THE POLITICS OF FORGETTING:
MIGRATION, KINSHIP AND MEMORY ON THE
PERIPHERY OF THE SOUTHEAST ASIAN STATE

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Migration histories of villagers from Pulau Langkawi, Malaysia, show extensive demographic movement. These histories can be linked to local notions of kinship in which the acquisition of attributes and relationships in the present and future is of greater importance than links to dead forebears. The fragmentary nature of memories of migration recalls a wider phenomenon in Southeast Asian kinship, often labelled 'structural amnesia', and analysed in negative terms. However, forgetting one's ancestors can be understood more positively when placed in a regional context and linked to historical features of Southeast Asian polities. The conclusion takes up the wider anthropological debate on individual and social memory and the relation between narrative and memory, and argues that closer attention should be paid to the process of forgetting.

In his well-known essay, 'Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?', Ernest Renan writes:
the essence of a nation is that all the individuals hold many things in common, and also that all of them have forgotten many things (my translation, Renan 1947-61, vol. 1: 892 [1887], cited in Anderson 1983:15).

Renan's formulation brings out the importance of forgetting as a collective act in the creation of shared identity. While anthropologists and historians currently devote much attention to the role of memory in notions of identity and in the transmission of knowledge, the importance of what people forget, and how they forget, has been less widely discussed.

This article is an attempt to consider the importance of the process of forgetting in the construction of identity among Malays on the island of Langkawi. For these Malays, identity and kinship are acquired throughout life through the process of living together in houses, sharing food, engaging in relationships of different kinds, marrying and having children and grandchildren (see Carsten 1991; in press). In this case, identity is not handed down from the past or even given at birth. Rather, it is intrinsically fluid, moulded and acquired through life, and shaped by the activities in which individuals engage.

In this article, rather than considering how identity is created in the present and future through shared activities, I focus on the past. I should stress at the outset that this approach would appear somewhat peculiar to the people I know in Langkawi. For them, the past, or where they have come from, has no special value or authority. Indeed, in most contexts, aspects of the past which I discuss

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here simply have no relevance. The past which I draw out involves personal migration histories which most people consider unimportant and seldom recall.

I begin by considering the rather fragmentary evidence from migration histories which I collected in Langkawi in 1988-89. The past revealed by these histories involves extensive demographic movement, not only between the Malay peninsula and the island of Langkawi, but also between Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia and Langkawi. I then go on to discuss how kinship is thought of in Langkawi and show how the creation of shared identity in kinship can be linked to the process of forgetting details of the past. In other words, rather than seeing forgetting in negative terms as a loss, I consider it as a crucial part of the way identity is actively acquired in Langkawi (see Battaglia 1992; 1993; Taylor 1993).

I then go beyond Langkawi to reconsider some of the anthropological evidence about the way Southeast Asian people have been represented as afflicted by ‘structural amnesia’ or ‘genealogical amnesia’, forgetting who their ancestors are. I question this rather negative perception and suggest that the process of forgetting can be linked to a more widespread demographic mobility in the region. Finally, I link both forgetting and population mobility to the quite fluid concepts of identity which anthropologists have noted as characterizing the Austronesian world.

This article is concerned, then, with the social and political context in which forgetting is an important part of the creation of shared identity. I show that forgetting particular aspects of the past can be better understood if placed in the historical context of state systems in Southeast Asia. Although it may seem that knowledge of the past is being lost, it is also clear that people do remember certain kinds of knowledge about kinship in considerable detail. What it is important to remember and what is left out of account, and why, are what concern me here. I show why, in spite (or even because) of Langkawi people’s lack of interest, migration should be considered as an important feature of Southeast Asian social and political organization.

This article raises a number of questions about the nature of the historical Southeast Asian state, and about the relationship between ‘individual’ memory and ‘collective’ amnesia. Underlying my argument is an assumption that out of small acts of forgetting—details about grandparents’ lives which are not transmitted to grandchildren, a family’s migration stories which are not told to their neighbours—a more widespread collective attitude is constructed. Pieces of knowledge which are not passed on have a kind of negative significance in that they allow other images of shared identity in the present and future to come to the fore.

In the conclusion I risk some assertions about the importance of forgetting, and about the relationship between narrative and memory. Anthropologists are in a privileged position to consider how the stories people tell about their past become, in time, enshrined in memory. However, an analysis of the relation between narrative and memory requires a systematic study of the crucial role of forgetting in the creation of social memory.
Migration in Langkawi

Pulau Langkawi is an island situated off the west coast of Malaysia, and forms part of the mainland state of Kedah. My fieldwork was conducted in a large, coastal fishing community which I call ‘Sungai Cantik’, and which is itself divided into several named hamlets. The origins of villagers of Sungai Cantik and their immediate ancestors are geographically highly heterogeneous—they include other states of peninsular Malaysia as well as Thailand and Indonesia.  

I begin with a paradox. It is central to my argument that kinship in Langkawi is focused on the future rather than the past and is encapsulated in the process of producing children and grandchildren. In such a context memory has a peculiar significance. During fieldwork, I was again and again struck by the different attitudes which villagers of Sungai Cantik held to present relations compared to past ones. It is not simply that these villagers are not greatly interested in their origins, although that is certainly the case. Some villagers had great difficulty remembering where their parents, let alone their grandparents, had been born. Very few people knew or cared much about the place of origin of their neighbours or fellow villagers. However, this did not mean that they were incapable of, or uninterested in, tracing out quite distant relationships between living people. Relationships between second or third cousins were explained with considerable enthusiasm. But these relations were reckoned ‘horizontally’, in terms of siblingship, rather than ‘vertically’, in terms of descent. The point about such relations is that they exist in the present and they have a future. If the kin involved live fairly close to one another, they or their children may well intermarry and thus be brought closer in the future.

