

REVISITING RELATIONS BETWEEN THE BRITISH AND THE MALAY ESTABLISHMENTS IN MALAYA

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Abstract

This paper examines the relations between the Malay establishments (Malay Sultans and Chiefs) and the British colonial government in Malaya from 19th to early 20th centuries. It reassesses the relations between both parties with regard to the socio-economic and political conditions in Malaya during the period under review. It is well known fact that the British authority required the support and cooperation of the Malay establishments in order to please the local communities and to give binding force upon any policies on Malaya. The paper also contends that the Malay Establishments as they were soon absorbed into the Western-style of administration of the states, depending on the British authority for their survival at the expense of steady progress of non-Malays in the fields of education, economy and administrative affairs.

Keywords: British authority, Malay establishments, Malaya

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Introduction

The advent of British colonialism in Malaya did not bring about abrupt change in the monarchy system of the Malay states. As a matter of fact, British left the monarchy systems intact, in the Peninsular Malay States. British policy essentially attempted to bring the Malay traditional elites i.e. Sultans and Malay chiefs into the orbit of European-based administration system so as to induce the Malays populace to cooperate with the British colonial authority. Yeo Kim Wah (1971) opined that this was done through the inclusion of the traditional Malay elites in the administration of the state, though one may argue how far the Malay courts were allowed to participate and exercise their powers, and the formalization of their status and position within the colonial administration through either payment of allowances or pensions. William Roff (1974) observed that these measures were done mainly to solidify

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Malays' support for the British colonial administration and this proved to be very essential during the settling in period and when it comes to the introduction of policies or reforms.

Another important point is that this measure served as a buffer as to hinder the political encroachment of other non-Malay communities (for example the Chinese community) in the public life of the state. The British, in order to facilitate the smoothness of the participation and inclusion of the Malay courts into the administration of the state, they provided an English education to the sons of Malay Sultans and Malay chiefs whom later were absorbed into the British-controlled administration. Other steps were through revival of certain positions which had been faded away in the pre-British rule. As a whole the rulers received attention from the British authority and even formalization of their position and status during the colonial period. It has been noted that the subordinate chiefs' dominancy getting less significant especially when the British had introduced European-based administrative system whereby knowledge of English education was considered indispensable in getting admission into that administrative system.

The use of this as a 'pretext' had led to lessening of the significance of the Malay chiefs in the administration of the state due to the fact they were educated and trained in a traditional way of education. Yeo (1971) also commented that the Malays of 'good birth' whom were referring to the sons of Sultans and Malay Chiefs had been prepared to undergo a training in English based educational system in a specified college that was established in Kuala Kangsar, famously known as Malay College of Kuala Kangsar. Essentially, the Malay society was of two layers, namely at the top where the elites resided, consisted mainly of Sultans, Malay chiefs and certain syeds family, and the other layer was the Malay peasants. This dichotomy was based on largely birth/bloodship. The Malays, economically speaking, were mainly doing simple economic activities such paddy cultivation and they were deeply attached to the rural life in the area where they lived. This situation was further intensified due to the strong attachment among the Malay traditional society to the traditional religious life which centered on mosques and musollas/suraus in villages.

In the 20th century, William Roff (1974) mentioned that the Malay society was basically experiencing a number of socio-political alterations. One of them could be seen through the creation of a new class of Malay intelligentsia group who had been trained in Malay College of Kuala Kangsar and Sultan Idris Training Center. These Malay intelligentsia later took up a number of positions in the government departments, though most of them were employed in the lower positions. Only a handful number of Malays were able to gain access to more important positions like the sons of ex Sultan of Perak, Sultan Abdullah. Rex Stevenson (1975) mentioned that Frank Swettenham, envisioned that indirect rule in Malaya was purposely done so as to protect and preserve the Malay society and running of those Malay States through close cooperation with the Malay courts. He used to remark the need to establish 'really friendly relations with the ruler and to either conciliate or overawe the chiefs, many of whom were powerful enough to at least covertly disregard the orders of the rulers'.

