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Social construction of ethnic identity

For most of the last three decades the sociology of ethnicity has been dominated by the situationalist or circumstantialist perspective, as a reaction to the primordialist view. According to this perspective, external political and economic circumstances shape the interests and strategies of ethnic groups and the construction of their ethnic identities. In Southeast Asia in the last century, three social processes have been critical to the lives of people, namely colonization, decolonization, and modernization. These influences have invested ethnicity with the potential for political mobilization and provided the opportunity for a political elite, from either an aristocratic or an intellectual, often Western-educated, background, to play the role of leaders in this. In recent years there has been a shift in emphasis, from viewing ethnicity as an aspect of social organization and political mobilization to regarding it as the consciousness and social construction of identities, constituting what has been described as the 'constructionist turn' (Vermeulen and Govers 1997:2). Social constructionism pays attention to the meanings of ethnic terms, discourse and ideology. The invention of traditions, the role of intellectuals in the colonial and post-colonial state, and negotiations and conflict both within and outside the ethnic group are issues relevant to the creation and propagation of ethnic identities. Social constructionism also requires us to focus on how the protagonists use existing knowledge and create new kinds of knowledge to construct their ethnic identity and to be aware of the social scientist's interpretation of how others use such knowledge.

The construction of Malayness in the Malay Peninsula, for example, is

LIAN KWEN FEE is an associate professor of sociology at the University of Singapore, who took his PhD at the Victoria University of Wellington. Interested especially in ethnicity and the nation-state, he has published, jointly with Michael Hill, *The Politics of Nation Building and Citizenship in Singapore*, London: Routledge, 1995. Professor Lian may be reached at the Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore, Kent Ridge Crescent, Singapore 119260.

regarded by Milner (1998:151-3) as 'ideological work'. Malayness is an invented concept, subject to development and contestation. Hence, also according to Milner, it is best viewed as a series of dialogues not only with the Chinese and with British colonialism, but also among the Malays themselves. How two groups of British colonists took a different view of the capacity of Malays to adapt to a world of commerce and trade initiated by European colonization of the region in the 19th century and how Western ideas of race were appropriated by the Malays will be described later.

This paper examines the colonial and the indigenous construction of Malay identity and discusses the implications of these for the contemporary construction of Malayness in the Malay Peninsula, Riau, and East Sumatra, which areas constitute the heartland of the Malay world. In examining the transformations of Malay identity in the region, I take into consideration that these occurred in the shifting polities of the pre-colonial and early colonial periods, and that this identity was incorporated in modern nation-states, namely Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. The political forces unleashed by post-War independence have taken each of these states on a separate trajectory in the nation-building project. This is reflected in the varying contemporary construction of Malay identity. The Malays in Riau represent an intriguing case, as they are located at the geopolitical point where the three states meet. In their attempts to negotiate the cross-currents of political history and the regionalization of economic development and of labour and capital movements, as well as the fallout of political developments in Indonesia, the Riau Malays have had to perform a balancing act.

The Malay world as it is understood today comprises peninsular Malaysia, the east coast of Sumatra, the west and southwest coast of Borneo, and the Riau archipelago. Traditionally settled on the coast and in riverine enclaves, the Malays derived their livelihood from the resources afforded by this kind of environment, including trade. The role played by Malays in the all-important trade, as K.W. Taylor remarks (1992:173-4), was that of carriers of local products traded in exchange for commodities brought to the region by merchant ships. Fed by the wealth created by this kind of activity, the kingdom of Srivijaya in southeastern Sumatra achieved prominence in the seventh century. According to the records, the origin of the Malay polity can be traced to the founding of this kingdom. In the thirteenth century, Malay influence waned as the Javanese kingdom of Majapahit emerged (Taylor 1992:175), only to grow again in the following century, when a Malay prince founded Melaka. As in the past, trade played a crucial role. Only this time China took an interest in this Malay entrepôt on the other side of the Straits. In the fifteenth century, the rulers of Melaka adopted Islam. 'The founding of Melaka and the emergence of Islam', Taylor (1992:176) observes, 'mark the beginning of Malay history as it has been traditionally remembered in recent

centuries. The Malay annals (*Sejarah Melayu*) are informed by an Islamic historiographical perspective and do not consider the pre-Islamic Malay past to be of interest.'

The purpose of this brief historical foray is to underline the fact that the members of the Melaka-Johor dynasty were descendants of the Srivijaya ruling house. The Riau-Lingga sultanate, which is an important object of concern in this attempt to make sense of contemporary developments in Malay identity in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia, was also closely associated with the Melaka-Johor sultanate. Early expressions of Malay identity in the Malay Peninsula may be found in court-sponsored documents relating to these ruling houses (Matheson 1979:370). In an analysis of some of these documents, Matheson observes that the term *Melayu* was used exclusively to refer to those of royal or noble descent. Subsequently, as a consequence of colonization, the introduction of public education, and the dissemination of the concept of 'Malayness' in the popular press, the meaning of this concept evolved away from the narrow emphasis on exclusively royal (*kerajaan*) genealogical origins. Articulated by a Malay Muslim intelligentsia who came from a non-aristocratic background and were the product of a colonial vernacular education, Malayness in this new sense was derived from two exogenous sources. One of these was the colonial ideas of how non-Western societies should develop, disseminated by what H. Maier (1988) refers to as the merchant-scientists and scholar-administrators of the Malay Peninsula. The other was the interpretation of the concept in the framework of a broader, universalistic notion of the Islamic *umat* by Arab and Indian Muslim migrants who had settled in the Straits Settlements.

