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THE MALAYS: THEIR ORIGINS, MIGRATION AND TRAVELS

Md. Salleh Yaapar

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Foreword

The Malays have long been known as a people connected by movement, trade, culture, and shared traditions across the Malay Archipelago and beyond. The Malays: Their Origins, Migration and Travels explores this rich historical journey, tracing the origins and movements of the Malay people from early times to the present day.

This monograph offers valuable insights into how migration, interaction, and adaptation shaped Malay identity and civilization over centuries. By bringing together historical, cultural, and social perspectives, the work highlights the important role of the Malays in the development of Southeast Asia and their connections with the wider world.

The study of origins and migration is not only about the past; it also helps us better understand contemporary issues of identity, heritage, and cultural continuity. In an increasingly globalized world, such discussions remain highly relevant and meaningful.

This monograph will benefit scholars, students, and general readers interested in Malay history, culture, and civilization. It is hoped that this work will inspire further inquiry and dialogue, encouraging readers to look beyond static definitions of culture and instead embrace the fluid, interconnected realities that have long defined the Malay world.

Azizan Baharuddin
Nur Lisa Mohd Yusoff

About the Author

PROFESOR DATO' SERI DR. MD. SALLEH YAAPAR

Dato' Seri Dr. Md. Salleh Yaapar is a Professor of Comparative Literature at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Penang, Malaysia. He is also currently a Member of the International Advisory Council, cum Distinguished Fellow at the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), Visiting Professor, Prince of Songkla University, Thailand and Fellow of the Malaysian Academy of Professors.

He is the former Incumbent, European Chair of Malay Studies, Leiden University, Netherlands and former Chairman, Board of Governors, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP), Malaysia. Previously, he was the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research and Development), Deputy Vice Chancellor (Student Affairs), and Dean, School of Humanities, all at USM. He is also the former Director, USM Publisher, former Coordinator, Centre for Policy Research and International Studies (CenPRIS), USM, former Adjunct Professor, ASWARA, Kuala Lumpur and most recently former Director, USM Ombudsman's Office.

Prof. Dr. Md. Salleh holds a Bachelor of Arts (Second Class Upper) from Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Master of Arts from the University of the Philippines (awarded Life Membership, Philippines Folklore Society) and from Temple University, Philadelphia, USA, as well as a Doctor of Philosophy (Distinction) also from Temple University.

His areas of expertise are Comparative Literature, Literary Theory, and Malay World Literature. Among his main books and monographs are *Poetry and Mysticism: A Hermeneutical Reading of the Poems of Amir Hamzah* (1995; 2015), *Ziarah ke Timur* (2002; English translation 2009), *Kesusasteraan Bandingan dan Kesusasteraan Asia Tenggara Abad Ke-21* (2000) and *Cultural Encounter and Religious Engagement in Nurturing World Peace: Lessons from Selected Literary Works and Authors* (2002).

Prof. Dr. Md. Salleh has published papers in indexed journals, including *The Muslim World*, *GEMA Online Journal for Language*

Studies, *Indonesia and the Malay World*, *Journal of Management, Spirituality and Religion*, *Asian Journal of Social Science*, *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies*, *Wacana Seni: Journal of Arts Discourse*, *American Studies in Scandinavia*, and *Al-Shajarh: Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization*, (2021).

Apart from the above, Prof. Dr. Md. Salleh is currently the Chairman, Technical Committee, Malay Language Academic Personality Award (ATABM), Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, Chairman, Journal Publication Incentive Scheme (CREAM), and member of the Academic Personality Category Panel, National Academic Award Selection Committee (AAN), all within the same ministry. He is also a member of the International Advisory Board, *Al-Shajarah Journal* (IIUM), Editor-in-Chief of *Malay Literature Journal* (DBP), and board member of *Kemanusiaan: Asian Journal of Humanities* (USM).

During his long academic carrier, Prof. Dr. Md. Salleh has received numerous awards and recognitions. These include the Malay Language Academic Personality Award (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia), Anugerah Perdana, Prolific Malay Literature and Culture Researcher (National Book Foundation, Malaysia), Youth Cultural Guide Award (Ministry of Education Malaysia), Malaysia's Premier Literary Prize (Book Category, DBP) and five *Anugerah Sanggar Sanjung*, USM, including the highest *anugerah*, namely the Chancellor's Award.

