Place Names: Preserving Cultural Heritage, Reflecting National Identity

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Abstract

The names of geographical and geopolitical entities such as villages, towns, districts and other topographical features often reflect a tapestry of cultural heritage that are worth preserving not only as a legacy of a diverse and rich tradition but also as an instrument for forging a national identity that is firmly rooted in the local environment and steadfastly anchored in indigenous culture.

This paper explores and describes the various factors that came to be associated with the naming of a place. Some geographical names are based on local legends or folklores. Others are based on local historic and historical events, or on local heroes, dignitaries, celebrities and luminaries, but the majority of the traditional villages and places are based on the flora and fauna that predominates a particular locality.

However, recent trends in the naming of new townships, business areas and shopping complexes have shown an alarming disregard of the intangible cultural and natural heritage. An example will suffice: a village in the metropolitan Kuala Lumpur once thrived under the name of 'Kampung Kerinci' (Kerinci Village), but new development in that area has created a new neighbourhood and commercial area now known as 'Bangsar South', thus subsuming 'Kerinci' under 'Bangsar' (therefore eliminating the cultural heritage of Kerinci) and using English in its name. This reflects badly on both the National Language Policy and the National Culture Policy.

This paper also argues that by maintaining and using the names originally assigned to a place, not only the cultural heritage of that area is preserved, but also the national identity of that area is reflected and reinforced.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The names of places reflect a rich cultural heritage and tradition, a diverse economic activities, and an identity that is rooted in the local environment, anchored in indigenous culture.

Place names are also "... historical monuments that transmit a multifaceted picture of older generations' experiences and insight into the interplay between man and Nature, and they are a valuable source of local history, at the same time as they represent an important factor for the well-being of the people in a local community (Helleland 2011)."

2.0 LANDSCAPE AND 'LANGSCAPE'

An expanse of scenery of any given place that can be seen in a single view is known as 'landscape'. That scenery characterizes the visual impact of that place and induces a response, whether as a thing of beauty or a blot on the landscape in any observer.

However, a place also portrays another kind of picture, not deriving from the lay of the land but from the language that is on display within an observer's line of sight. This is what we called 'langscape': The use of language on public displays, advertising boards, road names and signages, names of buildings and shops, and anything that is on displayed constitutes the 'langscape' of the place. Place name is an important aspect of the 'langscape' of any given area.

2.1 'Langscape' of Langkawi

Langkawi is made of of over 100 islands, on the north west coast of Peninsular Malaysia, the largest of which is the eponymously named Pulau Langkawi (Langkawi Island).

The other islands in this group are Pulau Dayang Bunting, Pulau Singa Besar, and Pulau Beras Basah.

While most are uninhabited, a few have been designated for tourism so that visitors from all over the world can admire and appreciate the 'magical' beauty of Langkawi.

The keyword here is 'magical', not only due to its breathtaking scenery, pristine beaches and duty free shopping but also most of the place names in Langkawi are based on myth and magic, folktales and legends, thus making Langkawi, Malaysia's very own 'Land of the Giants'. No wonder this island is usually referred to as 'Pulau Legenda' or 'Island of Legends' in tourist promotional materials.

However, Langkawi itself get its name, not from giants but from garden variety eagles 'lang kawi' that populate the islands coined from the Malay words 'Lang' (eagle) and 'Kawi' (reddish brown colour, after the colour of batu kawi[1] (manganese stone).

The 'langscape' of Langkawi is made offers many features based on:

i.   Legends and folklores

       Gunung Raya

       Kg Belanga Pecah

       Kg Padang Mat Sirat

       Kuah

       Pulau Beras Basah

       Pulau Dayang Bunting

ii.   Local Heroes/Dignitaries

    Kg Tok Senik

iii.   Flora

    Kg Kelubi

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[1] There are also other place names based on batu kawi, for examples, Sungai Batu Kawi and Kampung Bukit Batu Kawi in Kelantan.

Pantai Beringin

Pulau Timun

iv   **Fauna**

Kg Lubok Buaya

Langkawi

Teluk Yu

3.0   PLACE NAMES AS CULTURAL HERITAGE

Place names are a part of our cultural heritage in the sense that most have a story that tells something about that place that provides a sense of history about the first settlers of that areas.

Place names also show an interplay between man and nature, reflecting a picture of human existence in that place especially in their relation with their environment and surroundings. Thus the place names usually indicate or give some idea of the first settlers economic activities or the relative abundance of a particular species of plants or animals in that locality.

