

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE MATRILINEAL STATE OF NEGERI SEMBILAN

by
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A historian once remarked: "History comes at you in a great turbulent and violent rush - cascade of events, conjunctures, conflicts and chances, utterly disregarding academic borderlines." (David Thompson, **The Aims of History. Values of The Historical Attitude**; London: Thames & Hudson, 1974 Reprint, pp. 21-22).

It is in this spirit and from this perspective that this article tries to outline the history of the matrilineal state of Negeri Sembilan. It attempts to trace the origins of the history of Negeri Sembilan before the 19th Century.

When we talk of historical developments we must try to trace the starting point of these developments that we are trying to describe. This would, in a sense, provide a rough idea of origins.

1) When was Negeri Sembilan founded?

Two standpoints shall be considered here:

- a) the academic or documented; and
- b) the sources of oral tradition.

These two approaches must be classified because if we travel way back into time, the documentary evidence usually becomes thinner whilst the oral tradition (myths, legends and popular stories) becomes dominating. In order to weigh the strengths and weaknesses of these two perspectives, it is inevitable that we discuss both possibilities. A common denominator in both standpoints is the claim that the earliest settlers of Negeri Sembilan came from the Minangkabau clan in central Sumatra* (See Andaya, p. 16).

The Documented History

According to a leading local historian, the "history of Negeri Sembilan prior to 1800 is also vaguely known". (Khoo Kay Kim: 1972, p.14). Perhaps what Prof. Khoo is alluding to is the lack of written documents which could explain or throw some light on the history of the state before the 19th Century.

This remark carries some weight because a practitioner of history must be able to support his or her claims by resorting to a body of evidence, largely published or unpublished. However, three years after Prof. Khoo's book was published, there appeared another important work by Leonard Y. Andaya (**The Kingdom of Johor, 1641-1728. Economic and Political Developments**). In Andaya's book, it is clearly mentioned that in 1677,

"the Minangkabau settlements of Rembau, Sungei Ujong, and Naning asked for and received a new ruler called Raja Ibrahim from their overlord at Pagar Ruyong in the mountain fortress of Central Sumatra". (Andaya, p. 109). What this means is that more evidence surfaced after Prof. Khoo Kay Kim's earlier remarks. This academic evidence was largely mined from Dutch archival sources in the Netherlands, an advantage which Andaya has and which many Malaysian historians lack, that is, mastery or a high level of understanding of the Dutch language. Although this point might appear out of context, in terms of research and writing Malaysian history before the nineteenth century, the Dutch language is a useful tool or a relevant prerequisite.

Andaya also stated that the presence of the Minangkabau element in Rembau and Sungei Ujong's history began to undermine Johor's influence over the two territories. In fact, with this new dimension in the regional politics at that time and after the arrival of Raja Ibrahim from Sumatra, "both Rembau and Sungei Ujong shifted their allegiance from Johor to this ruler from Sumatra". (Andaya, p. 110).

Aside from these scholarly interpretations, there are also documented sources from the writings of British observers. For instance, Isabella L. Bird remarked:

The Malays of Sungei Ujong and several of the adjacent states are supposed to be tolerably directly descended from those of the parent empire Minangkabau in Sumatra The story current amongst the best informed Malays of this region is that a Sumatran chief with a large retinue crossed to Malacca in the twelfth century, and went into the interior ... (Isabella L. Bird, p. 155).

However, in Newbold's account (which was based on tradition), this view was challenged because he hinted that the earliest evidence of the presence of the Minangkabaus was beyond the 12th Century:

Tradition ascribes the peopling of the interior of the Peninsula by the Minangkabau to a more recent and direct emigration from Sumatra, than that of the 12th Century. (Newbold, p. 77).

Comparatively, however, the documentation of Negeri Sembilan's history by R.J. Wilkinson seems to be more structured. Wilkinson used some "critical methods" to test some popular accounts of Negeri Sembilan's origins. For example, it was stated that the Malays believed that Rembau

was founded circa 1551. Against this belief Newbold dated it to 1530 whilst Parr and Mackray advanced the date slightly to 1540. After testing the validity of these claims, Wilkinson disputed them because he believed that such claims "are rather serious calls upon our faith" (Wilkinson, p. 282).

Malay Tradition As History

In contrast to the documented histories, there exists a corpus of Malay oral tradition which had reconstructed the history of Negeri Sembilan. According to this tradition, the history of the matrilineal states could be split into three parts viz. i) the "Legendary or Sakai Period" (1450-1640); ii) the Nine Minangkabau States under Johor (1640-1773); iii) the modern period under a constitutional monarchy (from 1773 onwards).

What then emerges are two interesting features of the history of Negeri Sembilan. Firstly, if we are to be concerned solely with the matrilineal states, the relevant period, according to Malay tradition, could be from 1640 onwards. This is due to the traditional belief that the period before that largely centred on the aboriginal part of the state's overall history. Implied in this belief is that from 1640, it became increasingly clear that the Minangkabau element became stronger. This meaning becomes more significant because the idea of the matrilineal states originated from Sumatra as has been popularly known.

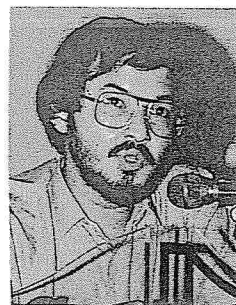
Secondly, there is a range of dates regarding the beginnings of Negeri Sembilan's history. At one extreme, Bird's aforementioned account mentioned the twelfth century whereas according to Prof. Khoo Kay Kim, before the nineteenth century the history of Negeri Sembilan was, at best, nebulous. What this actually means is that the various dates of the state's origin span a period of about 700 years. In real terms, the state's history, perhaps before the seventeenth century, is still *terra incognita* until more substantial documented evidence can be mined and brought to light. Given this twist, Prof. Khoo Kay Kim's earlier remark about the vagueness of the state's history can be accepted for the time being. The only difference is that this writer would push the documented history of Negeri Sembilan to the seventeenth century, bearing in mind Andaya's important study and not as hopelessly vague as Prof. Khoo had earlier indicated.

Nevertheless, it has to be reiterated that before one can even talk of the history of the matrilineal states, the origins of the states must first be established. This would entail more research and the reporting of the research findings as more evidence is amassed. Towards this end, it would be pertinent to ponder over the clarity and relevant of Wilkinson's words:

"Discrepancies of this sort between Malay tradition and indisputable fact make it imprudent to follow blindly in the wake of great pioneers of Negeri Sembilan research such as Lister and Hervey. Much evidence has come to light since their time to enable a more accurate account to be written; and, doubtless, this present history will be corrected and supplemented in its turn as more facts become known. The only finality that we need expect lies in the possibility of the old uncritical methods of study being abandoned for good. Far too much of our past information rested on no better authority than the representations of some inventive *lembaga* on the look-out for an increase of pay." (Wilkinson, p. 283).

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* This section on tradition based on Wilkinson, pp. 283-310.