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#### KING'S LETTERS IN SOCIO-ECONOMIC HISTORY OF THE MALAYS IN KEDAH, 1882-1940

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#### *Abstract*

This study aims to examine the socio-economic of the Malays in Kedah based on the collection of the King's Letters, famously known as Surat Raja-Raja (SRR) and Letters of Law, famously known as Surat Undang-Undang (SUU). The collections of correspondence are the written record of the administration of the Kedah state during the reign of Sultan Abdul Hamid Halim Shah, the 26th *Sultan* of Kedah. These collections of records are unique since it covers various aspects of the Malays civilization of the late nineteenth century until the beginning of the 20th century. The time frames from 1882 to 1940 is chosen because the Malays were directly involved in the development of the Kedah state economy. During that period, the Kedah government always emphasized the development and progress of the state although Kedah was under the protectorate of Siam and then British government. However, the Malays are still far behind from the current development and modernization, besides they were also plagued by poverty and are often stuck with various social problems in life. In fact, with the new rules and laws introduced through the State Council and the changes of government policy has had a major impact on the lives of the people of Kedah, especially the Malays. The SRR and SUU collections are local sources that can provide new information on the social and economic realities of the Malays which which were not discussed in the previous studies and official reports issued by the British.

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## 1. Introduction

King's Letters (*Surat Raja-Raja*) and Letters of Law (*Surat Undang-Undang*) are highly valued manuscripts. The content depicts the history and civilization of the Malay society and sultanate. SRR and SUU are the collection of letters by Kedah state's government deposited at the National Archives of the State of Perlis/Kedah. SRR and SUU recorded all the administrative affairs of Kedah during the reign of Sultan Abdul Hamid Halim Shah (1882-1943), the 26th Sultan of Kedah. During his reign, Kedah experienced rapid development in economic administration. The development continued when Kedah was under the auspices of Siam and later, the British.

Various interpretations were made about the life of the Malays in Malaya by scholars. The difference in interpretations were resulted by the used of different resources. Discussions pertaining to the Malays life based on local sources are rarely done. In this regard, this study uses SRR and SUU as a main resource to discuss the reality of social and economic life of the Malays in Kedah. During the reign of Sultan Abdul Hamid Halim Shah, there was a change in the state administration due to the transfer of power from Siam to British administration. Various regulations and laws had been enforced to strengthen the Kedah's economic development. Since then, Kedah's socioeconomic was rapidly developed, however, the livelihoods of the Malays are still lagging behind, and it seems like that the Malays were rarely involved in the socioeconomic development and modernization. In fact, most of the masses were still plagued with poverty and were often trapped with several social issues.

The original collection of *Surat Raja-Raja* (SRR) and *Surat Undang-Undang* (SUU) were written in full *jawi* script. The SRR is now fully transliterated into the Roman alphabet by the Perlis/Kedah State Archives of Malaysia with the help of 'Friends of Archives' while the SUU is still remain in original old *jawi* scripts. There were three volumes of about 1083 pages of SRR texts covering the year of 1882M (1300H), 1888M-1889M (1306H-1307H), 1895M-1897M (1313H-1315H), 1899M-1911M (1317H-1330H) (Saari, 2015). The SUU collection consists of 470 pages and was compiled in a single book that covers the year of 1903M (1321H) to 1909 (1327H). The historical background of these two collections was unknown. The transfer of the SUU from the Anak Bukit Palace, Alor Setar to the Kedah/Perlis Branch National Archives was carried out around 2008.

From the record of Perlis/Kedah State Archives of Malaysia, the first phase of transferring a part of the collection to the archives had begun with the Sultan Abdul Hamid correspondence (*Surat-Menyurat Sultan Abdul Hamid* (SMSAH) and a small portion of the SRR collection in around 1983. The collection was found in the State Government Office or '*pejabat dalam*' (currently known as Kedah State House). The second phase of transferring process took place in 2008 comprising the SRR and SUU collection from the file room at Anak Bukit Palace, Alor Setar to the National Archives of the State of Perlis/Kedah. However, the SUU collection is still undergoing preservation process (Saari, 2015).

