How to win a beauty contest in Tanjung Pinang

Nicholas J Long

The competition’s aim is to find the talent and potential of our teenagers who are berprestasi ... As a result we will be able to increase our human resources and preserve Malay arts and culture for our younger generation ... May it succeed in increasing our teenagers’ human resources and also manage to increase [our] tourism and locally generated revenue! Hopefully! (Beni & Mulyadi 2006)

In Tanjung Pinang, the capital of Indonesia’s Kepulauan Riau province, I recently found myself judging the province’s first bujang dara contest. This beauty contest was designed to select two exceptional young ‘tourism ambassadors’ whilst fulfilling governmental obligations to the regional Malay culture and boosting the province’s human resource base. This article outlines the problem that the bujang dara contest was designed to address, why contestants entered the competition, and the logics and values underpinning how the contest ran. In exposing the conflict of values that made the event so controversial, it presents in microcosm some of the important issues reverberating in contemporary Kepulauan Riau and raises broader theoretical issues about the character of governance and citizenship in this newly birthed Indonesian province.

Kepulauan Riau, or Kepri, comprising the archipelago of islands south of Singapore, became an independent Indonesian province in July 2004. Although this was due to various factors, for many in the archipelago it represented a move to return control of the region to the hands of its ‘native’ Malays. The argument made was that in the precolonial period the Riau Archipelago — the seat of a Malay sultanate — had been a significant centre of politics, scholarship and trade. By contrast, in post-independence Indonesia, the archipelago

was attached to, and governed from, an adjacent stretch of mainland Sumatra, sometimes termed Riau Daratan (e.g. Andaya 1997). Together, they formed the wider province of ‘Riau’. Although nominally Malay, Riau’s government was in fact dominated by other Sumatran groups — principally Minangkabau and Bataks. Coupled with the centralistic Javanist policies of the Indonesian state, this made many Malays — especially those in the outlying archipelagic heartlands — feel disenfranchised, ignored and marginalised. With increasing powers of regional autonomy\(^1\) in the era of reformasi, many Malay cultural figures saw their chance to recreate a land of their own and leave Riau Daratan to its own devices.

After two years of independence, such optimism was beginning to dwindle. Many had hoped that devolution would bring newfound prosperity as oil and gas reserves off the Natuna islands could be properly exploited. As of 2006, such development was yet to materialise and the annual income of the province was but a fraction of Riau Daratan’s. Civil servants who had been used to working at the kabupaten (‘regency’) level suddenly struggled to find themselves in charge of a province. Meanwhile ethnonationalists, optimistic for a return to Malay glory, were confronted with the thorny reality that within the province’s urban centres, the overwhelming majority of the population did not consider themselves Malay.

People in Tanjung Pinang tend to offer a very standardised explanation of what has caused this situation to come about. They note that the strategic location of their town and province, on the border with Singapore, has attracted many economic migrants hoping to draw on the strength of the Singaporean dollar. Local Malays could neither compete with these economic challengers nor drive them away due to deep-rooted cultural predispositions that were incompatible with free market culture. Likewise, the perceived inability of local Malays to excel in school and business meant that for many important posts, migrants needed to be actively recruited into the province. As one local cultural researcher asserted, ‘Tanjung Pinang is a town that has no human resources. Or at least, it has none of its own.’

These are complex issues for the nascent provincial government to deal with. Their basic approach has been two-pronged.
Firstly, there has been a proliferation of activities designed to increase the province’s human resources — a move mirrored by a host of small scale organisations, NGOs, and social networks. The activities typically target young people and are usually based around staging competitions that culminate in a public final. The stated aim is to improve both participants and spectators as ‘human resources’ whilst providing public entertainment, although they also perform the presence of the newly formed province, and showcase its ability to stage such an occasion. The second prong is to promote an integrationist approach to the cultural diversity within the province. While this position remains controversial amongst townsfolk, it represents some attempt to cut a middle ground between Malay ethnonationalists’ demands for positive discrimination towards Malays, and various parties’ calls for a radical pluralist multiculturalism. Integration is to be achieved through the heavy promotion and celebration of Malay history and cultural forms such as traditional clothing, pantun riddles and zapin dance. The principle draws added strength from the premise that Kepulauan Riau’s ‘Malayness’ is a hitherto untapped resource for developing the province’s tourism, which has suffered badly from recent crackdowns on gambling and unlicensed prostitution.

This approach raises questions about what it means to be Malay — not necessarily the same as being a Malay — what it means to be a good ‘human resource’, and how people engage with government activities. This article explores these issues as they unfolded in the first provincial-level bujang dara contest since devolution, held on 2nd July 2006. A bujang dara competition is a form of beauty contest for young, unmarried and thus (in theory) virgin men (bujang) and women (dara). Although informants would regularly describe it as a kontes kecantikan (lit: beauty contest) the aims of a bujang dara competition are wider reaching, the winners being appointed as provincial ‘tourism ambassadors’ (duta wisata):

The first winner gets a contract for a year with Dinas Pariwisata (Department of Tourism) to be the face of Kepri tourism. So they enter in the brochures, and they get to stand at the harbour to greet tourists, and to attend special events and so forth. And they get given money. Maybe five million Rupiah! So to win, they need to be assessed
on beauty, and they have to dance a Malay dance, they need to have good English, and they need to be able to answer the questions well. I think they have to answer questions about tourism, but it can be all sorts of questions. (Vivi², the contest’s compere)

Whilst bujang dara contests — a phrase ‘full of local [Riau] nuances’ (Suryadi 2005:147) — are only found in Riau and some regions of Kalimantan, equivalent ‘tourism ambassador’ contests are widespread in Indonesia. The relationship with beauty contests appears a close one; Indonesia’s candidate for Miss World usually emerges from the ranks of provincial tourism ambassadors. Nonetheless, the contest is not simply examining beauty, it tests and displays the contestants’ knowledge of local tourist attractions and their ability to convey this in English. As such it is considered an event that ‘promotes and increases human resources.’

