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The Search for the 'Origins' of Melayu

Leonard Y. Andaya*

Based on linguistic, archaeological, and historical evidence, this essay describes the environment that produced the culture associated with the 'Melayu', or the Malays. It also argues that Melayu ethnicity was never predetermined but was contested on both sides of the Straits of Melaka.

In recent years a number of writings have examined the meaning of Malayness.¹ While most scholars would agree that ethnic identity is constantly being reconstructed in the face of changing circumstances, there is less support for the idea of an 'essential' core that defines a group.² Yet popular belief in a primordial core persists and often is the primary stimulus for group action. The shifting elements that constitute the core reveal important concerns of a certain ethnicity at a particular point in time, and illuminate the impact of a specific historical situation. A group is always aware of its past, and examines it periodically to identify elements that emphasise its uniqueness in response to pressing circumstances.³

An excellent example of this process was the ancient rivalry between polities on both sides of the Straits of Melaka seeking to become the leading centre of the Malay world. The outcome was not determined until the establishment of British colonial rule on the 'Malay' Peninsula in the late nineteenth century. Eager to justify their presence on the peninsula and forestall conflicts with the Dutch across the Straits, the British created an entire colonial intellectual enterprise termed by one scholar, 'Malayistics'.⁴ The enterprise reinforced ideas that the homeland, and hence the centre, of

* Leonard Y. Andaya is a Professor in the Department of History at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. E-mail correspondence can be directed to andaya@hawaii.edu.

1 A. C. Milner, *Kerajaan: Malay Political Culture on the Eve of Colonial Rule* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1982); Milner, *Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya: Contesting Nationalism and the Expansion of the Public Sphere* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Milner, 'Ideological Work in Constructing the Malay Majority', and Shamsul A. B., 'Bureaucratic Management of Identity in a Modern State', in *Making Majorities: Constituting the Nation in Japan, Korea, China, Malaysia, Fiji, Turkey, and the United States*, ed. Dru Gladney (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 151-69, 135-50; Jane Drakard, *A Kingdom of Words: Language and Power in Sumatra* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1999); Drakard, *A Malay Frontier: Unity and Duality in a Sumatran Kingdom* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 1990); Hendrik M. J. Maier, *In the Center of Authority: The Malay Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 1988); and Adrian Vickers, "'Malay Identity': Modernity, Invented Tradition, and Forms of Knowledge', *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs*, 31, 1 (June 1997): 173-211.

2 There is a large amount of literature on ethnicity and identity, written principally by anthropologists. The debate has swung between two poles, with one arguing the existence of 'primordial' values that identify a group, and the other emphasising instead the 'situational' circumstances that determine who a group is at any particular time and place. There is also an intermediate position that suggests that there is a dialectic at play, in which the primordial values change in response to circumstances with reinterpretations becoming transformed and reified as a primordial sentiment. Ethnicity and identity are thus not fixed but continually moving between primordialism and situationalism and evolving in a spiral fashion. See especially, Stephen Cornell and Douglas Hartmann, *Ethnicity and Race: Making Identities in a Changing World* (Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press, 1998). The working of such a dialectic has important implications for the interpretation of Southeast Asian history.

3 This is the approach that I am taking in my latest project to examine the process of ethnic formation in the Straits of Melaka in the early modern period (c. 1500-c. 1800).

4 Maier, *In the Center of Authority*.

the Malays was on the peninsula, and that the fifteenth-century kingdom of Melaka was the cradle of Malay civilisation. Proper behaviour, customary laws and standards of government, language and literature derived from the oral and written traditions of Melaka became 'primordial' values associated with being Malay. The independent Federation of Malaysia retained this view of Malay history. Historical evidence of Malay antecedents outside the peninsula was rarely discussed, and few identified the ancient kingdom of Srivijaya as a Malay state because it was located on the Indonesian side of the Straits.⁵ Much greater interest was shown instead in the recent archaeological finds in the Bujang Valley in Kedah because, unlike the story of Srivijaya, they provide greater depth to the history of a Malay presence in the peninsula. This is an example of how the so-called primordial essence of a group may change or be reinforced through reference to a specific past that is identified and interpreted, or reinterpreted, for current ethnic needs.⁶ Moreover, as in the case of the Malays, attention to the past may reveal linkages that have been obscured by modern nation-state boundaries and shifts in ways of defining ethnicities.

In this paper I will hereafter use the term 'Melayu' in preference to its English translation 'Malay' for two reasons. First of all, the term is mentioned in the earliest documents and continues to be the appellation for particular places and peoples throughout history. Second, 'Melayu' is less political, and is suitable for discussing a region that in the past crossed present-day international borders. By tracing the use of this term historically, it is possible to suggest that a Melayu ethnicity was being developed along the Straits of Melaka beginning perhaps as early as the seventh century. Only much later did the culture of the Melayu begin to spread beyond these shores.⁷

In asking where and how Melayu ethnicity may have evolved, the issue is not to pinpoint the exact time and place of the origins of the group, but to reveal the process of ethnic formation. Throughout history various events and aspects of society have been selected, rearranged and reinterpreted to create the 'core' of an ethnic identity. As new research extends knowledge of the Melayu, fresh components become available for inclusion in what people see as 'primordial', and so the dialectic continues to the present day. In this essay the search for origins of the Melayu is intended not to provide definitive answers but to sketch the historical environment which produced the conditions for a specifically Melayu ethnic awareness.

Appearance of the 'Melayu'

The story should perhaps begin in Taiwan, the homeland of the Proto-Austronesian speakers. Based on archaeological and linguistic evidence, it is believed that these people were in Taiwan between 4000 and 3000 BCE. They then migrated outward between 2500 and 1500 BCE through the Philippines, the northern half of Borneo, Sulawesi, central Java and eastern Indonesia. From about 1500 to 500 BCE there was a further movement southward in Borneo, then out to the western half of

5 Georges Coedès and O. W. Wolters were among the most influential scholars who sought to document the existence of Srivijaya. See Georges Coedès, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: East-West Centre Press, 1968); O. W. Wolters, *Early Indonesian Commerce: A Study of the Origins of Srivijaya* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), and *The Fall of Srivijaya in Malay History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970).

6 As Bruce Kapferer so aptly put it: 'No tradition is constructed or invented and discontinuous with history.' See his *Legends of People, Myths of State: Violence, Intolerance, and Political Culture in Sri Lanka and Australia* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988), p. 211.

7 The complexity of the term 'Malay' or 'Melayu' is captured nicely in Philip Yampolsky's introduction to his CD on Melayu music in Sumatra and the Riau Islands. See 'Introduction' to *Melayu Music of Sumatra and the Riau Islands*, Compact Disc recording, *The Music of Indonesia Series* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1994), pp. 3-6. It is premature to distinguish a 'primary' from an 'extended' Melayu cultural area based on rule by a Melayu raja or sultan. Research is still needed to determine what Melayu meant in specific periods in the past.