In full recognition of the contribution of Prof. Dr. Md. Salleh in the field of Literature, fellow scholars at the international level have published and dedicated to him a festschrift entitled *Rainbows of Malay Literature and Beyond: Festschrift in Honor of Professor Dr. Md. Salleh Yaapar* (2014).

The Malays:
Their Origins, Migration and Travels

Prologue

This disccussion will concentrate on the Malays, specifically their origins, migration and travels. The term Malays here refers to both the restricted and the more general meanings. Geographically, the discussion will cover the Malay Archipelago as well as the Malayo Polynesian World. It will begin with history and quickly moves to pre-history, ending with the current scenario. The discussion will be based on findings in history, archaeology, oceanography, genetics, linguistics and folklore.

History

a) The Malays: Name, Lands and Kingdoms

Historically, the name Melayu has been known since the time of the Greco-Egyptian scholar Ptolemy, in the 2nd century (90-168 CE; Geography, 150 CE). To him it was "Maleu-kolon".

By the 7th century there was already a kingdom by the name of Melayu near Jambi, in Sumatera; Ma-lo-yu to the Chinese. It was later incorporated into a bigger kingdom (then empire) called Srivijaya, based at nearby Palembang.

Though based in Sumatra, the empire had tremendous influence on other islands in the Archipelago, including Java; eg its king, Dharanindra built the Borobudur in 770 CE; Samaratungga completed it in 825 CE.



Borobudur Temple

Srivijaya remained in power until the 13th century; had a lasting effect on the Malay Archipelago.

Numerous groups in the archipelago identified themselves as *Melayu* (Malays), with their homelands called *tanah Melayu* (Malay land). This includes Jambi, Palembang, Minangkabau, Siak, Kampar, Rokan, Pane, Kampe, Aru, Mandaileng, Tumiang, Perlak, Samudra, Lamuri and Barus in Sumatera, as Langkasuka, Kedah, Kelantan, Pahang etc. in the Malay Peninsula (Andaya, 2001; 32).



The Map of the Srivijaya Empire

The common identity with a shared homeland made it easy for the Malays to move around the Archipelago, without feelings as strangers. What more with *bahasa Melayu* (Malay language) as the lingua franca.

Thus when, Parameswara, for example, moved from Palembang to Singapura (1389) and Melaka (1402) where he started a new empire, he was not a *pendatang* (an immigrant). He and his followers simply wondered (*merantau*) from one point to another within their vast homeland.

This fact of history is not properly understood now by many in Malaysia, and more so in Singapore. Thus, some ignoramus still regard Malays in the two countries as *pendatangs*.

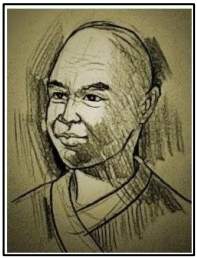
b) Trading, Sailing and Religious Activities

Srivijaya had a long history of mercantile and religious ties with India and China. Around 860 CE Raja Balaputra built a monastery at Nalanda University, in the Pala territory. In 1006 CE, Raja Maravijayattungavarman, constructed a vihara in Nagapatinnam.

In 671CE, a Tang Dynasty monk, I-Tsing, stopped by Srivijaya and Kitah (Kedah) on his way to Nalanda, India to study Buddhism.

In Srivijaya he studied Sanskrit and Malay languages for 6 months, before proceeding to India on a ship belonging to the raja of Srivijaya.

Later I-Tsing returned to Srivijaya and stayed from 689CE to 695CE, studying various aspects of Buddhism under a local pundit named Sakyakirti. According to him at the city of Bhoga (Palembang) where he studied there were around 1000 priests.



An artist impression of Yi Jing or I-Tsing

Due to Srivijaya's famous status as a trading centre and a centre for the study of Buddhism, and due to the good nature of the Malays, I-Tsing suggested that Chinese students of Buddhism should study first in Srivijaya before proceeding to India.