Enquiring into distant kin connexions between living people is a different matter from asking about people’s locality of origin. In Sungai Cantik such origins have little relevance to anything else. They are quite simply not a point of reference. People who originate from other parts of the Malay peninsula or elsewhere in the region do not live in distinct parts of the village or form endogamous groups. They are not recognizable by costume, deportment, accent, cuisine or by the styles of their houses.

In 1988-9 I collected detailed information on migration histories in Sungai Cantik. The figures I obtained only offer the most approximate guide to the actual rates of migration; what they do convey is a clear indication of the importance of migration as a general fact in the lives of villagers of Sungai Cantik. About one fifth of the 260 adults interviewed were not themselves born in Langkawi. Of the 212 who were born in Langkawi, forty-eight (nearly a quarter) had either one or both parents who originated from elsewhere. These people mainly came from nearby areas on the mainland: many from Kedah, significant numbers from Pulau Pinang, southern Thailand, Perlis and Perak. A few came from areas of the peninsula still further away: Johor, Terengganu, Negeri Sembilan. Others came from Aceh, Minangkabau, Java, India or Hong Kong. A picture quickly emerges of a village where a relatively high proportion of inhabitants at any time in the recent past have moved in from elsewhere, and where there is a very great diversity of origins.

While almost everyone can recall the place of birth of their parents, they are far less sure of the details of their grandparents’ lives, particularly if they never
knew them. Slightly more than half of the men and women interviewed could remember the first names of all four grandparents. In the cases where they could recall that they had grandparents who originated from elsewhere, they did not necessarily know their place of origin; and while they usually knew whether these were patrilateral or matrilateral grandparents, they did not necessarily recall whether it was the grandmother or the grandfather or both who originated outside Langkawi.

Out of the total of 164 interviewees who were themselves born in Langkawi and whose parents were also born there, I was told of forty-four cases where either the father’s parents or the mother’s parents had come from outside the island, and a further two cases where the grandparents on both sides came from outside Langkawi. The most frequently cited localities of origin were Pulau Pinang, mainland Kedah, and Perlis; once again a few came from further afield: southern Thailand, Aceh, Minangkabau and Java.

Very few people could recall genealogies beyond two or three generations. There is no systematic attempt to maintain traditions or memories of ancestors who have come from elsewhere. When villagers were asked whether they knew of any more distant ancestors than their grandparents who had come from outside Langkawi, the great majority replied in the negative. Some of them did recall that they are descendants of two named brothers and a cousin of theirs from Aceh in Sumatra, who are said to have come to Langkawi around the time of the Acehnese wars towards the end of the nineteenth century. These were probably among the founding members of the village. In spite of the fact that in Southeast Asia the Acehnese are widely respected for their independence, religious learning and extraordinary feats of resistance to external powers, no special claims are made by these descendants. Furthermore, my own research showed that very many more villagers were in fact descended from these early Acehnese immigrants but were either ignorant of this or regarded it as totally insignificant.

Once again, the implications are telling. One’s own and one’s parents’ origins are remembered, but those of more distant ancestors are rapidly forgotten. A few people can name ancestors four or five generations back but this is exceptional. Even where it would seem that these origins might form the basis for status claims or exclusivity, there is little evidence that this occurs.

When villagers were asked whether they knew of neighbours or fellow-villagers who have come from outside Langkawi, the replies were even more striking. Almost everyone replied in the negative. Given the large number of households that actually contain an immigrant resident (or whose members are directly descended from immigrants), this reported ignorance is impressive. There was no indication that villagers were trying to conceal this information, and whatever was remembered was willingly and openly offered in response to my queries. It simply seemed that this was not knowledge which was important to preserve or remember.

The frankness with which questions about migration were answered was especially striking when villagers were asked why they or their ancestors had come to Langkawi. The replies were straightforward and rather standardized: ‘to gain a living’ (cari makan, literally, ‘to look for food’); ‘to open land’ (buka
tanah); ‘to seek property’ (cari harta). Many explained how the land where they came from was all used up. In Langkawi it was still possible to open up new land. Many said that they came ‘to look for work’ (cari kerja); and to ‘work as a fisherman’ (kerja nelayan). One could gain a livelihood from fishing in Langkawi, even without land on which to grow rice.

According to villagers’ accounts, the main motivating force behind migration has been economic. Although other reasons are sometimes cited – quarrels with kin, fighting or warfare such as that in Aceh, Kedah and Siam in the nineteenth century, or the difficult conditions of the Japanese occupation in the 1940s – the chief concern was to make a living. These accounts suggest not only a great mixture of origins and influences in Langkawi, but also that the island has been bound into a regional network and historical economy in which, at least since the middle of the nineteenth century (and probably for very much longer), people have been relatively mobile and land and resources in outlying areas more abundant than near the centres of power on the mainland.

When villagers talked about how they or their ancestors came to Langkawi, they often said, ‘we came destitute, as migrants’ (kita mari bangsat). The term bangsat is significant. In standard Malay it can mean ‘vagabond’, ‘tramp’, ‘outcaste’ (Wilkinson 1959: 81) and even ‘thief’ (Iskandar 1970: 71). But villagers I talked to seemed to use it without pejorative connotations and indeed with great matter-of-factness.6 The general tone of their comments indicates that these villagers were not simply trying to underplay ‘questionable’ pasts, or keep them hidden, but that a sense of a shared history of poverty is central to their links with fellow-villagers, and makes the term bangsat appropriate.

