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CONTESTING AUTHORITY DISCOURSES IN DEFINING RELATIONS BETWEEN INDONESIA AND MALAYSIA: A CASE STUDY IN THE KALIMANTAN BORDER AREAS

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ABSTRACT

This article discussed and analysed relations between Indonesia and Malaysia from the relational dynamism between people and the state. Theoretically, the relations can be narrated through identity formation approach in the context of ‘authoritative-defined social reality’ and ‘everyday-defined social reality’. The reality of Indonesia-Malaysia relations in the last twenty-five years was very much defined by authoritative or elitist views, which have dominated and controlled the everyday discourses. However, elitist groups’ reality-defined perspective does not paint the whole picture of relations. This

article argued that it is crucial to analyse the relations in the context of ‘everyday-defined social reality’, especially from the common people’s perspective, such as workers, traders, activists, novelists, religious groups, artists, and families, who experience the reality of the relations. This ‘social reality’ can be observed in the dynamism of cross-border relation between people-to-people, as shown in the case studies, in the border areas of Kalimantan Barat and Sarawak as well as Kalimantan Utara-Sabah. It indicated complex but generally positive pictures in understanding relations between two countries. It is therefore expected that the awareness and understanding of this ‘everyday-reality’ can contribute to a better understanding of relations between the two countries.

Keywords: Everyday-defined social reality, elite discourses, cross-border relations, Malaysia, Indonesia.

INTRODUCTION

It can be argued that Indonesia-Malaysia relations for the last twenty-five years has entered a new era. The government-to-government relation (G-to-G), which dominated relations since the establishment of diplomatic relations, has been replaced with more complex relations that involve not only G-to-G, but also government-to-people (G-to-P) and people-to-people (P-to-P). Given this scenario, relations between these two neighbouring countries have become more complex and complicated than ever before and could not certainly be handled in the traditional G-to-G solution. This article, therefore, attempts to examine the dynamism of changes of relations between the two countries. Furthermore, the article analyses the likely directions that both countries could take to maintain good relations. The present paper will use the border areas of Kalimantan Barat (Indonesia) and Sarawak (Malaysia) and of Kalimantan Utara and Sabah as the case study in discussing the subject matter. With Indonesia’s impending move of its capital city from Jakarta, Java Island to Nusantara in Kalimantan Timur, the people-defined social reality would be more pronounced with an expected rise of P-to-P interaction. The focus of the article is not to elaborate on certain areas of economic, political, or military conflicts and cooperation but more on how common understanding of relations has actually developed socially in a day-to-day basis between people in both countries. It is neither to explain

nor to provide a panacea for a complex problem of relations between both countries but rather to attract the public's attention to the social aspects of relations that are important but largely overlooked.

Searching for a New Theoretical Understanding

Indonesia-Malaysia relations have attracted more attention from observers and academics now than before (Arba'iyah Mohd Noor, 2018; Khadijah Md Khalid & Shakila Yacob, 2012; Anwar, 2014; Liow, 2005; Kunaseelan, 1996). There have been at least two mainstream approaches. The first group attempts to revive the old idea of relations based on cultural identity and family or kinship relations (*serumpun*) and how to put and enliven it in a current time (Tanjung, 2019; Haryanti & Setiawan, 2021; Wahida & Hendra Himawan, 2022; Shaharir Mohamad Zain, 2003). The second group seeks to put the relations in the context of modern state relations based on rational calculations (Chan, 2018; Rohani Hj. Ab Ghani & Zulhilmi Paidi, 2010; Ruhanas Harun, 2006, 2014; Yong, 2003). Both groups, as will be elaborated later in this article, often underestimate views of one another and miss important points that can be shared in understanding relations between both countries.

Ideas of *serumpun* have been intricately argued as the main factor that is useful to maintain relations of both countries (Chan, 2018; Arba'iyah Mohd Noor, 2018; Zed Mestika, 2014; Yong, 2003). *Serumpun* or the kinship concept is certainly important. The majority of people in Malaysia have families and also cultural roots in Indonesia because of the past relations during pre-colonial and colonial periods as well as the independence period. However, to continue the idea of *serumpun* would contribute to a failure of bringing relations into the next level, given rapid regional and global changes. This has been shown in many instances where unrelated diplomatic issues like cultural claims continue to cloud the relations. Practitioners and policymakers of both sides often refer to the *serumpun* concept as a way to pacify conflicts and maintain relations. Nevertheless, quite often than not, the diplomacy based on this concept has begun to show its limitations. The concept may have its significance but needs to be reinterpreted and given new meaning.

The second group places its concerns on building relations based on rationale and cost benefit factors (Chan, 2018; Sukma, 2007; Wardhani,

2008; Farish Noor, 2009). According to Sukma (2007), both countries should depart from mesmerising the idea of *serumpun*. The relations should be built on the basis of rationale choices such as beneficial economic cooperation and mutual gains. Indonesia and Malaysia have to cooperate to face with economic competition and a need to follow legal agreements in pursuing both interests. This perspective seems to reject the concept of highlighting nostalgic sentiments, which are incongruent with the global *realpolitik*.