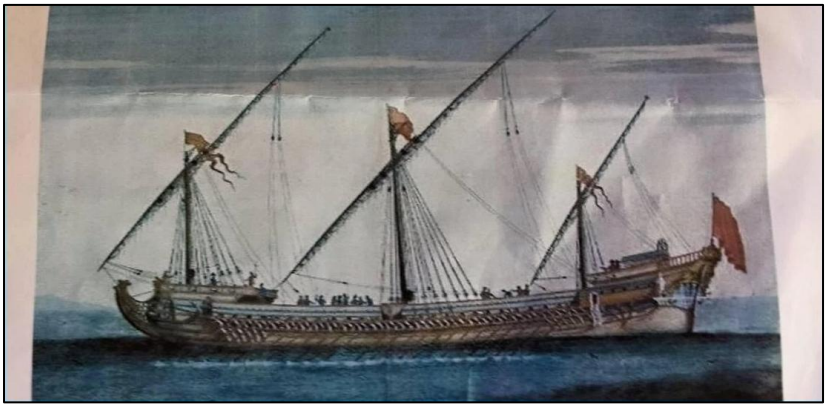
A generic illustration for Srivijaya or Ancient Palembang

I-Tsing referred to the Malays as Kunluns. Regarding their nature, he noted that "Kunlun people have curly hair, dark bodies, bare feet and they wear sarongs."

Actually, the term Kunlun as a reference to the Malays had been in use for ages. Ptolemy, in the 2nd century, for example, used its variant -- Maleu-kolon. A 3rd century Chinese historian, Wan Zhen, referred to the Malays as Kunlun. So were the Chinese of Tang Dynasty, from 7th to 9th centuries.

According to Wan Zhen (Wang Gungwu, 1968) the Kunluns were great sailors and traders. They built and sailed large jongs (ships) known as "kunlun-bo" - measuring 200 feet long, 20 feet high above water, with 4 sails, cargo of 900 tons and 600-700 people.

A typical jong was larger than Mendam Berahi, the famous ocean-going vassal of Sultan Mahmud Shah of Melaka (180 feet long, 3 sails, 100 padels, 400 fighters).

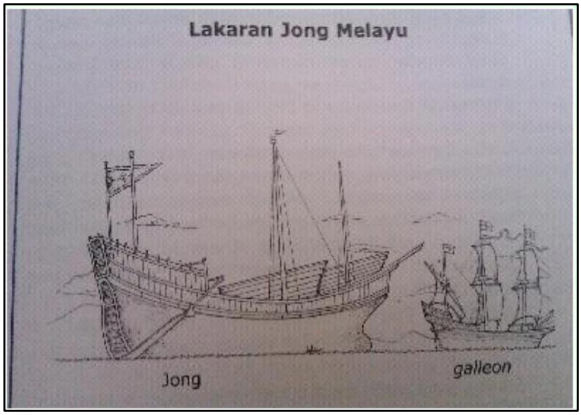


Mendam Berahi

According to L.N. Shaffer, The Chinese learned a lot from Malay shipping technology (Shaffer, Maritime Southeast Asia, 2015: 13). The great tradition was still there at the time of Malacca.

According to Portuguese writer, Tom Pires, in his Suma Oriental (1515), in Canton the jongs of Malacca were usually asked to anchor far from the harbour. This is because their big size could be dangerous to Chinese ships which were mostly smaller.

In fact, Malacca's jongs were also bigger compared to the Portuguese galleon.



Jong Melayu

During the Tang Dynasty, numerous Kunluns travelled back and forth to China. Many resided there, especially in Guangdong. This includes those who became body gourds to palace officials, called Kunlun nu (Kunlun servant). Their prowess impressed the Chinese, and became the source of inspirations to amulet makers and especially authors of the wuxia (chivalric romance) genre. An interesting example is the famous story of "The Kunlun Nu" by Pei Xing (825-880CE) which portrays a Malay martial arts expert named Mo Le who is invulnerable, can fly and has other supernatural abilities.



Mo Le in Pei Xing's chivalric romance flying from roof to roof with his master Cui and the master's sweetheart

Much later, based on the romance, a Ming Dynasty playright, Mei Dingzuo (1549-1615) wrote a play titled "How the Kunlun Slave Became an Immortal".

Heroic figures and stories like these had for ages been the models not only for the wuxia genre, but also for martial arts such as the Wudang Kung Fu, as well as the Chinese opera and film, with heroes capable of flying.



Two Taoist martial artists practicing Wudang Kung Fu

Interestingly, the dawn of the 21s century saw Pei Xing's romance, "The Kunlun Slave", adapted into a movie titled "The Promise" (2005). In this movie, Kunlun (Malay) fights and flies here and there, to save his master Guangming and the master's sweetheart, Qingcheng.



