1

THE MALAY PENINSULA
Early History, Melaka and the Colonial Setting

For countless centuries the Malay Peninsula was a major locus for maritime trade conducted between West and East Asia. The Peninsula was strategically situated at the crossroads of the principal South and East Asian maritime routes, lying between two major subcontinents (India and China) and two great oceans (Indian and Pacific). The international trade route between China and India and thence to West Asia and Europe passed through the Strait of Melaka, and the Riau-Lingga Archipelago (south of contemporary Singapore), regarded as the only known safe route between East and West Asia.¹ The centrality of the Malay Peninsula was underscored by the seasonal pattern of the monsoons. While between January and April the northwest monsoons were favourable to traders from China, between July and November the prevailing southwest monsoons brought traders from the Indian subcontinent. The pivotal location of the Strait of Melaka led to the early establishment of trading entrepôts on the Malay Peninsula and in Sumatra.² Trade networks reached as far as the African coast, Arabia, and the Persian Gulf and thence to Europe.³
Trade between India and the Malay Peninsula dates back to prehistoric times. Verifiable sources indicate that there were systematic exchanges between India, Southeast Asia, and China in the first millennium BCE and that throughout this period, India and Southeast Asia became important trading partners. However, the earliest documented Indian links can be traced to the period of the great Indian Emperor Ashoka (circa 268–233 BCE). Later Indian traders and adventurers visited the Peninsula in search of gold. Indeed contemporary Indian sources, both Hindu texts and Buddhist Jatakas, refer to the Malay Peninsula as the Golden Khersonese or “land of gold” (in Sanskrit, Suvarnabhumi).

The increasing volume of Indian maritime trade with Southeast Asia in the closing centuries had a powerful impact on indigenous political and social structures. The consequent Indianization of Southeast Asia was to reshape and leave a permanent imprint upon local cultures, societies, languages and religious beliefs.

Early Indian trade within the Malay Peninsula and Sumatra was conducted through local chieftains and chieftaincies. Most scholars accept that the processes of Indianization commenced in the earliest years and became more pronounced following the rise of the Gupta dynasty. (It is widely held that the Malay/Malaysian term “keling” as a generic descriptor for South Indians is derived from the prominent Gupta port Kalinga, from which many Southeast Asian–based cargoes were dispatched.) This adumbrated a political and administrative regime which became a model for the entire region. The development of East-West trade led to the transformation of commercial centres into established political units within the Malay Archipelago and on the Malay Peninsula. Small Indianized states began appearing in Southeast Asia from the first century CE. Two of the earliest trading centres appear to have been Langkasuka, an Indianized Buddhist kingdom which was established about 100 CE in the region of modern day Pattani, and the settlement in Kedah, which was known by the Sanskrit name of Kataha and the Chinese name of Chieh-cha.

The influence of Indian traders extended well beyond the commercial sphere and introduced new religious forms as well as systems of social and political organization. While Buddhism was the main religion of Indian traders, the rise of the Gupta Empire, which had adopted a state religion based upon pre-Buddhist Vedic traditions and rituals, encouraged the spread of a rival Vaisnavite trade network and the use of Sanskrit as the official language. Traders were followed into the new states by Brahmans who possessed the necessary skills of writing, organization
Early History, Melaka, and the Colonial Setting

and administration. The Brahmans intermarried with the families of local chiefs and thus exercised a powerful influence on the future shape of Southeast Asian polities. As Tan Ta Sen observes:

Indianization was seen as an expansion of an organized culture that was founded upon the Indian conception of royalty, was characterized by Hindu or Buddhist cults, the theology of the Puranas, and the observance of the Dharmasastras, and expressed itself in the Sanskrit language.

In keeping with Hindu notions of royalty, Brahman priests would have elevated the local chiefs by employment of the vratyastatoma, a rite which admitted foreigners into the received orthodox community. The newly anointed kings, now known by the titles of raja or maharaja, could thus claim to hold the Hindu rank of Ksatriya or regal/warrior caste.

