

# Contesting Malayness: the quest for the elusive *Melayu*

The term *Melayu* is ancient and was first noted by Ptolemy as early as the second century CA. In current, everyday usage a Malay is someone who speaks the Malay language, practices Malay customs, and in most cases, follows the Muslim faith. The term, however, is more complex and elusive than what is usually understood. Who then are the Malays? What constitutes Malayness? When did the notion arise, and among whom? These are some of the difficult questions that give rise to the collection of stimulating essays in this volume, aptly titled *Contesting Malayness: Malay Identity Across Boundaries*.

Md. Salleh Yaapar

The collection consists of a preface, eleven essays on Malay identity by experts in the field, a *syair* (a chain of rhymed quatrains) and maps showing important places discussed in the essays. The essays themselves are not totally new. Half of them are elaborations on papers presented at a conference on Malay identity at Leiden University in 1998, then published in the October 2001 issue of the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*. Most of the other essays have also been published. However, the convergence of these essays in *Contesting Malayness* makes it a most welcome volume.

In lieu of an introduction, the collection begins with an essay by Anthony Reid, an excellent overview of how the terms *Melayu* and Malayness have evolved from ancient times and how their understandings have been appropriated not only at the 'center' around the Straits of Melaka, but also at the 'peripheries' of the Malay world. According to Reid,

the terms were initially self-referent categories among people of the Archipelago. Later, they were used as social labels by outsiders. After the fall of Melaka in 1511, the notion of Malayness developed in two ways: to claim lines of kingship or acknowledge descent from Srivijaya and Melaka, and to refer to a pluralistic commercial diaspora around the Archipelago that retained the Malay language, customs and trade practices of the Melaka emporium. In the following essay Adrian Wickers reviews recent discussions of 'colonial constructions of identity'. He points out the fluid and overlapping concepts of Malay and Javanese that have since pre-colonial times been interacting with other indigenous categories. Wickers contends that Malay may be part of colonial invention, but was not invented out of thin air.

In the essays which follow, Leonard Y. Andaya affirms western Borneo and southeastern Sumatra as the homelands of the *Melayu*. His research on the history of Malacca, Johor, Aceh and

Minangkabau shows that Malay ethnicity was developing along the Straits of Melaka as early as the seventh century. It was a powerful concept - Malay leadership was worth fighting for. In an essay focusing on seventeenth and eighteenth century Southwest Sulawesi, Heather Sutherland shows how the Malay commercial diaspora became a central element in Makassar's urban society. As an ethnic category, however, *Melayu* was fluid and varied, for it included 'all those who wore a *sarong* sash, such as men from Pahang, Patani, Champa, Minangkabau and Johor'. Timothy P. Barnard then discusses Siak in the eighteenth century as one of the successor states to Melaka's heritage, showing how the people of Siak (*orang Siak*) in eastern Sumatra, through violence and literary texts, succeeded in becoming a sub-group within the larger Malay race (*bangsa Melayu*). In his contribution, Jan van der Putten focuses on nineteenth century Riau, stressing the precarious position of the powerful Bugis elites within the 'Malay heartland'. He demonstrates how Haji Ibrahim, like

Raja Ali Haji before him, diplomatically negotiated and legitimized the position of the migrant Bugis community in Riau, thus gaining the needed identity as Malay.

Shamsul A.B. in his essay concentrates on the idea and practice of Malayness within modern Malaya/Malaysia. He contends that Malayness as a modern concept is largely an Orientalist-colonial construction. To him categories such as *bangsa Melayu* and *tanah Melayu* were mainly constructed, codified, and given life by the British. Shamsul, however, reminds us that *Melayu* is an evasive concept that can shift meaning according to circumstances. In a related essay, Virginia Matheson Hooker focuses on Islam as a constituent of Malayness in Malaysia. By referring to contemporary developments, she interprets how Islam was reconfigured as a source of moral values and as a civil religion to enhance national unity. She also discusses the formidable task faced by the government to de-emphasize *bangsa Melayu* to promote the idea of *Bangsa Malaysia* (Malaysian race-nation).

