



HAL
open science

Seawards, Landwards. Can we make historical sense of the Borneo as the Homeland of Malay hypothesis?

Bernard Sellato

► **To cite this version:**

Bernard Sellato. Seawards, Landwards. Can we make historical sense of the Borneo as the Homeland of Malay hypothesis?. James T. Collins, Awang Sariyan. Borneo and the Homeland of the Malays. Four Essays, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, pp.119-129, 2017, ISBN 978 983 62 8725 0. <hal-02883029>

HAL Id: hal-02883029

<https://hal.science/hal-02883029v1>

Submitted on 3 Jul 2020

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



HAL Authorization

Seawards, Landwards. Can we make historical sense of the *Borneo as the Homeland of Malay* hypothesis?

Bernard Sellato*

Published in **Borneo and the Homeland of the Malays: Four essays**,

James T. Collins & Awang Sariyan (eds), Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 2006, pp. 102-110.

New edition: Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 2017, pp. 119-129.

As an anthropologist and a historian, I only have limited linguistic or archaeological competence to challenge or even discuss the data presented and hypotheses elaborated in the course of the 2000 colloquium. From my point of view, the "Borneo as the homeland of Malay" hypothesis seems acceptable, even appealing. Since no authoritative comment is expected of me on either the linguistic or archaeological data and hypotheses, I take the liberty to indulge in a speculative discussion of some historical questions related to this hypothesis.

The central topic discussed during the colloquium was a linguistic one. In fact, I found that I am not so much interested in questions like "Did Malay emerge in Borneo and spread around?", which I gladly leave to linguists, as I would be in "*If so*, then, why and how?" types of questions, that is, in social and economic historical explanation beyond the hypothesis.

1. If Malay indeed did emerge in West Borneo to later travel to other regions of archipelagic and peninsular Southeast Asia, it seems safe to assume that the original Malay-speaking population, or at least part of it, was a set of coastal tribal peoples, and we know that the Austronesian-speaking populations of those times already had a good knowledge of boats and navigation. Then, why and how did Malay spread away from West Borneo?

First, a time frame should be ascribed to those questions. What do we know for facts? Taking here for granted that Malay emerged in West Borneo, we only know that in Srivijaya (Palembang) Malay was spoken c. 680 AD, and that around 670 AD Srivijaya subdued the kingdom of Malayu (likely located at Jambi), which, given its name, very probably spoke Malay. So, what happened with Malay between, say, 200 BC and 650 AD?

I tend to concur with Peter Bellwood's suggestion that "Malay" trade would have been a crucial factor in the dissemination of the Malay language. Those coastal tribal peoples could have taken their wares to Bangka and the southeastern part of Sumatra, and even Java, not to mention other parts of the coasts of Borneo itself. If I understand him correctly, Bellwood would contemplate "prehistoric" trade (in, e.g., "Malay" pottery), that is, before the emergence of organized polities. So far as we can assume from the available archaeological data, this "incipient state-formation stage" can be dated to, at the latest, the third or second century BC.

Around that time, trading polities likely were emerging in southeastern Sumatra. As we know, trade with India apparently was already in operation by the third century BC. The process of "Indianization" proper, initially focused on the Malay peninsula's isthmus region, then spread to the Straits region, sooner or later introducing there certain concepts of authority and kingship. In my opinion, the question of the emergence of one or more trading polities on West Borneo's coast then becomes relevant to that of a more widespread dissemination of Malay.

At this juncture, two options are available. One would speculate that coastal southeastern

Sumatran populations already spoke Malay, thanks to intense interisland "Malay" peddling. But would the dissemination of Malay, here as a trade vernacular, have not remained relatively modest? Another would reflect that Malay could not have diffused broadly before the emergence of a regional network of trading polities. This, of course, would include one or more such polities on the West coast of Borneo, which, we can reasonably assume, spoke Malay. And we have no evidence that other trading polities in the region did.

Moreover, even though Malay-speaking peoples might have been the most prominent interisland traders -- between West Borneo, Southeast Sumatra and the tip of the Malay peninsula -- prior to the establishment of trading polities in Sumatra, and perhaps also elsewhere, would their continued prominence have been possible without the emergence of such polities on Borneo's west coast, to the extent that their language could indeed have retained prominence as a trade vernacular throughout the region?

So, somehow, if we accept the "Borneo homeland" hypothesis and wish to explain the diffusion of Malay to the Straits region, it seems that we have to make the assumption of a coastal West Borneo trading polity emerging just as early as others in Sumatra, *i.e.*, around 200 BC.

2. The Kapuas River basin is the largest of archipelagic and peninsular Southeast Asia -- a fact often overlooked by archaeologists focusing on the Peninsula or Sumatra -- and, in terms of forest or mining products, its potential resources well exceed those of any other river basin. So, whenever certain commodities came into demand by the long-distance maritime trade networks, the Kapuas basin certainly became a major source of products in the region and a prime target for the trade ships. For all purposes, the West Borneo coast undoubtedly was a "favoured coast," as Wolters put it.