Another criticism against the *serumpun* concept has been put forward by Wardhani (2008; 1999). She criticised the concept by arguing that,

‘The *serumpun* approach, in fact, has been an indication of unhealthy relations between Indonesia and Malaysia. The adoption of such an approach in the two countries’ relationship as a model of diplomacy has aggravated the dissatisfaction in the relationship. This suggests that the problems which have occurred between them have never been completely solved on the basis of candid attitudes and discussions. In the future, the relationship can no longer depend on the emotional tie, hence it needs a more rational approach... Both nations are economically, politically and strategically need each other and therefore both have no choice other than to maintain and improve the quality of the relationship.’ (Wardhani, 1999, p. 35)

Nevertheless, the proponents of *serumpun* have certainly had their point - a need to place the concept in a proper context and setting. They assert that the two countries should focus more on concrete and beneficial issues to strengthen the relations. In the same vein, history and close cultural affinity are important considerations in addressing challenging diplomatic issues such as migrant worker protection and territorial disputes since the two factors could provide more confidence and trust (Che Hashim Hassan, 2009). Disputes that arise are not conflicts but should be viewed as an opportunity for both countries to appreciate their common identity. This would then help both countries to improve their relations.

Relations between Indonesia and Malaysia can also be conceptualised through a constructivist’s perspective. Good relations need to be built from shared ideas, common identities, and mutual understandings

(Hara, 2008). Both countries share similar ideas on certain issues in making relations better. In Constructivism, ideas and identities do matter. In the context of Indonesia and Malaysia relations, the ebb and flow have something to do with the way people and government of both countries perceive and understand each other. Therefore, it is imperative to appreciate another influential independent variable – ‘the people’, and how people and state interact and socialise with each other to produce another dimension in understanding relations between two countries.

In discussing those interactions, Shamsul (1996) offered an interesting theoretical discourse, which is the basis of discussion in this article. His analysis focused on how modes of relations are constructed to form a shared identity (as also laid down by Constructivism) between the two countries. According to him, identity formation takes place in two contexts, which he calls as “two social reality contexts”. The first context refers to ‘authority-defined’ social reality. It is authoritatively defined by the elites, who are part of the dominant power structure. The second context signifies the ‘everyday-defined’ social reality, which is experienced by people in the course of their everyday life (Shamsul, 1996, pp. 477–478).

These two realities, according to him, can take place at the same time. In the context of Indonesia-Malaysia relations, ‘everyday-defined’ social reality, which is experienced directly by people in their interaction with one another in the two states, can happen together with the ‘authority-defined’ social reality that is often defined by the elites. However, there is a difference between these two social realities. If the everyday-reality is experienced directly, then the ‘authority-defined social reality’ is ‘only observed and interpreted’ (Shamsul, 1996, p. 478). ‘Authority-defined social reality’ is formed by the elites, circulated in official and unofficial statements. According to him, ‘authority-defined social reality’,

‘... includes debate and discourse—mostly designed, systematised and recorded - that have taken place, in the past and at present, within the government and between government and non-government collectives, amongst the members of the intelligentsia and within the sphere of *realpolitik*. In other words, the discourse in an authority-defined context is not a homogenous one. In fact, it

has always been characterised by vigorous and tense discussions on a broad range of themes and issues, both minor and major in nature, usually involving a number of social groups, each representing a particular form of interest.’ (Shamsul, 1996, pp. 477–478)

For instance, open discourse in media between government and non-state actors such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), academicians, and politicians is often seen as the contest of people’s aspiration in facing the reluctant and weak Indonesia in dealing with Malaysia. Based on Shamsul’s theory, however, these debates are part and parcel of the ‘authority-defined social reality context’ because it is ‘textualised’ and well documented in many forms, such as printed and audio media and academic writings. The result of the debates often becomes official policies taken by the government (Shamsul, 1996, 478).

In contrast, the discourse in the ‘everyday-defined social reality’ context is usually not well documented; it is “disparate, fragmented, and intensely personal conducted mostly orally” (Shamsul, 1996: 478). It is based on personal experiences and narratives, which are usually reported in blogs or pieces of reports in newspaper or magazines, yet, rarely become academic reference. It is often expressed in “... popular forms of expression or ‘popular culture,’ such as cartoons, songs, poems, short-stories, rumours and gossips, poison letters and the like” (Shamsul, 1996, p. 478). The popularity of this type of discourse is not important although sometimes it is accepted widely and become public concerns. It represents the opinion of subjects in their subjective texts. This aspect will be discussed further in this article in examining the ‘everyday defined reality’ in Kalimantan border areas (between Kalimantan Barat, Indonesia and Sarawak and in Sebatik Island between Sabah, Malaysia and Kalimantan Utara, Indonesia).

