ABDULLAH MUNSYI – WHO WAS HE?

Datuk Zahari A. Rashid

IN the two notable books that Abdullah authored, published originally in the *Jawi* script, in about mid-1800 (viz *Kisah Pelayaran Abdullah* and *Hikayat Abdullah),* he had written his name in full as: 'Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir, Munsyi'. For short, his name could be written as 'Abdullah Munsyi'. In time, it also came to be written as 'Munsyi Abdullah'.

While his father, Abdul Kadir, was born and brought up during the years of the first Dutch occupation in Melaka, Abdullah was born just after the English took over Melaka from the Dutch, namely, just before the turn of the 19th century. He grew up, went to school, and worked in Melaka town since the early days of English administration in Melaka.

A few years after Stamford Raffles had opened Singapore (1819) as a British trading station, Abdullah, then in his mid-twenties, sought occupation in Singapore. During this period Melaka had returned to Dutch rule for the second time (in 1818, but not for very long, as it turned out to be).

When in Singapore, Abdullah had to interrupt his work a few times, for some long periods in order to undertake some special tasks in Melaka. However, following his beloved wife's death (1840), he sold his house (which in his own words, was a beautiful house of bricks) in Melaka, and moved permanently to Singapore with his children. In Singapore, he built a house in the district then called Kampong Melaka.

Today, there is a prominent road in Melaka City named 'Jalan Munsyi Abdullah'. There is also one in Kuala Lumpur.

'Munsyi' is not a part of his given name; nor is it a family name. According to Abdullah himself, it is a Hindi word for teacher, being a personal and deferential address, given him by the families of sepoys (soldiers of Indian natives, recruited into the English army in India, from the 17th century until India's independence).

After completing his formal education Abdullah stayed for more than three years inside the fortress (*A Famosa*), teaching the Koran to the Muslim sepoys. In return, he learned Hindi from them. They called him endearingly, *'Abdullah Munsyi'* (Abdullah the Teacher). This address stuck with him, till this day, and has become his personal identity, as a writer.

How much do we know about this Abdullah the Teacher / Munsyi? Those among us who may have heard the name merely from the road name, or elsewhere, but have no inkling as to his background, may be excused. Such ignorance is not uncommon in modern Malaysia!

Even among the Malays today, the majority certainly (particularly among those who were born after independence), either have very sketchy or no idea who Abdullah Munsyi was. The reason is that Abdullah's many literary works, including his *magnum opus*, the autobiography-memoir, *Hikayat Abdullah*, are hardly available in the market today. They had ceased to be used as textbooks in schools for some years prior to independence.

Actually, during his lifetime, besides *Hikayat Abdullah*, Abdullah had written poems; translated a Tamil legend (*Panca Tanderan*) into Malay which he retitled *Hikayat Galilah dan Daminah;* edited the *Sejarah Melayu* (the Malay Annals); written his observations on his travels; helped to compile Malay-English vocabulary; and translated official documents

into Malay for the English government.

However, for some time now, there seems to be a revival of interest, at least among official circles, in the works of Abdullah. The *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka* (the government language and literary agency) has already set up a programme to compile the complete written works of Abdullah - all the books ever written by him; or those he had transcribed or edited or translated; and documents he had rendered into Malay.

In December 2004, the Minister of Culture, Arts and Heritage had announced a programme to recover the manuscripts and artifacts that had originated in Malaysia, but which have been kept for very long in other countries. Among the items that the Ministry is interested in are the original manuscripts of Abdullah Munsyi. The Minister had also suggested that some of Abdullah's books could be read again in the schools.

Abdullah the Educationist

In modern terms, Abdullah Munsyi was what we might call an educationist – scholar, writer, author and thinker. He wrote in Malay; and in the *Jawi* (Arabic) script. He was versed in a few languages: Tamil, Malay, Arabic, Hindi and English. He did learn Chinese also. He was a teacher of the Koran to the Muslims. He was the Malay language teacher to the Europeans both in Melaka and Singapore.

Abdullah Munsyi was also a travel writer and journalist of sorts. By nature he was full of curiosity. He would undertake some risky adventures; take down notes and then write reports on his observations and thoughts (which were subsequently composed and published).

For example, when still a young boy, he followed the *pawang gajah* (the medicine man who was reputed to have magical powers over wild elephants) and his assistants into the

jungle to hunt and capture wild elephants. The *pawang gajah* had been commissioned by the Resident Farquhar to capture as many wild elephants as he could and bring them into Melaka town.

