THE PREMISE OF DIFFERENCE: Race, culture, nation and cosmopolitan practice in (pen)insular Southeast Asia

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The problem of governance in so-called ‘plural societies’ is generally presumed to stem from the difficulties encountered by political regimes in ‘managing’ racially, culturally and/or religiously diverse populations. The legitimacy of political regimes has consequently often been measured against their differing ‘cosmopolitan’ capacities. And, according to the globally most influential models of ‘good governance’ (and of cosmopolitanism itself), that capacity is directly proportional to the ability of states to engage in successful nation building based on universalistic principles. This has led to a good deal of discussion and debate over the relative merits of different types or forms of national integration – ethnic, civic, pluralist, multicultural etc.

Much of this debate, however, takes cultural, racial and/or religious pluralism as given, a part of a socio-cultural landscape that exists prior to the processes of modern state and nation building. The state therefore tends to be seen as an autonomous actor, independent of society and acting upon or managing diversity within it. Yet much recent analysis of identity politics suggests that identities – whether national, ‘ethnic’ or religious - are themselves modern ‘constructions’. In other words the formation of identities is seen as contemporary with rather than prior to modern state and nation building. If this is the case, then the “problem of governance” itself needs to be reframed. It is no longer possible to think of state and society as separate realms. Indeed it is possible that states may be implicated in generating the cultural diversification or social pluralisation that they are claiming to manage, something that, if true, might make for a rather different assessment of their nation building efforts than would otherwise be the case.

In this lecture I have the rather limited aim of problematising this “problem of governance”, particularly as it has been framed in the context of the so-called plural societies of insular and peninsular Southeast Asia. The research involves an investigation

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1 It is an honour to have been asked to speak at this occasion of the launch of the Philippines-Australia Study Network. I would like to thank my hosts at Ateneo de Manila University, and the School of Social Sciences at La Trobe and especially Dr Trevor Hogan both for having made my own visit possible, but more importantly for their tireless efforts to make the Philippines Australia Study Network a reality. It is an innovative initiative, differing in important ways from the standard ‘area studies’ projects which have proliferated throughout the region, and I wish its organizers every success.
into the impact of western colonialism, nationalism and postcolonial state formation and nation building on the politics of identity in the “frontier” regions of what used to be called the “Malay world”. I am particularly interested in religious and cultural identity formation in this region from the latter part of the nineteenth century, the changes generated by political “modernization”, the kinds of conflicts that this has generated (and continues to generate), and the possibilities for cosmopolitan ideas and practices. The research currently focuses on the western ‘frontiers’ of this Malay world – peninsular Malaya, the British Straits Settlements (Penang, Malacca, Singapore) and Sumatra. Whether what I have to say is of relevance to eastern parts of what is now Indonesia and Malaysia, the Philippines, southern Thailand, etc - is best left to others to decide. I should also say that the research on which these remarks are based is at a fairly preliminary stage. My remarks must therefore be treated as provisional.

**The premise of difference in (pen)insular Southeast Asia**

An especially useful point of departure for a reframing of the problem of governance in (pen)insular southeast Asia is a recent paper by the political scientist Carl Landé which attempts to assess the different forms of nation building across the region according to their capacity to prevent the emergence of ethnic or religious conflict. Landé begins by classifying the nation-states of Southeast Asia into “four groups, characterized by different types of ethnic division, that require different remedies.” Here I will focus on two of these groups: the peninsular States on the one hand and those of northern Southeast Asia on the other. The first group - Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Singapore – according to Landé consists of a distinct type of “large and culturally diverse archipelagic states beset by regional demands for autonomy or separation.” “All of these peninsular states,” he argues “now face, in varying forms, the challenge of creating a new sense of nationhood among their previously separated peoples.” This finds its closest parallel with the situation prevailing in what Ernest Gellner called the third and fourth zones of modern nationalism (in eastern Europe), where there were (and are) a multiplicity of cultures and states, few with identical borders and which as a consequence remain zones of conflict among nations struggling to create states.

