

# The Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society — its History, Publications and Distribution in Ancient and Modern Times

by Tan Sri Dato Mubin Sheppard

## History

A meeting was held in Raffles Library, Singapore, on November 4th 1877 at which a resolution was presented and approved reading 'that the gentlemen present form themselves into a Society for collecting and recording scientific information in the Malay Peninsula and Archipelago. The said Society to be, for the present, called *The Straits Asiatic Society*.' Those present included Archdeacon G.F. Hose, who presided, W.E. Maxwell, who was then the Colonial Secretary, A.M. Skinner, who was then the Colonial Treasurer, W.A. Pickering the Protector of the Chinese, C.J. Irving, the Resident Councillor Malacca, and D.F.A. Hervey, a Magistrate. Mr. Skinner, who was the first Honorary Secretary, wrote to the Royal Asiatic Society in London asking if the new body could be accepted as a Branch of the older Society (which had been founded in 1826). Approval was received from London in March 1878 and the Society was then renamed *The Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*.

The Governor of the Straits Settlements agreed to be the Patron, and for many years the Governors continued to give their patronage. Founder members, enrolled during the first six months, numbered about 150 and included Hoo Ah Kay — 'Whampoa' — one of the first Unofficial members of the Straits Settlements Legislative Council, Syed Mohamed bin Ahmed Alsagoff, Syed Abu Bakar, a Selangor Chief, and Tan Kim Ching, son of Tan Tock Seng.

The name of the Society was, in fact, misleading and has continued to mislead throughout the long life of the Society. Neither the Straits Branch nor the Malayan or Malaysian Branch were Branches, in the accepted sense of the word, of the older Society. They presented no annual report or Accounts and there was no regular communication between Singapore and London. The

annual reports of the 'parent body' have never contained a reference to a branch in Singapore. When this anomaly was re-examined a few years ago it was decided to retain the old title by which the Society is known all over the world.

For the next 45 years the name remained unchanged, but in 1923, after circularising all members, it was decided to amend the name to be *The Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*. Eighty-two Journals had been published and the last of the Straits series was dated November 1922. The serial numbers of the future issues of the Journal were continued, but from April 1923 the Journals were given a Volume number, with two and sometimes three parts, published in different months of the year. The last Journal to be published before the Japanese invasion of Malaya was Volume 19. Part 3. in December 1941. The Society was revived in 1946 and the first post-war issue was Volume 20. Part 1. published in June 1947. In 1964, soon after the proclamation of Malaysia, the name of the Society was again changed, from Malayan to Malaysian Branch and the first issue of the new series was Volume 37. Part 1. with the serial number 205. The most recent issue of the Journal to be published at the end of June 1985 was numbered Volume 58. Part 1. serial number 248.

## Publications

The original rules of the Society included, under Objects 'the publication of Papers in a Journal'. There was no shortage of material: the history, geography, literature, language, botany and zoology in the Malay States were almost unknown, and members assembled information and read papers at monthly meetings which were subsequently published. The Journals which followed contained numerous contributions by Civil Servants. These dedicated scholars contributed numerous short Papers, which were assembled to form one issue, but some major works became a complete issue on their own. This was an expensive method of publishing the equivalent of a separate Monograph, since they were issued free to all members in return for their subscription, and few copies were sold to non-members. The practice in recent years has been to assemble miscellaneous papers to form each issue of the Journal, and to publish major works as MBRAS Monographs, which are sold to both members of the Society and members of the public at a modest price. In the course of time many of the issues of the Journal which were published more than thirty years ago have been sold out, leaving one copy in the Society's holding. Unfortunately most of the Issues of the Straits Branch were allowed to go out of stock and arrangements were then made in 1963 to have the complete

set of 82 Straits Branch Journals reprinted by Kraus Reprints, in Germany, on which a royalty has been paid to the Society. But these Reprints have now been exhausted and the firm is not interested in reprinting the series again. Substantial numbers of some back issues of the MBRAS Journal are still available in the Society's store, but in many cases the contents are not of general interest and orders are rare. Orders for 'a complete set' cannot be accepted.

In 1964 the Society began to publish MBRAS Monographs, starting with '*Social Stratification in Kampong Bagan*' by S. Husin Ali. This was followed at irregular intervals by 12 other Monographs on subjects as varied as '*Civil War in Kelantan*', '*An Historical Geography of Pahang*', '*Rain Forest Collectors and Traders*' (which has been reprinted), '*Pre-Colonial State Systems in Southeast Asia*', '*British Policy and Malay Politics during the Malayan Union Experiment*', '*Babad Dipanagara*', '*Social Relations of Dependence in a Malay State: 19th Century Perak*', '*Che-Wong Myths and Legends*', '*Kedah: a study of the Economic and Political Development, 1897-1923*' and most recently, '*Syair Mukomuko: a 19th Century Court Chronicle on the West Coast of Sumatra*' (Monograph No. 13.).

Some of the State Histories, written by Winstedt, Wilkinson and Linehan, nearly fifty years ago and published as separate parts of the journal, had been out of print for some years and it was decided to reprint them, and to initiate a series entitled '*MBRAS Reprints*'. These now number ten, and included *The History of Perak*, *The History of Pahang*, *The History of Johore*, *The Study of Ancient Times in the Peninsula and the Straits of Malacca* (a series of eleven long articles by Dato Sir Roland Braddell, covering 450 pages) and a biography of Yap Ah Loy.'

