



Genetic, historical and linguistic perspectives on the origin of the Kelantanese Malays



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ABSTRACT

The Kelantanese Malays who resided in the remote northeastern regions of the Malay Peninsula in the Kelantan state are believed to have a unique genetic signature. The objective of this review is to analyze the populational sub-structure of the Kelantanese Malays from historical, genetic and linguistic perspectives. Historical data suggest that the Semang were composed of the Jahai, Bateq and Kensiu sub-tribes, whereas the Senoi were composed of only the Temiar sub-tribe. The Mendriq sub-tribe is believed to be the first group of aborigines to land in Kelantan. Subsequently, genetic analysis showed that the Kelantanese Malays are an independent clade at the base of the phylogenetic tree and contain genetic material similar to that of the Semang, specifically the Jahai and the Kensiu sub-tribes. The genetic data are supported by the fact that the Aslian language, a branch of the Austroasiatic languages that is widely spoken by the Semang, was potentially transmitted through agricultural activities. However, the potential limitation of this mini-review is the lack of primary reliable sources covering the historical, linguistic and genetic features of the Kelantanese Malays.

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1. Introduction

The population in Peninsular Malaysia consists of Deutero-Malays (modern Malays), Chinese, Indians and three main aboriginal tribes, namely, the Proto Malay, the Negrito (Semang) and the Senoi (Ismail et al., 2009). The Negrito (Semang) and the Senoi are known as 'Orang Asal' or 'Orang Asli' in Malaysia (Ismail et al., 2009). Based on the migration and trading patterns from centuries ago, the Deutero-Malays were considered to be descendants of the Proto Malays, with four main sub-ethnic groups consisting of the Melayu Minang, Melayu Jawa, Melayu Bugis and Melayu-Kelantan or Kelantanese Malays (Hatin et al., 2011; Ismail et al., 2009), all of which are genetically heterogeneous. According to Hatin et al. (2011), the Melayu Minang, Melayu Jawa and Melayu Bugis are believed to have similar historical and cultural links with populations from the Indonesian archipelago when compared to the Kelantanese Malays.

From 100 Before Christ (BC) to 1300 Anno Domini, Peninsular Malaysia, which was strategically located and connected the Indonesian archipelago with the kingdom of Indochina, was a famous port for traders from China, India, Thailand, Arab and Sumatra. Consequently, the high frequency of intermarriage and integration with the local Malays attracted migrants from the surrounding areas (Marshall

Cavendish Corporation, 2008). Recently, a study investigated the genetic divergence among the Southeast East Asian population because family ancestries are strongly influenced by geographical and linguistic affiliations (Abdulla et al., 2009). For example, Hatin et al. (2011) hypothesized that the western region of the Melayu Minang and the southern Malays (Melayu Jawa and Melayu Bugis) experienced diverse cultural and historical links with the Indonesian archipelago, unlike the Kelantanese Malays who resided in the remote northeastern regions of the Malay Peninsula in the Kelantan state. In this review, we will discuss the populational substructure of the Kelantanese Malays from historical, genetic and linguistic perspectives to describe the origin of the Kelantanese Malays. Overall, the objective of this review is to analyze the populational sub-structure of the Kelantanese Malays from historical, genetic and linguistic perspectives (See Fig. 1).

2. Various populations in the state of Kelantan

Kelantan is located at the geographical coordinates of 6°75.12" north latitude and 102°14' 23.25' east longitude and consists of 10 districts, namely, Tumpat, Kota Bahru, Tanah Merah (Chi Tu), Pasir Mas, Bachok, Machang, Pasir Puteh, Kuala Krai, Jeli and Gua Musang. Kelantan is inhabited by Kelantanese Malays, aborigines, Chinese and Indians (<http://www.kelantan.gov.my/v6/>; Rentse, 1934).

Although the Semang and the Senoi are believed to have descended from a single ancestry in Kelantan, they can be differentiated by their adaptations to the distinct ecological niches (Hill et al., 2006). The Semang are composed of the Jahai, Bateq, Kensiu and Mendriq sub-tribes, whereas

Abbreviations: BC, Before Christ; mtDNA, mitochondrial DNA.

