PEASANTS AND THEIR AGRICULTURAL ECONOMY IN COLONIAL MALAYA 1874-1941

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THE MALAY STATES BEFORE 1895

Geography

The Federated Malay States comprise four states: Perak, Selangor, Negri Sembilan and Pahang located in the Malay Peninsula. These states total about 27,500 square miles and occupy more than half of the land extent of the Peninsula.1 Perak, the northernmost of the three states on the west coast, is dominated by a wide river valley through which the Perak river runs for nearly 200 miles. The state is enclosed on two sides by mountain ranges: the Bintang Range on its northernmost boundary with Siam and the Main Range on its eastern boundary with Pahang and Kelantan. On its southern side, opposite the Bernam river which forms the boundary, lies Selangor. Less than half the 7,800 square miles area of Perak, Selangor occupies 125 miles of the western seaboard and protrudes eastwards for forty miles at its widest extent into the Southern Main Range and its eastern boundary with Pahang. Negri Sembilan is smaller than Selangor, comprising 2,550 square miles to Selangor’s 3,150 square miles, and lies south of Selangor from which it is separated by the Sepang river. On the east, as with the other two states, Negri Sembilan borders on Pahang where the southern end of the Main Range tapers off and on Johore to the south. Pahang, the east coast state of the Federation, sprawls over 14,000 square miles or more than the area of the three other states put together and is the largest state in Malaya. The state is drained by the longest river in the Peninsula, the Pahang river which runs for 270 miles, and by three other rivers.

The Federated Malay States extend from 2° 20’ N to 6° N and, in common with the other parts of the country, fall within the equatorial region and has an equatorial climate.2 The climate is locally tempered by the maritime influence of the wide expanses of water surrounding the Peninsula and by the narrow girth and relief structure of the Peninsula itself. Characteristic features of the climate are the uniformly high temperatures, heavy rainfall and high
humidity. Daily temperatures range between 70° and 90°F with little variation throughout the year. Rainfall, though generally heavy and averaging 100 inches a year, has a greater variation during the year and from year to year, and seasonal and local variation of greater and lesser rainfall can be identified. The climate accounts for the dense primeval jungle and swamp areas which almost entirely blanket the landscape and which, in spite of large-scale settlement and cultivation over the last century, still cover a very large portion of the country. The typical Malayan topography and vegetation consist of a narrow, low-lying coastal fringe of mangrove swamps or beach forests succeeded by a broad coastal plain covered by the pervasive tropical rain-forest. The lowlands gradually give way to the highlands of the Peninsula and the hill and mountain forests which grow in the higher altitudes. These inhospitable natural features of the Peninsula have not deterred settlement but they have been an influential factor in controlling the very type and development of settlement.

Early History

On 20 January 1874 the Perak Malay chiefs signed the Pangkor Engagement with Britain and surrendered effective control of their negeri over to the British. A British Resident was appointed to the state whose advice was to be ‘asked and acted upon on all questions other than those touching Malay religion and custom’ and who was vested with a ‘right of regulation of the collection and control of all Revenues and the general administration of the country’.3 Perak was the first state in the strategy of colonial penetration into the Malay Peninsula but the others, Selangor, Negri Sembilan and Pahang, soon followed in rapid succession. In July 1895 another important step in the process of the colonial political organization of the four states was taken. The Malay Rulers of the four states signed an Agreement with Britain by which they agreed to constitute their countries into a Federation.4 The Federated Malay States was to survive until 1941 when the Japanese military machine smashed its way into Malaya and disrupted temporarily the British colonial order.

Prior to British colonial intervention Perak, Selangor, the states of Negri Sembilan and Pahang had been in existence as Malay states for many years.5 According to indigenous Malay history, Perak and Pahang had been founded by descendants of the royal dynasty of Malacca. The Perak Sultanate was established by one
of the sons of the fugitive Sultan of Malacca who had fled his state after an unsuccessful defence against a Portuguese military force in 1511. Pahang had been established earlier in the fifteenth century by a descendant of the line of Malacca Sultans, but in the eighteenth century a non-royal lineage of Bendaharas with connexions with the Johore Sultanate was begun. Selangor was a more recently formed Malay state and was colonized by Bugis chiefs and their followers in the early eighteenth century. One of these chiefs, Raja Lumut, was recognized as the first Sultan of Selangor in 1742. Negri Sembilan had been colonized by large numbers of Menangkabau Malays from Sumatra in the sixteenth century. The immigrants had readily assimilated with the ruling Malay society and had established a loose association of nine minor states under a ruler called the Yang Di-Pertuan Besar.