Most historians aver that Indian civilizational mores remained the province of the elite, especially the aristocracy, and that the general population continued to preserve an autochthonous culture structured around animism and ancestor cults. However, Indian influences helped shape indigenous crafts and modes of artistic expression, as well as providing a system of writing, an expanded vocabulary (containing both Sanskrit and Tamil words), a new lunar/solar calendar, administrative and legal structures, and a sense of social rank, influenced by notions of caste. In addition, the classic epics of Hindu cosmology, the Puranas, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, became integrated within the culture of the Malay Archipelago, and many generalist Hindu and Buddhist elements penetrated local belief systems and modes of organization. The processes of Indianization, predominantly South Indian, were “overwhelmingly peaceful”.

While China and Southeast Asia had enjoyed close connections for centuries, the introduction of Buddhism in the third century and the trading ethos associated with the religion, promoted more frequent exchanges among China, Southeast Asia, and India. Chinese pilgrims made their way to and from India, the land in which Buddhism had originated, often in the process stimulating scholarship in the Peninsular and Sumatran ports in which they broke their voyages. From the third century onwards, various Southeast Asian principalities sent tribute missions to China. Recognition of China’s overlordship proved beneficial to the states involved. Not only did this establish a trading relationship between the state and China, but it also accorded recognition to the rulers of these states and to their designated agents.
China’s renewed interest in Southeast Asia under the Tang Dynasty (618–907) fuelled the movement of international trade and led to a regrouping of Malay maritime polities. During this period, Peninsular Malay states increasingly fell under the direction of the powerful Buddhist kingdom of Srivijaya. The first official record of Srivijaya appears in the groups of inscriptions discovered in Sumatra which reveal the existence of a Buddhist kingdom in Palembang in 683–686, which had recently conquered the hinterland of Jambi. In the final quarter of the seventh century, Srivijaya strengthened its position as one of the leading transit points for ships sailing between China and South Asia. In subsequent years, Srivijaya expanded its control to both sides of the Strait of Melaka and to much of the Malay Peninsula. The kingdom established diplomatic relations with both China and Chola India.

It was throughout the period of the Srivijaya Empire that the common cultural features emerged of what might be regarded as an incipient Melayu (Malay) ethnicity. From the seventh century onwards, Srivijaya linked together most of the political units of the Melaka Strait, both in Sumatra and in the Malay Peninsula, in the process creating a broad accepted culture which incorporated language, institutions and an overlapping and interchangeable series of cultural forms. Leonard Andaya contends that an overarching sense of shared ethnicity originated in Southwest Sumatra and was later bequeathed to other parts of the region, most notably Melaka, Aceh and Johor.

Later developments in both China and India did much to promote trade in Southeast Asia. The Song Dynasty of China, founded in 960, adopted a much more aggressive trade policy. Within India, the rise of the Chola Kingdom, which from 985 onwards had expanded from its core region on the Kaveri delta to control all of South India and much of Central India, as well as the offshore islands of Sri Lanka and the Maldives, fostered wide-ranging trade networks between Arabia and India, Southeast Asia and China. Indeed, Chola kings took a personal interest in trade and, in addition to repealing harbour tolls and other imposts, encouraged trade missions and related maritime expeditions. The establishment of maritime trade between Song China and Chola India not only involved the states of Southeast Asia as active participants, but also led to the decline of the land routes which had hitherto borne the bulk of East Asian–South Asian trade. Trade between India and China also produced extensive diplomatic, cultural and religious exchanges between the two subcontinents and intensified Indian influences within Southeast Asia.
Given the ostensibly close ties between the Chola kingdom and Srivijaya, it is thus surprising to discover that in 1017 and again in 1025 the South Indian king Rajendra Chola launched attacks on Srivijaya. The latter was a more extensive action which targeted fourteen major port cities in Sumatra and along the Malay Peninsula. There appear to have been two major factors which led to these attacks, namely,

1. Persistent attempts to obstruct Chola trade with China.
2. The exaction of excessive imposts and other levies upon Chola ships transiting the Srivijaya controlled Melaka Strait.

An additional expedition was conducted against Srivijaya in 1077 by King Kulottunga I. In the years immediately following the final raid, the capital of Srivijaya was moved from Pelambang to Jambi.

