

INDIGENOUS PLACE NAMES CONTINUED EXISTENCE AS MARKERS OF INDIGENOUS IDENTITY IN SABAH

Jeannet Stephen¹, Jabil Mapjabil², Nor Arifah Mohd Nor³, Patricia Lajumin⁴,
Reany Koton⁵ & Johan Johnes⁶

¹Borneo Institute for Indigenous Studies (BorIIS), Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS)
(E-mail: jeannets@ums.edu.my)

²Borneo Institute for Indigenous Studies (BorIIS), Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS)
(E-mail: jabil@ums.edu.my)

³Centre for the Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning, Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS)
(E-mail: arifahmn@ums.edu.my)

⁴Centre for the Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning, Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS)
(E-mail: patricia.ljmn@ums.edu.my)

⁵Borneo Institute for Indigenous Studies (BorIIS), Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS)
(E-mail: reanykoton@gmail.com)

⁶Borneo Institute for Indigenous Studies (BorIIS) Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS)
(E-mail: johanjohnes28@gmail.com)

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Abstract: *Indigenous place names reflect not only the uniqueness of a community's cultural heritage but also serve as a tie to the rich history of the place. By the time the United Nation's International Decade of Indigenous Languages is officially launched in 2022, Sabah can vouch its contribution to the international initiative in Sabah's ability to maintain the various Indigenous place names in the state and consequently preserving Sabah's cultural heritage identity. Thus far, studies have yet to be conducted on Indigenous place names in Sabah from the toponyms or geographical names on the colonial maps of North Borneo, now known as Sabah. In this article, the authors examine the place names found on the colonial maps of North Borneo. Researching from the framework of critical place inquiry (McKenzie & Tuck, 2015) and using document content analysis as the method of study, the authors found that, to date, many place names on the colonial maps of North Borneo are either exactly the same or having only slightly different spelling. The maps of North Borneo are in themselves a repository rich with materials that provide evidence for comparison basis on the preservation of Indigenous place name. An encouraging aspect that the researchers found is, in contrast to practices that replace Indigenous place names with other names for this or that reason, that many Indigenous place names on the colonial maps of North Borneo still existing to this day in Sabah points to the positive maintenance of Indigenous identity within modern settings.*

Keywords: *Place Names, North Borneo, Indigenous Language, Identity, Colonial Maps*

Introduction

The Indigenous peoples and land are inseparable. The connection is deeply spiritual, cultural, social, and economic and this relationship is basic to their Indigenous identity and their very existence (United Nations, 2018: 1). Land is not only a resource for Indigenous peoples' livelihood but also sacred. The relationship between land and places is so significant that to some Indigenous communities, it is akin to religion. To the American Indians, for example, their lands and places are held in "...the highest possible meaning, and all their statements are made with this reference points in mind" (Deloria, 2016:62). This highest honor given to land is universal across continents and Indigenous communities in Southeast Asia included. Evers (2016:5) described the word *tanah air* as both Malay and Indonesian word referring to the homeland of the *dunia Melayu*, the Malay world or *Nusantara*. So deeply enmeshed is the relation between the individual and his/her land that phrases such as '*tanah adat*', '*tanah air*', '*tanah Melayu*', '*tanah rizab*' are lexicons familiar to Malay speakers. Of a more serious effect from honoring land and its significance to the identity of the Indigenous, is the taking of lands from the Indigenous peoples and this occurred via colonization or land grabbing. Colonization can be said to cause the most devastation to Indigenous peoples lands, identity, wellbeing, cultural knowledge system, language, and ceremonial practices (Pihama & Morgan, 2019; Daniels, 2019; Kingston, 2015; Lavalley & Poole, 2010).

The importance and significance of land is then reflected in its place names or names in general. The African scholar, Ngugi wa Thiongo, gave this scathing remark in his lecture delivered at the Harvard Centre for African Studies in 2016:

"In the history of conquest, the first thing the victorious conqueror does is to attack people's names and languages. The idea was to deny them the authority of naming self and the world, to delegitimize the history and the knowledge they already possessed, and to delegitimize their own language as a credible source of knowledge and definition of the world, so that the conqueror's language can become the source of the very definition of being" (Thiongo, 2019: 130).