It can be argued that Indonesia-Malaysia relations cannot be seen mainly from the perspectives of informed people or civil society; neither can it be viewed from the states as reported by the media. This is because both groups represent a similar idea of the role of modern state with its attributes such as sovereignty, power, and prestige. The underpinning factor to define the relations, this article argues, is also to understand the interplay between ‘the privileged’ and ‘the

underprivileged' in terms of their access to media and public opinion. The domination of modern state discourse has so far overshadowed the people-to-people's narrative of relations between the two countries. To further discuss how these two defined social reality contexts work, there is a need to understand the history or stages of historical relations between Malaysia and Indonesia.

Stages and Natures of Relations

Historical relations between the two countries can be divided into five stages: pre-independent, during the independent struggle, confrontation period, the Cold War era, and globalisation. During the first stage and prior to Indonesia's independence, relations were conceptualised as two nations (*bangsa*) rather than as a state (*negara*). Therefore, relations were reflected by P-to-P interactions and ideas. In Shamsul's (1996) term, the people-defined social reality of the relations was dominant during this period. This could be seen from shared writings such as novels and stories including folks between two nations. During this stage, the concepts of border and territory were alien to people. Society was more attuned to civilisational narrative, which was reflected in the formation of various empires in the maritime Southeast Asia. This stage constructed a common social system, religious belief, and societal structure as basis for the relations.

In the second stage, relations were transformed from a shared culture into a common form of a single political identity. This is a stage where both sides were fighting for independence from two different colonial masters. Since the early twentieth century, leaders from both sides, thanks to the close P-to-P interaction through political parties and youth organisation, envisaged an independent nation-state called Indonesia Raya. Names like Ibrahim Yaacob, Ishak Haji Mohamed, Soekarno, and Hatta were some of the influential leaders who were instrumental to the idea. They formed *Kesatuan Rakyat Indonesia Semenanjung* (Union of Peninsular Indonesian, KRIS) and *Persatuan Pemuda Indonesia dan Malaya* (Association of Indonesia and Malay Youth, PERPINDOM), to enhance their shared destiny (Wardhani, 2008). In spite of that, neither Indonesia Raya nor the close socio-political relations could propel both sides to form an imagined political union. In the Malay peninsula, the idea of Indonesia Raya received rejection mainly from the royal courts. Therefore, both nations had to gain

independence in their separate ways. Nonetheless, the significance of relationship was enunciated by the Prime Minister of Malaya, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj at the Meeting of Ministers in Jakarta on 8th November 1955. It cannot be denied that, according to him,

‘... perhubungan antarabangsa Melayu dengan bangsa Indonesia yang mana pada satu masa kita dikenali sebagai satu bangsa yang mendiami Gugusan Pulau-pulau Melayu... Sungguhpun kita bercerai di satu babak tapi bersatu yang lain iaitu babak kebudayaan ... (the Malay’s international relations with the Indonesian race, which at one time we were recognised as one (singular) race inhabiting the Malay Archipelago ... although we are separated in one aspect, we are united in another, which is culture.’ (translated by author and quoted from Rohani Hj. Ab Ghani & Zulhilmi Paidi, 2010, p. 228).

The third stage of relations was coloured by trials and turbulation. In this stage, Soekarno was the dominant actor who not only posited a domineering Indonesia position vis-a-vis Malaysia, but also defined the political relations between the two nations. This period reflected the strengthening of authoritative-defined reality. President Soekarno (1959–1966) was the leader and main proponent of anti-imperialism. The proposed formation of Malaysia, which would combine Brunei, Sabah, Sarawak, and Singapore, was perceived as part of western colonialism and imperialism that were represented by the British. After several diplomatic attempts failed to prevent the plan, Soekarno launched the confrontational campaigns to crush Malaysia, called *Ganyang Malaysia*. Although his campaign was reluctantly supported by the army, *Partai Komunis Indonesia* (PKI) strongly supported the action (Mat Yazid Mohd Nor, 2013). The developments illustrated how that state-driven policies had started to dominate the opinion of people and society. Governments of both sides dominated the relations and formed the opinion of society. This period also signified the formation of identity as two separate states. Nationalism and strong identification to the states were highly intensified. It is also the beginning of separate identity formation, which consequently drifts apart the sense of cultural belonging among the people.

In the fourth stage, the Cold War and during the administration of President Soeharto, not only ended the confrontation between

Malaysia and Indonesia, but also brought about new dimension to the regional political environments. Both countries became the founding members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and forerunner to the Southeast Asian way of diplomacy. During this period, relations between both states were dominated by G-to-G relations. Both countries determined direction of the relations and managed their differences either through leaders' personal relations or behind-the-scenes negotiations. This 'authority-defined reality' also tacitly framed the relations as *serumpun* and Nusantara to create a sense of common cultural diplomacy despite different political identities. The P-to-P relations, however, remain intact particularly in the border areas. The 'authority-defined reality' has strengthened the 'everyday-defined' social reality in these areas.

In the fifth stage since the end of the Cold War, the nature of relations continued to be dominated by G-to-G, but the same time, the P-to-P relations began to regain momentum. These different nature and settings generate a different kind of yet, complicated relations between the two states.