The raids resulted in Chola domination of direct trade between South India and China. The Chola kingdom also developed an extensive trading network, and South Indian trade guilds were established in ports in Burma, Srivijaya (both along the Malay Peninsula and in Sumatra), and Java.

The intrusion of Mongol forces in the late thirteenth century fractured the established political order and resulted in a fundamental rearrangement of the geopolitics of the Malay Archipelago. The decline of the Srivijaya Empire was accompanied by the Siamese occupation of much of the Malay Peninsula and the rise of Majapahit, the last of the great Indianized empires of the Archipelago.

**MELAKA**

The establishment of Melaka as a Malay kingdom is credited to Parameswara, originally a Hindu prince of Srivijaya and resident in Palembang, which had become a vassal state of Majapahit. In 1378, the Emperor Hongwu, founder emperor of the Ming dynasty, sent envoys to install the prince as king of Srivijaya. Majapahit viewed this action as a challenge to its authority and overlordship of Palembang, and in the ensuing affray the envoys were killed. Parameswara was forced to flee to Temasek (site of current day Singapore) where after a few years reign he was driven out by the Siamese kingdom of Ayutthaya. After sojourns in both Muar and Bertam, Parameswara arrived in Melaka in about 1400. Melaka, a settlement of about 2,000 people and founded by Bugis "piratical adventurers", was regarded as a Siamese dependency.
From the outset of his rule, Parameswara recognized that the continued existence of his fledgling state was threatened by both the Majapahit and the Siamese kingdom, the latter claiming overlordship of the entire Malay Peninsula. He therefore sought to forge an alliance with China, the region’s great power. Parameswara’s initiative coincided with a renewed Chinese interest in trade with Southeast Asia. Following Emperor Yongle’s accession to power in 1402, he ordered that a series of missions be despatched to foreign states to advise them of his succession. In 1405, the Emperor appointed Admiral Zheng He (Cheng Ho) to extend friendship and trade relations to Indian Ocean states and to organize these states into a tributary relationship with China. Between 1405 and his death in 1433, Zheng He undertook a series of voyages that concentrated on Southeast Asia but which extended as far as India and Africa. These voyages, and the armada which Zheng He commanded — consisting at times of a force of some 30,000 men and 300 armed ships — not only successfully projected Chinese military, diplomatic and commercial interests but also enforced widespread recognition of Ming China as the region’s dominant power.

The first Chinese reference to Melaka is in 1403, the year Emperor Yongle sent a mission under eunuch Ya Chi’ing to visit the state. This expedition probably reached Melaka in 1404. In 1405 Parameswara reciprocated by sending an envoy to the Ming Court. The official reception of this envoy signified formal Ming acceptance of Melaka as an independent kingdom. On 11 November 1405, Melaka was granted the status of a tributary state and was endowed with the Emperor’s inscription, thus officially gaining Chinese protection. In 1409 Zheng He visited Melaka with an armada of forty-eight ships. He bore official tablets which confirmed Melaka and its environs as a kingdom in the sight of Ming China. Ming warnings to the Siamese ensured that Melaka was henceforth free of the risk of encroachment. Melaka’s need for Chinese patronage was complemented by China’s need for a strategically located base which would command a safe sea route to India. Zheng He duly established his Southeast Asian headquarters in Melaka, thus making the state central to his regional operations. In this way, the actions of Ming China, and in particular the visits of Zheng He, not only protected the fledgling state but also elevated it to a position of regional prominence, in the process recasting the religio-political configuration of the fifteenth century Malay Archipelago.

Melaka made abundant use of its strategic location to regulate trade passing through the Strait, and indeed from 1434 to 1511 it became the
largest and most influential trading centre within Southeast Asia. By the time the close relationship with China was discontinued after 1435, when Ming China abandoned Yongle’s trade policies and focused state energies on the renewed Mongol threat on its northern boundaries, Melaka had attained the status of a great regional political power, one which was capable of withstanding Siamese pressure.