According to Ngungi wa Thiongo, colonization left the African languages with all its rich history and Indigenous knowledge as nothing more than dark bushes that "becomes a big barrier to imagining and therefore crafting a practical language policy" (p.131). The ability to give names to their people and to their lands is as necessary as breathing to the Indigenous community. Colonial policies that erased this function from many unfortunate Indigenous communities and colonized their lands effectively took away the pride and identity of Indigenous communities. Despite this rather somber introduction, the article attempts to describe that place names in Sabah still have a strong visibility of Indigenous element.

Literature Review

Maps are a form of communication about place and the environment. The information obtained from pre-historic maps are messages "...painted or carved by prehistoric peoples in Asia as elsewhere, have to do with place: the skies, the homesteads, the fields, the graves of this world, and the unknown configurations of the next" (Smith, 1994: 19). In this modern age, maps provide representations of the world we live in and allow not only places but items or materials to be represented on paper, online on digital media and digital repositories, further allowing us to understand, follow, or react to the links that exist to the items in the real world.

A map or a chart or a plan have particular purposes. This purpose becomes clear when a map is considered in social contexts i.e. the why, how, and who commission and use the particular map (Edney, 2019: 3). This detail is significant when we discuss colonial maps hence the arising issues in other previously colonized countries that erasure of Indigenous identity occurred on maps produced by the colonial power. The criticism is not unfounded as Edney observed, “In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Westerners used cartography’s geometrical essence to distinguish themselves from the Asians and Africans whom they colonized: the geometrical nature of Western cartography marked Westerners as innately rational, while the apparently non-geometrical maps of colonized peoples marked them as innately irrational and therefore properly subject to Western rule” (ibid.: 5).

Indigenous place names are reflections of the environment and the society of the time of map creation. According to Andrews (2001:36), maps “are constructions of reality, images laden with intentions and consequences that can only be studied in the societies of their time”. Barry (1999: 21) states “some cultures, or within particular worldviews (ways of thinking), the environment can include the dead, one’s ancestors and /or other entities from the ‘supernatural’ realm, such as gods, goddesses, spirits, angels, ghosts, etc.”. The definitions provided here provide understanding on the stories behind Indigenous place names. In Hawai’ian place names, for instance, the physical is not separated from the metaphysical i.e. the elders and ancestors (*nā kūpuna*), gods and goddesses (*akua*), and spirit guardians (*aumā kua*) are “...part of the framework of how Hawaiians experience their geographic reality” (Louis, 2004: 10). This practice is similar and universal amongst Indigenous communities when it comes to naming practices. The district Penampang in Sabah is a heartland of the Kadazan indigenous community. The word ‘Penampang’ is attributed to Kg. Penampang¹ one of the earliest villages in the area located near the Moyog River. The village at that time had many large rocks (*‘pampang’*) and over time the name changed to Penampang as it is known now (Penampang District Council, 2021)².

Indigenous peoples’ definition of land includes themselves as part of the environment, part of the ecosystem. Land is part and parcel of the Indigenous peoples’ livelihood. The land is not only a provider of food or resources, it is also tied very closely to the spiritual and cultural aspects of the Indigenous peoples. Even without the help of modern land and survey tools, the Indigenous peoples have their own conservation practices that they have used for the longest time. Place names not only refers to place but also to the purpose or what limits a place from certain other activities (boundary determination). Lasimbang (2004:2) explained that “Traditionally indigenous communities established community conserve area, which called *pulau, puru, soginadai, tanah simpan* etc.”

In their paper ‘Place names: Preserving cultural heritage, reflecting national identity’, Rusli & Norhafizah (2013) stated that place names 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”. They provide examples mainly from peninsula Malaysia such as Pulau Dayang Bunting (lit. ‘island of pregnant maiden’), Pulau Singa Besar (lit. ‘island of big lion’), Pulau Beras Basah (lit. ‘island of wet rice’) and these names are not unfamiliar in its background and stories if one is acquainted with the legends of Langkawi Island. The authors also stated

¹ Kg. is a short form for the Malay word ‘kampung’ meaning village.

