

**NARRATIVES OF MALAYSIAN INDIGENOUS
PEOPLES: A HISTORICAL LINGUISTIC STUDY OF
THEIR MIGRATION AND SETTLING DOWN BY
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BOOK REVIEW

Sharifah Sophia Ahmad
Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities
Universiti Malaysia Sarawak
(wassophia@unimas.my)
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There was a time when a valid source for knowing about the past came exclusively from reading academic historiography. History, a scientific discipline, carries objectivity that deals with facts and the writing of history is founded on the meticulous examination and the chain referencing of written sources. Later, the unquestionable faith in scientific historiography came under scrutiny when science was often taken as a coded reference to elitism in active denial of the common folk whose stories often did not get to be written down by the learned elites. *The Narratives of Malaysian Indigenous People* can be placed among the revivalist works whose stream of thought assumes that the past needs to be democratised by taking into account those social groups whose visions and voices were unwritten. Professor Asmah Haji Omar had produced a mesmerising account based on the oral, folk narratives which had long before been viewed with suspect by a professional historian. The author is a doyen of Malay language and linguistics, her longstanding interest and specialism took her to every ethnolinguistic groups in Malaysia and beyond. This is her latest intellectual footprint on the field of Malay language and linguistics in general, and significantly, to the collective memory of the people in Malaysia, represented by the diverse ethnolinguistic groups in Sarawak, Sabah and the Peninsula. Far from being an exercise in eulogizing the bygone past, Professor Asmah enjoins that the

examination of the oral narration must be subjected to linguistic sciences of which she is the authority.

The inclusion of linguistic factors in the reconstruction of the people's movement is a fascinating approach for a reader to be acquainted with. It adds objectivity to the folk narratives that warrant a respectable reading. Professor Asmah explains that the "linguistic elements (the "phylogenetic aspects" and "lexical items"), are all valuable data which can be used in support of the reconstruction done under historical geolinguistics" (p. 17). They reveal the interconnection of language and people as they moved in space and time; the language was developed into more or less diverse or retained its unitary system, and in a few cases, were rendered into extinction. Hence, the author is practical in her choice of amalgamating sources of folk narrative that yielded a reasonable amount of historical and linguistic data. The sources came from four provenances: those which were obtained in the course of fieldwork; accounts recorded from the informant and published in the language spoken; a narrative which has been rendered in Malay and English from an indigenous language; and literary writing in a fashion of Malay hikayat. Common in these contents was the coexistence of facts and myths, which Professor Asmah gently reminds her reader that the mythical component has a limited role in those accounts as they typically appear "in places in the texts where they contribute to the thread of the story, giving support to a particular theme ...". That was the extent where the narrator/scribe imagination begins and ends, and the rest, the author insists, "contain facts ..." (p. 23)

The Narratives is a *tour de force* account of the migratory movement of ethnic groups from their homeland to where they eventually built a permanent settlement. The author devoted three chapters to present those narratives from the 26 ethnic groups in Sarawak (Chapter 2), the 11 groups in Sabah, which include Kadazan, Dusun, Paitan, Orang Sungai, Murut, Bajau, Suluk, Ilanun, Bisayah, Malay and Kadayan (Chapter 3) and the three indigenous racial groupings in the Peninsula, the Austroasiatic Orang Asli, the Austronesian Orang Asli and Malay (Chapter 4). As the present review cannot recount each ethnic group and their narratives, only certain examples from the ethnolinguistic groups in Sarawak are selected here. This is relevant for the reviewer to read the *Narratives* against the background of an ongoing debate about the place of Sarawak and Malaysia Borneo in the intellectual discourse of nationhood. The book's intellectual contribution in demonstrating the historical roots of those ethnic groups to the Peninsula and Sumatera proved the network of kinship and filiation preceded nation-state, remembered and transmitted in the continuum.