Uncharacteristic for a person in his time, Abdullah did not believe in superstitions or magic. His intention was to see for himself what tactics the medicine man would employ. In a chapter in *Hikayat,* Abdullah provides details about the methods used by the *pawang gajah* for hunting and trapping the elephants. After obviously very hard work, the *pawang* succeeded in driving a herd of wild elephants into the strong enclosure, constructed from tree trunks. Abdullah counted that there were forty-two elephants in all – males, females, adults and the young. When news of this success reached Melaka town, it became the talk of the town that the *Pawang* had proven that he really possessed magical powers. What Abdullah discovered was that the *Pawang* did not use any magic at all, but simply logic and some clever tricks. He lamented that the methods used were quite cruel on the animals. They were denied food and water for several days, and were beaten with sticks from outside the cage, in order to weaken them. From the forty-two that were captured, only seven were barely managed to be brought into Melaka town alive.

When in Singapore, in about mid 1820's, Abdullah risked his life when he insisted of a close Chinese friend to take him along to visit the hideout of a dangerous Chinese secret society clan in the jungle of Singapore. Abdullah had to disguise himself as a beggar. He also wrote the account in *Hikayat* detailing the gruesome rituals that he secretly witnessed.

In 1837-38, Abdullah joined a sailing trip, as a translator for some European and Chinese merchants, from Singapore and back (in the often stormy and known pirate-infested seas) to the east-coast independent states of the Malay Peninsular (Pahang, Terengganu and Kelantan). His travel tales, which read like a diary

(except that there were no dates) were subsequently published.

In 1854, Abdullah sailed (alas, for the last time) from Singapore to Arabia, to perform pilgrimage in Mecca. His journalistic skills came to his assistance once again. All along the course of the journey, he wrote about the frightening experiences of storms at sea. At every port of call, he described the architecture of the houses, the physical features of the population, their manners and culture; and about anything that seemed very strange to him. A book on this voyage was published, but posthumously.

The Father of Modern Malay Literature

In the early 1960's, an inchoate circle of Malay literary exponents and critics, in an informal way, had arrived at a decision to affirm the earlier opinions that Abdullah Munsyi was the 'Father of Modern Malay Literature'.

The honour was not for Abdullah's achievements in advancing the standard of the Malay language itself, for it was agreed among the critics that Abdullah's standard of Malay was not quite exemplary enough, as evidenced from his writings. His Malay was far from the classical and aristocratic parlance of the palace that, at times, he seemed to have tried to emulate; it was not quite as polished. And going by modern standards, they say his Malay is not quite as grammatical, either.

Abdullah was given the title 'Father of Modern Malay Literature' for his writing style and for the contents of his writing. His writing style and subject matter very clearly demarcate a departure from the ancient and classical Malay literature. The old Malay literature had dealt in a juxtaposition of historical facts and legends, myths, superstitions, involving fairies, demons and spirits. Its focus had been mostly on the ruling class in a feudal political and social system: the ruler, the princes and princesses, the palace officials; and on their romances

and mystical prowess.

On the other hand, Abdullah's writing style was down to earth. He wrote on current affairs and happenings that were factual and real. He wrote about himself, his family, his early education and the punishing schooling regiments. He wrote about his work, about the relationships among the four major races (Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Portuguese); and about the activities carried out by the English administration in Melaka and Singapore.

Since Abdullah and after, the style of Malay literature writing became 'modern'. For a start, the authors were not shy to be identified by name. Language wise, Arabic-Islamic quotations and phrases were no longer liberally used. The language was not officious; it was what the average Malay could understand. The subject matter was current and readers could easily relate to it. It was not about the ruling elites from the palace anymore, nor about mythology. Abdullah was widely accepted by critics as the pioneer of this modern form of Malay literary writing.

Abdullah's Family

In which year was Abdullah born? Abdullah himself is not clear about this in *Hikayat.* Nonetheless, he does elude to it but with some ambiguity. Therefore, various historians have suggested and justified 1795, 1796 or 1797 to be the possible years of his birth. However, the year 1796 appears to be the more plausible, because Abdullah actually does say that he was born eight months from the year the British took over Melaka from the Dutch (which was August 1795). He could have learned of this date from his close association with the Europeans in Singapore, when starting to write *Hikayat.*

Abdullah was an only child; his mother's four earlier children (all boys) had all died very young even before he was born.

Impression of Abdullah Munsyi by Norizan Idrus
(*Source: Traill, H.F.O'B*)

Abdullah Munsyi was not Malay by descent, although there may be many Malays who would like to believe he was Malay. Abdullah was born into an early immigrant family that we today would call Indian-Muslim. At home they all spoke Tamil and would read and write in Tamil. This picture is not dissimilar to the practice of many Indian-Muslim families in the country today, for they speak Tamil at home too.

Nonetheless, Abdullah did not use the term 'Indian-Muslim' when categorising his family and community, for this term was never in vogue then. He used the word *'Keling'*, a word that was perfectly acceptable and was in use throughout the Malay Sultanate era in 15th century, down to the Portuguese and Dutch period from 16th to 18th century, and right up to Abdullah's time in the nineteen century. As a heritage from earlier times, old place names containing the term are still in use in Melaka and elsewhere in the country.