Migration appears to have occurred in a more or less continuous trickle from the mid-nineteenth century until today, and this, coupled with the great diversity of origins, may explain why people from the same localities have not formed distinct groups within the village.7 Nor does this migration have any single dominant pattern. Men and women have described to me how they, their parents or their grandparents came to the island as children accompanying their parents. Sometimes such a family group might be followed by one or other spouse’s parents or an unmarried sibling. Others came as unmarried young men, on their own or with a brother, and married and settled on the island. A child might be taken by an uncle or aunt as a foster child to grow up on Langkawi. A young man or woman from the mainland might marry someone from Langkawi and come to live there. People of all ages came. Some life histories show several movements back and forth between the mainland and Langkawi, movements which are often linked to particular marital histories.8 The migration histories of individuals are very varied. They are influenced by external political events, by economic constraints, by whom one marries, and by the many contingent factors that make one person’s life different from another’s. But in the way people talk and think about migration there is considerable consistency. These recollections are told in a manner which reveals that people in Langkawi have a common way of thinking about their own past, and that this is an important part of their shared identity.

I have already referred to some stereotypical phrases: ‘We came as poor migrants, to gain a living, to open land’; ‘Descendants sold their property. It was
finished. They looked for their own property.’ The image of a shared history of poverty is strong. Many people vividly described how the area where the village now stands was empty at the turn of the century: ‘There were few people. Land was plentiful, you could clear and plant it or build a house, and then take out title deeds. There were few houses where now there are many.’ I was told how ‘fresh water was plentiful – unlike in other places. The sources in Langkawi do not run dry and the water is pure, cool and pleasant.’ Even without land, men could survive by catching and selling fish, and buying rice. There were no big landowners in the village; ‘everyone had about the same, they were similar.’ There were no really poor or very rich people in the village. ‘Nobody had very much but there was enough to eat’.

Although people came to Langkawi in many different circumstances and at different stages of their life cycle, certain patterns stand out in people’s minds. There are prototypical stories which in some cases take on aspects of myths of origin and in which Langkawi appears as a haven, a source of land, water and women. Some people came simply because they ‘liked to wander’ (suka merantau); ‘they liked to move’ (suka berjalan). There are stories of shipwrecked travellers: one early immigrant from Aceh is reported to have drifted for three months in an earthenware vessel without food or water before fetching up on the shores of Langkawi.

Stories about men without parents, coming alone or with siblings, tell how new migrants were fostered by, or married, Langkawi women and so settled on the island and became part of the local population. Often villagers suggest that men are more mobile than women: ‘Men wander more. They see a good-looking woman, stay and marry.’ Groups of brothers are prototypical migrants. Many stories tell of two or three brothers coming to the island as young men without parents or wives. One man I knew well had come from Thailand after his parents died; then he brought his brother and sister; they came destitute (bangsat), and all married and settled in Langkawi. Such people ‘come to Langkawi and they do not go back’. Of some it is said that ‘people didn’t let him go back.’

Even if they do not record genealogies, or preserve their differences of origin, villagers are conscious of their diversity. The village headman told me how people in the village were from all over: ‘Penang, Java, Aceh, Bugis, Siam and Kedah. But people don’t keep records, they don’t remember. Lots of them have died now, their children don’t remember.’ An older woman put it more directly: ‘Everyone is from outside; where are there Langkawi people?’ When I asked one old man, himself a migrant from Kedah, who were the ‘original’ (or ‘native’) people in the village he explained, ‘There aren’t people from here. It’s not thought of like that. If you stay for a long time, you become a Langkawi person’. Discussing my findings with the village headman in 1989, he concluded: ‘People here are all people who have come. There aren’t any native people … [But they] mix easily … [and] don’t dig up their ancestry’.

These comments and observations emphasize diversity and mixing. In this context, marriage and fostering are highly significant as means of drawing outsiders in. New affines become connected to other villagers, especially once children are born. Marriage and the birth of children create interconnexions in succeeding generations. The full salience of these incorporative processes
becomes clear in the light of the history of migration I have described. It is through hospitality, fostering and marriage that new migrants become Langkawi people.

*Creating kinship*

To understand the attitudes to the migration stories which I have outlined, we need to know how relatedness is created in the present and future. I have mentioned how the theme of siblingship often occurs in migration histories. Siblingship is central to ideas about relatedness in Langkawi. Siblings are thought of as the embodiment of the unity and similarity that constitutes houses. The bodily substance which siblings share is derived both from their parents, principally their mother, and from food which is cooked in the house hearth. Eating food together can, however, produce shared bodily substance even in the absence of genealogical ties. Offering hospitality to strangers or distant kin by giving them a cooked rice meal or by having them to stay in the house creates a weakened form of shared substance. More permanent fostering arrangements may result in ties which are more or less indistinguishable from genealogical siblingship or filiation. I have drawn out the implications of this for anthropological ideas about kinship in other work (Carsten 1991; in press).

Siblings, who are strongly associated with one house, inevitably become dispersed as they grow up, marry and establish new houses of their own. They may marry a cousin, a fellow-villager, or someone quite unrelated who is originally from a different place. Affinal difference between spouses is transcended when a couple have children who themselves constitute a new sibling set. Marriage creates kinship in another sense too. Two previously unrelated couples, the parents of a bride and groom, are thought to become kin once they have grandchildren in common.

