Malaysia and Nusantara Heritage in the Adik-Abang Relationship

by Christopher Kremer
Indonesia and Malaysia, which occupy the same archipelago and have overlapping history and language, have fiercely disputed the ownership of Nusantara (“Archipelago”) culture. Indonesia and Malaysia are both members of ASEAN, but, since they gained independence from Britain and the Netherlands, which originally created their artificial borders, they have been locked in a contentious adik-abang (“younger brother-older brother”) relationship. The first assumption that underlies the notion of the adik-abang relationship between Malaysia and Indonesia is that one is superior to the other, and the second is that the two countries are closely related. While the paradigm of the modern nation-state has led Malaysia to view itself as superior within the adik-abang relationship, it acknowledges Nusantara as being common to both countries because many Nusantara practices can ultimately be traced back to islands in Indonesia’s territory.

Since Malaysia has become the so-called older brother of the adik-abang relationship, it has adopted the stance that Malaysian and Indonesian cultures are separate, implicitly asserting that Malaysian culture is superior. Malaysia’s use of the notion of a distinct Malaysian culture as a way to assert its dominance over Indonesia is shown by its shifting stance on immigration from when it was the “younger brother” to when it became the “older brother.” In the years after its independence, Malaysia welcomed the flow of immigrants from Indonesia and the Philippines as a way to keep its Malay majority, a policy that “became obsolete when the birth rates of non-Malays and Malays turned very much in favor of the latter”1. The fact that Malaysia shifted from a policy of cultural inclusiveness to one of cultural separateness shows that, as the country began to secure a sense of national identity, it no longer needed to rely on an identity common across the pre-colonial Malay Archipelago to give itself a sense of unity and history.

Today, Malaysia is able to claim a difference between Indonesian and Malaysian cultures because it has succeeded in distinguishing itself from Indonesia and does so in order to further the notion of their distinctness and to reinforce the notion common to both that it is the stronger of the two countries. This attempt to distinguish between cultures was evident when the Malaysian Family and Community minister announced plans to perform a study on the effects of Indonesian immigrant maids on the “cultural values” of the Malaysian children for whom they cared. Such plans not only demonstrated a perception among Malaysian officials that the two countries have separate cultural values but also hinted that Malaysian cultural values are desirable and superior to Indonesian ones.

While Malaysia’s claim to Nusantara heritage has been partly shaped by the juxtaposition of superiority and inferiority in the adik-abang relationship, it has also been shaped by Indonesia’s possession of the islands where many aspects of Nusantara originated. In order for Malaysia to reinforce its position as “older brother” it must not only accept that aspects of its culture originated on islands currently under the jurisdiction of Indonesia but also demonstrate that its culture is not derivative but is rather a distinct form of the same heritage. One Malaysian official stated, “It [Rasa Sayang] is a folk song from the Nusantara and we are part of the Nusantara”2. This statement is compatible with the Malaysian notion that Malaysian culture, however it may be related to Indonesian culture, is distinct. Rasa Sayang, for example, originated on Maluku, an island now part of Indonesia. As well, Gamelan and Batik, which have local variants throughout Nusantara countries, both have their origins in Java.

While the majority of ethnic Malays of Malaysia and the Indonesians are culturally and ethnically quite similar, the governments of both countries have used Nusantara heritage as a way to compete with each other. Both countries have asserted themselves in accordance to their sense of superiority or inferiority as a nation-state and have had to shape their claims to correspond to the geography of the origins of Nusantara. The fact that Malaysia and Indonesia compete so fiercely over Nusantara heritage attests to how closely related the two major countries of the Malay Archipelago are and to how divisive the idea of the modern nation-state can be for two countries whose lands were united for centuries.

REFERENCES: