His Highness Sultan Abu Bakar in about 1891
The Travels of Abu Bakar,
Maharajah Johore, to the Far East

by

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A definitive account of the life and times of Sultan Abu Bakar of Johore still remains to be written. At the moment there exists a “Hikayat Johore dan Tawarikh Almarhum Sultan Abu Bakar” written by the late Dato Haji Mohamed Said bin Haji Sulaiman, a life-long private secretary to the late Sultan Ibrahim of Johore. It is a straightforward narrative of the life and achievements of Abu Bakar written in the traditional spirit of the old Malay courtier’s tribute to his Ruler. The portrait of the great Sultan is prominent in the foreground but hardly anything exists in the background. We also have a good sketch of Abu Bakar in Winstedt’s “History of Johore.” There are scattered references to Abu Bakar in C.B. Buckley’s “An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore”, in Song Ong Siang’s “One Hundred Years’ History of the Chinese in Singapore” and in “One Hundred Years of Singapore (Edited by Makepeace, Brooke, and Roland Brad dell).” There are also numerous items of interest of varying degrees of relevancy in old newspapers, published in Singapore and in London, and also in academic exercises at the Universities of Malaya and Singapore.

A great deal of material has now been made available from British and (Colonial) Singapore Government sources. Now that Malaysia and Singapore are independent, it should be possible to write a new more critical and fuller account of the life and times of Abu Bakar and to assess their influence on the development of modern Malaya. Any such attempt must be based on a broader view of the contemporary development of Johore and other Malay States in the modern sense of evaluating the part played not only by the personalities and characters of the Rulers, but also by the personalities, characters and loyalties of ministers and chiefs. It will also include an assessment of the results of the interplay of political, social and economic forces which sometimes have their origins far from Singapore or Malaya.

Local source-material, apart from Dato Haji Mohamed Said’s biography, should be sought out and properly utilised. There is, for example, some extant correspondence as well as copy books and a great deal of other material in the Johore Archives. There may be private correspondence of Sultan Abu Bakar and his ministers still in the possession of the families of the old Datos in Johore and even in the hands of descendants of some of the Sultan’s friends in London. Lastly, perhaps, one may still be able to form some impressions of old Johore from the tales, stories and reminiscences of ‘old people’ who are sons and daughters of Abu Bakar’s young contemporaries.

From the Malay point of view Abu Bakar was undoubtedly the greatest Malay personality in the early days of modern Malaya. He was born and bred in Singapore in the broad day-light of history.

He must have read Munshi Abdullah’s autobiography and pondered over the significant differences between the traditional Malay rule and the kind of government under which Abu Bakar himself had grown up. It is interesting to note that he employed all the surviving sons of Munshi Abdullah: the eldest son Hussain was a teacher at Telok Belanga and was killed during the explosion of the Sultan’s steamship “Johore”. Mohamed Khalid followed Abu Bakar to Johore Bahru and organised Malay schools in the State. The third son of Munshi Abdullah, Mohamed Ibrahim, became prominent as the Dato Bentara Dalam.
When he succeeded his father in 1862, Abu Bakar realised that the future of his family and of Johore depended on his ability to create an impression in the minds of the British authorities in Singapore and in Great Britain that he was a modern and “civilised” Malay Ruler.

He realised from the beginning that he would have to exert his utmost energy to create such an impression not only in the minds of the British authorities but also in the minds of the influential section of the commercial population of Singapore.

Abu Bakar was lucky in the choice of his chiefs and supporters whose counsel and friendship and unwavering loyalty he retained until his death.

By the time he was recognised as Sultan of Johore, a Ruler of a sovereign State in treaty relation with the United Kingdom, in 1885 he had already become a public figure in Malaya. True, British forward policy in the Malay States would inevitably involve a change in the status of Johore. During the last years of his life, things were being said and written in Singapore and in London—not altogether in favour of Abu Bakar. But, at least no changes took place in the status of Johore during his life-time. And, one would like to believe that what had been happening in Johore under Abu Bakar was not without influence on the nature and tenor of the developing British policy of indirect rule in Malaya. Abu Bakar might well have meditated in his last years that he had saved his own State by his tireless exertions and might yet save others, by his example.

