

*Leaves of the Same Tree: Trade and Ethnicity in the Straits of Melaka.* By Leonard Y. Andaya. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008.

*The Leaves of the Same Tree* takes its title from a common Malay saying describing the interrelatedness of the peoples in the Malay world. However, this is more than a history book about human interactions in the archipelago. Historian Leonard Andaya takes on a more ambitious goal and makes an important contribution to our understanding of the complex issue of ethnicity in a region characterized by a great diversity of peoples and cultures. Drawing upon rich empirical data and three decades of scholarship, the author persuasively illustrates that historians can examine ethnicity not only as a subject in itself, but also as an analytical tool to understand Southeast Asia's complex past. This exciting work has important implications, not only for a historical understanding of ethnic identity in the archipelago over the past two thousand years, but also for our view of contemporary ethnic politics and conflicts.

In this work, which combines both classic historical-archival research and innovative theoretical analysis, the author highlights two important concepts regarding ethnic identity. First, the formation of ethnic identity is a dynamic and ongoing process. Second, ethnic group boundaries are porous, fluid, and constantly adapting to change. Andaya illustrates this dynamic process by tracing the history of ethnic formation, focusing on the role of trade as a stimulus to this process. According to Andaya, some groups saw "the value of detaching themselves from larger ethnicity to form smaller and more effective units, whereas others saw great advantage in becoming affiliated with larger ethnic groups" (p. 3). The history of this region and the myriad of peoples of the area make it an ideal "testing ground" to capture the "dynamism of the process of ethnic formation" (p. 4).

Andaya's work builds on the existing literature in the social sciences on ethnic boundaries and formation, which he eloquently summarizes in the first chapter. It is interesting to note that, in the humanities, this is a relatively new subject of analysis. Andaya, therefore, makes a critical contribution to bridging this gap in his

field, while further expanding the existing social science literature with his nuanced historical data. Debate in the study of ethnicity ranges from a primordialist stance on ethnicity — the view of ethnic identity as natural and innate — to a situationalist, circumstantialist, instrumentalist or constructivist stance (p. 8). Andaya straddles the middle ground in this debate. His project, drawing on the work of Joel Kahn, is to understand the social processes and historical circumstances that produce these different identities. Rather than focusing on the principles that create a particular ethnic identity, the emphasis is on understanding the “contingent nature of ethnic identity” and the “fluidity of its manifestation” (p. 13).

The first chapter in this book provides a cogent summary of the debates on ethnicity as the theoretical framework in which this work is situated. The chapters that follow illustrate the dynamic process of ethnic formation through a historical narrative, explaining “why, when and where ethnic categories were formed or reformed” (p. 13) in the past. Chapter Two examines the development of the Malayu culture between the seventh and fourteenth centuries. This chapter is informative in tracing the trail of the Malayu identity from Sumatra to Melaka and beyond.

Chapter Three explores the development of the Minangkabau identity — as separate from the Malayu — from the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries. Chapter Four examines the emergence of Aceh as the new centre of “Malayness” in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries after the fall of Melaka. While in the first two centuries Aceh took on the role of “successor” to Melaka, later on more effort was made to create an Acehnese identity distinct from the Malayu. Chapter Five deals with the formation of the Batak identity between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries in Sumatra. Chapters Six and Seven examine the changing relationship between the Malayu and the Orang Laut and Orang Asli.

The last two chapters illustrate that power and agency are important in understanding the formulation of ethnic identities and boundaries. The Orang Laut and Orang Asli played an important part in the Malayu polity, and were respected for their specialized

knowledge and skills in acquiring the natural resources instrumental for international trade. Colonial expansion and the shift in the Malayu economic dependency from forest extraction to agriculture and mining industries changed the nature of their relationship with the Malayu. While initially revered, the Orang Laut and Orang Asli became marginalized and discriminated against.

*The Leaves of the Same Tree* is an impressive attempt to theorize about ethnicity, which pushes historians to rethink their views on ethnic identity and politics, and cautions against the use of contemporary categories to understand past relationships. In turn, this work has important implications for how we think about contemporary ethnic politics and conflicts. First, it provides evidence that ethnicity is constantly changing, speaking against primordialist views on ethnicity and the kind of rights claims associated with such views. Second, it shows the importance of understanding ethnic identity within a broader context. In rethinking ethnic identity, we get a better understanding not only of the ethnic formation but also of the economics, politics, and cultures of the region.

The region Andaya describes here is the “Sea of Malayu”, which he suggests extends further than the Strait of Melaka to include the body of sea from India to Vietnam. However, the illustrations of the interactions in the process of ethnic formation presented in this book do not take us beyond the Strait of Melaka and are limited to Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula. Interactions with traders, missionaries, military envoys, and other travellers from China, Indo-China, India, and Arabia are also left unexplored. However, understandably, there is only so much that can be covered in a book and as it stands there are already many excellent examples of the process of ethnic formation provided here.

This book also sets out to focus on the role of trade as the principal stimulus for ethnic formation in the region, in the earlier centuries in particular. While international trade was indeed important, I found this focus somewhat narrow, and the actual data presented represents a wider range of stimuli. Factors such as migration, religion,

education, prestige, and nationalistic pride were also important in ethnic development and could have been further explored here.

This is an important book, of interest not only to academic scholarship but also for the current prevalent and pressing debate about ethnicity in the region. For example, Malay supremacy politics, which leads to discrimination against other ethnic groups in Malaysia, harks back to the idea of Malays as the first inhabitants having a God-given right to rule, while the historical evidence presented here shows how the Malayu identity was constructed over time and a history of interaction with other groups. In Indonesia and Malaysia, the Orang Asli and Orang Laut are chided for their chosen way of life and thought to be backward and uncivilized; yet as Andaya's work has shown, there is a long history of interaction between these groups and the Malayu. In fact, their distinct way of life made them important assets in the Malayu kingdom. Government policies that tend to see tribal communities as backward (and not quite Malayu) and needing to be brought into the mainstream ignore this long history of interaction and co-dependency.

Andaya's work reminds us that we can learn a lot about our present by understanding our past. The historical data presented illustrates clearly that ethnicization is a social and political process, which has important implications for our understanding of ethnic identities today. Leonard Andaya's *Leaves of the Same Tree* is an important and timely contribution to the discussion on ethnic history and, consequently, to contemporary ethnic politics. Accessibly written, this is an excellent example of how the study of history can be pressing and relevant for a wider audience.