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**Identity Matters:
Methodological Travails from Malaysia to Indonesia**

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Abstract:

The politics of identity is central to the study of race and ethnicity. This paper considers the utility of several methodological approaches relevant to making sense of ethnic identity. It details the contributions of narrative, performative, and dialogical understandings of identity-formation and the ways in which they intersect and inform one another. The paper further highlights their application to ethnicity through four case studies in Malaysia and Indonesia. Although analytically distinct approaches, it is important not to treat the three elements in isolation or separately. A performative or dialogical approach is only meaningful if the narratives implicit in both are uncovered and analyzed, while narratives gain greater import if they are regarded as dialogical. As this paper argues, if triangulated and used in careful combination, they can render a fuller sense of ethnic identity-formation and its complexities.

Keywords: politics of identity, Malaysia, Indonesia, methodology, narrative, performative, dialogical

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Introduction*

Since the 1980s debates about identity have occupied a prominent place in sociology, anthropology, politics, and cultural studies, to the point where we now refer to them commonly as the politics of identity. It is a capricious concept implicit in the work of social scientists who work on ethnicity and related issues. On the one hand, if we view identity in a strong sense, where it is clearly bounded, internally homogenous and therefore essentialist, it becomes vulnerable to the problem of reification. Conversely, in a weaker sense, if identity is multiple and malleable it can become prone to overly constructivist and relativistic interpretations. As Brubaker and Cooper (2000) note, conceptualizing identity from either perspective presents us with a dilemma: strong identity means too much and weak identity means too little. How then does social science deal with such a conceptual impasse? Brubaker and Cooper (2000) suggest the benefit of treating identity as an analytical category, that instead involves studying a process of identification.

In such terms, it becomes something that people to varying degrees, actively or passively engage in and not dissimilar to ethnicity, it is also cognitive and a way of seeing the world (Jenkins 2008: 5; Brubaker in Jenkins 2008: 9). The following paper details specific methodological issues arising from examining ethnic identity as a social process. If identification in race and ethnic relations is about discourses and narratives, there is a case for methodological heterogeneity in decoding that embodiment. Drawing on the work of Margaret Somers (1994) and Nira Yuval-Davis (2010), this paper considers the utility of several methodological approaches for examining the politics of identity and proposes their triangulation for making sense of ethnic identity-

* I'd like to thank Associate Professor Paul J. Carnegie for his valuable input in finalizing this paper.

formation and its complexities. The paper does so by taking contributions of narrative, performative, and dialogical understandings of identity and then applying them to ethnicity through four case studies in Malaysia and Indonesia.

Identity as Narrative

What are the methodological implications of adopting a narrative approach to the study of identity? According to Somers (1994), social science in the past has been slow to accept narratives, traditionally employed by historians, as legitimate sources of data. Narratives have often been regarded merely as representational and a way of presenting knowledge, i.e., historical narratives. They are considered more descriptive than explanatory in intent while social science is primarily concerned with observable social behavior such as identity-formation, the role of interests, norms, and values in the interplay of structure and agency. For narratives to occupy a focal position within the methodology of social science, Somers (1994) recommends the following:

First, we need to shift our understanding of narrative as simply representational to regarding it as an *ontological* condition of social life. A condition in which people make sense of their lives and construct their identity by locating themselves in one or more narratives or stories and experience their lives within and through such narratives. The subjective perceptual force of narratives makes them real with real consequences. Secondly, if narratives are stories about events - interpretations - we can only make sociological sense of them and attendant events by locating both in the relational context of symbolic, institutional, and material practices across time and space. Thirdly, if there is a limitless variety of events and stories, what criteria do we use to select the most relevant events? A prudent response is to allow themes to guide inquiry or what social scientists call 'the problematic.' For example, the problematic of race and nation- building. Events related to the latter problematic then become sociologically significant or *episodes* only after we have applied the second recommendation above. Finally, making a distinction between personal narratives and public narratives is judicious. Public narratives indicate a cultural and institutional significance that may be local or national, micro, or macro-stories about something of consequence.

