

Narratives and Indigenous History

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Abstract

Folk narratives are sources of information on the movements of people from one region to another, and who take with them their complex and plural speech systems. Other facts arising from their migrations include the routes taken, the motivations for their migration, the topography with its flora and fauna along the way of travel, and the meeting with people of different ethnolinguistic groups.

Data for this study represents all the three main regions of Malaysia: The Malay Peninsula, Sabah, and Sarawak, each with its own composition of indigenous groups. Information derived from the narratives are placed in different categories which are not all shared by the three regions. But the common factors present in all the three are the push and the pull factors. However, exponents of these factors differ from one region to the other.

This study contributes to an understanding of the growth of geolinguistic domains of the different indigenous ethnic groups of Malaysia as we see them today.

Keywords: *Linguistic anthropology, indigenous groups, Malaysia, geolinguistics, topography*

Introduction

In communities where events are recorded only in the memories of their speakers, folk narratives function as a device with which to retain various kinds of information which people deem important. These narratives contain rules of ethics and etiquette as part of their belief systems, various aspects of culture, and tales which are not just for family entertainment, but also for the handing down of the community's history. From the community's history come stories of origin, i.e., stories of migration and the settling down of the peoples in their present localities.

In Malaysia, most indigenous languages are still languages of memory, with the exception of Malay and a few others which already have writing systems, where there have been efforts in recording and publishing folk narratives. The narratives emerging in these languages provide information on the first settlers of particular regions, and the growth of these regions into multilingual ones. Some narratives describe regions that already have multiethnic populations, suggesting that research has to go deeper in order to see whether the situation had always been as claimed, or that there had been a disjunction in the historical information handed down from generation to generation.

Stories of origin offer accounts of movements of speakers with their languages, the routes taken, the reasons for migration, the topography with its flora and fauna along the way, and the meeting with people of different ethnolinguistic groups, some of which no longer exist. All of this information may well have come from observation and experience, and not simply from imagination. There certainly are aspects of the imagination and creativity emerging from the original creator of the narrative, and from time to time of the additions by those who relate the story to their listeners, perhaps in trying to make the narrative more appealing. There are also events belonging to the world of the mythical that were included for certain purposes, mostly to enhance the attention of listeners to the story. Whether a narrative is mixed with fairy tales, animal stories, myths, or legends, it is for the researcher interested in the history of migration and settlement to decide on the relevance of these supporting tales in the narrative to his or her research purpose.

As a myth is not all sheer imagination, some elements of the myth are grounded in reality. In the narratives of a particular event, the myth may have its function as a metaphorical presentation of an event that had occurred in real life, which when told literally would not have the effect on listeners aimed for by the storyteller. Rather, the metaphorical mode embodied by the stories could have been invented to protect protagonists from embarrassment or even shame were the story to be told without the disguise of the form of a myth or a legend. When a narrative containing myths and legends is taken as part of the corpus for a research project, it is for the researcher to decide on the relevance (or otherwise) of these additions, while drawing on their hidden meaning.

The Sarawak and Sabah languages of Malaysia are Austronesian, suggesting that throughout history, their speakers settled or roamed around in a defined geolinguistic region known as Austronesia, which consists mostly of islands and a peninsula. Some of these groups describe that they have always been where they are, e.g., the Kadazan/Dusun and the Murut in Sabah, the Penan and other smaller groups in Sarawak. Others claim that they originated from other regions within the Malay Archipelago: Kalimantan, Sumatera, Brunei, the Malay Peninsula (for Sarawak peoples); and the Philippine islands and the Malay Peninsula (for Sabah peoples). In the Malay Peninsula, the languages are Austronesian and Austroasiatic, pointing to the possibility of their origin in two different geolinguistic worlds – the Austronesian islands and the Malay Peninsula for the Austronesian speakers, which comprise the Malay speaking people and the Orang Asli (Aboriginal) Malays; and mainland Southeast Asia for the Austroasiatic Orang Asli.

