

Race-based Affirmative Action in Malaysia:  
*Misrecognised Subjectivities, Enduring Inequalities*

**Abstract**

Malaysia's race-based affirmative action is often studied within the objective domain of resource deficit and distribution. In this paper, I focus on the subjective domain to interrogate how racial identities of Bumiputera Malay youths shape their social attitudes towards affirmative action in Malaysia. Drawing on in-depth interviews, I posit three racial identity modes that correspond to three social attitudes towards affirmative action. The findings point to the disjuncture between Malay subjectivities and their colonial construction; the contestations over affirmative action that go beyond redistribution to recognition; and the neglect of intersectionality in conceptualising Bumiputera disadvantages. I argue that affirmative action can be better understood by incorporating non-elite perspectives, featuring different sites, scales and actors in the reproduction of subjectivities; the politics of affirmative action has to be reconstituted as struggles for recognition *and* redistribution; and the intersectional disadvantages of Bumiputeras must be foregrounded in the reclaiming of this policy agenda.

**Keywords**

Affirmative Action; Coloniality; Intersectionality; Malaysia; Racial Identity

## Introduction

Globally, race-based affirmative action (AA) is often viewed as a remedy to fix historical racial discrimination (Drucza, 2017; Harris, 1993; Sabbagh, 2011). In Malaysia, AA is usually studied within a material or resource paradigm i.e. AA's roles in reducing inequalities, building capabilities or enhancing opportunities (Agadjanian & Peng Liew, 2005; Lee, 2021; Lee & Khalid, 2016; Pong, 1995)—what I call the objective domain. It contributes to the popular imagination that contestations over AA revolve around struggles for resources, and preferences for AA pivot around relative access to and gains from these resources. This approach, while not wrong, is incomplete. The exclusive focus on the objective domain limits understanding of how perceptions, attitudes and identities—what I call the subjective domain, bear on questions of resources, and play a constitutive role in shaping the politics of AA and racial inequalities.

Against this backdrop, the aim of this paper is to situate AA in the subjective domain of racial identities and social attitudes. The objective is to examine the racial identity modes of Bumiputeras in Malaysia, the intended beneficiaries of AA, and their social attitudes towards the AA regime. More specifically, I am guided by the following research question: “How do the racial identity modes of Malay Bumiputera youths shape their social attitudes towards race-based AA in Malaysia?”

Malaysia's AA regime, with preferential treatment for the politically dominant but economically disadvantaged *majority* group (Lee, 2021), encompasses entrenched and far-reaching interventions in education, employment, entrepreneurship, wealth ownership and land. The Bumiputera is a postcolonial category used to bring together multiple racial and ethnic subgroups deemed as “native” to Malaysia, where the Malays constitute the largest and dominant sub-group.

AA and race continue to be central to the political economic discourse in Malaysia. The *Pakatan Harapan* (PH) government, largely perceived to be championing reforms of race-based AA, came into power in May 2018, the first change of government since the country's

independence in 1957. However, the PH coalition fell apart in March 2020, with a small faction from the PH government defecting and forming an alliance with opposition parties, uniting around race and religion to form the *Perikatan Nasional* (PN) government, a reversion to a race-centric coalition assuming political power. AA, also known as the Bumiputera Development Agenda, was then placed under the direct purview of the Prime Minister in September 2020. This followed a resolution put forward in the Bumiputera Economic Congress organised in the same month, underscoring the importance of AA in maintaining the power base of the new coalition. However, the links between preferences for AA and race-based politics must not be simplistically assumed (Lee, 2017a).

Based on analysis of in-depth interviews, three key findings are discussed: first, the disjuncture between Malay subjectivities and their colonial construction; second, the contestations over AA that go beyond redistribution to recognition; and third, the reduction of Malay disadvantages to either the race or class axis in these contestations, leaving their intersectional disadvantages unaddressed. The research concludes by arguing that AA can be better understood by incorporating non-elite perspectives, featuring different sites, scales and actors in the reproduction of subjectivities; the political economy of AA has to be seen as both struggles for recognition *and* redistribution; and the intersectional disadvantages of Bumiputeras must be foregrounded in the reclaiming and reconstruction of AA in Malaysia.

### **The colonial origins and evolution of AA in Malaysia**

The AA regime in Malaysia can arguably be traced back to three important historical “moments”. First, the constitutional guarantee of AA which came into force when Malaya obtained its independence from the British in 1957<sup>1</sup>. Second, the expansion of AA under the New Economic

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<sup>1</sup> The Federation of Malaysia was formed in 1963 with the merger of the Sabah, Sarawak, Singapore and the Federation of Malaya. Singapore was expelled from the Federation of Malaysia in 1965.

Policy (NEP) in 1971, following the racial riots of 1969. Third, the proposal in the New Economic Model (NEM) in 2010 to refashion AA to be “market friendly”, catalysing the popular discourse on need-based and merit-based AA as the way forward.