Java and westward to Sumatra, the Malay Peninsula and the central part of Vietnam.⁸

Archaeological records for island Southeast Asia indicate that during this migration of Proto-Austronesian speakers, only after good coastal sites were occupied were there any major attempts to colonise the interior areas. Founder rank enhancement played an important part in this process. Because founders of new settlements and their line were elevated to almost god-like status, there was strong motivation for members of a junior branch to seek an empty area to become, with their followers, a new senior line with priority over resources.⁹ Early Proto-Austronesian speakers were principally subtropical coastal and riverine peoples with a Neolithic economy based on cereal and tuber cultivation and domesticated animals. Within island Southeast Asia, descendants of these early Proto-Austronesian speakers introduced a wide range of subsistence economies. These included rainforest foraging and collection for trade; sea nomadism; differing types of irrigated and rain-fed rice cultivation; shifting cultivation of cereals, fruits and tubers; and palm exploitation.¹⁰

Proto-Malayo-Polynesian, derived from Proto-Austronesian, began to break up by at least 2000 BCE as a result probably of the expansion southward into the southern Philippines, Borneo, Sulawesi and Maluku.¹¹ Proto-Malay was spoken in western Borneo at least by 1000 BCE and was, it has been argued, the ancestral language of all subsequent Malay dialects. Linguists generally agree that the homeland of the Malayic-Dayak language is in Borneo – based on its geographic spread in the interior, its variations that are not due to contact-induced change, and its sometimes conservative character.¹² James T. Collins has even proposed a location for the ancestral area of these speakers some 100 kilometres into the interior along three parallel river systems: the Sambas, Kapuas and Pawan. K. A. Adelaar, however, has urged caution in identifying a precise area since there is still much linguistic investigation to be done in Borneo.¹³

More controversial among comparative linguists and historians is the question of the homeland of Melayu culture. Collins cites archaeological discoveries in western Borneo of Indian carnelian beads and Dongson drums of the fourth century CE, and silver and gold Buddha images from the eighth century CE, as strong evidence of links between India and 'the watery homeland of the Malays'.¹⁴ The implication is that a Melayu culture influenced by Indian ideas would have begun here before the development of a similar culture in southeast Sumatra at Srivijaya/Malayu between the seventh and eleventh centuries CE. While R. A. Blust and Adelaar agree that the homeland of the Malayic speakers was in Borneo, they believe that the culture generally identified with the Melayu most likely developed in southeast Sumatra.¹⁵ The contact between southeast Sumatra and particularly coastal Borneo would have been established at the time of the expansion of Srivijaya trade networks, which extended as far as the northern Philippines.

8 Peter Bellwood, *Prehistory of the Indo-Malaysian Archipelago* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), p. 118.

9 Peter Bellwood, 'Hierarchy, Founder Ideology and Austronesian Expansion', in *Origins, Ancestry, and Alliance: Explorations in Austronesian Ethnography*, ed. James J. Fox and Clifford Sather (Canberra: Department of Anthropology, The Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, 1996), pp. 18-40.

10 Peter Bellwood, 'Austronesian Prehistory in Southeast Asia: Homeland, Expansion and Transformation', in *The Austronesians: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Peter Bellwood *et al.* (Canberra: Department of Anthropology, The Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, 1995), p. 103.

11 Bellwood, *Prehistory*, p. 242.

12 K. Alexander Adelaar, 'Borneo as a Cross-Roads for Comparative Austronesian Linguistics', in Bellwood *et al.*, ed., *The Austronesians*, p. 84; personal communication with Bob Blust, 15 May 2001.

13 See Collins' article in this issue. Personal communication with Alexander Adelaar, 10 May 2001.

14 James T. Collins, *Malay, World Language: A Short History* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1998), p. 5.

15 K. Alexander Adelaar, 'Borneo as the Homeland of the Malay Language: Fifteen Years down the Road', Paper presented to the conference on 'Borneo as the Malay Homeland', Institute of Malay World and Civilisation (ATMA), Universiti Kebangsaan, Bangi, Malaysia, April 2000, p. 2.

Peter Bellwood has added an archaeological dimension to the linguistic debate by noting that the southward expansion of the proto-Malayo-Polynesians at about 2000 BCE was characterised by adaptation to the new environment. While rice, foxtail millet and other cereals of Southeast Asian origin continued to be grown on a small scale, there was increasing foraging mobility. The discovery in 1987 of the Bukit Tengkorak assemblage near the town of Semporna in Sabah revealed a community of skilled seafarers and possibly traders who may have had ties as far away as northern New Britain.¹⁶ The presence of a mobile trading community expanding to the coasts and later the interior of the island world is a likely scenario of the Malayic speakers. It is possible that an Indianised Melayu culture did develop in the riverine environment in interior west Borneo as suggested by Collins, but too little evidence is available at present to support this idea. By contrast, as will be demonstrated below, the historical and linguistic evidence for a Melayu cultural homeland in southeast Sumatra is overwhelming.

Bernd Nothofer and Collins have suggested that around 100 CE Malayic speakers left their riverine and swamp environment in west Borneo and sailed outward through the Tambelan and Riau Islands to Sumatra and then to the Malay Peninsula. They also posit later migrations from western Borneo northward along the west coast of Borneo, and then south and westward. From eastern Borneo a further move carried these people to southwest Luzon, especially the Manila Bay area, and then eastward to Maluku. Another migration from western Borneo went directly southward to the Karimata Straits to Belitung, Bangka, south Sumatra and the west coast of Java. While there is agreement among scholars that the homeland of Malayic speakers was somewhere in western Borneo, there is not yet universal acceptance of Nothofer's and Collins' proposed waves of migrations.¹⁷

When the Malayic speakers moved into the Malay Peninsula, they came into contact with the ancestors of the *Orang Asli* (indigenous people) who descended from two major races: the Australoid and the Southern Mongoloid.¹⁸ It is believed that the Negrito population stemmed from the former, while the Senoi were descendants of the later Southern Mongoloid migration. The archaeological record becomes more detailed on the Peninsula with assemblages found in Hoabinhian sites dated between 16000-8000 BC. It is believed that the hunting and gathering Hoabinhians were ancestral to the Negritos and to a lesser extent to the Senoi. The latter's biological affinity is more with the Neolithic Southern Mongoloid population which migrated into the Peninsula about 2000 BC. There appears to have been a rather sharp transition from the Hoabinhian to the Neolithic, with the change marked by the introduction of agriculture and Austroasiatic languages.¹⁹ The Negritos adopted Austroasiatic languages, and so today both the Negritos and the Senoi speak Austroasiatic languages in the subgroup Aslian, which has distant relationships with Mon and Khmer. The Negritos, however, continued to maintain their hunting and foraging lifestyle and did not adopt the agricultural developments of the Neolithic. In this

16 Bellwood, *Prehistory*, pp. 224, 227, 245.

17 Collins, *Malay*, pp. 3-5; Bernd Nothofer, 'Migrasi orang Melayu purba: Kajian awal', paper presented to the Fourth Biennial Conference of the Borneo Research Council, Bandar Seri Begawan, 10-15 June 1996.

18 As Bellwood points out, the use of such terms is for heuristic purposes, and the reality is the intergrading of both. *Prehistory*, p. 70.

19 This is not to say, however, that the Neolithic culture found in the Peninsula was due entirely to the migration of the southern Mongoloid population. It has been argued that in the later Neolithic in the second half of the first millennium BCE, stone and glass beads found in cist-graves in the Bernam valley and in sites in Kuala Selinsing, Perak indicate trade links of the inhabitants with India, Sri Lanka, the Mediterranean and possibly Africa. See Nik Hassan Shuhaimi bin Nik Abd. Rahman, 'Tracing the Origins of the Malays and Orang Asli: From Archaeological Perspective', *Jurnal Arkeologi Malaysia*, 10 (1997): 102.

regard they were much more descendants of the Hoabinhians than the Neolithic Southern Mongoloids associated with the Senoi.²⁰

Geoffrey Benjamin believes that when Malayic-speakers came up the west coast, they encountered an Austroasiatic Mon-speaking population in the Kedah area, which did not become culturally or linguistically incorporated into a Melayu culture until the twelfth century.²¹ The presence of a number of Mon-Khmer loan words in northern Malay dialects, including terms for wet rice fields (*bendang*) and irrigation canals (*glong*), may indicate that the Melayu on the Peninsula learned wet rice cultivation techniques from the early Mon population in the area.²² Nevertheless, there is still a strong case for an early Melayu link to Srivijaya prior to the twelfth century. Earthenwork pottery found at Pangkalan Bujang in the Lembah Valley of Kedah is very similar to that found in Kota Cina, an old port in north Sumatra associated with Srivijaya.²³

