

MALAY IDENTITY, COLONIALISM AND 'ADAT KNOWLEDGE' IN NEGERI SEMBILAN: A CRITICAL RE-EXAMINATION

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Introduction

Since 1988 I have embarked on a social enquiry on the construction of Malay identity and its relationship with 'colonial knowledge,' as a result of which I have written a series of essays on the latter.¹ However, I have also published other essays touching on the broader theme of 'identity formation and contestation in Malaysia,' within which my interest on 'colonial knowledge' should be located.² Being a Negeri Sembilan-born person as well as a trained social anthropologist, it is inevitable that one day I would make the 'anthropological journey' to the famous 'Adat Perpatih land', one of the most fascinating communities that was dear to the hearts of the British colonial officers. That I finally made that 'anthropological journey' in 1999 was due to the encouragement by a group of Japanese anthropologists, in particular Professor Hisashi Endo, who by then had made a number of field trips to Rembau. Of course, my interest in making the visit to the 'Adat perpatih land' was not only motivated by my research of Malay identity but also as an attempt to seek answers to a set of old questions I have in mind for at least three decades, particularly about Adat Perpatih and 'adat knowledge' namely in relation to the published works on the theme by local and foreign scholars, in the past as well as in recent times.³

I shall begin my exploration and analysis by outlining my own understanding of the general picture of the authority-defined version of Malay identity and present some responses from the everyday-defined perspective contextualised in a historical dimension. Following that I shall examine and contextualise the formation and application of adat knowledge in the past and the present with the intention of raising some unresolved issues relating to the said knowledge in the contest of making identity construction in Negeri Sembilan.

Malay Identity and 'colonial knowledge'

In Malaysia, most historians and other scholars in the humanities accept 'colonial knowledge' as the basis of Malaysian and Malay history. Moreover they do so in what seems like an almost unproblematic manner, even though politico-academic attempts are being made to 'indigenise' Malaysian history and the 'Malay' viewpoint has been privileged. Such attempts are admirable, and yet it is good to realize that this emphasis on the Malay perspective has been primarily motivated by a 'nationalistic' need to re-interpret history, and not by the urge to question the ways historical knowledge *per se* has been constructed. In Malaysia historical knowledge, a crucial element in the process of identity-formation, is the colonial knowledge.⁴

This silence about the basis of colonial knowledge and its power in shaping Malay and Malaysian historiography is a cause for intellectual and ideological concern, especially in the context of present day developments of Malaysian studies.⁵ Of course there have been numerous discussions among historians about 'Western elements' and 'colonial influence' in the writing of 'local history', but these discussions generally adopt either a 'foreigner vs. local' or a 'Malay vs. non-Malay' stance rather than problematizing the construction and definition of historical knowledge itself. The 'foreigner vs. local' debate is informed, so it seems, by the conflict between 'Eurocentredness' and 'indigenouslyness'.⁶ In the 'Malay vs. non-Malay' debates, the arguments revolve around 'ethnic histories', such as the need to emphasize 'Malay history' as the basis of 'national history', on the one hand, and the contribution of the 'Chinese' and 'Indians' on the other.⁷ Both, in short, have strong 'ethnicized' tendencies.

In short, Malaysian historiography is a kind of ideological struggle involving different interest groups (ethnic, foreign, academic, political, and so on), an articulation of the 'unfinished' cultural/ethnic nationalist project in Malaysia. The situation is reminiscent of Ernest Renan's famous essay 'What is a Nation?' in which history is placed at the centre of the 'nationalist project': the past requires a careful and selective interpretation, and in this process, Renan argues, 'getting history wrong' is the precondition of nationalist history since it requires not only a collective remembering but also a collective forgetting. This forgetting 'is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation, which is why progress in historical studies often constitutes a danger for [the principle of] nationality'.⁸

Following the discourse on Malay identity in Malaysia, one could argue that the colonial methods of accumulating facts and insights and the resultant corpus of knowledge have been critical in providing not only substance but also

sustenance to the endeavour of writing about 'Malayness'. The sheer volume of 'facts' that have been accumulated and amassed by the British on, for instance, traditional Malay literature and the modern history of Malaya/Malaysia has established the hegemony of colonial knowledge in Malaysia's intellectual realm, where the discussions about 'Malay identity' are taking place. Milner has demonstrated in a very convincing manner that even the 'political' discourse (perhaps one might say: 'discussions about identity') among pre-war Malay writers-cum-nationalists was mainly informed by or conducted within the framework of colonial knowledge.⁹

Relevant here are the methods of accumulating facts that resulted in the formation and organization of the corpus of colonial knowledge. The approach anthropologist Bernard Cohn developed to make British rule in India more understandable is extremely useful. The British managed to classify, categorize, and connect the vast social world that was India so it could be controlled by way of so-called 'investigative modalities', devices to collect and organize 'facts' which, together with translation works, enabled the British to conquer the 'epistemological space'.¹⁰

An investigative modality includes the definition of a body of information that is needed and the procedures by which appropriate knowledge is gathered, ordered and classified, and then transformed into usable forms such as published reports, statistical returns, histories, gazetteers, legal codes, and encyclopaedias.¹¹ Some of these investigative modalities, such as historiography and museology, are of a general nature, whereas the survey and census modalities are more precisely defined and closely related to administrative needs. Some of these modalities were transformed into 'sciences' or 'disciplines', such as economics, ethnology, tropical medicine, comparative law, and cartography. Their practitioners became professionals. Each modality was tailored to specific elements and needs on the administrative agenda of British rule; each of them became institutionalised and routinized in the day-to-day practice of colonial bureaucracy.

