

The Melaka Sultanate: Internal Administration and Control of Its Empire

by

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Since the days of R. J. Wilkinson and R. O. Winstedt, a great deal more has been written on the Melaka Sultanate but numerous questions remain unanswered. However, similar sources, studied and re-studied, have provided increasingly new perspectives. For example, it is clear now that there is ample evidence to show that the Melaka Sultanate was the progenitor of the socio-political traditions subscribed to by the later Peninsular Malay states, the only exception being Negeri Sembilan, a matrilineal society, which derived its tradition (called *adat perpatih*) from Minangkabau, Sumatra.²

While it is true that existing data simply do not allow the historian to write a precise chronological history of the Sultanate, the same data do provide a graphic picture of the social norms and values prevailing at that time, also. Fortunately, the broad structure of government and administration.

Of special importance are two documents on the laws administered during the period of the Sultanate. They enable modern scholars to understand the principles upon which government was organized then, the purpose of the titles conferred on major chieftains as well as the various functions, *albeit* rather generally, performed by them.³

But studies of the Melaka sultanate and commentaries on the *Sejarah Melayu* (a comprehensive document which throws light on Melaka's socio-political system) have tended to concentrate on political developments. Even writings on the post-Melakan indigenous Malay polity have paid little serious attention to the subject of administration. Neither visitors to the Malay states in early days nor later students of Malay society have shown any major interest in the subject. Indeed existing historiography, both indigenous and foreign, reveals that what is best understood about the history of Malay society is the subject of power politics.

While it is naive to believe that the political can be totally divorced from the administrative, some general distinctions must be made if only to allow for relevant emphasis. It would be appropriate to regard administration as more specifically the implementation or execution of policies, rules, decrees, and so forth, rather than the process of competition for authority and power, which is the substance of politics.

It should be noted that Melaka's socio-political system was established in the course of the expansion of the empire. In both the *Undang-undang Melaka* and the Maritime Laws, it is stated that these laws which had been compiled in the office of every minister were brought together only during the reign of Sultan Mahmud, the eighth ruler of Melaka.⁴ But it appears possible that the ruler who contributed most to the formulation of laws and court ceremonial was the third ruler of Melaka, Sultan Muhammad.⁵

Before the subject of administration during the era of the Melaka Sultanate can be meaningfully dealt with, it is necessary to explain, firstly, the Malay concept of "state" and, secondly, the geographical structure of the Melaka empire. Gullick's claim that the Malay word for State is "Negeri" is not well substantiated by the use of the term in pre-20th century Malay writings. Traditionally, it was used more specifically to denote territory (hence *negeri Laut*, *negeri Bernam*, *negeri Jeram*, etc.). It is only in recent times, after the advent of British administration, that the term has been used as the Malay equivalent of the Western concept of "state".⁶

It is the term *kerajaan* (the state of having a king) which more clearly conveys the Malay idea of state, i.e. it was the Raja rather than the existence of a territory with precise boundary which was the prerequisite for the existence of a 'state'. Therefore, the more correct translation for *kerajaan* is not *state* or *government* but *kingdom*. When Sultan Mahmud was fleeing from Bentan, where he had taken refuge after the fall of Melaka in 1511 he was assured by his minister that:

Every country has a Raja, and if your Highness is granted length of days, we can find ten countries for you!⁸

The Melaka empire, at its peak, covered an area very likely larger than Malaysia today. It is believed that it encompassed the entire Malay Peninsula (including Patani), a large part of eastern Sumatra (such as Kampar, Siak, Siantan, Palembang, Jambi and Tungkal) as well as Lingga and the Moluccas. Difficulties of communication naturally precluded the establishment of a highly centralized form of government. The administration unavoidably was loosely structured.