In southeast Sumatra the Malayic speakers spread along the Musi and the Batang Hari and their tributaries, and into the interior highlands.²⁴ The name 'Melayu' appears for the first time in literary sources as a settlement in southeast Sumatra that sent a mission to China in 644. The earliest detailed account is by the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Yijing, who spent time in Palembang and Jambi on two separate occasions in 671, and was there again from 689-95. He spent six months learning Sanskrit grammar in a place whose name for both the country and the capital was transcribed as (*Shili*)*foshi*. He was then sent by the ruler to the country of Melayu, where he stayed for another two months. On his second visit Yijing again went to 'Melayu', which he says had now become [*Shili*] *Foshi* [Srivijaya], meaning either that it had supplanted Srivijaya, or more likely that it had become a part of Srivijaya. He noted that there were many 'states' under this kingdom, and that in the fortified city there were more than a thousand Buddhist priests who had come to study religion. He even suggested that Chinese Buddhist priests should study religion in *Foshi* for a year or two before seeking further wisdom in Central India.²⁵

Yijing's presence in southeast Sumatra coincided with the earliest inscriptions written in 'Old Melayu' at Kedukan Bukit (Palembang, 683 CE), Sabokingking (near Telaga Batu in Palembang, undated), Talang Tuwo (Palembang, 684 CE), Karang Brahi (upper Batang Hari in Jambi, undated) Kota Kapur (Bangka, 686 CE), Palas Pasemah (Lampung, undated), and at Boom Baru (Palembang, undated).²⁶ All of these inscriptions, plus another written in Sanskrit found in Ligor on the Malay Peninsula and dated 775 CE, mention a polity known as Srivijaya and use the Pallava script in a style associated with south India and Sri Lanka in the same period. According to J. G. de Casparis, the absence of any clear local differentiation in the Sumatran inscriptions may indicate a recent borrowing of the script.²⁷

20 Bellwood, *Prehistory*, pp. 265-6.

21 Geoffrey Benjamin, 'Issues in the Ethnohistory of Pahang', in *Pembangunan Arkeologi Pelancongan Negeri Pahang*, ed. Nik Hassan Shuhaimi bin Nik Abd. Rahman *et al.* (Pahang: Lembaga Muzium Negeri Pahang, 1997), pp. 92-3.

22 Personal communication, Dr Uri Tadmor. See also Geoffrey Benjamin, 'Ethnohistorical Perspectives on Kelantan's Prehistory', in *Kelantan Zaman Awal: Kajian Arkeologi dan Sejarah di Malaysia*, ed. Nik Hassan Shuhaimi bin Nik Abd. Rahman (Kota Bharu: Muzium Negeri Kelantan, 1987), pp. 123-30.

23 Anthony Milner, E. Edwards McKinnon and Tengku Luckman Sinar, 'A Note on Aru and Kota Cina', *Indonesia*, 26 (1978): 26-7.

24 Barbara Watson Andaya, *To Live as Brothers: Southeast Sumatra in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993), pp. 15-16.

25 I-Tsing, *A Record of the Buddhist Religion*, trans. J. Takakusu (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896), pp. xxx, xxxiv, xxxvi, xl.

26 The Boom Baru inscription is the most recent find and is now housed in the Palembang Provincial Museum. It is written in Pallava script. Based on paleography, scholars believe the inscription dates from the seventh century. It contains eleven lines and appears to be an oath originating from a Srivijayan authority. It was placed at a port of entry to the city of Palembang.

27 J.G. de Casparis, 'Some Notes on the Epigraphic Heritage of Srivijaya', *SPFA Digest*, 3, 2 (1982): 29.

Even more important is the location of these inscriptions. The presence of four in the vicinity of Palembang, especially the oldest found at Kedukan Bukit, suggests that this was the centre of a major polity. The Kedukan Bukit inscription is unlike the others in providing chronological detail about a victorious expedition that resulted in power and wealth for Srivijaya.²⁸ Coedès suggests that the true significance of this particular inscription is that it commemorates the founding of a dynasty. In Indianised Indochina and Indonesia, the establishment of a kingdom or a dynasty was often accompanied by magical practices. Coedès argues that the founder of the dynasty underwent a ceremony known as *siddhiyatra*, which is a voyage or a pilgrimage from which one returns endowed with magical powers. To support his view, he cites the following phrases from the Kedukan Bukit inscription as an indication that a new dynasty was being founded: 'His Majesty boarded a ship to go in search of magic powers'; and 'Srivijaya, endowed with magic powers...' The discovery of the inscription at the foot of Bukit Seguntang, the sacred mountain of the Srivijaya rulers, reinforces his belief that the dynasty was following the well-documented practice of 'kings of the mountain' in Southeast Asia. One of the other two inscriptions found in the vicinity of Palembang, the Talang Tuwo stone (684 CE), proclaims the ruler's Bodhisattva status and his concern for the salvation of all beings, emphasising the importance of the ruler and his realm as a centre of a form of Tantric Buddhism. The inscription at Sabokingking (Telaga Batu) contains an imprecation against those who may wish to challenge the authority of an expanding kingdom. The list of officials and other occupations included in the oath of allegiance seems to imply a well-differentiated society, with a number of officials associated with the new dynasty.²⁹ The Boom Baru inscription may be a fragment of a similar oath.

The other inscriptions are found outside the vicinity of Palembang and indicate the extent of Srivijaya's pretensions. Inscriptions at Karang Brahi in the upper Batang Hari, at Kota Kapur in the southwest corner of Bangka, at Palas Pasemah in the Lampung, and at Ligor on the east coast of the Malay Peninsula are all in strategic positions. The upper Batang Hari was one of the major interior entrepôts where goods from the Minangkabau highlands could be traded for external goods going upriver. The headlands of the Musi, the major river in Palembang, do not link up with the Minangkabau highlands, unlike the upper Batang Hari River in Jambi. It is for this reason that Jambi came to play an important role as the alternate capital of Srivijaya. The archaeologist Soekmono was the first to suggest that Karang Brahi may have been essential for the protection of the land route between Palembang-Jambi and the Minangkabau highlands. For a similar reason, according to Soekmono, Kota Kapur was ideally located to safeguard trading vessels plying the Bangka Straits from Palembang to the Lampung and West Java.³⁰ Palas Pasemah was a collecting and redistribution centre for products from both the Lampung and West Java. Finally, Ligor, also known by the toponym Tambralinga, was for centuries an important east coast port in the Isthmian trade route.

The limited number of inscriptions emanating from Srivijaya restricts any detailed examination of the functioning of this polity. Nevertheless, the placing and the nature of the inscriptions reveal the character of an ambitious new polity that quickly sought to control all the major nodes of a trade network in the late seventh century. Yijing was present at the time of Srivijaya's establishment and expansion, and noted the importance of Srivijaya as a centre of

28 Coedès, *Indianized States*, pp. 82-3.

29 Georges Coedès, 'Les inscriptions malaises de Çrivijaya', *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient* [Hereafter *BEFEO*], 30 (1930): 34, 35, 37, 53, 58.

30 Louis-Charles Damais, 'Bibliographie Indonésienne: V. Publications du Service archéologique de l'Indonésie', *BEFEO*, 51, 2 (1963): 555.

