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Whose Imagined Community?

The Nation-State, Ethnicity and Indigenous Minorities in Southeast Asia

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UNRISD
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Post-colonial imaginings

Southeast Asia constitutes a fascinating case-study of rapidly industrializing multi-ethnic post-colonial states beset by ethnic tension and conflict which range from militant separatism in Indonesia and Burma to the ostensibly stabilized state of ethnic tension in Singapore and Malaysia. In many of these countries, ethnic tension is often related to ethnic minority dissatisfaction with the national imaginings and its ideological underpinnings constructed by the dominant elite. The strongly top-down approach of the nation-building process is characterized by limited public debate and consensus on national cultural policies and the overlooking of contending national visions. The competing visions encompass the area of citizenship rights, territorial boundaries, cultural policies, national ideology and identity and models of political and economic development. The Southeast Asian experience clearly demonstrates that the nation-building project is a process that is influenced by colonial ideology, profoundly political, tendentiously top-down and subject to re-imagination.

One of the enduring legacies of colonialism in Southeast Asia is the ordering and engendering of ethnic identity based on the genealogical myth of common ancestry[i]. Importantly, the conjuring of an historical homeland evokes powerful images of the natural ethnic family[ii]. Typical of the stuff that myths are made of, the myth of common ancestry does not need to be enamored with substantive content and accord with factual history so long as its ethnic members accept it[iii]. Recognizing the powerful appeal of the historical homeland, many if not most nationalist movements in Southeast Asia selectively incorporated aspects of genealogical mythology in the struggle against colonial rule and in the post-colonial nation-building process. Even communist nationalists were not immune from employing the myth of common descent. For example, Ho Chih Minh, father of the Vietnamese communist movement, proclaimed that, *"The North, Center and South are part and parcel of Vietnam!....We have the same ancestors, we are of the same family, we are all brothers and sisters…no one can divide the children of the same family. Likewise, no one can divide Vietnam"*[iv]. Similarly, Mao Tse Tung in 1938 referred to the Chinese communists as *"...part of the Great Chinese nation, flesh of its flesh and blood of its blood"*[v].

The paradoxical nature of nationalist leaders selectively appropriating aspects of the Western colonial imagination has been insightfully highlighted by Parta Chatterjee who, in extending the conceptual boundaries of Ben Anderson's[vi] 'imagined community' discourse, posed the telling question 'whose imagined community?'[vii]. Bearing a strong ideological and social resemblance to the colonial imagination, Asian nationalism has been described as being both imitative and hostile of western nationalism[viii].

With a population base of more than 200 million derived from more than 3,000 linguistic and sub-ethnic communities inhabiting hundreds of islands, Indonesia's post-colonial national boundaries have been besieged by centrifugal forces particularly from ethnic minorities in the outer regions. Inter alia, they generally perceive the unitary state to be economically exploitative and oppressively Java centered. In Malaysia, there is a growing restiveness within segments of the indigenous (bumiputera) and non-

indigenous communities against the predominance of communal style politics and the continuance of bumiputera-based affirmative action policies which have largely benefited the dominant Malay bumiputera community. After more than 30 years of bumiputera affirmative action policies, the Orang Asli bumiputera community has remained one of the most marginalized and dispossessed communities in Malaysian society. As Southeast Asia's most impressive economic performer, Singapore's multiracial ideology has long escaped critical scrutiny despite the authoritarian state's systematic attempts to maintain political power by the process of Sinification. Such attempts have begun to raise serious doubts about the state's ethnic neutrality and the propriety of its supposedly meritocratic policies in the face of the intractable marginality of the indigenous Malay community. In all three nations, ethnic minorities have exhibited high levels of relative deprivation and alienation towards the state that is dominated by the numerically dominant ethnic community.

Centrifugal tendencies and problematic ethnic tensions are also found in the authoritarian states of Burma, Cambodia, Vietnam and the democratizing states of Thailand and the Philippines. Paradoxically, Southeast Asia's entry into the 21st century bears strong parallels with the underlying ethnic tensions that characterized her entry into the colonial era of the 20th century. Without doubt, ethnic tensions have remained one of the most serious and intractable issues confronting Southeast Asian states currently mired in economic crisis.

