

# The Malay Language in Mainland Southeast Asia\*

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## Abstract

Today the Malay language is known to have communities of speakers outside the Malay Archipelago, such as in Australia inclusive of the Christmas Islands and the Cocos (Keeling) Islands in the Indian Ocean (Asmah, 2008), the Holy Land of Mecca and Medina (Asmah et al. 2015), England, the Netherlands, France, and Germany. The Malay language is also known to have its presence on the Asian mainland, that is Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. As Malays in these three countries belong to a minority, in fact among the smallest of the minorities, questions that arise are those that pertain to: (i) their history of settlement in the localities where they are now; (ii) the position of Malay in the context of the language policy of their country; and (iii) maintenance and shift of the ancestral and adopted languages.

## Introduction

At the present time,, the Malay language exhibits many communities of speakers, and many of whom reside away from the current Malay Archipelago. These communities are in countries such as Australia and in others such as the Christmas Islands, the Cocos (Keeling) Islands in the Indian Ocean (Asmah 2008), the Holy Land of Mecca in Saudi Arabia, and also the Holy Land of Medina in Saudi Arabia (Asmah et al. 2015). These also include England, the Netherlands, France, Germany, and the United States, to name but a very few. The Malay language is also very well known to have its presence on the Asian mainland, that is, in countries such as Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. As Malays in these three countries belong

to a minority, in fact among the smallest of the minorities, questions that arise are those that pertain to the following: (i) their history of settlement in the locations where they now reside and exist; (ii) the position of the Malay language in the context of the language policy of their country; and (iii) maintenance and shift of the ancestral and adopted languages of these locations.

In (i), the approach is geolinguistic, taking into account the history and presence of the Malays in the geographical context they are in, which includes their socio-cultural and political environment. Information on the history of settlement of a group of people in their contemporary geographical space should be able to tell us whether the community has been an original feature of the region or a product of migration. In order to be able to infer that a particular community is in its original geolinguistic region or otherwise, it is necessary to get information as to the size of the community prior; whether there had been groups among them breaking away to form communities elsewhere; whether there are lexical indicators such as place names to support the fact that they are in their primordial areas of settlement; and the type of topography that can be attributed to them being there from time immemorial.

A community of origin is usually bigger than one which is the product of migration, while one that broke away from the parent community is usually smaller. Place names are indicators of original areas of spread although they are also taken by migrants to name their new settlements. In terms of topography, an original area of spread is usually a continuum except for the presence of unpassable rivers and mountains.

A community that is the product of migration may have with it narratives with the following information: (a) memory of the homeland before migration; (b) the type of migration whether intentional, or imposed; (c) the course of migration, whether there were chains of or onward migrations; (d) factors for choosing current locality; (e) relationship with the community in the homeland, or with a sister community using the same language as that of the migrants; (f) reversing migration, due to adverse factors, e.g. of a political or socio-cultural nature in the new place; and (g) the topography of area of spread, which is discontinuous - made so by the presence of other ethnolinguistic communities, usually those native to the land.

### Position of Ancestral Language in the Adopted Country's Language Policy: Maintenance and Shift

The aim of this theme is to assess the use of the language within the context of other languages in the country or region, especially that of the national language. A language newly placed in another linguistic environment may have fewer domains of use than in its own traditional area of spread, but it does not mean that it cannot be maintained. Language continues to 'live on' if it is used

continually by its community of speakers and handed down from generation to generation.

The opposite of maintenance is shift, that is replacing one language with another in use. In shift, selected domains are assigned to a particular language in the community's life, such as in education and profession, and eventually it may result in a total replacement of one language by another. On the other hand, there may come into being a 'reversing language shift' (Fishman 1991).

## Situation in Thailand

Southern Thailand from the Malaysia-Thai border up to the Isthmus of Kra is inhabited by people of Malay origin. To a certain extent, Malay is still spoken, mostly among those of 60 years of age and above. In the Isthmus of Kra, Ranong, Nakhorn Sithammarat, Phuket Songkhla, and down south to Satun, the variety used is the Kedah Malay dialect. This whole stretch of land could have once been an area of spread of the Kedah dialect. This conclusion is supported by lexical items in the form of place names which have their origin in Malay, such as Satun (Ml.

*/sətul/* 'a kind of fruit common to both Malaya and Southern Thailand); Tammalang (Ml. */tambaʔ/* 'embankment'; */laŋ/* 'eagle' – embankment full of eagles); Phuket (Ml. */bukit/* 'hill'); Kupa (Ml. */kəpah/* 'a type of shell-fish'); and Ranong (Ml. */ranum/* 'over-ripe' – of fruits). Islands in the Andaman Sea have Malay names, such as Adang (Ml. 'shelter'), Lipe' (Ml. *leper* 'flat') and Rawi – a misreading of the Jawi script for *rawai* (Ml. 'a type of fish trap'). Ligor is a truncated form of */gəlugor/* 'a tree whose acidic fruit is used in Malay cooking.'

The presence of Malays in Ligor could be due to migration of the imposed type, as narrated by the Ligor Malays. They were brought over from Kedah when the latter was governed by Ligor in the mid-nineteenth century to be rice farmers, jewelers, fishermen and boat builders. When Siam managed to take back Ayuthaya from Burma in the nineteenth century, and needed to rebuild the place, Malays from Ligor were transported there.

In Bangkok, Malay communities do not form a continuous region such as the ones in Southern Thailand. Malays in Ban Pon in Pattumtani, Klong Neng, Prapadeng, To San and Sai Koding are of a mixed group as indicated by their dialectal varieties of Malay - Kedah, Patani and Kelantan. Migrations of their ancestors some 200 years ago were of the imposed type, to open lands for rice farming, to build canals, etc.

