



# Re-evaluating research directions In the study of Malaysia: An overview of the workshop “Malaysia out of the Box” held in Berlin in November 2009

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# 1. Introduction

This working paper is an overview of the workshop held by the B3 Malaysia subproject of the Collaborative Research Centre 640 in Berlin, November 2009.

The participants<sup>1</sup> of this workshop do not only share a common intellectual interest in Malaysia, they are also concerned about the well-being of the country. Until March 2008, Malaysia was ruled for decades by the inter-ethnic ruling coalition Barisan Nasional/BN (National Front). After the opposition alliance posed a serious challenge to the coalition by surprisingly high results in the 2008 elections, there was wide-spread optimism for a new political order. However, soon it became clear that a real political change would take much longer, since the BN was well entrenched and firmly anchored in Malaysian institutions. This experience led to a loss of faith in the system in large parts of society. Although many agree that Malaysia is currently undergoing a crisis, the outcome seems quite unpredictable. The spectrum of anticipation reaches from the belief that the political leadership and society will sustain the crisis, to the worst-case-scenario of a severe conflict along ethnic and religious lines. The latter scenario invokes comparisons to the violent conflict in Sri Lanka.

The aim of the workshop was not to be of scholarly importance only, but also to inspire scholars to do work with an impact on Malaysian society. The workshop created a space for the free exchange of ideas, and to inform each other on current research going beyond the existing, well-established ways of thinking and writing about Malaysia. The workshop from which this paper developed led together a number of scholars from different backgrounds who worked on topics and/or with approaches that add something new to the ways Malaysia is thought about. During the papers and discussions it became obvious that parts of the Area Studies connected to Malaysia are getting “out of the box” already, and that there are several viable ways to do so. They all have their limitations as well as merits; they can contribute to a new understanding of subjects and add new perspectives to Malaysian Studies.

Motivation for completing this working paper includes the wish to increase knowledge about thinking “out of the box”. As graduate students and participants of the workshop, yet without presenting own papers, we try to address some questions we found important. The concepts and approaches presented

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<sup>1</sup> The participants were Dr Tim Harper (the University of Cambridge), Dr Sunil Amrith (Birkbeck College, University of London), Dr Julian Lee (Monash University Malaysia and based at the time at the University of Kent), Dr Carlo Bonura (Oxford University), Dr Deborah Johnson (formerly a member of the B3 subproject, and now an independent scholar based in Australia), Dr Frederik Holst (Humboldt University) who was then completing his PhD dissertation on Malaysia; the researchers of the subproject, namely Professor Dr Vincent Houben and Dr Sumit Mandal; Saskia Schäfer who is a PhD candidate at the Berlin Graduate School of Muslim Cultures and Societies, and the research assistants of the subproject, J.C. Lanca and Carola von der Dick, both pursuing their masters degrees at Humboldt.

in the workshop are all linked to a Malaysian context; however, we expect them to be equally useful and fruitful when applied to other fields of study. Questioning and discussing concepts such as cosmopolitanism, ethnicity, or translocal approaches is increasingly important as we proceed in the search for new perspectives and insights. Our hope is that this collection and review of ideas will contribute to the discourse in academia, but also finds its way into other areas such as popular readings, discussions among political activists and non-academics interested in issues related to current developments in Malaysia and in a rapidly globalizing world.

The process of reviewing the workshop began by transcribing recorded files of the given presentations and discussions. The at times inconsistent quality of the recordings may have limited the adequate presentation of some ideas; however, we do have a rather exact transcript of all the thoughts discussed we can rely on. We went through the script carefully to detect reoccurring questions, concepts, connections in approaches or opposite positions, and concerns. In doing so, we were of course led by our own interests and backgrounds. We decided to isolate certain topoi that reoccurred in the presentations and discussions at the workshop and handle them in separate sections. This divide however, is mainly a heuristic one, and often the delineation between the topoi is permeable and flexible. Ideas and discourses that seem to lead “out of the box” might cross these boundaries and therefore be relevant to several of the themes listed below.

## 2. Strategies to get out of the box

Of course it is unlikely and hardly helpful to abandon the ways in which Malaysian Studies have been conducted up to now altogether. It is common sense that scholarly knowledge is interlinked with public as well as political discourse. While knowledge production may inform these two, the questions and perceptions of the scholar are also influenced by these discourses. This leads to a responsibility of scholars to scrutinize with what biases they work, which representations they reproduce and what repercussions their work might cause within and beyond academia.

The awareness of such responsibility of scholars was crucial for the design of the workshop *Malaysia out of the Box*. Contemporary Malaysian Studies deal with a country in a state of crisis, with numerous tensions within its society. A big part of that is closely connected to representations, that either result from careless perpetuation of out-of-date categories or are being held up systematically, e.g. for political or other gain. Scholarly work can cope with these representations by taking them for granted and re-deploying them or examine their actual significance and implications.

The continuous reflection of one's own biases and the scrutinizing of ways to think of Malaysia is not only a question of social and possibly even political responsibility as a scholar. Even from a purely academic point of view it is worthwhile analyzing the scholarly legacy that is the basis of our work today. Today's Malaysia sometimes confronts us with questions that might seem hard to answer with existing concepts. New developments occur in the country's society, while Area Studies themselves open up to new topics and research foci. Sometimes traditional concepts and narratives do not apply to the new conditions or scholarly objectives. If scholars then are aware of the shortcomings of past Malaysian Studies and find ways to get out of the box by either revisiting or amending the established perspectives on Malaysia, there is a chance to fill some of the remaining blind spots with well-informed knowledge.

In the following section, we will outline some attempts to look at Malaysia in a different manner. But first: What does it mean to think about Malaysia *in the box*?

Most ideas about Malaysia follow certain historical narratives, categorizations and patterns of interpretation about the state and its inhabitants. This means thinking about Malaysia as contained within its nation-state boundaries, and studying its history in isolation from events in neighboring or even far away countries, not taking into account the impact they have across borders. It means taking ethnic groups as given and not questioning labels readily applied to people(s). It means to think of a nation, as something that can be neatly divided into several homogeneous religious groups or to think of migration flows as unidirectional. It means not critically analyzing the flows of knowledge –what are the academic relations between the global North and the global South. It means not to challenge the concept of a singular flow of history.

