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# More than Colonial Vestige? Afternoon Tea as Heritage Practice in Penang (Malaysia)

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**Abstract:** This article builds on insights from both critical heritage studies and Indian Ocean studies to argue that there is a need to delve deeply into how, by whom, and why heritage is practiced. Empirically, the practice of afternoon tea in Penang (Malaysia) provides insights into habits, manners, and customs in order to explore heritage as a social practice. Drawing on ethnographic field research on the island of Penang in Malaysia, this article demonstrates how the multiple forms, as well as the changing production, practice, and preservation, of local cultural heritage are used to strategically and situationally create identities in dependence of the "other" and in response to a national heritage narrative. In contrast to what is nowadays often considered a colonial vestige, I maintain that these cultural heritage elements are not foreign but part of specific local cultural heritages.

**Keywords:** heritage as practice; cultural geography; critical heritage studies; Penang Jawi Peranakan; ethnography; Indian Ocean studies

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## 1. Introduction

In order to create a coherent national heritage narrative, the Malaysian state promotes heritage that has a precolonial history and is mainly rooted in Islam. However, the port city of Penang, George Town, does not have a precolonial history as this city was founded in 1786 by the British East India Company (e.g., [1]). The port city's historic centre has been well preserved, even during the waves of rapid modernisation of Penang in the 1980s and 1990s. Since Malaysian independence, the whole country has experienced prolonged periods of economic growth driven by rapid industrialisation, which changed the appearance of many cities in the short term, resulting in a sometimes-confusing mosaic of highways, low-cost apartment blocks, middle-class suburbs, industrial estates, and shopping malls. Inner-city George Town was at first not affected by these developments. In legal terms, this was mainly due to the Rent Control Act of 1966, which guaranteed rent stability for privately owned houses built before 1948. There were two apparent consequences of this legal regime: it helped to protect about 12,000 heritage buildings and it provided cheap rented housing to lower-income urban populations [2] (p. 9). This was not the case for George Town's immediate environs, where new industrial and infrastructural developments took off in the 1980s and 1990s.

Since then, George Town's urban character has undergone significant changes. Probably the most obvious aspect is the growing gentrification, which has been steadily increasing since its UNESCO World Heritage listing, together with Melaka, in 2008. The preservation of cultural heritage is always linked to economic as well as socio-cultural changes. These changes are particularly evident in George Town's Old Town, the core zone defined in the George Town Special Area Plan, which is just one and a half square kilometre in size but is now home to over a hundred cafés and hotels. The drastic and rapid changes in both politics and the urban environment mean that George Town's lived heritage has become a decisive point of reference. This can serve to distance oneself strategically and situationally from the narrative of a national cultural heritage or to connect to it. Strategies of connecting

or distancing help not only to challenge established (ethnic) categories, but to creatively subvert them.

As this article will show, examining the practice of having afternoon tea as a heritage practice provides a means to more deeply explore the experiences and negotiations involved in heritage practices, as well as considering the political implications involved in heritage-making. Firstly, I engage with ocean-centred approaches and discuss theoretical ideas of critical heritage studies and the politics of heritage-making. In the following sections, I offer ethnographic accounts with Jawi Peranakan and their history and heritage, especially in regard to afternoon tea, to demonstrate how a putative colonial leftover is in fact an important aspect of local heritage practices. The conclusions of this enquiry bring the theoretical debate beyond the particularity of a case study, and in this way, the article contributes to the wider debates on critical heritage and Indian Ocean studies.

George Town's networks have changed and developed over time and left their traces in the port city and its communities. Following McPherson's call to study the relationship between 'maritime trade and processes of cultural diffusion and interaction' [3] (p. 3) is useful to investigate George Town's role as an important trading port and the diverse population that resulted from this fact. What McPherson describes as 'cultural diffusion' becomes visible in the port city's specific tangible and intangible heritage, which embodies its manifold connections.

How to label the resulting heritages—whether as mixed, transcultural, fusion, hybrid, or creole—has been under dispute for the last couple of decades, and the latter two terms, hybrid and creole, are the two most popular concepts used in relation to post-colonial settings such as George Town, which are characterised by migration. They are accordingly contextualised in the following paragraphs in order to provide the basis for the proposed investigation of 'connected heritages'.

The concept of hybridity was first applied in nineteenth-century biology, when the word was interpreted as miscegenation and became a term of racial discrimination [4]. However, it underwent a positive revision in biology based on the theory of evolution and Mendel's law, in which novel combinations of genes were recognised as sources of innovation. In analogy, the concept was appropriated in literary studies and the humanities to describe processes of identity and the construction of otherness as an outcome of cultural contact.

