

MALAY SOCIETY

Transformation & Democratisation

A STIMULATING AND
DISCERNING STUDY
ON THE EVOLUTION OF
MALAY SOCIETY

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1. THE PENINSULAR MALAY SULTANATES: GENESIS AND SALIENT FEATURES

IN SO FAR as existing materials permit, the study of the peninsular Malay Sultanates should take off from the period of the Melaka Sultanate. The Melaka Sultanate formally established a set of traditions which crystallised into what may be justifiably termed the "political culture" of the peninsular Malays. Colonial administration admittedly introduced some significant changes but there has been no total break with the 15th century even today.

There are two historical documents which provide much of the needed information on the nature of the Melaka polity, namely the *Sejarah Melayu (Malay Annals)*¹ and the *Undang-undang Melaka (Melaka Digest)*.² In terms of providing an overall comprehensive perspective of the Melaka polity, the *Sejarah Melayu* is by far the more important document. There is yet a third document which throws light on the Melaka society; this is the *Undang-undang Laut (Maritime Laws)*.³ The persistence of Melaka's cultural and political influence has been emphasised by a modern scholar:

(The Melaka) Digest was adapted and adopted in Kedah, Pahang, Riau, Pontianak and was quoted in recent times as authoritative (in civil suits) at Brunei. This is why other legal digests such as *Undang-undang Melayu*, *Undang-undang Negeri*, *Undang-undang Johor*, *Undang-undang Pahang*, and *Undang-undang Kedah* show striking resemblances to *Undang-undang Melaka*. In two cases, the resemblance goes deeper. The *Undang-undang Johor* is no other than the *Undang-undang Melaka* and the *Undang-undang Kedah* is another version of the *Undang-undang Melaka*.⁴

It would be difficult to understand the close link between the Melaka Sultanate and the other peninsular sultanates without an overall view of the process of historical development of these Sultanates, subsequent to the fall of Melaka in 1511, as a result of Portuguese conquest. It is not contended here that Melaka was the first kingdom to have been established in the Malay peninsula. Local traditions, for example, point to the existence of pre-Melaka states such as Gangga Negara, in the Bruas-Dinding area (prior to the founding of the Perak Sultanate), Terengganu and Kedah. Records of the Ming Dynasty also prove the existence of Kelantan and Pahang during the pre-Melaka period.⁵ Not all the available evidence is conclusive; in many instances there are far-fetched speculations about the possible location of a particular place, the name of which is available only in the rendition of a foreign language (Arabic or Chinese, for instance).⁶ The existence of such earlier states does not, however, negate the claim that the peninsular Malay sultanates which have survived to this day derive their political traditions from Melaka.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

It is almost certain that Melaka was founded not much earlier or later, if at all, than the year 1400⁷; and it is widely acknowledged that the founder of Melaka was Parameswara (or perhaps more accurately, Permaisura). It is almost certain that his son succeeded him in 1414, assuming the title of Megat Iskandar Shah. The third ruler, Seri Maharaja (or Sultan Muhammad Shah) reigned between 1424 and 1444.⁸ If the *Sejarah Melayu* is to be believed, it was during the reign of the third ruler that an elaborate code of conduct as well as a set of legal procedures were drawn up for the state.⁹ The founder of the Melaka dynasty indeed became the progenitor of a royal patrilineage, members of which were to rule Pahang, Perak and Johor. During the reign of Sultan Mansur Shah (1459-1477), the sixth ruler of Melaka, Pahang became an appanage of the Melaka ruler who sent his son, Raja Muhammad, to rule there.¹⁰ The Sultanate came to an end in 1641 when it was absorbed by Johor.¹¹ The present royal house of Pahang was founded in 1881.¹² The ancient Sultanate of Johor was, in every sense, a continuation of the Melaka Sultanate. Sultan Mahmud, the *de facto* last ruler of Melaka, died sometime between 1527 and 1528 in Kampar (Sumatra). His son and successor, Alauddin, has always been considered the founder of Jo-

hor (the kingdom established along the Johor river).¹³ In fact, it would not be inaccurate to regard Sultan Alauddin's reign as a continuation of that of the last ruler of Melaka. Succession continued within the same family until 1699. In that year, the ruler, Sultan Mahmud, who ascended the throne in 1685, was killed by one of his chieftains. The new ruler, the Bendahara (Abdul Jalil), of non-royal descent, founded another royal patrilineage which has survived till modern times (in Terengganu, Pahang and modern Johor). The present royal house of Johor was founded in 1885. The old Johor kingdom, to all intents and purposes, collapsed when the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824 carved up the Malay archipelago into two spheres of influence—British and Dutch—lopping off Peninsular Johor from Lingga which was then the royal seat of the old Johor kingdom.

At the time when Sultan Alauddin succeeded his father as the ruler in Johor, another of Sultan Mahmud's sons had already been proclaimed as the ruler of Perak with the title of Sultan Muzaffar Shah.¹⁴ Through Sultan Muzaffar Shah, patrilineally and matrilineally, Perak's royal house has been preserved to this very day.¹⁵

Manifestly, one of the major events in the history of the peninsular Malays was the assassination of Sultan Mahmud of Johor in 1699. Except for the Sultanates of Kedah¹⁶ and Perak, all the others which exist today in Malaysia emerged after 1699. Two of the Malay rulers do not use the title of Sultan—Perlis and Negeri Sembilan. Negeri Sembilan is an exception in another way. This state whose population comprise largely people who claim that their ancestors originated from Minangkabau (Sumatra) was, at first, a dependency of Johor but gradually looked to Pagar Ruyung (Sumatra) as the source of its political authority.¹⁷ Socioculturally too, the people of Negeri Sembilan share little in common with the Malays in the other states. It is the only state whose name was not derived from a river. As Negeri Sembilan, when it emerged as an independent state, stood outside the sociopolitical influence of Melaka, it should not detain us here.¹⁸ More will be said about Perlis subsequently.

To return to the regicide of 1699, it may be mentioned that the event was unprecedented in peninsular Malay history.¹⁹ A modern historian comments: