

A Re-Analysis of Negri Sembilan Socio-Political Organization

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This paper¹ is an analysis of a few key features of the indigenous social and political organisation of the sultanate of Negri Sembilan, from around 1770 to about 1870, when British rule appeared imminent.

Three problems of theoretical importance constitute the focus of this paper: 1) How do we explain the emergence of the centralized state in 1780? Was the event inevitable or was it merely one of those historical accidents that bear little, if any, meaningful relation to the state of affairs at the time? 2) What probable function did the differential emphasis on principles of descent among the ruling dynasty on the one hand, and the commoners on the other, play in Negri Sembilan society? It seems rather curious, if not strange, that the ruling dynasty in Negri Sembilan, imports as they were from a strongly matrilineal society and grafted on to one of its kind should evolve patrilineal succession. What was it in the situation that precipitated such a radical departure? 3) What were the processes underlying the super-imposition of a patrilineal system on a matrilineal society? Anthropologists have been puzzled by the apparent facility with which two contradictory principles of descent have been incorporated and have functioned in Negri Sembilan. I suggest that the puzzle is more apparent than real and that it only remains so long as we insist on thinking in terms of abstract organizational principles rather than in terms of their actual dynamics. This I hope to be able to document.

There seems to be the consensus among writers on Negri Sembilan that the development of the centralized form of government of the sultanate was a response to the needs of trade and the demand for peace, which was continuously threatened by internecine warfare. Writers—mainly Gullick, de Jong and Swift²—have not been too clear on what precisely they mean by the needs of trade but I find their proposition unsatisfactory for the following reasons:

1. Trade had been going on for at least a century or so prior to the establishment of the Negri Sembilan sultanate. This suggests that the existence of a centralized political authority was not indispensable—at least as the argument has been presented—for the

1. This paper was originally written for an anthropology seminar on Southeast Asia under Dr. Alexander Spoehr. I would like to thank Dr. Spoehr, and Dr. Emrys Peters of Manchester University for their invaluable help in the preparation of this paper.

2. See J.M. Gullick (1958) *Indigenous Political Systems of Western Malaya*; P.E. Josselin de Jong (1951) *Minangkabau and Negri Sembilan*; M.G. Swift (1965) *Malay Peasant Society in Jelebu*.

conduct of trade between the different groups; or if centralized political authority was indispensable some critical changes must have taken place to necessitate the formation of a centralized state. Furthermore, trade did not radically alter after the sultanate had been created and the de facto situation prior to the sultanate persisted even after the establishment of the office of the sultan. While Negri Sembilan was nominally a centralized polity, this centralization appeared to be merely in form. In actuality, the dispersion of settlement and other factors as well—necessitated a decentralized system of administration. Moreover, as the great bulk of trade came from the mining areas which were generally in the hinterlands, the district chiefs retained effective control over them, a very critical factor in the power struggle between the different functionaries of Negri Sembilan.

2. The evidence put forward regarding the function of the sultan in preventing warfare is inconsistent with the available material on Negri Sembilan. We are made to understand that the sultan's office was created to deter wars between the states. Yet Gullick,³ who ascribes to this view, points out that 'warfare between the States did not occur at all' as the British sphere of influence was sufficiently effective to prevent wars of any real consequence and such wars were prevented without active intervention, at least prior to 1874. It is not entirely clear whether by 'States' Gullick meant those political units which were politically equivalent or comparable to Negri Sembilan, for example, Perak, Pahang, Selangor, etc., or whether the designation refers to the constituent districts of Negri Sembilan which were often referred to as states—Negri Sembilan itself means 'nine states'. Presumably the statement refers to the first alternative. If this is so, then the inconsistency of the argument becomes even more obvious. If the constituent districts of Negri Sembilan were the units referred to, the argument remains equally weak as Gullick points out again and again that the sultan had no real power to interfere in internal affairs and functioned within the framework of a constitution designed to minimize his power. The district chiefs, in fact, never gave any real internal power to the sultan and they were careful to retain almost absolute control over their own domains. We are told that they ascribed to the sultan 'only very limited power'. At best, the sultan could only play off one chief against another in the hope of retaining his position and authority. In fact, the 'district chiefs and the Yam Tuan lived in an intermittent state of warfare with each other'. This was hardly in keeping with whatever functions the sultan was supposed to have performed to start with.⁴

The arguments presented heretofore, however, are not to suggest that the sultan was entirely powerless as a political potentate in Negri Sembilan. On the contrary, what I am suggesting is that we re-examine the data to determine what kind of effect the sultan

3. Gullick, *ibid.*, page 120.

4. Gullick, *ibid.*, page 43.

generated. A few critical developments in Negri Sembilan and in Malacca prior to the establishment of the sultanate are directly relevant to the problem.

