

BALING

from DEMONSTRATION to
INDUSTRIALISATION

A Collection of Essays
in Time Geography



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Asmah Ahmad

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Preface

Baling is a place located in the northern frontier of Peninsular Malaysia. Most Malaysians know *where* it is. But, *what* is Baling?

Simply, Baling is remembered for shaping a part of Malaysia's post-Independence history. The place is synonymous with popular, grassroots uprising, something one does not expect for a well governed, sedate Malaysia. This is the place where hungry and angry smallholders and their compatriots staged the "Hunger March" in December 1974. They were among the 70 per cent or more of the poor in the district who wanted to tell the world that they had enough of being squeezed between rising costs of living and slumping rubber prices. There was virtually no development. That was Baling in Time Frame One.

Things changed thereafter although only slowly. By 1988, the smallholder poverty level slipped a little to around 70 per cent. That was still an unpleasant figure but there was more access to basic amenities like electricity, clean water and tarred local roads. Development had been initiated. That was Baling in Time Frame Two.

The pace of change quickened thereafter. By 1994, the smallholder poverty level slumped to around 45 per cent. That dramatic nearly thirty per cent drop signified the fruition of replanted rubber holdings and other development projects with long gestation, which were embarked upon since the mid Eighties. Development had delivered. This made for Baling in Time Frame Three.

Three contrasting phases of a place's life and time - Baling before, during and after development. This is how Baling became an inviting exercise in time-geography for me.

Time-geography is an approach to contextual theory originally developed by the Swedish geographer Torsten Hagerstrand and his associates at the University of Lund (the Lund School), which conceives of time and space as providers of 'room' for collateral processes. The latter term is of fundamental importance implying that time geography emphasizes the continuity and connectedness of sequences of events which necessarily take place in

situations bounded in time and space, and the outcomes of which are thereby mutually modified by their common localization (Hagerstrand 1976, 1984).

My Baling treatment, however, seeks to depart from the usual time-geography's illustrative and confined to the small-scale, short-term and essentially individual level. Rather it seeks to include a greater regard for the changing larger political-economy structures that have shaped Baling since then. So, what this book presents is more of a Baling 'choreography of existence' to borrow from Pred (1977) where the chapters register the significance of flows and encounters in Baling's socio-economic space for the subsequent constitution and construction of its life reality.

In other words, I was doing a contextualised time-geography with Baling. The ten chapters provide the varying contexts to understand the time-space settings and sequences of human activity of, and in, Baling which essentially were and are its own constitution. The Baling contextual explanations thus depend upon identifying relations of coexistence, connection or 'togetherness' there, which I did mainly through the life and time of its rubber smallholders. The chapters thus represent an attempt to recapture the flow of human agency as a series of situated events in Baling's time-space continuum, or rather prisms, of existence.

I have approached Baling as a 'pocket' of the world as it is found, with its mixed assortment of beings (Chapters 1, 2, 3), in contrast to other approaches which may remove the Baling folks from their habitats and place them in a theoretical or speculative abstraction. This is how, I feel, that a contextual approach serves the cause of modern geography. For, as Hagerstrand (1974) puts it, "Being a geographer basically means to appreciate that when events are seen located together in a block of space-time they inevitably expose relations which cannot be traced any more, once we have bunched them into classes and drawn them out of their place in the block".

Baling - From Demonstration to Industrialisation is, thereby, a reconstituted regional geography in which human activity quite literally takes place, and in which place itself becomes a process. It conceives of human activity in a region as a continuous discourse rooted in a staggered series of shared material situations that constantly arise out of one another in a dialectically linked distribution of opportunity and constraint (Chapters 2, 3).

In the heart of the mediation between individual and collectivity stands individuals' biographies or life stories in time and space (Chapters 4, 5). It is here that human practice and consciousness are connected with the temporal-spatial context through the notions of generation and locality (Chapters 6, 7). This is an important reminder that contextual approaches in the more

general sense defined above must be concerned with space as both context and creation: as both 'condition' and 'consequence' of human activity.

In treating Baling as a 'provider of room', or to take after Soja (1980; 1989), a part of the environment, a context for society - its container - rather than a structure created by society, the chapters depict some important features of Baling's socio-economic life that are inherently involved in its constitution as events unfolded further and further out from the initial situation of the 1974 (Chapters 8, 9). This way, the making of present day Baling is seen as a historically contingent process that emphasizes institutional and individual practices as well as the structural features with which those practices are interwoven.

To sum up, Baling is the 'actively passive' meeting place of social structure and human agency, substantive enough to be the generator and conductor of structure, but still intimate enough to ensure that the subjective aspects of human beings are not lost. Baling codifies the contextuality of its social life, its situated life story (Chapter 10).

The present book does not pretend to be a coherent piece. The ten essays are meant not to be the integral constituents of a single volume but rather an autonomous snapshots of time and life in Baling. They were the results of my three research undertakings on the area that spanned two decades inclusive of the first study in 1981 and the revisit studies in 1988 and 1994.

Presented as an anthology of essays the book does not pretend nor claim to have done justice to the whole phenomenology of Baling's transition from poverty to well being. Instead, what it portrays is snapshots of life events of Baling as a particular place at three different times frames.

It is my ardent hope that this collection of essays would benefit all, irrespective of whether they are academic or general users. However, I would like to emphasise that although the chapters stand independently some repetitions of information cannot be avoided for the sake of clarity of the issues and arguments posed.

I wish to acknowledge Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia for sponsoring all the three studies and for granting me the necessary leaves to complete the work, first, as a Ph. D thesis (1981) and, subsequently, as separate sabbatical projects (1988, 1994).

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