

Tradition and modernity in Malay society (1830s-1930s)

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Abstract: This study attempts to explicate what happened to the Malays between the turn of the 20th century and the beginning of World War II. This is important to underscore the fact that, contrary to general impressions, Islam did not hold back the progress of the Malays, and that even before World War II, major changes were taking place in Malay society. Modernity in Malay society began to emerge even before World War I. Although the intrusion of British administration to a great extent contributed to socio-economic changes in many parts of the Malay Peninsula, the Muslim intelligentsia were indefatigably urging the Malays to be sensitive to their environment; and one way of keeping abreast of change was to expose themselves to modern education. Malay journalism, Malay literature and the frequent exchange of ideas in the Malay media were characteristics of Malay society beginning from the early 20th century. Politics then was not yet to the fore. As in other societies, there were also conservative elements within that placed obstacles in the way of those who tirelessly pursued change from tradition to modernity.

Keywords: Malay, Islam, British administration, modernity, Malaysia

Abstrak: Kajian ini cuba menghuraikan apa yang terjadi kepada orang Melayu di antara pergantian abad ke-20 dengan permulaan Perang Dunia II. Hal ini penting untuk menekankan hakikat bahawa bertentangan dengan tanggapan umum, Islam tidak menghalang kemajuan orang Melayu malah sebelum Perang Dunia II, perubahan besar telah berlaku dalam masyarakat Melayu. Pemodenan mulai muncul dalam masyarakat Melayu sebelum berlakunya Perang Dunia I. Walaupun campur tangan pentadbiran Inggeris

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banyak menyumbang kepada perubahan sosio-ekonomi di sebahagian besar Semenanjung Tanah Melayu, pada masa yang sama, para intelektual Islam dengan gigihnya telah menggesa orang Melayu supaya peka terhadap persekitaraan mereka; salah satu cara untuk menyertai perkembangan perubahan itu adalah dengan mendedahkan mereka kepada pendidikan moden. Kewartawanan Melayu, sastera Melayu dan kekerapan pertukaran idea merupakan ciri-ciri masyarakat yang kelihatan dari awal abad ke-20 lagi. Politik masih lagi belum bertapak pada ketika itu. Tetapi, sepertimana yang berlaku dalam masyarakat lain, terdapat juga unsur-unsur konservatif dalam yang menjadi halangan kepada mereka yang bersungguh-sungguh mengejar perubahan dari tradisi ke modenisasi.

Kata kunci: Melayu, Islam, pentadbiran Inggeris, modenisasi, Malaysia

The term “modernization” has been defined by Thomas R. Leinbach (1976, p.279) “as the complex web of change which takes place as developing societies acquire chronological, social, economic and political characteristics common to the more ‘advanced’ countries. At the individual level, it may be measured, e.g., by innovation, knowledge information acquisition, accessibility, and use of modern services.” Using this definition as the base, this study examines the transformation of Malay society from tradition to modernity in the period from the turn of the 20th century to the beginning of the Second World War.

“Malay society” in the past referred to the Malay Archipelago as a whole but it was gradually narrowed down considerably in terms of geographical perception after the Anglo-Dutch Treaty was signed in 1824 splitting the Archipelago into two. The term “Malay” in more recent times has been consistently used mainly in Malaysia but elsewhere, except perhaps in Brunei, the tendency has been, in the post-colonial era, to lay strict emphasis on nationality. The southern Thais were once known as the people of “Pattani” and the southern Filipinos as the “Sulu” people. Certainly the term “Malay” is not widely used in Indonesia today although it is well-known that the Indonesian national language is based on the Malay language and, in Singapore too, when it achieved independence in 1965, the government chose “Malay” as the official language although the population there has been primarily Chinese since the mid-19th century.

A great deal of confusion arose when, in 1913, in formulating the Malay Land Reservations Enactment, the British decided to define the term “Malay” thus:

A Malay must be a Muslim, speaks the Malay language habitually and practises Malay custom (Sidhu, 1980, pp.164-165).¹

The same definition is found in the present Malaysian Constitution (see Article 160). Somehow, it was not well understood that, although “a Malay must be a Muslim,” a Muslim need not be a Malay. As a result, “masuk Islam” (become Muslim) was considered synonymous with “masuk Melayu” (become Malay). That perception has continued to exist even today. Most non-Malays in Malaysia cannot distinguish between “Malay” and “Muslims” believing that both are synonymous. In Singapore, soon after World War I, the Malays themselves made an attempt to remove the misunderstanding when, in 1926, they founded the Singapore Malay Union. Its membership specifically was open to only “Malays” but not Indian Muslims or Arabs although these groups had long become the more economically successful people within the Muslim community in Singapore and were able to stand on par with the Chinese (Kim, 1972).²

Malays were initially established in the eastern and northern part of Sumatra (Palembang in particular). Many of them later crossed over to the Malay Peninsula. They belonged originally to the widely dispersed Polynesian race whose language extended from Madagascar to the Philippines. They were a seafaring people, generally referred to in the West as “sea nomads.” It was along the routes of commerce that they carried the Malay language to sundry ports and lands (See Meilink-Roelofs, 1962). Clearly, the term “Malay,” from an ethnic perspective, is not a reference to only those born in the Malay Peninsula; it referred to all those born in the Malay Archipelago including the East Indies (Indonesia). It was after the coming of the English and the Dutch and the division of the Malay Archipelago by the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824 that the Malays of the Peninsula were distinguished from the indigenous people of what came to be known as the Netherlands East Indies. Even in Singapore as well as Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Javanese were in the past referred to

as Malays, but in Indonesia today, the Javanese do not usually refer to themselves as “Malays.” Indeed the term “Nusantara” was initially used to refer to what the Javanese considered the islands outside Java.

