Contesting Straits-Malayness: The Fact of Borneo

James T. Collins*

Through a discussion of language use in Kalimantan Barat (Western Borneo) a better understanding of cultural and sociolinguistic phenomena that are relevant to any discussion of Malay identity can be achieved. In this complex setting, the colonial nomenclature of Malay and Dayak, though widely adopted by the people of Kalimantan, does not adequately represent the intricacy and the fluidity of social relationships and identities. Colonial knowledge matches neither the results of linguistic research nor what the Malays and Dayaks know about themselves, their languages and their identities.

Although Borneo looms large at the geographic centre of the Malay world, and although most specialists agree that Borneo is the prehistoric homeland of the Malay language community, this vast land mass – the world’s third largest island – lies at the periphery of Malay studies, as if it were a low-lying coral reef barely visible on the distant horizon. The slight importance ascribed to Borneo in colonial epistemologies may be related to the island’s infertile soil, relatively sparse population, transportation obstacles and the comparatively docile ethnic groups. Beyond such economic, demographic and political factors, however, there has been an aesthetic obstacle: the romantic construct of Borneo. Joseph Conrad’s frank studies in human frailty and desperation should have taught the world something about the realities of Borneo, but the White Ranee, queen of the head hunters, and Oxford as well as Camel overland expeditions yet hold a stronger grip on imaginings of Borneo than Lord Jim or Almayer’s Folly.

*James T. Collins is a Professor at the Institute of the Malay World and Civilisation, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. aHis email address is pshatma@pkrisc.cc.ukm.my
I am grateful to Bernd Nothofer, Amin Sweeney and Shamsul A. B. for discussions about some of the topics in this essay. Their insights and suggestions were most helpful, however the errors and generalisations remain my own doing.

1 In the last decade, numerous Austronesian linguists have argued in favour of this homeland hypothesis. For the most important works, see R. A. Blust, ‘Malay Historical Linguistics: A Progress Report’, in Rekonstruksi dan Cabang-Cabang Induk Bahasa Melayu Induk, ed. Mohd. Thani Ahmad and Zaint Mohamed Zain (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1988), pp. 1-33; K. A. Adelaar, Proto-Malayic: The Reconstruction of its Phonology and Parts of its Lexicon and Morphology, Pacific Linguistics C-119 (Canberra: Australian National University, 1992); Bernd Nothofer, ‘Migrasi Orang Melay Purba Kajian Awal’, Sari, 14 (1996): 33-52; and James T. Collins, ‘The Malays and non-Malays of Kalimantan Barat: Evidence from the Study of Language’, paper presented at Conference on Tribal Communities in the Malay World, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (Singapore), 24-27 March 1997. Peter Bellwood, Prehistory of the Indo-Malayans Archipelago, rev. edn (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997) provides an archaeological framework that accommodates this linguistic hypothesis, a hypothesis that rests on well-established principles of comparative historical linguistics (see Nothofer’s above-mentioned work for an overview of the methodology). On 10-11 April 2001, the Institute of the Malay World and Civilisation (ATMA), in cooperation with Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, organised a Colloquium on ‘Borneo as the Homeland of Malay: Implications for Research’. The papers Blust, Nothofer, Adelaar and Bellwood presented shed new light on this hypothesis and laid the groundwork for ATMA’s current research project focused on testing the hypothesis. The essay presented here, however, is not concerned with the validity of this homeland hypothesis. Rather, it offers a preliminary description of language affiliation and ethnic identity based on the analysis of contemporary language use and language attitudes among some speech communities in Kalimantan Barat.
Surely, the time has come to discard Orientalistic geographies of the Malay world. Borneo is not a distant, exotic atoll; rather, it is the central island of the Malay Archipelago and should be a focal point in Malay studies. It is also time to reject Orientalistic views of Malays and Malayness. The Malay world is not a simple dichotomy of Sumatra and the Peninsula – a noetic dualism not coincidently marked by a colonial boundary line. Borneo and the Malays of Borneo merit attention not simply because of the large number of the latter, nor because of the antiquity of the homeland in Borneo. Borneo offers vantage points from which to view the process of creating and recreating Malayness. To cross over ‘the perpetually drawn and perpetually blurred boundaries that British imperialism has left behind’; it is necessary to reconnoitre beyond the Melaka Straits.