Although the Malacca Sultanate was shortlived (ca. 1400–1511) it established itself as an essential centre of trade. It was strategically situated on the sea route between India and China. By the early fifteenth century, the Malacca Sultanate was sending trade missions to China. The sultanate lived on foreign trade and while Malacca was compact and centralized, it also administered outlying areas through political officers from Malacca. A famous *Bendahara* (Prime Minister) had earlier been district governor at the mouth of the Klang River; another was believed to have founded the royal dynasty of Perak—a tin-producing area. We are not told specifically of the corresponding situation in Negri Sembilan, but given these facts, it is not too far-fetched to assume that the same arrangement could have obtained in Negri Sembilan. The latter is, after all, more accessible to Malacca than either Perak or the other areas administered by the Malacca Sultanate. Also Negri Sembilan is (or at least was) a major tin-producing area. While the administration of these outlying areas was of minor importance, as Gullick maintains,⁵ they were major sources of trade goods critical to the economy of the Malacca Sultanate.⁶

By 1641, when the Dutch had captured Malacca from the Portuguese—who in turn captured it in 1511—the nature of foreign policy had been considerably reoriented. The Dutch emphasized the promotion of trade with the “Malay States”. Which ones this rubric covered we are not told but we can at least surmise.⁷

A further point concerns foreign non-European elements in these areas. When the Portuguese took over Malacca in the sixteenth century they were aided in their attack by Chinese, Indian, and other foreign merchants who were resentful of the exactions of the Malay rulers. Presumably, these traders had some base—to what extent we do not know—in the Malay States. While the Chinese did not seem to have a significant hold on tin mines prior to 1820, there is reason to suspect that they were already making considerable inroads in Negri Sembilan hinterlands and in the other trade areas prior to this date. By 1840, the tin mines—which were completely controlled by Malays twenty years before—were almost entirely a Chinese concern.⁸

We must also never lose sight of the fact that the predominant population of Negri Sembilan were not autochthonous to the area. They were Minangkabau migrants and

5. Gullick, *ibid.*, page 8.

6. The memorandum in 1785 from de Bruijn, Governor of Malacca, indicates the great importance of the Malay areas in the trading of tin, opium, pepper and other trade goods.

7. The same document definitely indicates the desire of the Governor to attract the tin which the people of Rembau, Selangor and Pahang were trading for opium to Malacca. These goods were previously brought to and traded in Riau.

8. We can infer from the document mentioned above that as early as the 1780's the Dutch were already actively encouraging Chinese participation in the trade of the various items, mainly tin.

were preceded in the area by small-scale groups of mainly hunters and gatherers who subsequently withdrew to the hills.

Given these considerations, I suggest that the decision to invite an overlord by the immigrant population in Negri Sembilan was a political manoeuvre by the chiefs of the districts to secure and legitimize certain economic and political advantages which were otherwise difficult to obtain, and to minimize the threat of any potential opposition from foreign elements within Negri Sembilan itself. For reasons that will be discussed shortly, this ruler had to be an outsider.

When the Dutch administration decided to promote trade in the Malay States, it was only possible for Negri Sembilan to participate on its own terms by becoming politically independent and thereby making itself a comparable political entity to the Dutch. This independence implied the creation of a formally centralized government—one which was comparable in form⁹ to the European Powers, though not necessarily in content. The most visible manifestation of this form—and one which was easily comprehensible by the Europeans—was through kingship. The only alternative was to persist in the old pattern of acknowledging the suzerainty—albeit in name only—of the Malacca Sultanate, which was already under Dutch control—to the detriment of the district chiefs, as this would have vastly curtailed their own powers—or to deal with the Dutch on equal terms. Therefore, when the opportunity presented itself—and this is where I believe the historical ‘accident’ of the war with the Bugis warriors becomes relevant as it served as a catalyst to hasten this political development—the chiefs were only too willing to invite a prince, Raja Melewar, as ruler from the Minangkabau royal family, who at any rate was a king—vis-a-vis the district chiefs—only in name. I believe this is significant in understanding why centralization in Negri Sembilan was more striking in form and less so in actuality, and why the sultan was never granted any real power to deal with domestic affairs. The centralized form was critical but the chiefs were always careful to restrict the sultan’s sphere of competence to external affairs only—i.e. in dealing with other States, mainly with the European Powers. The sultan, we are told, was the undisputed authority on external affairs. Herein lies, I think, one of the most important clues to understanding the sultanate and how it functioned. The sultan was indispensable in the context of a different order of power relationships—external relations. It is in this sense that the centralized form becomes more understandable and acquires more significance than we are heretofore made to believe. The sultan represented a different form of power, one which did not seem necessary before. It is therefore misleading to evaluate the content of the sultanate’s