Various devices had to be used to string together the widely dispersed empire. Certainly one important contrivance was to create an aura of sanctity and inviolability vis-a-vis the monarch. As Wilkinson said:

Mohammed Shah thought it wise to emphasize a king's position by sumptuary laws. The king never slept, he "reposed" (*berada*); he was never ill, he "had maladies" (*gering*); he never ate, he regaled himself (*bersantap*). He never walked, he was "borne about on high" (*berangkat*).¹¹

As mentioned earlier, Sultan Muhammad also instituted court ceremonial:

He made white the colour of the Royal umbrella and allowed no one to be borne in a litter except himself. He also forbade others to build balconies or rest their ridge poles on pillars used directly on the ground. Without his permission no one could wear ornaments of gold or use the colour yellow either in attire or to fringe cushions and mats. He might confer on one favoured person the right to wear a kris sheathed in gold, on another the right to wear golden anklets, on a third the right to wear a yellow coat.¹²

The *Raja* was an absolute monarch. Legitimacy in all aspects of life, except Islam, emanated from him.

The *Sejarah Melayu* also clearly demonstrates that the ruler of Melaka was a King among kings. It would not be far-fetched to say that he was indeed the substantive "Paramount Ruler" unlike Malaysia's *Yang Di Pertuan Agong* (the term was not used in the past) who is elected once in five years. Petty kingdoms within the Malay Archipelago under Melaka's subjection (*jajahan takluk*) were expected to pay homage to Melaka - *menyembah ke Melaka*. Those that had the audacity to refuse soon faced the might of Melaka's invading force: hence, Kelantan and Siak were attacked.¹³

Melaka, on its part, extended protection to the subordinate kingdoms. When there was an uprising in Pasai and the ruler, Sultan Zaini Abidin, sought the help of Sultan Mansur, a fleet was sent to put down the uprising.¹⁴

In another instance, when the Telanai of Trengganu incurred the wrath of Sultan Muhammad of Pahang by doing homage in Melaka, the Sultan of Pahang ordered Sri Akar Raja to go to Trengganu and kill the Telanai. According to the *Sejarah Melayu*:

... the Telanai was killed. The Sri Akar Raja then returned to Pahang and Sultan Muhammad gave Trengganu to him as his fief. But when the news reached Malaka that the Telanai of Trengganu had been killed on the orders of the Sultan of Pahang, Sultan Ala'ud-din was highly enraged and said, '[The Raja of] Pahang has flouted our authority and I am minded to order the invasion of his country.' But Bendahara Paduka Raja said, 'May your Highness graciously pardon his humble servant, my advice is that we should not forthwith destroy Pahang, it is your Highness who will suffer loss [for Sultan Muhammad was Sultan Alauddin's elder brother]'¹³

But the ruler nevertheless had to assert his authority forcefully. It was decided to send the Laksamana to Pahang where his assignment was to give instructions to one of his men to kill a relative of the Sri Akar Raja. When this had been perpetrated and the Sultan of Pahang questioned the Laksamana, the latter replied:

It is true that the man killed a cousin of the Sri Akar Raja. Nevertheless I cannot consent to any account being taken of this, for the Sri Akar Raja himself offended against the Raja of Malaka in killing the Telanai of Trengganu without obtaining sanction from Malaka. And the Raja of Pahang was silent.¹⁴

As previously indicated, it is clear from the *Sejarah Melayu* that heads of petty kingdoms were expected to do homage by visiting the royal capital from time to time. One more example may be cited here. It should be noted that this occurred after the fall of Melaka in 1511. According to the *Sejarah Melayu*:

one night ... Sultan Mahmud was speaking of the vassal states towards the West, viz. Bruas and Manuong, and was saying how long it was since he had had a visit from their rulers (?), and how even Tun Aria Bija 'diraja [of Bruas] had not presented himself before the king since the fall of Malaka. That same night he sent for the Bendahara and said to him, 'What think you should be done? The western territories are slipping from our hands.' And the Bendahara answered, 'I suggest, your Highness, that the Paduka Tuan be sent to the West to summon Tun Aria Bija diraja hither, for the Paduka Tuan is his brother-in-law'¹⁵ (My italics)

The Paduka Tuan left for Bruas with no less than twenty ships. The result was that Tun Aria Bija Diraja went to Bentan to do homage and was given robes of honour befitting his rank.¹⁶

