

THE MALAYS

PATHFINDERS AND TRAILBLAZERS



RAMLI BIN NGAH TALIB



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PUSTAKA PERDANA



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| The Kris: From the author's collection



PREFACE

This collection of essays is an amazingly rich blend of a journey through the history of the Malays and the Archipelago – their special qualities, achievements and equally large disappointments. These essays are clearly the harvests from a large, inquisitive and fecund mind that interrogates not only the long journey into the past, but also the troubling present and the looming future of the country and people.

The writer, a politician, a long-term Menteri Besar (Chief Minister) of Perak highlights many clear points of contention, misunderstanding and prejudices, and attempts to explain and enlighten them, from the evidence of history, early settlements and states of the Archipelago, their maritime culture and the later successful states like Srivijaya and Melaka. He has also employed many discoveries and conclusions by many well-known local and international scholars.

The main point of interest is, of course, the Malays – a people of contention, whose character has often been questioned, their achievements doubted and disputed, but as is shown by the writer, in his essays, are often enough judged with the prejudice of colonialists or merely local detractors (including the Malays themselves). However, the book also highlights the many special qualities of the people, their states, systems of administration and justice. And not to forget, and refined features of the people, as is often referred to by colonial administrators who have lived close to the heat of their dynamic courtesy, civility and grace. Through the many centuries of their history and development, they have invented a most sensitive language, that may speak with gentle emotions to the beloved, as well as the respected elder, teacher or ruler.



This language is spoken throughout Southeast Asia and beyond, and is now the sixth biggest in the world. And through this language has been composed an oeuvre of many thousand poems, stories, ideas and proverbs – all in all producing one of the most beautiful literatures.

Ramli's chapters span a long and large terrain, across a wide expanse of interests, many centuries of history – from their origins in Africa 60,000 years ago, through the settling of Sundaland, the rise of the native ports and trading posts, to the establishment of important kingdoms and empires. He traces their successes, justice and impartiality, but also when these were no longer present, their downfall. The greed and aggression of European traders and seekers of Eastern wealth were among the worst of their enemies, which had used modern cannons and muskets, and not least their desire to terminate the legacy of Islam, that was the reigning belief and way of life in the Archipelago.

Most of us have, over many decades, been under the influence of the viewpoints and ideas of the imperialists and their scholars and scribes. Thus, even the Malays themselves sometimes seem to believe in their description and conclusions. For those readers who have been only given the colonial side and perspective of the story, these essays will help to provide the hidden and the native face of the discourse, their culture, values and language. Ramli searched through the many experiences of the British experiences in Malaya, and found they were many hat spoke quite the opposite of the official colonial reports. Some of them even found the Malays to be 'an extraordinarily attractive people.' While other still find them to be a proud and full of confidence, living an equally vibrant life.

Thus, while these essays try to describe the Malays from the pages of history and kind scholars, there is also an attempt on the part of the author, to debunk the many toxic and prejudiced perspectives by biased onlookers. The old accusations of them being docile or lazy are countered with the real reasons why these conclusions were arrived at. One of them is that the Malay is 'lazy' for him and many scholars have found the reason for this is their reluctance to be inscribed into the white capitalist gangs of workers.

The Malays have been living closer to a very generous natural environment. He was well-provided and would collect from it when his needs arose.

Unlike the migrant labourer, he was in no need to be a servant of the white man so that he may earn his wages. It is also this extremely kind and generous nature that has made him among the most polite and courteous of peoples.

The author has not left out the religious experience of the Malays, as it has been one of their greatest spiritual experiences. He traced its inception and developments in the various states of the Archipelago.

Ramli Ngah Talib is an heir to illustrious rebels of the 19th century and afterwards, who paid the English in kind. But he noted this pride was clearly seen on many other occasions too – the fight against the Spanish (led by Lapu-Lapu), the Portuguese and Dutch in several of the states of the Archipelago.

Ramli has a long administrative experience in Perak – he was Menteri Besar for 17 years when he continually observed the Malays. This gave him the material for his books, *Pasir Salak: Sehamparan Sejarah Perjuangan*, concerning the Malay rebellion in 1875 against British rule in Perak and also *Meniti Zaman (Going Through the Eras)*.

All these three works may be seen as arising from the need to help the younger generation come to terms with their own history.

Professor Emeritus Dr Muhammad bin Haji Salleh
Malaysian National Laureate



| *Tengkolok from Perak: From the author's collection*



INTRODUCTION

Working and writing on history pose certain problems. It is not just a narrative or a mere report of events containing a series or chronology of related or unrelated events. It is written by people who have emotion, bias, susceptible to form certain perceptions on matters he observes, listens to and reads about. His background, his physical surrounding, the group to which he belongs, his tradition, his learning and knowledge (or the absence of it), his interaction with others and his exposure and experience all help to mould and develop his world view. When he writes about an incident, he does not merely narrate the event in question, he interprets it and what comes out is a product that has been coloured by one or more or all of the factors mentioned above. This is historiography first developed by one of Islam's foremost philosopher, Ibn Khaldun, an Arab from Tunisia who lived in the 12th century. This is the core principle of historical writing which has been the guide to all historians ever since and which the lay man should be aware when reading history.

There are of course, certain things in history which had to be exact and specific and generally does not lend itself to much interpretation. These are dates, time, place and such others which are mostly not open to much interpretation. Nevertheless, for the writer, this poses a particular challenge as well, for they had to be verified as best as can be done in order to put forth a presentable end product. Despite this, mistakes are made.

This is not a tour de force of Malay history as such, but the book tries to cover Malay history in other parts of the Malay Archipelago as well. Admittedly, the exercise is concentrated on the Malays in the Peninsula



and parts of Indonesia, the Philippines, and the Champ people. Other parts of the Malay world including the Malay diaspora in Sri Lanka, South Africa and Madagascar are also mentioned.

Knowledge of history must generally be acquired through readings of books by historians and others. Here, they are credited and acknowledged by quoting them and by mentioning them in other ways. For the purpose of brevity, they are not mentioned in the footnotes. The historian and other writers we have referred to are written in the list of bibliography herein. If what we have written is attributable to some historians referred to but have not specifically been mentioned or quoted, then they are attributed to one or more of the historians and writers mentioned in the bibliography.

The Malay is full of contradictions. He was a hero, discovering Madagascar, trading with East Africa, and China long before anyone did, either from the East or the West, yet he was also found paddling the dug-out canoe in upstream riverine areas. He was the founder of the two civilisations, Srivijaya and Melaka, yet he was ruled by no less than five imperial powers, namely Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, Britain, and Japan in that order. Srivijaya and Melaka were overall more enlightened civilisations and the Islamic religion to which they adhered brought forth principles of high morality, responsibility, and trust. They are proud of their race and religion, except for the few who are highly politicised by dogma and slogan. Despite all the impression and perceptions foreigners have held throughout recent history, such perceived reputation of the Malays has not become a reason for people to disassociate themselves from him and his race. The opposite is true.

There is a note shared on the internet that the writer of the book *Around the World with a King* by William Armstrong (1904) telling of the King of Hawaii (King Kalakaua), a hefty man meeting the King of Thailand (King Chulalongkorn). During his discussion with the King of Hawaii, King Chulalongkorn asked the King of Hawaii as to his origin. He replied with pride that in his veins flow the blood of the Malays, whereupon King Chulalongkorn immediately replied that he too had partly Malay blood. In Singapore, some Muslims and some people of Malay origin are identified as Muslims even though most Muslims who follow Malay culture and Malay way of life prefer to call themselves Malays. Here, people of Arab origin are classified as Muslims and some

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people of the Malay Archipelago like the Javanese appear to be identified as Bangsa Jawa whereas Malaysia keeps it simple – they are all called Malays. It appears that these people are proud to call themselves Malays even though they have been called otherwise. The forerunner of Malay nationalism classified himself a Malay and when at the end he had to face the Spanish firing squad, Jose Rizal proudly reaffirmed himself as ‘Indio Puro’ (a Malay) even though he was of mixed origin. His pride as a Malay is reflected in his famous statement, “In my blood runs the wanderlust of the Malays”.

The well-known Greek geographer, Ptolemy who wrote *Geographia*, created great excitement among ancient travellers, sailors and merchants when he mentioned a rich land which he called the Golden Chersonese. He himself had never been to the land which he wrote about in 150 CE for his writing here was based on reports made by merchants, sailors, and travellers in 127 CE or even earlier indicating that the Golden Chersonese as a land of gold somewhere in the East. Since time immemorial men have always sought fortune to the ends of the world and they equate this with gold. In 1897, Dr C.O. Blagden pronounced that the Golden Chersonese without doubt was the Malay Peninsula. Both the Greeks and the Indians most probably had never been to the land of gold as there is in existence no evidence of them having been in

the Malay Peninsula at that time. By the 1st millennium BCE, Malays were intrepid sailors (Lynda Norene Shaffer) and by late first BCE and by some accounts by 300 BCE Malay sailors had sailed 3,000 miles and colonised Madagascar, and later traded with East Africa some settling in Aden. By the 1st CE, the Arabs who had contact with Malays in the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea, were soon using sail in the model used by the Malays. Any story about a rich land in the East as written in Ptolemy's *Geographia* could have been derived from the Arabs after having been in contact with Malay sailors.

