

Rapping Racial Tension: Namewee's Rap Songs and the Malaysian Education System

Ch'ng Xin Ying, UCSI University Institute of Music, Malaysia

On 30 August 2010, a day before celebrations of Malaysia's 53rd National Independence Day took place, the launch of four police reports made against Namewee led to attempts of police arrest at his house in Muar, Johor (Loone and Wong). These investigations were prompted by seditious claims found in a music video 'Nah!' uploaded on to the popular video sharing site YouTube on 26 August 2010. It was a mere three years after Namewee first made national headlines with the controversial 'Negarakuku' in 2007 and in 2009 with another video clip that railed about the power outage in Muar on 26 October 2009.

Namewee also better known as Wee Meng Chee has been an iconic voice in the Malaysian media and arts entertainment scene. His viral video 'Negarakuku' (2007) was written as a respond to the disgruntlement and frustrations felt particularly among the ethnic Chinese minority in Malaysia. Heavily criticized for his songs and music videos which were deemed offensive and culturally insensitive, Wee was deliberate in using his songs as a shockingly blunt commentary on the social and political issues in Malaysia.

According to the Malaysian Department of Information in the third quarter of 2021, the *Bumiputeras* (which consisted of the Malays and indigenous groups) were the majority that made up 69.8% of the population, while Chinese and Indian represent 22.4% and 6.8% of the population respectively. The remaining 1% would be made up of ethnic minorities.¹ Such notions of diversity inherent in Malaysia's multi-racial and multi-cultural identity are frequently celebrated and perpetuated by the state. Despite such official narratives of nationhood as reflected in tropes of unity among cultural diversity, the actual reality is often far from the case.

The video's title 'Nah!', which was intended as a provocative expletive, and was written in respond to a slew of events that was particularly critical of the Chinese citizens' place and rights in Malaysia (Department of Statistics of Malaysia Official Portal). The video started with Wee addressing the incidents that led to the reason and purpose behind the making of this video. The video included national news reports of two incidents in 2010 that projected underlying social anxieties and racial tensions found in Malaysia's education sector. The first was a complaint lodged against Siti Inshah Mansor, the headmistress of a high school, SMK Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra in Kulai, Johor. The headmistress who criticized non-Malay students in her school using offensive racist statements allegedly told that Chinese students are not needed and should return to China or Foon Yew School (a Chinese-based, private high school) and also likened the prayer bracelets worn on Indian students as dog leashes ("Namewee Faces Sedition"). The second incident followed promptly after reports were made on 20 August against another high school principal, Ungku Aznan Ungku Ismail of SMK Bukit Selambau in Sungai Petani, Kedah who echoed comments similar to the rhetoric of 'Chinese as immigrants' among Chinese students who were allegedly disrespecting the fasting month of Ramadhan by eating in public (Lee "Another 'Racist' School Head").

The release of the video caused an immediate uproar as investigations and reports were launched against Wee due to claims of the video stirring up racial tensions ("Namewee Faces Sedition"). While there were politicians and authorities who disapproved of Wee's use of expletives and obscenities in his video (Sinchew), allegations of the video as promoting sedition, according to Democratic Action Party veteran Lim Kit Siang seemed to be far-fetched and unfounded (Lee and Wong). Attempts to censor and to impose restrictions on 'Nah!' were clear as various political factions, organizations and individuals took the opportunity to openly respond to the issue even after Wee removed the contentious video three days after its upload. Rosnah Rashid Shirlin of Puteri, the young women's faction of leading party UMNO (United Malay National Organisation) condemned the video and insisted on stern action to be taken against Wee, while Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) President Chua Soi Lek's responded that support will be given towards whatever action that will be taken against Wee ("Puteri"). At the same time, dissatisfaction and contention were equally directed against the authorities' silence in responding to the troubling racist remarks from the two high school principals ("Take Action on"). The target of Wee's provocative video as 'seditious' and the subtle dismissal of the racial slurs hurled by the two high school principals revealed differing responses and attitudes towards racist sentiments voiced in public. Upon strong urges by differ-

ent parties, such as the Democratic Action Party veteran Lim Kit Siang and the Barisan Nasional Youth, in taking action against the two school principals, there seems to be little effort done in responding to these claims (“Take Action on”). Education Minister Muhyiddin Yassin’s silence over the issue and attempts to brush off this incident as a ‘misunderstanding’ by the Education Ministry director-general Alimuddin Mohd Dom were all interpreted as a ‘cover-up’ and a refusal to acknowledge the severity of these offences (“BN Youth”).

