Southeast Asian Identities

Culture and the Politics of Representation in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand

edited by Joel S. Kahn

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chapter one

SOUTHEAST ASIAN IDENTITIES
Introduction*

JOEL S. KAHN

In the last ten to fifteen years, we have stood witness to a remarkable world-wide resurgence of cultural politics. The rise of what are commonly termed nationalisms in Eastern and Central Europe, communalisms in Asia, tribalisms in Africa, racial and ethnic movements in North America, movements for the rights of indigenous peoples in Australasia and the Americas, conflicts over the consequences of immigration for the national cultures of Western Europe, to say nothing of renewed religious- and/or civilization-based sensitivities on a global scale, all contribute to the sense — shared by the vast numbers of academics, journalists, intellectuals, theologians, corporate executives and politicians — of a world in the grip, to the point of obsession, of what the philosopher Charles Taylor has called "the politics of recognition" (Taylor 1992).

Contrary to the impression generated by the majority of observers of contemporary Southeast Asia — of a region whose peoples are dedicated entirely to the single goal of economic development — matters cultural are never very far down anyone's agenda. Against the presumption of an earlier generation of "modernization" theorists and political economists, it seems to be that

cultural particularist rather than cosmopolitan goals have come to the fore for a large number of Southeast Asians. There are these days no national leaders who can avoid, even if they wanted to, cultural issues, most articulating visions of a future shaped by the twin goals of economic growth *and* moral or cultural integrity, rather than either one of these on its own. And no nation in the region can credibly claim cultural homogeneity. Everywhere, the evidence of cultural diversity is overwhelming, if only because it is forcibly brought to our attention either by political élites, or by the spokespersons for groups disempowered by race, culture, religion, gender or distance from the political centre. It may well be, as the leaders of Malaysia and Singapore frequently remind us, that cultural conflict in Southeast Asia has thankfully not led to the levels of open violence manifest elsewhere in the world, although this may be an overly sanguine view of both Southeast Asia's past and its possible futures. However, it is undeniable that the culturalization of the political landscape, as well as of everyday life for the majority of Southeast Asians, is as much a fact of life in the region as it is elsewhere in the world.

The relatively scant attention paid to these issues in much of the recent scholarly literature on Southeast Asia is probably sufficient justification for a volume which takes as its central theme the exploration of culture and identity politics in a variety of Southeast Asian contexts. But this volume does not represent an exhaustive inventory of cultural identities in contemporary Southeast Asia. There is a fair coverage of the region, with chapters by Chua Beng Huat and Nirmala PuruShotam on Singapore, Albert Shrauwers and Ariel Heryanto on Indonesia, Craig Reynolds on Thailand, Wendy Mee and Goh Beng Lan on Malaysia, as well as a chapter on Malaysia, but taking the globalization of Islamic discourses as its theme, by Rachel Bloul. But clearly these chapters deal with only selected aspects or regions of these countries. There are unfortunately no chapters on the Philippines, Myanmar, the countries of Indochina or Brunei, all of which in different ways would be necessary to a more complete picture. Rather, contributions have been selected not just for their regional focus, but for the ways they shed light on a number of central questions to which any contemporary analysis of cultural

politics gives rise. Of these questions, four might be singled out as of particular significance:

1. To what extent can we speak of identity politics as global — in other words, can we generalize about the nature, and implications, of the kinds of cultural conflicts summarized above?[1]
2. What are the causes of the turn to culture and identity in the contemporary world?
3. How accurate is it to speak of a *resurgence* of cultural politics — in other words, are we witnessing a re-emergence of Eastern European nationalism, or African tribalism or whatever? Or are these identities in a significant sense *new*? In particular, we need to ask whether there are important differences between contemporary forms of culture conflict and the conflicts over sovereignty generated by nationalist movements that emerged in post-Napoleonic Europe in the nineteenth century, or in the colonial world in the first half of the twentieth.
4. What should we, not just as analysts, but as citizens, make of claims for cultural recognition? This is a particularly vexing question for those with more traditional universalist and cosmopolitan notions about what constitutes progressive politics.