The paper examines the post-colonial state's nation-building processes and management of ethnicity from an historical perspective so as to identify the continuities, discontinuities and emerging patterns in contemporary Southeast Asia. The extent to which colonial ideologies and experiences have shaped post-colonial national ideologies, public policies and the thinking of political elites, and impacted on citizenship rights of ethnic minority communities is investigated. Another pertinent question examined is whether Malaysia's ethnic affirmative action policies, Singapore's supposedly multiracial and meritocratic system and Indonesia's unitary state have served to maintain the hegemony of the dominant ethnic communities. Also considered is the extent to which the implementation of these policies and ideologies has stifled the nation-building process and is in serious need of reformulation?

The politicization of ethnicity in historical and comparative contexts

It is not commonly appreciated that many pre-colonial Southeast Asian states were richly textured multi-ethnic and multicultural entities that had established a tradition of assimilating Hindu, Buddhist, Arab and Chinese ideas and practices. The 'other' had historically become blended into the 'us' social fabric[ix]. This was particularly the case in the kingdoms of archipelago Southeast Asia where extensive trading networks emerged between dynamic port cities such as Temasek (pre-colonial name for Singapore), Malacca, and Aceh and extra-regional cities in Northeast Asia, South Asia and the Middle East. It was not uncommon for merchants from China, India and the Middle East to establish permanent trading bases and long-term relationships with local women in the city-ports of archipelago Southeast Asia[x]. These inter-ethnic unions produced the *Baba* Chinese, *Jawi Peranakans* and Eurasian communities. By and large, ethnic identity and boundaries tended to be fluid and inter-ethnic relations were characterized by high levels of accommodation. This inter-ethnic accommodation was particularly conspicuous in the cordial working relationship between the Sultans and foreign traders who in the Malacca court were appointed to important positions in the pre-colonial bureaucracy.

With the imposition of western colonial rule, the multi-ethic complexion of Southeast was dramatically accelerated by immigration policies geared towards meeting the labor requirements of the colonial economy that met the needs of the industrializing 'mother country'. In contrast to the pre-colonial era, the influx of extra-regional migrant labor from China and India and the internal migration of local communities into the harshly competitive and ethnically segregated colonial environment contributed to a heightening of ethnic consciousness. Chinese businesspeople were also encouraged by the colonial authorities to engage in commercial 'middleman' activities that the Europeans were not particularly

interested in. By contrast, the indigenous communities in British Malaya and the Dutch Indies were encouraged to engage in agricultural activities or forced to engage in the cultivation of cash crops. The institutionalization of ethnicity based on an ethnic division of labor, engendered the emergence of Furnivallian plural societies where the different ethnic communities 'mix but did not combine'[xi].

As the scientific and technological gap between European and non-European societies widened in the nineteenth century, colonial rule was conveniently accorded with a paternalistic civilizing purpose based on the concept of the 'white man's burden'. This coincided with the increasing popularity of Social Darwinist ideas and notions of racial distinctions which became institutionalized in the racial classifications employed in the colonies. No doubt, racial categories served as a useful means of social control and social segregation and were integral to the colonial practice of 'divide and rule'. In British Malaya, race-based laws were the order of the day and race categorizations were integral to the census taking process. For the first time, a large segment of indigenous inhabitants from the archipelago region in 1871 became classified as Malay, henceforth accepted as a legal category[xii]. From 1881 to 1921, Straits-born or Peranakan Chinese in Malaya were classified as such until the 1921 census when they became subsumed into the category of Hokkien Chinese[xiii]. Similarly, in British Burma the arbitrary census classifications of ethnic communities was demonstrated by categorizing many Buddhist Karens as ethnic Burmans[xiv].