The Malays were traditionally traders rather than agriculturalists. Although by the middle of the 18th century, the Western nations, in particular the Dutch and the British, were practically in total control of the Straits of Malacca, four of the Peninsular states—Kedah, Selangor, Johor (Riau) and Terengganu—were still maintaining direct commercial links with the world outside the Malay Archipelago but it was by then practically the end of a long tradition which had begun with the emergence of the kingdoms of Kedah and Malacca prior to the 15th century. The latter was a great emporium which flourished owing to its *entrepot* trade. Although Kedah then was said to have no large junks of its own and therefore its shipping was confined to coastal trade, the country did have important commercial links with China and Gujarat. In the 18th century, the Dutch in Malacca reported that Kedah was visited by foreign traders through the influence of Arabs of *sayid* descent and Kedah itself did equip ships of its own to convey goods to India and to bring back commodities which were in demand in the Straits of Malacca. The Malays from Johor (Lama), ruled until 1700 by descendants of the old Malacca dynasty, were able to monopolize the Minangkabau goods by going directly with their ships to Kabon, Patapahan, and various trading areas in Kampar (Sumatra), (Wheatley, 1961).

The 19th century scenario

The Malays of the Peninsula, as mentioned earlier, were traditionally a maritime people. They lived close to the sea and trade was their main occupation. In the distant past, for example, Kuala Kedah was an important trading centre. By the 15th century, Malacca stole the limelight from Kedah and was once said to be the busiest port in the world where no less than 90 languages were spoken. After the fall of Malacca, beginning from the time of Portuguese conquest (1511), it was Riau in Johor which gradually gained fame as an international port. Kuala Terengganu, at about the same time, was another popular international port. By the late 18th century, the scene shifted back to the western part of the Peninsula. Linggi (later named Kuala Linggi)

in Negeri Sembilan, Kuala Selangor and Kuala Klang (Selangor) served the Malay states but mainly as dependencies of Singapore which from about the 1820s until modern times has been the principal port of the region. However, by the second half of the 19th century, the Malays had lost control of the regional as well as inter-ocean trade which fell into the hands of the British and Chinese traders who were using steamships by the 1860s and 1870s.

In Malaysian historiography, it is usual to use 1874, the year of the Pangkor Engagement (between Britain and Perak) which marked the beginnings of British intervention in the Malay kingdoms, as the important watershed between what is generally believed to be a period of negligible change and a period of rapid transformation. The importance of the events following the Pangkor Engagement cannot be denied. But it can be shown that other events had altered quite noticeably the overall format of Malay society even before 1874. It was certainly not a transformation which emerged internally; that it was the result of influence from outside the Peninsula is patently clear based on the available evidence. Tin mining, for example, took off on an unprecedented scale by the middle of the 19th century. However, tin production had by then been taken over almost completely by the Chinese. The majority of the entrepreneurs were Straits Chinese and they themselves were responsible for bringing large numbers of people from China to work in the mines in Lukut (Selangor), Sungai Ujong, Larut and the area adjacent to Kuala Lumpur.

A major contribution to this rapid growth in the demand for Straits tin was the commencement of the tin-plate industry in Britain, which soon found that its previous reliance on the tin supply from the Cornwall mines was no longer adequate to meet the needs of the industry. "Straits tin" (from the Malay Peninsula) was found to be the answer. No less significant was the fact that it was the American Civil War in the early 1860s, when canned food was used for the first time, that contributed to the growth in demand for tin-plate (See Ken, 1965, pp.81-82).

Tin was not the only economic activity which radically turned around the economy of many of the Peninsular Malay kingdoms. Commercial agriculture also took off at this time. Unlike in the past,

when the Malays were primarily subsistence peasants, commercial agriculture had been introduced in Province Wellesley and Johor by the mid-19th century. In the north, European and Chinese entrepreneurs opened up sugar plantations. Among the Chinese, those involved were mainly Teochews. The Hokkiens who were the first to arrive were primarily involved in the import and export trade. In Johor, the Teochews similarly opened up plantations but they grew gambier and pepper. By the late 19th century, rubber had arrived in the Malay Peninsula. It was a Malaccan Chinese, Tan Chay Yan, who was the first to open up a rubber plantation. These developments initially did not adversely affect the Malay Rulers who, traditionally, had been the principal entrepreneurs themselves. Together with their chieftains, they had long controlled land and water. They were indeed the first to develop tin mining in the early 19th century but they chose to make use of Chinese labourers whose mining method was a little more advanced than the *lampan* method used by the Malays. However, they depended on the Straits Chinese merchants for loans which several of them, including the district chieftains, were subsequently unable to repay. They then made the critical decision to allow the Chinese entrepreneurs to work the mines directly (See Kim. 1972).

One main development in the 19th century contributed noticeably to the marginalization of the Malays in the economic development of their own territories. More up-to-date technology—first steamships and then the railway—allowed British agency houses in Singapore and the Chinese middlemen to render almost irrelevant the services of the Malays themselves. In fact, both Penang and Malacca also became dependencies of Singapore, which was acknowledged to be the most important port in Southeast Asia (Ken, 1960).

The need for the Malays to acquire knowledge of Western ideas and technology was clearly noticed by some Malay leaders and, in particular, the Malays educated in Islam who, by the early 20th century, began to air their views through the mass media, originally the Malay media, and then the English papers as well.