Current Stage of Relations: The Hegemony of Authoritative Discourses

Since the end of the Cold War, both countries have experienced various stages of political changes. Indonesia embraces a fully democratic system, while Malaysia has undergone political reforms. The political changes, Hara (2008) argued, contribute to more complicated relations. This new political experience, coupled with the historical baggage that comes along, plays an important role in the construction of changing identities in both states in understanding one another. It has also provided more space for social and political criticisms in both countries.

Though states continue to define the identity and mode of relations, eventually people also play a crucial role in reconceptualising the relations but in a different context. This development was more pronounced during the turbulent period of Indonesian politics in the aftermath of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. Furthermore, in a globalised world, citizens in both countries have been better informed with the advent of rapid technological advancement. Sources of information retrieved not only come from conventional but also

social media. Given a more liberalised and open environment, even traditional media became bold in their reporting. In Indonesia, for instance, social activists and civil society voice their criticism against the government in media openly, something unheard of during the thirty-two years of Soeharto administration. What have been debated and discussed by people in the public sphere are not, however, about their aspiration in re-defining the relations. The debates have been focusing more on the dynamics within 'authoritative defined social reality' than within 'everyday defined social reality' context. In this context, in contrast to the official position to maintain good bilateral relations, people's aspiration to a large degree has been negative and confrontational towards Malaysia. Instead of promoting a shared identity for the two nation-states, Indonesians, in particular, have been abhorrent towards Malaysia. Why the changes take place?

It is argued that there are three reasons to explain this phenomenon. First, it relates to government discourse on state sovereignty. Prior to the *Konfrontasi* (confrontation), people in both countries felt that they came from similar culture and family and therefore shared similar identities. Therefore, they easily cooperated and helped one another. These shared identities were quite common and popular among the Indonesians. Jakarta assisted Kuala Lumpur by sending science teachers to Malaysian schools. It was considered a great time of relations with good memory between the two countries. Many Indonesians who experienced this period in Malaysia such as teachers could still remember how close both countries were during that time. The confrontation, however, showed that both sides had to accept the political reality that they were two different states with different views and aspirations. Both sides' attitude on each other could not be separated from the idea of modern states. Since the *Konfrontasi* episode, both states are aware of the fact that they eventually have divergent paths.

The confrontation, therefore, has been the turning point. People of both sides started to rethink the nature and identity of the relations. Both countries then began to pursue their own way of developing state and society. Malaysia has its own domestic problem and so did Indonesia. They hold tightly the main principles of modern state such as sovereignty and non-intervention principles. The formation of ASEAN has strengthened these principles.

State-defined relations also have a strong impact on how people of both sides perceive each other. There have been two interrelated

observations here. Firstly, the majority of Indonesians believe that Indonesia is not only a sovereign state but also the leader of ASEAN where other countries including Malaysia has to respect and follow. This aspiration, in relation to Malaysia, would be managed through various diplomatic means even through confrontation if Malaysia does not abide by Indonesian leadership. Secondly, the good times of relations where both states share much of similar identities as two states add to this feeling. Indonesia considers itself *abang* (brother) and therefore has the right to punish Malaysia as *adik* (younger brother) if it does not follow the *abang's* rules (Ruhanas Harun 2006, p. 49). Indonesians' decisiveness can be seen when they pressed their government demanding Malaysia to apologise in some diplomatic cases like cultural claims and migrant workers' treatment. Furthermore, Indonesia's failure to claim Sipadan dan Ligitan contribute to its assertive political and diplomatic position. Jakarta's show of force by deploying military power in border areas is one of the examples. Even Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004–2014), during his term as president, made regular visits to the Indonesian naval forces and issued statements that Indonesia would defend its territory at all costs.

Secondly, there have been differences between how people defined relations in the past and the present days. In the past, relations were defined particularly by good interactions and physical communication. It was equal and direct conventional communication, either thorough telephone, telex, or official letters, which could avoid misunderstanding. The idea was communicated, formulated, and agreed during meetings and, brought home to be discussed and implemented. There was solid understanding and positive attitude as the two countries supported each other in facing with the challenging Cold War environment.

Today, it is a different story. Social media tend to replace the official diplomatic channels. Therefore, the communication is subject to distortion, political division, ambiguity, and be full of rumours. These unofficial channels have made society easily provoked. It seems that those who control media would also control the means of communication. Certain politicians, especially in Indonesia, have jumped on the bandwagon for the benefit of their political popularity and career. When the Indonesian people, for instance, received news about migrant worker mistreatment, the use of local cultures and

songs by Malaysia, and the management of border between the two countries, more often than not, mass as well as small protests were a regular scene in the front of Malaysia's Embassy in Jakarta. It can be argued that the state discourse of sovereignty and political identity continues to have influenced people's perception and attitude. People were easily swayed by media reports that have political motives.

People-to-people communication in the past appear to be absent nowadays. 'People-defined relations' is not like in the past. Relations have been constructed in a different way by the dominant state discourse of the elites. There have been also a lot of distorted communications during this process.