The special position of the Bumiputera highlighted in the Federal Constitution must be understood within the context of the racial hierarchy produced by the expansion of British colonial capitalism in the region in the late 19th century, which correlated with the economic hierarchy at that time (Brennan, 1982; Jehom, 1999; Lim, 1980; Reid, 1997). Consequently, in Peninsular Malaysia, Malays occupied the lowest rung in the racial-economic hierarchy (Lim, 1980). At the same time, racial differences between natives and non-natives were solidified, influenced by the development of “scientific” European racial theories, which have since been discredited (Hirschman, 1986; Milner, 1998). Although the British occupied the apex of this hierarchy, immigrant non-Malays—mainly Chinese and to a lesser extent Indians—were seen as the main antagonists to Malays. Non-Malays were incorporated into the colonial economy through relations of exchange (instead of relations of production), where they became middle-men in different spaces of production and consumption, and their exploitative roles became more visible (Lim 1980, 142-144). On the other hand, the British, whose exploitative practices were less visible, was seen as protectors of Malays against the massive influx of non-Malay immigrants. The British signed treaties with the Malay rulers to establish their colonial legitimacy, trained a relatively small cohort of Malay aristocrats to support the colonial administration and left the Malay masses relatively undisturbed in their peasant agricultural economy (Brennan, 1982; Hutchinson, 2015; Lim, 1980).

Therefore, three key tenets underpinned elite bargaining and accommodation in the negotiation with the British for independence: (i) Malays became conscious of themselves as a coherent group with entrenched racial boundaries; (ii) Malays realised that they, as a group, occupied the bottom of the racial-economic hierarchy; and (iii) Malays demanded for protection from the British against the massive influx of non-Malay immigrants (Stenson, 1976). These tenets

shaped the formulation of Article 153 in the Federal Constitution, which provided recognition for the special position of the Malays in 1957—extended to natives in Sabah and Sarawak in 1963—and embedded the role of the monarchy as safeguard. The British conceded to the demands for AA led by the Malay aristocratic elites, driven by the strategic need to protect business and political interests in the region against threats from more radical, anti-colonial movements associated with communism at that time (Lim, 1980; Weiss, 2020).

The fact that the constitutional provision of AA was more symbolic than real in addressing historical disadvantages could be seen in the lack of economic progress for Malays between 1957 and 1969. In 1969, foreigners still owned 62.1% share capital in limited companies in Peninsular Malaysia, while Chinese 22.8%, Malays 1.5% and Indians 0.9%. The same pattern of foreign dominance could be seen in the holdings of rubber and oil palm estates (Malaysia 1971, 39-40). Malay discontents over persistent racial inequalities, fuelled by heightened communal politics, provided the impetus for the racial riots of 1969 (Cham, 1975; Lim, 1980). To remedy the racial imbalance, the NEP—presented in the *Second Malaysia Plan* and *Third Malaysia Plan*—was put forward with two prongs: first, to eradicate poverty irrespective of race; and second, to eliminate the identification of race with economic function.

Although the NEP has been vehemently debated and criticised over the years (S. H. Alatas, 1972; Jomo & Gomez, 2000; Lee, 2021), there are anti-colonial elements in the NEP that have not been given sufficient acknowledgement, perhaps overshadowed by its subsequent neo-colonial permutations. The NEP attributed racial and economic imbalances to “colonial policies” and “economic development during the colonial era” (Malaysia 1971, 41). The second prong of the NEP explicitly aimed to restructure the racial-economic hierarchy which was seen as a colonial legacy. Furthermore, the NEP recognised the dominance and control of foreign capital in the economy, established clear targets to reduce foreign ownership and ushered the shift away from laissez-faire capitalism (Lee, 2021; Malaysia, 1976).

While the NEP formally ended in 1990, its two-prong objectives continue to be central to Malaysia's policy architecture, persisted through the National Development Plan (1991-2000) and National Vision Policy (2000-2010), and lasting until today. In fact, since the NEP, AA has been expanded significantly in terms of the scale and scope of the programmes. More contemporary assessments of AA have been mixed, highlighting tangible benefits but also pressing concerns (Lee, 2021; Lee & Khalid, 2020). Critics also point to the role of AA in facilitating patronage politics by creating the conditions and opportunities for rent-seeking (de Micheaux, 2017; Jomo & Gomez, 2000). Despite these mixed results and trenchant criticisms, existing surveys suggest robust support among Bumiputeras for AA. However, these preferences could refer to different programmes and underpinned by different rationalities, inherently limited by survey methods that probe broad terminologies (Lee, 2017a).

Following the incumbent *Barisan Nasional* (BN) government's loss of its long-held two-thirds parliamentary majority in 2008, contributed by the loss of non-Bumiputera votes (O'Shannassy, 2009), the government announced the NEM in 2010, calling for AA to be "market friendly". The NEM was vague on details but called for a move from "the excessive focus on ethnicity" to needs and merits as guiding principles in redesigning AA (NEAC, 2010). Political resistance ensued and the government eventually backtracked on the NEM, but need-based AA had, by then, been etched into public consciousness despite its contradictions and incoherence (Lee 2017b, 12; 2021, 42).

This historical snapshot suggests that subjectivities surrounding AA are not straightforward, rooted in the colonial legacy of racial categorisation and stratification, and influenced by subsequent material development in postcolonial Malaysia. Therefore, theorising the subjective domain should ideally be grounded in a framework that can encompass its relations to the objective domain.

## **Theoretical Framework**

I posit that Bourdieusian theory provides a productive starting point for a synthesis of the objective and subjective domains in approaching AA in Malaysia. However, I extend Bourdieu in two ways. First, I make explicit the colonial elements found in early Bourdieusian thought and centre Bourdieu's field theory as a lens in which coloniality can be foregrounded. Coloniality is defined here as the structures of power, control and hegemony that emerged as a result of colonialism but also outlive it (Quijano, 2000). Second, I draw from Critical Race Theory (CRT) and cultural sociology to broaden the notion of racial identity, so that postcolonial repertoires can be incorporated beyond the limited confines of Bourdieu's homology.

