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The confluence of the Klang and Gombak rivers. City Hall is beautifying the area and the rivers. A row of attap shops in Java Street, now known as Jalan Tun Perak.

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# Who founded Kuala Lumpur?

IN September 2013, Abdur-Razzaq Lubis wrote a paper on Sutan Puasa for *The Journal of Southeast Asian Architecture* in Singapore, and the upcoming book is an expansion on the subject.

It will chronicle the history of Sutan Puasa from his migration from Mandalling in Sumatra, to his eventual settlement and founding of Kuala Lumpur circa 1830s. Since its inception, Kuala Lumpur was a riverine landing stage, serving the mining settlements in the interior.

Kuala Lumpur's growth as a trading post and commercial centre was spearheaded through the entrepreneurial leadership of Sutan Puasa. By 1850, there were already two business streets, which under the colonial rule, became Market Street and Java Street. Sutan Puasa himself lived on Ampang Street before moving to Batu Road and finally to Chow Kit Road.

If we survey contemporary literature, the disagreements as to the origin and the founding father of Kuala Lumpur becomes evident. London-based scholar, writer and cultural critic, Ziauddin Sardar said: "Contrary to the

**FINDING AN ANSWER:** Who is the real founder of Kuala Lumpur? Was it Sutan Puasa, Yap Ah Loy or Raja Abdullah? The matter has been raised by heritage expert and author Abdur-Razzaq Lubis, who is writing a book titled *Sutan Puasa: Founder of Kuala Lumpur 1800s-1908*, writes A Shukor Rahman

perceived impression of conventional history of modern Malaya, the beginnings of Kuala Lumpur owe their inspiration to the long-established pattern of enterprise of the Malays."

Eric Thompson, an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology of the National University of Singapore, is closer to historical convention.

"Like so many Malay-named places, the site was named after a feature of the landscape, the muddy river mouth or 'kuala lumpur'.

"Chinese merchants, in association with Mandalling (Sumatran) traders, made the site a trading centre in 1859 when tin exports began to emerge from the area," he said.

Mandalling women from Ulu Klang engaged in mining at Ulu Ampang, probably panning with a wooden tray in the river beds.

The origin of the name "Kuala Lumpur" has been debated for over half a century without producing an agreement.

Abdur-Razzaq said the word "lumpur" appeared in 1800 when the Mandallings pioneered tin mining in Selangor.

Mandallings also founded Klian Baru (Kamunting) and Klian Pauh (Taiping) after fleeing Selangor from the Klang War (1867-1873).

The identity of the real founder of Kuala Lumpur has been argued passionately for almost a century since the establishment of the river port settlement, now the capital of the Federation of Malaysia. Kuala Lumpur is better known regionally and internationally as KL.

The Malay version stated that Raja Abdullah, who had been proposed by colonial administrator Winstedt, was the founder, while the Chinese version has Yap Ah Loy as the founder.

"Raja Abdullah was a Bugis chief from Riau and therefore not Malay at all. Yap Ah Loy was the third 'Kapitan Cina' of Kuala Lumpur. If there was a Chinese founder, it would have been the first Kapitan Cina of Kuala Lumpur," said Abdur-Razzaq who pointed out that Raja Abdullah lived at Pengkalan Batu (Kuala Klang), 41km away.

"The earliest account of Selangor history is deafeningly silent about his role in the founding of Kuala Lumpur. It is unclear whether Raja Abdullah ever set foot on Kuala Lumpur soil.

"In terms of who was first on the spot, we know Sutan Puasa



The Petronas Twin Towers stand tall, surrounded by other skyscrapers in Kuala Lumpur.

was in Kuala Lumpur before 1850. Hui Siew and Yap Ah Sze Keledek were there in 1857. Liu Ngim Kong, also known by the name Pak Loh Tsi, appeared in Kuala Lumpur in 1861. All these men were invited to come over to Kuala Lumpur by Sutan Puasa. Yap Ah Loy only showed up in Kuala Lumpur in 1862," Abdur-Razzaq said.

Sutan Puasa was of Mandalling nobility from Tobang in Upper Mandalling, Sumatra. His real name was Sutan Naposom, which was corrupted in the peninsula before becoming Sutan Puasa. He hailed from the Lubis clan and migrated with his clansmen to Selangor via Malacca circa 1830.

He was definitely a raja, but of what rank is unclear, as Raja Duri was identified as the head of the Mandalling community in Kuala Lumpur.

As a prominent trader, Sutan Puasa was highly regarded by the non-Sumatran community, espe-

cially the Bugis royalty, Malay aristocracy and the Chinese business community.

His influence, interaction and network transcended both ethnic and geographical lines.

He was responsible for making Kuala Lumpur the commercial centre in the interior of Selangor up to the early 1870s in the pre-British era. In that, he had the support and assistance of Raja Asal, Raja Bilah and other Mandalling personalities apart from the first three Kapitan Cina of Kuala Lumpur namely Hiu Siew, Liu Ngim Kong and Yap Ah Loy.

He transformed Kuala Lumpur from an insignificant village to a vibrant locus of activities through his contacts, networks, influence, wealth and leadership.

He remained a tin trader and merchant in Kuala Lumpur and Kajang. He died in 1905 and was buried at the Muslim cemetery in Jalan Ampang.



Sultan Abdul Samad building. In the foreground is Dataran Merdeka with skyscrapers lining up in the background.