In the Indonesian context, state official's stance began to be challenged by people especially over Jakarta's policy and reluctance to deal firmly with Malaysia. Indonesian political openness aided by rapid progress of information technology and social media greatly contribute to the people's involvement in defining the relations. Its rapid social-cultural changes have led people's opinion to become part of authoritative voices that need be heard. Society could freely express opinions and ideas, both in social media and mainstream media. During the height of the tensions after the Sipadan case, for instance, the Indonesians and Malaysians launched cyber wars. The Indonesians, in particular, were more vocal in expressing their unhappiness towards the Indonesian and Malaysian governments. They accused the Indonesian government of incompetency for not seriously making attempts to solve issues that touch the pride of the nation, such as the mistreatments of Indonesian workers and border encroachment by Malaysian enforcement agencies. They also responded angrily to the physical abuse of an Indonesian maid, Nirmala Bonat, and Manohara's alleged claims that she was mistreated by a Kelantanese prince while marrying him. Indonesians, in general, accused the Malaysian government of being arrogant (Khadijah Md Khalid & Shakila Yacob, 2012; Shahrman Lockman, 2008; MStar, 5 June 2009). They also accused Malaysia of stealing Indonesian cultural performances such as dances and songs like *tarian pendet*, *rasa saying*, and *Reog Ponorogo* (Ali Maksum & Reevany Bustami, 2014)

The above debate between 'people' and 'government' narratives, especially in Indonesia, is a vivid example of what role a modern state

has played. In particular, it connotes a realist image of sovereignty, strength, power, and prestige that has to be owned and promoted by a state (Liow, 2005). It is different from what Shamsul (1996) called as ‘everyday-defined-reality’, which reflects experience of those involved directly in the relations. It indeed reveals those who have opinion on the relation but do not take part in the relation itself. In this ‘authoritative-defined reality’ context, the government’s position, particularly Indonesia, is relatively weak in facing with popular demands in society, yet the government has the power and position to make policies. Furthermore, the government could not meet all the people’s demands but to offer selective policies in maintaining good relations with the neighbour. The government needs to differentiate between irrational, emotive opinions, and the diplomatic reality of nation-state relations (Farish Noor, 2009). In the end, a cordial and good neighbourhood policy needs to be maintained.

Relations in the Context of ‘Everyday-Defined Social Reality’

Despite the dominance of ‘authoritative-defined social reality’ narratives, attention should also be given to ‘everyday-defined social reality’ perspectives. There are some discussions on this conceptual perspective, but they have not been explicitly discussed and applied with regard to an in-depth theoretical framework analysis (Rizal Zamani Idris & Rafiq Idris, 2018; Darma Surya, 2013). ‘Everyday-defined social reality’ can be found from daily activities and discussions among those who directly experience contact with one another in daily life such as workers, traders, businessman, activists, religious (particularly) Islamic leaders, families, scholars, and artists.

Their views on relations are often completely opposite to the views circulated in the ‘authoritative-defined reality’ context. Indonesian workers and businessmen, for example, perceive that a cordial relation between the two countries is the utmost important and beneficial to them (Shahriman Lockman, 2008, p. 68; Zulfikar, 2017). For Indonesian workers, when they arrive in Malaysia, a hope of better life is much alive. Issues of political prestige or state sovereignty are irrelevant. Improving socio-economic well-being is an essential part of their struggling since their home country could not provide job opportunities (Zulfikar, 2017). For them, the two countries’ relations should be harmonious, and more attention should be given to protect

their rights and to facilitate their stay. Furthermore, artists could also offer the ‘everyday-defined social reality’ perspective. Songs, movies, and dramas speak about the reality of relations, but this reality is not seen as authoritative discourse probably because they are apolitical. Artists of both countries expect good relations and good political climate, where their creativities could be enjoyed and shared. Many Indonesian artists are invited in Malaysia and vice versa to perform. Siti Nurhaliza and Shiela Majid are among Malaysian artists who very popular in Indonesia. Another group of people who are directly part of ‘everyday-defined social reality’ is religious groups. Indonesian’s Arab descent, Habib Syech bin Abdul Qadir Assegaf and his group, for instance, are famous with their Islamic-themed discourses in Malaysia. It can be argued that politics separate but arts unite people.

Narrative of people’s relations in these two countries can be also found in academic articles, novels, short stories, and folklores. In the past, Indonesian novels written by Achdiat Karta Miharja, Abdul Malik Karim Amrullah (popularly known as Hamka), and Marah Rusli were shared by Malaysians as well as Indonesians. In recent time, Karim Raslan’s novels, *Heroes and the Other Stories* and *Cerialah*, are well received in Indonesia. Linda Christanty (2010) narrated how common cultural acceptance such a Malaysia’s drama *Bangsawan di Udara* in radio, Hang Tuah stories, P. Ramlee’s and Sheila Majid’s songs has bonded people of these two neighbouring countries. Her subjective experiences in the introduction to Karim Raslan’s book *Cerialah* show a memory of good old days of relations between the two *serumpun* countries.