Abdullah received his early education in Tamil. He was tutored to speak and write good Tamil. He read Tamil literature. He learned arithmetic and Indian business practices in Tamil. At the same time he was taught to read the Koran and to learn Arabic. It was later on that he was sent to read and write Malay under a few reputable Malay scholars who lived in Melaka town.

It was in this way that Abdullah was introduced to abundant classical Malay literature, and which he came to love. So whatever skills he had in the Malay language were acquired. Malay was not his mother tongue.

There is a description of how Abdullah might have looked like, provided by a close English friend and a student of his. In his book, Mr J.T Thomson, then a government surveyor in Singapore, wrote that Abdullah had the features of a South Indian; he was of bronze complexion, oval-faced, and high-nosed. He dressed like most Tamil men of that period – wearing the long pants, with a sarong, shirt, and the scull cap.

Actually, Abdullah's family had Arab blood, too. Abdullah's great grandfather was an Arab from Yemen, who went to settle in India (Nagore city, Mysore), working as a teacher in Islam and Arabic. His name was Sheikh Abdul Kadir. There, he married an Indian woman. After Abdul Kadir died, all his four sons left India for the Malay Archipelago. Three sons settled in different towns in Java Island and the Meluku.

The son named Muhammad Ibrahim (Abdullah's grandfather) came and settled in Melaka. He later married a well to do woman, also of Indian-Arab descent. Abdullah's father was born during the Dutch administration, and he was named Abdul Kadir (after Abdullah's great grandfather, the Yemeni). Abdullah 's mother, named Salamah, was the daughter of a Hindu convert, originally from Kedah, who had settled in Melaka.

Abdullah's father was learned in Islam and could speak and write Tamil, Arabic, Hindi, and possibly Dutch. He started work as a petty trader; and as a religious and Arabic language teacher in rural Melaka. After he moved back to Melaka town, he became a petition writer and wrote letters for business and official transactions. Later, Abdul Kadir came to be occupationally associated with the local-born, independent, and prominent Dutch personality in town, named Adriaan Koek. He travelled overseas frequently on Koek's missions. During the interim Dutch occupation of Melaka, Koek was appointed acting Governor.

Abdullah's Books and His Works

Hikayat Abdullah was Abdullah's most important work that he wrote himself. However, *Hikayat* was the second such effort, and the manuscript was completed in 1843. Earlier, he had written and published the accounts of his journey by sea from Singapore to Kelantan, with stops at Pahang and Terengganu, as mentioned earlier. Titled *Kisah Pelayaran Abdullah*, the accounts describe the appalling economic, housing, and environmental conditions the ordinary people were living under in these states. The people confided in him. He theorised that the problems faced by the people were all due to the unjust and oppressive style of governance in these states.

Hikayat Abdullah is quite a large volume made up of 29

chapters. Each chapter consists of many different and unrelated episodes or events and are not quite arranged in chronological order. Nonetheless, *Hikayat* makes very stimulating and revealing reading about the kind of social life that was prevalent in Melaka town in the period 1800-1840; and also (later) in Singapore.

Although Abdullah claims that his book is an autobiography, only the beginning two chapters are about himself and his family. The rest of the book consists of something like narrations of events, very much like a memoir, connected with other people, the government in power, the English missionaries, and of course, includes his thoughts about life, the Malays and the Malay language.

Abdullah writes much about his association with the English; he had many close friends among officials in the government, the European traders, and particularly the Christian missionaries, first in Melaka, and then in Singapore. William Farquhar, the longest serving British Resident in Melaka, and Father W. Milne, the head of the mission, were examples.

Later on, Abdullah came to befriend Thomas Stamford Raffles when the latter engaged him temporarily as a clerk and copyist, during his third visit to Melaka. Abdullah was about fifteen years old at that time. Some years later, when Farquhar became the first British Resident of Singapore, Abdullah practically followed him there. It was in Singapore that he and Raffles were together again, for the second (and last) time.

It was during this period of British occupation in Melaka, from about 1816, that Abdullah became very closely associated with successive groups of Protestant missionaries from London (many among whom were scholars). They had come to Melaka to establish a training centre to prepare missionary workers for Southeast Asia and China. As a young person, Abdullah was engaged to teach them Malay. In return, they agreed to teach him English.