Bourdieu builds on the notion of economic capital in theorising two other forms of capital i.e. cultural and social capital. Hence, the Bourdieusian framework provides a mapping of the social space that depends not only on the amount of capital, but also the composition and relationship of these different forms of capital (Bourdieu 1986). Cultural capital can be understood as cultural competences in a whole array of domains including abstract knowledge, language, preferences and tastes, while social capital is the social networks and relations that people have (Atkinson, 2015; Prieur & Savage, 2011; Wright, 2005). It is cultural and social capital, working in concert with economic capital, that shape the habitus, or the durable disposition with "infinite capacity for generating... thoughts, perceptions, expressions and actions" (Bourdieu 1990, 55).

Hence, social attitudes must be understood here in a sociological sense, as "prescriptive and evaluative judgments of a particular phenomenon" (Voas 2014, 1-2). This definition differentiates it from personal preferences, which may be more descriptive and do not prescribe their views to other people, as well as departs from a psychological definition that tends to emphasise social attitudes as mental states (Voas 2014, 2-3). Therefore, the contestations between different social groups are not just over the distribution of economic capital, but also a struggle for recognition of their different forms of capital and dispositions which are manifested in practices and lifestyles in the symbolic space (Atkinson, 2015). Misrecognition is the insidious

process of veiling some practices and lifestyles under a different “realm of meaning”, a mechanism of subordinating certain groups while maintaining a set of distributional relations. In this sense, the Bourdieusian dynamics of recognition are deeply enmeshed with the logic of redistribution, which is different from Fraser’s theorising of recognition and redistribution as connected but ultimately distinct spheres (Fraser, 2009; James, 2015).

To integrate his theoretical devices, Bourdieu introduced the concept of a field. Field is the arena where individuals with different dispositions and strategies of actions contend over recognition and distribution of their various forms of capital (Atkinson, 2015; Prieur & Savage, 2011). A field has its own system of logic with field-specific capital that has to be obtained alongside a person’s pre-accrued capital (Davis, 2010). However, the field as a system with its own internal logic was derived from Bourdieu’s own encounters with colonialism in Algeria. His early work on Algerian society suggests an understanding of colonialism as a system with its own distinct logic, which laid the foundation for his later theorising of fields (Go, 2013). The early Bourdieu argued that race was central to the colonial system to legitimise and rationalise the colonial order (Go 2013, 55). He also contended that the violent dispossession of colonialism produced distinct subjectivities, where the colonised would always see their own dispositions in light of intrusive colonial values, but “sediments” from the past—a precursor to his concept of habitus—would remain in these new subjectivities (Go 2013, 60-63).

In this sense, the distinct postcolonial subjectivities surrounding AA in Malaysia must be assessed within the field of coloniality, which provides a lens to assess how the different forms of capital are considered dominant or subordinate. The field of coloniality is the arena where misrecognition is concretised and anchors the struggles for recognition and redistribution. Bourdieu is appropriate here not only because it can be applied to study AA in postcolonial Malaysia, but some of his key concepts were in fact derived from Bourdieu’s own encounters with colonialism. Hence, his theoretical devices would have to be reappropriated here for the assessment of racial identities and social attitudes towards AA in Malaysia.



Bourdieuian theory employs the concept of homology to denote the correspondence between one's position in the social space and subjectivities they express in the symbolic space (Atkinson, 2015). If the concept of homology holds, this means that the subjectivities of Malays would correspond to where they are positioned in the field of coloniality. However, in perceiving themselves and the world around them, people do not just draw from their "proximate" environments i.e. their immediate socioeconomic structures. Instead, people also acquire social and political acumens from broader features of society—what has been called "historically constituted national repertoires" (Lamont 1992, 87, 187-188). Although this does not discount the possibility that there can be a direct relationship between the objective and subjective domains, it suggests that homology should not be generalised but be subject to empirical inquiries.

Meghji (2019) argues that the CRT notion of racial ideologies as "racially based frameworks" can be used as cultural repertoires, or toolkits of "habits, skills, and styles" that people use to develop their "strategies of action" (Swidler 1986, 273). This means that even if race is central to the structuring of capital in the field of coloniality, racial frameworks provide agency for people in developing their different strategies of action. Therefore, race must be interrogated on its own without reducing it to class (Gilroy, 1987). In other words, Malay identities and attitudes are not necessarily fixed to their social positions in the field of coloniality. In this regard, racial identities can be understood as racial frameworks used in the positioning of oneself relative to others and responding to how oneself is being positioned by others (Meghji 2017, 1009).

There are two ways in which the postcolonial perspective is pivotal here. First, the racial categories that enter these frameworks, whether they are embraced or resisted, are racial categories solidified by colonialism. Second, these racial frameworks interact with other repertoires shaped by colonialism—what I call "postcolonial national repertoires". Two postcolonial national repertoires are pertinent here: national identity and neoliberal success.

On the repertoire of national identity, Malaysia has to embark on projects of forging national unity to deal with the colonial legacy of having different racial groups with augmented communal sentiments living together in a socially constructed national boundary. One of the most salient projects is the concept of Bangsa Malaysia. It was introduced by the former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed in 1991 in articulating his Vision 2020. Bangsa Malaysia has become an intensely debated concept, partly because the word “bangsa”, officially interpreted as “nation”, also carries the connotation “race” (Gabriel, 2015). As a result, Bangsa Malaysia has been subject to contesting interpretations—an opportunity to forge a post-racial national identity (Gabriel, 2015); a multicultural celebration (and for some, equal recognition) of distinct cultural identities; or a threat to the core pillars of Malay culture as the basis of national identity (Ishak, 2015; Shamsul, 2001). Racial frameworks have to contend with these contesting repertoires of national identity.

