

Chapter 2

*The Victorious
Water Buffalo
Crosses The
Straits*

Tunku Abdullah ibni Almarhum Tuanku Abdul Rahman was born on the 2nd of May, 1925, into the royal house of Negri Sembilan, one of the nine royal states in Peninsular Malaysia. Negri Sembilan is set south of the country's capital, Kuala Lumpur, and literally means "Nine States," the name alluding to the loose federation of Malay chiefs who ruled these lands, but were united under one Ruler.

Negri Sembilan is unique - a federation within the Federation of Malaysia. Also, unlike the peoples of the other Malay states the people of Negri Sembilan are Minangkabau, and had come across the Straits of Malacca to their new home. It is, therefore, across these Straits and across hundreds of years that our journey begins. It is from here that a complete perspective of Negri Sembilan and especially its royal house, the ancestors of Tunku Abdullah, can be gleaned. And it is from here that we may find some of the origins of the traits and character of this Negri Sembilan Prince, which led him to that rainy afternoon in Tokyo.

The Minangkabau still inhabit the western part of central Sumatra in Indonesia in an area known as Padang Highlands. The area consists of three districts or *luha'* namely: Agam, Tanah Data, and Lima Pulueh Koto (or "Fifty Towns"). The three districts form the *dare*, which is the inland area in contrast to the *rantau* or coastal territories, also known as the Padang Lowlands. The Minangkabau call their country *Alam Minangkabau*, literally translated as "The World of the Victorious Water Buffalo."

This World of the Minangkabau can be traced to the 14th century. The Minangkabau royalty resided at Pagar Ruyung, Tanah Data. The King was given the title Yang DiPertuan Besar or "Who is Acknowledged as Great Lord". The Minangkabau were ruled by three kings: Raja Alam or "King of the World", Raja Adat or "King of Custom", and Raja Ibadat or "King of Religion". The Raja Alam, who was the Yang DiPertuan Besar, dealt with all political matters and was the "Head-King". The officials from the Dutch East India Company regarded

him as the "Emperor of the Minangkabau". The title *Yang DiPertuan Besar* was more than a mouthful, and was often shortened by his people to *Yam Tuan*.

Beneath the kings came the important dignitaries who were the Base Ampe Balai or "Great Men of the Four Council Halls", these being; the Bandaharo, Tuan Kali, Mangkudum, and Indomo. They were not members of the royal family but Headmen.

The geographical and political unit within Minangkabau was the Nagari. The Nagari consisted of a large village and satellite settlements, and, at one time, these numbered as many as six hundred. Each Nagari was ruled by chiefs and were politically separate from one another. The word "Negri" in Negri Sembilan is derived from the Minangkabau word *Nagari*.

We may ask where this strange name *Minangkabau* comes from. It certainly is no ordinary name and evokes strange images and rituals. Its origins can, in fact, be found in the legends from the *Hikajat Radja-Radja Pasai* ("Legends of the Kings of Pasai"). In ancient times, a Javanese army invaded Minangkabau. The army was so vast that when the soldiers sharpened their swords on a rock in the valley, the entire rock was whittled away and became a gorge, which today bears the name of Kilieran Djao, the Javanese sharpening stone.

The subsequent battle must have come to some form of stalemate as the two warring parties then came to an agreement that the winning side would be decided by the outcome of a battle between two buffaloes, one chosen by the Javanese and the other by the Minangkabau. In another version of the tale, the Javanese had a tiger, and the Minangkabau had the water buffalo. As events transpired, it did not matter what animal the Javanese had as the Minangkabau buffalo won, killing the other animal.

The Javanese then withdrew but the Minangkabau attacked the retreating army, slaying the Javanese in such numbers that the Javanese bodies could not be buried. The

scene of the slaughter is today called Padang Si Busue' or "Field of Stench". Since the water buffalo had led them to victory, the locals called themselves MinangKabau or "The Victorious Water Buffalo".

There is, however, yet another version of the story - one with an underlying message. In the fight between the two buffaloes, the Javanese chose the fiercest bull they could find. The Minangkabau chose instead an unweaned calf which they separated from its mother until it was racked with hunger, and because the calf had no horns, they tied knives to its head. During the fight, the calf was so desperate to nurse that, when it faced the fierce bull, it frenziedly nuzzled the stronger animal's belly in search of a teat, stabbing it to death. Thus weakness, the need to nurture, and the strength of a child's ties to its mother triumphed over male power and aggression. Perhaps it was from this event that the matrilineal society of the Minangkabau was born or perhaps, more plausibly, this story was used to vindicate the social order.