Yet in actual practice, it seemed that what had been going on in the Peninsula had deviated from what that vision aimed for. Essentially, the Malay aristocracy were cooperating and participating outside the parameter of real and actual administration of the states and even if they did participate, the roles were so minimal. They seemed to serve as advisers to the British residents. The state administration was operated through a European based administrative system which directed by British officers from district level upwards. Nevertheless, the Malay courts i.e. Malay Sultans and Chiefs were consulted in a sense that their advice sought and were given a sense of participation in the running of the state's administration. Yeo (1971) rightly observed that the rulers played almost entirely a ceremonial role in the Federated Malay States, cut off from actual administration of the state administration. This ceremonial roles/functions could be seen in a number of occasions, for instance in the openings of the conference of rulers, meetings of federal councils and other public occasions.

Yeo further remarked that the Malay courts were being used to initiate changes which were already decided by the British authority. Later years, there had been increasing participation of the Malays in the subordinate services i.e. clerical positions. Yeo (1971) observed that with the establishment of Residential system in the Malay States, backed by the Governor of Straits Settlements, witnessed the foundation of western-oriented administrative apparatus in the Malay States. The Malay courts i.e. Sultan and Malay chief were excluded from participating in the actual administration of the states, which now placed in the hands of British officials and their advice was sought whenever necessary. One may see at this point that the Malay courts, at certain extent, now assumed the role of adviser to the British Resident, which supposedly according to the established principles in the treaties signed, the British resident would act as 'adviser' to the Sultan on all matters except those touching on the Islamic religion and Malay custom.

Yeo (1971) was of the opinion that the British rule aimed at preserving and maintaining the office of Malay kingship and he went on to note that the British had formalized their position and status by giving the Malay Sultans and chiefs a ceremonial role in the public affairs of the state. Thus it was not something surprising that as one may able to notice that the Malay Sultans and chiefs played minimal roles/functions and their influence and power was checked with the presence of British resident in the scene as far as the states' affairs are concerned. Yeo (1971) remarked that it seemed that the most vital medium through which the cooperation of the Malay courts was needed in the colonial administration was materialized in the creation of State Council. It was chaired and presided by the monarch yet it was practically controlled under the dictates of the British resident who was responsible amongst other to appoint its members and to decide on its programme/minutes.

It had been noted that in the early commencement of British rule in Malaya, the council was put to be in charge of framing a number of policies, with the presence of Malay courts and the Chinese members in the meetings. In this respect, the Malays had played their part in the administration of the state though one would have been wondering how far the

Malay courts could influence the formulation of the concerned policies. Nonetheless, by 1890s, that witnessed the rapid rise of the complexity of the administration of the Malay states and the abundance of tasks to be carried out, had reduced the role of the council into a merely a body simply responsible for recording and keeping the records of the legislations and decisions reached in the state secretariat. As time went on, the British authority had attempted to centralize the administration in the Federation of Malay States (F.M.S). On the other part of Malay Peninsula, the British as Yeo (1971) observed, attempted to induce the northern Malay States which were now still under the Siamese's sphere of influence into the orbit of British influence.

Nonetheless, this attempt was turned down by London authority with the fear that this might invite the intervention by other foreign power into the area i.e. French which would later might have been tried to bring Siam government into the French's territory. British authority finally took the initiative in 1900s to bring the northern Malay states into British's protection which culminated in the signing of Anglo-Siamese Treaty in 1902. This move eventually led to placement of British advisers in Kelantan and Trengganu. Their function was similar to that of British residents in the Federated Malay States. At last, a final treaty was signed between Siam and Britain in 1909 that saw the transference of the northern Malay States, namely Kelantan, Trengganu, Kedah and Perlis under the British's sphere of influence. The state in the south of Peninsula, Johor also had been absorbed into British's protectorate system following the signing of Anglo-Johore treaty in 1911.

This advice took in the form of Residential rule in the Malay states, and the British authority as they were proudly said it was established due to the very request of the Malay Sultans. The more conscious British scholar, on the other hand, opined that the Malay kingship tradition was quite difficult and subtle matter to deliberate on. John M. Gullick (1992) and Anthony Milner (1982, 1995) proposed that the Malay rulers during the pre-colonial period carried out a ceremonial role rather than a real one. Gullick viewed the institution of the Malay kingship as 'a collective inheritance of the dynasty whom were acknowledged as the 'heirs of the state (*waris negeri*). Thus for Gullick, it was *waris negeri* that governed the state's affairs in association with the Malay chiefs. He further remarked that the ruler was merely the chief of his own domain.