On the repertoire of neoliberal success, Malaysia’s development model combines the paradoxical ideas of a developmental state and neoliberalism<sup>2</sup>. Among their many characteristics, the former promotes state involvement in socio-economic engineering while the latter espouses an open economy with minimal state intervention. Nonetheless, a paradox is not a contradiction, and in Malaysia’s development model, this is reconciled by the state embarking on privatisation and selling government-nurtured firms to selected Bumiputera entrepreneurs, while maintaining arms-length control of capital through its tight political-business nexus. The unique blend of a developmental state with neoliberal tenets was accelerated in the privatisation drive of the mid-1980s but came to a halt during the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997. The government had to bail out these firms, which has since evolved into an extensive ecosystem of government-linked companies (de Micheaux, 2017; Gomez, 2009).

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<sup>2</sup> Neoliberalism is understood here as more than a set of policies but also a hegemonic governing rationality, or governmentality, that has a global reach (Hamann, 2009).

Malaysia's partial embrace of neoliberalism, with uneven permeation into the policy domains of AA, reinforces the relevance of the repertoire of neoliberal success as another contending script, which extols virtues of the neoliberal self (Lamont, 2018): autonomous effort, competitive competencies and meritocratic worth. This repertoire can be deployed to challenge the idea of attaining success via the "help" of AA, subverting the latter as reliant, uncompetitive and unmeritocratic—this, however, needs to be tested empirically. However, the notion of neoliberal success should not be seen as something disjointed from the past but continues from the colonial practice of refashioning the native aristocratic elites after the European image (S. F. Alatas 2019, 34). In this case, these neoliberal virtues are racialised virtues with whiteness at the pinnacle (S. F. Alatas 2019, 32). Whiteness here does not refer to white people, but an ideological position that entrenches advantage for those appearing or passing as white (Harris, 1993), elevating racialised neoliberal economic, cultural and social capital in the attainment of social mobility.

### **Research Methodology**

I used semi-structured, in-depth interviews as my research method. I adopted a relational interviewing technique that is grounded in the co-construction of meaning between the interviewer and interviewee (Fujii, 2017). I chose interview as my data collection method on the basis that the primary research motivation is to deepen understanding of racial identities and social attitudes beyond binary choices and broad terminologies, which may be difficult to achieve with surveys. At the same time, a study on racial identities and social attitudes involves stringing together imagined meanings and self-concepts (Lamont & Swidler, 2014), distinct from studying behaviour. Hence, it is more appropriate to conduct the research with interviews rather than participant-observation. I did not offer a working definition of AA in my interviews because I wanted to centre the subjectivities of my respondents rather than circumscribe them within a policy-centric

definition. While this could result in the lack of a common ground on what constitutes AA, I built in probes on the different programmes which were used as and when relevant.

For the sample selection, I focused only on the Malays because it is the dominant group within the Bumiputera category. Moreover, non-Malay Bumiputeras, predominantly from Sabah and Sarawak, warrant a separate treatment given their significantly different contexts, where a dissertation of such length would not do justice. I confined my sample to Malay youths aged 18 to 30 to ensure that the AA programmes were comparable for the interviewees. In 2019, the voting age was amended from 21 to 18 in the Federal Constitution, thus magnifying the political voice of youths. Examining the racial identities and social attitudes of Malay youths would be crucial in charting the prospects of AA in Malaysia.

Based on the sampling design, I recruited a total of 16 interviewees from my personal networks and three interviewees from snowball technique i.e. based on interviewee recommendations. One interviewee dropped out after confirming the interview, so a total of 18 interviews were conducted. Of the 18 interviews, five were female and 13 were male. Six were based in the United Kingdom and 12 in Malaysia. Ten were in tertiary education (of different levels) and eight were already in employment. Average age of the respondents was 24.6.

I used thematic analysis (TA) to analyse the data because my data analysis procedure followed a TA procedure of starting from the selection of codes and developing these codes into themes and global themes (Attride-Stirling, 2001). The development of codes and themes was based on an iterative process of deductive and inductive approaches (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Using the theoretical framework, I developed a set of provisional codes. I then immersed myself in the interview transcripts to see if there were any other possible codes outside the theoretical framework, in a way applying the Foucauldian method of suspending second-order judgments to the texts (Kendall & Wickham, 1998). This also resembles grounded theory, where the initial theoretical ideas were provisional and subject to further development via an interactive process of theoretical reflections and empirical analysis (Holloway & Todres, 2003). I conducted

two rounds of coding, the first one using descriptive codes and the second using analytical codes. These codes were then analysed further in relation to the research question.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### *Common narratives*

Based on the data analysis, I find that the racial identity modes of Malay youths are underpinned by conceptions of race, strategies of drawing boundaries with other Bumiputeras and sense of group domination. These identity modes shape their social attitudes towards AA in terms of how they view AA's fundamental problems, prescribe its normative agenda and justify its time horizon. In this regard, my main findings show that there are three racial identity modes which shape three corresponding social attitudes towards AA: (i) post-racial mode sees AA as inherently problematic; (ii) race-minded mode sees AA as having concealed benefits; and (iii) ethno-cultural mode sees AA as a reparable affair. However, before unpacking these three identity modes and their corresponding social attitudes, it is important to highlight some of the common narratives around AA.

