

Multiculturalism in History, History in Multiculturalism

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First of all I would like to say thank you to the conference organisers for the opportunity to speak here today. My name is Ros Hewett. I recently submitted a PhD in Indonesian history at the Australian National University. I also worked for 3.5 years as a research assistant on a Australian Research Council project about multiculturalism in Indonesia. Today I'm going to lead our discussion through this very broad topic of multiculturalism and history.

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Multiculturalism as a policy has been implemented in different ways in different countries. Most countries with ethnically diverse populations or a history of migrants have multicultural policies in some form. Policies on multiculturalism reflect the histories of these countries (Parker 2011).

Lyn Parker suggests that Singapore's multicultural policy uses a 'box model' based on race and religion (Parker 2011). Each person is put in a box based on the race and religion of their father: Muslim Malay, Chinese, Hindus and Indians. These boxes have become so entrenched in the popular imagination that when this photo of a young Muslim woman using her hijab to protect an elderly Chinese woman from the rain went viral, no one assumed that the Chinese woman could be her grandmother. She was called the hijabrella girl and in social media was praised for helping an elderly Chinese woman. In fact, she was of mixed descent, not Malay Muslim, and the old lady was her grandmother.

Singapore's policies on multiculturalism developed after the government tried to stop different ethnic groups living separate from each other. Under Singapore's Ethnic Integration Policy, introduced in 1989, there is a quota for the number of Chinese, Malays, Indians and Eurasians who can live in a housing block so that each area is mixed. This quota system developed because in colonial Singapore, members of these groups lived in different parts of the city and had little to do with each other.

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This policy is based on the idea that each person belongs to a specific ethnic group. But what about people of mixed descent, like the hijabrella girl? Singapore's multiculturalism policies are based on British racial classification. Of all European colonising powers, the British were among the most concerned with classifying people according to their race in the nineteenth century and making these categories legal. There was even a category for people of mixed race, Eurasian, in Singapore from 1849 (Pereira 1997, p. 10). In tandem with legal classification of different groups were the stereotypes about each group. These stereotypes were a way for British arrivals in a completely new part of the world to feel comfortable and think that they already knew what the people they ruled were like. So, according to British ideas, the Chinese were hard-working, the Malays were lazy (Spence 2015, p. 170), Indians were placid and willing to do repetitive manual labour (PuruShotam 1998, p. 56), and Eurasians or people of European and local descent were morally corrupt

and embodied the worst of races (e.g. Percival 1803, pp. 137-8, 145-46). All of these stereotypes were based on difference. A label for Chinese like ‘hard-working’ were used with reference to another group, like Malays, in opposition: so on the one hand, hard-working, on the other hand, lazy. Some of those stereotypes have continued today – and you might be familiar with one of them in Indonesia, that the Chinese are hard-working. But they were also completely created: what is an Indian? There were so many different ethnic groups in the region that we now call India that saying all people from India or who looked Indian in the nineteenth century before there was even an Indian national identity is problematic.

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In Indonesia, if we are talking about multiculturalism, we cannot ignore Pancasila and the five official religions based on it that developed during the New Order (later six with the addition of Confucianism). But why only these religions? What about local religions, animist beliefs and so on? What about agama suku? Why just foreign religions?

Did the Indonesian state decide on these official religions because of Indonesia’s colonial history? When classifying groups of people across the Indonesian archipelago, the VOC tended to only recognise what we call universal religions: Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and so on. Often, the VOC declared that those who followed local religions, or held animist beliefs, were heathens, or people without religion. Even the division today in Indonesia of Protestantism and Catholicism into two separate religions reflects Dutch colonial classification of religion and the history of the conflict between Dutch Protestants and Portuguese/Spanish Catholics in Maluku in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

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Let’s take a moment to look at several snapshots of Indonesian society that show how different groups interacted with each other, beginning with Java in the 1920s and 1930s. British colonial administrator J.S. Furnivall visited Java and classed it as a plural society – or, a society where groups lived side-by-side but did not mix. He wrote in 1936 that there were three social orders: the natives, the Chinese and the Europeans, who rarely met except in the market place (Furnivall 1944; Coppel 1997). Furnivall’s description is now debated, because historical records show that colonial society in Java was complex. The legal system in the Indies was different to the legal system in British colonies. European status did not mean that you were European or had parents born in Europe – there were Javanese, Ambonese, Manadonese and Chinese with European status, and those with the same legal status did mix with each other. But Furnivall’s overall description seems to have elements of truth in it: when we look at organisations and parties from the 1920s and 1930s, in that many tended to be divided along ethnic and racial lines compared to earlier in the 20th century.

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If we look at some of the contemporary descriptions of society in this period by people living in the Indies, we do find evidence that different groups did not mix. When nationalist leader Sutan Sjahrir was exiled to Maluku in the 1930s, he wrote that society there was very different to back in Java, because different groups mixed

and lived side-by-side. He was referring only to those groups not considered to be Indonesian: “The Indo-Europeans, the Indo-Arabs and the Chinese actually live and think exactly like the people in the kampung. It [society] is... divided only into classes.... In general, they are still more tolerant here than elsewhere.”

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Let’s look at another snapshot of ethnic relations that is often forgotten in histories of how nationalism united the different ethnic groups of Indonesia: the violence of 1945-47 on Java. Across Java, pemuda nationalist groups targeted and killed Indo, Manadonese, Ambonese, Timorese and Chinese-Indonesian families and children. Victims were targeted on sight – so, if someone looked Manadonese, for example, they were imprisoned and, in many cases, killed. It seems like the main reason for doing this was the popular idea that Manadonese, Ambonese and Timorese worked with the Dutch colonial administration. Even if families were loyal to Indonesia, they were still kidnapped, tortured and killed because of their appearance (Hewett 2016).