There is a wealth of narratives describing the settling down of the Malaysian indigenous peoples. In Sarawak and in Sabah, some narratives have been recorded in writing in the indigenous languages, and some have been translated into Malay. This fact suggests that a greater number of the narratives of these peoples are still in the form of the oral tradition. The Orang Asli narratives in the peninsula suffer from the same predicament. Malay narratives have had better luck as they were recorded at the same time as when the Malays acquired and adopted the Arabic script by integrating Arabic symbols to suit the phonology of their Malay language. In doing so, they were able to transcribe their narratives to writing and to save this particular heritage from complete extinction. Texts such as *Sejarah Melayu*, *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa*, and other *hikayat* (historical romance), provide several windows to the world of the Malays, from early on in the history of their civilisation, and to the Malay country over the centuries.

The focus of this paper is on the movement of people throughout history and their settling in new regions, and where they have remained until the present time. As such, the discussions on the subject matter focus on people and language movements, and are predicated on two perspectives; time and space. These perspectives are grounded on historical linguistics, yet also feature prominently in work on linguistic anthropology.

Ancient Narratives and History

Most stories of ancient peoples in the Malay world do not appear in documents, a process which historians would readily accept. This literary and discursive stance is rooted in the epistemology of history as an academic discipline, according to which, the history of a particular place has its beginning only when there is a written document, however brief, that records a happening in this place, giving a particular time frame if not a particular date.

In a forum organised by the *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka*, Kuala Lumpur, on 7th March 2019, on the history of Penang, historians maintained that the history of Penang or its Malay name, *Pulau Pinang*, began in 1786, when it was leased by the Kedah ruler, Sultan Abdullah,

to the British East India Company. This baffled all others. More baffling it was when the historians confirmed a point made in history books prescribed to Malaysian schools stating that the founder of Penang was Francis Light. To the non-historians attending the forum, the reality was that Francis Light did not come to a no-man's island. There were inhabitants on the island who had tilled the land to plant food crops, and fished in the sea around the island and neighbouring islands. People from mainland Kedah, as well as from Sumatera, would go in and out of the island, some opening new land, others visiting relatives. The island already had a name, and so did places within its shores. Islands in the vicinity, much smaller than Penang, had been given names showing that their existence was already in the knowledge of the people there, and that there had been activities on the island such as the growing of food crops and fishing. In the final analysis, *Pulau Pinang* belonged to Kedah, and it was only leased to the British company. With such information on the island and still not recognising that it had a history before the arrival of Francis Light and his East India Company, the historians seemed, to the audience, to be attempting to nullify Kedah's ownership of the island from earlier times, and thus attempting to obliterate Malay presence in the island's history before 1786.

In the same way, Singapore is said to have been founded by Stamford Raffles in 1819. The British bought the island from Johor where they laid the foundation of a modern city. The island was already inhabited by Malays and *Orang Laut* (sea people of the Malay race) when the English first landed. In *Sejarah Melayu*, it is said that they *Sang Nila Utama membuat negeri* ('established a country') on the island. Does this suggest that the story in *Sejarah Melayu* has no historical value? Before the island was 'opened' by *Sang Nila Utama*, it already had a name, *Temasik*. It was *Sang Nila Utama* who gave the name 'Singapura,' a decision he made when he saw an animal which looked like a lion (*singa*) and was impressed by its prowess in movement; the lion to him was an auspicious sign for his new country.

Names given to an object are devices which encourage people to recognise that particular object, not just for what it is, but what it stands for. A name is a symbol and its attachment to an object indicates that there is a human being behind naming it, as symbolisation in the form of language is largely the ability of humans only. In naming an object, the person transfers his experience and thought through verbal symbols, i.e., words, which will be retained in his memory, and in this way, he is able to make concrete references when speaking with others. An object which does not have a name is deemed to escape symbolisation; in other words, the object is not seen to be significant in terms of human experience.

The reality of the role of verbal symbols in naming a place as depicted above was illustrated for my benefit by a tour guide when I was in the Cocos (Keeling) Islands in 2004. I joined a ride on his boat around the atoll consisting of a number of small islands. Along the way I asked him for the names of the islands. There were islands with names both in Malay

and English, others with only English names, and still others with only Malay names. Even then, there were islands that did not have any name at all. When we passed by a nameless island, the guide would say, "No name." I asked him why that was so, to which he simply answered: "There is no activity on that island. Islands that have names are those with activities."

