

INDEGENEITY IN SOCIETY AND NATURE: THE AMBIGUOUS CASE OF BRUNEI ¹

By:

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Introduction

The core theoretical questions at issue in this paper focus on the concepts of 'indigeneity', 'nativeness' and 'autochthony'. If these features of identity and citizenship are increasingly discussed and in some contexts promoted, we can ask the following question for a range of societies: What are the criteria or bases on which this aspect of cultural identity is asserted and /or accepted? That is, how do societies work out who is 'an indigenous person' and who is not? Indeed, is this a more or less important question that varies across societies with different politico-cultural histories?

Specifically, is the category of an 'indigenous' person, who may be regarded as 'belonging' in a society more so than others, defined in relation to:

- an asserted aspect of ancestry
- place of birth
- birth place (s) of their parents and grandparents (and other kin)
- adherence to what is regarded as 'tradition' (in custom or religion for example)
- degree of emplacement – physical or imagined – in the environments and residence locations across the society?

¹This paper seeks to raise questions for research rather than present answers. Professor David Trigger has pursued brief inquiries in Brunei during 2005 and his interests are in facilitating comparative research across different countries on the negotiation of 'indigeneity' and assumptions about 'nativeness' in society and nature. Dr Siti Norkhalbi Haji Wahsalfelah is a scholar with substantial experience in Brunei Studies. The paper is based on discussion of relevant theoretical and ethnographic literature as well as the second author's substantive studies of aspects of Brunei society. The two authors carried out interviews and discussions with some 12 informants during a 10 day period in 2005 and the second author has subsequently interviewed knowledgeable scholars on this subject.

How does the understanding of indigeneity among people sit with notions of nativeness (and its counterpoint, ferality) in nature? To what extent and in what ways, are diverse visions or constructions of ‘nature’ made a vehicle for the envisioning of indigenous cultural identities?

This paper will: firstly, note some recent developments in theoretical literature concerning indigeneity; and secondly, examine case materials concerning legal definitions and informal understandings about cultural identity in Brunei. In conclusion, we will seek to draw out some conclusions around the ‘emergence’ of indigeneity in society, with a view to inviting comparative work on this issue in countries with very different cultural histories.

Indigeneity: Recent Theoretical Developments

Introducing their collection on Indigenous experience today, de la Cadena and Starn (2007: 3), present papers that examine ‘the changing boundary politics and epistemologies of blood and culture, time, and place that define who will or will not count as indigenous’. They wish to ‘historicize indigeneity’, severing it from sedimented stereotypes about timeless ‘tribal cultures’, while acknowledging such idealised and romantic essentialist themes are at times embraced by those identifying as ‘indigenous peoples’ as well as by activists and advocates for their cause (de la Cadena and Starn 2007: 3, 7). Here we have a number of scholars seeking to do away with equating authentic indigeneity with autochthony and the pre-modern (de la Cadena and Starn 2007: 8), promoting an understanding of indigeneity as in no way dependent on the staged native costumery that Ramos (1998), has termed in the South American context ‘the hyperreal Indian’.

Of most relevance to our work here is the notion of indigenous identities in a process of becoming, ‘not a fixed state of being’ (de la Cadena&Starn 2007:11), relational in the sense of always in dialogue with the so-called ‘nonindigenous’, and emergent in different forms in different parts of the world (de la Cadena&Starn 2007: 13). In his contribution to the volume, James Clifford points out that people are ‘improvising new ways to be native’, and that assertions of autochthony can ‘obscure important histories of movement’ (Clifford 2007:199). ‘More happens under the sign of the indigenous than being born or belonging in a bounded land or nation’ (Clifford 2007:199). Clifford thus loosens ‘the common opposition of “indigenous” and “diasporic” forms of life’. He comments (2007: 201), that the tensions between indigeneity and diaspora are ‘good to think with’.

