13 FLUID BOUNDARIES: MODERNITY, NATION AND IDENTITY IN THE RIAU ISLANDS

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The Indonesian language equivalent for the word ‘fatherland’ ... is ‘tanah air’ meaning ‘land-water’, thereby indicating how inseparable the relationship is between water and land to the Indonesian people. The seas, to our mind, do not separate but connect islands. More than that, these waters unify our nation (Indonesian delegation to UNCLOS III, cited in Pasaribu 2005: 2-3).

The archipelagic concept (wawasan nusantara) has been central to Indonesian nation building, because the concept of Indonesia is predicated on clear territorial boundaries that encompass both land (tanah) and water (air). This concept was first articulated through the Juanda Declaration of 1957 (see Chapter 2 by Butcher) and received further legitimacy when Indonesia’s status as an archipelagic state was recognized under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Whereas the concept of archipelagic statehood is concerned with ensuring national territorial integrity (that is, it is outwardly oriented), wawasan nusantara is focused on the internal dynamics of national integration in an archipelagic nation characterized by ethno-linguistic diversity. The archipelagic concept and the archipelagic state are nevertheless intrinsically connected, as each relies on the other for its legitimacy. Fundamental to both is the view that the sea unites Indonesia’s islands and the people living on them. This idea is expressed in comments such as laut adalah perekat ke pulauan Indonesia (the sea is the glue of the Indonesian archipelago) (Adhuri 2003: 4). In other words, the seas located within the territorial baselines that surround the archipelago draw the people of Indonesia together to form one, united nation, just as the international maritime
border which marks out the edges of the archipelagic state serves to separate the Indonesian nation and its people from other nations.

The archipelagic concept emerged in the immediate post-independence period as Indonesia’s leaders faced the challenge of encouraging Indonesians to think of themselves as a nation. To achieve this goal, the idea of the Indonesian nation was intensified and redeployed through a range of state ideologies, including *Wisma Nusantara*. National development projects have been especially important in realizing the archipelagic concept (cf. Barker 2005). The concept has also been reinforced through official statements and rituals, the media, the education system and the practices of the bureaucracy and the military. But just as it took many years for the concept of the archipelagic state to achieve international recognition and acceptance, so too has it taken time for the idea of a single *tanah air*, or land united by water, to become accepted in the way that Indonesians experience and imagine the nation. *Wisma Nusantara*, like other forms of national imagining, remains a process in the making rather than a statement of fact, and Indonesia’s territorial seas, rather than being a source of unity, continue to divide many Indonesians (Adhuri 2003).

The archipelagic concept continues to be challenged not only by internal divisions based on ethnicity and culture, but also by the arbitrariness of the international maritime border that demarcates the edges of the archipelagic state. The Riau Islands, which are scattered across the Malacca Strait to the northeast of Sumatra and directly south of Singapore, are a case in point (see Map 13.1).¹ The maritime borders that separate the main islands of Bintan, Batam and Karimun from Singapore and Malaysia delineate part of the northern boundary of the archipelagic state. However, for the many islanders who feel a strong sense of connection to Singapore and Malaysia, these borders have limited practical or symbolic significance. The proximity of these places means that the seas, rather than uniting Riau Islanders with other Indonesians in far-flung parts of the archipelago (as implied by the archipelagic concept), act as

1 The province of Kepulauan Riau (Kepri) consists of the islands of Bintan, Batam and Karimun, those of the Natuna and Lingga archipelagos and many other smaller islands and islets. We use the term ‘Riau Islands’ here to refer to the three main islands of Bintan, Batam and Karimun that lie to the south of the Malacca Strait. The research on which this paper is based was funded by an Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Project grant for the project, ‘In the shadow of Singapore: the limits of transnationalism in insular Riau’ (DP0557368). The component of the fieldwork that focused on the Riau Islands included ethnographic observation and over a hundred semi-structured interviews with Riau Islanders of different backgrounds. Most of the interviews were conducted in the port cities of Tanjung Piaang and Tanjung Balai Karimun.
a conduit between them and their neighbours. It also creates a sense of regional identity at odds with the concept of *wawasan nasional* that hints at the multiple ways in which the seas, the archipelago and the nation are imagined and experienced by different communities within the nation-state.

