

In Conversation with Professor Judith Ann Nagata



Interview by Christopher N. SelvaRaj in Singapore

Judith Ann Nagata is Tan Chin Tuan Visiting Senior Research Fellow of Malay Studies in the Religion and Globalisation Cluster. She is jointly appointed to the Southeast Asian Studies Programme, Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences. Judith Nagata is Professor Emerita of Anthropology and Senior Research Fellow at the York Centre for Asian Research, York University, Toronto, Canada. Throughout her career, she has focused on issues of religion, ethnicity and culture in North America and Southeast Asia. In Malaysia, she has been following trends in Malay Islam, which resulted in the production of two monographs, *Malaysian Mosaic: Perspectives from a Polyethnic Society (1979)*, and *The Reflowering Malaysian Islam (1984)*, both from the University of British Columbia Press. Her studies including the Sufi-inspired Al Arqam and other dakwah movements map growing Malay engagement with a totalising global Islam, in particular its religious conformity and Shariah-mindedness, which now threatens Muslim diversity in Malaysia. Her current project attempts to recuperate some vestiges of Sufi and Shi'ite non-Sunni practice, and also investigates problems of conversion across religious boundaries. She is also involved in another project on the globalisation of the Taiwanese Fo Guan Shan and Tzu Chi Buddhist movements, and the "Mahayanisation" of Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia.

Christopher SelvaRaj (CS): Good afternoon Professor Nagata and thank you for gracing us with this interview.

Judith Nagata (JN): It's my pleasure.

CS: I would like to start with a sense of your intellectual biography? Perhaps you could give us some sense of that? For example, what drew you to anthropology?

JN: Well, it started when I was very young. I've always

had an interest in the, what we called, "abroad". I was born and raised in England and went to a Grammar school. My grandfather had a very large library and maps and a globe atlas and I used to peruse his books and spin the globe atlas and look at those places where I thought it would be wonderful to go some day. I also love languages and I went on school trips and I was always the one that learn the language of the country or try a "Do It Yourself" book. I did "do it yourself" Norwegian and then I was sent to school in France. I went to school one summer and lived with the family. Then I went to Germany and I loved Latin and Greek at school. And then I developed a love for archaeology, and the history teacher used to take us on archaeological digs, and I also liked human biology because I once thought I'd like to be a doctor. So when I thought what am I going to do at university? Only anthropology accommodates all of that so I was given a scholarship to University College London where I could do all those fields – the biological, historical, cultural, linguistic, and it was just pleasure, a great pleasure.

CS: So what was the field of anthropology like when you actually entered? What were some of the key concerns that anthropologists were asking then?

JN: Well, first of all it was a very new idea, when I told my friends I was going to do anthropology, they said "What's that?" In a way, I wasn't quite sure either. I had a general idea but we did a lot of studies of kinship in those days. You may have heard that anthropologists love to ask about kinship and family relations and you get all these kinship terms and usually get them wrong. And structures, it was very structural then and this is something which I have turned against and we'll get on to that later, but it was very rigid. A lot of the anthropologists who were teaching at the time came from the old school, they were all colonial hands, you know, they'd all been out in the

“colonies” and they had done their observations there. So that was the kind of environment I went into and although kinship studies went out of fashion for a long time after that, I think it’s rather an error to ignore kinship completely because – I know you want to ask me later about some of the applications of anthropology – I think they are quite a few and maybe I won’t go into those now. And of course since then, I did my studies of ethnicity and found that things were not as rigidly structured and bounded as many people assumed. So I gradually got out of the structural kind of anthropology but at the time, that’s what we got.

CS: I see. It’s interesting that you bring up colonialism because I want to draw attention to the first work of yours that got me introduced to your whole field – and that was “*What is a Malay?*” (1974). Colonial knowledge played a very large role in the construction of the Malay identity. Maybe you could tell us a bit about how you set yourself against that kind of knowledge.

