Introduction

Of some six thousand ethnolinguistic groups in the world, about a thousand are found in Southeast Asia. This immense ethnic diversity has piqued the curiosity of linguists, anthropologists, and sociologists, but oddly, not that of historians until recently. In general the latter have tended to apply ethnic names loosely, giving insufficient attention to the nature of ethnic identity and the constant redefinition of groups, particularly in the precolonial period (i.e., before the late nineteenth century). Historians can therefore profit from social science insights regarding the shifting components that constitute an ethnic group and the complexity of ethnicity as a concept. One such insight, from the anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff, recognizes the ambiguous nature of ethnicity. “Is [ethnicity] an object of analysis, something to be explained?” they ask. “Or is it an explanatory device capable of illuminating significant aspects of human existence?” They then proceed to demonstrate the mutual and dialectic influences between ethnicity as an analytic framework and ethnicity as a conceptual subject.\(^1\) The Comaroffs are just two of many social scientists who have sought to explicate some aspect of this slippery concept. From this vast array of theoretical ideas, I have selected those that I feel have direct relevance to historians who wish to use ethnicity as a way of understanding Southeast Asian history.

The value of problematizing ethnicity becomes apparent in the context of trade, long the lifeblood of Southeast Asians and one of the dominant themes in the region’s history. Southeast Asia sprawls across the Indian and Pacific Oceans, and until perhaps the sixteenth century the only known sea passage through the region was the Straits of Melaka. Located midway between the major civilizations to the east and the west, the straits proved an ideal haven for ships because it was protected from the strong monsoon winds by parallel
mountain chains along the spines of Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula. It was the “endpoint” of both the northeast monsoons that blew between January and April and brought traders from the east, and the southwest monsoons of July to November, which carried traders from the west. While traders awaited favorable winds to return home, the communities located astride the straits quickly seized the opportunities the situation provided. They established ports for traders to repair their ships, replenish supplies, obtain local products, and exchange goods with merchants from all parts of the world. Furthermore, the interior of both landforms that bordered the straits produced valuable forest products, particularly camphor, benzoin, gaharuwood (eaglewood), and dragon’s blood (a kind of kino)—all of which were highly prized in the international marketplace, particularly in China.

For more than two thousand years, this narrow waterway brought traders, religious scholars, diplomatic missions, and adventurers to the ports bordering its shores. As a result of the economic opportunities provided by the steady influx of people and goods, communities in the vicinity of this waterway became increasingly involved in international trade. Much has been written about the impact of international and domestic trade in the transformation of Southeast Asian societies, both materially and spiritually. In every period it was trade that served as the stimulus for the movement of goods and ideas across continents, and Southeast Asia’s ideal location midway between
major civilizations provided its leaders with the luxury of surveying, experimenting, and selecting those elements that were most appropriate to advance their societies. Little noticed by historians has been the role of trade in the process of ethnic formation. The continuing presence of foreign merchants and visitors contributed to an intense awareness of self among local individuals and groups. To maximize advantage, small socioeconomic units ethnically identified by their location and involved in small-scale exchange gradually began to join others of like mind to form numerically larger and more extensive community networks.

The vicinity of the Straits of Melaka is an ideal site to investigate the relationship between trade and ethnic formation, especially in precolonial Southeast Asia. Before the middle of the first millennium of the Common Era, the favored passage through Southeast Asia combined sea and land routes across the Isthmus of Kra and the northern Malay Peninsula. While these northern routes continued to be used in later centuries, they became secondary to the preferred sea route through the straits. Communities bordering or in close proximity to the Straits of Melaka were therefore blessed with a continuing flow of seaborne commerce, bringing benefits to those most effective in adjusting to the opportunities presented. In the process of adapting to change, certain communities in the straits area saw the value of detaching themselves from a larger ethnic identity to form smaller and more
effective units, whereas others saw greater advantage in becoming affiliated with a larger ethnic grouping.

Ethnic formation in the Straits of Melaka may have been stimulated further by increasing contact with Europeans from the sixteenth century, the century that has been called “a high point in the cycle of ethnic consciousness” in Europe. With increased ethnic awareness, coupled with the desire to classify and thus control, the Europeans assiduously listed local individuals with whom they came into contact by their “ethnic group.” This was particularly evident in the ports, where European officials wished to control the movement of certain rival or enemy groups. The results were predictable: individuals tended to claim the most useful ethnic identity because there was little to distinguish one group from another, and most could communicate in Malayu, the trade lingua franca. When the Malayu kingdom of Johor was given special privileges by the Dutch East India Company (VOC) for their assistance in the seizure of Portuguese Melaka in 1641, there would have been many who claimed to be Malayu from Johor. An opposite reaction occurred when the Bugis of southwest Sulawesi were regarded as the enemies of the VOC. They simply claimed to be Malayu, Javanese, or another more favored ethnic community in order to be allowed to trade in Dutch ports and to travel the seas free from VOC harassment.

