

# Chapter 1

## Introduction: Towards a Sociology of the Everyday in Brunei Darussalam



Lian Kwen Fee, Paul J. Carnegie, and Noor Hasharina Hassan

**Abstract** To borrow Bourdieu's (1990) terminology, the habitus of everyday life is a lifeworld simultaneously constrained by and resistant of more powerful social structures and institutions. It alerts us to the idea that everyday life and 'ordinariness' can serve to mask extraordinary levels of adaptability, fortitude and reciprocity. This introductory chapter details a sociology of the everyday and its utility for developing our understanding of the ways in which people and communities in Brunei Darussalam perceive and interpret their contemporary reality. It considers the new angles of vision and scale that such an approach may offer on this most discrete of countries.

**Keywords** Brunei Darussalam · Ethnic identity · Knowledge production · Positionality · Sociology of the everyday

Nestled on the northern shores of the island of Borneo, Brunei Darussalam has often been portrayed by overseas scholarship as one of the most self-contained, circumspect and resolutely monarchical countries in Southeast Asia. Over the years, international scholars from history, politics, sociology and anthropology have got to 'know' Brunei (Tarling 1971; Nicholl 1975, 1980; Ranjit Singh 1984; Sutlive et al. 1987; Siddique 1992; Saunders 1994; Cleary and Wong 1994; Kershaw 1998, 2001; Fanselow 2014). Several have achieved remarkable clarity and detail on aspects of its history, traditions, culture, ethnic make-up, social structure, system of government, economy and nation-state-(ness) (Brown 1970, 1980; Kimball 1979; Maxwell 1980; King 1994; Hussainmiya 1995; de Vienne 2012, 2015; Ooi 2016; King and Druce 2021a, 2021b; Ooi and King 2022).

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As one of the few remaining absolute monarchies to persist in an age of modern nation-states, it is fairly unsurprising that quite a few scholars (from the perspective of ‘outsiders’) have turned their attention to the efficacy of a monarchical state (Krause and Krause 1988; Leake 1989; Braighlinn 1992; Gunn 1997; Naimah 2002; Schottmann 2006; Lindsey and Steiner 2016; Müller 2017). This has produced a tendency to focus variously on the ruling national ideology of Malay Islamic monarchy (*Melayu Islam Beraja*) as the lynchpin of social cohesion that commands the support of the sultanate’s subjects, the challenges of the Islamisation process, or economic issues associated with tradition, modernisation and globalisation. Yet apart from its natural resource wealth and Malay Islamic monarchy, the everyday life of this microstate remains relatively unfamiliar to the outside world. Despite several selective ethnographic studies and collective thesis contributions from students at Universiti Brunei Darussalam (UBD), as detailed by Anthony Walker (2010), the ways in which its contemporary everyday plays out are little documented (see Maxwell 1980, 1996; Chi et al. 1994; Kershaw 2000; Pudarno 2004; Fanselow 2014; Mahirah and Lian 2020; King and Knudsen 2021).

Indeed, when we think and talk about Brunei, so much of what we think we know sociologically about it, its people and places has often been refracted inadvertently through layers of knowledge production entangled with colonial era discourse and its broad and ready use of classification and categories (see Noakes 1950; Leach 1950). As Victor T. King (2021) remarks, ‘many Borneo specialists have tended to conform to the boundaries that had been set by the colonial powers’. Benedict Anderson (1991: 165–166) also presaged this epistemological limitation in his reflections on British and Dutch East Indies colonies:

These ‘identities’, imagined by the (confusedly) classifying mind of the colonial state, still awaited a reification which imperial administrative penetration would soon make possible....  
The fiction of the census is that everyone is in it, and that everyone has one—and only one—extremely clear place. No fractions.

It is a legacy of colonial rule and governance that has not infrequently influenced the lenses of social scientists working on both Sarawak and Brunei. There are notable contemporary exceptions and things are changing, but a not insignificant amount of what has been produced, circulated and given credence to is enmeshed in intellectual traditions and political legacies of that past.<sup>1</sup> And for the editors at least, one of the consequences of this process of epistemological sedimentation and entanglement is that, to varying degrees, a rather essentialised view of local groups and communities has emerged and gained purchase (for notable exceptions on Brunei, see Maxwell 2001; Yabit 2004; Siti Norkhalbi 2005; Kershaw 2010; Asiyah 2015, 2016; Fatimah and Najib 2015; Pudarno 2016; Tassim 2018; Noor Hasharina and Yong 2019; Awang et al. 2020; Asiyah and Nani Suryani 2021; King and Druce 2021a, 2021b; Ho and Deterding 2021; Ooi and King 2022). It is probably fair to say that past and present asymmetries in the production and consumption of knowledge have shaped,