The advent of Western ideas and methodology

Not many are aware that even the introduction of a modern system of administration in the Malay Peninsula did not begin in Perak, the

first kingdom to receive a British Resident in 1874. Indeed, by 1874, there had been established in contemporary Johor (founded in 1885) a Council, a treasury, a police court, a police department (with 13 police stations), a gaol, an arsenal, a marine department, a public works and land department, a Commissariat and the beginnings of a medical department. The Johor Council (the first among the Malay kingdoms) in 1875 consisted of 24 members. Postal, Survey and Education departments were set up by 1883. By 1886, the Indian Immigration Department had been established followed, in 1887, by the Registration Department and, in 1889, the Military Department had replaced the Commissariat. Incidentally, Johor was also the first Malay kingdom to have a written constitution provided by its Ruler, Sultan Abu Bakar, before his demise in 1895 (Kim, 1967/68).

The first modern town (with brick shop-houses, roads well laid out and a police force to maintain law and order) which emerged in the Malay Peninsula in the mid-19th century was, however, Lukut, which was originally part of Selangor but, after British intervention, was transferred to Negeri Sembilan (in exchange, the British placed Semenyih, which was in Negeri Sembilan, under the rule of Selangor). Lukut was the first settlement to be developed because it was the first place where tin mining took place on an unprecedented scale and it was administered by a very broad-minded leader, Raja Jumaat, who originated from Riau and whose brother, Raja Abdullah, laid the foundation for the development of Kuala Lumpur (Kim, 1972).

Economic development, as may be expected, had significant effects on political developments as well. Because of the greater demand for Peninsular raw materials in the West as a result of industrialization, there was unending exploitation of economic resources in the Malay states, so that in each state, by the mid-19th century, the control of districts rich in resources became very important. This incidentally coincided with the numerical growth of a royalty class (because of polygamy) in each state. By virtue of the high status enjoyed by members of the royalty and the aristocracy, they were able to extract for themselves positions which allowed them control over resource-rich territories. However, this gave rise to frequent struggles for control of territories in the Malay states, with the Chinese participating. The anarchy which prevailed was

the main reason for British intervention as, by then, the principal entrepreneurs involved in the economic development of the Malay territories were Straits merchants who were British subjects since the Straits Settlements had become a British Crown Colony in 1867 (see Turnbull, 1972).

The British, after many years of experience ruling India and having faced the Indian Mutiny of 1857, adopted a different approach in the Malay Peninsula. Since Malay society, traditionally, was neatly divided into two major classes—the ruling class and a very submissive subject class—the British came to the conclusion that it was easier to retain the traditional structure and rule the Malay states indirectly, i.e., through the local traditional ruling class.

Despite embarking on a policy of intervention to quell the frequent disturbances, they were unwilling to rule the states directly. They felt that it was necessary merely to modify the long-standing indigenous political fabric so that it could cope with the changing economic environment. They, therefore, strengthened the apex. Younger members of the royalty and aristocracy were sent to study the English language and western ideas. A special college—the Malay College at Kuala Kangsar—was established by 1905 to produce modern administrators. By 1910, the Malay Administrative Service (MAS) had been set up to train subordinate civil servants.

The traditional titular chieftains, however, were deprived of their functions although in some instances (Perak for example), the traditional titular system was allowed to continue, and has indeed survived to this day, although its members have long been left to perform mainly ceremonial functions. Actual administration was carried out by the newly trained bureaucrats (see Anderson, 1962). With the emphasis given to education, the recruitment of administrative staff by the government, even among the indigenous population, was increasingly based on education; eventually, even at the level of the village headmen—the *penghulu*.

Despite numerous modifications and changes, the political and cultural traditions which developed during the early years of the establishment of the *kerajaan* were not allowed to disintegrate totally. The link between the apex and the base has remained intact in many ways to this day. The continued presence of a Raja in each state

assumes the continued existence of a subject class and the bond was made inseparable although the British abolished the practice of debt slavery and, today, the national Ruler (the *Yang di-Pertuan Agong*) is the personification of the existence of the nation state while sovereignty has been transferred to the people since August 31, 1957 and the Rulers have since become constitutional Rulers.

Modernization: To be or not to be

Although Britain was always concerned with the need to adjust the political-administrative system in order to ensure that the economic resources of the Malay states could be efficiently exploited, its key officials serving in the Malay states were generally divided over what should rightly constitute Britain's policy towards the Malays who were seen as the subjects of the rulers and whose interests, therefore, must be given special protection as had been the case in the early days of the existence of the monarchies. There was no formal education in Malay society before the advent of British administration. Informal religious schools (*sekolah pondok*) were simple premises, usually the houses of the various teachers (*guru agama*), where persons with religious education, acquired mainly in the Middle East, helped both children and adults to learn to read the Qur'ān.

The first modern Malay school in the Malay states was established in Klang (Selangor) in 1875, but until 1889, only nine more schools had been added to the list and the total enrolment was 375. Subsequent progress was, however, more satisfactory. By 1902, there were 40 Malay schools with the enrolment rising to 1334. In Perak, the first Malay school was established in 1883 but Perak enjoyed a faster rate of progress. Within a decade, 58 more schools had been built. The larger proportion of the schools were located in the north, namely, in Larut (17), Kuala Kangsar (9), Krian (11), and Selama (5). In 1894, there were 75 schools in Perak and by 1909, the figure reached 171. In Selangor, the government subsequently passed a law to compel Malay parents to send their children to school. However, in Perak there was no similar law (See Loh, 1975).

In the Unfederated States where British administration was more lax—each had a British Adviser, not a British Resident—it was not the government which promoted the importance of formal education.