In addition, traders, businessman and families’ ties are part of this ‘everyday-defined social reality’ context (Shahriman Lockman, 2008, p. 68). Traders and corporate leaders prefer good relations that could promote healthy business environment. Similarly, those with family ties, especially in the border areas, hardly view cultural claims as a serious issue. For them, it should be the appreciation of the culture that is more important than to compete with the ownerships. They also value good relations as a conduit to a closer people-to-people socialisation. It can be argued that this group of people is indeed one of the main factors in the Indonesia-Malaysia relations since they are directly taking part and interacting in day-to-day activities. This example is part and parcel of, according to Ruhanas Harun’s (2014;

2006) words, ‘people-to-people diplomacy’ in the Indonesia-Malaysia relations.

‘Everyday-Defined Social Reality’ in the Kalimantan-Malaysia Borders

In discussing the ‘everyday-defined social reality’ context, this article uses the border communities in Kalimantan (along the Kalimantan Barat [KALBAR] and Sarawak, and Sebatik Island of the Kalimantan Utara province [KALTARA] and Sabah) as a case study.¹ It is interesting to note that, according Abdul Rahim and Azhar Harun (2018, pp. 23–24), cross-border economic and social development along this area “... is characteristically traditional”. Nevertheless, the state, they argued, tend to emphasise more on defence and security issues rather than that of development. This is a clear example how both states continue to use the ‘authoritative-defined social reality’ by emphasising on the needs to protect territory and sovereignty. In their study on the cross-border activities between Tawau and Nunukan Island, Abdul Rahim and Azhar Harun (2018) related how the unequal development and opportunities contributed to a heavy one-way flow of people’s movements. The fact that the level of poverty is higher in Nunukan in the North Kalimantan explains why many from the island decided to migrate and seek employment in Tawau.

Cross-border trade between the Sarawak-Kalimantan Barat (KALBAR) informally exists prior to the formal signing of the Malaysia-Indonesia Border Traffic Agreement in 1967. Under this 1967 agreement, the Sarawak/Malaysia Immigration would issue border passes to those who live along the border to allow visiting relatives in KALBAR within five kilometres from the border. Similarly, the Indonesian Immigration issue cross-border passes (PLB – *Pas Lintas Batas*) to local residents who want to visit Sarawak.

Under the Malaysia-Indonesia Border Trade Agreement 1970 (BTA 1970), both sides also agree to establish barter trade and services for the local community. Eventually, the Tebedu-Entikong

immigration checkpoint was opened in 1989 and further upgraded

¹ Observation field works, interviews, and focus group discussion (FGD) were conducted on both sides for a period of three years between 2016–2019.

as an international gateway through the establishment of Customs, Immigration, and Quarantine facilities (CIQ) in 1995, to facilitate and enhance trade and social-economic activities in the area. It was the first CIQ between Sarawak and KALBAR (Badan Nasional Pengelola Perbatasan Republik Indonesia, not dated; Padmiati, 2008).

In the 1970 agreement, the communities in both countries are only allowed to bring in goods worth RM600 (maximum value) every month without taxes for every PLB holder. The types of goods that can be brought into Sarawak are agricultural products, while those who entering KALBAR are allowed to bring along household goods with reasonable amount, except for electronics. However, such regulations have not generated hypes of cross-border trade activities since the trade goods allowed were limited. Although negotiations to increase the number of allowed cross-border goods and to maximise barter trade have been discussed between the two countries, the pandemic tends to put the negotiation on hold. Governments' tough border control of both sides and reduced trade activities have halted the attempts. Furthermore, the discontinuation of barter-trade imposed by the Malaysian government has reduced the types and volumes of the trade activities (Rebecca Chong, 2021).

In the Sarawak-KALBAR border areas, the total trade in 2017 was USD120.83 million (Yvonne Tuah, 2019; Bernama, 2011a). In Tebedu-Entikong, products like snack food, electrical appliances, electronic household goods, and construction materials are the major exports of Sarawak, while KALBAR import seafood, vegetables, and fruits (Bernama, 2011b). Tebedu-Entikong is also one of the five entrances for timber trade that is recognised by the Sarawak state government. (The Star, 2022). Import-export activities of timber through Tebedu-Entikong have been managed by Harwood Timber Sendirian Berhad, which is a subsidiary of Sarawak Timber Industry Development Corporation (STIDC).