9. Evans-Pritchard documents this beautifully in the account on the political development of the Sanusi Order in Cyrenaica. The Italians needed to deal with the Bedouins and the only effective way they could do this was to locate a point of power and then turn him into a political head. (See E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*, 1949).

centralization vis-a-vis the sultan's power over the district chiefs.¹⁰ The sultanate as a centralized organization was not an instrument for this domestic level of operation.

Although historical materials are scanty, I suspect that the need for the specific type of functionary represented by the sultan was directly related to expanding trade—especially in tin. Beyond a certain point—and this I would be hard put to define—it is more expedient to conduct trade from single-point negotiations rather than the previous multiple-point¹¹ dealing of the district chiefs.¹² Here writers have tended to miss the significance of the sultanate.

Furthermore, without the sultanate, it was difficult to restrict effectively the activities of the Chinese and other foreigners. District chiefs were chosen by lineage heads from among them. This implied that a great deal of the influence and power of the district chiefs derived from their kinship networks. Also, the district chiefs and their followers operated within the same cosmological framework, which meant that they could effectively invoke supernatural or ritual sanctions. Neither of these two principles were applicable to the foreign groups, particularly the Chinese for they were outside the chiefs' effective kinships networks and cosmological framework. It is significant to note that supernatural powers were believed to be less effective against the Chinese, as they were outsiders.¹³ In the absence of these two normally effective sanctions, only legal authority had any likelihood of effectiveness. Thus the need for a higher political authority.

Furthermore, this higher political functionary could not have been drawn, as I have suggested earlier, from the ranks of the district chiefs in Negri Sembilan, as all chiefs were of equal status and authority and to draw the ruler from their own ranks would be tantamount to a recognition of one chief's superiority over the rest. In the drawing of the sultan from Minangkabau, we see the proverbial 'stranger' who with his cloak of neutrality

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10. Gullick, *ibid.*, page 49, states that 'since the sultan had so little real power he had no need of an elaborate machine of central government'. This to me represents a dubious correlation as decentralization need not always imply the absence of power. Furthermore, centralization as I have discussed above was an instrument of a different order of power relationships and the degree to which the sultan held this power could not be measured in terms of the power held by the district chiefs themselves.
 11. I am very grateful to Dr. Emrys Peters for this suggestion and for clarifying my thinking on the subject.
 12. In de Bruijn's memorandum, he proposes means by which the trade Riau had enjoyed before 1784 could be diverted to Malacca. He must have appreciated the need for making one centre—Malacca in this case—for trade from which all transactions would be made. This had the advantage of ensuring greater control over the supply of trade goods and eliminating the inefficiency of multiple-point dealings.
 13. Gullick, *loc. cit.*, page 45 (footnote).

can perform those functions which the others within the system cannot perform.¹⁴ It was this power of externality and neutrality which alone could guarantee the peaceful conduct of trade.¹⁵

Finally, I suggest that the creation of the sultanate was an assertion of legitimate status by the dominant groups, the Minangkabau, in the area vis-a-vis the aboriginal Sakai on the one hand and migrants on the other. It is common fact that identity with the ruling group confers greater prestige and status on individuals in contrast to those who cannot claim relationship with the rulers. Myths enabled district chiefs and others to claim putative descent from their ancestresses who inter-married with the Sakai; cultural familiarity and identity with the ruling group established their political status. With this they were able to acquire more effective control over strategic resources.

The second problem I wish to consider concerns the probable function which patrilineal succession among the ruling dynasty in Negri Sembilan played in a matrilineal society. It seems rather paradoxical that the ruling dynasty which originated from Minangkabau—the seat of matrilineal customs—should adopt a radically different principle of organization. I feel that anthropologists have overlooked the significance of this paradox in their attempts to reconcile what they believed to be contradictions within the system.

