The formation of the framework of ‘Malays’ in British Malaya: An analysis on Penghulus in Selangor

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1. Introduction

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_Penghulu_, which had generally meant headmen in Malay, became the name of office in the British period. When the British obtained governance of Selangor in 1874, the government tried to incorporate ‘native headmen’ as a part of their administrative system. These headmen were given the title of _Penghulu._

Previous works about _Penghulus_ in historical analysis, by the works of E. Sadka, G. Gullick and P. Kratoska were mainly focused on their administrative functions. They were thought to be a link between the British regime and the local society. However, from the perspective of the local society, their social backgrounds should be more taken into account, as their backgrounds could reflect the characteristics of the local society.

Meanwhile, as _Penghulus_ at present play a key role in district administration, anthropological works, such as Shamsul. A. B. and C. Bailey, also deal with _Penghulus._ Their interests are mainly in the position of _Penghulus_ and the power relations of village society in modern Malaysia. Thus the historical transitions of their positions have been only mentioned limitedly in a retrospective manner.

The focus of this paper is on the interactions between the government and the local society around the process of selecting _Penghulus_ in the state of Selangor. Various parties of the local society, as well as the colonial authority, took part in the process.

The case of Selangor in these interactions would particularly show how Malay immigrant communities made their representation for these posts. Though _Penghulus_ were regarded as native administrators, the definition of ‘native’ was not so clear in the context of Malaya, as migration had been so common in the area that population could be too mixed to be decided who were natives. The fact was particularly true in Selangor, as the state had been on the crossroads of immigrants on the fringe of the Straits of Malacca. Not only Malays, but also immigrants from the Malay Archipelago such as...
Javanese and Banjarese constituted the native population in Selangor. What kind of backgrounds did ‘native headmen’ in that state have?

In addition, the case of Penghulus in Selangor raises questions about the historical process of formation of the concept of ‘bangsa Melayu’. The British brought the racial concept of ‘Malays’, which gave the conceptual framework for bangsa Melayu. Along the process of institutionalization of Penghulus as officials, the image of Penghulus changed from ‘native headmen’ to ‘Malay officers’ from the government’s point of view. When the term ‘native’ was replaced by the term ‘Malay’, how did immigrant communities respond to the framework? Through the interactions around Penghulus, this paper tries to show how immigrant communities adapted themselves to the colonial framework of Malaya.

2. Native headmen in Selangor at the early stage of the British intervention

When the British took the first census in 1879, the population in Selangor had already been heterogeneous. The result shows the state consisted of two different components, the settled river mouth area and the frontier inland area. In the former, settlements were small, the number of males and females was almost equal, and most inhabitants were Malays. In contrast, settlements were large, the number of males was far bigger than that of females, and Malays and Chinese were mixed in the latter. ‘Malays’ in the interior area, who were mostly migrants from Sumatra and engaged in mining and commercial activities, occupied the majority in all the ‘Malays’ in Selangor at that time. Thus, inhabitants labeled as ‘Malays’ contained a number of immigrants as well as locals inhabitants.

There were headmen with foreign origin among the ruling class in the late 19th century Selangor. Such headmen had the title of ‘Datoh Dagang’ or ‘Penghulu Dagang’. Controlling trade, Datoh Dagangs had influence among merchants, who were mainly foreigners. In some cases, Sultan gave his kuasa to authorize them to impose taxes on persons or articles passing through their district. Merchants sometimes made a petition to the government, for complaining against Datoh Dagang’s taxation or applying for appointment of a new Datoh Dagang. The government had contacts with the local society through these petitions in late 1870’s.

Immigrants were conscious of their origins, ‘bangsa’. They made communities by bangsa and wanted to have own headman representing their bangsa. There were two petitions from Minangkabau residents around Kuala Lumpur in 1876 and 1880 asking the government to appoint a Penghulu Dagang for ‘bangsa Minangkabau’.