The guide did not say that there had to be people living on the island for it to be given a name; he stressed only on activity. Activity signifies the presence of actors, i.e., people who make the activity happen. In the Cocos (Keeling) atoll with a string of islands, in the year 2004, only two islands were inhabited by people with houses, on each of which there was a school. These were 'Home Island,' where the majority of the people lived, and 'West Island' (*Pulau Panjang*) where the airport and the administrative offices were. But activities like fruit and vegetable farming, the rearing of chickens, and the burying of the dead, were on other islands, all of which had names. The islands still without names were known by their generic label in Cocos Malay, *pulu lepas* (literally 'break away islands'), which suggests that in the ideologies of the people, they were separated from those others with names (Asmah, 2008, p. 25).

My informant's insights suggest that the islands *Temasik* and *Pulau Pinang* already had human activity, before *Sang Nila Utama*, followed by Raffles, and Francis Light set foot there. Even if they were to have no inhabitants, which was not the case with these two islands, there was still human activity there, which may be interpreted as that the actors of those activities made the islands their workplace. The situation was different with Melaka; it was a vacant piece of land when Raja Iskandar Shah (Parameswara) arrived. The earliest texts to mention Parameswara as the founder of Melaka is *Sejarah Melayu*, written about two hundred years after his arrival. Historians have never had a problem with acquiescing with non-historians to accept this particular person as the founder of Melaka; history books prescribed to schools do not object recognizing Parameswara. Is this because Melaka was a relatively vacant land, with no prior owners or inhabitants to contend with Parameswara? Somebody had to clear the jungles and build a country, which, in this sense, would have been interpreted to be Parameswara and his followers. The place is mentioned as a fishing village, whose fishermen were possibly only interested in the sea and did not give concern themselves with the plains beyond the water's edge.

Approaches in the Study of Peoples' Movements in Folk Narratives

The expression 'folk narrative' suggests a story or tale of a particular group of people that has been handed down from generation to generation. These folk narratives consist of tales of various genres; animal stories, fairy tales, simple folk stories of life in their villages, epics of kingdoms, biographies, and the like. These stories are of value to linguists in terms of the language used, the regions where the stories are said to have occurred, encounters between peoples of different ethnic groups, movements of people from place to place during their

migration, and their settling down in regions which are seen as countries which they 'opened' for their people.

Whether spoken in storytelling genre or appearing in written form, folk narratives are of value to linguists, irrespective of the branch within which they work, that is, linguistic anthropology, sociolinguistics, general linguistics, historical linguistics, lexicography, and so forth.

Stories of people movements and the opening of land for settling both subsume the field of geolinguistics, and concern the use of language in a particular geographical space. In this study, geographical space covers the whole locality at which the migratory movement began, the routes taken by the migrants, and their final destination. However, certain factors, either internal or external, had to motivate the movement of an ethnic group moving out from a locality. These factors could emanate from various sources; the natural environment, belief systems, population pressures, and the like. People who move from one region to another carry their language. One concern arising in the use of this approach is that of what happens to their language once they are established in their new surroundings. Narratives tell us of what had already taken place in people and language movements, as they moved from their homelands or centres of dispersal to their final places of choice. In between these two points of extremity, they underwent many types of experiences, which may or may not have influenced their geographical orientation along the route. As all of these events took place in geographical spaces, the traversal of which significantly involved the passing of time, I term this part of the study historical geolinguistics. In short, in historical linguistics, reconstruction signifies the charting of the movement of the people in geographical space and the region of the spread of their language in the process of their migration.

This approach also focuses on specific words that reference various aspects of the culture, names of groups mentioned in the texts, as well as those of protagonists in particular events, including those mentioned in passing, and other personal names and titles. In the narratives, descriptions emerge of the topography of places familiar to the people or of those places through which they passed, together with which we also see place names. These elements provide valuable data that can support a reconstruction of language within a framework of historical geolinguistics, assisting us to arrive at the objectives of this study, i.e., the depiction of the movements of ethnic groups, the opening of their settlements, the identification of the groups involved, the factors that motivated them to migrate, the place they claim as their homeland, and the relationship between the groups.