Malaysia's history is seen as a linear development with commonly used landmarks from a feudal system with several sultanates that were brought together and administered by colonial rule and later on gained independence under the rule of prominent protagonists. In the Cold War era there was an insurgency of communist forces, put down by the anti-communist government. It is a constitutional monarchy with a democratic electoral system, but sometimes criticised for its authoritarian features. Its population is described as multiethnic with a slight but dominant Malay majority and two significant minorities, being Indians and Chinese, as well as smaller groups of different ethnic background. Malaysia today is a clearly defined territory, a home to its people(s) and a positive example of economic growth in the Southeast Asian region. Islam is its state religion, but (except for ethnic Malays) the freedom of religion is a constitutional right. These are a few outlines that might be used to describe what has become the well-established understanding of Malaysia in a nutshell. Even in extensive scholarly work these ideas form a framework in which most of the research is located.

Again: Thinking out of the box does not necessarily mean to reject this whole framework. Informed by the existing literature everyone working on Malaysia today builds their work on ground of discourses that acknowledge the ideas stated above. Scholars are accustomed to certain ways to understand and interpret them. However, by revisiting one's ways of thinking and established interpretations, one can possibly shed some light on questions that haven't been answered so far, that might need more than the existing answers, or that just might need to be posed in another way. Getting out of the box is not an attempt to reinvent the wheel in Malaysian Studies, but to get it rolling in places it had not gone to before.

An important premise for the success of taking new perspectives is challenging the flows of knowledge. In his opening remarks, Sumit Mandal suggests focusing on moments of dialogue as one step toward this objective. He illustrates such a moment with a quote from Yao Souchou. This now Australian based scholar received Chinese education in Malaysia, "Western" education on psychoanalytical theory, and now poses questions concerning Malaysia again. In a book review, he comments on the work of Anthony Millner and Tim Harper:

"And in this sense, the struggle for a progressive politics in the post-Anwar era may need to look towards that genealogy which Harper and Milner describe with such sharp and relentless insight. This looking back even if it is temptingly nostalgic, has to take on the spirit of a self-reflective, intellectual interrogation by all ethnic communities. For not only their leaders, but ordinary people in the street as well, have been in one way or another, a part of and contributed to the heart-wrenching ethnic polarization that infects Malaysian national life. And complicity is not too far-fetched a word here. For a tough examination of the personal investment in the ethnic division in Malaya may well promise, however faintly, the beginning to a truly progressive multicultural future" (Souchou 2002: 118).

This is an example of scholars from different backgrounds picking up each others ideas. The multidirectional flows here can be traced between Australia, Britain, Malaysia and Germany. Under current conditions in Malaysia, it is sometimes difficult to engage in critical scholarly work, since academic institutions need to be aware of- if not conform with - the political orientation of the administration. Therefore, the infrastructure for such dialogue between scholars may be difficult to sustain. Despite the lack of Malaysian scholars presenting, a merit of the participants in the workshop is that they are some distance away from the unfolding crisis, and are therefore in the position of commenting the situation in a more sustained manner, with broader and comparative questions.

### 1.1. Comparison

One way to come to new findings on Malaysia lies in working with comparisons on different levels. Comparison, as such, is of course not a new method. But it kept reoccurring in the papers and discussions of the workshop as a major key to new, valuable knowledge.

The overall research focus, when comparison was involved, has frequently been nation-bound. The book *NATION-BUILDING: Five Southeast Asian Histories*<sup>2</sup>, for instance, provides contributions by scholars mostly covering no more than one or at the most two countries in their papers. They hardly provide comparisons across national borders. This can only be made by the reader when perceiving the book as a comparison of Malaysia and Singapore with Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand. As a historian and area expert in the workshop, Vincent Houben looked at the crafting of national histories from a comparative point of view. His research however, and his use of comparison is rather innovative, because it provides this cross-national perspective.

He compares the birth of different nation states in Southeast Asia. According to Houben, comparative work on this field can help solving problems historians face when dealing with 'national myths'. The case of German histories serves as a good example to illustrate what phenomena occurs when different histories are produced. In a unified Germany now, the formerly separate histories of GDR and FRG must be compared, and the myths that were used become uncovered, before a new national history can be created. Obviously, it will never be agreed on one version of history from all sides, which makes it important to stay in the process of comparing the alternating narratives. The countries Houben intends to compare to one another are Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia and Myanmar. All being former colonial states, they took different paths to independence and developed individual political systems and social orders. They also created their own narratives and national myths along the way. Comparative work on national histories is a way to solve the problem of identifying and getting over certain national myths constructed to support political goals at the time. Especially for Indonesia it is true, that myths

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<sup>2</sup> Gungwu, Wang (Edt). 2005. *NATION-BUILDING: Five Southeast Asian Histories*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

were constructed or reinterpreted deliberately to legitimise the New Order-regime. Being engraved deeply into the narratives of national history, they keep hindering local historians in addressing sensitive issues of the countries' past. Indonesian historians are presently debating the concept of "*pelurusan sejarah*", which translates to "straightening history". It is the idea that you can "straighten" or "rectify" the history of Indonesia after the New Order. Unlike Indonesia, in Malaysia there is not that much debate about this notion. Malaysian historians do not tend to use this expression. That way, comparison reveals differences between the individual countries and explains the specific problems that arise in Malaysia for example, but do not occur in that manner in Indonesia.

A comparison to the birth of other nations in the region might add new perspectives, interpretations and references to the work of historians, especially when it comes to bilateral relations. In a similar way it can help historical work on Malaysia to leave the tight barriers of national history and embed the events and currents within the country in a wider framework by comparing them to the simultaneous developments elsewhere.

But it is not only the examination of parallel developments in a spatial dimension that can further the understanding of Malaysia. Temporal comparison is also valuable, especially in the observation of contemporary developments. Media reaction, political rhetoric and dynamics in public discourse point to paradigm shifts.

It is a fairly common thing for historians to compare current situations to similar ones in the past. In the context of Malaysia, comparing the current crisis to historical ones reveals continuities and differences. The way people speak about or behave during a crisis, the solutions they hope for, or even if a certain situation is understood as crisis-laden or not, are interesting benchmarks. Another question linked to that is whether the media, political elites, and the general public draw historical parallels, thereby connecting a current crisis to another and if so, what conclusions and claims they derive from it. The socio-political crisis in Malaysia today can be analyzed by such a temporal comparison, as well as Malaysia's reactions to the world financial crises recently can be compared to 1997, when Malaysia was in the centre of the Asian Financial Crisis.

Another field where comparison becomes important is the selection of sources. Tim Harper's research on transnational networks of political activists in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century gives an example of this: It shows an exchange of information between French and British colonial administrations on issues of organized political opposition hardly acknowledged by mainstream-historiography so far. However, the fact that the competing colonial powers were willing to share information on what they seem to have perceived as a threat common to both their sovereignties, shows the significance this "footnote" in history had for the ones in charge back then. By comparing French, Chinese, British and other ac-

counts on history in different archives, the diverse perspectives and concepts to describe phenomena become evident. In the discussion participants agreed that archival resources in China might add new information and possibly even different assessments of such networks of radical anti-colonialists. However, such research can only be conducted with the required knowledge of the languages involved or through translators. Especially where the subtext and the linguistic representations become important, reliable and competent translation is crucial to the outcome of the research. Under the condition of proper sensitivity to these linguistic nuances, reflection of transnational events, such as migration, becomes multi-faceted by including varieties of historical material.