The theme of siblingship is echoed in myths in which spirits often appear as sibling sets without parents. In the migration stories which I collected, these myths were evoked in another narrative frame. The mysterious filiation of spirit-siblings without parents becomes more meaningful in a context where siblings do sometimes arrive from foreign places without their parents. As these migration histories make clear, siblingship can actually prefigure parenthood. And, in a similar way, ideas about relatedness often seem to imply that ties of siblingship prefigure those of filiation.

The process of kinship which represents a good life involves marrying, having children, seeing them marry and have children in turn, and thus becoming a respected grandparent. So, at the end of life, one does not merely look back on one’s achievements, but since these are always being projected forward in time, one also looks forward to what will be produced in the future. Thus kinship is never thought of as static but as always in the process of being created. It is in the future that more children will be produced ensuring the continuing viability of communities in Langkawi.

These communities are imaged in terms of kinship, itself conceived as a continuum of relatedness from the close to the distant, which operates in an idiom of siblingship. Strangers, affines, distant kin, cousins and siblings are different points along a continuum; they can all be addressed and referred to as
siblings. In principle, those who are strangers or distant relatives in the present can be transformed into spouses and siblings in the future.

One woman described to me how her father had come to visit Langkawi from mainland Kedah as a young man, and how he had been a religious teacher. When I asked why he had not gone back, she replied simply, 'people ordered him to stay' (orang suruh dia duduk). The implication was, of course, that he was so well-respected and liked that people would not let him leave. He merely complied with the wishes of others. But the story reveals how the process of integrating new migrants is obligatory. In the ideal image, the newcomer's welcome is forceful: he is shown such overwhelming hospitality that there is no choice but to submit. A short stay becomes a long one, a foster home becomes as dear as one's natal home, and eventually one finds a spouse, has children and is truly settled.

Kinship in Langkawi is an active, ongoing creation of relatedness between those who were previously unrelated or distantly connected, a process which is linked to the mobility of the local population. It is through the processes of kinship – hospitality, fostering, marriage and having children – that newcomers to the island are transformed into kin. In these processes what is important is producing kinship in the future. To a considerable extent, the details of past diversity are gradually obliterated. In this sense, forgetting this past is part of an active process of creating a new and shared identity.

'Genealogical amnesia' in Southeast Asia

At this point we can return to the theme of memory. The problem of eliciting the memories with which I was concerned was that villagers themselves seemed to be engaged in forgetting them. Although experiences in the very recent past remain powerful and salient, more distant ones rapidly disappear. There is no sense that villagers are anxious to maintain traditions from their diverse places of origin. The emphasis is on absorbing and blending, rather than on maintaining regional and cultural difference.

The tendency to forget rather than remember such differences meant that conducting research on this topic was sometimes a frustrating experience. Answers to questions were often brief or dismissive; people were rather mystified as to why I was asking such detailed questions, when in other contexts they were more patient and forthcoming. If these difficulties challenged the accuracy and validity of my research, they also encouraged me to think harder about the significance of the stories I was being told and the manner in which they were related.

References to an absence of knowledge of ancestors are a more or less standard feature of ethnographies of cognatic societies in Southeast Asia. In Borneo, it has long been considered highly problematic to consider descent as an organizing principle (King 1978). Indeed, Freeman's (1961: 208) characterization of the Iban as a people suffering from 'structural amnesia' has come to seem almost stereotypical. Elsewhere in the region, Hildred and Clifford Geertz (1964) refer to the Balinese as having 'genealogical amnesia', while Jay (1969: 171) mentions a lack of interest in tracing kinship and scanty genealogical knowledge in rural Java. In the Philippines, Gibson records that the Buid 'do
not bother to remember genealogical connection past the level of their grandparents' (Gibson 1986: 88), while Jean-Paul Dumont discusses how Visayans enter 'into the business of forgetting relatives' (Dumont 1992: 146).

My own observation that slightly more than half of the Langkawi villagers interviewed could remember the names of all four of their grandparents is very much in the tradition of this ethnography. What is being described is a lack, a knowledge that is absent. And here Southeast Asian societies are implicitly or explicitly being compared with Africa or Europe (see Freeman 1961; Geertz & Geertz 1964; Gibson 1986: 61-7).

However, Freeman's classic essay on the bilateral kindred also drew attention to other structural features of bilateral kinship in more positive terms. He noted, for example, how easy it was for the Iban to recruit temporary action groups including large-scale fighting forces (Freeman 1961: 213-14). Here diffuse links over a wide geographical area are given a positive value. These two features of kinship seem to go together: diffuse horizontal ties spreading out in concentric circles are the positive side of 'structural amnesia', although it is not clear from Freeman's analysis why such kin continue to be recognized.

In an equally positive spirit, Hildred and Clifford Geertz (1964) discuss how 'genealogical amnesia' among Balinese commoners enhances the flexibility of their descent groups, enabling these to expand and contract in response to changing circumstances. They emphasize how teknonymy is an active process by means of which Balinese kinship is produced as a 'downward looking' system (Geertz & Geertz 1964: 105). In this system 'a man sees himself, so to speak, producing structure below him rather than emerging from it above him' (1964: 105). That the implications of this highly suggestive formulation have been little explored in the literature may have to do with the fact that, in another and rather better-known article, Clifford Geertz (1973) saw teknonymy in more negative terms. Here he linked it to a 'depersonalised concept of the person', a 'reduced sense of temporal flow' and the maintenance of a 'steady state' (1973: 406). In this rendition, a Balinese construction of an 'unperishing present' (1973: 379) has replaced the earlier evocation of an active production of children and grandchildren and an orientation towards the future.

