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## Revisiting Ethnicity in Southeast Asia

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## REVISITING ETHNICITY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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### ABSTRACT

To explain ethnicity, scholars have come to an endless discussion providing a wide spectrum of ethnicity throughout the world. Various perspectives have been suggested to comprehend the notion of ethnicity. To this point, there are three most well-known perspectives to explain this term, namely primordialism, instrumentalism, and constructivism approach. Most scholars commonly apply one approach to dissect a case study related to ethnicity. Few have combined two approaches, for each approach seems to contradict one another. However, this paper suggests that those three approaches can be simultaneously applied if critically used to discern certain case studies related to ethnicity in Southeast Asia. This argument will be elaborated into the analysis of ethnic identity for the minority and majority groups in Indonesia and Thailand.

### KEYWORDS

Ethnicity; primordialism; instrumentalism; constructivism; Southeast Asia.

### ABSTRAK

Cendekiawan dari berbagai penjuru dunia telah berusaha menjelaskan konsep etnis yang berujung pada diskusi tanpa akhir. Berbagai macam perspektif telah diusulkan untuk memahami bagaimana konsep etnis diimplementasikan. Hingga saat ini, ada tiga pendekatan yang sering kali digunakan untuk menjelaskan konsep etnis, yakni primordialisme, instrumentalisme, dan konstruktivisme. Banyak cendekiawan hanya menggunakan satu pendekatan dalam melakukan studi kasus suatu etnis. Hanya beberapa yang menggabungkan dua pendekatan karena tiap pendekatan dianggap bertentangan dengan lainnya. Namun, tulisan ini berusaha menjelaskan bahwa ketiga pendekatan itu dapat digunakan secara bersamaan jika secara kritis digunakan untuk menjelaskan kasus-kasus tertentu yang terkait dengan etnis di Asia Tenggara. Argumen ini akan dielaborasi lebih lanjut dalam analisis identitas etnis minoritas di Indonesia dan Thailand.

### KATA KUNCI

Etnis; primordialism; instrumentalism; konstruktivisme; Asia Tenggara.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The term *ethnicity* is usually employed to illustrate the categorization of people based on their shared culture. However, the use of ethnicity is not as straightforward as it might seem, for Cornell and Hartman (2007, 17–21) point out that culture cannot be the only tool to determine ethnicity. Given such a situation, many approaches have been proposed in order to fathom the concept of ethnicity. First, the oldest approach to understand ethnicity is primordialism. This approach has been slowly abandoned, for it does not offer flexible use to dissect a case study. This characteristic comes from its own nature which dictates that ethnicity is an inherited identity. This identity has primordial attachment in which a person is surely included in a certain ethnic group since born, so he/she feels she belongs in such a group (Geertz 1996). Given such a rigid definition, this approach has failed to understand the emotion of the individual who might not have a sense of belonging (Eller and Coughlan 1996). Such denial then leads to exclusion, for he/she will not approve his/her given identity. If it is not critically used, the primordial approach has a negative implication of essentializing identity.

Next, different from the primordialism approach, the instrumentalism approach gives agency to every individual to choose their own identity, for this approach allows them to use ethnicity as an instrument to gain resources. Such action is a rational choice made by an individual since every person has to fulfil their own needs of resources (Nagel 1994, 159). These resources range from economics, politics, to social aspects depending on what is aimed by the person (Cornell and Hartmann 2007). In line with this concept, Okamura (1981, 454) believes that such a phenomenon can be called *situational ethnicity* in which a person picks his/her identity based on certain situations, favourable for his/her benefit.

The most famous approach is constructivism, for this approach is more flexible than the other two. Based on this approach, ethnicity is constructed by asserting meaning to certain criteria so that people having those criteria could be categorized into a certain ethnic identity (Cornell and Hartmann 2007). This approach takes into account a dialectical process in which ethnic identity needs approval from both sides: the ethnic group and the people outside the ethnic group. This approval will create boundaries among the ethnic groups; in other words, it will create a categorization of people. In 1983, Reminick suggested that in order to get an ethnic identity, people need to have three levels of recognition namely psychology, sociology, and culture. He further elaborates that they have to confirm their own identity (psychological level) then this identity will be enhanced by the recognition from others (sociological level). In the cultural level, the people embrace the cultural products which are labelled as the culture of a certain ethnic group.

