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Migration, Mobilities, and Changing Political Landscapes

How Stateless People Are Made To Be Ghost Citizens In Malaysia

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My paper will explore ghost citizenship in Malaysia. Ghost citizens are stateless folks who reside in the state that they consider their own country with genuine ties and histories. Malaysian state also views all stateless folks and refugees as illegal immigrants. For instance, Muslim Filipino migrants in Sabah, adopted children who become stateless, temporary workers, maids, Rohingya refugees, and others. Hence, stateless folks and refugees are 'ghosted' by the state and forced to live in limbo without documentation, and have restricted access to healthcare access, education, and other necessities.

I use the term ghostliness, as stateless folks exist in a liminal space where they remain invisible to the state and simultaneously hypervisible as they are excluded from belonging to Malaysian society. Their ambiguous status makes them ghostly. This is done by the Malaysian state as they want to homogenize the population by reinforcing the superiority of the Bumiputera people, who are the Muslim Malay population. This nation-building project serves to exclude and deny citizenship to folks who have ties to Malaysia but do not fit the mold of a unitary national identity.

In my research, I want to challenge how ghost citizens are viewed with pity by emphasizing how their ghostliness can be used for resistance. Their ghostliness allows them to deconstruct the binaries set by the state, such as insider/outsider, Malaysian/foreign, and divisions between ethnic and racial groups. I argue that the Malaysian government recognizes the presence of stateless people, but actively delegitimizes their claims to citizenship. By doing so, they reinforce dominant power structures. Through the exploration of the invisibility and hypervisibility of ghost citizens, I aim to investigate how and why the state perpetuates the ghostliness of the stateless people to maintain power.