Through the application of hybridity in linguistics especially, the pivotal foundations were laid for the further development of the term. In particular, Mikhail Bakhtin's usage highlighted the mixing of two languages not as a harmonious mélange but as a 'collision between differing points of view on the world [*which*] consciously fight it out on the territory of the utterance' [5] (p. 360). This contestation emphasises the abilities of groups to articulate their differences, whereas conscious linguistic hybridisation undermines domination through a language that is purported to be standard.

Postcolonial studies concerned with historical power relations transferred the use of the term from the merely linguistic to cover various representations, culture, and heritage that are conceptualised as hybrid, contradictory, and layered, whereby elements overlap and mix in 'dynamic tension' [6] (p. 124). Thus, in postcolonial studies, hybridity denotes 'the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zones produced by colonization' [7] (p. 20). Employing hybridity emphasises the in-between positions of certain actors, especially migrants, an approach spearheaded by Homi Bhabha, who suggests that an 'interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy' [8] (p. 4).

However, Bhabha has been criticised for neglecting the conditions of migration, historical circumstances, and relations to specific places (e.g., [6])As such, the term 'hybridity' was dismissed as an epistemological dead-end for being restricted to signs and representations lacking spatial and temporal grounding. In order to provide more grounding for the term 'hybrid', it came to be described as a 'translation term', a reference to Clifford [9] (p. 39), in

order to emphasise that hybridisation strategies not only involve mixing but also exclusion, thus showing how hybridisation is actively carried out in migration settings (e.g., [10,11]).

The term 'creolisation' underwent a similar development, as it was first used in sociolinguistic studies but was later employed by other social scientists to investigate the dynamics of cross-cultural contacts and mixing. As the linguistic definition describes the emergence of new languages through contacts between different languages, cultural creolization, by analogy, denotes the emergence of 'a new cultural formation out of contact between different parent cultures' [12] (p. 11). Beyond its initial Caribbean context, creolisation has been used to describe similar processes in other settings [1].

In Thomas Eriksen's work on creolisation in Mauritius [15], for example, he examines three different meanings of the term. One refers to the state's system of classification, the second to the self-naming of certain groups, and the third to a supposed creole state of mind with a notion of individualism he describes as independent of both official and emic identifications [2]. Eriksen advocates using the term 'creolisation' in contrast to hybridity, especially in also considering 'decreolisation', whereby the subordinate group is 'socially or culturally assimilated into the dominant one' or in which creolised idioms are 'purified' [15].

In the context of ideas about an increasingly globalised world, the term 'creolisation' became even wider. For Ulf Hannerz, 'this world of movement and mixture is a world in creolisation' [17], in which all cultures are becoming subcultures [18]. Given such a broad definition, the term has been criticised for having evolved into a buzzword in the social sciences, used together with the terms syncretism, hybridity, transculturalism, and mixture [19]. As such, creolisation has developed into 'more of an epigrammatic than an analytical concept' (ibid.). In contemporary theory, moreover, it is not always clear to what extent creolisation differs from syncretism and hybridity [20]. Other criticisms of the term 'creole' argue that creolisation tends to be based on the assumption that ethnic groups and their heritages are themselves consistent entities, which only become mixed and varied through creolisation (e.g., [21]).

The decisive issue in this study is not to decide which of these terms is most applicable to the case of George Town, nor to invent a new and supposedly appropriate label for fusion, mixed, trans-, creole, or hybrid heritage. Rather, in the light of my own ethnographic data, and with reference to the concept of 'connected histories' [22], I would like to propose the concept of 'connected heritages', which aims at examining the connections that are an integral part of the tangible and intangible heritages of the port city. Accordingly, the emphasis is on *how* mixing and connections are used in expressing and defining identities and one's own heritage, while scrutinising the process of mixing as characterised by redefinitions, inventiveness, adaptations, and reflexivity.

Heritage is not simply a naturally occurring phenomenon but is rather produced, referred to, imposed, performed, and consumed. As such, heritage is 'a mode of cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past' [23]. To understand heritage as something of the present is at the heart of critical heritage studies (e.g., [24,25]). Heritage is taking the past into the present through 'historical contingency and strategic appropriations, deployments, redeployments, and creation of connections and reconnection' [26]. As such, heritage itself becomes a political resource [27] that reflects power structures [28]. Accordingly, critical heritage studies examine contemporary relationships between people and heritage in relation to power as a reaction against the domination of officially authorised heritage discourse [29].

In the case of George Town's context, there exist not one but two officially authorised heritage discourses. One is an international one, officially authorised by its UNESCO status as a World Heritage Site, together with Melaka [3], since 2008. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) referred to the 'outstanding universal value' of the two port cities. Part of the listing's description reads as follows:

> 'Melaka and George Town are living testimony to the multi-cultural heritage and tradition of Asia and European colonial influences. This multi-cultural tangible and intangible heritage is expressed in the great variety of religious buildings

> of different faiths, ethnic quarters, the many languages, worship and religious festivals, dances, costumes, art and music, food, and daily life' [4].