Categories of Narratives

The categories of narratives I use as data for this study are the following: (i) those directly taken from informants in the field; (ii) those originally recorded from members of the community, and published in the language spoken by the informants; (iii) those which have

been rendered in Malay and English from the various indigenous languages; and (iv) those which have been given a literary mode as in the Malay *hikayat*.

Each category of the narratives has its own peculiarity, the identification of the source of each of which assists in the analysis of the data. For example, the mention of a region linked to a particular ethnolinguistic group brings forth names of certain topographical features, and vice versa. Categories (i) and (ii) of the narratives, as I mention above, are sourced directly from informants, and provide not only stories of migration but also the language with which the narratives are told. Lexical items (single words, idioms, phrases) are valuable evidence in the representation of certain aspects of the life of the community, particularly the physical and the socio-cultural background of place of domicile at the onset of the group's migration through to its final destination. Category (iii) focuses on the story itself, not on the language of the narratives, where most of the narratives appear in Malay, and in English. Category (iv) only applies to Malay texts in the form of the *hikayat*. In addition to these four categories of narratives, I can also refer to working papers (published and otherwise), and official documents, in order to ascertain the realities of people's movement.

Some of the narratives refer to the geomorphology of a particular place at which an event is said to have taken place, as well as the type of agricultural activities in which the people were engaged. This type of information greatly assists in the interpretation of the level of civilisation the people had reached., requiring information from multiple sources relevant to the history of the respective ethnic group, i.e., not simply the geology, but also the archeology, the anthropology, the history, and the historical geography of the community.

The Indigenous Groups and their Languages

The different composition of each of the indigenous ethnolinguistic groups in the three regions of Malaysia reflects the differences in the movements and settling down of the peoples, as well as the physical and social factors that form the backgrounds to these processes. All groups in Sabah and Sarawak on Borneo Island speak Austronesian languages; in this sense they are homogeneous. However, on the Malay Peninsula, two groups belong to two different linguistic families: One is the Austronesian family, which, in this region has only one original ethnolinguistic member, and this is the Malay group, consisting of mainstream Malays and Aboriginal Malays (*Orang Asli Melayu*). The second group in this region are the *Orang Asli* (the aborigines) who speak a number of Austroasiatic languages, specifically those of the *Mon-Khmer* family of mainland Southeast Asia.

The narratives of the indigenous peoples in these three Malaysian regions describe that certain small groups have disappeared, along with their languages. This being the case, when a language or its speakers are mentioned in a narrative, a check has to be made to see

if the language and the speakers are still in existence. If no such speech system exists and hence no speakers use the speech system, any of the following interpretations are possible:

- a) The language had died together with the speakers. This absence suggests a total disappearance of the speakers due to some fatal disease, some natural calamity, or the like, and for example, a complete destruction of a settlement by an earthquake, a big flood, or a tsunami, such that nothing is left of speaker and language.
- b) Speakers and the language have been absorbed into another ethnolinguistic community. Processes that had brought about this phenomenon can be intermarriage, conquest, change of belief system, etc. In time, the people absorbed into the new community, usually a more powerful one than their own, adopted the speech system and way of life of this new community.
- c) Speakers and languages surfacing in narratives still exist but have been given other labels of identity. Here, both speakers and their language are known by a new name. A general label (a hypernym) for a subfamily of speakers and their languages is used to refer to a specific language spoken by a specific group of people within the subfamily (a hyponym).

An example of (a) is the mention of *Wila* as an *Orang Asli* (aboriginal) group in the Kedah narrative *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa*, and *Bilah* in letters of Kedah's Sultan Abdul Hamid Halim Shah of the late 19th century (Asmah 2013). Yet, no such group is found anywhere in the Malay Peninsula today. However, this total absence of the *Wila* or *Bilah* people could also be explained by point (b), which would suggest that they were absorbed at some point in history into other *Orang Asli* tribes in Kedah, and one such possibility is the *Kentak Bong* or the *Kensiu*. The narrative suggests that the *Wilah* came from the eastern side of the state of Kedah to fight against the Malays in the plains. This part of Kedah could be *Baling*, and in this place today one can still find the *Kensiu*, whereas previously there were also the *Kentak Bong* and the *Lanoh*, who migrated to Perak in the 1960s.