Although differing in the details of their political origins, these Malay states possessed societies which had broad affinities.6 The Malay political and social structure was a feudal one at the apex of which was a hereditary ruler, the Yang Di-Pertuan or Sultan or Raja, who personified the state and whose supreme power was legitimized by custom and religion. The Sultan ruled over a hierarchy of state officers, some of whom performed functions at the royal court while others were dispersed in different areas of the state. He usually resided at the kuala of the main river and conducted the affairs of the Malay world from this vantage point. However, the full exercise of the Sultan’s traditional authority was often hampered by the difficulty of communication in the tortuous terrain of the Peninsula and it was common for the Sultan to delegate authority to his territorial chiefs, especially in the inaccessible parts of the state. The delegation of authority was made out in the form of a kuasa, permitting the recipient to exercise various royal privileges such as the right to levy taxes on goods entering or leaving the district. These privileges could bring him both wealth and power. Often, especially with a weak Sultan in power, the territorial chiefs were able to seize authority independently of the Sultan’s wishes and to exercise practical authority within their respective areas. These limitations on the Sultan’s authority were mainly responsible for the decentralized power structure of the Malay states.

At the base of the Malay political and social structure were the peasants who formed the main body of the Malay population. They were gathered in small kampungs scattered throughout the river valleys of the state. The wide gulf between the peasants and their rulers was maintained by both custom and power considerations.
The peasants were obliged by custom to meet certain exactions imposed by the rulers, but the rulers themselves possessed the power to decide arbitrarily what these exactions would be. At the same time, manpower was an important component in the Malay balance of power and this factor deterred the rulers from abusing their positions to such an extent that their subjects would be driven away from their territories. There were also small groups of aborigines who did not come within the Malay system. Unlike the Malays who were relatively more recent immigrants to the Peninsula and had been converted to Islam, the aborigines, with their animistic culture, had been long settled in the lowlands. However, in the face of challenge from the more numerous Malays, they had either been assimilated or had retreated into the higher and more remote parts where they could pursue their own ways with less hindrance. Both the powerful and the lowly interacted within the narrow confines of isolated and simple societies, and their lives were dominated by local occasions.

These features of the Malay political and social system — the feudal structure, the decentralization of authority, the local nature of the affairs of state — are emphasized whenever they are related to the economic set-up of the Malay States. The Malay economy was made up of small groups of peasants who lived in *kampungs*, many of them self-contained and isolated, and who were primarily engaged in subsistence agricultural activity, hunting and fishing. The level of material culture was simple and concerned mainly with the satisfaction of the basic requirements of food, housing and clothing. The products of economic activity were shaped by domestic labour and resources and were consumed directly by the producing unit, the peasant family. Surpluses were infrequent and when available, they were either stored away or bartered within the kampung. In the larger kampungs there was usually a certain amount of trade in products such as salt, iron goods, cloth or ornaments but this exchange activity was infrequent and confined to a small class of people. Also, over the years a small number of Malays were engaged in the specialized production of goods which had an exchange value. The Malay chiefs usually had a force of craftsmen who fashioned their finery and workers who either panned for tin or gathered the forest products demanded by an outside world. The tin mining activity was especially important as its proceeds enabled the Malay states to import goods and helped to finance the political system. However, these specialized economic activities were marginal to the main subsistence agricultural activity. The abori-
gines were engaged in the more simple hunting and collecting economy which was typical of many pre-contact communities in the equatorial region.

The low level of economic activity in the Malay states was largely due to the difficult environment. The country was enveloped by dense forests which were a formidable obstacle to sedentary cultivation. The Malay States were also unhealthy places where disease took a heavy toll of the population. These sapping conditions of life discouraged large-scale settlement and prevented the growth of the Malay population to any substantial size. There were areas of permanent settlement where the Malay population had cleared the forests to carve out *kampungs* and *padi sawahs* and where they enjoyed relatively stable lives. However, large groups of the Malay and aborigine population were only able to eke out a precarious migratory existence and depended mainly on the resources of the forests, rivers and seas. Thus, in spite of their ability to come to terms with the harsh natural conditions, the Malays were unable to master their environment to create large and advanced societies.