Those three approaches explained above are usually applied separately. Only a few scholars attempt to combine those approaches to get a more comprehensive understanding of ethnicity. More than two decades ago, Nagel (1994) tried to explain the construction of ethnicity by depicting how cultures were used to give meaning to ethnicity. This action implied how ethnicity is constructed using certain cultural characteristics. Moreover, Nagel also showed how ethnic identity was chosen deliberately to get specific resources. It is implied that ethnicity is constructed but at the same time chosen to gain essential benefit. In other words, he applied both constructivism and instrumentalism approaches.

Ten years later, Brubaker (2004) argued that primordialism and instrumentalism approaches could be applied at the same time if ethnicity is seen as a *perspective* rather than an essentialized entity. By doing so, Brubaker tries to argue that ethnicity is a mind-set that could be altered at internalizes Malay culture rather than Chinese culture. He/she then could claim to be Malay Chinese at any point. Thus, the categorization of ethnicity is fluid and dynamic so that an individual will not be trapped into a single, fixed category. To illustrate, although a certain person bore the physical characteristics belonged to the Chinese descendants, he/she

could embrace another identity such as Malay, for he/she given the Chinese physical traits and Malay cultural internalization. It can be done since ethnicity is what one believes rather than what one sees. Also, other people should agree with this mindset in order to have this approach works.

More than a decade later, Resminingayu (2018) discussed how both instrumentalism and constructivism approaches can be used to explain the turbulent national identity in Laos. The Lao government has changed the national identity three times within a short period of time. The three identities are based on Buddhism, Socialism, and a combination of Buddhism and Socialism. The government expected its people to internalize certain beliefs to construct their identity. This effort shows how the Lao government tried to use the constructivism approach to construct national identity which was later proven to be a failure. It was because the people did not reciprocate the government's intention; instead, they still embrace their own identity. This failure could be explained using the instrumentalism approach since the government created ethnic categorization for the benefit of the government. It was not for the people in the first place, so the dialectical process failed.

Those previous papers barely implement all three approaches simultaneously. Given such background, this essay will argue that the use of critical primordialism, instrumentalism, and constructivism approaches are actually overlapping. Such an occurrence might happen if ethnicity is considered as perspective as Brubaker has argued. The hypothesis in this essay will be proven by analysing two study cases. These cases deal with the notion of ethnicity as an identity of a minority group when facing a majority group, specifically during the ethnic conflict in Thailand and Indonesia. The first ethnic conflict will be specified in a conflict in Southern Thailand where Malay Muslims are mostly living and getting involved in a conflict with the Thai government who are mainly Thai Buddhists. Southern Thailand in this essay refers to the Patani, Narathiwat, Yala, Satun, and Sonkhla, yet most discussion will focus on Patani. The second ethnic conflict is Chinese descendants in Indonesia that used to face great tension as a minority in terms of religion and culture. The conflict of the Chinese minority discussed in this essay refers to the general conflict faced by them despite the different areas they lived in. These two cases are chosen, for they share a similarity in which both Malay and Chinese are an ethnic minority who mostly adhere to different religions embraced by the majority.

## **2. ETHNICITY AMONG ETHNIC GROUPS**

### **2.1. Southern Thailand**

The on-going conflict in Southern Thailand is usually attributed to ethnic and religious conflict. Nevertheless, the root of this conflict is not simply the different religion and ethnicity between the southern part and the central government. If the history of Thailand was traced back, Southern Thailand specifically Patani, Narathiwat, and Yala had not been part of Thailand in the first place. Those three provinces used to be one under Pattani Sultanate and had been ruled by Malay King before it was conquered by Siam<sup>1</sup> in 1902 (Puaksom 2008, 80-85). After the total subjugation, the Southern people who were mainly Malay Muslims had to abide by the Siamese King along with the regulations of the kingdom. One regulation that triggered tension between the Malay and the Siamese people was the Compulsory Primary Education Act in 1921 in which children of Malay Muslims were obliged to complete primary education in Thai school (Aphornsuvan 2008, 102).

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1 Since late 15th century, Thailand used to be called Siam (Vaddhanaputi 2005, 151–152).