While there is growing scholarly interest in the everyday meanings and practices of nation building in Indonesia, there has been little consideration of the role the sea plays in drawing the nation together or in the ways that it pulls it apart. Even less attention has been given to the ways in which the communities that live along Indonesia’s maritime borders experience and understand the border in their daily lives. By focusing on the communities that live along the outer edges of the Indonesian nation-state, this chapter offers a means to explore the everyday salience of water for the process of constructing the *wawasan nasional*. We argue that although Indonesia’s maritime borders are a constant signifier of national identity and belonging for Riau Islanders, at the same time islanders have a strong sense of regional identity and belonging built on a dense web of transnational flows across the straits. Our research reveals that, for many Riau Islanders, it is the border that unites them with other Indonesians, but it is the waters of the straits that draw them to their northern neighbours.

**DIVIDING THE WATERS**

Like many borders, the territorial line that divides Indonesia from Malaysia and Singapore cannot be seen. The contemporary maritime boundaries that mark territorial spaces in the Malacca Strait are based on different legal systems and rights of passage arising from moves by Malaysia and Indonesia to extend their maritime boundaries during the 1970s. The Singapore Strait, which separates Singapore from the Riau Islands, is just 3.2 nautical miles at its narrowest and is constantly less than 15 nautical miles across. As Malaysia and Indonesia each claim 12 nautical miles of territorial waters, and Singapore claims three nautical miles, neither strait is sufficiently wide to accommodate their territorial claims. As a result, treaties have been negotiated to locate the international border at the mid-point (Roach 2005). Although the territorial border Between Indonesia and Singapore is considered to be a fairly stable marker of territorial sovereignty, some claims remain unresolved (Mak 2006). Agreement was recently reached on the western boundary of the border but negotiations continue on the eastern boundary (Osman 2009).

The maritime borders that divide Indonesia from its northern neighbours are based on a line originally drawn up between the British and Dutch colonial powers in 1824 as part of the Anglo-Dutch Treaty, which gave the British the Malay Peninsula and the island of Singapore at its tip and the Dutch Sumatra, including the Riau Islands. This division did not draw on pre-existing cultural or political boundaries. Rather, it reflected desired colonial spheres of trade and influence. Although it effectively split the Johor–Riau Sultanate in half, the original treaty was not a right to possession or governance, but simply a right to influence. With time, however, the 'line of demarcation' between the two colonial powers came to represent the border between their respective colonial territories of British Malaya and Singapore and the Netherlands East Indies and, much later, between three-separate countries. The border as it stands today took shape over some decades. Indonesia declared independence in 1945, but the Riau Islands were not incorporated administratively into the republic until the Dutch finally acceded to Indonesia's claim to independence in 1949. Across the straits, the Singapore and Malaysian borders were not established until Singapore declared independence in 1965 after a short-lived merger in the Federation of Malaysia in 1963.

These international borders were largely ineffective in dividing the waters between the Riau Islands and Singapore and Malaysia before the late twentieth century. Throughout the colonial period and up to the 1960s, individuals crossed the straits regularly with little regard for the markers of territorial sovereignty or jurisdiction. In doing so, they were following well-travelled trade routes established during pre-colonial times by Malay and Bugis traders, and further strengthened by the presence of Chinese migrants, who began moving into the region in the 1800s. As Singapore transformed itself into the dominant political-economic power in the region, the Riau Islands became increasingly tied to its economy (Trocki 1990) and trading networks flourished across the straits. It was only with Confrontation, when Indonesia's northern periphery was a key site of skirmishes between Indonesia and Malaysia, that the concepts of citizenship and nationality became more closely linked to notions of sovereignty and boundary maintenance. Thus Confrontation, rather than Indonesian independence, was pivotal in reimagining and reconstructing the borders in the straits (Ford and Lyons 2006).

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2 One exception is the working paper by Adhuri (2003). For a different way of conceiving of the archipelago, see Boeijen's (2005) work, *The City Archipelago*, which considers the interactions between sexuality, nation and identity.

3 The exception is the seafarers who fish in the waters between Indonesia and Australia; see Chapter 12 by Fox.

4 For a discussion of the relationship between the Johor–Riau Sultanate and the colonial powers in the region, see Trocki (1979).
By enclosing sovereign territory, the newly enforced border not only restricted movement across the straits, but also made people on either side of the border into national citizens whose rights of passage were determined by the possession of a passport. As immigration and customs regimes became more entrenched in the decades that followed, the relative freedom of mobility that had characterized the crossing of the straits during the early years of Indonesian independence began to change. Since this time, Riau Islanders have continued to cross the straits but with a heightened awareness of moving from one country to another.

