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## Uncommon view of 19th-century Perak

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"AS children," begins Datuk Mohamed Hashim Sam Abdul Latiff in *The Royal Commoner*, "my cousins and I were very much intrigued by the information we received from our elders about our grandfather. This information, however, did not come from our parents. They never wanted to talk about our grandfather, and they never encouraged us to ask questions about him. There really seemed to be a conspiracy of silence within the family about him!"

Hashim Sam's determination to solve the riddle of his grandfather's life has resulted in a book which, according to editor Roger T. Bell, "is the first attempt by a Malaysian author to follow in the footsteps of writers like Alex Haley. Haley and others have rewritten history from the perspective of the weak and the dispossessed, rather than the normal one of the powerful and the affluent.

"Here we have a *Malay Roots*," Bell continues of the book recently launched at the National Library; "19th-century Perak seen through the eyes of the people themselves, rather than through those of the colonial administration. A lifetime of research reveals a window to the vanished world of Perak in the last 30 years of the 19th century, and first 30 of the 20th - a period of increasing British influence and domination in the peninsula."

Who is the royal commoner? The book, its subtitle informs us, is about *The Life and Times of Imam Perang Jabor*.

On Nov 2, 1875, first British Resident of Perak J.W.W. Birch was assassinated at Pasir Salak. Among those tried for the crime were Pasir Salak chief Datuk Maharaja Lela, Imam Perang Jabor (Ngah Jabor) and Kampung Gajah chief Tok Sagor. The first was sentenced to death, the second received life imprisonment.

The author contends that this same Ngah Jabor, who, according to local lore, suckled at the breast of the mother of Perak's 28th sultan (and with whom he was therefore adik-beradik sesusu), may have been released by his "milk brother" Sultan Idris and, after a period during which he lay low to avoid British detection, emerged as the wealthy and influential landowner and tin miner of Kampar - Muhamed Jabor - Hashim Sam's elusive grandfather.

"In *Form Six*," recalls the author, "our lecturer spoke for the first time about the history of Perak from a local perspective. Before that, we'd heard nothing but tales of the British Empire. I realised that this history wasn't strange to me - the names Maharaja Lela, Tok Sagor, Kampung Gajah, Pasir Salak; they were all familiar.

"We hadn't been encouraged to ask about Tok Jabor," he continues, "but we'd been told of Maharaja Lela, for example. We'd learned of him as an historical figure, though, not as a member of the family.

"Our older cousins had told us of Pasir Salak, where Birch was killed. Pasir Salak was not the start of Malay nationalism. It was a tragedy - not something to be proud of. Pasir Salak marked an absence of Malay unity; between the Sultan, the chiefs and the people.

"After two hours, when everything was calm, normalcy returned. The following day, British-recognised Sultan Abdullah, surrounded by his nobles, frenziedly paddled their sampan to Assistant Colonial Secretary Swettenham, to offer him their condolences on the death of Birch and promises of assistance to hunt down the so-called Malay nationalists.

"Yet two months earlier, even the Governor of Singapore had been aware of a secret meeting in Blanja on the Perak River, with the chiefs gathered to oppose the Pangkor Agreement. They pledged full support to Maharaja Lela.

"Berlumba-lumba mereka berpaling tadah; bertalam dua muka. As Dr Mahathir has said: Melayu mudah lupa.

"It happened in 1511, too. They quarrelled among themselves, not realising that a durhaka - traitor - had opened the gates of Malacca to the Portuguese."

Hashim Sam wrote the English and Malay (previously published) versions of the book simultaneously.

"I had the material, unearthed at the National Archives," he says. "Upon retirement in 1983, I thought I'd Xerox it and distribute it to my cousins and their children.

"However, I realised I had but scratched the surface. I thought if I published what I had, other researchers would do more in-depth work. So a book wasn't the original intention. But the manuscript languished in my son's office - it was deemed unsellable.

"Then a small publishing company of Arab-Malaysian's Tan Sri Azman Hashim's with experience in primary school texts decided Azman would love such a project. Their advisor recommended it.

"But he said it should be a school text, to be sellable, and asked me to rewrite it as a history of Perak. I protested. I'm not a qualified historian, I said; I'm a geographer!

"Then he said I must write an introduction; include the Stone Age; adat istiadat; a comment on the constitutionality of the court which tried Ngah Jabor; again, I protested; I'm not a lawyer!

"Ultimately, I handed the manuscript to the National Library. I thought others could use it as reference material."

It had taken less than a year to complete.

\* For information regarding the purchase of this book, contact the National Library at 03-2687-1738.

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