

AL AZHAR

Malayness in Riau

The Study and Revitalization of Identity

In the province of Riau, to present oneself as 'a man from Riau', as one 'whose homeland is Riau', as 'a son of the Riau soil', or as 'a real native of Riau' in everyday conversations is not without a burden these days.¹ In the presence of the powers-that-be, the above designations can easily be interpreted as a philosophical statement that expresses a desire to break away from the unity and oneness of the nation as defined by the state ideology. 'A son of the Riau soil': it sounds like an attempt to break with the *wawasan nusantara*, the vision of the archipelago as a political entity, which in New Order Indonesia is considered of such great importance that it has been made a compulsory subject in the curriculum of schools and universities.

When stated in the presence of one or more so-called newcomers – those who may have been living in Riau for two generations – such a phrase may easily be understood as a rejection of their being in a particular area that was ordained to enter the map of the Indonesian Republic. Meanwhile, in the presence of people whose ancestors have been living in Riau from generation to generation, people, that is, who feel they are Riau Malays, the statement will most likely bring about more problems, for instance the formulation of an answer to the question: 'What kind of Malay are you?' In this respect, by the way, the people of East Timor and Irian Jaya are better off because they can state openly who they are, although therefore they recently had to put up with allegations of being wrong, 'not yet advanced' and narrow-minded, a frame of mind which then is immediately forgiven: they became a part of Indonesia much later.

When a well-educated urbanite who holds a certain position in the government presents himself as a 'Riau Malay' among rural Riau Malays, the burden will perhaps be heavier: he is expected to do more for Riau, to help his kin to improve their situation in life and to promote the realization of the dream of the Riau people: become masters of the house in their own land.

The phrase 'to become masters of the house in their own land' suggests many things. One of them is the feeling that the Malays have been robbed of a kind of wealth, a feeling that so far has never been articulated. Needless to say, the Malays of Riau today are not the leading actors in all the

¹ This paper was translated from Indonesian into English by Will Derks.

changes that are being brought about in their own land. Recent economic development in terms of rise in income per capita has not created a more prosperous life for them. On the contrary, in various areas of the province of Riau that have been made into cornerstones of the Indonesian economy, the Malays who have been living there for generations have been pushed to the margins. On the islands of Batam, Bintan and – before long – Rempang and Galang that are designed to become centers of industry and tourism, the cries of fishermen and coastal dwellers resound because the prices of the daily necessities have been rising while their earnings from fishing and agriculture have remained the same or even dropped. Because of the growth of industry and tourism set in motion by newcomers, the land inherited by the Malays from generation to generation has been reduced in size. Recently enormous natural gas deposits were found in Pulau Tujuh (Natuna archipelago) on the outer fringes of the province; it is to be expected that the thunderclaps of investment and exploitation there will soon increase the cries of the original inhabitants of that area too, adding to the cries over being isolated from the accelerated development.

The same holds true for the mainland part of the province, often referred to as the 'American settlement on Riau soil'. For a long time, the Riau people have been well aware of the fact that PT Caltex Pacific Indonesia, operating on the Riau mainland, has made a pivotal contribution to the Indonesian economy. For an equally long period of time, however, Riau Malays could put any hope right out of their heads that this oil company, in cooperation with the central government, was to reserve a part of the profits from the richness of the Riau soil for the good of the local people. After decades of exploration the Sakai, who are officially categorized as an 'isolated tribe', have been joined by the former rulers and commoners of the sultanate of Siak Sri Indrapura, the traditional owners of the land: they also have become 'isolated'. Tenas Effendy – a local expert who for most of his life has closely observed what he calls the *masyarakat pedalaman* (peoples from the interior), or the *orang asli* (autochthonous peoples) – once made a bitter statement that summarizes it all: 'The Sakai and the people in the hinterland have not decreased but rather increased in number because many other Malays, defeated by the whirl of change, have moved into the interior'.