JN: Ok. In my field of study, you have to recall that Penang wasn’t a typical Malay state with sultans, though the colonials had a very big hand in the Malay states and they were the ones that were involved of course in the drafting of the eventual constitution, which actually doesn’t work very well: because on the one hand, the Malays are granted freedom of religion along with all the other Malaysians in theory, but on the other hand, they have to be Muslims. So the colonials had the responsibility for all of that with national constitution and so on with the formation of Malaysia. But in Penang, being a Straits Settlement, the colonials had two stages in history. First of all, it was an East India Company run town, it was a Company town basically, and I think, when I read the reports, when I look back at the original sources, how the East India Company, the EIC, looked at the inhabitants, I got the feeling that they too were sort of split. They talked about, for example, Malays “of Arabian extraction”, they weren’t quite sure how to put it all together. But they seemed to be very interested in Malays and they were very generous to Muslims in giving land at that time, land for *wakaf* (properties recognized by Islamic law as being for charitable or religious purposes), land for *masjid* (mosques) and so on, in fact to all the religious communities, but that’s the kind of relationship they had. And I think some of their descriptions of people’s identities, which were often hyphenated, they gave me the impression that they weren’t quite sure who is who. But of course later on when you move on to a time 100 years later moving up to the nationalism period before the state was

formed, then there was this great emphasis on Malay *bangsa*, mostly by foreign born Malays, that was the thing: “foreign born Malays” or “foreign born Muslims”. It was all very uncertain, I think, and suitably flexible in the Straits Settlements about who was a real Malay. I mean they raised that question first: they said “Do we have any *Melayu Jati?* Do we have any *Melayu Asli?*” They thought it was terrible that there wasn’t much more of a real sense of *Bangsa*, and a sense of a something that could bring to fruition a kind of nationalist movement, cause these people outside were egging them on “come on guys, get your nationalism going and decide who you are”. So I think it was always a bit flexible, but that was a particular kind of colonial policy because in many other colonies they had a much more rigid division of labour. And I think even on the peninsula, the mainland as far as Penang is concerned, there was much more, as in Indonesia with the Dutch, a sense of “race” as a basis for kinds of occupational priority. The Chinese were tin-mining and in commerce, Malays were agriculturalists, they fed everybody else, Indians were commercial largely, or rubber tappers. And so that was the colonial view and it was very common, that kind of division of labour. That was not so clear-cut in Penang, it was much more open, a society in a process of being made and constantly in processes. As Lee Kuan Yew says of Singapore “a society making itself and remaking itself!”

CS: So what would you say if you had to characterise your early work? What would you say some of your most interesting findings would be?

JN: Beyond the fluidity of identities? Well, I think you could bring and can bring back a knowledge of kinship connections because one of the features when you ask who is a Malay in a bigger historical context, they’re not really a distinct – I hate this English word “race”. How do we get around it? *Bangsa*, if you like. There is no real genealogical blood connection. For one thing, Malays only have one name, so it’s hard to trace genealogies if you think about it. And you can erase anything you might want to erase very easily. You know, forget who your grandparents were conveniently – nothing like forgetting an inconvenient fact. That’s the social side, but kinship is also very bilateral and open: you can create kinship, adopt “aunties and uncles”. You can trace your cousins out “to the smell of the mango tree” I think is a term they used. And if you want to because you just trace people as far as you want on mother’s side, father’s side, no patrilineal bias. They are not like Chinese with clans where you can bound off, close off, who’s in the group and who’s out. And that can be useful when they want to create new

relationships. It's easy to have intermarriage with immigrants, which is what happened when male immigrants came in and married local women. Or, if you setting up a new settlement – Malays are very mobile – they could find spouses and start a new community there. Because they were no patrilineal protections of women or no clan boundaries like the surname boundaries like the Chinese had, so I thought this was very interesting. So the Malays were defined more by language than anything else, people who spoke Malay, not who had some kind of blood connection with somebody else. And so I think it's been very important in the colonisation of Southeast Asia not only by colonials but by the early Hadrami, Arab, and Indian arrivals because they could intermarry without any barriers, very few barriers. And that's what we got, we got a hybrid population. And again I hate the word hybrid, it sounds very clinical. So I prefer this word: Peranakan. It's a word that gets around race, it gets around hybrids, and it just sort of implies "Yeah these people are mixed but aren't we all mixed?" If we know enough and we're honest enough, we're all mixed. So Peranakan kind of lets you fall into that. It's almost a status in its own right, it says we're all mixed. I mean they had the Jawi-Peranakan: people of Muslim background, Indians, Arabs, Malays, Hadramis and so on who were intermarried. China-Peranakan, the Chinese who had often adopted many aspects of Malay culture except for religion. And so it really got around the hard edges of the English terminology, and I like that. So back to your question of how did it come in on the Malays – what was the way you phrased it?

CS: What were the most interesting findings?