Examples illustrating point (c) are located in the names of several ethnic groups of Sarawak. The name 'Sea Dayak' for speaker and language is seldom used today and is not known to the generations born after the formation of Malaysia in 1963, largely owing to its replacement by a new name, and that is the term 'Iban.' The same applies to Land Dayak which is now *Bidayuh*, and *Bintulu Melanau* which has been replaced by *Vaie*. The name *Semang* for the *Orang Asli* in Kedah is now no longer known among the younger generation, and has been replaced by the group label *Negrato*, or by the label for each tribe such as *Kentak Bong*, *Kensiu*, or *Lanoh*.

The phenomenon in (d) has external 'authorship.' This suggests that an identity label is one assigned to a particular group by people outside of that community based on the outsiders' observation of the physical features and the way of life of the members of that

community. An example is the name *Jawi* which for Arabs are Malay-looking people of the Malay Archipelago, the majority being Javanese and Malay. If a Malaysian of the generation born after the 1960s is asked to identify a *Jawi* person, he or she would not be able to respond; the bolder ones among them would direct the person, asking for information from people who are able to read and write the *Jawi* (Malayised Arabic) script.

The name *Kajang* is used by anthropologists to refer to a group of people using different languages yet living in the same area in the Balui region in Sarawak; these are the *Kejaman*, *Sekapan*, *Lahanan*, *Sebop*, *Punan* etc. Arising from this practice, individuals from these speech communities would, in casual interaction with outsiders, refer to themselves as *Kajang*. But when required to give data on the *Kajang* language, the informant from the so-called *Kajang* people would provide data on a particular language from the *Kajang* group; this could be *Kejaman*, *Sekapan*, or any of the others (personal experience). What this suggests is that there is no language with the name *Kajang*, just as there is no ethnic group or language known as *Jawi*.

The Contents of Narratives

The people's narratives have two types of content: The first type offers a straightforward description of their migration from their original homeland, moving through a vicissitude of geographical space, and the trials and tribulations of their journey prior to reaching a region of choice ideal for opening a new country; the second type borders on myths and legends.

In the first type, we encounter the narratives of ethnic groups in all of the three regions of Malaysia, and which tell of their places of origin and their destinations. In all narratives, there is no mention of the people having been somewhere outside of Southeast Asia, both insular and mainland. Those in Sarawak mention places in Kalimantan (Indonesian Borneo), Sumatera, and the Malay Peninsula. As for the indigenous groups in Sabah, the places in their memory denoting the origins of their ancestors were in Sabah itself, as well as in the neighbouring islands (which now belong to the Philippines), Brunei, and the Malay Peninsula.

As there are two different language families in the Malay Peninsula, there are then two different types of narratives. The early Malays (mainstream Malays and the *Orang Asli* Malays) have always been in the peninsula or on the surrounding islands, such as Sumatera, and the Riau-Lingga Islands. This group included the sea people (*Orang Laut*) who have become land people and who have been assimilated into the mainstream Malay group. The second type of narratives from the Malay Peninsula is from the Austroasiatic *Orang Asli*. Since their languages belong to the *Mon-Khmer* family of mainland Southeast Asia, there are narratives that suggest that they were previously outside of the peninsula but still within Southeast Asia. The *Semai* narrative of their land of origin mentions *Mengkah*, which may be interpreted as Mecca, the holy place of Islam. But a reconstruction of their sea voyage to

reach the Malay Peninsula shows that they may have come from Burma, now Myanmar, exiting from the west coast and moving southward. In another scenario, from a comparison of lexical items there seems to be a close connection between the Negritos of the Northern Malay Peninsula and the Phan-Nga people of Southern Thailand, an indication that they could have reached the peninsula from the hills of Myanmar and Thailand by taking the overland route.