The 'survey modality', which is the most critical, encompassed a wide range of practices, from mapping areas to collecting botanical specimens, from the recording of architectural and archaeological sites of historic significance to the minute measuring of peasant's fields. When the British came to India, and later to the Malay lands, they sought to describe and classify every aspect of life in terms of zoology, geology, botany, ethnography, economic products, history and sociology by way of systematic surveys; they also created a colony-wide grid in which every site could be located for economic, social and political

purposes. In short, 'surveys' came to cover every systematic and official investigation of the natural and social features of indigenous society through which vast amounts of knowledge were transformed into textual forms such as encyclopaedias and archives.

The next most important is the 'enumerative modality' one that enabled the British to categorize the indigenous society for administrative purposes, particularly by way of censuses that were to reflect basic sociological facts such as race, ethnic groups, culture, and language. The various forms of enumeration that were developed objectified and stultified social, cultural and linguistic differences among the indigenous peoples and the migrant population, and these differences were of great use for the colonial bureaucracy and its army to explain and control conflicts and tensions.

Control was primarily implemented by way of the 'surveillance modality': detailed information was collected on 'peripheral' or 'minority' groups and categories of people whose activities were perceived as a threat to social order and therefore should be closely observed. For surveillance reasons, methods such as anthropometry and fingerprinting systems were developed in order to be able to describe, classify and identify individuals rather accurately for 'security' and other general purposes.

The 'museological modality' started out from the idea that a colony was a vast museum; its countryside, filled with ruins, was a source of collectibles, curiosities and artifacts that could fill local as well as European museums, botanical gardens, and zoos. This modality became an exercise in presenting the indigenous culture, history and society to both local and European public. The 'travel modality' complemented the museological one. If the latter provided the colonial administration with concrete representations of the natives, the former helped to create a repertoire of images and typifications, if not stereotypes, that determined what was significant to European eyes; architecture, costumes, cuisine, ritual performances, and historical sites were presented in 'romantic', 'exotic', and 'picturesque' terms. These often aesthetic images and typifications were often expressed in paintings and prints as well as in novels and short stories, many created by the colonial scholar-administrators, their wives, and their friends.

These modalities represented, according to Cohn, a set of 'officialising procedures' which the British used to establish and extend their authority in numerous areas: '...control by defining and classifying space, making separations between public and private spheres, by recording transactions such as sale of

property, by counting and classifying populations, replacing religious institutions as the registrar of births, marriages, and deaths, and by standardizing languages and scripts'.¹² The colonial state introduced policies and rules that were organized by way of these investigative modalities; thus, the locals' minds and actions were framed in an epistemological and practical grid.

It should be obvious that Cohn's approach could very well be relevant in analysing developments in the Malay lands. The Malay Reservation Enactment 1913, to mention just one example, could serve as a very revealing illustration for this relevance: the Enactment defined, first, who is 'a Malay'; second, it determined the legal category of people who were allowed to grow rice only or rubber only; and third, it was bound to exert a direct influence on the commercial value of the land. This particular Enactment was instituted in the state constitution of each of the eleven *negeri* on the Peninsula separately, and in each constitution it offered a slightly different definition of who was a 'Malay'. For instance, a person of Arab descent was a Malay in Kedah but not in Johor; a person of a Siamese descent was a Malay in Kelantan but not in Negeri Sembilan. It could be argued, then, that 'Malay' and 'Malayness' were created and confirmed by the Malay Reservation Enactment. However, there is more to this: the Enactment also made 'Malay' and 'Malayness' contested categories.

The most powerful and most pervasive by-products of colonial knowledge on the colonized have been the idea that the modern 'nation-state' is the natural embodiment of history, territory and society. In other words, the 'nation-state' has become dependent on colonial knowledge and its ways of determining, codifying, controlling, and representing the past as well as documenting and standardizing the information that has formed the basis of government. Modern Malaysians have become familiar with 'facts' that appear in reports and statistical data on commerce and trade, health, demography, crime, transportation, industry and so on; these facts and their accumulation, conducted in the modalities that were designed to shape colonial knowledge, lie at the foundation of the modern, post-colonial nation-state of Malaysia. The citizens of Malaysia rarely question these facts, fine and often invisible manifestations of the process of Westernisation. What I have briefly sketched here is the 'identity of a history' since these 'facts', rooted in European social theories, philosophical ideas, and classificatory schemes, form the basis of Malaysian historiography. It is within this history that modern identities in Malaysia, such as 'Malay' and 'Malayness' and 'Chinese' and 'Chineseness', have been described and consolidated. Contemporary *Ādat* knowledge is part of that historiography.

Adat Knowledge and Malay Identity in Negeri Sembilan: Some Unresolved Issues

I wish to argue that 'adat knowledge' has been the site of contestation of various sorts, amongst historians, local adat experts and popular writers. There seems to be a continuous fascination with adat Perpatih, indeed a romantic one, amongst local and foreign scholars as well as local practitioners of the adat itself. In this part of the essay I wish to address a number of issues relating to the construction, production and maintenance of what I would call as 'adat knowledge', in the main, the one that has been textualised. As this effort is only an exploratory attempt based on a number of brief field trips to the adat district of Jempol over a period of two years,¹³ I could only outline the central points relating to each issue without giving an elaborate analysis and argument. Each needs further detailed treatment. The issues are as follows.

