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Letter from the Chair

Welcome to the Summer 2019 issue of Berita. Berita is the official publication of the Malaysian/Singapore/Brunei (MSB) Studies Group. A part of the Association of Asian Studies (AAS), we are a cross-disciplinary network of scholars, students, and observers with research and other professional interests in Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei.

As I write this letter, the officers of the MSB Studies Group — me (I serve as the current chair), Eric Thompson (the ex-chair, who serves in an advisory role during the current chair’s term), and Cheong Soon Gan (who will take up the chair after my three-year term ends at the 2021 AAS meeting)— are reviewing the panel and roundtable proposals that have been submitted to the Panel Selection Committee at the AAS for possible inclusion in the 2020 AAS Conference program. Last year we sponsored more panels than ever before, and were delighted to see that all our sponsored panels appeared on the final program. This year, we are thrilled that even more panels and roundtables have been proposed by members of our group. Quite a few of them reflect our MSB 2020 theme, “Revisioning 2020,” and explore the nearly three decades since Mahathir introduced Wawasan 2020 (Vision 2020) and the Malaysia that has emerged since he coined the slogan. Still others focus on the first year of Pakatan Harapan’s leadership after the surprising 2018 General Election in Malaysia, or, reflecting on the upset there, examine possibilities for the next Singapore election, which will occur in 2020. Although we don’t know yet which panels will be selected for the AAS 2020 Conference in Boston (it turns out that the AAS received the highest number of proposed panels ever), there is no question that research and analysis coming from the MSB region is thriving among a new crop of scholars who focus on its politics, economy, culture, and history. A considerable number of the panelists proposing papers are scholars from Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei—and we continue to seek every opportunity to connect our work among AAS-affiliated scholars with scholars worldwide.

Looking forward to the March 19-22, 2020 AAS Conference in Boston, I want to encourage everyone who shares our interests to consider attending this year. At the annual MSB Business Meeting, which is likely to be held on Saturday, March 21 in the evening (again, final scheduling is in the hands of the AAS), we will be welcoming a renowned keynote speaker who will address the vast changes and upsets that have occurred in Malaysia since the 1990s, when Mahathir claimed, as the pillar of Vision 2020, that Malaysia would be a “fully developed nation” by the year 2020. We anticipate following this event with a reception, where you can meet and talk to the growing group of young scholars (and “old hands”) who share interest in Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei.

I’m so pleased to note that this Summer 2019 issue of Berita fulfills the objectives that Eric, Cheong Soon, Dominik Müller (current editor of Berita), and I set out for this publication as Dominik took over its editorship. We want Berita to include new voices—and this issue does precisely that with an update from the “field” concerning research-in-progress on zakat “camps” in Malaysia, a report on a new (and feminist-oriented) filmmaker from Malaysia, and a summary of a recent article on Nyonya food heritage. All of these submissions come from students working on their PhDs. Regarding new publications, you’ll also find notice of a forthcoming book from Michael Peletz and a review of Wei Leng Loh and Jeffrey Sow’s new book on the economic history of Penang.

Finally, if my math is correct, this is the forty-fifth year that Berita is in publication. To that end, we’ve reprinted John A. Lent’s Berita article from 2002, in which he provides us with a history of the publication. I recall receiving my first
copies of *Berita* in the mid-1990s when I was conducting dissertation research in Malaysia, and welcomed the long list of new articles and books on MSB which were meticulously cataloged in each issue, in the days before JSTOR, ProQuest, and Google. John describes how *Berita* was sent in hard-copy form to hundreds of people and academic institutions in the 1970s and afterwards; and while I envy his mailing list, I'm pleased to say that via our Facebook Group and Google Group, we send our e-version of *Berita* to as many people and quite a few other regional interest groups, with hopes that it gets shared and forwarded ever more widely.

To that end, if you aren’t on our Facebook group (“Official Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei Studies Group [MSB]”), or, if you aren’t receiving updates from our Google Group, please let me know. We want *Berita* and MSB to enjoy another forty-five robust years and more, so please, continue to send us your updates, information on your research and publications, field reports, and articles. We look forward to seeing those of you who are able to attend the AAS Annual Conference (look for information on the accepted panels and more in the next Winter issue of *Berita*), at the annual MSB business meeting and the Revisioning 2020 event and keynote talk, or reading about your work and engagements in an upcoming issue of *Berita*.

Patricia Sloane-White, MSB Chair
pswhite@udel.edu

**Announcement**

*Berita* is now available through the new Ohio Open Library at: https://ohioopen.library.ohio.edu/berita/

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**Prizes**

**John A. Lent Prize 2019**

Prof. John A. Lent founded *Berita* in 1975, editing it for twenty-six years, and founded the Malaysia/Singapore/Brunei Studies Group in 1976, serving as chair for eight years. He has been a university faculty member since 1960 in Malaysia, the Philippines, China, and various U.S. universities. From 1972-74, Prof. Lent was founding director of Malaysia's first university-level mass communications program at Universiti Sains Malaysia. He has been a professor at Temple University since 1974.

Over the years, Prof. Lent has written monographs and many articles on Malaysian mass media, animation, and cartooning. He is the author and editor of seventy-one books and monographs, and hundreds of articles and book chapters. Since 1994, he has chaired the Asian Cinema Society and has been the editor of the journal Asian Cinema. He publishes and edits the International Journal of Comic Art, which he started in 1999, and is chair of the Asian Research Center on Animation and Comic Art and Asian-Pacific Association of Comic Art, both of which he established.

**John A. Lent Prize 2019 Commendation**

Prize Committee Members: Eric Thompson, Lynn Hollen Lees, and Dominik M. Müller (2018 Lent Awardee).

Winner: Jeremy Taylor (University of Nottingham, Department of History)

The Committee for the John A. Lent Prize for the best paper on Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei presented to the AAS in the previous year has chosen as its winner Jeremy Taylor's paper “Not a particularly happy expression’: ‘Malayanization’ and the New China Threat in Britain's late colonial territories.” The three committee members
all agreed that Taylor's paper deserves special recognition for relying on extensive archival, historical research on an under-examined aspect of how Malaysian identity was formed and formulated in the late colonial, early national period after World War Two.

Taylor's paper is a well-argued, effectively organized analysis of an important topic in the history of late colonial rule. He points out that despite much literature addressing the colonial anxieties toward the external Chinese “communist threat,” we know little about how lingering fears about Chinese nationalism influenced Malayanization policies. Taylor thus provides us with a back story of “Malayanization.” He links colonial anxiety about the potentially subversive impact in Malaya of various media created in the People's Republic of China to clandestine activities by the colonial government to create alternative sources of supply for print media. Drawing from an impressive base of archives in Britain, Singapore, Malaysia, and the United States, Taylor demonstrates how colonial administrators in Malaya worked to block the importation of cultural products from the PRC and then arranged for politically “progressive” media to be created in Singapore by individuals brought in from Hong Kong.

The paper effectively demonstrates that efforts to build a Malayan identity among people of Chinese descent during the 1950s were shaped not only by forces on the ground but by actions taken by the Secretary of Chinese Affairs and by governmental subsidies of approved authors and print media destined for Chinese language schools. In so doing, Taylor clearly links the creation of a new Sinophone press in Singapore during the 1950s to the policies of the British colonial government in Malaya and demonstrates how political concerns, as well as market demands, shaped cultural production in Malaya during the run-up to independence. His work offers a convincing look into colonial programs that shaped the Singapore publishing industry during the Cold War and provides a telling analogy to the CIA’s work in Europe subsidizing anti-Communist media during the 1950s.

Finally, it gives the John A. Lent Prize Committee particular pleasure to note that Taylor's paper addresses print media and its social impact, a topic that parallels and resonates with John A. Lent’s own research interests.

The Committee for the John A. Lent Prize congratulates Jeremy Taylor!

**Ronald Provencher Travel Grant**

The Ronald Provencher Travel Grant is named in honor of Ronald Provencher, distinguished cultural anthropologist of Malaysia, a long-time leader of the Malaysia/Singapore/Brunei Studies Group and former editor of Berita. It carries with it a US$750 award for a graduate student, postdoctoral fellow, or independent scholar from Malaysia, Singapore or Brunei to travel to present a paper at the Association for Asian Studies meeting.