The (pen)insular states can be contrasted, argues Landé, with those of northern Southeast Asia, namely Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam, which most resemble those of Gellner’s first zone (England, France, Portugal, Spain). Here modern state formation took place within or on the top of organized pre-modern states which took the form of hereditary kingdoms. Colonial governments in northern Southeast Asia essentially took over the territories of existing kingdoms and imposed modern state forms on large settled populations who had a common religion, and spoke the same or related languages. To these populations, colonial rulers merely added highland populations. To quote Landé: “While within these … states there remained marked inter-regional cultural difference and accompanying regional loyalties, none had produced among its lowland

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3 Ibid p.89

4 Ibid p.110
populations a serious movement for secession”. The main ‘ethnic’ conflicts instead have been between the nation shaped by the culture/civilisation of the lowland populations and the hill tribes.  

There are two aspects of Landé’s essay that are particularly useful for anyone doing research on the “problem of governance” in Southeast Asia. First, the fact that it breaks away from narrow, single-country analysis by reaching out to compare processes of conflict, identity, nation building and state formation across the region as a whole is particularly helpful. Second, his willingness to draw comparisons with parallel processes elsewhere in the world, both helps to avoid the pitfalls of an orientalist essentialisation of Asia while at the same time bringing insights to bear that have been developed in eastern Europe and, I would add, the United States and Australia, which are especially useful points of comparison for those interested in identity, nationalism and modernity in (pen)insular Southeast Asia. 

Singapore/Malaysia and Indonesia then fall into the category of “culturally-diverse” societies which “now face, in varying forms, the challenge of creating a new sense of nationhood among their previously separated peoples.” It is generally presumed that the main cause of ethnic division in Malaysia and Singapore is the legacy of immigration of Indians and Chinese that was stimulated by the rapidly rising demand for labour in the tin mining and plantation sectors. The arrival of ‘culturally-alien’ immigrants from China and India, it is presumed, is what led to the formation of what the British colonial historian J.S. Furnivall called ‘plural societies’, where different ethnic communities “live side by side yet without mingling in one political unit” Indonesian pluralism is of a rather different order; but here too the distinction between alien immigrant (Chinese) and indigene (pribumi) is also marked.

The Malaysian and Singaporean states can be adjudged to have been relatively successful in their ‘management’ of this diversity. They fall into that group of states in the region, Landé’ suggests, that “have resolved their conflicts peacefully”, adopting a judicious mix of authoritarianism, communitarianism and democracy which functions both to recognise social, religious and cultural diversity while at the same time containing its expression within rather narrow channels.  

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5 Ibid  

7 The similarities in the historical development of these, now separate, nation states, and the longstanding interconnections between them, make it useful to consider them together for the purposes of this discussion.  
8 Cited in Landé, p.101  
But before rushing to embrace the claims of religious and ethnic peace and harmony in Malaysia and Singapore, we do also need to qualify this positive assessment in the following ways:

1. Communal violence is not that old in the memory of Singaporeans and Malaysians, and many people in both countries remain apprehensive about its possible re-emergence.

2. In neighbouring Indonesia, which shares at least some of the socio-political characteristics of Malaysia and Singapore, the *pribumi*: non-*pribumi* divide continues to threaten to generate conflict, even violence.\(^\text{10}\)

3. As this suggests, the legitimacy of the governments of both Malaysia and especially Singapore depends largely on their capacity to deliver long-term economic benefits to all its citizens. One wonders what the effect of a long-term economic crisis such as the one that has prevailed in Indonesia for at least the past seven years might be.

4. There is a sense both locally and globally that Malaysia and Singapore might well become further caught up in the broader, global conflict between ‘Islam’ and ‘the West’. It is difficult to assess the risks of this, since it is sometimes difficult to separate reality from the rhetoric of security threats in the region. However even those who may be sceptical of American claims about terrorist networks in (pen)insular Southeast Asia, have to acknowledge that the problem will grow as rhetoric and action on both sides escalates in the mutually-constitutive way of such things.