What makes Indonesian festivals and ‘cultural performances’ distinctive is their competitive element. A ‘festival’ is rarely a mere parade or display; it is a series of lomba-lomba (competitions.) This point is often noted (e.g. Daniels 1999) but rarely developed, despite lending the activities some particular characteristics. Firstly, it makes them highly normative, because contestants are trying to win. To maximise their chances, they will present what they think the judges want to see. Under certain circumstances, then, the conduct of a competition could be tantamount to indoctrination: ‘choosing an individual whose deportment, appearance and style embodies the values and goals of a nation, locality or group’ (Cohen & Wilk 1996:2.) Yet contests also differ from other festivals because they are inherently unpredictable — unable to be strictly rehearsed, one can never be sure what a contestant will do until the contest is over. Nor can one know how a judge will react to the unexpected occurring within a contest. Moreover, if the contest is public, there is the risk that the audience will reject the judges’ choice and the whole event will be dismissed as rigged or farcical.

The analysis that follows suggests that the staging of the competition was essentially a normative argument about integrationist Malayness, a contention which echoes other scholars who have interpretively traced the ways beauty pageants inscribe ideas about
nationhood and normative identity upon women’s (in this case, young people’s) bodies (e.g. Banet-Weiser 1999; McGranahan 1996.) In some other respects the contest was not at all about integrationist Malayness, but about dramatising hierarchical relationships between Kepulauan Riau youngsters as measured in terms of *prestasi* (achievement). The cultural meaning of *prestasi* — itself a trope of nationhood and citizenship — established its own normativity that sat in an uneasy relationship with the normativity of the scoring parameters used by judges and audience. When these various templates of measuring performance could not be reconciled, the entire contest lost legitimacy.

**Entering a bujang dara contest**

A question to Number Five. What is your aim in entering tonight’s bujang dara contest?

I propose to follow the bujang dara competition firstly to increase my knowledge and experience in the culture and tourism sector of Kepulauan Riau province. Besides that, I want to help the government and become the ambassador of tourism.

Contestants for a bujang dara contest should be Indonesian citizens resident in Kepulauan Riau, unmarried and under twenty-five years old. There was no lower age limit on entry and the youngest entrant was a fourteen-year-old schoolgirl. On application, contestants had to fill in a form with biodata: name, date and place of birth, address, telephone number, occupation, height, weight, hobbies, previous *prestasi* and reasons for entering the competition, accompanied by a photocopy of their identity card and three modelling photographs. The best twelve would then be selected to proceed to the grand final.

As they prepared for the final, I asked the contestants why they had entered the competition. Whatever they may have said on stage, most entrants’ motive was not to promote Malay culture, nor to help the government, nor indeed to gain the advertising contract and the attendant five million Rupiah. That is not to say that they did not want to win. They conceptualised victory less in terms of the depersonalised money and contract, and more in the personalised vocabulary of *prestasi*.
Nick, you should know the answer to that by now. I like to berlomba-lomba (to compete in contests). Berlomba-lomba is my hobby! I’m always looking for ways to increase my prestasi. (Yudith)

Furthermore, it often seemed that entrants were not really very interested in the competitions they were entering, be that the bujang dara contest or anything else:

To be honest, I have no interest in bujang dara competitions. It’s such a strange thing to do! Nothing but walking around in Malay clothes ... But then I saw the people from my school who wanted to enter and I thought, I’m better than they are, why should they get the prestasi? So I thought I’d try, just for fun. But if I don’t get at least third place, yeah, I will be a bit disappointed. (Andri)

This competition is quite boring for me, and I don’t think I’m very good at it. I would prefer to be doing a speech or debate competition. I actually enjoy that. But at the minute, the only competitions running are modelling and bujang dara ... I don’t think I’m that handsome, but I’m not ugly either, so I’ve entered. The way I see it, the judges are all corrupt or incompetent anyway — it’s because they’re Indonesian judges — so who wins is really quite random. If that’s the case, I should enter as many competitions as possible and sooner or later I’m bound to win. The more I enter, the more prestasi I get. (Hendra)

Some, by contrast, loved bujang dara contests. A governance student at a local university, Hasan dreamed of working for the Department of Tourism, playing a role in bringing foreigners into Tanjung Pinang. When not studying, he busied himself volunteering at tourism-related events in the hope of acquiring both experience and personalistic relations that would help in his future career. He was adamant that success in the bujang dara contest — especially if he became champion — it would result in his being ‘noticed’ (dilihat) and further incorporated into departmental programmes. In this way prestasi became a source of social capital to help him realise his aspirations. Suhardi, a medical student at Jakarta’s Universitas Indonesia, also found prestasi to be a source of capital — specifically, prize money. Though not guaranteed to win every time, his success rate in modelling and tourism ambassador contests allowed him to subsidise the costs of his medical course with winnings. He used the
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remainder to cover the costs of flights to attend even more *bung da ra* competitions.

