

## BOOK REVIEWS

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***Contesting Malayness: Malay Identity Across Boundaries.* Edited by Timothy P. Barnard. Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2004. Softcover: 318pp.**

This is a book for specialists. It is erudite, dense, and packed with information. This collection of essays is primarily derived from a 1998 conference exploring the concepts of Malay, Malayness, and the “Malay world”, including the meaning of “Malay”, its derivation and boundaries, and the origins, transformation, and construction of a “Malay ethnicity”. The revised papers were subsequently published as a “Symposium on Malay Identity” in the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* in 2001. The essays offer perspectives from a number of disciplines — history, anthropology, literature, linguistics — and approaches (postmodern and critical theory particularly) and cover a vast period — from the second century CE to the end of the twentieth century.

Despite what seems to be a focused topic, the papers reveal just how discursive it is. At the end, these terms remain elusive and contested. The editor is to be congratulated for his efforts to tie things together and bring some coherence to the project, particularly in the Preface and by adding opening and closing chapters by Anthony Reid and Anthony Milner. This is a book with many, many trees, as the editor acknowledges. Despite efforts, it remains very difficult to see the forest. At the end, one is left, in the words of one of the writers “feeling disoriented”, if not overwhelmed by the immensity of the time and space covered, the many issues raised, and the mass of information.

Timothy P. Barnard and Hendrik M.J. Maier in the Preface state that although investigating the word “Malay” seems “very straightforward” at first glance (p. ix), it is not, and “it seems unlikely that the word will acquire any greater precision in the future”.

Reid’s opening chapter (“Understanding Melayu (Malay) as a Source of Diverse Modern Identities”) adds a welcome overview that touches on the issues discussed in the collection, by tracing the historical development of the core cultural complex centred in the Malay language, and the association with kingship from Srivijaya and Melaka. The colonists, he states, constructed the idea of a Malay race or *bangsa*, which eventually developed into Malay ethnic nationalism in Malaysia. This contrasts with Indonesia, where nationalism became more territorial than ethnic, and the nationalists took on the more difficult task of “building a bounded state without a core ethnies” (p. 21).

Adrian Vickers (“‘Malay Identity’ Modernity, Invented Tradition and Forms of Knowledge”) has written a complex chapter which investigates how the geographic separations created by colonialism, particularly the separation of “Malay” and “Javanese”, are still accepted as the basic terms for analysis (p. 26). Up until the 19th century, these terms were combined or used interchangeably to define the *pasisir* or coastal world of Southeast Asia (p. 33). He argues for looking at *pasisir* scale of forms (p. 54) through the study of literary texts that allows one to “view a more complex and ambiguous ‘Malay’ identity” (p. 26). He concludes that “Pasisir histories are one variety of counter history, alternative to the European/anti-European histories of colonialism and nationalism” (p. 55).

In an interesting essay, Leonard Y. Andaya (“The Search for the ‘Origins’ of Melayu”) investigates the rival claims of Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula to being the centre of the Malay world by tracing language derivations (p. 24). He concludes that it is the heritage of southeastern Sumatra and western Borneo that inspired the Melayu of Melaka. From the middle of the 15th century, Melaka’s commercial success and literary output made it synonymous with Melayu civilization and consequently Melayu identity was wrenched from Sumatra. With the division of the Malay world into Dutch and British spheres, Melayu finally became identified politically and in the popular mind with the peninsula.

In a chapter added later to the collection, Heather Sutherland (“The Makassar Malays: Adaptation and Identity, c. 1660–1790”) studies the Malay refugee community in the multi-ethnic port of Makassar, based on her close reading of VOC records and archives, among others. The account begins by considering the nature of Makassar’s commerce

and the early history of the Malay community there (from 1561) and then traces its history by looking at how various families adapted to changing political circumstances.