In this preliminary essay, I can only present a few glimpses of the linkages of language and identity in Borneo. Identity, according to Aamer Hussein, is dynamic, multidimensional, composite and continually defining itself. Linguistics can only contribute some insights and pose some questions. In the space allotted here, then, I will limit my discussion first, to a short overview of language and society in western Borneo (Kalimantan Barat, Indonesia) and second, to a linguist’s views of three Malay-speaking areas in that region. The conclusion will take up the issue of academic and indigenous classification, and consider the implications of the phenomena studied in Borneo.

Language and society in Kalimantan Barat

Kalimantan Barat, Indonesia’s westernmost province on Borneo, is characterised by a large number of languages and dialects. In addition to the indigenous languages under discussion here, the province has a large Chinese immigrant population, especially centred around the cities of Singkawang and Pontianak. Indeed, province-wide estimates of ethnic Chinese – many of whom still speak Chinese languages as their home language – range between 11 and 12 per cent of the total population of 3.5 million people. Much smaller communities include speakers of Madurese (2 per cent), Javanese (3 per cent) and Bugis (5 per cent); these groups are largely clustered around urban areas.

Still, about 80 per cent of the total population of Kalimantan Barat is ‘Malay’ or ‘Dayak’. Typically, estimates of the province-wide population identify the largest ethnic group as Dayak at around 41 per cent, with Malays comprising the remaining 39 per cent. In this article, the term ‘Malay’ refers to Muslims who speak a Borneo Malay variant as their home language. Ordinary usage in Kalimantan itself refers to autochthonous people of Borneo who are not Muslims as ‘Dayak’; although some Muslims also consider themselves Dayak. Most Dayaks in Kalimantan Barat speak Malayic variants - that is, languages that are closely related to Malay or even, in some cases (as we shall see), dialects of Malay. For example, unofficial estimates of the Kendayan, an
autochthonous group of Malayic-speakers in the northwestern part of the province, reach a half million. Moreover, Ibanic groups (Iban, Kantu, Mualang, Ketungau and others), a major branch of Malayic, probably approach that total as well, and there are also a number of smaller Malayic groups; for example, about 70,000 Dayaks in the southernmost part of the province, Ketapang regency, speak at least three or four Malayic variants. Thus, the number of first-language speakers of diverse Malayic variants – both Malays and Dayaks – in Kalimantan Barat probably exceeds 2 million.

This section provides information about the geographical distribution of these Malayic variants as well as other indigenous Austronesian languages spoken in the province, with a focus on Malayic variants spoken within roughly 200 kilometres of the coast because most information available so far has been collected in that long narrow strip. In a 1997 study, I provided a brief description of language distribution further in the interior. For example, non-Malayic, Austronesian subgroups, speakers of Tamanic, Kayan and Ot Danum, can be found in the headwater regions. In the hilly and montane areas that lie within 100 to 200 kilometres of the coast of the northern part of Kalimantan Barat, there are scattered many small groups speaking a wide range of variants that can be broadly labelled ‘Bidayuhic’ (following the Sarawak term) or ‘Land Dayak’. Bidayuhic-speakers live in hamlets that extend from within westernmost Sarawak in the north all the way to the region north of the Pawan River, but this cluster of Austronesian languages is not very closely related to Malay and, tentatively, has been excluded from the Malayic subgroup. However, some of Malay, who speak Malay dialects, and non-Malays, some of whom speak separate languages such as Iban and some of whom who speak variants which appear to be Malay dialects. This naming praxis parallels other language nomenclature. For example, ‘Germanic’ refers to separate languages, such as English and German, but also to variants that are apparently mutually intelligible, such as Swedish and Norwegian. For a discussion of Malayic and its members, see Adelaar, Proto-Malayic.


12 ‘Bidayuh’ is the term widely used in Malaysia to refer to those communities of western Sarawak that speak closely related languages, for example Jagos, Biatah and others. Bidayuh is derived from bi ('person') and dayuh ('interior'), but here the term is used to refer narrowly to the language group that Hudson, following colonial nomenclature, called ‘Land Dayak’. ‘Land Dayak’ was chosen as an exonym that contrasted with ‘Sea Dayak’, the colonial term for the Iban group of Sarawak. Because ‘Sea Dayak’ is no longer used as an exonym referring to Iban groups, the usefulness of its contrastive dyad, ‘Land Dayak’, seems questionable. In view of the growing use of terms like ‘Malayic’, ‘Ibanic’ and ‘Tamanic’ to refer to clusters of languages and dialects in Borneo, I propose using ‘Bidayuhic’ to refer to the widespread and diverse group of languages formerly known as ‘Land Dayak’. Collins, ‘Klasifikasi Varian Melayik di Ketapang’; A. B. Hudson, ‘A Note on Selako: Malayic Dayak and Land Dayak languages in Western Borneo’, Sarawak Museum Journal, 18 (1970): 301-18.