Selected for the way they have made important analytical as well as documentary contributions to the understanding of cultural politics in Southeast Asia, the chapters, while all written by social scientists — anthropologists, sociologists and historians — also draw on insights deriving from recent debates in cultural and literary theory. There are a number of reasons for this, not least the fact that those who have chosen to thematize the linguistic and discursive dimensions of modern existence have been better placed to offer insights into the processes of cultural representation and hence of identity formation and cultural politics that are so significant in the contemporary world than have been disciplines more strongly committed to the metanarratives of classical modernist social theory.

The contributions here, however, suggest three things: first, that out of this encounter with cultural theory, the social sciences

may be re-emerging, although in a modified form, to make a contribution to the understanding of contemporary cultural processes; secondly, that, in particular, this has been made possible by a renewed commitment in the social sciences to examining comparative and global, rather than merely local situations; and, thirdly, related to this, the re-invigoration of the social sciences has taken place, at least in part through the intervention of what are perhaps too facilely called "post-colonial intellectuals" into social scientific debate. That five of the contributors live and work in Southeast Asia is no accident — a central aim in putting this volume together was to bring together "insiders" and "outsiders" in a fruitful dialogue.

The chapters in this volume address these issues from the perspective of particular forms of identity politics in different parts of Southeast Asia. The volume begins with four papers that focus on the ways in which dominant discourses seek to construct distinctive forms of cultural identification below the level of the nation. They also describe the fate of such imperial forms of "ethnic" identification with the end of empire and, perhaps also, the waning of counter-imperial nationalism.

The chapter by Chua Beng Huat on "Racial-Singaporeans" is subtitled "Absence after the Hyphen", a reference to the relative (cultural) emptiness of the "Singaporean nation". Singapore is an interesting case because it shows quite clearly how universalist themes — such as anti-colonialism, class politics and/or socialism, or capitalist economic modernization — on their own are, or at least are perceived to be, insufficient for a "proper" national culture. Singaporean national culture has, of course, been shaped by all three, in particular by what Chua calls the "inscription of the culture of capitalism" through a productionist orientation, the development of a deep sense of competitiveness, a strong ideology of "meritocracy", and a cultural emphasis on "individualization". The Singapore state, as a consequence, relies heavily on developmentalist rhetoric as a mode of legitimation — an effective strategy, given Singapore's tremendous developmental record.

However, capitalist economic success on its own has proven to be inadequate grounding for a national identity, and like other modern nation states, the Singapore state has experienced pressures to define

itself in particularistic or culturally-unique terms, engaging as a result in various projects of "culture building". These have included, most significantly, an official multiracialism that has in fact had a disempowering effect, and various attempts to construct the Singapore nation as a unique reservoir of "Asian values", as embodying, in Chua's words, "the 'essence' of the communitarian cultures of Asia'". Among other things, therefore, the chapter by Chua Beng Huat shows how even in a place like Singapore, with no single "traditional" ethnic community which could give a culturally-particularistic shape to its national identity, and which probably more than anywhere else in Southeast Asia has been thoroughly interpenetrated by universal or global (or even "Western") cultural influences, the discourse on national identity has been highly particularistic. Singapore shows perhaps more clearly than anywhere else in the world that universalism and particularism, cosmopolitanism and primordialism are necessarily interconnected rather than separate cultural processes in the modern system of nation states.

"Disciplining Difference" by Nirmala PuruShotam traces the "multiracial" construction of Singapore to the period of the British empire, providing us with a detailed analysis and critique of the way that the British colonial government and subsequently the post-colonial state of the Republic of Singapore have constructed and continue to construct a "multiracial" citizenry.

After Singapore was opened up to the global economy by Stamford Raffles it had a highly diverse population made up of the descendants of people already in place at the time of the coming of the British and large numbers of immigrants. How, asks PuruShotam, did this extremely diverse population come ultimately to be forced into a classificatory system comprising four discrete "racial" groups" — Chinese, Malay, Indian and Other (CMIO) — into which all Singaporeans today are forced to insert themselves? By examining colonial census reports that appeared between 1871 and 1947, and that included extensive commentaries on the (changing) census categories, she shows how this "Orientalist" classificatory system was gradually constructed by various "experts", most of whom were of course British. It is impossible to do justice to this careful analysis of an emerging system of social classification. But what the

chapter shows is precisely how this surprisingly complex history led to the development of a highly specific set of concepts that served to construct Singaporeans as radically different from each other so successfully that most Singaporeans today have almost entirely internalized what was at the outset a highly arbitrary system of racial and cultural classification. Once again, in one of the societies most open to global economic, political and cultural influence, cultural particularism has flourished.

