The Growth of Kuala Lumpur and of the Malay Community in Selangor before 1880
by J. M. Gullick
THE GROWTH OF KUALA LUMPUR AND OF THE MALAY COMMUNITY IN SELANGOR BEFORE 1880

by

J. M. GULLICK

Many years ago I wrote for this Journal an account of the development of Kuala Lumpur between 1880 and 1895.¹ The main theme of that paper was the process of change by which a Chinese mining village became a state capital. It was a study of a community, with the emphasis on leadership, organisation and activities of various kinds. In more recent years there has been increasing interest in the identification and preservation of the remaining 19th century buildings of Kuala Lumpur.² As a contribution to that process I have written this description of the origin of the streets and buildings of the city in the 'pre-colonial' period which ended in 1880.

There is a record of continuous and rapidly growing settlement at Kuala Lumpur itself from the late 1850's. In 1857 Raja Abdullah bin Raja Ja'afar, then district chief of Klang, despatched into the interior of Selangor a party of 87 Chinese miners from Lukut who opened mines at Ampang, on the outskirts of the modern city.³ The trading post at the confluence of the Gombak and Klang rivers, the origin of Kuala Lumpur itself, may date from a couple of years later.⁴

However there is evidence that Sumatran Malays had settled along the upper reaches of the Klang River from the first quarter of the 19th century, or even earlier. Who were the Sumatran Miners? There is no extant contemporary first hand evidence until the late 1870s, when Swettenham and then Bloomfield Douglas made journeys through the interior of Selangor. It is risky to suppose that the situation which they recorded then had existed even ten years before, since the Selangor Civil War (1867–73) had severely disrupted both, Chinese and Malay settlements, but we know that Yap Ah Loy had allies from among the Sumatran miners.

The two largest Malay groups in the area were Rawa — Mandiling — and Minangkabau, though only the former engaged in mining. (The Mandiling and the Minangkabau communities lived in separate areas both in Selangor and in other states.) There were no more than 2—3,000 Malays scattered in small settlements in the interior of Selangor in the 1870's. In the 1860's the most prominent Malay leaders in Selangor were Raja Asal, headman of the important mining village of Ulu Klang, Sutan Puasa, who was like Raja Asal a Mandiling, Nonggek (later Haji Tahir), and Dato Dagang of Kuala Lumpur, and its district, and of the Batu Bahara miners and settlers. Syabandar Yassih was a Bugis. The Dato Dagang was, until his death in about 1894, the most prominent Malay leader.

Describing the reported situation in 1822 Anderson lists these villages, with a total population 'reckoned at about 1500'. The last two villages in the list, furthest up the river, are Gua Batu and Sungei Lumpoor.⁵ Of these and some nearby villages Anderson notes that 'tin is obtained but most at Lumpoor, beyond which there are no houses. Pahang is one day's journey from Lumpoor'.⁶ The local tradition later on was the Sungei Lumpoor was a stream flowing into the Gombak River about a mile
upstream from its junction with the Klang River. The success of these small ventures encouraged Sultan Muhamad (r 1825-1857) to prospect, but unsuccessfully, in the area. The Sultan was 'a bold businessman... but... all his endeavours failed miserably.' However Raja Abdul Samad, district chief of Klang at the time (and later Sultan from 1857) had more success in developing mines at Kanching in Ulu Selangor, as well as at Bukit Arang in Ulu Langat itself.

Some of these mining villages were short-lived but others became permanent settlements; for example Anderson’s list includes Petaling. Supplies for the miners in the Klang valley came in through the port of Klang and their tin exports went out by the same route to Melaka, which was the financial and supply centre for Selangor mining at this time. There was a practical difficulty in using the Klang River as a line of communication with the interior. A few miles above the town of Klang, at the village of Damansara, the river turns south-east in a wide bend which, with the many twists and turns of the channel, adds considerably to the distance to be covered in a boat to reach the beginning of the mine area at Petaling. Those who travelled light went by a more direct overland route from the jungle from Damansara to the mines. Thus Damansara village was a focal point, near which Raja Sulaiman, who was district chief of Klang until his death in 1853, had a residence at Bukit Bangkong; presumably it was a fortified stockade. Further along the track through the jungle was Kabu (Kubu?) Lada and a number of ‘clearings’. The arrival of Chinese miners in 1857 introduced more effective methods, i.e. open pit (lombong) mining, but did not displace the existing Malay settlements. During the long civil war (1867-1873) Malay and Chinese contingents fought as allies on both sides. Raja Asal, the headman of the important mining centre at Ulu Klang, and Sutan Puasa, another Mendiling leader, changed sides in 1872 and swung the tide of war in so doing.