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<sup>1</sup> This enmeshment is traceable in J.L. Noakes (1950) and E.R. Leach (1950) through to Nicholas Tarling’s *Britain, the Brookes and Brunei* (1971) and Robert Pringle’s *Rajahs and rebels* (1970), and tangentially in seminal works such as Derek Freeman’s *Report on the Iban* (1970).

consciously or unconsciously, the way we make sense of everyday life in this part of the world (see also Alatas 2000; Heryanto 2002; Zawawi 2008, 2017). As such, the intent of our volume is not to denigrate the quality of past scholarship on Brunei (far from it), but rather to unsettle the genealogies of previous preoccupations and positionalities relative to the study of contemporary Brunei.

Anthropologists working in the region since the 1990s have judiciously highlighted the significance of fluidity in identity formation through day-to-day activities (Rousseau 1990; King 2001a, 2001b; Chua 2007; Sillander 2016). ‘Identity’, as Janet Carsten (1995: 329) notes, ‘is not fixed at birth; people become who they are gradually through life as they acquire different attributes derived from the activities in which they engage and the people with whom they live’. The cultural boundaries and markers that may have seemed so apparent to the outsider in the colonial period have over the years since been denuded in a practical sense, and undergone a thoroughgoing (if ambivalent) process of acculturation and deculturation. What is more significant is the situatedness of place and locality to how people make sense of their lives and their identity (*ibid.*). Why does place matter? Simply put, it is where ‘people congregate for culturally valorized, focussed activity’ (Rosaldo 1988: 167). In this sense, contemporary place becomes a more movable and less fixed site under modern conditions. Viewed from such a perspective, the manifestations of ‘ethnicity’ are ‘at once arbitrary, external, and material’ (*ibid.*: 165–166). Moulded by everyday concerns, the exercise of ethnicity is imbued with a sense of pragmatic performativity. Where and when people gather at a place to share or celebrate life events such as births, deaths, coming of age and marriages, they are doing so not only as an act of recounting the past but as a process of selecting, discarding and improvising in response to situational demands (*ibid.*: 169). Nonetheless, despite these conceptual and interpretive advances, there is still a tendency in mainstream social science to underplay the intersubjective ways in which individuals manage social and cultural material within the context of everyday life (Gardiner 2000). Together with the other concerns noted above, the unintended consequence has been to elide more contemporary and nuanced appreciations of Brunei and its people from the ground level up.

Which brings us to the gradual emergence of what we could loosely term a third generation sociology of the everyday and its utility for studying contemporary Brunei. In short, a sociology of the everyday comprises a wide range of micro-perspectives that focus on day-to-day social existence of various scales. And in a broad schematic sense, this differs from a first generation sociology with a predisposition towards social organisms, functions and systems, or a second generation geared to unpacking social behaviour and action. While everyday life is and has been a focus of anthropology, it is comparatively new as an explicit matter to sociologists (Kalekin-Fishman 2013: 714). Often everyday life was taken for granted in abstract thinking about the social and remained largely hidden in plain sight. There was a tendency in mainstream sociology to overlook it and give greater credence to studying and explaining the existence, structures and behaviours of societies. Drawing on earlier work of the likes of Georg Simmel (1858–1918) (1971), the term does crop up in the late 1940s in Henri Lefebvre’s *Critique of everyday life* (1991a [1947]) and in the 1950s with

Erving Goffman's *Presentation of self in everyday life* (1956), alongside further elaborations by various scholars such as Guy Debord (1994 [1967]), Jürgen Habermas (1984, 1987) and Pierre Bourdieu (1990). But as a trend of sociological inquiry, it only began to gain serious purchase in the early 1990s in the wake of the so-called postmodern turn. This shift in the sociological imagination loosened an exclusive fixation and focus on classification, social organisms, systems and behaviour, and opened the way for new avenues of less schematic and less deterministic renderings of social existence and events (Sztompka 2008). In turn, everyday life became a particularly relevant site of inquiry.