Besides the importance of comparing different sources, Harper's research is also innovative in including facts that would not have been deemed significant in writings on Malaysia's history so far. When dealing with historical events, he extracts information on protagonists that might seem negligible on the first sight but help to further our understanding of their subject position. One example is the story of a young radical lady who delivered a bomb to colonial authorities in Kuala Lumpur in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Newspaper-clippings and protocols of her trial describe her as a modern-dressed woman, with bobbed hair, a rather exceptional appearance at the time. For the colonial administrators and the local press it was hardly understandable how a young, attractive and obviously "Western"-dressed lady was capable of such radical action. That contributed to the media echo to her case. The sources also show details of her individual biography. Amending the historical facts with such information helps to locate her in her historical context, hints to her affiliation to certain concepts of modernity, progressiveness and contributes to the understanding of her individual motivations for her violent action.

The usage of visual markers is a social practice with specific implications. As indicators of self-constitution and –positioning, they gained attention mostly in Subcultural Studies over the last decades. Moving visual markers into the spotlight can also contribute to new findings when examining archive images or other historical sources. The attentiveness for such nuances in historical or other scholarly work means including details in the broader picture that were left out before. Thereby it is possible to generate a more complete understanding of events and their protagonists.

While in many cases such markers might not seem to tell us much about a person, there are instances in history where they became significant representations of affiliation to a group or were decisive for the way in which people were seen and understood. An obvious and commonly known example for that could be the long-legged trousers of the Sansculottes or the Jacobins' hats in times of the French revolution.

One way to use comparison with rather new benchmarks seems relevant for historians as well as for scholars of Cultural Studies working on Malaysia, as Tim Harper pointed out in his presentation. It is

the comparison of political rhetoric and symbols to those of popular culture. Oftentimes, there is a vast intertextuality between both of them that helps understand where certain representations were borrowed from and what subtext they contain, hidden to those outside the (pop-)cultural framework. Forms of popular entertainment, such as travelling theatres in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, contributed significantly in spreading discourses from urban centres to the hinterland in the past. Pop culture is influential on public opinion and thereby has an impact beyond individual leisure time activities. Popular culture and entertainment media did not only transport political ideas: They sometimes unintentionally fed into political representations by generating images, that were later on picked up by political leaders in order to fit their agenda or personal exposure into shapes favoured by a vast population. Ho Chi Minh is one prominent example for this strategy in the Southeast Asian region.

Besides various ways to employ comparison as a hermeneutic means, the comparison itself can also be analyzed in regard to its significance as an element of political discourse. There has been a lot of writing about the policies of liberal Islam and the public intellectuals and organizations that are involved, both in promoting and opposing liberal Islam in Indonesia. Bonura focuses on the way in which comparisons emerge through political discourse and practice. He examines how they are employed in order to locate certain positions inside or outside what is deemed the legitimate discussion on religious questions.

As Bonura comes from a background of political theory, he challenges the use of specific theoretical concepts. While other scholars might use terms or concepts in a rather unreflected manner, Bonura problematizes “comparison” for instance as a theoretically constructed concept. He refers to Manu Goswami and his concept of “Epistemologies of Comparison”<sup>3</sup>, and asks, how comparisons are developed and employed as a strategy for argumentation. Who shapes the dichotomies for these comparisons? To illustrate these theoretical considerations about concepts, we will make use of the examples given in Bonura’s presentation concerning the reaction of Islamic intellectuals to what is called liberal Islam. As an example he refers to the writings of Caliph Muamar and his criticism of liberal Islam on intellectual grounds.

Bonura uses the term foundationalism to refer to ideological perspectives which use dichotomies such as true Islam vs. false Islam, proper Islamic methods of interpretation (determining what authentic and objective truth is) vs. false methods such as hermeneutics, relativism, deconstruction, post-modernism and contextualization, in their argumentations.

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<sup>3</sup> In reference to Manu Goswami, Assistant Professor of History at University of Chicago.

By these dichotomies and comparisons, liberal Islam gets located in the realm of secularism and illegitimate “Western” thought. It becomes a position incompatible with Islamic epistemologies, which are based on proper and truthful interpretations of Qur’an by Ulamas.

He locates the work of Caliph Muammar in the politics of foundationalism and is interested in how Muammar in his rejection of liberal Islam generates comparisons within his writings. There are comparisons between good and bad Islam, Islamic and Western epistemology, religious and secular approaches. For the Liberal Islam Network, the primary question is about religious authority, whereas for the Islamic reaction the question is what constitutes Islamic knowledge. Muammar’s aim is to reaffirm the epistemological authority of the Ulama, as the central place of methods of interpretation of legal reasoning.

Finally, Carlo Bonura uses another method of comparison. His presentation showed another topic in need of comparative approaches to get to a deeper understanding. He analyses the reactions of adherents of conservative Islamism to liberal Islam in different countries. By comparing foundationalist claims by Islamic academics who are opposing liberal Islam on intellectual grounds in Malaysia and elsewhere, one can understand how reaction to liberal Islam works in different places. This illustrates that conservative Islamism cannot be seen as a single global movement. According to Bonura, Islamic reaction usually is highly localized. While liberalization is a global trend with transnational networks and long-distance exchange between its agents, conservative Islam is normally rooted in a local setting with specific customs and traditions and less prone to networking on a global scale. Instead of understanding Islamic conservatism and reaction as a single, unified global movement, as is often done, one needs to compare its specific localized advocacy groups and their individual claims to come to a well-informed understanding of Islamic foundationalism. Studies of Islamic globalization need to take into account that the globalization of Islamic religious movements is multi-faceted and occurs simultaneously in many levels and contexts<sup>4</sup>.

Furthermore, comparison can not only be deployed as a research method in this field, but also as a focus. By coming up with certain comparisons in their writings, foundationalist thinkers define the legitimate line of argument and exclude what they deem “liberal” Islam from the discourse.

As the above examples show, the not-so-new comparison as an approach offers diverse chances to leave the well-worn paths of Malaysian Studies, when applied to the right questions. Given the other main topics that kept reoccurring in the discussions how to get out of the box in Malaysian Studies, comparison seems to be a key to more than one of them.