Yeo (1971) mentioned that there was one particular distinct quality that the Malay rulers had made their significance remained intact, namely the power of granting the honours and aristocratic ranks to the selected individuals. The residential system was therefore viewed as an administrative representation of the Malay courts in the Malay states. This system also proved to be vital in checking any rebellious sentiments and activities among the local Malay Chieftains and the Malay general subjects. Therefore, in principle, it seemed that the Resident had received 'a right to rule' from the Malay courts yet in actual practice, the Residents the instructions to govern the Malay states from London authority specifically from the Colonial Office. Gullick proposed that the Malay courts did play a role in the running of the state's

administration, acknowledged that the functions of the Malay courts i.e. Malay sultans were now simply as to affix their signature and received allowances and pensions from the British.

These public affairs of the state now were put under the charge of British residents whom were received the instructions on the matters from Governor of Straits Settlements who was currently the High Commissioner for the Federated Malay States. Though the Malay courts were reserved a certain authority on matters concerning the Islamic religion and Malay customs, yet these two fields were made dependent upon the approval of British authorities. Nevertheless, the British tried to maintain their good image before the eyes of the Malay courts so as not to upset them and their subjects. Yeo (1971) observed that the Resident supposedly to act as adviser to the Malay Sultans. It seemed that the power of the ruler was checked by the existing colonial administration, nevertheless, the usefulness of the Malay courts could not be denied in the sense that it proved to be an effective measure in suppressing any sort of local oppositions in order to safeguard British interests.

There was a noticeable sign that the Residents actually were the one who run the affairs of the native government through the office of Malay kingship. The roles of the monarch were getting diminished at the expense of overwhelming position of British Residents in the Malay states. This revealed that not at all times that the Sultans, for instance, had been pushed aside in the running of state affairs side by side with the British residents and its bureaucracy. It is also important to note that the real power relationship ultimately depending on the personalities of the British officials at one hand and the Malay courts on the other. Governor of Straits Settlements, Sir Frederick Weld remarked that it was something known that the British colonial government, through the British Residents had been relying on something more than 'advice' per se. Meanwhile for the federated of Malay states, it was evident that the prevailing influence of British residents in the States signified the minimal roles that the Malay sultans and Malay chiefs played with regard to the actual administration of the states.

Yeo (1971) commented that the Malay courts proved to be an indispensable instrument through which the British authority could utilize to safeguard their strategic and economic interests. The creation of a conference of rulers may be viewed as an important instrument through which all the monarch of the Malay states would gather at this conference to discuss matters that were of needs though it short of real legislative power. It was presided over by British High commissioner. Moreover, the British maintained and assured the Malay rulers that their powers would be the same as they used to it before the extension of British control as reiterated by the British governor, Sir Samuel Wilson in 1933. This signified the established principles which the British government held on with regard to their treatment to the Malay rulers. Samuel Wilson further noted that this indirect rule seemed to have been the most effective to safeguard the political hegemony (in principle) of the Malays, against the background of popular government based on western orientation, where the Malays were now outnumbered by steady increasing of non-Malay communities in the Peninsula especially those of Chinese community.

Roff (1974) opined that as a matter of fact, the life of the Malays was much centered on the office of Malay kingship, the Sultans and Malay chiefs. It is interesting to note that the British whenever they wanted to establish a settlement in any territories in Malaya; they would normally approach the Malay sultans and chiefs beforehand. These two classes were highly regarded positions in the traditional Malay society. The traditional Malay kingship was that of decentralized one; the monarch undeniably a supreme ruler occupied a religious and secular authority, signified the unity and independence of the state. Under him, there was a class of aristocratic ranks, which were either territorial or nominal, followed by village headman and penghulus. In retrospect, British authority was realizing this relationship between the Malay courts and their subjects, therefore ‘utilizing’, co-opting them in initiating, setting and finalizing whatever policies or directives decided by the colonial government and were to be implemented at district and village levels as an example.

Therefore, it is safe to note that the British at certain extent found the task of pacifying and implementing any decided policies and measure on the Malay populace relatively easy due to close cooperation between the Malay courts i.e. Malay sultans and chiefs’. Roff (1974) further commented that there were variations with regard to the opinions of the men on the spot as to how to effect the policy of government on Malay courts and their subjects. Some of them were sympathetic towards the Malay courts and the rural masses. For instance, some section of British administrators believed a necessity ‘to prepare the Malays’ to take up their proper positions in the running of the affairs of the government. Whereas, other section of British administrators were doubtful of the Malays’ capability to fill in such positions in the Malayan civil service as compared to the European staffs. They viewed and perceived the Malays as less industrious and less proactive than the other races in Malaya. In retrospect, the British tried to maneuver as subtly as they can so as not to upset the Malay elites in particular because they were considered vital for the well-being of the British colonial rule in Malaya.

