

Confessions of a 'Malaysian global entrepot'

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Will our bond to home and country ever be free from identity politics? Kuala Lumpur (KL)-based writer and director Mohamad Ridzwan Raslan believes that vibrant emerging identities will eventually shine through the authoritative gloom.

The Jakarta Post contributor **Kadek Krishna Adidharma** engages this speaker-to-be at the upcoming Ubud Writers and Readers Festival to get the pulse on the complex Malaysian identity and its relations with Indonesia.

The Jakarta Post: *What do you think of the historic and current relations between Indonesia and Malaysia?*

Mohamad Ridzwan Raslan: Historically, west-coast Malays had very strong connections with Sumatra, especially Aceh. Many Malays still proudly trace their links to present-day Indonesia.

My father's family was originally Bugis. I'm sure that a huge number of Malays could trace their roots to relatively recent arrivals if they cared to do so.

In the middle of KL is Kampong Baru, created by the British to encourage Malays to move to KL, which was dominated by Chinese at the time.

But the local Selangor Malays didn't want to move from the coast and, instead, Sumatrans and to a lesser degree Javanese moved there. I've seen the British census where they carefully noted the distinctions. Now Kampong Baru is seen as a Malay heartland.

What links remain?

If there ever were to be linkages between Malaysia and Indonesia then the fear might be that it would take place in the Malay/Muslim world. This could make the Chinese uneasy. Indonesia is seen as vast and threatening with a huge population and doesn't really figure in the Malaysian worldview, but Indonesians are not interested in Malaysia either.

Is there any space for Malaysia's pre-Islam culture?

Er, no. I don't know about Indonesia but there is no pre-Islam in Malaysia. That's a sticky subject and it's dealt with in the same way we deal with most sticky subjects: Ignore it and assume it will go away.

Malaysia has chosen a unique path in constitutionally defining what it means to be indigenous or Malay. How does this affect how you view your identity?

We Malaysians are defined by our race in virtually everything we do. The political parties rely on our observance of our racial classifications. If you don't feel like you fit neatly into the archetype of any given race then you could feel marginalized.

More people are feeling like this. The day will come when purely race-based politics will no longer do the job, but that day hasn't arrived yet.

What is your heritage?

You're making me feel like I'm an old building, but I take your point. My mother is Welsh and my father Malay. I lived for 20 years in England and 20 in Malaysia.

Having experienced East and West helps me to be able to understand both sides. I understand how, for instance, democracy functions for the West and the East and that there is no single neat fit.

The same for religion. In the East I have found systems that the West doesn't even see anymore and even the East has lost sight of. For instance, in Malay society feudalism plays an important role.

Do you consider yourself Malay or Malaysian?

There are many who would set the order of self-identity priority as Muslim, then Malay and finally Malaysian, but I am Malaysian because I am a "messed-up, globalized entropot" -- Just like Malaysia and just like KL.

Beyond the ad campaigns and rhetoric, does diversity really exist in Malaysia?

Yes, but not like the ad campaigns. I was recently reading an old ad campaign for racial diversity from 1957 and was struck by how the same images were used then as they are now for denoting the various races: Dances of various sorts, martial arts, etc.

Maybe, back then the images were true for describing the races but not any more. The overwhelming majority have never once danced to the sound of a gong or let fly a fist of fury.

We dance to our own tunes and in our own ways, but far from the advert images. There is space to do that in Malaysia, despite the fact that some would wish to squeeze us all back into our clichés; they won't succeed.

Considering the fact we're neighbors, how come Malaysians know so little about Indonesia, and vice versa?

The arrival of the Dutch was like the meteor that killed the dinosaurs and the whole map changed. The narrow straits of Malacca now seems like a vast chasm and Mecca and London feel closer than Aceh and Palembang.

There are perhaps a million "Indons" now living in Malaysia, who mostly come from Sumatra. Malaysians look down on Indonesians and Indonesians look down on Malaysians. We're seen as having no culture and Indonesians are seen as having no class.

Malaysians have become enormously arrogant but you have to understand that the only Indonesians we see are from poor backgrounds.

We don't see the cultural, democratic and intellectual vibrancy of Indonesia and most Malaysians would be very surprised to know about it.

Among the seventy international writers coming to Ubud this year, the diverse voices of Malaysia will be represented by playwright Ann Lee, Booker Prize nominee Tan Twan Eng and Kam Raslan.

Ubud Writers and Readers Festival

Sept. 25-30

www.ubudwritersfestival.com