The idea that forgetting who your relatives are represents a loss, and is part of a negative process, a flattening of personhood, a diminishing of kinship, a reduced temporality, has in fact been far more prevalent in the literature than more positive accounts. I mention as a final exception Jean-Paul Dumont's somewhat tortuous argument that this process of forgetting has the effect of turning 'distant and vague relatives into potential affines', thus allowing Visayans to maintain their cultural identity through endogamy (Dumont 1992: 155). One reason to doubt his logic is that exactly the same phenomenon is observed in cognatic societies with far less restrictive marriage rules than are found in the Visaya Islands.

What I suggest here is that this kind of forgetting is not only an active process, but that it is linked to other aspects of identity in Southeast Asia. The first of these is a stress on siblingship rather than filiation in kinship. I have already described how people in Langkawi place enormous emphasis on siblingship. For them, all kinship relations are thought of as in some sense
deriving from siblingship (see Carsten 1987; 1991). Communities are united by ties of past and present siblingship. These ties extend into the future in the form of relations between cousins. Cousins themselves are merely seen as more distant kinds of siblings. I mentioned earlier that while villagers will trace out relations between living cousins with considerable enthusiasm, they are far less interested in their connexions to long dead forebears. Because siblingship is logically prior to, and in some respects more important than, descent in this type of bilateral kinship (see McKinley 1981), it is possible to have a very broad knowledge of quite distant ties with cousins without being able to name one's forebears beyond about two generations.

This suggests why thinking in terms of amnesia may be misleading, since it fails to convey the importance of other kinds of knowledge which people do retain. Knowledge of kinship in cognatic societies of Southeast Asia tends to be 'wide' rather than 'deep': it stretches outwards, following degrees of 'siblingship' rather than backwards into the past.

The obliteration of the memory of different origins in Langkawi seems, similarly, to be an aspect of the horizontal nature of knowledge about genealogical connexions which I have described. But it can also be linked to the migration history of people in Langkawi. A lack of interest in precisely who one's ancestors are correlates both with an emphasis on siblingship as the core of kinship, and with the fact that so many people have come to the island as impoverished migrants in the recent past. Here kinship – or a sense of connectedness to place and people – is not derived from past ties but must be created in the future. The enormous emphasis on the production of children in marriage and the image of the community as one of shared grandchildren are both aspects of this forward projection. The Geertz's notion of 'downward looking' kinship is thus particularly apt for Langkawi.

In Langkawi, kinship – conceived as similarity of attributes and substance – is created both in the present and the future through the absorption and homogenization of difference. People 'mix easily'. In fact, they are given no choice but to do so. Differences that characterize newcomers to the island are rapidly erased, partly through an emphasis on conformity and similarity. Behaviour, dialect, consumption patterns, house design and furnishings, and style of dress may vary according to wealth and age, but they are not expressions of individuality. Differences of taste are actively discouraged; they are not a means of distinguishing villagers of different origins.

**Population mobility and the Southeast Asian state**

If knowledge about kinship seems to take a typical form in the societies to which I have referred, there may be some point in pushing the regional comparison further. In other words, it is worth trying to link the process of forgetting ancestors to other aspects of kinship and identity and wider demographic patterns in Southeast Asia.

I suggest that the demographic mobility that characterizes Langkawi is part of a more widespread pattern which may be linked to the history of Southeast Asian maritime kingdoms. In this region a history of maritime trade and the movement of people have been associated for thousands of years (see Coedes
1968; Wolters 1982; Reid 1988). Migration is, in fact, an intriguing feature of several historical and anthropological studies in the region (see Gullick 1958; Adas 1981; Roff 1969; Wang Gungwu 1985). The Iban (Freeman 1970) and Minangkabau (Kahn 1980; Kato 1982) are two well-known ethnographic examples of societies in which mobility is clearly a central feature of social life.

These examples are suggestive. However, a more detailed historical analysis is required in which the movement of people is considered as an aspect of political and economic processes in the region. As Anderson (1990) has made clear, the traditional Southeast Asian state was defined not by its perimeter but by its centre. Power was concentrated at the centre; at the outer margins the power of a ruler faded imperceptibly away and merged with that of a neighbouring sovereign. The geographic extent of the kingdom was always in flux (Anderson 1990: 41). In fact, the power of a ruler was revealed not so much by the extent of his kingdom, but in the number of people he controlled. Victorious rulers might augment their power during periods of dynastic conflict by moving large numbers of people to the centre (1990: 43).10

Conversely, those who lived at the periphery of the kingdom were least subject to the control of the sovereign. This, of course, is very clear in the case of the hill tribes, whether they were swidden cultivators or hunters and gatherers. The history of such groups is one of continual attempts to evade the domination of the lowland states (see Leach 1954; Gibson 1986). To a lesser extent, however, the same processes seem to have characterized relations between rulers and their paddy-farming subjects in the lowlands.

Adas (1981) has discussed the tendency of peasant tenants or labourers in precolonial and colonial Southeast Asia to transfer their allegiance to alternative rulers, or simply to move further from the centre, when the burdens of taxation and corvée labour became too great (see also Tambiah 1976: 120-3). Focusing on Burma and Java, Adas characterizes these wholesale migrations as a form of 'avoidance protest' (1981: 217). He stresses the importance of low population density and the existence of refuge zones of unoccupied lands (1981: 219). Kratoska (1985) has argued that peasants in late nineteenth-century Malaya were not particularly attached to their land and frequently abandoned it when it was readily available elsewhere, and when ownership was not an assurance of livelihood.