Underpinning a sociology of the everyday is the view that humans are at the forefront of their experience. Furthermore, if people construct their perception about the world they live in through their embodied activity and interactions, then that requires scholarly articulation. It is important to understand the ways in which they perceive and interpret any given reality even if it is shaped to varying degrees by forms of political ordering. Cultivating a sensibility of the everyday is by extension a way to appreciate human beings as complex social animals and further decode the contours and structures of meaning that give shape to their day-to-day lifescapes. What it does emphasise is a relational sensibility that draws attention to attachment, affective belonging and narratives of place-identity alongside reflections upon space as material and symbolic. However, recognising beliefs, desires and values and interpreting the ways these structures of meaning unfold in the circumstances in which they arise is not straightforward. As Lefebvre (1991b: 26) notes, '(social) space is a (social) product', it 'serves as a tool of thought and of action'. For Lefebvre, contemporary everyday life may be inhabited by the commodity and tinged with inauthenticity, but it also remains the site of resistance and change. To borrow Bourdieu's (1990) terminology, the habitus of everyday life is a lifeworld simultaneously constrained by and resistant of more powerful social structures and institutions. Here we begin to grasp that everyday life is full of extraordinary levels of adaptability, fortitude and reciprocity. It is the ways in which its very 'ordinariness' serves to mask the latter aspects that require unpacking. In this sense, the task of a sociology of the everyday is to illuminate the nuanced complexity of 'ordinary' lifeworlds (Kalekin-Fishman 2013).

The attempt to decode the social logics and interests that constitute life as ordinary reality does, however, present certain phenomenological and ethnomethodological puzzles. In large part this is due to the fact that the ideas and meanings through which individuals construct their worldviews are steeped in the contingencies of their everyday lives. We are led to considerations of the ways they understand their location, the norms that affect them and their own interests, beliefs and desires. Further, it may involve (but is not limited to) unravelling how mundane social reality is constructed as a meaningful experience and how social interaction works at the level of face-to-face communication and even delving into the ways in which social life is 'performed' in an everyday context, as in Goffman's (1956) dramaturgy or Clifford Geertz's (1973) symbolic interaction. Our attention may also turn to the ways social space and time are constituted and operationalised or how people deal

with social stigmas, the formation and reproduction of social identities, and finally, the ways ordinary life can pose extraordinary challenges for people (Swingewood 1991: 252–274).

If we are to articulate ‘everydayness’ in the taken for granted sensibilities, traits and ‘ways of doing things’ that are embedded in ties of kinship, authority and senses of (un)belonging, we must remain open to a range and combination of qualitative methods and data collection techniques from the social sciences. This can include (but not be limited to) participant observation, reflective accounts of personal experience, photo-elicitation or detailed descriptors of events or places. Being open to a suite of qualitative methods on data collection is a way to traverse the restrictive boundaries that patrol and control the disciplinary terrains of who is qualified to speak about what. It is a way to retain a level of reflexivity in the embeddedness of the encounter and a certain intellectual discretion when working out how best to animate and lend visceral immediacy to the extraordinary behind the ‘ordinariness’ of everyday lifeworlds. The plural data collection techniques embraced in this volume form an amalgam or collage of research related to the everyday.

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By investigating the everyday in Brunei, there is an opportunity to bring into focus the various ways Bruneians perceive their lives and construct rationales to support their perceptions. It invites us to explore new and different angles of vision and scale. The lives and goings-on portrayed in this volume are relatively undocumented and underappreciated. In a first of its kind, each of the contributions to the volume constitutes a distinct but interrelated case study of the everyday, whose lead authors are local Bruneian scholars, embedded in Brunei society and having access to informants in their social networks. We could say their work represents the interior views of ‘insiders’ with well-honed social science sensibilities. Collectively, the chapters thread together scholarly observations and experiences of life at a range of sites across Brunei over the last 10 years into a weave of continuity, contestation, negotiation and transformation that lends fine-grained texture to our understanding of Brunei society.

The volume is divided into four distinct but interrelated parts covering religious life, gender expression, interpreting space and place, and identity formation in the everyday life of Bruneians, with a total of 14 chapters. The contributions on the social organisation of religious life capture changes in Brunei society and culture as consequences of modernity, bureaucratisation and globalisation. Custom (*adat*) has been an important cultural marker in Brunei but some of its practices in Malay traditional marriage customs have declined, giving way to different forms of accommodation. Somewhat similarly, the formal regulation of what is permissible (*halal*) through the introduction of certification and compliance has meant a period of adjustment for small- and medium-sized enterprises—the mainstay of the domestic economy. The ubiquitous presence of the internet and social media in everyday life is also examined and its impact on the ways in which young Bruneians perform religiosity. Finally, the consumption and choice of food by the Malay Muslim middle class reveal a cosmopolitan lifestyle that is grounded in families influenced by Islamic practices.

