

Official State Records: A Minefield for Studying Pre-1957 Malay Women

MAHANI MUSA

ABSTRAK

Di Asia Tenggara, kajian tentang wanita dalam sejarah adalah fenomena terkini. Kekurangan dokumen asli dikatakan menjadi punca mengapa tidak banyak penyelidikan tentang sejarah wanita dilakukan. Takrif sejarah kebangsaan juga adakalanya meminggirkan kaum wanita manakala peranan golongan ini dalam aspek sosioekonomi dan politik pula dilihat hanya sebagai tambahan kepada sumbangan kaum lelaki. Di Malaysia, fokus kajian wanita juga amat terhad. Berbanding wanita Cina, kajian tentang penglibatan wanita Melayu dalam politik lebih diminati disebabkan sumber lebih mudah diperolehi, manakala amat sedikit diketahui tentang penglibatan kelompok ini dalam aspek sosioekonomi. Kedah, dalam hal ini, mampu memberikan gambaran yang lebih jelas tentang peranan wanita Melayu di negeri itu dalam pembangunan ekonomi menerusi pelbagai dokumen asli seperti rekod-rekod Pejabat Setem, Pejabat Tanah, Setiausaha Kerajaan Negeri, laporan tahunan pentadbiran, pendidikan dan perubatan, dan juga Undang-Undang Kedah 1893.

Kata kunci: Penyelidikan, wanita, Kedah, dokumen asli

ABSTRACT

In Southeast Asia, studies on women in history has been a very recent phenomenon. The unavailability of primary sources has been cited for the lack of historical research on women. Quite often the national history pushed women to the margins while the women's socioeconomic and political role is seen as supplementary to men. In Malaysia, the focus on women studies is limited. Unlike Chinese women, the study on Malay women's involvement in politics was more popular due to the availability of the sources and little is known of their socioeconomic contributions. Kedah provides us with a more clearer picture of the role played by Malay women in the socioeconomic development in the state through various documentary materials, including the records of the Stamp Office, the Land office, the State Secretariat, the annual report of the state administration, report on education and medical report and the law known as Undang-Undang Kedah 1893.

Key words: Research, women, Kedah, original documents

INTRODUCTION

A recent study by Zainab Awang Ngah, shows that between 1990-2004 a total of 3,346 publications on women in Malaysia were completed with an average of 200 for most years, except for the year 1990 and 2004 (2006:11). This indicates a definite increase in the number of literature on women. The study also highlights popular topics, including women at the work place, social-cultural aspects of rites and ceremonies in which women play an important role, the problems faced by single mothers, physical abuse and sexual harrassment in the home and the work place. All these are certainly a good sign for the future research on women in Malaysia.

The following data provided by Zainab Awang Ngah also shows there is an increase in the number of works under the category of “general works and history” for the 1991-2004 period compared to previous years. However, compared to other categories, the study under “history” still lags behind. The total of 258 publications under this category for the 1970-2004 period is small compared to the other categories, like economic condition, employment aspects, status & women’s role in development.

Publications on Women by Subject Categories for 1970-2004

Broad Subject Categories	Pre 1970	1970- 80	1981- 89	1994- 2004
1. General Works and History	5	12	15	226
2. Crime and Delinquency	2	12	2	205
3. Economic Condition, Employment Aspects, Status and Women’s Role in Development	7	70	154	667
4. Education	4	19	9	226
5. Feminism and Women’s Rights	1	3	8	81
6. Health and Welfare	4	17	38	396
7. Legal status, women and Family Law	28	60	18	132
8. Literary Aspects, Women in Literature	1	7	6	319
9. Marriage and Divorce, Fertility and Demographic Status	15	30	30	217
10. Muslim Women and Islam	3	16	22	202
11. Political Activities and Public Life	2	21	19	102
12. Socio-cultural Conditions and Status in Society: Sociological & Anthropological Studies	13	41	72	474
13. Technology and Science	–	–	–	99
14. Miscellaneous	–	–	4	–
Total	85	308	397	3346

(Source: Zainab Awang Ngah, *Studies on Women in Malaysia*, 2006)



Under the category of “general works and history”, there is an imbalance in the topics attempted; a substantial number of them concentrate more on biographical studies of women with 45 for the 1990-2004 period. In fact, of the 226 works published under the category “general and history” for the period between 1990 and 2004, only 59 or 26 per cent are actually under “history”.

SOURCES

The lack of primary sources is often cited as the main reason for the slow progress in writing women history in Malaysia and Southeast Asia (Andaya 2000: 2). In actuality, the sources are not that difficult to find. The published and unpublished materials kept at the national archives in Kuala Lumpur, and the many state branches, as well as other institutions are rich in documentary materials relating to women, if the researcher is patient enough with bureaucratic red tapes. Historians interested in the involvement of women in politics, for example, could always refer to the papers of political parties, letters, newspapers, interviews with the party ranks and files (male and female), collection of private papers and family papers and memoirs. For those interested in the socioeconomic aspects, official government documents, ranging from census to civil records, had proven to be a veritable “goldmine” on the economic and political involvement of women. While those interested in social history which covers a wide terrain including women, government documents and reports, private papers, and memoirs are invaluable sources to fathom the experiences of women. Clearly it is not the absence of information about women, but rather such information was seen as irrelevant to ‘history’ that led to the invisibility of women in past official accounts (Kleinberg 1992: 10).