Headmen with whom the British made relationships at the early stage were mainly immigrant leaders in the interior areas. The British distinguished Malay immigrants by calling them ‘foreign Malays’. The government agreed that foreign Malays had their own headmen by communities. The Resident stated in the State Council in 1877 that ‘each bangsa should have its own Orang Tuah’.

These facts indicate strong influence of Malay immigrants in Selangor. As immigrant communities held commercial activities, the political power of their headmen could not be neglected. The cooperation between the Sultan and foreign headmen appeared to be essential part of the power structure in Selangor. The British inherited
the relationship with them from the Sultanate, regarding foreign headmen as a part of the native order.

3. **Institutionalization of Penghulus in 1880’s and 1890’s**

*Penghulus as ‘native headmen’*

From the beginning of 1880’s, the government tried to extend their rule to rural areas for establishing the uniform administration system. The whole state was divided six Districts, where British District Officer administered. Then the government tried to incorporate ‘native headmen’ under District Officers. As to rural administration, the government aimed to ‘utilize the village district institutions and organize them to much a greater extent and more systematically than we do to the great advantage both of the government and natives’. The government gave these headmen the title of Penghulu for their authorization.

In 1883, the regulations for *Penghulus* about their duties and jurisdiction were introduced in the Selangor State Council. The State Council officially authorized 24 *Penghulus*. Then a number of *Penghulus* were appointed in each District throughout 1880’s and 1890’s, along with the extension of the British rule to frontier areas. While the power to appoint *Penghulus* belonged to Sultan in Council, it was British District Officers who had the initiative in selecting *Penghulus*. In 1880’s British officials in each District often inspected to distant places and appointed an influential person as *Penghulus*. Appointment of *Penghulu* was an important means for British district officers to establish their rule in each District. It was reported that appointment of a good person was ‘only way to get at people’.

At the same time, the jurisdiction of *Penghulus* was defined. By the end of the 19th century, *Penghulus* had become an officer responsible for an administrative unit named *Mukim*. In 1890’s boundaries between *Mukims* had been demarcated throughout the state. *Kuasa*, the letter of authorization, stipulated *Penghulu’s* duties. It contained a wide range of powers within their *Mukim*. As the government introduced the administration based on land, main duties of them were land administration.

**The interactions between the government and the local society**

Although *Penghulu* were apparently officers, their administrative abilities were generally poor. In turn, what the government actually expected *Penghulus* was to increase of the revenue in their *Mukim* by using their personal influence, rather than to have clerical abilities. *Penghulus* were expected to show ‘examples’ so that their people could follow. *Penghulus* who had a good reputation from British officers were those who made progress in agriculture in their *Mukim*.

The government expected them to introduce immigrants to develop the lands. Several *Penghulus* had financial assistance from the government to introduce immigrants and develop their estates especially in early 1890’s. *Penghulus* were expected to act a leading role for making native population settle down and engage themselves in permanent agriculture. Therefore, their influence among natives including immigrants was requisite qualifications for *Penghulus*. District Officers were eager to appoint foreign Malays as *Penghulus* to promote immigrants.
Meanwhile, petitions often came from the local society towards the government to apply for authorizing their headman. Foreign Malay communities in the inland districts, where immigrants were predominant, were above all active. For instance, Setapak Mukim in Kuala Lumpur District contained two communities, Minangkabau and Pahang. When a new Penghulu was to be appointed in 1889, both communities made petitions for recommending their headmen for Penghulu. In 1890’s election for Penghulu took place in some cases. When an election of Penghulu was held in 1892 in Batu, Kuala Lumpur District, there were 5 candidates, including one Minangkabau and one Javanese, for the Penghuluhip. In Ulu Yam, Ulu Selangor District, there was some conflict in an election and some dissatisfied with the result would leave this place, District Officer reported.

