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

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1. Introduction

This paper aims to examine the interactions between the British government and the local society in the process of selection of native headmen in Selangor, British Malaya from 1874 till World War II.

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

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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*ships, 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 *Penghuluship*. 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 *Penghulus* 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 *Penghuluship* 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 *Penghuluships*, 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 *Penghuluships* often claimed in their application that they were ‘*anak negri*’. The tendency that foreign Malays were disadvantaged for *Penghuluships* 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 *Penghulus* were always foreign origins in several *Mukims* where mostly consisted of Sumatrans in the interior districts. However, foreign-born *Penghulus* had decreased to only seven after 1907. As local Malay officers, *Penghulus* 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 *Penghulus* 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 honorary 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.