WRITING MALAY WOMEN HISTORY

Traditional texts, like the *Sejarah Melayu*, *Tuhfat Al-Nafis*, *Hikayat Patani* and legal texts like the *Undang-Undang Melaka* and *Undang-Undang Laut Melaka*, *Undang-Undang Kedah* (Ku Din Ku Meh version), *Tambo Minangkabau*, and *Tamboh Alam Naning* are invaluable in writing the history of Malay women in the pre-colonial period. Both Cheah Boon Kheng and Khasnor Johan had shown these traditional sources are worth looking into as they provide the texture of women’s life, be it political, social or economic. The *Undang-Undang Melaka* and *Undang-Undang Laut Melaka*, for example, highlight the economic roles of Malay women in the Melaka sultanate in both the agricultural sphere and commerce (Khasnor 1999: 147). Cheah, referring to traditional texts like the *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay Annals), *Tuhfat Al-Nafis* and *Hikayat Patani* concludes

that Malay women since the traditional period were never separated from the political aspects and they were involved in palace intrigues. They even had become rulers on their own rights (Cheah 1993).

Another legal text that has received much less attention is the *Undang-Undang Kedah/Kedah Laws Ku Din Ku Meh Version 1893* which is the only legal text that has acknowledged the contributions of Malay women on Kedah socioeconomic development in the pre-1909 period (Khoo 1992). *Undang-Undang Kedah A. H. 1311/1893* (the Ku Din Ku Meh version) was believed to have been in use since the 17th century during the reign of Sultan Rijaluddin Muhammad Syah (r. 1625-1652). This law continued to be in use until the 19th century. This version of the Kedah laws is much broader in its scope than the Kedah laws, also known as *Undang-Undang Kedah*, studied by R.O. Winstedt. While certain sections of both appear to be similar, their interpretations differ. Sections relating to the collection of taxes (*ripai*), regulations on the relationship between master and debt bondsmen, the *nobat* tax, and articles regarding women as part of the labouring force are not found in Winstedt's version. In Malaysian historiography, this *Undang-Undang Kedah A. H. 1311/1893* is one of the few Temenggong laws that actually recognised the role of women in economic development, something that is not even mentioned in the *Undang-Undang Melaka* which is the main source of Temenggong laws in the post Melaka period. Similarly, this aspect is given less prominence in the *Adat Perpatih* laws although these matriarchal laws, as reflected by the *Tambo Minangkabau* and *Tamboh Alam Naning*, pay much more attention to the rights of women with regard to inheritance (Edwar 1991; Mohd. Shah 1996). Similarly, the *Nineteen Nine Laws of Perak* do provide safeguards for the welfare of women, including their inheritance of property, although these laws do not recognise them from the socio-economic aspect (Rigby 1970; Abu Talib 2007).

The recognition of women labour appears in article 16 of the *Undang-Undang Kedah 1311/1893* which relates to marriage and the division of wealth in case of divorce or the death of either the husband or wife. This concern the welfare of women is believed to have originated with Shaikh Abu Bakar who was appointed the state Kadi in the early 19th century. He was known to have reminded judges to be fair to women in matters relating to the common wealth or jointly owned property (*harta sepencarian*). This reminder was apparently issued after he had observed that the women were more diligent than men in all spheres of economic activities in the Kedah sultanate. Consequently, he issued the order that a fair division of the common wealth in case of divorce or death of the husband had to be made to prevent the victimization of the surviving women and their children.

The *Undang-Undang Kedah 1311/1893* also directs its attention to marriage, matrimonial conflicts and divorce, based on both Islamic and *adat* laws. It spells out the dowry (*mas kahwin*) to the guardian who gives the woman in marriage (*wali*), the issuance of a reminder (which records the date



of marriage, total marriage expenses and the dowry). These articles are to assist the judge in dispensing justice in case of matrimonial differences, divorce (as well as situations in which the wife could ask for divorce and *fasakh*) and the division of the common wealth. This law differs from the other Temenggong laws as it also discusses incest (*sumbang mahram*) which is not touched in other legal texts.

Periodicals are another potential sources for those interested in writing on the emancipation and liberation of Malay women in the early 20th century. Women magazines, like *Bulan Melayu* (published in Johore in June 1930) and *Ibu Melayu* (published in Penang in 1947), became important avenues for Malay women to deliberate on “women question”. These magazines were run by women; *Bulan Melayu* was the official mouthpiece of the Johore Malay Women Association which was formed on 1st April 1930. It was published two months later under the initiative of Zainun Sulaiman or popularly known as Ibu Zain. Another magazine, *Ibu Melayu*, was under the patronage of the Penang Malay Women Association. The head of this association was Hasnah Ishak, who was also the editor of the magazine. The women intellectuals also wrote and published in the male-led magazine, like *Majallah Guru*, published in 1924 and became the official organ of the federation teachers association, *Kenchana* (published in Kota Bharu in 1930) and the other *Kenchana* that was published in Singapore in 1947. Although their tone, especially during the pre-war period is seen by some researchers as unambitious as they focussed more on the related issues of women as wives and mothers (Zabedah 1964), the early years were nevertheless important when Malay women were courageous enough to contribute ideas and views for the common good. They suggested to fellow Malay women to discard habits that were detrimental to the race; they suggested to the authority for the provision of opportunities for girls to learn the English language; and they criticised the unfair treatment of female by the male. These were courageous actions indeed.

