Who are the *Orang Riau*? Negotiating Identity across Geographic and Ethnic Divides

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Debates about identity have multiplied across Indonesia in the wake of the implementation of regional autonomy. In the ethnically heterogeneous province of Riau, identity is prominent in the public debate and pivotal to struggles over the distribution of resources and questions of political allegiance. This chapter examines the extent to which these public discourses of identity are reflected at the grassroots level, drawing from my own experiences as an intermittent member of a non-Malay Riau household, and on data from semi-structured interviews conducted in June 2002 with community leaders and 40 other people from a range of social and ethnic backgrounds (see Table 9.1).

Half of the interviews took place in Pekanbaru (the provincial capital, located on the mainland) and half in Tanjungpinang (traditionally the major administrative centre in the islands). They focused on four issues: understandings of regional autonomy; the potential division of Riau into two provinces; who can lay claim to being an *orang Riau* (a person of Riau); and relationships among ethnic groups.

My informants' responses confirmed that the hopes of the people of Riau for improved access to economic resources have fuelled both general public support for autonomy and Malay claims to preferential treatment. However, they also suggested that affective factors should not be overlooked in attempts to understand the nuances of regional autonomy in Riau. On the one hand, Malay identity is emerging as a form of collective expression. On the other, Malay claims to place have left many non-Malays with a sense that they have no place to claim. Where, then, does indigeneity end and citizenship begin? This question, which lies at the very heart of the identity conundrum in Riau, is important for Indonesia as a whole as it emerges from the New Order period.

Claims to place in an ethnically diverse province

Resource-rich Riau incorporates not only part of the Sumatran mainland but also thousands of islands scattered over hundreds of thousands of square kilometres of ocean. It has long had one of the most ethnically heterogeneous populations in Indonesia (Table 9.2). As a consequence, the debate about citizenship in Riau is very different from that in provinces in

which claims to place are accompanied by clear, ethnically based definitions of who is – and who is not – entitled to make them. The semantics here are instructive. Unlike the *orang Jawa*, for whom place and ethnicity are identical, or the *orang Sumatra Barat*, for whom place is a clear synonym for ethnicity, the question of who can call themselves *orang Riau* is strongly contested. For many, belonging – rather than ethnicity – lies at the heart of identity.
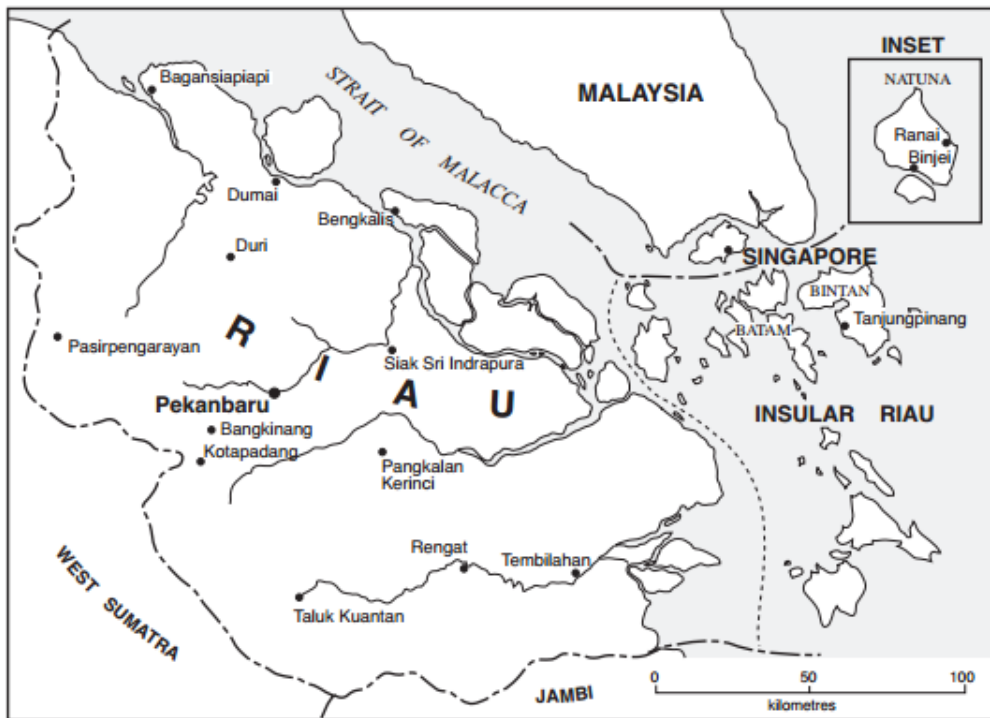
The Malays, who originally came from the islands – along with the Suku Laut (maritime people) and the mainland's indigenous non-Malay tribes, including the Talang Mamak, Akit, Hutan, Sakai and Bonai peoples (Djatmiko 1993: 35) – are widely considered to be indigenous to the province.[1] Malays and indigenous non-Malay tribespeople are not the only ones to make claims to place in Riau, however. As its mainland borders were drawn in a seemingly arbitrary manner, the province incorporates the homelands of significant numbers of Minangkabau (the dominant ethnic group in West Sumatra) and Batak (the ethnic group mostly associated with North Sumatra). In addition, Riau has long been the destination of migrants from other parts of the archipelago and from abroad, and the rate of intermarriage has been high.

