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When historians of Southeast Asia use the concept of ethnicity, it is usually in the context of the colonial period, when bureaucratic states used censuses to count, classify and control their subjects, and when interest groups mobilized support by articulating their own identity along ethnic lines. Ethnic identity politics were also an integral part of the colonial legacy to independent nation-states, and ethnic sentiments have played a key role in recent communal conflicts in Indonesia.

Leonard Andaya is also interested in ethnicity, but he goes much further back in time as he investigates how ethnic identities were formed and remodelled in connection with major flows of trade in the pre-colonial Malay world. This book is Andaya’s masterpiece because it is much more than a history of trade and ethnicity. It is the culmination of three decades of scholarship and offers nothing less than an integrated history of politics, economy, and culture of the Malay world over a period of two millennia, based on an impressive variety of sources. This is the new standard work for years to come on the early and early modern history of the Malay world.

The Straits of Melaka formed the core area of the ‘Sea of Melayu’, which stretched from the Bay of Bengal to coastal Vietnam, connecting India and Sri Lanka with the Malay Peninsula, Sumatra, the Mekong Delta and central Vietnam. This region was characterized by a high degree of commercial interaction and a common cultural idiom, which became known as Melayu. Having sketched the wide Melayu world with its flexible borders, Andaya concentrates on the core region of Melayu culture, which he locates in southeast Sumatra where the dynastic centre of Sriwijaya emerged. Melayu became a meaningful marker to differentiate between people in the Malay world and (for instance) the Javanese. But the emergence of powerful centres of Malay trade and culture also stimulated the articulation of counter-identities within the Malay world. Here we arrive at another key argument of the book. The centres of Malay political power and trade shifted from Sriwijaya to Melaka, Aceh and Johor, and this affected the ethnic profile of particular groups of
people. Andaya argues that Minangkabau culture did not develop in isolation, because it not only was in close contact with the Malay world but distanced itself deliberately from it by emphasizing a distinct Minangkabau character. In a similar vein Aceh accentuated a more inland-oriented Acehnese profile after it had lost its dominant position in the Malay world. Even the seemingly isolated Batak maintained trade relationships with the outside Malay world, which affected their cultural repertoire.

The orang laut, or sea nomads, and orang asli, or inland tribal communities, played a vital role in the Old Malay world. The orang laut were indispensable allies at sea, while the orang asli provided trade centres with valuable forest products. The complementarity of both the trade cum political centres and the sea and forest peoples allowed for cultural differences. It was only in the course of the nineteenth century under a new colonial regime and a different economy that both sea nomads and groups living in the forest came to be depicted as isolated and backward people.

Andaya demonstrates that in the Old Malay world ethnicity was a meaningful marker to indicate differences between groups of people who at the same time maintained vital connections. For the historian, ethnicity turns out to be a helpful tool in understanding both the dynamic interaction between inland, coast and sea, and long-distance trade, and the way trade, politics and identity formation were interwoven in a world that was characterized by shifting centres and changing flows of goods.

Coeli Barry (ed.), The many ways of being Muslim; Fiction by Muslim Filipinos. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, xix + 198 pp. ISBN 9780877276050, price USD 19.95 (paperback); 9780877276067, USD 40.95 (hardback).

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Although the short story has become the most popular literary form in the Philippines, so far no Muslim authors have been included in anthologies of short stories apart from Ibrahim Jubaira (1920-2004). This interesting collection, edited and introduced by Coeli Barry, is aimed at restoring this imbalance. It contains 22 stories, written by a total of nine authors (male and female), with lengths varying from two to thirteen pages. The stories are chronologically arranged.