The Japanese Occupation ushered a significant impact on the emancipation of women in Malaya and Southeast Asia. Undeniably, many associations and magazines of the pre-war period came to an end but the magazines which were allowed by the Japanese still provide space for Malays to focus on national awareness. And the Malay women were never left behind during this period. The women section in the two Japanese sponsored periodicals, *Fajar Asia* and *Semangat Asia* – (both periodicals were published in January 1943) – became the foci for pre-war female writers like Zainun Sulaiman, Mas Neng, Rohana Djamil and others to instill a new awareness among fellow Malays especially the womenfolk. They also elaborate on the idea of creating *puteri baharu* (new women). From their writings, we could trace their ideas, thoughts and perceptions towards education, the function of women as wives and mothers and their role in society, besides their love for the homeland.



A CASE STUDY ON MALAY WOMEN IN THE COLONIAL PERIOD OF KEDAH

The official state records are widely used by historians in writing the socioeconomic or political history of a particular state. Local historians, like Mohammad Isa Othman, has seen much of the Kedah official records kept at the National Archives in Kuala Lumpur and the Alor Setar branch for his study on the politics of Kedah and Perlis. Among the files he has consulted include the Letters of Sultan Abdul Hamid, the State Secretariat files of Kedah and Perlis, the Land Office files, the Stamp Office files, and the District Office files and printed government records like the Annual Reports and censuses. These files contained not only political and economic affairs, but also the “story” of women in the state. Although this ‘story’ is not immediately visible as women were not the main focus of these files, a careful scrutiny could shed much light on Kedah Malay women.

A study of the Kedah State Secretariat Files, District Office files, Land Office files, Stamp Office files, the Court files, Kedah Annual Reports, the Annual Education Reports and Medical Reports could provide us with a clearer picture of the involvement of Malay women in Kedah socioeconomic development. These files show the involvement of commoners in socioeconomic aspects as nothing new, or something that happened after the entry of capitalism into the state, nor were the women marginalised by colonialism. There was in fact a continuity in their involvement from the traditional period but with new emphasis and new challenges. With the introduction of labour and wages, women had to adapt to these changes in their pursuit of wealth and they did undertake this adjustment quite well.

The discussion below is based on the Kedah official records that had not been used by earlier researchers in writing women history. Similar situation are found in the official records of the other states that awaits the interested researcher who have the patience to face bureaucratic red tapes in the archives.

LAND OFFICE RECORDS

With the formation of the Kedah State Council in 1905, following the Siamese loans to the Kedah government, many aspects of the state administration were improved to rationalize the sources of state revenue. This includes matters relating to land administration since land was the basis of the state economy and its main source of revenue. This led to the establishment of nine separate Land Offices not only for the purpose of collecting land revenue, but also to rectify basic problems like improper and non-existence demarcation and boundary lines (Sharom 1984: 121). The Land Offices set up were located in Alor Setar, Kuala Muda, Kulim, Krian, Langkawi, Saputeh, Sungai Korok, Alor

Changleh and Sungai Limau. Herein lies much of the information on women history as the majority of them were involved in the agricultural sector. The 1911 census states that out of 41,715 Malay women who were involved in agriculture in Kedah, 99% or 41,625 of them were involved in paddy planting. Similar involvement were noted in the subsequent censuses of 1921 and 1931. In the 1921 census, for instance, 90% of Malay women were involved in paddy cultivation, while in the 1931 census, it was 86.6%. The decrease in 1931 is related to the shift of interest among Malay women to rubber planting with 11.4 % of them involved in this sector (Nathan 1922: 285-288; Vlieland 1932: 315).

In relation to this, the Land Office files, with most of them deposited at the National Archives, Kuala Lumpur, and a smaller number at its Kedah branch, serve as a general index to survey the involvement of Malay women, including those from the royalty, in agricultural activities. The records reveal the persistence of women in making land applications, the age of the applicants and the regularity of such application made by the same individual. The youngest female applicant for land in Kedah was a 15 year old girl from the *mukim* of Siong in Baling. This means that girls since the age of 15 or earlier had already entered the work force to assist their parents in the paddy fields. However, in general the applicants were in their twenties to the forties. For the period 1928-29 the Baling Land Office received 84 applications for state lands from Malay women for various purposes. In 1930 the applications had increased to 197 and between 1932-34, to 360. Similar phenomenon is observable in the Land Offices of Kubang Pasu, Padang Terap and other districts.

Besides applying for land for dwelling purposes, paddy cultivation and rubber planting, the Land Office files also contain application by women for land that were left behind by deceased relatives, land that had been worked earlier but without official permission, to buy auctioned land, to apply for change of name/nominee in land grants, and at the peak of the rubber boom in the 1930s, to change paddy land into rubber land. These shows Malay women actually followed closely contemporary economic development by involving themselves in rubber cultivation, despite the high capital outlay incurred and the risk of fluctuating prices.

As land were important assets, the women took a serious approach whenever they faced problems with their land. A scrutiny of the land office files of the various districts shows that Kedah Malay women were active in sending petitions to the land office whenever they received unfavourable replies on matters such as the land they had applied for had been given to others, actual land size did not tally with that stated in land grants, diminishing land size after being surveyed by the land office, claims for compensation when land was forcibly confiscated by the state for certain projects and so forth.

