

## In Memoriam: Dr Sharon Siddique (1946–2024)

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The late Dr Sharon Siddique was a distinguished scholar of Malay World studies and deeply knowledgeable about the Malays. Historically, her research spanned the pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial periods of the archipelagic region. Analytically, she utilized a range of sociological tools to make sense of the ontological material she had accumulated over a period of twenty-five years.

From 1990 to 1994, Dr Siddique served as deputy director of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), renamed ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute in 2015. As deputy director, she was responsible for the institute's research activities. After leaving ISEAS, she worked as a consultant for clients in several industries, advising them on policy and strategy design, efficiency and operations improvement, risk analysis and implementation of strategies.<sup>1</sup>

On her own, and together with colleagues, she published a number of important books and essays on Islam in the Malay world and the cultural practices of different indigenous groups in the Malay Archipelago as well as the major sociocultural and socio-economic challenges that they confronted. Her writings have frequently been cited by researchers, and many of them have appeared as reference for undergraduate and graduate courses in Malaysia and Indonesia.

However, to the best of my knowledge, her single most important and impactful academic contribution is the article “Some Aspects of Malay-Muslim Ethnicity in Peninsular Malaysia”.<sup>2</sup> It is indeed the first serious sociological analysis of and attempt at defining *bumiputera* as a concept, in terms of its history and association with various aspects of the sociocultural, religious, political and

economic development in Malaysia. It filled the gap of the failed promise by then prime minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who announced in 1980 that the Malaysian government would be formulating a legal definition of the term *bumiputera*, which would be incorporated into the constitution. By filling the vacuum, Dr Siddique's article became the main reference for academics and non-academics since then when discussions about *bumiputera* became public and popular. Not many in Malaysia and Malaysian studies today know about this important contribution of Dr Siddique.

In 1991, the Malaysian government officially accepted and used the *bumiputera* ethnic category in government documents, beginning with the Population Census Report 1991 and again in the subsequent population census reports of 2010 and 2020.

It is not surprising of course that most in Malaysia, including academics, have used and abused the term *bumiputera*, depending on which side of the divide one belongs to, since the term was adopted at the Kongres Ekonomi Bumiputera I in June 1965. The narrative was always clouded with confusion, prejudices and stereotypes, particularly after the introduction of the pro-*bumiputera* New Economic Policy in 1971. Nobody seemed to be seriously interested in making sociological sense of the term until the publication of Dr Siddique's article in 1981.

In 1986, my monograph *From British to Bumiputera Rule* was published by ISEAS. The title was finalized after much discussion with Dr Siddique, and the term *bumiputera* became part of the title.

In 2023, the Institute of Ethnic Studies (Institut Kajian Etnik, KITA), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, motivated by ideas from Dr Siddique's 1981 article, embarked on research to re-examine the content of the homogenized category "ethnic Malay", introduced for the first time in the Straits Settlement Population Census of 1891 as "Malays & other Natives of the Archipelago", which included as sub-ethnic groups "Aboriginese, Achinese, Boyanese, Bugis, Dayaks, Javanese, Jawi Pekans, Malays, Manilamen". Over many years, the homogenized "ethnic Malay" came to be reconstituted in different population censuses of Malaysia to include new sub-ethnic

categories, such as “Malay, Indonesian, Negriti, Jakun, Semelai, Semai, Temiar, Other Indigenous, Other Malay race”, found in the Population Census of 1980.

In the Population Census of 1991, “ethnic Malay” was divided into two new sub-categories—namely, “*Bumiputera*: with sub-ethnic Melayu” and “*Bumiputera Lain*: with 37 sub-ethnic categories”.

The findings from recent research have encouraged us to re-examine the epistemology, ontology and methodology of Dr Siddique’s brief but significant contribution. These have been published as a brief paper, “Memahami Kerumitan Konsep Bumiputera di Malaysia” (Making sense of the complexity of the Bumiputera concept in Malaysia), by Kartini Aboo Talib et al. (2023).

Dr Siddique’s contributions in the official and public discourse as well as narrative on *bumiputera* in Malaysia, and in the field of Malay World studies, have a special permanent place.

We miss you very much, Sharon.

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## NOTES

1. [https://www.sreekumar-siddique.com/sharon\\_siddique.html](https://www.sreekumar-siddique.com/sharon_siddique.html) (accessed 16 December 2024).
2. Sharon Siddique. 1981. “Some Aspects of Malay-Muslim Ethnicity in Peninsular Malaysia”. *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 3, no. 1: 76–87.