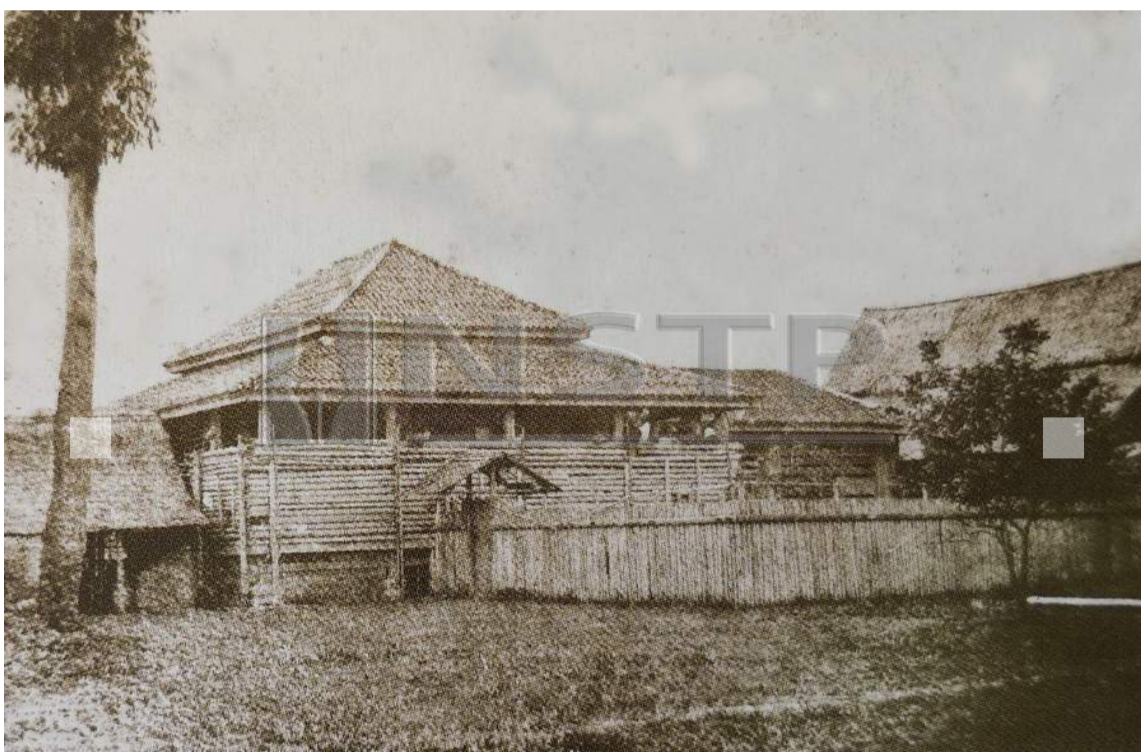


Let's learn more about one of Selangor's greatest rulers, Sultan Abdul Samad

By [Alan Teh Leam Seng](#) - December 16, 2018 @ 8:40am



Sultan Abdul Samad's residence in Kuala Langat taken in 1875.

Sultan Abdul Samad Ibni Al-Marhum Raja Abdullah's reign marked many milestones in the history of Selangor. His time on the throne saw the only civil war in this state, the establishment of Kuala Lumpur, the introduction of the Selangor flag and coat of arms, and the beginning of British involvement in the state's affairs.

Those pertinent points reeled off by a tour guide on duty immediately catch my attention as I find myself walking past the historic Sultan Abdul Samad building on my way to the nearby Majestic Hotel. I've passed by this area countless times but it had never occurred to me that the monarch who lends his name to Kuala Lumpur's most iconic building played such a significant role in the history of Selangor.

My interest piqued, I renegade on my initial plan and head off across Dataran Merdeka towards the Kuala Lumpur Library to find out more about the sultan who was born in 1804 at Kuala Selangor's Bukit Melawati. Sultan Abdul Samad's 41-year-rule was second only to that of Sultan Ibrahim Shah who reigned from 1778 to 1826.

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View of Kuala Lumpur in the 1880s.

EARLY SELANGOR

Selangor in the first half of the 19th century was almost uninhabitable. The Malay population in the 1830s was less than 10,000 and was scattered in groups over the five major rivers of Selangor - Bernam, Selangor, Klang, Langat and Lukut - with river mouths being the main settlement centres.

Revenue collection was decentralised by allotting each river valley to an influential member of the aristocracy. Apart from being inefficient, very little tax was collected from scanty trade in tin, gutta percha, rattan, hides and imported necessities like textiles, salt and rice. The sparse revenue translated to a ruling dynasty that failed to provide a strong central government.

Tin was by far the most important source of private wealth and public revenue. For the chiefs, this source of wealth was a means to power as they could provide for private armies to secure their domains from rivals. The Sultan usually held one of the river valleys as his royal domain and was also entitled to a share of tax collected by the chiefs of the remaining four valleys. Unfortunately, the sum was never enough to maintain a royal army strong enough to keep the chiefs in check.