In recent decades, Batam's population alone has risen from 6,000 in 1973 (BIDA 1998: 8) to over 400,000, and the province's population as a whole has more than doubled since 1980. On the mainland, as a result of transmigration, the Javanese are the dominant group of migrants in traditionally Malay rural areas (Tirtosudarmo 1990), while Bataks are strongly represented on plantation holdings. Pekanbaru and Dumai are essentially Minangkabau, or Minang, towns. In the islands, where the Bugis were a historically influential migrant community, the dominant contemporary migrant groups are the Javanese, Minang and Batak – although migrants from Flores are more visible than the statistics suggest. Mainland and

insular Riau are also home to large numbers of Chinese, who mostly live in the islands and the coastal cities of the mainland (GOI 1999: 14).

Table 9.1   Summary of Biodata of Interview Respondents

Ethnic Group	Status of Residence	Sex	Age	Occupation	Ethnic Group of Spouse	Language Spoken at Home
Mainland Riau						
Malay	Islands	M	44	Lawyer	Minang	Indonesian
Malay	Mainland	F	40	Petty trader	Malay (mainland)	Malay/ Minang
Malay	Mainland	M	39	Contractor	Malay (mainland)	Indonesian
Malay	Mainland	M	37	Public transport driver	Riau-born Minang	Malay/ Minang
Malay	Mainland	M	34	Plantation administrator	Lampung/ Javanese	Indonesian
Minang	Riau-born	F	41	Home duties	Minang	Indonesian
Batak/ Javanese	Riau-born	M	38	NGO activist	Riau-born Minang/Javanese	Indonesian
Minang	Riau-born	M	38	Civil servant	Minang	Minang/ Malay
Javanese/ Minang	Riau-born	M	34	Manager	Acehnese/ Sundanese	Indonesian
Bugis	Riau-born	M	30	Lawyer	Malay (mainland)	Indonesian
Minang	30 years	F	51	Civil servant	Minang	Minang
Javanese	19 years	F	45	Lecturer	Sundanese	Indonesian
Batak	17 years	M	43	Teacher	Batak	Indonesian
Javanese (transmigrant)	22 years	F	29	Home duties	Minang	Minang
Minang	20 years	M	21	Labourer	Buton/ Javanese	Malay
Batak	5 years	M	38	Engineer	Batak	Indonesian
Sasak	4 years	M	34	Labourer	Malay	Indonesian
Javanese	10 years	M	31	Military officer	Minang	Indonesian
Javanese	8 years	M	31	Security guard	Javanese	Javanese
Acehnese/ Sundanese	3 years	F	30	Home duties	Javanese/ Minang	Indonesian

Table 9.1   (continued)