Picture 1. Map of Southern Thailand (taken from [https://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/rough/2007/08/thailand\\_womenlinks.html](https://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/rough/2007/08/thailand_womenlinks.html)).

Despite the clash in 1922, the tension subsided at least for the next 15 years. It might be said as the result of the 1932's revolution of Thailand which transformed the old absolute monarchy into a new national state (Aphornsuvan 2008, 103). Nevertheless, the beginning of World War II led to Malay Muslims' dissatisfaction in Southern Thailand towards the Siamese government since they faced economic hardship (Aphornsuvan 2008, 104). Moreover, the new Prime Minister Phibunsongkram who was fully supported by army forces changed the name Siam into Thailand to pronounce the Thai-ness (Aphornsuvan 2008, 105–106). He also issued a regulation to construct *proper* Thai citizens by reshaping the socio-cultural life in Thailand (Suwannathat-Phian 2008, 164).

Since the issue of assimilation was addressed by the new regulation, the Malay Muslims in Southern Thailand showed resistance movement especially after the abolition of Islamic law in 1944 (Puaksom 2008, 85). The most famous leader of this movement is Haji Sulong who pursued his higher education in the Middle East, and he believed that exercising Islamic law was the appropriate way to govern Muslims. The government under PM Khuang Aphaiwong reduced the tension by giving Islamic patronage in 1945 (Aphornsuvan 2008, 108–110). However, as Khuang resigned and the economic condition worsened after World War II, the welfare of Malay Muslims declined. Such a situation led to the increase of crimes in which the government blamed Malay Muslims as the criminals and stated most of the victims as Buddhist Thais (Aphornsuvan 2008, 116–118).

By blaming the Malay Muslims for the escalation of crimes, the government assigned the resistance of Malay Muslims in Southern Thailand towards assimilation as a separatist movement (Aphornsuvan 2008, 122). The seven demands drafted by Haji Sulong and his members were considered as proves of treason. Haji Sulong then was imprisoned in the beginning of 1947. In fact, the seven demands hardly showed any separatist intention. Aphornsuvan (2008, 121) argues that the arrest of Haji Sulong was the outcome of the power struggle between Pridi and Phibun blocs within the government. It was enhanced by the fact that finally, Phibun came into power again in 1948 (Suwannathat-Phian 2008, 164–166).

After the imprisonment of Haji Sulong, a major clash occurred in April 1948 and by the end of 1975 which both happened in Narathiwat district (Puaksom 2008, 86). Despite those clashes, during the 1990s,

the Muslims were able to participate in the political realm such as the appointment of Muslim Foreign Minister in 1997 (Bajunid 2005, 11–15). However, the campaign against drugs held by the Thai government in 2003 resulted in the use of violence towards many Southern people (Peace Direct n.d.). As a response, at the beginning of 2004, series of attacks targeted Thai military camp, security forces, public buildings, and monks in Southern Thailand (Gunaratna, Acharya, and Chua 2005, 22–31). Nevertheless, the actors behind those attacks remain vague. Gunaratna, Acharya, and Chua (2005, 33–34) suggest that the 2004 insurgency was the result of rivalry and conflict based on the political interest for the sake of financial benefit.

Three insights can be highlighted in the case above. First, economic resources hold an important role during the escalation of the conflict. Previously, a high number of crimes were absent in Southern Thailand, but the economic hardship during and after WWII triggered the crimes. Then, the government separated the victims and criminals based on ethnicity. The second insight is the political situation in the conflict area. In Thailand, a fraction between two blocs within the government is the medium to set the hierarchy of power. Thus, action to imprison Haji Sulong is the sign of the power of one bloc over the other. The last insight is the construction of identity both by the ethnic majority and minority. Thai government dominated by the ethnic majority exercise national regulation in order to shape the ethnic identity. This assignation of meaning by the ethnic majority is challenged by the ethnic minority. It can be seen from the resistance of Haji Sulong in Thailand. This is the effort to assert meaning to their own ethnic identity despite the assimilation policy.