WATERS THAT UNITE AND DIVIDE

The composition of the Riau Islands’ population reflects the constant migratory flows of different populations into and out of the region over the last century. The original population consisted of Orang Melayu (Malays) and Orang Laut (nomadic fisher-people) (Wee 1985). During the colonial period, considerable numbers of Bugis traders and warriors, as well as Chinese traders and coolies, began to arrive, creating an increasingly diverse and vibrant community (Roeoe et al. 2003). In 1930, 60 per cent of Tanjung Pinang’s population was Chinese (Butar-Butar 2000: 5). However, the influx of migrants from Java and Sumatra over the last three decades has shifted the ethnic balance between the Chinese and non-Chinese in the city—and to a lesser extent in other parts of the Riau Islands—and created an even more ethnically diverse population. Figures from the 2000 census show that on Batam, the Javanese constitute the single largest ethnic group, followed by Malays, Minang and Bataks. On Bintan, Malays make up the largest ethnic group, followed by Javanese and Minang. The Chinese community comprises just under 10 per cent of the population of the entire province of Kepulauan Riau (Ananta and Bakhtiar 2005: 20).

Local Malays, the islands’ large Chinese population and many long-term residents from other ethnic groups have close and enduring links across the straits. Many Chinese and Malay families living in the islands have relatives in Singapore and Malaysia. Wealthier residents seek healthcare in Malacca and Kuala Lumpur and educate their children abroad, and since regional autonomy, Singapore government departments, educational institutions and cultural groups have initiated a wide range of cross-border outreach programs. Middle-class Riau Islanders also travel across the straits for leisure, particularly shopping and entertainment. Many other Indonesians cross the border to work either on a long-term basis on plantations or in secondary industry or services in Malaysia, or for shorter stints in Singapore. Significant numbers of internal migrants who move to Batam, Bintan or Karimun in search of work in the industrial zones end up working overseas, and most international migrants spend long periods of time in the islands prior to departure, or return there between placements (Lyons and Ford 2007). Some skilled workers employed in Singapore-owned factories in the industrial enclaves of Batam and Bintan spend time working in the Singapore premises of parent companies, while other workers move across the border on a daily or weekly basis, mostly illegally. These short-term labour migrants work as traders in second-hand whitegoods and computers, handymen or seamstresses, but also in restaurants and as sex workers.

Singapore’s considerable investment in the islands under the Indonesia-Malaysia-Singapore (IMS) Growth Triangle initiative means that Singapore businesspeople and company employees also move back and forth across the straits. Meanwhile, travel agents in Singapore promote the luxury resorts on Bintan and Batam as local, rather than international, holiday destinations (Ford and Lyons 2006). In addition, thousands of working-class Singaporean and Malaysian men travel to the islands each month for sex (Ford and Lyons 2008). Some of these men establish first or second households in the islands, joining other groups involved in cross-border relationships or marriages, such as those with longstanding cross-border family ties and individuals with experience working in Singapore and Malaysia. The physical proximity of Singapore, peninsular Malaysia and the Riau Islands enables couples who live on opposite sides of the border to see each other regularly while maintaining separate lives in their home countries (Lyons and Ford 2008).

This is not to suggest that all Riau Islanders—or all Singaporeans, for that matter—have the same experience of the border. An individual’s exposure to transnational encounters is influenced by his or her proximity to an international port. Only a limited number of official international ports service the cross-border ferries on each island. Whereas unauthorized ports (pelabuhan tikus, literally ‘rat ports’) also facilitate cross-border movement, the majority of travellers cross the border through the official ports. The important role of these ports as exit and entry points means that different communities within a short distance of each other may have dramatically different experiences of the border, even if both are located close to the sea. Islanders living in the port towns of Tanjung Balai Karimun and Tanjung Pinang or on the island of Batam have ready access to international ferry terminals. In contrast, islanders living near Bintan’s deep-water port of Kijang, which services Indonesian cargo ships and domestic Pelni routes, have more limited opportunities to cross the border. Residents of Kijang and villages on the east and north of the island must first travel to Tanjung Pinang (usually overland) if they wish to travel to Singapore or Malaysia. For this reason, they are less likely to
have crossed the straits. Conversely, for people living in Tanjung Balai Karimun, ferries to Singapore and Malaysia are both cheaper and faster than the interisland ferry to Bintan. As long as they hold a passport and make a day trip or can stay with friends or relatives, both these countries are more accessible physically, and even financially, to residents of Karimun than is Tanjung Pinang, the provincial capital.\(^5\) Yet even with easy access to an international port, residents of port towns or those living elsewhere in the islands who have the desire and means to travel may not succeed in entering the territorial space of Singapore or Malaysia. During the 1990s, the IMS Growth Triangle was often cited as an example of an increasingly ‘borderless’ world in which people, goods and information flowed seamlessly across national borders (Olmstead 1990, 1995). But as critics of this view argue, nation-states continue to play powerful roles in territorializing global order, and individuals who cross international borders continue to be constructed as national subjects (van Houtum and van Naerssen 2002; Cunningham 2004). Thus, although Indonesians, Malaysians and Singaporeans officially have reciprocal rights to visa-free tourism, these rights are treated differently at various border control sites. Similarly, although all three countries require work visas, this requirement is policed in different ways.

