nation-building which mirrored many of the debates ongoing in Singapore.⁵⁶

Conclusion

By the later 1950s debates over communalism, nation-building, the mobilisation of the peasantry and language and education policy were becoming important on the Malayan Left. Whilst the earlier struggle of the 1950s had emphasised anti-colonial unity against the British, by the later 1950s the radical English-educated were increasingly emphasising the problems faced by Malaya's communal-economic and cultural divisions. This in turn led them to focus on the need of the Left to resolve the national question in Malaya and to promote the role of the post-colonial state, state planning and social engineering in this process. In the history of decolonisation in 1950s Singapore, Puthuchery and others around him marked an important moment of transition from a radical anti-colonial movement to support for the developmental state and Malayan nation-building. Yet focus on the national question and the kinds of socialist discussions taking place in the period helps us to move beyond Amrith's framing of left-wing Singaporean politics as caught between a global language of rights and a state politics which focussed on developmentalism and the management of ethnicity. If after

⁵² See "Contrary Public Opinions in a Multi-Lingual, Multi-Cultural Society", Lim Shee Ping, "Chauvinism & Suicide" & Nanyang Students Union, "Statement on the Reorganisation of the Nanyang University", *Petir* 3, no. 10, 25 March 1960.

⁵³ Sidney Woodhull, "Towards a Concept".

⁵⁴ "Chinese language and Malayan culture: Two views – What role should Chinese play?", *The Straits Times*, 15 September 1959,

⁵⁵ "The Fears are Behind Now", *The Straits Times*, 30 August 1958

⁵⁶ Vasil, *Politics in a Plural Society*, chaps. 3 & 5; Xie, *Contesting Equality*.

1956 figures like Puthucheary came to increasingly emphasise the state, the politics of development and the management of ethnicity, this was not merely a conservative endorsement of the power of the post-colonial state. As a discussion on the national question, it was focussed upon broader questions of popular mobilisation, class unity and the historical development of Malaya in ways which remained in touch with a radical anti-colonial and socio-economically transformative vision, yet one which advocated different political means. If this discourse came to increasingly emphasise nationalism and nation-building over a focus on wider transnational solidarities, it continued also to draw upon other sources of internationalism: the situation in Hungary, questions of communalism beyond Malaya, in India and Eastern Europe, concepts of cultural autonomy and the multi-lingual state and its relationship with global communism, as well as Marxist thinking on national development. This centred on the question of nationalism but defined the situation in Malaya in far more global terms.

Chapter 4: Merger, Nationalism & Internationalism (1960-65)

By 1960 Puthuchery would become the Manager of the Industrial Promotion Board within the PAP government, now dominated by the moderate wing of the party, and, whilst outside of the clique around Lee Kuan Yew, was seen from the outside to be one of the party's "top intellectuals".¹ Through this role Puthuchery would enter into new international networks, networks which emphasised the more developmentalist politics he was pursuing post-detention. He would attend United Nations development seminars in New Delhi,² ECAFE conferences in Bangkok³ and economic conferences in Karachi.⁴ Thus at a time when the left-wing trade unionists around Lim Chin Siong were organising mass protests against the killing of Lumumba and the situation in the Congo in the name of Afro-Asian solidarity,⁵ Puthuchery's focus remained largely on the industrialisation of Singapore.

In 1961 he would leave his role to study Law at the University of Malaya, finding that his ideas of state-led industrial development clashed with the more market-oriented ideas of Goh Keng Swee, and Albert Winsemius, the United Nations adviser to Singapore. All the while divisions within the party were worsening between the group around Lee Kuan Yew and the group around Lim Chin Siong over the issue of detainees and influence in the party. Yet Puthuchery continued to call for unity believing in the need for socialists to build a united front in Singapore.⁶ Soon after, the issue of Merger between Singapore and the Federation would reignite questions of nationalism and anti-colonialism on the Malayan Left, yet emphasis upon Puthuchery and those around him points towards more complicated political engagement, both within Malay(si)a and internationally.

¹ "Letter to G. Mapara", 13 April 1960, ICFTU File, #3772-3775, IISH, Netherlands.

² "Puthuchery is off", *The Straits Times*, 29 November 1959.

³ "Two named for ECAFE talks", *The Straits Times*, 17 January 1960.

⁴ "Going to Karachi talks", *The Straits Times*, 11 July 1961.

⁵ "Boycott call at protest meeting on Lumumba killing", *The Straits Times*, 22 February 1961.

⁶ "Puthuchery Writes... What caused the break with PAP", *The Straits Times*, 21 August 1961.

