

ABSTRACT

Naming Places in Malaysia: A Historical Perspective

Peninsular Malaysia alone has numerous places whose names are very interesting but their origins are somewhat obscure, e.g., Mambang Di Awan) (lit. Fairies in the Clouds, in Perak), Yong Peng (in Johor), Batu Gajah (elephant stone, in Perak), Tanjong Kling (in Malacca), Kampar (in Perak), and Kuala Lumpur itself, the national capital. It is important to realize that there was no such political entity as 'Malaya' or 'Malaysia' before 1948. 'Malaya' was used unofficially to refer to several Malay kingdoms in the Malay Peninsula - each was an independent sovereign kingdom. After the coming of the English traders' to the Straits of Malacca, beginning from the late 18th century, four of the settlements: Penang, the Dinding district in Perak, Malacca and Singapore, were, in 1826, amalgamated and became known as the 'Straits Settlements' placed under the government of the East India Co. in India. These in 1867 became a British Crown Colony. In the Peninsula, beginning from 1895, nine of the monarchies already existed but, until World War II, Britain did not attempt to colonize them. Most of the Malay kingdoms derived their names from the rivers where each began: e.g. Perak from the Perak river; Terengganu from the Terengganu river; and Selangor from the Selangor river. Only Negeri Sembilan was not named after a river. After the establishment of British administration -- not rule -- a number of places were named after British officials: Port Weld (Perak), Teluk Anson (now Teluk Intan also in Perak), Port Swettenham (now Pelabuhan Klang in Selangor), Port Dickson (Negeri Sembilan), and Province Wellesley (now Seberang Prai). Fraser's Hill and Cameron Highlands, however, were not named after British officials. Many of the places in the country which have existed for a long time would seriously challenge any attempt to explain them such Bota, in Upper Perak, which has a right Bota (Bota Kanan) and a left Bota (Bota kiri), Durian Sebatang (in Teluk Intan), Batak Rabbit (also in Teluk Intan) and Behrang Station (in Lower Perak). Mersing has also given rise to speculations: there is a claim that it was named after a Sikh called Mir Singh. Even a name such as Batang Padang (in Perak) can be difficult to understand simply because it is not commonly known that *batang* actually means river. At the same time there is a district known as Batang Padang. In Malaysia, many of the inhabitants, in the past, tended to live in separate groups. Negeri Sembilan is well known: most of the locals are of Minangkabau origin. Many are likely unaware that the Banjarese are found mainly in the Krian district (Perak), Sungai Manik (Lower Perak), Tanjong Karang (Selangor) and Batu Pahat (Johor). The Bawean (in the past often known as 'stable boys' because they looked after horses) were concentrated in places where there were turf clubs: Penang, Ipoh, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore. Their languages, however, do not appear to have lent themselves to place names; similarly, the Bangkaulu who have long congregated at Sungai Choh (Selangor). After the country became a nation state, many road names were also changed (e.g. Ashby Road to Jalan Hospital in Ipoh; and Mountbatten Road to Jalan Tun Perak in Kuala Lumpur); similarly several place names were also changed (see some of the examples given above). Sadly, however, no serious attempt has been made hitherto to study the history of the country from this perspective mainly because history is considered of little importance compared to science and technology, and the pupils today do not study the geography of Malaysia.