Ethnic Group	Status of Residence	Sex	Age	Occu-pation	Ethnic Group of Spouse	Language Spoken at Home
Insular Riau						
Malay	Mainland	M	43	Journalist	Malay (islands)	Malay
Malay	Islands	M	40	Contractor	(unmarried)	Malay
Malay	Mainland	M	40	Teacher	Malay (islands)	Malay
Malay	Islands	M	37	Civil servant	Malay (mainland)	Malay
Malay	Islands	M	20	Student	(unmarried)	Malay
Minang/ Javanese	Riau-born	M	50	Taxi driver	Javanese	Malay
Minang/Batak	Riau-born	M	48	Bank employee	Malay (islands)	Indonesian
Bugis	Riau-born	M	43	Petty trader	Malay (mainland)	Malay
Javanese	Riau-born	F	33	Home duties	Riau-born Bugis	Malay
Batak	Riau-born	M	32	Restaurant owner	Malay (islands)	Malay
Javanese	38 years	M	62	Retired navy	Chinese	Indonesian
Minang	30 years	M	53	Retired army	Javanese	Indonesian
Batak	22 years	M	47	Petty trader	Batak	Indonesian
Minang	17 years	M	50	Salesperson	Minang	Minang
Palembang	15 years	M	39	Political activist	Malay (islands)	Indonesian
Acehnese	6 years	M	42	Business	Sundanese	Indonesian
Javanese	6 years	F	35	Business	Riau-born Javanese	Malay
Batak	2 years	M	30	Internet café operator	(unmarried)	Indonesian
Javanese	3 years	M	27	House painter	(unmarried)	Malay
Minang	4 years	M	25	Trader	Minang	Minang/ Malay

Table 9.2 Distribution of Population by Ethnicity, 2000 Census[a]

Population of Riau	Total (no.)	Malay (%)	Java (%)	Minang (%)	Batak (%)	Flores (%)	Banjar (%)	Bugis (%)	Sunda (%)	Other (%)
Mainland										
Pekanbaru	568,146	27	15	38	10	–	–	–	1	7
Dumai	120,498	24	18	31	16	–	–	1	1	8
Other urban	582,460	34	15	21	9	–	5	1	1	4
All rural	2,484,381	43	31	3	5	–	6	3	2	7
Subtotal	3,755,485	39	26	12	7	–	5	2	2	7
Insular										
Batam	415,750	18	28	16	16	2	1	2	3	5
Other urban	344,134	38	23	7	4	1	1	2	2	22
All rural	239,807	71	12	1	1	1	–	2	2	11
Subtotal	999,691	37	22	9	8	1	1	2	2	6
Total	4,755,176	38	25	11	7	–	4	2	2	10

a   These figures do not account for the children of interethnic marriages, as the census defines ethnicity paternally. The percentages do not sum to 100 in the original source data.

Source: BPS Propinsi Riau (2001), *Hasil Sensus Penduduk 2000 Seri L.2.2.4.4.*, Pekanbaru: BPS Propinsi Riau, pp. 34–40.

Separatism and sovereignty

Riau's wealth, demography and geography are important in defining the tensions between the province's separatist movement and its opponents (see Bach, forthcoming), and between the mainlanders and the islanders over the ongoing push for a separate province for the islands.

Free Riau (Riau Merdeka), the Malay separatist movement, emerged soon after the fall of Soeharto on the university campuses of Pekanbaru, under the leadership of Tabrani Rab. It came to national attention when the group proclaimed Riau a sovereign state on 15 March 1999. Given the province's rich resources, the separatists preferred to conceive of Riau becoming an autonomous political entity in a pan-Malayan world stretching across the straits of Malacca to the north, rather than south towards Java. Before the timber boom of the 1980s, Riau had been the wealthiest of the Indonesian provinces, contributing some 60 per cent of national oil production as well as being an important source of bauxite and tin (Butar-Butar 2000). In recent decades the focus has shifted from mining to manufacturing and tourism in the islands, particularly on Batam, where the central government encouraged foreign investment in manufacturing. Meanwhile, mainland Riau became Indonesia's largest producer of pulp and paper and a major player in the palm oil industry, while remaining Indonesia's premier source of oil (Soetrisno and Dewanta 1993; Butar-Butar 2000) (Table 9.3).

