

Eurasians in Singapore

By Fiona Hodgkins

The term Eurasian refers to a person of mixed European/Asian heritage. It originally referred to those who were descended from the first European/Asian unions in this region, but today, owing to the increasing number of mixed marriages, there are growing numbers of ethnic Eurasians.

The first Eurasians in Malaya date back to the 1511 Portuguese conquest and settlement of Malacca, but the term 'Eurasian' did not come into use until the British introduced it in the mid-19th century. Until then people of mixed European-Asian blood were variously known as Anglo-Indian, Indo-Britons, Ceylon Burghers, Anglo-Burmese, Native Christians, Casados, Mestizos, Kristang and Seranis, depending on where they lived and came from. The original mixed-race Portuguese in Malacca and their Malay partners were known as Luso-Malays (Luso referring to the Roman Catholic descendants of the original inhabitants of Portugal). In fact, at that time the inter-racial union of Lusitanians with locals was common in other trading centres around the world.

Throughout its history Portugal has encouraged its people to settle in their foreign dominions and enter into mixed unions, unlike the Dutch and British. So it was through these first Portuguese settlers that Roman Catholicism was introduced to Malaya. As Malacca grew, more Portuguese men came and were given incentives to settle – houses, fields, animals and orchards – and were also encouraged to marry into the local population. Such incentives worked. While in 1514 there were just eight Portuguese married to locals (Casados), by 1600 there were over 250 mixed unions. By now, Portuguese Catholic descendants were most commonly referred to as Seranis (from Nasrani or Nazarene, meaning coming from Nazareth referring to Jesus' birth place).

After the Dutch annihilation of Malacca in 1641, only 3,000 of the town's original 20,000 inhabitants are thought to have survived. Because Roman Catholics were greatly persecuted during Dutch rule (which lasted until 1795), it was hard for the Portuguese Eurasians to re-establish themselves as a community. Those who remained tended to be low-profile residents, mainly fishermen and odd-job workers. Their descendants are known today as the Melaka Portuguese, based around the Portuguese settlement of Malacca (established only in 1926 to help the descendants of the first

Portuguese during hard socio-economic times). The more fortunate Portuguese descendants who survived the Dutch siege either migrated or were deported to other trading centres in the region, such as Penang. Evidence of the indigenous Portuguese people's strong role in the region is provided in a comment (in 1642) attributed to Antonio Van Diemen, the Dutch Governor of Malacca, "Most of the Portuguese in Asia look upon this region as their fatherland and think no more about Portugal".

Intermarriage was not as common, however, with other nationalities. During Dutch times, although a small minority of Dutch men took Portuguese Eurasian wives, they tended not to intermarry and stayed 'out East' for a finite period depending on their jobs. They did not make Malacca or any other outpost their home. In Malacca they remained a small minority and did not generally mix with the other inhabitants. Therefore, there was little Dutch influence, apart from the architecture, on either the language or religion in Malacca despite the more than 150 years of their rule. After the Dutch took Malacca from the Portuguese most *atap* (palm leaf) dwellings had burned down and were replaced by the brick buildings we see today. The bricks were the ballast on ships which were empty when they left on the outward-bound journey from Holland.

Midway through their rule there was a relaxing of Dutch religious persecution because of the War of Spanish



Wedding photo of Eurasian couple William Fairley Scully and Mary Eleanor Rozells in 1904. Photo courtesy of Martha Scully Shepherdson and the National Archives of Singapore



Four Eurasian ladies clad in their best sarong-kebayas, courtesy of the Minjoot Family, Malacca, through Erwin Minjoot and Barry P Pereira



Wedding of Herman Marie deSouza (Jnr) to Mary Alethea Richards, Malacca, 1937. Photo courtesy of Claire Edwards



Singapore's first president, Yusof bin Ishak, being welcomed by Sir George Oehlers, Speaker of the Legislative Assembly and first Singaporean Eurasian to be knighted. Photo courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore.

Succession. It was around this time that there was a resurgence of Portuguese traders going to Malacca. Most Eurasians today can trace their ancestry to this period rather than to the time of the first arrival of the Portuguese.

In 1824 Malacca was ceded to the British in return for Bencoolen in Sumatra and the Straits Settlements (Malacca, Penang and Singapore) were established by the British in 1826. Malacca was already in decline as a trading post and the focus turned to Singapore. The first Eurasians were recorded here in 1821, but these were descended from earlier mixed European/Asian unions. They had come to Singapore for its trading opportunities – from Penang and Malacca and also from the ports of British India, Ceylon, Anglo-Burma, Portuguese Macao and the Dutch East Indies.

In spite of their differing backgrounds, all these Eurasians shared the link of having mixed blood (not just Portuguese, Dutch and British, but also German, Danish and Scandinavian: people from these nations having arrived in the region during the Dutch administration of the 17th century) and not being accepted by either the European or Asian communities. As a consequence, over time they established a particular bond. In 1849 these different types of Eurasians were grouped together in the Straits Settlements population census under the category 'Eurasians' and came to be known as the Eurasian Community. This was the first official recognition of a community whose population to this day has never exceeded five percent of Singapore's ever-increasing population.



Portrait of Dr Benjamin Henry Sheares, the second President of Singapore (1971). Photo courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore.

While small in number, they have played prominent roles in the

nation's development – as statesmen: Benjamin Sheares was Singapore's second president (1970-1981); in the police, John Le Cain was the first local Commissioner of Police; as sportsmen, in sport Lloyd Valburg was Singapore's first Olympian; as soldiers, Tommy Campbell was the first Chief of Staff of the Armed forces; and as community leaders, George Edward Noel Oehlers was the first Singaporean to have been knighted. These are but a few of Singapore's prominent Eurasians.

In 1919, the Eurasian Association, one of the earliest community associations in Singapore, was established. Its objectives were:

- to promote the economic, social, moral, physical and intellectual advancement of all Eurasian-British subjects
- to promote an active interest in Singapore affairs among members; and
- to look after the interests of all Eurasians in Singapore.

While Eurasians sought to find an identity within the larger Singapore community, various internal issues emerged – one issue of the pre-war era was their designation. Many felt the term Eurasian was too generic and did not reflect the origins of their mixed blood. However, alternatives such as Anglo-Malayan (copying the terminology used in India and Burma) were unpopular, so the term Eurasian was retained.

Eurasians in Singapore today remain staunchly proud of their long history in the region, but as marriage outside the community becomes increasingly common, the heritage of this unique community is being diluted. The number of modern Eurasians is growing as a consequence of present-day marriages between Europeans and Asians. As a community, the Eurasians of Singapore in the 21st century are at a crossroads: whether to maintain and honour both their ancestry and heritage or whether to embrace the new generation of Eurasians.

Fiona Hodgkins grew up in Singapore from 1975-1983 as an expatriate child. Since returning to Singapore as a teacher in 2008, she has been able to pursue her personal passion for history by re-discovering her maternal Eurasian roots.