How then might an anthropological perspective, addressing these issues and tensions, be brought to bear on a setting such as Brunei (and the wider context of Borneo)? In the Southeast Asia context, just as in other parts of the world the ways in which formal definitions of ‘indigenous peoples’ might apply are in dialogue with a host of government policies and approaches to the importance of local identity, the need for migration for economic purposes and the imperative of building national identities. Criteria for ‘indigeneity’ from such bodies as the International Labour Organization and other United Nations organizations, as well as a host of Non-Government Organisations affiliated with the international Indigenous Peoples movement, may not fit well with our research setting of Brunei Darussalam. What does this case contribute to our theoretical understandings of how the ideas of indigeneity and belonging are coming to operate across the world?

The Concept of Indigeneity in Brunei Darussalam: WHO IS ‘MALAY’

The central significance of the identity category ‘Malay’ has been discussed for Brunei (and surrounds). King (1994: 195-6) asks for:

... research on the ways in which the constituent ethnic groups of the Brunei sociopolitical system were incorporated and the consequences of these relations for the social organization, economy, and culture of such groupings as the Dusuns/Bisayas, Muruts/LunBawang, and Kadayans.

Our discussion of how the idea of being ‘indigenous’ might apply in Brunei is framed against the background of ‘the mechanics of the assimilation processes into Malay culture as they operated in Brunei society in relation to the Dusuns, Tutongs, Belaits, and others’ (King 1994: 196).

In his study of Malay identity, Yabit (2007) suggests both a general regional sense of indigeneity and a more specific meaning of being a native of a certain country. In the Brunei context, legally the concept of indigenous people (puakjati [puak = group; jati = genuine])² consists of two categories (Government of Brunei Darussalam 2002: Chapter 15): the general term ‘Malay’ and particular named groups considered to be historically ‘indigenous’ to Brunei Darussalam. ‘Other racial’ groups in Brunei are

²Other terms include peribumi and bumiputera, translating as ‘son of the soil’, hence linked to the English term ‘autochthon’.

people of Chinese, Indian and European ancestry. In addition, there are other foreigners currently residing in Brunei from countries of the Southeast Asian region, such as Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines and Malaysia.

Regarding the historical background of the concept of the 'Malay' category of person, this large identity grouping has been described as physically distinctive (Syed Hussin Ali 1981:1), and located across the region including the Malay Archipelago, encompassing Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines. The general Malay category of people includes different ethnic groups and dialects. Earlier times saw the rise of empires, such as Sriwijaya, Majapahit, and Malacca. With the fall of these empires, the territories under their dominance were divided into smaller parts, each with their own government. Western colonial powers established political boundaries that separated the Malays into different countries. The Dutch colonized a cluster of islands now known as Indonesia, whereas the British colonized the Malay Peninsula and northern Borneo, including Brunei, which was a British Protectorate until 1984.

According to Brunei's 1959 Constitution and national concept, built on the ideal of a Malay Islamic Monarchy (Md Zain 1998:41), 'Malay' is an umbrella term that encompasses seven ethnic groups, namely: Belait, Bisaya, Brunei, Dusun, Kedayan, Murut and Tutong. These 'indigenous' groups are all regarded as historically Malay irrespective of religious denomination. In Brunei, the formal identity of being Malay operates according to the legal interpretation of the constitution; the overarching Malay category is intended to establish a homogenous society from a political perspective, this being understood as the foundation of national sovereignty. The legal definition technically refers to ethnic identity rather than religion as such. However, in everyday usage the term Malay is widely accepted as having the religious connotation denoting those who profess Islam (Abd Latif 2001).³

³In nearby Malaysia, including the adjacent states of Sabah and Sarawak on Borneo, the term Malay is formally defined as 'those who profess the religion of Islam, habitually speak the Malay language, and conform to Malay customs' (Halim 2000: 136). In reality the Malaysian legal definition is again likely to be ambiguous in terms of everyday experiences among citizens, as Islam can also be the religion of those who do not identify as Malay – though Islam has become a significant identity marker for being Malay (Kerlogue 2000). Malaysia is a multi-ethnic society where increasing numbers of non-Malays are now fluent in the Malay language, practice certain Malay customs and have adopted Islam. The legal definition is thus not always consistent with patterns of cultural life & everyday practices.