The part played by the Chinese in the early development of Johore was vital. And Abu Bakar had many friends among the most influential leaders of the Chinese Community in Singapore. He may have had vague memories of the ancient Malay rulers’ relations with China as told in the “Sejarah Melayu”. So, in 1883, he decided to visit China and Japan. He called at Saigon and Hong Kong on the way. He was then still the “Maharajah Johore”. He travelled in a French boat accompanied by Enche Mohamed Salleh bin Perang, later Dato Bentara Luar, Enche Mohamad bin Mahbob, later Dato Mohamad bin Mahbob, Menteri Besar Johore, and two attendants.

Enche Mohamed Salleh bin Perang (Dato Bentara Luar) devoted his life to Abu Bakar and his State. He had special qualifications to accompany Abu Bakar to the Far East. Enche Mohamed Salleh bin Perang was one of the greatest of Johore’s pioneer statements and his versatility was an asset to the State. He was Commissioner of Police and Chief Surveyor, and as Chief Town Planner, he opened up towns and mapped out Johore in an incredibly modern and scientific way. He settled the borders between Johore and Malacca, and Johore and Pahang. He possessed another qualification. He had learnt Chinese. He could read and write Chinese. He had read the San Kuo in the original and could speak several dialects and paint in the Chinese traditional style on scrolls, paper and fans. He was also an accomplished Chinese musician.

A few words about Abu Bakar’s travels. He might have thought of the opportunity missed when his father, Temenggong Ibrahim decided against sending him to Europe for his education as far back as 1846. He did learn English under the Missionary Keasberry in Singapore. The comings and goings of British dignitaries and British traders might have influenced him to visit foreign parts. He also had friends among the British officials and commercial leaders in Singapore. Perhaps the Bugis wanderlust in him was an added factor. But one suspects that his real reason for visiting foreign countries was political. The government had begun to move from Telok Belanga to Tanjong Puteri, Johore in 1855. And, in 1866, the little village at Tanjong Puteri was named Johore Bahru. In the same year, Abu Bakar, accompanied by Inche Jaafar bin Haji Mohamed, (later Dato Menteri Besar Johore) visited England and had an audience of the Queen.

Altogether he paid six visits to Europe. He died on the 6th June, 1895. He had visited not only the United Kingdom but also Germany, Austria, France, Italy, Switzerland and other European countries.
and Turkey. During these visits he was decorated by the Rulers of these countries with some of their highest Orders. He was always accompanied not only by his ministers, and advisers, in turn, but also by his younger brothers and cousins. During his visit to Europe in 1878, he arranged for one of his nephews and another Malay to be left in England for studies.

He had visited India in 1875 and the Dutch East Indies in 1881, and so, accompanied by these two future Ministers and two attendants, Abu Bakar left Singapore for the Far East on 28th April, 1883.

They reached Saigon on the 1st of May and was received and entertained by the French Governor. On the 2nd of May they left Saigon and arrived in Hong Kong on the 6th of May. They were received by the Governor and honoured with a salute of guns.

On the 7th of May they left for China proper and arrived at Shanghai on the 11th. They stayed in Shanghai until the 16th of May when they left for Japan.

They arrived at Nagasaki on the 17th of May. On the 19th of May they left Nagasaki and passing through the Inland Sea arrived at Kobe in the early hours of the 21st May. From Kobe they went to Osaka and spent several days in Osaka, Kyoto, the old Capital of Japan, and also visited the areas of historical and cultural interests around this part of Japan. They spent a day at Nara. On the 31st of May they were at Lake Biwa.

From Kyoto they started off for Tokyo by train, stopping at several places spending a day here and a day there, always accompanied by polite Japanese officials, stopping and meeting members of British or American Diplomatic missions or commercial community leaders, staying sometimes at “modern” hotels, sometimes at traditional Japanese hotels.