The 2019 Ronald Provencher Travel Grant was awarded to Michael Yeo, DPhil Candidate at the Faculty of History, University of Oxford. He co-convened the panel “Sabah and its Region: Mobility and Migration on an Inter-Asian Frontier,” in which he presented his paper “Settlers, Sojourners, and Smugglers in a Frontier Town: Sandakan in a Region Connected, 1878–1942.”
Panel Reports: AAS Annual Conference 2019 (Denver, CO)

MSB Sponsored Panel

Toward a New Malaysia? The 2018 Elections and Their Aftermath
March 23, 2019

Organizer/Chair and Discussant:
Meredith Weiss (SUNY Albany)

Presenters:
Ibrahim Suffian (Merdeka Center)
Johan Saravanamuttu (RSIS, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore)
Wong Chin Huat, Penang Institute (then)
Ross Tapsell (Australian National University)

The panel surveyed Malaysia’s historical 14th Election (GE14) which ended UMNO’s uninterrupted one-party rule since Malaya’s independence in 1957, making it a rare case of “democratization by election.” Notwithstanding the uncertainties for the early hours, the regime change was peaceful and smooth overall, in an era where democracy has pushed back from other developing countries. The panel aimed to understand how the change could have happened and its implications, using voting data, poll data and big data to examine campaign, messaging, patronage, partisanship, and ethnic voting patterns, placed in the larger historical context.

In his presentation titled “Malaysia’s 2018 General Election Voting Patterns and Implications” co-authored with Lee Tai De, Ibrahim Suffian of the established pollster Merdeka Center analyzed voting patterns by ethnicity and age group to offer explanations for the electoral ousting of the UMNO-dominated ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional (BN), at the hands of the three-years-old Pakatan Harapan (PH). Election data from all 22,933 polling streams (sub-divisions of polling districts [precincts]) ordinarily segmented by age, from 1 (oldest) to 6 (youngest) in West Malaysia were analyzed using Gary King’s Ecological Inference method.

The duo’s most important finding was apparent strategic voting amongst anti-BN Malay voters, who chose the Islamist PAS over PH in Malay heartland areas like Kelantan (by 9.2%), Terengganu (by 7.0%), Pahang (by 18.7%), and some parts of Redah but PH over PAS in most West coast constituencies which were ethnically mixed. This pattern was pronounced amongst younger voters, who preferred PH over BN or PAS except in the Malay-belt states, where PAS is favoured over BN and PH by a large margin.

In Sarawak, a significant swing from BN was observed amongst non-Muslim Bumiputera voters from the Bidayuh, Iban, and Orang Ulu majority areas while Muslim Bumiputera remained largely loyal to BN. Meanwhile, in neighbouring Sabah, where BN’s support amongst Chinese and non-Muslim Bumiputera was already weak, sacked UMNO leader Shafie Apdal, who formed a multiethnic splinter party Warisan, succeeded in pulling significant share of Muslim Bumiputera votes away from BN to allow for its ouster.

Nanyang Technology University Political scientist Johan Saravanamuttu offered a path-dependence account in his presentation, “The Path-Dependent Triumph of Pakatan Harapan – Continuity in Change.” He revisited the history of coalition politics in Malaysia, starting with the first mover’s advantage of the Alliance and its successor BN, to the emergence of effective challenges by multiethnic opposition coalitions since 1990, and to the erosion of BN’s base across ethnic groups since 2008. In 2018, BN faced three regional rivals: PH in the Peninsular West Coast, PAS in Kelantan and Terengganu and Warisan in Sabah. With the entry of UMNO
splinter Bersatu and Mahathir’s credibility to buttress its Malay base, PH could lay claim to the “mediated communalism” started by BN, underpinning a basic path-dependent premise of multiethnic power-sharing heading into GE14. This broad multiethnic consensus overshadowed the more radical agenda of Reformasi, signifying a continuity in change.

Saravanamuttu argued that fragmentation of Malay votes in the West coast states benefited PH, not BN and even less so PAS. Despite PAS’ staying out of PH, voters considered PAS to be in opposition to BN rather than to PH, adding to a nationwide anti-BN swing, and resulting in BN’s vote share being eroded from both fronts. In contrast, in Kelantan and Terengganu and in significant areas of Kedah and Perak, it was PAS that benefited from three-way Malay vote-splitting.

Political Scientist Wong Chin Huat, then of think tank Penang Institute, presented on “Revisiting Consociationalism, Centripetalism and Power Sharing through Permanent Coalition in Malaysia.” Reviewing the related literature, he questioned if Malaysia’s permanent coalition under the First-Past-The-Post (FPTP) electoral system can be characterized as consociationalist or centripetal. He showed that Malaya/West Malaysian elections from 1959 to 1986 as well as in 1995 and 2004 did not produce a grand coalition large enough to be considered consociationalist. In those years, the Alliance/BN as the multiethnic government was sandwiched by Malay-based and non-Malay-based opposition. The elections in 1990, 1999, 2008, and 2013 produced two multiethnic coalitions which can be classified as centripetalist. Against the historical background, he argued that the 2018 election has produced an unprecedented pattern where the multiethnic government (PH) is challenged by an emerging monoethnic coalition pact of BN (practically reduced to UMNO) and PAS.

Wong challenged the conventional wisdom that FPTP elections promotes moderation. Expanding on Gary Cox’s (1997) insight that the national party system is determined not by the legislative electoral structure but by the executive electoral structure, he argued that vote pooling only encourages moderation for communal parties in mixed constituencies and hence the system cannot discourage communal parties based on monoethnic constituencies. Meanwhile, excessive concentration of power in the federal executive counter-productively removes the incentives for communal parties to form multiethnic coalitions if they cannot see the prospect of power. This limits the moderating effect of FPTP to only the parties in government or a strong opposition while opposition parties without any prospect in winning executive power may position themselves at the fringe.

Finally, ANU media scholar Ross Tapsell shared his insights on “Big Data Campaigning and Smartphone Communities in Malaysia” which includes the first scholarly work on big data companies, which were first used in Malaysia’s elections. Controversially utilized in the West, companies like Cambridge Analytica and Invoke were present in the lead up to and throughout Malaysia’s GE14, using data-driven algorithms to identify “swing” voters. Having long used new media, the opposition was far more concerned with the question of whether big data companies could assist them in an unlikely election victory in an unfair campaign environment than with the ethical questions that employing a big data company might raise.

Methodologically, Tapsell’s analysis combined online observation and personal interviews with social media campaigners in big data companies. While it is difficult to ascertain whether big data companies were wholly or partly responsible for the GE14 result, their emergence raises significant moral and theoretical questions for future election campaigns and democracy. Big data campaigning is not only about pushing...
information out, but about gathering information in. The findings here resonate with worldwide debates around social media’s potential to encourage “echo chambers,” target unwilling voters through intrusive algorithms, and generally to promote disinformation campaigns.

**MSB Sponsored Panel**

**Sabah and its Region: Mobility and Migration on an Inter-Asian Frontier**

March 24, 2019

Organizers:
Andrew Carruthers (University of Pennsylvania)
Michael Yeo (University of Oxford)

Chair and Discussant:
Oona Paredes (University of California, Los Angeles)

Presenters:
Shinobu Majima (Gakushuin University)
Imelda Tambayang (Universiti Malaysia Sabah)
Michael Yeo (University of Oxford)
Vilashini Somiah (University of Malaya)
Andrew Carruthers (University of Pennsylvania)

Sabah is frequently regarded as existing at the “periphery” or “frontier” of Malaysia because of its distance from the peninsula, low population density, numerous irregular migrants, and territorial disputes with the Philippines. Whether by consequence or coincidence, this East Malaysian state is also often relegated to the sidelines of historical and contemporary scholarship in Southeast Asian Studies. This state of affairs is, in fact, a missed opportunity to illustrate the much-vaunted pluralism of the country. As a corrective measure, the panel sought to study Sabah as the center of a particular inter-Asian space, embedded between the intersecting geographical regions of the southern Philippines, the Malay Archipelago, and southern China. Far from being a “peripheral” place, myriad commodities, languages, and people cross paths and coalesce here, resulting in the creation of new identities and strengthening connections to distant lands. One vital question shared across the papers, therefore, was how these multiple mobilities and connections shaped and continue to reshape Sabah’s socio-political world(s).

Shinobu Majima opened the panel with a paper co-authored with Imelda Tambayang, “The Salt Trail: Inland Trading Routes of Colonial North Borneo Linking the Global and the Deep Within.” It examined how mountain footpaths on the west coast of Sabah served as both connection and deterrence between the Dusun communities of the Crocker Range and the “outsiders” of the tamu (periodic markets), settlements, and government stations along the coast. The paper focused on Kampung Buayan, a centuries-old village along the Salt Trail, named after one of the most coveted commodities transported on it. These paths were primarily used by villagers to convey jungle produce, especially rattan, to coastal and lowland markets in exchange for salt, fish, textiles, metalwork, and other items. Gradually, but not completely, this trade subsumed these communities into the export economy of the North Borneo government. Yet these footpaths traversed difficult terrain that required local knowledge to navigate, providing the villagers with a means of keeping the outside world at arm’s length. The paper demonstrated, therefore, the latent tension in interactions between Sabah’s interior and coastal communities.

