

History of malay language history essay



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The first phase is Old Malay (682-1500 C. E.) that comprised extensive borrowings from Sanskrit. The inscriptions from the late 7th century located in the Palembang region describing Srivijaya and its emperor, are the earliest enduring evidence of the Malay language. Terms for geographical concepts are borrowed from Sanskrit and the script is Indian, but the terms for authority and political relations are Old Malay.

Additional knowledge about how the mandala/datu relationship probably performed comes from Srivijaya's inscriptions. These inscriptions are worth describing them briefly. They begin to manifest in the late 7th C. E, using Sanskrit language and Old Malay, written in a script originating from south India. They are the oldest testament of a language which is recognisably identical to modern Malay. To date, they have been revealed in the Palembang region, close to the island of Bangka, and at locations much further away, including upper reaches of rivers in Sumatra. Inscriptions and artefacts tied with Srivijaya, dated from between the 10th and 12th centuries have been located in west Java, islands in the Straits of Melaka and on the Malay Peninsula, indicating a wide sphere of supremacy. The inscriptions uncovered near Palembang can be divided into three descriptions: a mantra or prayer asking for success in an endeavour, notification of royal victories and oaths of devotion apparently imposed to chiefs who were associated with Srivijaya. It is from the latter two types of inscription that we can gain some idea of the system of trade and exchange on which Srivijaya's standing as a port, and its system of administration depended.

The Srivijayan/Old Malay inscriptions uncover bold local culture which expressed itself in terms familiar to outlander visitors while maintaining its

own identity. The Old Malay of the Srivijayan inscriptions is formal in style and tone and restricted to official royal business yet it is recognisably related to standard modern Malay. If we compare Chaucer's English with modern English and Old Malay with modern Malay, the latter is recognizably closer than the former. Inscriptions using Old Malay have been found beyond Sumatra-seven in Java and one in the southern Philippines- and date from between the 8th and the early 10th centuries. The existence of these inscriptions outside southeast Sumatra reminds us also that trading networks were extensive and that points along the network were in communication with each other.

In the western and southern parts of the Peninsula, however, the archaeological evidence clues contact with Austronesian-based cultures. The languages of some Orang Asli groups in the south of the Peninsula (those which follow the Malayic sociocultural pattern) endorse this theory because they show evidence of extended contact with Austronesian speakers.

It was only with the adoption of Islam and the development of the already existing Malay civilization into one that can be called a Malay-Muslim civilization that the empires centred on the Malay Peninsula and Brunei grew to a height which brought them fame to the east and west as great commercial hubs and centres of the finest in culture. While the Malays had their own indigenous writing systems, these were at best rudimentary and were mainly the tools of shamans; it was the Indians who introduced a 'proper' system of codes to write their language, the Pallava script from South India. However, knowledge and acquisition of the script was confined to a handful of people close to the rulers who were the 'gurus' to the rulers,

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while the rulers may have regularly been illiterate, as were all their other subjects. Literacy came to the Malays, regardless of the social class they belonged to, with the coming of Islam and the conversion of the Malays to Islam in the fourteenth century.

Reference : 4. “ Tatabahasa Dewan Jilid 1: Ayat”

Reference : 2. “ The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia” volume one (from early times to c. 1800)

The second phase is Early Modern Malay (1500-ca. 1850) that witnessed the indigenization of Arabic loan words, changes in the affix system, and a rather liberal word order. The Islam arrival complements the revelation on the ground floor and the next point of Malaysia's history, the period of the famous 15th century kingdom of Melaka, begins upstairs on the first floor of the building.

To be Muslims they had to read the Qur'an in the Arabic script, although they did not understand the meaning of the text. Recognizing the matching of symbols and sounds

in Arabic led them to adopting and adapting the Arabic writing system for their language. This was the beginning of the great Malay literary tradition, which can be seen in the production of a large number of literary romances and the recording of the oral traditions of the pre-Islamic era in Arabic script (which for the purpose of indigenization has been termed the 'Jawi' script). Literacy through Islam also made it possible for the Malays to codify their laws and statutes in the governing of the land, which to all intents and purposes from that time was based on the laws of Islam.