Malayu ethnicity is an important theme in this study. In a situation of increasing economic competition there was a politicization of ethnic identities, or what Kahn has termed the “ethnicization” of groups. The emergence and expansion of the Malayu resulting from a convergence of economic and political interests encouraged at different times the formation of the Minangkabau, the Acehnese, and to a certain extent the Batak ethnic identities. For such groups, identifying cultural discontinuities within a common Malayu culture was a necessary process in the erecting of ethnic boundaries. The Malayu were also the stimulus for the formation of the new ethnic categories of Orang Laut (Sea Peoples) and Orang Asli/Suku Terasing (Original Peoples/Isolated Ethnic Groups, i.e., the forest and hill peoples). They performed valuable services for the Malayu rulers as providers of ocean and jungle products and as defenders of the routes through the various seas and forests. In return they were richly rewarded economically and spiritually by the Malayu rulers, thus encouraging the maintenance of this symbiotic exchange through the preservation of separate lifestyles. Yet deliberate efforts by all groups in the straits to erect ethnic boundaries to emphasize difference cannot disguise the fact that they are “leaves of the same tree.”

In this study I have attempted to capture the dynamism of the process of ethnic formation with each individual group. Because of the unevenness in the quality and quantity of materials available, it has not been possible to follow a
single pattern of investigation nor to maintain a common time frame for all. Instead, my primary concern has been to make the best use of the sources in illuminating the process and thus demonstrating its vitality and significance in the interpretation of Southeast Asian history. Too often the story of Southeast Asia has been structured according to ethnic struggles, a presentist approach that obscures the flexibility of ethnic identities in the past. I hope that this work, focusing on trade and ethnic formation in a small area of Southeast Asia, will encourage other historians to engage the issue of ethnicity to determine the extent to which it informed the actions of Southeast Asians in the past.

**Ethnicity as an Explanatory Device**

The plethora of writings on ethnicity in the social sciences has led to a bewildering variety of interpretations, raising some doubts regarding its usefulness as a concept. Yet scholars persist in attempting to understand ethnicity because of the intensity of emotion that ethnic issues continue to evoke among ordinary people. While some have argued that ethnicity is a modern phenomenon, there is every reason to believe that group identity based on shared beliefs, practices, and real and fictive ancestors would have been as significant in the past. This is the proper task of the historian, who can bring a different perspective to the studies of ethnicity long dominated by social scientists. At the very least such an endeavor should encourage other historians to become aware of the problem of an unreflective acceptance of ethnic communities as somehow fixed forever in time.

Anthropologists have demonstrated the fluidity and complexity of ethnic identities, particularly in Southeast Asia. Edmund Leach’s classic 1954 study of highland Burma reveals the ease with which a Kachin could become Shan and a Shan a Kachin by means of a preference of one form of social system over another. In viewing the Kachin as a complex product of its political relations with neighboring distinctive communities, Leach encouraged a new direction in the study of ethnicity. Since Leach’s work, social scientists have examined the socially constructed and political nature of ethnicity, and it has become clear that the colonial state and the modern nation-state have been instrumental in the creation of ethnic categories and groups. Charles Keyes has even argued that ethnicity has flourished as a result of nationalist discourses. In the United States, the increasing politicization of ethnic minorities has spawned an entire new field of ethnic studies and created new identities based on geography (pan-Asian), as well as on culture and language (Latino).

Yet the interest in difference is a human quality, and there is every reason to believe that ethnic ideas were also prominent in Southeast Asia’s past.
Although people, and hence documents, may not have used such terms as “ethnicity” or “nationalism,” there is no reason to believe that such notions of group identities were absent. The anthropologist Richard O’Connor was among the first to suggest that ecological adaptation, language, and agricultural techniques are significant shifts that can explain the so-called “decline” and “emergence” of ethnic groups in Southeast Asia. There are encouraging signs that historians of Southeast Asia are finally engaging the issue of ethnicity. In a recent article, David K. Wyatt cautions against reading modern ethnic identities into Thailand’s past. A similar critical reading of ethnicity is addressed in Victor Lieberman’s 2003 study of Southeast Asia between the ninth and nineteenth centuries. The persistence of ethnic issues suggests that ethnicity should not be regarded simply as a precursor to nationalism of the modern nation-state, but as a concept that was relevant in the past and may help to illuminate the particular ways that events unfolded in Southeast Asia. Although the much-quoted phrases “invention of traditions” and “imagined communities” begin with the premise that this process was associated with the creating of modern ethnic or nation-state nationalisms, this process was also a feature of communities in precolonial Southeast Asia.