The interviewees generally understood AA as having the objective of addressing the resource deficits of Bumiputeras in various economic spheres. These could be deficits in income, wealth, skills, knowledge, education or jobs. While they sometimes compared these deficits with non-Bumiputera attainments—essentially framing the issue as a racial inequality problem, they often emphasised the deficits of *low-income* Bumiputeras as well—thus, also a poverty problem. The notion of AA promoting racial diversity and representation was seldom invoked, unless prompted. Even with these promptings, they would provide the caveat that diversity should not be based on tokenistic representation without considerations of merit and capability. Besides these material dimensions, the symbolic element of AA also surfaced occasionally in some of the interviews, where the constitutional provision of AA was contemplated alongside other symbolic

features e.g. constitutional monarchy, the official religion of Islam and the official language of Malay, as securing the special position of the Bumiputera in Malaysia.

The interviewees shared a broad consensus that things have deteriorated from the past, that AA as an agenda has lost its sense of direction for a variety of reasons. Many of their criticisms revolved around how AA have been captured by the elites through mistargeting, and by the political class through cronyism and leakages. These AA benefits have disproportionately gone to the “underserving” Bumiputeras instead of the “deserving”, usually low-income, Bumiputeras. Elite capture was sometimes explained more diplomatically as evidence of social mobility, pointing to divergence in the racial hierarchy and economic hierarchy among Bumiputeras—which were previously conflated, raising the question of whether the Bumiputera category can still be accepted as a coherent target group for delivering AA.

Despite these criticisms, the interviewees recognised the benefits of AA for low-income Bumiputeras. They weighed these *absolute* benefits received against the *relative* social mobility attained by Bumiputeras in developing an overall assessment of AA, plus consider the extent that these benefits entrap low-income Bumiputeras in undesirable debt and political gratitude. However, they seldom questioned the socioeconomic ladder underpinning social mobility or flagged the socioeconomic ladder as a problem that needs to be deconstructed.

#### *Identity modes and social attitudes*

The post-racial mode can be characterised by the desire to transcend racial categorisations, particularly the Bumiputera category and to a lesser extent the Malay category. Racial boundaries are seen as malleable and a social construct, while race is viewed as becoming less salient in the organisation of public life. For example, Tajuddin<sup>3</sup> (male, student), who epitomised a post-racial mode, said:

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<sup>3</sup> All names used are pseudonyms.

*“I think the last thing that I would have... I would really, really, you know, how do I phrase this... you would really have to extract the Bumiputera phrase out of me before I can even consider myself as a Bumi, because I think that is the furthest notion at the back of my mind... If someone were to ask me my racial background, I would just say that I am Malay or they would further ask me how are you Malay and whatnot because... So I am a Malay in name...”*

Interviewees in the post-racial mode viewed their Bumiputera identity as “a very official government thing” (Asra, female, employee) and tended to identify least with being Bumiputera compared with other forms of identity. At best, being Bumiputera merely provided a gateway for them to access AA benefits, an identity they otherwise attached very little emotion and meaning.

At the same time, they would either reject outright or be sceptical of nationalistic categories like Bangsa Malaysia. Instead, they put on a self-presentation of global cosmopolitanism, a socio-cultural milieu in which they were embedded, espousing more non-materialistic rather than neoliberal notions of success. They embraced dominant forms of cultural and social capital, from the standpoint of the global cosmopolitan self, in drawing boundaries with other Bumiputeras, but seldom articulated the connections between these dominant socio-cultural forms and economic capital. For example, they would see the ability to “mingle around” and be exposed to certain ideas or literatures as “natural”, rather than how the possessions of economic capital had insulated them from everyday urgencies in their cultivation of social skills and exposure to a broader set of ideas (Bourdieu 1984, 55). Huda (female, student), who also exemplified a post-racial mode, explained:

*“I was brought up in a generally quite a diverse and a very inclusive and a very egalitarian kind of environment. So... it's not something I had to put inside of me,*

*it's not something that I had to teach myself. It was something that I saw happening in front of me and then it was very natural to want what you have, I have. What I have, you have too. It was very, very, it was a very normal concept to me. But I think if you were brought up in a much more segregated places... you're a lot less likely to want things to actually be, you know, be equal."*

The post-racial mode characterises the social hierarchy in colour-blind terms and explains away racial domination as non-racial experiences. While interviewees in this mode acknowledged the existence of racism and racial discrimination against Bumiputeras, they would often downplay the gravity of these encounters as something else e.g. perpetrators lacked awareness, victims perceived wrongly. The fact that Bumiputeras are the majority population in Malaysia also contributed to the downplaying of Bumiputera's racial experiences as something that could not be widespread—what I call the “majority mirage”.

Therefore, the post-racial interviewees tended to view AA as racially unjust because the use of race as an organising principle in distributing resources was seen as intrinsically unjustifiable. They reckoned that applying the racial criterion to a colour-blind social hierarchy would unfairly exclude “deserving” non-Bumiputeras. In this regard, AA was seen as complicit in creating a racially segmented society. Instead, they envisioned a post-racial future in which race-based AA must be ended in both its symbolic (constitutional) and material (programmatic) forms, with a strong take-up of need-based AA as replacement. Generally, the post-racial mode views AA as something that should not have existed, should not continue and should have ended long time ago.

At the other end of the pole, the race-minded mode sees race as a fixed, immutable category, conferring sentiments of pride and dignity in Malay civilisational history and contemporary developments. Interviewees in the race-minded mode were also wary of Bangsa Malaysia as a concept, but these stemmed more from their apprehensions that such nationalistic



categories could erase racial distinctions. Instead, they preferred Malay identity to be the backbone of national identity and national unity, but also recognised other forms of cultural expressions.