On the mainland, the so-called *orang asli* as well as the former nobility and their subjects of the Malay sultanates in the interior and on the east coast of Sumatra have depended on agricultural and forest products since the days of old; now they are being pressed to transfer their personal and customary claims on land, forests and rivers to giant, cash-rich companies that have started to set up plantations and industry-related forestry there. The vast secondary jungle around the small Malay villages that since time immemorial was used as a reserve for swidden cultivation, has been transformed into oil palm plantations. These are surrounded by settlements where tens of thousands of workers are living, people from other parts of

the country who came on their own initiative or were brought in by companies operating in the name of national economic progress. The vast forests, parts of which have been protected by the sayings and proverbs of Malay customary law for centuries, are close to total annihilation. Its multifarious trees are cut to feed plywood and paper factories. Also in the vicinity of these factories, new villages are emerging, inhabited by people whose world view is totally different from the world view of the inhabitants of most Malay villages. On the one hand is a world view adapted to the movement of machines and the terms of employment dictated by a boss, on the other hand is a world view shaped by the past and tradition.

This conflict of world views has not yet led to physical violence, as was the case in Aceh and, more recently, in East Timor and Timika, Irian Jaya. Since they were confronted with their 'brothers', the transmigrants from Java, in the 1970s, the Malays of Riau have chosen to remain 'silent' toward these 'newcomers'. This silence toward newcomers appears to constitute a change in attitude among Malay groups in Riau. In the past, a country that attracted or invited people to come and settle down was considered to be well managed by an able ruler, and to give newcomers a warm welcome was to act in the appropriate manner. Many Malay tales of old tell us how newcomers such as traders and traveling students were given all the space they needed; the interaction between original inhabitants and newcomers stimulated the dynamics of Malay behavior, tradition and culture. Purity in terms of a 'strictly Malay tradition' that rejected outside influences was not considered an ideal, and the formation of a *budaya kacukan*, a hybrid culture, was not seen as a problem. Hybridity could lead but to modesty and elegance, so finely illustrated, for instance, by the playful conversation between some Indrapuran singers and Laksamana Hang Tuah in the *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, one of the greatest Malay works of all time:

Maka kata biduan itu: '[...] Sungguh beta Melayu, kacukan juga, bukan seperti Melayu Melaka sungguh.' Maka Laksamana pun tersenyum seraya berkata, 'Orang Melaka gerangan Melayu kacukan, bercampur dengan Jawa Majapahit!' (Ahmad 1975:189.)²

And the singers said: '[...] Really, we may be Malays, but we are hybrid, not like the real Malays of Malacca.' The Laksamana [Hang Tuah] smiled and said: 'Maybe the people of Malacca are hybrid as well, mixed as they are with the Javanese of Majapahit, that is.'

Because of this very hybridity people were given a place of respect in the Malay world. Hang Tuah is just one example. The people from the Holy Land are another, as are those who returned from the pilgrimage to Mecca and started to spread the teachings of Islam they had absorbed there.

² See also the contribution of Henk Maier to this volume.

Those days are over: newcomers can no longer expect to be treated with respect and warmth.

How to interpret this shift from giving a warm welcome to newcomers to being silent toward them? What does it mean, what does it imply? The problem perhaps is that among Malay groups in Riau there is a growing awareness that their hopes and desires, shaped by the tradition and culture they have inherited, are no longer reflected by the rules and regulations that are governing public life in Riau today. For instance, consider the sector of political power and the bureaucracy. Although quite a few Riau Malay men and women are serving in governmental institutions, they are always mere instruments of power who have been ordered to implement the guidelines of the 'center of excellence' in Jakarta. Their role amounts to nothing more than being a spearhead for securing the policies that are decided in the capital, even though often enough this spearhead is pointed at and ready to stab not only their kith and kin outside the circle of power, but also their own conscience. Here it is tempting to draw a comparison with the past.

In the early eighteenth century the Dutch became involved in the power struggle between Raja Kecil and Johor. In the last quarter of the eighteenth century the Yang Dipertuan Muda (viceroy) of Riau, Raja Haji, was killed in Teluk Ketapang near Malacca in a battle against the Dutch. In the first quarter of the nineteenth century the British and the Dutch signed an agreement, called the Treaty of London (1824), whereby Riau-Lingga-Johor-Pahang became *Riouw-Liengga* and Johor and Pahang. Raffles changed Temasik into *Singapore*. Subsequently Sultan Mahmud Muzaffarsyah was deposed by the Dutch in 1856, among other things because he was said to be incompetent, residing more often in *Singapore* than in Lingga. A nascent revolt in Reteh was suppressed. The sultanate of Riau-Lingga was liquidated by the Dutch, *de jure* in 1911, *de facto* in 1913. Those were the highlights that mark the defeat of Riau as the basis of Malay power. The highlights: they show that the Malays of Riau were capable of escaping crises, time and time again building on what the colonial victors left behind, improving and strengthening their position by constantly bargaining with the colonialists. Whatever may happen, 'tak hilang Melayu di bumi' (the Malays will never disappear from the face of the earth); the more so in the coastal area of Sumatra where the sultanate of Siak Sri Indrapura successfully developed a political and economic hegemony that reached throughout East Sumatra to Temiang in Aceh.