These cases reflect a broader social valorisation of *prestasi* or the state of *berprestasi* (being one who achieves) which has become a common — though under-researched — trope and slogan in contemporary Indonesia. The school citizenship syllabus underscores the national duty of citizens to become *berprestasi* through identifying opportunities for *prestasi* and approaching these with due preparation and enthusiasm (Departemen Pendidikan Nasional 2003:19). This attitude is not confined to schools, but recurs in settings as diverse as marketing strategies for children’s health supplements and local anti-drugs campaigns (Batam Pos 2006). Local newspapers regularly run profiles of *berprestasi* children, typically accompanied by lists of their recent *prestasi* in tabular form, which groups of children thumb through, slowly reciting the achievements in awe.

Although *prestasi* has evidently been established as a socially desirable target, it has other dimensions as well. Teddy, a self-described ‘competition addict’ who had found out about the *bung da ra* contest too late to enter, explained a little of the thrill of *prestasi*. He recounted the day he had been announced as *juara umum* (top of the school) in his final year of SMP (Junior High School). As he went up to the stage to collect the trophy he found that he was:

> dizzy and could hardly walk. I was crying, but because I was so happy. And then when I took the trophy and I heard the applause ... It was the most perfect moment of my life. After that I knew I had to enter a lot of competitions so I could experience that again.

These remarks underscore how the emotional and sensory dimensions of *prestasi* make it appealing: the swimming legs, tears clouding his eyes, the sound of the applause — a sensation that he could not achieve elsewhere and that, like a narcotics hit, prompts this ‘competition addict’ to search elsewhere for a repeat experience. Many of these physical sensations are dependent on social factors in developing an atmosphere of suspense and grandiosity. Having gone through this ‘ritual of *prestasi*’ from which one emerges as a winner, the fact monumentalised in a large, shiny trophy, social relations are also transformed — at least within the spheres for whom the competition
is meaningful. Teddy recounted that competition success made his life ‘a lot better’ (*jauh lebih enak*). Now, whenever he passed by teachers who didn’t know him, they would smile and say hello, something they had never done before. Likewise, Esther reported her pride that, amongst her friends, she alone was personally known to the Mayor of Tanjung Pinang ‘because I am always representing my school, and always winning!’ The competitive dimensions of acquiring social capital are also significant: Andri, cited earlier, was explicit that for him a key reason for entering contests was so that other people who didn’t deserve *prestasi* couldn’t get it.

Such values are most evident in entrants’ responses to defeat. Elisha exemplified a stoic response upon her elimination from a critical thinking contest: ‘I’m very disappointed, but I have done my best, and they are better than me.’ Yudith, ranked lower in the *bujang dara* contest than her school rival, was less stoic and stormed off with a bitter ‘she has beaten me twice!’ Others would rationalise their defeat through an analysis that the judge and the event organisers were ‘unprofessional.’ Frequent accusations against judges are that they are too young or inexperienced to judge, that they have accepted bribes, that they are discriminating towards candidates because of their physical attractiveness, religion or ethnicity, and, as an ultimate fallback, that they are ‘Indonesian’. As Teddy explained, ‘Indonesia has very poor education and human resources, so obviously an Indonesian judge is going to be a lot less expert than a foreigner. Besides, Indonesia has a lot of corruption; I think an Indonesian judge doesn’t know how to be honest (*tidak tahu jujur*).’ Their response to this situation is to enter another competition as quickly as possible in order to win back the *prestasi* that was rightfully theirs.

These observations illuminate the appeal of contests to local policy makers. One official from the Department of Tourism explained that when a competition is staged it, by definition, manufactures champions. When other children see the champions, they become envious and want to be just like them.⁵ ‘The students will become a model for their classmates. The classmates will see that they have won the prize, and that will give them motivation to be more disciplined so that they can win a prize in the competition next year.’
On this understanding of the process, the desire to get *prestasi* results in the contestants absorbing whatever content the organisers have specified. As such, contests were described as ‘an excellent socialisation strategy.’

With this in mind, the discussion now returns to the *bujang dara* competition. What was being ‘socialised’ and was it effective? How was *prestasi* generated when it came to deciding the winners? And how does that ethnography complicate and enrich the argument so far?

**Beauty and the *bujang dara* contest**

I once read in the newspaper that a black (*orang hitam*) won Miss World! I was very surprised — how could the judges think a black woman was beautiful? But if a black can win Miss World, then we Indonesians shouldn’t be ashamed of being *bitam manis*. Mind you, the winner of this competition can’t just be beautiful. All our contestants will be marked on the ‘Three Bs’: *Brains, Beauty, and Behaviour*! (Extract from opening speech by a Tourism Department official)

The *bujang dara* contest had four judges. As is often the case in Indonesian competitions, each adjudicator was appointed a different area of expertise on which to score the contestants. A medium-ranking tourism official was in charge of studying the photographs to select the *juara fotogenik* — a task dissociated from the main competition. The other three had responsibility for deciding that.

The first judge, Hj. Dewi, was the owner of a very successful wedding salon in Tanjung Pinang. Her task was to mark the contestants’ *seni budaya* (cultural arts). Interestingly, it was this category of ‘cultural arts’ which regular informants, the contest entrants, and even the opening speech, referred to as ‘beauty’ (*kecantikan*) with clear implications of attractiveness. Her jurisdiction was to mark two aspects of the performance: a Malay dance, and the contestants’ appearance when on parade.