² Penampang District Council. Retrieved 15 Aug 2021 on <https://ww2.sabah.gov.my/md.ppg/>

the reasons for replacing colonial place names in Malaysia after its Independence as “to reflect better local identity and to give real meaning to being independence (sic) by not continuing to worship the former colonial master”. The examples given are place names of towns changed after the Independence: Jesselton to Kota Kinabalu, Maxwell Hill to Bukit Larut, Port Swettenham to Pelabuhan Kelang, and Port Weld to Kuala Sepetang.

Research Methodology

This study utilized the document analysis method to study the four colonial maps of North Borneo from different publication years. The maps are downloaded from the United States Library of Congress online repository. They are then analyzed for specific place names of general well-known places in Sabah. These place names are then compared between the maps and then cross-checked with the Gazetteer Report for Sabah (2017) from the Malaysian MyGeoPortal website.

Due to the large number of the place names on that Gazetteer report, this study will focus on the ones clearly available on the colonial maps (rivers, towns, hills) and those that are familiar to the authors. Familiarity is important as it would be impractical to hazard a guess on the current equivalent of the place names due to the different spellings often found on the centuries old maps. As the authors are more familiar with the area of Papar – given that Papar is the hometown of one of the authors – it was decided to focus on place names from Papar and also Kota Kinabalu. Several well-known place names of towns in Sabah will be considered as well.

Findings and Discussion

The colonial maps analyzed for this study are detailed in Table 1 below with the Digital ID as the main criteria of differentiation as well as the date of published. This is because the names on the Library of Congress repository tend to be the same for some of the map hence relying on names to locate the map on the repository are not practical.

Table 1: The colonial maps analyzed in the study

No.	Title	Contributor	Dates	Published	Digital ID
2	A map of British North Borneo	Edward Stanford Ltd. British North Borneo Chartered Company.	1888	London	http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gmd/g8033s.ct001931
1	A map of British North Borneo	Edward Stanford Ltd. British North Borneo Chartered Company.	1899	London	http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gmd/g8033s.ct001933
3	A map of British North Borneo	Edward Stanford Ltd. British North Borneo Chartered Company.	1903	London	http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gmd/g8033s.ct001930
4	Borneo	Stanford's Geographical Establishment	1919	London	http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gmd/g8030.ct001929

Given that the four maps were created and published by the same publisher, the place names did not differ much beginning from the 1881 map. The thirty-year difference between the 1881 map and the 1919 map are in terms of density, clearer visual, and additional places (not necessarily bearing Indigenous name). Some of the Indigenous place names taken from the 1881 map are listed on the table below with other place names noted from the other three later maps:

Rivers and Ports	Hills	Town & Kampung
River Papar, Benoni River, Kawang River, Kinarut River, Pangalat River, Pagalan River	Limbahao Hill, Low Hills	Papar (T), Mondolipo (k), Bangawan (T)
Sampanmangio Pt., Kwamut River,	Mt. Kinabalu, Mt. Tambuyukon, Mt. Kilangalangan,	Ranao (T), Kudat (T), Pampang (T), Marudu, Selimpodor (T), Matungong (T),
Rivers Burog, Buntingnabai, Kalangan, Tolungan, Gindusud, Masugi, TogoPON, Tiulu, Tupa, Kapa, Ponobukan, Boyan, Sonsuron, Babagan	Mt. Ponuntungan, Mt. Bolinkadus, Kinindukau Peak	

Table 2: Selected place names from the maps (1881–1919)

The authors can surmise the comparison between the maps are that the maps consistently show the Indigenous place names as from the earlier 1881. Nevertheless, the rivers Burog, Buntingnabai, Kalangan, Tolungan, Gindusud, Masugi, TogoPON, Tiulu, Tupa, Kapa, Ponobukan, Boyan, and Babagan were no longer visible. It is possible the rivers had died, or the rivers had become smaller or insignificant to the cartographers at the time of the map’s publication. These rivers however featured very prominently on the 1881, 1899 and 1903 maps as can be seen here on Figure 1:



Figure 1: Map of North Borneo (1899) showing the river branches and their names

When compared to the Gazetteer report for Sabah (2017), the place names in Table 1 are found to still exist although with a different spelling. The results for the cross-check or comparison to the data on the Gazetteer report are as such for the place names we observed earlier.

