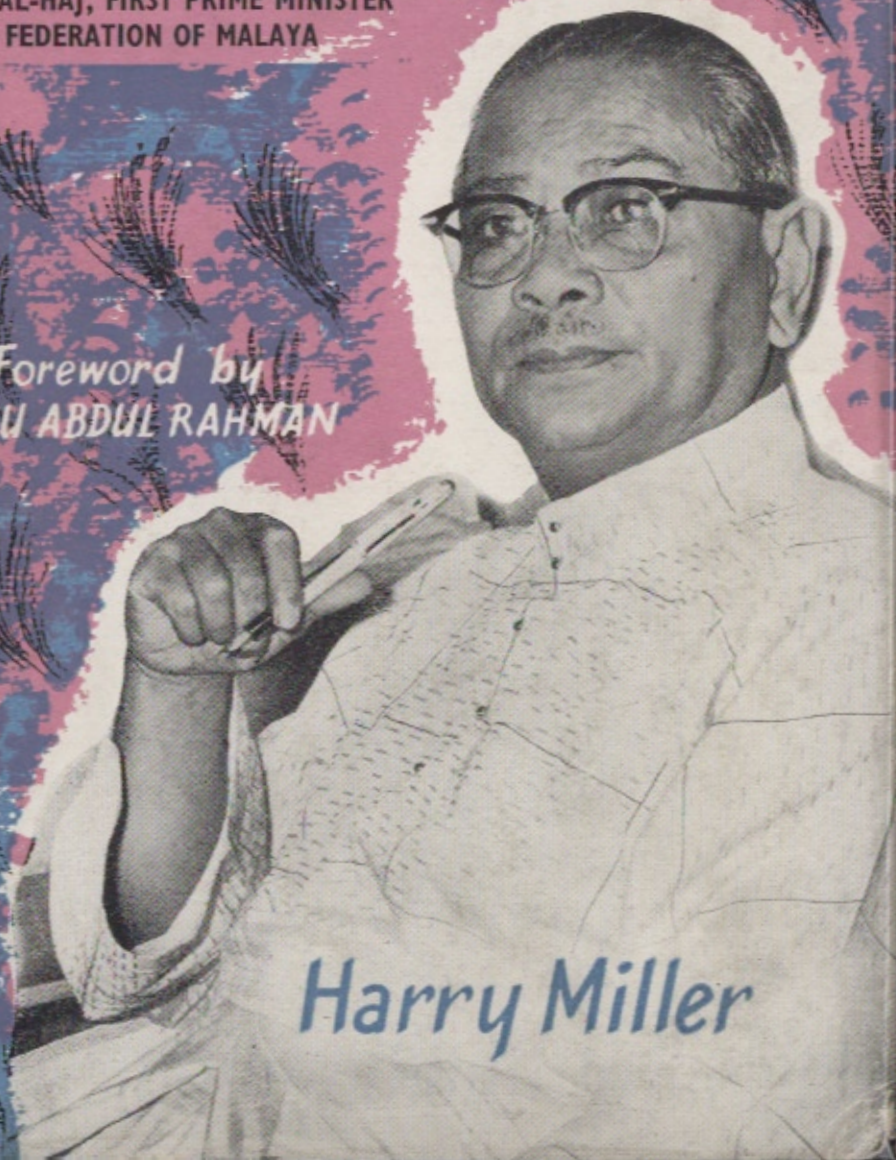


PRINCE *and* PREMIER

A BIOGRAPHY OF TUNKU ABDUL RAHMAN
PUTRA AL-HAJ, FIRST PRIME MINISTER
OF THE FEDERATION OF MALAYA

Foreword by
TUNKU ABDUL RAHMAN



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CHAPTER ONE

Born under a Lie

When Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra was born in Alor Star on February 8, 1903, there was little excitement in the lovely Malay State of Kedah. To the peasants working in their paddy-fields he was just another son born to a prolific father who happened to be their Sultan, Abdul Hamid Halim Shah, and who, though still only thirty-nine years of age, had already been on the throne for twenty-one years.

Sultan Abdul Hamid died in 1943 at the age of seventy-nine. The eight women he had legally married at various stages had borne him forty-five sons and daughters, who themselves gave him ninety-two grand- and great-grand-children—quite one of the most extensive royal families in Malaya.

Abdul Rahman's mother, Makche Menjelara, had been the Sultan's sixth wife.¹ She was Siamese, which was not unusual in view of the close historical and social affiliations that existed between Kedah and Siam. Menjelara remained the Sultan's favourite wife until she died in April 1941. When Abdul Rahman was born she had already presented her royal consort with three sons (one of whom died very soon after birth) and three daughters. In the next nine years until 1912 she had another six children.

For many years the Sultan was seriously ill mentally. Indeed, from 1896 to his death in 1943 he lived the life of a recluse, and a Regent looked after the affairs of State. Yet, in spite of his illness, he outlived some of his wives whom he had not divorced, and a very large number of his children, including three heirs-apparent, as well as three Regents, one of whom had been a younger brother.

