

Who was Tok Janggut fighting?

NST - 11/9/2006

SINCE today is such an auspicious day that will be known throughout history as The Third Day After The Wedding, I will take a break from the usual format of this column to talk about a book.

Yes, a book! If the results of a recent survey are to be believed, then the average Malaysian reads only two books a year. (But we apparently read and respond to many surveys.)

I am only halfway through this book I am about to discuss, so if I were an average Malaysian then I would have fulfilled 25 per cent of my annual quota already.

The book is a new one, *To' Janggut: Legends, Histories and Perceptions of the 1915 Rebellion in Kelantan* by Cheah Boon Kheng, the retired Professor of History of Universiti Sains Malaysia. It is published by the National University of Singapore, which might explain its rather frightening price: RM75 for a slim paperback, and it doesn't even come with colour photographs or a CD-Rom!

I have never met Cheah although I have read many articles by him. I tried to interview him last year for a documentary. He politely but firmly declined. The fact that he seemed publicity-shy in an era where everyone and his ex-fiancee want to demand their 15 minutes of karaoke time was, of course, a source of wonder — and some irritation. "Doesn't he want to be famous?" I wondered. The documentary ended up getting banned and lots of attention, but that's a different story.

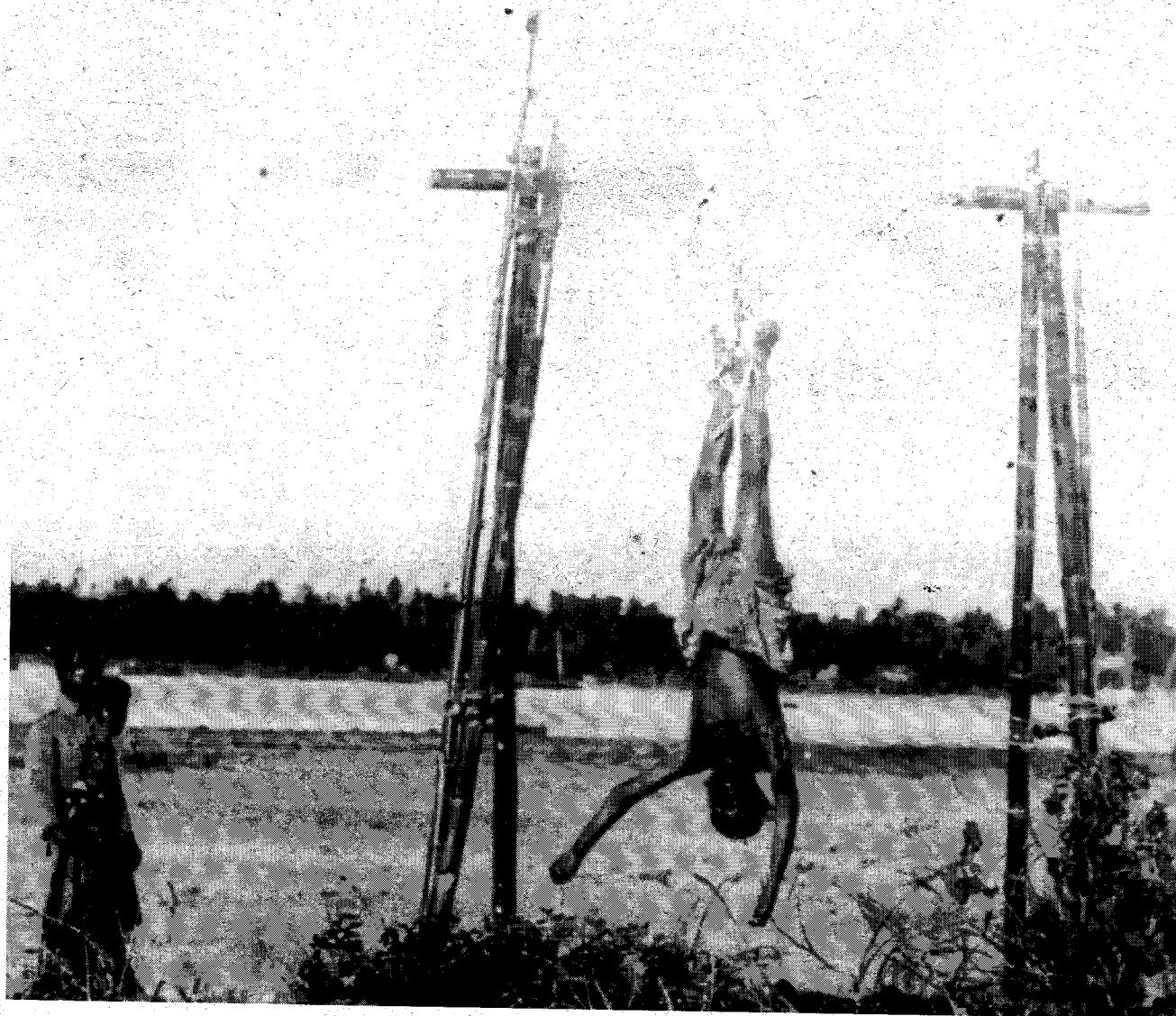
Anyway, his new book is about Tok Janggut, the Kelantanese man who has been the subject of many legends.