13 In fact, in the upper reaches of the Laur River, a north-side tributary of the Pawan River itself, there are more than 500 speakers of a Bidayuhic variant in the village of Selangkut (Aleksandra, personal communication, 17 Sept. 1998).

these variants have attained local importance and some Malayic-speakers have acquired fluency in Bidayuhic variants—a bilingualism that may account for the occurrence of some Bidayuhic words in the basic vocabulary of various Malayic variants.

To the west and south of this tier of hills largely (but not exclusively) inhabited by the Bidayuhic groups, lie the complicated waterways of Kalimantan Barat’s three main rivers, namely the Sambas, Kapuas and Pawan Rivers. In these three roughly parallel riverine systems, the deltas, swamps, flood plains and islands stretch north-to-south about 100 kilometres from the coast. It is there that most of the speakers of Malayic variants live. Although some scholars classify large stretches of these riverine systems as ‘uninhabited areas’, this does not seem to be the case. While some swamps in the Kapuas River delta area may be only sparsely populated, older records indicate that other areas have been populated continuously for a long time, and this view matches the oral traditions of some of the Dayak groups who even now live there, for example Bagan Asam, also in the Kapuas delta.

The antiquity of the occupation of these riverine territories by Malayic-speakers partly accounts for the language diversity in the region. Even if we only consider those Malayic variants spoken by Muslims, that is, ‘canonical’ Malay dialects, the diversity is remarkable. Recent surveys conducted in Kalimantan Barat identify no fewer than five major canonical Malay dialects spoken in the province (Sambas, Landak, Pontianak, Ketapang and Ulu Kapuas). The tentative classification and rough mapping now available for these dialects already constitute a significant improvement over the somewhat agnostic and most uninformative label ‘western coastal Malay’ offered by Stephen A. Wurm and Shiro Hattori as a cover term for all the kinds of Malay spoken anywhere in the province. Nonetheless, much work still remains to be done.

In addition to these Malay dialects spoken along the western Borneo littoral and the banks of its major rivers, there are numerous other Malayic variants in the lowlands and scattered hills of the region. The villages and hamlets where these non-Malay Malayic variants are spoken are either interspersed with Malay-dialect-speaking communities or occupy distinct territories, sometimes near Malay villages but just as often distant from, or at least non-contiguous to, Malay-dialect-speaking areas. Dozens of names, usually based on a village, valley or clan name, are used to list these variants. Recent studies provide overviews of these Malayic variants, including the Kendayan group in the northwest, the so-called ‘Dayak Tebang’ group near the delta of the Kapuas River (a region often labelled ‘uninhabited’ in contemporary linguistic atlases), the Kayung-Pesaguan group in the southern part of the province and the Ulu Jelai group in the southeasternmost part of the province. Other Malayic variants are also spoken in the Ketapang residency, including Gerai, Randau Jeka’, Kenyabur and Beginci as well as a cluster of related Malayic variants along the Laur River, a northern branch of the Pawan.

In Borneo, as elsewhere in Southeast Asia, topography plays a significant role in the patterns of language diffusion. To some degree, the tier of foothills and mountains that stretches southward from western Sarawak apparently blocked or at least restricted and funnelled the expansion of