Riau now has the third highest per capita GDP in Indonesia after East Kalimantan and Jakarta, and the third highest gross regional GDP outside of Java (BPS 2002b, 2002c). In 2000, it is estimated to have accounted for 23 per cent (US$11,012 million) of Indonesia's total export income and 28 per cent of the country's oil revenue (BPS Riau 2002a, 2002b). Yet while Riau has earned billions of rupiah for the central government and for the provincial elite, its people have received little benefit from their province's wealth (Rice 1989: 134;

Rusli, Sumardjo and Syaukat 1996). Economic development has been strongly centred around Pekanbaru, with the focus on extractive and primary industries favouring investors from other parts of Indonesia or abroad. Yet, according to some estimates, over 40 per cent of the population live below the poverty line and only 16 per cent have a high school education (Djasit 2001). In the words of one local inhabitant, for the average person, living in Riau is akin to suffering from starvation while sitting on top of a milch cow (interview with Tabrani Rab, Pekanbaru, June 2002).

Just as the physical and symbolic distance between Jakarta and Riau defines the relationship between core and periphery, so too does the distance between the mainland and the islands. For the proponents of a separate province in the islands (which would be called Kepulauan Riau, or Kepri), the lure of independence is outweighed by the spectre of continuing dominance by the mainland. Instead, they contend that insular Riau can best achieve sovereignty in the post-Soeharto era by standing alone, free of the authority of Pekanbaru, as an independent province within Indonesia.

Although the idea of Riau as a region with its own identity has a long history in the islands (Wee 1985: 66; Wee and Chou 1997: 528), the formal existence of Riau as a separate province is relatively new. At the time of Indonesian independence, most of the mainland – including Pekanbaru and many of the islands close to the Sumatran coast – was part of the residency of East Sumatra, while its western and southern extremities were subsumed by West Sumatra and Jambi respectively. It was only in 1958 that Riau acquired its present form. When the seat of provincial power was shifted from Tanjungpinang to Pekanbaru soon after, the islands were forced into a new relationship with the mainland. With the exception of Batam, the islands received little attention from New Order development planners, and the people of insular Riau were forced to rely on Pekanbaru – or, in the case of Batam, on Jakarta – for the provision of government services and community facilities.

Vivienne Wee has argued that Riau Malays have sought to answer the question of 'who owns Riau' through a process of atavism, or politically motivated ethno-historical claims (Wee 2002: 17). Her insight is a powerful one that has currency beyond the island Malays among whom she carried out her research. Elite Malay discourse on mainland Riau is also imbued with a strong sense of history of former Malay greatness (Al Azhar 1997: 767). Political separatists and cultural assimilationists alike draw on the past when defining the present, albeit with very different results. In seeking sovereignty, the separatists aim to reconstruct the glory of earlier times when Riau was at the centre of the Malay world rather than on the periphery of a Java-centric Indonesia. They promote an exclusive form of Malay sovereignty that leaves little space for other groups long established in Riau:

> In demographic terms, the people who live in Riau now come from many tribes, but politically, it is important to return to the past, to history – Malays deserve political priority because we own this place. We must be masters of our own house. Newcomers need to adjust to our visions, to our dreams – they must remember that someone owns this land. We don't want to go forward from our position at the end of the Soeharto era – we want to go forward from where we

were at the end of the nineteenth century (interview, Riau Merdeka supporter, Pekanbaru, June 2002).

In contrast, Tenas Effendy of the Malay Cultural Institute (LAM) emphasises that Malayness itself was created by a process of acculturation (*akulturasi*) among a heterogeneous population over centuries. Problems have arisen, he argues, because of increasing materialism and the corresponding loss of traditional values. Whereas people once came to Riau with the philosophy, *dimana bumi dipijak, disitu langit dijunjung* ('where our feet touch the earth is where we hold up the sky'), in recent decades that philosophy has become *dimana bumi dipijak, disitu tanah dikapling* ('where our feet touch the earth is where we subdivide the land'). In response, he says, Malays have drawn new boundaries, excluding groups who 'previously felt themselves to be *orang Riau*' (interview with Tenas Effendy, LAM, Pekanbaru, June 2002). Malay resentment about the unequal distribution of economic and political power has taken a very concrete form in recent years. Malay militia groups have made threats against Caltex and a number of other large companies operating in Riau over issues of inadequate compensation. Ethnic tensions have also risen. Outbreaks of physical conflict have occurred between ethnic groups both on the mainland and in the islands – most, although not all, involving Malays.

