CULTIVATORS AND ADMINISTRATORS

British Educational Policy towards the Malays 1875–1906

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I

MALAY SOCIETY AND
BRITISH POLICY

In an address to the Royal Colonial Institute a little over twenty years after the signing of the Pangkor Engagement, Sir Frank Swettenham told those assembled that among the difficulties faced by the first Residents in each state had been the fact that there were two classes of Malays ‘to be dealt with: first, the Malay chiefs, the hitherto rulers of the country; second, the Malay people’.1 And as he went on to suggest later in his speech, such were the considerations involved in deciding the role to be played by each class under the new regime that they gave rise to two British policies towards the Malay.

The Malay Ruling Class and ‘Conciliation’

The traditional Malay ruling class was an ordained and privileged class that was virtually closed to those outside it.2 At the apex was the Sultan and below him was a graded, territorially based, aristocracy which can be divided into two groups: those who were directly or distantly in line to the throne and those whose family had been granted hereditary rights to certain chiefly offices. For chiefs of both royal and non-royal descent, rank was clearly defined and of obsessive concern. All members of the Malay ruling class enjoyed prescribed privileges as well as inherent status which entitled them to tax and extract tolls, labour and other forms of revenue from their subjects and the resources of the state.

The indigenous Malay political system was a decentralized one. The Sultan, the supreme secular and religious authority, embodied the unity and integrity of the state. Under him and owing allegiance to him, was a hierarchy of chiefs, both territorial and nominal, and village headmen. Each major chief personally ruled a district which gave him control of the mouth or some other strategic section of a river. This enabled him to collect tolls on passing trade and to defend
his district more easily. It also gave him a degree of autonomy which, if coupled with good fortune in trade and the availability of exploitable natural resources, might allow him to become militarily and economically more powerful than the Sultan. It was not rare for a Sultan to control only effectively the district in which he had established his seat. Thus, in reality, although the sanctity of the Sultanate was never challenged, its occupant might be defied.

Below each major chief was a number of minor chiefs, and village headmen or penghulus. The office of penghulu in particular was an important one for it provided a link between the chief and his subjects. Sometimes the penghulu was of the ruling class but mostly he was of peasant stock; usually from an established village family that had a hereditary claim to the office. His many duties included maintaining law and order, settling disputes, and collecting taxes.

The states with which this study is concerned, Perak, Selangor, Negri Sembilan and Pahang, came under British control between 1874 and 1889. This was achieved by the government of the neighbouring Crown Colony, the Straits Settlements, through a series of treaties and permissive letters signed with the respective Malay rulers. Although these documents varied in their terminology and provisions, in each state they resulted in the establishment of a British Resident whose duty was, in the words of the Pangkor Engagement, ‘the collection and distribution of all revenues and the general administration of the country’. In theory, the Resident was to ‘advise’ the Malay ruler who was to remain in effective control of the government. In practice, however, it soon became apparent to contemporary observers that the British adviser was effectively ruling and the Malay ruler was occasionally advising. The Residents went on to build up modern administrations, staffed by British district and departmental officers, and in each state separate civil services came into being. Subject only to the control of the Governor in Singapore, they initiated legislation and framed policy in all its aspects, and ruled their states almost as benevolent despots.

The impact of these developments on the Malay ruling class was a mixed one. The Sultan or ruler gained in ‘real as well as ritual authority’. He remained titular head of the State and government was carried out in his name, although the part he played in the making of policy was a small one. He was consulted on a wide range of matters,
especially those relating to domestic Malay questions, and was genuinely made to feel a participant in the affairs of the State. He was given a substantial personal allowance, and, in Perak and Selangor at least, rehoused in a handsome palace.

The aristocracy fared rather poorly by comparison. The introduction of the British Collector and Magistrate (later District Officer) deprived them of their independent territorial authority, and with it political power and wealth. They had not the education or experience to be incorporated into the new European style administration but for it to function smoothly, their tacit support at least was necessary, and as Swettenham later admitted, the need to establish ‘really friendly relations with the ruler and to either conciliate or overawe the chiefs, many of whom were powerful enough to at least covertly disregard the orders of the ruler’, was one of the most pressing tasks confronting the early Residents.

The expediency of conciliating the Malay ruling class was acknowledged in some degree even by J.W.W. Birch, first Resident of Perak, whose year in office proved to be an unmitigated disaster for Anglo-Malay relations. In 1876, Swettenham, after experience in both Selangor and Perak, wrote of the need for senior Malays to be associated with the new administration. But it was only after Hugh Low was appointed Resident of Perak in February 1877, and Swettenham took over the Selangor Residency in September 1882, that the policy of ‘conciliation’ can be said to have been put into effect. They gradually managed to win the allegiance of the ruling class by two means. First, they compensated them for their loss of power and customary revenue by the payment of pensions, euphemistically termed ‘political allowances’. These gave due recognition to previous rank and increasingly to loyalty and service to the new government, and were calculated on the principle that the recipient should not suffer a loss of income as a result of the circumstances in which he now found himself.