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<sup>4</sup> This multi-strandedness is suggested by the Malaysian sociologist of contemporary Islam Norani Othman. She is a founding member of Sisters in Islam and Professor of Sociology at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

## 1.2. Transnationalism, Diaspora, Movement and Cosmopolitanism

### Moving away from a nation-bound perspective

Applying the concept of Diasporas can be a way of acknowledging that the national boundaries did not always exist, and therefore is a way of thinking beyond the boundaries of Area Studies in the old sense. Sunil Amrith's work serves as an example for this approach. His project started in India with two coincidental discoveries: The first one was a private library in Madras, containing a vast collection of Tamil art from the 1920s to the 1930s, published above all in Penang and Singapore. This was the insight to an incredibly rich world of printed Tamil language, generated outside of South India. The second discovery of a more informal sort was the discovery of traces of Malaysia and Singapore wherever Amrith went in South India. So Malaysia seems to have left its mark on India, just as South Indian migrants have made their contribution to Malaysia in a more conventional sense. Through his work Amrith learned that people's morals and political imaginations were never constrained by the political boundaries of the Malay peninsula; this does not accord with the many boundaries scholars tend to place on these debates. Such findings require a sensitivity for marginal artifacts and practices and calls for an inclusion of items left out by the bias of Area Studies so far.

Problems and discourses that are relevant to Malaysia today (or were in the past) might also be addressed in other parts of the region or in the world. It is useful leaving the "national box" by looking for interlinkages between interest groups and positions in these conflicts and discourses internationally.

To relate the historical scholarship to the present conditions, Hindraf<sup>5</sup> serves as a good example. Amrith asks: "What is the most helpful way of thinking of the Hindraf protests if we are looking on it from a longer historical perspective? Is it a reassertion of diasporic connections upon the parts of Malaysian Indians?" The Hindraf incident was the first time ethnic Indian social and political organizations were involved in the politics of Malaysia on a larger scale. They also sought the support of organizations based in India. This made it a more global issue of Indian diaspora. Many Malaysian activists are depressed at this way of seeing it: They would argue it is not about diaspora, but citizenship, and so the nation becomes important again. This is one problem arising in the approach of moving away from a nation-bound perspective. Although Diaspora Studies reduce the significance of the nation, it does become important again through issues concerning citizenship, laws, territorial borders and infrastructure. Due to these factors, diasporic communities may lose touch with their area of origin over time and so the colonial and successively the postcolonial state does come up again.

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<sup>5</sup> **HINDRAF** or **Hindu Rights Action Force** began as a coalition of 30 Hindu non-governmental organizations committed to the preservation of Hindu community rights and heritage in Malaysia. In November 2001, its leaders led a historic demonstration involving tens of thousands of people that was put down by the state through the use of force.

Concerning India, the politics have changed remarkably. In 1937, Nehru stated on his visit to Malaysia, that the Indians there must make their life there as local citizens. It was only in the 1990s that the Indian state began to consciously cultivate the idea of non-resident Indians or now 'special category' Indians. There are new categories of dual or semi-dual citizenship for persons of Indian origin, however mostly for wealthy Indians in the West rather than for Tamils in Singapore or Malaysia. Presently, similar approaches of forming categories for the Malaysian diaspora are being discussed in the Malaysian government.

Amrith concludes by mentioning an article by Darini Rajasingham<sup>6</sup> which points out that the vote for Diaspora Studies has come out of a context of multicultural Western democracies. Certainly they began as politically progressive, and were connected to the quest for recognition of minorities or other underrepresented groups, but in South and Southeast Asian context, Rajasingham points out, calling a group a diaspora can have very negative political consequences, because citizenship remains bound to place, indigeneity and residence.<sup>7</sup>

Another danger in Diaspora Studies is that this perspective may over-emphasize external connections<sup>8</sup>, and bring a sense of triumphalism. On a popular level, Diaspora Studies may be tied to identitarian projects. Claims for example on certain foods, or batik in the case of Indonesia and Malaysia, could be seen from another perspective. However, these sorts of claims still do involve the nation state and are an attempt to create identity.

### Cosmopolitanism

Since issues of cosmopolitanism are relevant to other topics in this report as well, we shall only mention it briefly here, since it certainly has a relevance for questions of movement, migration and diaspora. Later on, it will also be discussed in other contexts.

One must be careful of romanticizing by drawing the picture of a happy cosmopolitan past against a darker future. Amrith suggests using the term civility to describe more accurately what he is concerned with. The Anthropologist Jonathan Spencer<sup>9</sup> talks about everyday pluralism and everyday civility, terms which carry less intellectual baggage than the term cosmopolitanism.

Concerning the concept of cosmopolitanism, we must bear in mind that the existence of prejudice is as unquestionable as the one of cosmopolitanism and co-existence. Perhaps we need to write new histo-

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<sup>6</sup> Bikkhu Parek, Singh, Guralp and Vertovec, Steve (eds.).2003 *"Diaspora and Citizenship" in Culture and Economy in the Indian Diaspora*. London: Routledge.

<sup>7</sup> About Sri Lanka, Rajasingham says, talking about a Tamil diaspora in Sri Lanka may cause as many problems as it solves, because these are Sri Lankans fighting for particular rights of citizenship and they do not think of themselves as Tamil diaspora.

<sup>8</sup> That is why Amrith finds the ethnographic work by Joel Kahn for example so important, for example his 2006 book *Other Malays: Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Malay World*. Singapore and Copenhagen: Asian Studies Association of Australia in association with Singapore University Press and NIAS Press

<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Spencer. 2008. *Anthropology, Politics, and the State*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

ries of prejudice as well as histories of cosmopolitanism. We need to be careful about romanticizing coexistence in the past - inter-community conflict has a history of its own and is not simply a state created history. Julian Lee also emphasises this point. It would be contra-productive to neglect inter-ethnic conflicts. Nevertheless, at the same time there are many ways in which people find ways to work around the barriers of ethnicization. These barriers are often set up and enforced deliberately and utilized for the sake of political agendas.

### Transnationalism

The acknowledgement of the constructed-ness of national boundaries by scholars leads to a turn towards transnationalism. As explained before, transnational comparison, the studies of transnational networks and the observation of global processes and currents on a level beyond national boundaries all have their merits. Especially for scholars in Area Studies new perspectives open up when leaving the “box of nations”. Tim Harper's current work is one example for research on transnationalism in a historical perspective. Julian Lee, on the other hand, shows that it is also a valuable perspective when studying current discourses. His work on networks advocating sexual and bodily rights in Muslim societies can again further our understanding about the global background of a local discourse. However, this currently wide-ranging turn of scholars towards transnationalism might be harmful to Area Studies at the institutional level. It needs to be kept in mind, that even if it is the area expert who can employ an interdisciplinary bundle of methods on a certain country or region when exploring transnational connections, this kind of work endangers the very discipline of Area Studies. “What is academia’s benefit from Area Studies and country experts, if we now prefer to use a transnational or even transregional view?” is a question scholars from this field might soon be confronted with.