5. There is a good deal of dissatisfaction, particularly among minority/non-elite groups in both Singapore and Malaysia, much of which manifests itself in racial/ethnic/communal terms. It may well be, for example, that the Chinese:Malay relation has become less sensitive than in the past, but new conflicts are brewing over the exclusion of Indians, indigenous peoples in Malaysia (*Orang Asli*, the ‘tribal’ groups of East Malaysia)

6. Singapore and Malaysia depend very heavily on the labour of relatively large numbers of new immigrant workers from the region, and from farther afield. While the governments of the two countries may feel that they have reduced the dangers of conflict among Chinese and Malays, there is every chance of conflicts breaking out between citizens and migrant labourers.

7. Inter-ethnic/inter-religious peace in the region may be bought at an increasingly high price of political authoritarianism which poses dangers of its own, and which observers and citizens alike may find increasingly unacceptable.

But as I have suggested, the main problem with this way of assessing the “successes” and potential “failures” of the Singaporean and Malaysian states is that it takes pluralism as a given of the social landscape, a given to which regimes are then seen to react. Instead, we need to problematise the “premise of difference” that informs analyses such as Landé’s.

And we can do this by posing a simple question: are the cultural and religious differences that Landé treats as given in the societies of (pen)insular Southeast Asia really independent of modern nation building and state formation in the region? And, the corollary, can the ethnic homogeneity of the nations of northern Southeast Asia, to which one might add Korea, Japan, and the countries of Gellner’s ‘first zone’, be taken for granted as a given features of the premodern religio-cultural landscape?

There are at first sight many reasons why one is tempted at first sight to answer yes to these questions, and Landé’s own discussion repeats the well known facts: the cultural-ethnic ‘artificiality’ of the Indonesian nation versus the vast diversity of languages, cultures and religions scattered across the archipelago; the ‘objective’ religious division between Christians and Muslims in the Philippines; the presence in colonial Malaya of large numbers of “alien” labourers from India and China and so on. All of this seems to support the view of an objective ethno-religious diversity in (pen)insular Southeast Asia far greater than that in lowland Vietnam, Thailand, Korea, Japan etc.

And yet there are also good reasons to doubt both that such supposedly ‘objective’ religious, linguistic and cultural differences on their own are sufficient to explain the development of a generalised ‘premise’ of difference anywhere in the world, especially in the era of cultural globalisation; and that in any case, at least what we might call the “imputed contents and contours” of such differences really pre-date and are independent of the shifting matrices of power and ethogenesis that have characterised processes of political modernisation in (pen)insular Southeast Asia.

To take just one example: Landé is far from being alone in attributing conflict to religious differences in the region (notably in the Philippines). And yet in a place like Korea, where religious differences are objectively as great as anywhere in Southeast Asia, these differences are downplayed, de-emphasised or transcended within a homogenised national imaginary. If the existence of supposedly objective religious difference accounts for social pluralism in the Philippines, then why do the same levels of difference not make Korea a plural society? What this suggests is that the presence of a “premise of difference” requires explanation. Pointing to supposedly “objective” religious or cultural differences within the nation is not enough.

One needs therefore to ask whether the salience of the plural society model in Singapore and Malaysia is merely the inevitable consequence of the intermingling of objectively different cultures, religions, races. If not, then what accounts for the peculiar salience of this particular discourse of difference in contemporary Singaporean and Malaysian society?

The Case of “the Malays”

As is evident from the brief discussion above, the Singaporean and Malaysian nations both now, and in the colonial period, were constituted very much on a premise of
difference – colonial administration, nationalist movements, the practices of postcolonial states, and nation building processes in both places being strongly inflected by the presumption that these were/are ‘plural societies’, deeply divided by religion, culture, and even “race”. The colonial government came to classify the population of British Malaya strictly into four groups: Chinese; Indians; Malays; and Others (including mainly Europeans and various Eurasian groups) And in somewhat different ways in Singapore and Malaysia, this basic classification of the nation continues to strongly shape government policies in a wide range of fields, but also the popular consciousness more broadly. Modern Singapore and Malaysia are, not to put too fine a point on it, obsessed with difference and identity, and the crucial differences with which they are obsessed are these.