In a context where power was measured by control over people rather than land, where administrative structures were weak, where population densities were low, and land on the periphery readily available, it seems that the ability of peasant cultivators simply to move to pioneer areas on the periphery exerted a serious limit to the control of rulers.

Many of these factors characterized late nineteenth-century Kedah, the Malay state on the fringe of which Langkawi is situated. As Sharom Ahmat (1970a; 1970b) has shown, at this time the economy of Kedah was essentially based on rice cultivation. The power of the sultan depended on control of economic resources through taxation. But Sharom has emphasized how, in contrast to other Malay states, the political and economic structure in Kedah was highly centralized. The limited resources and small population of Kedah meant that
an elaborate administrative apparatus was unnecessary; members of the royal family held most of the important political posts.

Sharom argues that these factors encouraged political stability in Kedah at this time (see also Gullick 1983: 69). The revenue of the state depended on the ability of the *raayat* (‘the masses’) to cultivate rice without major upheaval. Kedah’s rice was largely exported to Penang, which was dependent on it for its food supply. It was thus in British interests too to maintain political stability. Sharom’s argument is particularly relevant, because a point which emerges clearly from it is the importance to the state of rice cultivation proceeding without disruption.

Both the sultan and other members of the ruling class were aware that their interests dictated that the masses should not be exploited, for in such an event they could either adopt a policy of non-co-operation or in the last resort, migrate (1970b: 121).

A British administrator’s contemporary comments make this point even more forcefully:

In a Malay state, the exaction of personal service from the rai’yat is limited only by the powers of endurance of the latter. The superior authority is obliged, from self-interest, to stop short of the point at which oppression will compel the cultivator to abandon his land and emigrate (Maxwell 1884: 104).

Sharom emphasizes the efforts made to minimize this exploitation and shows that where local leaders (*penghulu*) were the subject of complaints from peasants to the sultan for their corruption or excessive use of forced labour, they might well be replaced (Sharom 1970b: 121).

Although it appears that during this period there was minimal migration (Sharom 1970b: 120-1), the seriousness with which this problem was taken by the sultan demonstrates very clearly the strength of the threat and its disruptive potential. In spite of Sharom’s description of the ‘stable demographic pattern in Kedah’ (1970b: 122) at this time, it seems that this pattern was not wholly consistent. He cites two cases of villagers migrating in the 1880s causing ‘considerable alarm among the ruling classes’ (1970b: 121). These resulted in the administration taking measures to prevent the recurrence of such movement.

Discussing the same themes, Banks (1983: 9-44) has emphasized that Malaya can be seen as a ‘frontier society’. He suggests that nineteenth-century Kedah was characterized by two styles of life. One, on the plain, near to the royal court, was highly stratified. Peasants were subject to heavy demands of forced labour, military service and taxation. This, together with the fragmentation of landholdings, led to migration to the fringes of this society. The isolated areas to which these peasants migrated were characterized by relative freedom from the exactions of the sultans, lower agricultural yields, less marked wealth differentials and a more egalitarian social order. In these distant areas of refuge, however, they ‘had to put up with lawlessness and periodic oppression by outlaw bands’ (Banks 1983: 19). Banks’s discussion refers to Sik, a hill district of northern Kedah. But this characterization might also apply to Langkawi, which in 1850 was characterized by a British observer as

inhabited by a race of Malays, who are, in general, thieves, and commit frequent acts of piracy (Topping 1850: 42).
**Mobile people and fluid identities**

The historical and anthropological sources reveal a widespread pattern in which the centre of the Southeast Asian state was relatively fixed but the periphery was unstable. For those people at the bottom end of the hierarchical order and on the outlying regions of the state (in other words the most mobile segments of the population), kinship seems to have taken a characteristic form. Here the features of kinship which anthropologists have noted as characterizing cognatic groups of Southeast Asia take on a crucial political importance.

The most significant of these features are that one becomes related to previously unrelated people relatively easily through fostering and marriage, and that absolute distinctions between kin and non-kin tend to be avoided. Kin ties may be spread over a very wide geographic area, as Freeman and other ethnographers of the region have reported. But these features, which are merely puzzling when considered in the context of stable communities, mean something quite different when coupled with population mobility. They all make the attachment of migrants to new places and people rather easy.

Similarly, the cast to memory described here—in which knowledge of kinship is ‘wide’ rather than ‘deep’, produced in the future rather than derived from the past—takes on a different meaning. For when people are highly mobile, it may be more important to create kinship out of new ties than to remember ancestors whose identity has become largely irrelevant.15

Anthropologists have recently emphasized the fluidity of Austronesian notions of identity (see Fox 1987). Identity is not fixed at birth; people become who they are gradually through life as they acquire different attributes derived from the activities in which they engage and the people with whom they live. One important contributor to identity is place. People are shaped, and their bodies become marked, by the activities in which they engage in the particular locality in which they live. Identities, skills and personal characteristics are acquired rather than innate.16 Interestingly, the Ilongot of the Philippines actually remember their past in spatial terms, as a ‘winding thread of continuous movement through space’ (Rosaldo 1980: 16). History here becomes a succession of places (1980: 42), ‘a movement through space in which ... people walk along a trail and stop at a sequence of named resting places’ (1980: 56).

The idea that identity and place are closely associated once again has a different meaning in a context of demographic mobility. By settling in a new locality one can quite easily become of that place. Or as Langkawi people put it, in characteristically exhortatory fashion, ‘stay here; marry a person from here; become a person from here.’