For Yuval-Davis (2010), we can examine identity (which she subsumes within the broader field of the politics of belonging) from three perspectives: as narrative, as performativity, or as dialogical practice. Identities as narratives are stories that people tell themselves and others about who they are, and who they are not but also about who and how they would like to be (Yuval Davis 2010: 266-7). In this sense, narratives are forms of representation, and narratives of identity are representations of identity. Of course, there are personal/individual narratives but here the concern is with narratives of collective identity. Such narratives of identity can be verbal or written renditions – oral or written histories, personal accounts, literature, and political speeches and writing. Moreover, they are constructed as and reflected in specific practices: political discourses of identity, daily life, and in rituals and performance. The main point here is that these sorts of practices or non-verbal narratives can exert a pervasive influence without the presence of discrete, specified persons or institutions. As Brubaker & Cooper (2000:16) note, this may influence identity – establish, maintain, and reproduce it – anonymously by and through discourse. The latter's force (written or otherwise) does not lie in tangible accounts of events by agents but in the way they imperceptibly permeate our thinking, speech, the images in our heads and the way we make sense of the social world.

Somers (1994:606) further highlights the study of identity-formation as diachronic which means taking into consideration and incorporating aspects of time, space, and relationality. As we will see narratives about Malay or Tamil identity are historically specific and structured relationally vis-à-vis the state, nation or other ethnic groups, and the economy. It is a relationality imbued with power relations.

Identity as Performative

We can also examine identity in a 'performative' sense where the work of identity is conducted through performing, some more public than others. This may involve non-verbal expressions such as rituals or occasions like national day celebrations, religious observances etc. To understand identity as performance, however, we need to go beyond conventional understandings of mere performance. Performance presumes a subject, that there is a person doing the performing. What makes it performative is when an act is repeated and ritualized publicly and visibly, it brings into

effect what it names - reification. Performativity is expression or discourse, and its significance lies not in the temporality of the event but in its repetition (Butler 1993 in Yuval-Davis 2010:269-70). It is the discourse surrounding the act, rather than just the act itself (as we shall see later in the discussion of *Thaipusam* and the lion dance) that matters. Significantly, performative identity is also narrative in a non-verbal sense and can situate identity narratives within, counter to or outside existing social discourses. A one-off public celebration is of little consequence but if repeated and reproduced regularly, it assumes the reiterative power of discourse. There is a reiteration of the norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer (or participants). This effectively produces something that appears self-sustaining and reproducible. For instance, collective acts of remembrance or observances are performative. The point about performativity for this discussion is that its very expression and repetition facilitate the social construction of collective identity.

Identity as Dialogical

A more dialogical approach to studying identity-formation restores agency in a way the other two approaches above tend to overlook. If we adopt a narrative or performative approach to understanding identity it is easy to slide into a static and over-socialized conception of identity.¹ As Yuval-Davis (2010) notes, the trap of identity politics is to assume that all members of a group or collectivity are similarly positioned or identified and therefore representative of the collective narrative. A dialogical perspective treats identity-formation as an open-ended process of becoming which may result in affirmation, contestation, or subversion of a putative common script. This is a particularly useful perspective in the politics of identity, where the eventual manifestations of identity from the bottom up are less predictable and certain than they are from the top down. For Yuval-Davis (2010:272), the dialogical approach:

does not necessarily assume predetermined narratives of identities, although, in many cases, common cultural resources and meanings, as well as common signifiers of identity, will be used as building blocks of narratives. Nevertheless, although the successful dialogical process is accumulative, it provides its participants with the space for exploring new possibilities, changes and

¹ Dennis Wrong (1961) introduced the oversocialized conception of individuals to refer to the assumption that people internalize social norms readily to conform to the expectations of others. This results in ethnic identity being essentialized rather than constructivist.

contestations, as well as the utilization of the diverse experiences and resources of the participants in the dialogue.

In a large amount of literature on identity-formation there is a heavy reliance on the narrative treatment of identity. Yet, such narratives are not only representations/interpretations of identity but also constitute the basis of public/political discourses of identity. The latter invariably influence how people in their everyday lives identify themselves in relation to others and make sense of their position in society.

As the above highlights, while the narrative, performative, and dialogical approaches to studying identity-formation are analytically distinct, they overlap in practice. In other words, narratives are implicit when ethnic identity is examined from the performative or dialogical perspective. This brings us to an issue raised at the beginning of the paper. If identity is a process of identification, then it is important to treat it analytically as discourse. As Fowler (cited in Mills 1997: 6) notes:

‘Discourse’ is speech or writing seen from the point of view of the beliefs, and categories which it embodies; these beliefs etc. constitute a way of looking at the world, an organization or representation of experience – ‘ideology’ in the neutral non-pejorative sense.

When discourses are enacted in social and institutional contexts, discourse “may be identified by the institutions to which it relates and by the positions from which it comes and which it marks out for the speaker.” (Mills 1997: 11) The awareness that discourses occur in dialogue and in response to contrasting or opposing discourses or groups is no less pertinent than in interethnic relations (Anthias 2008).