## 2.2. Indonesia

The current Chinese Indonesians are the descendants of Chinese immigrants who were mainly traders and came to the archipelago that later became Indonesia. Suryadinata (2007) states that the descendants from intermarriage between Chinese and local people have created *Peranakan*<sup>2</sup> community in the archipelago since the 18th century. Nevertheless, this essay will only engage the history of Chinese descendants after the independence of Indonesia in order to see the relation between the state dominated by the indigenous and the descendants of immigrants.

Chinese descendants used to be seen as non-Indonesians because their place of origin is not the Indonesian archipelago. Nonetheless, the first Indonesian president Soekarno embraced the Chinese community as a part of Indonesians and allowed the formation of Baperki (the *Peranakan*-dominated Citizens' Consultative Body) (Suryadinata 2007). However, it did not last long, for Soekarno's reign ended along with the Communist coup in September 1965. The coup was followed by mass murder which particularly targeted the Chinese descendants. Nevertheless, Roosa (2006, 202–225) argues that the mass murder is just a pretext to enable Soeharto who was fully supported by the military forces to come into power. Thus, Dieleman, Koning, and Post (2010, 10) claim the victims are both real and imagined communists.

Soeharto as the next president had restrained the Chinese community by exercising the policy of assimilation in which Chinese could be '*Indonesianized*'. Three basic pillars of the Chinese community namely Chinese media, Chinese schools, and Chinese organizations were banned under Soeharto's reign (Suryadinata 2007). Related to the religion, Soeharto excluded Confucianism believed by most Chinese descendants from the list of official religions in Indonesia. It was argued that Confucianism did not meet the criteria of an accepted religion in *Pancasila* (Indonesian national ideology) (Hoon 2009, 96).

The situation of Chinese Indonesians worsened at the beginning of 1998. Purdey (2006, 78–82) argued that people blamed traders especially Chinese Indonesians because the economic condition

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2 There used to be two categories of Chinese in Indonesia: *Totok* as those maintaining pure line of Chinese descendants and *Peranakan* as the descendants of intermarriage.

dropped. Chinese Indonesians then became victims of robbery, rape, and assault due to the acceleration of the anti-Chinese atmosphere across Indonesia. May 1998 riot is the climax of the anti-Chinese movement leading Soeharto to give up his power (Purdey 2006, 109). After the fall of Soeharto's oligarchy system, the situation of Chinese Indonesians was getting better. Gus Dur as the next two presidents after Soeharto gave more freedom to Chinese Indonesians by annulling Presidential Decree No.14 year 1967 (Suryadinata 2007). Since then, the Chinese are able to express their identity and culture freely. It was followed by the acknowledgment of Confucianism as the sixth religion in Indonesia. The request to hold *Imlek* (Chinese New Year) as a Confucians' celebration was also granted. Because of this, some Muslim leaders prohibited Muslims to celebrate *Imlek* in 2013. Hoon (2009, 98) argues that *Imlek* as a religious celebration has been monopolized by Confucians since it is a Chinese cultural celebration.

From this situation, it can be inferred that Chinese Indonesians were blamed and assaulted because of the economic hardship in 1998. In this case, ethnicity is not the core problem of the conflict. Economic resources create a social gap and trigger tension between the ethnic majority and minority. Based on this fact, ethnicity is employed to rationalize the unfair treatment towards the ethnic minority who was considered wealthier compared to the ethnic majority. The ethnic minority then became the scapegoat. Next, Indonesian governments exercise national regulation in order to shape the ethnic identity which favours the ethnic majority. The ethnic minority, however, challenges this production of meaning by strengthening the Confucianism religion in Indonesia.

### 3. ANALYSIS

Ethnic conflict from the two cases above could be explained using three stages of the approach, rather than using only a single approach. Firstly, both ethnic minorities in Indonesia and Thailand must have had prior knowledge to determine their identity as Malay and Chinese descendants. This prior knowledge has been inherited through generations. For instance, the Malay in Thailand have acquired the knowledge in form of inherited Malay dialect and religion. The Chinese descendants in Indonesia also have the knowledge of being Chinese, particularly through the banned culture during Soeharto's regime. Such prior knowledge then develops into a sense of belonging, so that they embraced the identity of being Malay or Chinese. This situation is in line with Brubaker (2004, 32) who states that ethnicity is a perspective believed by the people. The perspective of being a certain ethnic group, if believed and held, will turn into an identity embraced by the people. In this case, the critical primordialism approach could explain how primordial knowledge and feelings are embraced to define ethnic identity.

