

TRADITIONALISM AND THE ASCENDANCY OF THE
MALAY RULING CLASS IN COLONIAL MALAYA

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This is a study of the problem of tradition in colonial Malaya. It was the central paradox of colonial rule in the Malay states that while the economic, demographic, and political foundations of the peninsula were transformed, the British sought to preserve Malay society in traditional form—overwhelmingly rural, politically docile, and deferential to traditional aristocracies and royalties. The ensuing tension between the imperatives of change and preservation were manifest most significantly in the efforts of the Malay ruling class to survive and flourish in these circumstances. Occupying a privileged position under “indirect rule,” Malay rulers and chiefs were both agents of change in Malay society and defenders of tradition. In fact, they functioned much more as advocates for tradition because their very position depended on the continuing characterization of Malay society as traditional.

This study demonstrates how the ruling class used the defense of tradition to survive two crucial transitions which featured fundamental change in the way political power was exercised. The first is the transition into colonial rule in the late nineteenth century. With the assistance and encouragement of British colonial officials, the Malay ruling class developed suitable versions of Malay ritual, politics, and social relations

which were articulated within colonial structures of authority. This conscious use of tradition, or traditionalism, provided new rituals of state and roles for Malay royalty and chiefs that located Malay authority safely within the greater glory of the British empire and protected the position of the ruling class from challenges from below.

The second period examined is the transition to postcolonial politics (1945-1947). In this period of restored colonial rule between the Japanese Occupation and the anti-Communist Emergency, the Malay ruling class faced the loss of its privileged position under the British, as well as the challenge of political nationalism. Its response was to incorporate the forms and language of nationalism into its discourse and simultaneously bring traditionalism into the political era. Updating traditionalistic elements of Malay culture, such as loyalty, treason, deference, and sovereignty, the ruling class successfully waged an ideological battle to determine the shape of the postcolonial nation-state.