Undoubtedly, in certain occasions, the Malay elites found themselves in a difficult situation whereby they caught in a situation where they need to secure their position at the expense of rallying and mobilizing people support behind the British administration. As far as education was concerned, there had been a gradual progress of its development in Malaya. One may see that there were at least three types of schooling systems in Malaya namely Malay School, English school and Religious-based school. Moreover, Roff (1974) also opined that the progress of educational development was also varied from state to another partly due to concentration of economic and administrative centers. Big towns such as Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh, had a quite substantial number of Malay and English schools available in the areas. In Johore, for instance, its first school was established in the vicinity of Sultan’ own buildings. Moreover, the roles of ulama and religious teachers were also pivotal in contributing towards the development of religious schools in Malaya. On the same note, the Christian missions also contributed towards the establishment of English schools besides the Government-sponsored schools that normally concentrated in urban centers.

In this respect, the Malays were left behind as compared to other races in terms of accessibility to English education and its enrollment in the schools. Roff (1974) pointed out that as the nation's administrative machinery becoming more detailed and intensified, having knowledge of English education proved to be a need of that time in order to get admission into Malayan civil service. In terms of Malays' admission into Malayan civil service, the numbers were very small in nature and at most the Malays were employed in the subordinate positions i.e. clerical positions. Only a handful number of Malays, mostly those who belonged to the ruling elites, were able to secure positions in the Malay civil service and Malayan civil service; they were worked as native magistrates, assistant district officers and settlement officers. The British colonial government, after the report by the Retrenchment commission on education, launched a number of changes so as to improve the existing conditions among the Malays in the fields of civil service and education.

This included for instance giving certain number of allowances to those Malays students who were undertaking special class on English education in English schools. The British authority also had established a training center for teachers, whereby the Government had founded the Sultan Idris Training Center to train the teachers and to equip of know-how in the education. He was seemed to be sympathetic towards the Malays' backwardness in education sector. He had commented that in 1902 that modern government system in Malaya had brought about quite profound changes upon the locals, from the standpoints of socio-economic and political life of the Malays. Therefore, it was not something unusual when Wilkinson found that the atmosphere and mood surrounding the conditions of vernacular education among the Malays were that of poor and ill maintained.

Roff (1974) deliberated that there had been an understanding amongst the British administrators that the Malays should simply receive what was considered to be appropriate for their socio-economic life, therefore, over-education was something that should be highly avoided, afraid that it would produce a new class of Malay intelligentsia that would go against the colonial government. Even in the 20th century, British authority still required close cooperation from the Malay courts through their participation in the administration of the states though the very nature of that participation was minimal. Yeo (1971) observed that having a local knowledge and good acquaintance with the Malay courts proved to be an effective tool for British in the running of the state's affairs. It was the high policy of the colonial office not to infringe upon the power and authority of the Malay rulers and their interests as long as the strategic and commercial interests of British Empire would be safeguarded. Thus the British would entertain their views and opinions whenever they thought would be necessary.

This was mainly because the British realized the usefulness of the Malay courts especially with regard to the mobilization and pacification of the Malay masses that eventually could hindered any anti-colonial sentiment within the society at one hand and solidified the root support for the British rule in Malaya on the other hand. Yeo (1971) observed that this situation will also help to maintain the commonly believed perception that

the Federated Malay States were essentially a Malay State, thus it filtered the inclusion of non-Malays into the political scene of the country. He further commented that in the field of administration, the monarch still chaired the state council and exerted an influence in the appointment and recruitments of penghulus and kathis. The presence of rulers was needed through the requirement to have his signature sealed to validate and certify any official documents such as letter of authority (*surat kuasa*) of penghulus and kathis, though the document was prepared beforehand in the council with the approval of the British resident.

His signature was also required in matters concerning legislations of the state and federal's enactments, laws or ordinances enacted at their respective legislatures. The Malay monarchs tied to the government's policy so as to induce the general Malay masses to cooperate and abide to any decided policies and measures as observed by Roff (1974). As pointed out earlier, the Malay establishments in the Unfederated Malay States, continued to administer their states effectively and the British adviser attached to the state government operate as real adviser without executive power. In line with the imperial policy, the British adviser sought to develop and administer the state as a truly Malay state based on the interests of the Malay populace. Therefore, it was not something surprising to observe that the British advisers in Unfederated Malay states had been agreed not to westernize the political institution of those Malay states. Accordingly, the rulers had a real say in the state's administration through his state council.