The complexity of the subject demands a clarification of certain key terms. “Ethnicity” is used throughout this work to refer to a way of conceptualizing the world and acting in it by privileging group identity and interests. Religion, class, and gender are other ways in which the past could be structured, but they are subordinated to and form components of ethnic identity.

The second key term is “ethnic group or community.” The historian Anthony Smith believes that the French word *ethnie* best captures and combines the distinction found in Greek between *genos*, applied to kinship-based groups, and *ethnos*, a broader term used for groups sharing a culture. He lists as attributes of an *ethnie* a collective name, a common myth of descent, a shared history, a distinctive shared culture, association with a specific territory, and a sense of solidarity transmitted by the upper strata to the rest of the community. The last point is particularly important because in times of crisis all class, factional, regional, and other identities are submerged by the strength of the group’s sense of solidarity. Smith’s *ethnie* attributes are relevant in the formation of ethnic groups in the vicinity of the Straits of Melaka. In defining a group, greatest emphasis was on a strong social network established through real and fictive kinship ties, reinforced by shared myths and symbols associated with and often created by their leaders.

“Ethnic category” forms the third key term in this study. This refers to a loose and generalized collectivity to which groups attach themselves or are assigned by outsiders because of certain shared characteristics. While the members of an ethnic category acknowledge some common cultural relation-
ship, their interpersonal and intergroup relationships are limited. In central Borneo, for example, such ethnic categories as Kayan, Kenyah, Kelabit, Penan, etc., do not form social units or a distinct social system and may not even share the same language and culture. A similar observation may be made of the Orang Laut and Orang Asli/Suku Terasing ethnic categories in the Straits of Melaka. Ethnic categories and ethnic groups are fluid concepts and can be re-formed to include or exclude others.

Basic to the notion of ethnicity is that a group’s ethnic consciousness arises through contact with others who are perceived as different. As Thomas Eriksen explains, “ethnicity is essentially an aspect of a relationship, not a property of a group.” Once difference is acknowledged, it is necessary to exploit this difference through the establishment of ethnic markers. Commonly cited as ethnic markers are cultural elements, such as dress, clothing, food, language, or even religious belief, but different ethnic groups may also share the same cultural elements. For this reason Frederik Barth argues that rather than focusing on the “contents,” one should identify the “boundaries” erected by the group to distinguish itself from its neighbors. In his study of the Pathans of Afghanistan, for example, he lists hospitality, councils of equals, and seclusion of women as elements that make up the Pathan “boundary.”

In a close reading of Barth’s study, however, Marcus Banks found evidence that Pathans will in fact grudgingly claim a common ethnic unity based on cultural features, or what Barth calls the “contents” of an ethnicity. Among the shared features named by the Pathans are patrilineal descent from a common ancestor, Islam, and custom, including language, oral literature, and certain masculine attributes. Banks argues that both the Pathan-centric and the Barthian-centric conceptions are closer to Barth’s “contents” than his “boundaries,” since many of these features are shared by neighboring ethnic communities. Banks then makes the important observation that the only principle that distinguishes the Pathans is their putative descent from a common ancestor.

In 1998, responding to criticisms of his pioneering 1969 work on ethnic boundaries, Barth modified his arguments. He acknowledged that in individual lives, culture often consists of the blending of difference and of adaptation, rather than the erection of boundaries. For this reason he suggested focusing on the process whereby variation of culture is identified and made salient to form a shared understanding of the “cultural discontinuity” that then forms the crucial boundary of an ethnic group. Such boundaries may separate an ethnic group from another, or ethnic groups within an ethnic category. Each new boundary-making exercise is accompanied by the process of reinterpreting tradition to establish legitimacy for and loyalty to the “new” community. As this study shows, ethnicity can be invoked to serve as a
stimulus and a justification for group action to maximize the group’s advantage, as well as to counter a negative image or prevent absorption by a dominant ethnic community. Membership in the group is determined by acknowledgment of a shared field of interaction and communication. An ethnic group can identify itself and be identified with an ethnic category, but most of its interactions will be within an ethnic group or community.