The mission went on to build the Anglo-Chinese College,

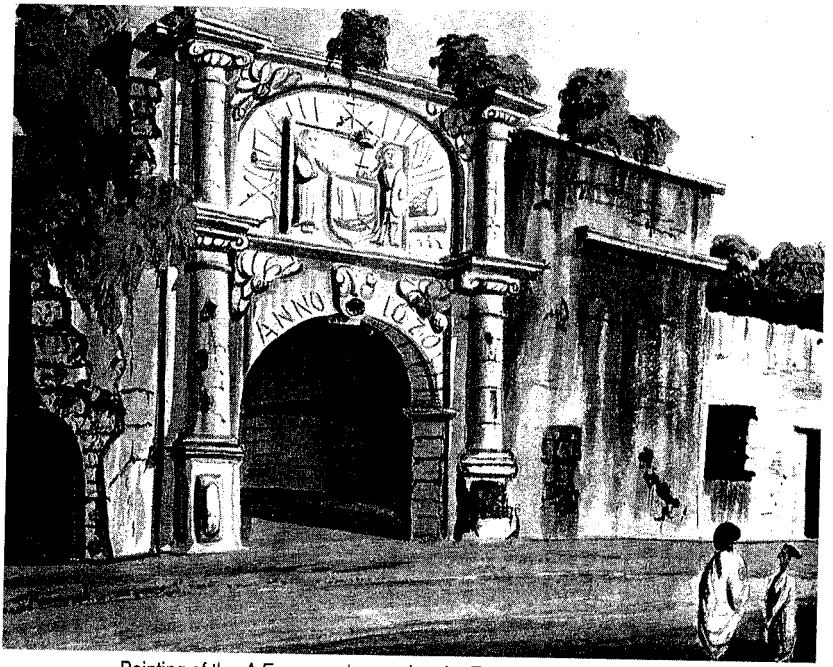
(somewhere close to the beach, near the then Tengkera Gate), which they used as the office, school and printing press. It was there that Abdullah spent much of his working time and early youth. Since the Christian mission's work also included printing and publications, Abdullah came to be involved extensively in the printing and publication of books, magazines, documents, translations of numerous Christian texts (including The Ten Commandments), compilation of Malay vocabulary and arithmetic books.

Abdullah's very close association with the work of the Christian mission, especially that involving the publication and translation of Christian books, as well as his very close friendship with Father Milne, for example, was received with much apprehension in the close- knit and devout Muslim community to which he belonged. What more, when the mission had plans to proselytise the local Chinese community!

Abdullah was also asked to persuade Muslim families to send their children to the College. Although for secular education, in this he was unsuccessful.

To indicate their disapproval, the Muslim community then began to nickname him *'Abdullah Padri'* (Abdullah the Priest). Abdul Kadir, Abdullah's father, became extremely angry with him, as he could no longer tolerate the insinuations from his own relatives. He demanded that Abdullah leave the mission, and asked him to become a cloth merchant instead. Abdul Kadir was going to whip him; but knowing his father's temperaments too well, Abdullah quickly prostrated before him, asking for his forgiveness.

Eventually, Father Milne intervened and successfully dissuaded Abdul Kadir from making Abdullah leave his work at the mission. Soon, Milne became a family friend. Milne persuaded Abdullah to get married, and even sponsored Abdullah's wedding expenses and extended help in the wedding preparations. Father Milne, his



Painting of the *A Famosa* shows what the Fort would have looked like during Abdullah's time, 1840s. (*Source: Heritage, Vol. 1, 2003*)

wife and the mission staff all attended a special wedding dinner for them at his (father's) house.

Abdullah writes that even his wife (who used to be very afraid of white men) came to accept Milne as a father; and was quick to confide in him the marital hiccups with Abdullah. Some years later, the mission built a chapel of wooden structure next to Abdullah's own house; and across the main Chinese temple (which could well be the present Cheng Hoon Teng Temple).

The Demolition of *A Famosa*

In *Hikayat,* Abdullah gives graphic descriptions of the fortress of Melaka (*A Famosa)* as he saw it, before it was demolished: its shape, length, breath, height, the main gates,

and the massive stones and earth that made up the fortress. He also gives an account of the many buildings that were found within the walls of the fort, and what they were used for. He even gives us a vivid picture of the security routines and regulations pertaining to the fort.

Abdullah was an eyewitness to the demolition of the fortress. He tells us how fond and proud the town people from the four major races were of the fort. And how very sad, confused and frightened they were, upon learning that the English were going to tear it down. He tells us how, day-by-day, the fort was slowly, but surely, being torn down, namely by the combination of manual labour (using the *changkuls*, pick-axes and spades) and high explosives.

Abdullah does not give the date; but historical records show that the manual tasks for the demolition began first, one morning in August 1807; and explosives began to be used a month later. It took two years to completely level all sides of the walls and most of the buildings within. Abdullah says that the pride and glory of Melaka was the fort, so much so that when its destruction was completed, Melaka lost its spirit and glitter, like the countenance of a woman who has just lost her husband.

Abdullah tells us that many pieces of stones and boulders, big and small, were blown away onto the streets, the shop houses, into the river and the nearby sea, by the sheer force of the gunpowder, killing and injuring not a few residents. Later, the residents collected those stones for some use at home. Abdullah might not know it, but historical records show that the good stones, boulders, iron and metal pieces from the fort and buildings, were first salvaged by the English, and were then shipped to Penang. Where were these remnants from Melaka used again in Penang?