Debating Merger

The PAP's official position on Merger was outlined in two key documents "The New Phase After Merdeka—Our Tasks and Policies",⁷ authored by S. Rajaratnam in 1958⁸ and "The Fixed Objectives of Our Party"⁹ authored by the Central Executive Committee in 1960. In these documents the party argued that with the independence of the Federation the central dynamic of merger was a communal one: how the Malay-dominated Federation could merge with Chinese-dominated Singapore. In addressing the question the Party would locate itself within the broader "world-historical" development of socialist thought, to justify why a communist approach would be inappropriate for anti-colonialism in Singapore.¹⁰ In "The New Phase After Merdeka" the Party would argue, in terms similar to Puthuchery, that the "textbook approach" which emphasised class struggle and the dictatorship of the proletariat was unsuited to Malaya, that its "proletariat" was and would remain "for several decades to come" largely Chinese, and that the Malays had been unexploited by British capital.¹¹ Socialism in Malaya would not then take the form of class struggle but would have to emphasise nation-building and economic development through the democratic system.¹² In "The Fixed Objectives" it would argue that socialists in Malaya had largely overlooked the problem of communalism in favour of economic contradictions. Something which had thus far limited their political reach.

These communal divisions are what Marxists would call internal contradictions within a people, and are secondary to the prime contradiction between the people and the colonial power. But we must never forget that communal divisions had led the people of India to break up into two nations, India and Pakistan. ... The failure of the M.C.P.-

⁷ "The New Phase After Merdeka—Our Tasks and Policy" in Lee Kuan Yew, *The Battle for Merger*, Singapore: Straits Times Press, 2014 [1962], 147-162.

⁸ For authorship see Irene Ng, *The Singapore Lion: A Biography of S. Rajaratnam*, (Singapore: ISEAS, 2010), 262.

⁹ "The Fixed Political Objectives of Our Party" in Lee, *The Battle for Merger*, 163-174.

¹⁰ "The New Phase After Merdeka".

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 161-162.

¹² Rajaratnam's background is particularly interesting, during his time in London he was close to George Padmore and Marxist and anti-colonial political circles (see Ng, *The Singapore Lion*). We don't know enough about the relationship between Rajaratnam and Puthuchery but it is clear that such re-evaluations were taking place in the PAP. Intellectually this approach was derived from Rajaratnam's own reassessment of Marxist thought, which would lead him to argue that Marxism had underplayed the role of culture, and therefore communal identity, in politics. S. Rajaratnam, "The Cultural Approach to Politics", *Petir*, vol. 3, no. 15, 7 September 1960, 4-6.

led insurrection is mainly due to their failure to recognise the importance of these secondary contradictions.¹³

Such a position entailed for the Party a reassessment of the centrality of anti-colonialism to the Malayan struggle. For the Party, a purely anti-colonial and anti-British stand was “essentially a negative one”. “The creation of a socialist Malaya”, they argued, “cannot be based on anti-colonialism alone”.¹⁴ It required a positive force to unite the people, namely a sense of Malayan national identity.

It was in this sense that the Party would reject ideas of independence for Singapore without Merger with the Federation. Firstly, they argued that an independent Singapore cut off from the rest of the Peninsula was an “economic impossibility”, and secondly that the independence of Singapore would only encourage majoritarian communities in both the Federation and Singapore to emphasise communal goals, breaking apart any sense of a future Malayan nationhood.¹⁵ This relied upon the example of Israel in the Arab world, and the idea of Singapore as becoming a Chinese island in a Malaysian region.

Yet this argument also relied upon ideas of historical development. In the same way that Puthuchery’s arguments over capitalism and nationhood argued for the maintenance of old identities and cultures as “reactionary” and the building of new unities as progressive, so too would the PAP argue that Merger would mean building upon the existing process of nation-state development Malaya had been undergoing during colonial rule:

The problem before us then is not to ‘create’ Malaysia but to retain the unifying trading currency and administrative pattern colonialism had created and use them as the foundations of which to build a socialist Malaysia.¹⁶

The opposite tendency was to induce “Balkanisation” and to split up the Peninsula, which they saw as a reactionary course which would leave Malaya open to foreign domination and communal divisions. This was on the one hand a geopolitical logic: “in the era of big states and superstates” where there is “no political safety or economic stability for pint-sized

¹³ “The Fixed Objectives”, 163-164.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 173.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 169-171.

¹⁶ “Working Paper Outlines the Basis for Socialism in Malaysia”, *Petir*, vol. 5, no. 1, 7 March 1962.

nations".¹⁷ Yet it was also a particularly developmental logic which emphasised broader national unities over narrow communal identities: to fight against the development of nations was reactionary, to follow its course was to follow the developmental flow of history. Malaysians shouldn't then wait for Merger, mirroring Puthucherry's argument around nation-building: "We must strive to quicken the pace of history. But never try to block or counter the course of history."¹⁸ The PAP would regularly argue for the historical inevitability of Merger.