JN: Oh yes. All of these were interesting findings, because you bring in kinship but it's not a controlling factor, it's an enabling factor among the Malays. If a man wants to do business, he can marry the daughter of someone he's interested in doing business with. The Sultans, they all brought in immigrant Arabs or Indians or Indians of Arab descent and they became their advisors religiously or organizationally, they can be *shah bandar* or *sheikh Islam* and made a great contribution to local society. So I think the Malays arising out of all of that, one has to ask who is a Malay, all the time.

CS: Perhaps something that we didn't really deal with at the start, but one thing I am curious about is how you become interested in this particular region? Why the Malay world?

JN: Ah, ok. Now that's a long and a short story. The short answer is that when I was a graduate student in

the United States – I got a Fulbright Scholarship to the United States – and another certain Japanese man also got a Fulbright to the United States. We were both international students so at that time I was in Latin American studies. I spoke Spanish and you know studying those other languages, and then we met, and then we got married and then he said "By the way, I want to go to Southeast Asia". He had studied Southeast Asian society and culture. When he was in Japan, he had a teacher who specialized in this area. So once we both got jobs in Canada – you might know that Fulbright Scholars are supposed to leave the United States when they are finished. In theory, you're supposed to go home, so we said, "Are we going to go to Japan where 'I have a mother-in-law'. Or, "Should we go to England where 'You have a mother-in-law'? That was a joke. Anyway, we both got jobs in the same town (Toronto) which is, as you know, important. So we went to Canada and then after a couple of years, my husband said "I think I want to go to Indonesia." And then Konfrontasi was on so we couldn't go to Indonesia. So he said "Well, I've got a colleague who just came back from Kuala Lumpur (KL) and he likes it very much, I'm going to apply for a job." At that time, University of Penang was just beginning, and they wanted lecturers, so he got a job. And being a good Japanese wife, I followed him. And then, I didn't know a word of Malay, so we took – we had got a tutor and we mugged up basic Malay – we took courses in the evening. Just colloquial Malay: got the old Swettenham textbooks, grammars and all that. And so we worked on it and then I was offered a lectureship, my husband already had a three year position, and at the end of the first year, they said "Well, we'd like you to take a group of students to Pahang to teach them field methodology." And I was still learning Malay, so I was there to teach them methodology and they were to teach me Malay. We went to Ulu Pahang and I quickly learnt the Pahang, you know "nak gi tori getoo" (let's go and tap rubber"); I came back with a really thick Ulu Pahang dialect. But I was fairly fluent, so the mission was accomplished. And from then on, you know, when I got back everyone said I spoke like a *Patani*, and "you just got to clean up your language to use in University and urban circles." So that's how I got established, then I got a grant, I think I got a Ford research grant at the time to do research. In the interim in Canada, I had been doing some studies of ethnicity there because it's a very multi-cultural society. So having now been transplanted to Penang, I thought well I'll do some studies here, along lines of ethnicity, and that's when *What is a Malay?* came out. But then of course it evolved and it became evident that there were a lot of undercurrents, religious ones and others, which I became interested in

and so it moved on towards more the study of Islam itself: expressions of Islam among Malays.

CS: And that kind of ties in nicely with the next question because since that initial period a lot of your work has fundamentally been about identity politics right? You've talked about ethnicity, religion, and fundamentalism. And what I'm curious to know is that, has that initial fluidity that you saw at the start, has that perspective changed? Has it remained constant?

JN: No, I think it's remained constant. Actually on that, I've always hoped, I think you had a question about how we might apply anthropology to other things in the modern world, and it ties in with this. Yeah, I think studies of interpersonal networks which often is based on kinship, peer networks: relationships between peers in college and school, friendship groups, business groups, and I'd love to see more anthropology applied to business because you know all these questions about conflict of interests, insider trading, who goes on whose yacht, who trades with whom, who marries into whose family, that's just "meet-and-drink" for anthropology. You see they could do a wonderful analysis of a market in those terms and I think it would help us to explain what we call corruption because you probably experience situations when you really want to help your friend but you're not quite sure whether it's appropriate in this situation. And these things come up in everyday life and I think that's why there is a lot of corruption in business and politics, among other things, I mean some of it is deliberate and blatant. I think it can be explained by the underlying networks of friendships and other relationships at the same time. So I really would like to see a team of anthropologists – because we specialize in personal relations, we like to spend a lot of time with a very small group and when you've been in a *kampung* too long, you lose sight of the big picture – so you really need a team of people in different networks of the market you know on Goldman Sachs or something to figure out what's going on and then to link these nodes, to find out how it operates under the surface. I think we could learn a lot that way and I love to see that being done some time.

CS: So where is anthropology moving now? I mean if it's not moving in that direction, then why do you think anthropologists are not engaging with these questions?