- * First, I would try to establish that adat Perpatih (AP) as we know it now has a strong 'colonial knowledge' base as well as content.
- * Second, the adat knowledge has been dominated by the 'Rembau story' that has now become the accepted (mis)-representation of AP knowledge.
- * Third, because of the over-dependent on the Rembau story, historians and anthropologist have become a-historical in the way they construct the history and social life of peoples in other adat districts, such as in Jempol where I did my field research.
- * Fourth, though the historiography on pre-colonial Negeri Sembilan is very poor and vague, the textualised Rembau story has been able to generate a stereotype, including amongst the finest scholars on adat Perpatih, that Negeri Sembilan is populated by 'Minangkabau Malays' practising and surviving on 'Minangkabau culture'.
- * Fifth, although AP as an oral tradition is dead, inspite of numerous attempts to re-invent it, nonetheless, 'adat perpatih', along with, 'Malay language', 'Islam' and 'Malay royalty', has always been the fourth pillar of Malayness amongst Negeri Sembilan Malays.

Is contemporary adat knowledge based on colonial knowledge?

Based on my arguments on Malay ethnicity in the preceding part of the essay and my previous essays on 'colonial knowledge', I would argue that the understanding and representation of adat Perpatih (AP), whether academic or non-academic, either in the past or at present, has been shaped by colonial knowledge. If viewed from Walter J. Ong's theoretical perspective, adat Perpatih,

in its original form, was never a textual knowledge.¹⁴ AP knowledge and its accumulation had always been an oral one until the arrival of the Europeans, particularly the British administrators-scholars who indeed was fascinated with the matrilineal system and began documenting whatever they could about the various aspects of AP both for officialising procedure purposes as well as making sure the adat did not disappear with modernization that was brought by colonialism. In short, AP became textualised from then on, not for use by the social actors themselves, most of whom were illiterate, but mainly for the learned and the literate and, most importantly, colonial bureaucratic rule.

Indeed, I would further argue that what constitutes as 'knowledge' on Negeri Sembilan's territory, history and society that is available today is largely based on a corpus of colonial knowledge that has now become 'standard reference'. This knowledge was built through the kind of methods termed as 'investigative modalities' by Cohn that he has elaborated extensively in a recent book.¹⁵ It is very striking that despite the availability of a number of major anthropological monographs on Negeri Sembilan and AP and numerous undergraduate academic exercises, MA and PhD theses, the main 'historical sources' remain to this day those written by British administrator-scholars between 1834 and 1934.¹⁶

Even the works of local researchers, such as by Abdul Rahman Haji Mohammad, Abdul Ghani Shamaruddin, Samad Idris and Norhalim Hj. Ibrahim, and foreign ones, such as by P.E. de Josselin de Jong and Michael Swift, beside using oral sources and ethnographic material, their cases, stories and analyses about AP and Negeri Sembilan were built and constructed on or around the historical accounts of the same British administrator-scholars listed in this essay.¹⁷

Without doubt, therefore, that contemporary adat knowledge, both the academic and non-academic one, has been built and accumulated upon a base that is a colonial knowledge one. Of course, that adat knowledge was, in its original form and content, an indigenous one. However, the way this knowledge was textualised and 'repackaged', as it were, either for hobby or officialising procedure reasons, during the colonial period, have had significant impact on the imaginations about adat perpatih itself, both upon the practitioners and especially others. What are these impacts? We shall turn to them one by one below.

Is Rembau = Negeri Sembilan?

Another striking feature of the present adat knowledge is that more than half of the published documents on Negeri Sembilan and AP have been on

Rembau, one of the nine states. So much so that "the story of Rembau" has been taken as the story of adat Perpatih in Negeri Sembilan. It is not surprising therefore that many of the generalizations on AP, academic or popular, have been based on the Rembau story. The recent published works of Norhalim, Peletz and Stivens provide us the best evidence.¹⁸

The "adat stories", or the variations of the idea and practice of AP, in other adat districts of Negeri Sembilan, namely, Johol, Jelebu, Sungai Ujong, Jempol, Terachi, Ulu Muar, Gunong Pasir, Inas, Gemenceh, Tampin, Linggi, and Ayer Kuning, have rarely or never really been told, described or analysed in equal breadth, depth and detail as Rembau. For that matter there is no agreement amongst scholars and, less so, among the practitioners of adat Perpatih, as to which are the "nine" adat districts that made the "Negeri Sembilan", or "nine states." One colonial observer, Newbold, listed Segamat, Johol, Naning, Sungai Ujong, Jelebu, Rembau, Klang, Ulu Pahang (including Serting and Jempol) and Jelai (Pahang) as the components of Negri Sembilan.¹⁹ At present, the areas called Segamat and Ulu Pahang belong to Johor and Pahang states respectively although previously they were parts of the nine states.

Such is the dominance of the Rembau story in contemporary adat knowledge that many seemed to think that the history and development of AP in Rembau and Negeri Sembilan is one and the same, particularly in official and academic discourse. Of course, Rembau's adat history and the Negeri Sembilan one is not the same but the fact that so little has been written by the colonial officers and writers on the other adat districts within Negri Sembilan that, inevitably, almost everyone has to depend on the Rembau story for some sort of explanation or as a model about AP elsewhere in Negeri Sembilan, as mentioned by Stivens.²⁰ Indeed, the Historical Society of Negeri Sembilan, for instance, has held many seminars on AP, many of which I have attended, but always dominated by papers presenting various aspects of the Rembau story. One has only to go through all the undergraduate academic exercises on Negeri Sembilan the standard reference or benchmark is yet again the Rembau story.