Secondly, they gave them a minor share in the new apparatus of government. State Councils were established in Perak and Selangor in 1877, in which the Sultan and senior chiefs (together with selected Chinese headmen) could discuss and debate matters of policy and new legislation with the Resident and his lieutenants. The Residents exercised direct control over the Councils, and it was only where
purely domestic Malay matters were concerned that the voice of the Malay members was likely to prove decisive. None the less, Council Membership associated a chief with the government and gave him considerable prestige as well. But the number of senior Malays thus employed was small, and finding administrative positions for Rajas and chiefs, who were not appointed to State Councils, proved the most difficult aspect of the 'conciliation' policy to translate into positive action. In time a number of new posts such as 'native magistrates', 'judges', and 'superintendents of penghulus' came into being, but their jurisdiction was restricted to village matters and, in some cases, they were little more than sinecures. In Selangor where many new areas were opened up for settlement, lesser Rajas and chiefs were often appointed to the newly created penghuluships. Under the new regime, the Malay ruling class thus found itself with its traditional status untarnished but stripped of political power and allocated a governmental role confined to that of 'assistance with the minor incidents of Malay life alone'.

The penghulu was the one traditional Malay office holder who found his role essentially unchanged by the introduction of the Residential system. The British were quick to appreciate his value in providing a necessary link between the Malay villager and the District Officer, in his knowledge of local affairs and personalities, and in his ability to carry out their more routine administrative tasks. Individual villages were found too small for the administrative purposes of the new regime and they were parcelled into larger units known as mukims or sub-districts. The penghulu was now placed in charge of a mukim and paid a small salary to keep the peace, enforce and explain new government regulations and report on the mukim's general progress. He subsequently became the most overworked and underpaid of government officials.

The Malay Villager and 'Non-Interference'

The great majority of Malays were subject peasants engaged in subsistence agriculture and fishing. They lived in isolated communities scattered along rivers and waterways, this pattern of settlement being dictated by the fact that rivers provided the only convenient
means of transport and communications. The villages or *kampungs* in which they lived varied in size from hamlets of a few houses with populations of approximately 20 to 30, to the occasional large settlement of a 100 houses or more with a population in the vicinity of 500. But according to McNair writing of Perak in the early 1870s, a village of 40 houses was a large one.\(^{13}\) The size of a settlement was governed in most instances by the availability of cultivable land which was used principally for wet rice farming as well as the gardening of fruits, vegetables and coconuts. When the pressure on land became acute a group of families would leave the village and establish a new hamlet. In time this would grow into a village and the pattern would be repeated. There was also a small export trade based on livestock, jungle produce (rattans, gutta, precious woods) and gold. More important was the trade in tin which by the 1850s had developed into a major industry, and was responsible for the presence of large numbers of Chinese in Perak and Selangor by the 1870s.\(^{14}\)

The Malay population of the three west-coast states of Perak, Selangor and Sungei Ujong in 1874, the year they came under British control, was sparse and fluid. No figures are available for two of the states in that year, but they can be roughly indicated.\(^{15}\) Perak, the largest state with an area of 7,890 square miles, had in 1861 an estimated Malay population of 50,000. In 1879, a poll-tax count by *penghulus* returned 59,682. In contrast to the comparative stability of Perak’s Malay population, those of Selangor and Sungei Ujong in the same period underwent extreme fluctuations. In 1874, Selangor with an area of 3,166 square miles, was the home of only 5,000 Malays. But a decade later, a government census counted 17,097. Sungei Ujong, much smaller in area again at 660 square miles, in 1878 had an estimated Malay population of as few as 2,000. But by 1891 it had risen to 9,341. The spectacular rise in the number of Malays in the latter two states was mainly due to the settled conditions that prevailed after British intervention and to the influx of large numbers of immigrants from adjoining territories and Sumatra which began in the mid-1870s and continued throughout the remainder of the century.

Although never as baldly stated at the time as the policy of ‘conciliation’ towards the former Malay ruling class, British policy towards the Malay villager was one of ‘minimum interference’. The ori-
gins of this policy lay partly in the conditions found by the British on entering the Malay States and partly in the make-up of the first generation of administrators sent there to rule. In the states themselves, two factors proved decisive. The first was the presence of a thriving tin-mining industry, overwhelmingly Chinese-owned and operated, which gave the first Residents an immediate and lucrative source of revenue. Within a year or two of intervention in the 1870s, the duty on tin was providing the major part of the government’s finances in each state and continued to do so throughout the remainder of the century. Thus the British were not forced to depend on the Malays as their revenue-getters, or to resort to the type of forced labour or cultivation systems employed by the Dutch in Java and Sumatra.

The second was the fact that the indigenous Malay population was at first too small and scattered over too large an area to meet the labour needs of a capitalist plantation economy or an expanding government public works programme; hence, the commencement of a scheme of Indian immigration to the Protected Malay States in the early 1880s. For their part, the Malays were strongly attached to their subsistence economy and the way of life it provided, and were extremely reluctant to work as wage labourers. Short of uprooting and coercing them, the British could not seriously think of the peninsular Malays as a source of revenue or labour, and it proved as the years went by that they did not have to. The swelling Chinese and Indian communities came to provide both.

Of the first group of administrators sent to the states to rule, only J.W.W. Birch, first Resident of Perak, carried with him the ‘cross’ of a crusader, and even then his subsequent activities only served, by an unforeseen act of fate, to re-emphasize the wisdom of a non-interference policy. Birch, in the words of Sir Richard Winsteadt, ‘dashed into Perak’s Augean stables like an angry Victorian Schoolmaster, confident that decision and firmness would soon clean it up’. His intolerance of Malay custom and his gross mishandling of such matters as slavery and taxation soon drove the chiefs into bitter opposition, and he was murdered in Lower Perak in November 1875. A small but expensive military campaign, known as the Perak ‘war’, followed. Sultan Abdullah and several of his major chiefs were banished and three were hanged. Birch’s death, therefore, gave the