Life in Melaka Town

Among the many very interesting episodes and reminiscences of the life in Melaka town that we learn from *Hikayat* is that, although Melaka was under the British, a dual administrative system was in force, namely that of the English and the Dutch, especially up to the early 1800s. Official Dutch terminologies were used, and public documents were in English and Dutch. Abdullah wondered why this was so. This indicates that he had not come to learn the political background of the handing over of Melaka by the Dutch to the English in 1795.

Abdullah also described the schooling system. The schools were privately run. Abdullah's paternal grandmother also ran a school or classes for Koran reading, Arabic and Malay languages. She employed a few teachers. The teaching, learning and writing materials employed in the school were meagre. For instance, the children began learning to write on sand, and using their forefingers. Then, they used slate boards for exercise books.

Abdullah also describes the seemingly accepted practice of quite severe punishments meted out by teachers on the lazy, inattentive or naughty pupils; and presumably also, on the naturally slow learners. For instance, the punishment for a reluctant child was to hold him upside down by the legs, over the smoke from coconut husks. His descriptions of other types of punishments are accompanied by his own, hand-drawn sketches of the various devices used by the teachers to inflict pain on the children.

Abdullah also portrays the social life among the many racial groups, how they were able to maintain a harmonious and peaceful co-existence, and how the residents were able to build good relations with the government. The government installed a government-people communication and coordination system (inherited from the Dutch) by appointing village community

elders. For each of the major communities (Malay, Chinese, Portuguese and Indian) the government appointed a *Kapitan* (*Ketua Kampong*).

So, there were *Kapitan Melayu, Kapitan Cina, Kapitan Nesrani* and so on. These *Kapitans* were empowered to settle minor disputes among their respective communities as well as between the communities. When that failed, the cases were brought before the government officials and the police; and finally before the court.

Abdullah says there was mutual respect and tolerance among the communities. One very interesting example of inter-communal acceptance, he tells us, was that a member from one community (for example a Chinese) could intervene and even punish a boy from the other community (for example a Malay) for being mischievous. This would not cause any communal rift. Instead, the boy's parents would be grateful for it.

When Melaka Town was Busiest, and Food Most Expensive

Abdullah tells us of an occasion when the usually uneventful and tranquil life in Melaka town was suddenly jolted. Within the space of a few weeks the town was transformed into the busiest ever during Abdullah's time. 'Foreigners' inundated the town, and the harbour was full of ships of all sizes. Although Abdullah himself does not give the figures, historical records state that at the height of the influx, there were well over 30,000 people who had newly arrived in the town, and in some 100 ships. The arrivals lasted six months. One day, just as abruptly, the town returned to its usual charming tranquillity.

These were soldiers comprising sepoys (Muslims and Hindus) and their white commanding officers who arrived from India in war ships. According to Abdullah, the whole town, and areas all along the coast from Tanjong Keling down to Bandar Hilir, were filled with soldiers.

In the early mornings, the troops would perform their drills and combat exercises, dressed in their beautiful and colourful uniforms of different styles. Some used cannons and horses and bulls. The whole town would come out and watch in awe and admiration at the skills of both men and their animals.

The episode depicted by Abdullah, followed the arrival in Melaka town of Stamford Raffles and his wife, who stayed for about six months, renting the *Kapitan China's* bungalow in Bandar Hilir. Raffles' stay this time was on a mission to plan and prepare for an invasion of the island of Java, which had come under the control of the French-Dutch power under Napoleon, in Europe.

This was the occasion when Abdullah met Raffles for the first time. Raffles engaged Abdullah, along with a few others, to help in the clerical work as copyist, which involved drafting of letters in Malay to be sent to Malay rulers in the region, and the arrangement of natural specimens. As an aside to his main purpose, Raffles had used the occasion to indulge in his personal hobby, namely the collection of Malay manuscripts and biological specimens. He sent out hosts of local people to the town and villages, rummaging for manuscripts; and into the surrounding jungle looking for plant, animal and reptile species.

Raffles took a liking to Abdullah. Abdullah was not engaged to teach Malay to Raffles, for Raffles could already speak Malay well. Moreover, he had brought along a Malay secretary from Penang. When Raffles wanted to see for himself how the local people lived, he took Abdullah with him in his horse-drawn carriage to show him around town.

The tour included a stop at a school in Tengkera. Raffles was taken aback upon seeing three children undergoing punishment, each wearing a chain around his body. One child had the end of his chain tied to a heavy log, and was made to walk around while carrying the log on his head. The second child had the end

of his chain tied to the pillar; while the third child had just the chain around him.

Abdullah says this was the time when there were jobs for everybody in town. The rich and the poor alike, had quite a lot of income. But, the downside was that the prices of goods and food, like chicken, eggs, fish and vegetables, all shot up like the town had never known before.

Finally, there arrived in town Lord Minto, the English Governor-General of India, who was to lead the armada to Java. Abdullah was on hand to witness the elaborate ceremonial reception, starting from the pier to the Stadthuys, laid out by Raffles and Farquhar.