The reluctance of the indigenous populace in British Malaya to become wage laborers in the rubber plantations and tin mines, as wage rates were lower than the real wage of peasants and working conditions notoriously harsh, prompted colonial administrators to propagate notions of the lazy native[xv]. Typical of this colonialist genre, British colonial administrator Frank Swettenham pronounced in 1906 that *"Whatever the cause, the Malay of the peninsula was, and is, unquestioningly opposed to steady continuous work"*[xvi]. By contrast, the Chinese were derided for being like "*bees who suck the honey from every profitable undertaking…It is almost hopeless to expect to make friends with the Chinaman (who)…do not understand being treated as equals; they only realize two positions – the giving and receiving of orders"*. Likewise, the Indians were ridiculed for being "*... oily in body, cringing in demeanor, maddening in speech*"[xvii]. Writing about the local inhabitants in the Dutch Indies, John Crawfurd asserted that they were deficient *"...with respect to their intellectual faculties ...may be pronounced slow of comprehension…it must be confessed that an Indian islander of the best capacity is unequal, in most respects, to an individual not above mediocrity in a civilized community"* [xviii] .

Christian subjects were often accorded favored treatment by colonial authorities because of the presumed civilizing influence of Christianity. Christian Karens in Burma enjoyed favored positions in the colonial army, police, civil service and the education system. As a significant number became wealthy landowners, barristers, teachers and traders, their relatively high status galvanized the Karen elite to imitate the British and view their community as being more modern and civilized relative to the other ethnic communities. Influenced by British racial discourse, they believed that their community was of Mongolian racial stock and civilization while the ethnic Burmans were Tibeto-Burman in racial origin[xix]. In Malaya, the Peranakan or Straits Chinese community were generally given favored treatment and regarded as the dominant Chinese group by the colonial authorities. Proud of their status as British subjects, the Straits Chinese reform movement in 1900 enjoined their community to journey forth towards *"…the path of European advancement… identify…fully with the British…*" and become *"…true British heart and soul"*[xx].

Notwithstanding the dramatic changes to the socio-economic structures of Southeast Asia, the colonial authorities were careful to selectively maintain aspects of feudal society which could assist in maintaining colonial rule. In the Dutch Indies (Indonesia), the aristocratic classes such as the *bupatis* were deployed to assist in managing the system of forced labor for cash crop cultivation from 1830-1870[xxi]. In Malaya, the Malay Sultanates were not only preserved but were bestowed with greater symbolic functions

as the British monarchical system became the model for the sultanate system[xxii]. Elite schools such as the Malay College in Kuala Kangsar were established for the training of young aristocrats in the colonial civil service while the Malay masses were provided with the level of rudimentary education required to maintain their rural lifestyle[xxiii]. To an important extent, the feudal orientation of Malay society under British auspices became 'rigidified and ossified'[xxiv].

It is worth noting that the ethnic divisions and tensions generated during Western colonial rule were exacerbated by the relatively brief but tumultuous Japanese occupation years. In Burma, the nationalist Burma Independent Army (BIA), supported by Japanese forces, killed about 2,000 Karens loyal to the defeated British in 1942[xxv]. The Japanese tended to treat the Chinese with brutality, due largely to their support of the Chinese resistance against Japanese military aggression in China. In West Kalimantan, they had massacred so many Chinese community leaders that it was difficult for the devastated community to rebuild after the war[xxvi]. By contrast, indigenous nationalist leaders were generally treated with some measure of civility. In Malaya, the divergent war experiences of the Chinese and non-Chinese communities dampened ethnic relations particularly after the predominantly Chinese Malayan Communist Party (MCP) sought retribution against Malays who had 'collaborated' with the Japanese. The brutalities faced by the general Chinese community during Japanese occupation years had a homogenizing effect on their identity as the distinction between Peranakan and non-Peranakan blurred. With the heightening of ethnic consciousness and tension in colonial Southeast Asia, it was thus not altogether surprising that with the attainment of political independence *"...the ghost of plural society lingered on as a historical medium"*[xxvii].