Ariel Heryanto, in his chapter entitled "Chinese Indonesians in Public Culture: Ethnic Identities and Erasure", also looks at the formation of an ethnic identity, this time of Chinese in Indonesia. Moreover, in examining the changing representations of Chineseness in Indonesian public and/or popular culture, he suggests that perhaps this particular identity is being de-ethnicized.

Throughout Southeast Asia, ethnic politics inevitably calls forth images of conflict between "indigenous" peoples and the largest immigrant group among them, the "overseas Chinese". For example, Malay nationalism from the outset relied heavily on a strong image of the Chinese as (threatening) other, and indeed since well before independence, Malaysian politics has been characterized by a more or less strict organizational separation on racial or "communal" lines.

In Indonesia too, there has been a history of antagonism between groups constructed as "indigenous" (*pribumi*) and others classified as Chinese, a classificatory system that emerged first in colonial times. In Indonesia, however, there has been an added dimension. As Heryanto shows, this system of ethnic classification was reworked during the period of the so-called New Order regime of President Soeharto whose rule has been legitimized by its claim to having rescued (and continuing to rescue) the country from the threat of communism. Moreover, given the official narrative of significant involvement by the Indonesian Chinese in the activities of the Indonesian Communist Party, together with a belief that the People's Republic of China was involved in what the regime likes to call the "abortive communist coup" of 1965, this othering of the Indonesian Chinese played a role in the horrendous massacres that followed Soeharto's rise to power.

As a result, argues Heryanto, the myth of Chinese otherness, combined with the language of communist threat, has been an important legitimizing myth of the New Order regime, which can at the same time rely on the co-operation of ethnically-Chinese economic élites and still disenfranchize the Chinese community as a whole. Here, cultural particularism becomes embedded in the legitimization of a modern authoritarian regime, reminding us that nationalism based on the unique cultural characteristics of its constituents also involves processes of othering and demonization of non-nationals.

Having demonstrated the extent to which the politics of cultural representation has been central to the rise of modern authoritarianism in Indonesia, Heryanto also suggests that evidence of its decline is at the same time evidence of the weakening of the New Order's grasp on power. Here, challenges to the essentialist images underpinning a system of ethnic classification may at the same time be challenges to the power of an authoritarian state.

While so far we have focused largely on internal factors in the emergence of discourses of cultural uniqueness and cultural alterity, global cultural influences have never been out of sight. Indeed, especially during the colonial period, local languages of culture and difference were thoroughly hedged in by the interests and imaginations of the colonial powers. Moreover, there is the sense that current national forms of culture building are as much a consequence of the imperatives of the global system of nation states as they are of particular states in Southeast Asia.

The next three contributions introduce notions of globalization more explicitly. In his chapter on "Globalization and Cultural Nationalism in Modern Thailand", Craig Reynolds writes of the impact of globalization on cultural identities in Thailand. Reynolds draws attention to the ways in which the phenomenon of cultural globalization differs from earlier forms of cultural imperialism when the hegemony of metropolitan cores (whether in the West, or in Thailand itself) almost inevitably resulted in the domination if not the extinction of peripheral cultures. The effect of globalization in Thailand has been ambiguous, as likely to support previously

dominated indigenous cultures as to wipe them out, as likely to support new social/cultural movements as to undermine them. The paradoxical result of this is that, in his words,

> [a]s cultural flows import more and more from "out there", whether "out there" be Hong Kong, Tokyo, Taiwan or San Francisco, new regional and ethnic identities are being forged.

One reason both for the relatively high porosity of Thailand to global cultural influences, and for the ability of Thais at the same time to preserve the old and to create new distinctive cultures and identities, may be the history of "openness and receptivity to the world generally", a sort of cosmopolitanism that nonetheless does not take the form of a slavish imitation of other ways, Reynolds suggests.