Nevertheless, in Brunei, the sense of ‘belonging’ is not produced solely through the identity categories of Malay and Muslim. There are Malays and Muslims who are not perceived as ‘Brunei people’ (orang Brunei) or ‘our people’ (orang kitani). Citizenship can be obtained by persons from diverse backgrounds. Although Brunei is a predominantly Malay and Islamic country with an expectation that every citizen should understand and respect Malay culture and Islamic religion (Hashim 1999), it has been for a long time recognized that other ‘races’ and religious groups can be part of the nation. This has been clearly stated in the Nationality Act 1961 which makes provision for the acquisition of the status of a citizen of Brunei.

There are three categories of citizenship in Brunei Darussalam:

1. Subject of His Majesty by operation of law (Rakyat Sultan dengankuatkuasamutlakundang-undang)
2. Subject of His Majesty by registration (Rakyat Sultan secara Pendaftaran)
3. Subject of His Majesty by naturalization (Rakyat Sultan melalui cara penuangan taraf kebangsaan)

Apparently, being a subject of His Majesty by operation of law is limited to those of Malay or other indigenous identity as specified in the Nationality Act 1961.⁴ ‘Other races’, as well as other people who have been living in Brunei for a long time, who wish to be citizens of Brunei may apply but must fulfil the requirement stated in the Brunei Nationality Act. They will become citizens or Subjects of His Majesty by registration or by naturalization. Among other requirements, an applicant to be granted such citizenship must fulfil the following criteria:

- (e)has been examined by a Language Board and such Board is satisfied that he –
 - (i)has a knowledge of the Malay language to such a degree of proficiency as may be prescribed; and
 - (ii) is able to speak the Malay language with proficiency or is unable to speak such language with proficiency by reason of a physical impediment or an impediment of speech or hearing.

Complicating the issue further is the extent to which in everyday life people may continue to identify with local ethnic labels while remaining

⁴This Act has undergone revision accordingly in 1984 and 2002.

ambivalent about the overarching category ‘Malay’. We understand that, especially in the case of the older generation, individuals will often identify themselves with the name of their local group rather than referring to themselves as Malay. In fact, indigenous non-Muslim ethnic groups residing in the interior of Brunei can equate the term Malay with having a Muslim religious identity and hence do not think of themselves as ‘Malay’. However, among younger people since Independence in 1984, there seems to have been a paradigm shift such that non-Muslims are more receptive to embracing the identity label ‘Malay’ – this being consistent with the formal legal constitution promoting a sense in which being Malay entails a higher status (Yabit 2007) and certain material benefits (Maxwell 2001: 175-7).

Historically, the term Malay was used to refer only to one of the 7 indigenous or ethnic groups referred to above, namely the group known as ‘Brunei’ (Noor Azam 2005). This is evident from the first proper records listing ethnic classification which can be found in the 1906 Brunei Annual Report (BAR), where it would appear the largest sector of the population labelled ‘Malays’ were members of the then ‘Brunei’ indigenous group:

Est. Population 25,000:	Malays	12,000
	Kadayans	7,000
	Bisayas	4,000
	Muruts	1,000
	Chinese	500
	Other Nat	500

(Govt of Brunei 1906, cf Noor Azam 2005:16)

However, it seems peculiar that other indigenous groups, namely Belait, Dusun and Tutong, were not included in the list. Perhaps Tutong and Belait were not distinguished because they were already considered as ‘Malay’ due to religious embracing of Islam (although not all Belait were Muslims at the time); yet this could not have been the explanation regarding the Dusun, who are traditional non-Muslims. Noor Azam (2005), raises the possibility that the Dusun might have been incorporated under the Bisaya group label. In the 1924, population figures, the Belait, Dusun and Tutong are recognized as separate communities, whereas the Bisayas are referred to as the Bukits (cf Noor Azam 2005).

