Introduction to the Issue

Identities in Maritime Southeast Asia:
Ethnicity and Nation-state

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The six papers in this special issue were first presented at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies-Busan University of Foreign Studies (ISEAS-BUFS) International Conference, with the theme "Revisiting and Reconstructing Southeast Asian Characteristics," on 27-28 May 2016. In their own ways, these contributions by academics actively working and living in the region, address the complexities of identities in the island world of Southeast Asia. Three focus on Malaysia, with one examining issues of Bugis ethnicity in North Kalimantan, formerly part of East Kalimantan, while the other three are concerned with national and sub-national identities in Brunei Darussalam.

There is probably nowhere in Southeast Asia that discussions on identities have been so intense, as well as debates about multiculturalism so long-standing and wide-ranging as in the Federation of Malaysia, which also extends to its relationship with neighboring Brunei, Singapore, and Indonesia. In these, a central concern has been the tensions between the reality of cultural and ethnic diversity and the need for the said governments to manage,

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control and police their borders, as well as to construct, develop and sustain national identity, unity, and loyalty; in other words, to build a nation. On the one hand, there is the desire to maintain, if possible, a more confined, localized identity, operating at the sub-national level, and on the other, to accommodate the demands of nation-building.

At the core of our humanity is the constant engagement in thinking about, conceptualizing and determining similarity and difference. We identify and define those who we classify as “like us” and those who are different from us, the “others”. We do this in different areas of our everyday lives and we also operate with several identities, usually ranging from the more specific to the more general. We adopt different identities according to the context or circumstances (even though these may not necessarily cohere if considered to define an individual). We usually feel comfortable with those whom we see as being like us, and we adopt different modes of behavior and attitudes when we have to deal with people who are not like us. As we know sometimes this might lead to not just negative and critical views about “those others” but also to outright hostility and contention.

Governments usually want to avoid these excesses and encourage an environment of tolerance, mutual understanding, and stability. But this is not an easy task when the human tendency is to differentiate, to classify, and to assign positive and negative values to those classifications. Often, it is small differences that matter: the way one talks, one’s speech and accent; how one dresses; how and what one eats; whether one operates as an individual or goes around in groups; how one behaves towards one’s children in a public space; the bodily attitudes and demeanour one adopts (whether this is deemed respectful and controlled or loud and aggressive). All this is happening in an increasingly globalized world; through the media, consumption of global brands, international communications (the internet) and travel, we are constantly confronted with others, and with cultural difference; with other ways of speaking, doing, acting, behaving, thinking. How do we deal with this? There is often a tension between our desire for the familiar and for security and stability—to conduct ourselves within the world

we know on the one hand, and in another, our anxiety about others, about difference, about moving into worlds which are unfamiliar to us and into situations which carry risk. At the same time, the globalizing world also affords us the zest for excitement, and sometimes for the dangers of difference, of experiencing new things, and also perhaps, of reflecting on our identities and values by being confronted by others who are different and who do things in different ways.

In her comparative paper on translocal and transnational movements of the Bugis, from their homelands in Southern Sulawesi which date back to the seventeenth century and continued to thrive in the twentieth century in the eastern regions of Kalimantan, and in Sabah and Johor in Malaysia, Yekti Manauti discusses the issues involving migrant communities in constructing viable identities. In situations of movement, communities frequently operate with multiple identities, and switch ethnic roles as required in different situations. They do so in the context of the interventions and constructions of governments and more powerful "others." The Bugis identify themselves as Bugis, but in a Malaysian context where the constitutional status of Malay customs and language, as well as of Islam are all-important, and where national identity is framed in Malay and Islamic terms, some Bugis identify themselves as Malay, usually when they reside in Peninsular Malaysia, or (Bugis) Malay, or (Bugis) Sabah; they may also identify themselves at a national level as Malaysian or Indonesian. As we know, the Malays of Malaysia in particular are an amalgam of populations (Javanese, Minangkabau, Bugis and others) from other parts of the island world.