By the time the first Europeans (the Portuguese, followed by the Dutch and the British) visited the Malay Archipelago in the sixteenth century, the Malay empires were already well-established polities with their own systems of government. The Malay language, while being the lingua franca in the ports in the archipelago, was also the language of diplomacy in the region, and was the language used by the European powers in their communication with rulers in the region. Letters between the royal Malay courts and the courts of St. James, Paris, and Portugal were written in Malay and at this time Malay epistolary became developed into a finest art, not only in the style of writing a text but also in calligraphy and the art form which was a necessary characteristic of the scroll or the leaflet that was sent.

Reference : 4. “ Tatabahasa Dewan Jilid 1: Ayat”

Reference : 3. “ Southeast Asia: People, Land and Economy”

Late Modern Malay (ca. 1850-1957) featured substantial loan words from Dutch and English, and subject- verb-object as the preferred word order. The centuries of colonial rule brought many Portuguese, Dutch, and English words into Malay, such as buku (book), pensel (pencil), siling (ceiling), and sekolah (school). English words of Malay origin include gingham, sarong, bamboo, rattan, kapok, cockatoo, paddy, and amok. Orangutan is a combination of the Malay words orang (person) and hutan (forest). Compound, in the meaning “ enclosed area,” comes from the Malay kampong, which means “ village.”

Although the Portuguese came to rule in the sixteenth century and the Dutch in the seventeenth century, there was no attempt to teach their respective languages to the populace. The British who first arrived in the form of the

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East India Company in 1786 stayed longer than the Portuguese, and perhaps on the basis of their political and commercial pragmatism established schools using Malay as medium of instruction as well as schools using only English. This development not only introduced English as a language through which the Malays and all other groups could attain literacy and a formal education, it also brought the use of the Roman script as an addition to Jawi in the writing of Malay. Reference : 4. " Tatabahasa Dewan Jilid 1: Ayat"

The first Malay school of a secular nature was established by the colonial government as a branch of the English-medium school, Penang Free School, in 1816, in Penang, the place where the British first set foot on Malay soil. Other Malay schools that followed were mostly built in the rural areas to suit the location of the greater population of the Malays. These schools were meant to teach the ' three Rs' (Reading, Writing, and ' Rithmetic), basic agricultural skill, basketry, and weaving to the children of the peasants so that they could become good farmers, fishermen, and craftsmen. With the purposes mentioned above, education in the Malay schools never proceeded beyond Standard VI of primary school. Similar schools were set up in Singapore and in Borneo in Brunei, Sabah, and Sarawak, where the British also had commercial interests. Even at the primary level teachers needed to be trained and the colonial government started teacher training programmes in 1878, but it was only in 1922 that a male teachers' training college was established, the Sultan Idris Training College (SITC) in Tanjong Malim, Perak, where boys who had undergone six-year primary education were sent to be trained as teachers for the Malay schools. Boys with a similar career orientation were also brought in from Singapore and the Borneo territories to

be trained at the college. A parallel college for women, the Malay Women Teachers' Training College, was set up in 1935, in tandem with the increase in the population of girls attending Malay schools. The college became an important nursery in the cultivation of a Malay ethnic identity which glued together the Malays of the Peninsula, Singapore, Brunei, Sabah, and Sarawak. Among those who fought for the Malayan (1957), and then Malaysian (1963), independence were graduates of the SITC. Regardless of which British colony they came from, the college gave them an opportunity to see the Malays in a broader perspective, beyond the borders of their individual states, and stretching as far as Indonesia. The idea of uniting the whole, widespread Malay people was already being nurtured, with the relevant identity factors being a package consisting of ethnicity (Malay descent), religion (Islam), and language (the Malay language). Reference : 1. " The Languages of East and Southeast Asia"

The idea of providing education in English was to train Malaysians to work in the government service, mostly as clerks and general administrators. With proficiency in English they were able to interpret government policies to the people. More and more English schools were built following the first one in Penang, both by the government as well as by Christian missionaries. At the end of the fifth year of their secondary schooling, students had to sit for a standard set of examinations designed and assessed by the Cambridge body known as the Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate. A good pass in the Senior Cambridge Examinations (as it was known) would allow students to enter a two-year pre-university programme, at the end of which they had to sit for the Higher Cambridge Examinations which would take them to tertiary

education in the United Kingdom and other Commonwealth countries.