The colonial construction of Malayness

The colonial construction of Malayness, according to Maier's stimulating account (1988), emanates from two groups of British colonists in Malaya in the nineteenth century. These were the early generation of colonists and mainly Scottish servants of the East India Company, the so-called merchant-scientists, and the later generation of scholar-administrators.

The first group, which included men like James Low, who served in Penang and Province Wellesley in the 1820s and 1830s, was imbued with the ideas of the Scottish Enlightenment and held the view that human nature is uniform and that all human beings have similar capacities (Maier 1988:37, 43). Although the Malays had a simple economic system and less advanced social institutions, this pro-Enlightenment camp argued, they should be taken seriously because they were capable of improvement. Commerce and industry in this view provided the key for their advancement, and once in

possession of this key, the Malays would move up to a higher level on the scale of civilization (Maier 1988:59).

The second group, the scholar-administrators, which included men like H. Clifford, F. Swettenham, and the leading British Malaya educator Richard Winstedt, rejected the assumption that the Malay 'race' could fully attain to the benefits of civilization (Maier 1988:51-7). Hence the Malays could not be taken seriously, even if they were to be admired – their behaviour reminded the colonists of the courtesy and loyalty of the English gentleman class. By the time Winstedt arrived in the Peninsula, at the turn of the 20th century, British social and cultural superiority was well established. Malay society, by contrast, was regarded as being disoriented and decadent, partly, so the colonists believed, because the Malays were incapable of withstanding Western and Islamic influence, and partly because their society was inherently weak. No doubt the differences were accentuated by the presence of Chinese and Indian immigrants, whom the British respected for their industry and discipline. No doubt, too, the colonists by that time were influenced by Darwinism and accepted the idea that there was a hierarchy of races in the Peninsula, with the British at the apex and the Malays at the bottom. It was natural for them to believe, therefore, that some degree of inequality and segregation should be maintained here. As Maier (1988:56) remarks, paternalism, tutelage, and romanticism all played a role in the colonists' attitude towards the Malays. The Malays required protection, their identity and self-esteem needed safeguarding. Malayness should be accentuated and strengthened, and this could be achieved by nurturing Malay culture, literature and education. So the Malay College of Kuala Kangsar and the Sultan Idris Teachers College were established. The former was designed for members of the aristocracy, to prepare them for positions in government, the latter for commoners, who at the end of their course could return to the rural areas to train Malays to be good agriculturists. In the process, the scholar-administrators created Malayness in the image of their own brand of class society, of which it was a muted version. In the event, however, the Malays had different ideas about their place in Malaya.

Indigenous response

Milner's well-documented book of 1995 traces the development of Malay political discourse by examining several important examples of indigenous texts. The author of one such text was Munshi Abdullah, a language teacher of mixed Arab and Tamil descent who lived in the Straits Settlements in the first half of the 19th century, and an early critic of the Malay aristocracy. Drawing on western liberal ideas, he laid the blame for the backwardness of

the Malays squarely on their cruel and unjust rulers, or *kerajaan* (Milner 1995:34-54). In contrast to the early reference of the name *Melayu* to royal descent, Abdullah used the name to refer to the common people. It was clear to Abdullah at that time that the concept of the 'real Malay' as a commoner, as opposed to a member of the aristocracy, was to be used as a yardstick against which the progress of the community could be judged (Maier 1997:681). The use of print was important in disseminating this idea, but also in fostering a greater Malay awareness of the need for development and progress.

For Abdullah, the Malay term *bangsa* (race) referred to the primary community or collective identity. He used the term to draw attention to the stage of development of the Malays as compared with the stage of progress of other *bangsa*, from fear that the Malays might come to be governed by other 'races' (Milner 1998:154). The political significance of the concept was not clearly realized until the turn of the 20th century, when non-Malay groups, as a consequence of immigration, came into evidence in several Malay states. The intellectual construction of *bangsa*, as Milner (1995:89) describes it, began at the turn of the 20th century, at a time when British Malaya saw a mass influx of Chinese and Indian immigrants who had come to work in the tin mines and on the rubber plantations. A major contribution to this construction was made by the press. For example by the *Utusan Melayu*, edited by Mohammed Eunus, which was the first major national Malay newspaper to be circulated in the Straits Settlements and the Malay States (Turnbull 1996:119), and which became a daily paper in 1915 and had a wide readership among the Malay-literate population. The *Utusan Melayu* articulated Malayness by reference to two concepts, and in the process helped to shape Malay political discourse (Milner 1995:98-110). It focused on the Malays as a race, or *bangsa*, clearly distancing itself from the sultanate or the Islamic community (*umat*). The royal court was still important for Malay society, the *Utusan Melayu* asserted, but the rulers should defer to the more important concept of *bangsa*. Here it should be noted that local understanding of the idea of 'race' did not have the biological-genetic overtones that it had among the followers of Darwinism. Furthermore, the *Utusan* popularized the idea of territory by referring to the *negeri* (state), *watan/tanah ayer* (homeland), and the more specific *tanah Melayu* (Malay land), which latter term was later adopted by the Malay nationalists, rejecting the English name 'Malaya'. In this way the *Utusan Melayu* played an important role, Milner notes, in promoting *bangsa* consciousness and helped to construct a political community.