The following sections draw on relevant examples to allow us to consider the utility of investigating the process of identity-formation as discourse in narrative, performative and dialogical terms. By detailing their application to ethnicity through four different case studies in Malaysia and Indonesia, we gain a greater appreciation of the ways the narrative, performative and dialogical dimensions of identification intersect and inform one another. If triangulated and used in careful combination, the approaches can render a fuller sense of ethnic identity-formation and its complexities.

Narrating Malays in Peninsular Malaysia

An obvious starting point is to track and analyze how narratives of Malayness have developed since the early 19th century. For Anthony Milner (1998) the construction of Malayness in the Malay Peninsula is in large part the product of ideological work. In a Ben Anderson (1983) sense, Malayness is an ‘invented’ concept, subject to construction, contestation, deconstruction, and reconstruction. According to Milner (1998), it is something best viewed as a series of dialogues not only within British colonialism and in contestation with Chinese communities after independence but also amongst the Malays themselves, particularly from the late 1980s onwards.

To elaborate, in colonial discourse, British colonists represented the Malays in two opposing views (Maier 1988: 37, 43). The early generation of colonists, predominantly Scottish employees of the East India Company – who served in Penang and Province Wellesley in the 1820s and 1830s – were heavily influenced by ideas emanating from the Scottish Enlightenment and a climate of political reform across Europe that sought to promote greater equality and the view that people have similar capacities if given the opportunity. The pro-Enlightenment camp believed that Malays were capable of improvement and that commerce and industry held the key to their advancement. Another contrasting view also gained purchase largely from the scholar-administrators - mostly of English origin - who came later. The latter believed that Malays were incapable of withstanding Western and Islamic influence because their social organization was inherently weak and their capacity to advance limited. These administrators, reflecting the traditional Orientalist attitudes of their own class backgrounds, treated Malays with a mixture of paternalism, tutelage, and romanticism and further nurtured a Malay ruling class as an extension of their own authority.

Endogenously, one of the first significant attempts to conceptualize Malayness comes from the writings of the Malacca born Munshi Abdullah in the middle of the 19th century. He used the term *bangsa* (ethnicity) to refer to the condition of the common people (as in *rakyat*) for which he had deep concern (Milner 1995: 52). Munshi was troubled by the plight of common Malays relative to what he perceived as the oppression of the rajas and in relation to their standing with other *bangsas* (which were non-specific but could refer to India, Bugis, Chinese or European). The *bangsa Melayu* as articulated in the narratives of Munshi Abdullah is an early example of a process

of identity-formation that involved othering, not only non-Malay *bangsas* but also the ruling class (*kerajaan*).

Furthermore, the turn of the 19th - 20th century witnessed the introduction of the first Malay newspapers and signaled the role print media would play in spreading and raising Malay consciousness to identify as an ethnic community and begin to form a collective identity. The *Utusan Melayu* which became a daily in 1915 picked up where Munshi Abdullah left off in promoting Malay *bangsa* in two senses: one that *bangsa* took precedence over *kerajaan*² and that it was a territorialized identity – associated with *negeri* (state) and *tanah ayer* (homeland) (Milner 1995: 106-107). In this way, *Utusan* helped shape Malay political discourse (Milner 1991). In the sixty years since independence with the politics of race dominating the country's socio-political landscape, *Utusan* has taken every opportunity to racialize any and every issue that can differentiate and divide the Malays and non-Malays. This has continually undermined efforts to establish political coalitions capable of transcending entrenched ethnic and racial allegiances.

For most of the first half of the 20th century the narratives of *bangsa Melayu* as a collective identity were initiated and articulated by a small minority of intellectuals – chroniclers, journalists, and teachers – of common or peasant origins. There is little historical evidence to suggest how widespread their understanding of *bangsa Melayu* was shared by the rest of Malay society. When UMNO³ was founded in 1946 in the wake of widespread opposition to the British proposal to establish the Malayan Union⁴, it marked a significant phase in Malay identity-formation. As the British historian Anthony Stockwell (1977: 494-495) noted UMNO was ‘an umbrella organization led by Western-educated members of the traditional Malay elite, embracing a variety of Malay associations....and enjoying royal patronage.’

² The Malay peninsula prior to colonization consisted of numerous polities, each presided by a ruler or *raja*, whose influence waxed and waned depending on his personal abilities and political skills in dealing with internal dissensions and external intrusions. The *raja* dominated the moral, religious, and political lives of his followers – who were regarded as extensions of the *raja* (Milner, 1982:113-14). Describing the political condition of the Malays, Milner states, “men considered themselves to be living not in states or governments, but in a *kerajaan*, in the ‘condition of having a *raja*’”.