Buddhist learning, which is reaffirmed in the Talang Tuwo inscription. This observation is further testimony to the self-confidence and wealth of a court able to host more than a thousand Buddhist priests in the capital city itself. The Sabokingking (Telaga Batu) inscription confirms this view in the listing of a number of functionaries and occupations associated with Srivijaya.

Though the inscriptions were in the Melayu language, in the seventh century the land called Melayu was in the vicinity of present-day Jambi. O. W. Wolters argues that Jambi was never called Srivijaya, and his assertion appears to be supported by the Chola Tanjore inscription of 1030-1 CE, which clearly distinguishes between 'Srivijaya' and 'Malaiyur'. G. P. Rouffaer believes that Malaiyur referred to the city of Jambi. Equally fascinating is Rouffaer's assertion that the Melayu and the Tamils regarded Jambi as the 'motherland of the Melayu'.³¹ Between 1079 and 1082 the capital of Srivijaya moved from Palembang to Jambi, and tributary missions to China in 1079 and 1088 were now sent from *Zhanbei* (Jambi). Zhou Qufei (1178) and Zhao Rugua (1225) both comment on the fact that *Sanfoqi* (the Chinese name given to Melayu-Jambi) compelled ships to enter its harbour to trade. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Melayu is the name of a kingdom ruling over the Jambi area.³²

The extent of Srivijaya's influence in the western half of the archipelago is attested to by evidence of seven Old Melayu inscriptions in Java and one in the Philippines. Those on Java date between the seventh and the ninth centuries, and, with the exception of one found at Candi Sewu in the south, originate from north central Java. From an examination of the language of the inscriptions, de Casparis concluded 'the use of Old Malay in Java reflects direct or indirect influence from Srivijaya'.³³ Another Old Melayu inscription written in Pallava script and dated 942 CE was found near Bogor, Java. Although it refers to the restoration of a ruler of Sunda by the order of a Javanese lord, a Rakryan Juru Pangambat, it is written in Old Melayu and again suggests influence from Srivijaya.³⁴

Laguna in Bulakan province in southern Luzon in the Philippines is the furthest location where any inscription written in Old Melayu has been found. It is a copperplate inscription dated 900 CE and is related, but not identical, to those on Java and Sumatra. It records the clearing of an individual's debt and demonstrates an awareness of debt, slavery and class distinction. There is a mix of languages used in the inscription. While the main language is clearly Old Melayu, it is not identical to that found in Sumatra or Java. Old Javanese words are used to express ceremonial forms of address, while Sanskrit words, in simplified spelling and supplied with local affixes, are used for technical terms. The place-names in the inscription are all located on rivers with access to the South China Sea, which strongly suggests that Melayu language and ideas most likely accompanied trade. The Laguna inscription is the first indication that Old Melayu had developed a vocabulary to deal with matters of debt and class distinction.³⁵ Of course, such a development would have been expected from a society of the sophistication implied by the occupations listed in the seventh-century Sabokingking inscription from Palembang.

31 Rouffaer argues that 'Malaiyu' derives from the Tamil word, *malai*, 'hill', and *uur*, 'city', hence 'Malaiyur' or 'Hill City'. He provides no reference to support his claim that the Tamils and Malays claim Jambi as a motherland. G. P. Rouffaer, 'Was Malaka Emporium vóór 1400 AD Genaamd Malajoer', *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land-, and Volkenkunde van Nederlandsch-Indie* [hereafter *BKI*], 77 (1921): 16-18.

32 Wolters, *Fall of Srivijaya*, pp. 45, 194, fn. 9; Friedrich Hirth and W. W. Rockhill (trans. and ann.), *Chau Ju-kua: His Work on the Chinese and Arab Trade in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries Entitled Chu-fan-chi* (New York: Paragon, 1966), p. 66, fn. 18.

33 De Casparis, 'Some Notes', p. 34.

34 F. D. K. Bosch, 'Een Maleische inscriptie in het Buitenzorgsche', *BKI*, 100 (1941): 49-50.

35 Anton Postma, 'The Laguna Copper-Plate Inscription: Text and Commentary', *Philippine Studies*, 40, 2 (1992): 185, 187, 190, 195, 197.

While the Philippines remained at the edge of Melayu influence, Java at the very outset was central to the idea of Melayu. The desire to emulate Srivijaya is evident in the manner in which ambitious rulers in Central Java used Old Melayu documents to consolidate their positions. On the north coast of Central Java, the inscriptions invoke the gods of different regions, while that found in the Kedu Plains to the south simply calls on the spirit of Tandrum Luah, the Protector Spirit of Srivijaya.³⁶ An Old Melayu inscription found at Sojomerto on Java mentions Dapunta Selendra, an 'ardent Saivite', whom Boechari believes to have been the founder (*vamsakara*) of the Sailendras, one of the powerful families that governed central Java from the second half of the eighth to the first half of the ninth centuries.³⁷ Mahayana Buddhism flourished with the establishment of the dynasty, possibly because the Sailendra overlord was from Srivijaya, a Mahayana centre since the seventh century. In 856 Balaputra, a son of a Srivijayan princess and a Sailendra ruler, was defeated in battle and fled to Srivijaya. After this time Sailendra power flourished in Sumatra and waned in Java.³⁸ The struggle between the former and the new centres of Sailendra power for control of international trade is recorded in both Chinese records and inscriptions.

Arab and Persian sources reinforce epigraphic evidence indicating the presence of an important polity somewhere in Sumatra or Java. About 916 CE Abu Said, a Persian amateur geographer, compiled an account based on his own readings and on interviews with people who had sailed to the east. He writes of the king of Zabag, called 'Maharaja', whose possessions are principally on the island of Srivijaya.³⁹ In a story repeated in later Arab and Persian sources, he describes a daily ritual in which the Maharaja throws a gold ingot into a pool of water. Only at low tide could one see the vast accumulation of gold ingots in the pool. At the death of the maharaja, the gold was recovered and distributed to the princes and the royal family, among men, women and children equally; and to the officers and eunuchs according to their rank and prerogatives of their offices. What remained was given to the poor and unfortunate.⁴⁰

Masudi, an Arab writing in 943, repeats this story and adds that in the empire of the Maharaja is the 'island' of Srivijaya, as well as the 'islands' of Zabag (which Gabriel Ferrand believes to be a general reference to Java and Sumatra), Rami (Aceh?) and Kalah. He then offers a formulaic description of wealth and power by reporting from 'a reliable source' that, when a cock in that country crows at sunrise, others answer in a wave through contiguous villages extending outward to over 600 kilometres.⁴¹ An account by the Arab Edrisi in 1158 explains that when there was turmoil in China, the Chinese merchants transferred their commerce to Zabag and to the islands subject to it. This decision was taken because of the latter's reputation for fairness, good conduct, amenable customs, and facility in trade. For these reasons, continues Edrisi, the island of Zabag was highly populated and well frequented by foreigners.⁴²

In the Persian and Arab accounts, the Maharaja is said to be the ruler of Zabag, with possessions in Srivijaya, Rami and Kalah. The reference to 'islands' does not refer literally to islands

36 De Casparis, 'Some Notes', pp. 29, 34.

37 Boechari, 'Preliminary Report on the Discovery of an Old-Malay Inscription at Sojomerto', *Madjalah Ilmu-Ilmu Sastra Indonesia*, 3, ii and iii (Oct. 1966): 242-3, 245-6. Although Boechari dates this inscription to the beginning of the seventh century, most believe it to be of a later period.

38 Coedès, *Indianized States*, pp. 108-9.

39 Ferrand writes 'Jawaga', but according to a French Arabist, J. Sauvaget, the old Arabic system of transcription would have written 'b' for the 'v' and 'z' for the 'j'. Thus 'Jawaga' becomes 'Zabag', and 'Sribuza' becomes 'Srivija(ya)'. See Coedès, *Indianized States*, pp. 130-1, 320 (fn. 173).