Scenes from the 2005 epic wuxia fantasy film, The Promise

Kunlun flies, glides...helping Gaungming, resqueing Qingcheng - who was attracted to him!

Pre-History

a) The Malays: Their Origins and Migration

In the context of pre-history too the Malays are not immigrants to the archipelago. The idea that they migrated from Taiwan and Yunnan is outdated and false. Unfortunately, it is still being circulated in the academe, and occasionally picked up by politicians.

In studies on the origins of people and their migrations, there is indeed such an idea or theory. It is known as "Out of rraiwan" theory.

It is pioneered by the archeologist Peter Bellwood, especially by the way of his writing "Taiwan and the Prehistory of the Austronesians-speaking Peoples" of 1998. His ideas regarding this are shared by the linguist Robert Blust.

Basically, the "Out of Taiwan" theory upholds the idea that around 4,000 years ago ancestors of the Malayo-Polynesians migrated from southern China and Taiwan to Southeast Asia, and to the numerous islands in southern Pacific and even to Madagascar. They brought along with them their skills in agriculture and knowledge about the sea.

The migration is often illustrated by maps such as the following:



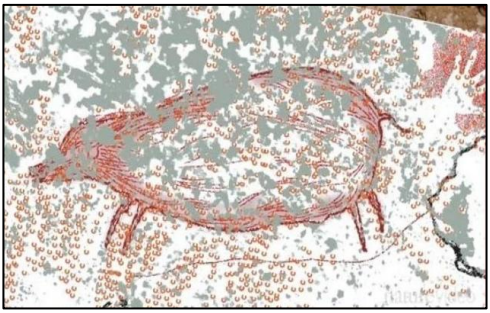
"Out of Taiwan" migration theory

Actually, the theory does not have solid evidence. Recent findings prove the fact that Malayo-Polynesians had already developed agricultural and sea-going skills here in the Archipelago itself, and very much earlier. Latest findings by Anthony Dosset et al, of the University

of Wollongong, at Gua Moros, Sulawesi in 2013 show that around 39,000 years ago this region was already populated; and they were already good in making hand stencils and rusababi paintings on cave walls, as the ones below.



Prehistoric red ochre hand stencils discovered inside the limestone caves of Sulawesi, Indonesia



The famous Sulawesi warty pig (*Sus celebensis*) cave painting

A recent finding by Dr. Danny Natawidjaja, a senior geologist of the Indonesian Institute of Sciences, is even more significant. It is a megalithic site in the form of a pyramid at Karyamukti village. Cjanjur regency, in West Java. The pyramid is called Gunung Padang (Mount of Light, in Sundanese). According to Natawidjaja, the site goes back to the last Ice Age.



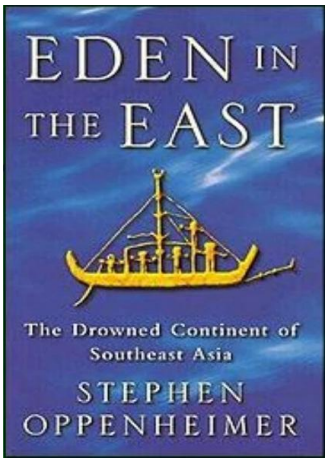
An image of Gunung Padang, located in Karyamukti, Cianjur Regency, West Java, Indonesia

He said, “I can only conclude that we're looking at the work of a lost civilization and a fairly advanced one” (Clements, Mysterious Universe, 29 January, 2014).



Gunung Padang Pyramid

Contrary to "Out of Taiwan" theory, and in line with above findings, is the "Out of Sundaland" theory advanced by Dr. Stephen Oppenheimer, especially through his book Eden in the East: The Drowned Continent of Southeast Asia (1998).



Oppenheimer is a scientist from Oxford University and frequent visiting professor at Universiti Sains Malaysia. His theory is based on findings from history, archaeology, oceanography, genetics, linguistics and folklore.

Oppenheimer believes that during GGM (Global Glacial Maximum) about 16.000 ago, before the last Ice Age (1.8 million to 11,700 years ago), Southeast Asia was a huge continent double the size of India.

The land mass, provisionally called Sundaland (Benua Sunda), was already a cradle of civilization.

Unfortunately, at the last Ice Age it was submerged by a catastrophic flood due to the rise in water level. Thus, Sundaland vanished as the lost Eden (Eden = Biblical name of Paradise; from Sumerian edin).