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If we skip forward to the New Order, we see that the Suharto government’s assimilation policies targeting Indonesians of foreign descent drew on colonial categories. The colonial administration had divided the population of Indonesia into European status, foreign oriental and native. You could in fact have no Indonesian ancestry whatsoever but still be classed as native if you were not acknowledged by a European father. Like I said earlier, many Indonesians got European status, so these legal definitions were not always based on racial or ethnic identities. From 1978, Indonesians born with European status or foreign oriental status in colonial Indonesia had to carry an extra document proving they were Indonesian citizens. In practice, only those thought to look foreign were asked to produce this document (Lan, 2012, p. 238). The problem was that many people in colonial Indonesia who had European or Chinese descent were given native status, so they never had to apply for this document.

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On the other hand, for other Indonesians classed as indigenous (pribumi), there were government attempts at what we might call superficial multiculturalism, or boutique multiculturalism for ethnic groups the government considered indigenous (Raihani 2014, pp. 1-2; Fish 1997). Boutique multiculturalism means engaging with people of other ethnicities at the level of food, festivals, costumes and stereotypes. It means being aware of different ways of thinking, speaking and doing things, but often deciding that these are wrong, or inferior to our own way of doing things.

The most well-known display of boutique multiculturalism in Indonesia is probably Taman Mini Indah Indonesia. For those who have not been to Taman Mini, it is a fascinating place that has a section for each of the ethnic groups that the Suharto group recognised: traditional buildings, costumes and so on. I visited in 2013 and spent some time in the North Sulawesi section out of curiosity, because my husband is from North Sulawesi and I have lived in Manado. There were statues wearing traditional clothes that I had never seen in North Sulawesi, and traditional instruments and other implements. It was very different from what I saw in Manado when I lived there.

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Just like the British created stereotypes about groups in colonial Singapore so that they could deal with difference, so it seems we often use stereotypes to deal with diversity in multicultural societies. Before meeting someone new, there is an expectation of how they will behave and talk based on their appearance. So, I know that Manadonese eat spicy food, talk a lot, and are Christian. I know this, even though I know a lot of Manadonese people who do not like spicy food, are very quiet, and one of my closest friends from Manado is Muslim.

For my PhD, I interviewed a woman in Malang who looked just like me: blue eyes, white skin, light hair, but she was born in Indonesia, spoke Indonesian fluently and grew up believing that her Manadonese step-father was her father. She never lived anywhere else and she felt herself to be Manadonese. But when people saw her, they thought she was foreign – other Indonesians sometimes asked her for money because they thought she was wealthy, based on her appearance, when in fact she just worked as a cleaner in a hotel.

The most interesting thing about Manadonese identity is that there was no Manadonese, or Minahasan, ethnic group before the VOC arrived in the seventeenth century. Rather, there was a collection of tribes who often fought with each other. The VOC called these tribes the Alfurese and described them as heathens compared to Muslim traders living on the coast (Kipp 2004). It forced these tribes to unite and to make peace with each other so that they could supply rice to VOC ships going to Ambon. Eventually the term Minahasan was used to describe these tribes as a group. Today, of course, we know this group as Manadonese because of the city of Manado. The stereotypes about them are very different to even a hundred years ago, when they were known as colonial civil servants and *Belanda Manado* (Manadonese Dutch) because of their close relationship with the colonial administration (Henley 1992, p. 154).

I apologise if I am using the Manadonese example here a lot – I have written about Manadonese history, so I know this somewhat better than the history of other groups, but please do not consider this example only limited to the Manadonese. The Dutch created ethnic categories for census purposes, and they also used stereotypes to describe each group. For example, we know that the Dutch in documents often described Javanese culture as refined (*halus*). Did the idea that Javanese are *halus* originate from the Dutch? We do not have adequate documents to prove this, but we do know that a common characteristic of colonialism was to use stereotypes to describe different groups of people. We also know that Javanese culture and ideas about what it meant to be Javanese were only formalised and put to paper in the nineteenth century in response to colonial rule (Weiss 2010, pp. 64-65).

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So what about multiculturalism today? In short, the currently acceptable version of multiculturalism in academic circles is that multiculturalism should involve understanding and accepting difference without judging or saying that difference is wrong.

You must all be familiar with these two different ways of doing things: using gayung when you go to the toilet, or using toilet paper. I have an example to share with you that illustrates how just understanding a different way of doing things might not be enough.

And another example: you all know the phrase kalau belum makan nasi, belum makan. When I first met my Manadoese mother-in-law, she assumed that I must eat bread with everything like Indonesians eat rice with everything, so every meal she provided me with bread. It was very kind of her but I often do not eat bread for weeks. Even now, if I do not eat rice once a day, she asks, sudah makan nasi hari ini Ros? And if I get sick, the explanation is that it is because I have not eaten rice! On the other hand, if my husband is sick, I automatically want to cook him soup, when all he wants is bubur – it is very difficult for me to accept that for him rice porridge is healthy, because I was raised to think that if I am sick, I need vegetables.

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I am going to leave you with some questions to think about. Think about your workplace. Are there people there who look different to you? Have a different religion to you? Speak a different language to you? Were born in a different province or country?

Think about your bosses, community and political leaders. Are they all from the same group, same religion, speak the same local language?

If someone has a different way of doing things or different opinion to you because of their background, do you automatically think they are wrong?

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