The origins of the Minangkabau royalty itself though, date back several centuries before the battle against the Javanese. In 500 AD there existed a state in South Sumatra called Malayu. In the 7th Century this state was overwhelmed by Srivijaya from Java which was to dominate the Sumatran and Malay Peninsular for five centuries. By the 13th Century, the empire of Srivijaya had declined and a new Malayu, also called Dharmmasraya, came into being. This was centred in present-day Djambi, on the east coast of Sumatra.

Around 1275 a Javanese king, called Krtanagara, came upon Sumatra and either reduced the King of Dharmmasraya to the status of vassal or at least entered into some close alliance. In 1347, a Prince of Malayu or related dynasty, came to West Sumatra and became ruler of the Minangkabau. It is this Prince, called Adityavarman, who, in the 14th century, founded the royal dynasty of Minangkabau and, consequently, Negri Sembilan.

It is possible, of course, not just to rely on historical

writings, but rather set the imagination free by seeking the origins of Minangkabau royalty in the bizarre and mystical legends of the Malay Annals. There existed a monster called Si Kantimono that was wreaking havoc and devastation upon the land. Near Palembang, lived a native chief called Demang Lebar Daun who had several beautiful daughters. One day these maidens encounter three strangers with supernatural powers: Karna Pandita, Nila Utama and Nila Pahlawan, who was their leader and rode upon a mighty ox. The girls watch the ox salivate, a spittle dropping to the earth, and out of this bovine saliva a man is formed. He rises from the earth, we are not told whether he is naked or clothed, though one can presume the former; he then calls himself Batala and, quite conveniently, proclaims Nila Pahlawan king with the royal name, Sang Sapurba Trimurti Tribuwana. The king promptly marries one of the daughters - Wan Sendari, who must have been quite impressed with this spectacle - then kills the monster, Si Katimono, and becomes King of Minangkabau.

Another legend, this one straddling across vast geographical distances, comes from what is described as the "Minangkabau Group". In this story, several brothers, descendants of Alexander the Great, sail around the world on a voyage of conquest. The brothers, Maharadjo Diradjo, Maharadjo Alif and Maharadjo Dapang, have a falling out as can sometimes happen between brothers, especially on important matters like who is the rightful owner of the crown. The brothers struggled on the boat, each pulling vigorously at the crown, it slips from their grasp, falls overboard and sinks to the depths of the churning sea. Maharadjo Diradjo, who would have been a great businessman, sees this not as a loss but as an opportunity, so he cunningly gets his goldsmith to make an exact copy of the crown, then raises the imitation high in the air, shouting that he has found it. The brothers believe his duplicity and reluctantly admit to his superiority. The brothers separate and each claims a country for their own. Maharadjo Alif takes Rome and becomes the Sultan of Turkey,

Maharadjo Dapang becomes the Emperor of China, and Maharadjo Diradjo, of course, chooses that jewel of all the world - Minangkabau - and becomes its rightful king.

From legend, we turn to history and the migration of the Minangkabau across the Straits of Malacca. It is not known what caused this migration other than that they were a people characterised by a strong wanderlust. A time spent abroad as a merchant was a normal feature in the life of Minangkabau men - to *merantau* as they called it. For the Minangkabau to *merantau* was as much an experience as well as a geographic destination, with many men leaving the villages to make it on their own. This wanderlust was certainly a characteristic passed through the centuries to the Negri Sembilan Prince born in 1925, though when one considers his life, it may be asked what other kind of lust could have also been passed!

In any case, towards the end of the 14th century the Minangkabau wandered in large numbers across to the *tanah sabrang* or the land across, the name they used for the Malay Peninsular. Building houses with much-recognised roofs that swept to horn-like peaks, they established vibrant communities in what is now known as Negri Sembilan. The Victorious Water Buffalo had crossed the Straits and with it would come its ancient royal dynasty and, of course, Tunku Abdullah, it's unorthodox Prince.