This phenomenon has insidiously distorts and corrupts both the story and history of other adat districts in Negeri Sembilan. Let us now turn to just one example, what I would call the "Jempol story", the adat district where I conducted my field research.

Undang Luak Jempol, or the adat district of Jempol, in terms of physical space, is the largest adat district in Negeri Sembilan, approximately three times the size of Rembau. In spite of that, one may ask, why has its Penghlulu Luak not made one of the ruling Undangs? The present four are Undangs of Sungai Ujong, Jelebu, Johol and Rembau. How could Jempol become so big, physically, but not as prominent, politically? I would attempt to provide a possible explanation.

At the turn of the 14th century, about 400 years before Negeri Sembilan was founded as a confederacy, Malacca became established as an entreport. The presence of Muar river, facing the Malacca Straits, was of great importance because it was connected to the Pahang river, facing the South China Sea, and that connection made it possible for Malacca to have access to Ulu Pahang and Ulu Kelantan, both of which produced much of the Peninsula's gold and jungle products, important to the Malacca-China trade. The Muar and Pahang rivers were connected through a busy and famous short land-portage area known as Penarikan.²¹ This important and strategic area is in the adat district of Jempol.

Both Thai and Malay sources also mention about a major Thai campaign in mid-15th century, which the *Sejarah Melayu* says was under the command of a provincial lord who led his troops overland through Pahang and cross the Penarikan route to Muar around 1455-56. Whether the campaign was a success or failure it is not known.²² Chinese records, called *Hai-Lu* (records of the Sea), of the 18th century mentions several gold producing settlements in the Kelantan and Pahang interior. Since the search for gold, tin and other local products became more important to the expanding international market stimulated by the industrial revolution in Western Europe, the old Penarikan route across Peninsula remained an important means by which gold and jungle products were carried to both east and west coasts. Around that time, in the 1770s, tin and gold mines were opened in Rembau, Lukut and some other areas in Negeri Sembilan.²³

What is critical here is the fact that, for about 400 years before a gold mine was opened in Rembau, from the 14th century onwards and until the 18th century, Jempol, through the land portage at Penarikan, was a strategic and critical area which was linked and integrated to the international trade between Malacca and China, Malacca and the West, and also Western companies in the Peninsula with their home bases in Europe. Therefore, it is not too outlandish to suggest that Jempol, even though itself was not a producer of gold or tin and

perhaps only have jungle products to offer, was a bustling area where people from nearby areas or afar came to settle or earn a living as porters, traders, shopkeepers, boat repairmen and a host of other jobs and activities. The Undang Luak Dato' Jempol must have been a powerful and influential person blessed with wealth and riches obtained from the economic activities generated by the Penarikan, hence the large physical area that came under his control.

However, after the British came and expanded its economic activities that led to the signing of the Pangkor treaty in 1874, with its interest mostly in tin found in the west coast of the Peninsula, the famous land-portage Penarikan became irrelevant. Jempol was left on its own, indeed almost sidelined, because gold and tin mines were now opened in Lukut, Rembau, Sungai Ujong, Johol and Jelebu. Suddenly these adat districts became more important to the British and so, too, were their leaders. It is not surprising therefore that when the British reconstructed the "nine states", according to the needs of the political and economic circumstances then, the four major players were Jelebu, Sungai Ujong, Johol, and Rembau.

Rembau became the focus for the British and Chinese business interests since the discovery of gold and the opening of a gold mine there in 1769.²⁴ This explains the large amount of historical documents and writings on Rembau, followed by those on Sungai Ujong, Jelebu and Johol, in that order. Except for Dr. Ione Fett, the Australian anthropologist, who did a study on a Batu Hampar clan in Jempol in 1976, there is no other foreign anthropologist or scholar who has conducted any research or written on Jempol.²⁵

The 'colonial silences' on Jempol is therefore understandable. Such silences has led to what I would call, the a-historical tendency that is present in the way adat perpatih history has been written, but the 'post-colonial forgetting' of Jempol is perplexing. Indeed, Jempol as an adat district was, lumped together with other adat districts, namely, Terachi, Johol, Ulu Muar, Inas, Sri Menanti and Gunung Pasir to constitute the post-colonial administrative district of Kuala Pilah. It was not until a decade ago that an administrative district called Jempol was established and gazetted, separating it from the other six adat districts.

During the field research, I was informed that the 12 clans found in Jempol are not identical to those found in Rembau. For instance, there is a Suku Sri Selemak Pahang in Jempol but none in Rembau. The explanation according to the Head of the said clan is that many families from Pahang, Johor and Kelantan must have come and settled in Jempol over a long period of time due to the Penarikan attraction. His own, according to the family genealogy, has arrived at

least four generations ago'. In other words, Jempol, not surprisingly, could have been actively receiving migrants, or soujourners, for at least 400 years especially during the periods when the trade along the east-west river 'highway' was on the up-swing, much before the arrival of Europeans. It is also not improbable that Minangkabaus, known for their business acumen, could have come to Jempol for the same economic attractions. Based on the above-mentioned situations it could therefore be suggested that such circumstances and varieties of peoples from that many places could have configured the clan composition in Jempol quite differently from that of Rembau. However, this has never been thought of before let alone being studied by anyone. This brings us to the next major issue about adat perpatih and its communities and also its overall identity.