In 1945 Indonesia proclaimed its independence; Batavia became Jakarta; minor and major kingdoms united in the form of a republic. The 'terror of fear' that soon came to be remembered as the 'Social Revolution' destroyed not only Dutch power but also the self-esteem and courage of Sultans and nobility who for so many centuries had been the rallying point for Malays. In the second decade of Independence, the economy of the common people in the Riau archipelago was destroyed,

first by the policy of *dedolarisasi*, then by the command to crush Malaysia (*ganyang Malaysia*). One of the fruits of the affluence in the Riau archipelago before the *dedolarisasi* had been that it had opened up possibilities for the children of the land to go to school and prepare themselves to become an alternative rallying point once the era of Sultans, nobility and theologians had expired.

Thus the winds and the currents changed direction, carrying away the self-confidence as well as the tradition of the Malays of Riau, heralding a totally new era in which the Malays adjusted themselves little by little to survive. The fact that they chose to be silent in all these changes, showed that the traditional idea of how to behave toward the ruler persisted. Loyalty (*setia*), that is, not insubordination (*durhaka*). Their idealtype was Hang Tuah, not Hang Jebat.

But in the long run this new era also sowed other seeds. Malays started to question themselves: Who am I? Where do I come from? Where should I locate myself? In the search for answers to these questions efforts were made to retrieve lost self-confidence. These people were born from stock bred by life in the cities and towns of the province of Riau after the thunderous rhetoric of the Indonesian Revolution and the turmoil of 1965. Of course, many thrived on the education they obtained in the schools of Tanjung Pinang, Pekanbaru and other small towns in Riau and beyond.

To complete the development of their abilities, forms of higher education came into being in Pekanbaru in the early 1960s, where, apart from academics from other parts of Sumatra, a number of Malays who had obtained tertiary degrees from universities in Java were employed. The capital of a province, Pekanbaru, was in that first phase not a 'Malay city' in the sense that all important stimuli for its development were given by Malays from the former sultanates of Siak Sri Indrapura, Kampar, Indragiri, Rokan and Riau-Lingga. As a result, 'Malayness' was hardly palpable in this city in the early 1960s. As is still the case today, the political power and the bureaucracy – even though for a small part in the hands of Malays – were made to toe the line that was determined by the center. The markets and the harbor became filled with newcomers, many of them originating from Minangkabau who considered Pekanbaru to be their nearest settlement 'abroad'; a part of Sumatra under their suzerainty that in 1958 was suddenly lost when Riau became a province of its own, detached from Sumatera Tengah (Central Sumatra) that was controlled from Bukittinggi.

In the field of the performing arts something similar happened: certain dance forms that had their source in movements from Minangkabau martial arts were performed more often than *joget*, *zapin* and *Serampang Dua Belas*; *randai* was watched more often than dramatized stories from the rich Malay heritage such as *Laksamana Bintan*, *Hang Tuah* and *Lancang Kuning*, presented in a style that mixed elements of *bangsawan* and modern drama. This, at least, is the impression one receives from statements

by several elderly artists who are really rooted in Riau; statements that were made on the occasion of various meetings that were organized to reflect upon present-day cultural life in that province. Some of these older artists are now employed by that part of the government that handles the arts, for instance the Bidang Kesenian Kantor Wilayah Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan (Regional Arts Department of the Ministry for Education and Culture) or the Taman Budaya (Culture Park). In such a position they play an important role in the 'Malayization' of the performing arts in Riau, for example by formulating the criteria for a contest or a festival that may read as follows: 'the dances (or music or stories) that are presented have their source in the rich Riau Malay cultural heritage'. The question of what a work of art might entail that has its source in this rich Riau Malay cultural heritage is, of course, open to debate and indeed it is often hotly debated. Some artists in Riau view these criteria as a limitation that is at variance with the principle of creative freedom. Others, including some present-day Riau Malay students of culture as well as opinion leaders, see this limitation as a necessary means to create an image of the wealth of Malay arts.