The members of the state's councils were predominantly Malays except British adviser. The state government also had been assisted by Malay secretariat. The rulers-in-council possessed legislative and financial powers and the Malay secretariat was considered to be the main administrative apparatus in the states. The secretariat was headed by a Malay head that's coming from ruling family. In the Unfederated Malay states, the judiciary was basically administered by the Malay magistrates and judges with necessary assistance from their European colleagues in the high court. The European officers made their presence most felt in the technical services such as departments of survey, public works and finance to name a few. At this juncture, in context of Malay's participation and appointment in the Malayan civil service, in order to cater Malays in civil service, there was a creation of junior administrative scheme that came appeared in the scene mainly due to campaigns carried out by pro-Malay officers such as Birch and Wilkinson besides the pressure from the Malay establishments.

Having access to English education, the Malays from aristocratic ranks and files were able to secure their appointment in the Malayan civil service. Often times there had a few Malays who were originally coming from the rural villages, found their way in the training centers for teachers besides other manual jobs. All these measures had been carried out with the cooperation between the British authority and the Malay establishments so as to ensure its smoothness and effectiveness. Roff (1974) mentioned that despite the fact that the monarchs had a least a say over the state's documents to which they affixed their seal of signature, the British authority through British residents were careful in dealing with the Malay

establishments so as to give them a sense of participation and appreciation through seeking their thoughts on the concerned matters. British authority had also provided a monthly allowance to the members of the ruling elites besides entertaining their requests as the conditions permit. British also constructed a palace for the Sultans using the state's expenses.

Strictly speaking, as Roff (1974) observed, the real participation among the Malays was restricted and limited in nature, for example, the Malay Sultans in exercising his power and authority, had to ask 'advice' from the Resident before they could proceed with the plans with the exception in matters concerning Islamic religion and Malay customs. Roff (1974) mentioned that the assistance tendered by the Malay establishments towards the British authority in matter of concerns had been proved to be vital in smoothing the transition of rule in the hands of British government especially in the early years of British residential rule. Yeo (1971) remarked that this conditions mainly happened due to centralization policy underwent in the Federation. The British still realized the usefulness of the Malay establishments so as to keep the Malays intact and remained obedient to the British rule in Malaya. In context of Malays' participation in the civil service, one may conclude that that these conditions again had to do with the British policy which showed elements of hesitancy and lacked of thoughtful deliberation of the concerned policies on Malays.

Conclusion

In retrospect, the Pangkor Treaty of 1874 became a departure point in the socio-political structure of Malaya which saw the foundation of British Residential rule in the Four Protected Malay States that later known as Federated Malay States in 1896. The Malay courts i.e. Sultans and Malay chiefs practically had been stripped away of their power and authority in public affairs of the state's administration that the control now in the hands of British resident and its foreign staffs. Kobkua (2009) commented that the Malay Sultans for instance at certain extent could only have a real say in the matters concerning Islamic religion and Malay customs, whereas other real matters i.e. the affairs of the state must be worked according to the Resident's advice. This subtle and pragmatic approach on the part of the British authority undeniably able to tie the Malay courts' support and cooperation and the Malays populace in the colonial administration through the maintenance of the office of Malay kingship and the creation of State council at each respective Malay states.

This protectorate system was based purely on the indirect rule. It worked in a manner in which the British officials would run the affairs of the government on behalf of the Malay courts where the latter assisting the British authority through their participation and involvement in the State council. Some renowned British administrators such as Stamford Raffles, Hugh Clifford, George Maxwell and Frank Swettenham, to name a few, were of the view that the Malay court was fundamentally 'despotic in character' where the rulers ruled their respective states with absolute authority. Thus, British rule was considered to be of vital

important that aimed to establish an efficient and orderly administration through the British's advice, assistance and aid for the betterment of the Malay courts and their subjects. Roff (1974) had pointed out one interesting remarks that the British authority had relatively won the cooperation and `confidence of the Malay establishments i.e. Malay sultans through a number of approaches, for instance, by providing them with appropriate allowances befitted to their ranks and status and by incorporating them into the administration of the state's affairs.

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