The available evidence also shows that the ruler of Melaka endeavoured to establish close rapport with members of the ruling echelon in the subordinate territories. On one occasion when Sultan Mansur made plans to visit Majapahit, he

... sent messengers to Indragiri, Palembang, Jambi, Lingga and Tungkal to bid Maharaja Merlang [of Indragiri] and the Raja of Palembang, Jambi, Lingga and Tungkal accompany him to Majapahit. They all consented to escort him....¹⁷

It is noteworthy that the *Sejarah Melayu* spoke of the 'Rajas of Indragiri, Jambi, Tungkal and Lingga', as well as "the *Raja* of Palembang".¹⁸ Other territories also had their own Raja such as Pahang, Kedah, Patani, the Moluccas, Kampar and Stak.¹⁹ It confirms what has been stated earlier that the ruler of Melaka was indeed a *King among kings* and Melaka was an empire.

Not every subordinate territory, however, had its own *Raja*. There were territories which were given as fiefs (*pegangan*)²⁰ to those who had served the ruler well. Holders of fiefs appear to be of two types - resident and absentee. It may be surmised that the resident incumbents were entrusted with the responsibility of directly administering the fief. Tun Perak, who was to become the Bendahara of Melaka, was once resident at Klang to take charge of the administration there.²¹ He was then known as the *Penghulu*. Later the administrator in Klang was called the *Mandulika*.²² Tun Mahmud, son of the Paduka Tuan, was given Selangor (the Selangor river basin) as his fief by Sultan Mahmud. But Selangor was not elevated to the status of a *kerajaan*.²³

The absentee holders of fiefs were usually officers of distinctions who were bestowed fiefs in recognition of their devoted services so that they might have a source of revenue. These continued to stay in Melaka and served the ruler directly. Among them may be mentioned the Bendahara who held Bentan as his fief,²⁴ the Laksamana who held Siantan;²⁵ the Paduka Tuan who was granted Buru;²⁶ and the Seri Udani who held Merba.²⁷ It is not clear what other perquisites (apart from the right to collect revenue) accompanied the conferment of a fief but it may be surmised that the appointment was highly prestigious and it also enabled the incumbent to acquire a following of his own.

Rulers of subordinate territories and holders of fiefs had not only to do obeisance by periodically visiting the ruler in the capital, it was also their bounden duty to ensure that revenue was remitted to their overlord from time to time. An instance is given in the *Sejarah Melayu* of a revenue bearer arriving in Melaka during the reign of Sultan Alauddin Riayat Shah:

Ere long the Adipati of Kampar came to pay tribute as was customary; and he went to the Sri Nara 'diraja, for the custom was that whenever the Adipati of Kampar, the Raja of Tungkal, the Mandulika of Klang or other administrators of territory that paid revenue came to present the revenue they had collected, they went first to the Treasurer and it was he who took them to the palace.²⁸ (My italics)

Despite the seemingly unlimited authority reposing in the ruler, in practice, he was normally not the sole decision-maker. The *Sejarah Melayu* never ceased to reiterate that the ruler must always consult his advisers; it is, for example, said that:

... no ruler, however great his wisdom and understanding, shall prosper or succeed in doing justice unless he consults with those in authority under him. For rulers are like fire and their ministers are like firewood, and fire needs wood to produce a flame.⁴⁰

This is more explicitly stated in the *Undang-undang Melaka*:

Every ruler must appoint high dignitaries to act on his behalf so that he need not concern himself (with trivial matters).

Every king must, in the first place, appoint a Chief Minister (Bendahara), secondly, a Police Chief (*Temenggung*), thirdly, a Treasurer (*Penghulu Bendaharu*) and fourthly, a Harbour-master (*Syahbandar*). (and if he does so) both the ruler and his subjects can live in peace and security.

The law is divided into three divisions, firstly, that of the Chief Minister; secondly, that of the Police-Chief; and thirdly, that of the Harbour-master.

The Chief Minister is given jurisdiction for instance over those who are holding office, and those who rank as *tuan*, the *sida*² (Court-officers) and the children of high dignitaries.