3.1   Economic Activities

- Batu Arang (lit. 'charcoal stone' - *coal mining*)

- Batu Pahat (lit. 'chiseled stone' - *quarry*)

- Bukit Besi (lit. 'iron hill' - *iron mining*)

- Penggaram/Bandar Penggaram (*salt industry*)

- Pengkalan/Pangkalan ('pier' - *fishing/river transport*)

3.2   Topographic Features

- Changkat Jering (cangkat - *hillock*)

- Gong Kedak (gong - *low eminence/rising ground*)

- Gua Musang (gua - *cave*)

- Guar Chempedak (guar - *low eminence/rising ground*)

- Jeram Pasu (jeram - *rapids*)

- Lata Kinjang (lata - *waterfall*)

3.3   Language

- Changlun (*Thai – fallen elephant*)

- George Town (*English - after Britain's King George III*)

- Kok Lanas (*Thai –* kok = *low eminence*)

- Kuala Muda (Mua Dat) (*Thai - sulphur store*)

- Sik–(*Thai –four*) Tanjung Dawai (Than Wai) (*Thai – first defence*)

- Taiping (*Chinese - Heavenly kingdom?*)

3.4   Man-made features

- Bagan Lalang (bagan - *quay*)

- Ladang Bikam (ladang - *estate, orchard*)

- Parit Raja (parit - lit. 'ditch' - *canal/water channel*)

- Pelabuhan Kelang (pelabuhan - *port*)

- Sungai Korok (korok - *dredged/dug*)

The use of certain place names can also indicate an identity of that particular area. For example, place names that indicate high areas or eminences (but lower that hills or mountains) such gong, guar, or kok indicates local dialects. Thus place names with 'gong' are usually found in the state of Terengganu (or the east coast area of Peninsular Malaysia) while 'guar' in Kedah (or north western area of Peninsular Malaysia).

As for 'kok', it is only found in Kelantan and the word itself is of Siamese origin, thus reflecting that the first settler there probably were Siamese[2].

4.0   REFLECTING NATIONAL IDENTITY

The names of present day nations, as recognised by the United Nations, usually reflects the nation's linguistic heritage, and countries that was once colonised and exist under a colonial given name usually changed their name to better reflect their independence and the new national identity[3].

For example,

Southern Rhodesia (1923) —> Rhodesia (1965) —> Zimbabwe (1980) ['Zimbabwe', symbolises the Shona homeland and the archaeological site of 'Great Zimbabwe']

Some country also changed their name not because of Independence but with the intention of wanting to be known by their endonyms rather that exonyms.

For example,

- Bombay   —>Mumbai (1995) [still Bollywood, not Mumywood]

- Burma   —>Myanmar (1989) [still Burmese cat)

- Ceylon   —>Sri Lanka (1972) [Ceylon tea]

- Peking   —>Beijing (1980s) [Peking duck, Peking opera]

- Persia   —>Iran (1935) (Persian Gulf, also Gulf of Iran)

- Siam   —> Thailand (1949) – [Thai kickboxing, Thai food but still Siamese

fighting fish, siamese cat, siamese twins]

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[2] Hardly surprising since Kelantan was once part and parcel of the Kingdom of Siam.
[3] Which is reflected by the language it use naming the country and administering the country.

4.1   The 'Langscape' of Malaysia

Malaya, or technically, The Federation of Malaya[4], (nine Malay states and the two British Straits Settlements of Penang and Malacca), gained its Independence on 31 August 1957. From January 1948 to 16 September 1963, Malaysia was the known as Malaya. On 16 September 1963 Malaysia[5] was born with the addition of Sabah, Sarawak, and Singapore[6])

4.2   After Independence

Changes in place names after Independence were undertaken in order to reflect better local identity and to give real meaning to being independence by not continuing to worship the former colonial masters.

Thus most place names undergone changes, such as,

Towns:

Jesselton	—> Kota Kinabalu
Maxwell Hill	—> Bukit Larut
Port Swettenham	—> Pelabuhan Kelang
Port Weld	—> Kuala Sepetang

Roads:

Birch Road	—>Jalan Maharajalela
Brickfields Road	—>Jalan Sambathan
Campbell Street	—> Jalan Dang Wangi
Dickson Street	—> Jalan Masjid India

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[4] the Malay name is Persekutuan Tanah Melayu.
[5] Probably based on other countries in the Pacific rim region such as Indonesia (derives from the Latin and Greek *Indus*, and the Greek *nēsos*, island); Melanasia C19: from Greek *melas* black + *nēsos* island; with reference to the dark skins of the inhabitants; on the model of *Polynesia; Micronesia* C19: from micro- + Greek *nēsos* island; so called from the small size of many of the islands; on the model of *Polynesia; Polynesia* C18: via French from poly- + Greek *nēsos* island.
(http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/)
[6] Which later left Malaysia on 9 August 1965 to form the Republic of Singapore.

Foch Avenue ⟶>Jalan Chen Lock

Java Street ⟶>Mountbatten Road ⟶> Jalan Tun Perak

However these exercise we not done exhaustively and in some areas, the colonial legacies persist, sometime whole areas or town, such as George Town, now preserved as Unesco World Heritage Site, with most of the colonial road names remain to this days.