Melaka, like George Town, is a highly diverse port city. In particular, its built fabric consists entirely of colonial hybrid forms, with the single exception of the sultan's palace, a reconstruction outside the scope of the official heritage conservation [30]. However, Melaka differs significantly in the fact that it presents a heritage rooted in a distinctively Malay past as the port city's history is older than colonial encounters. As such, Melaka is the expression of 'a golden age of Malay commerce, political power, and cultural expansion' [31]. In Malaysia's post-colonial historiography, Melaka thus came to play a significant role in the construction of a new nation state, its national identity, and its heritage narrative, which is the other officially authorised heritage discourse. In this discourse, the fifteenth-century Sultanate was portrayed as 'the ancestral state of peninsular Malaysia' and accordingly served as a geographical precursor of the Malaysian state and a representation of its nationhood (ibid., p. 133).

In contrast to Melaka, George Town is a result of colonial encounters in which local groups emerged whose histories and heritage are deeply intertwined with colonial histories and heritage [1]. Since independence, the colonial heritage of Malaysia has been deliberately muted by the narrative of a national heritage because otherwise this would complicate the maintenance of an 'authentic' national, authority-defined identity and social reality [32]. This has caused continuing tensions in George Town between conserving a historically important site on the one hand and promoting a national Malay heritage on the other. Therefore, the related issue of identity politics is an important aspect that provides deeper insights into how processes and strategies of identification take place on the ground and in everyday practices within the various facets of heritage-making.

Accordingly, in this study, I analyse the questions of by whom, how, and why a recourse to the past takes place in the context of Penang's Peranakan and the heritage they seek to produce, perform, and preserve. The politics of heritage-making are particularly relevant for the context of the Indian Ocean [33]. By employing an ethnographic perspective, this article examines these politics of heritage-making, along with complex identity struggles and strategies rooted in historical experiences and connections.

Consequently, the proposed approach of connected heritages can be used to investigate connections as roots, routes, and adaptations in order to stress the ever-changing and mutable character of heritage. Acknowledging that every heritage is mutable, influenced, and changed through various connections suggests that every heritage, whether of a port city or not, is connected heritage. However, I argue that, as they are themselves outcomes of manifold connections, port cities offer a particularly high density of various influences coming to and circulating within them. Thus, port cities provide particularly fertile soil for connected heritages.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This study was mainly based on long-term ethnography. I lived in Penang for over a year in 2015 and 2016 and came back every year afterwards for at least one month, until the COVID-19 pandemic. I conducted over one hundred qualitative formal and informal interviews. I followed and interviewed conservation architects in George Town and preservation activists from the Penang Heritage Trust and the George Town Heritage Action, the latter of which was founded while I was there. I also documented cases of eviction and assisted in taking surveys of the remaining living craftsmen and artisans in the historic centre of George Town. I also joined numerous heritage walking tours for tourists and heritage artisan festivals, interviewing both locals and tourists. As I was interested in what was being promoted as Penang's heritage, I even joined training programs for tourist guides and became thus certified for certain fields. By living in the UNESCO-defined core zone, I came into contact with its few remaining inhabitants, some of whom for various reasons tried to keep tourists at bay by putting up signs on their doors to prevent people from taking photographs. It took a while for them to distinguish those tourists from myself,

a process which was only achieved through my staying and living in the neighbourhood for a long period.

During my fieldwork in George Town, I was trained in smelling, tasting, hearing, touching, seeing, and practicing Peranakan's connected heritages. I was intensively trained in cooking Nyonya cuisine, which gave me the opportunity to participate with all my senses while I was learning and observing Baba Nyonya heritage. Being close friends with two Jawi Peranakan, one of whom was also a chef, their families provided me with the chance to learn about their cuisine, habits, and celebrations. I was invited to many afternoon teas at home and in colonial settings, a *hari raya* open house [5], and two weddings.

I applied a hermeneutic method by frequently discussing the insights I gained during my fieldwork with my informants and in Penang's public forums and talks, and even sent drafts of papers to key informants for them to comment on. I was invited to give a public lecture at George Town World Heritage Incorporated (GTWHI) about my research and its findings, which gave me the opportunity to spark a discussion and gain further emic perspectives from Penangites.