### The Printing of the Society's Publications

During the first few years of the Society's existence the Journals were printed either by the Government Printing Department or the Prison Printing Office. The first Commercial firm to be entrusted with the work was referred to as The American Mission Press, Singapore: they continued to undertake this work for the next ten years. The work was then carried out by the Methodist Publishing House, who continued to carry out the work until 1929, when Fraser & Neave printed Volume Seven and Singapore Printers then took over the printing of the Journals until the Japanese invasion.

After the war and for the next 20 years the Malaya Publishing House printed the Society's Journal. The Editor, Dr. C.A. Gibson Hill, then distributed the work of printing a number of major publications to Times

Printers, Singapore, Art Printing, Kuala Lumpur, the Alden Press, Oxford, Princraft, Kuala Lumpur, Nanyang Printers, Singapore and Tieh Wah.

When the Society's headquarters were moved to Petaling in 1972, the Editor found it more convenient to entrust the printing of the Journal to Printers in Kuala Lumpur or Petaling Jaya, giving preference to Art Printing Works. The rise in printing charges led to a search for another printer of almost equal proficiency and the Journal is now being printed by Academe Art & Printing Services, Kuala Lumpur.

## Distribution

The importance of making the Society's publications available overseas was recognised by the first Council and they appointed the firms of Trubner in London and Leroux in Paris as the Society's Agents. The London Agency continued to be held by Trubner and their partners, notably Kegan Paul and Trubner, until 1983 when they sold their interests to a foreign firm with the name of Knightsbridge Books. No agent in Paris has been appointed for many years but the booksellers, Nabrink, in Amsterdam, have been the Society's rather inactive Agent for Europe for several decades. A second agent, John Randall, has been appointed in London, and assists in the marketing of the Society's publications in England. No satisfactory agent has yet been found in Australia or the United States.

After a number of experiments, the Society has appointed a Sole Agent for Malaysia and Singapore (International Booksellers, Petaling Jaya) for the distribution of the Society's publications, with satisfactory results. But the Society recognises that distribution even in Malaysia and Singapore needs to be improved, particularly in the field of Universities, Colleges and Schools. The Society had its headquarters in Raffles Museum for nearly a century, and only left it, at one month's notice, at the request of the Director of Museums, who stated that he required the store and office space for other uses. No other suitable free accommodation could be found at short notice in Singapore and the Society was obliged to move to Petaling Jaya, where the Director of Archives Malaysia, kindly made available a small office and store for the Society's substantial stock of publications. The Society's office and store is now located in the Department of National Registration in Petaling Jaya. The office and store share security arrangements which are provided by the Department, without any charge.

The physical separation from Singapore has adversely affected the sale of Journals and Monographs in the Republic. The Press both in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur are reluctant to publish reviews of the Society's Journals and

other publications and the public in Singapore, other than members of the Society, are ignorant of the availability of the Society's publications.

The Society is therefore keenly interested in the dissemination in Singapore of information about scholarly printed matter.

The Society receives quite frequent orders from individuals overseas, which indicates that an interest in scholarly publications about Southeast Asia exists in other English speaking countries, notably in Australia, and the United Kingdom: an increased interest has also been shown recently in Japan.

A scheme for cooperative marketing of scholarly publications about Southeast Asia which serves a number of different publishers in this area would be of great potential interest to this Society.

The deterioration in the knowledge of English among school-going students in Singapore and Malaysia and the possibility that this situation may not be easily remedied, suggests that special efforts should be made to publicise overseas English Language scholarly Journals published in Singapore and Malaysia. This view is magnified by the fact that there is virtually no market for books and Journals in English in Indonesia or Thailand, our nearest neighbours.

The focus of attention overseas should therefore probably be directed to the Faculties and Departments responsible for Southeast Asian Studies in Universities in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States.

## The Language Issue

The English language has always been used in the MBRAS publications. The Council is of the opinion that there is still a demand for academic Journals of a high standard in English and there is therefore no reason to change this policy. A few Malay Hikayat have been published by the MBRAS and a new Monograph, which has just been published, contained part of the Malay text of a 19th century Court Chronicle with translation and commentary. A Javanese Historical Poem, with Malay and English translations, describing the struggle of Prince Dipanagara against the Dutch between 1825 and 1830 was published in 1981 and two short Malay biographies written in Johore more than half a century ago, about Sultan Abu Bakar and Sultan Ibrahim, and published in Jawi type, are to be republished by the Society using Romanised type later this year, but this does not indicate that the Society's general policy has changed.

## The Supply of Articles for Publication

For many years after its formation almost all contributions to the Society's Journals were supplied by its expatriate members who were in the Government service in Singapore and other parts of the Straits Settlements. The Society was fortunate in having among its most dedicated members such expatriate scholars as R.O. Winstedt, R.J. Wilkinson, W. Linehan, H.N. Ridley, I.H. Burkill, and later Dr. C.A. Gibson Hill. After Independence a number of expatriate scholars have continued to contribute regularly, notably Dr. John Bastin, J.M. Gullick and Nicholas Tarling. But a new generation of writers on Southeast Asian subjects has emerged in the Universities of Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States, and the Editor is in the happy position of receiving more articles than he can immediately accommodate and has a number of suitable articles in reserve. This is in gratifying contrast with the situation in 1971, when the Journal was two years in arrears and not a single article was awaiting publication. Material for Monographs is also plentiful, and three new manuscripts which have been accepted now await publication.

## Conclusion

The Editor of the Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society welcomes most warmly the opportunity for closer cooperation, both in the sharing of information and the future exchange of views in time to come.

The short distance which separates Petaling Jaya from Singapore should be no obstacle to closer links and cooperation in future.