

Of bandits and bullfights

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The sight of a lone farmer tending to his field takes Alan Teh Leam Seng back in time to Kedah's colourful past

ONE of my favourite ways to relax is to get a book, hop on my motorcycle and ride to the nearby Hutan Kampung padi fields. There, I'd seek a shady spot beside the canal and spend the next hour or two immersing myself in the literary world, occasionally stealing glances at the green pastures surrounding me. The rustle of young fronds swaying in the breeze coupled with the sound of a sudden splash when a puyu or haruan emerges for air is therapeutic.

Lost in my reading, my concentration is startled by the roar of a motorcycle driven by a farmer, a scythe in his hand. Parking his trusty bike nearby, he smiles at me before proceeding to remove the weeds around the perimeter of his field. I stare at him hard at work and find myself wondering: How had life been for his peers a long time ago?

Riding a buffalo

ROBIN HOOD

The northern Kedah plain is said to have been cultivated since the 12th century. During that time, the majority of the farmers utilised the dry planting or ladang technique to plant padi. The technology for wet cultivation, which involves flooding the fields and ploughing with water buffaloes, was imported from Siam (modern-day Thailand) some three centuries later. Although this new planting method produced better yields, the farmers faced a persistent water supply problem. Back then, they were entirely dependent on the weather.

Farmers rarely fertilised their fields during the early formative years, the main reason being that bat droppings or guano was relatively expensive. Most farmers resorted to

applying additional nutrients only once every three years. This contributed to slower growth and lower yields. Common fungal diseases together with rat infestations further decreased the harvest.

Most of the profits were made by merchants who became middlemen and rice millers. This economic inequality led to a group of villagers robbing the wealthy and then distributing their ill gotten gains to the poor. Cheah Boon Kheng wrote about Malaya's very own Robin Hood in his book *The Peasant Robbers of Kedah 1900-1929: Historical and Folk Perceptions*.

Social banditry, said Cheah, was rife in Kedah during the early 20th century. The author became interested in this subject after coming across Mansor Abdullah's work *Panglima Nayan: Robin Hood Malaya*. Both books trace Nayan's early development and how he attracted a loyal group of followers. These men subsequently elected Nayan as their leader or panglima. In addition to taking cash and valuables, the robbers also took cattle and other livestock from the rich. Nayan was said to have fallen in love with an Achenese merchant's daughter, whom he'd kidnapped. He subsequently died in the hands of a fellow robber during a police ambush.

Other notable bandits during Nayan's time were Salleh Tui and Awang Poh. Both terrorised the Padang Terap district with Salleh Tui making occasional forays into Kubang Pasu, just a short distance away from the capital, Alor Star.

Salleh Tui regularly raided the homes of wealthy Malay landlords as well as big Chinese gambling farms. WG Maxwell, the first Kedah British Adviser, noted in his 1909 Annual Report that Salleh Tui was shot dead at the Siamese frontier in December while resisting arrest. Meanwhile, Awang Poh met his end in the hands of a police raiding party on 17th Ramadhan 1340 (14 May 1922) as reported by British Adviser H. Peel in his annual report of the same year.

The legends of these Robin Hood-style bandits still live on among the Kedahans. I remember vividly playing a local version of police and thieves called "Main Tui" with my peers during our primary schooldays. The game is played with one member taking on the role of the thief who gets a 30-second reprieve to go into hiding. After that, the rest of the group would hunt him down. The first person to find the thief and shout Tui! would win. Perhaps that game got its name from Salleh Tui?

BULLFIGHTS

In 1907, Kedah's Chief Minister came up with a novel plan to introduce a modern irrigation system in the state. Together with a team of villagers, Wan Mat Saman built a canal that cut southwards all the way from Alor Star to the foothills of Gunung Jerai. It's said that the men had ingeniously aligned burning torches at night to construct the perfectly linear canal.

The most notable past time in the past was bull fighting

Despite having access to regular water supply from the canals, farmers still faced other problems like delays in ploughing. Many farmers didn't own livestock and had to resort to borrowing buffaloes to till the land.

Buffaloes were in short supply in Kedah. It wasn't until the late 1950s that mechanised hand rotary tillers were introduced to solve this problem permanently. At the beginning, the villagers were sceptical about the ability of these new machines. As such, Japanese manufacturers like Yanmar had to team up with local distributors to arrange for demonstrations at the villages. The farmers were encouraged to try them out.

The early contribution of the padi industry and buffaloes to the Kedah economy were so great that both were featured prominently when the State decided to issue its first set of stamps in 1912. All the lower value adhesives featured a sheaf of padi while stamps of higher values featured a man working his field with two buffaloes.

A design depicting Mat Jaffar, the Penghulu (headman) of Anak Bukit with his team of bullocks was used as the vignette for stamps of 10 cents, 20 cents, 30 cents, 40 cents and 50 cents values.

DRM Holley mentions an interesting anecdote regarding this matter in his book *Kedah and Perlis: Their Stamps and Postal History 1887-1941*. He wrote about a design depicting a Malay ploughing a rice field used as the vignette for the 10 cents, 20 cents, 30 cents, 40 cents and 50 cents values. According to Holley, the design was taken from a photograph of Mat Jaffar, the Penghulu (headman) of Anak Bukit, with his team of bullocks. Unfortunately, the State Council wasn't entirely satisfied with the photograph as it showed Mat Jaffar ploughing dry ground instead of a wet soggy field.

Meanwhile, prominent local historian Datuk James F. Augustine wrote about the code for buffaloes in his book *Bygone Kedah*. The code stipulated that buffaloes had to be under constant watch when they weren't working to prevent them from straying and damaging rice fields belonging to others. If that were to happen, the animal could be rightfully stabbed to death by the owner of the damaged field without any penalty.

Unlike the double cropping system practised today, padi was only planted once a year in the past. Farmers planted vegetables in the fields during the dry season and often indulged in a variety of recreational activities like kite flying and fishing in the canals. The most notable past time in the past was bull fighting. Although most of these animals were specially bred for the sole purpose of clashing in the ring, there were occasions when villagers used their cattle during the dry season for the same purpose.

Bull fights were regularly held at the field opposite the entrance to the Istana in Anak Bukit. Spurred on by thunderous cheers from the crowd and kompong beats, these magnificent animals would charge full speed at each other. The fights seldom ended in death as the fallen would beat a hasty retreat for the nearest exit while the victor enjoyed the spoils of victory, which was usually in the form of a juicy sugar cane! These fights were finally banned in the 1930s.

Due to its immense contribution to the state, all the lower value stamps featured a sheaf of padi when Kedah issued its first set of stamps in 1912.

I'm brought back to the present with a jolt. Time has certainly been ticking. Just as I'm about to leave, an elderly woman arrives with a long pole in her hand. Obviously someone's going to enjoy some delicious fried haruan and sepat tonight. I smile happily to myself as I ride away. It's nice to know some things remain unchanged to this day.

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