40 Gabriel Ferrand, *Relations des voyages et textes géographiques Arabes, Persans et Turks relatifs à l'Extrême-Orient du VIII au XVIII siècles* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1913), pp. 82-4.

41 *Ibid.*, pp. 91-4, 99-100; Coedès, *Indianized States*, pp. 242-3.

42 Ferrand, *Relations*, p. 175.

but to regions, polities and even settlements. Being ruler of Zabag, that is, of Sumatra and Java, and having the polity of Srivijaya and the settlements of Rami and Kalah as possessions, accord with the evidence from Old Melayu inscriptions of this and earlier periods. All of the sources indicate that the area including southeast Sumatra and parts of Java was at one time subject to the influence of one ruler.

In 1024-5 the situation changed dramatically when the Chola invaded Srivijaya's territories on both sides of the Straits. Jambi appears to have been little affected by the Chola invasion, or else made a rapid recovery, for it was able to dispatch tributary missions to China in 1079 and 1088 under the name *Zhanbei* (Jambi).⁴³ But the name 'Melayu' may have still been used for the areas formerly known as Srivijaya, for in 1275 Kertanagara, the ruler of Singosari in Java, launched the Pamalayu expedition against southeast Sumatra. Although there is little in the sources about the expedition, subsequent events indicate that as a result of this campaign there may have been a retreat from the coast to the interior of Jambi. An inscription dated 1286 found in the upper reaches of the Batang Hari commemorates the arrival of religious statues from Java and their establishment at Dharmasraya at the orders of Kertanagara. It states further that all the inhabitants of Melayu – *brahmans, ksatriyas, vaisas* and *sudras* – and especially the king, Srimat Tribhuwanaraja Mauliwarmadewa, rejoiced at the presentation of the gifts. In a period of about a decade, Javanese forces had penetrated as far as the upper Batang Hari, which was still regarded as part of Melayu. Based on archaeological evidence, F. M. Schnitger suggests that Melayu consisted of two centres: one on the coast and another in the interior.⁴⁴ This view seems substantiated by a Melayu mission to China in 1281 led by two envoys with Muslim names, who were most likely foreign traders based on the coast.⁴⁵ The existence of upstream and downstream kingdoms continued on the Musi in Palembang and the Batang Hari in Jambi into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁴⁶

The placement of religious images at Dharmasraya continued an earlier Srivijaya tradition of distributing sacred inscribed documents on stone at crucial locations. For non-literate communities, these were visible signs of the power of the ruler and his supernatural sanction. Dharmasraya was located in the transition zone between the downriver centre and a new interior one which was beginning to develop in the highlands of Minangkabau. The first evidence of this new centre came in the form of an inscription dated 1347 made on the back of a religious image originally brought in 1286 from Java. The image was taken to Melayupura by Adityavarman,⁴⁷ who bore a title which one scholar believes is an attempt at a synthesis of the royal titles traditionally employed in Srivijaya and Melayu.⁴⁸ Other inscriptions associated with Adityavarman were found in the vicinity of Pagar Ruyong in 1347 and in the highlands of Minangkabau.⁴⁹ These inscriptions dating from Adityavarman's reign which lasted till 1375 suggest that the 'upriver' Melayu centre had moved even further inland to the Minangkabau highlands.

Wolters contends that Adityavarman was most likely the same person as the Melayu-Jambi ruler known as Maharaja Prabhu. He reaffirms an earlier view that there were two parts of Melayu, but believes that the Melayu-Jambi ruler moved inland to become the ruler of Melayu in the Minangkabau highlands, while coastal Melayu came to be associated with Palembang.⁵⁰ If this

43 Hirth and Rockhill, *Chau Ju-kua*, p. 66, fn. 18.

44 F. M. Schnitger, *The Archaeology of Hindoo Sumatra* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1937), p. 8.

45 N. J. Krom, *Hindoe-Javaansche Geschiedenis* ('s-Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff, 1931), pp. 335-6.

46 Andaya, *To Live as Brothers*, ch. 3.

47 Krom, *Hindoe-Javaansche*, pp. 393-4.

48 Coedès, *Indianized States*, p. 232.

49 Krom, *Hindoe-Javaansche*, pp. 393-4.

50 Wolters, *Fall of Srivijaya*, pp. 57-8, 75.

reconstruction is correct, it would explain the close cultural relationship between the Minangkabaus and the Melayu. It may even explain why the Melayu in subsequent centuries continued to speak with awe of Minangkabau and to describe it as 'the cradle of their race'.⁵¹ When Mpu Prapanca, a Majapahit court poet, wrote the *Desawarnana* (more generally known as the *Nagarakrtagama*) in 1365, he listed the Melayu lands as including not only Jambi and Palembang, but also Dharmasraya and Minangkabau. All the polities in east Sumatra from Lampung in the south to the northern tip and around to Barus were regarded as part of the Melayu lands.⁵² At one time or another these areas had come under the influence of Srivijaya/Melayu and were therefore placed together as being part of Melayu. Writing in the early fifteenth century, Tomé Pires identifies a very precise location of 'Tanah Melayu (Land of the Melayu)' at the southeastern end of the province of Palembang, where he believes the founder of Melaka originated.⁵³

To summarise, linguists have identified a proto-Melayu language dating to at least 2000 years ago. Speakers of this language spread from west Borneo to southeast Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula. The first evidence of a written Melayu language was in the seventh-century inscriptions found in Palembang, and the first mention of the name 'Melayu' is from a seventh century Chinese document referring to the area of Palembang and Jambi. In the eleventh century the Srivijaya centre moved from Palembang to Jambi, and the Chinese began to use the name *Sanfoqi* for both Melayu and Jambi, which may refer to the same place. In the thirteenth century a new centre of Melayu was established close to the Minangkabau highlands on the upper Batang Hari River. From about the mid-fourteenth century, Melayu could be said to incorporate the coastal areas of present-day Palembang and Jambi; the settlements along the major Batang Hari and Musi river systems and their numerous tributaries; the lands which formed crucial links between the two rivers; and finally the interior headlands of these great rivers. The *Desawarnana* lists the entire east coast of Sumatra around to Barus on the west coast as belonging to the 'land of Melayu'. Settlements on the Malay Peninsula, on the other hand, appear as 'Pahang' rather than Melayu.⁵⁴ Finally, there is a Portuguese comment in the early fifteenth century locating a very precise homeland of the Melayu in southeastern Palembang. Conventional practice of naming people by a settled area would suggest that those inhabitants occupying lands identified as Melayu, wherever and however it was defined, would be known as *orang Melayu*, or 'the people of Melayu'.

Melayu antecedents on the peninsula

Prior to the foundation of Melaka in the early years of the fifteenth century, 'Melayu' referred solely to Sumatra. While there is ample evidence of the existence of earlier entrepôts on both the northwest and the northeast coasts of the Malay Peninsula and the isthmian region to the north, the sources make no mention of the name Melayu.⁵⁵ Recent excavations in the area have been the basis of a reconstruction of early 'Malaysian' history, though one scholar believes that they were most likely Mon speaking and linked to the Mon civilisations to the north. Nevertheless, he believes that the people eventually adopted Islam and became Melayu.⁵⁶ The presence and antiquity of these

51 Rouffaer, 'Was Malaka', p. 51.

52 *Desawarnana (Nagarakrtagama)* by Mpu Prapanca, ed. Stuart Robson (Leiden: KITLV Press, 1995), p. 33.