Importantly, the internalization of colonial racist discourses and other unflattering ethnic stereotypes - such as the lazy native, opportunistic Chinese, drunken Indian, quarrelsome Madurese, crafty Minang, were transmorgrified into public policies in the post-colonial era. The controversial racial views and writings of post-colonial political elites such as Singapore's former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and Malaysia's Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed attest to this. In his controversial book *The Malay Dilemma*, Mahathir employed the biological and cultural deficit arguments of colonial administrators such as Swettenham and Crawfurd to explain the socio-economic marginality of the Malay community. Notwithstanding their projected image as champions of Malay interests, UMNO politicians in Malaysia have a long tradition of admonishing Malays for their cultural shortcomings and paternalistically advising them to reform.

From *Indonesia Raya* to Javanese *priyayi* dominance

Indonesia's post-colonial nationalist leaders were acutely aware that the ethnically diverse unitary state located between the continents of Asia and Australia should not be centered around any ethnic or religious community so as to preserve its fragile national boundaries. Guided by this premise, the unitary state's *Indonesia Raya* (Greater Indonesia) nationalist ideal resolutely emphasized the nation's ethnic and religious diversity in the *Bhinneka Tunggal Iku* (unity in diversity) slogan. At the same time, ethnic identification was subtly de-emphasized by the post-colonial state's refusal to apply the category of indigenous to the smaller ethnic communities and the national census to record ethnic identity until 2000[xxviii].

Central to the *Indonesia Raya* ideal lay the rekindling of territorial boundaries from the pre-colonial Sri Vijaya and Majapahit empires and the claim to all former Dutch colonial possessions on the basis of sovereign succession. It was thus argued that the territories of the pre-colonial empires and the colonial Dutch Indies should be included into the post-colonial Indonesian state. Furthermore, the calculated decision of Indonesia's 'founding fathers' to establish a unitary rather than federal state system was strongly influenced by the Dutch attempt to exploit the colony's ethnic diversity, manipulate the feudal elite and suppress the republican nationalist forces by proposing a federation of United States during the war of independence from 1945-1949[xxix]. As such, the association of federalism with

colonialism, disunity and disintegration remains deeply ingrained in the psyche of many within the Indonesian political and military elite. Significantly, support for the unitary state was also quite strong in the outer regions during the war of independence. Booth has noted that dissenters to the unitary state came largely from those who had fought for the Dutch army (KNIL) and some members of the nobility who, having supported the Dutch, feared for their future[xxx].

Mindful that the unitary state not accord special status to any particular religion, the national ideology *Pancasila* expressed the establishment of an Indonesian state based on religion and the belief in God but did not accord special status to a particular religion, even though more than 80% of Indonesians are Muslims[xxxi]. No doubt, early uprisings in the *santri* (religiously oriented) Muslim regions against the Javanese- dominated central government hardened the military's perception of Islamic-based movements as a destabilizing force. In 1958, the Muslim-based political party *Masjumi* was banned, and by 1971, Muslim parties were forced to coalesce under a single party structure. By the mid-1980s, Muslim-based organizations were required to renounce any intention of working towards the establishment of an Islamic state and to accept the *Pancasila* as a condition for legal association. It was only in the last decade of the New Order regime that cultural Islam was cautiously promoted even though political Islam continued to be discouraged[xxxii].

Moves towards greater centralization gained momentum with the rise to office of the Suharto New Order military regime after a bloody coup in 1965. Greater state centralization was integral to the New Order's consolidation against the supporters of former President Sukarno and its drive towards economic recovery[xxxiii]. Re-centralization was also prompted by the growing oil, timber and other mineral resource revenues from the outer regions which in turn enhanced the financial power of the central government.

In tandem with the construction of Suharto's image as *Bapak Pembagunan* (father of development), economic development was touted as the New Order's main priority while politics was relegated to the background. Political party branches below the *kabupaten* (district) level were closed down and political activity was tolerated only during elections every five years[xxxiv]. The numerous provincial *Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Daerah* (Regional Peoples Representative Councils) were dominated by Golkar and appointed military personnel and supervised by a Governor appointed by Jakarta. By and large, local officials implemented the plans and budgets dictated by the central government[xxxv]. In the authoritarian state dominated by the military and technocrats, regional dissent was barely tolerated and often harshly suppressed on the grounds of maintaining national unity. Additionally, the *dwifungsi* (dual function) powers of the military, which accorded them with military and socio-political functions, allowed it to penetrate right down to the village level.