In the coastal districts, Javanese and Banjarese came as new settlers. They often distinguished themselves from local Malays to such an extent that District Officer described them as ‘clannish’. There was a petition from Javanese community for appointing Javanese headmen in 1889. They made the petition by Jawi, Malay in Arabic letters, to claim they were separate bangsa so that they could have their ‘kepala’. District Officer thought that Javanese were superior to local Malays as agriculturalists and ‘if Javanese Penghulu were appointed, its capabilities can and will be fully availed of’. As the result, in late 1890’s two Javanese Penghulus were appointed.

Social backgrounds of Penghulus reflected migratory character of ‘native’ population in Selangor. In 1896, out of 42 Penghulus in Selangor, thirteen were foreign born. Moreover, there were only seven who took their appointments in the District where he was born. Throughout the last quarter of the 19th century, the total number of Penghulu appointed in Selangor amounted to 95. Among them, there were at least 29 Penghulus from outside Selangor, fourteen were from Sumatra, thirteen from neighboring states of the Malay Peninsula such as Pahang, Negeri Sembilan and Malacca, and two from Java. Many of them had some titles, such as Datoh, Haji and so on. Meanwhile, among Selangor Malay Penghulus, 39 of them had the title of Raja. It indicated that in Selangor leadership was based on their personal prestige. Therefore, the list of Penghulus in Selangor contains various Malay notables, regardless of their origin.

**Datoh Dagangs**

In addition to Penghulus, Dato Dagangs had survived under the colonial regime. In 1880’s Datoh Dagangs had changed their characters from commercial controllers to rural agriculturalists in response to the government’s policy of rural development. For instance, one Datoh Dagang in Klang District had a large coffee estate using Javanese labourers.

**Kuasa** for Datoh Dagang stipulated their duties to introduce settlers and to help Penghulu to develop the lands. Their functions were similar to these of Penghulus, but they were a protector of immigrants within the whole District. For instance, in Kuala Selangor District Datoh Dagang from Kelantan encouraged Banjarese settlers into that District. When that Datoh Dagang was appointed, District Officer reported that ‘formerly it was the custom to wait for orang dagang and then select Datoh Dagang but at Kuala Selangor the process has been reversed and with the best possible returns’.
Besides official Datoh Dagangs, there seemed to be many unofficial Datoh Dagangs. When District Officer of Ulu Langat District asked the Resident to appoint a Penghulu in 1884, the Resident refused because Datoh Dagang was appointed instead. In that District, five Datoh Dagangs were mentioned in Annual Report of the District in 1886 for making progress in development. It showed there were many headmen with the title of Datoh Dagang. They often substituted for Penghulus and especially in districts where foreign Malays were numerically predominant.

By the end of 19th century, the colonial system of Penghulus in Selangor began to take shape. This was the process that the headmen with different background were framed into the uniform official category of ‘native headmen’. The process of selection of Penghulus contained the interactions between the government and the local society. On the one hand, the government tried to use appointment of foreign headmen as means to make settled population. On the other hand, various foreign communities, that formed the ‘native’ population in Selangor, made their claims towards Penghuluships. As the result that both parties’ claims met, foreign Malays had good position for Penghuluships. In addition, there were various foreign headmen, whether officially or unofficially, representing each community.

4. Penghulus as Malay Officers: Changes in the 20th century

Bureaucratization of Penghulus
From the beginning of 20th century on, the government had adopted the so-called ‘Pro-Malay policy’. Along the policy, Malays were officially privileged to other races for recruitment of officers. At the same time, the government began to refer to Penghulus as ‘Malay officers’. Penghulus were placed in a part of the establishment of Malay officers and regarded as reserved posts for Malays.

In 1904, ‘education and employment of Malays’ were discussed in the Conference of the Residents in FMS. One agenda in the conference was improvement of the salary and the position of Penghulus. As to improvement of their salaries, the salary scheme for Penghulus in Selangor was introduced in 1917. Penghulus were divided into four classes and they were promoted from the 3rd to the 1st, then to the special class with seasonal salary increments, along with their length of service. As to improvement of their position, the government conferred more administrative powers on them. The government thought administrative abilities of Penghulus had improved so that they could relieve some duties of District Officers. The government expected Penghulus to carry out the internal administration with their Mukim, especially the land administration.