Employing Bakhtin’s concept of ‘heteroglossia’ (Bakhtin 269) and also Gaik Cheng Khoo’s adaptation of ‘social heteroglossia’ in Namewee’s comedic films (Khoo 58), I argue that in ‘Nah’, both textual and social-political subtexts emerged that are symptomatic of the deeply embedded racial and social anxieties in the Malaysian society. A closer analysis of the music and the text suggests another layer of heteroglossic meaning found in the musical content that might be missed among listeners less acquainted with Malay musical styles. The song starts with an introductory four-bar melodic line on loop that is played with an accordion sample reminiscent of *ronggeng* music, a broad genre that encompasses a variety of Malay folk music styles performed for social dances (Tan, “From Folk to National” 287-9). *Ronggeng* repertoire and related genres have been widely incorporated into Malaysian popular music to evoke a national aesthetic in the Malay film music of the 1950s and 1960s (Tan, “The Performing Arts in Malaysia” 298-300; Adil, “Cosmopolitan Sounds” 478-9) and the popular *Irama Malaysia* (Malaysian Beat) sounds of the 1990s (Tan 303-5; Zawawi 32-6). Thus, Namewee’s evocation of a *ronggeng* aesthetic in his backing track could be analysed as a signification of ‘Malayness’. The melody features a stepwise five-note melodic pattern in the key of A harmonic minor (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Five-note main melodic pattern based on a sample in ‘Nah’

The rhythmic outline and upbeat melody are reminiscent of the Malay *zapin* (a dance genre found in *ronggeng* repertoire), which features the accordion as one of the main melodic instruments in the traditional ensemble. In line with Tan Sooi Beng’s (293) transcriptions, the typical rhythmic pattern of a *zapin* can be heard in the quaver and semiquaver rhythmic pattern (see Figure 2) implied in Namewee’s drum beat that accompanies the accordion melody.



Figure 2: Zapin rhythmic pattern

Alongside its aesthetic reference to ‘Malay’ music and the use of the Malay language, Namewee’s four-line rap verses loosely parallel the structure of *pantun*, a poetic format sung over *ronggeng* music that employs alternating quatrains in an A-B-A-B rhyme scheme (Tan 294). Of course, this formulation is also commonly used in hip-hop and many lyrical styles of popular music globally. When hearing the lyrical delivery however, the typically refined (*halus*) form and poetic content of Malay *pantun* is turned on its head. The combination of a perceived aesthetic vulgarisation of Malay music and language forms the basis of Namewee’s prosecution:

<i>Nah! Siti Inshah! Nah! Sucks banana!</i>	Nah! Siti Inshah! Sucks banana!
<i>Nah! KPM Nah! Nah! Kurang ajar!</i>	Nah! Ministry of Education! Nah! Impudent one!
<i>Nah! Siti Inshah! Nah! Sucks banana!</i>	Nah! Siti Inshah! Sucks banana!
<i>Nah! KPM Nah! Nah! Diam-diam lah!</i>	Nah! Ministry of Education! Shut up lah!

The song is divided into two sections with four strophes of rap verses and a chorus with the word ‘Nah!’ echoed in a call-and-response manner and peppered with expletives. This song is directed to the Ministry of Education (KPM - *Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia*) and the aforementioned principal Siti Inshah. The rap incorporates

obscene language and vulgar hand signals. While Namewee's lewd lyrics were deemed offensive and criticised by various parties, he claimed such language was chosen to express his message 'with more impact' in demonstration of his protest against racial discrimination ("Namewee Cans Video").

A typical feature common in Namewee's rap songs is the hybrid mix of multiple local dialects and languages. 'Nah!' is the first Malay rap-song that was written and rapped by Namewee. Most of his previous songs were in Mandarin, apart from 'Negarakuku' which incorporated a few lines of Malay from the Malaysian national anthem. The use of local Malaysian slang such as '*wa* (I)' and '*kasi* (give)' demonstrates a race-based context of Chinese citizens communicating in pidgin Malay; evoking the informality and casualness of everyday interaction experienced by Malaysians. Through words such as '*wa*', '*kasi*', '*sirap bandung*' (which is a bright pink, syrup-based drink found in Malay cuisine), Namewee references a quotidian realisation of inter-ethnic integration. Such multilinguistic expressions in Malaysian popular music are common, especially in hip-hop groups such as Poetic Ammo, who rap in Malay, English, Tamil and Cantonese (Pillai). The use of Malay in the country's popular music is also complicated by the top-down imposition of the language via the National Culture Policy (NCP, 1973), which resulted in a proliferation of non-Malay artists and groups flourishing the local music industry of the 1970s and 1980s with pop songs in the national language (Tan 142; Pillai 6-7; Adil, "Intercultural Intimacy" 194-5).