Carlo Bonura also touches the topic of transnationalism when he explains the difference of transnationally connected Islamic networks that are all called “liberal” because of certain shared notions and conservative groups that are rather locally rooted.

He refers to Norani Othman<sup>10</sup>, who suggested that the globalization of Islamic religious movements is multi-stranded, and occurs simultaneously on many levels and contexts. Her elaboration leads Bonura to two analytical conclusions:

1. Dynamics of appropriation and transposition can be included in the concept of globalization. Identifying similar dynamics of political thought elsewhere might be one fruitful method for studying this form of globalization.
2. Bonura is critical of over-emphasizing the notion of movement in the discussion of globalization. In the cases Bonura presented, liberalism travels transnationally, while the reaction stays fixed in specific political contexts. Rather than focusing on movement of public moralities, and seeing Islamism as a

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<sup>10</sup> Othman is a founding member of Sisters in Islam and Professor of Sociology at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

unified movement, the study of Islamic globalization may require recognizing the articulation of reaction across different contexts, each with their own controversies. By comparing what he calls foundationalist claims, we could understand more about how the reaction to liberal Islam is common and what is unique about it in different local settings. This understanding needs transnational research on Islamic foundationalism.

### 1.3. Finding a new language

Following the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, language shapes worldview. The assumption that language influences our way of thinking makes the quest for a new language so important. In the German discourse about “foreigners” in Germany, the term *Gastarbeiter* (work migrant) is not used anymore. It can be debated whether the phrase “*Menschen mit Migrationshintergrund*” (people with migratory background) merely replaced this label, or if we really *do* think differently about migrating people when we use this new term. The challenge is to not just replace one noun or adjective with the other, but to introduce new concepts that are understood by the recipient in the way they were intended. The first step for scholars therefore is to be more reflexive about existing concepts they employ. According to Houben, there are then three practical approaches to finding a new language; the first one being defining a general term anew. Anderson<sup>11</sup> takes this approach when he introduces the Javanese idea of power, explaining to a presumably Western audience what is to be understood when the term is used in a Javanese context. Another solution would be the possibility of using an indigenous term (for example *derhakar* - “betrayal”). The danger here, however, is to cultivate “othering”: The people or societies described are made so fundamentally different from “us” that we must employ terms in the indigenous language to be able to talk about certain concepts. The third approach has perhaps been the most successful. It is combining an indigenous concept with a well established one, such as Wolters’<sup>12</sup> *Mandala-state* or Geertz’s *Theatre-state*<sup>13</sup>. These terms were so successful that they were employed by other scholars in areas they initially had not been created for.

Cosmopolitanism was a term that came up in the discussion frequently. When using the expression, we need to be aware of the term’s connotations. In “Western”-centred notions, it mostly describes well-educated, socially privileged, well-travelled people, thereby excluding or neglecting the everyday cosmopolitanism of broader parts of society. A less burdened term could be “Rough-and-ready civility”, as suggested by Sunil Amrith and Julian Lee. This is not meant to replace “cosmopolitanism” altogether, but rather to complement the term.

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<sup>11</sup> Anderson, Benedict R. 1990. *Language and Power: Exploring political culture in Indonesia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

<sup>12</sup> Wolters, O.W. 1982. *History Culture and Region in Southeast Asian Perspective*. Singapore: Institute for Southeast Asian Studies.

<sup>13</sup> Geertz, Clifford. 1981. *Negara: The Theatre State in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Bali*. Princeton: Princeton University Press

However, the shift of meanings of a newly introduced term is unpredictable. People might well end up using a newly introduced term with the same notions as the old one it was supposed to replace, after a while. Although new terminology can offer a new perspective on issues, the effect might wear out through frequent usage.

In his thesis, Frederik Holst tries to go beyond merely deconstructing the terms of ethnic and ethnicity and introduces the term of ethnicization, to demonstrate that the instrumentalization of ethnicity is an ongoing process. He argues that while ethnicization affects multiple layers of Malaysian society, there is no single mastermind behind ethnicized policies. These policies have rather become a practice in their own right with the people implementing them not always being aware of the ethnicized nature of them.

Ethnicity has in many cases simply replaced the term race, and the question concerning Holst's analysis is, if the concept of "ethnicized groups" really can avoid bringing in ethnicity through the back door. However, it provides a different way of looking at these complex categories.

A larger debate is where and when the concept of ethnicity originated. For one, 19th century colonialism brought about different kinds of racial categorization. We must sight history carefully to evaluate to what extent these categories were pre-existent and continued to be used for bureaucratic reasons.

Sunil Amrith addresses "diaspora history" rather than "migration history" in the old sense. The use of the term diaspora is intended to shift attention to questions of movement rather than questions of destination. By taking this perspective, he concentrates on tracing the movement of people, ideas, texts and material goods across the Bay of Bengal, rather than being led by the question of whether the people coming to Malaya intended to settle there.

Another issue, in which sensibility towards employed language and its notions is necessary, is the use of the term "liberal Islam". Liberal Islam as a concept must be seen as a creation by various intellectuals. Although the term has travelled globally already, its deeper meaning changes in different local contexts. While in many non-Muslim societies in Europe and North America 'liberal Islam' is much appreciated, it can be disadvantageous to identify with liberal Islam in a Muslim context, given the dichotomies created by its opponents through comparisons in their intellectual work. Many groups referred to as agents of liberal Islam in their area, do not apply this term to themselves.

Different from Indonesia, liberal Islam has acquired an entirely negative conceptualization as a danger in Malaysia. Transposition as a theoretical concept can be helpful to understand the different notions of such transnational ideological movements. Certain notions of a term or concept might be overlapping in different local and social contexts, but still there are differences in their deeper meaning and

the associations connected to them. Shared vocabulary may flow easily across spatial distances, but might acquire different meanings, depending on the local settings.

One example for networks to whom the negatively connoted term “liberal Islam” is sometimes applied to in Malaysia, is the Council for Sexual and Bodily Rights (CSBR), an organization active in mainly Muslim societies. Julian Lee described the work of this internationally active network in his presentation. Some of its members would not understand themselves as affiliated to “liberal Islam”, but see themselves simply as Muslims, regardless of their rather progressive ideas about sexual and bodily rights. Where they might see no contradiction between religiosity and the right to sexual self-expression, conservative and foundationalist groups connect them to un-Islamic discourses and “Western” thought. Thereby they try to exclude them from a position within the religious discourse, from which they could find acknowledgement for their agenda among other Muslims.