The Concept of Indigeneity in Brunei Darussalam: ‘Other Indigenous’ Groups

As mentioned earlier, the Brunei Nationality Act 1961, recognized other groups to be considered ‘indigenous’ (jati) to Brunei. They are Bukitans, Dayaks (sea), Dayaks (land), Kalabits, Kayans, Kenyahs (including Sabups and Sipengs), Kajangs (including Sekapans, Kejamans, Lahanans, Punans, Tajongs and Kanowits), Lugats, Lisums, Melanaus, Penans, Sians, Tagals, Tabuns and Ukits. While ‘indigenous’ they are not recognized as automatically citizens of the Brunei state; although if such a person’s father was born in Brunei, the child is legally a citizen. In the revised edition of the Brunei Nationality Act (2002), these groups are still considered indigenous (jati) to Brunei but in the recorded population statistics of the ‘other indigenous’ group for year 2001, this category has been absorbed under the general label ‘others’ (JPKE 2005). The only ‘other indigenous’ group apparently ‘visible’ in recent years are the Penan. And in 2002 a report indicated that there are only 108 Penans in Brunei (RampaiPagi [a daily morning TV program], 26 January 2002).

An interesting scenario concerns the position of the Iban in Brunei. They are people whose traditional lands are in northwestern Borneo. Those in Brunei are believed to have migrated from Sarawak during the 19th and early 20th centuries (Graham 1987) looking for work especially after oil was discovered. There was no direct mention of Iban in the Brunei Nationality Act 1961 although they may have been referred to as Dayaks (sea) (Government of Brunei 1961). However, MohdShahrolAmira (personal communication, 7 June 2008) suggests that the Ibans are hesitant to call themselves Sea Dayaks because of the negative connotation linked to piracy. According to the 1991 Census, the Ibans made up 6% of the Brunei population. Of that number, 36% are registered as citizens, 41% were permanent residents, and 23% were temporary residents.⁵

⁵While not regarded as ‘indigenous’, the further group in Brunei, is the Chinese. The Chinese are believed to have had some presence for a long time. The Syair Awang Semaun recounts that Ong Sum Peng, a Chinese Muslim was married to Princess Ratna Dewi, the daughter of the second Sultan of Brunei, Sultan Ahmad. However, Chinese mass immigration to Brunei only occurred in the early 20th century. At present, Chinese make up about 15% of the population and constitute the largest minority group. Through their involvement in business and trade, they also play a significant role in Brunei’s economy. In an interview we conducted in 2005, a senior staff member at the university explained that Chinese can apply to become citizens but would never be regarded as ‘native’ or indigenous to Brunei.

Our interviews in 2005 with several professionals working at the Universiti Brunei Darussalam and MalayTechnologyMuseum indicate that across the society, Iban are regarded somewhat ambiguously, as not legally indigenous, but as holding considerable traditional knowledge about nature and the environment. It was said they are generally known to be 'native' to Sarawak, having come to Brunei at the time of the Second World War. One scholar explained how Iban were left out of the 'native' groups of Brunei and have suffered to some extent with an ascribed low status and even been the butt of jokes connoting they are less developed or less intelligent than others. The status hierarchy in Brunei is evident in our interviews with a general assumption that it is the 'Brunei Malays' who are at the top.

Our interview in 2005 at one Iban longhouse recorded a head man aged in his 40s explaining his family origin was indeed in Sarawak. But they have lived in Brunei (not far from the border) for many years, since the head man was a child – in fact he was born in Brunei. In his view, Iban may convert to Islam and leave the long house but they return for ceremonial gatherings and other purposes, thus maintaining a strong sense of an Iban identity. In current times, this identity is apparently boosted or undergoing recuperation in part through production and sale of distinctive Iban handcrafts and artefacts.