53 *The Suma Oriental of Tome Pires*, vol. I, ed. Armando Cortesão (New Delhi/Madras: Asian Educational Services, 1990), p. 158.

54 *Desawarnana*, pp. 33-4.

55 For a useful overview of earlier and more recent debates on archaeological sites on the Peninsula, see Leong Sau Heng, 'Collecting Centres, Feeder Points and Entrepôts in the Malay Peninsula, 1000 BC-AD 1400', in *The Southeast Asian Port and Polity*, ed. J. Kathirithamby-Wells and John Villiers (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1990), pp. 17-38.

56 Benjamin, 'Issues in the Ethnohistory of Pahang', p.87.

settlements on the peninsula and the isthmus may have had an important bearing on the development of Melayu identity.

A number of inscriptions dating from the fifth century CE have been found on the northwest coast of the peninsula and the isthmus. The writing is similar to that found in contemporary southern India and employs various 'deliberate deviations' which demonstrate long familiarity with the literary system. One of the inscriptions found south of the Muda River in Kedah, in an area known today as Seberang Perai, mentions a sea captain known as Buddhagupta who was a resident of 'Raktamrttika'. The latter name is not used in India, and its meaning of 'Red Earth', or *Tanah Merah* in Malay, is a common place name on the peninsula. It may be a reference to *Chitu* ('Red Earth' in Chinese), a kingdom on the east coast of the peninsula, which was also an area of significance during this period. The texts of these inscriptions found in an area between Gunung Jerai and the Muda River indicate that this area was already intellectually and commercially linked to the outside world by the fifth century CE.⁵⁷

Between the fifth and the early eleventh century, Sungai Mas in the Bujang Valley was the centre of Kedah. Buddhist inscriptions found in the Valley are evidence of Indian contact from the fifth to the sixth centuries. In the seventh century it became a collecting point of local products for an expanded trade in the Straits. At a time when mariners could not calculate longitude but could determine their latitude through stars, Southeast Asian ships could sail due west from Kedah to reach southern India or Sri Lanka, while Indian ships went due east to Kedah. Sometime in the fifth century Buddhagupta of 'Red Earth' inscribed a prayer on stone at Bujang Valley before setting sail for India, and the Chinese pilgrim Yijing stopped in Kedah in 671 on his way to study Buddhism in India. Indian traders obviously found Kedah an important landfall, and even after Srivijaya became the overlord of Kedah (by 685), Indian sources continued to regard Kedah, not Palembang, as the centre of Srivijaya.⁵⁸ Archaeological discoveries of large shell midden sites in Kedah and directly across the way in east Sumatra are indications that these were areas of substantial populations. There is no evidence, however, that the Sumatran site was ever a trade port,⁵⁹ which suggests that it may have provided the forest products that were then brought to the trading port of Kedah. The pattern of collection centres of local products serving major trade emporiums became well established in the history of the Straits of Melaka.

The Bujang Valley continued to be important, but from the end of the tenth century the centre in Kedah gradually shifted from Sungai Mas to Pangkalan Bujang, which maintained its dominance until the end of the fourteenth century.⁶⁰ Pangkalan Bujang is located on the first firm ground after the mangroves of the Merbok estuary. The concentration of wares and the large amounts of porcelain imply, according to Alastair Lamb, that this was a site for the loading and off-loading of ships. Goods may have been carried through the overland river route to the east coast of the peninsula, and would have reached local populations engaged principally in fishing and rice cultivation. In the nearby Kuala Selingsing site in Perak, identified as a 'feeder point' most likely supplying an entrepot in the Bujang Valley,⁶¹ locally made beads, some from recycled foreign glass, as well as clay, bronze and iron items were found. Similarity of pottery designs on the Malay Peninsula, southeastern Sumatra and southwestern Borneo, and the discovery through metallurgical analysis that the gold used in ritual deposits in a tenth to eleventh-century CE temple

57 John Miksic, 'From Prehistory to Protohistory', and 'Wider Contacts in Protohistoric Times', in *The Encyclopedia of Malaysia*, vol. IV (*Early History*) (Singapore: Archipelago Press, 1998), pp. 64, 75.

58 John Miksic, 'Entrepots along the Melaka Strait', in *Encyclopedia of Malaysia*, vol. IV, p. 117.

59 John Miksic, 'Trade Routes and Trade Centres', in *Encyclopedia of Malaysia*, vol. IV, p. 78.

60 Nik Hassan Shuhaimi Nik Abdul Rahman, 'The Bujang Valley', in *Encyclopedia of Malaysia*, vol. IV, pp. 106-7.

61 Leong, 'Collecting Centres', p. 29.

in Kedah originated from western Borneo, are evidence of trade between these areas.⁶² Perhaps these links, dating back to the period of migrations of the Melayu from their homeland in western Borneo to the new areas of settlement in southeast Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula, were never severed. By about 1300 CE the sites of southern Kedah and Kuala Selinsing were abandoned.⁶³

Some archaeologists have suggested that a major trading centre referred to as Kataha (Skt.)/Kadaram, Kidaram or Kalagam (Tamil)/Kalah (Arabic) was located in Takuapa, believed to be somewhere in the Tenasserim/Tavoy area, from the seventh to the tenth centuries, and in the Merbok estuary in Kedah from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries.⁶⁴ From here traders could sail inland along the rivers, transfer to land portage, and then reload on boats on rivers flowing to the east coast. Lamb places Takuapa some 100 kilometres north of Phuket Island and about 500 kilometres north of Pangkalan Bujang on the Merbok estuary in Kedah. At this location, at the end point of the crossing at the Isthmus of Kra, Kakao Island protects the river mouth from breakers from the Bay of Bengal. There is evidence of habitation on the site between the seventh and the tenth centuries, and excavations have produced a mixture of glass, beads and ceramics from the Middle and Far East. A ninth-century Tamil inscription *in situ* mentions the Manikkiram, a powerful Tamil mercantile corporation. In the early eleventh century Takuapa fell victim to the Chola invasion of the Srivijayan lands.⁶⁵

A second significant area of settlement on the peninsula in the proto-historic period was along the northeast coast. While the Indian connection was particularly strong in the northwestern part of the peninsula, the Chinese were involved with the settlements in the northeast. Between the third and the seventh centuries some of the names mentioned by the Chinese are *Dunsun*, *Chitu*, *Panpan*, *Dandan*, and *Luoyue*. The third-century BCE settlement of *Dunsun*, according to the Chinese, had 500 Indian families and 1,000 Brahmans. An early seventh-century Chinese source describes *Chitu* (possibly in the upper reaches of the Kelantan River) as a wealthy city-state with control over other city-kingdoms and a developed administration. Although a former king had abdicated to preach Buddhism, there were several hundred Brahmans serving the court. The same source describes *Panpan* (Kelantan or Terengganu?) as Buddhist in orientation, and *Dandan* as having 20,000 families and eight state officials who were Brahmans. In Tang sources *Luoyue* is the only settlement in the southern part of the peninsula mentioned, and it is only remembered as a collecting point for forest products.⁶⁶

Although it is Chinese sources that describe these settlements in the northeast of the peninsula, the societies reflect Indian rather than Chinese influence. It was therefore much more likely in these early centuries for Indian traders to have taken the less dangerous though difficult passage across the isthmus or the peninsula by boat and land portage into the Gulf of Siam. In addition to the well-known trans-peninsular route at the Isthmus of Kra, the Tembilang Valley played an important role as a highway between the two coasts. From the Straits one could go up the Muar River, then overland a short distance at the Penarikan ('Portage') to enter the Seriting River,

62 Alastair Lamb, 'Miscellaneous Papers', *Federation Museums Journal*, 6 (1961): 21, 33, 34, 81-2; John Miksic, 'Expansion of Trade', in *Encyclopedia of Malaysia*, vol. IV, p. 77; Miksic, 'Entrepots along the Melaka Strait', p. 117.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 117.