The world knew more about the maritime activities of the Arabs (more than 1,000 years later (as written by sailors as one of the episodes in *One Thousand and One Nights*) and about Ferdinand Magellan and his failed attempt to circumnavigate the world through Francis Drake more than 1,500 years later. They are known because there are books written about them. Unfortunately, this cannot be said of the Malays for, even though they were already active sailors being the first to ride the monsoon by the first millennium BCE (Lynda Norene Shaffer), no books were written about their exploits and their contribution to maritime explorations. The Mediterranean Sea and the Arabian Sea in which the exploits of Greek heroes in their mythology and the adventures of the Arabs in 'Sinbad the Sailor' in the Arabian Sea respectively were perhaps like local waters to the Malays who had criss-crossed the oceans, possessed higher nautical skills and experienced far greater challenges. Neither Malays themselves nor others chronicled anything about these ancient sailors. They are the most underrated people in the world and most people it appears, would like them to remain so. Very few people know of their skills in shipping and shipbuilding even though they sailed the seas and oceans earlier than anybody else. The pilgrimage undertaken by Chinese pilgrim I-Tsing and much earlier in the 5th century Faxian to India and back is a case in point. So underrated that when scientists through their research in genetics discovered that the Malays have been in the Malay Archipelago called the Sunda Continent for more than 60,000 years, there are others who have the audacity to dispute the scientific findings of these scientists and call the Malays as '*pendatang*' or immigrants to the region. They have not said much as a rebuttal – due to his nature; the Malays were one of the most self-deprecating and self-effacing people in the world.

The Malays had built two great kingdoms and empires in the course of its long history. Taking into account what Tomé Pires wrote about Melaka, that it could accommodate 2,000 ships at any one time and those 80 languages could be heard spoken among the crowd of people and merchants in Melaka ports, with hundreds of ships of all kinds streaming into and out of Melaka, it wouldn't be difficult to believe Afonso de Albuquerque's pronouncement that it was the greatest port in the region.

In modern times, their achievements have not been that bad either although they lag economically compared to other communities in the country. FELDA the land development authority, for example, have developed into one of the biggest plantation companies in the world. This they did from scratch in the 1950s, with grit and determination. The Federal Land Development Authority with the modest intention of trying to improve the Malay rural farmers, have morphed into a colossal plantation company. Alas, despite such and other efforts, the Malays have been saddled with the enduring perceptions as being lazy and docile people. Their success in gaining independence for their country in a shorter period than expected and after the British having been in their country for only 84 years, is something which most people would like to ignore.

There has been no real effort and approach in helping the Malays except employing them in non-managerial posts. They feel that their tolerance and hospitality are not appreciated; in fact, their rights as hosts in this country have been disputed and assailed even though those rights have been agreed for the Malays to keep.

They feel that the British as colonial masters had deliberately made all opportunities and modern facilities which non-Malays enjoyed, out of reach of the Malays especially in the field of education. Secondary education for the Malays was almost non-existent except for a token in the form of the establishment of the Malay College at Kuala Kangsar in 1905, where about a dozen sons of royalties were taken in. Yes, the Penang Free School was built in 1816 but one can be sure that there was not a single Malay student studying there at that time and that appears to be the case for a long time afterwards. The Penang Free School was followed later by scores of mission schools initially driven probably by the prospect of converting students to Christianity. Most probably no Malay

students who were admitted to these institutions were ever converted to Christianity. Christian mission schools had the same experience with Muslim students in Africa. The sights of big crosses being erected on mission schools and the teacher-priests with their flowing white robes doing about their work around the school, were less than inviting to conservative Malay parents, except when they had no other choice. In the initial stages, the few Muslim students admitted were probably viewed less favourable than other students at these schools. These adverse factors had formed part of the overall lack of opportunity the Malays had experienced in education alone, where they were behind in their exposure to structured educational facilities. Malay students were negatively viewed as they were not material for conversion. A few Malay students were accepted grudgingly to be admitted there. With all these adverse factors faced by the Malays in education alone, they are at least 150 years behind in their exposure to educational facilities.

In many countries, the call for meritocracy to be pursued is irresistible because it is progressive and egalitarian. This is indeed a highly desirable policy if everyone is given the opportunity to achieve such a standard. Like everything else, such a policy can be abused by providing one group in society with the opportunities to enable them to achieve such a standard and depriving other groups the opportunities of attaining the same. This is the bane of the Malays, wherein they face the call that they would be judged on the basis of merit, yet they were planned to live in a dimension where the opportunities to achieve such a merit are not available. The level of economic development of this country shows the Malays as the underachievers. Meritocracy would be a sham if not a malicious policy, if the conditions they live in are not in the least conducive for achieving the merit called for. With hundreds of years of deprivation of modern facilities and opportunities, the efforts needed to redress the imbalance and achieve holistic social diversity in the economy of the country cannot hope to be realised within a short space of time. Affirmative action to uplift the economic and social positions of the Malays long ignored by colonial economy as well as thereafter in order to achieve social and economic balance is more than justified.