Throughout the first half of 20th century, the bureaucratization of Penghulus had taken place. Penghuluships came to be treated uniformly one another regardless of their personality. Penghulus were frequently subject to transfer of his Mukim with promotion or salary increment. Penghulu themselves often applied for transfer seeking for better salary. However, the process was gradual, for the special position of Penghulus in Selangor was emphasized repeatedly. Because a large number of foreign Malays flew into Selangor, Penghulus should be persons of ‘good position’ compared to other states. The perception that Selangor had large immigrant population slowed the process of bureaucratization of Penghulus.
The framework of ‘Malays’ in the process of appointment of Penghulus

From the beginning of the 20th century, every time when a post of Penghulu became vacant, many applications came to the government. Applicants represented various classes of the local society, such as village headmen, teachers in vernacular schools, contractors of estate and so on. It became usual procedures that District Officers collected all the applications and sent them with his recommendation to the State Council.

Their opinions reflected the changes of ‘claims’ of Penghulus. While their connections with outside world had been thought much of in the late 19th century, the duties of Penghulu shifted to administration within their Mukim in the 20th century. As the result, their ties with the place, as well as their clerical abilities, became important qualification for the posts. District Officers tend to require Penghulus to ‘know the people and the place’. In 1923, out of 50 Penghulus and Assistant Penghulus in Selangor, twenty got his office in the District where he was born.

In addition, the framework of ‘Malay’ affected selection of Penghulus. The racial concept of ‘Malay’ contained Javanese, Banjarese and so on as well as Malays. As Penghulus were at the top of all the inhabitants within their Mukim, appointments should be not for a single community, but acceptable to all the communities. At the beginning of the 20th century, District Officers recommended an appointment of Javanese Penghulu several times, but their suggestions were declined. The Resident was against ‘special appointment’ for Javanese because Penghulus received their salaries by ‘doing particular duties for Malays, Javanese and other Asiatics’. In 1906, District Officer in Kuala Langat made recommendation for a Penghulouship suggesting a candidate because of his good reputation among Malays, Javanese and Chinese. Community relations were covered under the framework of ‘Malay’.

In addition, the government did not expect Penghulus to introduce immigrants any more, because massive immigrants flew into the state without their assistance. In 1903, when District Officer of Kuala Langat District inspected Javanese settlement, he reported appointment of immigrant headman was ‘unprofitable and impolitic’ as immigrants came in sufficient numbers without such a measure. As the result, the attitude towards foreign Malays had also gradually changed.

Meanwhile, Selangor Malays got preferences. The Resident stated ‘in the selection of headmen, the natives of each State appear to have clearly the best claim to consideration, and it is to be regretted that so many of Selangor Penghulus should be foreign Malays’. District Officers often put their priority on choosing a local candidate as much as possible in their suggestion for new Penghulu. Although there were foreign Malays’ applications for Penghulouships, these applicants were often neglected simply because they were foreign Malays. In 1903, the Resident stated he would not appoint Penghulu ‘unless he is a Selangor man’ and tried ‘to ascertain to what Malay country (candidates) belongs’.

‘Malays’ themselves were always sensitive of origin of Penghulus. Applicants for Penghulouships often claimed in their application that they were ‘anak negri’. The tendency that foreign Malays were disadvantaged for Penghulouships was clearer when Malay notables were consulted for selections. When Raja Muda made interviews to
applicants for *Penghulu* in 1903, he asked them about the origin of their father. In addition, local inhabitants sometimes made petitions against appointment of certain applicants claiming them as foreign origin. In one case, anonymous petition claimed against a candidate because his grandfather was Banjarese. Though the British District Officer claimed he was Selangor born Malay if this petition was true, his suggestion was declined in the State Council.