15 Language Atlas of the Pacific Area, ed. Wurm and Hattori, Sheet 42.
16 See, for example, P.J. Veth, Borneo’s wester-afdeeling. Geographisch, statistisch, historisch (Zaltbommel: Joh. Noman en Zoon, 1854).
17 Collins ‘The Malays and non-Malays of Kalimantan Barat’.
18 Ibid., and Nothofer, ‘Klasifikasi vari-an-vari Melayik’.
19 Language Atlas of the Pacific Area, ed. Wurm and Hattori.
20 Collins ‘The Malays and non-Malays of Kalimantan Barat’ and ‘Klasifikasi Varian Melayik di Ketapang’.
Malayic languages to the east. Moreover, communities speaking a non-Malayic language, ‘Bidayuhic’, in a large number of dialects, inhabited these highlands. This barrier, however, was penetrated and passed by travelling along the broad Kapuas River to the other side of the tier to the expanse of swamps and wetlands in the Kapuas lakes area and to other major ‘north-south’ tributaries like the Belitang and Ketungau Rivers. As the land flattened before them into alluvial plains and swamps, the Malayic-speakers, represented by today’s diverse Ibanic dialect communities, especially speakers of Mualang, Sebruang, Ketungau, Kantu‘ and Iban, spread out and occupied this familiar environment. Malayic-speakers remaining in the waterways to the west of the Bidayuhic tier similarly dispersed and, as did the Ibanic branch in the Kapuas lakes area, diversified into a large number of closely related but often socially mutually exclusive dialects and languages. The process yielded today’s complex distribution of 2 million Malayic-speakers in Kalimantan Barat.

The second part of this paper considers three Malayic language networks along the Landak, Sekadau and Melawi Rivers – all tributaries of the great Kapuas River. There, patterns of relation and exclusion define identity.

**Language and identity along three Kapuas tributaries**

During an early survey of languages in the Ketapang regency (September 1996), I visited several Malay and Dayak villages on the tributaries of the Pesaguan and Pawan Rivers. In one of the Malay villages, Pebihingan, a Muslim hamlet where Ketapang Malay is spoken, respondents often disagreed about the status of some lexical items in their language. One person would volunteer a vocabulary item, but another would state emphatically that that word was not Malay, but Dayak. This process of elicitation and revision occurred frequently during that session. The lexical canon of Malay in Pebihingan did not include all the vocabulary known and used by the respondents. However, in another Malay village, Nanga Tayap, just a few hours by motorcycle from Pebihingan, where Ketapang Malay is also the home language, respondents offered a wide range of vocabulary, including terms specifically rejected in Pebihingan. When queried about those terms, they replied: ‘Well that’s our language; that’s how we talk.’

Subdialects of Malay, of course, often display lexical differences. What interested me was the difference in perception about the status of those words. There was a clear difference in language attitude and social constructs. The lexical repertoire in Pebihingan and Nanga Tayap was the same but the social features ascribed to some items of the lexicon were different. Respondents in the more rural and isolated village of Pebihingan insisted on a purist canon of Malay vocabulary; the Malays of Nanga Tayap, whose village forms part of a small town, with shops and the administrative offices appropriate to a district (kecamatan) capital, rejected such lexical prescriptivism.

Following from this description of an unexpected encounter with two language ‘policies’ in the Pawan River area, this section touches on the connections between language and society along three different tributaries of the Kapuas River basin.

**The Landak River**

The Landak River is a major tributary of the Kapuas debouching in the Kapuas delta in Pontianak city. About 100 kilometres upriver from the mouth of the Landak River, the district capital of Ngabang is sited around the kraton of the former Malay sultanate, which traces its genealogy back roughly 600 years. The distribution of communities which speak the dialect of Malay historically associated with this sultanate extends beyond today’s district territory; many
upriver branches of the Landak River, now assigned to different administrative districts, include villages where Landak Malay is the home language. Yet, the total number of home-language Landak Malay-speakers is not large because they form a minority in a region where most inhabitants speak Kendayan variants as their home language.

In February 1998, I took part in joint research, involving fieldworkers from Universitas Tanjungpura and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, in four upriver villages, Jata’, Darit, Betung and Meranti’, located on two major tributaries of the Landak River, namely on the Menyuke and Behe Rivers. The results of that survey have not yet been published but some preliminary observations can be reported here.23

First, the recordings and wordlists collected in these villages indicate that the kind of Malay spoken along the Menyuke and Behe Rivers must be classified with the Malay spoken in and around the kraton of Ngabang, although the distance separating those villages from Ngabang is considerable, and would have been especially so at a time when the rivers were the chief means of transportation. For example, of these four villages, Jata’ is the closest to Ngabang, but when travel was still accomplished by poling boats down the Menyuke River, the trip from this, the closest village, would take three nights and four days; with a motorised boat the time could have been reduced by one day. Nonetheless, despite the historical and contemporary isolation of these villages, there is a remarkable uniformity in vocabulary and grammar among all the Landak Malay variants studied thus far.