Three SRR volumes were successfully transcribed and recorded. The SRR collection is registered in different names and years (Saari, 2015). SRR Book No. 1 is called 'Letter of the Kings of TH. 1306 TH. 1888 ', book no. 2 titled 'Copy of Letters to TH's Rulers. 1312 TM. 1895' and book no. 3 entitled 'Copy of Letters of Rulers TH. 1317-1329 (TM 1899-1911).' Studies shown that SRR contains not only the letters but also some memos (Kerajaan Kedah, 1895), list of lease results, expenditure statements, property

censuses and census of property offenders in the mining area along with other letters (Kerajaan Kedah, 1888).

On the other hand, the SUU Collection comprised most of the Kedah people's appeal letters. It also comprised letters from Penang merchants and quitters. In regard of the laws, the SUU also reveals that many decisions were issued by main courts, small courts and *shariah* courts for Islamic matters. The SUU collection also consists of notification letters regarding regulation, legislation and notices issued by the state government. Although the SUU was only recorded in a piece of paper, but the content shows the problems of the Malays in Kedah concerning to the land, crime, lease, theft, household problems, illnesses and others. Therefore, this collection is a very important source because the content reflects the political, economic and social history in Kedah.

The correspondence and contents of SRR and SUU clearly show "who the author and to whom the letter is about". For SRR collections, most writers are sultanates, relatives, rulers of the ruling elites in certain constituencies or *mukim* and sultan's men. The letters are composed of various categories and functions. In addition to the letter of instruction, there are also letter of note, letter of application, shouting letter, letter of complaint, letter of arrest and so forth. For example, there was a letter in the form of a directive, sent by Sultan Abdul Hamid to Tunku Yaakob regarding the deployment of SRR No. 2 (Kerajaan Kedah, 1895). Additionally, there was also a letter from Tunku Abdul Aziz to Wan Muhammad Saman on the issue of tin ore in Karangan, Kulim (Kerajaan Kedah, 1895). Such correspondence is categorized as a letter of instruction, from the government (from the sultan) to the regional chief. Besides that, there were also letters between Sultan of Kedah and the Siamese, his clerk or his secretary, the district chief, the Siamese and the British consul and several landlords in Kedah. Sultan of Kedah was also often sent the letters to the individual resided outside Kedah such as Penang, Singapore, Perak, Perlis and southern Thai provinces of Setul, Raman, Patani and Singgora.

SRR also includes scraps, diaries, district budget statements, regulations and legislation. The SRR correspondence function may be slightly different from the SUU collection. Most of the contents of this collection are more directed to feedback letters or notices about a court decision being decided by the court or otherwise. This collection also contains notices, regulations and laws submitted to local authorities, district heads, job leaders or ordinary people. All contents in SRR and SUU are primary resources that can explain the reality of life of the Malay community in Kedah. Having viewed from the writing aspect of SRR and SUU, the characteristics of the writing are more into the letter. It reflects the culture of the authors and the recipients. The style of language and the writing between the sultan and the nobility of the state and his relatives, the district chiefs with the head of occupation, British officials or Siamese had a very little different. Every information was recorded in formal and orderly manner. From the records, it can be identified the social stratification between the sender and the recipient of the letter through the words of praise or individual title. For example, "*Surat tulus ikhlas kasih sayang serta sangat mesra yang tiada menaruh syak dan waham tiada berputusan dan berkesudahan selagi ada cakerawala matahari dan bulan...*" (Kerajaan Kedah, 1909) or "*Duli Yang Dipertuan Yang Maha Mulia...*" (Kerajaan Kedah, 1895). Normally, the words of praise are preceded before the author's name or to whom it is addressed. The contents of the SRR and SUU give a lot of clues and clarification on the important events that took place in Kedah and neighbouring countries. Although there are some correspondence that are difficult to identify

but the real purpose of writing a letter can be understood as each letter had a specified headline. Therefore, it is easy to analyse the historical facts contained in the letter.

## **2. Problem Statement**

Most of literatures on the life of the Malays are based on the colonial reports. Thus, this study aims to look at the reality of the Malays' lives in Kedah based on the perspectives of the local people through the SRR and SUU collections.

## **3. Research Questions**

- 3.1.** To what extent the SRR and SUU as local sources able to give a true picture of the social and economic reality of the Malays in Kedah from 1882 to 1940?
- 3.2.** What are the effects towards the Malays in Kedah during the turmoil situation in Kedah?

