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Feature-Polynesians

ARE POLYNESIANS AND MALAYS DISTANT COUSINS?

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KUALA LUMPUR: For years, scholars and the like are wondering if the Malays of Southeast Asia and the Polynesians are of the same ethnic stock as they attempt to unearth linguistic, social and cultural similarities or differences between them.

The Polynesians live on Pacific islands from Hawaii southwest to New Zealand and east to Easter Island, Samoa and other widely scattered island groups.

Tantalising for many are the empirical similarities seen thus far, in the form of certain words in languages, culture, art and tradition, not excluding the outrigger canoes that made these all peoples well known as seafarers of the old days.

In fact, there is a theory among the scholars that the ancestors of the Polynesians left Asia more than a thousand years ago, perhaps even much longer. Likewise, some others argued, the reverse flow could also be possible.

But very little is known yet about those voyages and these scholars would need to discover and know more of that part of their common historical heritage, if there were any.

To know more of the similarities, the chair of Malay Studies at Victoria University in Wellington, recognised by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad when he visited New Zealand in 1996, has initiated two symposiums on Malayo-Polynesia Culture so far.

The first was held in Wellington in May and the latest at the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) in Bangi, south of here, two weeks ago.

Chair of Malay Studies of Victoria University Prof. Hood Salleh told the meeting that traces of similarities between the two groups continued to abide in linguistic and cultural forms.

Those were the two fields of social experiences which the symposium would try to emphasise and in the long term, would try to synthesise.

Prof Hood who has researched on the subject closer since his stay in New Zealand two years ago, said there were remarkable similarities between the Malay people of Asia and the Austronesian-speaking people of the South Pacific which given the right nurturing, could well prove to be a tremendous asset for both parties.

According to Dr Nabir Abdullah and Yahaya Abu Bakar of UKM's Department of History, the similarities are such that one could not possibly understand the history of the Oceania except in terms of the history of Southeast Asia or even Asia as a whole.

"Take for example, the Oceanic society at the time of the European arrivals were neolithic. Their technology was based on stone, bone and shell. They cultivated tubers and fruits trees, all of which were Southeast Asian in origin," they explained.

The neolithic cultivation was also associated with three domesticated animals, namely, pigs, dogs and chicken, also of Asian connection, he said.

The Polynesians, despite a varying substratum of negroid race in their composition, are both in physical type and in language related to the people of Southeast Asia.

The seas functioned as commercial highways as well as avenues to forge the cultural dialogues between peoples across regions. Interestingly, the Oceanic people, the Argonauts of the Pacific, had a long tradition of

interaction with the sea, where fishing, trade and voyages were conducted since time immemorial.

They said the equipment of hooks, lines and nets together with diving activities to procure oysters which provide the magical pearls shells as well food, were quite similar with Southeast Asia.

In the same way, the art and techniques involving the making of several types and many sizes of boats, stabilized by outriggers, masts and sails, in the Pacific had, to a certain extent, a connection in one way or the other with the islands of Indonesia.

The adventure, prestige and ceremony associated with the voyages in the Oceania also appeared close in affinity with their counterparts in this part of the world, they said.

Like their counterparts in Southeast Asia during the pre-European Era, the Polynesians too were lacking the mechanical aid in navigations. They, however, had the knowledge on the conditions of winds, seas, sky, stars and were amazingly skilled in holding to a course, they said.

Added to this, the Polynesian languages abound with terminologies for stars, currents, winds, land forms and directions. The belief such as the sea was managed and controlled by a host of spirits, is also quite similar between the two areas.

For that reason, according to the Malays, the sea must be treated with a great care if not fear and appropriate rites and ceremonies were performed in order to safeguard the journey or fishing activities.

What is, however, holding up any definite conclusions is the paucity of documented evidence in the two areas, Dr Nabir and Yahaya said in their paper "Pacific Studies and Malaysia Studies: In Search of Common Ground".

John Temara of the School of Maori Studies of Victoria University said in his working paper "The Maori Hand" that the Malay word for hand, "tangan", seemed phonologically and physically worlds apart from the Maori "ringa".

"Ringa is related to the Fijian lin(g)a, Malay lenga(n) which in turn is related to tangan," he noted.

Theses differences however, he explained, were mainly due to the new social, cultural and political surroundings to which they have had to adapt over several centuries.

"This is just a beginning. Hopefully, it shall lead to an elaboration, perhaps in the form of a joint Malay-Maori research by scholars from Malaysia and New Zealand, or the establishment of a joint Malayo-Polynesian Studies Programme, based at UKM or Victoria University or othe similar efforts", said Prof Hood of the scholars' search for the links between the Malays and Polynesians. -- Bernama

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