The debate over Merger that emerged over 1961 complicated the position of the Party. Whilst the Party had earlier envisaged Merger as a future possibility between Singapore and the Federation, the Malaysia Plan put forward by Tunku Abdul Rahman and the British opened the possibility of a quick Merger which would also bring in the Borneo territories of Sarawak and Sabah. Moreover, it envisaged the inclusion of Singapore as a separate entity, maintaining autonomy over education and labour policy, without Singaporeans gaining full citizenship in the new federation.¹⁹ This subjected Merger to the dynamics of elite politics, as well as to questions over the kind of nation that was to be produced, and the role of British neocolonialism in its formation. Yet if the PAP would come to argue that Merger was politically necessitated, the Barisan Sosialis would focus on the need to promote values of self-determination, popular democracy and wider Afro-Asian unity. This foregrounded anti-colonialism above Merger.²⁰

The Barisan Sosialis's position was most clearly laid out in the debate in Singapore's Parliament in November 1961, led by Lee Siew Choh in a 7-and-a-half-hour speech. Against the PAP's proposals they argued that a Federation should be produced by a free and democratic decision of each of the constituent units, not by power politics from London or Kuala Lumpur. So too should each unit of the Federation, and its citizens, enjoy complete equality within the Federation.²¹ Malaysia should also be centred on anti-colonialism and, he argued later, form part of a broader regional unity: "to unite the peoples in their struggle to

¹⁷ S. Rajaratnam, "Political Case for Malaysia", *Petir*, vol. 5, no. 1, 7 March 1962.

¹⁸ "The Fixed Objectives", 172.

¹⁹ Tan Tai Yong, *Creating "Greater Malaysia": Decolonization and the Politics of Merger*, Singapore: ISEAS, 2008.

²⁰ P.J. Thum, "'The Fundamental Issue is Anti-colonialism, Not Merger': Singapore's 'progressive left,' Operation Coldstore, and the Creation of Malaysia." Asia Research Institute, Working Paper Series No. 211, pp. 1-25.

²¹ *Singapore Legislative Assembly Debates*, vol. 15, 20-21 November 1961.

eradicate all traces of imperialist domination and to bring about political freedom, unity and stability to the entire region".²²

Whilst the PAP emphasised the unity of former British territories, the Barisan could also imagine a broader Federation in future including other territories, particularly Indonesia, representing a post-imperial vision of the region. The Barisan saw this as a Federation that would itself be in touch with the "Afro-Asian spirit" of "freedom, equality and justice", arguing that "The peoples of Singapore and the Borneo territories are largely inspired by the spirit of Afro-Asia" and its values of freedom and neutrality.²³

As Amrith earlier underscored in reference to the Bandung Conference, this repeated invocation of Afro-Asia in the Barisan's statements on Malaysia overlapped the international and domestic: if values of neutralism defined the external relations of states in the region, it was the invocation of freedom and self-determination which determined for the Barisan the kind of equal constitutional relations between peoples required by a future Federation. The Barisan Sosialis came to argue for either a complete or "true" merger, based on the complete integration and the equality of all citizens and states²⁴ or, alternatively, a looser confederation of states serving only to coordinate foreign affairs but without internal power over the constituent states, which would retain autonomy. Without true merger or a looser confederation, the Barisan argued for complete independence for Singapore with a view to entering into negotiations for a future Federation.

Whilst the PAP continuously rejected the idea of an independent Singapore, a figure like Lim Chin Siong would later suggest that an independent Singapore, "adhering to the five principles of co-existence promulgated at the Afro-Asian conference held in Bandung in 1955" could have worked and would "exert positive influence on the neighbouring countries",²⁵ challenging colonial rule in Southeast Asia and promoting Afro-Asian values.

In this approach the Barisan was joined by the Socialist Front above the Causeway. The Front's foreign policy since 1960 had emphasised a particularly internationalist approach

²² *Singapore Legislative Assembly Debates*, vol. 16, 24 January 1962, 587.

²³ *Ibid.*, 591

²⁴ This was premised upon the smaller Bornean states entering into a Borneo Confederation to allow the Bornean states to enter Malaysia on an equal footing.

²⁵ Lim Chin Joo, "An Extract from Lim Chin Siong's Posthumous Manuscripts", in Poh, *Comet in Our Sky*, 196

and their place within a global socialist and anti-colonial movement. “AFRO-ASIA is our world and the Bandung Spirit our touchstone!” concluded their 1960 policy statement.²⁶ They called for the turning of Malaya into a base to support peoples’ movements and for the establishment of study groups and a “militant bureau”, including education in schools, to take Afro-Asia to the ground.²⁷ For a figure like Ahmad Boestamam, a leader of the Front, this formed part of a broader vision of Malaysia which built upon earlier visions of Melayu Raya (Greater Malaya, inclusive of Indonesia). For Boestamam, speaking in Parliament in May 1962, such a federation would go on to form the basis for a broader Pan-Asian movement in Asia which, linking with Pan-African, Pan-American and Pan-European movements would form the basis for a future world federation.²⁸

Both the Barisan Socialis and Socialist Front’s arguments around Malaysia formed part of a broader vision of self-determination and anti-colonial freedom both locally and internationally. One which conforms both to Amrith’s emphasis on a global language of rights, as well as to Adom Getachew’s recent focus on world-making in her account of Pan-Africanism.²⁹ Yet such broader cosmopolitan imaginings had themselves to also confront the dynamics of communal divisions which Puthuchery had earlier highlighted as problematic on the Left and which the PAP emphasised in its thinking on Merger. The Socialist Front was itself repeatedly divided on these issues, and if united on the question of Malaysia, disagreed repeatedly on issues of language policy, education policy and the special position of the Malays within Malaysia. This entailed debates over concepts of cultural autonomy which mirrored those taking place in Singapore.³⁰ Here, debates on the national question intersected with broader visions of decolonisation.