Tales from all the three regions are interpolated with myths, more so in tales from the peninsula as opposed to those in Sabah and Sarawak. The myths do not appear at random but rather, at places where they contribute to the thread of the story, giving support to a particular theme such as the establishment of a kingdom with a ruler who was believed to be a descendant of Alexander the Great of Macedonia. But the various myths of origins and migrations are not without historical value. The myths in the Malay texts of *Sejarah Melayu* and *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* contain facts from geolinguistics, geology, and archaeology, that could not have just been the result of the imagination of the story teller or the scribe. What is told could have been based on reality, but there have been additions in the embellishments of story tellers in their efforts to make the narratives interesting. Susanne Langer (1951) stated that in myths, there is primitive philosophy, presented in simple form in an attempt to understand the world. The part played by reality in myths is explained by Langer in the following passage:

We do not know just where, in the evolution of human thought, myth-making begins, but it begins somewhere with the recognition of realistic significance in a story. In every fantasy, no matter how utopian, there are elements that represent real human relations, real needs and fears, the quandaries and conflicts which the "happy ending" resolves. Even if the real situation is symbolized rather than stated (a shocking condition may well be disguised, or a mysterious one strangely conceived), a certain importance, an emotional interest, attaches to those elements.

(Langer 1951, p. 154).

Langer considers legend as "primitive history, naively formulated in terms of love and hate" (p. 153). In Malaysian indigenous narratives, legends are connected with figures mentioned in the primitive history of a particular place. Due to this connection, place is just as important as person in the legend. An example is the opening of Melaka which can be considered as a legend, where the central figure in this legend is Parameswara or Raja Iskandar Shah. There is also the legend of Datu Merpati who, in the narratives of both the Sarawak Malays and the Land Dayak, is believed to be the person who opened Santubong.

Factors Leading to the Migration of the Indigenous Peoples

Apparent in the narratives is the fact that the various groups claim to have a homeland. This term 'homeland' as used here suggests the place where the groups made their earliest move to migrate, which may also be interpreted as their centre of dispersal. Various factors motivated the groups to leave their homeland, which I summarize below as 'push and pull' factors, that is, forces from the inside or from the outside of each group. However, each subgroup or tribe within a particular ethnic group has its own reason(s) for leaving their erstwhile living space to migrate to where they are now.

Push Factors

A number of push factors contribute to the migration of the groups. One such factor stemmed from the natural environment, which seemed to affect most groups, be they in the peninsula, Sarawak, or Sabah. Most of the time, the push factor began with the environment being insufficiently productive for food subsistence. Infertility of soil and poor harvest led to food becoming scarce. The constant flooding of place prevented the groups from working on their land, where some groups had to leave the plains for higher grounds. Living in proximity to jungles exposed the groups to attacks from wild animals. Such conditions rendered these people susceptible to diseases, and without moving out, these people would succumb to severe illnesses and possibly death.

Opposite to population depletion, population growth could not be sustained by the dwelling area and the subsequent increasing need for food crops. With the pressure of population increase, the people were required to find bigger or new places of habitat. A number of groups in Sabah and Sarawak were affected by this phenomenon. In the peninsula, the *Semai* story proposes this factor as the strongest motive for relocation from the homeland.

A change in sociocultural environment would force groups to leave their place of origin. This phenomenon has appeared in recent history, such as in the migration of the *Kentak Bong* from Baling to Gerik in Perak in the 1960s. The migration of the *Kentak Bong* came following an encroaching urbanization and a change of lifestyle which would require the group to leave the cool and shady environment of the hillside (personal communication).

Socio-cultural change also signifies change in belief systems such as religion. The emergent narratives told of occasions where emigrants were not the targets of conversion into a new religion, such as Islam, but rather, would consider the socio-cultural change in their surroundings brought about by their neighbours inappropriate, thus becoming a push factor. One of the narratives of this type of occurrence came from the Iban when they were still in Central Sumatera in the vicinity of Kampar or Palembang. When neighbouring peoples converted to Islam circa the 11th century or earlier, the Iban left their place, crossed the straits off the east coast of Sumatera, and sailed eastwards, until they reached Borneo,

at the current location of Pontianak. From there, they moved northwards following the Kapuas River and then moved going upstream until they reached Sarawak.