STAMP OFFICE RECORDS

The Stamp Office records came into the historian's territory because it is related to the estate duty paid by the heirs who were given the letters of administration of the property of the deceased. The heir, however, had to undertake certain actions namely to undertake a proper accounting of the estate whether it involved immovable (refers to real estate) or moveable property and the payment of estate duty if the net value of the estate exceeded \$500.00. Along with the listing of the assets and liabilities of the deceased, the heir has to apply to either the Lower Court or the High Court for letters of administration which was then forwarded to the Stamp Office for verification. These lists and correspondence between the Stamp Office and other relevant offices like the Land Office for the provision of valuation on the land owned by the deceased later ends in the Stamp Office.¹ This led to a fascinating findings about the estate of women especially the well to-do,² their sources of wealth, lifestyle, and their dependence on money lenders, especially the *chettiyars*. Although the Islamic inheritance procedure or *faraid* did not allow women to have much inherited wealth as the stipulated ratio of 1:2 for daughters would change depending on the number of surviving sons of the deceased, the records of the Stamp Office nevertheless indicate Malay women, especially from the royalty, had left behind sizeable wealth. These records which began from 1920s to the 1940s and its continuation, the Estate Duty Office which is primarily deposited in the National Archives of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur and its Kedah branch, enable the researcher to identify the socioeconomic strength of Malay women.

For the royal women, their positions allowed many the opportunity to accumulate wealth through inheritance, *ampun kurnia*, and through individual purchases. One notable case was Che Manjalara, the favourite consort of Sultan Abdul Hamid. Based on the records of the Stamp Office, she had left behind wealth in various forms officially estimated at \$59,649.00 and accumulated debts of \$35,345.07. After deductions, including \$1,250.00 for burial expenses, her heritable wealth was valued at \$23,053.93.

Information from the Stamp Office also disclosed the kind of life these royal ladies had led including the dependence of a few of them on money lenders or *chettiyars*. One *chettiyar*, Mutukarpen who was based in Pekan Cina, regularly extended loans to Che Manjalara. The biggest loan she had ever obtained from this money lender was in 1935/36 to the tune of \$28,860.00. At the time of her death in 1941, \$4,329.00 of the loan was still outstanding (*SO 120/60 Estate of Yang Teramat Mulia Che Manjalara bt. Long Nara*). The Stamp Office records provide clues as to why *chettiyars* readily extended loans to the royal ladies namely the possibility to apply to the state government to deduct payments from the monthly royal allowance, and the high value of land mortgaged by these royal ladies. In the case of money owed by Che Manjalara to Mutukarpen,

the value of the land mortgaged was officially estimated at more than \$50,000 based on the existing market price.

Beside the well to-do, the Stamp Office Records also throw much light on the socioeconomic positions of commoners. Most of them lived in poverty, while the shrewd ones managed to live in luxury by the standard of the time. The files also enable us to detect how commoners derived their wealth through inheritance, and joint property and those purchased on their own. These files also described Malay women who actually developed the lands that they owned. A most interesting file refers to Balkis binti Hasan which show her a shrewd women in the way she had diversified her income. This woman traded in jewellery on credit basis and rented out her lands, while the list of her properties include an automobile, which was beyond the reach of most people at that time (*SO 83/55 Estate of Balkis bt Haji Hassan*).

As an important contributor to the household economy, women did not take lightly problems relating to inheritance. Malay women were known to write their wills to ensure fairness in the distribution of wealth. Women wrote petitions to the state government with regards to property claims by surviving heirs and they always supported their case with the relevant evidence. The second wife of Haji Dahaman bin Penghulu Hasan, who was known as Eshah, tried to claim her right with regards the joint property on the death of her husband. She had to face Haji Dahaman's son who was also making a similar claim in February 1945. As the common property was not included in the list of inheritable properties issued by the Kedah Stamp Office, Eshah applied to the High Court to have it included as these properties were obtained after her marriage to her late husband which lasted 40 years. In this claim Eshah meticulously listed down the common properties she had held with her late husband. It was a credit to her tenacity that she manage to secure what she had claimed for (*SO 50/87 Estate of Haji Dahaman alias Haji Abd. Rahman bin Penghulu Hassan*).

THE KEDAH STATE SECRETARIAT (SUK) FILES

The State Secretariat files proved to be an important source for a study of the socioeconomic history of Malay women. The files had been in existence since the establishment of the State Council in 1905 and rich in various aspects of the administration, economy, social and politics which contain information useful for gender studies or women history. As in other official files discussed earlier, most of these files are kept at the National Archives of Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur. There is much information on women in these files. For example, the presence of women at the land office for grant application was raised by the State Council in its meeting of August 1, 1927. The government had received numerous complaints about the land office being crowded with women who came to settle their land grants and who had brought along their children. To



overcome this problem, the state government allowed the procedure for the changing of names in land grants to be done by representatives who were certified by the *penghulu* (*SUK Kedah 375/46*). The presence of women at the land office shows that land was important to the women – a place where they could build family dwellings and for cultivation, or to be sold in time of need and to be passed on as inheritance.

The Kedah State Secretariat (SUK) files also reveal controversies over land applications involving women from the royal family for under the Land Revenue Exemptions Enactment, they too were allowed to own lands (*HCO Kedah 1078/1917*). However, quite often such privileges were abused by selling the land to Chinese often at inflated prices, or for speculative purposes. Both royal males and females were involved. There are many files in which the government decided to freeze the land applications by these royal women or they being given stern warning for these abuses (*SUK Kedah 1667/1349*).