The Police-Chief is given jurisdiction over crimes committed in the country and (matters) such as the investigation (of crime) and the apprehension of criminals in the land.

The Harbour-master is given jurisdiction over all matters concerning foreign merchants, orphans and all who have suffered injustice and furthermore, the regulations pertaining to junks, cargo-boats and other vessels.

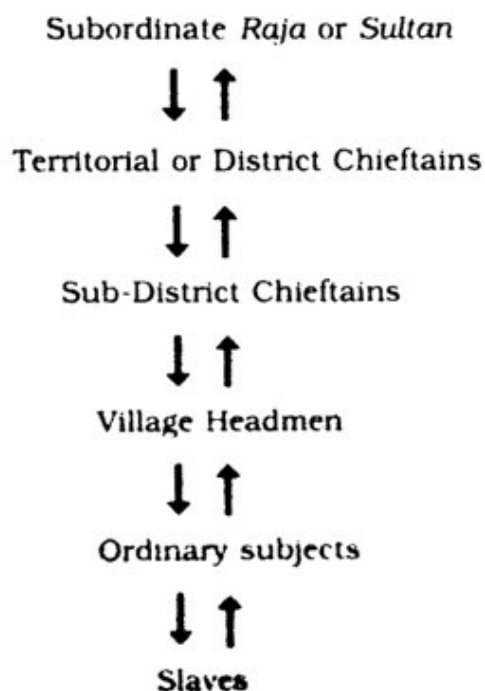
But it does not alter the fact that the ruler's word [*titah*] was law.

What emerges from the preceding discussion is a picture of an elaborately organized government. However, it must be admitted that both the *Sejarah Melayu* and the recorded laws of Melaka, in general, merely present the *ideal* situation. There is very little accurate information available on the actual working of the government. Early Portuguese accounts⁴¹ are undoubtedly valuable documents but, like other documents, they tend also to focus on the overall structure. This is the main problem faced by scholars of Malay society. Even mid nineteenth century historical documents provide scanty information on local administration. In every traditional Malay state, the centre appears to be all important; the periphery counted for little.

In the later Malay states, the situation was at least less complicated. It can be ascertained that every *kerajaan* consisted of the centre together with various riverine basins. The kingdom was, in formal treaties, referred to as "*Negeri* (for example, Perak or Selangor or Johor) *dengan segala jajahan takluknya* [and all its dependencies]".⁴² Administratively, the kingdom was generally divided, in descending order, into smaller and smaller units, with a chieftain or headman in charge of a particular unit, and the headman of the smallest unit was responsible to the headman of the next larger, and so on, up the scale.

In the Melaka situation, it is possible to discern at least one extra tier in the overall political-administrative hierarchy. This class comprised the subordinate *Raja*, sometimes also using the title "Sultan" (for instance, the Sultan of Pasai).

Jajahan or dependencies with a *Raja* or *Sultan* may be justifiably called "subordinate kingdoms", although in Malay no specific terminology exists. It is not clear how each *jajahan* was actually administered but it can be assumed that the subordinate kingdoms enjoyed a higher degree of autonomy than the ordinary *jajahan*, if only because the heads of these petty kingdoms were persons of royal status (for example, the Sultan of Siak)¹³ and, in certain instances, they were, in fact, members of the Melaka royal lineage (for example, the Sultan of Pahang).¹⁴ Very likely, in the subordinate kingdoms, the political-administrative structure was as illustrated below:



Admittedly, not every one of the subordinate kingdoms necessarily had a whole complement of chieftains and headmen as shown above. Density of population and the size of the kingdoms were obviously factors which directly determined the degree of elaborateness of the political-administrative system. In such petty kingdoms, it was the subordinate *Sultan* or *Raja* (for example, that of Palembang, Indragiri, Kedah, Jambi and Tungkal)¹⁵ who had more direct relations with the Sultan of Melaka. It is doubtful that chieftains at a lower level (except those who performed duties as emissaries) had any easy or regular access to Melaka's ruler.