In “Settlers, Sojourners, and Smugglers in a Frontier Town: Sandakan in a Region Connected, 1878–1942,” Michael Yeo argued that despite its modest size, the port town of Sandakan facilitated human mobility in the maritime region between southern China and
northern Australia. The port became, in particular, a springboard for illegal immigrants and opium smugglers travelling from Hong Kong to the southern Philippines. Attempts by the governments of North Borneo and the Philippines to police these flows were futile, not least because indigenous watercraft and seafaring knowledge remained effective ways of subverting these efforts, even during the era of steamships. From the early twentieth century, this movement of people shaped the demographics of contemporary Sandakan and Sabah, influencing ideas and heated debates about identity, belonging, and migration.

Taking the narrative into present day, Vilashini Somiah’s paper, “We Are the Monsters: Irregular Migrant Youths by the Shores of the Sulu Sea,” depicted how youths descended from Filipino and Indonesian migrants navigate their “illegal” status in Sandakan. Regarded as “ghosts” or “monsters” by Sabahans, despite being born and raised locally, this new generation of irregular migrants feel a sense of alienation from the place they regard as home. However, equipped with unprecedented access to education and technology, these youths are able to express their desire for rights, opportunities, and a sense of belonging. To eke out a living and build camaraderie amongst themselves, they frequent the town’s shores, a liminal space between land and sea that simultaneously represents their heritage, estrangement, and longing.

In his paper, “Clandestine Flows and Specters of Affinity in Contemporary Sabah,” Andrew Carruthers explored the politics of policing and passing in one of the largest settings of clandestine cross-border movement in the world: the Indonesia-Malaysia borderlands. Attending to the history and sociocultural aspects of Bugis migration from Sulawesi to Sabah, he described how Bugis migrants have long irregularly migrated from Indonesia to the East Malaysian state, filling labor shortages in burgeoning economic sectors, and readily assimilating or passing as Malay-speaking members of the greater “Malay race.” In recent years, however, they have been the objects of sweeping state efforts to “cleanse” Sabah of so-called “illegal immigrants” and “phantom voters.” Carruthers focused attention on how these state efforts are confronted by a practical challenge: Bugis Indonesians are virtually indistinguishable from their co-ethnic Malaysian counterparts. He analyzed how Sabahans are policing this spectral presence by attending to suspected undocumented migrants’ habits of talk and comportment, and how migrants effectively “pass” by minimizing or masking certain behavioral signs they are assumed to evince.

In her comments, Oona Paredes provided a comparative perspective using Mindanao, which was also regarded by the Spanish and Americans as a so-called “frontier”—a place of marginality and liminality. She argued, however, that such spaces more aptly represent the limits of our knowledge or the intersection of the known and unknown. Studying mobility in these spaces allows us to reconceptualize our assumptions and understandings about them. Paredes noted that the papers in the panel presented Sabah as a dynamic site of production, new possibilities, identities, commerce, and knowledge. “Frontier” regions were and are, in fact, the locus of “true cosmopolitanism,” where diversity is deeply embedded in their communities. Rather than thinking of them as the “edges” of circulation, the papers challenged us to consider them the “start-ups” of circulation—enabling linkages, instead of breaking them. Nevertheless, the concept of the “frontier” remained a poisonous one because of its associations with the notion of terra incognita and the erasure of the indigenous. Thus, Paredes concluded by asking, “What concepts continue to haunt our study of Sabah?”

As a whole, the papers demonstrated how various mobilities shape the construction of
space and identity in Sabah. The power to control such flows was long sought by state and non-state entities, not only as a mechanism to govern people, but also to construct narratives about citizenship and belonging. Majima’s paper showed how managing mobility—by sharing or withholding their knowledge on how to navigate mountain footpaths—was a tool that allowed the villagers of the Crocker Range to preserve their sovereignty and culture. By placing Sabah firmly at the center of their inquiries, the papers also challenged notions of national and regional spaces. The papers by Carruthers and Somiah indicated that the east coast of Sabah remained far greater immersed in the socio-political world of the eastern Malay Archipelago, than Putrajaya and Peninsular Malaysia. In addition, Yeo’s paper suggested that the boundaries between East and Southeast Asia were mere abstractions for Sandakan’s inhabitants, at least in the early twentieth century. Ultimately, this panel revealed that the study of Sabah offers new and timely perspectives on issues of migration and mobility, which deserve greater scholarly attention.

**MSB Sponsored Panel**

“Malaysia’s Democratic Spring? Authoritarian Elections, Ethnicity and Gender in Comparative Perspective”

Organizer & Chair:
Kikue Hamayotsu (Northern Illinois University)

Presenters:
Sebastian Dettman (Cornell University)
Maznah Mohamad (NUS)
Kai Ostwald (University of British Columbia, Canada)

Discussants:
Kikue Hamayotsu (Northern Illinois University)
James Jesudason (Colorado School of Mines)

For the first time in Malaysia’s history, a change of national government took place after the 14th General Elections held in May 2018. The victory of the opposition Alliance of Hope (Pakatan Harapan) was a first after 61 years of continuous rule by the National Front (Barisan Nasional) coalition, and came as a huge surprise for many observers. Without doubt, it has important questions and implications for other entrenched authoritarian governments in Asia and beyond. Our panel, “Malaysia’s Democratic Spring? Authoritarian Elections, Ethnicity and Gender in Comparative Perspective” brought together three presenters, Sebastian Dettman (Stanford University), Kai Ostwald (University of British Columbia) and Maznah Mohamad (National University of Singapore), and two discussants, James Jesudason (Colorado School of Mines) and myself, to address key issues pertinent to the unexpected regime transition.

To our pleasant surprise, the panel, scheduled in the traditionally unlucky first evening slot on Thursday, attracted a roomful of attendees, some even standing. All of us were thrilled to see many colleagues and friends having gathered not only from North America, but also from Asia as well as Europe and Australia, obviously eager to get to hear fresh fieldwork findings and expert analysis from these active scholars and long-time observers of Malaysian politics and society.

Drawing on diverse materials, methods, and approaches, the three presenters skillfully situated the election and regime transition within broader research agendas on gender and politics, opposition challenges to authoritarian governments, and the challenges inherent in institutional reform. More specifically, Dettman, Mohamad, and Ostwald examined the extent to which the parties sought to improve their gender representation, the causes and consequences of political strategies employed by the opposition to win power, and salient role of ethnic and religious identity in politics. The panel provided
firsthand analysis into the events that led to a change in government, while offering a forum to discuss critically and comparatively the possible trajectories of "New Malaysia."

Overall, a general consensus among the three papers was that a much-awaited "New Malaysia" is likely hard to come by. Institutional reforms to consolidate democracy and constitutional civil rights in particular are unlikely or very slow at best, although each paper offered somewhat different explanations or accounts. Dettman, for example, argued that the electoral victory of the opposition was possible because defectors from the ruling party, UMNO, complemented the opposition. It is still uncertain whether defectors and reformers, especially Mahathir Mohamad and Anwar Ibrahim, would be able to overcome their inherent disagreements and rivalries to consolidate the coalition to implement democratic reforms. Mohamad, on the other hand, showed that gender representation in the newly elected parliament is comparatively limited despite some considerable variation within regions as well as parties. Her admirable amount of findings raises an important question about improvement of gender rights under the new democratic regime, especially when religious fundamentalism and conservativism is in full swing. Finally, Ostwald provided a novel perspective on "identity politics" demonstrating that the distinctive voting patterns are explained by what the authors name "the four arenas" – deeply and historically rooted regional and ideological identities. This identity perspective is refreshing because the identity and electoral politics in Malaysia is traditionally defined by ethnicity. According to this perspective, as indicated by the other two papers, expectations among the four identifiable regions about the national vision ("New Malaysia") differ significantly, thereby making democratic reforms likely difficult. Ostwald aptly summarized such a dilemma facing the Harapan leadership in the following way: "Mahathir and Bersatu offered “different (personnel) but same (policies) with UMNO -- to secure PH victory."

In short, whether, and in what ways, the reform agendas of pro-democracy movements and organizations in political and civil societies will be materialized in reality to bring about a truly new Malaysia for all Malaysians still remains to be seen in the years ahead. What is at least certain for students and observers of Malaysian politics and society is that there are a number of fascinating and important questions to be investigated and answered for the development of Malaysian Studies from various disciplinary and analytical perspectives.

**MSB Sponsored Panel**

**Malaysia in Transition? Before and After the Historic May 2018 General Elections**

March 22, 2019

Organizers:

Jiayun Elvin Ong (University of British Columbia)

Nawab Osman (Nanyang Technological University)

Chair:

Nawab Osman (Nanyang Technological University)

Presenters:

Terence Gomez (University of Malaya)

Nawab Osman (Nanyang Technological University)

Jiayun Elvin Ong (University of British Columbia)

Aida Arosoaie (Nanyang Technological University)

The panel *Malaysia in Transition? Before and After the Historic May 2018 General Elections* was held at the Plaza Court 2, Plaza Building of the
Sheraton Denver Downtown Hotel. The conference room was packed with a full audience with standing room only. The presenters were Nawab Osman, Assistant Professor at Nanyang Technological University, Elvin Ong, Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of British Columbia, and Aida Arosoaie, a PhD graduate student from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Bridget Welsh served as a discussant and provided feedback for all three presenters.