While the earlier governments under President Sukarno were ethnically heterogeneous, with Javanese representation roughly proportional to their numerical percentage in the larger nation[xxxvi], Suharto's New Order regime became increasingly dominated by the secular-oriented Javanese *priyayi* elite. Constituting 66% of the military elite in 1965, the Javanese proportion increased to a sizeable 80% by 1982 as a consequence of recruitment and promotion policies[xxxvii]. Power and legitimacy became strongly depicted in the traditional Javanese form to transform disunity into oneness from a higher centralized authority. The traditional Javanese *priyayi* ethos of paternalistically leading the masses, instilled in military schools, strengthened the power of the center and engendered suspicions of Islamists, communists and other egalitarian philosophies which appealed to the masses[xxxviii].

The non-Javanese perception that they had exchanged Dutch colonialism for Javanese colonialism and were subjected to a systematic process of Javanization was supported by the realities of Javanese political and economic dominance, diffusion of Javanese terminology, and the transmigration of hundreds of thousands of Javanese to the supposedly under-populated outer regions. For the non-Javanese, the

Indonesia Raya ideal of the 'founding fathers' had effectively internally colonized them in their traditional homelands.

***Bumiputerism*, *Melayu Raya* and the Malaysian Malaysia ideal**

The modern Malay nation took shape when the community, galvanized by the aristocratic Malay elite, rose up in opposition to the 1945 Malay Union which threatened to erode the core markers of Malay identity[xxxix] centered around *bahasa* (Malay language), *agama* (religion) and *raja* (royalty)[xl]. The community was fiercely opposed to the Malay Union's proposed termination of the sovereignty of Malay rulers and the granting of liberal citizenship rights to immigrant groups which threatened to diminish the community's numerical status.

By and large, Malay nationalism movements of various ideological hues, sought to establish a Malay political roof over the structures of the modern post-colonial state[xli].

Even left-wing Malay nationalist groups such as Kesatuan Melayu Muda (Union of Malay Youth), Patai Kebangsaan Melayu (Malay Nationalist Party) and Angkatan Pemuda Insaf (API, Conscious Youth Force) forcefully advocated that Malays and other bumiputeras had legitimate claims to special rights and championed the supremacy of Malay culture and language in the post-colonial state. Their Malay- centered nationalism, strongly fuelled by the socio-economic marginality of the community, prompted left nationalists such as Ishak Haji Muhammad from the Malay Nationalist Party to call for the termination of *"...the Malays [from] being exploited by other races"*[xlii]. To an important extent, Malay nationalism was and continues to be defined in opposition to non-Malays. This is not surprising in view of the fact that other left-wing nationalist parties and movements also took on a distinctly ethnic tone. For example, the predominantly Chinese Malayan Community Party (MCP) was strongly oriented towards China, failed to initiate serious attempts to project a multiracial image and was not particularly sensitive to Malay concerns. Illustrative of this insensitivity, the MCP, in a 1956 memorandum to the Reid Commission, called for the special position of the Malays to be abolished[xliii].

In contrast to the aristocratic Malay nationalists from the United Malay National Organization (UMNO), left Malay nationalists did not envision a central role for the Malay royalty in the independent nation and openly criticized the Sultans and Malay chiefs for cooperating with the British[xliv]. Inspired by republican Indonesian nationalists such as Sukarno and particularly by the latter's *Indonesia Raya* ideal, the Malay left championed the *Melayu Raya* ideal which advocated the political union between the colonial territories of the Dutch Indies and British Malaya. Significantly, Soenarno has explained the Malay left's enthusiasm for the *Melayu Raya* ideal within the larger Pan Indonesian state as a means of countering the potential domination of the Chinese community[xlv].

In establishing a historical case for the *Melayu Raya* concept, the boundaries of the pre-colonial Sri Vijaya and Malaccan Empires were regaled and proclaimed. The push for the *Melayu Raya* ideal was