The astonishing rise of Melaka was fuelled by the rapid expansion of trade throughout Southeast Asia from the late fourteenth century onwards. This was based firstly upon the post-Crusade “spice orgy” which engulfed Europe, and secondly the trade generated by Ming China and associated with a complex trading network reaching beyond Southeast Asia and India to Europe. Melaka was both cosmopolitan and pluralistic and housed resident colonies of traders, including Indian Muslims, South Indian Hindus, Bengalis, Gujaratis, Parsees, Chinese, Arabs and representatives of all the diverse ethnic groups of the Malay Archipelago. Contemporary records reveal that in 1500 Melaka’s population was approaching 100,000, and the Sultanate possessed a merchant fleet of one hundred junks, thus, according to Anthony Reid, achieving a more than comparable status with the great Mediterranean port of Venice. At the height of its powers, the Melaka Sultanate exercised suzerainty over the entire Peninsula, extending as far north as Pattani and incorporating parts of Eastern Sumatra.

**ISLAM**

Arab Muslim traders established their presence in Southeast Asia between the eighth and ninth centuries. The newcomers often worked in partnership with Indian and Chinese and Southeast Asian traders and provided a crucial link between Asian producers and European markets. In the ninth century, Baghdad, capital of the powerful Islamic Abbasid Dynasty, became the greatest commercial centre of the Middle East. Throughout this period, Arab merchants established trading enclaves in a number of Asian commercial centres. With the advent of the Crusades and the later severe impact of the Mongol conquests and the consequent decline and ultimate collapse of the Abbasid Dynasty, Middle Eastern trade became concentrated in the hands of the Fatimid Dynasty of Egypt. The subsequent relocation of trading activities from the Persian Gulf to the Red Sea increased the centrality of the Malabar Coast to intra-Asian trading routes. Arab traders, mainly from Hadramaut in Yemen, established an
enduring presence in the Indian Ocean. Intermarriage with locals, leading to absorption in the Malay world, created a kinship network which, while especially concentrated in the Strait of Melaka, stretched from the Hejaz to Sulawesi. Following the decline of the Srivijaya Empire, Arab traders exercised virtual control over the spice trade. Aceh embraced Islam in 1204, while Samudera-Pasai became Muslim in 1292 and Terengganu followed in 1303. However, while Islam became firmly established in these locations, in other states its advance was checked by strong cultural resistance from Hindu courts.

While the Malay Annals assert that Parameswara converted to Islam, Ming records suggest that it was the Raja’s son Megat Iskandar Shah who made Melaka a Muslim state. In 1413, Megat Iskandar had married a princess from the Islamic state of Pasai and had converted to Islam. Raja Parameswara, the founding ruler of Melaka, died in 1414 and was succeeded by his son. Following his accession to the throne, Melaka formally adopted Islam as its state religion and became a Muslim sultanate rather than a Hindu kingdom.

However, while Megat Iskandar’s conversion may have been prompted by religious convictions, in as other parts of the Archipelago, acceptance of Islam was at least partially spurred by pragmatic politico-commercial considerations, in particular recognition of the economic power of Arab traders and their near monopoly of spice routes. But, while Arab traders not only dominated the complex network which underpinned the spice trade, they also offered access to superior technology, including advanced maritime proficiency and weaponry far superior to that available within the contemporary Malay world.

The Melaka Sultanate became a focal point for the dissemination of Islamic thought and scholarship throughout the Archipelago. The Sultanate became a noted centre of theological speculation, learned debate and mysticism, especially under the patronage of Sultans Mansur Syah (1456–1477) and Mahmud Syah (1488–1511). During the post-Mongol period, Islam made rapid progress throughout the Malay Archipelago. Apart from isolated enclaves, Islam was to become the common heritage of the Malay world. The religion encouraged commercial and intellectual pursuits and was well suited to the needs of the maritime traders of the Archipelago. Malay, used as a lingua franca, and Jawi Malay, written in Arabic script, became the media of intellectual creativity in religion, philosophy, history and literature.
The school of Islam promulgated in Melaka was that of Shafi‘i, which followed the philosophical path enunciated by Muhammad ash-Shafi‘i (died 820) who had taught in Baghdad and Cairo. Shafi‘i had argued that the Sunna, the collection of readings which claim to recount Muhammad‘s words and deeds, as well as those of the Prophet’s earliest followers known as the Companions, comprised the wellspring of fiqh or Islamic jurisprudence. At the heart of Shafi‘i’s teachings is the philosophical quest of plumbing the essentialist “premises” (illa) of the Qur’an, in the process eschewing literalist and formulaic interpretations, the application of which might not necessarily obtain within localized cultures. While maintaining the sanctity and inviolability of core Islamic values and principles, the Shafi‘i school emphasized the need for community consensus in interpretation and application of fiqh.