Jayum Jawan, in his comprehensive paper on political contestation in Malaysia, also refers to the status of being Malay in Malaysia and the formal contracts which were established between the Malay population and other constituent communities (Chinese, Indian, Orang Asli, and Borneo Dayak) in 1948, 1957, and 1963, in the context of the progressive post-war withdrawal of the British. From a period of ethnic harmony, which broke down in the "race riots" of 1969, to the establishment of order and stability by way of the direct intervention of the state from the 1970's, uncertainty

seems to be increasing. He draws attention to the recent evidence of the increase in ethnic tensions, the complexities of political party alliances, and electoral competition in a nation-state where ethnic political allegiance, the demographic composition of electoral constituencies, and shifting alliances are crucial for political outcomes. He proposes that the states of Sarawak and Sabah—where no single ethnic group is demographically dominant and where ethnic accommodation has been more evident—might take on an increasing role in forging a new era of tolerance and cooperation, and in serving as a model for the Peninsula.

There is considerable synergy between Jayum's contribution and that of Ooi Keat Gin who provides a nuanced historical treatment of Malayan/Malaysian political development from 1947 to 1991, demonstrating the difficult process of bringing together a multicultural constituency. He does this by placing Malaysia in an international Cold War context, and by examining the changing international perspectives and policies of the first four Malayan/Malaysian Prime Ministers, along with their personalities, characters, and backgrounds.

The three papers on Brunei Darussalam, all written by Brunei academics, examine different dimensions of Brunei nation-building and the ways in which the country's Constitution of 1959, supported by the Nationality Law of 1961, which specified seven indigenous or original components of the "Malay race" (Brunei, Kedayan, Tutong, Belait, Dusun, Bisaya, and Murut), has played out in practice since the nation gained its full independence from Britain in 1984. The need to define and delimit "Malayness" has obvious parallels with the Malaysian experience.

Siti Norkhalbi Haji Wahsalfelah examines the role of material culture, and the production and consumption of textiles, as both status markers and markers of identity. Although part of Brunei Malay culture, woven textiles have come to provide a more general symbol of national culture in a political and economic structure where Malays are dominant and other groups progressively absorbed. Meanwhile, Asiyah az-Zahra Ahmad Kumpoh and Noor Azam Haji-Othman consider the emerging consequences for the

non-Brunei Malay populations, particularly the Dusun, of the position of Islam, and Malay language and culture in the nation-state. Asiyah adopts a positive stance; she uses the distinction formulated by Shamsul Amri Badaruddin of “authority-defined” and “everyday-defined” identities, and proposes that elements of Dusun identity remain through everyday practices embedded in family and kinship. Noor Azam observes that the use of local languages, including Dusun, is disappearing and that indigenous monolingualism has virtually disappeared from Brunei, to be increasingly replaced by the use of Malay and English.

Therefore, the papers in this issue on Malaysia and Brunei cast light on ongoing processes of change since independence from Britain, and particularly changing ethnic identities and political trajectories. More generally, it is the process of nation-building after the establishment of politically independent states in Southeast Asia which has been a major preoccupation of political leaders in the region and a major interest of social scientists and historians in the post-war period. In Southeast Asia, states are a relatively modern creation and a product of processes of modernization set in motion by European colonial powers. They were the result of the arbitrary carving up of the region between European states and America, essentially from the nineteenth century onwards, although territories began to be occupied and administered from the sixteenth century. These were largely artificial creations, bringing peoples together, many invariably not sharing a common culture, language, or history. The former British territories were a mix of differently administered units. They were also an amalgam of communities (local and immigrant, large-scale and small-scale, state-based and tribal), with different religions, languages, histories, and customs. This is what the English scholar-administrator, John Sydenham Furnivall from his experience in colonial Burma, referred to as a “plural society.”