As shown by the illustrations below, what could be seen left behind is what is now called the Malay Archipelago:

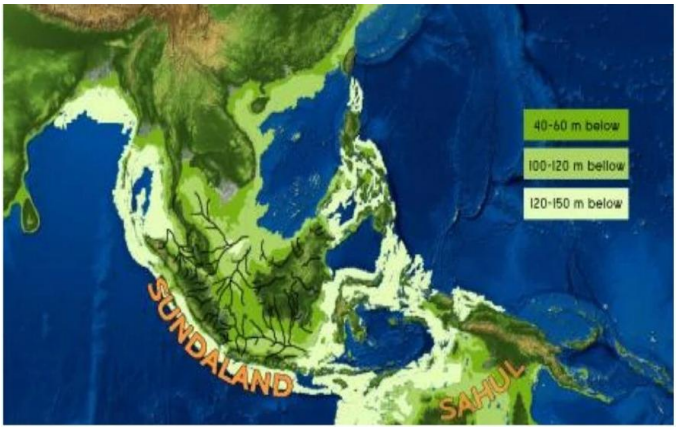
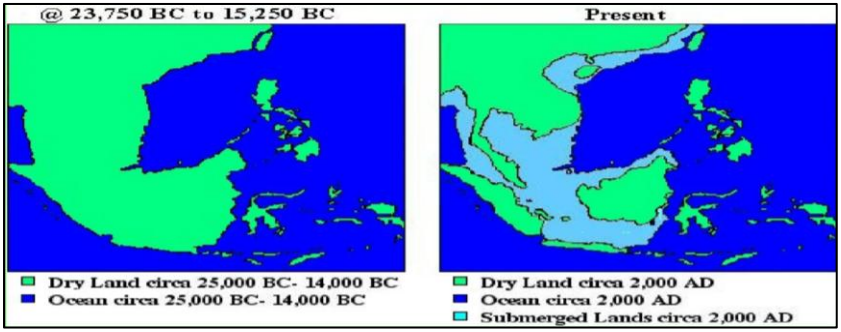


Illustration of the paleogeography of Southeast Asia and Oceania during the Last Glacial Maximum (LGM), explicitly mapping out the boundaries of the prehistoric continents of Sundaland and Sahul

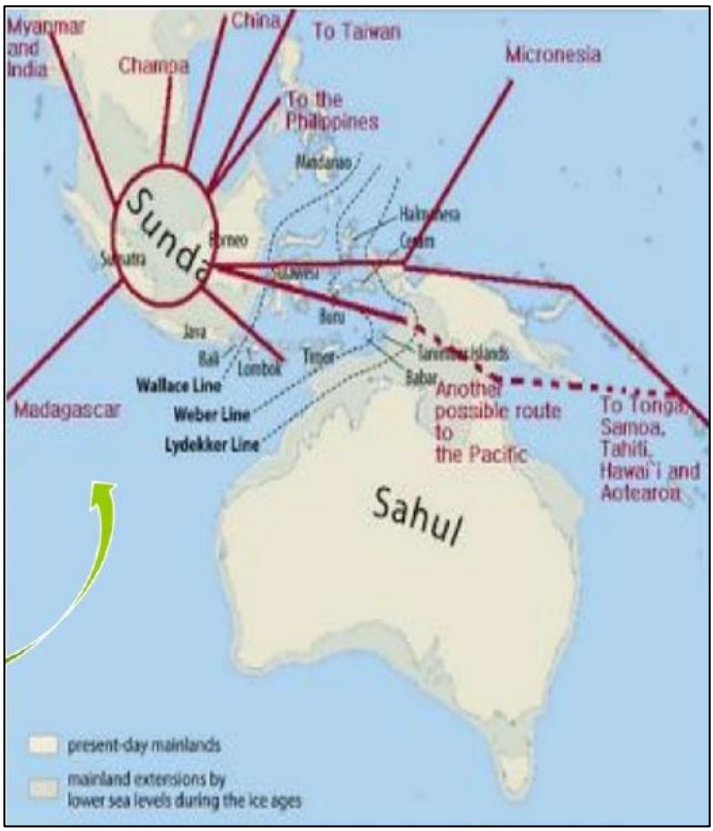


Dramatic flooding of the Sunda Shelf (Sundaland)

Due to the flood, a great majority of the people of Sundaland migrated to distant lands: to the Philippines, Taiwan and China in the North; to New Zealand in the South: to the Pacific Islands and Easter Island in the East; as well as to Madagascar in the West. In these places they became early settlers aka natives.