³ UMNO or the United Malays National Organization was the first Malay political party founded in the post-independence politics of Malaysia and heralded the emergence of a political consciousness based on Malay ethnic identity.

⁴ The Malayan Union proposed the creation of a unitary state over the whole of the Peninsula, a liberal citizenship policy inclusive of the Chinese population, and removed the sovereignty of the Malay traditional rulers the Sultans (Andaya and Andaya, 1982: 254-55).

UMNO's legitimating grammar of Malay identity had rhetorical appeal to significant sections of Malay society and resonated with the *realpolitik* of the time. Even in the last years of the colonial period (which saw the rise of UMNO), very few Malays thought of themselves as 'Malays' rather than subjects of *kerajaan* (Milner 1991: 110). The concept of *bangsa* (invoked by a Malay-educated intelligentsia) remained too abstract for the majority of Malays over and above their bonds to *kerajaan*. In contrast, the first generation of UMNO leaders, recognizing their ties with royalty, sought to articulate Malay identity by marrying the concept of *tanah ayer* (homeland/territory) to that of *kerajaan* as the symbol of Malay sovereignty. The consequence of such a marriage was to establish a highly racialized form of political discourse on Malay identity. In sum, *bangsa Melayu* was exclusive and meaningful only in the rejection of Chinese and Indian categorization, especially the former who were perceived as a political threat. Somewhat differently, the anti-establishment Malay left, who set up the Malay Nationalist Party after the War, proposed an alternative to *bangsa Melayu* in the People's Constitution by calling it a *Melayu* nationality. This would have accepted Chinese as part of an integrative national political identity if they rejected their ties outside of the country and voluntarily acknowledged the Malay peninsula as their home.

However, for the next thirty years UMNO exerted dominance over the country's political narratives and discourse of a racialized Malay identity. During this period the single most important change that occurred and which entrenched a racialized Malay identity in Malaysian society was the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1971. This institutionalized the status of *bumiputera*. As a response to the race riots of May 1969, the Malay-dominated coalition government introduced policies which privileged Malays in accessing economic and educational opportunities. It was a privilege status formalized by the official category of being a *bumiputera* and institutionalized in all subsequent governmental policies and practice affecting Malay and Chinese communities. This racialization of Malay identity and Malaysian society has been maintained and reproduced since then. For instance, expressions like *pendatang* (a label applied to migrant newcomers but used perjoratively to refer to any non-Malays as outsiders) and *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy) entered and became normalized in public and political debate.

While Malayness from the 1950s to 1980s assumed a rather exclusive and defensive posture both publicly and politically, the 1990s ushered in a phase of new-found confidence for Malays under the tutelage of Dr. Mahathir as Prime Minister. By then Malay society had become substantially urbanized and Malays achieved significant social mobility from the NEP. UMNO itself had changed from a party whose traditional strength lay in support from Malay teachers, local administrators, and a rural electorate to one where a new generation of urban-based businessmen and university-educated professionals – a burgeoning Malay middle class also held sway. There was further transformation with the shift of a significant number of rural Malays into a more urban proletariat demographic.

Emboldened by these shifts, Dr. Mahathir, the first PM not to have close connections with royalty, challenged the excesses of the traditional aristocracy on various occasions.⁵ In 1991, he promoted a new Malay identity – *Melayu baru* (Lian 1997: 74) – the new Malay was not only ready to compete with the Chinese but also step into the international economy. For Mahathir, the stance of *Melayu baru* need no longer be defensive, negative, and inward-looking. Here we can detect a resonance with Munshi Abdullah's *bangsa* (the fate of a community) and the early Scottish colonists who believed that the Malays will eventually take their place in commerce and industry. By the 1990s, despite the ethnonationalist credentials - Dr. Mahathir - and his government were able to freely articulate the concept of a more inclusive national identity, *bangsa* Malaysia. The period from 1988 – 1995 witnessed a period of sustained yearly economic growth rate of 8 per cent. This prosperity created a more liberal climate within which the government could entertain the notion of a national identity that downplayed racial and ethnic loyalties.