The significance of the contribution of the Malay press in the period of its foundation was that it helped popularize the idea that the concept of Malayness covered more than *kerajaan*. The Malays belonged to a single community, sharing a common sense of identity and destiny. Of key significance in

this destiny was their economic future relative to that of the immigrant groups. It was imperative, the *Utusan* believed, that the Malays should prepare themselves for a colonial economy in which the Chinese and Indians had already made considerable progress and the Malays were in danger of being left behind (Milner 1995:119-21, 124-5), to the point that the *bangsa Melayu* might even disappear. By the 1930s, quite a large core of the Malay intelligentsia had become well established. Largely a creation of the colonial scholar-administrators, who had taken it upon themselves to educate the Malays in the Malay language, the intelligentsia was made up of teachers and journalists mostly from a rural background. While at training college, they had it impressed upon them that their task was to raise the standard of Malay education and cultural life. When they returned to their own states to start teaching, 'they did so with a new consciousness of the wider unity of the Malay world, its people and problems' (Roff 1980:144). In this period, too, many new Malay-language newspapers and Malay political associations were set up (Milner 1995:249). By the late 1930s, the intelligentsia had established an agenda and evolved a language of Malay political discourse that had the potential to challenge both the *ulama* and *kerajaan* (Milner 1995:252).

To summarize, the colonial construction of Malayness was loosely linked to the post-Enlightenment ideas that the colonists brought to the Malay Peninsula. These ideas, emphasizing reason and the need to question traditional authority, stimulated the gradual evolution of a secular, liberal, and democratic society. They also laid the basis for modern government in the area, encouraging free trade and development so that society and its members might derive maximum benefit. The early colonists, the products of the Scottish Enlightenment, were convinced that the Malay people could and would benefit from the relevant policies. The later colonists, the scholar-administrators, on the other hand, convinced of their own superiority, believed that the Malays were capable of only limited advancement. Enlightenment ideas were later incorporated in the concept of *bangsa*, articulated and popularized by the Malay intelligentsia. *Bangsa*, broadly defined as ethnic community, was a political community capable of forging its own destiny through economic development. As was mentioned earlier, the writings of Munshi Abdullah and Mohammed Eunos contained many ideas that can be traced back to Enlightenment influence. *Bangsa*, although it did not reject *kerajaan* outright, was in part a reaction to the privileges of *kerajaan*. Hence it reflected an underlying tension in a society that had become increasingly conscious of class-type distinctions. Until the early colonial period, descent was the dominant factor in traditional Malay society. Descent worked against the politicization of Malay identity. The earliest signs of the gradual transformation of Malay society from a society in which vertical bonding was important (as under *kerajaan*) into a society stressing horizontal relationships,

and, I may add, the ethnicization of Malayness, are to be found in nineteenth-century Malay texts (Nagata 1984:4). The end of the Japanese occupation of Malaya in 1945 signalled the beginning of the decolonization process. Over the next decade, lengthy negotiations took place between the British authority and representatives of the Malay, Chinese, and Indian communities about power sharing, the constitution of the independent state, and citizenship and nationality. Unlike in Indonesia, there was no concept of *bangsa Malaysia* here. Instead, there was the idea of a *bangsa Melayu*, as *primus inter pares*, including *bangsa Cina* and *bangsa India*.

As the British prepared Malaya for independence between 1946 and 1957, the concept of Melayu was contested in Malay society (Lian 1997:70-1). The anti-establishment Malay Left proposed acceptance of a Melayu nationality, an ethnic identity based on historical and cultural origins, to which members of other ethnic groups, such as Chinese and Indians, could be admitted if they were prepared to renounce any ties outside the Malay Peninsula. The traditional elite, who spearheaded the UMNO (United Malays National Organization), rejected the name Melayu and favoured an exclusively *bangsa Melayu* nationality, which was to include only Malays residing in the Malay states in the Peninsula. Thus the territorial criterion was adopted in anticipation of the formation of the modern nation-state.