With his lands situated at the focal point of the East and the West, it is little wonder that for thousands of years Malays are perhaps the most exposed group of people in the world. Foreigners came to trade,

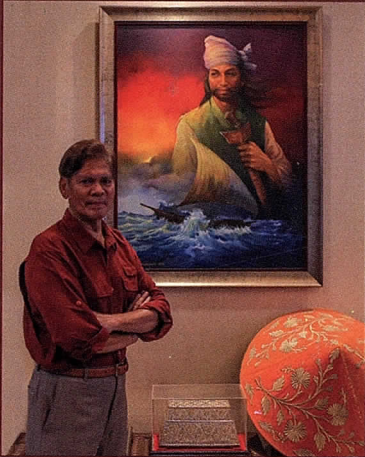
to proselytise religions, to colonise their lands and some came to stay for good. They, themselves were involved in long distance and trade and it is a matter of record that they did these longer than anybody else. With such long exposure to outsiders came understanding and tolerance towards others. Whereas in some parts of the world, xenophobia is pervasive and as ancient as the Bible, among the Malays this is rare, if at all. In Europe, Jews were not only discriminated against but from time to time they were hunted down and killed by groups of people. Crusaders who were intoxicated with religious zeal, travelling on foot and horses to the holy land to rescue Jerusalem from the Muslims, took time off on their way, to raid and burn Jewish settlements. Such xenophobic attitude was generally unknown to the Malays, but they do feel that as hosts they were never respected nor reciprocated for their tolerance.

That they were sometimes viewed by outsiders as an enigma and mysterious is somewhat justified in view of some descriptions made of them by writers like R.O. Winstedt, Henri Fauconnier and Frank Swettenham. Ernest Birch, the British Resident of Perak and son of the first British Resident of Perak described the Malays as mysterious, while R.O. Winstedt and Frank Swettenham as having a 'disinclination to work' attitude.

A few described Malays as piratical in nature. Against this background, the confusion in the outlook of outsiders towards the Malays arose because they noticed that at the same time, his other attributes were admirable and laudable, surprisingly, as expressed more than 500 years ago by Afonso de Albuquerque, the conqueror of Melaka himself. His treatment of the Malays, however, was far from admirable. Francois Valentijn, a Dutch writer in 17th century on the other hand, described the Malays as 'the politest people of the East also known among many British civil servants in Malaya as nature's gentlemen'. Less known were the Malays who were cross-border traders, introduced the entrepôt concept, invented the sail and built ocean-going ships and who trail blazed many other seminal maritime navigational discoveries. Despite the many negative jibes about the Malays which have left indelible marks on them, they do not seem to be a factor that would make some people disassociate themselves from them. In Singapore many non-Malay Muslims would rather have themselves be included as Malays

THE MALAYS

PATHFINDERS AND TRAILBLAZERS



The main point of interest is, of course, the Malays – a people of contention, whose character has often been questioned, their achievements doubted and disputed, but as is shown by the writer, in his essays, are often enough judged with the prejudice of colonialists or merely local detractors (including the Malays themselves). However, the book also highlights the many special qualities of the people, their states, systems of administration and justice. And not to forget, and refined features of the people, as is often referred to by colonial administrators who have lived close to the heat of their dynamic courtesy, civility and grace. Through the many centuries of their history and development, they have invented a most sensitive language, that may

speak with gentle emotions to the beloved, as well as the respected elder, teacher or ruler. This language is spoken throughout Southeast Asia and beyond, and is now the sixth biggest in the world. And through this language has been composed an oeuvre of many thousand poems, stories, ideas and proverbs – all in all producing one of the most beautiful literatures.

Ramli's chapters span a long and large terrain, across a wide expanse of interests, many centuries of history – from their origins in Africa 60,000 years ago, through the settling of Sundaland, the rise of the native ports and trading posts, to the establishment of important kingdoms and empires. He traces their successes, justice and impartiality, but also when these were no longer present, their downfall. The greed and aggression of European traders and seekers of Eastern wealth were among the worst of their enemies, which had used modern cannons and muskets, and not least their desire to terminate the legacy of Islam, that was the reigning belief and way of life in the Archipelago.

(Muhammad Haji Salleh, Malaysian National Laureate)

The author, Ramli Ngah Talib, has written several books, including on his tenure as Speaker of the Dewan Rakyat (House of Representatives) of the Malaysian Parliament, as well as one on his journey of growing up in a rural village before proceeding to read law in United Kingdom.

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