There could be various reasons (as explained earlier on the names of rivers not found on later versions of the North Borneo map) for the place names existence on the maps then and now. We remind readers that this study does not attempt to be detailing specific geographical factors for events that occurred in the place names visibility on the maps but rather – as have been explicated in the introduction – to see whether place names were Indigenous in Sabah some 140 years ago when it was still known as North Borneo.

The authors found that it is possible that North Borneo and its indigenous communities during the colonial times – and at present - did not experience what many Indigenous communities elsewhere i.e. name replacement by the colonial powers then. For example, Victoria Falls in Zambia already has a local Indigenous name which is *Mosi-oa-Tunya* that translates to ‘The Smoke that Thunders’ but the explorer David Livingstone recorded that mighty waterfall in his journals and writings as Victoria Falls after the Queen Victoria of England (Hudson, 2013). The place names in North Borneo as can be found on the colonial maps from as far back as the 17th century could still be found in the maps of present Sabah. Spelling changes are not due to efforts to erase the Indigenous identity but because the whole country underwent spelling change that affected the phonology, grapheme, and structure of Malay (Hassan Ahmad, 1999).

Place names	Visibility on Sabah Gazeteer Report (2017)	Comments
Limbahao Hill	no record, but there is a Kampung Limbahau	Kampung and no hill found
Low Hills	-	not found
Benoni River	no record, but there is a Kuala Benoni	estuary 'muara'
Kinarut River	-	not found
Pangalat River	Sungai Pengalat Besar and Sungai Pengalat Kecil	
Pagalan River	Sungai Pegalan	spelling adjustment to Malay
Mt. Kinabalu	same place name	
Mt. Tambuyukon	same place name	
Mt. Kilangalangah	no record	
Mt. Bolinkadus,	no record	
Kinindukau Peak	Kinandukan (a scientific station)	spelling adjustment to Malay
River Kalangan	no record, but there is a Kg. Sinungkalangan	Kampung found but no River Kalangan
River Buntingnabai	no record	
River Tolungan	no record	
River Gindusud	no record	
River Togoapon	no record	
River Burog	no record	
River Tiulu	no record	
River Tupa	no record	
River Kapa	no record	
River Ponobukan	no record	
River Boyan	no record	
River Babagan	no record	
River Sunsuron	same place name	
Papar (town)	same place name	
Mondolipo (town)	no record	
Bangawan (town)	Bongawan	spelling change
Ranao (town)	Ranau	spelling change
Kudat (town)	Same place name	
Pampang (town)	no record, but there is Penampang	extended version
Marudu (town)	no record, but there is Marudu Bay	
Selimpodor (town)	no record, but there is Kg. Salimpodon	pronunciation change over the centuries
Matungong (town)	no record, but there is Matunggong	spelling adjustment to Malay

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The study and its findings are by no means exhaustive in nature. It is in exploratory and indeed finding that the colonial powers then more or less left the Indigenous place names alone is one we feel deserve a more thorough study. We propose for a more detailed study with collaboration between cartographers interested in the critical inquiry of place as place becomes increasingly important to the Indigenous researchers and communities, and the studies on place and place names “... enables greater attention to the ways in which land and environmental issues intersect with social issues and social life. (Mackenzie & Tuck, 2015).

Conclusion

Helleland (2009) state that place names are labels that are vital for the knowledge of our past. Indigenous peoples value their past because there is meaning in the past that brings an amalgamation of all its history into making one's identity today. This does not mean that Indigenous peoples look backward. In contrast, Indigenous peoples revere the lands because of the ties that bind them to their people and the contribution of the lands, the hills, mountains, rivers, forests, plains, give to the cultural identity of an Indigenous person.

Indigenous place names from centuries ago still existing today is no mean feat. The treasure in that is that "...a person's landscape identity (or place identity) is strengthened if he or she knows the place names of the area. Place names are an important part of one's language and one's personal vocabulary, and as such also of oneself" (Helleland, 2009: 502).

Sabah is indeed fortunate that only minor changes are done to the Indigenous place names in Sabah. We believe that each locality (kampung or towns) should make it their priority to document the history of the place names. Some may have done this already but some may not. Sabah risked losing out on not on a rich data of geographical, historical, anthropological, ethnographic, social, psychological, and linguistic knowledge from its Indigenous place names.

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