Several contestants protested over the dance being scored. In their view it was ‘just for fun’ and ‘irrelevant to the task of tourism ambassador.’ As events transpired, trouble with the power supply
disturbed the dance performances to such an extent that they could not be formally marked. Nonetheless, why was this ‘irrelevant’ feature included in the programme? Many authors have commented on the Indonesian authorities’ reductive approach towards ‘traditional dance’, which turns dance into a politically charged symbol of ethnicised regional identity (e.g. Acciaioli 1985.) In Kepulauan Riau the ethnicised conception of the province as ‘Malay soil’ (*tanah Melayu*) is perpetually offset with a rival conception that stresses the region’s pluralism, cosmopolitanism and internal diversity. Specifying proficiency in Malay dance is not only a symbolic affirmation of the ‘Malay soil’ model. Rather, because the dance demands the bodily internalisation of Malay dancing rhythms, movements and steps, it is on some level forcing contestants to be made ‘more Malay.’ Even should they wish to maintain an alternative conception of themselves, be that ethnic, or couched in terms of locality in a *kota campuran* (town of mixture), they are expected to draw upon a body of knowledge that defines Malayness in order to qualify as an ambassador, and therefore symbol, of the province.

The second aspect of Hj. Dewi’s task was to mark the parade. In this section, contestants came on stage in male-female pairs, dressed in ‘traditional Malay’ clothes, walked downstage with ‘traditional Malay’ gait, and bowed to the audience with a ‘traditional Malay’ greeting. As they did so, the comperes read out information from the contestants’ entry forms, underscoring how the contestants, parading as a historical continuation of ‘Malay historical tradition’ embodied the national and contemporary values of prestasi and moral restraint. ‘Alisha was born on 13th August, and once won a speech contest! Suhardi, who often wins bujang dara competitions, says that he hates all kinds of kenakalan (immorality) especially free seks!’ These statements were greeted with cheers and applause from the audience and approving nods from the judges.

Although the parade requires the internalisation of ‘Malay’ comportment as evinced through a distinctive form of greeting and gait, everyone talked about it as assessing ‘beauty.’ Why then is it scored under ‘cultural arts’? Could being beautiful itself be taken as a cultural art? In fact, beauty is assessed in two ways in the competition.
The first, a more Euro-American notion of determining whether an entrant is attractive, is located within the bracketed-off *juara fotogenik* selection. In the main competition, however, conceptions and scores of beauty are mediated through that icon of culture: Malay clothes.

The clothes in question, variously described as *baju istana* (palace clothes) or *busana Melayu* (Malay costume) represent a contemporary reimagining of sultanic opulence, featuring swathes of padded satin laced with gold and silver thread, often in vibrant colours and adorned with sequins to achieve an effect that would not have been possible given the dyes and materials actually available during the sultanic period, let alone worn by commoners. This meant that, for some, these clothes were not traditional but rather *Melayu modifikasi* (modified Malay) and their popularity bespoke a shallow appeal to notions of ‘the palace’ whilst the nuances of how to wear textiles properly were slowly being forgotten. Nonetheless, for these same people such clothes had become an essential component of a formal or public event, and their absence was often highly criticised.

The most revealing example of this was at a pantun competition, in which twenty per cent of marks were allocated for the appearance of the team. One team, which ironically consisted of three *raja* with palatial Malay descent, mysteriously lost against a group of schoolchildren that they, in the opinions of the audience, outridled. When many expressed surprise, and grumbled accusations of nepotism or corruption, the judges explained that although the *raja* team had scored higher than the schoolchildren in the riddling, the schoolchildren had won on the basis of the twenty per cent clothing score. Being dressed in neon-coloured *baju istana* rented from a top salon, the schoolchildren scored very highly. The *raja* team were dressed in formal but plain *baju kurung* — a more austerely Islamic conception of traditional Malay dress. One judge explained that this clothing was ‘not appropriate for the occasion ... too everyday’ and as a result of this failure to perform sultanic Malayness, the team who in fact claimed genealogical connection to the sultanate were eliminated.

Historically, Malay societies have often regulated the propriety of clothes. In the sultanic period, wearing yellow (the royal colour) was an insult to the king, as was wearing linen in the royal
compound (Liaw 1976:76.) Newer formulations of Malay clothing stress the inherent modesty of its design (Tarigan and others 1996:25.) The bujang dara contest disrupts both these models — with the exception of the compere, female participants are not veiled and their necks are exposed, whilst contestants do not only wear yellow, they actively masquerade as raja. Clothing is not deemed appropriate when it reflects concerns of restraint or status, but when it provides

Figure 1. A victorious male participant and the contest’s female compere sporting opulent Malay baju istana
spectacle—a visually arresting dramatisation of ethnic-cultural identity (see Figure 1). Successful contest performance hence requires successful appropriation of *baju istana*. Hj. Dewi explained the process of formulating her scores as follows:

I have to ask myself: how do they wear the clothes? Do they look good in the clothes? Can they move well in the clothes? Because these are Malay clothes—not everyone can wear them well. Number Nine ... he might be good-looking to a Westerner but for me he can never be the winner. He is too thin for the clothes. Perhaps there [Britain] people should be thin. But a Malay needs to be a little bit fat, he needs to fill his clothes, to look healthy. Then when he moves, the clothes stay close to him—like Number Seven. But when Number Nine walks, it's like he's loose in his clothes.