A few points concerning the ruling group in Negri Sembilan are relevant in this connection. Unlike the other Malay States in which greater social differentiation and horizontal stratification obtained, the gap between the ruling dynasty and the commoner groups in Negri Sembilan was less clear-cut. The royal lineage was weak and not well-unified and there was an absence of a formally recognized dividing line between the two groups. Sultans had great difficulty in amassing wealth and it was not rare to find wealthier district chiefs who lived on a comparable—if not better—scale than the sultan. One sultan, for example, had a difficult time in building a palace suitable for a man of his stature. It is also important to note that sultans were situated by the mouths of rivers—a location strategic for the trade routes. The greater bulk of the population by the rivers were mainly cultivators, as it was only around these areas that soil was sufficiently fertile

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14. This 'stranger' is a very familiar figure in many societies. For example, among the Bedouins (according to Peters) holy men assume great judicial powers especially in the context of saints' tombs which are endowed with neutrality. The Leopard skin chief among the Nuer has more 'power' than any other person in the community. Only he can curse. In other societies, e.g. the Plateau Tonga, the LoDagaba, joking partners can perform a wide variety of tasks—ritual and otherwise—which members of the other lineage cannot perform.
15. In African societies, the peace of the market was always guaranteed and the market place was often the only common ground where hostile parties could meet without danger of aggression. This was specially more so in societies where markets assumed more economic significance—i.e. they were not too peripheral to the economy. (See P. Bohannon and G. Dalton, *Markets in Africa*, 1962.)

for agriculture. We are told, however, that there was not much agricultural surplus, which meant that the sultan had to be largely dependent on trade for revenues. But the greater source of trade lay in the mining areas in the hinterlands, to which district chiefs, by virtue of their geographical proximity, had more effective access. No wonder that many district chiefs were wealthier than the sultan.

On still another level, the sultan was a *primus inter pares*. Like other chiefs he had his own district, the nucleus of which was the capital where the palace was situated and for whose administration he was responsible—as other chiefs were responsible for their own individual districts. He was therefore, apart from being titular head of the whole political unit, also a district chief who lived much like other district chiefs. True, he was supposed to have greater powers and greater control over supernatural resources but these did not really seem to matter nor make much difference when the chips were down, i.e. when the district chiefs chose to ignore him, as for example if the chief did not want to perform the customary *obeisance*.

Given the factors mentioned above, I suggest that the emphasis on a different principle of descent by the ruling dynasty functioned to introduce a component of differentiation which was necessary if the sultan was to retain that semblance of externality which as the sovereign head of the state it was extremely critical for him to possess. As I hope I have shown, this differentiation could not be conferred by other factors in the system because of, among others, his ineffective control over the critical resources.¹⁶ It is important to note that Gullick maintains that there was no important social contrast between the *waris* and the first arrivals from Minangkabau because of the lack of a central organ and symbol around which the *waris* could rally and distinguish themselves from the rest. I wish to submit the reverse argument—that because there was insufficient stratification and social differentiation, the development of a centralized political system was inhibited. That it was important for the sultan to acquire some degree of externality is suggested by the fact that the position of *Raja Muda* ('junior ruler') was institutionalized. The *Raja Muda* acted as the head of the other members of the royal lineage thereby structurally separating the sultan from the lineage.¹⁷ In other respects, however, this absence of a clear-cut division between the ruling class and the rest of the population was to some extent an advantage

16. Buganda, for example, presents another interesting case. It was strongly centralized—at least towards the latter part—and strongly patrilineal too. Yet the royal dynasty which was also weakly developed acquired the name of the mother's clan instead of the father's as the others. Buganda social stratification was also extremely fluid and the practice of the Kabaka of shifting his appointees constantly inhibited the development of a rigidly stratified society.

17. Beattie also reports this practice for the Bunyoro. He views the practice of appointing the oldest son—who can never be the Mukama—to be Okwiri or the Mukama's 'official brother' who represented the royal lineage's interests as having the effect of separating the Mukama from his own lineage and thereby conferring greater representativeness on the Mukama. (See J. Beattie, *Bunyoro: An African Kingdom*, 1960).

as it gave the ruling group greater leeway for their manipulation of the system. This is a convenient starting point for a consideration and analysis of the third problem—the matrilineal-patrilineal puzzle.

De Jong prefers to view Negri Sembilan social organization as one of double descent rather than as a separate matrilineal/patrilineal system per se. He says 'Minangkabau should not be considered as a matrilineal island in the midst of surrounding patrilineally organized societies, but the various Sumatran social systems may prove to be based on a double unilateral organization which assumed a patrilineal stress in the Atjeh and Batak and a matrilineal stress in Minangkabau'.¹⁸ He further asserts that Minangkabau society assumes its matrilineal aspect in socio-political matters and a patrilineal one in religious or sacred affairs. While this is a realistic possibility—and true of many societies—it is not entirely consistent with the Negri Sembilan data. Moreover, this compromise explanation implicitly assumes that there is an actual contradiction in the co-existence of different principles and that the same principles cannot be found within the same social system and operate within comparable contexts. That is, that their domains have to be formally separated and clearly delineated. I argue that this formal separation of domains is necessary only for the anthropologist who insists upon abstract organizational principles and that in actuality this co-existence of different principles operated to give the Negri Sembilan system greater flexibility. At the same time, it vastly increased the channels of mobility for the more deserving candidates for office.