In opening mines at Ampang, Raja Abdullah had invested some $70,000, much of it borrowed from Melaka towkays. To strengthen his authority in an area where he had so much at stake, he sent one of his lieutenants, Syahbandar Yaseh (a Bugis), with a party of armed men, to serve as a local garrison. Yaseh selected a strategic position between the mines and the riverhead at the Gombak-Klang junction, and in accordance with accepted Malay tactics of the period built a stockade on rising ground, the slopes of Bukit Nanas, now in the heart of Kuala Lumpur. It was Yaseh’s mishandling of a dispute with the local Sumatran headmen which set in train the events leading to the outbreak of the civil war.

To sum up, in the mid-19th century there were Malay settlements in the interior of Selangor, linked with Klang by the river and by a jungle track. The main economic activity of these Sumatran villagers was mining for tin. The comparative success of their primitive surface mines led Raja Abdullah, with the support of his brother, the influential Raja Jumaat of Lukut, to introduce Chinese miners, who opened mines at Ampang, and later at some other nearby places. Their presence greatly increased the flow of traffic, with the result that the transhipment point, at the junction of the Gombak and Klang Rivers, expanded to become a flourishing trade centre. As it grew Kuala Lumpur drew in population from elsewhere and the boundaries of the town spread outwards. It was a continuing process, which can be traced by successive stages to the foundation, at the end of the 19th century, of the Kam-
pung Bahru Malay Settlement which 'has... tempted (Malays) to come this way who
might otherwise have preferred to remain in a less populous vicinity'.

The Origin of Kuala Lumpur. The heavy boats which carried men and supplies
up the river could not go beyond the junction of the Gombak and Klang Rivers. At
that point it became necessary to make a short trek through the jungle to the mines at
Ulu Klang, Ulu Ampang and Sungei Putih. Although the village of Kuala Lumpur,
as it existed in the 1860's, was completely destroyed in the last stage of the civil war, it
was then rebuilt, to serve the same purposes and apparently on the same lines.

As the mines lay on the east side of the Klang River, the point of disembarka-
tion was on that bank, so that it was possible to reach the mines without recrossing
the river further up. However even at that time the river was liable to overflow its
banks in times of heavy rainfall, since its course below the confluence was very wind-
ing. For that reason it was prudent to site any buildings on the rising ground, at a little
distance from the river bank. These were the factors which affected the choice of the
site of the first trading post, established by two Hakkas — Hiu Siew and Ah Sze — in
1859. But it is not possible to determine exactly where it was.

The place flourished and at some time — we do not know precisely when — it
acquired the name 'Kuala Lumpur'. The name is a conundrum. 'Kuala' is the Malay
word for the end of a river, where it runs into the sea or joins another, larger river. As
the Gombak River runs into the Klang at this point, normal usage suggests that the
place should have been called 'Kuala Gombak'. But there is no contemporary refer-
ence to it by that name at all. There is no modern theory which satisfactorily explains
the origin of the name 'Kuala Lumpur'.

Kuala Lumpur down to 1875. Although the history of events at and around
Kuala Lumpur down to the end of the civil war is well established, we have only one
extant, brief description of the place by a contemporary observer before its total de-
struction in late 1872. Writing at the age of 92, seventy years after his first visit, Swet-
tenham describes it as being in 1872:-

'A purely Chinese village, consisting of two rows of adobe-built dwellings,
thatched with palm leaves... With the exception of the Capitan China's own
house — which was more pretentious and solidly built — the place consisted
of thatched hovels with earth flooring, some of them unoccupied.'

In an empty hut Swettenham found 'a dead Chinese, with a bullet hole in his chest,
who was sitting on the red earth floor with his back against a wall'.