Territories which were more directly under the control of Melaka, including the several fiefs held by the principal dignitaries resident in Melaka, were probably administered by territorial chieftains appointed by the Sultan of Melaka for he was the source of legitimacy. The holders of fiefs, however, very likely had a voice in the appointment of such territorial chieftains. The *Sejarah Melayu* provides hardly any information on this subject and only in one instance is the title of such a territorial chieftain mentioned, namely, the *Mandulika* of Klang,⁴⁰ earlier known as *Penghulu* when Tun Perak was put in charge of the territory.⁴¹

In either the subordinate kingdoms or the ordinary *jajahan*, whether sub-district chieftains were also appointed is open to conjecture. But village headmen there must have been. This conclusion is arrived at on the basis of the situation prevailing in the later Malay states where the inhabitants were wont to cluster in little groups in specific localities called *kampung*⁴² and every *kampung* had a headman. The titles conferred on each of them was peculiar to a particular *kerajaan* (for example, Tok Sidang in Perak, Tok Kweng in Kelantan, &c.).

Because of the wide geographical dispersal of the numerous *jajahan*, it can be surmised that the Melaka Sultanate exercised a form of indirect rule. While administration in the capital itself was evidently tightly controlled - the duties of the major officers of state were precisely enumerated in the *Undang-undang Melaka* - administration of the outer dependencies was entrusted to Raja or Sultan or territorial chieftains on the spot. Occasionally, Melaka sent out its own princes to rule over subordinate kingdoms (for example, Sultan Menawar, son of Sultan Alauddin of Melaka was the Sultan of Kampar)⁴³ or officers (sometimes also from the royal family) to administer its outlying dependencies (for example, Tun Mahmud was made the territorial chieftain of Selangor).⁴⁴ More usually, Melaka appointed or merely confirmed as the head of a dependency the local chieftain (for example, Sultan Ahmad Shah of Patani,⁴⁵ and Sultan Khoja Ahmad Shah of Siak).⁴⁶ Although the *Sejarah Melayu* does not specify the duties of the subordinate Raja or Sultan and that of the territorial chieftains, it can be deduced that the collection of taxes was certainly one of the major functions. Also, from a commonsense point of view, one may add that they had to maintain peace to ensure continual loyalty to the Paramount Ruler, and to execute decrees promulgated from time to time. Otherwise, the local rulers were left very much to their own devices.

Melaka was, in effect, an empire, not a unitary state. Strong though the central government was, it encountered numerous problems in the administration of its vast domain. The *Sejarah Melayu* does not conceal the fact that punitive expeditions had to be sent again and again. But so long⁴⁷

Melaka maintained its prosperity through the steady growth of its trade. It had adequate resources to deal with recalcitrant dependencies. Even the fall of Melaka in 1511 did not at once lead to the dismemberment of the empire. The capital was merely transferred elsewhere and eventually established at the Johor river. But what is more significant is that the socio-political traditions which evolved in the course of the development of the Melaka Sultanate survived even longer than the *kerajaan* of Melaka-Johor.

Based on available evidence there is no reason to conclude that the later Malay states radically departed from the political or administrative structure of the earlier Malay states. Reports of British officials, especially in the 19th century, indicate quite clearly that the basic structure was similar (the earlier system, as mentioned previously, can be generally reconstructed based on the *Undang-undang Melayu*, *Sejarah Melayu* and other contemporary documents). But some basic differences there must have been if only because both Melaka and Johor (Lama) were geographically more widely dispersed and difficulties in communication alone must require the formulation of a looser structure.

Although the presence of the Portuguese (1511-1641) and the Dutch (1641-1795 and 1818-1824) in Melaka also rendered the control of the Melaka-Johor empire more difficult, the turning point in the fragmentation of the empire occurred more significantly after the assassination of Sultan Mahmud of Johor (the last ruler from the Melaka dynasty) in 1699. The 18th century witnessed the emergence of new Malay kingdoms, no longer under the hegemony of Johor. These were Negeri Sembilan, Terengganu, Kelantan, and Selangor. But all the new kingdoms continued to subscribe to the grand tradition established by the Melaka Sultanate.