Membangkit batang terendam, to bring a submerged tree trunk to the surface, is an expression that is perfectly well known by the 'engineers of Malayness' in the field of the arts in Riau. It allows at least two interpretations: firstly, the role of the Malays in Riau has become weak; secondly, awareness is emerging that an identity can be created by way of looking back to the neglected heritage from the past. Since the early 1970s energetic efforts have been undertaken to unearth the cultural heritage for the sake of conservation as well as adaptation to contemporary needs. These efforts are an example of what Umar Kayam phrased 'the search for a generally agreed upon "idiom" with which the heritage offered by history could be brought into blossom' (Kayam 1981:17). This search became a nationwide project and for Indonesia as a whole this project culminated in an endeavor to formulate an answer to the question: What is a national culture? That was the question that was posed on the highest level, the center; it trickled down to the regions in the form of another question: What is a regional culture? What is its red thread? How can its abstract traits be demonstrated in a concrete way in that region itself? In Riau the answer to these questions was not so easy to find: each Malay group created its own memory of the past. For instance, the triumphal arches that were erected since the mid-1980s in towns and near village borders in Riau are, in their present form, considered by many as a symbol of mainland Riau dominance, particularly the area of the former sultanate of Siak Sri Indrapura, over the province of Riau as a whole.

Within these dynamics in the field of arts and culture, the institutions of higher education in Riau also began to contribute something to the means for rediscovering the Malay heritage in Riau. In 1972 U.U. Hamidy, a lecturer at the Universitas Riau, published a short treatise entitled *Bahasa*

Melayu Riau (The Riau Malay Language), in which the meaning of Riau Malay for Indonesian was explored. This little book was the first in a long series of writings about the Riau Malay language and its dialects, in the form of books, papers, research reports and master theses by students in Riau who did not forget to emphasize or glorify the role that Riau Malay language has played in the birth, growth and development of Indonesian. U.U. Hamidy has rightly been regarded a pioneer; he stimulated scholars of education, history and Indonesian language and literature at the Universitas Riau to pay attention to the publications of Hasan Junus about the group of Malay authors on the island of Penyengat in the nineteenth and the early twentieth century. As a result, the writings that were produced in the sultanate of Riau-Lingga and its dependencies became an object of lively investigations. Above all, the 'Riauness' of these writings was explored; if necessary the Malayness of authors who did not originate from Riau Lingga, for instance Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir Munsyi, was ignored.

In the early 1970s the 'bringing to the surface of the submerged tree trunk' became one of the top priority projects at the Universitas Riau. Together with the regional government this university organized a seminar on the history of Riau, the proceedings of which were published as a book in 1976 under the title *Sejarah Riau* (The History of Riau). One of the objectives of this seminar was to collect the scattered studies, ideas and memories concerning the past of the areas that were united in the province of Riau, including their development in various fields until the beginning of the New Order. As a reference work this book is still of great help for researchers and students of regional historiography of the Universitas Riau, the Universitas Islam Riau, the Universitas Lancang Kuning, the IAIN Sultan Syarif Qasim (Susqa), as well as others outside the Riau academia. In 1982 the Universitas Riau defined two main goals of scholarly activities (*pola ilmiah pokok*), one of which was 'the advancement of the illustrious Riau Malay language and culture'. The organization of this program by the Universitas Riau was obstructed by internal difficulties, although eventually a part of it was implemented thanks to the efforts of certain individuals and other institutions. A few years later, the Universitas Lancang Kuning adopted this field of study as its own *pola ilmiah pokok*. But so far the results of this decision have been meager. More recently the Universitas Riau founded a new research institute, the Pusat Kajian Bahasa dan Kebudayaan Melayu (Center for the Study of Malay Language and Culture), shortly after the Universitas Islam Riau had established its Pusat Pengajian Melayu (Center for Malay Studies).

From this short summary of the activities of the various universities in Riau it should be obvious that the creation of formal research institutions for Malay culture does not guarantee the immediate emergence of important publications. Neither does it guarantee a growth in the number of researchers. The mere fact that these institutions were created in Riau should, most of all, be understood as an indication that those who created

them formally agree on the importance and usefulness of solving the problems that are placed on the regional (and national) agenda. The formal recognition of the importance of Malay Studies by the three universities of Riau suggests that the interest for Malay culture is growing.