Therefore when Abdul Rahman was slapped into his first cry by a buxom Malay *bidan* (midwife) who was primitive in her methods the only stir he really caused was in his home, and within the bosom of his mother, because this fourth son of hers had been conceived in circumstances which lead Abdul Rahman to-day to exclaim laughingly, "I was born under a lie. That's what my mother often told me."

¹ Under Islamic law a man may marry as often as he wishes so long as he does not have more than four wives at any one time, and so long as he is able to maintain them.

It is a delightful, and perhaps significant, story. One day Sultan Abdul Hamid was told that the Keeper of the Ruler's Seal had misused the Seal by selling State land without authority, and had retained the money. Punishment lay with the Sultan. He ordered death for the Keeper, and as a taint on his family for the rest of their lives he decreed that the right thumbs of the Keeper's wife and all his children should be chopped off.

It was a harsh and horrifying punishment which ordinarily would have been accepted with Koranic philosophy about the divine rights of the Sultan. However, the Keeper of the Ruler's Seal was dearly loved by his wife. She did not wish him to die, and she was revolted at the prospect of her children going through life without a right thumb, a visible stigma of their father's crime.

She sped to Menjelara, then known to be the Sultan's favourite among his wives, and implored her intercession. Menjelara rebuked her, saying, "It is not my place to interfere with the Tuanku's justice, and your husband deserves his punishment." But the sobbing supplicant pleaded that punishment should not be imposed on her innocent children.

Menjelara was also a mother. She finally promised intervention. She had an audience with her husband, and told him she was pregnant again, and her pregnancy would be seriously affected if he persisted in punishing the Keeper and his family. She feared that her child might be born without a thumb—perhaps without a limb.

Menjelara was subtle in her plea, for there is a Malay superstition that a husband should do nothing evil during his wife's pregnancy, otherwise a dark spirit would enter the child in the womb. Menjelara's news had a double effect: the Sultan was so elated that his favourite was to present him with another child, and so anxious at the same time that nothing evil should befall it, that he ordered the ex-Keeper to prison instead and suspended the punishment on the family.

The truth, however, was that Menjelara was not pregnant at the time. Fortunately, she conceived very soon afterwards. The child born was Abdul Rahman. The many orthodox Malays in Kedah who believe in signs, omens, and portents like to say that Menjelara's grace and charity in interceding on behalf of the unhappy wife of the Keeper were passed into her next child, and that is why Abdul Rahman is the kind, generous, open-hearted man he has always been.

The Kedah royal family is perhaps the oldest in Malaya. The dynasty has been unbroken through more than a thousand years, and is traceable through nine Hindu Rulers and sixteen Muslim Sultans. Kedah princes and princesses are taught that their first

ancestor was Marong Mahawongsa, a Mongol prince from India, who was on his way to China to marry a Mongol princess when his ship was wrecked in the Straits of Malacca. He was among the survivors who landed on the shores of Kedah. The people took to him and accepted him as their Paramount Ruler.

It is an historic fact that more than two thousand years ago Pallava traders from the Coromandel Coast of India sailed eastward looking for spices, sandalwood, ivory, gold, camphor, and tin. They found that if they anchored their ships on the west side of the narrow part of the Malay country—what is now the Kra Isthmus—and carried their cargo overland to the east and loaded it on ships waiting there, they would have markets right up the coast and into China.

It was, however, cumbersome to haul cargo across Kra, and inconvenient to arrange for ships on the east side. The Pallava traders began sending their fleets farther south to look for a route to China. They eventually found a passage round the uninhabited island that is now Singapore.

On their way south to Singapore through the Straits of Malacca they became very familiar with a landmark which they could see from twenty to thirty miles out to sea. This was Jerai Mountain in Kedah. Modern ocean liners still use Jerai as their northern Malayan landmark. They know it as Kedah Peak.

The ancient traders anchored their great two-hundred-foot sailing-ships in an estuary at the foot of Jerai, and came ashore for fresh water. Here, just before World War II, an archæologist discovered the sites of twenty-one Hindu temples and other buildings dating from the fifth to the twelfth century. These are believed to have been on the site of a Hindu city which had the Sanskrit name of Kataha. The ancient Chinese knew it as Kietcha. The Pallavas called it Kadaram. The modern Malay word is Kedah.

The Indians came first as sailors, but they were followed by traders who settled at the revictualling ports along the west coast of Malaya, and also along the east coast of the opposite island of Sumatra.

Malacca and Palembang became rich ports and the centres of kingdoms. Kedah itself became the heart of the kingdom of Langkasuka. Its towns were walled and had double gates. Its inhabitants wore just sarongs around their waists. Their nobles, long-haired in the Hindu fashion, slung flowery-designed cloth over their shoulders and wore golden ear-rings.

The eighth century saw the rise of the kingdom of Sri Vijaya. Its Maharajah sat in Palembang. Kataha became one of its subordinate States, but it was given an honoured position because of its importance on the trade route. Indeed, the empire was sometimes called Sri Vijaya and Kataha.