In Kedah, even before the beginnings of British administration in 1909, some of the children were sent to Penang to be educated. The first Malay vernacular school in Kedah was built at Changlun in 1892, followed by one in Kulim in 1896. Alor Star had its first school in 1897. In 1907, the post of Superintendent of Education was created. Thereafter, with Kedah becoming a British Protectorate in 1909, the development of education came largely under the control of the British Adviser but beginning from the 1920s, the public in Kedah also contributed their share. In many villages, the locals themselves built *rakyat* (people's) schools. The villagers actually built the schools and provided the teachers with houses and other facilities while the government, on its part, supplied the school equipment. The first *rakyat* school was built at Binjal (in the Kubang Pasu district) in 1926. The school was managed by a committee of village elders in accordance with regulations laid down by the Education Department. By 1938, there were 24 *rakyat* schools in Kedah with an enrolment of 1,742 (Kim, 1991; Sidhu, 1980).

In Johor, with the existence of an Education Department by 1885, subsequent progress was even more evident. The government, in addition, took control of religious education. In 1895, the Religious Department (*Jabatan Agama Islam*) had been established with one whole section under the control of the Inspector and Registrar of Religious Schools. Owing to government involvement in both vernacular and religious education, by the turn of the 20th century, there were no more *pondok* schools in Johor (Kim, 1967/68).

Quite unlike many of the other Malay states, the early phase of educational development in Kelantan owed almost nothing to the British administration. It is believed that the *pondok* schools in this state had been in existence from the time Islam found a firm footing in the Peninsula. They were certainly very popular in Kelantan by the 19th century. There were already several learned teachers then. By the early 20th century, in Kota Bharu itself, there were a number of knowledgeable teachers who opened up *pondok* schools and there emerged, at that time, a teacher who was to become a legendary figure in Kelantan history. He was Haji Muhammad Yusuf bin Ahmad, better known as Tok Kenali. He had left Kelantan at the age of 10 to study in Mecca and returned only 22 years later. By 1917, he had no less than 300 pupils studying under him. He was popular because

he adopted the “Q and A” method instead of merely requiring his pupils to learn the Qur’ān by rote (Kim, 1991).

Terengganu was also well-known for the importance it placed on Islam in the lives of the people. During the reign of the first ruler—Sultan Zainal Abidin I—the family held in the highest regard in Terengganu society was the al-Idrus family. The first member of the family to arrive in Terengganu from West Asia was Sayid Mohamad Mustaffa al-Idrus. But it was his grandson, Sayid Mohamad bin Zainal Abidin (better known as Tokku Tuan Besar), who became a famous religious teacher. He was a contemporary of Baginda Omar, one of Terengganu’s best remembered rulers (1839-1876). There were several other renowned religious teachers, too, and together they made Islamic education far more important than secular education. Terengganu, at any rate, was the last Peninsular state to receive a British Adviser in 1919. However, influenced by Johor, the Terengganu people were also bestowed a written constitution by their Ruler in 1911, earlier than in the federated states. There was, however, one important difference between Kelantan and Terengganu. During the inter-war years, the people of Kelantan managed to publish a number of journals, the most famous being *Pengasuh*. The people of Terengganu attempted to follow in the footsteps of Kelantan but did not succeed. It did not have sufficient support from the people (Kim, 1991).

By the early 20th century, the Methodist and Catholic Missions had begun their efforts to develop modern education in Malaya. English schools for boys and, almost simultaneously, for girls, had been established in several of the major towns in the western Malay states but the English-medium schools mainly benefitted the non-Malay segment of the local population. Britain did not encourage the ordinary Malays to study English. *The Malay Mail* (March 8, 1901), concerned with the inability of the Malays to keep abreast of the non-Malays, asked: “Have we [the British] as a nation acted honestly and fairly towards the Malays of the Federated Malay States?” An answer to the question was unintentionally given by the *Evening Standard* of London two years later (December 22, 1903). Quoting the recently retired Governor of the Straits Settlements and High Commissioner of the Malay States, it said:

Sir Frank Swettenham has, in his books of singular charm, declared his warm liking for the people he governs... But the Malay nationality is doomed...under the modern conditions, it cannot even live, apparently. The... pushing [Chinese], like a spider, is devouring these butterflies. Everywhere the process goes on, more and more rapidly. It is safe to predict that in fifty years a Malay will be something of a curiosity in the region of the Straits.

Swettenham, however, was against teaching “English indiscriminately” to the Malays. Instead, he wrote in the *Perak Annual Report 1890*, that

... if the Government undertakes to teach this, the Koran, and something about figure and geography (especially of the Malay Peninsula and Archipelago), this knowledge and the habits of industry, punctuality and obedience that they will gain by regular attendance at school, will be of material advantage to them to earn a livelihood in many vocations...

However, coincidentally or otherwise, the same concern as that of the *Evening Standard*'s was later expressed by several of the Malay newspapers which were published in Singapore in the early part of the 20th century, among them, the *Taman Pengetahuan* (1904), the *Al-Imam* (1906), the earlier version of the *Utusan Melayu* (1908), and the *Neraca* (1911). All of them resulted from the emergence of a new spirit among the Malays, actuated by the urge of new interest and ambition, and it found expression in the form of journalism. By the second decade of the 20th century, their correspondence columns were generally punctuated by controversies covering various topics from the lively discussions of the Malay language and idiom to the interpretation of certain obscure passages in some Islamic religious texts (Bin Ahmad, 1941).