As land was an important asset, Malay women viewed seriously problems relating to land applications and ownership. They sent petitions to the land office, and the Office of the State Secretary, to file claims with the court (including against the royalty) if they could not get satisfactory solution to their problems. Petitions were submitted in relation to family inherited wealth, jointly owned property, problems of land boundary, claims for the same property among eligible heirs, and trespassing or cheating with regards lands own by the family and heirs. Although it is not possible to trace the outcomes of these cases, it shows the length that Malay women would go to safeguard their interests as far as wealth ownership was concerned and to prevent them from falling into the hands of others. Besides having to contend with the challenge from male heirs, Malay women did not hesitate to take their husbands or members of the royalty to court in matters pertaining to inheritance and the division of properties. One such case involving a commoner and royalty took place in 1922. The commoner woman, Jah bt. Ngah Man, had taken Che Manjalara to court with regards to her “*surat hebah*” (letter of announcement) through which all her properties were deposited with Che Manjalara. Che Manjalara had refused to return these properties despite a claim made by Jah and her son (*SUK Kedah 320/1341*). Unfortunately, I have not been able to trace the result of this case in the files of both the courts and the State Secretariat Office. Nevertheless, this case shows that Malay women were willing to go the extra mile to overcome their fear of the royalty to safeguard their interests.

One interesting discovery from the state secretariat files relates to the dependence of the Malays including women on money lenders especially the *chettiyars*.³ Valuable lands were lost to these *chettiyars* when they failed to settle outstanding loans. Loans were procured for various purposes including every day needs when the paddy harvests failed, for making marriage feasts, and for funeral expenses. Quite often these loans were obtained with land as collateral; when repayment could not be met in time, the *chettiyars* would make

a report to the government asking permission to bring the matter to court. The State Secretariat files shows that the State Council, besides managing the affairs of state administration, also had to contend with the debts problems of these Malay women. At times the government received applications to change land titles (*pindah nama*) to money lenders to settle existing debts, requests for government loans in order to settle outstanding debts, and from debtors to divide the properties of the deceased just to pay up outstanding debts. Malay women too were involved in these cases. One extraordinary request involved a royal woman who requested the continuance of her royal allowance after her death to enable her heirs to pay all outstanding debts (*SUK Kedah 807/1341*). The application was found to be frivolous and it was rejected by the state.

The State Secretariat files indicate that the Kedah government took a serious view with regards to debts owed by the royal women. Besides affecting the prestige of the royalty especially those with husbands who were in government service, the royal women continued to be trapped in debts due to illiteracy. As a result, they became easy victims of dishonest practices, such as loans given without any written agreement or witnesses, while creditors tend to allow loans to drag on for lengthy period to enable them to collect high interest rates. Tunku Ibrahim, the acting sultan, in June 1923, had expressed the opinion that royal women were prone to manipulations by creditors because they were illiterate. To him, it was futile to increase the monthly deductions from the royal allowance as this would not deter the royal women from borrowing from unscrupulous *chettiyars* (*SUK Kedah 2427/1341*). Similar fears were expressed by the male royals as quite often they too were taken to court for being guarantors of these loans. The climax of this anxiety was the signing of a petition on 17 April 1929 by six male members of the ruling house who appealed to the government to institute suitable regulations to safeguard the interest of royal women (wives, daughters) from debt problems (*SUK Kedah 3069/1347*). This led to the establishment of Kampung Baharu Girls' School in 1925.

FEMALE EDUCATION AND HEALTH IN KEDAH

The State Secretariat files, the Kedah Annual (Administration) Reports, the Annual Education Reports and Medical Reports provide interesting information on the attitudes of the Malay commoners, the British advisors and the state government towards girls education, and the challenges and problems they encountered in their attempts to increase the number of girls in schools or to get more Malay mothers to visit government hospitals/clinics in Kedah.

The annual progress of female education is well covered in the State Annual Report and files from the State Secretariat. From these files, we could get the real picture behind the slow progress of female education in Malaya before 1941. Before the Second World War there were only five girls' school in Kedah



compared to 82 boys' schools and this throws a number of questions. Were the passive Malays a major stumbling block? Or perhaps the attitude of colonial administrators were to blame? Malay prejudice towards anything introduced by the west is often taken as the main reason for their slow progress, including the slow development of girls education in Malaya. In coming up with this explanations various factors have not been adequately dealt with such as, innovations from outside would not be accepted easily in areas where a similar institution had already exist, have never been seriously considered. In Kedah, the *pondok* institution have already taken root for a long time in Malay society and for them western institution would need more time to be accepted.

Then there is misconception that modern schools were a place to convert Muslim boys to the Christian faith. One must note that most modern schools were located in the urban centres which not many Malays could afford, besides the problem of transportation. These matters were never raised by the colonial government. Is it true that Malays were not favourable to modern education? This is an interesting question as in Kedah, the Malays including the elites, the aristocracy and *penghulu* (head of cluster of villages) had long started efforts to provide education for local children, including girls. The first Malay girls' school, for instance, was established on 28 November 1907; it was initiated by Tunku Yahya, the first Kedah Superintendent of Education. As reported in the 1909/10 Kedah Annual Report, E. A. G. Stuart who assumed the post of Superintendent of Education, viewed the establishment of this school as a waste of time and money due to unsatisfactory enrolment (*CO 716 Kedah Annual Report January 1909-January 1910*). Other related factors were the change of premises to one located in the centre of Alor Setar town affected the privacy of students which caused considerable concern among parents was not duly addressed by this same official in his evaluation of the poor response to this school.