Secondly, given certain circumstances – in this case, ethnic conflict – ethnicity is employed to justify the acts of those who belong to a certain ethnic group for political purposes. This is what Cohen (1996, 84) calls ethnicity as a *political phenomenon* in which dispute over cultural difference bears political problems behind it. This is congruent with Brubaker's idea that ethnicity is not an entity, but perspective. As a perspective, ethnicity is employed by the ethnic majority to justify their actions in the name of their ethnic group; whether they want to gain political power or economic resources. However, it is not necessarily beneficial for the entire members of the ethnic majority. As the instrumentalism approach suggests, ethnicity then is just an instrument used by certain people to get certain resources under political or any other circumstances.

Thirdly, the instrumentalism approach alone cannot explain the whole phenomenon. On the one hand, the ethnic majority strengthens the difference by assigning negative meanings towards ethnic minorities such as blaming Malay Muslims as the robbers and accusing Chinese Indonesians as communists. On the other hand, the ethnic minority also makes effort to assert their own meaning. For example, Haji Sulong put Islamic

values as the characteristics of Malay, while Chinese Indonesians who are adhering to Confucianism claim *Imlek* as a religious celebration. This is how a dialectical process occurs when one group asserts meaning and the other responds by assigning other meanings. Such actions can be explained, for they are in line with the constructivism approach; a certain group makes effort to construct their identity which is either accepted or denied by other groups.

The effort to assign and assert meanings is how the ethnic majority and minority create boundaries and categorization of ethnic groups as stated in the constructivism approach (Cornell and Hartmann 2007, 80–84). Within an ethnic group, those people in power might create categorization; however, it may not set distinct boundaries. The association of one ethnic to a particular religion along with the characteristics, for example, is not quite appropriate. In Thailand, it neglects the fact that some Malays might not adhere to Islam. Similarly, *Imlek* might be celebrated by Chinese believing in other religions.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

I would argue that the critical primordialism, instrumentalism, and constructivism must not be employed lightly due to their limits in explaining ethnicity. Firstly, the general perspective they offer sometimes is not suitable for a specific ethnic group in a region. Then, the clear-cut category to separate one ethnic group from another is not exactly found in the reality. Last, one approach might not best describe how different ethnic identities emerge in certain areas. Instead, I propose to combine the critical primordialism, instrumentalism, and constructivism in order to understand some cases related to ethnicity.

This analysis, nonetheless, cannot be generalized to the whole members of a certain ethnic group. Although they have inherited prior knowledge of being a certain ethnic group, every individual has the rights to accept or refuse such knowledge. If one rejects prior knowledge of his/her ethnicity, he/she would not embrace the identity which would be the shortcoming of the critical primordialism approach. Such a case can be found when a person inherited more than one ethnic identities from their parents or grandparents. He/she then could freely pick any identity he/she favours most. This situation then would be better understood using the instrumentalism approach since there are reasons why a certain identity is picked. The most notable reason would be the benefits gained from a certain identity. In other words, an ethnic identity is used to gain certain needed resources. Freedom to pick any certain identity also has its own limit. If the people around him/her refuse to acknowledge the identity, then the dialectical process of constructing identity will fail. The identity will not be attained and held unless one asserts meaning to the identity and the others accept it. In other words, the constructivism approach could be used to explain this situation.

Therefore, the use of three approaches can be implemented to explain certain cases only. As defining ethnic identity involves not only the ethnic group but also the outsiders, one approach might be used to explain the action of the ethnic group while another approach is employed to get the understanding of the outsider. To illustrate, the critical primordialism approach can be used to explain how an ethnic group believes and holds their inherited identity. Then, the instrumentalism approach can be used to dissect the response of another ethnic group as the outsiders. Last, the constructivism approach will complete the analysis by providing a dialectical process while constructing a certain ethnic identity. However, other cases might require the different combination of approaches to be comprehended. Other cases, for instance, might only require two approaches to get a comprehensive understanding. Indeed, every case study should be dissected carefully to choose a particular approach that might be best to explain ethnicity.



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