As Heyman (2004) notes in his work on international airports, immigration checkpoints, which are usually located within the territorial boundaries of the nation-state, have become the border gates of the nation. While Singaporeans and Malaysians pass through Indonesian checkpoints regularly without being questioned, every Indonesian who seeks to enter Singapore or Malaysia faces a greater or lesser risk of being turned back. Sometimes refusal of entry is imposed arbitrarily. The treatment accorded Riau Islanders at immigration checkpoints is also affected by ethnicity, age and class. Wealthy people are less likely to be refused visas or asked to show that they have sufficient funds to cover the cost of travel abroad. Social status and money do not always guarantee an easy passage, however. Our research suggests that Chinese Indonesians of all classes are able to enter Singapore more easily than Indonesians from other ethnic backgrounds, and that older people of all backgrounds have less trouble crossing either border.

The disparities between the ways Indonesians and their cross-border counterparts experience immigration regimes are nowhere more visible than on the Singapore–Indonesia border, where Riau Islanders have great difficulty crossing into Singapore because of Singapore government con-

cerns that they may engage in illegal work or overstay their tourist visas. As unemployment grew in the islands in the wake of the Asian financial crisis, both Singapore and Malaysia stepped up surveillance to prevent unauthorized labour migrants from attempting to cross the border with or without passports in search of work.\(^7\) Increased pressure on the border led to heightened immigration controls at the major checkpoints in the Harbour Front and Tanah Merah terminals in Singapore used by ferry services from the Riau Islands. These efforts appear to have had some success in reducing the numbers of people attempting to enter Singapore by sea (Ministry of Home Affairs 2007a, 2007b). Malaysia’s attempts to stem the flow of undocumented labour migrants from Indonesia have been much less successful, in part because of a lack of commitment and wherewithal on the Malaysian side. Hundreds of thousands of Indonesians cross into Malaysia without proper documentation, but these irregular migration flows are typically dealt with through forced repatriation of undocumented labour migrants rather than by interception at the border (Ford 2006).

The proximity of Singapore and Malaysia means that the islands are also a strategic hub for people-smuggling syndicates, which operate throughout Indonesia (Agustinanto 2003: 178). In recent years, the provincial government has passed human smuggling regulations and local police departments have established counter-smuggling desks. International agencies such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) have provided support for these efforts, leading to increasing numbers of arrests of ‘traffickers’ and the identification of significant numbers of ‘victims’ – the majority of whom are migrant workers (IOM 2007). Counterintuitively, it is therefore generally easier for young men to cross the border than young women, because immigration and customs officials in Singapore (and to some extent Malaysia) are conscious of the concerns surrounding the trafficking of young women.

The security responses to these illegal border crossings have converged with the increasingly visible presence of navy and customs boats as a result of bilateral and multilateral agreements and joint policing initiatives on piracy between Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore.\(^8\) The Malacca Strait is one of the world’s busiest waterways. More than 50,000

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5 Residents of Bintan, Batam and Karimun are exempt from the exit tax levied on Indonesians travelling internationally.

6 For an extended discussion of differential access across the Singapore–Indonesia border and how it has changed over the decades, see Ford and Lyons (2006).

7 While some of these ‘illegal migrants’ travelled to Singapore and Malaysia from other parts of Indonesia, many were initially drawn to Batam through the promise of work in the industrial zones established under the IMS Growth Triangle Initiative (Lyons and Ford 2007).