Elvin Ong presented a paper titled “Urban versus Rural Voters in Malaysia: More Similarities than Differences?” He first highlighted the numerous research problems afflicting contemporary scholarship suggesting that urban and rural Malaysian voters have different political attitudes and voting behavior. Most concerning was the fact that current analyses of voting behavior in Malaysia use unclear and arbitrary measurements of the urbanization of electoral districts to infer an individual voters’ geographical locale. Furthermore, because of the large numbers of internal migration within Malaysia – official data suggests that about 10 percent of all Malaysians migrate from their place of residence within every 5-year electoral cycle – using electoral results to infer the impact of urbanization was also potentially inaccurate. Malaysians could be working and voting in very different places.

Ong then analyzed quantitative data from three waves of the Asian Barometer survey results and qualitative data from field interviews conducted during the May 2018 Malaysian General Elections. He found that both urban and rural Malaysians actually have very similar political attitudes with each other. Both are political committed to democracy as a political system, and have very similar rates of political participation. They also demand very similar qualities from the prospective election candidates. They wanted substantive plans and results in improving the economic lives of the voters in their electoral district.

Nawab Osman presented a paper titled “Islamism in the Aftermath of the 14th Malaysian Election.” He first noted the strong influence that Islam had in the long political history of elections in Malaysia. Islam’s role escalated initially during the “Islamization race” in the 1980s and 1990s between PAS and UMNO. After PAS began moderating its strident rhetoric during the reformasi era of the late 1990s and early 2000s, UMNO tried to recapture the initiative on Islam with Abdullah Badawi’s promotion of “Islam Hadhari” (Civilizational Islam). But this idea was soundly defeated by PAS’s more moderate and inclusive tagline of “PAS for All” during the period of its alliance with DAP and PKR in the Pakatan Rakyat coalition.

Just before the May 2018 General Elections, Malaysian political Islam was divided into three distinct but inter-related strands – PAS’s traditionalist Islam, UMNO’s bureaucratic Islam, and Amanah’s post-Islamist Islam. During the campaign, UMNO and PAS placed heavy emphasis on Islam being under attack. Specifically, UMNO and PAS leaders cast the secularist and Chinese-majority DAP as the chief threat to Islam in Malaysia. Regardless, the electoral results revealed that PAS’s traditionalist Islam was surprisingly resilient, having won control of the state governments in Kelantan and Terengganu. This may eventually lead to a convergence between PAS’s traditional Islamists and UMNO’s bureaucratic Islamists. Whether Amanah’s post-Islamist brand of Islam would gain traction among Malaysian voters in the next few years is an open question.

Aida Arosoaie concluded the panel by presenting her paper titled “The Three Cornered Fight of Masculinities in GE14.” She began by noting that the Pakatan Harapan opposition alliance’s electoral campaign was heavily influenced by Mahathir’s emotional performances highlighting his self-reflection, remorse, and sacrifice in returning to the political arena. This raised
questions about Malaysians’ perceptions of Malay Muslim masculinities on which there was a death of scholarship. In any case, existing explanations of Malay Muslim masculinities failed to entertain a political economy-informed perspective on the topic.

Arosoaie then argued that the political economy context of the elections – which included contentious issues such as the 1MDB scandal, the unpopular GST, and continued debate over the bumiputra affirmative action policy – resulted in Mahathir’s response of self-reflexivity as representing his brand of Malay Muslim masculinity. In doing so, he first branded PAS president Hadi Awang as a traitor and Prime Minister Najib Razak as a corrupt thief. Then, in a viral Pakatan Harapan online video, he performed a role as a self-reflective, emotionally vulnerable man who has come to terms for his past mistakes. In that video, Mahathir’s brand of hegemonic Malay Muslim masculinity was further illustrated in his self-repentance and determination to make sacrifices for the nation.

After the three paper presentations, Bridget Welsh provided generous and useful feedback. She then moderated a Q&A session where audience members actively engaged with the presenters. The panel concluded with general remarks emphasizing how strong this panel complemented the other panels on Malaysia’s historic elections in the same AAS conference.

Article

TO HARMONIZE OR NOT HARMONIZE? SHARIAH CRIMINAL LAW IN MALAYSIA

Kerstin Steiner (Associate Professor, La Trobe University)

Malaysia’s society is multi-racial and multi-religious in nature, comprising Muslims (61.3% of the population), Buddhists (19.8%), Christian (9.2%) and Hindus (6.3%). This diversity is also reflected in its legal system. Malaysia has a plural legal system in which civil (sivil, non-religious) law and Islamic law (syariah) co-exist.

The Constitution of Malaysia of 1963 divides powers between the federal and state governments. Islamic matters had long been closely linked to the individual states and their respective rulers, so it was not surprising that this principle was enshrined in the Constitution of independent Malaysia. Legislative and executive powers over most aspects of Islamic legal tradition other than Islamic banking and finance were given to the States by Item 1 of the State List (List II) of the Ninth Schedule of the Constitution. The individual states also retained power over the Syariah courts, while the Federal government obtained executive and legislative power over criminal and civil law and the courts that dealt with these matters pursuant to Item 4 of the Federal List (List I) of the Ninth Schedule of the Federal Constitution.

Despite the fact that power over Islamic matters and especially Islamic law are in the purview of the states, there have been numerous attempts to standardize and/or harmonize Islamic law.

One rather practical reason for this is that the different Islamic laws arguably allow for Muslims to go “forum shopping.” Since the state Islamic law only applies to Muslims within the geographic boundaries, Muslims can theoretical go beyond those geographic state boundaries and try to get a more favorable outcome in a different state. Harmonization and/or standardization can occur in two ways.

Possibly one of the earliest attempts of standardization is the establishment of the National Fatwa Council which is part of the National Council for Islamic Affairs (MKI-Majlis Kebangsaan Islam) with one purpose being “improving, coordinating or encouraging the standardisation in law or administration,”
section 7 MKI Regulation. However, no individual state can be forced to accept a fatwa issued by the National Fatwa Council, due to constitutional framework discussed above. In the early 2000s, reforms of the respective states’ Administration of Islamic Law Enactment saw an inclusion of a provision for the standardisation of fatwa on issues of national interest. Yet not all states have followed this model and a national fatwa still has to be declared and gazetted in each state to be effective.

Working with model codes in general is a common theme for harmonisation, there for instance, are two different models in the area of Islamic family law with the Islamic family law model in Kelantan following one specific more restrictive Islamic school of thought while the one in the Federal Territories in general borrowing more freely from other Muslim majority countries and other school of thoughts. The other states are basically following one of these models with some minor modifications.

The most recent attempt to harmonise the different Islamic laws is in the area of Islamic criminal law. This is deemed necessary due to the variance in scope and punishment of the different state Islamic criminal law. In general, Islamic criminal law is applicable to offences prescribed by law perpetrated by persons professing the Islamic faith, including matrimonial offences such as wife abuse and infidelity; sexual offences, such as illicit intercourse outside marriage (zina), close proximity between sexes in private (khulwat), incest and prostitution; offences relating to intoxicating drinks, drinking, selling and buying alcohol; offences relating to the five pillars of Islam such as failure to attend the Friday sermon, non-payment of zakat fitrah, failure to fast during the month of Ramadan, and renouncing Islam or failure to report and register a conversion; and miscellaneous offences not listed above. The punishment is limited by the so-called ‘3-5-6 formula’ that is three years imprisonment, a fine not exceeding MYR 5,000 and that any whipping punishment ordered should not exceed six strokes, section 2 of the Syariah Courts (Criminal Jurisdiction) Act (No. 355) of 1965.