Tertiary education in Malaya and Singapore only saw its beginning in 1948 with the establishment of the King Edward VII College of Medicine and Dentistry in Singapore, a university college of the University of London. It was only in 1952 that this college, together with other faculties added to it, became a full university, known as the University of Malaya. The university provided another place, and this one closer to home, for students who had had the privilege of attending the English schools to pursue a higher education. In 1956 a second branch of this university was built in Kuala Lumpur, and in 1962 the two branches separated, the one in Kuala Lumpur remaining as the University of Malaya while that in Singapore became known as the National University of Singapore.

In an effort to increase the number of Malay children in the English schools, bright Malay children were subsequently taken from Malay schools at the end of Primary IV to enter a programme known as the Special Malay Class in the English schools. This was a two-year programme in which the students were immersed in a curriculum which was totally run in English. At the end of the two years they were promoted to Form I of the secondary school where for the first time in their life they saw themselves sitting with children of other racial groups. The obligation that the British felt towards the 'sons of the soil' (i. e. the indigenous Malays) motivated the British to establish a boarding school in 1925 based on Eton in England and intended for the sons of the Sultans, the Malay aristocrats and chieftains. This was the Malay College Kuala Kangsar (MCKK) which produced some of the earliest English-educated Malay elite, who were then channelled to universities in the United

Kingdom, including Oxford and Cambridge. In 1948, a parallel school was built for the girls in Kuala Lumpur, known as the Malay Girls' College. It should be added that all these educational 'innovations' in the life of the Malays were localized in the Malay Peninsula, but served those who were in Singapore and the British territories in Borneo including Brunei. Just as common people in Brunei were given the opportunity to join the SITC in Tanjong Malim, so members of the Brunei royalty were given places in the MCKK and in the other well-placed English schools. This made it possible for the British colonial government to set up a single core syllabus for all the territories, with direction from Kuala Lumpur. The same was also true for the training of office administrators, with a common system set up by the central government in Kuala Lumpur.

Reference : 4. “ Tatabahasa Dewan Jilid 1: Ayat”

Reference : 1. “ The Languages of East and Southeast Asia”

The phase of Contemporary Modern Malay (post-1957) saw the elevation of Malay to national language status in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei, and the establishment of institutions and agencies-such as Indonesia's Balai Pustaka dan Lembaga Bahasa dan Kebudayaan and Malaysia's Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP; Institute of Language and Literature)-for developing the language and literature. A common orthography and terminology was developed in 1972. Bahasa Melayu is widely used in the media in present-day Malaysia.

Literacy became a right for every Muslim Malay and was not confined to the small elite which held the reins of power in the land. The way it spread was in the form of informal teaching of religion in the homes of chieftains,
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mosques, and village religious schools which were known as pondok. These schools were privately funded by villagers through the payment of tithes and small donations, and teachers were paid from the tithes. The pondok schools were the earliest institution to provide formal education to the Malays, and they continued to function as an educational institution well into the second half of the twentieth century when their place was taken over by government schools which included religious studies and Arabic in their curriculum.

Reference : 4. “ Tatabahasa Dewan Jilid 1: Ayat”**The Malay writing system**

The traditional writing system for Malay is known as Jawi. It is based on Arabic letters introduced along with Islam in the fourteenth century, the time when the great Malay empire centred on Malacca converted to Islam. As the sacred language of the Qur'an, and the language of the Muslim heartland of the Middle East, Arabic enjoyed tremendous prestige for centuries-and still does. The Jawi system (so-named after the island of Java) is designed to be written with a brush, and so the letters are smooth-flowing, and most have somewhat different forms depending on their position in words. Versions of the Jawi script were the main vehicle for writing Malay until well after the European colonization. The Dutch introduced a Romanization into the region which is now Indonesia, and the British introduced a slightly different system into what is now Malaysia, but the real ascendancy of Roman letters (and the decline of Jawi) did not take place until well into the twentieth century. There is still one Malaysian newspaper published in Jawi, and learning the basics of Jawi is still part of the Malaysian school curriculum. Until 1972, the Romanizations used in Indonesia and Malaysia differed from one another in various ways, a result of differences between the Dutch and British systems. In that year, both countries modified their systems to create a common orthography.