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to provide new insights on the Malays in Kedah especially in social and economic aspects. This study may serve as a basis for the production of history writing using the local sources in order to provide a comprehensive perspective that may not available in official reports issued by the colonial.

## **5. Research Methods**

This study applied a qualitative research method in which researchers extract and analyse the documents or sources from archives. This library study also used secondary sources from books, articles, journals, papers, theses, dissertations and other reliable sources.

## **6. Findings**

During the era of Sultan Abdul Hamid Halim Shah's reign, the Malays are actively involved with agricultural activities, especially in rice cultivation. Among of the important developments in the economic system in Kedah was the agricultural land. This activity had spurred Kedah's economic, especially by the immigrants who were involved in rice farming activities. The migration did not only change the patterns of population and economic growth in Kedah but also affects the lives of the Malay people (Mahmud, 1966). Despite the positive development in the agricultural economy in Kedah, the Malays were continued to live in poverty. It is difficult to find any evidence through the SRR and SUU that shows the Malays are actively involved in the commercial economy.

The traditional Malays of Kedah are involved in planting and fishing. The basis of their economic development is self-sufficiency farming. The Malays rely on rice crops and the majority are farmers living in villages near the river or river delta. By the 19th century, paddy cultivation system in Kedah was influenced by Siam's technological system resulting in increasing Kedah's paddy production. Nevertheless,

not every year that the cultivation of paddy could produce a good income to the farmers. Sometimes, there were times where the paddy was affected by the diseases and insects, drought and damaged due to the natural phenomena (Hoo, 2003; Haji Omar, 1981). As a result, the income earned could not cope with everyday life needs. This situation caused Malay farmers to be trapped to debt problems, land problems and crimes.

The development of commercial economics since the 19th century that took place in Kedah did not favour the Malay farmers but instead benefited the upper classes, Chinese investors and immigrants. The information contained in the SUU shows that Chinese investors had the power to control the economic resources in Kedah. For example, a notice dated 26 *Syaaban* 1324 (1908) listed the names of tax chiefs in Kedah which are largely monopolized by the Chinese (Kerajaan Kedah, 1909). Thus, it is not surprising that commercial economic power was dominated by Chinese investors in Kedah.

In addition to farming activities based on rice cultivation, the information in SRR and SUU stated that Kedah's revenue comes from cassava, rubber, animal husbandry and forestry. The Malay elites are actively involved in providing leases to Chinese investors. The land acquired by the Chinese investors or the leaseholder, was cultivated with a massive commercial crop. On contrary, the Malay peasants are hardly engaged in commercial agricultural activities due to their lack of capital and the fact that commercial sources were dominated by the Chinese investors and Malay nobles.

The use of land among the Malay community before Siam and British administration was very simple. The use of land at that time was merely to meet the fulfilment of their necessities. Because of this, the Malay community did not establish a special and institutionalized land ownership system. However, in Kedah, there was a customary land law to facilitate the use of land. All lands, in general, were owned by the *sultan* or the king. The ordinary people can only use the land after getting permission from the sultan.

The problems related to the replacement, sale or land mortgages activities in Kedah involved the Malay farmers. Money lenders among the Chinese and Indian are very common to lend money or to obtain farmer lands through auctions. The SRR and SUU discovered that the Malays always lost their land, especially the land of inheritance due to fraud tricks among themselves. For example, the SUU stated, there was a complaint from a woman named Mek Leha who complained about a man named Mat Hassan who had stolen her land ownership title. Although the Court of Appeal did not disclose the case, but the judge named Syed Hassan was given the power by the Supreme Court to make a decision (Kerajaan Kedah, 1909). The SRR reported that many Malay land for sale, auctioned, cheated, taken violently and lost land due to failure to obtain land ownership titles (Kerajaan Kedah, 1895). The Malays are certainly dependent on the land, although its size is small. Losing land means losing their life's guarantee for the future.

Besides the land, the forced labour system (*sistem kerah*) is also synonymous in the lives of traditional Malay societies. They were subject to the orders of the king and the forced labour system to be an important tool of the Malay elite to harness the power of the Malays to perform the works of rice farming, state defence, bridge construction, fort, trench, castle and others. Forced labour are imposed on Malay peasant and were segregated from aristocrats, taxpayers and foreigners (Gullick, 1972). This situation was common to all Malay society in other Malay states, who are often became the victims of the upper-class people and they have no ways to defy such discriminations.

