

A History of
KUALA LUMPUR
1856-1939



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MBRAS
THE MALAYSIAN BRANCH OF
THE ROYAL ASIATIC SOCIETY

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The Klang Valley

In 1806, Raja Jafar bin Raja Haji relinquished control of the Klang Valley which had been assigned to him by his cousin, Sultan Ibrahim of Selangor, a few years before, and returned to Riau-Lingga, capital of Johor. 'He took with him a box of money, which needed eight people to carry it.'¹ It had been a profitable interlude in Raja Jafar's career, which illustrates the recovery of Selangor from the economic doldrums of the 1790s, and the growing volume and value of its exports of tin.

Although Kuala Lumpur had its origin half a century later, in 1857, there had been Malay settlements in the Klang Valley from much earlier times. Klang town itself had been a political outpost of the Malacca Sultanate of the fifteenth century.² When Malacca fell to the Portuguese assault in AD 1511, we lose track of Klang and the Klang Valley until the eighteenth century, when the Bugis settled along the coast (of modern Selangor), but were content to leave Klang under the rule of a Malay chief, To' Engku Klang, with whom their relations were distant and at times strained.³ However, the export of tin became the mainstay of the Selangor State economy after 1800, and it may be assumed that the Malay settlements along the Klang River in the 1820's had their origin in a recent search for tin in the upper reaches of the valley. There were, in the 1820's, twenty-three

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1. Raja Ali Haji ibn Ahmad, *Tuhfa al-Nafis*, translated and annotated by V. Matheson [Hooker] and B. W. Andaya as *The Precious Gift*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1982, p. 215. Jafar had come to Selangor at a time of intense rivalry between Bugis and Malay factions at the royal capital of Johor (Riau-Lingga) – 'like crockery in a ship's locker, broken by the tossing of the waves, becoming more jagged daily with the jarring and pounding' (Ibid., p. 201). On his return to Riau in 1806, Raja Jafar became Yam Tuan Muda (Underking) (1806-31). J. M. Gullick (*A History of Selangor 1766/1939*, MBRAS Monograph No. 28, 1988), deals with the broader context in which the events described in this study occurred.
 2. R. O. Winstedt, 'A History of Selangor', *JMBRAS*, 12(3), 1934, p. 1.
 3. Ibid., pp. 112-13.

named villages along the river, with an estimated total population of 1,500. Eight of these settlements, furthest up the river, were producing tin, and the most important of these, one day's journey from Pahang, was 'Sungei Lumpoor'.⁴ However, until the mid-nineteenth century the main centres of tin production in Selangor were elsewhere, at Lukut near the coast and so readily accessible, and in Ulu Selangor, where the richest tin ore deposits workable at that time were to be found.

The situation changed, however, when new methods of production were introduced. In the rural Malay mixed economy, tin collecting – it was hardly 'mining' – was an intermittent activity for those seasons when the cultivator, temporarily relieved of work in the fields, could fit it in.⁵ Hence, it could not be a continuous operation. Yet, in a country of heavy rainfall any excavation in low ground, where tin ore was covered by a non-productive top stratum of soil, would fill with water almost overnight. Malay methods of recovery of tin ore were mainly washing (*lanpan* mining) i.e. sluicing in the bed of a stream, where the problem of flooded workings would not arise. These methods could only reach the uppermost tin strata, and yet the richest deposits were often at depths of up to 20 feet below the surface.

The importation of Chinese labourers, employed throughout the year, greatly increased the production of tin at important mining

4. J. Anderson, *Political and Commercial Considerations Relative to the Malayan Peninsula, and the British Settlements in the Straits of Malacca*, Penang: Government Press, 1824, p.199. It has been reprinted in *JMBRAS*, 35(4), with an Introduction by J. S. Bastin, which explains the context in which it was written. Anderson was an official of the Penang Government, who in 1818 had visited Selangor (and Perak) on missions to negotiate long-term contracts for the purchase of local tin. See p.7, for the origin of the name 'Kuala Lumpur'; the perplexing feature is that later on, when the town had been founded, there was no identified 'Sungei Lumpoor'.

5. The dry season after the paddy harvest was the preferred time for primitive washing for tin. H. C. Clifford, *Studies in Brown Humanity: Being Scrawls and Smudges in Sepia, White and Yellow*, London: Grant Richards, 1898, p. 4. Apart from small-scale family outings to wash for tin, there were more intensive and large-scale Malay operations in which surface material likely to contain tin ore was pulled down into a channel of fast-flowing water (from a river or reservoir). But that method of washing for tin did not make it possible to mine at a depth below the surface.

centres such as Larut (Perak) and Lukut. They dug large pits (*lombong*) and began each working day by baling out the water which had seeped in overnight. By the 1850's, the use of Chinese labour made it possible to reach ore deposits at much greater depths than before. Raja Abdullah bin Raja Jafar, who became ruling chief of the Klang Valley in about 1853, was essentially a businessman, whose brother, Raja Jumaat, was obtaining previously unheard of profits in his district of Lukut.⁶

Raja Abdullah saw the potential of mining by these methods, and decided to send in Chinese miners to work in the upper reaches of the Klang Valley; that initiative led to the establishment of Kuala Lumpur, as will be related in the next chapter. Before going on to that momentous event, some other geographical features of the Klang Valley and adjacent areas require mention, since they affected the history of Kuala Lumpur.⁷ First, the Klang River was by no means an ideal route for boats carrying men and goods between Klang town and the interior. Like many other Malayan rivers, its channel had many twists and turns. The distance by river greatly exceeded that in a direct line, so that progress along it was slow. The bends also tended to obstruct the flow of water in times of heavy rain, causing floods, to which Kuala Lumpur was vulnerable until the channel was satisfactorily straightened in the late 1920's. Moreover, between Damansara village, a few miles upstream from Klang town, and Petaling, a similar distance downstream from Kuala Lumpur, the course of the river was a wide detour to the south. Although the direct distance was not much more than 20 miles, Frank Swettenham and Davidson had to make a three-day boat journey to reach Kuala

6. So too was Long Jafar, the chief of Larut in Perak, but these entrepreneurs' efforts are too remote for retelling here.

7. In normal Malay linguistic usage, the upstream end of a river valley is called by the river name preceded by Ulu, for example, 'Ulu Selangor'. However, in the Klang Valley, 'Ulu Klang' had a more limited meaning as the name of a small but important village, a centre of Sumatran tin mining. 'Ulu Klang' is therefore reserved for that application, and is not here extended to the larger surrounding area of the Klang Valley.