A study of ethnicity usually begins with the old debate between the primordialists and those called situationalists, circumstantialists, instrumentalists, or constructivists. The former stance, often associated with Edward Shils and Harold Isaacs, argues that individuals are born endowed with certain fixed qualities that they share with a specific group of people. It is these “primordial” elements that serve to bond the members into an ethnic unity. The situationalist position, which many social scientists adopt, criticizes the rigidity implied in the primordialist argument and views ethnicity as a fluid concept. It argues that the elements defining the group are constantly undergoing change and rearrangement in response to shifting historical and cultural circumstances.

Most scholars writing on ethnicity today take a middle ground. They agree that an ethnic group is fluid, is continually adjusting to shifting circumstances, and is multilayered, but they also recognize the significance of the primordialist emphasis on some ineffable quality of group identity that defies any situationalist explanation. It is this perceived “primordial” element that has evoked such fervent, even fanatic response from individuals throughout history. There is also a recognition of the agency of ethnic actors who are not merely shaped by contexts, but who actively seek to construct their identity from a host of variables. In the process of ethnic re-formation, the group adjusts the “contents” and “boundary” to enable its members to be ideally placed to benefit from new circumstances. The “middle” stance therefore acknowledges the ongoing, active role of the group in redefining the cultural elements constituting its identity, as well as the desire of a group to believe in an essential core that distinguishes it from others.

The resulting “traditions” are not “invented” in the Hobsbawm sense of being manufactured in order to “inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour.” They are instead selected, reorganized, and reinterpreted from a corpus of old and new symbols, myths, remembered events, etc., in light of shifting circumstances. It is essential that members believe in an enduring core that defines the group, despite the constantly shifting elements that make up that “core.” Individuals seek commonalities that can be summoned to bind them together as a group for maximum economic, social, or political advantage. The enhancement of a group’s status and prestige in the eyes of others, which Donald Horowitz describes as “group entitlement,” in turn serves to
bolster the individual member’s own sense of pride and self-worth.\textsuperscript{25} The process of ethnic formation enables the individual and the group to select from, in Joanne Nagel’s memorable phrase, “a portfolio of ethnic identities.”\textsuperscript{26}

The increasing globalization in all spheres of life and the resulting human and capital mobility have all but transformed our traditional perceptions. The porous borders, transnational activities of individuals, and the merging of global economic forces have all produced a phenomenon Arjun Appadurai has described as an “ethnoscape.” By this neologism, he means “the landscape of persons who make up the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest-workers, and other moving groups and persons.”\textsuperscript{27} Those inhabiting this ethnoscape interact with the more conventional established networks of affiliations to create new possibilities of unities. The cultural dynamics of deterritorialization thus enable individuals and groups to imagine themselves from a wider set of possibilities than ever before.\textsuperscript{28} For a historian working in the precolonial period in Southeast Asia, the situation described by Appadurai is familiar. The Straits of Melaka served as a channel of goods, ideas, and news from the outside world, thus igniting the imaginations of individuals and groups living along its shores to new possibilities of ethnic and other affiliations.

A common origin and a shared ancestor form meaningful ethnic markers that legitimize the group and reaffirm its sacred links to the past. Acknowledging the spiritual potency of the idea of origins, John Armstrong and Anthony Smith have both used the concept of a \textit{mythomoteur}, defined as “the constitutive myth of the ethnic polity,” which is based on the belief in a mythic primordial past.\textsuperscript{29} Adherence to a \textit{mythomoteur}, they argue, provides a powerful sense of a “common fate” among its members, thus defining them from others.\textsuperscript{30} Although Smith distinguishes between a dynastic and a communal \textit{mythomoteur}, he nevertheless questions whether one should insist on such a division. He asks, “Is it true that upper-class culture was generally of an utterly different character from the many cultures of the peasantry, and that therefore there could be no sense of shared identity between the classes in any area or polity?”\textsuperscript{31} In the case of the Malayu in the precolonial period, sumptuary laws may have been created to recognize difference but customary law and shared cultural ideas clearly emphasized the communal purpose, thereby strengthening group unity. Precolonial Southeast Asian societies were characterized by strong bonds between chiefs/rulers and their subjects, who were often kinfolk. When a larger unity was required, the dynastic \textit{mythomoteur} served to establish the social and political bonding for the newly extended boundaries of the group.\textsuperscript{32}

In the theories of ethnicity, the elite groups play a leading role in the creation of a group’s cultural ideology. But the process is not all one-sided,
and ordinary people are equally important in reinforcing these boundaries by emphasizing differences, no matter how slight. How men and women wear their hair or tie their sarongs, what types of food they eat, what language they speak or even how they speak it, can all be important markers of ethnic identity. For the common folk these are not “soft” boundaries but meaningful ones that are reinforced through daily activities. By making these mundane choices, people themselves strengthen the boundaries established on a more reified level by their spiritual and temporal leaders. Tangible and easily adopted, the boundaries erected by common people can be readily breached to enable individuals and groups to strategically deploy one or more identities in different circumstances to maximize advantage. The role of the elite and the ordinary people in the process of ethnic formation thus allows for maximum flexibility in periods of rapid change. This is the situation that prevailed among many of the communities living in the vicinity of the Straits of Melaka in the precolonial period and explains the ease with which individuals and groups moved from one ethnic community to another.

Language is one of the most cited elements in defining a group, and its strength as a unifying force comes from its flexibility. This is clearly demonstrated in an episode involving the main protagonist Hang Tuah and the maidens from Indrapura in the popular Malayu tale the *Hikayat Hang Tuah.* When the maidens apologize that their use of the Malayu language lacks the purity of that of the Melakans, Hang Tuah reassures them that the language of Melaka itself is “mixed” (*kacukan*). During Aceh’s dominance as the center of the Malay world in the seventeenth century, its form of the Malayu language became the prestigious version even though it created difficulties in comprehension in parts of the wider Malayu-speaking world. A Muslim scholar from Banjarmasin in the seventeenth century wrote a companion piece to a Malay Islamic treatise from Aceh because he claimed that the latter contained too many “Acehnisms.” These examples suggest that the Malayu language was spoken in different ways in the seventeenth century. Even Melaka, regarded as the center of Malayu culture in the fifteenth century, acknowledged the validity of the Malayu language spoken in Indrapura. Yet the dialectal differences in no way diminished the importance of the Malayu language as an important boundary marker in delineating a Malayu world that incorporated a diverse population.

While the variation in the manner in which the Malayu language was spoken and written was used to define specific ethnic communities, the Malayu language was the boundary for the ethnic category. The variations of the Malayu language suited the multiplicity of ethnic groups that used that language as a basis of identity. The late nineteenth century, however, saw a change in the attitude toward language use. In order to learn more about the
area and to facilitate their control, European colonial powers commissioned the recopying of local histories, law codes, belles lettres, and other cultural works. The coincidence of a particular language that was used both for written documents and for ordinary speech by the majority community often became the colonial basis for ethnic identity. In time such ethnic boundaries were self-fulfilling, with bilingual or even trilingual speakers claiming the most advantageous language and ethnic group with which to be identified to the colonial powers.

It may be scientifically indefensible to argue for distinctive ethnicities because of the continuing intermingling and exchange of biological and cultural elements among groups. Nevertheless, individuals and communities have displayed a persistent desire to underscore difference and to define and redefine themselves in order to promote their individual or group interests. History is rife with examples of ethnonations and nation-states successfully appealing to some sense of communal solidarity to defend a bounded entity. There is a conviction that their “venerable traditions,” and hence their link to the ancestral past, remain unchanged. Activity based on ethnic consciousness, notwithstanding ethnicity’s variability and ongoing reinterpretations, is an undeniable historical reality. The corpus of traditions allows variant interpretations and a degree of ambiguity that facilitates the incorporation of desired individuals or communities. Even the concept of hybridity, seemingly counterintuitive to ideas of “origins,” can be harnessed to strengthen a group’s identity. It is precisely this hybrid quality that enabled individuals to claim Malayu ethnicity no matter how tenuous their claim to shared traditions. The ambiguity and multiple meanings that groups could extract from Malayu origins and traditions made Malayu an extensive, expansive, and imperializing ethnicity.

There is a large menu of ethnic theories with a bewildering array of approaches. Although some lament the lack of precision and consensus regarding a definition of ethnicity, such “unsatisfactory” results are to be expected. Human interactions are by nature unpredictable and dynamic, defying any clear and definitive characterization. Yet it is possible to use ethnicity as an important analytic tool to explain group relations in Southeast Asian history.

**Ethnic Communities as Objects of Analysis**

According to many oral traditions, the early communities in Southeast Asia began as small, kin-based societies with clan elders as their natural leaders. Such groups were generally known by a name they called themselves (endonym) and one or more names given to them by outsiders (exonym). The most common form of self-identification was the local word for “human being”
or “people,” in contradistinction presumably to animals, ethereal beings, the forests, and all others that inhabited their universe. To distinguish themselves from other human communities, a group often added another form of identification based on location, such as “people of the upriver,” “people of the hills,” “people of the swamplands,” etc. These were appropriate and adequate markers of ethnicity among economically interdependent groups living within a limited geographic space.