Another narrative of a similar occurrence, but which occurred much later than the Iban flight to Pontianak, comes from the *Mah Meri*, an *Orang Asli* group now living in Selangor, in Peninsular Malaysia. According to the *Mah Meri*, their people were working as servants in the royal court of Melaka during the glorious days of the Melaka Malay kingdom. When the sultan and the Malays converted to Islam, the *Mah Meri* withdrew from their service in the palace as they saw the sultan as being cheated by the Arabs. Their withdrawal took them to Sepang, on the coast of Selangor. Islam came to Melaka in the 16th century, a date which marks the migration of the *Mah Meri* from Melaka to Sepang in Selangor.

However, stories of conversion to Islam also have it that the people who withdrew from their homeland were not the rejectors of the religion, but the converts. These are stories from Sarawak and Sabah. In the former, the people were the *Penan* from *Baram*, who migrated to work in the Niah region, where they converted to Islam. In Niah, they found comfort in interacting with the Malays with whom they shared this religious faith. This group has come to be known as *Niah Penan* (Sandin 1958). In Beluru, Sungai Bakong, and neighbouring places, small groups such as the *Dalik*, *Bakong*, and *Belait*, still exist, and formally resided in *Kenyah* communities in Upper Baram, but now reside in new locations after converting to Islam. Another offshoot from the *Kenyah* subfamily, which migrated from Upper Baram to live in Marudi, are the *Narom*, a move concurrent with their embrace of Islam; in Marudi, they are also known as Malays (personal communication with informants in Marudi). In Sabah, the group that fragmented from the parent group, *Kadazandusun*, were the *Bisayah*, also after converting to Islam.

Traditional belief systems of a particular group also constitute push factors. These factors usually involve taboos (*pemali* in Iban), observable in the conduct of the community. According to a belief among the Iban, a transgression of a particular taboo would bring a curse to the whole longhouse or community for as long as seven years. In the past, this was motivation enough for the people in the longhouse or community to abandon the whole place and to seek an alternative location far from the cursed place of origin, thus relinquishing themselves of the curse and starting a new life. Among the *Temiar* in the Malay Peninsula, two people from the same village cannot marry each other. Commonly, the man would leave his village to look for a bride elsewhere, and in this way, the expansion of *Temiar* territory occurs. When migration involves all inhabitants in the community, the result is the splitting of the people into different directions. Here, a number of geolinguistic regions emerge speaking the language of their parent community, but may evolve into specific dialectal regions with the passing of time and with the encountering of new surroundings.

Conflicts between different ethnic groups and even within the same group would at times force one of the parties in the conflict to migrate. At times, a particular group would

continuously move when chased by another group. Along the way, splinter groups on both sides would emerge, which would traverse any of various tributaries to build their own settlements, as is the case in Sabah and Sarawak. Motives for such conflicts include disputes over ownership of farming land with invisible boundaries, or a disagreement within a particular family over a succession to the position of chief of the community, as illustrated by members of the *Jakun* tribe of Terengganu in moving to the west coast, as told in the *Hikayat Awang Sulong Meah Muda*.

Political oppression also constituted a push factor that drove people to migrate to another place. One prominent incident has been the escape of the ruler of Singapore, Paramewara (or Raja Iskandar Shah), to the Malay Peninsula, where he opened his new country, Melaka. Migration stemming from this type of push factor is also illustrated by the movements of various groups in Sumatera under Dutch rule to find a more peaceful place in the Malay Peninsula. Among these people were those from Bengkulu and Kampar (Asmah et al., 2015). The presence of Malay communities from Cambodia and Vietnam in the peninsula also resulted from this type of push factor (Asmah, 2019).

Pull Factors

Pull factors that had brought people from the Malay islands to reside permanently in Malaysia began at the time as when people from the islands could move freely to the peninsula as national boundaries did not exist in any form at the time. The migration of the people from *Minangkabau* to build their own country, known today as Negeri Sembilan, emanated from an absence of an immigration law regulating the coming and going from one region to another.