Malays in Thailand adhere to the language policy of the country, which means education for them is wholly in Thai, and that Thai has eventually become their home language. The ones with the ability to speak Malay are of the age 60 and above, and most of them are those who frequently visit Malaysia, or at least run their small businesses in foodstuff and fruits along the southern border. However, Malay is kept alive as the medium in the teaching of Islam in their religious

schools which are run by the communities themselves, using Malaysian religious texts.

## Situation in Cambodia

In Cambodia, Malay is spoken by the people known as 'Cham.' As recorded in history, they were originally from Champa, in present-day Vietnam. Cambodian Cham communities are located in Siem Reap, Tonle Sap, Pnom Penh and a few other places in the south. The discontinuity of these locations is an indication that they were inhabited by the Chams at different times.

As for the typology of their migration, it can be said that the first wave that took place after the conquest of Angkor by Champa could have been imposed by the Champa authorities with the purpose of peopling their newly acquired land with their own racial group. The second wave which came after the fall of Panduranga to the Vietnamese may also be considered of the imposed type on the Muslim Cham who feared that they would suffer physically and ethically as conquered people. Some in this group chose Cambodia as it was not far from where they were, while others in the same situation fled to the Malay Peninsula, and to Aceh, as told in *Sejarah Melayu* or *The Malay Annals* (Asmah 2013).

Although a minority group, the Cham in Cambodia are not prevented from using their ancestral language, that is Cham or Cham Malay, and from professing their religion of Islam, except in the years 1975-1978 when Cambodia was ruled by Pol Pot. With a language and education policy similar to that of Thailand where the objective is assimilation of all the ethnic groups, children grow up being educated wholly in Khmer, Cambodia's national language. Over time, Khmer has become the home language of the Cham people, displacing the Cham language. Just as in Thailand, Malay is taught as part of religious education, and this program runs only during weekends and school holidays, in mosques and religious schools established by the people themselves.

## Situation in Vietnam

In Vietnam, there are three different groups of Cham, based on their religion. These are Cham Jat, Cham Bani, and Muslim Cham. The first group consists of Cham Jat who still maintain their original (Jat) religion, that is Hinduism with a mixture of local animism. When Islam first came to Champa, estimated to be circa 10th – 11th century CE, a part of the Champa population converted to Islam. Over the centuries, there arose two groups of Cham who called themselves followers of Islam – one in which the teaching has now deviated from mainstream Islam, known as Cham Bani, and the other are those who are faithful to mainstream (Sunni) Islam, and are known as Muslim Cham.

There is no statistics to refer to, but informants have their own rough estimate of the proportion between the groups: Cham Jat - 65%; Cham Bani - 25%; Muslim Cham - 10%. The total

population is said to be less than a hundred thousand. Cham Jat and Cham Bani are mostly found in Panduranga, while Muslim Cham are in regions in the south as far as the Mekong Delta, especially in Chau Doc, An Giang and Ho Chi Minh City. There are about 6,000 Muslim Cham in Panduranga itself. There is a community in Ninh Thuan in Panduranga where the people were converted from Cham Bani in 1962.

Cham as spoken in Vietnam today is a language that appears to be closely related to Malay but is not readily intelligible to Malay speakers of Malaysia and Indonesia. Judging from wordlists of the seventeenth century, Cham was then a dialect of Malay just as the Malay dialects of Malaysia are. This is evident from a set of four lexicons compiled by sailors of Champa in the 17th century who frequented the Malay Archipelago (Po Dharma 2000). The collection is bi-dialectal with Champa Malay and Malay commonly used in the archipelago at that time. John Crawfurd (1852), in his volume of grammar and dictionary of the Malay language, has put on record that Cham was Malay but with some elements from other languages.

Vietnamese, the mother tongue of the Cham people, is the only language that is used in carrying out life outside the home and in the workplace. At home among Muslim Cham, Malay is used, that is one that is intelligible to other Malays in the Malay archipelago. This is due to the community's programme in maintaining the language through the teaching of Islam in the mosques on school holidays, and their contact with Malaysia, especially in Kedah and Kelantan. In Chau Doc there is a centre which trains imam and religious teachers, and which also teaches Malay to those who wish to study in Malaysia.

As in Thailand and Cambodia, Malaysian texts in the Jawi script are used for the teaching of Islam. However, Muslim Cham in Vietnam have progressed a bit further by translating those texts into Cham Malay to give greater comprehensibility to the students. A Cham (Malay)- Malay Dictionary has been produced by them for reference.

A reversing language shift is taking place among the Muslim Cham, and this process comes together with their program in the preservation of Islam as their religion. Their language being another dialectal variety of Malay makes it easier for them to re-cultivate it among their people, besides the fact that it is the main medium of Islamic teaching in the Malay world.

## Summing-Up

There are more similarities than differences in the Malay language situation in the three countries under consideration. They differ mostly in their histories of settlement. In Thailand there are two types of settlement of the Malays: (i) their original geolinguistic region (southern Thailand); and (ii) regions which resulted from migration (Bangkok and Ayuthaya). Cham Malay settlements in Cambodia are products of migration, while in Vietnam the Cham people are in their original

homeland. In all the three countries, there is a reversing shift to Malay, although on a very limited scale, as maintenance lies with the national language of the country which has become their own.

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## Notes

\*A more comprehensive account of the Malay language situation in these three countries is given in my book, *Bahasa Melayu di Daratan Asia Tenggara*, published by the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, March 2019.