## 3. Ethnography

An orderly, well-maintained square of green grass surrounds the white, two-storey, tile-roofed bungalow mansion of Suffolk House on three of its four sides. The founder of Penang, Francis Light, had bought the land on which Suffolk House stands as a pepper plantation, with a small garden house, and named it Suffolk after his county of birth in England. After Light's death, his house was replaced by a newer and larger building when Penang became the Fourth Presidency of India in 1805. Suffolk House served for a while as a government building and underwent many alterations over the years [34]. Built in an Anglo-Indian architectural style, Suffolk House is today the oldest case of such colonial grand houses and counts as one of the best remaining examples of Anglo-Indian architecture outside India. Therefore, it was used as a shooting location in 2015 and 2016 for *Indian Summers*, a British TV costume drama, with a story actually set in the colonial India of the 1930s but filmed in Penang due to the similar architectural influences. Today, Suffolk House hosts a restaurant, which is famous for its afternoon high tea, yet many visitors also come simply to see the site.

To enter the house, one has to pass a guard at a large iron gate separating the garden that surrounds Suffolk House from the parking area in front. When my friend Nuril and I arrived, the guard asked us whether or not we had a reservation for the restaurant, because we would need to pay an entry fee if we were not going to eat there. We did have a reservation for the afternoon high tea, which his mother organises on a fairly regular basis. Since one of her friends could not make it that weekend, she asked her son Nuril to take me along instead. The number of guests has to be even as the afternoon tea sets are made for two. The path to the house was covered with white pebbles, at the end of which wooden panels bridged the ground to the slightly higher ground floor of the building. A broad wooden staircase led up to the second floor, where the restaurant was located. A wide terrace surrounded three sides of the upper storey, and due to the open structure of the building, with its large windows and doors, a cooling flow of air went through the restaurant, boosted by the fans in the ceiling.

We met the others at the entrance to the restaurant at a round wooden table almost completely covered by an opulent bouquet of flowers framed by the restaurant's announcements of specials and its menu. Two waiters guided us to our table, which was covered with a white tablecloth, and handed us a tea menu with elaborate descriptions of the teas and a brief history of the house and its significance for Penang's colonial period. There were six of us, and each of us had to pick his or her own tea, since we were each provided with a small individual pot. Soon afterwards, the table was filled with three *étagères* holding triangular crust-free sandwiches at the bottom, some truffle-flavoured chicken pies in the middle, and little square-shaped pastries on the top. The set was accompanied by a basket full of freshly baked scones with a variety of handmade marmalades and jams, from classic

strawberry to the most delicious mix of apple and ginger, freshly whipped cream, and some biscuits.

'So, how did your conference go, Mika?' my friend's mother asked me without looking up but instead pouring herself some tea. Whenever I was with her, I knew her as the one who led the conversation. Aunty Wazir was a warm-hearted woman in her late sixties, although definitely also incredibly tough and intelligent, and I almost felt blessed to receive any kind of attention from her. Two of her sons became my closest friends in Penang, and it was as if I had attracted her attention because of them. 'I think it went quite well; I got some good comments on my paper', I answered with my eyes fixed on her so as not to miss anything when she looked up. 'Remind me again, what was your paper on?' she asked, after taking a sip of tea. I noticed a slight mark from her deep red lipstick on the white porcelain cup. I almost always saw Aunty Wazir with deep-coloured lipstick that matched the long blouses she usually wore. Her high-combed dark-brown hair gave her appearance a touch of the late sixties. She was a Muslim but rarely covered her hair, and if she did only loosely with a light scarf that matched the rest of her outfit. She had been born in Melaka, but had trained as an economic anthropologist at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Focusing on what she called indigenous feminism, she had introduced gender studies to Kedah and Penang in the late 1970s at a time when research on gender was an almost unknown subject in Malaysia. She is therefore still considered one of the pioneers in these fields, especially in Southeast Asia. In later years, she focused on the heritage of the Straits Muslims, especially the Jawi Peranakan, from which her own family is descended.

Jawi Peranakan belong to George Town's mixed communities, called *Peranakan.* Generally, Peranakan is the Malay term for locally born people of foreign descent, often interpreted simplistically as the offspring of foreign traders and local women [6]. In terms of their heritages and their narratives of origin, the Jawi Peranakan are understood to be a mixture of Indians or Arabs with Malays. Indian Muslim and Arab traders, who formed a significant part of the urban business elite, married local women and their offspring, who became endogamous in subsequent generations and formed a community of their own, known as the Jawi Peranakan or Straits-born [38]. Their tangible and intangible heritage is a mixture of Indian and Malay elements, while also incorporating European influences that were circulating in the port city at the time. Thus, Jawi Peranakan emerged in the port city of Penang and are therefore valuable for an anthropological approach to the dynamics of inner port cities, since they embody connectivity processes and are themselves an outcome of colonial encounters.

Auntie Wazir's grandparents were Punjabis from Lahore in present-day Pakistan. 'I don't have mixed heritage, but my children do. But in your socialization you move around with people who are in this category [*Jawi Peranakan*]', she had explained to me on an earlier occasion. This transformation, to become Jawi Peranakan not through intermarriage but through certain habits, had already started with her mother, even though she was 'pure Punjabi' too, though born in Penang:

> 'She changed her [Punjabi] costume, she dropped her accent and she became Malay. So eventually of course, she became just a Jawi person. The political and economic climate at that time did not encourage you to maintain your so called 'puristic' origin and things like that. You had to choose a category to belong' (Wazir, July 2016).