Why would an independent nation with its own agenda of nation-building, its own national identity to promote and propagate be willing to maintained an exonym[7] remains a mystery.

In the case George Town, this place has an endonym[8], long before Francis Light set foot on the island of Penang. The area was inhabited by Malays, mostly fishermen, who called the area Tanjung Penanga, and many present day local affectionately refer to George Town as 'Tanjung'.

There other place names that retain their pre-Independence names such as,

Cameron Highlands

Jalan Cochrane

Jalan Peel

Jalan Travers

4.3 New Trends in 'Langscape'

The naming of new entities such as buildings, shopping complexes/centres, roads are governed by Act 171 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1976 which provides for the enactment of bylaws to ensure that the name complies with the national language and reflects reflect a Malaysian identity …

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[7] A name given to a place by foreigners ⇒ Londres is an exonym of London (http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/exonym).
[8] The local name for a geographic place (e.g., what we call Rome is *Roma* in Italian); contrast *exonym* (http://wordcraft.infopop.cc/dictionary/part4.htm#endonym).

Act 171
... Naming of public places, etc.
68. A local authority may, with the approval of the State Authority, determine the name by which any public place or housing estate or housing scheme shall be known and may from time to time alter the name of any public place or housing estate or housing scheme
or of any part thereof whether or not such name was applied to such place, estate or scheme before the commencement of this Act…

Even though there are laws and bylaws governing the naming of places and properties, the laws are not strictly enforced thus the naming of shopping complexes, buildings and condominium usually use English. Recent development in UEP Subang Jaya saw the development of 'One City', with does not have any cultural identity or significance except for its English name and probably the allusion to 'One Malaysia'.

In the case of Kampung Kerinci in Kuala Lumpur, the area being developed there a known as 'Bangsar South' thus subsuming 'Kerinci' in 'Bangsar' probably because the word 'Bangsar South' probably will be associated with the more upmarket and uptown 'Bangsar' area.

4.3.1   Reflecting Global Identity

Naming of places or buildings by using English names or by copying the names of places in other countries are usually for marketing purposes without taking into account the need to refelct local identity. Thus we have,

- Bangsar South

- Berjaya Times Square

- Damansara Heights

- Pavillion

- Star Hill

4.3.2 Reflecting Local Identity

Ayers Rock is also known as Uluṟu, the name given to it by the local Pitjantjatjara Aboriginal tribe long before surveyor William Gosse named it in honour of South Australia Chief Secretary Henry Ayers in 1873. Today, the Aborigines own and administer the land on which the rock stands and, since they attach spiritual significance to it, they prefer visitors not to climb it. Nowadays Uluru is given prominence over Ayers Rock as a mark of respect to the early settlers of that region.

4.3.3 Old Names for New

The most difficult aspect of changing or replacing the colonial given names or exonyms with local names or endonyms that have local historical significant is the authentication or verification of the endonyms.

Take for example the well established names of the states of Melaka, Kelantan and Kedah. These are all established names and we would not anticipate any change at all for the foreseeable future.

Except for Melaka which is named after the 'melaka' tree (*Emblica officinalis*) according to a legend involving a dog, a mouse-deer that fought back, a prince, and a tree where the prince was resting while witnessing the 'great fight-back'[9], there is no definitive research to indicate the names of 'Kelantan' and 'Kedah' although both are in existence long before 'Melaka'.

The name of the state of Kelantan is said to be named after the tree 'gelam hutan', 'kelantan' being a corruption of 'gelam hutan'. Others claim that name is derived from the

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[9] We will never know why Parameswara did not named the place after the brave, albeit diminutive winner, otherwise Melaka would be known as 'Kancil' now.

Malay word *kilatan* (shiny/glittery) or *kolam tanah* 'pool of clay'. When Kelantan was under the influence of the Siamese, they called the place **Kalantan** but its meaning remains obscure.

Kedah exist even longer that Kelantan, but its meaning are obscure. Archaeological evidence found in Bujang Valley reveals that a Hindu–Buddhist kingdom ruled ancient Kedah possibly as early as 110 A.D.

Reference to ancient Kedah was found in a Tamil poem written at the end of 2nd century A.D. It described goods from *Kadaram.* Other than *Kadaram*, Kedah was also known *Kataha-Nagara* and *Kataha*. In the middle eastern literature, ancient Kedah was referred as *Qilah* and *Kalah.*

However, the fact is, the origin of the name of Kelantan or Kedah remain a mystery and this illustrate a very important point in that for most places, the cultural identity or significance of their names could not be verified or authenticated.

5.0   CONCLUSION

Place names have an history and reflect a shared collective memory of the community or inhabitant of that particular place. Most names created during the colonial period were replaced with new names, either previous names from pre-colonial days or new names with local significant and place names which reflect local and national identities and help to preserve cultural heritage of the nation.

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