The process of exclusion of foreign Malays from *Penghuluships* was gradual, for Penghulu were always foreign origins in several *Mukims* where mostly consisted of Sumatrans in the interior districts. However, foreign-born *Penghulu* had decreased to only seven after 1907. As local Malay officers, *Penghulu* should be locally born Malays. This perception was shared by both the officers and the local society. The meaning of foreignness turned to be negative in the 20th century.

**The *Penghulu* Scheme in 1935**

The system of selection of *Penghulu* changed drastically when the new *Penghulu* salary scheme was introduced in 1935. By the scheme selections were made by examination. The scheme regulated the qualification of candidates; age between 20 and 25; born in Selangor; certain educational achievement in Malay school. Candidates who passed the examination were sent as an Assistant *Penghulu* to *Mukim* where *Penghuluship* was vacant, regardless of their origin. In this scheme, personal influence in the place was not counted any more. *Penghulus* were selected by the central authority and transferred more frequently.

Under the 1935 scheme, District Officers were against an idea that ‘appointment of native of a particular *Mukim* to the *Penghuluship* of that *Mukim*’. Promotions and transfers should be due to their efficiency rather than their birthplaces or places of residence. Even Malay officers who held the post of District Officer at that moment agreed this view because *Penghulus* were hard to have influence among their people in the situation of mixture of population as the result of massive migration.

The first half of 20th century saw the bureaucratization of *Penghulu*, namely the process of absorption of *Penghulus* into the regime of the colonial administration. As the process of selection became purely bureaucratic at the 1935 scheme, *Penghulus* had lost their ties with the place and fully became a part of the establishment of Malay officers. As qualification for applying for *Penghuluships* was strictly limited, *Penghulu* ceased to offer opportunities that various layers of Malay communities made their claims for.

5. **The framework of bangsa: the role of village headmen**

While incorporating *Penghulus* into their establishment, the government authorized village headmen in 1916 and 1918. In 1916, District Officer of Kuala Langat suggested a new *Datoh Dagang* should be appointed, but it was declined. Instead, village headmen (Ketua’an Kampong) were authorized as ‘an orang tua from each race in his (*Penghulu’s*) *Mukim* to advise him on matters connected with that race’.

Duties of village headmen, in their *kuasa*, were to assist duties of *Penghulus*. *Ketua’an Kampong* was the honourary title and they did not receive any salary, but they
were paid special allowances for encouraging rice cultivation. Their qualifications were knowledge about the village, adat and the religion. The role of village headmen appeared to be similar to that of Penghulu in the late 19th century.

The total number of 200 village headmen had been authorized during this period, and many of them were foreign Malays. Among 162 village headmen whose origins were identified, there were 44 Sumatran races such as Minangkabau and 43 Javanese, while Selangor Malays were only 30.

They were expected to act as a mediator between Penghulus and their community. The government aimed to systemize the function of village headmen to subject these communities to Penghulu. In some Mukims, Mukim council, which consisted of village headmen and was chaired by Penghulu, was organized. One reason of the government to regulate their powers is to prevent village headmen, who were ‘foreigners without exception’, from getting too strong to oust Penghulus’ prestige and to help Penghulus keep independent from them. As Penghulus had the role of Malay officers in the administration, the role of village headmen gained importance as representatives of their community.

Before the authorization of village headmen, there were some cases which Penghulu and foreign Malay communities did not have good terms. Several Penghulus were dismissed for illegal claims of money against foreign Malays or Chinese in arrangements for acquiring lands. It was reported that ‘a request of this nature from a Penghulu to foreign Malay was considered dangerous to refuse’. In Sabak Bernam, where Javanese and Banjarese communities were numerous, there were some conflicts between Penghulus and their headmen.

