Note on the name Kuala Lumpur

by E. Macfadyen

(Taken from the Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, May 1916).

KUALA LUMPUR is generally assumed to be a descriptive title—'Muddy Mouth'—but the use of a descriptive epithet to qualify the word Kuala is so unusual, that one frequently hears ingenious explanations put forward to account for it in this instance.

Kuala in place names is commonly qualified by the name of the river or tributary which debouches at that point into the sea or a main river; Kuala Perak for instance or Kuala Kubu. If one met a Kuala Merah it would naturally be the name of a place where a Sungei Merah flowed into some larger river. I do not think it would occur to Malays to speak of a place as Kuala Merah because the water there had a red tinge.

Some old residents of Kuala Lumpur have even gone the length of suggesting that a small stream known as the Sungei Lumpur once flowed into the Klang River where the Selangor Government offices now stand. If so...
the name Kuala Lumpur would be quite natural; but I much doubt there being any historical basis for this hypothesis.

An old Malay who worked for me in Kuala Langat used to speak of Kuala Lumpur as Pengkalan Lumpur and I have once or twice questioned Malaya on the subject who said that old-fashioned people used that name for the place. It is to be noted, moreover, that the town of Klang was formerly known as Pengkalan Batu; a name by which it is still considered good form to describe the place in full dress writing.

At a time when there were only two settlements on the Klang River it appears probable enough that one should be called Pengkalan Batu and the other Pengkalan Lumpur. The place up stream, however, was from the first almost exclusively a Chinese settlement and anyone who has heard Chinese residents of places like Pengkalan Durian or Pengkalan Kempas refer to these places will agree that 'Kalen Lumpur is about as near an approximation to the correct form as they would be at all likely to attain.

I suggest that this is possibly the origin of the name. The transition, by a false analogy, to Kuala Lumpur would be tempting to people much more accustomed to Malay place names beginning with a Kuala than with a Pengkalan; and at a time when the 'tulisan Roman' was an undiscovered art there would be few obstacles to the mistaken version becoming stereotyped. No large or indigenous Malay element existed in the population to correct such tendency.
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