By the words 'that time', she meant the rise of nationalism in the fight for independence and the national narratives that arrived with it. Despite the closeness to Malays she described by saying 'she became Malay', differences have always been maintained and expressed in the English-medium education and specific habits of the Jawi Peranakan, both of which distinguish them from the Malays. They were and still are 'very British, very colonial', as Aunty Wazir put it:

> 'My mum had to have an aperitif before her meal, she had to have a sherry. After the meal she would have a peppermint liqueur or Cointreau. I developed that habit in Oxford, too. I was Muslim and of course I ate pork-free. But only after I came back and married my husband I became a bit more conform[ist] and Muslim. Even though I am Muslim, I can't be a Malay, so I am happy to claim that I am Jawi Peranakan, even though I am pure Punjabi. But my kids are Jawi Peranakan [as her husband is Malay] and most of their friends are English-speaking Indian Muslims, from English schools. You got to be from an English smart school'. (Wazir, July 2016)

Due to Malaysia's race-based policies, in the Federal Constitution of Malaysia the category of Malay is narrowly defined as

> 'a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, conforms to Malay custom and— *(a)* was before Merdeka Day born in the Federation or in Singapore or born of parents one of whom was born in the Federation or in Singapore, or is on that day domiciled in the Federation or in Singapore; or *(b)* is the issue of such a person'. [39] (p. 130)

As a consequence, not all Jawi Peranakan are unambiguously defined as Malay: some are registered as Indian, despite their far-reaching roots and cultural overlaps. Especially if there is a background of intermarriage with Malays, Jawi Peranakan are labelled Bumiputera, literally. 'children of the soil'. Interestingly, this is also the category in which indigenous Malays who are not Muslims are placed. Access to certain scholarships, government positions, preferential treatment for loans and housing, the ability to buy Malay-reserved land, and a Bumiputera unit trust with relatively high interest rates are all limited to the category of Malays and Bumiputera. These special rights were originally established to emancipate this economically rather weak group. Jawi Peranakan, by contrast, have always formed a local elite due to their high economic and social status, derived from their strong trading networks and cooperation with the colonial government.

> 'Well, what did you speak about?' Aunty Wazir had rephrased her question and finally looked up from her tea, awaiting my answer. 'I spoke about colonial nostalgia in Penang', I said. All of those sitting around our table—her husband, a couple of her friends and her youngest son—started laughing and she replied: 'What an appropriate venue to tell us about your paper! An afternoon tea at Suffolk House, presumably one of the most colonial things one could do in Penang.'

All my companions belonged to Jawi Peranakan families, and a discussion began about how much having afternoon tea is actually part of their own local culture. They quickly agreed that tea-time is ubiquitously Malaysian. It is not exclusively a Jawi Peranakan habit, 'but we do celebrate it in a more lavish way', one of the guests explained. One finds a lot of Malay households that have something to eat and drink at teatime. 'It is kind of a general colonial heritage that we simply enjoy, maybe sometimes without realising that it is quite colonial, because we drink our tea really sweet and eat local treats instead of cucumber sandwiches and scones when we have tea-time at home', someone else added. Generally speaking, Jawi Peranakan tend to practice their tea-time in a quite Malay kind of way, at least in terms of food, with sweet tea, banana fritters, and curry puffs being served for afternoon tea at home.

Going out to colonial places for afternoon tea, on the other hand, is a sign of affluence and a Western upbringing, which is part of Jawi Peranakan identity as a socio-economic elite. Penang Jawi Peranakan tend to be relatively affluent and Western-educated. Moreover, during colonial times the Jawi Peranakan were more receptive to the British, which was described to me as a reason why British manners are not at all alien to them. Nowadays, as mainly English-speaking Muslims, Jawi Peranakan constitute a minority that is rarely recognised politically. Aunty Wazir remembered how her oldest son first struggled at school because he was marginalised for being an English-speaking Muslim:

'We got him to Penang Free School then, which was founded by missionaries but is very open, and you are not penalised for being an English-speaking Muslim. And he adapted well to that school and became proud of being an English-speaking Muslim. People like us, my children and I, we were marginalised all the time. It's only recently, actually after I retired, that I reclaim what I am. Because in university, it was so hard for me. I kept saying I was Muslim Malaysian, but they said, what are you actually, you don't look like Malay, you don't look this, you don't look that, are you Arab? They kept on asking you all these questions. Are you Eurasian originally? So, people like to pigeonhole you because only when they pigeonhole you they can deal with you, they can interact with you in a certain, particular way, you know?' (Wazir, July 2016)

The son she is talking about, Raqib, was not there with us that day because he had started working as an editor for an English-language newspaper in Kuala Lumpur. However, he and I became close friends, and we spoke often about being Jawi Peranakan and what that means to him. Raqib grew up speaking English and only learned to speak Malay a little later in life. Culturally, he sees the Jawi Peranakan as living between different worlds:

Raqib: 'People like me, we're very compartmentalised in a sense. Like, when we're doing Western things, they're very Western. And when we're doing Asian things, you know, Malay things, Indian things, they're very, very ethnic.'