In his discussion of Thai reactions to global influence Reynolds also draws our attention to another important dimension of the processes of identity formation, namely, the significant role played in these developments by intellectuals. Neither mere puppets of imperial or local state power, as some of the post-colonial critics would have it, nor speakers of the unmediated voices of the subaltern, as they themselves often imply, intellectuals in places like Thailand (and, indeed, in the West), on the one hand, have their own particular voices and agendas and, on the other, are very often the most significant social group in the production and consumption of cultural identities, new and old. By looking at recent public debates, Reynolds shows how, in the Thai case, intellectuals, many of whom come from a radical, leftist background, are playing a crucial role as the mediators of global culture. Indeed, globalization is itself a central trope of Thai intellectual discourse, as Reynolds' discussion of debates over what the Thais call *lokanumwat* shows, something that suggests that in speaking of cultural globalization we must take into account the fact that it is as much an emic as an etic category.

Reynolds' rich discussion of issues raised both by globalization theory and by cultural politics in contemporary Thailand deserves careful reading. But one thing it demonstrates quite clearly is that our earlier understandings of global cultural flows which envisaged a culturally homogeneous world as its evolutionary endpoint (the

classical understanding of "cosmopolitanism") or a world culture produced almost entirely through Western cultural hegemony needs to be substantially revised as we recognize that globalization is as likely to generate difference, uniqueness and cultural specificity as it is to produce a genuinely universal or homogeneous world culture.

This is of course reminiscent of the important work of the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, who has reminded us that the current state of global culture is characterized by disjuncture and difference as much as it is by sameness and a one-way cultural hegemony. In contrast to the period of European imperialism, now the variegated ideoscapes, ethnoscapes, finanscapes and technoscapes, to use Appadurai's catchy terms, channel cultural influences in a criss-crossed pattern across the globe (Appadurai 1990). As just one example of this change, sometimes just as important to Southeast Asians' perception of the world as the images emanating from the Western-controlled media, are those that come through the medium of Indian or Hong Kong film, or the products of the Japanese communications industries.

In "Gender and the Globalization of Islamic Discourses", Rachel Bloul demonstrates how Southeast Asian discourses on gender are also shaped in significant ways by a "non-Western" globalized discourse, this time that of a world Islamic movement. Describing the debates that took place among the participants at a conference on "Islam and the 'Woman Question'" held in the Malaysian city of Penang — debates that made frequent reference to the local and particular nature of Islam — Bloul argues that in fact they testify to the emergence of a global Islamic language on gender and identity.

Bloul's chapter is important for two other reasons. Firstly, she shows clearly how a particularistic discourse (in this case, one that stresses the distinctiveness of Islamic, as opposed to "Western", discourses about femininity) becomes universalistic, or perhaps better reified under a globalizing impulse. Hence, what may start out for Malaysian Muslim intellectuals as a language of Malay particularism becomes subsumed under global categories like "Islamic womanhood".

Secondly, Bloul's chapter tackles directly what is implicit in a number of other chapters, namely, the extent to which these new

discourses are inevitably gendered. Consequently, concepts such as an "Islamic society" imply, almost as a matter of first principle, distinctive gender roles and modes of behaviour. The importance of gender and gendering in relation to recent cultural and identitarian discourses in Southeast Asia is evident in most of the other contributions to this volume. Thus, for example, in her discussion of the construction of "multiracialism" by the Singaporean state, PuruShotam shows how each "race" can only be completely represented by its related, and yet at the same time differentiated, males and females. In a somewhat different way, imperial representations of Asians were also frequently gendered. A clear example of this is seen in the way British writers on the Malays not only wrote of "typical" gender roles among the colonized peoples, but in classic imperial fashion also constructed feminized images of the Malays which contrasted with the "masculine" world of both the colonizers, and that of the more "modern" Chinese.

Theorists of the global condition have tended to argue that a significant determinant of contemporary forms of cultural politics is the nature of the new communications technologies that have developed in the last decade or more. While ideas about cultural globalization first emerged particularly in analyses of the impact of televisual technologies, in the last few years, the transmission of electronic data by means of what has come to be known as the Internet has generated renewed interest in the intersection between local cultures and identities, on the one hand, and the global situation, on the other. While scholarly research on this new technology has been focused largely on the West, and particularly the United States which shapes information flows in significant ways, there is little doubt that, perhaps because of rapidly increasing levels of technical sophistication in Southeast Asia, culture and society in the region are already being shaped in significant ways by the linking of (some of) its citizens both to each other and the outside world by means of the Internet. A volume dealing with the intersection of the global and the local in the Southeast Asian context would be incomplete without a consideration of the role played by these electronic networks on cultural politics in the region.