Getting history wrong:

Are all Malays in Negeri Sembilan Minangkabau Malays?

One important impact of the Rembau story as well the 'silences' in colonial history on the eight other adat districts has been the almost 'unchallenged' assumption that because Rembau was overwhelmed by Minangkabau migration at some stage of its history, therefore, like Rembau, the Minangkabau factor has been perceived as critical in the formation of the Negeri Sembilan confederacy. As a result, the identity of the Negeri Sembilan populace as a whole has now been 'fixed', and taken for granted, as being "Minangkabau Malays" because their culture is purportedly based on "Minangkabau culture".

Even in the present hey-day of post-structuralism, post-modernism and post-colonial studies, this label has never been seriously questioned, both academically and at the popular level. The 'Minangkabau label' has always been accepted by the social actors themselves, and, sadly and especially, by anthropologists, who should be more aware of the constructed nature and the artificialness of such labels. Take, for instance, the opening two sentences of Stiven's recent monograph, published in 1996, in which she said:

"This book is about women's lives within the historical encounter between 'matriliney' and 'modernity' in Rembau, in the small Malaysian state of Negeri Sembilan. This **Minangkabau culture** (my emphasis) is one of a very small number of so-called 'matrilineal' societies which have assumed importance in the western imagination out of all proportion to their actual size and incidence."²⁶

There are too many questions left unanswered relating to the 'Minangkabau factor' that has not been explained satisfactorily until today, except by clever

manipulation of minimal historical 'facts' or of creative guesswork by extremely innovative social scientists and their peers in the state apparatus.

For instance, for a long time it has been accepted that Negeri Sembilan, as a political entity, with Raja Melewar at the helm, was established in 1773. There is evidence now to show that Raja Melewar was already in Rembau in 1727. The Raja Melewar-Raja Khatib struggle for power, according surviving Dutch record, happened in that year.²⁷ Indeed Raja Khatib, who was sent to Rembau to prepare for the arrival of Raja Melewar, was in Rembau on the instruction of Raja Kechil of Siak, trying hard to unite the different Minangkabau factions in order to oust the Riau-based Bugis in Rembau. It is unlikely Raja Melewar, who was then said to be about 50 years old, survived the clashes of 1727 and came back 46 years later, in 1773, to be installed as the first Yang DiPertuan Besar of Negeri Sembilan at Penajis, Rembau, and was said to have lived for another 20 years at least. If all these were true and really had happened, then Raja Melewar must be around 120 years old when he passed away. However, in treaties signed by the Dutch and the Minangkabau negeri (in Sumatra), beginning from 1750 onwards, Raja Melewar's name seems to be conspicuously absent. The mystery is further compounded by the fact that the Negeri Sembilan royal family genealogy, where Raja Melewar sits on the top of the family tree, is a disputed one and was said to be the construction of two British colonial administrator-scholars, namely Begbie and Newbold.²⁸ In 1874, Braddel, another British administrator-scholar pointed out the flaws in the genealogy²⁹, which was reconfirmed by another such scholar, Hervey, in 1883.³⁰ One could argue that Raja Melewar's presence in 1773 looks improbable and the stories about him gets more vague as we have to depend more and more on oral sources. So, even the Raja Melewar 'history' remains a contested one to this day.

Historical evidence and other studies on the Minangkabau people have shown that they have migrated to so many different areas within the Malay world, from Borneo to Sulawesi to Java and to many different parts of the Malay peninsula.³¹ But the impression that we get from all the writings on Negeri Sembilan, especially on Rembau, is that the Minangkabau have all descended upon Negeri Sembilan and no where else in the Malay world. This is certainly a grave historical misrepresentation or indeed a big lie.

The only logical reason, if I may suggest, why they came in droves and stayed on in Negeri Sembilan, and not elsewhere in the Malay world, was because they found that the indigenous peoples, mainly Proto-Malays such as the Jakun, Semelai, and Temuan in the area, have already practised an advanced matrilineal system, around which stable polities have existed for some period, which the

Minangkabaus found most suitable and comfortable with. The fact that only the local-born Binduanda clan, and not any other from the Minangkabau-originated ones, such as the Batu Hampar clan, could provide heirs to all the Undangs of the all the adat districts, is a strong enough evidence to support this claim. Therefore, the invitation of a Minangkabau prince to be the Yam Tuan Besar was mooted by both the ruling Biduanda clan and the Minangkabaus.

This claim is in no way diminish the importance of the Minangkabaus' contribution in the construction of what is now known as the adat culture in Negeri Sembilan. Colonial knowledge, too, is equally important in institutionalising the Minangkabau position in the making of adat knowledge, in the past and present. The Minangkabau architecture, for instance, must have been adopted by the ruling Biduanda clans as something acceptable perhaps because of its sophisticated aesthetics form. Upon closer scrutiny, it is not surprising therefore that most of the Minangkabau-like houses we find in Negeri Sembilan today are those belonging to adat chiefs and elite and not to the ordinary folks.

The contemporary obsession amongst the postcolonial ruling elites in Negeri Sembilan about anything Minangkabau is related to the more recent state-sponsored exercise of the re-invention of the unique Malay culture of Negeri Sembilan within the larger context of increased consciousness about Malay and Malayness in the whole of Malaysia.