For Puthuchery’s part he became increasingly withdrawn from politics as the debates over Merger intensified. He would join the Barisan Socialis but would remain only a peripheral member and made no public statements on Merger in the period. Yet a transcript of an

²⁶ “Towards a New Malaya” in Tan Kim Hong (ed.), *Malaiya Laogung Dang Wenxian Huibian [The Labour Party of Malaya, 1952- 1972: Selected Documents]*, (Petaling Jaya: Party History Working Committee, Labour Party of Malaya, 2000) 78-90.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ *Parliamentary Debates, Dewan Rakyat, Official Report*, vol. iv, no. 6, 2 May 1962 (Kuala Lumpur: Government Printers) 730

²⁹ Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019.

³⁰ Vasil, *Politics in a Plural Society*, 128-129; Xie, *Contesting Equality*.

interview given to the Australian journalist Peter Hastings in September 1961 gives us an insight into his thinking.³¹ In the interview he would advocate the Barisan's line, arguing for "complete merger" with proportionate representation for all the states within Malaysia, and uniform education and labour policies. Yet he would also emphasise the national vision on which this rested, he would highlight the need for Malay to become the "common language so that Malaysia can find some common national destiny" arguing that it was only through Malay that a socialist front could reach the Malays and "persuade them to work with us".³² Yet alongside his emphasis upon nation-building the interview also highlighted his broader, regional, thinking. When asked about the situation in Indonesia Puthuachery argued that it would be best for Indonesia to join a "Greater Malaysia", "comprising the whole Malay area" before launching into a long indictment of SEATO and Australia's role in the region.

Yet as Puthuachery would later come to argue in his Oral History, he came to feel that elements of the Barisan lacked commitment to Merger, preferring in the end an independent Singapore to a full merger with Malaya. Puthuachery himself couldn't envisage the possibility of an independent Singapore firmly believing in a united Malayan nation.³³ One aspect of this was the Barisan's fear of detention within Malaysia. Yet another force was undoubtedly the division between urban Singapore and the rural Malay heartlands and the compromises which would have to be made in working with elite-led Malay political parties – a problem which emanated from long-running debates on the national question.

Yet in this context Puthuachery's position helps to outline the more complex tensions between nation building and anti-colonialism which emerged through Merger, beyond more binary interpretations.³⁴ This becomes evident in Puthuachery's own withdrawal from politics in the early 1960s, as well as in the political transitions made by Puthuachery and those around him after the formation of Malaysia.

³¹ "Conversation with James Puthuachery at University of Malaya on Wednesday 20th September 1961", Papers of Peter Hastings, MSS 374, series 2, folder 1, Special Collections, UNSW Canberra; Limited parts of this interview were published as Peter Hastings, "Malaysia", *The Bulletin*, 4 November 1961.

³² Ibid.

³³ Puthuachery, Oral History, Reel 10.

³⁴ Amrith, "Internationalism and Political Pluralism".

Malaysia: Competing Visions on the Afro-Asian Stage

On 19 September 1962, three weeks after the Malaysia referendum result in Singapore the National Trade Union Congress, PAP-aligned and led by Devan Nair, organised a display of Afro-Asian unity to celebrate the result, hosting union leaders from across Afro-Asia who also pledged their support.³⁵ This formed part of a new wave of engagement with Afro-Asia. On the morning of 2 February 1963 Operation Coldstore saw the detention of many of Singapore's radical left. Lim Chin Siong, Sidney Woodhull and James Puthuchery were arrested. Said Zahari and A. Mahadeva of the Singapore National Union of Journalists (SNUJ) were arrested the evening before departing to Jakarta for the Afro-Asian Journalists Conference. Lim Shee Ping, a member of the Barisan Sosialis's Central Committee was enroute to Nairobi to attend the Afro-Asian Solidarity Conference in Tanganika where he was detained and returned to Singapore for arrest.³⁶ The *Straits Times* suggested that the detentions "nipped in the bud" attempts to subvert Malaysia overseas.³⁷ On the PAP side Devan Nair, Jek Yuen Thong, Othman Wok and Rahim Ishak³⁸ arrived at the Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity Organisation (AAPSO) conference Moshi, Tanganika to counter the anti-Malaysia propaganda. They went not as government representatives but as "a group of people in Malaya who supported non-alignment and Afro-Asian solidarity".³⁹

The Asian-African People's Solidarity Organisation, particularly influenced by Indonesia,⁴⁰ continued to publicly criticise Malaysia's formation as neo-colonial, yet at its conferences more conciliatory views were also expressed.⁴¹ Within this context, both

³⁵ Union leaders came from Algeria, UAR, Guinea, Ceylon and Indonesia. Nair said "We have proved today to the people of Malaya, of Malaysia and all Afro-Asia the following: The workers of Afro-Asia stand for independence. They stand for socialism, for peace and progress. They will not accept orders from London, Washington, Moscow or Peking." "Display of Afro-Asian unity highlights victory rally", *The Straits Times*, 19 September 1962.