Mareike: 'Can you give me an example of both?'

Raqib: 'Well, you are talking to a guy who could probably go to any restaurant and know which pieces of cutlery to use to eat Yorkshire pudding and roast beef, right? Which cutlery to use for which course. But when it's a religious occasion, I know exactly which prayers to say. I know all of the kinship terms, I know what is proper, what is not proper, and I can eat with my hands.' [pausing and smiling at me]: 'It always leads back to food with Malaysians, unfortunately. That's why it's a very convenient metaphor; so many of our interactions are around food.'

Mareike: 'And who taught you what?'

Raqib: 'I suppose my dad covers all the ethnic Malay things, and my mum covered the very, very colonial things. And every now and then there is some kind of bipolar fusion of the two that happens somewhere in the middle. Like, you know, as colonial as my mum's family is, every now and then we have a religious gathering. Everybody dresses traditionally, and everybody owns very traditional dresses. We like to engage, sometimes even ironically, using a second or third language to joke around in these very ethnic situations. And we derive a certain degree of pleasure from almost being exotic to ourselves.'

Mareike: 'What do you mean when you say that your mother's family is very colonial?'

Raqib: 'My grandfather was basically a British civil servant who sang 'God save the King' every Monday. And, you know, they would have Sunday tiffin [a light tea time meal] and Sunday lunches, and they spoke just painfully good English at home. They spoke the Queen's English everywhere they went. But the odd thing is that my grandmother was still very much a Peranakan lady. So she wore the *kebaya* [a traditional blouse] and she would speak guttural market Malay when she went out marketing because she was a tough woman: she was not to be messed with. And then she'd go back and she would just sound like a Downtown Abbey character basically. And they're all Peranakan ladies. But at the same time, my mum's family was raised by housekeepers, by maids who were of Johorian descent if I'm not mistaken. I'm not sure. *Orang Laut* my mum used to call them, 'sea people', very rough and tumble, very tough people. And so they had this kind of cultural adjunct to their own culture as well. And they

> were partially Malay and partially Indian and partially British, and then all of their social peers were bringing them up like Johorian natives with very strong roots in Sumatra and Melaka, very Malay, you know, very, very, very Malay. So my mum had the benefit of all these things as well. I think with regards, some Malaysians are sometimes here, just two or three different things at the same time. We walk around being two or three different things at the same time. We're juggling cultural identities all the time.'

Raqib's father is basically a Malay person, yet digging a little deeper, I learned that one side of his family is Bugis and the other is Javanese, while simultaneously being connected to Pakistan, though 'it does not show', as Raqib phrased it; hence, no one would question his background. That is not to mention the fact that a lot of their relatives married, then re-married, and therefore had siblings and half-siblings. His father was also educated in an English-medium school, as some Malays were, many of whom became civil servants, like Malaysia's first prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman.

Education plays a significant role in the identity of the Jawi Peranakan of Penang, as Aunty Wazir had stressed in the quote above when she said, 'You got to be from an English smart school.' She continued: 'From an early stage they wanted to modernise everything, especially education'. 'And modern meaning what?' I asked, 'Western' she replied. This notion of 'modern' equalling 'Western' appeared in a number of my interviews with different people in Penang. In talking not only about the past but also about current developments, the terms 'Westernised' and 'modernised' are used interchangeably. What is most important seems to be the fact that the English language and the degree of Westernisation that Penangites see in their education system play a significant role as common middle ground. As one of my informants, also a Jawi Peranakan, once put it:

> 'I think there is a certain level of open-mindedness towards being Asian and being very Western-educated. Like when you go to school, even if the medium might still be Malay but, especially in Penang, everybody speaks English around everybody else—especially in these old missionary schools. It breeds a specific, a particular kind of person. Especially if the racial quotas are nice and even, then there has to be a decent middle ground of communication between the people who are there. So, there is a sufficient degree of Westernisation going on that serves as a nice generic meeting ground for all these people who come from very strong ethnic identities. And we carry this wherever we go, and we use this as our mode of communication, and it becomes our social comfort, at least for many people in Penang. And then it gives us an appreciation for different cultures, different races, different religions, as well as that sort of Western middle ground that we so enjoy. But they do it with a heavy overlay of their own language and ethnicity, and they do use their take on it.'