Two types of succession may be distinguished in Negri Sembilan—succession to the sultanate and succession to the district and other lower offices. The first three rulers from Minangkabau were appointed for life, a successor coming over from Minangkabau at the death of the predecessor, until a royal dynasty emerged. Two of these initial rulers married the daughters of their predecessors and thus the royal family of foreigners married into the matrilineal family of the district chief of Ulu Muar, where the royal capital was situated. While a sultan theoretically had to be acceptable to the majority of the chiefs, he could also advance the ablest of his sons to prominence during his lifetime. Sultans were chosen from the *waris negri* group, which consisted of individuals whose father or father's father or any close agnate had been a sultan. A second critical factor in the choice of a new sultan was the status of his mother. One whose mother was of royal descent was preferred to others of less impressive credentials. This is why a sultan, hoping to better his sons' chances of succession, usually married a woman of royal descent as his first wife and official consort while having other wives of inferior status. The rotation of office among the different branches of the ruling dynasty—a practice unknown in the Malacca Sultanate and in Hindu traditions—was very widespread in Negri Sembilan. In fact, it was possible for an office to be held by one line for a long period of time, if not permanently, by

18. P.E. Josselin de Jong, *Minangkabau and Negri Sembilan*, 1951, page 91.

utilizing critical marriage links with the group where the next successor was to come from. A further rule prohibiting the marrying of two women from the same *suku* where polygyny occurred¹⁹ insured the proliferation of one's kinship ties.

On the lower levels of political offices, some transition had to take place from patrilineal to matrilineal descent. As far as this transition was concerned, several factors seem to be critical. First, the matrilineal 'take-over' vis-a-vis various lower level positions seems to have been gradual and piecemeal. Some positions remained patrilineal—especially where Minangkabau influence was weak—while others had already lent themselves to matrilineal succession. Second, the theoretical incompatibility between the merging of two different principles of descent as critical criteria for succession was more apparent than real. Thus if ego held an office to which he wanted his son to succeed, it often happened that he married the daughter of the lineage segment which was to provide the next incumbent to office. In so doing, he was able to strengthen his son's claim to the position by access to both important patrilineal as well as matrilineal ties. In such cases, what was considered matrilineal succession was equally patrilineal. Thus succession rules were circumvented by compounding one's significant relationships whereby forceful individuals were able to manipulate the rules to their advantage.

While this process went on at both the sultanate and the district levels, it was more critical for the district chiefships as these were constantly absorbing those individuals from the ruling dynasty who were on the fringes of royalty. These were individuals who were being constantly pushed out of the significant area of attachment to the sultan, as with each generation their kinship links to him became more blurred. It was also in this sense that the ruling group through their patrilineal organisation was able to take advantage of the commoner offices while the commoners could not do the reverse. The ruling group could manipulate their matrilineal ties for succession to district offices, but the commoners could not utilize patrilineal ties to gain the same advantage. Moreover, as the ruling group became more and more endogamous vis-a-vis its women, this had the effect of putting some closure on their ranks and thus they were able to restrict entry to their group. This was not too applicable to the commoners. Finally, the geographical isolation of the royal district helped to spatially separate the operation of the two principles of descent such that patrilineal descent became removed from the immediate experience of the commoners.

In summary, I suggest that the Negri Sembilan sultanate—and other sultanates in Southeast Asia, perhaps—might be viewed as a response to the need for a single-point centre for negotiation due to expanding trade, and as a political attempt by the dominant population to secure certain economic and political advantages. Furthermore, the patrilineal organization among the ruling dynasty in Negri Sembilan functioned to introduce a component of differentiation which could not be conferred by other factors in the

19. de Jong, *ibid.*, page 125.

system and that the co-existence of two different principles of descent gave the system greater flexibility and increased the avenues for manipulation to office and power.

Although the arguments presented above are speculative, and the historical and ethnographic data suggestive rather than definitive, I hope that this paper has offered some interesting areas for further exploration in the context of the comparative study of South-east Asian sultanates.

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