In surveying the development of female education in Kedah, it is found that by the 1920s when the parents were more at ease with the changes that were taking place around them when more schools for boys were built, they were enthusiastic enough to built schools for girls in their locality through co-operative efforts (*gotong royong*). The Kedah State Secretariat files contain many petitions for the establishment of schools for girls. For example, a petition dated 4 August 1925, from one Mohd. Ariffin and the residence of Kuala Kedah, implore the government to build a girls' school in the district, stating that around 100-120 girls in Kuala Kedah had not attended school for that year. Another petition written by one Penghulu Haji Mohd. Jaafar on behalf of the residence of Anak Bukit similarly requested a girls' school in that district as there were 111 girls in the district who had not received any formal education. In 1928 petitions from the *rakyat* to build separate schools for boys and girls were received from Baling, Sungai Petani, Kulim and Bandar Baharu after the state Education Board Kedah issued a statement on 6 June directing that girls were no longer allowed to study in boy schools. This directive was issued by the

senior most religious officer in the state, Sheikhul-Islam Wan Sulaiman Wan Sidek, who opined that boys and girls should not be allowed to mix freely in the classroom even though the pursuit of knowledge should be encouraged.

These petitions also throw much light on the attitudes of the colonial administration (British officers) with regards to how far locals were allowed access to education. The petition from Kuala Kedah was rejected on the rationale that the government was not ready to build separate schools for girls in the locality while the limited resources had to be allocated to earlier requests from other areas (*SUK Kedah 206/1344*). Due to the many petitions for the establishment of girl schools, the government acceded to these requests and built them in Baling, Kulim and Sungai Petani in 1929. Their construction, however, was put on hold due to the economic depression. And until 1934, the government refused to entertain new requests for schools and so forth. After the depression, the government continued to build more schools in Kedah although the number of girl schools remained the same at 5 in the state.⁴ From the State Secretariat files, we know that the slow development was related to the official mind which uphold the view that it was the males who require education as they were the breadwinners. Hence education in the state was meant more for them (*SUK Kedah 2076/1349*). As the government was seen as disinterested in increasing the number of schools for girls and especially after girls were barred from boy schools, the government was inundated with petitions from the rakyat demanding girls be given permission to attend boy schools. Until January 1934, the Superintendent of Education received not less than 589 requests from Malay parents to enroll their daughters in boy schools in the state (*SUK Kedah 3339/1352*).

The Kedah State Secretariat files also provide some rationale in the establishment of certain girls schools. The establishment of the Kampung Baharu Girls' School (KBGS) in 1924 in Alor Setar, for instance, originated from a petition written by a group of Malay officers on 19 December 1922. These officers requested the setting up of an English medium school, specifically for the daughters of the aristocracy and the official class to ensure protection of the dignity of this class. They insisted the provision of education for girls from this class must commensurate their future status as wives of state officials, able to organise their households and protect the dignity of the husbands by not getting into troubles with debtors (*SUK Kedah 987/1341*). Thus, the establishment of the KBGS, a prominent girls school in Kedah, that later produced the first Malay women doctor, Dr. Salmah Ismail, originally was related to the problem of indebtedness which was prevalent among the female members of the royalty, besides to improve their social status when interacting with European ladies in the course of their husbands' official duties.

A somewhat different scenario is observable with regards to government efforts in public health. The health programme in Malaya were implemented soon after they were introduced in the centre (London); it reflected not



government understanding of colonial needs, but rather contemporary changing ideas and practices in public health occurring within the United Kingdom (Manderson 1996: 11). Yet there is no denying the relationship of these measures with the future of the British colony besides upholding the idea that Britain was the benevolent “protector”. Three categories of files relating to health, namely the Kedah Annual Report, the Kedah Annual Report of the Medical and Health Department, and the State Secretariat files, clearly show the government’s concern on the high infant and maternal death rate since the 1920s.

These files not only provide yearly progress of the medical and health department but also highlight government efforts to reduce death rate among mothers and infants and the impediments faced by Kedah Medical officials in getting more people to visit government hospitals and clinics. Some of these impediments, include the shortage of medical staff and the over dependence on traditional midwives, unhygienic residential environment that bred various diseases, and shortcomings of Malay dietary practices that led to anaemia and other ailments.

Of significance these files highlight government efforts to fulfill the needs to develop medical and health services especially among the Malays. Consequently, women and children clinics were open in the districts, research on diseases were continually undertaken and the post of Lady Medical Officer was introduced in 1925 to the state with the aim of reducing the death rate among the Malay mothers and infants (*CO 716 Kedah Annual Report 1343/2 August-21 July 1925*). This was meant to ensure that the food supply was not disrupted through a break in the supply of local labour. Hence, there was a need to look after the health of mothers who would be producing future labourers for the state. The health survey by Dr. W. J. Vickers and J. H. Strahan in 1936 was mainly focussed on the Kedah Malays as they were the main group of paddy planters in the state. A report produced two years later in 1938 based on the survey describes conditions in Kedah that has not been recognised or observed before such as subnutrition and other factors like malaria which contribute to the high infant and maternal mortality (*CO 717 133/51901*).

These files also enable us to study Malay responses toward modern medicine and health programme introduced by the government. Although by the early decades of the 20th century, Malays were seen as reluctant to visit government hospitals because of various prejudices, this negative perception towards modern medicine had begun to change gradually. From these files we know of the role played by the Malay administrative elites and the *penghulu* in changing the Malay mindset. In the 1930s, an Infant Welfare Work Centre was set up in Anak Bukit which was funded by voluntary contributions initiated by the Regent Tunku Ibrahim (*CO 716 Report of the Medical and Health Department Kedah & Perlis for the Year 1930: 8*). With the establishment of this centre, the government urged the Malays to bring their children for medical treatment.