It is probably safe to supplement this account by reference to the more detailed
descriptions of Kuala Lumpur, after it had been rebuilt in 1874. The same topog-
graphical factors and human needs determined the shape of the town after as much as
before the civil war. The main centre of movement and activity was the river bank
(roughly the area of the modern Embankment (Benteng). There would have been
landing stages, as there were in the 1880's, where Market Street (Leboh Pasar Besar)
and Cross Street (Jalan Silang) meet the river bank. Rough tracks, perhaps raised
above the mud or surfaced with logs, would be needed for transit from the boats to
the drier, higher ground further from the bank. Swettenham's 'two rows of dwellings'
probably fronted, on either side, the track through the village, parallel with the river,
on the line of what became High Street (Jalan Bandar). From this tentative recon-
struction of the original layout of the settlement emerges the familiar rectangular
pattern, bounded by the river, Market Street, Cross Street and High Street, with the open space (Market Square) in the centre affording a site for a market, place of assembly and gambling booth. From this hub of the town paths, later improved to become country roads, went off through the jungle to the various mines.\textsuperscript{23}

Although Swettenham says explicitly that Kuala Lumpur in 1872 was ‘a purely Chinese village’ there is no doubt that Syahbandar Yaseh’s stockade already stood on the nearby higher ground of Bukit Nanas.\textsuperscript{24}

\textbf{Kuala Lumpur between 1874 and 1879.} From 1875 onwards we have a number of short descriptions by Swettenham and other European visitors, and also an 1875 sketch map by Swettenham.\textsuperscript{25} Kuala Lumpur was rebuilt in 1874 and its subsequent development by fits and starts was determined by the fluctuating fortunes of the tin mines.

Since the tin produced in Selangor was sold at prices determined by the world market, data from the London market is an indirect but sufficient indication of the trend. In 1874 the average London price (per ton) of Straits tin was £98, which was very remunerative to the Malayan producers. Then in mid 1875 a steady decline began which, continuing year by year, brought the price down to £61 at the beginning of 1879. At that level Yap Ah Loy, by far the largest employer in Selangor, was facing bankruptcy. If he had gone under, as Douglas predicted in mid-1878, his fall would have caused a crisis from which Kuala Lumpur might not have recovered for years. Fortunately, however, the London price, which stood at only £64 (per ton) at 1 August 1879, then rocketed, moving up from £73 to £95 in one month (October). On 1st November 1879 the London Metal Exchange reported that tin was ‘much dearer’ — something of an understatement. It then stabilised at about £90 per ton for some years.\textsuperscript{26}

The first year and a half (1874 to early 1875) after the end of the war was a period of comparative prosperity in which Kuala Lumpur was rebuilt and the mines reopened. In March 1875 Yap Ah Loy told Swettenham that ‘almost the whole of the present town of Qualla Lumpor had been built within the last year’.\textsuperscript{27} Miners were flooding in to the mines:—

‘The last time the steam-ship “Telegraph” came to Klang... she left nearly 200 would-be passengers, Chinese, at Malacca, for want of space’.\textsuperscript{28} The working population of the mines was estimated at 7,000 Chinese and Malays; the town itself had a population of 1,000 Chinese and 700 Malays. However when J. G. Davidson, the recently appointed Resident of Selangor, came to Kuala Lumpur in August 1875 he ‘found the miners very much depressed in consequence of the low price of tin and their being unable to get credit from traders’. It seems that in the euphoria of the recent boom the miners had over-extended themselves in their borrowing to finance the opening of mines. Now neither they nor their backers could see the way to repayment of the loans out of the proceeds of future production.\textsuperscript{29} This situation continued, and got worse, until the tide turned late in 1879.

In March 1875 Kuala Lumpur impressed Swettenham very favourably as:— ‘by far the best mining village I have seen, the streets wide and excellently arranged, the shops most substantial, and the Capitan China’s house would be no disgrace to Singapore. There is nothing like it in Laroot. The town is divided into a Chinese Quarter and a Malay Quarter in the form in the margin,
Map 1
A Comparison of Swettenham’s Sketch Map of 1875 and the actual topographical features.