Timothy P. Barnard (“Texts, Raja Ismail and Violence: Siak and the Transformation of Malay Identity in the Eighteenth Century”) investigates the rise of the Siak state in eastern Sumatra in the 18th century at a time when Johor’s power and status were in decline. It simultaneously traces the transition of Siak’s Minangkabau migrants to a Malay identity (p. 112). The rise of the Siak state, and the violence that accompanied it, “is one reason Siak is often placed outside the parameters ... of Malayness in most literature (p. 119). The tales of the rulers of Siak in the Hikayat Siak “provide a glimpse into some of the earlier aspects of the contestation of Malay identity that would continue well into the colonial era and beyond” (p. 120).

In a narrowly focused essay, Jan van der Putten (“A Malay of Bugis Ancestry: Haji Ibrahim’s Strategies of Survival”) provides background on the life of a Bugis official who lived in Riau in the nineteenth century and needed to adapt his identity. Much of the data are derived from letters by Haji Ibrahim to a Dutch scholar stationed in Riau.

Prominent Malaysian anthropologist Shamsul A.B. (“A History of an Identity, an Identity of a History: The Idea and Practice of ‘Malayness’ in Malaysia Reconsidered”) notes that it is very important to remember that there is not only a contestation about the identity of Malayness, but also a contestation of the methods or frameworks through which this “identity” is examined and elaborated. He writes that “most knowledge about the Malays has been constructed and elaborated in an Orientalist mould ...” (p. 136). He argues interestingly that the British colonial conquest was not only a matter of superior weapons, political control, and economic energy; it was also a cultural invasion in the form of a conquest of the native “epistemological space” that disempowered the natives by limiting their ability to define their world.

A contemporary paper by Virginia Matheson Hooker’s (“Reconfiguring Malay and Islam in Contemporary Malaysia”) focuses on the views of Anwar Ibrahim and Dr. Mahathir in 1996–97 newspaper articles on the relationship between Islam and the Malays, Islam and the state, and Islam and development. The essay concludes with a discussion of Vision 2020, the “New Malay” and the proposed civic nationalism envisaged in Bangsa Malaysia. The postscript suggests there are signs now that UMNO may be moving to re-Islamization to counter PAS claims as protector of Islam (p. 166).

James T. Collins’ (“Contesting Straits-Malayness: The Fact of Borneo”) essay is summed up well by the title. He writes that it is time

to reject Orientalist geographies of the Malay world and Orientalist views of Malays and Malayness. He rejects the idea of the Malay world being a simple dichotomy of Sumatra and the Peninsula — “a noetic dualism not coincidentally marked by a colonial boundary” (p. 168). Western Borneo, which Collins believes is the very homeland of the Malay language, offers a vantage point from which to view the process of creating and recreating Malayness (p. 178). I disagree with his statement that “Identity is a matter of choice” (p. 179). It is not always, and often not entirely, simply a matter of choice.

Will Derks’ (“A Literary Mycelium: Some Prolegomena for a Project on Indonesian Literatures in Malay”) essay seeks to challenge the prevailing approach to Indonesian literature by focusing on the oral literary tradition in Malay, concentrating on poetry and short stories, by mapping the widespread phenomenon of the literary club (p. 187). He sees the Indonesian literacy system as subject to constant renewal, readaptation, and reinterpretation (p. 202).

The collection then presents a very long poem — 299 stanzas running over 37 pages — about the Malays, their history, strengths and weaknesses, values and politics, by Tenas Effendy, translated by Timothy P. Barnard and Rohayati Paseng Barnard (“An Epic Poem of the Malay’s Fate”). While interesting, this might have fit in better with the collection if it had been accompanied by some interpretation and analysis.

Finally, Anthony Milner (“Afterword”: A History of Malay Ethnicity”) reviews the essays in the collection. Milner does an excellent job of organizing the essays into a series of “issues”. He also mentions his concerns with the various positions and arguments, for example, the “danger of reading modern concerns about ethnicity into an eighteenth and nineteenth century context” (pp. 245–46); asks probing questions; identifies areas that have not been examined in the collection (e.g., the extent to which a person “conforms to Malay custom” (p. 243). He concludes with an interesting agenda for future research that picks up from the introduction by the colonial regimes of the concept of race and nation, beginning with “How the Malay bangsa or ‘race’ was invested with emotive power”.

This collection, while challenging for the non-specialist, should be of considerable interest and appeal to the specialist.

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