In time the group’s numbers generally increased, the search for additional resources became necessary, and contact with the outside world grew more frequent. The impingement of groups became common, and the need for some type of mutually agreeable economic and political arrangement encouraged the formation of a more active and intrusive form of governance. The process is captured in local traditions, where a pre-existing community seeks anarbiter in its affairs whose judgment would be accepted by the people. This condition is met in the dynastic myth (Smith’s dynastic “mythomoteur”), which associates the progenitor of the royal family with supernatural origins. Around this sacred figure the various kinship communities coalesce to form a single political entity. With the proliferation and expansion of such polities, the authority of these sacred figures/rulers overlapped at the frontiers. These frontiers thus formed the dynamic region of political arrangements termed “mandala polities” by Wolters and “galactic polities” by Tambiah.

According to this roughly similar conception, the mandala/galactic polity is the center of its universe, with satellite communities located around it. A graphic image of the exercise of power in such polities is that of an upturned lamp, whose light is intense in the center but gradually fades away at the edges. What the image conveys is a situation of constant realignment of groups, in which the overlapping edges of authority become the site for contestation. The periphery retains a position of strength because it is able to shift allegiances or maintain multiple allegiances in promoting its best interests. At these dynamic edges individuals and groups are able to claim multiple ethnic identities, or to move in and out of ethnicities as the circumstances warrant. The periphery, then, determines whether the “exemplary center” survives or is replaced by another. For this reason, the center takes great care to maintain strong bonds with influential families or individuals in the crucial borderlands.

The common practice of bilateral kinship, which traces lineage through both males and females, facilitated alliances among families in Southeast Asia. There was no particular advantage in having male children; female children were as valuable because they, too, could be strategically married to advance the family’s economic, social, and political fortunes. Through such marriages, certain powerful families had networks extending to more than one polity,
with some family members at the periphery claiming multiple allegiances. Bilateral kinship inheritance patterns made it imperative for individuals to retain rights both in their own families and in those of their in-laws. Sometimes this involved belonging to two separate ethnic groups, as in the case of the Batak, because land ownership and the rituals associated with its transfer could only be effected by ethnic Batak. In some cases, the Batak adopted an additional Malayu ethnic identity because of the advantage of being intermediaries between the Malayu coast and the Batak highlands.

In short, precolonial Southeast Asia was not subject to international conventions confining individuals within a fixed space and imposing on them a specific legal identity. Ethnic identity was a fluid concept, and the decision to adopt one or more ethnicities was the privilege of the individual. The mandala/galactic polity encouraged rather than opposed such practices because people were a source of wealth. The relative paucity of people in Southeast Asia until the twentieth century made rulers particularly anxious to retain their subjects and to attract others. Indigenous documents exhort rulers to perform good deeds to attract followers and thereby bring prosperity to the land. In this regard, Southeast Asian groups were more concerned with the maintenance of the porosity rather than the impermeability of their ethnic boundaries.

In this study I have been guided by Joel Kahn’s astute observation that one should not focus on the “principles” that unite a culture, but on the social process operating under specific historical circumstances that produced that culture. Implied in this statement is the futility of depicting any ethnic identity as fixed since the construction of ethnicity is an ongoing sociohistorical process. For this reason I have focused on the process of ethnic formation to highlight the contingent nature of ethnic identity and the fluidity of its manifestation.

**Process of Ethnic Formation in the Straits of Melaka**

Each chapter relies on a historical narrative based on trade that helps explain why, when, and where various ethnic groups and categories were formed or re-formed in the distant and more recent past. The groups that have been chosen as the basis of this study are those that are regarded as the “ancient” inhabitants of the lands and seas bordering the Straits of Melaka. Although Indians, Chinese, and the Bugis have played important roles in the history of the straits, they are relatively recent settlers and are associated with home areas outside the straits. Inclusion of these groups would also have required attention to another major issue, that of diaspora, and thus complicate an already complex subject.
The Malayu were one of the earliest and most influential in the straits, and their prominent role in international trade spurred the ethnicization of other groups. As far as I can determine, as an ethnonym, “Malayu” referred first to the communities living in southeast Sumatra and later came to include those settled along both coasts and in the central and northern interior areas of the island. From the fifteenth century the ethnonym was also applied to those living on the Malay Peninsula who were descendants of Malayu immigrants from Sumatra. The name itself has been used at various times to refer to a language, a culture, a regional group, a polity, and a local community. It is not surprising, therefore, that it has spawned a wide variety of interpretations concerning its meaning and significance. Most of these discussions, however, overlook an emerging culture in the northern portion of the Straits of Melaka that formed the antecedents of Malayu culture. The settlements in northern Sumatra and in the Isthmus of Kra and the Malay Peninsula were part of an extensive network of communities, which I have termed the “Sea of Malayu.” Chapter 1 explores this exchange network that extended from southern India and Sri Lanka to northern Sumatra, the Isthmus of Kra, and the northern Malay Peninsula, across to the Gulf of Siam and the Lower Mekong of southern Cambodia, to the Cham areas of southern and central Vietnam. The long and profitable interaction within this common “sea” produced a shared cultural idiom that helped shape Malayu identity.