Swettenham’s map reproduced from his Journal (p. 219) by permission of the Oxford University Press

The actual position of certain features — a comparative sketch

Notes
1. River channels. In Swettenham’s sketch there is no sign of the Gombak River nor of its confluence with the Klang River. Instead the Klang River is shown swinging round on to the line of the Gombak River, with the route to Ampang, which in fact follows the Klang River out of Kuala Lumpur, on that line.

2. Malay Quarter. Swettenham shows the Malay quarter extending along the river bank almost as far as the market square in front of Yap Ah Loy’s house. The comparative sketch shows the situation as it is known to have been ten years later, when the line of what became Java Street (Jalan Tun Perak), shown by the broken line, marked the division between Malay and Chinese quarters until it approached the confluence.
the Chinese near their Captain and the Malays at the further end of the town. In front of the Captain’s house are the Gambling Booths and the Market. The backs of all the houses on the river side of the town go down to the river so that boats can go up to the people’s doors.30

There were also ‘quantities of boats’.31

We must be grateful to have Swettenham’s sketch map (‘the form in the margin’) but it presents some problems. First, it does not show the confluence of the Gombak and Klang Rivers.32 Instead Swettenham shows the Klang River above the village swinging away on the line of the Gombak River. A correct depiction of the two rivers would show the Klang River going in the other direction through the area marked ‘Malay Rajah’s house on hill’, which is obviously the Bukit Nanas stockade. Swettenham only spent two days in Kuala Lumpur on this occasion. It is possible that he wrote up his Journal, adding the map, a day or two later when he did not have the actual ‘lie of the land’ to look at.

The other feature of the map which requires comment is the position of the ‘Malay Quarter’, which is not, as the Journal entry states, ‘at the further end of the town’ but is shown on the river bank between the Chinese Quarter and the river, roughly where Market Square actually stood. However that detail is to some extent confirmed by Hornaday’s (1878) description:-

‘All along the river bank the houses of the Malays stand in a solid row on piles ten feet high, directly over the swift and muddy current.’33 Swettenham of course says that the backs of the houses ‘on the river side’, which on his map are Malay houses, ‘go down to the river’.

In later years the ‘Malay Quarter’ certainly did not stand in the position shown on the map of 1875. It was further up the river bank, divided from the Chinese Quarter by the track which became Java Street (Jalan Tun Perak). As guesswork one may surmise that when Malays came to Kuala Lumpur as newcomers after the civil war (it had been ‘a purely Chinese village’ in 1872) they followed their normal custom of building houses, on piles, at the river bank, where the Chinese, whose dwellings were on the higher ground, had left a vacant space. Subsequent experience of the devastating floods to which Kuala Lumpur was subject — the flood of December 1881 destroyed most of the town — may then have induced the Malays to move their ‘quarter’ to a less vulnerable position, where it became the area known as Kampong Rawa, north of Java Street.34

The next informative description of Kuala Lumpur is given by the American zoologist, Hornaday, from whom the above passage has already been quoted. Hornaday spent a day or two in the town in July 1878. Moreover what he says is also a reliable guide to the town in 1875 since Swettenham, on his return in 1878, noted that:-

‘A few houses have been added, but otherwise Kuala Lumpur is now much the same in appearance as when I last saw it in 1875.’35

1875—1878 was of course a period of stagnation in which the town did not grow at all. Yap Ah Loy had a struggle to prevent a large Chinese exodus during the slump. Hornaday wrote that:-

‘The houses elsewhere throughout the town are walled with mud, and very steeply roofed with attaps (shingles made of nipa-palm leaves) so that a view of the town from any side discloses very little except high, brown roofs slanting
steeply up. In the centre of the town is a large market where fruits, vegetables, meats and various abominations of Chinese cookery are sold. The vegetables are sweet potatoes, yams of various kinds, beans, melons, cucumbers, radishes, Chinese cabbage, onions, egg-plant and lady's fingers. The fruits were the durian, mangosteen, pineapple, banana, and plantain, oranges (of foreign growth), limes, papayah, and other small kinds not known by English names.

In the centre of the market-place are a lot of gambling tables which, a little later in the evening, were crowded with Chinese earnestly engaged in the noble pastime of "fighting the tiger". The principal streets are lined with Chinese shops, and are uniformly clean and tidily kept.36

One notes with appreciation the precision with which the natural scientist, a trained observer, lists the market produce.