It is important not to equate the preference for Malay-centrism by the race-minded mode as racism. In fact, the interviewees in the race-minded mode were also critical of the rhetoric of Malay superiority (*ketuanan Melayu*) and other racial undertones used to justify AA. Some of them even took on a broader, pan-Malay worldview instead of conflating race with narrow nationalism. They made a clear distinction between racial advocacy and racism in explaining why the former was needed to address a social hierarchy that was seen as ubiquitously racialised. This was reinforced by their strong sense of racial domination, informed by their own encounters with racism, racial discrimination and stereotyping. Imran (male, student), who approximated a race-minded mode, said:

*“Well, firstly, to avoid some unnecessary misunderstandings, there’s a clear distinction between racism and also racial advocacy. Racial advocacy is meant to help a particular race to succeed in life, this is not really controversial, while racism, on the other hand, can be defined as a sense of superiority and also the sense to see other races or let’s say the other go down.”*

Nonetheless, the race-minded interviewees were aware that they could be constructed by others as “conservative” and “traditionalist”. In turn, they drew boundaries with their critics by characterising them as privileged, English-speaking urban elites, who embrace western ideas uncritically. They not only challenged dominant cultural and social capital as normative standards, castigating them as “western influence”, but also surmised that these dominant socio-cultural forms were imbricated with economic capital. This can be seen in Zariff’s (male, student) boundary-drawing:

*“Ok, I feel like the people who are, who want to transcend race, most of them would come from a better off socioeconomic background because they don't have the urgency to protect themselves right. So the question of desperation is not really a problem. So they can afford to sort of think about not have these securities.”*

The race-minded mode views AA as an important pillar for Bumiputeras, offering clear and evident benefits for the community. Those in this mode explained effort, competitiveness and merit *within* the architecture of AA, sometimes supported with Islamic narratives to serve as counterpoise to the neoliberal script of success. While they acknowledged the problems of AA, they expressed the root causes underlying these problems to be the broader racial segmentation and racist propaganda brought about by self-serving politicians. From this perspective, these racial segmentation and propaganda, exacerbated by elitism, cause AA to be misconstrued as unjust and concealed the benefits of AA. Unlike the post-racial mode that sees AA as complicit in creating a racially segmented society, the race-minded mode sees AA as a casualty instead.

Hence, in direct contrast to the post-racial mode, the race-minded mode sees relevance of the racial criterion in both the symbolic (constitutional) and material (programmatic) realms of AA. The constitutional guarantee is seen as durably relevant, to be retained indefinitely or for a long period of time. Even if the race-minded interviewees made concessions to relax the racial criterion and open up selected programmes to non-Bumiputeras, these efforts must be done without detracting from the core focus of AA on Bumiputeras. They envisaged that the more important solutions should be directed at the root causes of racial segmentation e.g. vernacular schools, supported by programmatic improvements in AA to increase access and awareness.

The ethnocultural mode lies between the two modes above and draws strategically from them based on calculated pragmatism. Interviewees in the ethnocultural mode sometimes faced moral dilemmas and personal conflicts in negotiating between these two poles. They tended to

view race as a cultural practice e.g. language, customs—thus, closer to notions of ethnicity. They considered their racial identities of being Bumiputera and Malay as equivalent with other forms of identity e.g. national and gender identities. Unlike interviewees in the other two modes, they were also the most enthusiastic in embracing Bangsa Malaysia as a concept to promote national unity.

While the ethnocultural mode is similar to the post-racial mode in using dominant cultural and social capital to draw boundaries with other Bumiputeras, it also shares the perspective of the race-minded mode that these dominant socio-cultural forms are imbricated with economic capital. Consequently, interviewees in this mode would be more sympathetic to Bumiputeras constructed as different from them. Sulaiman (male, employee), who personified the ethnocultural mode, said:

*“I think it has to be related to educational background... to a certain degree, I would say I'm a well-educated man, but if you look, if you talk to the people in kampung, those in low-income group people, who drives taxi, they will say that... they will have a different view from me. They would say that, oh, this programme has benefited them and they wish for it to continue. So they might have different view from me. And I don't blame them for... to have such view because, like I said, I come from a middle-income family.”*

Like those in the post-racial mode, they also downplayed experiences of racism and racial discrimination against Bumiputeras. Even if they recognised Bumiputera's racial experiences, they did not regard these problems as serious and widespread, veiled by the majority mirage. Instead, they saw these racial experiences as problems that could be readily solved without resorting to a full-fledged, race-based AA. Their views were reinforced by neoliberal ideas of success, a script they embraced most strongly compared with interviewees in the other two

modes. Success based on government assistance, including AA, was seen by them as aided effort, protected from competition and not based on merit, reducing its overall value.

Therefore, the ethnocultural mode sees the problems of AA as outweighing its benefits. The assessments of AA by those in the ethnocultural mode were also differentiated by programmes, where the outcomes could be mixed. They viewed the problems of AA as something that could be solved, with judiciousness and pragmatism, as these problems stemmed from unintended consequences rather than inherent injustices. They would support a gradual transition to need-based AA for the material realm (programmatic) but remained ambiguous on the symbolic realm (constitutional). These were explained using pragmatic reasoning, as demonstrated here by Adam (male, student):

*“I think things like that, although it is in the Constitution, if it does not translate itself into concrete discrimination, then I think it's fine. If you want it there just for it to be symbolic and whatnot, because if it's there, then it's also related to the raja-raja thing, then it's fine. We don't need to have that much changes anyway, just focus on the things that affect everyone's everyday life first and then we can think of that.”*

#### *Situating the research findings*

The post-racial and race-minded modes, marking two ends of the identity spectrums, with the ethno-cultural mode in between, are really two sides of the same coin. They are detached from the colonial origins of AA, albeit in different ways. The post-racial mode glosses over the colonial racial hierarchy and its relevance for contemporary Malaysia. Its assumption of a colour-blind social hierarchy and envisioning of a post-racial future without AA mystify the persistent functioning of race and evolution of the racial hierarchy into subtler forms. On the other hand, the race-minded mode perpetuates the colonial legacy of fixed, entrenched racial boundaries,

uncritical of how the native question was first and foremost a colonial preoccupation (Mamdani, 2018). The idea of the native, and that native needed protection, was concretised in Southeast Asia through scientific racism, colonial conquest and industrial expansion (Noor & Carey, 2021).