The colonial construction of Malayness and its incorporation in Malay political discourse has had ramifications for political developments in contemporary Malay society. The first generation of UMNO leaders (Tunku Abdul Rahman, Tun Abdul Razak, and Tun Hussein Onn), who have effectively ruled the country in coalition with their non-Malay partners since independence in 1957, were Western-educated and had close ties with the Malay aristocracy. The product of the policies formulated by the colonial scholar-administrators, they drew their support from the rural Malay heartland through Malay-educated teachers and journalists. The first generation of leaders was reformist, but at the same time was careful to retain the privileges of royalty and to protect its own interests. The next generation (represented by Dr Mahathir, who became Prime Minister in 1981) represented a break with traditional leadership. Their links with royalty were more tenuous and their privileges less secure, and they drew their support increasingly from an expanding middle class of professionals and businessmen to which the New Economic Policy of the seventies had given rise. By the mid-eighties, the UMNO had changed from a party dominated by school teachers and rural interests to one in which the professional and business classes, who gave priority to stimulating economic development in a competitive market (Lee 1990:489; Khoo 1992:69), were dominant (Funston 1988:365). The latter epitomized the views of the early colonists and East India Company officials, the merchant-scientists, who believed that commerce and industry held the

key to the advancement of the Malays. In the process of forging a modern Malay political identity, the Malays had inadvertently accepted the colonial construction of Malayness.

Riau-Lingga-Johor

So far the discussion of the development of a Malay consciousness and identity has been confined to the Malay Peninsula. When Malayness is viewed from another perspective, that of the political history of the Riau-Lingga-Johor connection of the Malay sultanate, the concept acquires a different complexion. It is necessary to sketch the rudiments of this political history, drawing mainly on the work of V. Matheson (1986, 1988) and B.W. and L. Andaya (1982). The fall of Melaka to the Portuguese in 1511 drove the descendants of the Palembang-Melaka ruling house away to the Johor River area, where it then established its court. The kingdom of Johor was run along the same lines as Melaka until the 17th century, when the reigning sultan, Mahmud, was murdered by one of his nobles, after which the family of the Bendahara established itself as rulers. A period of political intrigues between rival claimants to the throne, including a number of assassinations, followed. In 1718 a leader from Siak, in Sumatra, claiming to be a direct descendant of Mahmud, seized the Johor throne with the help of a Minangkabau force. The Bendahara was later killed. His relatives enlisted the help of a group of Bugis and successfully regained the throne, setting up court at Riau. The Bugis were then given influential positions in the Malay political hierarchy, including that of Yamtuan Muda (junior ruler). Throughout the 18th century, Riau flourished, while maintaining its position as principal entrepôt on the traditional sea route from India to China (Andaya 1977:124). As the Bugis consolidated their influence in Riau-Johor, Malay resentment grew. Malay-Bugis rivalry in the region finally came to an end when the reigning sultan married the daughter of a Bugis Yamtuan Muda and gave her and her relatives the island of Penyegat, near Riau, in 1804. The sultan made it clear that Lingga was his domain, while Riau-Penyegat were under Bugis control, thus creating a formal split into two rival centres of influence in the Malay kingdom (Barnard 1994:20).

The Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824, whereby the British and Dutch agreed to respect each other's, mutually exclusive, spheres of influence, 'irrevocably divided the Riau-Johor kingdom and arbitrarily severed the cultural unity of east coast Sumatra and the Peninsula. Islands south of Singapore, including Java and Sumatra, were to remain the preserve of the Dutch [...]' (Andaya and Andaya 1982:122). Riau's economy, disrupted by years of internal strife, suffered further decline as Singapore prospered under the British (Andaya

and Matheson 1979:109-10). By the middle of the 19th century, Riau had become a backwater on the Southeast Asian trade routes (Barnard 1994:22). The period of Dutch rule in Riau-Lingga in the second half of the 19th century also saw the decline of the political influence of the Bugis and Malay factions. The Dutch sought to weaken both sides, first, in 1857, by removing, with Bugis support, the Malay sultan, ostensibly because of his un-Islamic lifestyle (Barnard 1994:24), and later, at the turn of the century, by abolishing the Bugis-held function of Yamtuan Muda (Andaya 1977:126). The last Malay sultan of Riau-Lingga, Abdul Rahman, was finally deposed and exiled to Singapore in 1911 (Andaya 1977:148).

It is against this background of declining Bugis influence that the role of the Bugis in championing Islam in the region and promoting Penyegat as a centre of Islam and a repository of Malay knowledge in the 19th century should be viewed. Indeed, Wee argues (Barnard 1994:21) that this was deliberate Bugis strategy to counter the traditional power of the sultan. As Singapore became westernized and increasingly cosmopolitan, Riau championed the traditional *adat* (customs and traditions) and Islam and profiled itself as the guardian of what was regarded as the Malay heritage. The Bugis, regarded as outsiders in the traditional Malay world, had consolidated their position not only in Riau-Johor but also in Kedah, Perak, and Selangor. In Riau, a prominent Bugis leader close to the ruling family, Raja Ali Haji, wrote the text *Tuhfat al-Nafis* in the 1860s as a history of Bugis relations with the Malay world, primarily in Johor-Riau-Lingga. A key motif in the *Tuhfat* is the justification and legitimization of the role of the Bugis in Malay history. At another level, it may be viewed as a record of the author's ideas on man's proper conduct vis-à-vis society, the state, Islam, and God (Andaya and Matheson 1979:115). It is worth noting with Maier (1997:683) that the well-known writer of Arab-Tamil descent, Munshi Abdullah, who castigated the Malay aristocracy for their backwardness, was a contemporary of Raja Ali Haji. Raja Ali Haji does not mention Munshi in his writings, however. Nor is he referred to in the court chronicles from the Peninsula. This Arab-Muslim author was an outsider in the Malay world as defined by the ruling houses.