Hj. Dewi's assessment of beauty is a lot less about cultural perceptions of attractiveness than about cultural politics. In assessing the beauty of these clothed men and women, it is the clothes that set the bar: Number Nine might be gorgeous, but he does not suit the clothes. The *baju istana* costume is a powerful symbol that is not only ethnic but also regional—the sultanic era corresponding to an image of a time when the Riau Archipelago had an importance and power which it is now hoping to resurrect through provincial devolution, regional autonomy laws and engagement with transnational schemes. Yet it is no mere form of reductively ‘objectified culture’—its very materiality as an object gives it a generative agency. The loose cut of the costume, combined with the stiff inflexibility of the padding and songket waistcloth, demands to be filled in a particular way in order to—literally—make a convincing Malay who can move in the smooth and dignified way that evokes an ideal image of how sultanic life must have been—and how Malay life should continue to be now.

Eco has written of how particular kinds of clothes, by their design, can impose an identity and ‘demeanour’ upon the consumer (1986:192.) Although *baju istana* might promote a Malay demeanour, their agency is less that of Eco’s jeans than that of Cinderella’s glass slipper: an article ‘made for Malays’ that through interaction with the human body can identify ‘convincing Malays’ in a way that trumps other templates (such as descent) and promotes an identity and
meaning which is greater than the sum of its parts. The *baju istana* are not a reductive ossification of Malayness. Rather, glass-slipper-like, they identify and generate Malayness, and in order to master *seni budaya* and win the competition, the contestants must also be mastered by the material cultural markers of this knowledge. It is through this ‘acid test’ — that can be passed or failed by any ethnic group — that the *bujang dara* competition tries to both ‘promote and preserve Malay culture’ whilst also maintaining the *keterbukaan* (openness) that Malay culture wants to be famed for in the face of multiculturalists’ accusations of ethnic exclusivity.

**The logics of tourism**

A question for Number Six: If you are chosen, what contribution will you make to the Department of Tourism?

If I win in this contest, for our nation and to solve the problem that is faced in our tourism, I’m going to help our government to promote to abroad! I’m going to help our government to promote to investors! And the last, I will help the government with trying to improve human resources so they can be professional workers to work well in the tourism sector!

Once all twelve contestants had completed their parade, they were called back on stage for the question and answer session, marked by Pak Hamzah, a *raja* hailing from the island of Lingga and now working in the history section of the provincial tourism office, also the chair of the judging panel. These questions — already leaked to contestants several days beforehand to help boost their performance — were designed to test knowledge of tourism (*wawasan pariwisata*): a field which included describing or listing tourist sites in a particular region, ‘theory of tourism’ (is tourism dependent on prostitution, what makes a tourist attraction successful, etc.), the purpose of *bujang dara* contests, and the administrative structure of the province. Answers would often draw on formulas present in policy formation rhetoric: the high potential of tourist sites, the need for good human resources, the historic significance of the sites described. Sweeney (1987:98-100) has argued that postcolonial Malaysian and Indonesian language has become characterised by formulas ‘carefully calculated to evoke an
emotion in those who hear them.’ Regardless of the broader truth of
this claim, the presence of formulas certainly seemed to make a big
impression on Pak Hamzah, even when the answer bore little relation
to the question:

A question for Number 12. Name the tourist attractions in Kabupaten
Lingga.

Good evening. Lingga is a very high-potential island — it has a high
value because of the historical places. And why don’t people know
Lingga very well? Because it is not well promoted! And that’s why I’m
here to tell you that we should promote and preserve our historical
sites, not only in Lingga but also in all of Kepulauan Riau province.

This answer shows no awareness of what the tourist attractions
in Lingga actually are. Nevertheless, the contestant scores 80 (the highest
mark Pak Hamzah awarded) because in referring to Lingga’s high
potential, its historic value, the need to promote it, and finally a reference
to its place in a broader Kepulauan Riau strategy, the formulas employed
were familiar and convincing to the judges and audience.

Since the formulas valorised in this way are highly normative
visions of local tourism, it is worth considering the assumptions and
principles they invoke. The starting premise is that Kepulauan Riau
and Tanjung Pinang are sangat berpotensi (high-potential) and thus
inherently attractive to tourists. One question in the bujang dara
competition, for instance, asked, ‘why are many tourists attracted to
Penyengat Island?’ — a formulation that takes as a priori the fact that
Penyengat does attract many tourists. Given this, factors that prevent
tourists from visiting are categorised in two ways. Firstly there are
powerful external factors that deter tourists: unreasonable fears of
terrorism or disease, Islamophobia, or cheaper prices elsewhere.
Secondly there are problems with the ‘human resources’ of Kepulauan
Riau tourism: there is a deficiency of trained guides and tourism
workers, many ‘outstanding’ tourist attractions have yet to be correctly
identified for promotion; those that are promoted are promoted
poorly. The assumption persists that the tourist attraction itself is
high-quality and high-potential, and would be popular with tourists ‘if
only they knew.’
In practice, most informants considered the proposition laughable. ‘Where are the extraordinary tourist attractions?’ joked one shopkeeper, ‘there aren’t any! Not unless you count Batu 24! [a prostitution complex.]’ For many in Tanjung Pinang, especially those who hailed from the tourist centres of Danau Toba, Bukittinggi and West and Central Java, it was impossible not to make an unfavourable comparison between Kepulauan Riau and their place of origin. One Minangkabau motorcycle taxi driver explained that he had been so disappointed with his visit to Penyengat Island that it was ‘impossible for him to consider Tanjung Pinang as anything but a place to work.’ He then suggested that, if I hoped to get a PhD from researching culture, I would be well advised to relocate to West Sumatra as quickly as possible! For these informants, other things came to symbolise the ultimate tourist experience: the culturally meaningful sites in their own kampung, the ‘great aesthetic objects’ such as Borobodur that had come to symbolise the Indonesian nation and nationalism (Siegel 1999:111), and the retail tourism of Singapore. By contrast, the cultural tourism on offer in Kepulauan Riau involved small, unimpressive buildings related to a historical background that, for them, was ‘overrated’ (*terlalu dilebih-lebihkan*).