The section on gender begins with an ethnographic account of how Malay primary schoolchildren understand gender and become gendered. The work on aging in Brunei illustrates how, as a gendered process, older Malay Muslim women maintain their identity by extending their roles in the traditional family, at the same time finding in religious activity a comforting experience to ameliorate the negative consequences of growing old. The lives of the sultanate's female domestic workers (who play such a significant role in many middle-class Bruneian families) remain largely underappreciated and undocumented. In the chapter on domestic workers from East Java in the Bruneian household, interview data suggest that such work is not only a menial or exclusively oppressive experience but contains aspects of determination, agency, value and empowerment. The discussion of ritual specialists in marriage ceremonies (*pengangun*) highlights the role of women in performing the rituals alongside men; but both have had to adapt to the introduction of Islamic law (*syariah*).

Space and place are a taken for granted reality in everyone's lives, yet they belie a significance that is often given scant attention. In the chapter on Kampong Ayer, the reference point for Brunei's origin, history and culture, they have seen their fair share of embellishment through narratives of national identity largely constructed after Brunei became independent in 1984. Fires, resettlement and development over the years have resulted in displacement and the mobility of its inhabitants. Migrant workers have moved in, attracted by low rents and accessibility to the city. As home and neighbourhood, Kampong Ayer provokes an ambivalent reaction from older generations of Bruneians who have lived there: nostalgia and regret. This leads us to our next piece that examines the significance of homeownership to Bruneians and its links to housing policies, cultural practices and consumption behaviour. In the last chapter of the section, the narratives of Javanese migrants are recounted. By analysing their worldview, captured in the concept of the rite of passage when someone leaves home (*merantau*), these migrants are able to make sense of the uncertainties and challenges that they put themselves through away from home.

No volume on everyday life would be complete without contributions on how ethnic and social identity formation occurs in the sultanate. While official and many academic narratives tend to gloss over the diversity of the local population on the ground, the study of the lived experiences of the offspring of mixed Chinese-Malay marriages foregrounds bicultural practices and the ways in which boundaries and belonging are negotiated. Significantly, for the authors the influence of assimilation has largely precluded the formation of hybrid identities as expressed in other parts of the region. Rather, the bicultural subjects under investigation have to contend more with the 'inbetweenness' of their lives. It is easy to overlook that Bruneians who have been born around the millennium, Generation Z or the zoomers, have a high degree of exposure to the influence and interactions of the internet and social media. In this chapter, a case study of female undergraduates uncovers how their identities are shaped by both bilingual practices and social media language. To conclude the section, a case study of the Iban of Melilas documents how one particular community has negotiated and managed their acceptance as full citizens of Brunei while retaining their Iban identity.

Given the comparatively limited attention Brunei has received from mainstream social scientists working on Southeast Asian societies, the contributions in this volume draw attention to how structures, institutions and processes work their way into and reflect in the lives of ordinary people. They animate the ways in which religion, gender, place, ethnicity, nation-state formation, migration and economic activity operate through complex processes to influence the lives of inhabitants. As mentioned at the beginning, we contend that the ability of a sociology of the everyday to document the banal and daily routine embodied in people's lives—microsocial processes—can mitigate mainstream social science's preoccupation with establishing macrosocial processes and its tendency to privilege prior categorisations and explanatory abstraction. Much gets overlooked. Detailed, grounded fieldwork and engagement with the lives of informants can assist in further deciphering the varied peoples and communities in Brunei.

Our volume does not pretend to provide a definitive or conclusive analysis of Brunei, but rather speaks to contemporary day-to-day existence: its nuance, diversity and ambiguity. This is something that we can inadvertently overlook if we focus too much on social structure and categorisation rather than the everyday relations that form in particular settings. Having engaged and amplified local scholars to speak their truth on everyday affairs that matter to them (not us), the hope is that a window will be opened on interior renderings of life in Brunei that were previously neglected or simply considered unworthy of inquiry. For the editors, it is vitally important to encourage such endeavours, especially when you consider that in the past Bruneians (with notable exceptions as mentioned) were largely omitted from the production and consumption of the very knowledge that putatively sought to represent them. Much of what was deemed important areas of sociological inquiry and thus 'relevant' to and about Brunei and Bruneians was set, for want of a better word, by outsiders. By taking the reader into the lives of Bruneians, we hope the contributions in this volume will allow their everyday reality to speak from more disaggregated and grounded standpoints. The aim is to stimulate thinking on the complexity of contemporary Brunei, at the same time as emphasising the significance of a sociology of the everyday for that task.

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