

Introduction

How do postcolonial elites repurpose imperial inheritances in constructing nationalizing states? This paper argues that postcolonial nationalization is structured through elites' strategic redeployment of imperial vocabularies, institutional logics, and interpretive frames to address domestic fragmentation and national survival within unequal global hierarchies. Using Singapore as a case, I show that this process was driven simultaneously by responses to racial tensions and elite rivalry and by concerns over state viability in an unstable international environment. Empirically, the paper draws on a reflexive thematic analysis of Lee Kuan Yew's post-independence speeches (1965–1972). I identify four interlocking discursive logics—survivalism, managed pluralism, vigilance within global hierarchies, and moral-institutional engineering—that structure Singapore's early nationalizing project.

Literature Review

Modernist theorists, operating largely from metropolitan vantage points, have tended to marginalize empire in their accounts of nationalism (Anderson 1983; Gellner 1983; Hobsbawm 1990; Brubaker 1996, 2011). Conversely, postcolonial scholarship has productively “brought empire back in,” but tends to retreat into localized specificity in ways that can obscure the transnational structuring forces that shape postcolonial nationhood (Chrisman 2004; Go 2016; Getachew 2019). As a result, the field remains divided between macro-structural accounts that overlook empire and postcolonial critiques that sometimes particularize and under-specify the transnational dynamics of nationalization.

I take Rogers Brubaker's concept of the nationalizing state as a generative starting point where his relational and transnational framing usefully displaces substantialist understandings of the nation and reconceptualizes nationhood as a category of practice. However, his model overlooks the legacy of Soviet colonialism and the decolonial aspirations animating contemporary nation-building. Furthermore, while Brubaker recognizes the role of elites in theory, he offers no clear conceptualization of *who* is nationalizing, *how*, and under *what* political conditions. These gaps are particularly consequential in postcolonial contexts, where imperial legacies and elite agency remain foundational to the structuring of nationalizing states.

I address this lacuna by advancing a middle-range conceptual intervention organized around three mutually constitutive elements: (1) relational positioning within global hierarchies; (2) imperial debris as structuring inheritance; and (3) elite articulation as an enabling mechanism. These shift the analytic focus from nation-building as internal consolidation to nationalization as a historically situated process, clarifying how postcolonial nations are assembled through elite improvisation operating within inherited imperial and global hierarchical constraints.

Data and Method

Empirically, I draw on a systematically constructed corpus of Lee Kuan Yew's speeches collected from the National Archives of Singapore. The dataset was assembled through a multi-stage filtering process beginning with 661 transcripts (1965-1976) and narrowing to 23 core speeches from 1965-1972, the period corresponding to Singapore's most formative phase of postcolonial national consolidation. The paper adopts Reflexive Thematic Analysis as a method (Braun and Clarke 2006; 2020). RTA is particularly suitable because it allows theoretically informed interpretation while maintaining methodological transparency. Coding proceeded iteratively in atlas.ti, moving from first-level semantic coding to second-level latent interpretation. Across the corpus, more than one thousand initial codes were progressively consolidated into four overarching themes capturing the dominant logics through which the Singaporean nation was discursively constructed. The methodological goal is not exhaustive content description but the identification of patterned meaning structures that reveal how elites conceptualized vulnerability, order, and international positioning during the critical post-independence years.

Nationalization After Empire

In my empirical section, I show that Singapore's post-1965 nation-building discourse, as articulated by Lee Kuan Yew, was structured through the strategic repurposing of imperial debris rather than a clean rupture from empire. I identify four interlocking thematic logics: (1) survivalism, (2) managed pluralism, (3) global hierarchy, and (4) moral-institutional engineering, which collectively produced the discursive architecture of Singapore's nationalizing state. Elites consistently translated postcolonial vulnerability into calls for discipline, recoded ethnic heterogeneity into a state-managed bilingual order, framed Singapore's development through vigilant positioning within unequal global hierarchies, and institutionalized national character through schools and civic ritual. These mutually reinforcing logics demonstrate that postcolonial nationalization in Singapore operated as an elite-driven process of adaptive recombination, in which inherited imperial vocabularies and governing techniques were selectively redeployed to legitimize a highly interventionist project of nation making.

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