Indonesia-Malaysia Relations:
Cultural Heritage and the Politics of Garuda vs Harimau

Marshall Clark

This presentation today, which I have been working on since late 2011, is part of a new project for me. This paper is part of an overall project examining the transnational cultural and politics flows between Indonesia and Malaysia. I should confess from the outset that I was trained as an Indonesianist, but by the same token by looking further afield, at not just Indonesia’s foreign relations but also the society and politics of its neighbours, this project is in one respect also a fresh way to better understand Indonesia. Many other Indonesianists have looked at other countries as a way of generating fresh insights into Indonesia, and I would place this as one of my aims. Indeed, some of the most respected Indonesianists who have lived and worked here in the nation’s capital have been well known as commentators of both Indonesia and Malaysia.

To analyse Indonesia-Malaysia relations, we really do need a variety of divergent fields and a multiplicity of explanations. This in fact is what has occurred. In general, there have been two dominant approaches to Indonesia-Malaysia relations. The first dominant mode has been 1) to look at Indonesia-Malaysia political relations, either from the perspective of political history or from International Relations. The second dominant mode has been 2) to compare the two nations side by side.

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2 Dr Marshall Clark is Senior Lecturer at the Institute for Professional Practice in Heritage and the Arts, Research School of Humanities and the Arts, ANU), who is currently completing a co-authored book, Indonesia’s Relationship with Malaysia: Cultural Heritage, Migrant Labour and Politics (Routledge, forthcoming).
In terms of the first approach, Jamie Mackie’s book on the historical contours of Indonesia’s confrontation with Malaysia from 1963-66 is a good example. Joseph Chinyong Liow’s 2006 book, *Indonesia-Malaysia Relations*, written from could be loosely classed as an “International Relations perspective”, is also a strong case study.

In terms of comparisons between Indonesia and Malaysia, Tony Milner’s recent book *The Malays*, is an excellent example of this genre, and Ariel Heryanto has also written a few essays and an edited a book or two comparing the two countries. To some extent the various other Indonesianists writing on Malaysia have dabbled in comparisons between the societies, cultures and politics of the two.

In recent years, a third approach has emerged, exploring the flows and interactions between the two nations, highlighting the ‘entangled’ histories of the two. This has been most popular among anthropologists, especially those examining the cross-border or inter-island flows of legal and illegal workers, including sex workers. This transnational approach has also become increasingly popular in Europe, where it is a case not so much of world or regional history overcoming the dominance of national history, but rather a case of transnational European scholars becoming increasingly interested in cultural transfers, of transnational flows in business and trade. The rise of the EU and the notion of a ‘regional identity’ have encouraged this scholarly approach. In Southeast Asia, the persistence of ASEAN, against all odds, has led to increasing interest in regional approaches to the societies and politics of Southeast Asia.

My own approach to understanding Indonesia and Malaysia relations is to focus on transnational flows, be they in terms of culture, politics, diplomacy, trade, labour. One key element of a transnational approach is cultural heritage, and today’s paper is a test run of this.

But I will start by asking why examine the Indonesia-Malaysia relationship? This relationship has been described as one of the most important bilateral relationships in Southeast Asia, not least because Indonesia, with a population of 240 million plus, is the largest and most important nation in Southeast Asia. Malaysia is much smaller than Indonesia, with a population of just under 30 million, but it is much more advanced economically and has enjoyed a democracy of sorts for a lot longer than Indonesia. Since Indonesia’s transition
from authoritarianism to democracy, however, Indonesia has progressed much further politically than Malaysia. Where does culture or heritage come into it? I would argue that almost any time the issue of Indonesia-Malaysia relations are raised, cultural heritage comes into play. For instance, both states often reiterate that they are committed to the relationship and as if to prove this a great deal has been made about their similar ‘stock’ (serumpun) and much vaunted ‘sibling’ identity (persaudaraan). A common culture, religion and to some extent ethnicity has been able to sandpaper over any perceived or real political tensions. But over the last decade or so, with or without a shared heritage, bilateral relations have been strained by various issues, many of them heritage-related.