While some of the interviewees alluded to the colonial origins of AA, these references were based on an incomplete reading of the postcolonial situation, skewed to one part of the racial hierarchy instead of its production in entirety. Colonialism was seen as a problem of the “past” and its effects no longer present today. These modes do not differentiate between AA at independence which preserved many of the features of colonial relations and the stronger anti-colonial elements of the NEP. The point here is not to blame the interviewees for these missing narratives but to direct attention to the question of how postcolonial subjectivities without a colonial oppressor are being reproduced in contemporary Malaysia. Initial assessment points to the need to consider households, communities, schools, and workplaces as important sites—and non-elite actors within them—in the reproduction of postcolonial subjectivities.

When uprooted from its colonial origins, the *raison d'être* of AA is diminished. As exclaimed by Zariif, *“the problem with our affirmative action discussion is that... we don't have a sort of antagonist”* and echoed by Nizam (male, student) *“...since we don't have a common enemy, it's probably going to be hard”*. Hence, the rationale for AA has been seen as one of economic attainments to reduce racial inequalities or resource deficits, rather than the deconstruction of a set of colonial social relations. Although this is not to say that economic attainments are unimportant, the fundamental issue is how a set of social relations—brought about by colonialism and continue to assert their influence today—are inhibiting economic attainments, and in turn preventing new social relations from emerging.

The present disjuncture means that the socioeconomic ladder underpinning social mobility has been accepted rather uncritically, as demonstrated in the common narratives of AA above. The lack of social mobility is widely understood to be due to “deficits” embedded within Bumiputeras, assessed from the standpoint of an unproblematized hierarchy, instead of how the

hierarchy itself is causing systemic disadvantages for different groups. This resembles “a condition of coloniality without colonialism” (S. F. Alatas 2019, 32), propagating the myth that the problem lies with individual capabilities rather than systemic disadvantages. This is prevalent in the interviews where AA was always referred to as a privilege or an advantage, where its removal would level the playing field, instead of AA as something that fixes a systemic disadvantage and equalises the playing field. From a policy standpoint, this shift from systemic disadvantages to individual deficits has a tendency of defining success by referencing characteristics of the dominant group, instead of reconfiguring the economic system to amplify misrecognised capital of the subordinate group.

In depicting their own racial identities and social attitudes, the interviewees constructed “the other” and their ways of life as problematic and inferior. In other words, the clash over the different interpretations of AA went beyond struggles for *redistribution* of resources to contestations over *recognition* of their different forms of capital. This affirms the Bourdieusian theory within the field of coloniality. For example, on cultural and social capital, it was highlighted earlier that those in the post-racial mode tended to see the ability to mingle around with other races as inborn and natural. They construed those who supported AA as people who came from racially segregated places, lacked exposure to diversity and thus, preferred unequal treatment of other races. However, Adam provided a more empathetic account here:

*“But I also have to say that the mixing can be quite intimidating if you're not comfortable speaking in English. Because I remember back then, I think that's a good point to make, because back then even in primary school, when I mix with my non-Malay friends, there's clearly a language barrier because the non-Malay people would usually speak in English... And I know some of my Malay friends, they probably would be fine interacting with these non-Malay people if the language barrier isn't there.”*

Besides English, several interviewees spoke about how Mandarin has become a barrier for interacting with other races in informal settings. Many of the interviewees also pointed to broader discontent with how the Mandarin criterion for employment has discriminated Bumiputeras from accessing certain jobs. In this case, the narrative that Bumiputeras suffered from deficits in languages with an economic premium—whether English or Mandarin—was challenged with the counter-narrative that it was the lack of recognition for the Malay language which explained why Bumiputeras could not be integrated properly.

However, these contestations are not neutral because the burden is always on subordinate groups to adopt dominant socio-cultural forms to fit in and attain progress. In fact, the reproduction of dominant socio-cultural forms is fashioned after a desire for whiteness, a continuity from the colonial practice of recreating the native aristocratic elites after its own European image. Whiteness, given impetus by global neoliberal capitalism and camouflaged by post-racialism, reinforces the power of foreign capital and its domestic allies. It further suggests the limits of conceptualising AA as a tool to promote diversity, if it means that subordinate groups would have to assimilate into homogenous, dominant socio-cultural forms to succeed in these defined spaces.

The key takeaway here is not which side is right but to underscore the point that contestations over AA can go beyond the material to the symbolic realm. While struggles for redistribution are undoubtedly important, contestations for recognition hint at how redistributive languages e.g. notions of class and social justice, can be subverted to maintain a particular regime of distribution to keep the racial-economic hierarchy intact. Similarly, while race can be taken to the extreme in various permutations of racial superiority to justify AA, race narratives can also be used to unravel subtler racial processes and provide opportunity to decolonise inherited social hierarchies, categories and relations.