By then the Malays did not merely write to the Malay press. Many of the younger generation had obtained an English education and wrote to the English press as well. For example, *The Malaya Tribune* of Singapore, which was owned by a Chinese, on October 30, 1919 published a letter by “Young Malays” which summarized

all the writings in the Malay papers in Singapore by saying that "... a nation can only have a firm footing when there is unity, and that unity can only be had when there is education." The letter also identified the following three reasons for the weakness of the Malay society:

1. Uneducated Malays living in kampongs...
2. Malays with education either in Malay or English who know and see the fall of their nation,...are unable to render any assistance except by crying for help in the corners of newspapers, and
3. the Rajas and the Datos (chiefs) with no feeling for the fall of their nation...are satisfied with leaving the welfare of their nation to the mercy of others.

"Will it not be a nice thing," asked "Young Malays," "...if all the Rajas and Datos speak out in the Councils asking for assistance with which to send sons of the soil for education, at Government expense, to foreign countries...England, America, etc.?" Also, according to them, "The education we want is of course not the education such as we have out here, which is only good for copying clerks. What we want is education of a high standard in Medicine, Electricity, Engineering, Science, Law, etc."

Another letter by "Muslim Muda" published in *The Malaya Tribune* (November 4, 1919) pointed out that the young Malays were showing "the sign of a new awakening...resolutely determined to courageously carry on patriotic propaganda of educating its younger sons and daughters of the soil..." "Muslim Muda" urged "...my Malay fellow countrymen" to take seriously "the kind of practical education and training which will help and prepare them to live the life of useful citizens in their country, and be a helpful force to Humanity." *The Malaya Tribune*, in its editorial of November 6, 1919, confirmed that "there is a feeling of disappointment that the Malays have not done better all these years" and that "[there is] a desire to encourage a new spirit, one which will tend to uplift the race and make it take its place side by side with the other races who are progressing in the Malayan Peninsula." The Judicial Commissioner of the Federated Malay States, Sir Lionel Woodward,

shared the views of the young Malays and urged, as reported by *The Straits Echo* (February 6, 1924), that “The Government should not lag behind in affording the younger generation opportunities to improve their chances.” According to the paper, “Sir Lionel Woodward preaches the divine discontent which incites people to try to do better, and we hope his example will be followed.” And the paper concluded that:

... education, and the inculcation of principles essential, if there is to be economic salvation for those who cannot be “absorbed” in the rice-growing industry, must receive proper attention, otherwise there may be very grave difficulties ahead for them.

The *Singapore Free Press* was equally sympathetic to the Malays. However, in its editorial of March 8, 1924, it cautioned against hurling Eastern students at an impressionable age with all their inbred Eastern traditions

... into the vortex of a sordid, industrial civilization, where they cannot possibly be expected to separate the tares from the wheat ... Modern Western education is one of the greatest curses of the world, not because of its inherent wrongness but because of the inability of so many who swallow it either to digest or assimilate it.

Later in the same year, when for the first time a Malay doctor (Dr. Hussein Md Ibrahim) who had just graduated from the School of Medicine in Singapore (later the Singapore Medical College) lamented that “Since the opening of the School, on September 28, 1905, only three Malays from the F.M.S. had passed, out of a total of 170 qualified assistant surgeons from the same College. “This is a Malay country, ... [there should be] more Malay assistant surgeons in the Government hospitals, but at present it is the contrary.” He suggested the setting up of a special fund to help Malay children.

In Singapore, Eunos Abdullah, the first Malay representative to the Straits Legislative Council in 1924, repeatedly raised the subject of Malay interests. A correspondent (“A Son of the Soil”) who wrote to *The Singapore Free Press* on July 15, 1924, praised Eunos for voicing the feelings of the Malays “in regard to the education and the future of the Malays.” Towards the end of the 1920s, *The Malaya*

Tribune initiated a weekly column on “Muslim Affairs.” Malay/Muslim education was repeatedly raised and backed the efforts of Eunos Abdullah and others saying (November 2, 1929) that Eunos’s speech “clearly proves that the present educational policy of Government with regard to the English education of Malay boys is not a suitable one and ought to be amended. He is in a position to know the educational needs of his community better than others...”

The issue concerning the education of the Malays was also raised at the Fourth Annual Conference of the Malayan Teachers’ Association which was held in Kuala Lumpur on August 14, 1929. In his speech, the President, Syed Shaidali, from Perak, painted a grim picture of the unfortunate Malay pupils in schools and their late registration for the Cambridge Junior examination. He raised several interesting questions:

Why are there very few Malay students at the Medical College, very few Malay teachers in English schools, and not one Malay Queen’s Scholar? [The first scholar was Ahmad Ibrahim of Singapore (later Prof. Tan Sri) who won the scholarship in 1936]. The Malay lad when he comes to us and can hold his own with the best of any nationality, is often much brighter and cleverer than his class mates and frequently tops the list at examinations, yet as he goes higher up in his school career his progress decreases in arithmetical progression.

However, he himself did not explain why Malay boys tended to fall behind in the upper forms.

At the same conference, Ho Seng Ong, B.A. (Lond.), read a paper entitled “Geography and citizenship” and he remarked:

If we have a local problem, it is the question of how best the land may be made to contribute to our welfare. Not by “restriction” but by research lies the path to our economic weal; not merely by the extension of areas devoted to this crop and that crop but also by the more intensive cultivation of the higher yielding strains of our economic plants is the way to make Malaya the go-ahead country it now is....

Education was also frequently discussed in Johor where “Universal English Education” which had been in existence for several years

was abolished by H.R. Cheeseman when he was made the Superintendent of Education there in 1928. This led to protests from the Malay leaders including the Ruler, Sultan Ibrahim, who brought up the subject with the Colonial Office. Onn Jaafar, who was educated in England at the elementary school level, and who was then the editor of a Malay paper, the *Warta Melayu*, passed some pungent remarks against the British. In his letter to *The Malaya Tribune* on November 11, 1929, he said:

... while compelling its subjects to learn their mother tongue, the Government in no way encourages them to do so in the way they should. Theirs is a hypocritical policy. Even in the Government Service, Malay is given a back seat. Clerks knowing Malay only are treated in a very much inferior way to those knowing English and their pay and prospects are smaller. If it is intended to revive the [Malay] language and keep it as "the language" of the State, surely the Government should be the first to recognize its value and enhance it accordingly.