Abdullah describes the scene that fine morning. The residents had earlier been ordered to spruce up their houses, gardens and yards. The streets were swept and buildings decorated. That morning the troops lined up the routes in their bright uniforms; there were trumpets and music. There were the throngs of curious and excited natives who turned up to watch the arrival of this most important person from India, whom they had been told to expect, weeks earlier. Abdullah was among the crowd.

As Lord Minto stepped ashore, cannons were fired in salute. Accompanied by Raffles and Farquhar, he walked along the route towards the Stadthuys. What Abdullah saw and observed of this V.V.I.P astonished him greatly. The picture that he had conjured up in his mind about Lord Minto, as a soldier and a general, was that he was a huge person, cold and fierce looking, haughty and unsmiling. However, it was all the opposite. Lord Minto was not huge but slightly built, looked quite soft and fragile; and was very gentle in his manners. He greeted the crowds, waving his hat, and smiling all the way.

As one reads Abdullah's meticulous account of this episode, one could feel as if one is being transported back in time to that

morning, to be one with him among the multitude; sharing his excitements, and savouring the sea breeze.

The period in history when Melaka town was at its busiest (with the presence of a very large number of troops) and prices were highest, as told by Abdullah, was between December 1810 to June 1811. And then, just as suddenly as it had begun, Melaka town was back again to its serene, pleasant and quiet routine.

Abdullah says that when Raffles was leaving Melaka to invade Java, he had wanted to take him along. It was only after his mother had pleaded with Raffles, arguing that Abdullah was an only child, that he was still a boy, and that she had heard about the prevalence of diseases overseas, that Raffles took one of his uncles instead. This uncle died in Batavia a month after the English victory in Java.

People and Events

All in all, *Hikayat* lends itself to a very revealing and fascinating reading about life in Melaka town and Singapore during the first half of the nineteenth century. We can visualise and relive the scenes in our minds. They have become moments in history. They are presented in vivid details, and told in a very interesting and stimulating style.

The episodes mentioned above are just a few examples of the kind of social life and society in Abdullah's lifetime. During the course of the Naning War (1831-32) and following it, he met soldiers who were also scholar-writers, like P.J Begbie and T.J Newbold. They were posted in Melaka in connection with the War. Abdullah helped Begbie in researching the history of Naning for the latter's book, which was subsequently published in India.

Abdullah accompanied Newbold into the jungle near Alor Gajah to meet and study an *Orang Asli* tribe. After settling in

Singapore, Abdullah became a good friend of his language student, Thomson, to whom Abdullah gave a copy of the *Hikayat* manuscript to translate into English. Thomson did this, but only after Abdullah's death. He also wrote other books about his experiences in the East. Edward Boestead, a leading trader in Singapore (and later in Malaya) was among Abdullah's students in Malay.

During the Residency of J. Crawfurd in Singapore, Abdullah describes the tense scenes at two meetings held between the Resident on the one hand, and Sultan Hussin Shah of Johore and the Temenggung on the other. These meetings were possibly the most historic of all meetings between any Malay ruler and the English in the old days, as far as the old Malay kingdom of Johore-Singapore-Riau is concerned.

Both meetings took place at Crawfurd's residence. These meetings ended with the signing of a formal Agreement between Crawfurd and the two Malay rulers. The Agreement read that the entire island of Singapore and its sister islands were to be ceded *"in full sovereignty and property, to the Honourable the English East India Company, their heirs and successors for ever..."*

Abdullah writes that Crawfurd read out the Agreement in English, followed by a shorter version in Malay. It was then signed and sealed by both parties. When the singing ceremony ended, cannons were fired twelve times to celebrate the occasion. In *Hikayat,* Abdullah produces the Malay text of the Agreement that was read to the two rulers. It was dated 2nd August 1824. The official English copy of the Agreement confirms this date.

Five days later, continues Abdullah, the government sent town criers around Singapore, complete with gongs, to proclaim to the public, that the sovereignty over the whole of Singapore had been transferred to the English; and that Sultan Hussin and the Temenggung had ceased to have any authority and power whatsoever; and that neither could do anything as he liked anymore.

Abdullah says that when the Sultan and Temenggong came to hear about this, they suddenly realised that they had made a grave mistake and regretted it. Quoting the Malay proverb, Abdullah writes, *"sesal dahulu pendapatan, sesal kemudian tiada apa gunanya* (i.e it is futile to cry over spilt milk)".

Some ten years later, Sultan Hussin moved residence to Melaka. According to Abdullah, the Sultan first lived in Bandar Hilir. Later on, he moved to Kg. Belanda (close to Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock, formerly Heren Street), renting the house of one Adrian Minjoot. Abdullah was present at the official funeral of Sultan Hussin Shah in late 1835.