## 4. Discussion

One of the examples Raqib gave of the supposedly British colonial aspects that became part of local Jawi Peranakan heritage, in addition to the language, was Sunday tiffin. Interestingly, Sunday tiffin is believed to have been invented in the 1800s in colonial India, as the hot climate made a light lunch or a light tea-time meal conducive. Like the afternoon tea, this habit is an important aspect of Jawi Peranakan's Sunday practices. As mentioned above, what is served at home during an afternoon tea differs from the restaurant version, and in relation to some of the dishes served at an afternoon tea, at home 'their take on it' becomes visible. An example of an afternoon snack that is regularly served to accompany the tea is a curry puff. This is a deep-fried pastry shell filled with either chicken or potato curry, whereas varieties with tuna, sardines, and beef rendang [7] also exist. 'A curry puff is basically what would happen if a British chicken pie and an Indian samosa would have a baby', as one of my interlocuters put it so vividly. The curry puff demonstrates that the Peranakan's adaptation of presumably British manners and habits carrying a Penang cultural 'vernacular'. In fact, the sort of Western cultural influences that Jawi Peranakan

practice are not exactly similar to those practiced in the 'West' either, or have not been in a long time:

> 'To a modern Brit, our 'Westernness' is probably quaint, and even alien to them. They have become unique to Malaysians, in particular Penangites, and even more specifically the Jawi Peranakans of George Town. There is a Malay idiom that goes '*Ambil yang jernih, buang yang keruh*' [Take what is clear, throw away what is murky]. We take what we think is good, and we simply do away with the things that we don't think are good' (Raqib, March 2016).

Given the various groups that share social as well as economic spaces in Penang, it is evident that out of the inter-connectedness and proximity described here, a connected heritage emerged that embodies this admixture. In an analysis of Orientalism, Burkhard Schnepel claims that these movements are characterised by translations of meanings and functions which are linked to processes of '*Nostrifikation*' [40], the process of making something one's own. Iain Walker makes a similar argument in describing the inhabitants of the island of Ngazidja in the Comoro Islands. The Comoros are located on the other side of the Indian Ocean and are similarly an important hub for trading networks. Walker uses the concept of mimesis, which he describes as the strategic negotiation of the different influences that come to the island to show how they are actively incorporated and are therefore more than just an imitation of or assimilation to the Other, being rather the 'product of the praxis of engagement with the Other' [41]. My Jawi Peranakan friend described a similar idea of heritage as a product of the reincorporation of various elements via a food metaphor by saying:

> 'Our heritage is like mayonnaise. The individual ingredients look nothing like the finished product and for all intents and purposes shouldn't mix, but agitate them enough that they bind and become something new.' Accordingly, Penang's connected heritages are emulsions like the mayonnaise, or synergies, that is, more than the sum of their parts. Penang's Peranakan communities are the outcome and embodiment of connectivity, and in their heritage we see the elements of various connections related to migration, trade, and the social-economic fabric of the port city. Thus, their connected heritages encompass elements of various influences, which were actively transformed and made their own. In contrast to what is nowadays often considered a colonial survival or vestige, I maintain that these cultural heritage elements are not foreign but part of specific local cultural heritages that are remarkably enduring and still current.

In the beginning of this article, I engaged with the terms hybridity and creolisation in order to then shelve them in favour of connected heritages. However, what a thing or a practice is connected to does not necessarily say anything about how it is constituted in itself. Nevertheless, I argue that thick ethnographic descriptions capture the different modalities and textures of heritage. The examples given in the article hint at both amalgamations (call it fusion, creolisation, hybridity, synergy, or mayonnaise), as well as to a form of code switching. The latter is visible in the fact that sometimes the intention of my interlocutors was not to mix but to stick to, for example, a specific 'Britishness' that is even 'more British than the British' or enjoying being in ethnic or religious settings 'almost exotic to ourselves'. This leads me to conclude that the ethnographic description did in fact shed some light on how certain things are constituted in themselves, without the necessity of using the controversial concepts of creolisation or hybridity. Since I did not have the impression that the use of either term would add analytical value, but rather feared the opposite, I decided not to use these labels.

However, if one wants to think of hybridity in terms of the Jawi Peranakan heritage I have described here, I suggest that one could think about it not just in terms of the beautiful mayonnaise metaphor described above, but could also consider the analogy with a hybrid engine. A hybrid engine has the ability to switch between different sources of energy. So

too can Jawi Perankan switch between specific habits, practices, manners, and languages, while simultaneously all of these are their own.