Identity Shifts in Brunei

Dahl (2001, cited in Noor Azam 2005: 105), suggests that 'people shift through cultures, and identities. Cultures do converge, new identities do arise'. In Brunei, the socio-political and socio-cultural trends we have outlined have enabled (if not facilitated) such change and identity shifting, such that the issue of 'indigenous' belonging is complex and emergent (Hashim 1999; Noor Azam 2005; Yabit 2007). Here we discuss how identity shift in Brunei is influenced in a major way by: i) conversion to Islam, ii) intermarriage practices and iii) education.

i) Conversion to Islam:

As mentioned earlier the legal definition of the Malay identity category does not technically involve religious connotations and in fact not all Malays are Muslim in Brunei. However, conversion to Islam is indeed accepted as an avenue for becoming Malay. AbdLatif (2001) argues that a Muslim convert will sooner or later adopt and integrate him or herself to the way of life of the Brunei Malay community which is the dominant culture in Brunei Darussalam. When other indigenous groups (such as Iban and Penan) and

non-indigenous non-Muslim groups (such as the Chinese) undertake conversion to Islam, this is understood as a conversion to Malay ethnicity. Converting to Islam can entail a sense of losing one's identity and embracing Malay ethnicity (Martin and Sercombe 1996:309).

ii) Intermarriage Practices:

Traditionally, intermarriage is not common in Brunei. Marriage is a family affair and parents play a significant role in giving their consent. Arranged marriage was common in the past as parents would choose the partners of their children. Frequently, to safeguard their social status and prevent property from going to strangers, parents preferred to marry their children to their own kin, or at least within the same ethnic group and social stratum. In current times, arranged marriages are no longer common although parental approval remains significant. Intermarriage between different ethnic and social groups has also come to be widely accepted (SitiNorkhalbi 2007).

The acceptance of intermarriage has given impetus to what we are terming identity shift in Brunei. Marriage between Malay men and non-Malay women results in children legally inheriting their father's ethnicity. There are also instances where non-Malay men marry Malay women and are then absorbed into their wives' identity and practicing of aspects of Malay culture. Noor Azam's (2005) research finding on language shift shows that couples from different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds are commonly adopting Malay language and custom out of convenience. When a Muslim wants to marry a non-Muslim, the non-Muslim must convert to Islam. Not only is such conversion seen as a change of religious status but also as an integration process of becoming Malay (AbdLatif 2001).

iii) Education:

Education has been accessible to all people in Brunei and this has significantly influenced identity shifts. Malay is a significant subject of study and in fact no one can be promoted to a higher level without passing it. In addition, there is a sense in which Malay culture has come to dominate the general school environment. Due to socialization in such an environment for young people, Brunei Malay culture has influenced other ethnic groups, exercising considerable pressure towards assimilation. Yabit (2007), notes that the younger generations among the minority groups of below 30 years of age have moved towards adopting a Malay identity. Such a move has been due to openings of new opportunities in employment

especially in the public sectors which emphasize good understanding of Malay culture.

While we cannot discuss this subject expansively here, the theme of identity shift has been evident in our interviews. An illustrative case is our discussion with a small group identifying with Belait history and culture in the west of Brunei. In 2005, the senior man seeking to create a cultural tourism enterprise based around a reconstructed historical style of house on the Belait River, explained the difficulties of teaching young people about the different ethnic histories of indigenous groups in Brunei. He pointed out that young people learn all they know these days from television and that there is little in school teaching them about the history of their ancestors' practical living skills in the environment. This leads us to the question of the relationship between nature, cultural identity and 'indigeneity' in Brunei.

Is 'Nature' Significant For The Construction of Cultural Identities in Brunei?

This question might be asked more properly in ecological terms of the entire island of Borneo. We are interested in the extent to which nature is made a vehicle for nationalist sentiment. In the Brunei case, we find some articulation of the idea of plants and animals that 'belong' to Brunei. For example, there is the extensive work of Dr Serudin Tinggal (1992), examining the properties and characteristics of wild fruit-producing species of plants. In introducing this publication, the then Minister of Education mobilized 'nature' in the interests of national identity-making in Brunei (Serudin 1992, preface):

"Many fruits are indigenous growing in special ecological niches, rare, uncommon and unfamiliar even in the country. Others are exclusively Bruneian flora unknown outside Brunei Darussalam. Collectively, these fruits symbolize the country's botanical heritage".

