The Indonesia-Malaysia Cultural Contestations: A critical analysis of UNESCO’s Intangible Heritage Listing of Batik

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Leaders of Indonesia and Malaysia have often claimed that their two countries are ‘blood brothers’ anchored by the same racial and ethnic ‘stock’ (serumpun). They share a similar language, culture and religion, and historically both countries have drawn on a common cultural heritage as a means of effectively managing any political tensions. Yet bilateral ties between these two nations have been, and remain today, subject to rivalry, acrimony and conflict. In 2009, for example, there were heated anti-Malaysia demonstrations in Indonesia after Malaysia claimed cultural heritage rights to a variety of Indonesian cultural forms. The staking of claims over each other’s culture came to a head when UNESCO recognised batik, a wax-resistant dyeing technique, as a distinctly Indonesian form of intangible cultural heritage. This was widely perceived in the region as a snub towards Malaysia.

Focusing on the UNESCO batik decision, this paper will explore how heritage has been mobilized in national and transnational discourses of cultural identity and cultural distinctiveness, with a focus on the real world political implications of such uses of heritage in a complex post colonial, transnational and regional context. Accepting that heritage undertakes ‘work’ for societies using concepts of the past and tradition in a future-focused discourse about national and transnational trajectories, our analysis of these contests over the ‘ownership’ of shared Indo-Malay cultural traditions provides important insights into broader debates on heritage and cultural identity production in the context of globalization.
Biographies

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