Intensifying trade, with associated Indian cultural influences, led to the crystallization of certain coastal tribal chiefdoms into petty trading kingdoms. Due to a total lack, to date, of archaeological investigation in West Kalimantan, we have no idea about where those kingdoms developed, or how, between the last century BC and the first centuries AD.

It is relevant to note that, prior to the founding of the Pontianak sultanate, which managed to establish a monopoly over the whole Kapuas trade, the Kapuas delta area, unhealthy and unsafe, was not the traditional trade outlet. Instead, it seems, the old trade route went from the lower Kapuas (Sanggau) across to the Pawan and Simpang rivers via the Sekadau River, to reach the coast farther south, in the Sukadana and Teluk Melano area. That good mooring bay, the only one along the whole West Kalimantan coast, was probably easy for ships to find, behind the salient Karimata Island peak and further marked by a conspicuous mountain (Gunung Palung) a short distance inland. I submit that it is in the Sukadana Bay area that the site of a major early port, dealing with the whole Kapuas trade, should be sought.

By 400 AD, Kutai already was a somewhat notable kingdom, and considering that Kutai was lying off the main trade routes, West Kalimantan, although not located along the best possible maritime route either, could in all likelihood have been home, in the first centuries AD, to a more important trading kingdom than Kutai. Naturally, the development of long-distance trade in gold and forest products would not have precluded the continued, short-distance trade in local manufactured goods such as pottery.

As for the relations between the West Borneo polity or polities and other polities in Sumatra and elsewhere, we can only speculate, in order to explain the continued spread of the Malay

language, that one Bornean "Malay" kingdom developed not only into a trading power of some consequence but also into an active maritime (shipping) power, in contrast with polities on Bangka, the southeastern coast of Sumatra, and the tip of the Malayan Peninsula, which might have been somewhat more "passive" harbors, though possibly wealthier and even politically more significant. In this respect, the Bornean kingdom would bear a similitude with the later Bugis or Makassar maritime power, as opposed to North Javanese harbor polities.

It may even be contemplated that, at some point (5th or 6th century AD?) the West Bornean king, keen on keeping an edge on his neighbors in the international maritime trade, moved his seat of power to southeastern Sumatra, a more strategic location, to establish (or take over) another kingdom, later known as Malayu, and left his former Bornean capital to a younger brother or a vassal king. This certainly was standard operating procedure for trading kingdoms, as attested in the later history of the Straits. Such a move could reconcile the "Borneo homeland" hypothesis and the existence of a "Malayu" kingdom in Sumatra.

Later on, possibly with the intensification of the maritime trade between Western regions (the Persian Gulf and India) and China, the Bornean harbor (Sukadana Bay area or elsewhere) could have found itself in a commercially and politically peripheral position -- although it certainly continued providing trade products in large quantities. (Much later, with the advent of Pontianak, Sukadana Bay truly became a backwater area.)

With an important and commercially aggressive "Malay" fleet, the Malay language may then have been promoted to the status of a regional language through its function as a trading lingua franca. It may also have benefited, along with the "Malay" culture (see below), from the prestige associated with an important polity and from royal intermarriage and alliances. After "Malay" kings moved to Sumatra, the centers of "Malay" culture definitively shifted to the Straits region, and the subsequent, more massive spread of the Malay language may have originated in those new centers. Therefore, "Malay" culture, although Borneo might well have been its original cradle, possibly only started developing into a major regional culture after it became firmly established on Sumatra.

In any event, it seems that most researchers are in agreement to reject the idea of "migration" in the sense of massive movements of population to explain the diffusion of Malay to faraway places overseas. Indeed, it is not necessary to consider such movements. If the Malay language did originate in West Borneo, it certainly did spread to coastal areas all around the island, to the extent that, for example, Malay speakers in East Kalimantan today far outnumber the non-Malay speakers, although we do not know of any massive "Malay" migration to East Kalimantan (with the exception of recent Banjarese input). It is thus quite conceivable that the expansion of the Malay language outside Borneo likewise occurred only through a chain of trading posts and ports along the trade routes, combined with cultural prestige and aristocratic intermarriage.

3. "Malay" culture, it can be assumed, began to develop in the early trading harbors, based on trading habits and related ways of life, and incorporating a number of imported features. At that point, Malay culture in Borneo began to lose its overall congruence with Malay language, since traditional "Dayak" tribal cultures persisted in association with Malay language farther inland, hence the classic Dayak vs. Malay cultural contrast.

Malay-speaking tribal groups residing some distance to the interior at the time of the emergence of coastal kingdoms may have maintained themselves there, expanded, or migrated and, in the

process, may have undergone language diversification. In my opinion, the very existence today, in the Melawi and Pinoh river basins, of a score of separate, named Dayak groups (which I have had the opportunity to briefly survey) exhibiting distinctively "Dayak" cultural features (longhouses, secondary funerals) and speaking discrete, named Malay isolects (closely related to the Melayu dialects of Sintang and Nanga Pinoh) bears witness to this and calls for further investigation.