Although the discussion so far has centred on identity politics and the ability of those who hold power to define and dictate the discourse and direction of identity-formation, we should not overlook the politics of identity. Attention to how people challenge, subvert, or negotiate from positions of relative powerlessness in interstitial spaces is also important to consider. One example is *Angkatan Sasterawan* or ASAS 50 which developed from *Sahabat Pena*, a correspondence club that grew from the readership of a twice weekly newspaper (started by religious reformists) in

⁵ Open tensions between Dr. Mahathir the then Prime Minister and royalty began in 1983 when he limited the power of the King in the Constitution by passing a law that the latter can only delay but not refuse royal assent for any bill passed in Parliament. Later in 1992 as a result of an assault on a civilian by a Sultan, he removed immunity from prosecution any crime committed by members of royal households.

Penang in 1934. It kept readers in touch and provided a forum to promote the practice of letter-writing in the Malay community (Lian 2001b:207). At its peak the club had a membership of two thousand from all over the Peninsula. When the Malayan Emergency was declared by the British in 1948 many of its talented and active members left for Singapore, largely driven by British suspicion of their leftwing sympathies and association with radical political groups. The climate for expression in Singapore was less restrictive at the time. In the island state, many avoided overt political activity and devoted much of their efforts to developing and promoting Malay language and literature in the belief that it was critical to protecting Malay culture and identity.

The significance of ASAS 50 was that its members came from mostly rural backgrounds, were commoners with vernacular education. Having grown up in the 1930s in a colonial society they felt doubly marginalized (ibid.). They were not only alienated from an English-speaking community who enjoyed status and opportunities but marginalized by the Malay political elite and aristocracy who took little interest in their work. Their writing was highly didactic, idealizing the rural and the village while rejecting the city as a negation of Malay culture and criticizing those who were westernized and misused their power. In their struggle for identity and self-esteem, they had to contend with other communities in the form of race-consciousness and within their own community in the form of class consciousness. ASAS 50's focus on language and culture in its early years simultaneously challenges the privileges of a local identity – Malay or otherwise – in a colonial society. Later after independence, *Bahasa Jiwa Bangsa* (language is soul of community/nation) introduced in the third Congress of ASAS 50 in 1956 was used by UMNO to formulate and promote a national identity based on the Malay language.

In recent years, calls for greater nuance to the understanding of Malay identity-formation have also emerged. The work of Joel Kahn (2006) has drawn attention to the interplay between local and global forces in shaping identity. For Kahn, intra-regional migration and religious reformism have been largely overlooked by narratives of Malay identity. Sumit Mandal's (2004, 2007) work on 'transethnic solidarities' has also helped foreground a variety of efforts by Malaysians to actively participate in society without reference to ethnic origins, in the past and in the present. For instance, the creolization of *Baba-Nonya* identity, the practice of *Bangsawan*

theatre, and the development of Malaysian Tamil popular music that combines local influence with rock, reggae, and rap.⁶

The world of cinema has further played a role in this shift with Sharmani Gabriel (2011) describing the work of Yasmin Ahmad as trans-racial and narrativizing the hopes and desires of a multicultural nation. Until the turn of the millennium, films produced in Malaysia reflected an ethnically pluralistic society using the respective vernacular languages spoken by the Malays, Chinese and Tamil populations. The films reflected racialized narratives, depicting characters and concerns that appealed to mainly racially segregated audiences. Yasmin's work on the other hand dwells on inter-racial issues through the prism of romance, casting both female Malay and male Chinese actors speaking in vernaculars; thereby challenging the racialized boundaries of everyday life publicly and successively promoted by a ruling political elite. Although narratives of hybridized identities in cultural productions and practices may seem innocuous and, in many instances, remain on the margins, the popularity of Yasmin's films unsettled the official script on racially exclusivist identities.

Having traced the political construction of Malay identity through selected narratives that cover the colonial period, independence, and post-colonial developments, the paper has attempted to highlight several analytical points. In the years leading to political independence, the political narratives/discourses of Malay representation centred on establishing boundaries against and racializing the non-Malay (Chinese and Indian) immigrant presence. A further point is that politically dominant narratives are always partial and necessarily exclusive and discriminatory by degree. For instance, the first generation of Malay political leaders led by UMNO in the years preceding independence sought to articulate ethnic identity and sovereignty by marrying the concept of *kerajaan* (kingship) with that of *tanah ayer* (territoriality), in a way that would have popular appeal to the Malays. What was not so obvious in these accounts was a persuasive undercurrent of counter discourses. Munshi Abdullah's writings are critical in espousing the first notions of a Malay identity and thereby activating the process of ethnogenesis. It is somewhat