Reference : 1. “ The Languages of East and Southeast Asia”**Reference : 4. “ Tatabahasa Dewan Jilid 1: Ayat”****Arrival of the Chinese and the Indians: A Change in the Malayan Demography**

Although there were Chinese and Indians who came to settle in the Malay Peninsula from the fourteenth century onwards, these were relatively insignificant in number. It was only towards the end of the nineteenth century that immigrants from China and India arrived in large numbers attracted by the growth of the tin mines and the rubber plantations, causing the Malay Peninsula, or Malaya as it was also known (which then included Singapore), to undergo a changing demography, in which the three main races of Malay, Chinese, and Indian found themselves concentrated in different geographical niches: the Malays in the rural areas taking care of their rice farms and traditional fruit lands, the Chinese in the tin mine areas turning themselves into wealthy miners and in the urban centres where they dominated as merchant traders, and the Indians mainly in the rubber estates and along the railway routes where they worked as labourers. Each community carried on with its own socio-economic pursuits, and practised their own ethnic cultures, communicated in their own languages, and built their own schools using their own languages, without much interference from the others. The perpetuation of such separate identities was furthermore endorsed and encouraged by the British rulers of Malaya through a deliberate policy of divide and rule. Quite generally, while the Malays are homogeneous in terms of their identity factors, the same cannot be said categorically of the Chinese and Indians present in Malaya/Malaysia. Though the Chinese may be homogeneous in one sense, in terms of ethnically belonging to the people commonly known as ‘Chinese’, the Chinese ‘language’ subsumes a wide range of dialects which are not mutually intelligible and which separate speakers into different language communities. The

Chinese are also not homogeneous in terms of religious adherence, as while most Chinese may be Buddhists and Taoists, there are also those who are Christians and Muslims. As for those referred to broadly as the ‘Indians’, this label links up many subgroups which differ from one another not only in terms of linguistic affiliation but also in terms of culture and religion. Although the Malaysian Indians originate from all over the Indian subcontinent and Sri Lanka, it is the southern Indians which predominate in the Indian population in Malaysia. The Malaysian Indian Congress which has been a partner to the Malay political party, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), and the Chinese political party the Malaysian Chinese Association, in ruling Malaysia from the time of independence from the British in 1957, is overwhelmingly Tamil in terms of its membership.

Reference : 3. “ Southeast Asia: People, Land and Economy”

Reference: 1. “ The Languages of East and Southeast Asia”

Racial Riots, the Sedition Act, and Renaming the National Language

While the Malay population in the 1960s seemed to believe in and be striving towards the creation of a national identity facilitated by a common national language, such a commitment was not obviously shared by the non-Malays. In debates over national policies whether among politicians or academics, the special rights and privileges of the Malays as well as the use of the national language were regularly brought up as topics of discussion and complaint, and these two themes were perennially major bones of contention among non-Malays. On the other hand, the Malays themselves appeared very despondent over their socio-economic inferiority when compared to the

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non-Malays, especially the Chinese. Mistrust towards one another led to conflicts in the market places and in May 1969 this gave rise to the most serious ever racial conflict in the country's history, beginning on 13 May, and lasting for over a week. The communal violence which is now referred to as the May 13 Incident led to the suspension of Parliament and for twenty-one months Malaysia was ruled by a committee known as the National Operations Council (NOC) chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister, Tun Abdul Razak Hussain. It was during the rule of the NOC that the important New Economic Policy was formulated with a two-pronged objective: to eradicate poverty and to restructure society in the country. The Sedition Act was also amended in a significant way to make it illegal to criticize constitutional clauses relating to Malay special rights, the national language, the Sultanate, and the citizenship rights of the non-Malay communities. It was additionally during the administration of the NOC that the nomenclature of the national language was changed to bahasa Malaysia (language of Malaysia) from bahasa Melayu (language of the Malays). The idea behind such a change was to give the language a more 'national flavour', as it had been argued by dissenters that the national language was really just the language of the Malays, not of the Malaysians in general. In connection with this name change, there was the local precedent of Indonesia which had taken (a form of) Malay and renamed it bahasa Indonesia (language of Indonesia), thereby apparently winning greater acceptance for it as the national language of Indonesia. By renaming the national language in Malaysia it was hoped that parties hitherto averse to accepting bahasa Melayu as the national language would find it easier to identify themselves with bahasa Malaysia as the language of the whole country/the Malaysians, and not just the Malays. This

name change was never incorporated into the constitution, however, and the official name as far as the constitution goes has always been Malay (bahasa Melayu). It can also be noted that thirty years after the May 13 Incident, when the position of the national language had become fully stable as official language as well as the main language medium in education, the term Malay (bahasa Melayu) has resurfaced, spearheaded by the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, with the argument that the official name as recognized by the constitution was indeed bahasa Melayu, not bahasa Malaysia. So far there has not been any protest against the renewed use of the term Malay/bahasa Melayu.