Namewee's 'Nah' however, starkly disrupts the power balance imposed by the NCP – which privileges elements of Malay and Islamic culture for cultural works to be considered 'national' – by articulating (in Malay) the everyday-expressed racial stereotypes and tensions experienced by Malaysians. The lyrics in Malay: 'Hey, principal, is your brain damaged?/Haven't you read who made Malaysia rich?/Oh! Is it not written in the history books?'), were particularly controversial in the context of Malaysia's ethnopolitics. Namewee insinuates that Malaysia's history of economic growth was (solely) based on the contributions of the Chinese community. These lyrics reveal unsettling sentiments felt between Chinese- and Malay- Malaysians; symptomatic of the Sino-Malay tensions that underpin and shape the entire ethnonationalist discourse of nation building in Malaysia (Shamsul, "A History of an Identity"; Leow). The insult in the lyrics of 'Nah' is due to perceived implication of the Malays' absent contribution to the nation's economy. Such discourse has deep roots in Malaysia's colonial history, in which the indigenous Malay population, mainly involved in the rural industries of farming and fishing, were given the label of 'lazy natives' (Alatas). This is further complicated by usage of the term 'pendatang' (newcomer) which was described by Sumit Mandal as 'primordial' to further differentiate between 'us' (Malay) and 'migrant' others (non-Malays). (Mandal 57) Such terminology itself was very much racialised and employed to challenge the very notion of national identity and belonging of the entire Chinese community. Yet, contestations of national identity in the Malaysian society were not only apparent in Namewee's music video, it also highlighted failings of the Malaysian education system.

Racial Tensions in the Malaysian Education System

The 'Nah!' video incident demonstrated the entrenchment of segregated and divisive attitudes towards race and religion in the national school system, where teachers and educators were not excluded from making racially offensive and derogatory statements towards students. Such clear frustrations voiced against the national education system and its concomitant issues of racial discrimination, politicization of education is often underpinned by prevailing racial anxieties and tensions. In recognising the difficulties in forging a multi-ethnic and diverse nation within a segregated and stratified racial and economic distribution, there has been, since the beginning of the nation's formation, a conscious effort from the government to focus on education as an important basis of racial integration and national unity (Malakokunthu and Rengasamy 149- 154).

The National Educational Policy (1957), the establishment of the Curriculum Development Center (1973) and the 1967 policy in the founding of Malay (Bahasa Melayu) as the national language were some of the policies attributed to efforts to encourage social cohesion in the ethnically and linguistically diverse nation through education. Yet, these policies were often met with suspicion and anxiety especially by the non-Malays, as the prioritizing of the Malay language as the cornerstone of national education, demonstrated an emphasis of Malay and Islamic enculturation at the expense of other distinctive cultural and ethnic identities in Malaysia. Malakokunthu and Rengasamy concluded that despite the apparent social and racial disparity that existed due to such policies, yet they maintained that this is an education system that worked and one that allowed for co-existence and individualistic growth within the diverse racial and ethnic make-up of the nation (Malakokunthu and Rengasamy 153). The Malaysian Chinese as an ethnic minority – albeit relatively large in population and economically influential – have often rallied around the issue of education as a means of demonstrating racial unity and cohesion in the

face of a dominant Malay-Muslim political hegemony. While it is not uncommon for Namewee's songs and films to be critical against the previous ruling BN government, grievances directed against the national educational system has been a common trope since the start of his claim to fame in 'Negarakuku' (2007). Education can be seen as 'a sore point of contention between BN-UMNO and Chinese Malaysians' (Tan 31).

The Malaysian national schools and the national education can be interpreted as an arena of racial contestation. In the explanation of A.B. Shamsul's 'two social reality' context, the 'authority-defined' and the 'everyday-defined' versions of identity are often largely contrasted and 'intricately-linked' ("Debating about Identity" 477). While state versions of national identity often employ education as a tool of enculturation for social cohesion and unity, 'Nah' projects the 'everyday reality' found in the classrooms and schools as one that is highly contested and racialised. I highlight that in 'Nah', Namewee uses 'provocation' as a tool to display the stark contrast between both versions of realities. Through the linguistic adaptation of pidgin Malay and signalling of 'Malayness' in the musical arrangement, Namewee provokes and challenges the version of national unity and identity that is often paraded and displayed at the national front. Instead, 'Nah' parodies not only the education sector in Malaysia, but also the cultural and aesthetic sensibilities of the Malay community as a way of 'envoicing' and attributing agency back to the Chinese community.

Notes

¹ 2021 provided the latest report on the demography of ethnic groups in Malaysia. Categories of others (0.9%) and non-Malaysians (9.6%) make up the rest of the population.