The rest remained behind and present-day mainland mairland extersions struggled with the new landscapes and ecosystems. The

experiences are recorded in their numerous flood myths and migration legends.



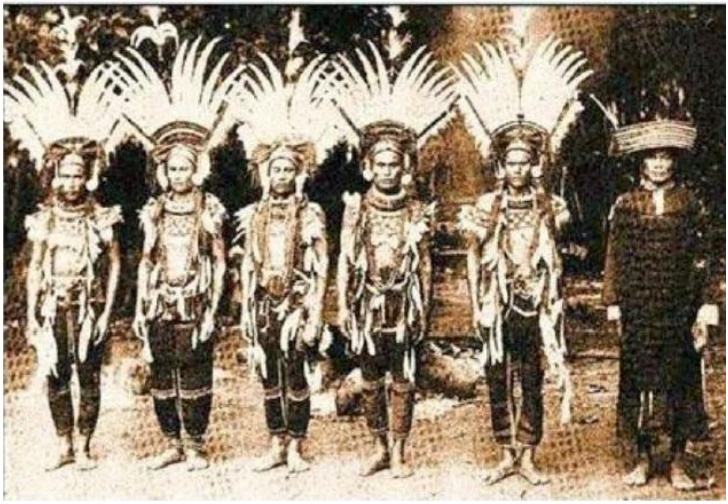
Map of Sunda and Sahul

The "Out of Sundaland" theory has been backed by many scholars from various disciplines, including physics, oceanography, genetics, linguistics and folklore. One of them is Prof. Arysio Nunes dos Santos, a nuclear physicist from Universidad Minas Gerais, Brazil. An ardent believer in Plato's Atlantis story, in 2005 Santos published Atlantis: The Lost Continent Finally Found, The Definitive Localization of Plato's Lost Civilization. In the fascinating book he declares with certainty that Sundaland is the location of the lost Atlantis narrated in Plato's Timaeus and Critias. Aside from Ice Age events, Santos connects the flood and the migration to the volcanic eruptions of Krakatoa and Toba in ancient times.

Another strong support for the "Out of Sundaland" theory comes from a linguist, Dr. Johanna Nichols from UC at Berkeley. She is an expert on migration patterns and the spread of languages. Regarding her study on the Pacific Rim, there is a report about "An enormous and sustained wave of human migration (which) started about 50,000 years ago somewhere in Southeast Asia." (Adler, "Echoes from the Past," Science Notes, 1999). This resulted in strands of related languages forming "a pattern that circles the Pacific Ocean like a necklace." Nichols is here referring to the Malayo-Polynesians and their global family of languages.

Language is a strong element of "Cultural DNA". And, equally strong are the oral r folk narratives - myths, legends and tales. Many scholars have used folk narratives in studying tribal origins and migrations. One such scholar is Michael Stainton who published "The Politics of Taiwan Aboriginal Origins" in 2007. Stainton records the effort of George Leslie, a Canadian missionary who worked among the matives of Taiwan in 1872 1901. He says,

Leslie firmly believed that "...the aboriginal tribes...are all descendants of settlers from around the Malay Archipelago." (1895:94); their legends say that their forefathers came from southern direction... they formed the aboriginal race, and that race is Malayan (Leslie, 1895:98) (Stainton, 2007: 29).



Amis men dressed in ceremonial attire during a festival



Men from the Bunun tribe

Their tales could be summarized thus: “We are Amis. We came from the Malay Archipelago! We are Yami. We are Malayan! Our ancestors are from Batanes and beyond”.

Genomics is another field of study that has lent tremendous support to "Out of Sundaland" theory. In 2009, eg., Human Genome Organisation (HGO) found genetic evidence which is in line with Oppenheimer's theory.

The evidence indicates that population expansion in mainland Asia took place by way of the Malay Archipelago, most probably due to the glacial movement during the last Ice Age.

In a media statement of the Singapore branch of the genome organization, it is clearly said that: "This indicates that Southeast Asia was the major geographic source of East Asian and North Asian populations."

Another genomic contribution in line with "Out of Sundaland" migration theory comes from Su B et. al. in their article "Y-Chromosome evidence for a northward migration of modern humans into Eastern Asia during the last Ice Age" published in the American Journal of Human Genetics,1999.