JN: I think some anthropologists are. I mean I've been teaching students for a long time and invariably the question comes up: "Well what am I going to do with anthropology?" So I say: "You can do a lot of things,

don't ever tell the job interviewer that I'm "only" an anthropologist, I'm sorry. You say, I'm an anthropologist, and I can do this, this and this. Generally, anthropologists speak more than one language, generally they have decent research skills and they can write pretty well, do critical analysis, because all of this is essential to what we do. Tell them you can do that. And in addition, if you want to go on to a further degree, to add to anthropology like law or business or some other kind, well particularly those professional, schools, you can then create an additional qualification which go well together. I mean if you know anthropology and you're a lawyer, you know you can handle family legal cases, cases that involve personal relations, corruption. If you're a business person, you know how the world works in terms of conflict of interest, all that sort of thing. So in fact a lot of my students when I go back to the files, because we have to do profiles of our graduates every so often, so we do know where many of them went. And some were employed in places like IBM – they're wanted in multinational corporations. They want their technical specialists, their engineers, their computer analysts. But some of those people don't write very well or do the kind of analyses they want. Maybe anthropologists are not very good engineers either but you know, you can help in the international divisions either cultural relations or help a multinational get established in another country and be kind of advisor for that. Or in marketing, I mean we know all about consumer taste, how to promote things in terms of somebody's cultural or actual language. And a lot of possibility in marketing and so quite a number of people have gone into marketing in one form or another with an anthropological background.

CS: So in essence, anthropologists are in the right places?

JN: Some of them are.

CS: But they're just not asking the questions that you would like to see them be asking yet?

JN: Well those people are, I think. They're getting into positions where they can. How far they can influence the marketing, but then if they are advisors, they can influence marketing. Questions of ethics may come up but they can do that. But one thing I would love to, you know I did a little bit of toying with the ideas of fundamentalism once. And I decided that having sort of examined, just to establish what I basically mean by fundamentalism: it's a kind of dogmatic approach to the world which is unprepared to accept any kind of evidentiary arguments. It's already

you've decided your position, you don't negotiate ideas, it's a black and white world, it's a good and bad world. And essentially it's one that doesn't yield. But I mean that's not unique to religion. It's not the same as conservative religion. There are lots of conservative religious people but they're not all fundamentalists. They don't impose it on others and they don't get involved in bigger political violence or acts. I think fundamentalism is a mentality, an attitude of mind and I see, once again going back to the market, I think the people in the big financial markets are just as fundamentalist as religions because even when their market's melting, they say well you know it's the best thing we've ever had. The market must find its own natural prices and way, you know that we believe in the invisible hand, the law of competition – where are all the people in the markets? The market isn't, you know, an inanimate object. They (financiers) don't even see the contradiction, even as they are being bailed out, they were still maintaining that the “market” is basic. Well I mean that to me is an absolute perfect example of fundamentalism. They cannot be deflected from their one single, one sided view. So I think that tied in with what I said previously about markets, I think one could have a totally new perspective on markets, to present them in a different light. And then you could say, now you see those Islamists are just like you, or you're just like them.

CS: It's probably not something that they would like to hear.

JN: Well, maybe they should.

CS: What's interesting is that when you characterise fundamentalism, you have called it a special kind of identity politics but to what extent do you see fundamentalist identity politics actually taking over many spheres, not only the market and religion.

JN: Yeah, I think probably they are now. Well, many political parties in many countries. I think there's sort of dogmatic approach to the world. I think some legal people, legal purists and lawyers, well it sounds quite unchallengeable when they say “well, we follow the law or it's the legal script that we're following”. But in fact the law is not as inflexible as they might like to present it because of their own particular interest in that particular case. And if you look at the way law is applied, really it's present in most democratic countries today, they tell their citizens “well you have a rule of law, isn't that great, you know we have justice for everyone, we're all equal under the rule of law, and we're all eligible to use it.” But when you actually look at the way the law is enforced – and I won't mention

any countries – that you know it's really only for the strong and the rich. And so I think that's sort of a fundamentalist way of presenting legal systems, and of course you can't bend the law because that's in that clause 123, you know article such and such. It enables people to defend otherwise indefensible ideas because they just put on the cloak of the lawyer and hide behind that. So I think that's a bit like the market: well if the market is doing that, that's the way it is.

CS: In your work on religion, you have some recent work where some of your interests have been to rescue Sufi and Shi'ite, non-Sunni, practices from what might be called kind of a totalizing Islam? How would you characterize that project? Have you been successful? Have you faced a lot of obstacles?