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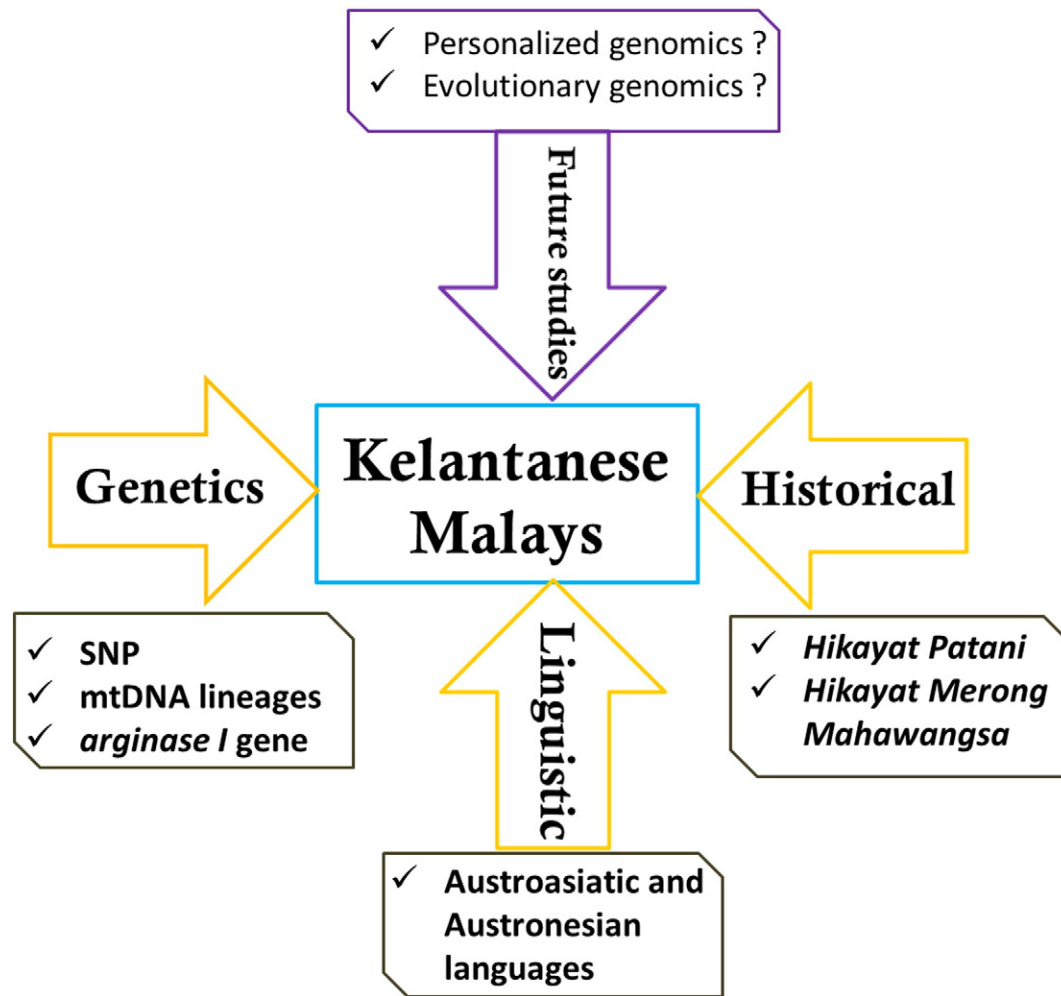


Fig. 1. Genetic, Historical and Linguistic Perspectives on the Origin of the Kelantanese Malays and the Gaps that can be filled with future studies Abbreviations: SNP: single nucleotide polymorphism, mtDNA: mitochondria DNA.

the Senoi are composed of only the Temiar sub-tribe. The Semang and Senoi are scattered in various districts of Kelantan (Hamid et al., 2013). The traditional Semang, who are of patrilineal descent, are rainforest foragers and practice egalitarianism. The cognatic descent of the Senoi resulted in an appearance that is between the Negrito and Mongoloid. The Senoi live in longhouses and practice slash-and-burn agriculture at higher altitudes (Hill et al., 2006). The Senoi also practice egalitarianism (Hill et al., 2006).

Historically, the Mendriq are believed to be the first group of aborigines who landed in the Gua Musang district of the Malay Peninsula. The Mendriq have physical features resembling the East African population. The Mendriq were foragers who harvested seasonal fruit and gathered forest products for consumption and medical purposes (Mohamad, 2010; Musharbash and Barber, 2012; Subramaniam, 2012). In 1972, resettlement projects were launched by the Malaysian government to improve the lifestyles of the Mendriq. Economic transformation projects were designed to help the Mendriq by focusing on commodity production (Musharbash and Barber, 2012). Unfortunately, this move indirectly demolished their traditional homeland, or *saka*, and their group identity. The Mendriq eventually became dispirited and suffered from frequent malnutrition, which finally led to their extinction (<http://asiaharvest.org/people-group-profiles/malaysia/>).

The Jahai or Jah Jehai initially settled along the Pos Rual River in the Jeli district. The Jahai practiced hunting using blowpipes and poison darts and scoured for fish (Mohamad, 2010). This indicated their

advancement from a shifting cultivation to a semi-nomadic way of life. However, the Bateq inhabit the Kuala Krai and Gua Musang districts, mainly in the areas surrounding the national park. The Bateq live as small nomadic foraging groups and are hunter-gatherers who trade rattan and resinous wood for tobacco and other staple foods (<http://asiaharvest.org/people-group-profiles/malaysia/>; Mohamad, 2010).

Rather than settling in the Kelantan districts like the other groups, the Kensiu Kelantan tend to practice cross-border migrations into Thailand and live in scattered areas, such as Kampung Baru Siong in Baling, Kedah and the Narathiwat and Yala provinces in Thailand (the southernmost town in Thailand at the Malaysia–Thailand border). This group has a close resemblance to the Kensiu Thai and is reclusive, avoiding any social interaction with the outside world; however, their unique singing styles were widely adopted by the locals. Because intermarriages (including with the Malays) are strongly prohibited, the genetic makeup of the Kensiu has likely been highly conserved for generations, and this conservation can be useful for the analysis of the Malay substructure (<http://asiaharvest.org/people-group-profiles/malaysia/>; Mohamad, 2010).

The Temiar or Sakai is the fourth largest aboriginal group. Unlike other aborigines, the lives of the Temiar are highly dependent on bamboo for making weapons and receptacles and for building houses (Benjamin, unpublished data, Nanyang Technological University Singapore; Mohamad, 2010). The Temiar live in longhouses in extended family

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