Second, although the Malays living in Kampung Raja of Ngabang are seldom fluent in the Kendayan language spoken in the villages all around them, many, if not most Malays in the Menyuke and Behe River villages are bilingual in Landak Malay and Kendayan. Local Kendayan-speakers vouch for the fluency claimed by these Malay villagers. For example, Betung, the Malay village furthest up the Menyuke, is a small hamlet of perhaps 20 houses, too small to merit an elementary school, and children walk to the nearest Dayak village to attend classes there. Cash income is chiefly obtained from digging up and collecting sand from the bottom of the Menyuke and selling it by the truckload to contractors. Most of the Betung villages can speak Kendayan (Ahe variant) besides Landak Malay. This fact was not only reported by Malay and Dayak respondents, but also surfaced in the collection of a wordlist. Moreover, the Kendayan-speakers of this area are bilingual in Kendayan and Landak Malay; in fact, some Kendayan-speakers use Malay more often and speak it with more confidence than they do Kendayan. Bilingualism is widespread among both the Malays and Dayaks of the Menyuke and Behe River systems.

Third, this bilingualism has had an impact on the Malay sub-dialects spoken in these river systems but not on the Malays’ allegiance to Landak Malay. When participating in a working session to elicit basic vocabulary, the Malay respondents in Betung often mentioned the term bahasa orang kampung (‘the language of the kampong people’). For example, when asked the word for ‘neck’, a respondent offered [tege] but the chief respondent definitively rejected this; ‘bahasa kampung’ was his dismissive assessment. It wasn’t Malay. Similarly, the term [mangçadup] was also offered for ‘to butcher, to cut up’ but rejected as ‘bahasa kampung’. Several other words suggested by various respondents participating in the session, such as [kitar] ‘you (plural)’ and [sapit] ‘ill(?),’ were also considered ‘bahasa kampung’.

In Betung – as in all Malay kampongs visited in the Menyuke and Behe River systems, the

23 I am grateful to Professor Mahmud Akil, S. H., then Rector of Universitas Tanjungpura, who designated Dr Chairil Effendi as my research counterpart. Dr Chairil Effendi has proven a particularly resilient and insightful colleague, whose participation in the fieldwork of February 1998 greatly enhanced our ability to record reliable data. It was a pleasure to work with him in Kalimantan in February and to join him on the same conference panel in Leiden the following April.
emblematic language was Landak Malay, although they also spoke Kendayan. Unlike their village language – Malay - Kendayan was (merely?) the language of the other; it was the kampong language. Ideologically, these Malays were not orang kampung; indeed, the collocation ‘orang kampung’ had already acquired an idiomatic (euphemistic?) strength and simply meant the indigenous non-Malay (non-Muslim) peoples around them. Thus, in the upper tributaries of the Landak River, there are drawn clear ethnic and linguistic lines in a very strong bilingual setting.

The Sekadau River
About 300 kilometres upriver from Pontianak, the Sekadau River meets the Kapuas River in a swampy estuary. The town of Sekadau on the banks of the river is a large and lively market centre with many shops, inns, schools and government and church offices, located on the road that links the far interior of the Kapuas basin with Pontianak. Sekadau was the seat of a Malay principedom that vied with the Sanggau kingdom downriver for regional supremacy. Moreover, the numerous archaeological sites found so far on the Sekadau River or nearby, including a Sanskrit-language memorial tablet, attest to the antiquity of this settlement. Data about this dialect of Malay were collected in 1995 and 1996; a brief survey of Malay and other languages spoken near Sekadau was conducted in April 1996 as well. Unlike the Malay communities on the Menyuke and Behe Rivers, the Malays of Sekadau generally do not speak Dayak languages, such as Mualang, an Ibanic language spoken near Sekadau on the Belitang River or any of the numerous Bidayuhic variants spoken in several hamlets along the Upper Sekadau River and its tributaries. Bilingualism does not appear to be common among the Malays in the bustling cluster of villages that make up Sekadau town.