8 For a discussion of these initiatives, see Ong-Webb (2006).
ships pass through it each year, carrying more than one-third of global trade and two-thirds of the world’s liquefied natural gas (Ong-Webb 2006: xix). The strait has strategic importance for Singapore because its economy is largely dependent on the shipping trade: if the Singapore Strait were closed, ships would have to travel an additional 500 nautical miles, with an immediate effect on freight costs worldwide (Roach 2005). By contrast, several commentators have pointed out that Indonesia is much less invested in securing the strait, because it accounts for only a small proportion of the country’s sea trade (Teo 2007).

Piracy, which thrived during the pre-colonial and colonial eras (Manap 1983; Tagliacozzo 2007), has long been a matter of international concern. The topography of the region, with its numerous small islands covered in dense mangroves and dissected by tidal streams, offers protection to pirates who are able to take advantage of their knowledge of the land and sea to escape detection. In 2005, one-quarter of the world’s reported piracy attacks occurred in Southeast Asia—a majority of them in the Malacca Strait and in the territorial waters of Indonesia (Ong-Webb 2006). Scholars who have studied piracy in the region, such as Frecon (2006), have found few links between piracy and terrorism, arguing that in the Riau Islands piracy is, rather, an opportunistic activity linked to petty crime. However, the international view that piracy and terrorism are linked appears to have achieved traction at the regional level in the post-9/11 world. In June 2005, the Joint War Committee of Lloyd’s Market Association described the Malacca Strait as an area at risk of ‘war, strikes, terrorism and related perils’ due to the ‘intensification of the weaponry and techniques used by the pirates in the Straits … who are now largely indistinguishable from terrorists’ (cited in Teo 2007: 541).

The narrowness of the straits, combined with their role as a key international shipping lane, has given rise to concerns about terrorist activities, including ‘floating bombs’ that could be used to target Singapore’s harbour and oil refineries (Vijayan 2004). Fears of terrorism also extend to rumours of possible bombings in the Singaporean tourist zone in the north of Bintan, exemplified by reports that Bintan could become ‘another Bali … only closer to home’. These concerns shape the way the straits (and the islands) are perceived regionally and internationally. The international perception that the straits are a dangerous place inhabited by pirates, traffickers and terrorists, and the security forces that seek to control them, has had a very real impact on the ability of Riau Islanders to cross the border and thus has affected the sense of connection that Riau Islanders feel with their near neighbours.

IDENTITY AND NATION IN THE BORDER ZONE

Despite the increasing securitization of the border, Singapore and Malaysia remain central in local imaginings of identity, nationhood and belonging. For Riau Islanders living in the port towns of Tanjung Pinang and Tanjung Balai Karimun and anywhere on Batam, the trappings and rituals of the international ports and the foreigners who enter their communities through them are part of their daily geography. Individuals do not need to cross the border to feel a sense of connection with Malaysia and Singapore, because they regularly engage in transnational encounters with commuters and other foreigners who purchase supplies in their shops, eat in their food stalls and walk on their streets. Whether or not Riau Islanders wish to, can afford to or are able to travel across the border, the proximity of Singapore and Malaysia, and the visibility of Singaporeans and Malaysians in their towns, on television and in their newspapers, makes those places seem easy to know.

This is not to suggest that those who are less mobile have a more uniform experience of transnationalism than those who cross the border. The wealthy businessman who takes his family to Malaysia for regular holidays and the Chinese market stall owner who saves every penny to educate her children in Singapore experience transnationalism differently from the second-hand goods trader who crosses the border each month to buy new stock. Similarly, the sex worker employed in the busy port town brothel, the motorcycle taxi driver who hustles tourists on the dock and the immigration official who stamps passports in the arrival hall have a more intense transnational experience than the primary school teacher who has neither the means nor the desire to cross the border or to engage with foreigners. Ultimately, however, it is impossible to live in any but the most isolated communities on Batam, Bintan and

9 The world’s international maritime powers have proposed a range of initiatives to address security in the straits. However, the littoral states are concerned that international initiatives to secure safe passage may undermine their sovereign rights. While UNCLOS defines piracy as an act that occurs on the high seas or outside the jurisdiction of any state, the International Maritime Bureau has changed its definition to allow acts of violence against ships in national waters to be treated as piracy on the high seas. This means that one state may take action against pirates in the national waters of another state, with consequences for national sovereignty.