JN: I don't think I said I rescue them. I think rescue in the sense of retrieve them in history because in my knowledge of Muslim history here in this part of the world much of it was brought by Sufis, by mystical usually very low-key, low profile carriers of religious ideas; not dogmatic, not doctrinaire and certainly not fundamentalist and probably not even interested that much in profits and trading. It was that segment that was very important in this part of the world. Many of them came first from India and picked up a lot of ideas about Indian mysticism which were already current here from the previous Hindu-Buddhist era. So I think that they were always important. If you read the histories of the Malay Peninsula, and Indonesia too, you see a lot of Sufi *tariqa* names and many of the respected local leaders in the *kampung* and the *pondok* schools and the *madrasahs* were Sufis. So rescuing them means that now that we have the Malaysian state which seems to have a very narrow and compressed view of Islam – I'm sure you know the trends. They seem to think that anything that isn't sort of a kind of robotic UMNO type of image, outwardly pious: dressing the right way, eating the right food, behaving correctly, going to prayers at the right time, and a good voter for UMNO, that's about all you really need. So they seem to have squeezed out some of the creativity, the ethical, spiritual, compassionate side of Islam. I see that's disappearing. And Al Arqam was a strange mixture of Sufi and Sha'ria application, but I was very attached to them, I felt very comfortable with them. They were a very humanistic kind of people underneath, for all their adherence to the Sha'ria law, and you may know of some of the offshoots of their musical arm. One of the ways of evangelising: they had a band of several groups of young men, boys of different voice ranges, the *Nada Murni*, who used to go and sing. It's not like Christian evangelism but, I mean they did, they were very popular

among non-Muslims and Muslims alike. And it was kind of really a *zikir* (chanting) but very haunting and very appealing, a mix of Malay and Arabic. And when Arqam finally folded, some of those groups went popular, they went what I call “Sufi pop”, and there were at least two groups: one was called *Rabani* and one was called *Raihan*. I think you can still get their CDs and I certainly have them at home. And, there were these aspects still in Arqam which I appreciated very much, and we come back to kinship, the way they enlarge their communities. Arqam, in moving from Malaysia to Indonesia, the Philippines, South Thailand and eventually Uzbekistan which is where *Bohra*, the old, original centre of the *naqshbandi tariqa* was. So the Arqam who actually took a lot of inspiration from *naqshbandi* in the Bukhara, Samarkand and Tashkent zone of Uzbekistan, once the Soviet Union fell in 1989-1990, suddenly that whole central Asian region was open again. We’d had so little contact with it, and so little of the history was known to connect the dots between what was going on in Southeast Asia, East Asia, South Asia and all that big uncharted zone of Central Asia. The Soviets were studying it, but we didn’t know what they were doing. So now it was available and Arqam sent a bunch of students to Tashkent to enrol in the university. The common language by the way there was English because Arqam didn’t speak Russian, and most of them didn’t speak colloquial Arabic and nor did the Russians because, I mean, they were just newly minted Uzbekis, and so the only common language was English. And they made some videos, they were very good home video makers. Arqam had a film and I’ve still got those videos actually in Canada – they’re now DVDs. I’m upgrading them because I suspect that I’m one of the few people in the world that still has anything like that. Yeah, so they documented this Uzbeki adventure, they brought some Uzbekis who of course were, in Arqam’s ideas, lapsed Muslims, brought them down to Malaysia and they have this video of them all in the markets in KL looking at all this wonderful produce. So they’re being told how to dress correctly, men and women, listening to the songs of this group, but the other aspect of it was not just the music, it was the kinship. They married women from these groups which is a very old way of proselytising in Islam apparently. The Baniya tribes spread the seed when they would go around and marry women of various groups and create a marriage and a religious link so that whatever the conversion is, it takes place within the family and they sort it out, you know interpersonal familial relations. That’s what they did, they actually made many recruits: Filipino women who were not Muslim to begin with, Indonesian women who mostly were, and some Thai women and

brought them into the community, because they could have more than one wife so they expanded pretty rapidly at the height of their success in the 80s and early 90s.

CS: It’s interesting that the movement actually folded in the end because what I find when I have tried to excavate diversity in Singapore’s multicultural context is that usually these groups that don’t enjoy a popular status, they are relegated to the private sphere, they cannot maintain a political voice. Do you find the same thing?

JN: What you mean to say the private sphere? They just become a cult?