⁶ *Baba-Nonya* refers to the descendants of early Chinese settlers, in the Straits Settlements, who intermarried with the local Malay population and practiced a hybridized culture. *Bangsawan* is traditional Malay theatre performed with music and dance that showcases the romance and adventures of nobility and folk heroes in the Malay world in Southeast Asia. It draws its material from diverse sources including Malay, Indonesian, Indian, Arabic, Chinese, and Western.

ironic that in the early discourses of Malayness, he planted the seeds of discord by recognizing that there were fundamental divisions between the ‘commoners’ (*rakyat*) and ruling elite (*kerajaan*). Indeed, this was to surface in the emergence of the Malay literary group, *Angkatan Sasterawan*, who dedicated their work to promoting Malay language, culture and identity, partly in response to colonial marginalization and partly to *kerajaan* elitism. Dr Mahathir was emboldened enough to promote the narrative of *Melayu baru* (new Malay) in 1991 as the Malays had by then made significant economic progress relative to the so-called immigrant communities. The work of Joel Kahn and Sumit Mandal further drew attention to alternate narratives of Malayness and its representation outside of the dominant ideology. In contemporary cultural production, Yasmin’s films on romance between Malay and Chinese partners – juxtaposed in the use of vernacular dialogues – posed an uncomfortable challenge to the racialized worlds of private life which the UMNO government had endorsed in its public narratives.

As we have seen, narratives may appear in different forms – historical interpretations, political discourses, cultural productions, *kopi tiam* (coffee shop) conversations – but they also have one thing in common. Narratives do more than just represent; they reproduce differences. Having established that, the following sections examine specific cases of performative identity reproduction and their intersections.

Performative Tamil Thaipusam

The performative treatment of identity and identity-formation is a more recent development in the literature on Malaysia. Yet, as mentioned, the performative is not separate from the narrative, for the ‘performance’ also tells a story. As such, it may be situated within, counter to or outside of the dominant discourse (Balme 2007).

Andrew Willford (2002) gives a particularly illustrative account of the significance of *Thaipusam* or *Murugan* worship to working class Tamils in Malaysia and how identity expresses collectively through the Saivite ritual of self-mortification and penitence. The deity *Murugan* is known for championing the downtrodden in Tamil society and his worship is often associated with some unorthodox practices alongside aspects of social protest against Brahminical hierarchy. In attendance and intensity, this religious festival outshines most public events in Malaysia, and it is

also the most visible expression of collective Indian identity. The important and dramatic part of the ritual involves the carrying of the *kavadi* which are hooked to the flesh with spikes and the piercing of the tongue and cheeks with the lance (*vel* representing God's active power in the world) by young and older adults. This act of vow-fulfillment is usually undertaken by the devotee who believes that a favour has been granted him as a consequence of tangible improvements in his life or his family. Because *Murugan* worship is viewed as the bestowing of God's grace irrespective of caste or Brahminical convention, it holds particular appeal to underprivileged Tamils. Participation in *Thaipusam* at Batu Caves grew from 200,000 in the mid-1960s to 800,000 in 1987 and around one million in the mid-1990s (Wilford, 2007: 63). If attendance in the other major cities is taken into account, Wilford estimates that close to two million Indians are involved, out of a total Indian population of 2.2 million.

This widespread participation of the working-class Tamil population in *Thaipusam* is frequently attributed to their historic marginalization in colonial and post-colonial Malaysian society and the development of a Tamil *lumpenproletariat* since the 1970s (Collins 1997, Wilford 2007). As Wilford argues, Hinduism represents a distant Malay past of Indicized practices and further suggests that this particular interpretation of *Murugan*-worship functions as an antithesis to state-sponsored discourses of Malay-Islamic-modernity. The implied narrative in *Thaipusam* locates it as a counter narrative of the latter. Paradoxically, the most important religious festival of Malaysian Indians is also the most significant event in the Indian political calendar. In the *realpolitik* of a plural society, political parties, and leaders from both the government and the opposition go to great lengths to garner the support of the Tamil electorate at this most religious of occasions (Lian 2011).

As highlighted, such identity narratives are about the politics of belonging and representation. However, this most public, visible, and ritualistic display of Tamil identity in religious penitence also contains elements of 'embodied narrations' about body images, vocational aspirations, or even sexual prowess (Yuval-Davis 2010:267). In other words, the experiential overcoming of temporal pain and physical challenges in *kavadi*-carrying is an embodied manifestation of identity and identity-making. The ability of the individual to express it in the form of body images and physical prowess is about performing identity: in the ritual, the performative becomes the narrative.