This kind of exclusion is hard to fight. Therefore, groups excluded by foundationalism may need to resort to other discursive elements in order to legitimize their claims. One example offered by Julian Lee was the Sisters in Islam Network that picked up a part of the preamble of the Rukanegara for their advocacy of women rights. Freedom of religion stated in the constitution did not work in their lines of argument due to the affinity of judges to conservative Islam interests. However, one part of the Preamble referring to human rights could be employed in the interest of Sisters in Islam without the risk of being identified with a negatively connoted “liberal Islam”. This case helps to picture how a label uncontroversial in one setting can have very negative implications in another.

Scholars both within and outside Muslim societies need to be aware of the different implications of the term “liberal Islam”, for in some cases it might be more helpful to use alternative expressions in order to support such positions. A high sensibility to language and the local interpretations of terms appears as a scholarly responsibility.

#### 1.4. Every day life as an alternative to nation-state narratives

The examination of currents and practices in every day life is yet another way to come to new findings on Malaysia that are otherwise often neglected. As Area Studies mostly observe a country on a macro-level, there is the danger of narrowing down the scholar’s view to elite decisions, questions of legislation and a history of developments and decisions in the governmental arena. Extensive studies of everyday life can add knowledge on how certain historical events and current discourses are picked up on by vast parts of the population and how they become relevant for the single individuals and their interactions.

For example, it can further our understanding of interaction and delineation between ethnicized groups to look at how racism occurs in ways that might have little to do with the categories of the state and the idea of a pluralistic society. An approach here would be to also examine the terms people use to

refer to themselves and other, different communities, not only in formal, official language, but also in terms of slang. Observations such as the ones made by Sunil Amrith when talking to a school teacher, who described a growing racism and even readiness to resort to violent confrontation among her students, are valuable contributions when trying to understand in what kind of atmosphere discussions on ethnicity take place today. Here Amrith also includes a group mostly left out in writings of Area Studies. The underage are hardly acknowledged in works on political history, unless they gain a dramatic role either as victims or perpetrators or get utilized in high numbers in extraordinary events. Nevertheless, the ideas and framework with which they grow up might contribute significantly to their opinions and actions later on. They do not only reflect what they hear and see in their families, but might also influence opinions in their families. What Amrith's discussion with the school teacher shows is that the every-day language in some milieus might be much more radical than language in public media discourse or in political rhetoric. Especially the attitude of young people, as this teacher's students, shows the repercussion of such racial topics in parts of the society.

On the other hand, there is a subtle claim by the BN-government, that due to the multiethnic population structure, there is always a danger of race riots to be kept at bay. The official answer to this danger is the coalition government, which includes all major groups in order to mediate between them. Looking closely into every-day life of people grants an insight into how this threat of racist outbreaks forms the perception of one another between ethnicized groups. Simultaneously, it might also show on what levels and in which social environments the demarcation of ethnicized groups consistently affirmed by official rhetoric has already been overcome by everyday practices. It is one of many examples of inter-ethnic contacts opposing long-standing ideas of fixed and clearly defined ethnic belonging that can reveal which mechanisms are at work to build barriers between "the races", how they affect people's life and what individuals do to work their way around them.

While claiming to prevent race riots, it is also a strategy of the BN-government, and especially by UMNO, to reaffirm the barriers between ethnicized groups instead of leading them together into a more integrated Malaysian community. Julian Lee showed in his presentation how ethnicity is utilized, by UMNO youth in order to reduce criticism by political opponents to a purely ethnic issue. That way groups opposing the Internal Security Act for example, would be criticized by UMNO organizations for their ethnic formation. If such a group contained relatively few ethnic Malays, UMNO-youth would deem their criticism of the ISA illegitimate, implicating that it was not a question of human rights or liberalism, but only an attempt to change the political and juridical order in Malaysia out of ethnic interest.

Despite a tradition of ethnic categorisation of people, there are, and for a long time have been, forms of a lived multiculturalism, that emerged as soon as people of different backgrounds, socialisation and languages had to deal with one another, and they kept developing until today. Balancing one's re-

search focus between these positive examples without shutting out the problems and conflicts between the different groups, is a viable alternative to academic work on Malaysia which keeps reaffirming clichés about and boundaries between ethnicized groups.

Looking into every-day life shows that there is a form of cosmopolitanism that does not correlate to the concept of cosmopolitanism as it is mostly used in academic literature. Interethnic, heteroglossic every-day contacts and exchanges beyond government politics and elite circles often touch on questions of global politics. Examinations of these contacts can give an insight to what relevance certain social orders, representations and inequalities actually have in Malaysia as well as in contacts between Malaysians and people from other places. This can in some cases be closely linked to the Diaspora Studies mentioned above. Such cosmopolitanism is not limited to highly educated, well-travelled parts of society. Instead, it shows the local repercussions of global trends in the life of a broader population, oftentimes neglected in academic writing. Of course, historical sources on this low-level cosmopolitanism in every-day life are thin, due to the inattentiveness of traditional scholarship for processes on the bottom of society. Nevertheless, this general interest in global trends and events, the heteroglossic exchange and the casual overcoming of ethnic boundaries is nothing that emerged with modern-times communication technology and media. Instead, through diaspora, migration and the need of groups with different backgrounds to communicate with one another and to react on events beyond their local reach it has a long history in Malaysia. Unfortunately that kind of history has hardly been worked on so far in Malaysian Studies.

So the examination of every-day life contributes to a more extensive picture of Malaysia today as well as in historical dimensions. Not only can it show what happened beyond national politics and elite circles. It also explains in what kind of environment, if not to say collective state of mind and zeitgeist certain political events and decisions on a national level took place. The revelation of individual biographies or description of interaction of groups apart from their prominent representatives can deepen our understanding of why national events turned out the way they did, and what consequences they had or might have, that were not possible to anticipate without an understanding of every-day life.

However, as Carlo Bonura remarked, the concept of “every day life” still needs to be theorized properly instead of being employed in unreflected and simple terms. Within and beyond Malaysian Studies a theoretical framework for research on every day life would be a relevant contribution.

## The ethnographic approach

The discussion about the findings of Holst's field-study among Malaysian students brought to light the problems of quantitative research methods, in the observation of every-day life. For example, the results to the question "How important is your ethnic/ ethnicized identity for you?" on a sheet handed to students can be evaluated by the researcher in various, even contradicting ways. Did they mark it "very important" because they feel comfortable identifying with a specific ethnic group or to indicate that it is very important because identification is a problem? The criticism of quantitative research methods in the social sciences together with the suggestion of focusing on the every-day life are signs of a turn to more ethnographic, qualitative research methods.