Is adat perpatih the fourth pillar of Malayness in Negri Sembilan?

The advent of the New Economic Policy (NEP), a pro-Malay affirmative action policy launched in 1971 and that ended in 1990, has contributed directly to the heightened consciousness about Malay and Malayness in Malaysia and the 'new Malay' identity.

I would argue that the NEP has brought about not only major economic and social changes that we have thus observed in Malaysia but it has also redefined its politics, because the triumph of 'Malay entrepreneurship' through NEP, must be contextualised within the rival claims to legitimacy, power, and piety in the NEP era. Thus modern Malay entrepreneurship, irrespective of how we want to characterize it either as 'ersatz', 'rentier' or 'incubated', implies a tangible victory over alternative and polemic forms of power, be they ethnic, political, class-based, religion, or even, espousing a universally applicable Muslim entrepreneurial culture superior to global or Western capitalism. Certainly, demonstrating entrepreneurship holds tremendous legitimizing weight in 'new Malay' identity, to the point it has become almost overloaded and inflated with

importance, meaning, and value, a kind of meta-symbol. Practising entrepreneurship implies a number of processes.

First, it implies a radical transformation of the Malay worldview, a self-generating move from the *kampung* to the *bandaraya* (metropolis).

Second, it also implies that an important spiritual transformation, one which establishes economic modernity in Muslim terms, and which, framed in terms of concern for the worldly and other-worldly consequences of spiritual goodness and for the collective whole, has been used by moderate pro-Mahathir Muslims, led by Anwar Ibrahim, as strong critique of and challenge to the perceived backwardness of fundamentalist and radical *dakwahism* and the pressing contestations of Islamic political activists.

Third, it implies class mobility, that is, the move from an elite and aristocratic ascriptive society to, arguably, a more 'meritocracy-inclined' one in which any *kampung* boy or girl can succeed.

Fourth, it implies a vast political transformation, one that allows a kind of openness within the Malay political sphere, now populated by the educated, well-to-do and well-off entrepreneurs, that begets internal contestations ridden with 'money politics'. This has led, for instance, within UMNO, the freezing of UMNO's president and deputy president's posts from being open to competition, as if to avoid the entrepreneurship-driven political openness from decentring the core of Malay power. In other words, the 'new Malay' has generated a 'new politics' amongst Malays and subsequently in Malaysia, too.

In the Negeri Sembilan context, like elsewhere in Malaysia, although the NEP has opened-up new discourses on Malayness, the three pillars of Malayness, namely, *agama* (religion), *bahasa* (language) and *raja* (royalty) remain important anchoring most of the discussion. However, *adat perpatih* is special and unique to Negeri Sembilan Malays, so it has been claimed by both scholars and the ruling elite in Negeri Sembilan. To back this claim and to articulate it openly, the Negeri Sembilan state government has launched and financed various projects and activities related to this move mainly aimed reinforcing the fact that 'adat Perpatih' is the fourth pillar of Malayness amongst the Negeri Sembilan Malays.

Wherever one goes in Negeri Sembilan today one would find newly constructed buildings, especially those financed by the state, adopting the Minangkabau architecture style. The Negeri Sembilan 'parliament' or 'state assembly' building is one such physical structure. A series of adat items used in

official rituals, such as *tepak sireh* (betel nut and sirih leaves container), *sirih junjong* (sirih leaves arranged in a container used for weddings and other ceremonies), *destar kelok sembilan* (the royal headgear which has nine layers of cloth) and the like.

The national radio station, RTM (Radio dan Televisyen Malaysia), has a local station called "Radio Tiga, Seremban" solely to serve the Negeri Sembilan audience. Beside broadcasting the national news, it also offers local news especially relating to adat activities. It also carries special programs of popular Minangkabau music, such as *randai*, and Negeri Sembilan songs and music, such as *cak lempong*, sung in local dialects. The station also organises talk shows discussing adat issues involving the public usually in Negeri dialect.

Other cultural activities include the Negeri cuisine cooking competition and exhibition organised annually and attended by hundreds of spectators at the Negeri Sembilan Museum and Cultural Centre in Seremban, the state capital. These activities and many others carried out through the year are attempts towards reinforcing the uniqueness of adat as the all-important identity of the Negeri Malays.

Conclusion

What I have tried to demonstrate in a very schematic manner is basically how an identity is constituted, in this case 'Malay' and 'Malayness'. More importantly, I have also tried to examine the construction and nature of adat knowledge, both in historical and contemporary sense, that highlights adat as the other pillar of Malayness in Negeri Sembilan. More than that I have also tried to introduce the idea that adat knowledge is also a site for a number of contestations not only amongst foreign scholars but also between local ones, both scholars and practitioners. However, despite this, I believe the fascination of many, indeed a romantic one, about Adat Perpatih will continue, not least surprisingly amongst the younger generation of adat practitioners within and outside Negeri Sembilan itself.