Generally, heritage is inherently dissonant and formed through contestation and negotiation [42]. It is constructed through narratives and the mediation of conflicts [27,43] and as such, a continuous process and an intangible one (e.g., [24,27,44,45]). Afternoon tea is a fitting example when talking about connected heritages more broadly. As I stated at the beginning of this article, every heritage is connected heritage. Afternoon tea is related to more than just everyday practices and habits, as it 'developed in tandem with colonial expansion' [46] (p. 1). Accordingly, it is not *despite* the fact that afternoon tea is considered British heritage but *because* it is considered British that afternoon tea opens up an entry point to speak about colonialism, the balance of power and status, and Indian Ocean trade.

The diverse heritages of Penang are manifestations of the port city's historical, economic, and political connections across the Indian Ocean World. As a result, the heritage practices in Penang entail elements from the colonial era. Putative British colonial heritage has been neglected as a topic in the narrative of Malaysia's national heritage since independence through the attempt to strengthen an 'authentic' and uniform national identity. This causes problems for a port city such as George Town that suddenly had to fit into a nation state with which it shares little history. With regard to the dynamics of this port city and the Peranakan in George Town as their outcome, who were mostly educated in English-medium colonial schools and who held high positions in the municipal administration, as well as in trade, I maintain that, for them, colonial heritage is not a foreign heritage. In light of my ethnographic data, some aspects of supposedly Western cultures became inherent elements of the connected heritage of Penang's Peranakan. Through this (re)composition, such elements are made into something new, different, enduring, and most of all their own.

In contrast, practices involved in the historical recollection of the nation are concerned with the nation's heritage narratives, rather than dealing with the migration histories and connected heritages of minorities. The restriction to or emphasis on specific episodes, events, or characters in the construction of a national heritage narrative aims at binding the nation together. Though critical heritage studies have developed especially strongly over the last ten years, 'the critical exploration of heritage remains an underexplored field in the Malaysian context' [47] (p. 4). As Malaysia is a young state, the national heritage narrative is still in the making and is constantly being renegotiated. The National Heritage Act (Akta Warisan Kebangsaan) was installed as a new law in 2005. Through the promotion of heritage, the aim of this law was 'to foster nationhood and national identity in a multicultural country' [48] (p. 163). The national identity struggle Malaysia is facing is connected to its population divide into the categories of Malay, Chinese, Indians, and others, and its adjunct majority-versus-minority discourse. Accordingly, the question of who is and who is not part of the nation state is a continuous matter of dispute and is especially challenging for those minorities who fall between the major categories.

For over two centuries, George Town has been a place where new heritages have emerged, in which the influences of Western elements have been salient and incorporated. As the example of the Jawi Peranakan demonstrates, not only the colonial architecture but also the resulting habits and manners are manifestations of such remarkably resilient connections. Heritage is 'used to construct, reconstruct and negotiate a range of identities and social and cultural values and meanings in the present' [27]. In Malaysia today, a stronger focus within the national heritage narrative has been placed on the country's religious background, which bases its narratives on Islam. The question of how Islam is embedded in the Malay world and particularly in Malaysia needs to be understood in the context of major influences by Indian, Chinese, and European, as well as the three colonial systems, namely, the French, Dutch, and British [49] (p. 449). However, the Malaysian Constitution became a pivotal 'institutional tool for moulding and conditioning Malaysian Islam, thus defining its sociopolitical space in Malaysian government and politics' (ibid., 465). In the constitution, every Malay person is automatically defined as a Muslim, leading to the notion that Islam became the ethnic identifier of Malayness for the Malays (ibid.).

Accordingly, the colonial past becomes neglected or even muted in national narratives by being jumped over to an earlier Islamic past. This causes tensions in the port city of George Town, which has no past earlier than its colonial history. During this process of merging and neglecting elements associated with the colonial era, such as having afternoon tea, are not merely the practice of local habits but simultaneously serve as markers of distinction, as well as being deployed to recover prestige and a sense of self-confidence.

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## Notes

1. However, some scholars insist that the term should not be used outside the Caribbean context, as it would then risk losing its temporal and spatial particularity and its associations with colonialism and forced migration; see, for instance, [13,14].
2. For the role that creole identity plays in Indonesia and how it contributes to identity formations, see, for example, [16].
3. For a detailed study on Melaka as a UNESCO heritage site see [30].
4. Official UNESCO description of the sites in 2008: https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1223 (accessed on 15 November 2022).
5. Hari Raya open house is usually celebrated at the end of Ramadan, also known as the first day of Syawal. On this day, Muslims will welcome visitors to their home to eat and celebrate, mainly friends and family, irrespective of the visitor's religious background.
6. Other examples of Peranakan that emerged in port cities are the Chetti in Melaka; see [30] and the Baba Nyonya in Melaka, Singapore, and Penang, see [35–37].
7. A rich beef stew, slowly cooked and braised in coconut milk until the liquids evaporate and the meat becomes caramelised and infused with the spices.

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