Reference : 3. “ Southeast Asia: People, Land and Economy”

Malay Language as National Identity

For the Malays, however, the designation of a language as the national language of Malaysia was seen as a highly important, symbolic act, expressing the sovereignty of the newly independent nation, and there was no question of having any other language imported from outside their native world to be placed on a par with the language of their choice, let alone usurp its position. If that happened, Malaya in their eyes would no longer retain its position as a Malay nation. Potentially putting English side by side with Malay on an equal national language footing was also unacceptable for the simple reason that it was a colonial language with negative associations in addition to having a foreign origin. An exoglossic choice for national language was therefore out of the question for the Malay population. Malay also appeared to be the natural choice for national language for various reasons other than being the mother tongue of the Malays. First of all, the language projected a sense of history from within the land itself and was not a language transported from outside. Secondly and connected to the first factor was that Malay had had a long tradition of being the language of the successful empires that had ruled insular Southeast Asia, and a wealth of fine literature.

Malaysia Independence reflected a critical way of thinking in the minds of the Malays: that language was their soul and the soul of the nation as contained in their slogan Bahasa Jiwa Bangsa (language is the soul of the nation). This slogan has since become the motto of the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (Institute of National Language), established in 1956, a year before independence, to implement all policies concerning the development, use, and usage of the national language. The importance of the national language as a symbol of the sovereignty of the nation is echoed in many other slogans to the same effect. It has become part of the belief system of the Malays that they have to uphold the language come what may, because in it rests their whole ethos and standing as a race and as a nation. It is believed that if language progresses, so will the people.

(Reference : 3. “ Southeast Asia: People, Land and Economy”)

When Malay became the national and official language, the script chosen for it was the Roman script, and this has been incorporated in the constitution. Sacrificing the Jawi script which has been part of the Malay identity since the fourteenth century was seen as a step towards accommodating non-Malays in the country, so that they would find the language easier to learn and accept it as the national language of the whole country. The Jawi script with its special calligraphy now remains as a cultural trait specific only to the Malays, and is not used as a medium for public writing of the national language when directed at all citizens of the nation.

Concern for identity exists at all levels of the society, and this concern often surfaces when a particular group feels its existence threatened by others. In the Malaysian situation, national identity had its origins within the Malay ethnic group when the Malays belonging to separate little kingdoms on the Malay peninsula began to think of themselves as belonging to a single ethnic group collectively dominated by a foreign colonial power, the British. And this stance and the nurturing of a sense of belonging together with those who share the same distinctive ethnicity had an infectious effect; it flowed on to the other ethnic groups present in Malaya, later Malaysia. Official Malaysian government policy has never strived to obstruct the growth and development of ethnic identity. In fact considerable assistance is given by the government for the different racial groups to nurture and perpetuate their separate cultural traits, including their linguistic heritage. Cultural diversity is considered a significant asset to the country. Whilst supporting such diversity at the sub-national level, the overall identity of the nation and the identification of all racial groups with a single national image has been promoted through official endorsement of one common language as the main medium of everyday communication in the nation. This was the idealized picture and goal right from the beginning, stemming from the Malay belief that a national language is the soul of the nation, and that the growth of a shared national language is possible only in the common use of a single language, unopposed by other languages at the level of national communication. Socio-economic developments in the country and processes of globalization especially in the area of education and technology subsequently motivated a change in mindset and

it came to be believed that the national language, Malay, could maintain its critical position as the single most important symbolic embodiment of national identity, even if certain linguistic space was ceded to another language for use in various official and formal domains, notably English. The acceptance of English as a language having pragmatic usefulness in formal domains has subsequently been made in Malaysia, paralleling the situation in Brunei. The concept of national identity and its construction and maintenance is important not only for the value it has in potentially giving a sense of belonging to different racial groups in multi-ethnic nations such as Malaysia, but also for the projection of the image of a nation relative to other nations.

Reference : 4. “ Tatabahasa Dewan Jilid 1: Ayat”