About sixty years after completion of the *Tuhfat al-Nafis*, a Malay history entitled *Kerinkasan Sejarah Melayu* was compiled in Lingga (Matheson 1988:20). In this text the history of Riau is related from a Malay rather than a Bugis perspective. Matheson (1988:22-4), who compared these two texts, found the differences between them telling. The *Tuhfat*, representing the Bugis view, makes almost no mention of the Malay court in Riau, and wherever it does refer to this court, it does so in a negative light. It credits the Bugis with saving Riau and ensuring its commercial prosperity and highlights their championing of Islam as well as their creation of a state on a Muslim model. The *Kerinkasan Sejarah Melayu*, by contrast, attributes the

success of the kingdom to the Malay sultans, makes no mention of Islam, and takes the classical Malay state of the Melaka sultanate as its ideal. Unlike the Bugis text, it does not invoke Islam in support of these sultans' claims to rule. Instead, it bases the legitimacy of the Malay sultans of Lingga on claims that they are descended from the sultans of Melaka. It blames the collapse of the kingdom on failure to follow the correct line of descent. As was observed above, the early court texts conceived of Malayness in terms of descent. Even in modern times, descent continues to be a key criterion for deciding membership of the Malay aristocracy.

Clearly the construction of Malayness in Riau was very much an elitist matter. In the Malay Peninsula in the 1920s, a relatively autonomous Malay intelligentsia had emerged. Largely a colonial creation, its members had become aware by the 1940s of incipient class differences in Malay society between commoners and the aristocracy. They formulated an idea of Malay identity that transcended *ulama* and *kerajaan*, though they were mindful that they had to tread carefully between the demands of both. In Riau, the identity discourse was dominated by different, competing political elites: a Malay faction with strong claims to *kerajaan* descent – in other words, the Melayu descendants of the Palembang-Melaka ruling house – and a group of Bugis outsiders who had links with Melayu royalty through the part they had played in the military-political arena. It was this Bugis elite that assumed the intellectual leadership of Malay society in Riau by promoting Islam and the Malay language through the printed media, challenging the traditional authority of the Malay ruling house. Eventually, the Bugis and the Malay elites both recorded their respective contributions to the Riau-Lingga sultanate for posterity. In the process, they invented history, the Bugis resorting to a discourse focused on *ulama* and the Malays to one on *kerajaan*.

The Indonesian, East Sumatran perspective

In Malaya, Malay nationalism was stimulated by the British proposal in 1946 to establish a Malayan Union, a unitary state whereby the sovereignty of the Malay rulers would be transferred to the British Crown and citizenship would be granted to large numbers of non-Malays in the Peninsula. Surprised by the strength of Malay resistance, the British discarded this plan, however. The colonial administration did on the other hand give encouragement to a secular nationalist movement (Milner 1986:55) in order to nurture a moderate Malay leadership who would agree to share power with the Chinese and Indians when the British eventually withdrew from Malaya. Drawn mainly from the traditional aristocracy, the Malay political elite, in coalition with a Chinese and Indian elite, was given independence peacefully

in 1957. Malay nationalism in the Peninsula was exclusivist, being confined to a particular ethnic group. In Indonesia, by contrast, nationalist aspirations were broadly shared by a number of groups. As a reflection of the heterogeneity of Indonesian society, the national sentiment here consequently was also more fragile. As Legge (1964:113) observes, 'the struggle for political independence and the attempt to develop a united national sentiment, able to knit together the distinct societies of the archipelago and to lay the foundations of a modern Indonesian state, were two sides of the same coin'. Indonesian nationalism was necessarily inclusive. It arose among a heterogeneous population living in a unitary territory forcibly administered by a colonial power (Smith 1976:5). The boundaries of the territory and the form of the administration became the focal points in the discussions about the new nation. Indonesian nationalism was a territorial form of nationalism, while Malay nationalism was ethnic nationalism (Kratoska and Batson 1992: 256).

While the Malay identity in the Peninsula was circumscribed by specific ethnic sentiments, across the Straits, in east Sumatra, it was subsumed under an Indonesian nationalism that transcended narrow ethnic loyalties. Nationalism in Indonesia, in comparison with Malay nationalism in British Malaya, was more fundamental, widespread, deeply rooted, and confrontational: there were often violent clashes with the Dutch colonial power.

Since their arrival in East Sumatra, the Malay heartland of Indonesia (which comprised over forty petty chiefdoms), in 1862, the Dutch, pursuing a policy of indirect rule, had treated the Malay rajas as simple monarchs and enhanced their status at the expense of the lesser Malay chiefs and the leaders of non-Malay ethnic groups (Reid 1979:3). Fertile land was much sought after by the Dutch plantations, so that it was expedient for the Dutch to recognize the authority of the Malay rulers in order to gain access to this land. The rulers, in return, were well rewarded in terms of political status, material wealth, security, and control over Malay vassals and other ethnic groups.