True to his distinctive style, Abdullah writes a report of the official funeral of Sultan Hussin Shah, giving careful attention to interesting details about the arrangements, rites and decorations. For example, he gives a clear description of the royal hearse (and includes a hand-drawn sketch of it too); how it was borne on the shoulders by the bearers; and the firing of gun salutes from St Paul's Hill (59 rounds, as counted by Abdullah, corresponding to the Sultan's age). He also mentions the local dignitaries (including the British Resident, Samuel of Garling) who accompanied the hearse on foot to the burial ground.

The burial ground was next to the Tengkera Mosque. If the procession had started from Kampong Belanda, the burial ground would have been a short distance away. Both the mosque and the royal tomb are extant today, and are included in tourist maps and guide books.

Criticisms of Abdullah

If in his lifetime Abdullah had to face resentment from his own community for being closely associated with evangelical Christianity, long after his death he was subjected to general criticisms for the books *Hikayat Abdullah* and *Kisah Pelayaran*

Abdullah. At the turn of the 20th century these books continued to be published and were distributed in Malay vernacular schools as textbooks, until after the War. This time the opposition came from the Malay aristocracy and from the emergent anti-colonial, Malay nationalist groups.

To begin with, Abdullah had great admiration for the English system of governance, and for the latest developments in European science and technology. He was very impressed by the fair administration of law and order, under a democratic and egalitarian political and social system, founded on the rule of written law with independent judicial institutions, as was practised in Melaka and Singapore. Indeed, Abdullah was at the threshold of what may be called the modern era.

Abdullah seemed to have stirred the sensitivities of the aristocracy, for he had courageously drawn unfavourable comparisons between the political, social and economic governance that was obtained in the traditional Malay states ruled by Malay royalties, with that of the English in Melaka and Singapore. In *Pelayaran* he wrote about the dire state of poverty among the subject peoples in each of the three eastern coastal states he had visited; and of their abject living conditions, the physical infrastructural neglect, and of the oppression, in general, that the people had to quietly endure.

In *Hikayat* (which was published after *Pelayaran),* Abdullah continued with those political comparisons (deemed impertinent) between Malay and English styles of governance. In the course of this he paid tribute to Queen Victoria by wishing her a long life. At the same time, he attacked the personal habits and behaviours of not only Malay royalties, but also that of some wealthy Malay men and their wives. He attacked their selfishness and extravagant lifestyle.

In contrast, he showered such English personalities as William Farquhar, Stamford Raffles (and wife), Father Milne (and wife), Lord Minto, and Father Alfred North with compliments. He had

great admiration for their humility, sensitivity, industry and fairness.

Maybe for the reasons above, Abdullah Munsyi's role and significance in the subsequent political and social development of the Malay community seem to have been somewhat marginalized until this day. His works are no longer widely read; and are regarded as nothing more than mere esoteric literature among certain circles within the academia. The consequence is that very few Malays today know who he really was and what contributions he had made toward the general development of community.

Abdullah was Critical of the Malay Community

From the socio-political angle, Abdullah seemed very concerned for the future of the Malays. For this reason, he had much to say about the negative side of the Malay community. He would chide them for their lack of motivation, for preferring to take the easy way out, and for trailing behind the other races in economy and education. He was particularly unhappy about the way the Malay community had neglected the Malay language.

He believed strongly that the salvation of the Malays lay in abandoning traditional attitudes and superstitions, and embracing change through education. The way to education was through one's own mother tongue, just as in the case of the Arabs, the Europeans, Chinese and Indians, he would say.

We can see that there has been no hiatus in these acts of chiding, reminding and exhorting the Malay community, in the hope that they will change their ways and mindsets to achieve greater progress. After Abdullah Munsyi, there was Za'ba, the Malay language grammar exponent, who in his own way, attempted to get the Malays to change their old habits.

Those critics, who accuse Abdullah as being too fond of

Views of the mosque frequented by Abdullah as it looks today along Jalan Tukang Emas, Melaka

everything English, may not be entirely right. Abdullah was not slow in condemning the Englishmen for their character, when he thought it was bad and immoral. For example, Abdullah had very nasty words for the English commanding officer in Melaka, named Mr Bean, who indulged in sadistic tendencies at the expense of the poor youths and children in the town.

Mr Bean enjoyed catching young boys and children from poor families and forcing them to fight each other in bloody boxing matches. He then paid them small sums of money. At other times, he would arrange for monkeys to be released in the trees, and ducks in the sea, so that he could shoot them one by one, for sport. Abdullah was also very critical of the unruly behaviour of drunken English sailors, who roamed noisily around the town at night.

And, for some reason, Abdullah did not quite like the Resident John Crawfurd, who he said was rash, unfriendly and was slow to listen to the opinions of others. Instead, he praised the later Singapore Governor, W.T Butterworth, because he was very friendly with the people, and brought much improvement to the state. Thus, when Abdullah paid high compliments to certain white men for their character, it looks like that was his way of telling the Malay elites just how they should behave in order for their leadership to be acceptable and just.