### 1.5. Crisis as a research focus

Various times the term "Malaysia's current crises" was used in the workshop, without the need for further explanation. The answer to the question of what exactly the crisis is, might differ according to the background of the ones invoking it. The scholars participating in the workshop all shared a concern for Malaysia, and therefore shared a worried view on certain processes in its society as well as its political landscape. According to the participants, characteristics of this crisis are the turning towards and clinging to an increasingly authoritarian demeanor by ruling political elites, and the enforcement of barriers between religious, ethnicized or other groups by various kinds of agents. Other groups might speak of a crisis in Malaysia, while understanding authoritarian behavior of the ruling elites not as a symptom, but as the proper reaction to the crisis.

The analysis of crisis, as a concept as well as a short concrete time span in which a society has to face inner tensions and problems, appears to be a rewarding project. For Malaysian Studies crisis as a research focus may lead out of the box and result in new findings on Malaysia's history as well as its contemporary state.

Vincent Houben in his presentation described crisis as generated by incoherence between a social order and its forms of representation. The four dimensions in which such incoherence may trigger crises are the institutional, the spatial, the religious and the ideological one, following a line of thought by Houben and Deborah A. Johnson. Especially if there is an inconsistency of representation and social order in more than one of these dimensions, crisis might occur in a society. Crisis can lead to change in representation and/or social order, but quite different from longer-term developments, the events triggering the change happen very condensed and more clearly defined in a short namable time span. Since times of crisis can be clearly defined and limited down to a short period as a heuristic method, they allow for analysis of certain events crucial for further developments. The merits of such analysis shall be described in detail later (see following section).

One major point of concern and an observation of current discourses in Malaysia repeatedly described by participants is a rising chauvinism in the country and a tendency to nourish sentiments of belonging to a group, thereby excluding those who do not belong. Julian Lee pointed out that crisis oftentimes is something claimed and fostered for political gain, as e.g. corrupting trans-ethnic contacts. Chauvinist groups evoke an external threat in order to bring about and utilize a crisis for political gain.

Following this thought it seems promising to scrutinize past crises with regard to agency. If crisis is not understood as something that just develops by itself, but something that is generated, (probably by shifting certain representations crucial to the social order), the question arises, which groups or elite circles provoked it. It seems also relevant if these groups constructed a crisis deliberately or not, and if they did, what they gained from it.

A limitation of this approach to crisis is, that it neglects every-day life and subaltern histories. Again the fate of a nation seems to lie in the hands of few. From a Cultural Studies perspective this bias can probably be avoided by examining what relevance and notions the artefacts that brought about crisis (such as speeches, media reports and symbols) had, in different milieus.

Research on crisis is a valuable, complete and rewarding project in its own right. Still, its merits can be even increased when amended by accompanying work on every-day life.

General guiding questions that can be used to employ research on crisis as a way to think of Malaysia in new ways might be: What is perceived as the “current crisis in Malaysia” from different points of view? Which conditions triggered a certain crisis? What does a crisis mean for further developments, independently from longer-term developments? Who defines a crisis and who gains from it? Is a crisis claimed in elite circles just as relevant in daily life for the population’s majority? And, getting back to comparison: What connections, parallels and differences can be found to past crises?

## 1.6. Alternative histories

One way to look at the birth of nations might open new perspectives on these events, as it can answer questions of agency. Understanding the transition of one governmental form to another as a time of crisis, if not as an outcome of crisis in the previously existent political order, makes it possible to focus on certain crucial events during that time.

This is especially true for the emergence of postcolonial nation-states, such as Malaysia. The transition from colonial Malaya to the independent nation state can temporally be located in a comparably short time span, during which some distinct events were decisive for the course of the nation afterwards. In his forthcoming article, Houben examines moments of the birth of the nation of several Southeast

Asian nation-states (Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Myanmar). In three of the four cases, we can find instances shortly after the Second World War, in which committees of interest groups representatives sat together in the midst of crises.

When shifting one's research focus onto crises, even the birth of a nation can be limited and narrowed down to crucial months or weeks. In this time, people sitting together in committees were making enormously influential decisions on how the nation-state should look, what its boundaries should be or how citizenship was going to be arranged, once political stability was regained.

Archival resources offer a diversity of minutes, protocols and transcripts of such meetings. By close reading, they offer researchers valuable insight on the high importance of the according event.

Not only have representations been forged in these talks, especially in the realm of political language that are still influential up to present times. There were occasions in which even fundamental characteristics of Malaysia's political structure have been brought into being by negotiation, argument or even chance. These decisions, and the myths connected to the birth of the nation, are still highly influential for present-day politics.

Turning away from the conception of the nation state as a product of long-term change and pinpointing events that gave way to the state's further development in such a manner helps to clarify by which group or protagonist different issues and concepts were pushed forward. Instead of dealing with rather abstract items such as 'the political elite' and 'interest groups' (or, even worse, claiming ethnicized groups as a whole to be the agents behind certain political decisions in times of crises), focusing on crucial events allows for the researcher to trace these decisions back to much smaller groups or even to certain individuals. Thereby, alternative histories can be written, that are not only more precise but can also trigger a revision of the roles and motives of prominent figures in Malaysia's political history.

That also leads to the national myths that exist in Malaysia as in any other state and oftentimes are connected to the founding of the state. These myths sometimes come in the form of anecdotes, while others are fully fledged historical narratives. Some of them have been formed through misconceptions, while others were spread deliberately by certain protagonists in the sake of their political agenda. Such parts of the national history contribute to the explanation of a political and social order through a historical approach, but might not stand up to a close scrutiny. Houben presented an example from Indonesian history to demonstrate this: One of the central myths here is that the Japanese somehow gave the initial approval to the Indonesians to develop their independence, but that in the crucial moment, the Japanese retreated and left the creation of the nation state to the Indonesians themselves. However, Dutch historians tend to view the declaration of independence in a sense as a Japanese creation.

National histories or relevant parts of those can be constructed around narratives, which lose their integrity once revisited with a new perspective. Thereby alternative histories that take into account

transnational exchange, global settings and groups within the nation state, might be legitimized. These were excluded from the historical canon in well-established writing so far.

In these exclusions it becomes obvious, that common historical narratives have their blind spots. Usually following the transitional pattern *pre-colonial (=feudal) system – colony – nation-state* they mainly focus on political elites and describe the past of what is Malaysia today as a linear, singular and constant development within a more or less clearly defined territory. Neither subaltern histories nor potentially relevant transnational currents are properly acknowledged.