Apart from Swettenham other visitors commented on Yap Ah Loy's house, standing on the south side of the market square, and his generous entertainment. Innes called it 'a fairly good loose board house... surrounded by atap houses occupied by his coolies'.37 Hornaday arrived at a time when Ah Loy was away:-

'but his people received us quite as if he had been there, and made us comfortable with a fine dinner, an abundance of excellent champagne and good beds.'39

Swettenham too had memories of his reception in 1872:-

'Many Mexican dollars had been turned into spoons and forks for our use... but the forks, being pure silver, bent under the smallest pressure and had to be constantly straightened in order to carry food.'

Again in 1875:-

'I went straight to the house of the Captain China, who has a palatial residence and is provided with (almost) all the luxuries of civilised life... he offered me champagne, but that I declined preferring the excellent beer which I certainly never expected to find here.'39

Douglas, in his visits (1876 onwards) stayed with Yap Ah Loy but sometimes found the ambient smells of piggeries, the market etc. rather over-powering. In May 1879 Douglas escorted old Sultan Abdul Samad to Kuala Lumpur. A full account of the Sultan's visit in May 1879 is given in the relevant entries in the Diary which have been printed in the Journal of the MBRAS Volume 48. Part 2, where it appears, incidentally, that in addition to Syed Shaaban, the Headman of the Rawa community, Dato Sati and the head of the Minangkabau settlers were also presented. These Minangkabaus probably numbered about 1,000, and live in surrounding villages. Douglas wrote:

'Then we crossed the bridge and entered the shed leading from the river to the Captain's extensive premises. We stopped at a very nice gateway and entered the Captain's kampong, all nicely decorated and certainly on this occasion scrupulously clean. There was a strong bamboo fence all round the quarters prepared for the Sultan... None of us got much sleep from the intense heat, stuffiness and smells, the two latter always features in our hospitable friend's abode. There was also a wayang going on till nearly 2 a.m. which rendered repose until nearly morning almost an impossibility.'40

Yap Ah Loy could not raise the world price of tin, but he applied himself with characteristic energy to reducing the local cost of producing it. When Douglas first came to Kuala Lumpur in 1876 he found that, apart from a seasonal glut in durian:-
Other articles of food are very dear. Fowls (small) for a dollar. Capon $1.50, buffalo beef 12 cents a pound — and other articles in proportion, certainly double Singapore prices.\textsuperscript{11}

The most important foodstuff was of course rice:

'It is not so much the low price of tin that affects them — it is the high price of rice, and if rice fell to its old rate of say $800 a koyan, they could work tin.'\textsuperscript{12}

By 1878, on the evidence of Hornaday's report on the market, Yap Ah Loy's efforts over a period of years were yielding results. Even in 1875, when Swettenham approached the town on foot from Ulu Langat, he walked:

'Along a first-rate unmetalled road used by bullock carts... the road from Ulu Ampang to Qualla Lumpur is all open thro' lallang, gardens and occasional villages and I found it intensely hot. There are acres and acres of plantations on both sides of the road, mostly owned by Malays'.\textsuperscript{13}

Two years later Douglas took the same route and 'was immensely gratified by the excellent cultivation of the land between Qualla Lumpur and Ampang.'\textsuperscript{14} In the 1880's this area was still the garden of Kuala Lumpur, described as 'one of the best specimens of cultivation in the district'.\textsuperscript{15} This was an amenity which later still drew the well-to-do Chinese out of the centre of the town to build 'villa residences' along the Ampang Road, making it a prosperous garden suburb.\textsuperscript{16} Thus the desperate expedients of hard times in the 1870's had results continuing into this century in terms of town development.