CS: So for example, they are forced to rely on kinship, family networks because they cannot articulate a political voice.

JN: Oh I see. Well it may have been that aspect but it was a traditional way that Sufis moved, that’s how they helped colonised South-East Asia with Muslims, and at the same time they brought trade and other things I think. And so I think that was built in, but as for falling back on family, maybe to some extent. Actually, just to think of the end of Arqam, you mentioned the end, they were banned that’s why they stopped – they were banned in 1994.

CS: Oh they were banned.

JN: And for a while, they went underground. They were there, I knew where they were. A lot of my students used to come and tell me because they were members. And then eventually they resurfaced. First the government, in a very brief project, wanted Ustaz Ashaari, the leader, to help them with a anti-drug programme (anti-*dadah* programme) because a lot of mothers of Arqam recruits had all said when I asked them if they were happy that they (their children) were in Arqam, they said well better that than they were doing drugs. And so they (Arqam) got the reputation of being very good for curing potential drug addicts. So the Malaysian government, when they let Ashaari out – he’d been in prison on Labuan for some time, some years – they said “well will you do us an anti *dadah* programme? Music or whatever you want, just try it.” It didn’t seem to last very long because then some disappeared from the scene, and then a couple of years later, they were resurfacing in the suburb of Kuala Lumpur as a business group – *Rufaqa*: Friends of the Heart. You can’t keep them down these people and they were just doing business in shop-houses and I think they were keeping their schools

going under the surface, they were I know. Some of the old connections were there but, you know, in public they were just a group of people, like Chinese, one group doing business and became quite successful. They had lots of contacts in the Middle East – didn't hurt. So they fell back on their old skills because they'd always used a bit of trade as their underpinning when they were at their height. They used to peddle homemade *rumpah*, ketchup, and all kinds of products which people seemed to like and they did quite well. And they were also professionals, you know, most of the recruits to Arqam were graduates. That's why the government was so down on them because they thought what a shame, a loss of all these Malay skills being put into Arqam and not being employed in government departments as teachers or engineers. So they were also earning salaries, so they were not poor, they were really quite middle-class. And as far as I know, nobody touches them, they're just very low-key and they're still there – I think, very resilient. And there may be many more Sufis, because I don't know how you snuff them out, and people under the surface can still have practices in their home. There still aren't inspections of people's homes and private spiritual practices I don't think, although it's coming to that, it could come to that. There's a lot of surveillance about so called Shi'ites. And I think what the Malaysian government identifies a Shi'ite is something which may be associated with present day Iran but which for centuries was embedded in a kind of Indian, South-East Asian *kampung* practice; it was part of the *Adat*, it wasn't practiced as *Shia*. People were not being consciously *Shia*, they just had these practices, these sort of leftovers from *alam muharram* and certain kinds of things they did at that time, certain things they ate: like on *Ashura*, they eat this kind of special *bubur*. And nobody thought that was *Shia*, it's just what they do in the *kampung*. So, I think, maybe they are a few self-professed *Shia*, maybe the government is worried about Iran, but I think it's getting a bit overplayed.

CS: You are currently in your final few weeks as the Tan Chin Tuan Visiting Senior Research Fellow of Malay studies in the Religion and Globalization Cluster. And as I understand it, you just came back from fieldwork?

JN: I went up, but you don't have time in three months to do much fieldwork. I went up to Penang to check up on some sources and update.

CS: Maybe you could tell us a bit about what projects you are working on at the moment?