The same physical reasons limited the intrusion of alien groups into the Malay states and enabled the Malay societies to remain intact for a considerable period of time. Towards the end of the fifteenth century the Malacca empire had begun to break up. This coincided with the arrival of the Portuguese and resulted in a period of protracted political upheaval. The Portuguese captured Malacca in 1511 and from it exerted a strong influence over the area for more than a century. But their will and strength were steadily eroded by a series of debilitating and indecisive wars against the old Malacca Sultanate, now re-established at Johore, and against Atjeh, a powerful state in Sumatra. The Portuguese eventually lost their dominant position to another European power, the Dutch, who captured Malacca from them in 1641. The Dutch were similarly engaged in intermittent wars against the native powers, especially against the Bugis, but they successfully preserved their dominant position until the late eighteenth century when, in the political settlement at the end of the Napoleonic wars, they recognized a British sphere of influence in the Peninsula in exchange for a Dutch one in the Archipelago. Besides these conflicts of the European powers against each other and against the native powers, there were also internecine wars among the native states themselves. The Malay states were drawn into the turmoil in varying degrees as they were often compelled to take political sides in the various struggles. But generally, the forays of alien groups for more than three and
a half centuries following the fall of Malacca to the Portuguese were confined to small areas and limited objectives and were not sustained or sufficiently penetrative to make an impact on the Malay population scattered in the forests.

The assertion of a British sphere of influence over the central and southern half of the Peninsula in 1824 had been undisputed and appeared to usher in a period of peace for the Malay states. But this proved to be the proverbial lull before the storm. Events with far-reaching implications soon occurred, and before the century had come to an end the very nature of the Malay states had been transformed beyond recognition. The forces responsible for this turning point in the history of the Malay states and of the Peninsula were an unusual combination. The initial catalyst was tin, a mineral which has been sought after since early times. The Malay states have traditionally been important sources of tin in the Archipelago, and the Portuguese and the Dutch during their respective periods of ascendancy in the region had attempted with varying success to gain a monopoly control over the profitable tin trade. The Dutch, in particular, were especially concerned with this and had imposed trade treaties on the Selangor, Perak and Sungei Ujong rulers to enforce the sale of tin to the Dutch. However, in spite of its value to the participants, the initial tin mining activities in the Peninsula were carried out sporadically and on a limited scale and did not therefore affect the pattern of life of the Malay population in the negeris to any extent.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, a demand for tin arose in the industrial countries in Europe and the United States. The scale of tin mining activity in the Peninsula began to increase markedly as a result of the ready supply of Chinese capital and labour located in the nearby Straits Settlements. Many areas of mining were rapidly opened up, including Lukut and Sungei Ujong in Negri Sembilan, the Kinta Valley in Perak and the Bernam and Klang valleys in Selangor. Mining activity, in particular, registered a spectacular growth after the 1840s when rich deposits of tin ore were found in Larut in Perak and Kuala Lumpur in Selangor.11 Large numbers of Chinese miners swarmed into the Malay states to supplement the groups of Malays who were working the tin resources. The Chinese miners brought along with them their traditional socio-political organizations in the form of triad societies and violent disorders soon broke out as two rival societies, the Ghee Hin and the Hai San, battled for control of the mining areas and domination over each other. The increased scale of mining
activity was also the outcome of a scramble among the Malay chiefs for opportunities to exploit the tin resources. The reason for their enthusiasm was clear. The mining activity brought with it unprecedented wealth which was not only desirable in itself but could also be used to buy men and material and to advance political ambitions. The presence of large and unruly Chinese groups and the new power derived from tin exploitation added important elements of instability to the Malay political system and the delicate equilibrium which had existed previously in the Malay states was upset. In the 1860s and 1870s disputes over the succession claims in Perak, Selangor and Sungei Ujong were transformed from the normal short feuds to prolonged and bloody wars.

It was against this background that the decision was made by Britain to intervene in the Malay states. British interest in the Archipelago and the Peninsula had wilted following the massacre in Amboyna of a British group by the Dutch in 1622 and for a long time the British did not challenge the dominant position of the Dutch in the region. In the eighteenth century, however, there was a revival of British interest as shown by Francis Light's founding of a settlement in Penang which resulted in the first British foothold in the Peninsula. A bigger step towards the establishment of British hegemony in the Peninsula was taken by Raffles who founded Singapore in 1819. But British designs appeared to have been met mainly by the Anglo-Dutch Treaty in 1824 which delineated a British sphere of influence in the Peninsula. The British possessions during this period comprised Penang, Malacca and Singapore and they were regarded as adequate for the metropolitan country's interests. In the first place, the Straits Settlements, by providing bases which helped to protect the sea link between China and India, satisfied the strategic considerations which were foremost in the minds of the imperial policy makers. Furthermore, a policy of territorial expansion was likely to be expensive and could provoke other powers into activity in an area which was already under a degree of British influence. An official policy of non-intervention in the Peninsula was therefore charted by local officials and fairly scrupulously maintained.12

At the same time, the rapid growth of the Straits Settlements and its economic prosperity confirmed to the British the soundness of the policy of territorial non-intervention. The Straits Settlements had become the focus of an expanding and valuable entrepôt trade between the region and the rest of the world and within the region itself. The relinquishment of Dutch territorial claims in the Penin-