It would be foolish, however, to dismiss the government’s model as propaganda. Rather, it reveals a lot about the relationship between Malayness, government policy, and tourism practices, a relationship socialised and internalised by the *bujang dara* contestants. While officials and townsfolk alike are quick to point out that several of Kepulauan Riau’s beaches are ‘better than Bali’ the provincial tourism strategy centres on cultural tourism, a decision that reflects the need to develop jobs in the tourism sector, primarily in urban centres, and the more general policy within the provincial government to fulfil the perceived obligation that they have towards *budaya Melayu* as the ‘indigenous’ culture of the region. Under this model, which takes ‘traditional Malay culture’ as an inherent good, to be cherished and preserved, historical sites and cultural forms become inherently interesting because of their ability to connect people with their Malay selves. As ‘Number Two’ answered to the question on why so many tourists were attracted to Penyengat:
In my opinion, Penyengat island has a high historic and cultural value, especially about the history of the Riau-Lingga kingdom. It was where Raja Ali Haji wrote *Gurindam Dua Belas*. Because of that, Penyengat island has become a tourist attraction. Tourists who are interested in the history of the islands make Penyengat one of the places they visit in Kepulauan Riau.

By contrast, the local government’s handling of tourism would often receive quite sharp criticism from contestants answering ‘theory of tourism’ questions; yet these responses did not provoke outcry, remark or even comment, merely quiet nods. Consider the response of ‘Number Eleven’ to a question on what makes a tourist attraction successful:

Actually, we could be successful. But we lack human resources for tourism—for example, tour guides. Secondly, Kepulauan Riau needs experience. We have so little experience of tourism! Thirdly, not all the attractions in Kepulauan Riau are fully developed yet. In fact, we have a lot of potential tourist attractions. And finally, there is a lack of promotion. If we don’t promote our culture, they won’t know it and they will never come here.

When the government harnesses the contest as a ‘socialisation strategy,’ the imaginary they inculcate is one that legitimises not the Department of Tourism but the (cultural and historical) tourist attractions themselves. Although this does not map with the populace’s—or many of the contestants’ own—experiences of these tourist attractions, it should not be rejected as ‘misrepresentation’, but rather viewed as a normative argument. Claims to the ‘inherent interest’ of a tourist attraction rest upon its significance in Malay history and thus in one’s own biographical background as a Malay. Most other ethnic groups do not like the tourist attractions because they mean nothing to them. It is this fact that tourism officials cannot admit: firstly in the service of ‘Malay culture’ as a locally embodied intrinsic good; secondly because they believe that it is through promoting Malay culture that the multiethnic society of Kepulauan Riau will be united and unified. On this template, anyone living on ‘Malay soil’ has a right to claim a certain Malayness. The difficulty is in encouraging them to exercise this right.
If the performance and adjudication of the ‘parade’ section of the 
*bujang dara* contest was an enactment of an ‘ideal Malayness’ that 
inhered in the interactivity between body and clothes, this 
performative quality of Malayness was also being tested in the 
question and answer session. An ‘ideal Malay’ will feel a certain link 
and kinship with a Malay cultural and historical site, or at least the 
narratives surrounding it. Their Malayness inheres in the interactivity 
between place, history and person. Their ability to prove this 
interactivity through recounting details of the places accurately and 
enthusiastically — and remember here that the questions were 
believed by all viewing to still be spontaneous — shows them to have 
become Malay, at least within one particular plane of their social 
person. By entering the competition in search of *prestasi*, contestants 
from a variety of ethnic backgrounds expose themselves to these 
narratives and undergo these transformations in order to win, thereby 
presenting themselves as exemplars for other, *prestasi*-hungry youths to 
follow. Of course, somebody working as tourism ambassador needs to 
understand the administrative structure of the province and have a 
sensible critical approach to theories of tourism, and so several of 
these questions are also thrown in.

**How to win a *bujang dara* contest**

I was the final judge. The event organisers had failed to find anyone 
qualified to assess contestants’ English, so the radio station sponsoring 
the event suggested me. Having a genuine ‘native speaker’ was not only 
prestigious; it also allowed a more accurate scoring since I would know 
‘for real’ what was correct and incorrect English. With no guidelines 
on how to score, except the specified 50 to 100 point range, I worked 
out my own criteria based on whether or not a tourist would be able 
to understand the answer given. Just before the competition began, I 
was approached by the judge charged with assessing the photographs 
and given a sombre warning:

*We must be responsible. You must be responsible. Do not give scores 
that are very high. Just imagine — you see someone who is great and 
you give them 90 or 100. Then the next person is even better — what 
happens then?! Score responsibly. I hope you understand.*
Far from convinced that I would be giving any scores in the 90s, I assured him that I had understood — though it quickly transpired that I had not.

Since all three judges had been marking separately, our first task was to hand the score sheets to Pak Hamzah who, as the chair judge, was in charge of totalling the scores. Once this had been done it was clear that there was a problem. The female contestants’ marks had been widely distributed such that it was clear who were the winners. Furthermore, all three judges were agreed on the rankings. There was nevertheless a difficulty because Pak Hamzah had ‘never heard of’ Welly, the first-placed female. This was considered especially problematic because the comperes had announced that several of the other contestants had previously won other competitions, and it would create a stir if these berprestasi people were knocked out by newcomers. It was therefore necessary that the result be ‘checked’. Each judge had been given a photocopy of the candidates’ entry forms in a folder alongside scoring sheets and it was to these photocopies that Pak Hamzah and Hj. Dewi now turned. When they got to Welly’s sheet they breathed a sigh of relief. ‘She was placed first in an English language speech contest! And she has come second in a town debate contest,’ announced Pak Hamzah, ‘it turns out she is quite berprestasi after all.’