Chapter 2 is a more specific examination of the Malayu culture that developed in the early southeast Sumatran polities of Sriwijaya and Malayu between the seventh and fourteenth centuries. While inscriptions and external sources are limited, there is sufficient linguistic and archaeological evidence to form the basis for a tentative reconstruction of the sociopolitical organization and the nature of the economy of these polities, especially of Sriwijaya. Certain features of the society can be detected, including the role of family in government, a reliance on sea and forest peoples in assuring the collection of products and protection of routes for international trade, the maritime and riverine environment, the sacral quality of kingship, and the use of oaths as an important political and economic tool. The term “Malayu” thus came to designate those communities that had incorporated many of the features identified initially with Sriwijaya and its successor, the polity of Malayu. In Sumatra, the expansion of the Malayu as an ethnic community and an economic force served as a catalyst for the ethnicization of other groups.

The historical circumstances that gave rise to a separate Minangkabau ethnic identity from the Malayu is the subject of chapter 3. In 1365 the Indonesian court poem, the Desawarnana, included the Minangkabau highlands and most of the areas on Sumatra as part of the bhumi Malayu, the “Malayu world.” Inscriptions, artistic remains, and other archaeological finds indicate
that there was a polity in the highlands whose royal settlement was called *Malayupura*, “the Malayu City.” But sometime between the late fourteenth and early sixteenth century, the local identity that had been subsumed by the Malayu began to assert itself. Early sixteenth-century Portuguese documents mention the Minangkabau by name and of their kings ruling in the highlands. Only with the arrival of the VOC in the seventeenth century, however, are there sufficient contemporary reports to trace the ethnicization process of the Minangkabau. The economic opportunities provided by the removal of Acehnese control and the increase in trade through the straits provided the impetus for the formation of a separate Minangkabau ethnic identity. Through a convergence of local beliefs in the supernatural powers of the Pagaruyung ruler and the VOC decision to support his claims, a new Minangkabau ethnicity was created that proved effective in rallying the people to act as one for economic and political advantage.

The Malayu were associated with Sumatra until the rise of Melaka on the Malay Peninsula in the fifteenth century. Melaka’s stunning success as an international entrepot and center of Islamic scholarship raised the regional status of the Malayu considerably. Melaka became synonymous with Malayu and began to be regarded as the standard-bearer of Malayu culture. With the capture of Melaka by the Portuguese in 1511, two competitors emerged to claim the mantle of Melaka’s successor in the Malayu world: Johor and Aceh. As shown in chapter 4, Aceh prevailed because of its strong economic and cultural links to the great Muslim kingdoms in the Middle East and India. During the sixteenth and for much of the seventeenth century, Aceh established new standards of Malayness based on Islam and on many court practices that mirrored the foremost Muslim kingdoms at the time. As the leading Malayu polity, Aceh’s new standards were applied along both Sumatran coasts, in the west coast of the Malay Peninsula, and in Pahang on the east coast.

When Johor eventually emerged in the late seventeenth century to replace Aceh as the center of the Malayu world, it adopted the stronger Islamic behavior instituted by Aceh but reverted to the court customs of the Melaka period. By the late eighteenth century, Aceh’s rejection as the major Malayu center forced it to emphasize a new ethnic identity centered on the interior and agriculture, rather than on the coast and international trade. Unlike the coastal regions of Aceh, where the Malayu language was dominant, the interior areas were principally Acehnese-speaking. The new Acehnese identity was reinforced by literary works written not in the Malayu but the Acehnese language. The new Acehnese identity proved so successful that by the nineteenth century few remembered Aceh as once being the leading center of the Malayu world.