Bibliography

- Alatas, Syed Hussein. *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the Image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th Century and Its Function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism*. Frank Cass and Co, 1977.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, edited and translated by Michael Holquist. University of Texas Press, 1981.
- "BN Youth: 'Racist' HM Must Be Punished." *Malaysiakini*, 19 Aug. 2010. <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/140549>. Accessed 24 March 2023.
- Demographic Statistics Third Quarter 2021*. Malaysia Department of Statistics Malaysia Official Portal, 8 Nov. 2021, <https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php>. Accessed 24 March 2023.
- Johan, Adil. "Cosmopolitan Sounds and Intimate Narratives in P. Ramlee's Film Music." *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, vol. 40, no. 4, 2019, pp. 474–490.
- Johan, Adil. 'Intercultural Intimacy: Malaysian Popular Music as an Expression of Social Cohesion (1970s and 1980s)', *Jebat: Malaysian Journal of History Politics & Strategic Studies*, vol. 47, no. 3, 2020, pp. 191–213.
- Khoo, Gaik Cheng. 'Imagining Hybrid Cosmopolitan Malaysia through Chinese Kung Fu Comedies: Nasi Lemak 2.0 (2011) and Petaling Street Warriors (2011)', *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2014, pp. 57–72.
- Lee, Regina. "Another 'Racist' School Head in Kedah." *Malaysiakini*, 20 Aug. 2010, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/140676>. Accessed 24 March 2023.
- Lee, Regina and Wong Teck Chi. "Namewee Grilled by Police on 'Nah' Video." *Malaysiakini*, 31 August 2010, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/141565>. Accessed 24 March 2023.
- Leow, Rachel. *Taming Babel: Language in the Making of Malaysia*. Cambridge University Press, 2016.
- "Liu: Chukou Chengxian Sui Bu He Guoqing [Liu: Despite Vulgarly's Discrepancy with National Sentiment, Namewee Has No Agenda]." *Sin Chew News*, 2 Sept. 2010, <https://www.sinchew.com.my/?p=1822148>. Accessed 24 March 2023.
- Loone, Susan and Wong Teck Chi. "Namewee Escapes Police Swoop." *Malaysiakini*, 30 Aug. 2010, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/141524>. Accessed 24 March 2023.
- Malakolunthu, Suseela and Rengasamy. Nagappan C. "Education Policies and Practices to Address Cultural Diversity in Malaysia: Issues and Challenges", *Prospects*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2012, pp. 147-159.
- Mandal, Sumit K. 2004. "Transethnic Solidarities, Racialisation and Social Equality", in *The State of Malaysia*, edited by Edward Terrence Gomez (Routledge), pp. 49-78.
- "Namewee Faces Sedition Charge Over Video Clip." *Malaysiakini*, 30 Aug. 2010. <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/141465>. Accessed 24 March 2023.
- "Namewee Cans Video, Wants Tango with Puteri Umno." *Malaysiakini*, 29 Aug. 2010, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/141401>. Accessed 24 March 2023.
- Pillai, Shanthini. 'Syncretic Cultural Multivocality and the Malaysian Popular Musical Imagination', *Kajian Malaysia*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2013, pp. 1–18.
- "Puteri: Take Stern Action Against Namewee." *Malaysiakini*, 27 Aug. 2010, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/141326>. Accessed 24 March 2023.
- Shamsul, A.B. 'Debating about Identity in Malaysia: A Discourse Analysis', *Southeast Asian Studies*, vol 34, no. 3, Dec 1996, pp. 476-499.
- Shamsul, A.B. 'A History of an Identity, an Identity of a History: The Idea and Practice of "Malayness" in Malaysia Reconsidered', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2001, pp. 355–366.
- "Take Action on 'Racist' Principal in Johor." *Malaysiakini*, 17 Aug. 2010, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/140330>. Accessed 24 March 2023.
- Tan, Chong Yew. 'Hegemony and Symbolic Resistance in Malaysia: A Study of Namewee's Music', *The Journal of South East Asia Research Centre for Communications and Humanities*, vol. 4, no.1, 2012, pp. 21-40.
- Tan, Sooi Beng. 'The Performing Arts in Malaysia: State and Society', *Asian Music*, vol. 21, no.1, 1989, pp. 137–171.
- Tan, Sooi Beng. 'From Folk to National Popular Music: Recreating Ronggeng in Malaysia', *Journal of Musicological Research*, vol. 24, no.3, 2005, pp. 287–307.
- Zawawi, Ibrahim. 'Disciplining Rock and Identity Contestations: Hybridization, Islam and New Musical Genres in Contemporary Malaysian Popular Music', *Situations*, vol. 9, no.1, 2016, pp. 21-47.