The male section was more problematic. Adit, the top candidate, had a score of 229. Hasan had a score of 227. Two candidates, one of whom was Suhardi, the candidate who had won many competitions before, had 226. Had there not been a mark for English language, Suhardi would have — just — won again, but because I had found his question and answer session inarticulate, my English mark had tipped the balance and put him in danger of elimination. Pak Hamzah looked at me anxiously and explained that there was a serious problem because ‘Suhardi is the most berprestasi. He is the man who ought to win, but now he might not even get third place.’ As a result the marks — which had already been signed as definite and final — needed to be changed. We finally agreed, after a vote on the tiebreak, that Suhardi should take third place. Hj. Dewi remained dissatisfied, arguing that because Suhardi’s seni budaya was
very good, he should get a higher score. I replied that she had already given him a high score and that in terms of English, which was equally important in the structure of the competition, the advantage lay with Hasan. As a result, I was deeply opposed to changing the scores.

The dispute represents a disjunction between different technologies of counting and quantifying persons — in Ferme's (1998) terms, ‘the violence of numbers.’ As I understood matters, the scores were meant to be a measure, on a calibrated scale, of the performances we had seen. The scores thus generated the champion, and by announcing the scores along with the titles we could make it clear this was a close-run thing. The other two argued that if one looked at Hasan’s entry form, his prestasi was very poor — he had come runner-up in a modelling competition once, and nothing else. This was in contrast to Suhardi who had listed high rankings in ten competitions, including one at the national level, and was studying to be a doctor. It was clear, Pak Hamzah argued, that Suhardi deserved the prestasi more, and our marks collectively must have been wrong. For Pak Hamzah and Hj. Dewi, although the scores they gave did reflect how they measured the performance, such numbers were never intended to be definitive, but rather guidelines that would hopefully corroborate a previously existing hierarchy based on biography and track record of prestasi as declared in the entry form.

This difference in understanding the role of numbers was made clear by the subsequently proposed compromise. Hj. Dewi suggested that we allow Hasan to keep his higher score, but promote Suhardi, still with a lower score, to second rank. ‘It’s honest if it’s like this,’ she explained, ‘because we show we prefer Suhardi, but also that Hasan got a higher score.’ Now Pak Hamzah was beginning to have his doubts, since it was far from clear that such an announcement would be well-received by the audience. Ultimately it was announced that Hasan would take second place and Suhardi the third.

**Performance, prestasi, and the public**

A question for Number One. Explain the meaning of the Kepulauan Riau provincial logo!
How to win a beauty contest in Tanjung Pinang

I will answer in both English and Malay! You may see in the logo that there is a motto. It means that in our daily activities we must keep to the truth that the Tanjung Pinang people give to us. The people in Kepulauan Riau province must always keep the pride of the people in Kepulauan Riau province.

Cohen and Wilk suggest that ‘slips’ in the conduct of a beauty contest ‘expose the multiple cultural systems and structures of power in which contestants and audiences are enmeshed in their daily lives’ (1996:9). Such is certainly the case here. On the one hand, the contest is designed to showcase a political assertion. Young people, consistently seen in Indonesian rhetoric as the future of the nation — and it is here that the age limits and requirements of ‘unspoilt’ virginity become conceptually important — are seen to be honouring and reanimating their land’s Malay traditions, preserving them for the future. Moreover, since they are wearing Malay dress to answer questions about the tourism industry in English, Malayness becomes equated with progressiveness: business acumen, educational performance and good human resources, the very things that stereotypes of Malayness consider it to be incompatible with. While contestants’ ability to generate this performance is scored and rewarded, this scoring is trumped by another ranking of contestants: that of their previous prestasi as declared on the application form. There is a problem when Suhardi loses because he is more berprestasi than those who have beaten him. Likewise, Welly’s victory is only legitimated once the result has been ‘checked’ by seeing her previous prestasi. Such dilemmas occur in many types of competition, and are regularly reported by disillusioned judges and event organisers.

This material demands that prestasi be theorised more deeply than its straightforward translation as ‘achievement.’ The events at the bujang dara contest show that dapat prestasi — literally ‘getting an achievement’ — is not a momentary event or performance. It is a quality of people, a revelation of character and capability that can be accumulated through time to increase one’s agency in the social world. Clearly quantifiable, measurable and comparable, the longer your list of prestasi, no matter how many defeats you have endured in obtaining it, the more berprestasi you are considered to be.
Despite these qualities, *prestasi* is not an automatic mystification of ability. When the outcome of competitions engenders debate over whether someone really deserves to be considered *berprestasi* it is clear that many still expect such matters to be decided on merit. At the same time, when someone known as *berprestasi* fails to achieve, rumours can begin to fly that the competition was rigged or the judges bribed. A ‘successful’ competition is therefore one in which performance on stage correlates with previous *prestasi*. When an unexpected result occurs, judges are faced with a predicament. They can remain true to the numbers of their scores, and risk the accusation of having rigg

The adjudication of the competition was ultimately about allocating *prestasi*. But for the spectators, the *bujang dara* contest was still about Malayness, and this adds a twist to the tale. When the winners were announced a ripple of shock went through the audience. The controversy was not over Suhardi’s third place — the big issue for the judges. Rather it was that Welly had been chosen as the winning female. In assessing her ability to wear Malay clothes, her knowledge of tourism theory and her ability to speak English, and in checking her *prestasi*, the judges had overlooked one crucial factor: she was ethnically Chinese.