Yet there are significant differences in the substance of these laws and the punishment meted out for offences. For instance, there are different approaches taken on how apostasy should be handled. Some states have enacted legislation that sets out forms of treatment ranging from education and “rehabilitation.” In the states of Malacca (section 66 Syariah Criminal Offences Enactment (Malacca) (No. 6) of 1999) and Sabah (section 63 Syariah Criminal Offences Enactment (Sabah) (No. 3) of 1995), a Muslim who attempts to change religion either by words or conduct is to be detained in the Islamic Rehabilitation Centre for the purpose of rehabilitation and must repent in accordance with Syariah regulations. In addition, some states considered this also criminal offences and provided for fines or imprisonment, see for instance section 7 of the Syariah Criminal Offence Enactment (Terengganu) (No. 4) of 2001. In Pahang, an offender is liable to a fine not exceeding MYR 5,000 or imprisonment for a term not exceeding three years or to both and to whipping of not more than six strokes, section 185 Administration of Islamic Law and Malay Adat (Pahang) (No. 8) of 1982. Perak for instance has imposed significant lower sanctions with a fine not exceeding MYR 3,000 or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding two years or both, section 12 and 13 of the Crimes (Syariah) Enactment (Perak) (No 3) of 1992. Complicating the matters even further are the regular attempts of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) to implement hudud especially in the states of Kelantan with the Syariah Criminal Code Bill II and the Syariah Criminal Offences (hudud and qisas) in Terengganu. If successful,
the penalty for apostasy would then be death provided that certain criteria are fulfilled. So far, those attempts have stalled due to the constitutional limitations on the Syariah courts and the punishments it can impose and the lack of political will to change the legislative framework.

Harmonizing the different Syariah criminal laws would therefore ensure consistency in the substance and the punishments across Malaysia. Still, the question is whether it will be feasible? Looking at the track record of the standardization/harmonization projects in Islamic law in general it appears highly unlikely. Adding to this that there have been heated social and political debates in the area of Islamic criminal law. These have concerned the hudud debate but also the more recent debate regarding amending the Syariah Courts (Criminal Jurisdiction) Act of 1965 in order to increase the maximum punishment to 30 years imprisonment, a fine of MYR 100,000, and 100 strokes of the cane.

The new Islamic criminal law is envisioned by the current ruling coalition to be modelled upon Syariah Criminal Offences (Federal Territories) Act (No 559) of 1997, and thus follow the model endorsed by the federal government. Following the 14th General Elections (GE 14), the federal government was formed by PH (Pakatan Harapan, Coalition of Hope). It consists of parties that have been critical towards the implementation of hudud, for instance former and now current Prime Minister Mahathir, leader of the Malaysian United Indigenous Party, opposed the earlier attempts by PAS to implement hudud. Amanah, another party in the coalition and a splinter group of PAS, is also cautious in its approach to hudud.

It might be that this move is now an attempt by the ruling coalition to pre-empt any challenges by UMNO or PAS to place Islamic criminal law back on the agenda. After all, 70 percent of Malay voters opted to remain with either UMNO or PAS in the GE14. If PH wants to remain in power, it has to appeal to this constituency. What better way to be seen in the driver’s seat to set the terms for a moderate Islamic criminal law, address the issue of consistency across the different offences and cloud it in terms of harmonization and modernization of the laws. One would expect an adjustment of the punishments, probably even an increase of the prison sentence and the fines, with some “new modern form of punishments” such as a good behavior bond or rehabilitative measures such as community behavior. This would allow PH to set the tone for a modern Islam, one that moderate Muslims and also non-Muslims can agree on. Whether this will actually find the political support by the opposition parties which are in power in some of the states and the rulers remains to be seen. If it will win PH the next election is also a different matter.

**Article**

**REFLECTIONS FROM THE FIELD: ON A QUEST TO SAVE THE POOR, A DAY IN A “ZAKAT CAMP”**

Timea Gréta Biró (PhD candidate, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology)

Between December 2017 and November 2018, I conducted anthropological field research in Malaysia for my PhD thesis. I set out on this journey with the aim to get an insight into the zakat (Islamic alms) distribution practices and inner workings of some of the most successful (in terms of the amounts collected and distributed) zakat management institutions in the country. In line with the Islamic administration’s and sharia judiciary’s decentralized Federal structure, most Malaysian states make sure to facilitate their citizens in fulfilling their godly obligation by...
including zakat payments into their sharia penal code, and by establishing corporate-type zakat collection and distribution bureaucracies appropriating modern management techniques. The results are growing amounts of collected zakat year by year. As zakat is not “just” a religious tax but also is a key component of Islamic ritual life, the third pillar of Islam (Sunni) after prayer and the declaration of faith (syahadah), most Malaysian Muslims take seriously their zakat obligation and entrust it to their local amil (authorized zakat collectors) mainly by having it deducted from their salaries. For many people, this is the easiest and most convenient way of paying their zakat, while at the same time they assume that the bureaucracy has the means and knowledge to hand it to all those who are entitled to receive it.

On the other hand, I often heard people saying that “only God knows” exactly what happens to zakat money after it leaves their pockets. Making reference to the high number of Malaysian Muslims living in poverty, this attitude, while not widespread, reflects a kind of mistrust towards these institutions shown by some people. Following a “corporate” principle of maintaining transparency and accountability, information on zakat distribution is easily accessible to anyone who takes the time to look up the yearly, even monthly, statistics and reports. The zakat collection and distribution center I am most familiar with provides lengthy reports about its distribution programs. Studying these documents, I focused my ethnographic interest in the zakat program called “Human Development.” Only after spending some time at the zakat institution did it become clear to me that the “Human Development” program is one of five main programs (“social,” “education,” “religious,” “human” and, “economic”) that zakat distribution is categorized under in the respective states. Although in the reports there is no specific description about the mission and activities of the Human Development Program, I was told by zakat officers that it encompasses training events, spiritual and moral “counselling,” also referred to as “motivation courses” for the asnaf (eligible zakat recipient) categories of fakir (poor), miskin (needy) and muallaf (converts).

These motivation (or “counselling”) courses are organized during the weekends at mosques, at a training center built by the zakat institution itself, or in hotels, with free accommodation and meals. They follow a module containing several courses, and each registered asnaf needs to participate several times during the year to complete the module. Zakat officers told me that when they invite people to these events they warn them to participate, otherwise their zakat might be stopped. The CEO of the zakat bureaucracy finds these events to be good occasions for observing how serious the participants are towards improving their lives, because even if they are Muslim, many don’t know “what is that they are supposed to do as a Muslim, how to pray……that’s why they become poor,” he said. “Being poor and not practicing Islam are interconnected (…)”.

Among the different counselling events, there are weekend programs organized on a regular basis for the children of asnaf; some of these are framed as “religious counselling / motivation” and preparation for exams. One of such programs I participated in April 2018 was particularly notable. This particular event was organized at a recreational (camp) site and lasted for two days. There were more than 100 children and young people participating, organized into five age groups and levels of education. Each age group was taken care by a program facilitator and a religious teacher / motivator (ustaz) contracted by the zakat institution. The event had a strict schedule from 5 o’clock in the morning until 11 o’clock in the evening comprising of the obligatory prayer times, motivational / personal development classes, and preparatory classes for English and Mathematics.
I was invited to join a group of more than thirty students (boys and girls) who were about to complete their final exams for high school. I accompanied them to a dark, spacious conference/meeting room, where the boys and girls sat in two different rows facing a projector screen and the religious teacher, who was already waiting for them. After they settled down, the program started with the students taking an oath that they will give their full attention to the program; they will always obey God, the Prophet and their parents; they will always adhere to school rules and regulations; will show good behavior; will perform well in examinations, and last but not least, will become the best asnaf students and do well in the future.

After they took their oaths the students were requested to answer a set of questions by raising their hands, such as: who has, since puberty age, ever neglected their daily prayers? Whose parents do not perform their prayers? Whose parents had never taught them to perform or how to perform prayers? Who does not have a mother or a father? Then the ustaz randomly played videos showing a baby, a cat, and a Spiderman cartoon-image in a praying posture, jokingly adding that even babies and cats perform prayers. His face and voice then turned serious and gave a lengthy talk about the importance of performing one’s prayers. He told the students that one prayer session being abandoned results in seventy years of living in hellfire. He advised the students to be mindful in upholding the prayer ritual, because if one dies having neglected his or her prayers, the person will face severe punishment in the grave. He continued by stating that the grave contracts and the body will be squeezed from bone to bone. A huge snake will appear in the grave and will contract itself around the sinner’s body, and bite the sinner every day until the day of Resurrection. On the said day, the sinners will be raised with their faces turned into those of boars, dogs and monkeys. Finally, he asserted that they will appear nude but unashamed by their condition.

The ustaz then asked the students to write down their life goals, possible ways of achieving them, and problems they might face in their families, while introducing to them the concept of SMART objectives (an acronym for specific, measurable, achievable, relevant/realistic and timely), which is primarily a business management tool. The students then went to pray for dhuhur (the third prayer of the day in the early afternoon), then returned shortly after in a disciplined manner. The session continued with some of the students reading out loud their named goals and difficulties in achieving them, which were all related to their studies and exams, and in some cases to the strictness of their parents. Without much discussion of the issues raised by the students, the session continued with a series of short video screenings showing disabled people with missing limbs carrying out their everyday activities, such as a young mother with no arms taking care of her baby, and a young girl playing the piano using her legs. Then footage followed from war-torn Syria showing bleeding children crying over the dead bodies of their parents and small children playing on top of ruined buildings and dump sites. In between the horrifying images, images of funny cat and dog videos popped up. The students watched sitting quietly.