Conversely, West Borneo Malay-speaking groups remaining in coastal or lower-river regions may have seen the process of linguistic diversification hindered by their protracted, direct or indirect, association with Malay trading kingdoms. They even may have undergone some degree of homogenization by feedback effect from the Malay lingua franca that developed in the western part of the archipelago. Today's coastal-port Malay dialects (e.g., Sambas, Ketapang) may display evidence of this -- irrespective of the possible influence of neighboring major groups speaking Malayic isolects.

Until some time in the first half of the second millennium, it can safely be assumed that coastal traders did not penetrate very far into the hinterland, with Sintang a likely limit. Instead, the upstream peoples shipped their trade goods down to comptoirs on the lower Kapuas. Later, traders or settlers spread up the main courses of rivers, even to remote upriver places, to establish Malay settlements (e.g., on the uppermost Melawi) or clusters of settlements (e.g., the Senganan Malays upstream from Putussibau). Thus, the coastal Malay dialect(s) and culture diffused upstream, later followed by Islamization. In the process, a string of petty sultanates and lower-level Moslem polities was established at the confluence of major tributaries.

The progressive conversion to Malayness, or the Malay culture and way of life, of local riverine Dayak groups in the proximity of Malay trade posts and settlements -- a process that certainly predated by several centuries their conversion to Islam -- heavily contributed to the spread of Malay, and led to the birth to various local Malay dialects, most still bearing, more or less heavily, the imprint of the tongues of neighboring speech communities (e.g., several sub-groups of the Kutai in East Kalimantan, or the Banjar dialects in South Kalimantan).

4. Regarding West Borneo's land-oriented historical dynamics, which naturally have a bearing on its linguistic history, I would tend to believe that iron and its technology, becoming more widely available in the second half of the first millennium, played a significant role. We know that the exploitation of large iron ore deposits at the southwestern tip of the Schwaner Mountains goes back a long time. We also know that coastal people, trading polities and tribal groups alike, mostly subsisted on the Metroxylon sago palm – *lemanta*, one of the possible origins of the name Kalimantan. The interior was thinly populated, and likely by peoples relying more on tuber and root crops than on rice for their subsistence. The role, which I believe to be weighty, of such crops before the introduction of New World cultigens (e.g., cassava) in the 16th century or later certainly requires some exploration. Iron allowed for the massive opening of Borneo's inland forests, a real take-off of swidden rice farming, and for a powerful demographic expansion into the interior.

Some of the Malay-speaking tribal groups, now culturally divorced from the trading kingdoms but armed with iron tools and weapons, may then have progressed and settled farther inland, promoting swidden rice cultivation to interior groups, subduing and culturally assimilating them. The massive drive of the Iban (not a Malay-speaking group) from southwest Borneo to the north is probably related to a similar process. Their expansion in fact was as much an expansion of the dominant Iban culture to neighboring minor groups, later assimilated, as it was

an actual migration, aggressive or not, of Iban people.

It may be assumed that the circulation of people and the dissemination of ideas and artefacts, to some extent, proceed differently on land and on the seas. Contrary to some regions of the Caucasus or New Guinea, Borneo's central mountain ranges have always been permeable to people, artefacts, and ideas, as a close look at the many land routes across the island demonstrates. Nevertheless, it appears that the time factor is very important. Whereas people, artefacts, and ideas may circulate quite fast across seas, they move along very slowly across land, especially in a huge, bulky island such as Borneo. For example, iron, known on the coasts before the 10th century, did not reach the upper Mahakam or the upper Bahau before the 18th century. And by the time Islam took over trading polities on the west coast, Indian cultural features were still making their way to the uppermost Melawi and Kapuas tribal groups.

To conclude on the subject of the implications of the "Borneo as the Homeland of Malay" hypothesis for research and, more particularly, for an interdisciplinary research program, I would like to make two very brief suggestions. Firstly, it is here just as important to look landwards as it is to look seawards. To learn how Malay spread away from Borneo is certainly interesting, but it is no less interesting, though perhaps less politically stimulating, to learn how it developed within West Borneo. Secondly, full use should be made of geographers, ethnographers, and ethnohistorians -- and not just linguists and archaeologists -- to better understand, in a diachronic perspective, the physical, economic, and social factors at work -- the whys and hows.

* Institute for Research on Southeast Asia (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique and Université de Provence), Marseilles, France. Heartfelt thanks to Pierre-Yves Manguin and Sander Adelaar, who kindly offered insightful comments, as well as stern warnings regarding my natural propensity towards wild speculation, for which I remain, of course, solely responsible. And what fun would there be in history, anyway, without speculation?