Whether there are any or many species which could be endemic to Brunei is doubtful as there are no ecological boundaries between the Brunei state and the surrounding states of Sarawak and Sabah. However, if there are any aspects of 'ecological nationalism' (Hage 1998: 165ff; Morton and Smith 1999) in the Brunei context, they may involve such proud articulations of the qualities of Brunei fruits as are celebrated in Serudin's book. Other publications similarly celebrate the natural qualities of species

in Brunei, e.g. Jackes and Nyawa's (2003) profiling of herbs, small shrubs and climbing plants in the TasekMerimbunHeritagePark. Wong and Kamariah (1999) write similarly on Forests & trees of Brunei Darussalam. As well, a host of tourism publications promote an alleged distinctive Brunei ecology, e.g. in the publication 'The Green heart of Borneo' (see www.tourismbrunei.com).

Serudin's work includes a comparison of biodiversity between Peninsular Malaysia as a whole and Brunei in particular and he concludes that there is a higher number of species per sq km in Brunei (Serudin 1992:143). Serudin comments (1992: 143) that: 'Brunei although small in geographic area, is regarded as having one of the richest diversity of plant and animal life'; and that (Serudin 1992:144): 'These species, many having traditional affinity to Bruneians, are most vulnerable with each wave of development' [our emphasis]. Serudin argues that: 'Many of these fruits have their origin in Brunei Darussalam' (Serudin 1992: 145), thus suggesting in these sorts of comments, that there is an intimate relationship of connection between certain flora and the history and culture of Brunei society.

Furthermore, we are aware of a number of illustrative cases where particular natural species have been focused on as emblematic of an 'indigenous' or 'native' identity for the society. The BungaSimpur plant (*Dillenia suffruticosa*) was adopted as a national flower, officially launched in 2000 when Brunei hosted a major APEC meeting. During the meeting, the flower was used as a logo and made into lapel pins and brooches given to all leaders and their wives. Of course, this species grows widely beyond the boundary of Brunei,⁶ yet it is mobilized to inform a distinctive Bruneian identity. In a similar way, certain species and ecological environments are celebrated as emblems, if not icons, of the Brunei nation through imprinting on currency notes. Examples, include simpurgajah (riverside simpur) on the front of the \$1 note with a rainforest waterfall (Air terjuntropika) on the back. On the \$5 note, we have the Somboi-somboi (Pitcher plant) and Rainforest Floor (LantaiHutanTropika) at the back; on the front of the \$10 note, there is the KeladiLaut (Purple leafed forest Yam) and on the back a Rainforest Canopy (KanopiHutanTropika). On the \$50 note, there is the TepusKantan (*Etlingera Solaris*) and on the back BelukarTropikal (Tropical shrub); and finally, with the \$100 note we have on the front the kuduk-

⁶As is the case for other plants or flowers used as national emblems, e.g. the hibiscus in the case of Malaysia, and orchids in Singapore.

kuduk (*Melastoma Malabathricum*), and on the back the woods of the Pulau Chermin (a small Island in Brunei).⁷

Nevertheless, we would not wish to over emphasise this usage of nature to articulate Brunei identity. At least, we must acknowledge that these species and landscapes might also be constructed as emblematic of other parts of Borneo. And we do not assume that ‘native’ plants and animals are necessarily valued more highly in Brunei than a host of other species. Preliminary inquiries indicate that the nation is full of desired species drawn from outside not only Brunei but Borneo as well. On a fieldwork visit to one of the small number of plant nurseries in Brunei, it was clear that vendors apparently bring their seedlings and larger plants to sell from a wide range of origins. Women working at the nursery explained that most of the plants they had for sale were grown from seeds they buy from importers; with seeds coming particularly from Thailand. They pointed out a relatively small number of plants being sold that were “Bruneian” as such. So while official discourses celebrate certain features of nature made emblematic of the nation, in everyday life citizens are apparently much less concerned about focusing conceptually on the ‘native’ or ‘indigenous’ aspects of Brunei’s environments.