Based on SRR, there were many correspondence showing the Malay peasants involved with various forced labour activities. Among others, they were instructed to build a *tandip* to welcome the arrival of the Emperor of Siam to Kedah. Through a letter dated 12th *Jamadilakhir* 1307H (February 2, 1890M), the people were called to build the bridge, repair the roads and build a tandem to welcome the arrival of the Siamese Emperor who was expected to arrive on April 16, 1890. The order to conduct this activity had created a dissatisfaction among the peasant people. They issued a complain about it as recorded in the letter dated 27 *Syaaban* 1314H (January 30, 1897M). In one of the letters sent to Tunku Yaakob, there was a complaint from the people of Mukim Kupang regarding Wan Ahmad (Chief of Mukim Kupang) who always in a state of demanding people to do various work (Kerajaan Kedah, 1895). This case shows that the people also have the right to defend themselves if they think that the order were illogical and unacceptable.

Through SRR and SUU, credit practices in Kedah involve the government and the people. This debt issue became a serious issue that led to the pledge of land and property. Referring to the SRR, there are many correspondence recorded about debts in Kedah. For example, SRR No. 2 recorded a clerk named Sulaiman who owes a *rial* to a Chinese man named Pui (Kerajaan Kedah, 1895). The letter dated 24 *Rabiulakhir* 1326 (1908M) recorded a complaint from Haji Abdullah who stated that a man named Nik Wan or Mek owed him a *rial* (Kerajaan Kedah, 1909). Due to the widespread practice of debt in Kedah, the state ruler had ordered to ban on gambling. According to the notice, individuals involved in gambling, they are not allowed to owe or make a mortgage if they lose in gambling (Kerajaan Kedah, 1909). This clearly illustrates the seriousness of debt problems among the people of Kedah that gave a negative impact in their lives.

In addition, Sultan Abdul Hamid himself had supported the application of a Chinese named Poh Ah Leong to give debt to the farmers. This action led the Malays especially those engaged in agricultural activities to be burdened with debt and living in poverty (Abd Aziz, 2011). The reality is that, the forced labour system causes the Malays to live in distress and poverty. Eventually, it became easier for them to be trapped in debt problems, crimes and social problems.

Typically, if the farmers who are in debt did not get income from their agricultural activities, then debt payments cannot be settled. Difficult and poor lives leave farmers with no other option to pay the debts. They were forced to mortgage their land, including the land of inheritance. In addition, with the existence of new regulations and laws, the situation becomes more difficult for the farmers living in the villages. The difficulties in life caused the Malays to engage with the crime and social problems.

The SRR and SUU shows that the people of Kedah are involved with criminal and social problems such as robbery, murder, stealing, kidnapping, gambling and others. This crime issue is not just the case in Kedah, but it also happened across the border. The crime occurred not only involving the people of Kedah but also involving the people of Penang, Perak and several provinces in southern Siam (Saari, 2015). The SRR and SUU stated that several criminal investigations were filed through the State Council to eradicate the crimes in Kedah.

By reading the SUU, researchers discovered records related to the law that sets out guarantees of the guilt and the others. This law was approved by the State Legislative Assembly in 1906 (Kerajaan Kedah, 1909). Crimes of stolen cattle such as cow and buffalo were the most cases reported in SRR and SUU. This

activity really concerns the government because of life-threatening conditions and involves people's properties.

## 7. Conclusion

The SRR and SUU contain a lot of important informations about the administration and community issues in Kedah, especially around the late 19th century until the early of 20th century. The contents cover various categories as well as highlighted the history of Kedah especially the Malays. In fact, through SRR and SUU, Malays in Kedah could be described as a society that has undergone a challenging transition period from traditional to modern times. Thus, the contents of SRR and SUU as a historical source need to be analysed and interpreted. Historical facts through the collection of correspondence came from the sultan, the chiefs and the Kedah officials. The authenticity of SRR and SUU content indeed provide authentic information on the Malays' social and economic realities in Kedah.

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