The libraries in this field are poorly supplied. Therefore, university classes, symposia and seminars play an important role for the researchers as well as for the quality of their research. In 1978, long before the decision makers in the field of Indonesian education advocated curricula that partly consist of *muatan lokal* (teachings that have their source in specific local needs), the students of Indonesian language and literature at the Universitas Riau could already attend courses on 'Malay Tradition' as well as 'Regional Literature,' given by, again, U.U. Hamidy. The teaching materials were based on his own research (he wrote more than thirty books and research reports!), ranging from customs in Malay villages handed down from the past to Malay ceremonies connected to the life cycle, from Malay shamanism to Malay social systems. Similar courses were subsequently developed at Universitas Islam Riau and Universitas Lancang Kuning.

Although casuistic in nature, not very systematic and far from comprehensive, these courses on 'Malay Tradition' stimulated the interest from students of the three universities in Riau, and even those of the IAIN Susqa. This becomes clear from the inventory of senior theses by university students in Riau focusing on the Malay cultural heritage that was made by the Pusat Pengajian Melayu (Universitas Islam Riau). Over a period of fifteen years (1979-1994), no less than 310 theses were written on this subject. Among them more than a hundred dealt with 'Malay tradition' within the framework outlined by U.U. Hamidy (ceremonies connected to the life cycle; means of existence; value systems; traditional leadership, et cetera); the others were concerned with the Malay language and its dialects in Riau, oral tradition, and performing arts (Supriadi, forthcoming). Perhaps not surprisingly, there was a close relationship between the kind of 'Malay tradition' that was chosen as the subject of the thesis and the area where the students came from; students from Kuantan, for instance, who wanted to write a thesis about 'Malay tradition', were inclined to choose one or more aspects of tradition in their own place of origin. Their choice to 'go home' after more than four years of 'emigration' to an institution of higher education was clearly a way of giving meaning to the increasingly strong search for and revitalization of Malay identity in Riau.

As was suggested above, the search for the Malay identity in Riau, leading to a revitalization of Malayness, has become an urgent issue for Riau Malays who live 'abroad' in the cities, particularly in Pekanbaru. Their transcendental wanderings through years of study, reading and working seem to have brought them to a habit of questioning the status quo; more than just a longing for the pleasures of an imagined past, this questioning easily results in the demand that the original inhabitants of Riau be given a greater role to play. This is reflected in the following

statement: 'The status of the original inhabitants of Riau, the Malays of Riau, has changed into that of a minority in their own land.' Their access to information and the machinery of power in Pekanbaru strengthens their belief in the truth of this statement. What is often felt to be awry in the several decisions and actions of the authorities on all levels in Riau is the acute absence of the intention and objective to protect the interests of the original inhabitants. In support of this statement, the intelligentsia point to the concrete example of the progress achieved by their near kin in Malaysia: the heirs of Malay culture are capable of competing with the heirs of whatever other culture if only they are given the chance to do so. The preconditions for Malay greatness of the days of old, too, are explored; they are brought forward in the numerous debates on the issue and in particular the decision makers in Riau are constantly reminded of it. To lessen the suspicion and perturbation of some of the newcomers, other examples that are taken from the past are also given: until they ceased to exist, Malacca and other Malay sultanates welcomed people from lands 'to its leeward' as well as 'to its landward'. The more populous a country was and the more newcomers came and visited it, the more prosperous it was considered to be.

But doubts arise also among some 'supporters of the Malays', as is reflected in the saying *Melayu sukar dipersatukan* (Malays are difficult to unite). Obviously, this is the favorite expression of those who consider 'unity' to be a *conditio sine qua non* for progress; today this view is held by many people who are worried about the Malays in Riau. Small wonder that studies and conversations in Riau usually focus on one of the two following topics: either the search for the greatness of the Malay heritage or the search for a Malay identity that is acceptable to all groups. The first one may strengthen the self-confidence of the Malays as a dignified people, while the second one endeavors to reformulate the traits and characteristics of Malayness that not only are able to resist the threats of foreign cultures, but also provide opportunities to participate in global change.

Both of these streams will perhaps continue to be followed until the Malays in Riau succeed in solving the problem of their alienation in their own land; until they are able to answer the question of their identity themselves by paying heed to contemporary phenomena (the formulation of which perhaps does not have its source in the past). In the meantime, the question of why Malay studies are so important and urgent can perhaps best be answered by the following statement by Tenas Effendy: *Melayu di Riau hari ini, pucuknya mekar akarnya layu* (As for the Malays in Riau today, their leaf buds are unfolding while their roots are pining away).

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