But the region was also greatly influenced by the mystical form of Islam known as Sufism, which was introduced by initiates of the Sufi order. At the basis of Sufism is the tariqah (tarakat in Malay), the “long and arduous path of spiritual self-reflection … the mystical journey that leads the Sufi away from external reality of religion and toward the divine reality — the only reality — of God”. The Sufist thus necessarily resists the imposition of centralized forms of religion in favour of, under the direction of an appropriately qualified preceptor, a measured and disciplined individual path.

Megat Iskandar Shah’s transformation of Melaka into an Islamic state set a pattern for sultanate rule which was to become a model for statecraft throughout the Peninsula. However, while Islam was to establish itself as the major regional religion, it remained grafted upon an indigenous culture which for over a millennium had been permeated by Indic concepts of religion, statecraft and social organization. The Sejarah Melayu clearly demonstrates the continued tolerated coexistence and acceptance of these seemingly disparate strands of Malay culture. Indeed, Islam was rapidly and seamlessly synthesized with the ruling ideologies which had long prevailed in the Malay world. Nearly all indigenous chronicles took considerable trouble to highlight the continuity (and hence legitimacy) obtaining between the new Islamic polities and the earlier dynasties. Although rajas became sultans, in effect the pre-existing Hindu/Buddhist rituals and precepts remained largely unchallenged. Instead of being blessed by Indra, King of the Gods, sultans were regarded as caliphs, representatives of Allah on Earth. Most of the Malay states retained
pre-Islamic traditions surrounding courtly ritual and the other paraphernalia associated with aristocratic life, as well as the daulat (aura of sovereignty) which constituted the ruler’s major claim to the throne. Hindu practices lingered on in the use of Sanskrit words for titles of rank and formal codes of address. The social hierarchy, based upon vertical bonding, which lay at the core of Southeast Asian polities, the definition of self, which rested upon the individual’s social distance from the sultan, remained largely unaffected by the adoption of Islam.91

At the popular level, Islam became intertwined with long-established and deeply embedded Indic and animist beliefs, traditions and social relations which endured as a substratum of Malay adat (custom).92 Thus, to select some random examples, Indic influences could be observed in numerous rituals and observances, including Malay weddings93 and the practice of silat (a Malay form of self-defence), while kris belts often contained motifs depicting Garuda (the mythical avian mount of Vishnu). Both animist and Indic influences were found in the practices of local healers (bomohs and pawangs).94

Melaka was to build upon the ethnic forms — language, institutions, and cultural norms — established throughout the period of Srivijaya dominance, and which were embraced by communities within Sumatra as well as parts of Java and other diverse regions within the Malay Archipelago.95 On the eve of the intrusion of European colonial powers, the Melaka Sultanate was a confident, outward looking and vibrant polity, a state which rejoiced in the “exuberant diversity”96 which typified the Southeast Asia of that era. This easy cosmopolitanism had been informed by a plethora of cultural influences and religious forms which over the centuries had become deeply entrenched within Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula and which had profoundly shaped the outlook of the local populations.