Chapter 5 narrates the story of the ethnicization of the Batak. As with the Minangkabau and the Acehnese, the Batak were formerly a part of the
fourteenth-century Javanese depiction of the bhumi Malayu. Contrary to widely held opinion, the Batak were never isolated from the outside world because they were the principal suppliers of camphor and benzoin. These two resins grow abundantly in north Sumatra in the Batak country surrounding Lake Toba and were in great demand in the international marketplace. To meet this demand, the interior Batak communities organized themselves for the collecting and transporting of valuable resins to the Malayu entrepots on both Sumatran coasts. Until the destruction of Sriwijaya by the Cholas in 1025, these products were brought to this leading entrepot on the southeastern coast. Subsequently, the Batak brought the resins to Kota Cina and other polities on the northeastern coast of Sumatra, as well as to Barus, an ancient entrepot located on the northwest coast. As a result of this long trade relationship, there was a flow of ideas between the Malayu and the Batak. This is clearly evident in the monuments and statues found at the archaeological site of Padang Lawas, at the frontier of the Batak and the Malayu (later Minangkabau) lands.

Beginning in the fifteenth century, the introduction of pepper cultivation in Sumatra provided yet another opportunity for the Batak to become involved in international trade. The intensive labor required for the cultivation of pepper left little time for rice cultivation, and so rice became a valued commodity in the pepper-producing areas of Sumatra. Many of the Batak were thus encouraged to move out of their home areas around Lake Toba to seek lands for the planting of rice. The spread of the Batak into different areas led to separate developments and modifications of Batak cultural ideas and the formation of various Batak subethnic communities known today as Karo, Simalungun, Pakpak-Dairi, Toba, Angkola, and Mandailing. But in earlier times the term “Batak” would have been used as an ethnic identity for those who traced their origins to the area of Lake Toba and adhered to the indigenous religion. The ancient belief system provided the myths and symbols that defined and strengthened ideas of Batakness. Its priests and religious teachers with their extensive network of marketplaces, worship centers, and students forged a common Batak identity that proved useful in the competitive economic environment of the Straits of Melaka.

The final two chapters discuss two ethnic categories, marginalized today but once invaluable to the Malayu groups both in Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula. Chapter 6 discusses the communities that form the ethnic category known by the exonym “Orang Laut” (though the government in Malaysia has arbitrarily submerged this identity under that of “Orang Asli”), and chapter 7 focuses on the Orang Asli (known as “Suku Terasing” in Indonesia). Their current emasculated political and economic position has colored interpretations of their important role in Malayu polities in the past as collectors of
sea and forest products and as guardians of the sea and jungle routes. The Orang Laut’s knowledge of the seas and their navigational skills made them an indispensable part of the Malayu ruler’s naval forces. Malayu traditions themselves acknowledge the debt owed to the Orang Asli and the Orang Laut, and even highlight the significant marital arrangements contracted between these two groups and the Malayu rulers to strengthen their mutually beneficial relationship.

The distinct, complementary economic role of the Orang Laut and the Orang Asli/Suku Terasing to that of the Malayu was a major reason for a respected partnership in earlier times. Their ethnicization was therefore a deliberate effort to preserve a way of life that guaranteed their advantage and eventual survival from the intrusions of their numerically dominant Malayu neighbors. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, with the shift in economic wealth away from sea and forest products, the Orang Asli/Suku Terasing and the Orang Laut lost their value to the Malayu. In a relatively short space of time, an exonym once bestowed in respect and proudly ethnicized by its members became a stigma. The result was a predictable rise of mutual suspicion and of violence committed mainly by the Malayu against the sea and forest peoples. Through the revitalization and resymbolizing of the “Orang Asli” name, the group has been able to promote its political interests in Malaysia and acquire greater recognition from the outside world. No such progress, however, has been made in the position of the Suku Terasing in Sumatra.

Ethnic formation is an ongoing process, with trade being the principal stimulus for change in Southeast Asia in earlier centuries. With this understanding of the nature of ethnicity and of the process of ethnic formation, it is necessary to rethink views of “ethnic” politics in history. Ethnicity can be a means of explaining difference, a basis for group action, and a mechanism contributing to the successful functioning of the mandala/galactic polities in precolonial Southeast Asia. Fortunes of groups change, and the stories of the Orang Asli/Suku Terasing and the Orang Laut are useful reminders that some groups exercise greater agency than others in the formulation of ethnic identities. By acknowledging both ethnicity’s explanatory value and its dynamic characteristics, historians should be able to examine this concept with greater precision and offer a more nuanced view of its role in Southeast Asian pasts.