³⁶ A. Mahadeva, "Remembering Lim Chin Siong" in Poh Soo Kai (ed.), *Comet in Our Sky: Lim Chin Siong in History* (Petaling Jaya: SIRD, 2015) 159.

³⁷ "The swoop began at 3 a.m.", *The Straits Times*, 3 February 1963.

³⁸ "Team to Moshi Talks Back to Big Welcome", *The Straits Times*, 16 February 1963.

"'Fiasco' says Jek of Moshi talks", *The Straits Times*, 11 February 1963

³⁹ "Team to Moshi Talks Back to Big Welcome".

⁴⁰ "Support to the North Kalimantan People's Struggle against Malaysia", in Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Movement, *Statements and Appeals of the Permanent Secretariat*, (Cairo, UAR: The Permanent Secretariat of the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organisation, 1963) 48-50; "Answer is 'no' for Malaya", *The Straits Times*, 9 February 1963.

⁴¹ Katharine McGregor and Vanessa Hearman, "Challenging the Lifeline of Imperialism: Reassessing Afro-Asian Solidarity and Related Activism in the Decade 1955-1965," in Luis Eslava, Michael Fakhri, and Vasuki

supporters and detractors of Malaysia, inside Malaysia, turned to the Afro-Asian movement to support their claims. AAPSO had itself developed out of solidarity committees inspired by the Bandung Conference and grouped around the 1955 Non-government Conference of Asian Countries. Whilst seen as a particularly radical organisation, which McGregor and Hearman suggest entailed its association as a “communist” organisation in the context of the Cold War, it offered also a transnational space in which questions of decolonisation, non-intervention and peace could be discussed, amidst emerging divides across the Third World.⁴² This was evident in Malaysian engagement with AAPSO. The supporters of Malaysia in the PAP and the Alliance government – whilst increasingly critical of AAPSO for what they saw as its communist leanings – continued to emphasise the need for Malaysia to be within the mainstream of Afro-Asian society and to be recognised as an independent and non-colonial state.⁴³ Part of this lay in a wish to maintain good relations with important Asian powers across South Asia and Africa, and to avoid becoming caught within the binary international politics of the Cold War. Part of it lay in a belief amongst more progressive elements in the PAP and the Alliance Government in the values of Bandung.⁴⁴ On the other hand, for the Left-wing groups who opposed Malaysia, engagement with organisations such as AAPSO bolstered their critique of neo-colonialism, but also provided forms of international recognition outside of the international state system which could help to delegitimise the government of Malaysia.

By 1964 Malaysia would send goodwill missions to Africa to shore up support for Malaysia and to advocate for Malaysia’s invitation to the Afro-Asian Conference in Algiers.⁴⁵ Lee Kuan Yew would visit 17 capitals in the first few months of 1964, meeting Nyere and Nkrumah, returning via Colombo and Delhi.⁴⁶ Donald Stephen’s the chief minister of Sabah would attend an Afro-Asian solidarity conference in Algiers in March 1964, countering anti-

Nesiah (eds.) *Bandung, Global History, and International Law: Critical Pasts and Pending Futures*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017) 175.

⁴² Ibid. 163.

⁴³ *Malaysia in Afro-Asia: Speech by Dato Muhammad Ghazali bin Shafie, Permanent Secretary for External Affairs, Malaysia, to the Consular Corps in Singapore, on 26th November, 1964*. Kuala Lumpur: Federal Department of Information Malaysia, 1964; “Algiers conference was loaded against Malaysia, says Kuan Yew”, *The Straits Times*, 29 March 1964.

⁴⁴ Johan Saravanamuttu, *Malaysia's Foreign Policy, The First Fifty Years: Alignment, Neutralism, Islamism*, (Singapore: ISEAS, 2010), 90-91; “Lee: Let's build up Afro-Asian opinion”, *The Straits Times*, 23 October 1965.

⁴⁵ Saravanamuttu, *Malaysia's Foreign Policy, The First Fifty Years*, 109.

⁴⁶ “Lee is 'not unhappy' with his African – tour”, *The Straits Times*, 20 February 1964.

