

The Seletar Community (Orang Laut) of Johore and the Challenges against Development

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Abstract. The Seletar community of Johore is also known as “Orang Laut” or maritime people. It is the only indigenous community in Peninsular Malaysia who lives by the sea. The other indigenous communities live close to the city or in the interiors of the States. Johore, at the southern tip of the peninsular is a rapidly developing state. Its development is taking place all over the state especially around the coastal region due to its proximity to Singapore. The Seletar community has long lived by the sea because their settlement to the coastal regions from living in boat houses was partly due to the geopolitical situation. Most of their livelihood is depended upon the bountiful of the sea. They are also living a subsistence economic life, mostly living off what the sea has to offer. However, due to rapid development which also encroaches into their settlement and the surrounding sea, the Seletar community has to face challenges to adapt to new kinds of livelihood that is not too dependent on the sea. As the development comes closer to their villagers, the Seletar community must be prepared for changes in their lifestyle. The main challenge that they have to confront is adapting to the new development. However, this requires skills that will ensure the community is able to live within the new ecology. This paper aims to highlight the challenges that the community is facing, share the capital (social, economic, environmental) that they have within themselves and the community as well as propose strategies that can assist the community in the onslaught of development. It is hoped that by sharing the experiences of the Seletar community that has to deal with development, other communities can be assisted in dealing with the issues of adaptation to development.

Keywords: Seletar, Indigenous community, Development, Capital.

1. Introduction

The Seletar community of Johore is also known as “Orang Laut” or sea people. It is the only indigenous community in Peninsular Malaysia who lives by the sea. The other indigenous communities live close to the city or in the interiors of the States. Johore, at the southern tip of the Peninsular Malaysia is a rapidly developing state. Its development is taking place all over the state especially around the coastal region due to its proximity to Singapore. The Seletar community has long lived by the sea because their settlement to the coastal regions from living in boat houses was partly due to the geopolitical situation. Most of their livelihood is depended upon the bountiful of the sea. They are also living a subsistence economic life, mostly living off what the sea has to offer.

According to history, the Seletar community has played a significant role in the formation of the Johore Government in the early days. Living off the coast of Johore, they were the forefront of the defence to protect Johore from being attack from the sea. In the old days, the Seletar community lived in boats that they built and conduct their day to day activities in the boats. However, nowadays, most of them have resettled on land settlement provided by the Government by the sea or living in houses on stilts as they cannot live very far from the water.

The population of the Seletar community is Johore is around 1700 people and residing in about 9 villages. In some of the villages, development that has taken place around the coast has brought them further from the sea. However, being maritime people, they will still go out to sea at least once a day to catch whatever that they can catch for the day. Most of the villages that are located near the sea are now threatened by the rapid

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development that is taking place around the coastal regions for residential, commercial and tourism development.

Their roaming areas for fishing have been polluted due to the high end residential and commercial development which has taken place by the sea frontage. Hence, the community has to fish further out into the open sea as opposed to the just fishing with a radius of 3 miles along the shore of where they lived. The mangrove areas are also affected due to the sedimentation of sand and this have affected the ecology of the mangrove, as well as affect the livelihood of the communities who used the mangrove to hunt for crabs, shellfish and other seafood.

2. Background of the Study

The study was conducted in two Seletar villages which were the villages affected most by the development that is taking place at the Johor Straits. Currently their backyard has been approved for developments like resorts and high income condominiums as well as bungalows with the sea frontage. The proposed development is currently encroaching into their villages and for the village which is situated on private land, the status of their village is very fragile because they can be relocated anytime. Majority of the household are fishermen and depend on the sea as the main source of income. One of the main issues that the Seletar community faced is the lack of permanent status of their land. The ownership of their land is mostly the Government or private. Hence, there is no permanency of their settlement and they can be relocated anywhere and anytime when the pressure of developing their areas began to take the centre stage.

Currently, the two villages that was studied, that is Kampong Sungai Temun and Kampong Bakar Batu is encountering of the possibility of relocation due to the encroachment of development within their areas. Due to the problem of land ownership, they can be relocated without any compensation. However, the Government has to deal with the issue in a delicate manner considering that the Seletar community has been known to be loyal wards to the governing Sultan. Therefore, efforts has been undertaken to ensure that if the Seletar cannot continue to work as fisherman, alternative forms of employment can be accessible to them.