Today, we cannot fault Abdullah for his admiration for the more democratic and egalitarian polity, because we today have chosen and embraced that same system, too. As for the development of the Malay community, the Malays are still lagging behind the other communities in education, economy and social status.

Being a devout Muslim, Abdullah was all too aware of the importance of justice in Islam, and the injunction to always do good and avoid the bad. He was also critical of the belief in superstitions, which happened to be quite widespread among all the races. He saw the injustice of the Muslim ruling class in the

independent Malay states as well as the wasteful indulgence of the rich Malays, who therefore could not be role models.

Once when in Singapore, Abdullah had to witness a most touching and painful scene in his life. That was the trading of slaves, who had been brought ashore probably from the Riau-Lingga islands. He saw how badly they were being treated, and sold like animals. He saw how mothers (some were in the late stage of pregnancy) and their young children were being sold to different people. Abdullah cried when he saw all these. If one were to read this account in *Hikayat,* one could not avoid being emotionally touched.

Abdullah reported what he saw to Raffles who was in Singapore at the time. Raffles told Abdullah that this activity would soon become unlawful, because the English Parliament in London had just passed a law, abolishing slave trading in England and in all British territories.

Coming back to Abdullah, his concern at the low achievement and motivation among the Malay community seems genuine enough, although he himself was not pure Malay. Some historians have argued that as he advanced in age, Abdullah tried to portray himself more and more as a Malay, and lesser as a person of Indian-Muslim descent. In Singapore, his children mixed with some Malay princes (the children of the Temeggong of Johore), and they went to the same school. This friendship continued after school. One of them was later appointed to one of the high offices in the Johore Palace.

In early 1854, Abdullah left Singapore in a sailing ship for pilgrimage to Mecca. Once again, his journalistic habit came in handy for he recorded and wrote about his experiences all the way, as mentioned earlier. Some months later, he arrived in the Saudi port of Jeddah. Some writers say that he died in Jeddah soon after. Others say he died in Mecca as his writings showed that he had eventually entered the holy city of Mecca. His writing

just stopped there, and remained unfinished. A book was posthumously published, bearing the title *Kisah Pelayaran Abdullah Ke Negeri Jeddah.*

Legacy from Abdullah's Times

What Abdullah had written in *Kisah Pelayaran Abdullah;* and in his major book, *Hikayat Abdullah,* are all facts and not fiction. The episodes that he mentioned were real events in history. His shortcoming, maybe, was that he did not provide accurate dates. As he began to learn the significance of dates, he attempted to insert them in his writings, but mostly in the Islamic Hijiriah calendar. At times, he attempted to give the equivalent dates from the CE/AD calendar, but somehow, the two dates were later found not to tally precisely. Did he get the Islamic dates wrong or the CE/AD dates wrong? Or was the conversion table he used not quite correct?

Nonetheless, the period in which Abdullah lived is not very long behind us. *Hikayat* gives us graphic glimpses into the kind of society that existed in the 1800s, particularly in Melaka town. There were the residents of many races who lived harmoniously, although in distinct communal areas, yet in close proximity. They were all seemingly quite happy to be living under the British administration. There are many place-names, houses, and places of worship mentioned by Abdullah.

Many of these places still exist today. The village in which Abdullah was born was called Kampong Palli (Palli is Tamil for *Masjid* or Mosque). This spot can still be located, although this name is no longer in use. However, the village mosque that he used to frequent; and where his wife and daughter were buried, still exists today. The mosque is still known by the same name: *Masjid Kampung Keling.*

The main Chinese temple that Abdullah says was situated

across his house (unmistakably the Cheng Hoon Teng Temple) still stands. The St Paul's Hill (which Abdullah says was of average height, and which during his boyhood days used to be a fortress, completely enclosed by high walls) together with the church ruins, have now become a major tourist attraction. The Stadthuys (or Stadthuis), which Abdullah calls 'Rumah Raja', has now been converted into a museum.

Abdullah also mentions the Portuguese-Dutch gate (curiously, Abdullah never used the name *A Famosa).* In *Hikayat,* he attempts to explain the figures and pictures etched on it. That gate is still standing today in Bandar Hilir. The engravings on it are still visible, exactly as he describes them, although they may have weathered, somewhat.

There must be many people in Melaka (in the city or elsewhere) today, who could be the descendents of the people who lived in Melaka town during the era of Abdullah Munsyi. There could even be artefacts or drawings, or even photographs from Abdullah's era that survive to this day.

All these could be most helpful in our attempt to reconstruct the past through images in our mind about a particular place and its society. The remnants from the past will enable us to look back in time, and to deeply feel and enjoy the sense of history.

I fervently hope we would cultivate a deep sense of history, and help preserve whatever legacies and heritage that have been left behind for us from our past.

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