Performative Chinese Lion Dance

The work of Sharon Carstens (1998) on lion dances provides the second example of identity as performative. The lion dance was bestowed political recognition when Chinese associations were invited to perform the dance when the then Prime Minister, Tun Abdul Razak, returned from a historic visit in China in 1974 and the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. In the following years there was renewed interest in the formation and organization of lion dance troupes and calls from Chinese politicians to give national recognition to the cultural practice. Its performance held significant prominence in debates about what constituted national culture in the 1980s.

The lion dance is an integral part of the auspicious celebrations when Malaysian Chinese usher in the Chinese New Year. It forms an expression of hope for good fortune in the coming year and symbolizes core Chinese culture values. The dance involves stylized steps and athletic feats while emphasizing rules of etiquette such as bowing and greeting, and it is performed to summon good fortune and chase away evil spirits. The dance reaches a climax when the lion snatches a bunch of green vegetables and/or *hong bao* (red packet containing cash) from a high and precarious perch as a reward for its effort. According to Carstens, the lion dance performances epitomize the hardships experienced by generations of migrants. Success and good fortune come from not only applying skill and hard work but the presence of auspicious circumstances.

In comparing the cultural expressions of Tamil and Chinese identity in its ritualized and public performance we can discern certain differences. On the one hand, *Thaipusam* contains retreatist and counter-cultural undercurrents that situate it in contradistinction to dominant Malay-Islamist 'developmentalism'. On the other hand, the cultural rhetoric of the lion dance is situated squarely within nationalist discourse at least by Chinese politicians, as a relevant and positive contribution to 'national culture'. It was a good fit for the developmental credentials of the 'multiethnic' coalition government (*Barisan Nasional*) and its wider aspiration of joining the ranks of the dragon economies of East Asia at that time. We gain a further appreciation of why *Thaipusam* is regarded as withdrawal whereas the lion dance is seen as engagement when we consider the relative political positions of the Tamils and the Chinese vis-à-vis Malay dominance. Generally speaking, the Tamils are politically and economically marginalized while the Chinese enjoy significant participation in the economy even if they are largely politically subordinate. The

next section further advances our understanding of the complexities of ethnic-identity formation by outlining a dialogic take on Malayness in the Riau Archipelago.

A Dialogic Malayness in the Riau Archipelago

As the previous sections highlighted performative identity is also narrative. A more dialogical approach to examining identity formation as process attempts to incorporate both narrative and performative elements to give a fuller grasp of the dynamics of identification, namely its aspects of affirmation, contestation and/or subversion. The work of Nicholas Long (2013) provides the third illustrative example and focuses on being Malay in the Riau Archipelago against the backdrop of the nation-state of Indonesia.

Under the depoliticizing cultural policy of President Suharto's New Order government, so-called 'authentic' regional cultural identities were recognized and promoted by provincial administrations as a means of countering regional tensions and factionalism within a highly centralized political system (Long 2013:207-9; Carnegie 2019: 796-7). Following New Order edicts, regional cultures were standardized with the performance of dance and music required to conform to traditions deemed acceptable by the state. In the Riau Islands numerous dances, parades and theatre performances are staged and funded annually by the local authorities. As Riau was part of the Johor Malay Sultanate until it was separated in 1824 after the Anglo-Dutch Treaty established mutually exclusive spheres of influence, the provincial elite has long prided itself as the protector of Malay culture and identity in Indonesia. It has sought to promote 'Malayness' as a symbol for uniting the increasing diversity of a transmigrant population who have settled there. Government-sponsored cultural performances and contests invariably represented Malayness as inherently integrationist. However, the post-Suharto period of democratization and decentralization opened greater space to contest the interpretation of what regional cultures and identities could and should be (Long 2013: 210; Anata et al. 2023: 13).

One such cultural performance/contest was organized for the first time in 2006, a *bujang dara* competition for young unmarried men and women. This is a beauty contest with participants judged on two criteria, first on how well they represent Malayness and secondly, on their knowledge of local tourism including the ability to communicate this in English (Long 2013: 212-