In examining each of the ethnic groups' narratives, three elements were strung together: the motivation for venturing out of the homeland; the contact with the other groups at the various points of transit was evidence the land they came to settle was not *terra nullius*; and, the effect a permanent settlement had on the linguistic system of the ethnic groups. These three elements were imposed upon those narratives and became the subjects of academic scrutiny. Upon gathering the linguistic system of the Penan groups from the Baram and the Belaga river-basins where the author was present in 1978, she found minimal diversity in their speech system. The author inferred from the linguistic data that there must have been a continuous face to face interaction between the two groups who wandered in the two separate rivers. As they settled down with the other communities, the Penan groups learned to acquire the language of the more dominant groups inhabiting the locality either of Kayan or Kenyah while retaining their own language. There were other scenarios where the settling down of the indigenous groups inevitably succumbed to a greater social force that had assimilated them into a larger social grouping. Based on the field research conducted by Professor Asmah in Marudi in 1978, she was told by her Narom informant that they were descendants of Kenyah from central Baram who had settled in Marudi and became Muslim, assuming the identity of Malay and adopted Malay culture. Similarly, the author also found that the assimilation of the settled group of Penan Niah into the local Muslim community had led to their detachment from their non-Muslim kindred. In another example, the author cites an ethnography of the Lahanan group in the Balui area by Jennifer and Paul Alexander, which found that the assimilation of the elite family of Lahanan into the Kayan aristocracy through marriage and tribute is a strategy to maintain their access to prestige and economic capital within a dominant Kayan community. The author concludes that the contrasting fortunes of the languages ensuing sedentarism between the resilient and the endangered is causally related to the ongoing contact between the speakers of a kindred language, thereby maintaining "similarities between dialects" (p. 302). It goes that a language is said to be threatened or faced extinction when those social ties between the once unified language speakers are weakened, which is a feature of a society undergoing change involving some forms of disintegration either in language or in social cohesion.

Among these outstanding explorations, there are two which strike the reviewer as captivating. One relates to the study of the 'other' language and culture as one finds them in the field. The fluidity of ethnic boundaries and the relatively pragmatic relationship to language were some of the puzzles she came across in her early years as a linguistic researcher. Prof Asmah first conducted her

field study in Sarawak in the early 1960s and returned to Sarawak in the 1970s to explore the linguistic system of the ethnic groups in Baram and Belaga. In her effort to compile a so-called ‘Kajang’ language, she was then introduced to a Kajang informant with the expectation that he was a speaker of the language. The informant turned out to be a speaker of the Sihan dialect, and there was no ‘Kajang’ language at all (p. 49). Being in the field allows Professor Asmah to collect linguistics data within the context of discovery; for example, the fieldwork of the ‘Kajang’ group reveals that there was in fact, a common understanding between the speakers of the Kejaman, Sekapan and Lahanan (p. 50). The author also found a visual example of “social conductivity”, a critical aspect of her historical reconstruction, among the Kenyah in Long Terawan on the Tutoh River during her fieldwork in 1978. During her stay in the Temenggong Baya Malang house, she witnessed the assimilation effect on the cultural identity of the earlier inhabitants of Tutoh, the Tuban and Tring, into the Kenyah society, who were the later arrival from Long Pata. She met a few Tring people who claimed to know the Tring language but whose main communication medium was Kenyah. There was also exposure to the Brunei palace culture. The author witnessed a thanksgiving ceremony for the Temenggong’s daughter, which was performed similarly to the Malay rites as his predecessors had previously served in the royal palace (p. 93). Another example of integration was found when the author visited a Narom community in Marudi who introduced themselves as Malay to the author, only to be found later that they were not speakers of Malay. Reading about on-the-field discoveries today is a real treat given the context of those times when male European researchers dominated research among the indigenous groups in Sarawak.

The other pertinent aspect is the author’s emphatic advocacy of the ‘stay at home’ theory by Stephen Oppenheimer, who argues that the homeland for the Austronesian was Southeast Asia. The memory of indigenous groups in Malaysia remembers their homeland belonged in the region. This admission was even more astounding among the people in Malaysia Borneo in the light of the latter-day polemics of provincialism. Professor Asmah looks at the culture of wanderlust and opening land common among the pioneering-oriented groups in the region encapsulated in the essentially Malayic lexical terms which are ‘tanah’ and ‘negeri’ in Malay, ‘menua’ in Iban, and ‘vanua’ in the old Malay language (p. 9). She cited several homeland narratives that paid homage to their origin in Sumatera and the Malay Peninsula. In the Sarawak Malay narrative, Hikayat Datuk Merpati claimed that the coastal Malay was a descendant of Datuk Merpati and his wife, the princess of Johor (p. 112). Elsewhere in Borneo, the Kutai Malay in the east Kalimantan claimed their ancestor came from the east of Sumatera and sailed to

Kutai around the fourth century to trade (p. 112). The author also found linguistic parallelism to the Iban and Selakau claims of their earlier homeland in Sumatera. There was a phonological similarity between the Malayic variants of Kampar Malay and Iban. In regards to the Selakau, the nasal plosion aspect in their phonology can only be found among the speakers of the Austroasiatic language family inhabiting the northern part of Sumatera.

The book is a fine example of the reconstruction of history that utilises indigenous knowledge and demystifies some of their larger-than-life constructs. The technicality of the method is delicately presented to ensure that the book is accessible to specialists and non-specialists alike. The author persuades her reader to think of 'Malay' as a regional-wide identity and language united through a common linguistic root and geographical space. The *Narrative* is a worthwhile reading; underlying the elegance of its prose and its unpretentious approach lies a timely reminder of a deep fault line that wedges the overwhelming present from its understated past.

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