Within these contestations, the problems with disadvantaged Bumiputeras are often reduced to an either-or option of being a race or class issue. If the focus is just on class, then the racial hierarchy structuring the various forms of capital in the field of coloniality persists. Post-racialism conceals the racial hierarchy, underpinned by subtler expressions of racism, racial discrimination and stereotype, keeping disadvantaged Bumiputeras in a subordinate position. If the focus is just on race, then elite capture and cronyism remain unchecked in the disproportionate allocation of resources to privileged Bumiputeras. Either way, disadvantaged Bumiputeras would lose out, their relative position in the racial-economic hierarchy unchanged.

This is similar to the reduction of Black women's marginalisation to either a race or sex issue when the "intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism" (Crenshaw 1989, 140). Intersectionality is not merely having more vectors of disadvantage added for consideration, but the overall intensification of subordination brought about by the multiplicative effects of these vectors, constituting these experiences as distinct (Kabeer, 2014).

While Lee (2021, 44) has put forward a policy framework to enhance race-based AA with need-based and merit-based selections, there is still a need to foreground intersectionality in conceptualising the problems of disadvantaged Bumiputeras to serve as a basis for new policy thinking. These intersectional disadvantages are rooted in postcolonial hierarchies, categories and relations interacting with each other, resulting in the inequalities faced by disadvantaged Bumiputeras to endure. However, these durable inequalities are seldom problematised in policy design and often hidden by the majority mirage and conspicuous presence of a group of elite Bumiputeras.

## **Conclusion**

My research affirms the premise that social attitudes towards AA must be understood in the subjective domain. The social attitudes of Bumiputera Malay youths towards AA depend not just



on whether they gain or lose from AA, but also how they view themselves and the world around them. Drawing from an expanded Bourdieusian theory, underpinned by racial frameworks and postcolonial national repertoires, I show that these subjectivities relate to broader notions of capital—economic, cultural and social—structured and racialised as dominant or subordinate in the field of coloniality. My findings point to three racial identity modes and their attendant social attitudes towards AA.

Situating these findings within the theoretical framework signals several embedded myths in the discourse on AA and racial inequalities. First, the myth that the primary function of AA is to resolve problems located in individual deficits rather than systemic disadvantages shaped by the enduring effects of colonial legacies. Second, the myth that the socioeconomic ladder underpinning AA is something to be scaled instead of something to be deconstructed. Third, the myth that the problems of disadvantaged Bumiputeras can be reduced to either a race or class issue, rather than a set of postcolonial social relations perpetuating conjugated disadvantages for this group of Bumiputeras, in which inherited hierarchies and categories continue to obscure their enduring inequalities.

My research is significant because it centres the need to recover the discourse on the reproduction of postcolonial subjectivities in the study of AA in Malaysia. The implications derived from the findings provoke the question of why, how and where these subjectivities are reproduced, and whether AA in Malaysia can be adequately understood at the level of the nation-state and within a policy-centric frame without situating AA at the different sites—households, schools, communities, workplaces—where subjectivities are reproduced. Recovering the discourse on postcolonial subjectivities opens new research dimensions at different scales, from coloniality underpinning the international political economy to the domestic spaces that give rise to identity formation, compelling the research agenda to move beyond its prevailing national frame. It is also an invitation to interrogate AA from the standpoint of non-elites, foregrounding different scales, sites and actors in shaping the material realities and postcolonial subjectivities in Malaysia.

The significance of my research can also be situated in the new frame it provides to the politics of inequality in Malaysia. Rather than pitting race against class, my research suggests that the politics of inequality, pivoting around AA, must be reconstituted as a struggle for recognition and meaning, with implications for the distributive battle for resources. It means that both race-based *and* class-based rationalities can be used in these unequal contestations to preserve and legitimise the structures that privilege some Bumiputeras over others, but usually veiled as something else—what Bourdieu calls misrecognition. Therefore, in the politics of recognition, it is important to make race and class explicit in how they are contested and examine their implications for the different groups of Bumiputeras. Such explicit discourse on race would serve as an important antithesis to the suppression of race talks in Malaysia, a common theme raised by the interviewees.

Finally, my research calls for an articulation of injustice that is grounded in the embodied, intersectional experiences of disadvantaged Bumiputeras. The notions of injustice underlying AA have been deliberated along the lines of distributive justice, corrective justice and the diversity paradigm (Harris, 1993; Sabbagh, 2007), but none of them are satisfactory when their interconnections are not foregrounded. Distributive justice focuses on whether the correlation between race and class has been decoupled (Sabbagh, 2007), but tends to neglect the question of whether the decoupling comes at the costs of abandoning one's own socio-cultural forms. Corrective justice is seen as rectifying harms done in the past, but coloniality points to persistent but mystified links between the past and present. The diversity paradigm further increases the epistemic distance between the rationale for AA and contemporary effects of coloniality, aggravated by the problematic presumption that racial diversity translates seamlessly into diversity in socio-cultural forms.

While my research is not aimed at articulating a new conception of justice, the focus on intersectionality points to possible pathways of combining these different notions of justice. It portends new policy considerations such as the kind of misrecognised capital possessed by

disadvantaged Bumiputeras that can be amplified in the design of AA programmes. The normative and justice horizon of AA must recentre the imagination of a new political community, in which the enduring and intersectional inequalities of disadvantaged Bumiputeras must be confronted with fresh perspectives. A new conception of justice, forged this way, could establish the AA agenda with more compelling moral force, and provide the impetus for AA to be reimagined, reclaimed and reconstructed in more effective and relevant ways.

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