Wanderlust, *merantau* in Malay and *bejalai* in Iban, was an ingrained habit among the Malays and the Iban. This habit was not restricted by the host community as it was an accepted practice. I suggest that the *Minangkabau* people in Negeri Sembilan as well as other communities of Sumateran origin in the peninsula had their beginnings in *merantau*. Nordin Selat (1970, p. 121) defines *merantau* as follows:

In Negeri Sembilan ... it refers to the phenomenon in that society of young men leaving their kampong or village for an indefinite period of time to try their fortunes elsewhere.

Inherent in the concept of *merantau* is the quest for *rezeki* – the idea that a much better life awaits you somewhere and that you must venture to find it. Thus, a young man leaves the village (*tanah tumpah darah*) and goes far away from his family and kin. Nordin goes on to explain that among the Negeri Sembilan people, there is *merantau* blood:

The blood of travellers and adventurers runs in their veins. The immigrant instinct is still in them.

(p. 127)

Usually, at times when things prove to be good to the person in *merantau* in a 'far-off land,' young men would return home, marry, and take their wives to their adopted land. News of their good fortune would become transmitted throughout the homeland, motivating relatives and friends to join. A chain migration results, and a new community forms with speakers communicating in a new variety of speech system.

When an Iban man goes on a *bejalai*, he goes with a mission, that is, to better himself. Dr. Peter Kedit (a former Director of the Sarawak Museum) conducted in-depth work and research on the Iban *bejalai* (Kedit, 1993). His explanation of *bejalai* is as follows:

The spirit of adventure as endorsed in the custom of *bejalai* is again a highly rewarding social achievement for young Iban individuals. Hence, it makes the Iban mobile, both in the physical sense of the word, as well as mobile in the cultural sense of acculturation. Iban are quick to grasp new ideas and adopt it for their own use: it is the 'pioneering' ethos of wanting to be the first of the many, that motivates them to be culturally mobile.

(Kedit, 1989, p. 12)

It is from their 'pioneering ethos,' notes Kedit, that the Iban, more than any other ethnic group in Sarawak, has managed to build their own ethnolinguistic communities in almost all administrative Divisions in the state (Asmah and Norazuna, 2020, Chapter 3).

Wanderlust among the Malays and the Iban did not only entail travel to see the world for pleasure or to satisfy curiosity. The travelers also had a mission to improve their socio-economic disposition, and thus to increase the means by which to elevate the quality of life of family.

Improving one's quality of life also requires receiving an education. Among the Malays of Sumatera who migrated to the peninsula prior to the Second World War, *merantau* included receiving religious education. The many *madrasah* or *pondok* schools in Kedah which catered to young males from Sumatera attest to the point above. Kubang Pasu, a district in North Kedah, contained *madrasahs*, all within several miles of one another, run by local ustaz (Islamic leaders or teachers), and foreign students were mostly from Sumatera and Southern Thailand. The many families of Sumateran and Southern Thai origins that make up the population of the district today are descendants of those who migrated to the district for the purpose I mentioned above.

Conclusion

The formation of new ethnolinguistic communities in new regions does not seem to stop throughout history. In recent history, the availability of jobs in Malaysia has attracted people from the islands of Indonesia and the Philippines, as well as from mainland Southeast Asian countries such as Cambodia, Vietnam, and Myanmar, to work and later settle down in various parts of the country. Javanese, Mandailing, Rawa, and Minang communities in the peninsula are among those from Indonesia that were set up from the time of the late 19th or early 20th centuries, following chain migrations from their original localities. Towards the end of the 20th century, Malaysia needed additional labour to cope with its development and growth in the various emerging sectors, particularly in agriculture, in building, and in manufacturing. Today, immigration law has become more stringent, in the sense that there is a time limit on the service of foreign workers in Malaysia. In this way, permanent settler communities from the Malay islands do not emerge as easily as in the past. Both push and pull factors were at play in the establishment of indigenous communities in Malaysia. As such, certain ethnolinguistic communities came into existence in different geographical regions by way of either one of these two types of factors.

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