Riau Merdeka lost much of its momentum when Al Azhar replaced Tabrani, who traded in his local credibility for a place on the central government's Regional Autonomy Council. Popular support for the organisation softened further as Riau gained access to a larger proportion of its provincial income and Malays were preferentially appointed to political positions and some civil service posts. Although many representatives of Minang, Batak and Malay ethnic organisations continue a strong discourse of interethnic tolerance (interviews, June 2002), the issues raised by Riau Merdeka are echoing long and loud. Most important among them is the question of who can lay claim to citizenship in Riau, and consequently to the economic and political benefits promised by regional autonomy.

Community responses to regional autonomy and Riau's geographic divides

How entrenched are the divisions between geographical regions and ethnic groups among grassroots communities in Riau? To what extent does public rhetoric predict the future of the province? Regional autonomy was widely supported by interview respondents in both Pekanbaru and Tanjungpinang (Figure 9.1). In fact, only two respondents who understood what autonomy meant were opposed to it – a serving army officer and a retired navy officer, both of whom were Java-born Javanese.

The most common reason given for supporting regional autonomy was the expectation that it would redress the imbalance between Riau's resources and the welfare of its people. Conversely, a perceived decline in economic welfare underpinned some respondents' desire for a return to the stability of the New Order period. A number of informants – particularly those involved in government, or in businesses that dealt with government – believed that there was already evidence of improvements in Riau's economy. Examples cited included new buildings in Pekanbaru, an increase in salaries for civil servants and improved opportunities for public scrutiny of development projects. Many more who could not point to

actual improvements to date were nevertheless optimistic that these would be realised sooner rather than later. Both mainland and island respondents were generally supportive of the central government's decision to concentrate economic and political decision-making power at the kabupaten/kota (district/municipality) level, because local decision-makers were perceived as being more in touch with the needs of their constituents, and more accountable to them.

Figure 9.1 Interview Respondents' Opinions about Regional Autonomy[a]

	Malay		Other Riau-born		Long-term Resident		Short-term Resident	
	Mainland 1 2 3 4 5	Islands 6 7 8 9 10	Mainland 11 12 13 14 15	Islands 16 17 18 19 20	Mainland 21 22 23 24 25	Islands 26 27 28 29 30	Mainland 31 32 33 34 35	Islands 36 37 38 39 40
Has heard of autonomy	X X X X X	X X X X X	X X X X X	X X X X X	X X X X X	X X X X X	X X X X X	X X X X X
Understands autonomy	X X X	X X X X X	X X X X X	X X X X	X X X X	X X X X	X X X X	X X X X X
Supports autonomy	X X X	X X X X X	X X X X X	X X X X X	X X X X	X X X X	X X X	X X X X X
Supports Kepri	X	X X X X	X	X X X X X		X X X X		X X X X X
Supports regional autonomy because of:								
Economic benefits	X X	X X X X X	X X X X X	X X X X	X X X X	X X X	X X	X X X X X
Political benefits		X X X X X	X X X X X	X X X X	X	X X X	X X	X X X X X
Worried about:								
Corruption	X				X X		X	
Rising cost of living	X X				X		X	
Government priorities	X X	X X		X	X X	X	X	X
Malay power			X		X X		X	
Ethnic conflict			X		X		X	

a   There were five respondents in each category (numbered 1–40 in the column headings). A cross indicates that the respondent's definition of *orang Riau* included the characteristic described in the left-hand column.

In contrast, there was a clear division on the question of establishing a separate province for the islands. Most mainland respondents were either against or indifferent to the idea of splitting Riau. The mainlanders who opposed the formation of Kepri generally did so because they believed Riau's influence would wane and that the mainland would suffer economically if the division were to proceed; a small number felt that the new province would be overly vulnerable to Singaporean interests. In contrast, in the islands it was felt almost unanimously that having a separate province would be beneficial. Reasons given for supporting the push for a separate province ranged from practical considerations, such as minimising bureaucracy and improving community services, to questions of cultural disparity.