The anxiety of the Malays to achieve progress on par with the other communities did not subside in the course of the 1930s. The issue became even more urgent. Hitherto, there has been a tendency among those who write on Malay politics before World War II to regard the *Kesatuan Melayu Muda*, founded by Ibrahim Yaacob in 1938, as the party that first instilled political consciousness in the Malays. In fact, Malay political consciousness was earlier ignited by the controversial Decentralisation Policy announced by Sir Cecil Clementi (Governor of the Straits Settlements and High Commissioner of the Protected Malay States, 1930-1934) at the Durbar held at Sri Menanti in August 1931 (See Tregonning, 1964). Sir Cecil's speech at that time focused on constitutional issues. He reiterated the Government's pro-Malay policy and, arising from the Durbar, the slogan: "Malaya for the Malays" became increasingly popular. Clementi added, too, that education in the Malay medium would be given prior attention.

The Decentralisation Policy was an attempt by the British administration to woo the Malay Rulers who were unwilling to join the Federated Malay States (created in 1896) so that there could be a Pan-Malayan Federation. They were unwilling because they

understood that to participate in the Federation would lead to their losing a great part of their autonomy. Sir Cecil thought that by weakening the centre of the federal government, the Malay Rulers might change their minds.

The policy was, however, opposed by the business community who feared that it would cause the administration to become less efficient, which would adversely affect economic development. The English-educated non-Malays felt that decentralization, supported by the slogan of “Malaya for the Malays,” would place them in a disadvantageous position. What happened subsequently was that the English-language newspapers became very anti-Clementi while the Malay-language papers clearly supported him. It was in this atmosphere that the first Malay state association was born in 1936: the Perak Malay State Association. By 1939, there were sufficient Malay state associations throughout the Peninsula to get together to hold an All-Malaya Malay Congress, which rightly should be considered the prelude to the formation of the United Malay National Organization (UMNO) in early 1946.

A decade of intellectual and political ferment

Much of the Malay Archipelago, as well as mainland Southeast Asia were, since the earlier years, i.e., just before the beginning of the first century A.D., influenced culturally by Hinduism and Buddhism, followed by Islam, beginning from about the 14th century. It was Islam which in later years moved the Malay society towards modernization, although the battle was fought uncompromisingly between the traditionalists, generally called *Kaum Tua* (the Old Cohorts), and the modernists, called *Kaum Muda* (the Young Cohorts).

For example, one writer who gained notice because he came out strongly against the popular *Boria* (a form of popular entertainment in Penang) was Mohd. Yusof bin Sultan Maidin of Penang. In 1922, he published a pamphlet entitled *Boria dan Benchana-nya*. He followed that up a few months later with *Sha'er Boria*. Both the publications were directed against what he considered “the evils and abuses of the *Boria* plays” in Penang. However, he did not play the role of a pure critic for he soon came out with *Rahasia Kejayaan* (Secrets of Success) which was a collection of

essays on education, knowledge, friendship, character, duty as well as how to earn and spend money, reading and its benefits, newspapers, the difference between humans and animals, reason and its uses, mutual help, the power of speech. In a period of less than a decade, he brought out several more books. There was *Hikayat Pelayaran Gulliver*, an abridged translation of Part 1 of *Gulliver's Travels*. About three years later, he translated the *Voyages of Sinbad (Kisah Pelayaran-pelayaran Sinbad)*. His last publication was *Kejatohan Kaum-kaum Islam dan Pergerakan Baharu* which traced the progress of Islam in the early days, its subsequent decadence and the causes contributing to it, and the revival which followed. His discussions, though not entirely focused on Malay society, were very relevant during the inter-war years. The Peninsular Malay society had suffered tremendous trauma beginning from the mid-19th century. Ironically, those were precisely the years which saw the Malay Peninsula (unofficially called Malaya then) emerging as a progressive and economically very viable society.

Before World War II, although the English-educated played a significant part in raising the subject of Malay backwardness compared to the non-Malays, they were in fact not the first to do so. It was the Islamic paper, *Al-Imam*, published in Singapore in 1906, which first voiced the grievances of the Malays and, at the same time, sounded a warning to them that if they did not change their attitudes and assert themselves, their position in their own country would be in jeopardy. This paper, contrary to previous claims, was not primarily concerned with religious issues. To *Al-Imam*, Islam was the prescribed cure for all social and economic ills in Malay society. Therefore, it was preoccupied with the material problems faced by the Malays. It accused the British of using the upper class in Malay society to suppress the common people, and criticized Westerners for assuming that their religion and civilization were superior. They called upon all Eastern races, not just the Malays, to free themselves from bondage.

Another publication which dealt with the same issues as the *Al-Imam* was the *Pengasuh*, the official organ of the religious council known as the *Majlis Agama Islam dan Adat Istiadat Melayu Kelantan*, which was first published in July 1918. It did not ally itself with the *Kaum Muda* but it stated categorically that every article

or essay published in its columns was meant to awaken the Malays from their slumber and stir them from their lethargy—whether in affairs relating to the country and its inhabitants or matters concerned with the custom, behaviour, education, development, trade, vocation and agriculture of the Malays. It also advocated education as an indispensable means of achieving progress and called for opportunities to be made available to girls as well. Like *Al-Imam*, it asked the Malays to emulate the Japanese. It stood out openly as an opponent of conservatism for it openly chastised those ‘*ulamā*’ who abused their authority.