In Sekadau, the dialect of Malay does not differ greatly from the dialect documented under the sobriquet Ulu Kapuas Malay. As noted above, Ulu Kapuas Malay is one of the ‘canonical’ dialects of Malay in Kalimantan Barat. A number of innovations distinguish it from other Malay dialects in Borneo. For example, Proto-Malayic *a in penultimate position shifts to a back round vowel, [ɔ] or [ɔ]; so, *betis ‘calf’ > [botis], *kaniq ‘forehead’ > [konin]. Also final nasals not preceded by a nasal at the beginning of the syllable undergo consonantal diphthongisation whereby the final nasal is ‘stretched’ into an occlusive-nasal cluster; so, *makan ‘eat’ > [makatn], *tulan ‘bone’ > [tulaŋ], but *kanan ‘rightside’ > [kanan].

Recently, I compared four variants spoken in this region of the Kapuas, including the variant of Sekadau. The conclusion was that all four variants were closely related, and probably subdialects of the same Malay dialect, Ulu Kapuas. Two of the variants, Sekadau and Kalampok, showed some
indications of a closer connection, in the form of a few shared lexical innovations. For example, in both variants Proto-Malayic *lih ‘neck’ was replaced by [yoko] and *mulut ‘mouth’ by [jawa].

On the one hand, this apparent close relationship between the Sekadau and Kalampok variants is not surprising because Kalampok is spoken on the Sekadau River too, about 40 kilometres upriver. Geographic proximity as well as economic and transportation links would lead us to expect such a close connection. On the other hand, the variant in Sekadau is named Malay and spoken by Muslims, whereas the variant in Kalampok is named Dayak and spoken by Catholics. How is it that variants so closely related lexically and grammatically as to be considered by linguists as subdialects of the same Malay dialect can be considered by their speakers to be different languages?

Perhaps the Kalampok-speakers shifted to Malay at some earlier period. Yet Kalampok is not the only Dayak village that speaks this variant as the home language. Recent research conducted in the Ketapang residency (1997-98) resulted in the collection of lexical and textual materials of a Dayak variant spoken in a new hamlet resettled from the Sekadau River a generation ago. This Dayak variant (now spoken by Catholics on the upper reaches of the Keriau River in the Pawan River basin), in Kenyabur village, is very closely related to the Kalampok variant. Moreover, researchers at the Dayakology Institute in Pontianak report that many Dayak villages along the Sekadau River speak this variant, sometimes referred to as ‘Taman Sesat’. So the occurrence of a Malay dialect as the home language in Kalampok is not a unique circumstance: a whole cluster of villages spread over a rather wide geographic area speak ‘Taman Sesat’.

Just as the variant of Malay spoken in Sekadau is linked closely to a much larger network of Malay variants almost along the whole length of the Kapuas River, the variant of Dayak spoken in Kalampok is linked to a broad network of Dayak variants near the Kapuas. It is unlikely that this large group of Dayaks shifted to Malay, just as it is unlikely that the large group of Ulu Kapuas Malays shifted to Dayak. Rather, we might conclude that both the Sekadau Malays and their congeners as well as the Kalampok Dayaks and their congeners have (by and large) spoken the same language for centuries, probably before they were known as Malays or Dayaks and almost certainly before they became Muslims and Catholics.

In this case, then, in contrast to the rigid lines of language and ethnicity in Betung on the Menyuke River where Malays and Dayaks are bilingual, settlements on the Sekadau River present clear ethnic categories (Malay and Dayak) but blurred linguistic lines – all in a setting with asymmetric multilingualism where most Dayaks are fluent speakers of Ulu Kapuas Malay as well as their own home language and perhaps other Dayak languages (Mualang or a Bidayuhic variant), but the Malays (of Sekadau town, anyway) speak only Ulu Kapuas Malay.

The Melawi River

In the Landak River area, two ethnic groups maintain clear ethnic boundaries while participating in a symmetric bilingual language ecology. They share two different languages but not...
their identities. In the Sekadau River area, two ethnic groups are distinguished by a whole array of distinct cultural activities yet share the same home language. Despite their very close language affinity – probably subdialectal, they maintain separate identities. In both the Landak and Sekadau River basins, then, shared language, whether as a second language or as a first language, does not inevitably lead to shared identity.

But the situation in Kalimantan Barat offers other profiles of language and society that are more problematic. More than ten years ago, Bernard Sellato reported (but did not provide relevant published documentation about) the language situation on the Melawi River, another major tributary of the Kapuas. In the uppermost reaches of the Melawi, the people speak Ot Danum, a non-Malayic Austronesian language related to languages of Central Borneo, but elsewhere along the same river, a variant of Malay is spoken by Malays and non-Malays alike, albeit with some subdialectal variation.