In this article the Chinese scientists conclude that: "This pattern indicates that the first settlement of modern humans in eastern Asia occurred in mainland Southeast Asia during the last Ice Age, coinciding with the absence of human fossils in eastern Asia, 50,000-100,000 years ago. After the initial peopling, a great northward migration extended into northern China and Siberia".

b) The Malayo-Polynesian World

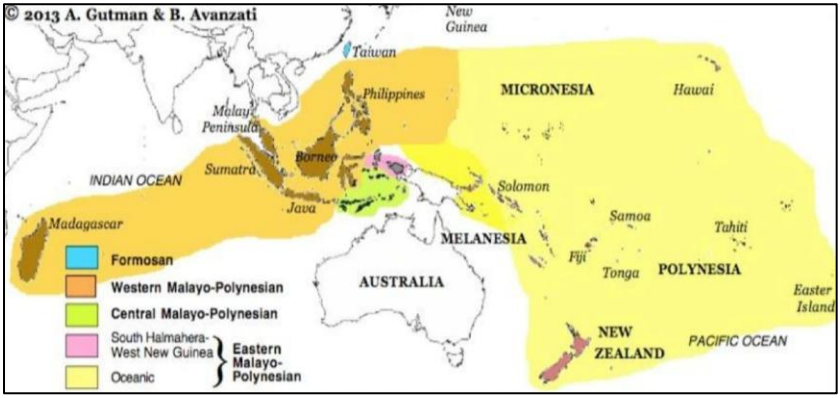
We have seen how, due to the great flood and Krakatoa and Toba eruptions, the Sundalanders have been dispersed across two oceans – Pacific and Indian, thus forming a mega racial family living in perennial separation.

A German scholar in Comparative Anatomy, Dr. Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, has studied them and in his writing in 1795, he referred to them as razze Malese o Malay. He describes them as follows:

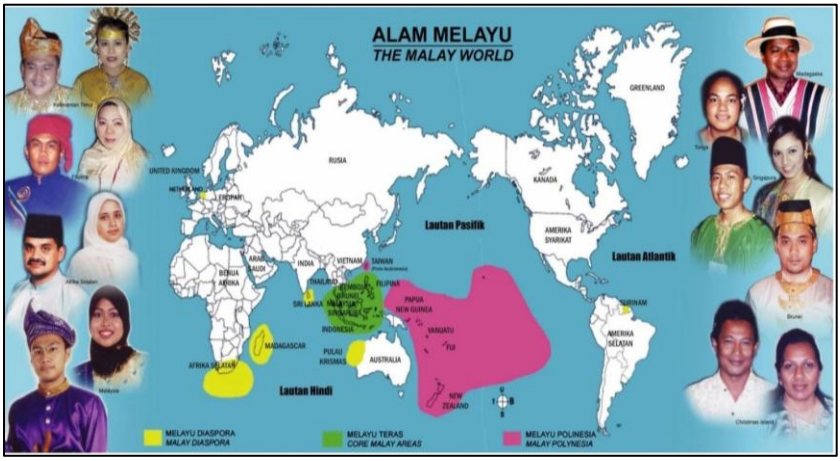
"This variety includes the islanders of the Pacific Ocean, together with the inhabitants of the Marianne [Micronesia], the Philippine, the Molucca and the Sunda Islands, and of the Malayan peninsula. I wish to call the variety Malay, because the majority of the men of this variety, especially those who inhabit the Society [Tahiti], and the Friendly

Islanders [Tonga], and also the Malambi [Merina] of Madagascar down to the inhabitants of Easter Island [Rapa Nui], use the Malay idiom". (http://austronesianconnections.blogspot.com/p/about-this-blog.html)

A vast homeland: From Taiwan to New Zealand, from Madagascar to Hawaii and Easter Island (Easter Island in native tongue is *Mara ki te rangi* and in Malay, *Mata melihat ke Langit*)



Map of Austronesian language groups



The Malay World

c) Malayo-Polynesians: Together Again

In comparative studies of the human races, the term "Malay race" (razze Malese o Malay) has been used alternately with the term "Malayo Polynesians" the same meaning.