The official files clearly show the *penghulu* were playing a crucial role in improving the health status of women and children by canvassing the *rakyat*, in fact brought them along, to visit this centre with their infants. They also brought in Lady Medical Officers to the village as many village women were poor and could not afford the time to visit the centre. However, the government was unable to fulfill the many requests due to the shortage of medical officers. To overcome the problem of space, some *penghulus* took the initiatives of building suitable structures (often like a small hut) near the local markets where treatment could be given to women while doing their daily chores (*SUK Kedah 2855/1353*).

CONCLUSION

The case of Kedah has indicated the potentials for studies on the socioeconomic history of Malay women through meticulous scrutiny of a variety of official documents presently deposited in the local archives. A similar situation exists in the other states, although for some the records might not be as good as Kedah. The Kelantan files which are deposited mainly in the National Archives, Kuala Lumpur, offer a rich variety of official documents like the files of the British Adviser, annual reports, medical reports, reports of the religious establishment *Majlis Agama Islam dan Adat Istiadat Melayu Kelantan* (MAIK) and Land Office reports that provide evidence on the roles of women in Kelantan history similar to Kedah. The Kelantan land office files and files of the Kelantan British Adviser, for instance, reveal that before the Second World War, the women of Kelantan had been actively involved in agriculture, especially in paddy cultivation. These files do make reference to land disputes which involved women, to women demanding compensation from the government for confiscating their lands, ostensibly for development purposes, the construction of railway line and so forth. The MAIK files, on the other hand, provide much materials for those interested to study Malay prostitution as it contained records and details of arrests of prostitutes since the first decade of the 20th century. The incidence of prostitution in Kelantan has already been highlighted by Munsyi Abdullah during his visit to the east coast in 1837-38 (Abdullah 1981). The matter had also received considerable attention from within Kelantanese society; voices of such concern are found in local magazine like *Kenchana* (published in Kota Bharu in 1930). This concern also led to the enacting of the anti-prostitution law called *Hukum Maksiat di Kelantan* (Law to Control Vice in Kelantan) by an anonymous ulama probably at the end of the 19th century or early 20th century.

A similar pattern seems to exist in the Johore and Penang state archives. For Johore, the records of the Ecclesiastical and Education Department, the Johore Annual Medical Report, as well as the many reports compile by the Office of the Chief Qadhi were among the files that discuss at length on the Malays

including women. These files enable the researchers to write on the social and socioeconomic history of Malay women in the state, female education and health matters, marriage and divorce as well as elite perceptions towards the employment of Malay women in a variety of jobs, notably in the entertainment and food industry.⁵ On the other hand, the records of the Jabatan Diraja Istana Besar, Johore Bahru which has been in existence since the pre-war period possibly contained related information on the royal house of Johore, including court ladies that might be of interest to the historian of social history.

In the Penang archives, one interesting file that had yet to be fully utilised by researchers that might be of interest in the study on women is the files on the development of the Penang Co-operatives Society.⁶ Since the 1950s, many women co-operatives society had been formed in the state including the Balik Pulau Women's Thrift and Investment Society Limited, the Kaum Ibu Jelutong Co-operative Thrift and Investment Society Limited, the Titi Teras Kaum Ibu Co-op, the Kaum Ibu Burma Road Investment Society, the Kampung Rawana Women's Thrift and Investment Society Limited, and the Kelawei Women's Thrift and Investment Society Limited. The formation of these co-operatives was meant to encourage Malays to save so as to prevent indebtedness. These files offer much promises with regards to efforts, perceptions and thinking of women towards saving and the impediments faced by the government of the day to encourage the habit of saving among the Malays including women.

Documentary sources is similarly available for women history for the other states which are deposited at the National Archives in Kuala Lumpur and its branches. These are waiting to be tapped by patient researcher who could put up with the foibles of these archives. It is only when the history of women for all the states is known that a more comprehensive women's history in Malaysia could be attempted without risking the pitfalls of generalisation.

ENDNOTES

1. The importance of the Stamp Office Records of Kedah as an historical sources was first highlighted by Khoo Kay Jin in his paper entitled "The Stamp Office Records of Kedah: A Neglected Data Base" which was presented at the *National Seminar on Issues in Historiography* organised by the History Section, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 17-18 August 1992.
2. As stated by Khoo Kay Jin, the Stamp Office Records did not contain the "history" of the poorest as only the net value of estates exceeding \$500 would require the payment of an estate duty. Furthermore the poor often settled the distribution of wealth through private arrangement.
3. The SUK files together with the Stamp Offices files and Court files also offer a good opportunity to undertake research on the chettyyars in Malaya especially Kedah.
4. According to the *Kedah Annual Report*, from June 1928-June 1929 there were 75 boy schools and 3 girl schools but between 29 May 1930-18 May 1931, the number of boy schools had increased to 82 while for girls, to 5.