In February 1998, Yusriadi, then a graduate student in linguistics at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, carried out a brief survey of language use in and around Nanga Pinoh, more than 400 kilometres from Pontianak in the middle reaches of the Melawi River. Again results are still tentative but merit mention within the present context. Wordlists, narratives and traditional oral art forms were collected and tape-recorded in three villages: Nanga Pinoh, Kebebu and Ponal.

Nanga Pinoh is a district capital, with shops, offices, schools, mosques and churches; the market bristles with satellite receiving dishes. Like Sekadau, it began as a collection of Malay hamlets, Muslim for centuries. Located about 30 kilometres upriver from Nanga Pinoh, Kebebu (also known as Nanga Kabebu) is a small hamlet whose inhabitants converted to Islam and thus became Malay about three generations ago. Less than 7 kilometres downriver from Kebebu is the hamlet of Ponal, which only recently (within the last 20-30 years) converted to Catholicism and so remained Dayak. Thus, Malay-Muslim ethnicity includes Malays who have been recognised as Malays for as long as anyone remembers, as well as Malays who acknowledge that their original non-Muslim (animist) grandparents became the first Muslims of the village.

One way to view this Melawi pattern reported by Yusriadi is that there are again two ethnic groups: Malays, both ‘old’ as well as ‘new’, and non-Malays, that is Dayaks. But the available language data do not support that classification because all three communities speak Malay as the home language and the Malay dialect that they speak is the same. Moreover, the ‘new’ Malays speak a subdialect closer to that of the ‘new’ Catholics than to that of the ‘old’ Malays. So, linguistic analysis suggests not a bipolar classification of Malays and Dayaks, but rather a continuum of Malay-speakers. From a linguistic perspective all these Malay variants are closely related and can be considered subdialects of the same Malay dialect.

Apparently there is again conflict between academic, linguistic classification and acknowledged, indigenous social networks. Just as in the Sekadau basin, Malays and Dayaks along the Melawi River speak the same home language, in this case apparently the same subdialect. But, there is still the dualistic nomenclature – the ‘Malay/Dayak’ distinction, now prevalent in Kalimantan Barat, which does not recognise the linkages and continuities discerned by linguists. However, recent developments in the Melawi area indicate that local knowledge does not always

---

32 Yusriadi, born about 700 kilometres upriver from the Kapuas delta, is himself a speaker of a variant of Ulu Kapuas Malay closely related to the kind of Malay spoken in the Melawi River basin. I am grateful for his strong contribution to the UKM-Untan cooperative project, in particular for the data collected during his Melawi field trip.
33 Personal communication, Yusriadi, 28 February 1998.
conflict with academic analysis. Yusriadi reported that in the past ten years, the Muslims of Kebebu have been active in asserting their identity, not as Malays as their grandparents had, but as members (warga) of the Katap Kebahan ethnic group, an identity which encompasses the Muslims of Kebebu and many other Muslim villages (but not Nanga Pinoh) as well as even more non-Muslim villages, many of them Catholic like Ponal.

A 1998 calendar-poster produced and circulated by Muslims of Kebebu reflects these findings. More than half of the space is allocated to a large photograph of the largest mosque in Asia, Mesjid Istiqal in Jakarta, and a schedule of Islamic prayer times, again in Jakarta. However, the largest lettering in the poster, exceeding even the dates of the calendar itself, is the line reading IKATAN WARGA KATAP KEBAHAN (‘The Association of Katap Kebahan Members’ - IWKK), followed by a list of 84 villages and hamlets belonging in this network (with a note that there are some villages not yet included in the list). This 84-village list includes both Muslim villages, like No. 27 Nanga Kabebu, and non-Muslim villages, like No. 25 Ponal.

Linguistic research in the Melawi River basin has only begun, so it is impossible to comment on the language classification of these 84 villages, or to provide sociolinguistic information about language attitudes and ethnic allegiance. However, the fact that at least some Malays can affirm an alternative ethnicity that encompasses Malays and non-Muslims alike is of immediate interest to the notion of contesting Malay identity. As in the Sekadau river system, speaking the Malay language as a first, home language is not an automatic marker of Malay identity. Other identities can be chosen and affirmed.