For starters, he was supposed to be *kebal* (invulnerable), a belief somewhat revised when British-employed forces managed to gun him down in Pasir Putih.

Although the bare facts of his rebellion seem to be a matter of public record, there are still contesting accounts as to why he did what he did.

Kelantan in 1915 had only been under the British for a few short years. To the locals, "foreigners" would include not only the British but Malays from other States, so strong was the sense of regional identity.

In April and May of that year, several attacks were



The body of the man believed to be Tok Janggut was hung upside down by the British. — NST file picture

made by Tok Janggut and his followers against authority, and troops had to be dispatched from Singapore to quell the situation.

Was his revolt a simple protest against new systems of taxation or could it be read as an early form of anti-colonial uprising?

Did he initially get the tacit approval of the Kelantan Sultan, whose kin had to pay taxes for the first time, and was this approval revoked for reasons of political convenience? Did the earlier murder of his father and elder brother by locals connected with State nobility fuel his wrath? And did any of this have to do with *ji-had* (holy war) in support of Turkey during World War One?

The gruesome climax of his revolt: Tok Janggut was killed and his corpse hanged upside down and displayed to the

public for thousands to see. There are British photographs of a corpse displayed in such a manner; it is most likely Tok Janggut, although the photos were uncaptioned when unearthed in libraries. Although most accounts have the corpse displayed for an hour in one location, other accounts have him taken to two places or hanged for three days.

So there you have it. A relatively isolated incident in the annals of early British occupation has gripped the imagination of successive story-tellers, although the reasons for this endurance shifts in tune with contemporary concerns. History is only useful when it is in the present tense.

Cheah analyses not only official British documents and newspaper accounts but Malay books that have been written on the incident, as well as Kelantanese oral histories

from people in the area.

Interestingly enough, the earliest folk accounts have it that the rebellion was, at least in part, aimed at the Kelantan Sultan and aristocracy who were perceived to have sold out the interests of the locals to the newly-established colonial power.

The title of the 1955 book by the Kelantan writer Yahya Abdullah is, quite tellingly, *Peperangan To' Janggut, atau Balasan Derhaka*. Telling because *derhaka* denotes rebellion against the Sultan; rebellion against the British would not require such a word.

This book has it that Tok Janggut's father, Panglima Monas, raped his master's concubine because this lord had ignored appeals to avenge the murder of his son (Tok Janggut's brother) at the hands of a retainer of the Sultan. Panglima Monas was then

ordered killed and the cycle of vengeance continued.

It is a thrilling story that is also "a subtle critique against Malay feudal society and its values".

A subsequent revision of the book just two years later was retitled *Riwayat Hidup To' Janggut dan Peperangannya di Kelantan*.

This version, however, eliminates the anti-feudalist critique of Tok Janggut's *aerhaka* or *lese-majesté*. There is no criticism of the Sultan or aristocracy. It starts the process of recasting Tok Janggut as an anti-British proto-nationalist, and this is the version that is continually retold in history books.

The more recent historical dissertations even claim he is a *ji-had* warrior expressing solidarity with Turkey, then in the midst of WW1, although there is no evidence that the

rebels had ever invoked Islamic sentiments.

The reluctance of local, principally Malay Muslim, scholars to examine the anti-feudalist nature of Tok Janggut's rebellion can be attributed to the sacrosanct image that our rulers enjoyed until the landmark 1993 constitutional amendment that removed their immunity from criminal charges. So the earliest folk accounts of the rebellion could be seen as running counter to both the British and feudal Malay establishments.

National Laureate S. Othman Kelantan also narrates how the story of Tok Janggut was such a controversial one decades after the incident that a play that he wrote about it was not allowed to be staged in his native State.

Cheah is interested not only in what happened but why different accounts have emerged. Not to descend into a post-modern relativist mush but to respect and gently probe the social context in which each contingent version came to flourish.

Reading his book made History (a subject we all hated in school, of course) so much more interesting. I couldn't help thinking things like: Of the thousands of people who marched against the new British-imposed land taxes, how many had land to be taxed to begin with?

And how many were doing the bidding of the gentry, most of whom would not have to pay for their fiscal dissatisfaction in blood? How complicit was the feudal elite in crushing the scattered and sporadic anti-British protests that erupted in colonial Malaya throughout the early 20th century? Do we not find it now ironic that elements of the feudal elite would then be considered as symbols of resistance when it suited them?

It would be a boring country whose history can be told in a linear and unambiguous fashion. Although some recent events may lead us to despair at the hegemonic tendencies of national historiography, we can take solace in the fact that things don't have to be boring.

Although Malaysians don't like to read, so many of our multiple histories are in print, waiting to be discovered. So to celebrate your sense of Independence, increase your reading to three books a year.

And make this one of them.