Malaysia propaganda.⁴⁷ Their trips were followed up by Tun Abdul Razak, deputy prime minister, later in 1964. Following Razak was A. Samad Ismail, now within UMNO and a close ally of Razak, who would write a series of articles for the *Straits Times* about Malaysia's reception amongst other African nations, visiting Uganda, Somalia, Kenya, Egypt, Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia.⁴⁸ These articles reflected not only on Razak's diplomatic mission but also on Afro-Asian connections and the "African Personality", a concept Kwame Nkrumah was popularising. It helped, argued Samad Ismail "if you understand that the African journalist, or politician has invariably read Laski and has more than a superficial understanding of Marx".⁴⁹ Samad Ismail would go on to call for more missions to Africa led not by civil servants but the best representatives of Malaysia, this should emphasise connections beyond diplomatic missions and the state: "What they [Africans] are most anxious to see is whether the stirrings in Africa have affected the Malaysian view of the world."⁵⁰

Malaysian attempts to attend the Winneba Conference in Ghana in 1965 would take place under the umbrella of the Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity Organisation in Malaysia. The organisation marked a cooperation between younger members of the right-wing Alliance Party, more anti-colonial and oriented towards Malaysia's future in Afro-Asia than its conservative leadership,⁵¹ and members of the Left like James Puthuchery. Important to this cooperation was Tun Razak and A. Samad Ismail. Chairman of the AAPSOM was Mahathir Mohamad, an UMNO MP with particularly nationalist inclinations, whilst the secretary-general was Abdullah Ahmad, the political secretary of Tun Razak. The organisation was headquartered in UMNO's offices in Kuala Lumpur.⁵² AAPSOM would, over 1965, speak out against American intervention in Vietnam,⁵³ white-rule in Rhodesia⁵⁴ and would call for a

⁴⁷ "Dato Stephens for Afro-Asian Meet", *The Straits Times*, 19 March 1964; "We block many anti-Malaysia resolutions", *The Straits Times*, 1 April 1964

⁴⁸ A. Samad Ismail, "The Friends Malaysia Has", *The Straits Times*, 3 December 1964; "Razak's success in Addis Ababa", *The Straits Times*, 31 March 1965; "Nairobi: Meeting with Jomo for Tun Razak", *The Straits Times*, 1 April 1965; "Namesake joy for Razak", *The Straits Times*, 4 April 1965; "Obote to Razak: Malaysia must be invited to Algiers", *The Straits Times*, 10 April 1965; "When an African talks of Malaysia...", *The Straits Times*, 19 April 1965.

⁴⁹ A. Samad Ismail, "When an African talks of Malaysia..."

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Saravanamuttu, *Malaysia's Foreign Policy, The First Fifty Years*, 151-2. Mahathir Mohamad, *A Doctor in The House a Memoir of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad*, Kuala Lumpur: MPH, 2014.

⁵² "Constitution of the National Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity Committee, Malaysia", Accession Number: 20020004700, Arkib Negara Malaysia; Saravanamuttu, *Malaysia's Foreign Policy*, 90.

⁵³ "Mahathir condemns U.S. rice crop war", *The Straits Times*, 23 December 1965

⁵⁴ "AAPSO kutok rejim 'puteh' Rhodesia", *Berita Harian*, 14 November 1965

review on Malaysia's position on foreign bases and for "the establishment of diplomatic relations with 'progressive' countries".⁵⁵

The delegation attending the AAPSO Conference in Winneba, Ghana in 1965 were Mahathir Mohamad and Lee Sum Choon, both Alliance MPs, Abdullah Ahmad, Musa Hitam, an UMNO political secretary, James Puthuchear, now a lawyer in Kuala Lumpur, Samad Ismail, Devan Nair a PAP MP and Wong Ling Ken, a member of the PAP.⁵⁶ Perhaps the most surprising inclusion was that of Puthuchear, who, only 18 months out of detention, was supporting the nation for whose formation he was detained. Yet his invitation came from Tun Razak to attend the conference and it marked a growing affinity between Puthuchear and Razak.⁵⁷ For Tan Chee Khoo, a Socialist Front MP, the inclusion of Puthuchear was "presumably to add respectability... and for him to do the back room work."⁵⁸ K.G. Tregonning who had been the Raffles Professor of History at the University of Malaya during Puthuchear's time there expressed surprise at Puthuchear's inclusion, arguing that it was likely an attempt to "discredit Lee Kuan Yew and the Singapore government", in the context of worsening relations between Singapore and the Federal Government over 1965.⁵⁹ The delegation at Winneba was nevertheless not successful, as Samad Ismail and Devan Nair both outlined, Malaysia's support for bombing in North Vietnam had been a major obstacle.⁶⁰

In 1965 the Barisan Sosialis formed the Malayan People's Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee to compete against AAPSOM. As the term "Malayan" in its name emphasised, it sought to engage with Afro-Asia to challenge the establishment of Malaysia and to advocate for an anti-colonial Malayan nation-state. It would send Lee Siew Choh of the Barisan Sosialis, and V. David and M.K. Rajakumar of the Socialist Front to Algiers to challenge Malaysia as a neo-colonial enterprise.⁶¹ In opposition AAPSOM would send Musa Hitam, leading the

⁵⁵ "Govt Urged: Work for an Honourable Settlement with Indonesia", *The Straits Times*, 12 August 1965

⁵⁶ "Tengku: I would have said 'no' to Winneba Mission", *The Straits Times*, 20 May 1965

⁵⁷ A. Samad Ismail, "Our James", 60.