Concluding remarks

Kalimantan Barat presents a wide range of cultural and sociolinguistic phenomena that are relevant to any discussion of Malay identity. One would expect this to be the case in the very homeland of the Malay language, where for the last 2,000 years Malay-speakers have been in contact with speakers of other closely related languages, and where Malay-speaking Muslim societies interact daily with Malay-speaking non-Muslim societies. In this complex setting, the colonial nomenclature of Malay and Dayak, though widely adopted by the people of Kalimantan, does not adequately represent the intricacy and the fluidity of social relationships and identities. Colonial knowledge matches neither the results of linguistic research nor what the Malays and Dayaks know about themselves, their languages and their identities.

In Kalimantan Barat it is possible to find groups which are equally fluent in the same two languages but do not share ethnicity, like the Betung Malays and their neighbours, Kendayan-speakers of Ahe, in the upper reaches of the Landak River. There are even groups which speak the same dialect, like the Malays and the (‘Taman Sesat’) Dayaks of the Sekadau River, yet do not share ethnicity. In contrast to settings of shared languages but distinct identities, there exist other cultural settings where language and dialect are shared but ethnic lines are blurred, or, rather, likely to shift, as they shift even now in the Melawi River basin.

Identity is a matter of choice; it is dynamic, invented and imagined. Language can serve as an emblem of identity, but it cannot serve as a yardstick to establish identity. The nineteenth-century paradigm of nationalism based on a monolingual, monocultural society is not relevant in Borneo, nor in many other parts of the Malay Archipelago.

34 For more information, see Shamsul’s contribution in this issue.
35 In a survey of multilingualism, identity and changing notions of nationism in Europe, Eric Hobsbawm observes that Balkanisation of language and identity has emerged as a political alternative to plurilingualism. Eric Hobsbawm, ‘Language, Culture and National Identity,’ Social Research, 63 (1996): 1065-80. I would like to thank my colleague at Goethe-Universität in Frankfurt, Klaus Schreiner, who first directed my attention to Hobsbawm’s essay.
Scholars must be careful not to exoticise, or ostracise, the situation in Borneo. They should not be hasty in saying that ‘Well, perhaps, in Borneo this may be so, but not in the Malay heartland, along the Straits of Melaka.’ In Sumatra, Riau and the Malay Peninsula there exist numerous communities of Malay-speakers who are not Muslims and therefore are not acknowledged as Malay. The Temuan and Jakun groups of the southern part of Malay Peninsula all speak Malay as their home language but display numerous cultural differences with other Malay-speakers in West Malaysia. The Kubu, Lubu, Sakai and other Malay-speaking groups of Sumatra by and large are neither Muslims nor Malay, just as many of the Orang Laut groups of the Riau and Lingga Islands have maintained a separate identity despite their allegiance to Malay as their home language. A closer study of these groups may reveal complicated and diverse ways of asserting identity and using language.

Certainly, on the peripheries of the Malay world there have been historical shifts in identity. In Capetown, South Africa, a community originating only in part from Southeast Asia became known as the Cape Malays. But in the mid-twentieth century, in the face of apartheid and thus the need for wider alliances, they renamed themselves South African Muslims, an identity they asserted until quite recently, when they now usually identify themselves again as Cape Malays, although they do not speak Malay as a home language or even as a second or third language, being generally bilingual in Afrikaans and English instead.

In southern Thailand some Muslim Malay-speakers assert their identity as Muslim-Thai or simply Thai, rather than Malay. This is the result of a long history of assimilation policies in Thailand. On the other hand, in central Thailand, tens of thousands of Muslims still consider themselves Malay, though most of them do not speak Malay at all; their home language is Central Thai. However, in northern Malaysia on the island of Langkawi, Paktai, a language closely related to standard Thai, is spoken as the home language in several villages on the north coast of the island; yet these Paktai-speakers are Muslims and unequivocally affirm their Malay identity.

The aspirations and affiliations of Malays and Malay-speakers, whether they live along the remote Melawi River or in the centre of Capetown or Bangkok, reflect Penelope Corfield’s assertion that:

  a socially constructed and socially negotiated language implies a linguistic community to construct and use it, and in using it, to develop and re-create it ... Languages are used and articulated within historical contexts, as part of the complex experience of human society. ... Language cannot evade history.

Only by studying the social history of the social phenomena related to language and society can we expect to reach a deeper, humanistic explanation of the relationship of language and identity.