Most informants in Tanjungpinang believed that the islands had been neglected by the provincial government because of their distance from Pekanbaru and because of a lack of understanding about conditions in the islands. Three Malay respondents pointed to the difficulties associated with having to travel to Pekanbaru to organise documents and permits, and a fourth argued that the mainlanders did not understand the needs of those in the islands. The fifth Malay, a mainland-born teacher who had been posted to Tanjungpinang, was one of only two islanders who did not support the formation of a separate province in the islands. Non-Malay informants born in the islands all had strong feelings about the need for a separate province. Two pointed to the practical considerations of transport and bureaucracy. A third emphasised the different ways mainlanders and islanders interact socially, and a

fourth the differences in language and culture. According to the fifth, the islanders wanted to demonstrate their own identity, which was more closely aligned to Malaysia than to mainland Riau.

According to one man, the differences between the islands and the mainland were a product of history and the islanders' ties to neighbouring countries:

> Even though they are all Malay and they're all related, they are separated by the sea, so their historical journeys have been different. Because Kepri is so close to Malaysia and Singapore, they have a close relationship [with Singaporeans and Malaysians] and many have intermarried. On the mainland, they have been more influenced by Minang culture (interview, long-term resident, Tanjungpinang).

Other long-term and short-term residents gave similar reasons for supporting an independent province for the islands.

Questions of belonging and contested claims to place

On one level, debate over the right to call oneself *orang Riau* is defined by a struggle for economic resources. On another, however, it represents a struggle for belonging. While respondents were quick to point to economic issues as the root of ethnic tension, the sense of betrayal and hurt felt by many mainland non-Malays in the face of perceived Malay chauvinism was also clear. Despite this, most respondents in Pekanbaru and Tanjungpinang believed that people born in Riau, as well as Malays, could make claims to place (Figure 9.2). Understandably, short-term residents were least often included in the definitions of *orang Riau*. It is of note, however, that one-quarter of respondents believed that even those who had been in the province for just a few years had the right to call themselves *orang Riau* if they could demonstrate their commitment to the province and felt that they belonged there. In the words of one newcomer, reflecting on the perspective of non-Malays in general, 'no matter where they're born, if they feel that they belong here, they call themselves *orang Riau*'.

On the whole the islanders provided more inclusive definitions of orang Riau, and felt that interethnic relations were more stable in the islands (with the notable exception of Batam) than on the mainland. In contrast, in Pekanbaru there was a general feeling that ethnic divisions have grown in recent years, a development that was seen to be closely associated with the push for regional autonomy. In the words of a Malay informant:

> With autonomy, people's feelings of regional identity got stronger. Some Malays started saying, 'these ethnic groups are outsiders', even though they've been here a long time and intermarried, and consider themselves Malay (interview with Malay informant, Pekanbaru, June 2002).

Malay claims to exclusivity were also commented upon by a Riau-born Minang respondent:

> Feelings about ethnicity have gotten much stronger since regional autonomy. Each tribe wants to promote itself. Especially the Malays – they no longer want to accept that we're *orang Riau*. But Riau's not a tribe, it's a place. We were born

here, brought up here. We are *orang Riau* (interview with Riau-born Minang informant, Pekanbaru, June 2002).

None of the islanders was concerned about excessive Malay power, but mainlanders frequently invoked stereotypes about Malay inferiority and were concerned about the opportunities for rent-seeking behaviour under regional autonomy. Less than a quarter of mainland informants were worried about Malay aspirations *per se*, but many more noted that, as *putra daerah* ('sons of the region', or local inhabitants), Malays had made significant attempts to gain preferential access to jobs and resources. While only seven islanders and just five mainland respondents emphasised a contribution to Riau as a criterion for claims to place, almost all mainland respondents mentioned the extent to which non-Malays had contributed to Riau's development. Although most believed Malays should be given positions ahead of members of other ethnic groups if they met merit-based criteria, they criticised their ability and accused them of being lazy and proud: 'When it comes to work, they choose jobs where you get a lot of money for not much effort' (interview with Riau-born non-Malay, Pekanbaru, June 2002). A number also highlighted their concerns about increased corruption and the emergence of *raja-raja kecil* – a phrase that in Riau both literally means 'little kings' and is a play on the Malay title, *raja*.