In the next essay James T. Collins contests the exclusive attention given to the Straits of Melaka at the expense of Borneo, the prehistoric home of the Malay language. Communities in western Borneo, Collins points out, often share languages - either Malay or Malayic variants - but do not necessarily share Malay ethnicity. In the next essay, however, Will Dirks takes the reader back to the Straits of Melaka, specifically Riau. Dirks affirms the notion of Malay literature, dating back to pre-colonial times, and its vibrancy. Utilizing the metaphor of a mycelium, he shows how popular expressions of the literature sprout from time to time like mushrooms. This is followed by Tenas Affendy's 'An Epic Poem of the Malay's Fate' translated from his 'Syair Nasib Melayu' written in 1995. In the concluding chapter Anthony Milner reviews the essays and poses his own argument. Milner thinks Malay ethnicity is time-bound, primarily a product of the colonial period. However, he takes stock of ideas and arguments dissimilar to his own, especially on the pre-colonial period.

Generally, the essays reflect rigorous, nuanced and lively discussions with most writers constantly problematizing Malay and Malayness. Clearly there are contributors who support arguments for pre-colonial origins and developments of the notions of Malay and Malayness while others contest them. However, all writers agree that although in everyday usage the term *Melayu* is readily understood, in truth it is fluid and elusive. Taken as a whole, the volume reflects the difficulty - or rather impossibility - of rigidly defining Malay identity across times and boundaries. It is precisely this elusiveness and difficulty that keeps discussions on Malay identity alive.

Though generally well-argued, several ideas or points in the collection are open to contestation. These include the idea of the 'colonial invention' of terms or phrases such as *tanah Melayu* (Malay land, traceable to William Marsden) and *bangsa Melayu* (Malay race/people, traceable to Munshi Abdullah and Stamford Raffles) held, for example, by Shamsul. Actually, prior to Marsden, the term *tanah Melayu* was already used in *Hikayat Hang Tuah*. In the *hikayat*, when Hang Tuah was banished from Melaka and journeyed to neighbouring Inderapura, he was asked where he would go next. He answered saying he would go wherever his feet take him, adding '*lamun pada tanah Melayu*' (as long as it is within the Malay land). Likewise, the term *bangsa Melayu* was used in traditional Malay texts long before Raffles. Reid acknowledges this in his contribution. However, quoting Virginia Matheson, he contends that *Hikayat Hang Tuah* is the only pre-modern text to use the term *bangsa Melayu*. This is not quite correct, for the term is also used in *Sulalat al-Salatin*. As such, *tanah Melayu* and *bangsa Melayu* were not really invented by the British; they were codified, yes, but this too was not something accomplished *ex-nihilo*.

Another point for contestation has to do with the Inderapura dancing incident in *Hikayat Hang Tuah* referred to by several writers in relation to the issue of pure and hybrid Malays. Milner locates Inderapura, the land of the beautiful Tun Teja, in Sumatra. Reid agrees, and names the state as Kampar. Both seem to be in line with Wilkinson who much earlier referred to it as Siak. The text itself, however, does not allow this reading. Instead, it unambiguously points to a state not far from Melaka, reachable by land, close to Trengganu, with a coastline like the latter. Kassim Ahmad, the editor of the text used by Reid, considers it to be present-day Pahang, which is textually credible. Intertextually, this reading is supported by *Sulalat al-Salatin* that clearly refers to the state as Pahang.

Having noted the above, there is no doubt that this volume is a major and significant contribution towards the understanding of the *Melayu* identity and to Malay studies in general. It should be a recommended text in departments where Malay and related studies are taught. It would also be a useful reading for civil servants, politicians and other interested parties in countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, and Thailand where the Malays mostly reside. ◀

- Timothy P. Barnard, ed. 2004. *Contesting Malayness: Malay Identity Across Boundaries*. Singapore: Singapore University Press. pp. 318, ISBN 9971-69-279-1 (Paperback) 9971-69-295-3 (Casebound)

Md. Salleh Yaapar is the European Chair of Malay Studies at Leiden University / IIAS. [m.s.b.yaapar@let.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:m.s.b.yaapar@let.leidenuniv.nl)  
[mdsallehy@yahoo.com](mailto:mdsallehy@yahoo.com)