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- ¹ I have written a series of essays on 'colonial knowledge' in the context of identity formation in Malaysia and they are as follows: Shamsul A.B. "Ethnicity, Class, Culture or Identity? Competing Paradigms in Malaysian Studies", *Akademika*, 53, (July 1998):33-59; idem, "Colonial Knowledge and the Construction of Malay and Malayness: Exploring the Literary Component", *Sari*, 17, July (1999): 3-17; idem, "Identity Contestation in Malaysia: A Comparative Commentary on 'Malayness' and 'Chineseness'", *Akademika*, 55 (July 1999): 17-37; idem, 'Colonial Knowledge & Identity Formation: Literature and the Construction of Malay and Malaysness', *Asian Culture Quarterly*, 28,1 (Spring, 2000):49-64; idem, "Ilmu Kolonial dan Pembinaan Fakta mengenai Malaysia" in *Masyarakat, Budaya dan Perubahan*, ed. Rahimah Aziz and Mohamed Yusoff Ismail, (2000):189-201; idem, "Ilmu Kolonial Tunjang Pembinaan Ilmu Sains Sosial: Satu Tinjauan Kritis", *Jurnal Pengajian Umum*, 1 (Disember 2000):1-16; idem, 'Malay' and 'Malayness' in Malaysia Reconsidered: A Critical Review", *Communal/Plural*, 9,1 (2001):69-80.

- ² Shamsul A.B. 'Debating about Identity in Malaysia: A Discourse Analysis', *Tonan Aja Kenkyu*, 34,4 (1996): 476-499 and idem, 'The Construction and the Transformation of a Social Identity: Malayness and Bumiputerness Re-examined', *Journal of Asian and African Studies* (Tokyo), 52 (1996):15-33.

- ³ Norhalim Hj. Ibrahim, *Negeri Yang Sembilan* (Kuala Lumpur: Fajar Bakti, 1995); Michael Peletz, *A Share of the Harvest: Kinship, Property and Social History among the Malays of Rembau*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Maila Stivens, *Matriliney and Modernity: Sexual Politics and Social Change in Rural Malaysia* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1996); Sherifa Khan, *The Making of Modern Negeri Sembilan* (Seremban: Taman Seni Budaya, Negeri Sembilan, 1986). For a recent contribution, see, Hisashi Endo, "Adat in Transition: Concerning the Development of Customary Land in Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia" in *Political Culture and Ethnicity: An Anthropological Study in Southeast Asia*, ed. Toh Goda (Quezon City, Philippines: New Day, 1999):1-22.

- ⁴ Cheah Boon Kheng, 'Writing Indigenous History in Malaysia: A Survey on Approaches and Problems', *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 10,2 (1997):33-81; Charles Hirschman, 'The Making of Race in Colonial Malaya: Political Economy and Racial Category', *Sociological Forum*, Spring (1986): 330-61.

- ⁵ A.J. Stockwell, 'The Historiography of Malaysia: Recent Writings in English on the History of the Area since 1874', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 5, (1986): 82-110; Khoo Kay Kim, 'Local Historians and the Writing of Malaysian History in the Twentieth Century', in *Perceptions of the Past in Southeast Asia*, ed. Anthony Reid and David Marr (Singapore: Heinemann, 1979), pp. 299-311; Khoo Kay Kim, 'Recent Malaysian Historiography', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 13, 2 (1979): 28-39; Khoo Kay Kim, 'Malaysian Historiography: A Further Look', *Kajian Malaysia* 19, 1 (1992): 37-62.
- ⁶ D.P. Singhal, 'Some Comments on the Western Element in Modern Southeast Asian History', *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 2, 2 (1960): 72-102; Khoo, 'Local Historians and the Writing of Malaysian History'; Anthony Milner, 'Colonial Records History: British Malaya', *Kajian Malaysia* 4, 2 (1986): 1-18; Yeoh Kim Wah, 'The Milner Version of British Malayan History: A Rejoinder', *Kajian Malaysia* 5, 1 (1987): 1-28.
- ⁷ Kassim Ahmad, 'Satu Konsep Sejarah Kebangsaan Malaysia', *Dewan Masyarakat*, November (1981): 47-54; Lim Say Hup, 'The Need for a Reinterpretation of Malayan History', *Malaya in History* 5, 2 (1990): 41-3; Malik Munip, *Tuntutan Melayu* (Kuala Lumpur: Sarjana Enterprise, 1975); Kua Kia Soong, *Malaysian Cultural Policy and Democracy* (Kuala Lumpur: The Resource and Research Center, Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall, 1990).
- ⁸ Ernest Renan, 'What is a Nation?', in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 11.
- ⁹ Milner, *Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya*. Mohd. Taib Osman addressed this same issue in his inaugural lecture on 'Malay Studies', which was published as *Pengajian Melayu Sebagai Bidang Ilmu di Universiti. Inaugural Lecture for the Chair of Malay Studies* (Kuala Lumpur: Universiti of Malaya Press, 1991).
- ¹⁰ Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 1
- ¹³ I must mention that I have lived in Seremban, Negeri Sembilan's capital city since 1985 and had continuous access to both written and oral sources on

adat knowledge from a variety of sources but never attempted to analyse the information, academically, this is my first serious attempt.