Both were accepted in international politics; recognized e.g., by King Kalakaua of Hawai'i (1838-1891) and others in the Pacific Ocean. In fact, the king regarded himself a Malay. He was close to DYMM Sultan Abu Bakar. Johor. In their meeting in 1881 they were excited to notice common Malay Hawai'i vocabulary (e.g., api/ahi and lima/alima). They considered themselves as “long-lost Malay brothers” (William N Armstrong, 1977: 144). The Sultan happily presented to the King a green and gold copy of the Qur'an and introduced him to Islam (Armstrong,1977: 145).



Sultan Abu Bakar, Johor



King David Kalākaua, Hawai'i

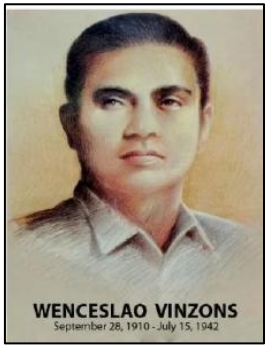
The family spirit was high in Hawai'i when in 1879 its parliament discussed a bill that would help unite the "Malayo-Polynesian World". The dream did not come true, but the spirit lives on.

In fact, this later would be part of the Pan-Malaysian Movement involving Malay scholars and freedom fighters such as Dr. José Rizal (1861-1896), Diosdado Macapagal and Wenceslao Vinzons (1910-1942) of the Philippines. The latter in 1932 formed an association in Manila with a Malay name “Perhempoenan Orang Melayoe”, with “Malaysia Irredenta” (Malaysia Merdeka) as its rallying cry. Earlier

than Kesatuan Melayu Muda, 1938 and united Malay National Organization MNO, 1946.



Jose Rizal



Wenceslao Quinito Vinzons Sr.

Now, in the 21s century, the family bond is being rekindled, thanks to the hard works of some Malayo-Polynesian scholars and leaders.

For example, on 5th and 6th July 2012, an International Conference on Malay-Polynesian Ancestral Nations took place in Seremban, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia. It was attended by 560 delegates from 11 countries. The main players were Dato' Seri Kamarudin Kachar and Tunku 'Abidin Muhriz, both from N. Sembilan. This was followed by a conference in Waitangi, New Zealand (Aotearoa) in 2014.





Dato' Seri Kamarudin and Tunku 'Abidin Muhriz in red Malay costume. The Hon. Peter Sharples (Minister of Mäori Affairs), 3rd from left

Among the fruits of these conferences is the formation of The World Melayu-Polynesia Organisation, during the first conference itself, with Dato' Seri Kamarudin as its President.

Also, a Nusa Melayu-Polynesia International University was planned. Later, the Mãori community in New Zealand organized the Mãori Malay Polynesian Ancestral Nations Society Inc. These organisations are now busy with their current and future activities.



d) Malay Identity

At this juncture, one may ask about the nature and characteristics of Malay identity.

Based on the above discussion, it is clear that as a huge racial group, the Malays do not have a singular or homogenous identity. Rather, their identity should be understood within a concentric circle, with shades of meanings and definitions.

First, they are Malayo-Polynesians – a racial grouping made up of various indigenous ethnic or tribal groups, with slightly different customs, scattered in the Pacific and Indian oceans. Their shared identity is mainly based on anthropological factors, including language.

Second, they are Malays of the current Malay Archipelago. This includes all indigenous ethnic groups in Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, Singapura, Philippines and Southern Thailand. Their shared identity is mainly based on anthropological factors, language and geography. Islam plays a role too.

Third and last, are the Malays of Malaysia (excluding the Orang Asli of Semenanjung and the Bumiputra of Sabah and Sarawak). Their shared identity is based on anthropological factors, language and more. This includes religion and politics, specifically the country's constitution. Thus, according to Article 160 (2) of the Malaysian Constitution, a Malay must fulfil 3 criteria: he/ she must profess Islam, practice Malay customs and culture and speak the Malay language. This is a constitutionally motivated sense of Malay identity.

Epilogue

We have discussed the origins, migration and travels of the Malays. We have revisited their history as well as their pre-history; their past glory and their subsequent situation.

We observed how their eden homeland in the Malay Archipelago was submerged due to catastrophic events. But their subsequent migration and travels have added new homelands, thus creating the larger Malayo Polynesian World. They also left a global linguistic pattern that circles the Pacific Ocean as well as the Indian Ocean "like a necklace."

Indeed, the Malays are a huge racial group with a vast homeland. They are a people of great diversity and shaded identity, now yearning for unity.

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