The year 2009 was a particularly bad year, with anti-Malaysia demonstrations occurring in Jakarta associated with a maritime border dispute over Ambalat, a block of oil-rich maritime territory off the coast of eastern Borneo. In 2009 the alleged mistreatment of the Indonesian model Manohara by her Malaysian husband, the Prince of Kelantan, also caused protests and a mini-bilateral brouhaha. In addition to these cases, both of which you could write a book chapter if not an entire book about, there was a public outcry in Indonesia after Malaysia allegedly lodged intangible cultural heritage claims with UNESCO to a variety of supposedly Indonesian cultural forms.

The staking of claims over each other’s culture came to a head when in mid-2009 UNESCO recognised batik, a wax-resistant dyeing technique, as a distinctly Indonesian form of intangible cultural heritage. This was seen in the region as a snub to Malaysia. Inflaming the situation, the Indonesian media claimed that Malaysia had also lodged claims with UNESCO over batik, claiming that batik was a distinctly Malaysian form in intangible heritage. Tit-for-tat, allegations also emerged suggesting that the melody of the Malaysian national anthem was plagiarised from an old Indonesian keroncong song. During the same period several Malaysian tourism advertising campaigns inadvertently appropriated brief clips of Indonesian art forms.

This is where a transnational approach, I believe is useful. Another way of labelling such an approach is ‘Postcolonial International Relations’, which combines on the one hand postcolonial literary theory, with its local focus on specific cultural and literary productions set or produced in the postcolonial context with, on the other hand, the somewhat more global or regional themes of International Relations. A transnational or ‘Postcolonial IR’ approach is
useful I believe because almost ALL of the present tensions can be closely associated, ultimately, with colonialism and the dominant ideology that colonialism gave birth to, namely nationalism. As many scholars have argued, the colonial encounter has irrevocably determined the manner and extent to which friends in the Malay world have become strangers, or worse. The impact of colonialism may explain much of the anti-Malaysia attitudes promoted by Sukarno in the late 1950s and early 1960s. After all, it was the fact that the Malaysian nation was born without the input from Sukarno that most incensed him. Sukarno, of course, long believed in the notion of a pan-Malay union, called ‘Indonesia Raya’, combining the Indonesian archipelago with the British territories of Malaya, Sarawak, North Borneo and Brunei.

Although the word ‘konfrontasi’ is endlessly raised in relation to Indonesia’s troubled postcolonial relations with Malaysia, many commentators have preferred to highlight another problem, the mistreatment of Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia. Many see this as the key source of disquiet in the relationship. Indeed this issue has been quietly bubbling away for decades until the present day, despite the Indonesian government placing a moratorium on the sending of maids and other workers to Malaysia for much of 2010 and 2011. In November 2011, after the negotiation of improved protection arrangements for Indonesian workers, the moratorium was rescinded, for better or worse.

**Malaysia’s alleged cultural heritage claims: 100% fiction**

But today I will focus on another issue eating away at the bilateral relationship – the widespread notion within Indonesia that Malaysia has laid claim to Indonesian cultural and art forms. Arguably, this notion is responsible for much of the anti-Malaysia sentiment in recent times. It should also be stated from the outset that allegations regarding Malaysia’s claims on Indonesian art forms, put simply, are false.

According to several UNESCO officials in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia has never submitted an official claim for a UNESCO listing of any disputed forms of intangible cultural heritage, including *batik*. Why not? Apparently the Malaysian government is not interested in deliberately antagonising its much larger and more powerful neighbour. This has meant that Malaysia has held back from lodging legitimate claims for much of its best-known cultural heritage, including *batik* and *wayang kulit* shadow puppet theatre.
Malaysia’s efforts to placate Indonesia seem to have fallen in deaf ears, most recently demonstrated by the 2011 SEA Games, held in Jakarta and Palembang during the month of November. For many Malaysians, the 2011 SEA Games were memorable for two things: 1) the strident anti-Malaysianism demonstrated by both crowds and officials alike; and 2) Malaysia winning the gold medal football final against Indonesia in front of a partisan crowd of 100,000 at the Gelora Bung Karno Stadium in Jakarta.