64 Leong, 'Collecting Centres', p. 28; Alastair Lamb, 'Takuapa: The Probable Site of a Pre-Malaccan Entrepot in the Malay Peninsula', in *Malayan and Indonesian Studies*, ed. John Bastin and R. Roolvink (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), pp. 83-4.

65 Lamb, 'Takuapa', pp. 76, 80-3.

66 Paul Wheatley, *The Golden Khersonese: Studies in the Historical Geography of the Malay Peninsula before A.D. 1500* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1961), pp. 17, 28, 36, 42, 49, 51, 55, 194, 290; Nik Hassan Shuhaimi Nik Abdul Rahman, 'Chi tu: An Inland Kingdom', in *Encyclopedia of Malaysia*, vol. IV, pp. 68-9.

which flowed on to join the Pahang, Jelai and Tembilang Rivers. Sailing down these rivers to the east, one would reach the Lebir Valley in southeast Kelantan and then proceed onward to Patani.⁶⁷ Archaeological sites along these interlocking river systems indicate that these waterways, linked by short land passages, were actively used in the past and may account for a greater amount of commercial traffic than previously believed.⁶⁸ Paul Wheatley identified five major trans-peninsular routes linking the Bay of Bengal with the Gulf of Siam.⁶⁹ Written sources mention that goods from the ports on the northwest coast were transported to the east coast to Ligor (Nakhon Si Thammarat) and Langkasuka, which scholars locate in the vicinity of Patani. Langkasuka was ideally located for ships coming from China, being almost due west from the southern tip of the Mekong Delta. Moreover, like Kedah, it was a stopover for Buddhist pilgrims on their way to India. A further attraction was the ability of Langkasuka to provide very high quality camphor, which was highly prized in China. Langkasuka's importance is attested by the frequency of its embassies to the Chinese court in the sixth century.⁷⁰

The significance of these entrepôts for international trade made them vulnerable to ambitious and aggressive kingdoms such as Srivijaya. The eighth century Ligor inscription provides evidence of Srivijaya's pretensions over the peninsula and the isthmus, but it does not mean that these settlements had become Melayu. Archaeological finds in the Bujang Valley do not link its inhabitants with a specific ethnic community. Given the strong presence of Mon-Khmer settlements immediately to the north, particularly at the Satingpra complex to the south of Ligor, it is likely that these Kedah sites would have been subject more to Mon-Khmer than to Melayu influences. By incorporating archaeological studies with his own linguistic and ethnological research, Benjamin has proposed that the ancient communities on the peninsula experienced influences from two different directions. Inhabitants in the north, influenced by nearby Mon-Khmer-speaking civilisations, may have been Mahayana Buddhists and Mon-speakers, even though there would have been many residual Austronesian (though non-Melayu) loan words present in the language dating from an early migration. Only later did the northern inhabitants switch to the Melayu language and adopt Islam. In the south, on the other hand, the people were Austronesian speakers, including early speakers of a Melayu language.⁷¹

With the demise of Srivijaya as the most prestigious Melayu centre, there would have been a jockeying for dominance among groups formerly regarded as part of the Melayu lands on Sumatra. Sometime perhaps in the fourteenth century, according to the *Sejarah Melayu*, a refugee Palembang prince from the lands associated with Melayu went with his followers to the peninsula. The traditional association of the name 'Melayu' with Sumatra made it doubly important for any group on the peninsula to assert its right to be regarded as the heirs of Srivijaya. For the migrant group from Palembang seeking to recreate the glory of Srivijaya on the peninsula, it was necessary not only to re-establish the conditions for favourable trade, but also to promote itself actively as the new centre of the Melayu.

An interesting contest thus ensued not on the battlefield but in the creation of rival texts. It would have begun in the fifteenth century when the Melaka court asserted its centrality in the Melayu world through a court document entitled *Sulalat al-Salatin* (Genealogy/Descent of Kings).

67 Benjamin, 'Issues in the Ethnohistory of Pahang', p. 86.

68 Nik Hassan Shuhaimi bin Nik Abdul Rahman, 'Arkeologi di Kelantan: Satu Tinjauan Sejarah, Prasejarah dan Proto-Sejarah', in *Kelantan Dalam Perspektif Arkeologi: Satu Kumpulan Esei* (Kota Bharu: Perbadanan Muzium Negeri Kelantan, 1986), p. 3.

69 Wheatley, *The Golden Khersonese*, pp. xxvi–xxvii.

70 Miksic, 'Trade Routes and Trade Centres', p. 79.

71 Benjamin, 'Issues in the Ethnohistory of Pahang', p. 93.

Better known as the *Sejarah Melayu* (History/Story of the Melayu), it is a document that makes Melaka the ultimate measure of all things Melayu. The first known recension dates from 1610 when Johor, which viewed itself as the direct heir of Melaka, was greatly weakened by frequent invasions from both the Portuguese and the Acehnese.⁷² The writing of the *Sejarah Melayu* was intended as a reaffirmation of its central position in Melayu. At about the same time the *Hikayat Hang Tuah* (Story of Hang Tuah) is believed to have been first set down on paper. It is a well known and popular work that began as oral tales associated with the legendary heroes of the Melaka kingdom, particularly the exploits of Hang Tuah, the ideal Melayu subject. Scattered throughout this *hikayat* the phrase '*tanah Melayu*' (Land of Melayu) is frequently and consistently employed to refer to the peninsula, not Sumatra. It is no coincidence that both these two texts were first committed to paper in seventeenth-century Johor, at a time when that kingdom was being challenged by Aceh in north Sumatra for dominance in the Melayu world.

Despite the appropriation by Melaka and later Johor of Melayu identity for the peninsula, the Sumatran contenders continued to dispute this claim. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Aceh demonstrated its political, economic, religious, and literary leadership of the Melayu world and offered its own claims to Melayu leadership through its court text, the *Hikayat Aceh* (The Story of Aceh).⁷³ Not to be outdone the Minangkabaus in central Sumatra reasserted their claims to Melayu in a later and different recension of the *Sejarah Melayu*, which gave prominence to the eldest of three brothers who became the progenitor of the Minangkabau monarchy in Pagar Ruyong.⁷⁴ The *Hikayat Siak* (The Story of Siak), an extended version of the *Sejarah Melayu*, emphasises the significance of the founder of the kingdom of Siak, Raja Kecil, who is legitimised through his connections to both the Palembang and Minangkabau lines of Melayu.⁷⁵

In summary, the pre-Melakan inhabitants of the peninsula were never considered to be part of the Melayu lands. There was, moreover, a distinct divide between the Mon-Khmer-influenced northern populations from the people of the southern part of the peninsula, who were more influenced by Austronesian culture. Only with the foundation of Melaka in the fifteenth century by Melayu immigrants from Palembang did the peninsula become part of Melayu. Melaka then sought to make it the centre of the Melayu world, a pretension that did not go unchallenged by those along the eastern coast of Sumatra.

The 'primordial' Melayu

The search for origins of any ethnic group can be controversial, particularly if it is motivated by nationalist or colonialist concerns. In many countries archaeology has had to endure unrelenting political pressure by governments to 'uncover' ancient roots of a dominant group for nationalist or racist purposes. Archaeology has even been used at times to undermine or colonise certain groups by denying their indigenous past.⁷⁶ Geoffrey Benjamin is one scholar who has dared to suggest that some of the archaeological sites located in the Bujang Valley may not have begun as 'Melayu'

72 This is known as the Winstedt version, named for the man who published it in printed Jawi in 1938. C. C. Brown published a romanised version in 1952. See R. O. Winstedt, 'Sejarah Melayu: The Malay Annals, Raffles MS No. 18', *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* [hereafter *JMBRAS*], 16, 3 (1938): 1-226; C. C. Brown, 'Sejarah Melayu or 'Malay Annals', A Translation of Raffles MS 18', *JMBRAS*, 25, 1-2 (1952).