JN: Well continuing this trying to find the Sufis because I think they're around. They are even international Sufis who still come in. From another branch of the *Bokhara Naqshbandiyyah* lineage who are based in Cyprus and the United States and who speak English and who come to Malaysia as guests of the Sultan of Selangor, Sultan of Brunei and a few royal princes, and of course you can't touch the heads of Malay religions so they're allowed to come in. And they're almost like the Christian evangelist type: they come in, they give their inspiring speeches and everything is in English, they have lots of *makan* and so on. And then they go on to Indonesia, Indonesian students that I know are very great followers of these people. So that's continuing to go on so I keep track of them. But also I'm involved in some heritage projects in Penang, I've been for a long time, and I'm interested how the heritage portrays history. I mean heritage groups, some of them, even if they are tourist-oriented, they have to have a vision and a programme and a framework. So I'm interested in how they portray history, particularly in conjunction with, or, in opposition to, the official government portrayal when it comes to identity. Particularly I'm interested in living heritage and the way identities are portrayed. So we've been looking back as to how the early settlers in Penang which can be traced as there were people here when the East India company came in; the bulk came in later, so you've got a pretty good narrative of what went on. And how they were portrayed in terms of Islam and their relations one to another, when and how did the Malays emerge among those groups, and how is it presented to the public – tourists or any other kind of public. There were a lot of contestations about that, both the UMNO view and also among different heritage groups. Just in Penang alone, you've got people who are more drawn towards the Chinese heritage, built and living heritage, and then those who are more oriented towards the Muslim heritage. The missing item is really the very little on Malay heritage specifically, they're sort of, once more, pushed into the Muslim group. So it's almost hyphenated: Malay-Muslim. It goes back to that, I don't think you can get around that in Penang, I think it's going to be that way for a long time, which doesn't bother me but if anybody has a project to show Malay heritage, show it to me. Well, you can't quite isolate it clearly in any built form, there's not much, except for the *wakaf* and that's really Muslim heritage. *Wakaf* means the charitable or Muslim donations of land to build mosques and cemeteries and so on. And they're shared between Malays and other Muslims. And on that, it was very interesting when it (George Town) became a UNESCO World Heritage Site – that was only granted in 2008. We, I say we because I have been working

with the heritage groups for two decades, we had been doing all kinds of preparation and having conferences and inviting lesser groups in to subsidise research and so on: American Express, Japanese and German groups, all towards this ultimate goal of the UNESCO World Heritage Site. So it was an international group and I think many of them, including the UNESCO committee, felt that Penang's greatest strength was its diversity. So they weren't interested in finding where are the Malays. They said they can make conditions. But also the Federal Government has to agree in order for them to operate in Malaysia and also the Federal Government had to make some commitment, through the Ministry of Culture and through Khazanah funding. And, first thing that was said was well "you know we can't present it in such a way that all religions are equal, we can't have this levelling of religions; we have freedom of religion, but Islam is special because the diversity protocol had been a proposition to make this, you know, heritage walk of diversity: you stopped at the Chinese temple, at a Hindu temple, Christian church, at a *masjid* of course – which was *Kapitan Keling* – because the UNESCO site is actually rather limited territorially and that's rather unsatisfying because there were lots of potential heritage sites outside that particular area, but none of them inside were really uncontestedly Malay. So in the end they decided well *masjid* Aceh – the Acehnese mosque – which really is a Malay mosque, the *masjid* Melayu. So that's how Malay counted. There was a lot of contestation about that because pressure from the government, pressure from UNESCO and pressure from what people considered the authenticity, if there is such a thing in heritage, because it's really a bunch of different ideas being hammered out – it's another version of history.

CS: It's almost as if you have a deliberate attempt to manage diversity that you still want to present as spontaneous right?

JN: Well yes, yes, you do. You want to say "you know, it's there, it just emerges out of the data", but nothing does. I mean all histories are contrived in that respect. And then at the same time that the UNESCO project was being in its last deliberations, the same time and continuing to the present 2008, 2010, the government was bringing out new school textbooks with their own version of history which was really kind of teleological: everything leads up to "Malay Civilisation". You could see it all emerging which was yet just another one. So the UNESCO people and the heritage people need the Federal Government's permission to go ahead. You can't do it without their involvement, and the Feds kind of like the idea of

UNESCO World Heritage Sites so they don't want to abandon it too quickly because it means it (Penang) will be more like Singapore, more like Malacca and other big sites. So it's really by default that the UNESCO site has come about. I don't know how long it will last, whether people will be offended at some stage, because it's walking a very narrow tight rope between diversity and trying to follow up people's specific identity interests – and that's where we are right now. And so, you know, I had to go and find out what was happening. But even more, if you're interested in the twist and turns of this, and the impact of outsiders not just as funders but also influence, because when it was Badawi and then Najib who were very much against presenting all religions as equal, as though they were equal, in one project, we need to dig in their heels, things were getting very tense. And then it so happened, one of this serendipity things: the UMNO government in KL invited an Indian from India, not a Malaysian Indian, a scientist and a poet called Abdul Kalam. He's a Tamil-speaking Muslim, and apparently he's well-known. He was invited for other reasons, but this person became very interested in what was going on in Penang and asked to be shown around. He took a side trip from KL and met the Penang heritage people. They said: "would you like to take our heritage walk?" and so he took it. He went into the church and he read a little brief note of peace. He went on to the Goddess of Mercy temple and lit a joss stick. Then he went into the *masjid* and did his prayer. And you know he went all the way up, went to the Hindu temple, a church, all the way up and he then said "this is a wonderful project." And so it took all the wind out of UNMO's sails, because they had invited him for other purposes. So it just shows how serendipitous and how reactive you have to be in heritage, and how uncertain it is.