In our interviews with Dr Serudin, as well as with two curators at the Malay Technology Museum in Bandar Seri Begawan in 2005, we broached the importance of preserving biodiversity in Brunei. All pointed out that local level knowledge of environments is waning. Young people are losing knowledge of the Brunei ecology but this is concerning mainly for those professionally interested in natural science. To quote: ‘It’s a dying kind of tradition, people don’t know much about plants and animals anymore’. The Museum scientists (Curators of Ethnography and Natural History) say that officially the Brunei government sectors dealing with environment are concerned about maintaining what are understood to be ‘native species’, but younger people throughout the society have limited interest in such matters. As one of the interviewees put it: ‘My father knew but I don’t. Parents also are confused on this. We grew up in boarding school and we never returned to our village [in the Tutong district], so since the age of ten, they’d [people of our generation] never learned from our elders all these things on the wildlife. We lost the knowledge’. As less people are interested in plants for traditional ritual uses, ‘because of the strong influence of Islam’, ‘native

⁷Pulau can be translated as Island, Chermin - directly translated as mirror.

tradition, especially when it comes to do with anything to do with superstitions, they don't look for those plants anymore because they are not practising rituals anymore'.

In the Belait district, we interviewed the small group seeking to recuperate aspects of village traditions, partly to promote cultural tourism but also to teach young people aspects of their forebears' cultural practices and beliefs. The senior man present commented: 'So I intend to tell them [young people] that this type of house [lived in around the BelaitRiver area prior to major changes through economic development] they've [their ancestors have] been living before. Hopefully, they [young people] like to see that. But unfortunately they say it is boring to do this type of work'. He further commented that, while 'through the father, children are Belait', most 'Belait Malays [are] now integrated into Melayu [a Malay identity], children don't speak Belait, though they understand. So to communicate to my children I have to speak Malay'.

Conclusion

In light of the theoretical literature with which we introduced this paper, whereby current theorists regard the idea of 'indigeneity' as an emergent and changing cultural category, what does our case of Brunei offer in terms of better understanding this issue comparatively across countries with different cultural histories? Writers such as Maxwell (2001: 174), have pointed out that the presence of multiple ethnic groups generally 'may explain why there is such an intense focus on Malay ethnicity in Brunei'. Maxwell (2001:182), comments on the historical process whereby a Malay identity has gradually achieved overwhelming significance. We have discussed how any addressing of 'indigenous' status must thus deal with the ambiguities and tensions involved in the ways 'Malayness' is understood against the historical background of the minority ethnic distinctions in Brunei.

In the paper, we have presented an overview of this process whereby the idea of a native or indigenous identity has been transformed from a number of distinctive cultural groups into a nationwide societal ideal of 'Malayness', a cultural category in significant respects also linked to the religious status of Islam. We have not found the conventional debates about culturally distinctive 'indigenous peoples', and their emergence from a

history of colonization, to have high profile or visibility in Brunei – though it is an interesting question as to whether this may change in the future.⁸

In the later part of the paper, we have been particularly interested to build a discussion that asks about the role of nature in the intellectual construction of indigenous and other cultural identities. Our inquiries to this point indicate considerable intellectual use of certain plant species as emblems for the Brunei State; but little in the way of widespread knowledge about features of the environment. Nevertheless, it would seem ‘ecotionalism’ may well develop more fulsomely in Brunei, particularly if linked to perceived opportunities for eco- and cultural tourism. Yet, if cultural identities in conjunction with ‘indigenous’ landscapes are to be celebrated because they are both distinctively ‘native’ to the Brunei nation, such a process may well be in tension with the sense of growing allegiance to the ideologies of Malayness and Islam.

What we hope to underscore is that application of ideas of ‘indigeneity’, in a context such as Brunei, must transcend any assumptions that being ‘native’ is connected to an unchanging set of cultural traditions. If there is to develop a greater reliance on ideas of being ‘indigenous’, the underlying concepts put to intellectual and symbolic use in this way, will necessarily encompass flexible visions of how such an identity category changes and emerges over time. It is in this sense that the case of Brunei connects with current approaches to theorising the potential relevance of the concept of indigeneity for social analysis across very different cultural settings.

⁸Here we may note, for example, King’s (2001: 3) comment on attempts by ‘indigenous elites’ in Sarawak and Kalimantan to create ‘Dayak’ political consciousness.

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