Even after village headmen had been authorized, foreign Malay communities kept their uniqueness and took frequent actions towards the government about their Penghulus and village headmen. In the inland districts, there were some petitions applying for appointment village headman of Sumatran bangsa, such as Kerinchi. In the coastal districts, Javanese and Banjarese formed a considerable part of Malay population. In 1923, a petition was made from the Javanese community asking for appointment of a Javanese member in the Council. They claimed that bangsa Jawa did not have Council member, though bangsa Melayu, bangsa China and bangsa Kling did.

In addition, petitions for Penghuluships were often made by the framework of bangsa. In 1918, one Selangor Raja was appointed as Penghulu as the result that petitions from Malays, Javanese and Chinese supported him. In 1925, Chinese made a petition recommending a candidate for Penghulu because all bangsa, such as Malays, Chinese, Javanese and Banjarese, had admired him. These petitioners used the framework of bangsa to join the official procedure of selecting Penghulus, while admitting Penghulu as posts for Selangor Malays.

The authorization of village headmen meant the government regarded Penghulus as representatives of the whole ‘Malay’ race and village headmen as those of each bangsa. Interactions among Malay communities were still observable. Bangsa relations continued to be an important factor in the local society. Not only Malays, but Javanese, Banjarese, and Chinese used the framework of bangsa as a unit to make claims to the
government. Meanwhile, they were incorporated into the framework of Malays by making relationship with the government, as their headman was subject to Penghulu.

6. Conclusion

During the British period, Penghulus had been institutionalized as a part of the colonial administration. There were various kinds of interaction between the government and the local society around Penghuluships.

In the late 19th century, The British regarded Penghulus as headmen among ‘natives’, including immigrants from the Malay Archipelago. The government was ready to appoint foreign Malay headmen as Penghulus to introduce immigrants for making settled population. Immigrants formed communities by bangsa, their origin, and took part in the process of the selection of Penghulus. These communities often made applications towards the government for authorizing headmen for their bangsa. Penghulus were in some cases representatives of immigrant communities from Sumatra, Java and neighbouring states such as Pahang and Negri Sembilan.

From the beginning of the 20th century on, Penghulus had changed their character from ‘native headmen’ to local ‘Malay officers’. Along the process, Penghulus represented the whole ‘Malay’ race in each Mukim and the official framework of the ‘Malays’ superseded each bangsa. Foreign Malays, often encouraged for the appointment in the late 19th century, was excluded from the office to give way to Selangor Malays. The perception that Penghulus should be locally born Malays had been shared by the local society.

Meanwhile, village headmen, authorized under Penghulus since 1910’s, took the role as representatives of their own bangsa. Although undermined in the official concept of the ‘Malay’ race, immigrant communities continued to be bangsa-conscious even after they settled down. The government subjected the framework of bangsa to the framework of ‘Malays’ by subjecting village headmen to Penghulus. The framework of ‘Malays’ had taken its shape along with the settlement of immigrants as the result of these interactions.

At the same time, the framework of bangsa was widely utilized, for it was regarded by immigrant communities, such as Javanese Banjarese and even Chinese, as a unit to participate in selecting ‘Malay officers’. Taking part in the administrative processes, they were incorporated into the state of Selangor as ‘Malays’. The fact that framework of ‘bangsa’ as a political unit was shared by immigrant communities could affect the formation of concept of ‘bangsa Melayu’ in the decolonization period.

Penghuluships offered opportunities Malay immigrant communities to make their claim to the colonial administration. Penghulus in Selangor reflected the process of adaptation of migratory society to the colonial framework. Backgrounds of Penghulus reflected heterogeneousness of ‘Malays’. Dynamism of the local society in Selangor, which made up of various immigrant communities, could be seen through the process of selection of Penghulus. This process shows how these immigrants settled down and join the framework of ‘Malays’. In that sense, these interactions would set a new perspective on the historical process of the formation of the framework of ‘Malays’ in British Malaya.