It also neglects the fact, that beside the discourses, allies and rivalries in the elites, there might have been other realities at the bottom and the fringes of society. Several political ideas and discourses might for instance have been relevant to significant parts of society long before they became prominent among the elites. On the other hand political events and the rise of state markers (such as citizenship, territorial borders, and parts of legislation) might not have had any impact on parts of society whatsoever. On the bottom level of society, there might have been ways for people to avoid these problems in everyday life.

Nationalism itself, as other political ideas, became the common denominator for vast transnational networks in the region, long before the dawn of the nation-state. The forming, rise, development and end of such networks, which occasionally even played a role in (or at least interfered with) the high level politics, did not correlate with the historical cornerstones of national history as it was written and reproduced for most of the time. Taking such groups into account and writing a narrative away from the narrow circles of the elites can enrich the historical work on Malaysia and open up the scholarly and social discourse for ideas beyond the box of traditional nation-state histories.

## 2. Results, Conclusion, Outlook

Many of the issues the participants are concerned with have also been well developed in feminist or postcolonial theory. It would be useful to include concepts generated in disciplines such as Feminist Cultural Anthropology or feminist-informed History in the research on Malaysia, and gain from the experience already collected there. The Book “Knowing Southeast Asian Subjects” edited by Laurie Sears (2007) is an example for this objective. It contains a collection of essays that “pose questions ranging from how a concern with postcolonial and feminist questions of identity might reorient the field to how anthropological work on civil society and Islam in Southeast Asia provides an opportunity for comparative political theorists to develop more sophisticated analytic approaches”<sup>14</sup>

In her essay “The Politics of Boarder Crossing: Black, Postcolonial, and Transnational Feminist Perspectives”<sup>15</sup> Hyun Sook Kim examines feminist epistemologies and methodologies that deal with the questions of political and social difference. She gives examples of work done by feminist geographers dealing with “geographies of power”. They employ a methodology that aims at linking issues of subjectivity and identity with institutional, geopolitical, material and cultural practices of power and privilege. The empirical research Kim cites emphasizes grounded, collaborative study, which incorporates perspectives of the global South and North, shedding light on the importance of place, space and the local in global processes. The dimensions Kim outlines for a transnational feminist sociology correspond very much to the suggestions made in this workshop<sup>16</sup>, seeking to avoid binary reductionism and generalizations about power/resistance, dominance/subordination, national/international, East/West and so forth. Kim’s concluding words just serve as an example that themes discussed by the participants here also occur in other disciplines:

“...meaningful feminist research would also involve more than the application of the most current theories and concepts. Instead, feminist scholars and activists must constantly ask weather the questions and concepts we frame capture the fluid, situated, and varied contexts, and weather our analysis adequately attends to the voices and conciseness of marginalized groups.”

The perspectives that can be obtained by following feminist approaches are too important to remain on the ‘margins’ of academic disciplines. In this report we were only able to describe superficially in what ways scholars in Malaysian Studies try to find alternatives to existing ways of writing. We think

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<sup>14</sup> University of Washington Press Review

<sup>15</sup> Kim, Hyun Sook. 2007. “The Politics of Border Crossings: Black, Postcolonial, and Transnational Feminist Perspective”. In: *Handbook of Feminist Research. Theory and Praxis*. ed. Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, 107-122. London: Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage.

<sup>16</sup> She elaborates on four dimensions: An approach that 1. bridges discursive and material analysis, 2. highlights the importance of social structure and the state, 3. Refers to various forms of boarder crossings, including conceptual, temporal, bu-reaucratic and so on, and 4. stresses the role of empirical research.

that it became obvious, that there is a need as well as a number of ways to do so. Nevertheless, the workshop *Malaysia out of the Box* was of course very limited regarding time and number of participants, but still started an encouraging discussion on methods and ideas to conduct work on Malaysia with a new trajectory. We hope that this paper can contribute to spread these ideas and open the discussion to a further audience.

Besides the different topics mentioned in the sections above, one important and probably crucial characteristic of most of the presenters works is the willingness to broaden their scholarly view and taking into account details, groups, phenomena and events that did not find much scholarly attention beforehand. This openness for what is usually regarded marginal or insignificant is what oftentimes delineates new approaches in Malaysian Studies from the established ways of thinking and can create a new impetus for further research. We hope that this insight inspires senior scholars as well as graduate students to innovative work and leads to an amendment of knowledge in Area Studies.

One of the outcomes of the event was, that the participants and attendants decided not only to stay in touch and keep up their exchange on their works and findings, but also to extend the sphere of reflected, new thought on Malaysia. Julian Lee stressed that it could promote the sophistication of Malaysian studies if they were deeper involved in public engagement. One way to reach this is to feed into the public discourse by sharing innovative information. Thus, it was agreed on a series of article-publications, not only accessible for a scientific audience. The way this idea was realized is by publishing well-informed yet easily-accessible articles in *Off The Edge*, a monthly magazine that was published in Malaysia. Thereby, new ideas on Malaysia currently only acknowledged by a narrow circle of scholars can be revealed to a broader public.

Furthermore, organizers and attendants of *Malaysia out of the Box* hope for an ongoing and extending exchange of new ideas on Malaysia within academia as well. Future publications can hopefully contribute to build vivid discussions and consolidating networks for scholars within Area Studies and other disciplines, where old and new lines of thought can be revisited, scrutinized, amended and finally bring about a reflected, considerate and multi-faceted picture of Malaysia today and its history.

Beginning with the participants themselves, the workshop already showed first effects in this direction by inspiring them to pick up ideas from one another, reconsidering expressions they used so far or by pointing them towards new research angles and methods.

Malaysia, may it be understood as a nation-state, a high density area of Malay culture in touch with others, or as a specific part of a wider region, is a dynamic object of research. Therefore, studies on Malaysia need to be flexible and dynamic just as well. Getting out of the box, can never be a destination but needs to be understood as a direction, an ongoing work in progress. While developing new

approaches on the subject, it needs to be kept in mind, that they have their shortcomings as well, and might themselves need to be revisited and amended sooner or later. Researchers trying to do more innovative research are aiming for a moving target, and being entirely detached from established thinking on Malaysia is neither an achievable goal nor desirable, since it would mean to loose touch with a rich scholarly tradition.

Keeping that in mind, the effort to leave the box of well-established Malaysian Studies appears to be a rewarding endeavor which enriches the academic landscape while also paying attention to the researcher's responsibilities. The Berlin workshop was surely not the first step of Malaysia Studies towards new cognizance, but a contribution to raising the awareness of the potential gain of new approaches to the field.

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