It was clear to the traditional ruling elite, or *kerajaan*, that Indonesian nationalism, committed as it was to a common identity and equality for all, would pose a direct threat to its interests (Omar 1993:21). Its fears were compounded by the presence of a large group of Javanese, who had migrated to Sumatra to work on the Dutch plantations. In fact, it viewed Indonesian nationalism as a covert attempt to establish Javanese dominance over the Malays with the connivance of non-indigenous *suku* (tribe) in Sumatra (Omar 1993:24). Hence the Malay rulers in East Sumatra found themselves in a more precarious position than their counterparts across the Straits (Omar 1993:71). As the concept of *bangsa Melayu* was articulated overtly by Malay nationalists in British Malaya as an exclusive identity in reaction to the immigrant, particularly Chinese, presence, and only covertly as a reaction to the privi-

eged position of the Malay ruling elite, it did not pose a direct challenge to the *kerajaan*. *Bangsa Indonesia*, on the other hand, represented an explicit nationalist call for Malay and non-Malay Indonesians to subordinate their identity for the sake of a greater cause, and in particular required the ruling elite to give up its privileges in view of the fact that the *kerajaan* had been intimately associated with Dutch imperialism.

The dominance of *kerajaan* in Malay society here was so strong that it was generally accepted that Malay issues and problems could only be resolved through the traditional palace channels (Reid 1979:68-9), even though this aristocracy was poorly educated, few of its members having ever received more than a primary education. This first changed in 1938, when a group of Dutch-educated Malay commoners founded the East Sumatra Association. Led by two schoolteachers, the association was concerned to bridge the educational and economic gap between the local Malays and the non-Malay migrant groups. In its activities it championed the cause of a pan-Malay identity in East Sumatra (Omar 1993:25). Its work was undermined by rivalry and conflict among the Malay rulers, however. The Malays, who had no enthusiasm for Indonesian nationalism, came to have doubts about the ability of *kerajaan* to protect Malay interests. Only when the Dutch could no longer be relied on for protection and the sultans started losing their influence did they turn to *suku Melayu* as a last resort (Omar 1993:78). Then they supported a loosely defined regional Malay identity, but it was too little too late. Events overtook them, the Indonesian revolution gathered momentum, and the Indonesian Republic was proclaimed in 1945. The notion of Malay identity, closely associated with *kerajaan*, gave way to a national identity based on the revolution and *negara* (nation-state). The Sultan of Siak, it should be noted, in 1946 publicly stated that absolutism should give way to democracy and popular participation in government. In an action unprecedented in the post-war history of the sultanates in East Sumatra and Malaya, he abdicated in the interests of the state and *bangsa* (Omar 1993:71, 85).

The sheer heterogeneity of the Indonesian archipelago in ethnic, linguistic and cultural terms impressed upon the leaders of the nationalist movement the need for single-mindedness in forging a national identity and ideology, to be imposed by force if necessary, as the only way of holding Indonesia together after independence. Hence ethnic loyalties and religious affiliations were subordinated to the priorities of the new nation-state and the construction of a national identity. There was even a concept of a national culture formulated as a mix of the best elements from the various regional cultures (Hooker and Dick 1993:4; Foulcher 1990:303) – a celebration of regional diversity. In the early years of national independence, this ideal was adhered to, but in later years the growing political dominance of the Javanese gradually reversed this process and Javanese culture gained precedence.

A comparative analysis

Above, I mentioned the importance of examining contemporary Malayness as encapsulated in the developing nation-state. How the nation-state in Indonesia, in Malaysia, and in Singapore deals with ethnic identities in plural societies depends on what models of ethnic integration they subscribe to. Recently, this was aptly described by Heryanto (1999), as follows:

In Singapore and Malaysia, the Malays are conditioned to be more 'Malay' in appearance, practice and consciousness than their Indonesian counterparts, the Chinese more 'Chinese' and the Indians more 'Indian'. In Indonesia, construction of ethnic authenticity exists mainly in the theme park [...] and official speeches.

The strength of the Singapore Government and the small size of its territory and population help explain its success in engineering racial integration. Indonesia's New Order government was no less ambitious in managing racial differences, but aiming at an assimilationist rather than the fashionable 'integralist' or 'multi-culturalist' model. Fortunately, the government lacked the necessary resources in the face of the enormous size of its territory, large and heterogeneous population, and poor state apparatus.

Clearly it is one thing for state elites to enunciate their national ideologies and collective identities, but another to have the infrastructural capacity to implement these. Speaking in terms of a continuum, the state is strongest in Singapore and weakest in Indonesia, while Malaysia is somewhere in between. For this reason, although the Indonesian government officially applies a loosely defined 'assimilationist' model of ethnic integration, in practice ethnic groups are left very much to themselves. This is not possible in either Malaysia or Singapore, where governments proceed from a clear conception of Malayness, Chineseness, and Indianness, and therefore exercise an influence on how people themselves perceive their ethnic identity in their everyday lives.