They made their way to Tokyo quite leisurely stopping at Nagoya and at other places which are difficult to identify now. On Sunday, 10th June they were at a small town near Mount Fuji. On the 12th June they passed a day near the Lake Hokone. On the 13th June they arrived in Yokohama staying at the Grand Hotel.
On the 17th they spent the night at Kamakura. After staying at Yokohama, they visited places in and around Tokyo where they were received by the Japanese Prime Minister and other Japanese dignitaries and also by Sir Harry Park, the British Ambassador.

Wherever they went they were lavishly entertained. They visited places of interest day and night whenever they had time to spare. On June 26th Abu Bakar and his companions were given a lengthy audience by the Emperor Meiji in his palace in Tokyo. The next day he entertained the Royal Princes. During the next few days he travelled a great deal between Yokohama and Tokyo entertaining and being entertained. He also had time to entertain officers of the British warships present in Japan.

On the 1st of July the party visited Nikko. On the 10th of July they came back to Tokyo and in the evening he was entertained by the Japanese Imperial Princes, the Japanese Prime Minister and members of the Cabinet in grand style in one of the royal palaces. On the 13th of July they left for Yokohama. They spent several days visiting neighbouring areas and were present at the funeral of a Japanese Cabinet Minister on the 25th of July at a small place called Shinagawa.

They left Yokohama on the 1st of August on a Japanese boat ‘Tokyo Maru’. At Kobe on the 3rd of August the Maharajah had to be attended to by a doctor for a serious attack of diarrhoea. Later Enche Mohamed bin Mahbob also had to be attended to by a doctor suffering from the same ailment. They spent about 10 days in that part of Japan visiting Kyoto again and places which they had missed when they stopped at Kobe on the way to Tokyo.

They seemed to have spent a considerable time in Southern Japan, between 3rd of August and 26th of August. Perhaps they felt they had relieved themselves of the official aspect of their visit and could now move about more as private individuals. They also indulged in spending sprees including the purchase of valuable mementos and presents for their relatives and friends at home. They left Kobe on the 28th August stopping at Nagasaki for a day when the Maharajah went to the European Club to play billiards!

On the 31st of August they left Nagasaki in very bad weather. All members of the party were seasick. They arrived at Shanghai on the 1st of September. They boarded a ship called ‘Shanghai’ and proceeded to Hong Kong, stopping at Nanking. They enjoyed the scenery and the sights of ancient pagodas and temples perched on the cliffs on the sides of the great river. On the 9th September they reached Hangkow where he and his party were entertained by the British Consul and also by the European community. The Maharajah had time to indulge in his favourite game of billiards at the club. He was lavishly entertained by Chinese officials and was received with gun salutes. They spent quite some time visiting various places.

On the 10th of October they left by the P. & O. Mail, “The Deccan”. The sea was extremely rough. On the 13th of October they were sailing to Swatow and were very impressed by the magnificent view of the mountain ranges on the mainland and the innumerable islands covered in mist. Perhaps it was the “Chinese eye” of Enche Mohamed Salleh that caught sight of the impressionist scenery so much loved by the great Chinese artists. They also saw thousands of Chinese fishing boats. They came across an American warship, and in the evening they were in Hong Kong harbour.

They spent 5 days in Hong Kong and left for Macao on the 18th October in a ship called “White Cloud” returning to Hong Kong the next day. On the 20th they left for Canton. Canton was full of Chinese warships and soldiers because there had been some trouble a few days previously. They returned to Hong Kong on the 22nd October. After a few days in Hong Kong they left on the 30th for home.

The first part of the journey home from Hong Kong was most unpleasant as the ship was caught in a typhoon and almost all the passengers were seasick. The ship
had to make a detour off its normal
course to avoid the full force of the winds.
On Monday, 8th November they passed
Batu Puteh. Later, a party from Johore
including the Maharajah's relatives, Teng-
ku Mohamed Khalid, Tengku Mohamed,
and Sayed Alwi came in a motor launch
and got on board the ship. The ship
arrived at the P. & O. wharf at Tanjong
Pagar and later Abu Bakar left in a steam
launch for Johnson's pier for the official
reception.