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- ¹⁵ Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge*.
- ¹⁶ See, P.J.Begbie, *The Malayan Peninsula* (Madras 1834): 133-260; T.J.Newbold, *Political Statistical Account of British Settlements in the Straits of Malacca* (London, 1839), 1:190-266, 2:74-175 and 439-460; J.H. Moor, ed. *Notices of the Indian Archipelago and the Adjacent Countries* (London, 1837); D.F.A. Hervey, "Rembau" *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of the Straits Branch* (JSBRAS), 13 (1884): 241-358; H.A. O'Brien, "Jelevu" *JSBRAS*, 14 (1884):337-343; M. Lister, "Negeri Sembilan, their origin and Constitution", *JSBRAS*, 19, (1887): 35-53, idem, "Malay Law in Negeri Sembilan", *JSBRAS*, 22, (1890): 299-319, idem, "Pantang Larang of Negri Sembilan", *JSBRAS*, 23 (1891):142-144; R.N. Bland, "Aturan Sungai Ujong", *JSBRAS*, 28 (1895); A. Hale, "The Minangkabau Code", *JSBRAS*, 31 (1898):43-61; C.W.C. Parr and W.H. Mackray, "History of Rembau", *JBRAS*, 56 (1910):1-157; A. Caldecott, *Jelevu* (Kuala Lumpur, 1912); idem, "Jelevu Customary Songs and Sayings", *JSBRAS*, 78 (1918): 3-41; J.E. Nathan and R.O. Winstedt, *Johol, Inas, Ulu Muar Jempol, Gunong Pasir and Terachi: Their History and Constitution*, (Kuala Lumpur 1920); R.O. Winstedt, "Some Rembau Customary Sayings", *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* (JMBRAS), 4,4 (1928); idem, "Royal Tabus in Negeri Sembilan", *JMBRAS*, 7,3 (1929); R.J.Wilkinson, "Sri Menanti", *Papers on Malay Subject* (1914); idem, "Sungai Ujong", *JSBRAS*, 83 (1921); L.A. Mills, "British Malaya 1824-1867", *JMBRAS*, 1, 2 (1925): 115-128 and 172-175 and Appendix, "Malay Documents relating to the Naning War"; E.N. Taylor, "Customary Law of Rembau", *JMBRAS*, 7,1 (1929); G.A. de C. Moubray, *Matriarchy in the Malay Peninsula* (London, 1931); R.O. Winstedt, "Negeri Sembilan, The History, Polity and Beliefs of Nine States", *JMBRAS*, 12, 3 (1934); I.W. Blelloch & H.P. Bryson, "Ceremonial Custom in Negeri Sembilan", *JMBRAS*, 14,3 (1936); J.J. Sheehan, "The Installation of Tuanku Abdul Rahman ibni Al-Marhum Tuanku Muhammad Shah as Yang di-Pertuan Besar, Negri Semiblan", *JMBRAS*, 14,3 (1936); J.M. Gullick, "Sungai Ujong", *JMBRAS*, 22, 2 (1949); idem, "The Negeri Sembilan Economy of 1890s", *JMBRAS*, 24,1, (1952); "The War with Yam Tuan Antah", *JMBRAS*, 27,1 (1954).

- ¹⁷ See, footnote 23 and also, Abdul Aziz, "Adat Kuala Pilah", *JMBRAS*, 14,3 (1936); Abdullah, Dato' Sedia Raja, "The Leading Saints of Rembau", *JMBRAS*, 3,3 (1925); Abdul Rahman bin Haji Mohammad, *Dasar-Dasar Adat Perpatih* (Seremban, 1964) and idem, *Dongeng-Dongeng Negeri Sembilan* (Seremban, 1966), Abdul Ghani bin Shmaruddin, "Undang Luak Jelebu, Pertbalan", *Bahasa*, 2,1 (1959); Samad Idris, *Negeri Sembilan dan Sejarahnya* (Kuala Lumpur: Utusan, 1968); Nordin Selat, *Sistem Sosial Adat Perpatih*, (Kuala Lumpur: Utusan, 1976); A. Wahab Alwee, *Rembau: A Study in Integration and Conflict in Negeri Sembilan*, Centre for Asian Studies, Working Papers in Asian Studies, No.1, (Nedlands: University of Western Australia, 1987); P.E. de Josselin de Jong, *Minangkabau and Negeri Sembilan: Socio-Political Structure in Negeri Sembilan* (Leiden, 1952); M.G.Swift, *Malay Peasant Society in Jelebu* (London: Athlone Press, 1965); Diane Lewis, "Inas: A Study of Local History", *JMBRAS*, 33,1 (1960).
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- ¹⁹ See, Newbould, *Political and Statistical Account*, Vol. 2:78-79.
- ²⁰ Stivens, *Matriliny and Modernity*, pp. 45-49.
- ²¹ Barbara Andaya & Leonard Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 2nd ed. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), p. 42.
- ²² Andaya & Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, p. 66.
- ²³ Andaya & Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, p. 93.
- ²⁴ Andaya & Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, p. 93.
- ²⁵ I was the research assistant to Dr. Ione Fett, an anthropologist from the Department of Anthropology & Sociology, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia, when she conducted her field research in Kampung Bukit Laka, Jempol between May 1976-May 1977. See, Ione Fett, "Land Ownership in Negeri Sembilan, 1900-1977" in *Women's Work and Women's Roles*, edited by Lenore Manderson, (Development Studies Centre Monograph, Canberra: Australian National University, 1983): 73-96.
- ²⁶ Stivens, *Matriliny and Modernity*, pg. 1

- ²⁷ Leonard Andaya, *Kingdom of Johore 1641-1728: Economic and Political Development*, (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp.310-311.
- ²⁸ Newbould, *Political and Statistical Accounts*, pp.78-79.
- ²⁹ T. Bradell, *Second Continuation of Report on the Proceedings of Government relating to Native States in the Malayan Peninsula*, (HMSO, London, 1874).
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- ³¹ Mochtar Naim, *Merantau: Minangkabau Migration*, (Singapore: ISEAS 1980) and Tsyushi Kato, *Matriliny and Migration: Evolving Minangkabau Traditions in Indonesia*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1982).