I do not want to suggest that nothing has changed since the colonial period, or that there are no differences between the two nations – clearly there are. Nor am I convinced by the argument that the racialisation of difference in Singapore and Malaysia was in any simple sense a colonial construction. Explaining why these two places became sites of such intense pluralising and racialising discourses and practices is a complex matter. But what I do want to suggest is that the common supposition that ethnic division in Malaysia and Singapore is the legacy of immigration radically different racial/cultural/religious “others” - Indians and Chinese – needs to be questioned. Instead we have a large and growing body of research that suggests strongly that the key identities that together constitute the Singaporean and Malaysian nations were themselves modern ‘constructions’. They are modern constructions in the sense at least that asserting a ‘Malay’, ‘Chinese’ or ‘Indian’ identity requires the merging into a single category a diversity of peoples; ascribing a fixed cultural/religious content to each of the identities; and hence drawing arbitrary boundaries among these groups. 11

The key to all of this lies in the origins of presumptions about the “authenticity” and “indigeneity” of the category “Malay” (Melayu). Yet people who came to be classified, and to classify themselves, as Malay are the descendents of linguistically and culturally diverse peoples from different parts of the archipelago, sometimes including descendants of Indians, Arabs, Chinese and others who may have come to the region centuries ago, usually intermarrying with local “Malays”. Similarly “Malay culture” is a reified abstraction being in fact the product of centuries of cultural influence, borrowing, hybridisation.

To presume radical differences among “Malay”, “Indian”, “Chinese” and “Other” therefore requires a kind of discursive labour. It does not happen automatically, built on the basis of objective religious, cultural or racial differences among so-called “indigenous” and “immigrant” peoples.

In particular, as my research shows, Malay-ness in the pre-colonial period, and in the first few decades after the imposition of formal colonial rule in the peninsula (and indeed

sometimes even today) was rarely if ever a fixed identity in the modern sense of the term. Instead it was what might be called an *interstitial identity*. Here being Malay involved speaking the regional *lingua franca*, interacting with peoples of quite different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, inserting oneself into Islamic commercial networks, making the pilgrimage to Mecca, or to Muslim holy sites within the Malay world, attending modernist educational institutions (*madrasah*) in Sumatra and the Malay peninsula and the like. In the diasporic “Malay world” in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries then Malayness was neither a fixed nor a permanent identity. Most “Malays” also had other identities – local, political (attachment to particular rulers), ‘ethnic’ etc, that became salient at other times. Malayness therefore had the potential to be a cosmopolitan, i.e. non-exclusionary identity, one that implied religious and cultural interaction and commercial exchange.

What it meant to be Malay underwent a transformation beginning around the third decade of the twentieth century. With the development of modern state institutions and discourses in the colonial period, the rise of Malay nationalism, and subsequently the development of the postcolonial state, Malayness came increasingly to define a permanent association between “blood” and “territory” to borrow Appadurai’s terms. In the process Malay became a fixed rather than an interstitial/cosmopolitan identity as Malays now came to be defined, and to define themselves, as the “original” inhabitants of *Tanah Melayu* (the Malay Land). This involved the development of the idea of Malays as *bumiputera* (lit: princes of the soil) which serves to distinguish them territorially, culturally and (given the links between the physical body and the environment) “racially” from alien Indians, Chinese and Europeans. The “pluralist” landscape of contemporary Singapore and Malaysia is in no simple sense a colonial construction. But it is quite clearly a precipitate of political modernisation.

The fact that the processes of racialisation that produced such divisions took place in the context of political modernisation broadly defined – modern state formation in the late colonial period; the rise of modern nationalism; the formation of postcolonial states – suggests that we need to rethink the connection between ‘governance’ and ‘pluralism’ in contemporary Southeast Asia. It is no longer sufficient to look at the successes, and failures, of modern states in the management of religious and/or cultural diversity. It is necessary also to investigate the ways in which states constitute and reproduce diversity in the first place. In this it is probably no accident that “plural” societies are frequently found in places in which more than one transmigrant population became caught up in modern nation building projects which involved, among other things, the application of systems of governance aimed at turning diasporics into citizen/subjects of particular territorial regimes.

Among other things this suggests also that we need to look beyond the arena of state if we want to explain both cosmopolitan success stories as well as failures.

Maybe the Philippines Australia study centre will be one such arena!

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