CONCLUSIONS

Over many centuries, the premodern Malay Archipelago, and in particular the regions adjacent to the Melaka Strait, forged dynamic trading and cultural relationships with various Indian polities and China. Indic traders and scholars introduced concepts of statecraft and political organization as well as religious and cultural forms, all of which deeply permeated indigenous culture. The founder of the Melaka kingdom, Parameswara, was a Hindu prince who originated from Pelambang and who sought
and obtained tributary status from Ming China. The protection provided by China, especially the presence of the armada of Admiral Zheng He, enabled Melaka to resist Siamese pressure and to develop as a formidable regional power. Parameswara’s son, Megat Iskandar, converted to Islam and, following his accession to the throne, made Melaka a Muslim sultanate. The school of Islam adopted by Melaka was that of Shafi’i, which emphasized community consensus in interpreting Islam and thus permitted considerable latitude in observing *adat* inherited from the pre-Islamic Archipelago. Islam in Southeast Asia was also deeply tinctured with Sufism which emphasized personal mysticism and direct experience of the Divine and often blended with pre-existing religious forms. The Melaka Sultanate derived legitimacy from its immediate predecessor, the great kingdom of Srivijaya, and retained many of the Indic influences and modes of social and political organization which had informed this polity. The Melaka Sultanate, in common with earlier Melayu entities, was a cosmopolitan and confident state that demonstrated a readiness as well as an actual capacity to accommodate a diversity of peoples.

**Notes**

8. Arun Mahizhnan, “Indian Interactions in East Asia”, in *Rising Indian and Indian...*


10. Andaya, Leaves of the Same Tree, p. 27.


12. Ibid., p. 36; Dhoraisingam, Peranakan Indians, p. 2; Nicholas Tarling, Southeast Asia: Past and Present (Melbourne: Cheshire, 1966), p. 11.


14. Andaya, Leaves of the Same Tree, p. 27.

15. Tarling, Southeast Asia, p. 25.


19. Pradeep Kapur has noted that the continuing influences of Sanskrit and Pali are readily discerned in all the major languages of Southeast Asia, and the names of several cities and at least one country (Singapore) are derived from Sanskrit (Pradeep K. Kapur, “Indian’s Engagement with Asia”, in Rising India and Indian Communities in East Asia, edited by K. Kesavapany, A. Mani and P. Ramasamy (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008), p. 90.

20. Coedès, Indianized States, p. 33; Tarling, Southeast Asia, p. 25.


22. Coedès, Indianized States, p. 34.


24. Ibid.


28. Coedès, Indianized States, p. 84.


30. Andaya, Leaves of the Same Tree, p. 61.

35. Tan, Did Zheng He Set Out to Colonize Southeast Asia, p. 74; Devare, Cultural Implications, p. 181.
40. Wolters, The Fall of Srivijaya, p. 142.
42. Champakalakshmi, Trade, Ideology and Urbanization, p. 222.
44. Tan, Cheng Ho and Islam, p. 175.
45. Ibid., pp. 175–76.
50. Widido, “A Celebration of Diversity”, pp. 94–95; Tan Ta Sen, Did Zheng He Set Out, p. 44.
52. Ricklefs et al., A New History, p. 119.
58. Ibid., p. 18; Tan Ta Sen, Cheng Ho and Islam, p. 155.
60. Ibid., pp. 176–77.
61. Ricklefs et al., A New History, p. 120; Wang, The Opening of Relations, p. 19; Coedes, Indianized States, p. 246.
63. Tarling, Southeast Asia, p. 32.
64. Reid, Charting the Shape, p. 220.
70. Coedes, Indianized States, p. 244.
71. Tan, Cheng Ho and Islam, p. 152.
72. Ibid., p. 168.
74. Tan, Cheng Ho and Islam, p. 178.
75. Ibid., pp. 177–79.
77. Tarling, Southeast Asia, p. 30; Wolters, The Fall of Srivijaya, p. 160.
81. Reid, Charting the Shape, pp. 222–23; Ricklefs et al., A New History, p. 83.
84. Means, Political Islam, p. 22.
Early History, Melaka, and the Colonial Setting

85. Reid, *Charting the Shape*, p. 19.
88. Richard Allen, *Malaysia: Prospect and Retrospect* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 17. The precariousness of Islam as a state religion was shown by an attempted restoration of Hinduism under Parameswarar Deva Syah (1445–46), who was deposed and killed after a coup that placed his Muslim half-brother Sultan Muzaffar on the throne (Rickles et al., *A New History*, p. 111).
89. Andaya, *Leaves of the Same Tree*, p. 137.
95. Andaya, *Leaves of the Same Tree*, p. 81.
96. Reid, *Charting the Shape*, p. 39.