

The Story of KUALA LUMPUR (1857 - 1939)

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(1857 – 1939)

J.M. Gullick

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A Note on the Name 'Kuala Lumpur'

You may have heard that in Malay the name 'Kuala Lumpur' means 'the Muddy River Junction'. It may be so but there are reasons for doubting whether that is the true origin of the name.

'Kuala Lumpur' is indeed two Malay words. But a Malay speaking his language according to his own idiom would not combine them in that way. There is the problem.

Kuala means the place where a river runs into another larger river or into the sea — the point at which the river loses its identity in some more extensive flow of water. So one links 'kuala' (as a place name) with the name of the river which comes to an end at the *kuala*. Kuala Selangor for example is the estuary of the Selangor River where it runs into the sea. Since Kuala Lumpur lies some twenty miles inland the *kuala* here must be the point of junction with a larger stream. There is of course a confluence of two small rivers in the heart of Kuala Lumpur. It is the point where the Gombak joins the larger Klang.

By Malay usage the place ought to be called Kuala Gombak, the end of the Gombak river. Yet from 1857 if not before it has always been called Kuala Lumpur.

There are a number of theories about this. It could simply be that 'lumpur', which means mud or mire, is here used as an adjective. But it would be more correct to add the adjectival prefix so that one has 'kuala berlumpur' — the muddy junction of rivers.

Another explanation is that the Gombak river is (so it is said) called the Lumpur river higher upstream from the junction in the town. But the evidence for this is slender and it does not explain why, if it changed its name to Gombak before it ran into the Klang, it was nonetheless called the junction of the Lumpur river.

There is a theory which relates it to the traditional name for the old town of Klang which was undoubtedly called 'Pengkalan Batu' — the stone jetty — because there was a stone jetty at Klang.