⁵⁸ Tan Chee Khoo, "Rejection of Malaysia's Application for Membership of the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organisation", 17 May 1965, Socialist International File #735, IISH, Amsterdam.

⁵⁹ He declared, "After his release the Malaysian Government rather surprisingly, and for reasons it has never made clear, sent him to Africa, probably in the hope that he would discredit Lee Kuan Yew and the Singapore Government". K.G. Tregonning, "An Interview with a Prime Minister," *The Australian Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (1965): 78-86.

⁶⁰ "We can't go against Afro-Asian opinion: Nair", *The Straits Times*, 21 May 1965; "An Insult to Malaysia by Winneba Conference" *The Straits Times*, 19 May 1965.

⁶¹ "Barisan chief: We'll speak against Malaysia" *The Straits Times*, 15 June 1965

delegation, James Puthuchearry and Sulaiman Alias, a research officer of the Alliance Party.⁶² *Berita Harian* would also list Sidney Woodhull as accompanying them to Algeria, possibly from London where he was studying law after his release from detention in 1963.⁶³ In doing so he would be following Puthuchearry's political trajectory: moving from the Barisan Sosialis to supporting Malaysia. Yet whereas Puthuchearry was marginal to the Barisan Sosialis, Woodhull had played a leading role.

However, whether Woodhull joined the group or not, the period after his detention in Operation Coldstore was also the start of a period of ideological transition. In an article published in *Venture*, the journal of the Fabian Society, titled "Is Socialism in Malaysia Dead?" he would argue that socialism in Malaysia had failed, particularly in its attempt to mobilise the Malay peasantry, leaving a conservative UMNO-led government to win "overwhelming, genuinely democratic majorities".⁶⁴ Yet whilst socialists had failed, ideas of socialism had not, and the continuing exploitation of the rural peasantry by the middlemen may, he would argue, necessitate a "leftward turn" in UMNO. Writing against Woodhull in a later issue Lydia Howard would argue that it was state repression and not political failure which had limited the socialist movement in Malaya.⁶⁵ This was a debate which would continue on the Malaysian Left for decades to come. Yet what Woodhull's writing suggested in 1966 was that the possibility of progressive, anti-colonial, socialist politics in Malaysia – of the kind the Barisan Sosialis had envisaged – was subordinated to the terms of the national question and to the problems of communalism and uneven economic development which figures like Puthuchearry had been emphasising.

Whilst by the late-1960s representatives of the Barisan Sosialis would go on to attend the Tricontinental in Havana,⁶⁶ radicalising their left-wing discourse even further, figures like Samad Ismail, Puthuchearry and Woodhull were emphasising the way in which the dynamics of the national question were to structure engagement with anti-colonial politics and Afro-Asia. This led them to work with or within the Alliance government in the attempt to

⁶² "Another Malaysia delegation going to Algiers", *The Straits Times*, 19 June 1965

⁶³ "Rombongan Malaysia ka-Algeria mulai pulang", *Berita Harian*, 29 June 1965

⁶⁴ Sidney Woodhull, "Is Socialism in Malaysia Dead?", *Venture*, vol. 18, no. 3/4, 1966, 9-11.

⁶⁵ Lydia Howard, "Malaysian Socialism Suppressed", *Venture*, vol. 18, no. 9, October 1966, 11-14.

⁶⁶ "Barisan chief returns from Cuba", *The Straits Times*, 25 January 1966.

promote a progressive left-wing alternative, both within Malaysia and on the Afro-Asian stage.

Conclusion

In the move to form Malaysia, engagement with Afro-Asia, both intellectual and organisational, continued to reflect splits on the Left between a more rights-oriented politics and a politics which reflected ideas of state sovereignty and the developmental state. Nevertheless, focus on Puthuchery and those around him can locate the more complicated connections and ideological processes on which this relied. In the debate over Merger, Puthuchery, who was emphasising in the late 1950s the importance of communalism and developmental nation-building, continued to emphasise the importance of both nation-building through Merger, as well as anti-colonialism. This differentiated him from the PAP's increasingly narrow position on Merger, yet it also came to differentiate him from the Barisan Sosialis and their advocacy for an independent Singapore.

Whilst the Barisan Sosialis through the Malayan People's Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee sought to realise a progressive, non-colonial, Malaya through the pressure of Afro-Asian states, Puthuchery and others came to accept the reality of Malaysia and came to advocate for it on the Afro-Asian stage, alongside right-wing, though more progressive, communal elites. Yet as this chapter has sought to suggest, this was not driven simply by an acceptance of the sovereignty of the post-colonial state but by broader arguments on the communal and nationalist dynamics of Malaysian politics. Emphasis on Puthuchery here helps us to highlight the ways in which debates on the national question informed engagement with anti-colonial politics and Afro-Asia.