**Harimau vs Garuda**

In Malaysia, Indonesia’s generally discourteous reception attracted a lot of media attention, adding spice to the wave of national euphoria in response to Malaysia’s victorious U23 football team, dubbed the ‘Harimau Muda’ (Young Tigers), who were pitted twice against the host nation’s ‘Garuda Muda’ (Young Eagles). Malaysia’s victory was made much sweeter by the parochial crowd dynamics of the cauldron-like Soviet-style Gelora Bung Karno Stadium, which was built in 1958 with the help of the Soviet Union. Before both matches, the Malaysian media milked the bilateral rivalry for all it was worth, describing it as a ‘no-holds barred encounter’ between two ‘bitter rivals’ with a massive crowd packing the stadium in the hope of witnessing ‘the Indonesian bull gore the Malaysian matador’.

As has been well publicised on YouTube and other Internet chat forums, preceding the grand final match the rendition of the Malaysian national anthem, ‘Negaraku’, was drowned out by a large proportion of the parochial crowd. The Malaysian players and officials were obviously uncomfortable, but continued to sing the anthem nonetheless. The sell-out crowd figure of approximately 100,000 could have been quite conservative, as many of the tens of thousands of fans without tickets milling outside the stadium were granted entry, to avoid a stampede. This was not the first time in the tournament the stadium was filled to capacity, either, as Indonesia had already played Malaysia before in the group stage. The group match was also marked by the Malaysian national anthem being drowned out.

**Malaysian response**

In Malaysia, some commentators were happy to fan the bilateral flames and others preferred to play everything down. In one of the last front-page reports on the SEA Games fiasco,
Malaysia’s Youth and Sports Minister Datuk Ahmad Shabery Cheek called for a sense of perspective. He insisted that there was no ‘bad blood’ with Indonesians and if there were any isolated expressions of hostility it was just among a ‘small number of people’ and certainly not a reflection of the close relationship shared between the two governments: ‘I believe the love-hate relationship between Indonesia exists because we are so close. It is a tendency among neighbours to have more than a few squabbles’

At least one Malaysian newspaper article paused to consider the underlying causes of the open hostility (beyond the much-quoted notion that Indonesia was seeking revenge for losing a previous clash between the two in 2010), namely social media claims that ‘Malaysians are known for abusing housewives and maids’ and ‘Malaysia stole the copyrights of Indonesian traditional textiles’. Of course, many Indonesians feel aggrieved that Malaysia has attempted to steal or rather ‘claim’ their cultural heritage. This is now such a widely-held belief that the verb ‘mengklaim’ (to claim) has now entered the Indonesian language over the last five years or so. During the same period the neologism ‘Malingsia’ has also been coined as a pejorative synonym for ‘Malaysia’ (‘maling’ is an Indonesian word for thief or robber).

But as mentioned earlier, we can have some confidence in the knowledge that Malaysia has not officially claimed any of what Indonesians might regard as distinctly ‘Indonesian’ cultural heritage forms. Moreover, in recent years, Malaysians have demonstrated little interest in responding to Indonesian hostility on the cultural front. Indeed, when it comes to batik, UNESCO’s listing of batik as a distinctly Indonesian intangible cultural heritage has barely registered on Malaysia’s national barometer.