10 There is evidence that the number of reported attacks on international ships has declined since 2005, although attacks on fishing vessels (often not reported) continue (Murphy 2007).

11 ‘Shocks and disbelief at attack so close to home’, Straits Times, 15 October 2002.
Karimun without developing some awareness of the ‘other’ across Indonesia’s northern maritime borders, even if simply to reject the Singapore rat race in favour of the more ‘civilized’ pace of life at home.

The cross-strait connections that Riau Islanders have forged and the constant flows of people and goods across the border have thus created a way of life that is different to that which they imagine other Indonesians experience. This sense of the special character of islander life emerges in a context where travel to other parts of Indonesia is relatively rare for long-term residents. The tyranny of distance has lessened considerably with the deregulation of the airline industry and subsequent advent of cheaper airfares and a wider array of destinations. A limited air service has been re-established between Tanjung Pinang and Pekanbaru, the capital of mainland Riau, but Batam remains the only place in the islands effectively linked to the rest of Indonesia by air. The cost of tickets and the need to travel to Hang Nadim airport in Batam means that air travel is still beyond the reach of most islanders. Water therefore continues to provide an important conduit between the islands and Pekanbaru, and between the islands and Jakarta. However, the sea journey to these other parts of Indonesia is time-consuming and arduous. The journey to Jakarta takes 24 hours on the Pelni boats that dock in the port of Kijang on Bintan. Other large and medium-sized ships link Batam and Karimun with the major north Sumatran port of Belawan, outside Medan, and Padang in West Sumatra. A journey by boat to Pekanbaru entails either a journey up the Sิงk River in a small motorized vessel, which takes three days and two nights, or several hours by boat to the mainland port of Dumai, followed by several more overland. By contrast, the journey from Batam or the northern reaches of Bintan to Singapore is less than an hour by ferry. Karimun, which lies to the west, is also less than an hour by ferry from the Malaysian state of Johor, and little further to Singapore.

Islanders’ sense of the physical distance between the Riau Islands and other parts of Indonesia has diminished somewhat in the last two decades with the influx of migrant workers attracted to the islands by the prospect of work in the IMS Growth Triangle. These vast new flows of migrants have irrevocably changed the character of island communities, since the newcomers have not assimilated into the local community to the extent that their predecessors did (Ford 2005). Improvements in information and communication technology have also helped to integrate the Riau Islands into the Indonesian nation and make island communities less outward looking (Faucher 2006), and with the exception of the longstanding Chinese community—many of whose members speak little Indonesian—most islanders now watch Indonesian television broadcasts, whereas just 20 years ago Singaporean and Malaysian stations were the only ones Riau Islanders could watch. However, this growing awareness of their Indonesianess has by no means displaced Riau Islanders’ sense of connection across the straits. In places like Tanjung Pinang and Tanjung Balai Karimun, where there are strong, traditional community links across the border, islanders emphasize the Riau Islands’ ‘shared history’ and ‘family links’ with Singapore and Malaysia. In describing their sense of belonging and identity, local Malays continue to refer to the longstanding kinship and trade ties that bound the Riau Islands and Singapore—and to a lesser extent Johor—during the colonial period and since (Ford and Lyons 2006). They argue that these networks are the basis for a regional identity shared by those who live along the border. These accounts resonate with the discourse of ‘pan-Malayness’ that is sometimes invoked in scholarly and popular accounts of the region (cf. Barnard 2004) and is common in the scholarly literature on the Riau Islands (Wee 1985, 2002; Wee and Chou 1997; Benjamin and Chou 2002).

Writing about the salience of such a Pan-Malay identity in contemporary Singapore and Malaysia, Kahn (2006: 82) claims that “it is in the modern trans-border Malay World that one is most likely to find genuine alternatives to nationalist narratives, as well as the sources of resistance to the projects of building modern states and nations in the region”. Similarly, Rahim (1998: 16) argues that pan-Malay consciousness continues to have potency, as demonstrated by the cultural, social and economic links that Singaporean Malays are forging at a regional level. However, as Cribb and Narangoa (2004) suggest—citing the example of the ‘Malays’ in Malaysia and Indonesia—transnational identities are difficult to maintain in the face of political boundaries and international borders that are strengthened through a range of state practices. This is borne out by our research among young Malay Singaporean men, who say that they feel little connection with ‘other Malays’, and even less with Indonesians (Lyons and Ford, forthcoming). And, with the exception of some among the Malay elites, almost none of the Riau Islanders we spoke to explicitly invoked any kind of overarching pan-Malay identity in describing their connections with communities on the other side of the maritime border. Instead, they argued that the waters of the straits drew them together and shaped a common sense of place and destiny. This suggests that contemporary forms of cross-border identity are the product of location rather than ethnicity or culture, emerging out of the increasing frequency and volume of transnational flows and individual movements across the straits (and beyond).