The next day, the Lembaga Adat Melayu (Board of Malay Customary Law) issued a statement of protest that a Chinese had even been allowed to participate in the competition. They objected on the grounds that Kepulauan Riau was a Malay province, and so needed to be represented in promotional material by a Malay, or at least someone who could pass as Malay. They suggested that Esther (despite being an Ambonese Protestant) would have been a wiser choice. The community was broadly in agreement. Those who sympathised with Welly’s position blamed the event organisers for allowing Chinese to
enter in the first place. Other justified a proposed exclusion because Chinese were richer than pribumi (‘native Indonesians’), could afford English lessons, make-up and even cosmetic surgery, and so were at an unfair advantage during the competition.

Meanwhile, the Chinese community had interpreted the heated discussion between the judges — in reality about where to place Hasan and Suhardi — as being about whether Welly should be allowed to win despite her Chineseness. The conviction spread that Welly had only won because there was a Western judge who had been able to see what other Indonesians were blinded to by racism. This claim prompted questioning over whether it was appropriate or necessary to have English language featuring in the competition. Many argued not — bujang dara contests should assess beauty, cultural arts and knowledge of tourism; English language, no matter how useful it might be in increasing human resources, was better reserved for an English language contest. Subsequently, new bujang dara events proliferated. These had an increased emphasis on Malayness, encouraged contestants to recite Malay literature and use Malay rather than Indonesian, and foreign languages received no additional score. Three weeks later exactly such a contest was set up in Batam, and Welly was excluded by a minimum age parameter of eighteen. The winner of this contest, a student from Karimun, became the face of Kepulauan Riau, and Welly, although invited to help welcome guests to the mayor’s office for Idul Fitri and so forth, received far fewer such invitations than the finalists she had beaten.

If the bujang dara contest had intended to promote Malayness as accessible to all, and to valorise its celebration by Kepulauan Riau’s youngsters — an intention intrinsic to the competition’s structure — its aftermath illustrates to what extent such integrationist aims exceeded their limits. While a wider ethnic participation may have been acceptable, the racial cleavage between Chinese and pribumi was too severe to allow the Tanjung Pinang population to accept and endorse the result. The bujang dara contest’s mobilisation of Malayness is highly participatory: measuring ‘Malayness’ through performative skill, it underscores the right of anyone in the province to enter and to enjoy being Malay. In fact this outlook was not opposed by many in the
town. What made the July contest unacceptable is that a Chinese could score better in a competition which was for many — from the use of the locally nuanced words *bujang* and *dara* in the title, through to the scoring of dress and dancing, through to the pro-Malayness position implied in the questions and demanded in answers — about being Malay. The logic of integrationism was trumped by a Malaysian-style model that demanded extra rights and greater protection for Malays, both in ethnic and (especially) racial terms and a primordialism that rejected any notion that a Chinese girl could be involved in a Malay cultural activity. For contestants, the competition brought the bitter realisation that the ‘meritocratic’ logic of *prestasi* was still answerable to classifications on the basis of race.

Primarily seen as public entertainment, the *bujang dara* contest also aimed to promote and naturalise two frameworks of citizenship. The first was a citizenship that managed to be multiethnic whilst respecting and maintaining Malay culture; the other was a citizenship that inculcated values of *prestasi* to develop the human resources and economics of the future. What the contest actually put on show, in Malay costume, was how complicated and precarious both such citizenships can be.

*Nicholas Long is the Honorary William Wyse Student in Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge, where he is completing a PhD on the anthropology of Kepulauan Riau. His postal address is Department of Social Anthropology, Free School Lane, Cambridge, CB2 3RF, UK. His email is NJL34@cam.ac.uk The research on which this article is based was funded by the United Kingdom’s Economic and Social Research Council and the University of Cambridge’s Evans Fund, and sponsored by the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI) and Universitas Riau.*
Notes

1. See Faucher (2005; 2006) and Ratnawati (2006) for analyses of how regional autonomy has impacted on Kepulauan Riau’s politics and society.
2. All personal names used in this article are pseudonyms.
3. This use of ‘Indonesian’ reflects disrespect for Indonesia, but it is not an oppositional category. Hendra would identify both the judges and himself as Indonesian.
4. When one English teacher ran a primary school storytelling competition with book prizes rather than trophies, the winning children’s parents were outraged and complained, forcing her to provide both books and (small) trophies next time.
5. Although contests are popular, many adolescents see themselves as outside the reach of such competitions and never enter.
6. A term referring to the attractive (but dark) complexion of some Indonesians.
7. Noted also by Rasmussen (2001). It is designed to avoid judges marking something on which they have no expertise.
8. A very broad term for promiscuous or pre-marital sex.
9. In this sense, the changing role of clothing reflects historical shifts in the construction of ‘Malayness’ itself; first an expression of political allegiance, colonially reconstructed as an ethnic category and then postcolonially appropriated in projects of ‘national culture.’ See Milner (1982; 1995) Reid (2001) and Vickers (1997) for discussions of this trajectory.
10. See Wee (2002:13-17) for an analysis of the ‘inherent’ interest of a Malay grave.
11. Their wawasan pariwisata scores were the same.

References


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