18). On the first criterion of performing culture/ethnic identity, the judges focused on proficiency in Malay dancing, its rhythms, movements, and steps; and in the parade, how well contestants wore traditional Malay clothes, walked with a ‘Malay’ gait, and delivered a traditional Malay greeting. While it was expected that the Malay costume reflect the opulence of clothes worn on occasions in the *istana* (palace) setting, the emphasis was on spectacle and dramatization of ethno-cultural identity rather than restraint and hierarchy.⁷ As far as the second criterion was concerned the ability to promote the Riau province in tourism involved knowledge of popular tourist attractions. The local administration was also keen to raise the profile of Pulau Penyegat, an island of historical and political significance to the Bugis who had established their influence in Riau in the 18th century and championed the spread of Islam. They came to regard the island as a centre of Islam and a repository of Malay knowledge in the 19th century to counter the traditional power of the Sultan of Johor (Lian 2001a: 68-69). In a sense, the promotion of tourism was interwoven with narratives of Riau as a Malay cultural and historical site. In sum, we can discern several sub-texts in the performance of the contestants in the *bujang dara* pageant, namely youth as the future of the nation, Malay cultural and historical traditions being honoured and revitalized, and its relevance to the tourism industry. This in turn links subliminally to progress, education and the development of human resources (Long 2013: 221).

While Long’s account further illustrates how the performance of ethnicity only makes sense by decoding the underlying narratives, the aspects of affirmation, contestation and subversion of identity are only captured by a more dialogical appreciation. As Long recounts (2013:222-23), the eventual winner of the contest was a female who the judges scored highly for ‘Malay’ deportment, knowledge of tourism, and English language proficiency. However, what they conveniently overlooked was that she was of Chinese descent. A local Malay cultural organization questioned how she could be the face of the Riau Islands in tourism brochures. Ironically, they suggested that the runner up, a Protestant Christian from Ambon would have made a better choice. There are several obvious contradictions at play here. On the one hand, the contest was intended to promote Malayness and celebrate youth, while on the other, national imperatives of integrative inclusion and ‘meritocracy’ encourage participation irrespective of ethnic origins. Differing, seemingly incompatible discourses of privileging, racializing and integration converge

⁷ The palace of the rulers has traditionally been the setting for the public display of the pomp and ceremony of Malay culture and traditions.

and intersect in one event, the beauty pageant. Long's account demonstrates the utility of combining performative, narrative, and dialogical elements in examining ethnic identity as identification.

Conclusion

While the narrative, performative and dialogical approaches to identity are analytically distinct their application in the four cases in Malaysia and Indonesia demonstrate telling overlap. They intersect and inform one another. The narratives of Malay identity over the colonial and post-colonial periods display a dialogical process of identity-formation. From the subaltern construction of *bangsa* first articulated by Munshi Abdullah (as a way to distance Malayness from the aristocracy) to the later promotion of Malay language and literature by ASAS 50, eventually coopted by an elitist UMNO to legitimize its position as the ruling party of the country. The performances of the *Thaipusam* and lion dance also function as narrations of two distinct experiential encounters with hegemony. Revealing the dialogical dimensions of Malayness in Riau further indicates the complexities of ethnic identity formation and agency. The participants, organizers, and judges involved in the contest interpreted the attributes required of the winning contestant differently and simultaneously affirming, contesting, and subverting the projection of and desired 'model' for Malay identity.

We could say that the shifting narratives on *bangsa Melayu* are about identity-formation in the diachronic context of racialization and the institutional development of the nation-state. This avoids over-essentialization and draws attention to the issue of relationality and relations of power in two ways: how Malay identity was 'othered' by British discourses of Malayness and by the presence of non-Malay communities. There is also the influence from within of competing narratives emanating from a class-conscious leftwing Malay Nationalist Party and ASAS 50 driven by racial and cultural concerns. This perspective maps on to critical episodes in the story of contemporary Malaysia: the Malayan Union in 1946 precipitated the UMNO narrative, the 1969 Election institutionalized the racialization of Malay identity in economic terms (*bumiputraisim* as the narrative of the NEP), the distancing of Malayness from *kerajaan* in the several disputes in the late 1980s between Dr. Mahathir and royalty, and finally the pragmatic shift from an exclusivist

identity to a more inclusionary *bangsa Malaysia* in the wake of the rapid rise of East Asia in a globalizing economy.

Hopefully, this paper has shown the importance of avoiding the categorical rigidities often associated with discussions of identity. Identity-formation is embedded in overlapping networks of relations that shift over time and space. If we are to propose a methodology relevant to examining the politics of identity and ethnicity, significant utility lies in the careful triangulation of narrative, performative and dialogical approaches to tease out and make sense of ethnic identity-formation and its complexities. Although distinct, it is critical to not treat the three approaches separately. As highlighted, a performative or dialogical approach is only meaningful if the narratives implicit in both are uncovered and analyzed while narratives gain greater import to the politics of identity if they are regarded as dialogical.

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