**Malaysian batik: from strength to strength**

Despite UNESCO’s ruling in favour of Indonesia, in Malaysia the batik industry continues to experience a prolonged period of resurgence. Batik plays an important commercial role in the national economy. In 2008, the total sale of batik crafts amounted to as much as RM 528 billion, which was a percentage of the GNP. The robust popularity of batik is demonstrated by the large number of Malay women wearing batik fashion on a daily basis. The bustling nature of Malaysia’s batik industry is demonstrated in many other ways, including through the publication of numerous high-quality coffee-table books and magazines on batik, most of them focussing on Malaysian batik in particular.
Malaysia can also boast an impressive number of museums, exhibitions, galleries and fashion shows devoted to showcasing batik art, design and fashion. This trend was perhaps inspired by the late Datin Seri Endon Mahmood, the wife of former Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi, who established the annual Malaysian Batik Week as well as other innovations such as an annual competition for batik designers. Endon Mahmood is also known as the inspiration behind ‘Batik Thursday’, when all public servants have to wear batik (made in Malaysia, of course). Finally, there are numerous Malaysian designers and artists who have long been willing to adopt the motifs and textures of batik textiles into their latest designs, which are regularly be exhibited in art galleries, fashion boutiques and malls.

In Indonesia meanwhile, since the UNESCO listing, batik has experienced a resurgence. Nationalism has a lot do with this. Despite UNESCO’s listing of Indonesian batik, evidently there are many Indonesians who fear that unless batik is regularly worn and promoted at all levels of state and society, the ever-present Malaysian bogeyman, lurking in the shadows, will lodge a claim. Thus in Indonesia, every Friday the nation’s public servants, as well as hotel staff and other private enterprise workers, tend to wear batik, which is now known as ‘hari batik’ (batik day). Batik in Indonesia has become a bit like the football used in the SEA Games football final – a mere pawn in a much larger game of transnational one-upmanship. Malaysia, meanwhile, has enough problems of its own without needing to worry what Indonesia is up to. Malaysia’s main concern is namely the never-ending struggle to ensure ongoing economic prosperity in the context of a society and a soft-authoritarian politics internally riven by ethnic tensions.

Before making a few concluding points, I should mention that the recent rise in Malaysian tourism to Indonesia is in a large part due to Malaysian wholesalers buying batik in bulk, to be sold in Malaysia for a considerable mark-up. Often, the base fabric is purchased in Indonesia, only to be made into high-quality batik in Malaysia, via Malaysia-based Indonesian batik artisans. Evidently, Indonesia-based batik sellers have few qualms about selling cheap Indonesian batik to their supposed mortal enemy, Malaysia. Similarly, Indonesian batik artisans living and working in Malaysia do not lose sleep about the purely commercial appropriation of a distinctly Indonesian heritage occurring on a daily basis in Malaysian states such as Kelantan and Terengganu, which are the heartlands of Malaysia’s batik industry.
Conclusion

In relation to this, it is common knowledge that, UNESCO-listed batik and wayang aside, both at a national and regional level Indonesia has little motivation to maintain and revive much of its cultural heritage, particularly tangible heritage products that are ‘old’ or no longer in active use. The reason for this is that as long as Indonesia’s economy is still developing, the average Indonesian citizen will be more focussed on alleviating poverty or ensuring economic survival rather than protecting tangible or intangible cultural heritage or visiting museums, let alone funding museums. Ironically, unlike Indonesia, Malaysia is determined to ensure that history and heritage plays a leading role in its ongoing national cultural narrative. In Malaysia, the promotion of museums, traditional craft fairs and cultural theme parks, with the closely related process of ‘museumification’ of the material culture of both the modern and the past, is closely related to government initiatives to instill national pride among Malaysian citizens. The Malaysian government has a proclaimed aim of becoming a fully industrialised country by the year 2020, and modern elements of this project, such as Kuala Lumpur’s Petronas Twin Towers, the tallest ‘twin towers’ in the world, are given equal weighting to ‘traditional’ elements of the nation’s narrative, such as the Sultan’s palace with its wood-crafted dwellings and the many material artifacts found in museums and theme parks. So if we move beyond the nationalistic grandstanding, in terms of maintaining and promoting tangible and intangible cultural heritage, in comparison to Malaysia, Indonesia still has some way to go.