Conclusion

This thesis began by highlighting James Puthuchery as a figure situated within global networks of decolonisation, engaged as he was from the 1940s to 60s with Bose's Indian National Army, networks of global socialist thought and Afro-Asian networks which emerged out of Bandung.

In doing so, this thesis has followed Puthuchery from his earlier engagement with Indian nationalism and his subsequent turn to Marxism, to his involvement in the student and trade union movement in Singapore, his political re-evaluation whilst in detention between 1956-59 and his more ambivalent approach to the emergence of Malaysia, coming to support Malaysia in Afro-Asian meetings across 1965.

In following Puthuchery this thesis has sought to locate him within two prominent discourses on the Malayan Left in the period. The first, the emergence of Afro-Asianism, as a transnational identification with anti-colonial struggles across Africa and Asia and, the second, communist and socialist discourses on the national question, addressing the national dynamics of socialist and anti-colonial struggles. This thesis has suggested that in Malaya these two discourses overlapped, and that James Puthuchery offers a particularly important lens to understand this dynamic.

What is important about this interaction is the way in which it allows us to situate Malaya's internationalist engagement with Afro-Asia within debates on the Malayan Left over questions of socialist strategy and nationalist politics. Highlighting earlier debates over the relationship between nationalism and anti-colonialism in the 1940s and early 1950s this thesis emphasised the way in which there emerged, alongside Bandung and the rise of Afro-Asia, a new anti-colonial movement in Singapore. This movement emphasised the unity of the people against colonialism and the formation of a united independent Malaya, and in doing so saw itself as part of broader Afro-Asian struggles against colonialism. By the independence of the Federation in 1957 communal divisions between the Federation and Singapore became more politically evident, leading socialists in Singapore to problematise the unity of the people in the achievement of independence. In the writings of James Puthuchery this developed into a socialist critique of the national vision of the Malayan Left and its

identification with anti-colonial struggles across Asia, one which drew upon an assessment of Malayan class/communal dynamics, Soviet debates on the national question and broader Marxist thought. This suggested that the question of nation-building was central to anti-colonialism in Malaya – complicating questions of unity, popular struggle and the type of nation that independence from colonialism was to produce.

Over Merger this came to increasingly inform left-wing engagement with Afro-Asia. Whilst the PAP saw Merger as part of a process of nation-building which supplemented anti-colonialism, the Barisan Sosialis saw Merger as both detrimental to nation-building, and as contradicting values of self-determination, democracy and freedom it drew from Afro-Asia. Whilst the PAP and the Alliance Government in Malaysia sought to have Malaysia included within the Afro-Asian mainstream to avoid its international marginalisation, the Barisan Sosialis sought to challenge the formation of Malaysia and to mobilise Afro-Asian organisations to this end. Yet, as the presence of Puthuicheary, and others like A. Samad Ismail and Sidney Woodhull, attests, support for Malaysia was not only a conservative endorsement of the post-colonial Malaysian state. Whilst it entailed a moderation of their earlier radical politics, such support drew also upon earlier reassessments of socialist and anti-colonial politics within Malaysia and more radical political cultures, and saw figures such as Puthuicheary working to push Malaysia within a more progressive direction. This process became obscured as a more ethno-nationalist politics took hold in subsequent decades.

Focus on Puthuicheary encourages us then, beyond Amrith's account of internationalism in Singapore to emphasise the more complex conversations over anti-colonialism, nationalism and internationalism which were taking place. Conversations which drew upon more diverse sources of internationalism, which problematised ideas of anti-colonialism and identification with wider Afro-Asian struggles and which moved across divisions between moderate and radical politics, state planning and popular mobilisation and nationalism and internationalism. Here questions of global rights, self-determination and freedom and equality had to be related to concrete questions of national unity, relations between class and community, and questions of economic development. The answers to these questions were by no means self-evident and were political and historical problems which socialists in Malaya continued to wrestle with for decades to come. Whilst scholars like Amrith might rightly suggest that the 1950s and 60s in Malaya were a period in which a more

pluralist and rights-based politics was suppressed by a more authoritarian post-colonial state and political class, emphasis on Puthucheary helps us to also shine a light on some of the limitations of anti-colonial activism in the period and the more complex politics of economic and political decolonisation within which the Left operated.

Against what Christopher Lee terms the more triumphal narratives of post-colonial assertion this thesis shows the way in which a figure like Puthucheary problematised anti-colonial activism in a way which made questions of decolonisation in Malaya more open, uncertain and shifting. Attention to the problems Puthucheary raised and his more complex intellectual and political allegiances can then contribute towards furthering the intellectual history of Afro-Asian networks, the post-colonial developmental state and socialist and anti-colonial thought.

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