This sense of regional belonging described by many Riau Islanders has been enhanced by the efforts of the central government to incorporate the islands into Indonesia’s national project. The IMS Growth Triangle and the location of the Riau Islands so close to Indonesia’s neighbours
means that the government has increasingly sought to regulate the region through a strong bureaucratic and navy presence, often overriding the insights and knowledge of local government and local communities. Riau Islanders are acutely aware, and often resentful, of central government initiatives that impinge on their way of life, leading them to complain constantly of central bureaucrats’ lack of understanding of local conditions—that the central government and its representatives simply ‘do not understand’ conditions in the islands. They have been equally wary of attempts to draw them into the political concerns of those living on mainland Sumatra. When Malay elites in Pekanbaru attempted to establish a separatist movement soon after the fall of Soeharto, they did so with almost no support from the Riau Islands. The successful push in the islands for the establishment of an independent province in the early 2000s further emphasized their sense of difference from mainlanders, regardless of ethnic background (Ford 2003).

The Islanders’ close cross-border connections do not mean, however, that they feel a stronger sense of connection with the governments in Singapore or Kuala Lumpur than they do with Jakarta. Nor do Riau Islanders imagine themselves as part of a post-national community. Their sense of their place in the world is firmly grounded in their view of themselves as both Riau Islanders and Indonesians. They see their way of life as being intimately tied to the lives of their neighbours, but their sense of regional belonging also stands in opposition to their view of Singaporeans and Malaysians as different to themselves. The dramatic devaluation of the rupiah following the Asian financial crisis of 1997–98 and the growing differences in the purchasing power and lifestyles of islanders compared with Singaporeans and Malaysians have further served to emphasize the dividing effects of the border. The experiences of urban Riau Islanders living in and around the main port towns on Bintan, Batam and Karimun thus do not make the existence of the Indonesian state redundant or irrelevant. Their sense of identity and belonging is defined by their location on the northern edges of the Indonesian nation-state. This awareness is built on a level of understanding that precludes blind admiration or acceptance of the values of their ‘more developed’ neighbours. At the same time as a starry-eyed factory worker stares at the glittering Singapore skyline clearly visible from Batam’s north coast, a sex worker in Tanjung Pinang speaks scornfully of the background and lifestyle of a working-class Malaysian client, and a Chinese businessman in Tanjung Balai Karimun reflects pityingly on the rat race his Singaporean cousin must endure.

Indonesia’s maritime borders are therefore a constant presence in the consciousness of those who live in the islands. These invisible borders, made present in the border practices of authorities in Malaysia and Singa-

dore and reinscribed through the actions of the navy and customs officials from all three countries who patrol the straits, mark out their identity as ‘Indonesians’. Their knowledge of their Indonesianess is made evident in the need to possess a passport to cross the waters that divide them from their neighbours and is reinforced through the actions of a central government that seeks to include Riau Islanders in its nation-building agenda through the provision of national education and telecommunication systems. It is also ever-present in the behaviour and actions of recent migrants, whose sense of place is oriented away from the border, and in the lifestyles of Singaporeans and Malaysians, the majority of whom share little in common with their islander neighbours.

At the same time, Riau Islanders have a strong sense of their place in an archipelago—not the Indonesian archipelago invoked by the concept of tanah tanah, but an imagined archipelago of islands drawn together by the waters of the Malacca Strait. This imagined space cannot be mapped neatly against any known archipelagic zone (such as the Riau Archipelago) or the existing provincial boundary (Kepulauan Riau). It is an imagined space that transcends the international border and signifies the dense web of transnational linkages between the differently situated communities living along Indonesia’s maritime edge. In professing a sense of regional belonging and identity, Riau Islanders do not pretend that this sense of place is experienced by all who live along the border. However, it is central to the way in which they think about their place within the Indonesian nation, for while the international border ties Riau Islanders to Indonesia, the sea ties them to the lands across the straits.

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