As the class was coming to an end, the female facilitator went to the presenter’s desk and started her closing speech. Sad music was played in the background, accompanying her words. She prompted the students to reflect on their past actions and to be better persons in the future. She asked them to ponder upon why God had destined them to be in the camp and to be grateful for this opportunity, telling them about another student whose grandmother passed away the day before, so she could not make it. By this time some of the students were sobbing loudly. As the background music got louder, the
facilitator’s voice and the sobbing of the children increased in volume, resulting in what felt to me was an incredibly fraught atmosphere. The facilitator then told the students to reflect on the uncertainty of death, because while laughing and playing, they show ignorance towards the horrors of the outside world. They ended the session by reciting the surah al-fatihah and sending prayers to God, requesting success in this life and the hereafter.

After the sobbing students left the room, still affected by the disturbing images and the emotionally heated talk, I asked the facilitators what was their goal in showing such videos. The answer was one that I expected: to make them realize that they are in a privileged situation compared to others, to make them grateful for whatever they have in life, and to be good practicing Muslims. This reminded me of what I had previously heard from zakat officers, that in addition to covering asnaf’s basic financial needs, their “spiritual” life and religiosity must be “saved” as well by enhancing their knowledge of Islam, reminding them that Islam is “a way of life,” so that they become “better Muslims,” “get out of poverty” and become zakat payers. This argument, legitimizing the need to “counsel” the poor, reflects the religious position of the Islamic bureaucracy in Malaysia, while at the same time it underlines the perspective of the profit-oriented business-like institutions which collect zakat that poverty is partly a result of the mindset and “inappropriate religious behavior” of the poor, thus they need “spiritual guidance” and “education” started at an early age.

The youngsters participating at these events are taught to always respect and never question their teachers and parents, to appreciate and be happy with what they have, and to strive to become successful in life. They are also taught that becoming successful is conditional upon following Islam’s religious rituals, and upon living an Islamic life, as defined by the religious institution. Seeing religion (and religious ritual addressing a God they fear) as the solution to poverty, without looking at the lived realities of the community and deeper societal questions, such as the poor quality of the education system, low wages, and etc. which necessarily contribute to the maintenance of inequalities, requires them bear all the responsibility for their situation. This kind of representation of the asnaf, especially of the fakir (poor) and miskin (needy) categories, is best understood in Malaysia’s sociopolitical and economic context characterized by the nexus between economic development-oriented policies and Islamization, and the idea that economic development and the welfare of the poor is a good Muslim government’s inherent duty. Giving out monthly zakat allowances paired with teaching religious ritualistic knowledge to poor individuals who are required to prove and perform their eligibility and poverty, is one way the Malaysian government is trying to fulfil this duty. The monthly zakat money often pays for their food and/or rent, but if they are still not capable of changing their circumstances after “counselling,” it is clear to the government who is at fault: it is a clear result of their bad character and un-Islamic lifestyle.

**Article**

**A CONTEMPORARY GHOST STORY: THE TALE OF THE PONTIANAK**

Rosalia N. Engchuan (PhD candidate, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology)

The Pontianak is prominent figure in Southeast Asian mythology. She haunts folktales, stories, nightmares and movies, popular culture, and oral histories. Stereotypically, one imagines a pale woman with long black hair and red eyes in a blood-soaked white dress, hanging from a tree. She is a feminine monster, living in the woods,
haunting for revenge—revenge for those who raped and murdered her.

A cliché trope in the horror genre: a beautiful woman turns into a monster. Horror stories are not real, but in fact they could not be truer. The Pontianak is a prime example of what Barbara Creed (1993) termed the “monstrous feminine.” Her monstrosity is linked to her sexuality, something that is constructed as a danger.

As a woman, when I hear the story of the Pontianak, I have two choices: either I develop an unhealthy fear of my own sexuality and suppress it to avoid being labeled as a monster. Or I feel sympathy and respect for a woman that has been incredibly hurt.

‘I love the Pontianak. She is so beautiful, so strong and so raw… for a woman to go through a lot and come out so strong, you can’t beat that.’ (Director Amanda Nell Eu at Singapore International Film Festival).

The Malaysian filmmaker Amanda Nell Eu grew up with the story of the Pontianak. This story is passed down from generation to generation. But the rules of the game have changed. Technology now offers new “ways of imagining and acting upon the world” (Blanes et al 2016: 16). Amanda felt sympathy and admiration for a powerful woman. Using her expressive capital as an artist and filmmaker she made a film.

When women write hi/story(ies) and bring their own perspectives they open up possibilities for new realities on and off screen. The film title alone speaks volumes about this change of perspective and is a stark criticism of patriarchal culture: “It's easier to raise a cattle (...)” - the beginning of an old proverb, which goes on as follows: “(...) than a girl.” As Amanda explains: “My film is about the sexuality of young girls, their wild and raw side, and also their gentle and loving side. And those are things that people fear about women, so they’d rather raise a herd of cows than one daughter.”

Ramah and the Pontianak smoke cigarettes and dance to discobeats. Screenshot from “Lagi senang jaga sekandang lembu,” written and directed by Amanda Nell Eu, produced by Gan Hui Yee

Amanda’s film is a coming-of-age story about the friendship between two girls: Ramah and Pontianak. It is a beautiful and mesmerizing tale of sisterhood among two women who are both strong and vulnerable. The forest is their space to be carefree: climbing trees, playing and dancing, smoking cigarettes to discobeats. The dark jungle is a place of intimacy and freedom. A space full of possibilities, affection, curiosity and sexuality. As long as the two are alone, everything is fine.
Rural landscape as a cinematic space for liberation is a familiar trope. At the Asian Cinemas Studies Society conference in Singapore scholar Phoebe Phua (2019) talked about “She of the Outlands” to think about the spatial removing of women from society in their quest for liberation from violent societal codes and mores. But this short film is more than a window into a microcosmic utopia where young girls are living a harmonic life in the woods. The liminality of their freedom is ever present. There is talk of websites, of posing in a bikini, with scars. The joyful and courageous Pontianak suddenly lies crumpled on the ground. She is obviously hurt. Ramah stays by her side. In another scene she lovingly strokes her hair, while the Pontianak, in what might be regarded as the only cliché image in the film – drenched in blood, sucks a lifeless male body. But this is different. Ramah’s acceptance and their bond are ultimately stronger than societal conventions and the constructed monstrosity of the Pontianak. The two are not enslaved to the notion of the ideal type women, they are free spirits. The film beautifully exposes that the problem is not them. The problem is those men who do violence to them – hence the scars.

Amanda’s very own Pontianak story traversed the borders of Malaysia and made it all the way to the Venice film festival. Amanda was the first Malay female director to debut at the Venice film festival. She and her producer are storytellers and history makers, giving audiences a loving and captivating glimpse into Malaysia today – a notion that is always evolving and up for grabs. And in this re-imagining, re-inventing and re-making, representation matters. It matters so much. Who tells stories? Who makes histories? There is a wind of change in what too long has been an exclusive boys club and that is good. In Amanda’s film, audiences meet not an abstract monstrous creation but a more human Pontianak, someone we can relate to. Ultimately what is possible now and therefore more important than ever is not so much exposing and reconstructing what we already know (that toxic patriarchy is violent and ever present) but a focus on rebuilding alternatives. Alternatives from the point of view of young women who refuse to be categorized and use creative ways to create new realities – on and off screen.

References
**Book Review**


Review by Cheong Soon Gan (University of Wisconsin-Superior).

Loh observes that Penang today is “a cosmopolitan society with a flexible mind-set, able to draw on past strengths to cope with the current challenges of a highly competitive global environment,” and the source of this resiliency lies in the “earlier processes of movements and circulation with regions east and west.” (p. 1). Through four chapters, the author deploys a wide-ranging array of tables, statistics, numbers and documents, buttressed by extensive footnotes, to paint a detailed picture of the comings and goings of goods to and from the island, and brief explorations of the people that followed the commodities.