In the case of Malaysia, the term Malay was used by the colonial administration to distinguish Malay-speaking Muslims residing in the Peninsula and offshore islands from Indian and Chinese immigrants (Andaya and Andaya 1982:302). The Malayan Constitution at independence in 1957 formalized colonial practice by defining a Malay as 'one who speaks the Malay language, professes Islam and habitually follows Malay customs'. The official definition of Malayness was based on cultural criteria. This definition was implicitly accepted in Singapore until the island separated from Malaysia in 1965. Over the next two decades, partly because of an aversion to the ethnic politics in which the PAP (People's Action Party) government had been involved in Malaysia, and partly because of the preoccupation with laying the foundations for Singapore's economic survival and future, the political construction of Malayness was discouraged here. In 1988, during the prepar-

ations for the introduction of the Group Representative Constituency system for the purpose of ensuring minority representation in Parliament, a Report of the Select Committee on the Parliamentary Elections Bill was prepared. This Report stated that a person belonging to the Malay community was any person, whether of Malay or any other ethnic origin, who considered himself to be a member of that community and who was generally accepted as such by that community (Tham 1993:11). In contrast with Malaysia, in Singapore the voluntaristic element in Malay self-identification has become more evident as the Republic acquired greater confidence as an independent nation-state in the midst of the Malay world. The multiracial (multicultural) ideology espoused by the PAP government, it should be noted, defines the population of Singapore as being constituted by different 'races'. The significance of this is that the state in Singapore regards the relationship between society, culture, race, ethnicity, and the individual as unequivocally interchangeable (Benjamin 1976:118). While Islam is explicitly mentioned as a criterion for membership of the Malay community in Malaysia, it is only implied as such in Singapore. In Malaysia, to become a Malay (*masuk Melayu*) is to become a Muslim (*masuk Islam*). In Singapore there appears to be a move towards a more liberal interpretation of Malayness (Tham 1993:14). There are, however, fairly large non-Malay Muslim communities there, including the Arab and Indian groups, so that the loose 'Malay/Muslim' label is sometimes used. In Indonesia, however, there is no coincidence between membership of the Muslim faith and ethnic affiliation.

The position of the Malays of the Riau archipelago is unique. As was said above, the fall of Melaka in 1511 resulted in a shift of the centre of the Malay world to the south, to the Johor-Riau-Lingga region, straddling three would-be nation-states. The Anglo-Dutch treaty of 1824 shattered the cultural unity of the Malay world as a result of a tacit recognition of two spheres of influence, a British and a Dutch sphere.¹ Decolonization after the Second World War led to the formation of three nation-states: Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. As a consequence of its political history, the Riau Archipelago today is the point where political, economic, and socio-cultural undercurrents emanating from these modern centres of power meet. Since the 1970s the province of Riau has undergone an impressive economic development, fuelled by oil production, forestry, and large-scale rubber and oil palm plantations (Mubyarto 1997). In the 1990s the establishment of a Growth Triangle here, in which Malaysia and Singapore participated, provided a further economic impulse for the region as a result of the introduction of technology-based and construction industries and tourism. The population of Riau has grown at a rate of more than four per cent in the last ten years, compared with less than two per cent for the country as a whole (Derks 1997:701). For Batam, the growth was more than ten per cent between 1980 and 1990. These in-

creases were the consequence of an influx of migrants from Sumatra, particularly Minanagkabau, and Java. The Riau Malays, as a result of these developments, had real fears of economic and eventual political marginalization. The growth of industry and tourism, spearheaded by Jakarta-based conglomerates, has put pressure on local Malays to sell and leave land they have inherited from past generations (Derks 1997:700; Al Azhar 1997:765). Indigenous inhabitants have lost out in employment opportunities to non-Riau residents, as big businesses often recruit their staff from their home regions, such as Java (Mubyarto 1997:545). Transnational economic cooperation, such as in the Growth Triangle, has disempowered the Riau Malays and marginalized them (Wee and Chou 1997:527). Moreover, geographical and communicational distance from Jakarta and the rest of Indonesia have been responsible for the political and economic orientation of the Riau Archipelago towards Malaysia and Singapore. Links with these areas have presented local Malays with opportunities to restore their past greatness and to regain their former prestige (Andaya 1997:500-1). The presence of large groups of migrants from both Sumatra and Java has swung the political pendulum towards Jakarta and Indonesia, however, as the Riau Malays have become increasingly apprehensive that there is a price to be paid for ignoring the national politics of Indonesia. Cathy Hoshour's (1997:573) observation, based on her fieldwork on the provincial border between Riau and North Sumatra, that 'ethnic and racial divisions may emerge or be politicized as a result of a group's differential incorporation in a public domain if this, in turn, determines their access to "entitlements" administered by the state' is most relevant to an understanding of inter-ethnic relations and the construction of Malayness in the Riau Archipelago. As Derks (1997:702) argues, state policies in Riau have been successful, if only temporarily so, in eroding a regional identity. Political and economic pressures from Jakarta have resulted in a definition of Malayness, even by Malays themselves, in negative terms such as *malas* (lazy) and *miskin* (poor). For this reason, Derks concludes, Malay identity work may be viewed as a form of resistance aimed at recapturing dignity.