Although Malay journalism was very much alive during the inter-war years, not all shared the same interests and views but many did, such as the *Lembaga Malaya* of Singapore, the *Majlis* of Kuala Lumpur and the *Warta Kinta* of Ipoh. All the papers were intent on enlightening the Malays. One paper which fully shared *Al-Imam*’s cause was the *Saudara* of Penang, which began publication in 1928. Its founder was Syed Sheikh al-Hadi, the leading Islamic reformist in the country until his demise in 1934. All through, the *Saudara* was a powerful and uncompromising critic of Malay life and a strong advocate of social and religious reforms for Muslims. It had a companion periodical called *Al-Ikhwan* which similarly breathed the fiery spirit of the social reformer.

No discussion of education in Malay society would be complete without at least a cursory glance at the development of religious education among the Malays, in particular the development of the *madrasah*. The first, established in Singapore by 1908, was the Madrasah al-Iqbal. In terms of its organization, curriculum and approach to teaching and learning, it was meant to compete with the existing secular English schools. However, it was a little too soon then and the first *madrasah* did not last very long and had to be closed down. The Sekolah al-Hadi in Malacca was the next *madrasah* in the Straits Settlements. The Madrasah al-Masyhur was the third to be established in the Straits Settlements. It was the most successful.

The *Majlis Agama dan Istiadat Melayu*, created in Kelantan in 1915, also played an important part in establishing the Madrasah Muhammadiyah there, which eventually catered for three streams of education: Malay, English and Arabic. The English education

provided by the *madrasah* was, in 1917, 19 years in advance of that provided by the state government under the advisory system. In 1918, this single *madrasah* in Kelantan had an enrolment of 466 pupils whereas the 16 vernacular schools there together had an enrolment of only 464. However, the government continued to build more schools and by 1935, there were 58 government schools with a total enrolment of 4,863. Many of the pupils from Madrasah Muhammadiyah were even able to continue their education at the Penang Free School, the Malay College in Kuala Kangsar and the Sultan Idris Training College in Tanjong Malim. Two of its students—Tengku Abdullah Hassan (in 1927) and Nik Ahmed Kamil (in 1930)—completed their law studies in England.

Earlier than the Madrasah Muhammadiyah of Kelantan was the Madrasah al-Hamidiah founded in Limbong Kapal, just outside Alor Star, Kedah in 1906. It was founded by Haji Wan Sulaiman bin Haji Sidek who had previously had 20 years of education in Mecca. The teachers were given certificates. It was the school which, for many years, produced the leading Muslim scholars in Kedah (Kim, 1991). An even better example of the modernity of religious schools is the Sekolah Al-Diniah at Kampung Lalang, Padang Rengas, Perak. It was founded in 1924 by Sheikh al-Junid, a Mandailing. He later became mentor and father-in-law to Datuk Asri who in the early 1950s became President of Parti Islam Se-Malaya (the Islamic Party of Malaya, PAS). The school had an enrolment of 16 in 1924 but its enrolment in 1941 was no less than 500. At least eight branches of the school were later opened up in various *kampongs* in the vicinity of the original *madrasah*. Religious and English education were practically the most conspicuous in the development of Malay society in the first two decades of the 20th century because it was the educated segment of the society which played the most vital role in enlightening the Malays leading to eventual formation, in the 1930s, of various associations for the protection and advancement of Malay interests in the Peninsula. Hitherto, the impression given by earlier scholars has been that it was the *Kesatuan Melayu Muda*, founded by Ibrahim Yaacob in 1938 which brought about the political awakening of the Malays.

Onn bin Jaafar who, after World War II, was to become the founder-President of UMNO, also discussed the transformation of

Malay society in a talk delivered at the Singapore Rotary Club in 1931 (reported in *The Malaya Tribune* on January 31, 1931) in which he said that “the modern Malays, those born since the beginning of the present century or a little before it, have seen the advantages of science and knowledge...They are the young men who are doing away with the age-old custom and ideas...The young men are no longer prepared to follow blindly the dictates of custom.”

It is not common knowledge that although the Malays had yet to form political associations in the 1920s, the British were beginning to be concerned. Sir Laurence Guillemard, Governor of the Straits Settlements and High Commissioner of the Protected Malay States reported to the Colonial Office on November 8, 1920 (v. *The Malayan Bulletin of Political Intelligence*) that the Malay “has advanced greatly of recent years.” The report continued that:

It will be regrettable if unconscious neglect due to changed circumstance and the mass of routine work over-alienates the sympathies of Moslem Rulers so loyal as the Malay Sultans showed themselves during the War. Moreover, the wide-spread social and economic unrest of the present time is affecting also the Mohamedan world, and waves of unrest are apparent in the Dutch East Indies, where various societies exist which are suspected of revolutionary tendencies.

True enough, by 1934, the Special Branch reported that the Communist International had considered it timely to try to convert the Malays by using “Indonesian” agents which had begun operations in Singapore. The report said:

This group which numbers about fifty...in Malaya of any importance are the local representatives of that body who fled from the Netherlands Indies after the rebellion there of 1926-1927. Amongst them are supporters of all or nearly all the various political groups into which the aspirations of “Indonesians” are split up. There is also amongst them, a small section that helpers have been found by the M.C.P. [Malayan Communist Party] to prepare the propaganda in Malay...which is intended to further the progress of the “Racial Movement” in Malaya.