73 *De Hikajat Atjeh*, ed. Teuku Iskandar ('s-Gravenhage: M. Nijhoff, 1958).

74 Drakard, *A Kingdom of Words*, pp. 238-43.

75 *Hikayat Siak*, ed. Muhammad Yusoff Hashim (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1992); Leonard Y. Andaya, *The Kingdom of Johor 1641-1728* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1975), ch. 9.

76 Siân Jones, *The Archaeology of Ethnicity: Constructing Identities in the Past and Present* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 1-10.

settlements, and that some of the present-day Melayu of the peninsula were descended from *Orang Asli* through a long process of adaptation. Because of the lower status of the *Orang Asli* and the current controversy over what constitutes indigenous in Malaysian society, there has not been much support for such views.

As these comments reveal, the historical reconstruction of the 'origins' of the Melayu is not a straightforward task. It involves an interaction between political concerns and historical evidence. Historians seek to uncover as much of the past as is possible given the limitations of the sources themselves, and then suggest the significance of their findings. Yet, governments can manipulate these conclusions for their own purposes, such as elevating a particular historical incident to a national symbol, or identifying a period in history as the cradle of that group's culture and civilisation. The Melaka kingdom has become for the present-day dominant ethnic group in Malaysia the essence of what it means to be Melayu. Through the mainly inadvertent but at times overt collaboration of academic scholarship and governmental directives, there has been an imaginative historical reconstruction of the dress, the customs, and the values of the Melaka Melayu based principally on the *Sejarah Melayu*. This reconstruction of Melayu culture, reinterpreted at various times to accord with changing times, has been made the basis of a new Malaysian cultural identity, and Melayu 'values' have come to be primordially associated with the beginnings of Melayu civilisation.

One should not confuse the 'use' to which governments may put historical conclusions with the evidence itself. While it may still be too early to make bold statements about the prior lifestyle of a group that eventually came to settle Melaka in the fifteenth century, it is possible to make some supportable generalisations. New research suggests that the ancestors of the Melaka 'Melayu' may have originated in western Borneo and developed in southeastern Sumatra. They practiced a mixed economy of swidden agriculture and foraging along the rivers, the tributaries, and the coastal regions. When international trade began to flourish from about the sixth century, there was greater specialisation of tasks. Foraging on land and on the seas became the dominant occupation for some. Requests by foreign traders for supplies of aromatic woods, resins, and rattans created groups who specialised in acquiring the knowledge and expertise to fulfil this demand. Similarly, those who scoured the seas and shores for edible seaweeds, sea tortoises, and pearls began to intensify the search in response to international trade. The presence in the society of officials, lawmakers, law enforcers, food producers, shippers and so on, as part of the organisation of the labour resources for trade, is mentioned in the seventh-century Old Melayu inscriptions from Srivijaya.⁷⁷

The greater organisation of Melayu society and specialisation of functions did not, however, lead to a massive bureaucracy and greater control from the centre. Instead, the society continued to revolve around personal relationships established between the ruler and his subjects.⁷⁸ Recent archaeological studies have located multiple 'hubs of activity' along some 12 kilometres of the northern bank of the Musi River in Palembang.⁷⁹ In a riverine polity linked by multiple hubs, there was little need for an extended bureaucracy for the efficient functioning of government. Rivers and tributaries were linked by short land passages, and *pangkalan* (collection and redistribution ports) dotted the interior. These *pangkalan* were strategically located at sites easily accessible to those

77 J. G. de Casparis, *Selected Inscriptions from the 7th to the 9th Century AD* (Bandung: Masa Baru, 1956), pp. 15-20.

78 O. W. Wolters, *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspective* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 1999), p. 131.

79 Pierre-Yves Manguin, 'Palembang and Srivijaya: An Early Malay Harbour-City Rediscovered', *JMBRAS*, 66, 1 (1993): 33.

80 Oki Akira has used the nineteenth-century sources to show the intricate way that the major rivers of east Sumatra were strategically linked through tributaries, land routes and *pangkalan*. Oki Akira, 'The River Trade in Central and South Sumatra in the 19th Century', in *Environment, Agriculture and Society in the Malay World*, ed. Tsuyoshi Kato *et al.* (Kyoto: Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, 1986), pp. 3-48.

bringing goods from the interior forests or highlands.⁸⁰

The great distances between the coasts and the interior areas, and the difficult and sometimes dangerous rivers, which all traffic had to traverse, made control irregular. The nature of the polity based on a principally riverine environment limited the options available to the government to enforce its decrees throughout the realm. Military expeditions were fruitless because a recalcitrant lord and his followers could easily move further upriver or inland to await the inevitable departure of the invading armies. Instead of physical force, persuasion was employed to convince people of the benefits of cooperation in return for titles, status, and access to external goods. But the most effective appeal was the reputation of the ruler. He was the source of the highest status in the land through the distribution of rank and wealth, and his attributes included supernatural powers that could be invoked against those who failed to uphold his laws. Solemn oaths of allegiance were administered, culminating in the drinking of water in which a royal *keris* had been placed. The water thus impregnated with the magic force of majesty became the instrument of supernatural punishment if the subject did not adhere to the oath.⁸¹ Inscriptions on stone were also placed at strategic locations, at *pangkalan* or along well-travelled routes, to remind the inhabitants of the long reach of the ruler's sacred powers. Even in the twentieth century local inhabitants viewed with considerable awe certain stones bearing markings because of the heritage of an earlier time when stones inscribed with indecipherable letters represented the supernatural potency of the ruler.⁸²

It is this heritage from southeastern Sumatra and western Borneo that inspired the Melayu of Melaka. The new settlement adopted its lifestyle and methods of governance, including the use of sacred oaths, from these sources. From the middle of the fifteenth century, Islam and a rise in court literary production helped to reinforce and export Melaka values to other parts of Southeast Asia. Melaka's success as a centre of commerce, religion, and literary output made it synonymous with Melayu civilisation in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Melayu identity was therefore wrenched away from Sumatra and became a major source of conflict in the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with the principal Melayu contender in Sumatra: the kingdom of Aceh.⁸³

Despite efforts by Aceh and other areas on Sumatra to reclaim the right to be regarded as the heart of the Melayu lands, the identification of Melayu with the peninsula became increasingly entrenched. With the division of the Melayu world into Dutch and British spheres by the Anglo-Dutch treaty of 1824 and the subsequent creation of independent nation-states in the mid-twentieth century, Melayu finally became identified politically and in the popular mind with the peninsula. Although to this day Melayu groups elsewhere, particularly in the Indonesian provinces of Jambi and Riau, claim to be the original and pure Melayu, their story is rarely heard. The political struggle for the right to claim to be the centre of the Melayu has been won by Malaysia. It continues to monopolise the study of Melayuness, with the kingdom of Melaka made to represent the 'core values' of the Melayu.⁸⁴

81 De Casparis, *Selected Inscriptions*, p. 31.

82 Schnitger, *Archaeology*, pp. 1, 4.

83 See Leonard Y. Andaya, 'Aceh's Contributions to Standards of Malayness', *Archipel*, 61 (2001); 29-68.

84 In 1987 the then minister of education, Anwar Ibrahim, called for a strengthening of Malay values as symbolised by the kingdom of Melaka.