Although the adoption of Malay culture was a prerequisite for valid claims to place for only a few informants, many non-Malays in both Pekanbaru and Tanjungpinang emphasised how they had been influenced by local customs and values – in doing so, shifting away from their inherited cultural norms and weakening their links to their ancestral homelands. In the islands, the relatively successful assimilation of non-Malays was a source of security and a sense of belonging, but in Pekanbaru, perceptions of Malay exclusivity had caused considerable anxiety among those who felt they had no other place to go – most notably among Riau-born non-Malays, but also many long-term residents.

> If I go back to my parents' village, the people there don't accept me. They say I don't know *adat* [tradition] – that I'm an outsider because I'm from Riau. That's never mattered to me before, because I've never wanted to be from anywhere but here. But if we can no longer call ourselves *orang Riau*, where can we go? (interview with Riau-born non-Malay, Pekanbaru, June 2002).

This fear of displacement is strongest among mainlanders of non-Malay interethnic background or in non-Malay interethnic marriages – that is, among those whose children are the furthest removed from ethnically defined claims to place in Riau or elsewhere. In the words of one Riau-born respondent, who was clearly distressed by threats to his own and his children's sense of place:

> Our children have the blood of four ethnic groups – Sundanese, Javanese, Minangkabau and Acehnese. One was born in Pekanbaru and the other in Jakarta. If they won't accept the one born in Jakarta, well, I can understand that, but what about the one born in Pekanbaru? Is she Malay, or Minang, or Javanese or Sundanese or Acehnese … or does she have no place? (interview with Riau-born non-Malay, Pekanbaru, June 2002).

The most obvious silence among informants was on the subject of religion. Yet while only one respondent identified belonging to Islam as a criterion for being an *orang Riau*, those explicitly advocating the adoption of Malay culture were implicitly imposing Islam as a condition of belonging. The Batak people, who comprise the largest Christian community in Riau, are the group most clearly excluded on the grounds of religion. Yet only two of the seven respondents of Batak descent mentioned tension or discrimination against Bataks on religious grounds.

One – a man who had lived in a primarily Muslim neighbourhood for almost two decades – gave concrete examples from everyday life, such as having to pay higher prices for kerosene because he was not a Muslim. He believed that he and his family had no choice but to accept such discrimination because the Bataks were identified as being Christian, and Christians were a minority group. Even so, both he and his wife felt that they belonged in Riau, and had no desire to return to North Sumatra. The other Batak who mentioned religion – himself a Muslim – pointed out that many of the violent incidents that had taken place in Riau had been directed against Bataks. He noted that a number of those incidents had been about practices that impinge on Muslim sensibilities, such as gambling and the drinking of alcohol, and about the building of a large number of churches – a development which he interpreted as a cynical Batak strategy for taking control of traditional Malay land. Nevertheless, all respondents felt that ethnic relations were better in Riau than in Indonesia as a whole. When questioned about the interethnic incidents that had occurred in recent years, they pointed to underlying economic disparities or personal disagreements, rather than ethnicity itself, as the root cause of conflict. Only three respondents, all from Pekanbaru, were worried about the possibility of serious ethnic conflict in the province.

Conclusion

How far can Indonesia be reshaped into a series of ethnically defined homelands? What are the consequences of such a process for its people? The case of Riau is instructive for Indonesia as a whole as it struggles to define itself in the era of regional autonomy. Overall, my informants' responses suggested that while ethnic conflict could certainly increase in Riau, the likelihood of a major escalation has been overstated.

This does not mean that ethnic relations should not be taken seriously. According to representatives of Minang, Batak and Malay ethnic organisations interviewed in June 2002, the provincial government and community leaders have already taken steps to deal with the symptoms of conflict by forming emergency response teams to deal with outbreaks of violence on a case-by-case basis. However, such outbreaks are likely to continue unless the economic and affective root causes of conflict are addressed. There is no argument for returning to the suppression of ethnic identity, but the path ahead will be a rocky one indeed if ethnicity becomes the overriding criterion for determining access to resources and claims to place.

Notes

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[1] In public discourse, these non-Malay indigenous tribes are subsumed in the category 'Malay'.