Abu Bakar is the first Malay Ruler to
have visited Japan and the first Malay
Ruler to have visited China since the
Imperial days of the Ming Emperors. It
is to be remembered that China at the
time of the visit was in full decline under
the disintegrating Manchu regime. She
was then a prey of the European imperial
powers.

Modern Japan was barely 30 years old
at the time of the Maharajah's visit and
was already pushing ahead with her
process of modernization.

Whether Abu Bakar formed any special
impressions of the conditions and the
future development of China and Japan
he left no records.

Abu Bakar did, however, indulge in
his usual habit of buying presents and
mementos in China — especially at
Hangkow. He was perhaps influenced by
his Chinese friends and also perhaps by
his European friends, perhaps even by
Enche Mohamed Salleh bin Perang. He
brought back a valuable collection of por-
celain. It included a large number of blue
and white plates of the Kangsi period.
He also acquired some large ornamental
jars of indifferent value.

Some of the valuable procelain is still
kept at the Istana Besar, Johore. Parts of
the Kangsi blue and white porcelain were
given as presents to his relatives, ministers,
chiefs and friends. A considerable portion
of the Kangsi collection, however, is
broken or badly chipped, and, until some
years ago, was kept under the big steps
of the Istana Besar.

He also brought back a large number
of Japanese plates and jars of not much
value but extremely ornamental. Some of
the plates were given away to his rela-
tives, chiefs and friends as mementos of
his travels. Abu Bakar never came home
from his travels abroad empty handed for
his relatives and friends and ministers
and chiefs.

Some of the ornamental Japanese plates
are now hanging in the Central Hall of
the Istana Besar and contribute not a
little to the brilliant aspect of the Istana
when lit up on ceremonial occasions.

The visit of Abu Bakar to Japan formed
a lasting link between Japan and Johore.
Not long after the visit some Japanese
began to come over to Johore. Some
settled at Semberong Batu Pahat where
they developed a large marshy area
turning it into a prosperous rubber estate.
The Japanese continued to open up rubber
estates and engaged in other business in
Johore until the Second World War.
There is no record that Abu Bakar was
decorated by the Emperor. His son,
however, was given The First Class Order
of the Rising Sun.

The Tokugawa family, the Samurai
clan, who had ruled Japan for 300 years
prior to the Restoration of the powers of
the Emperor in about 1868 became family
friends of the Johore Royal Family. Some
members of the Sultan of Johore's family,
including (now) Professor Ungku Aziz,
were sent to Japan and "adopted" by the
Tokugawas and stayed with them in Japan
during the Japanese occupation of Ma-
laya. It is not surprising that when the
Japanese Crown Prince visited Malaysia
recently he expressed a desire to visit
Johore.

The appreciation of the Chinese com-
mercial population in Singapore and
Johore for the enlightened rule of the
Maharajah must have impressed the
Manchu Emperor. On the 10th December
1894, Abu Bakar, who was then Sultan
and sovereign Ruler of Johore, was invested
by the Son of Heaven with the First Grade
of the First Class Order of the Double
Dragon. The ceremony was held at
Tyersall, Singapore, where one of the
largest gatherings of Chinese towkays
assembled to witness the presentation.
The Chinese Consul explained that the
Emperor of China had bestowed this honour upon the Sultan in token of the kindness shown by the Sultan of Johore towards the numerous subjects of the Chinese Empire living in these areas and for the sympathy and goodwill manifested by the Sultan in sending aid to China for sufferers in the famine and for those in places devastated by the recent great floods. The Sultan in his reply said that the Chinese had done so much for his country that it was no exaggeration to say that, without the Chinese, Johore would never have become what it was.