The North Kalimantan province (KALTARA) and Sabah particularly between Tawau-Sebatik Island-Nunukan is another important and vibrant border area. Sebatik Island displays a unique geographical position, when the 452.2 km² island is divided into two states. Indonesia owns 246.61 km² of the area while the rest belongs to Malaysia (Siburian, 2012, p. 57). There are no updated official

data for the last ten years over on the amount of cross-border trade in this area. The Tawau-Sebatik-Nunukan border areas also show a contradiction between ‘everyday-defined social reality’ and ‘authoritative everyday-defined social reality’ contexts. States tend to exert their ‘authoritative-defined social reality’ context by enhancing their capabilities to control people movement between two borders. This can be seen by the states’ efforts to fortify security, trade, and immigration control in the area (Sinar Harian, 2021; Utusan Borneo, 2021). Furthermore, unresolved maritime claims over the Ambalat have dragged the two neighbouring countries to various diplomatic protests (Druce & Baikoeni, 2016; Parlina, 2015; Jakarta Post, 2010). Nevertheless, it is the ‘everyday-defined social reality’ context that presents the genuine situation on the ground. Cross-border mobility, either legal or illegal, continues despite the tension.

Border situation and activities provide arguably an ironic picture of the bilateral relationship between the two countries. In contrast to the states’ competition for prestige and sovereignty protection cliché as being reported by media, situation on the ground is very much different. Based on observations and interview with the local people and market traders at Entikong, the issue of national prestige and sovereignty was not in the card. They argued that for a long time, Jakarta has neglected the well-being of the border community. The Indonesia areas are much developed as compared to that of Malaysia’s. They expressed their happiness and care most to maintain century-long interaction and communication with the other side. Border restrictions are a nuisance to their daily cross-border activities. Their grievances, in fact, have been recognised by the Indonesian government (Gatra, 2005). Under the Jokowi administration, a large financial budget has been allocated for the development of border areas (Taufik Ismail, 2021).

Furthermore, in the Tawau-Sebatik-Nunukan border area, a focus group discussion (FGD) session was conducted with Malaysia’s heads of the Village Security and Development Committee (*Ketua Jawatankuasa Kemajuan dan Keselamatan Kampung – JKKK*).² The FGD session with the JKKK heads were conducted in 2018. Fieldwork in the villages located close to the Sebatik-Indonesia border was carried out on the next day. The purpose of the session

² The FGD was conducted at the ADUN Office, Level 1, Kalabakan UMNO Building, Tawau.

was to get how the community felt about their life and their perception about intermittent diplomatic spates between Indonesia and Malaysia.

Respondents were from selected villages consisted of ethnic Bajau, Bugis, Tidung, and Suluk. The ethnic Chinese were more focused in Kg. Sungai Bergosong Kecil. The residents of Kg. Sungai Melayu, Kg. Sungai Limau, Kg. Sungai Tamang, and Kg. Sungai Wallace Bay have familial ties with the residents of nearby villages in Sebatik Indonesia, which are Desa Aji Kuning, Sungai Pancang, Sungai Nyamuk, Kg. Bambang, and Kg. Mantikas (*Jawatankuasa Kemajuan dan Keselamatan Kampung (Persekutuan) – JKKK(P)*).

Figure 1

Villages in Sebatik Indonesia



Ethnic Profile						
Selected Villages	Bugis	Bajau	Suluk	Tidung	Chinese	Ikatan Saudara
1. Kg. Sungai Wallace Bay	✓	x	x	✓	x	✓
2. Kg. Sungai Pukul	x	✓	x	x	x	x

(continued)

Ethnic Profile						
Selected Villages	Bugis	Bajau	Suluk	Tidung	Chinese	Ikatan Saudara
3. <i>Kg. Sungai Tamang</i>	✓	✓	x	✓	x	✓
4. <i>Kg. Sungai Lahat-Lahat</i>	x	✓	x	x	x	x
5. <i>Kg. Sungai Pisak-Pisak</i>	x	✓	x	x	x	x
6. <i>Kg. Sungai Limau</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓
7. <i>Kg. Sungai Melayu</i>	✓	✓	x	x	x	✓
8. <i>Kg. Sungai Bergosong Kecil</i>	x	x	x	x	✓	x

The findings of the FGD can be summarised as follows. Firstly, cross-border movements are considered norms to the community. Such mobility even exists before the coming of the colonial power. Therefore, when Malaysia and Indonesia were formed, families and relatives were forcibly separated by a modern notion of border and sovereignty. Yet for the respondents, the strength of the family ties continues. Their arguments are also shared by an elected head of district or Bupati of Indonesia's Nunukan island, Asmin Laura Hafid (Interview, 13 December 2018). Bupati Asmin Laura's close relations with the Sabah side came in many forms. In addition to having relatives, she was born in Tawau. She understands that as a politician, she needs to put her country's national interest first in dealing with neighbouring countries, but social and culturally, she is very much close to Malaysia's Sabah. Her love and affection towards Tawau in particular are beyond doubt. In addition, Nunukan port is known as an important transit point of Indonesian migrants from East Indonesia to enter Malaysia through Tawau.