Roads, to link tin mines and vegetable gardens to the town, were an essential part of Yap Ah Loy's strategy of survival. As we have seen Swettenham noted a 'first-rate' road from Arnpang. On the following day he looked round the town and its environs:

'The roads are made by a gang of Javanese who make very good unmetalled road with a first-rate ditch on each side for $10 the 200 yards thro' cleared ground and $20 the 200 yards thro' open jungle. They have offered to make a good road from Qualla Lumpur to Damansara for $750 the mile, i.e. $13,000 altogether; it would I think be cheap at that.'\textsuperscript{17}

We will come later to the Damansara Road. The roads existing in March 1875 ran for distances of 8 to 10 miles from the town to the outlying mines. A road to Pataling was then under construction.\textsuperscript{18}

These roads ran right into the centre of the town and thus added to the 'wide and excellently arranged' road network in Kuala Lumpur, permitting the bullock carts to go through with their loads (or to pick up loads) at the point of shipment on the river bank. Regular and concentrated bullock cart traffic within the town posed problems of maintenance (of unmetalled roads) to which no satisfactory solution was found until Spooner introduced his 'Ceylon system' of road upkeep in 1892.\textsuperscript{19}

Apart from reducing his cost of local tin production Yap Ah Loy had a keen eye for possibilities of diversifying the economy by export of other products. In 1875 Menangkabau settlers had begun to grow tobacco near Pataling and it was 'doing exceedingly well.'\textsuperscript{20} In 1878, when the mines were in crisis, Ah Loy took up a 12,000 acre concession along the Damansara Road, at its Kuala Lumpur end, to plant tapioca which he planned to export to Singapore. To process the crop he installed a mill, driven by a steam engine under the supervision of a European engineer. How-
ever the project was not a success and Yap Ah Loy professed to have lost the vast sum of $40,000 on it. But by then (1882) the recovery in the tin price had made him rich beyond the dreams of avarice. The mill, which was probably on the Batu Road, was the first industrial plant in Kuala Lumpur, apart from crude tin smelting sheds, and the first use of steam power in the town. 51

Yap Ah Loy’s other industrial venture was also unprofitable and shortlived. In 1879 Swettenham reported that he had:-

‘established a brickfield and kiln, and already produced a large number of most excellent bricks and tiles. The latter he proposes to send to the Singapore market hitherto supplied from Hong Kong. The clay of which these tiles are made is of a peculiar quality, which enables them to be made at once thin and light, whilst they are stronger and more durable than the ordinary roofing tile’. 52

The implication of this passage is that the bricks were to be used locally. There is no mention of building in brick at Kuala Lumpur at this time; possibly the bricks were to be set down river to Klang. It is possible, and indeed likely, that Yap Ah Loy’s brick kiln was the first of its kind in the area later known as Brickfields. 53

The Damansara Road. This was the first attempt to construct a speedier and cheaper supply route than the winding river between Kuala Lumpur and its port of export (and import) at Klang. British officials, and the state government, joined with Yap Ah Loy in building the Damansara Road. It was a failure but it led to the expansion of the town on the south-west side, made possible the transfer of the state capital to Kuala Lumpur in 1880, and prepared the way for the railway link built in 1883—6.

As the crow flies, Kuala Lumpur is only 20 miles distant from Klang. Yet the mid-19th century traveller, ascending the river took three days to complete the journey. 54 Although goods necessarily went by boat, British officials, from the mid-1870’s shortened the journey to 6 or 7 hours by going up the river, by steam launch, as far as Damansara only, where the river begins a wide southward bend. They then disembarked at Damansara and went overland, riding on ponies, over the track which became the ‘Damansara Road’. The hope was that the road could be made the main link between Kuala Lumpur and Klang (via Damansara and the lower reaches of the river).

When the road was marked out, each milestone was numbered. The final stone, just short of Brickfields, was Mile 15, from which Brickfields became known originally as Batu Limabelas.

As we have seen Swettenham heard talk in 1875 of the possibility of building the road. 55 It is likely that, among other jungle paths in the interior of Selangor, this route had been in use by travellers on foot since immigrants first penetrated to the upper Klang valley. At all events the Australian surveyor, D. D. Daly, when he arrived to ‘commence a rough topographical survey of Selangor’ in 1875 was instructed to select a line for the road. Daly’s trace went by way of some existing settlements. 56

When Swettenham revisited Kuala Lumpur after an interval of three years in 1878, 12 miles of the road had been completed as an unmetalled earth road. Swettenham travelled over it, noting that Yap Ah Loy, then in financially desperate circumstances, had undertaken to complete the remaining 3½ miles:-

‘in liquidation of an old-standing debt of his to the Selangor Government. The