**Conclusion**

I have argued that the process of forgetting about one’s ancestors is linked in Langkawi to the positive creation of kinship. It is by dressing, eating, bathing, sitting and speaking in the right way that one gradually becomes a Langkawi person. In local ideas, kin are not sharply defined in opposition to non-kin. Nor is identity inherently given at birth; it alters throughout life. People become kin, that is, complete people, through their shared activities in houses,
through eating and living together in the present, intermarrying and having children and grandchildren in the future.

The past is to a considerable extent one of diversity, but the future can be projected as one of similarity and kinship. The corollary of such an image of the future is that the past which underlies it has little relevance. Differences of origin are always in the process of being converted into similarity; they are best forgotten. As the village headman told me, ‘people don’t dig up their past’. They ‘mix easily’.

The migration histories I have discussed are at one level the stories people tell, their narratives. However, it is significant that, as far as I know, they do not actually tell such stories spontaneously, and relate them only when directly questioned by an anthropologist. Nor do these stories indicate directly just how much they remember or forget. In fact, the precise relation between these stories and memory is problematic. That not everything is forgotten is obvious simply from the fact that I was able to elicit some information on these topics in some contexts. Nevertheless, these fragments were elicited in response to semi-formal interviews and direct questioning, and in response to an external enquiry which seemed peculiar to those who took part. Indeed, it is just as significant that people are entirely unaware of the particular histories and origins of their neighbours. In this sense, individual memories seem to coexist with ‘collective forgetting’.

The widespread ignorance about other villagers’ origins underlines the importance of the transmission of knowledge through acts of communication. When grandchildren are told little about their grandparents, when a family does not recount their individual migration histories to their neighbours, these small omissions are part of the construction of shared knowledge about the past, present and future. Over time, the stories which are not told, the relatives who are no longer significant, are forgotten through the fact that no information about them is transmitted. One cannot forget what one has never known. In this sense, Halbwachs (1925) argued that ‘collective memory’ can be thought of as an abstraction from acts of communication between individuals (see also Halbwachs 1950; Connerton 1989: 36–49). Memory here is conceived as essentially dynamic, always undergoing reconstruction, and forgetting has a crucial role in its transformation (see Dakhlia 1990: 6–7).

I would argue that the kind of forgetting I have discussed differs from the explicit acts of disremembering the dead which occur in the mortuary rituals of the Sabarl of New Guinea (Battaglia 1992; 1993) and the Jivaro of Amazonia (Taylor 1993). In the case of the Sabarl (and seemingly of the Jivaros too), ‘forgetting is acknowledged as a collective goal’ (Battaglia 1993: 440; italics in original). Forgetting or ‘finishing the memory’ of the dead is part of the creation of new memory free of the attributes of the dead individual. In these cases we are dealing with what Battaglia calls a ‘willed transformation of memory’ (1992: 14) which is necessary for the continued construction of the identity of the living. This kind of ‘forgetting’ is, of course, a social process which occurs through acts of communication; it is a more or less explicit purpose of these mortuary rituals. Forgetting in these rituals is a kind of marked activity. In
Langkawi, by contrast, the process of forgetting is implicit, gradual and unmarked – its effects are, in a sense, more hidden.

This contrast underlines the obvious point that different kinds of knowledge, like different forms of communication, have different significance. However, we should not assume that small everyday acts of forgetting are less important than the rather special kinds of 'forgetting displays' which may occur in ritual. On an everyday basis, stories are recounted because they seem significant; in the process they become part of a 'social' memory and a knowledge which is shared.17 Psychologists and anthropologists have in fact considered the kind of long-term memory I have been discussing as central to an investigation of the link between the individual and the social, or between public and private representations (see Bartlett 1932; Luria 1976; Sperber 1985; Bloch 1992; Tonkin 1992).

It seems to me, however, that when anthropologists write about memory, they are generally thinking of something quite different from what cognitive psychologists investigate. Most anthropologists have in mind a rather loose idea in which people both remember things and forget them. This corresponds to a folk model of memory in Western culture. Cognitive psychologists, however, work with a much more precise and technical model of memory. In this model people seem never to forget at all; rather, the problems of 'forgetting' are actually ones of storage and retrieval of information (see Baddeley 1976; 1990). Knowledge once acquired is not actually lost; it simply cannot be accessed.

Nevertheless, there is a relation between these two models, just as there is a relation between the stories people tell (their narratives) and memory. Bloch (n.d.) has recently argued that anthropologists need clearly to separate narratives from memory. Stories about the past do not give us direct access to knowledge of the past. The material presented here certainly bears out his point. However, I would go on to argue that we need to pay much more careful attention to the relationship between narratives and memory. In particular, we need to consider how, over time, and through small everyday acts, the one might be transformed into the other.

What I have suggested here is that social memory and shared knowledge are constructed as much from things which are untold, or left implicit, as from what is recorded. The way in which people forget, and what they forget, are not random but systematic and patterned. Forgetting in Langkawi is part of a collective construction of identity which focuses not on the past but on the present and future. And it takes place in particular political and historical circumstances. What may appear as an absence at the level of the village, takes on a different significance in the regional political context I have described. If, in the end, I have said less about memory than about the communication of knowledge, perhaps I have also shown why anthropologists need to consider forgetting as part of the process by which shared memories are constructed.

NOTES

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of the University of London. Further fieldwork on the history of migration was conducted in 1988–89, financed by the British Academy, the Wenner-Gren Foundation and the Evans Fund of the University of Cambridge. I am grateful to Wazir-Jahan Karim and to Cheah Boon Kheng of Universiti Sains Malaysia for advice and support while I was conducting fieldwork, and to Olivia Harris, Jonathan Spencer and participants in seminars at the Queen’s University of Belfast and the London School of Economics, and to Hastings Donnan for their comments on earlier versions of this article.