Loh’s first chapter lays out the historical context of trade and the movement of peoples in the region. In tracing the circulation of specific trade products such as glass beads, jade, spices, bronze wears, Loh (p. 18) demonstrates that “intercontinental (Eurasian), intra-Asian interaction and exchanges date back to prehistoric times.” Penang and its proxy Kedah benefitted by being at the north-western entrance to Southeast Asia, whose strategic location ensured a steady flow of long-distance and regional visitors trading in goods, ideas or religions. Loh’s history is succinct and clear, a valuable overview of key figures, debates and themes. Chapter 2 looks at the early years of colonial rule (1786–1830), and argues that “as soon as there was news of British entry into Penang, a steady stream of people with their wide variety of goods – consumer products, daily necessities, and primary commodities intended for transshipment to other destinations – followed on the heels of the EIC personnel; the beginnings of an emporium were in the making.” (p. 25). These merchants settled, and from these diverse diasporas rose “a vibrant society of diverse communities…” (p. 2). Loh ends the chapter with brief biographies of key figures in Penang’s early years: Koh Lay Huan, Sayyid Hussain Aidid, Cauder Mohideen Merican, James Scott, David Brown, Lowe Ammee,
Nacodah Kechil and Cheah Hum Eam; a pattern she repeats in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 3, which takes the story up till 1867 when rule passed from the East India Company to the Crown, and Chapter 4, which examines Crown rule up to the beginnings of WWII (1940), are the heart of Loh’s argument. The author notes that this newly established cosmopolitan society thrived in part by tapped into pre-18th century trading networks that had already been firmly established. In other words, while the British may have supplied the real estate and the infrastructure, they did not create Penang’s lucrative transnational trade. In these two chapters, Loh examines the establishment of Singapore, Penang’s commercial rival and existential bête noire. The rise of the former as the administrative center of the Straits Settlements meant that Penang was unfairly taxed and starved of the necessary funds and autonomy to expand appropriately in a manner that would maximize its vast human (specifically economic and commercial) capabilities.

Even in these difficult circumstances – Loh considers the encroachment of Singapore and Kuala Lumpur on the Penang as “the rape of her resources” (p. 86), Penang thrived, a reflection, Loh (p. 88) says, of “the enterprising business communities availing themselves of opportunities…” This story of overcoming administrative disadvantages is one of the key theses of the book. Of value is Loh’s focus on Penang’s relationship with Sumatra, which is, more than just about the movement of goods, but also people. This intertwined political, social, economic and cultural relationship was disrupted with the intransigence of the Dutch, who reneged on the 1824 treaty with the British that was supposed to ensure unencumbered movement of people and goods between the two islands. Again, Penang was able to overcome these challenges due to the resilience and flexibility of its cosmopolitan inhabitants.

The latter half of the 19th century saw a shift in Penang’s trading role. More and more, the island plugged into the global trading system, a shift brought about by “the momentous industrial revolution in the West, fueling demands for tropical raw materials and markets for their factory-produced manufactured goods, with the British imperial periphery, well integrated into the world economy, serving far-flung markets in Europe and America.” (p. 86). The different trajectories Singapore and Penang took continue to be examined, suggesting that even as the former grew exponentially, Penang found its own path and while her growth never exceeded her southern neighbor’s, Penang adapted and kept pace. For example, it wasn’t just international trade that was expanding. Penang Chinese merchants, with their regional and transnational networks, were also looking closer to home, taking the lead (bearing the risks and reaping the potential future profits) in expanding into the Malay Peninsula, Sumatra and Burma. Through a series of detailed charts and brief biographies, Loh traces how a myriad of these pioneers paved the way for future economic expansion of those regions.

The strength of the book lies in how Loh integrates the detailed tables, charts, appendixes, and statistics, with the both the broader story of Penang’s economic growth as well as some of the key personalities of its history. One feels the hustle and bustle of an island and people that does not seem to sit still. These primary sources – especially key historical documents reproduced in full – are a goldmine for readers seeking inspiration for future research projects. This is surely behind Loh’s main caveat regarding her monograph: that “is introductory in nature, providing an outline of the subject; hence it does not give comprehensive coverage to the many topics addressed,” (p. 2) paving the way for others to take the story deeper in new directions.

This work adds to the further scholarship on the relationship between Penang and Singapore.
The Singapore of today, through well-funded and savvy marketing campaigns, seeks to take credit for a myriad of regional features (chicken rice, food courts) and attempts to distinguish itself from its neighbors through claims of meritocracy, competence and better infrastructure. These provoke an understandable regional eye roll, but Loh’s book puts into historical context how Penang, another cosmopolitan island port city, feels the comparison more keenly than others.

Loh notes that her focus on economics and trade “expands our vision into the socio-cultural life of the port town as we look at the movements of peoples and products, while trading partners provide indicators of the likelihood of business networks.” (p. 53). Her caveat precludes her from diving into the socio-cultural life in depth, which is a lost opportunity, as a sustained examination of how economics and socio-cultural life are intertwined in specifically Penang ways surely strengthens her thesis regarding the adaptability, flexibility and eventual success of cosmopolitan Penang community.

Overall, however, this is a worthy, well-crafted exploration of Penang’s commercial growth up till 1940, built on strong evidence and foundations, and should serve as a starting point for scholars from multiple disciplines.

**Publications**

**Michael G. Peletz** (Emory University)


Few symbols in today’s world are as laden and fraught as *sharia*, an Arabic-origin term referring to the straight path, the path God revealed for humans, the norms and rules guiding Muslims on that path, and Islamic law and normativity as enshrined in sacred text or formal statute. Yet the ways Muslim men and women experience the myriad dimensions of *sharia* often go unnoticed and unpublicized. So too do recent historical changes in *sharia* judiciaries and strategies on the part of political and religious elites to shape and rebrand these institutions. *Sharia Transformations* aims to help ameliorate this situation. It does so by providing ethnographic, historical, and theoretical
perspectives on the practice and entailments of *sharia* in Malaysia, arguably the most economically successful Muslim-majority nation in the world, based on ethnographic fieldwork and archival research conducted since the late 1970s. Building on the insights of Foucault, Bourdieu, and assemblage theorists, the book focuses on the routine, everyday practices of Malaysia’s *sharia* courts, the changes that have occurred in the courts in relation to processes of Islamization and neoliberal globalization, and how Malays and other Muslims engage ethical norms and deal with law, social justice, and governance in a rapidly globalizing world.

**Mareike Pampus** (Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology)

*Heritage Food: The Materialization of Connectivity in Nyonya Cooking* (a summary)

This article systematically reviews the narratives and the making of one particular Nyonya dish, Chicken Kapitan, to provide an insight into the materialization of connectivity processes, which are defined by the changes of local and global settings, as well as movements of people, goods, ingredients and techniques. Nyonya cuisine belongs to the Baba Nyonya or Straits Chinese, a group of people of Chinese origin with local cultural features who were born in the former British Straits Settlements consisting of Penang, Melaka and Singapore. Their narratives, practices, dresses and dishes are considered a mixture of different influences that came to these three port cities. Baba Nyonya explain that they take the best of all the cultures, put them together and create an even better and new one. Picking, compiling and improving is thus the basis of their narratives of how their local heritage came into being.

The way food is prepared, performed, eaten and offered is deeply linked with different histories, techniques and localities. Recent approaches in the anthropology of food have drawn attention to the social, corporeal and culinary dimensions of eating (Warde 2016). Cooking as an everyday practice has also been subjected to ethnographic consideration (Sutton 2014), and taste in relation to trade has been highlighted through arguments against the nation-based study of food (Ray 2013). The field of studying food and foodways in Asia has emphasized the connections between migration and local, regional and global settings. The discussions move between (a) cultural continuity, where terms like “traditional” and “authentic” are discussed; and (b) local transformation, which deals with concepts of creolization of cuisine, assimilation and acculturation.

My article, however, examines a cuisine with connectivity as its base, in order to show how various actors strategically relate and distance themselves, how socio-cultural adaptation takes place and how identities are shaped through and
with food. The focus is on everyday practices, with cooking and eating as the main examples to demonstrate how cooking certain dishes, as well as eating habits, are used in the construction and performance of Baba Nyonya identity. In order to do this, the narratives and cooking process of the dish called Chicken Kapitan are discussed and analyzed. The ways of cooking and consuming that are self-consciously used by Baba Nyonya to differentiate themselves from other (Chinese) groups in Penang reveal how a dish can come to be intimately linked to the historical experiences of the residents of a port city and the ways in which 'recourse to the past' (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998: 150) is used for identity constructions. The port city’s history embodied in this dish is characterized by Indian Ocean trade, allowing to follow Krishnendu Ray’s argument for theorizing about the existence of an Indian Ocean cuisine characterized by maritime trade connections (Ray 2013).

In the concluding section, the objectives of these identity strategies are examined in the context of the Malaysian national heritage narrative. It is argued that the way food is prepared, performed, eaten, and offered has deep connections to different historical factors, localities, and contemporary politics of heritage-making. At the same time, the making of one particular Nyonya dish provides insights into the manifestations of connectivity processes in local and global settings, as well as into the mobility and circulation of people, goods, ingredients, and techniques. Through an emic concept of authenticity through adjustment, it becomes visible how the versatile dynamics in a port city like Penang created something new, unique and highly localized, which is not associated with notions of homeland or nation state, but with the maritime interconnectedness of a port city.