At the same time, it was becoming quite noticeable which Malays were drawn towards the communist movement. In 1935, two Javanese

living in Malaya were said to have joined the M.C.P. The *The Malayan Bulletin of Political Intelligence* in 1936 proved even more worrying for the British. It was reported that an All-Malaya Muslim Missionary Society had been founded to foster Pan-Islamism. The society had started publishing a journal known as *Genuine Islam* which was distributed all over the world. In 1936, it allegedly published an article in its journal which was anti-Jewish because of the disturbances in the Palestine. A year later, the Special Branch reported that:

In July,... Haji Abdul Wahid bin Haji Wahab, the Javanese founder of “nadwatul-Ulema” (society of distinguished learned men) in Sourabaya... arrived in Singapore and opened a branch of this society amongst the members of the local Boyanese community (Carnell, 1953, p.69).

There is no evidence, however, that the local Malay state associations which were beginning to emerge from 1936—the first in Perak—were influenced by the radicals from the East Indies. They were not concerned with ideology. They were more concerned with advancing the economic interests of the Malays who were clearly not on par with the non-Malays (both the Chinese and the Indian commercial segments of the population). What was obviously flowering in Malay society was the major interest shown in literary activities. They were particularly interested in fiction but there were philosophical and intellectual discussions, too, such as *Umat Melayu dengan Masyarakat* (1938), which discussed the relationships between the Malays and the other ethnic groups; *Pertandingan Sokma* (1937) which was a story of the rivalry between Islamic and Christian propaganda in Java; and *Korban Poligami* (1937), a story illustrating the influence of ‘modernity’ on the Malays. Between 1935-1936, a number of humorous and rather erotic love-stories were published by one Raja Mansor bin Raja Abdul Kadir, who was born in Kuala Dipang, Perak, but brought up and educated in Sumatra and later Java.

Abdul Samad bin Ahmad from Klang also published a number of works beginning from 1936. He continued to be active after World War II. Among some of his works were *Abraham Lincoln* (1936), *Chinta Itu Bahaya*, a novel dealing with sexual love and the danger of vetoing it once it has taken root and has been reciprocated; and

Kenang-Kenangan Selangor (1937) which was a valuable contribution to Selangor historiography. Such modernist publications were not confined to Penang, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore. Malay publishers in smaller towns such as Ipoh and Muar also made some contributions. The 1930s was a period which witnessed unprecedented literary effervescence in Malay society.

Because of the tendency of historians to focus on the growth of nationalism in Malay society, social, educational and intellectual aspects of the society during the first three decades of the 20th century have hitherto been neglected. Also, few non-Malays write on Malay society, while Malay scholars themselves tend to focus only on data in Malay sources, whereas the Malayan English press was not partisan. Every paper took an interest in all segments of the society, as well as all the ethnic groups. Since the English press in this country dates back as far as 1806 and since there were no less than seven newspapers published from Penang to Singapore in the inter-war years, the information available on the country is far more than any single historian can hope to cope with. Newspapers are especially valuable because they provide, on the whole, contemporary reports but they also contain useful historical accounts and, by the 1930s, many newspapers published photographs which are no longer easily available today.

Concluding remarks

Beginning from the mid-19th century, owing to the advent of capitalism, albeit still on a modest scale, as well as technology (relevant to shipping, mining and commercial agriculture) introduced from outside, the Malays found that they were increasingly losing control of their own society. By the turn of the 20th century, they had been practically displaced from the main modern urban areas. The earliest group of Malays to be conscious of the danger which lay ahead were those with exposure to reformist ideas which were bringing about change in the Islamic world in West Asia. They foresaw the danger that would befall Malay society should the Malays continue to be oblivious of the serious situation that was besetting Malay society. Influenced by what was happening in West Asia, they led the way to try to infuse a new spirit into Malay society. They were also aware that modern education, based on the Western

model, could help the Malays to keep abreast of the other communities.

However, Malay society was soon assailed by politics, largely through the influence of Malays from the Netherlands East Indies (later Indonesia). Gradually, the Malays became increasingly enamoured with politics. This was especially so when the Japanese surrendered in 1945 and the Communist Party of Malaya almost took control of the country, followed by the British attempt to impose a “Malayan Union” (by removing the sovereignty of the Malay rulers) which so shocked the Malays that it instilled in them a deep desire to preserve the originality and completeness of the Malay society. Since 1957, many members of the Malay intelligentsia, unlike those in pre-war days, have consistently urged the Malays to resist any form of foreign influence. The Malays today are confronted by a ponderous dilemma.

Endnotes

1. Malacca is well-known for its *peranakan* (local-born) communities. They are descendants of Chinese, Indians, Indian Muslims, Portuguese and Dutch who at some point in time had married outside their own ethnic groups. In the past, the Chinese were commonly referred to as Baba and Nyonya. They were also known as Straits Chinese or Chinese British (sometimes even referred to, before 1957 when Melaka was still a British Colony, as King’s Chinese or Queen’s Chinese depending on who the ruler of Britain was at a particular point in time). The local-born Indians have long been known as members of the Chitty community. The Portuguese Eurasians known as Kristangs have spread out to other places in the country. Many of them are found in Seremban and Penang. Very few of the Dutch Eurasians have stayed back even in Melaka. Many migrated to Britain before World War II.

2. This was more evident in Penang and Singapore where Indian Muslims and Arabs were wealthy and tended to overshadow the Malays. The Singapore Malay Union, formed in 1926, excluded non-Malay Muslims. The Malay newspaper *Utusan Melayu* began publishing on the eve of World War II. Capital was subscribed only by the Malays. In Penang, the Indian Muslims formed, in 1927, what was called the Penang Malay Association although it was at that time not recognized as a Malay association.

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