CS: Clearly there is still a lot more that needs to be done.

JN: I think so. It's always changing. But I think the basic issue about who is the Malay is not really important anymore. I mean I know UMNO needs Malay votes, but Malays themselves, more and more young people identifying as Muslims: they're part of the world *ummah*, more transcending ethnic identity as part of the Muslim community – it's a global thing. And the *dakwah* people began that, PAS has long said: "we don't like ethnic priorities – that's *asabi'yah* – that's a racial division, and so it's going to be very hard to keep the Malay identity distinct. Yes, you can for certain purposes, I suppose you could still have Malay on your IC card, but, really, they're fighting against a stream. And so we're back to the way it was a 100

years ago: you *masuk Melayu*, *masuk Islam*, *masuk Melayu* – the two things are the same. Although the state won't let you probably: if I want to *masuk Melayu* or a Chinese wants to *masuk Melayu*, because it's become so dogmatic. I mean I think the UMNO state is fundamentalist in its way of thinking, it doesn't yield.

CS: One final question. In light of all this, if you had to characterize your own contribution to the debate, how would you do this? I know it's a difficult question to ask.

JN: Well, I don't know, I went against structures at the beginning and I'm all still against structures. I don't know, I just like to look for new ways of applying anthropology. I feel like I have to justify my profession: and teaching students, you know, give them some sense of hope. They are things they can do which aren't you know sitting in the kampong in the old-fashion way, but you can do that too. Nothing momentous but I've examined things that are of importance in the world today. I'd like to take it further, an analysis of business, and to try to demystify fundamentalism. The other thing which interested me, which I haven't published but I did write some notes, was when terrorism was, you know, the big thing in the last decade. Again, you can apply kinship and networks beautifully to that. How these terrorists, around the time of the Bali bombing, there was this school in Johore, a Malaysian religious school. You know there had been quite a few of them and that time it was Suharto's period. It was still under Suharto in Indonesia so all the aspiring activists in Indonesia came to Malaysia and it wasn't difficult to get PR status if they married a Malay girl – there you go. Some even married Chinese who converted. I'm quite amazed at the number of Chinese who converted because I can talk to the women more too and I can get their side of it. That's the advantage of being a woman, I can't always talk to the men but I can talk to the others. And when the *Orde Baru* ended, then a lot of them went back to Indonesia, but I think there's quite a consensus that a lot of training was done in Malaysia, leading up to various violent acts in New York, and in Bali and elsewhere. And a lot of fund gathering too,

fund raising. But then it shifted over to Indonesia, when Mahathir ran a very tight ship, it was hard to do it. Mahathir also had to not be seen to be too hard on Muslims but not too easy either. So it was always a tense balance. Back in Indonesia, it was much more open after Suharto, that's when all the JI began, *Jemaah Islamiyah* began, but the networks were already in place. The schools, the marriages, the personal ties, some of them had been to the Middle East, they met in Afghanistan or Pakistan as well, and old school ties they die hard. And they had this division of labour, schooling and fund raising in Malaysia, beginning to practise their skills in Indonesia which had a few bombings, bomb-making in the Philippines, special bomb-making unit in Mindanao and a refuge in Thailand which is where Hambali went when he finally got tracked down. Do you remember the name Hambali?

CS: I do.

JN: Ridzuan Isamuddin, who went under the name of Hambali. He married a Chinese girl from Sarawak actually on one of his travels. And he ended up in Ayutthaya where he was finally picked up. And I believe by default because I know he was picked up, he's not in Thailand, he's not in Indonesia. I think he is under US interrogation somewhere, maybe not in the US but somewhere. I think he's being, what's that word they used? Rendition or something?

CS: Rendition.

JN: Yes, I suspect. So, but again the same perennial networks of kinship. So I don't really want to add something new. I mean I think that I've discovered some rather basic fundamental findings about human operations, whatever the context and they should be applied more broadly. But forget the old structures and see what's happening in between the structures.

CS: I think that's a great way to end. Thank you so much for your time.

JN: Okay. Well, thank you.

Christopher N. SelvaRaj is a National University of Singapore Research Scholar at the Department of Sociology. His previous research examined the consequences of state multiculturalism on the identity politics of minority communities in Singapore. His current work revolves around explaining the historical formation of "elite schools".