1 'Or l'essence d’une nation est que tous les individus aient beaucoup de choses en commun, et aussi que tous aient oublié bien des choses'.

2 Exceptions include Borofsky (1987); Dakhlia (1990); Gow (1991); Tonkin (1992). Recently, Battaglia (1992; 1993) and Taylor (1993) have discussed the importance of forgetting in the mortuary rituals of the Sabarl of New Guinea and the Jivaros of Amazonia respectively.

3 I did not conduct detailed research on migration histories in other villages on Langkawi. However, my impression from visits to other villages and conversations with Langkawi people more generally is that the population of Sungai Cantik is fairly typical of that in other villages elsewhere on the island. I therefore generalize my argument at various points in this article from the village of Sungai Cantik to the island of Langkawi as a whole.

4 I was quite willing to believe that, as a foreigner, I might be blind to such details but if so the Malaysian history students who assisted me on this project were equally so. Sharifah Masniah, Ibrahim Takip and Jamaliyah were then third-year history students at Universiti Sains Malaysia. They expressed considerable surprise at the information they collected.

5 I had many informal conversations with older people about their early memories of Langkawi and about their family histories. In order to get a broader picture of the extent of migration, I also carried out a household survey with the help of three research assistants. Information was collected from all married couples, widowed or divorced people living in 110 houses distributed in four different hamlets of Sungai Cantik. These 260 interviewees were asked for their own place of birth, the names and birthplaces of their parents and those of their grandparents. They were asked whether they had any ancestors from those who came from outside Langkawi, and if they knew of any immediate neighbours who came from elsewhere. Where informants or their ancestors had come from elsewhere, they were asked for additional information about their reasons for migrating and the circumstances involved.

6 The meaning of bangsat in this context seems to be synonymous with merantau, the term used in Sumatra and other regions for 'to travel', 'migrate', 'wander' (Iskandar 1970: 71).

7 In-migration has certainly been accompanied by a similar trickle of out-migration. However, detailed information on this is even more difficult to collect since, as many ethnographers of similar Southeast Asian groups have observed, relatives who move away are rapidly forgotten or become irrelevant, unless their immediate descendants intermarry in the future.

8 For example, a couple with ties to Langkawi and a village in mainland Kedah might spend many years after their marriage on the mainland before coming to Langkawi. Divorce or death of one spouse and subsequent marriage of the other might be followed by further moves.

9 The idea that men are more mobile than women and are associated with the outside of the house is echoed in the symbolism of post-partum rituals. A baby boy's placenta is tied up with rattan before burial, and a girl's with pandanus. This is because in adult life men must use rattan to tie the steps of an exterior house ladder, while girls weave pandanus for the interior mats.

10 For extended discussions of the nature of the Southeast Asian polity see Tambiah (1976; ch. 7); Wolters (1982: ch. 2); Errington (1989).

11 It was for this reason that the sultan relaxed the obligations of the naqat to perform forced labour (kenah) (Sharom 1970b: 121). However, Gullick (1983: 66) links a heavy kenah burden in mid-nineteenth century Kedah to the low population. See also Gullick (1985: 116).

12 One case involved a group of sixty families who intended to migrate to the Dindings in Perak, and the other a group of peasants from Yen who moved to a neighbouring district. See Scott (1985: 245-6) for a discussion of flight as a means of resisting oppression on mainland Kedah. Syed Hussein Alatas (1968: 584-5) has described how this means of avoidance rather than defiance conformed with peasant values.

13 Gullick (1983: 56) has described how the boundaries of mid-nineteenth century Kedah were not clearly defined; the state was made up of a central core zone and an imprecise outer zone.

15 This, of course, is not always the case among migrants. One important factor may be that Langkawi people have not migrated in large groups, but have come in small numbers from diverse places over a very long period. The political status of immigrants in their new home might also be expected to play a role in the kind of ties these migrants maintain with their ancestors and places of origin.

16 Astuti (in press) gives a finely drawn description of this process among the Vezo of Madagascar.

17 Conversely, the framing of individual memories of this kind is thoroughly social, if only in the sense that they are influenced by what is socially significant.

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De l'usage politique de l'oubli: migration, parenté et mémoire à la périphérie d'un état de l'Asie du Sud-Est

Résumé
Les différentes versions de l'histoire migratoire des villageois de Pulau Langkawi en Malaisie révèlent un mouvement démographique important. Ces faits historiques peuvent être mis en rapport avec les notions locales de parenté, selon lesquelles l'acquisition d'attributs et de relations dans le présent et le futur comptent beaucoup plus que le maintien des liens avec les ancêtres défunt. Il est montré que le caractère fragmentaire de la mémoire des mouvements migratoires s'accorde à un système de parenté très courant dans le sud-est asiatique, et qualifié, plutôt négativement, d' 'amnésie structurelle'. L'auteur suggère que, remis dans son contexte régional et rattaché aux traits historiques spécifiques des formations politiques du sud-est asiatique, ce système de parenté, centré sur l'oubli des ancêtres, peut être analysé d'une manière plus positive. Pour finir, l'article s'insère dans les débats anthropologiques concernant, d'une part, l'individu et la mémoire sociale, et, d'autre part, le lien entre mémoire et texte narratif. L'auteur préconise une approche qui accorde plus d'importance au phénomène de l'oubli.

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