5. These files are classified under *J/JUG 7 Pejabat Agama Islam dan Pelajaran Johor* (Johore Ecclesiastical and Education Department) which is dated from 1916 to 1967 and *J/KAD 2 Pejabat Qadhi Besar Johor* (Office of Chief Qadhi of Johore). For an important work on marriage and divorce in Johore among the Muslim during the Japanese Occupation using these materials, see, Abu Talib Ahmad 1998. Marriage and Divorce in Johore Among the Malay-Muslims during the Japanese Occupation, 1942-45. *JMBRAS*, 71(2):63-90.
6. The file classification number is *APP 40/88 Pembangunan Koperasi Pulau Pinang*.

REFERENCES

Unpublished Sources

- APP 40/88 Pembangunan Koperasi Pulau Pinang (Penang Co-operative Development).
CO 716 Kedah Annual Report , 1905-1940.
CO 717 The Annual Report of the Medical and Health Department, Kedah, 1920-1940.
DOKM District Office Kuala Muda, 1948-49.
EDO, Estate Duty Office, Kedah, 1945-48.
EOK, Education Office Kedah (Pejabat Pelajaran Kedah), 1945-48.
HCO, Unfederated Malay States 1078/1917
K/PU 1 *Undang-Undang Kedah* A. H. 1311 (1893) Ku Din Ku Meh, Kuala Lumpur:
National Archives of Malaysia.
LOPP The Pasir Putih Land Office, 1932.
LOB, Land Office Baling, 1913-1952.
LOK, Land Office Kulim, 1930-1968.
LOKP, Land Office Kubang Pasu, 1914-1940.
LOPT, Land Office Padang Terap, 1933-1952.
Mahkamah Tinggi Alor Setar (High Court, Alor Setar), 1920-1940.
SO, Stamp Office, Kedah, 1930-1940.
State Secretariat (SUK) Kedah, 1908-1963.

PUBLISHED SOURCES

- Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir Munshi. 1981. *Kisah Pelayaran Abdullah* (second edition with introduction by Kassim Ahmad). Kuala Lumpur: Fajar Bakti.
- Abu Talib Ahmad. 2007. Adat (Customary) Laws and Social Stability in the Malay World. In *Legal Traditions of Southeast Asia*. Yangon: SEAMEO Regional Centre for History and Tradition.
- Abu Talib Ahmad. 1998. Marriage and Divorce in Johore Among the Malay-Muslims during the Japanese Occupation, 1942-45. *JMBRAS* 71(2): 63-90.
- Andaya, Barbara. W. 2000. *Other Pasts: Women, Gender and History in Early Modern Southeast Asia*. Honolulu: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Hawai'i at Manoa.
- Bulan Melayu* 1930
- Cheah Boon Kheng. 1993. Power Behind the Throne: The Role of Queens and Court Ladies in Malay History. *JMBRAS* 66(1): 1-21.
- Edwar Djamaris. 1991. *Tambo Minangkabau*. Jakarta: Balai Pustaka.
- Fajar Asia* 1943

Ibu Melayu 1947

Jelani Harun. 2002. Hukum Maksiat di Kelantan: Peranan Ulama dalam Menasihati Pemerintah Negeri. Paper presented at the *Workshop on Malay Manuscript II*, Akademik Pengajian Melayu, Universiti Malaya.

Kenchana (Kota Bharu) 1930*Kenchana* (Singapore) 1947

Khasnor Johan. 1999. Undang-Undang Melaka: Reflections on Melaka Society in Fifteenth-Century Malacca. *JMBRAS* 72(2): 131-150.

Khoo Kay Jin. 1990. Some Reflections on Couillard's The Pangs and Pitfalls of Development for Malay Women: From the Rule of the Domestic Sphere to Its Downfall, *Kajian Malaysia* 8(2): 103-123.

_____. 1992. The Stamp Office Record of Kedah: A Neglected Data Base. Paper presented at the Conference on Issues in Historiography, organised by the History Section, School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia.

Kleinberg, S. Jay. (ed.). 1992. *Retrieving Women's History: Changing Perceptions of the Role of Women in Politics and Society*. Paris: Berg/UNESCO.

Majallah Guru 1924-1950

Manderson, Lenore. 1996. *Sickness and The State: Health and Illness in Colonial Malaya, 1870-1940*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Khatijah Sidek. 1995. *Memoir Khatijah Sidek: Puteri Kesatria Bangsa* 1995. Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

Mohammad Isa Othman. 1990. *Politik Tradisional Kedah 1681-1942*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.

_____. 2001. *Pengalaman Kedah dan Perlis: Zaman Penjajahan British*. Kuala Lumpur: Utusan Publications.

Mohd. Shah bin Mohd. Said Al-Haj. 1996. *Tambo Alam Naning*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.

Nathan, J. E. 1922. *The Census of British Malaya 1921*. London: Waterloo & Sons.

Rigby, J. 1970. The Ninety-Nine Laws of Perak. IN M. B. Hooker (ed.). *Readings in Malay Adat Laws*, Singapore: Singapore University Press, 57-82.

Sharom Ahmat. 1984. *Tradition and Change in a Malay State: A Study of the Economic and Political Development of Kedah 1878-1923*, Kuala Lumpur: MBRAS, (Monograph No. 12).

Vlieland, C. A. 1932. *A Report on the 1931 Census and on Certain Problems of Vital Statistics*, London: Crown Agents for the Colonies.

Zabedah Awang Ngah. 1964. *Antologi Esei Melayu*, Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.

Zainab Awang Ngah. 2006. *Studies on Women in Malaysia 1990-2004: An Overview and Bibliography*, Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

Mahani Musa, Ph D
School of Humanities
Universiti Sains Malaysia
11800 Penang
Malaysia

Emel: mahani@usm.my