

## Article

# An Initial Qualitative Exploration of Economic, Cultural, and Language Changes in Telok Melano, Sarawak, Malaysia

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**Abstract:** This research focuses on the present economic, cultural, and linguistic issues of Telok Melano, a hamlet in Sarawak that was formerly isolated from nearby communities. Telok Melano is changing dramatically as a result of the Pan Borneo Highway construction and the nature of cultural obsolescence in modern society. This qualitative study has been conducted through face-to-face structured and semi-structured interviews, as well as participant observation. This study found that the highway construction benefits the villagers. An economic overturn has begun among them, and basic infrastructure has also been greatly enhanced as a result of the project's spin-off. Are these changes beneficial to their cultural practices? Ethnographic techniques are delivering a number of interesting results. For instance, the changes have solidified the local Malays' religious beliefs. Although the locals have abandoned many traditional practices in order to comply with Islamic beliefs, they have preserved certain traditional etiquette. In terms of language, a generational gap emerged between three linguistic varieties spoken in this area. Their dominant mother tongue, the Kuching Malay dialect, is becoming more commonly spoken, particularly with outsiders. This study successfully presents the picture of economic and social changes in Telok Melano following the development of this new road system.

**Keywords:** economic; cultural; language; changes; rural; Pan Borneo Highway

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## 1. Introduction

Telok Melano is a small hamlet located near Tanjong Dato (Cape Dato), a headland on Borneo's western coast (see Figure 1). Before the new Pan Borneo Highway was constructed to this remote village in 2019, Melano Bay's inhabitants were an isolated rural community. Melano Bay is bordered in the north by the South China Sea, while the interior area in the south is densely wooded. In the vicinity of Telok Melano, the nearest township is Sematan. The sea ferry was the main means of transit between this hamlet and other Sarawak areas (Malaysia). Traveling from Telok Melano to Sematan takes about 2 h across the bay, and during the monsoon season, this location is completely inaccessible (October to February). These geographic constraints have hindered Telok Melano's development in terms of electricity and water supply, industry, and telecommunications services. As a result of the impact of economic development and globalisation, the isolated, poor, and backward hamlet now faces enormous changes in social, economic, and culture. The completion of the Pan Borneo Highway in 2019 (see Figure 2), as well as the fact that "the remoteness itself did not suffice to insulate Telok Melano from national and even global developments" [1] are the major factors driving these changes. The next section delves more into the Telok Melano setting, focusing on the late twentieth and early