

The sounds of the Riau rivers: A review

Modern Standard Indonesian is based on Riau Malay (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Riau>). Riau is a central province in the Sumatera Island of Indonesia. There are four major rivers in Riau province, namely *Inderagiri*, *Rokan*, *Kapar* and *Siak*. These names were part of a recollection of learning some decades ago. The rivers are historical and literary locales, which share in a collective, ancient memory of Malacca's empire expansion and the spread of Islam in the Southeast Asian region and bear witness to the appearance or disappearance of certain mythological Malay character(s). Although the phenomenon was unknown then, the names of the four rivers captured a host of sound semiotics reflexive of local nomenclature.

The sound-symbolic river names ebbed through the performing of *Yayasan Laksemana* from Indonesia on 9 October 2009 in conjunction with Singapore's Pesta Raya from 9-18 October. *Laksemana* is the Malay term for sea captain in ancient maritime Southeast Asia, equivalent to our head of the marine police. *Pesta Raya* meant New Year Fiesta, a festive occasion for the Muslims in the month of *Syawal* following a month-long fasting in the month of *Ramadan*. Indeed, spreading cultural performance across the four seas of the Malay world could be likened to playing the role of *Laksemana* in safe guarding and sustaining the local cultural heritage. The Yayasan **Laksemana** arts company was formed in 1983 and since 2004 the group has performed in Europe including Italy, France and Germany at various international folk dance and music festivals.

In glorious percussive sounds, the meaning of the rivers was transported back in time by the ensemble consisting among others *kompang* (Indonesian-Malay hand-held drum), *dol* (big Malay drum), *gendang* (typical Malay drum), *rebana* (a series of drums), *gambus* or *selodang* (stringed or guitar-liked instrument), *biola* (violin), and *nafiri* (trumpet-like instrument). Many of the

instruments were made of wood, bamboo, hide, rattan and metal. Accompanying in these ensemble were an accordion, the shakers and a few tambourines.



An ensemble of korpang with lead singer, composer and artistic director

It was a memorable musical performance for city dwellers giving rise to a fascination with traditional music. Through the narration the audience became more aware of the meaning behind *Inderagiri*, *Rokan*, *Kampar* and *Siak* according to the rhythms of the flow. *Inderagiri* was a turbulent river hence a five-syllabic name befitting its choppy current. The ensemble provided sound transformation in capturing the river's soul with loud and melodious beating of hitting of the instruments. Whilst listening to their performing a vigorous river with its water bursting into all directions was felt through the mix of percussive sounds.

The sound of *Rokan* mesmerized the audience with a deep current as symbolized by [o] in the first syllable. The vital energy blocked by a final nasal in its name [n] symbolically captured a powerful stoppage of air flow. The pronunciation of its name with a velar plosive [k] in the middle opened an imagination that the river might have curvy contours with its water flowing zigzag across hence generating bank busting sounds at each turn as the water gushed by. The accompanying Silat, the Indonesian-Malay martial arts display on the *dol*, bestowed an awesome admiration for the local knowledge. The arts experience was like a marriage between the past

and post modern with traditional musical instrument rendering ancient meanings of four rivers in the Esplanade, an ultra modern performing center built to resemble the shape of a durian by the Singapore River.



Performing Rokan River on the *dol*

The third rendition symbolized the *Kampar* river flow, which came across as more tamely in comparison to *Inderagiri*. The final retroflex of its name simulated a reverberation of air flow throwing some friction to an otherwise powerful discharge of river water. One's imagination was propelled to a state of water flow running in minor friction against the rocks and pebbles along its course. The ensemble maintained the drumming as the underlying foundation of the percussion yet allowing the crisp stir of violin imbued with a tinge of melancholy to emerge amidst the thudding and hitting.

At this point, the dancers from the Singaporean Malay dance company *Era Dance Theater* waded gracefully on stage. A Malay dance piece choreographed by Mr. Osman Hamid was an intelligent combination with the percussive ensemble not least it added variety to the display for outdoor folks of various creeds and different ages. The vitality and joyousness of the dancers enlivened the mood of viewing with a colorful animated visual impact. The multiple

intelligences of the audience were addressed by the performers from both Yayasan Laksemana and Era Dance Theater (cf. Sew 2007a).

River *Siak* sounded calmest of all four rivers in the performance. Invoking phonetic symbolism, the river only has one syllable containing a cluster of two vowels. A latent semi-vowel [y] germinated between the two vocalic sounds [i-y-a] indicated that there is more in this river name [Si y ak] than meets the eyes. At first blush, the performing of the ensemble seemed to maintain a softer pulsing beat, paving the way for the tambourine to chime through. The exquisite shimmering lighting at the Esplanade Concourse laced the sound production with soothing tranquility.



Artists performing with Gambus

Happily, interactivity was part of the musical experience in which the audience was included in the swinging moves characteristic of the Malay Archipelago, the largest island cluster in the world. The dancers and performers from both Era Dance Theater and Yayasan Laksemana descended from the stage to woo the crowds in joining them for a memorable evening. The second Friday evening in the month of October was an evening of good fun with locals and visitors reaping the maximal outcome from the cultural treat by the Singapore River. For some

brilliant moments, the participants were living up to the visual-spatial and rhythmic semiotics of *Ronggeng*, a type of Malay dance accompanied with gongs, drums and violin.



Cultural interactivity at Concourse Esplanade Singapore

After Edward Sapir, Dwight Bolinger reminded us of the relevance of sound and meaning in its most natural combining. Evident in original and natural Malay-Indonesian naming is the iconic-phonetic existence of phonesthemes, recurrent sub-morphemic clusters of similar references in Malay and Indonesian words (Sew 2007b, 2005, McCune 1985). Such phonosemantics further suggests that sound-based process as a basis for naming in the Malay world was commonplace since time in immemorial. Nature's voices were some of the best pointers for places like river and hill to be identified and recognized linguistically.

As in *Inderagiri*, *Rokan*, *Kampar*, and *Siak* in Riau, Sumatera, there are many places in Singapore containing interesting Malay names. With names like *Bukit Batok* (Coughing Hills, *batuk* 'cough', and *bukit* 'hill' in Malay), *Bukit Merah* 'Red Hill', and *Bukit Panjang* 'Long Hill', among others, these locales await the arrival of their own rendition.



Era Dance Theater at Pesta Raya

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