2.1 The Capitals Within the Seletar Community

The Seletar community is rich in indigenous knowledge and skills. One of the important skills instilled in them as the maritime community is the skill of swimming and fishing without the use of any sophisticated equipment. Children as young as 3 years old are taught on how to swim by just simply throwing them to the sea. If the children are still not able to swim by the age of 4, the mothers will feed them with the flesh of a type of sand shark which is grilled because they belief that eating the sand shark will help them to swim. Hence, for the children, swimming is natural to them and as they grow up, they can swim underwater without the aid of oxygen mask for more than ten minutes. This means that they can catch fish with bare hands if they are able to see the fish underwater.

This is one of the capitals of the community which can be tapped to enable them to utilize it as an alternative to fishing. Being natural swimmers, the young generation can be taught swimming skills that can be used to develop a skilled group of competition swimmers. Another skill related to water that the community has is the ability to catch fish with bare hands or using simple harpoon made from bamboo and catching it while swimming underwater. This was the traditional way of catching fish to ensure that they have enough fish to eat because the method will not over kill the fish. However due to the degradation of the water quality and pollution, fish are scarce now and they have to resort to using fish nets which do not give them the amount and quality of fish like before.

One of the indigenous knowledge of the Seletar community is the skill of boat making. The boat which is called 'pauk jolo' has been traditionally used for fishing. This skill is not uncommon because for many years before becoming land dwellers, the boats were their houses. One boat is like one floating house per family. The cook, eat and even give birth in the boats. However, due to deforestation, they are now limited to

showing their ability for boat making by doing boat models to be sold to visitors. They are also adept at making weapons like spears using materials gathered from the swamps around their settlement.

Hence, the skills that they have in boat making can no longer be sustainable due to the lack of suitable wood to make them. Most of the swamps have been cleared to make way for development. One of their main source of food that is catching crab, gathering seashells and the use the leaves from the pandanus plant to weave mats are becoming limited. What needs to be considered is the loss of these skills amongst the younger generation and with the loss of skills, also come the issue of the lost of identity.

Family relationship is another capital that should be enhanced within the community. The Seletar family structure is more egalitarian than the Malays where they closely resemble (Mariam Ali, 2002). Male and female are both equally involved in the economic provision of the household. However, when it comes to decision making, the males are the decision maker and the roles of the Tok Batin (tribal leader) as the leader is very important in directing the views of the community.

The Seletar people are very family oriented. Unless necessary, they will not go out to fish without their family. It is not unusual to find 3 generations of family members in one boat on one fishing trip. According to one of my informants account, there is no gender difference in the ability to fish and swim. Males and females are both adept at fishing and swimming. It was only until formal school education came into the life of the Seletar communities did schoolchildren were left behind when the family goes out to sea. That is done with the assistance of neighbours who are around to help keep eyes on the children while the family is at sea.

For the children, helping their parents or grandparents fishing on the boat is not considered a chore but a form of recreation because they can jump in and out off the boat. They considered the sea water as more rejuvenating compared to fresh water. They actually prefer to take a bath using the sea water because they feel more energized and considered tap water to weaken their body system.

While family relationship is very important to them, there do not trust the people they come into contact with open arms. According to one informant, they trust the Chinese traders more than their Malay neighbours. Hence, inter marriages between Chinese and the Seletar community is more common than marriage with Malay. This is quite strange because the Seletar community is one who is closes in terms of resemblance to the Malays and they are also known as proto- malay when considered as a major ethnic grouping of the Orang Asli in Malaysia.

2.2 The Challenges of the Seletar Community

With development encroaching within their settlement and the environmental deterioration affecting their source of income, the Seletar community needs new skills in order for them to survive the urbanization and social changes taking place. They need to be equipped with new skills and new means of income generation. In order for their life to be well adapted to accommodate the changes taking place, it is proposed that an evaluation of their capitals be done based on the approach of asset based community development. Asset based community development is defined by Cunningham and Mathie (2002) as an approach to community-based development, based on the principles of:

- Appreciating and mobilising individual and community talents, skills and assets (rather than focusing on problems and needs)
- Community-driven development rather than development driven by external agencies

According to Green et al (2006), Asset based community development is an approach that mobilizes the people and not agency driven. It relies on the community identifying (or in the case of the Seletar community, assisted by the external agency) to identify the strengths and weaknesses within themselves so that proper plans and programs that are designed will suit the capabilities and needs of the community.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Seletar community's largest asset is their uniqueness as an indigenous community, being the only community that is sea dwellers rather than forest dwellers. While it is difficult to stop

development coming into their life, the best way to help them to live as normal a life as they can is by knowing the capitals that exists within them and harness these capitals to the advantage of the community without displacing them. It is only through knowing their abilities and adaptability can successful programmes and projects to ‘urbanized’ them be embarked upon without compromising their identity and way of life.

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