Secondly, it is also revealed that cross-border activities are part and parcel of everyday social activities due to familial ties and common identity. Strong family bonding could reflect the everyday reality of social life in this area. Local border community of both sides continue to visit their families. In several Sebatik villages, informal crossing, without valid international travelling document, is a norm although

the fear of being caught by the enforcement agency is there. Formal cross-border crossing in the Sebatik-Tawau area is complicated. This is because there is no Malaysian immigration post that is located along the Sebatik-Malaysia-Indonesia border and the nearest immigration post is in Tawau. Those from the Malaysian side need to travel to Tawau Immigration Post beforehand by boat to get certification for international travel and then proceed to board a ferry to the other side. Therefore, there have been demands from the local leaders to build an official CIQ complex in the Sebatik Island itself. The cost however would be a major limitation.

Kampung Sungai Melayu (Sebatik Malaysia) is in fact very close to Desa Aji Kuning (Sebatik Indonesia), where the border is only marked by small rocks, paddy field boundaries, and mango trees. In addition to familial visits, communities in these two villages cross over to attend wedding ceremonies and participate in cultural programmes. Based on the unity spirit of the Nusantara and familial ties, the Indonesian National Military (*Tentera Nasional Indonesia – TNI*) that control the Kg. Sungai Melayu-Desa Aji Kuning border are inclined to facilitate those cross-border visits without imposing stricter conditions or restriction.

Furthermore, an official cross-border travelling produces a great deal of hassle. There are only two immigration posts – the Sungai Nyamuk and Sungai Pancang Immigration Posts (Sebatik Indonesia). During the field visit, only the TNI control the border. There is no Malaysian General Operations Force (*Pasukan Gerakan Am – PGA*) for controlling the Sebatik-Malaysia-Indonesia border in the interior. Instead, the Malaysian PGA is posted along the coasts of Sebatik Malaysia with the aim of preventing smuggled goods and human trafficking.

An official journey path, therefore, would entail greater travelling cost and time as compared to using informal travel routes, facilitated by the military guarding the Sebatik-Indonesia-Malaysia border on the basis of familial ties and mutual respect. For the residents of Kg. Sungai Melayu-Desa Aji Kuning, it would not be practical to take the official route because the location of both villages is very close and there is no fence or wall that separates the two communities.

Thirdly, the inflow of the Indonesian community into the local village communities adjacent to the border is basically driven by the need to

find jobs, especially in palm oil and cocoa plantations. The majority of the Sebatik-Indonesia community views Sebatik Malaysia as a platform to enter Tawau to buy daily necessities by using the cross-border pass. The Sebatik-Indonesia community has to travel to Tawau to sell agricultural produce, fruits, and vegetables. In other words, the Sebatik-Indonesia community depends on Tawau and Sebatik Malaysia's economy for their well-being and basic necessities.

Finally, the FGD also reveals that the Indonesian community presence is well received by the local Sebatik Malaysia community. They do not view each other as strangers or foreigners since cultural relations have co-existed for decades prior to the formation of the two sovereign countries. The Malaysian Sebatik even assists the Indonesian Sebatik to find employment opportunities in locally-run agricultural plantations. The social interaction and economic dependency indirectly reflect that the idea of big brother-little brother is non-existent. It is a symbiotic relationship where each group needs one another to co-exist. The symbiotic people-centred activities paint a picture of 'everyday-defined social reality' of relationship between the two countries. Sebatik Island can be characterised as a real borderless world. Even though political and diplomatic conflicts tend to dominate the relationship between Malaysia and Indonesia—such as the Sipadan-Ligitan Island and Ambalat as well as illegal immigrant issues, it does not affect the socialisation of people in the border areas. In short, the Sebatik island communities reflect 'everyday-defined social reality' of the relationship between Malaysia and Indonesia. The 'prosper thy neighbour' concept has been very much practised in the community.

CONCLUSION

This article discussed relations between Indonesia and Malaysia from the perspectives of people and state. It utilises Shamsul's (1996) approach of identity formation in the context of what he mentioned as 'authoritative-defined social reality' versus 'everyday defined social reality'. This article argued that relations between Indonesia and Malaysia in the last twenty-five years was defined by the elitist viewpoints in politics and media. Their views have been dominant and authoritative.

The social reality of relationship between the two countries, however, does not reflect the whole picture. It is more important to view the relationship from the experience of people transactions, which is referred as 'everyday defined social reality'. This perspective shows complex but generally positive views with the expectations that relations between two countries remain good. Relations among these groups through 'everyday defined social reality' have been taking place for a long time and they become the core that maintains relations between the two countries till now. This article also discussed the complex social interactions yet harmonious relations among people along the Kalimantan border areas with Malaysia. This article contended that the contributions to understand the reality of the Malaysia-Indonesia relationship are long ignored and disregarded because of the domination of state discourses dominated by Westphalian political issues. It is time, therefore, to conceptualise Malaysia-Indonesia relations from the 'everyday defined social reality' rather than to view it from the perspectives of power and interests.

Furthermore, both governments need to strengthen this 'everyday-defined social reality' in order to ensure that peace and stability are maintained in the area, and to allow local economy in both sides to thrive further. Informal cross-border activities should not be viewed as threats to security, but as an opportunity to empower border communities. This is because despite diplomatic tensions between Malaysia and Indonesia, perception and attitude of the border community remain unchanged.

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