The travels of Abu Bakar, as has been indicated above, are largely of political nature — to broaden his vision and experience, to build up his prestige — in the interests of his State and his dynasty. His confrontation with the acting Governor Blundell (when young Abu Bakar was acting as agent of his father, Temenggong Ibrahim) had taught him a lesson. He realised from his early days as Raja Temenggong of Johore that the real danger to his family and his State lay in the powers of the Governor — powers exercised in the form of secret reports, advice, and recommendations submitted to the Home Government. To ensure that these reports and advice would not be unfavourable to Johore, he established fairly cordial relations with the Singapore Government. In addition, he succeeded in gradually establishing “direct contact” in the United Kingdom. His wide travels in Europe and the Far East gave him prestige and the experience gained enabled him to build up and develop a fair and efficient administration in his State, not unfavourably viewed by the British authorities in Singapore and in Britain. In his last days, he provided Johore with a written constitution. On a very small scale and in a small but remarkable way, Abu Bakar’s “internal reforms” coupled with a “foreign policy” pursued with the full vigour of his personality did indeed achieve the measure of success anticipated by him, his loyal ministers and advisers.

The Malay Sultan who would give a walking stick as a present to the Head of the greatest Empire in history and the most venerable and influential Monarch in Europe and received private, intimate personal thanks from her, in her own hand-writing, could no longer be represented as a picturesque Eastern potentate, ruling over some small, rude, remote and semi-barbarous land. Here is a letter addressed by the great Queen to her “friend”, written by her own hand. There are probably several others awaiting discovery:

Windsor Castle,
March 11, 1891.

Your Highness.

Pray accept my warmest thanks for the beautiful stick you have so kindly sent me and which I shall always greatly value as coming from you.

I truly appreciate your support and friendship.

That God may have you in his keeping and quite restore you to health, is the sincere wish of your

Affectionate friend

Victoria R.I.

Abu Bakar died in London on 4th June 1895. His remains were brought back and buried at Mahmudiah, Johore Bahru, on 7th Sept. 1895.

The editorial of the Straits Times of 6th June 1895 sums up the character and achievements of the great Sultan.

“With deep regret we announce that Sultan Abu Bakar of Johore is dead. Thus death has removed the most prominent personality in all Malaya. Astute, far-seeing and sagacious, for thirty years he reigned within 15 miles of a seat of English Government and held that Government at bay. No Asiatic has ever been able to do such a thing: yet, the Sultan Abu Bakar did it with brilliant success.

He was the Caliph of the Arabian Nights, the source of all justice, the remedy for all grievances, the personal cause of everything, accessible to every man’s murmur, the earthly regent of Allah”.
THE MAHARAJAH OF JOHORE

(reproduced from an English Magazine)

The accompanying Portrait is a faithful likeness of one of the most enlightened and respectable of the independent Princes of Eastern Asia, living on terms of friendship and alliance with the British Government, and now sojourning in London. His Highness Tunkoo Abubeker bin Ibrahim, Sree Maharajah Sovereign of Johore (commonly called “the Tumong-gong”), is the grandson of one of the Malay Princes by whom the island of Singapore was first ceded to Sir Stamford Raffles, as political agent for the British Government, from 1819 to 1824. This Prince succeeded to the sovereignty of the Johore territories in 1861, on the death of his father, the late reigning Prince; and he has delegated the exercise of his power and authority during his absence to his brother, the Prince Unkoo Abdulrahman. His Highness is thirty-one years of age, and rather tall of stature for a Malay, with a prepossessing appearance and highly engaging manners. He is very intelligent, understands and speaks English; and there is every reason to expect that both he and his subjects will derive great benefit from his present visit to this country. He has not come to seek the redress of any grievances, or to make any complaint against our Indian Government. He says of himself, “I have come to see the Queen, to see my old English friends, and to amuse myself.” We are satisfied that the first Malay Prince who has visited our shores will not quit them with any sense of disappointment. As a ruler of liberal and enlightened ideas, his Highness has obtained the favourable notice of his English neighbours. Some years back the Singapore Free Press remarked that “the late as well as the present Sovereign of Johore have anxiously applied themselves to the improvement of their dominions. As far as possible, the elements of good government have been introduced, and every encouragement has been given to settlers of industrial pursuits.” The Johore Government long maintained a flotilla, in conjunction with our own, to suppress piracy in the narrow seas of their respective possessions; and about twenty years ago the father of his Highness was presented by the Government of India with a sword, in acknowledgment of his successful services in putting down piracy.

The Portrait is from a photograph by Mr. H. Webster, of Bayswater.