References


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Other Recent Publications


Job Opportunities

**Kyoto University**: Professor, Human and Social Sciences on Maritime Southeast Asia, Center for Southeast Asian Studies. More information: https://www.h-net.org/jobs/job_display.php?id=58731

**Harvard Divinity School**: Tenure-Track Position in Islamic Studies (focus: Islam in Southeast Asia or Islam in the Americas). More information: https://hds.harvard.edu/faculty-research/faculty-openings

**Yale-NUS College**: Tenure-Track Assistant Professor position in Anthropology. More information: https://www.yale-nus.edu.sg/careers/faculty/academic-appointments/

Calls for Papers

**21st Malaysia and Singapore Society of Australia (MASSA) Symposium 26-27th September 2019 Monash University (Clayton campus), Melbourne**

“Post'-Colonial Futures: Interactions in and around Malaysia and Singapore”

This year, Singapore celebrates the bicentennial of its “founding” and Malaysia continues to come to grips with the results of 2018’s historic elections. As both countries attempt to chart a new course while confronted by local, national, regional and global challenges, they must also come to terms with the legacies of their shared pasts.

Acknowledging both countries’ colonial pasts, the 21st MASSA Symposium takes stock of Malaysia’s and Singapore’s progress ‘post’-colonialism, and how identities and connections between and within the region have shifted. Focused on critically engaging with the idea of “valuable aspects of colonial heritage” (Vasagar 2018), the symposium is interested in the opportunities and challenges faced by Malaysia and Singapore since their emergence as sovereign nation-states. Encouraging the interrogation of Malaysia and Singapore’s status as ‘post-colonial’, the conference invites scholars from all disciplines to present on the diverse issues that Malaysians and Singaporeans have grappled with historically, the challenges they face in this time of change, and the possibilities that the future might hold.

Topics of interest include but are not limited to:

- Legacies of colonialism
- Post-colonial theory
- Nationalism and nation-building
- Economics and economic development
- Language, culture and ethnicity
- Childhoods
- Identity and multiculturalism
- Mobilities and migration
- Digital cultures
- Transnationalism and demography
- Democracy and authoritarianism in an age of populism
- Cultural heritage and tourism
- Social inequalities
- Malaysia and Singapore in Southeast Asia and beyond
- LGBTIQ+

All topics and researchers working on the study on Singapore and Malaysia in general are welcome to submit a paper. Please send abstracts no longer than 200 words to: massa.melbourne@gmail.com by 30th August 2019.

This event has received institutional support from the Monash Migration and Inclusion Centre (MMIC).

More information: https://arts.monash.edu/migration-and-inclusion
Call for Papers: Volume #4 – Issue 1: Open Issue / Issue 2: The Long 19th Century

The fourth volume of SOUTHEAST OF NOW: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia invites contributions that will be published in an open call issue and a special issue on 19th century art and cultural history. We invite contributions from scholars working in and between all disciplines and fields of inquiry, as well as from artists, curators, and others. We accept:

- **SHORT RESPONSES** (1,200–2,000 words) including artist’s pages;
- **ARTICLES** (4,000–7,000 words inclusive of footnotes);
- **REVIEWS** (1,000–3,000 words) of publications, exhibitions, conferences and other projects. Other formats or lengths upon discussion with the editorial collective.

Full paper should be submitted to southeastofnow@gmail.com by January 10, 2020. If accepted will be submitted for review by two experts in the field. The digital publication is scheduled for distribution in the second half of 2020.


Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs (SAGE Publishing)

JCSSA is a double-blind peer-reviewed academic journal published by the GIGA Institute of Asian Studies, Hamburg. Aside from the print edition, JCSAA is also be available online as an open access journal. It presents key research and professional analyses on current political, economic, and social affairs in Southeast Asia, with listings in major indexes. It invites submissions for research articles, book reviews and special issue proposals. For further details see [https://journals.sagepub.com/home/saa](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/saa)

Member Notes:

**Alicia Izharuddin** has been selected by Harvard Divinity School’s Women’s Studies in Religion Program (WSRP) as a Research Associate (Visiting Senior Lecturer on Women’s Studies and Islam) for the Academic Year 2019/2020.

**Joseph Kinzer**, an ethnomusicologist who studies performing arts traditions in the Malay world, has accepted a position as Senior Curatorial Assistant in the Archive of World Music at Harvard University. He hopes to be an advocate for more bridges between the archive and Southeast Asian Studies.

**Nurul Huda Mohd Razif** has been selected by Harvard Law School’s Program on Law and Society in the Muslim World (PLS) for the Academic Year 2019/20. She has also been appointed as an Evans Fellow in Southeast Asian Studies at Cambridge University (2019–2021).

**Dominik M. Müller** has co-convened a Workshop at Harvard University’s Program on Law and Society in the Muslim World on April 4-5, entitled “Bureaucratizing Diversity in Southeast Asia and Beyond,” together with Kristen Stilt and Salma Waheedi. The event was attended by MSB Group members including Patricia Sloane-White and Michael Peletz, as well as Fauwaz Abdul Aziz, Timea Greta Biro, Rosalia Engchuan, Tamir Moustafa, Jeremy Menchik, Mona Oraby, and Nurul Huda Mohd. Razif. The keynote was given by Singapore’s newly appointed Deputy Mufti, Dr. Nazirudin Mohd. Nasir. The event also included a film screening and discussion (On Friday Noon, Indonesia, and Dory, Philippines) chaired by Rosalía N. Engchuan and Michael G. Peletz.
Berita has been published for a full twenty-seven years, this issue, Number 76, volume 26. The first Berita appeared in Spring 1975 as a four-page newsletter which I compiled for my Royal 440 typewriter, a piece of "information technology" I still use for all my typing. Gradually, the periodical increased in size, accounting for 18 pages in the first four issues, and 533 pages in 22 numbers through the first decade. For comparison, Volume 19 had 133 pages and the total number of pages over twenty-seven years is 1,948.

In July 1975, I mailed Berita to about 130 individuals who had interests in Malaysia and Singapore, using Temple University and my own resources. By the fourth issue, 253 individuals from 124 institutions in 17 countries received the newsletter; many of them acknowledged receipt, with very complimentary and encouraging remarks. The Summer 1976 issue went out to more than 300 individuals and institutions. There was no charge the first two years as most expenses were absorbed by Temple University's School of Communications and Theater, which under a since-existent type of dean — enlightened and enthusiastic — encouraged publication and research. With the Summer 1978 number, individuals were charged $3 annually, institutions $5. Two price increases followed in the Fall 1984, when both rates doubled, and Fall 1991, when the individual subscription went to $10, institutions to $20.

The format and content of Berita has not varied much. The name, simplistic and encompassing, I chose rather impulsively; it fit in 1975 when Berita was conceived mainly as a newsletter. The art in the logo was redrawn by Temple University's John Gilpin (now a nationally-syndicated cartoonist) from a Malaysian hotel envelope design; I liked it because of the number of Malaysian artifacts and symbols included. The main features from the beginning were book and periodical literature reviews, conference and symposia information, and news notes. Except for a brief period in the late 1980s, minutes of the annual Malaysia/Singapore/Brunei Studies Group meetings were published. From 1976 to 1986, and occasionally since, MS/SB Studies Group chairs have written reports of the group's activities.

Other mainstays of Berita in the early years were the lists of dissertations on Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei; usually provided by John A. MacDougall and Frank Joseph Shulman, and the directory. With a goal of identifying scholars and researchers associated with the three countries, Berita published a questionnaire in each issue, responses to which formed the short biographical sketches that then were published in subsequent issues. This practice continued through Spring/Summer 1984. In all, 27 installments of the directory appeared, profiling 282 individuals. These entries supplemented Directory, Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei
Editorial Information

Berita is the official publication of the Malaysian/Singapore/Brunei (MSB) Studies Group, published since 1975. A part of the Association of Asian Studies (AAS), we are a cross-disciplinary network of scholars, students, and observers with research and other professional interests in Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei.

Editor:
Dominik M. Müller
Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology
muellerdo@eth.mpg.de

Leon Sau Heng. The third, Brunei and Malaysian Studies: Present Knowledge and Research Trends on Brunei and on Malaysian Anthropology, Mass Communication, and Women’s Studies came out as Publication No. 54 of Studies in Third World Societies in April 1994. Also edited by Muller and Lent, this volume had chapters by Gerald H. Krasse on Brunei, followed by a commentary by K.O. Menon, as well as contributions by Ronald Provencer on anthropology in the Malay Peninsula and North Borneo, John A. Lent on mass communication, and Heather Strange, on women’s studies.

No doubt some other activities of the Group have been missed in this rundown. Therefore, I invite any former chair, or any member of MS/BSG for that matter, to contribute amendments to this history. But, as is readily evident from what is presented here, the Malaysia/Singapore/Brunei Studies Group has been one of the most active of AAS country groups, and Berita has been one of the few regularly-published, comprehensive group newsletters.