Nation-state formation creates its own momentum. One of its consequences is a tendency towards homogenization, as reflected in the national language policy in Indonesia and Malaysia. Maier (1997:692) aptly argues:

[...] one of the main ironies of the emergence of *bahasa Indonesia yang baik dan benar* and 'standard Malaysian' is that the people who are living in what has for so long been considered the Malay heartland – the coasts around the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea – are no longer thought of as using the most correct and true form of Malay. Riau and Johor, once regarded as the cradle of Malay, have been marginalized, their inhabitants' speech being dismissed as a dialect.

The construction of Malayness is complicated by the predicament the Malays of Riau find themselves in, namely that of having to deal with not one but three states all at once.

Concluding remarks

The contemporary construction of Malayness in Riau is a function of the geopolitical relations between the three states that converge here, of history and memory, and of cultural 'authenticity'. Malaysia is perceived as having a stronger economy and a more stable political order than Indonesia, so that it is believed that one is better off in the former than in the latter. To be a Malay in Malaysia is certainly more prestigious, even if the distinction between these Malays and Malays in Indonesia may be blurred where a person living in Riau is identified as having come from Johor. Clearly, the Malays in Singapore and Malaysia view their counterparts in Riau as being at the bottom of the economic hierarchy. Politically, the Malays of Riau until recently have regarded themselves as being closer to Kuala Lumpur than to Jakarta. The economic crisis in Indonesia, the fall of the Indonesian president Suharto, and subsequent Indonesian promises of political reform have encouraged the Malays of Riau to hope that some measure of autonomy may come to the province. Memories of the political history of the Johor-Riau-Lingga sultanate are invoked from time to time to make sense of the cultural discontinuity and political separation of the past, both precolonial and colonial. Underlying all these sentiments is the notion that there was once in the Malay world a pristine civilization which combined the best elements of *adat* and Islam, and which has gradually been eroded by European colonization and economic development. In Riau Malay society, the construction of a Malay identity has long formed part of an elitist political discourse between the Bugis, who appealed to religion, and the descendants of the Malacca sultanate, who appealed to nobility of descent. In the past twenty years, as external political and economic forces impinged on Riau society, local Malay leaders have probably increasingly had to mediate such influences, in the same way as the traditional Malay elite in the Peninsula did fifty years ago.

In Malaya, and later Malaysia, the development of Malay identity has its roots in the dichotomous class structure of traditional society, dividing commoners from the aristocracy. Egalitarian notions made their appearance in the writings of commoner Malay intellectuals who had been exposed to Western ideas. The early discourse on *bangsa* was preoccupied with the economic position of the Malays. The colonial view of the indigenous capacity for progress was ambivalent. The early colonists, comprising mostly Scottish employees of the East India Company, believed that commerce and industry

were the key to a successful economic future for the Malays; the English scholar-administrators, however, were convinced that the Malays were capable of only limited progress. Eventually the latter came to have much influence in the Peninsula, where they were directly responsible for colonial policy and practice. The arrival of non-Malay immigrants here at the end of the 19th century and their increasingly prominent role in the local economy impressed upon Malay intellectuals and leaders how little economic progress their own community had made under the colonial system. In the colonial period, as today, the debate about Malay identity was dominated by the question of the economic destiny of the community. In the Malay community, *bangsa* has from time to time been articulated in opposition to *kerajaan*. The latter has in the past been criticized for impeding the progress of the community. Nevertheless, the political construction of Malay identity required the retention of *kerajaan* as an important pillar of ethnic identity. In sum, the construction of Malayness was the product of two different though related forces: an exogenous one, namely the colonial capitalist economy which intruded into Malay society, and an endogenous one, namely traditional social distinctions that evolved into class-type distinctions as a consequence of modernization.

In Singapore until 1965, when Singapore separated from Malaysia, the terms of reference for Malay identity reflected political developments across the causeway. Indeed, during the colonial period reformist views of the position of the Malays were inspired by a cosmopolitan environment of Malay, Arab, and Indian Muslim intellectuals, writers and journalists living in Singapore. These views were disseminated in the Peninsula through the press. After independence, the state became directly involved in the construction of ethnic identities. As a consequence of the adoption of 'multiracialism' as the national ideology, the state classified the population into four different groups: Chinese, Malays, Indians, and Others, and formulated its policies accordingly. In the process, Malay identity was essentialized. However, because of the strict separation between religion and politics by the secular government, Islam has not been institutionalized as the basis of Malay identity to the same degree in Singapore as in Malaysia.

In the late colonial period, the British administration in the Malay Peninsula made some attempt to prepare the Malays for both exercising political power and participating in a modern economy upon independence by providing limited education and training. The Dutch in East Sumatra, on the other hand, were content to uphold the traditional authority of the Malay sultanate to facilitate the alienation of land from indigenous holders for their own plantation economy. Challenges to the dominance of the aristocracy in Malay society in the area were rare. Then, as an egalitarian-inspired nationalist movement gathered pace in Indonesia, the reluctance of the Malay

rulers to support political independence for the country was simply swept aside by a bloody revolution. The strength of nationalist sentiments and the destruction of the sultanate ushered in a prolonged period of Malay political acquiescence in Indonesia. Malay political self-awareness only began to show signs of recovery following the collapse of the Indonesian New Order government.*

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