Notes

- 1 For example, the *Undang-Undang Melaka* (The Laws of Melaka), a legal digest was adapted and adopted in Kedah, Pahang, Riau, Pontianak and Bruges. And the *Undang-Undang Johor* was exactly the same as the *Undang-Undang Melaka*. See Liaw Yock Fang, *Undang-Undang Melaka*, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1976, pp.1, 3f.
- 2 For a general discussion of this subject, see Khoo Kay Kim, "Tanah Melayu Abad ke 18" (Malaya in the 18th Century), *Journal Sejarah* (Journal of the Historical Society, University of Malaya), Vol. XV, 177/78, pp. 1-11.
- 3 See R.O. Winstedt and P.E. de Josselin de Jong, "The Maritime Laws of Malacca" *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, Malayan Branch* (henceforth JMBRAS), Vol. 29, Pt. 3, 1956, pp.22-59, and Liaw Yock Fang, *Undang-Undang Melaka*.
- 4 See R.O. Winstedt and P.E. de Josselin de Jong, *op.cit.*, p.29, and Liaw Yock Fang, *Ibid.* p.65.
- 5 Haji Buyong Adil, *Sejarah Melaka Dalam Zaman Kerajaan Melayu (The History of Melaka During the Period of Malay Government)*, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur, 1973, pp.17-25.
- 6 J.M. Gullick, *Indigenous Political Systems of Western Malaya*, Athlone Press, University of London, 1958, p.21.
- 7 See Khoo Kay Kim, *The Western Malay States, 1850-1873: The Effects of Commercial Development on Malay Politics*, Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur, 1972, p.3, for examples of earlier uses of the word *negere*.
- 8 C.C. Brown, "Sejarah Melayu or Malay Annals", *JMBRAS*, Vol.25, Pts. 2 & 3 (1952), p.189.
- 9 R.J. Wilkinson, "The Malacca Sultanate", *JMBRAS*, Vol.13, Pt.2, 1935, p.29.
- 10 *Ibid.*, pp.29-30.
- 11 W.G. Shellabear (ed.), *Sejarah Melayu (The Malay Annals)*, Malaya Publishing House Ltd., Singapore, 1961, pp.146, 205.
- 12 C.C. Brown, "Sejarah Melayu or Malay Annals", pp.105-107.
- 13 *Ibid.*, pp.115-116.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p.117.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p.182.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p.183.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p.77.
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 *Ibid.*, *passim*.
- 20 W.G. Shellabear, *Sejarah Melayu*, p.147.
- 21 C.C. Brown, "Sejarah Melayu or Malay Annals", pp.65-66.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p.197.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p.183.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p.86.
- 25 *Ibid.*, pp.82-83.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p.108.
- 27 W.G. Shellabear, *op.cit.*, p.147.
- 28 C.C. Brown, *op.cit.*, p.197.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p.124.
- 30 Liaw Yock Fang, *op.cit.*, pp.63-65.
- 31 See, for example, A. Cortesao (ed.), *The Suma Oriental of Tome Pires*, Haklart Society, Second Series, No.89 & 90, London, 1944; Francisco de Sa De Meneses, *The Conquest of Malacca*, Tr. E.C. Knowlton Jr., University of Malaya Press, Kuala Lumpur, 1970.

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- 32 The usual official translation for *jajahan takluk* was "dependency". More correctly, it means "territory which has been subjugated".
- 33 C.C. Brown, *op.cit.*, p.105.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p.97.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p.98.
- 36 *Ibid.*, p.77.
- 37 *Ibid.*
- 38 W.G. Shellabear, *op.cit.*, p.90.
- 39 For an idea of the numerous villages which were strung out along a major river basin, see F.A. Swettenham, "Journal Kept During A Journey Across The Malay Peninsula", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Straits Branch*, No 15, 1885, pp.1-37.
- 40 C.C. Brown, *op.cit.*, p.183. It should be noted that "Selangor" here refers not to the present State of Selangor but to the Selangor River Basin.
- 41 *Ibid.*, p.152.
- 42 *Ibid.*, p.181.