INDEBTED SULTAN

Sultan Ibrahim passed away in 1826 and after a struggle for power, Raja Muhammad, his son by a secondary wife, acceded to the throne. Sultan

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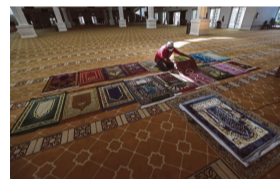
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indebted to Melaka financiers who advanced him money for his unsuccessful mining ventures in the Klang valley.

In 1839, Sultan Muhammad was threatened by his creditors with arrest for debt while passing through Melaka on his return from Riau to visit his relatives. Fortunately, the Sultan's cousin Raja Jumaat was among the royal entourage. He secured the Sultan's release by standing in as surety.

Soon after, Raja Jumaat and his brother, Raja Abdullah, consolidated their positions by each marrying one of Sultan Muhammad's daughters.

Seven years later, Sultan Muhammad was careless enough to pass through Melaka and once again came within reach of his creditors. This time, Raja Jumaat took over primary responsibility of the debts which amounted to \$169,000 (£35,000 at that time). Grateful for the favour, Sultan Muhammad gave Raja Jumaat a grant in perpetuity of the territory and revenue of Lukut. That made Raja Jumaat the most powerful man in Selangor until his death in 1864. After that, Lukut fell into a long decline when power was passed to the less competent hands of his sons.



Sultan Abdul Samad ruled Selangor from Jan 6, 1857 to Feb 6, 1898.

APPEARANCE OF ABDUL SAMAD

The later years of Sultan Muhammad's reign saw a struggle for power. During the intrigues of this tumultuous period, Sultan Muhammad's nephew, Raja Abdul Samad strengthened his position by the familiar expedient of marrying his uncle's daughter, Raja Atfah in 1844 and was subsequently appointed chief of the Selangor valley.

In one of Frank Swettenham's writings, the British official related that Raja Abdul Samad was rumoured to have killed 99 men with his own hands. This wasn't refuted by Raja Abdul Samad as it was a useful reputation to have in the murderous court circle of the 1850s.

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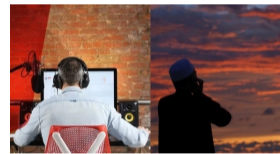
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proclaimed the fourth ruler of Selangor with the support of Raja Jumaat. Sultan Abdul Samad's position on the throne, however, was scarcely more secure than his predecessor. He placed his eldest son, Raja Musa in

charge of Selangor valley and kept Langat valley for his own. Bernam was long held by a well-established chief who wasn't friendly to the Sultan while Lukut, in the hands of Raja Jumaat's sons, was no longer a source of strength.

The most contentious issue at that time was control of Klang valley, whose ruling chief was Raja Suleiman, a son of Sultan Muhammad who died before his father. In 1853, Raja Abdullah was put in charge of Klang valley. This became a source of bitter resentment to Raja Suleiman's son, Raja Mahadi who considered it his birth right to take over his father's fief. Unfortunately, Raja Mahadi lacked the means to take Klang valley by force. He bided his time by trading tin as a private citizen in Klang.



Sultan Abdul Samad attended the first 1897 Durbar in Kuala Kangsar.

TROUBLE BREWING

In 1857, Raja Abdullah succeeded in establishing his first party of Chinese miners on the upper reaches of the Klang river. This venture lit the fuse to the stormy early history of Kuala Lumpur. The establishment of mining centres in Kanching saw the recruitment of more Chinese labour from older mining centres of Lukut (Selangor), Larut (Perak) and Sungei Ujong (Negri Sembilan). The miners brought with them the prevalent secret society organisations and Kanching became a stronghold for the Ghee Hin group while Kuala Lumpur was controlled by the Hai San faction.

Raja Mahadi gained sufficient strength in 1866 and made his move on Klang valley. The elderly Raja Abdullah was easily driven off and he died soon after in Melaka. Raja Abdullah's sons, Raja Hassan and Raja Ismail and their widowed mother, Raja Lijah appealed to Sultan Abdul Samad for royal support. In order to get away from the storm centre, Sultan Abdul Samad moved his royal seat from Klang to Jugra in Kuala Langat.

In the later years, there surfaced rumours that the move to Kuala Langat was a deliberate and calculated move by the Sultan to keep the civil war alive and benefit immensely from it. The blockade of Klang by both rivals meant that tin from Kuala Lumpur had to be diverted out via the Langat valley and that significantly increased Sultan Abdul Samad's receipts at the Kuala Langat custom house.

The long-drawn discourse in the Klang valley saw Raja Mahadi enjoying much local support as well as the patronage of Johor's Sultan, Ali Iskandar Shah. On the other hand, Raja Abdullah's sons aligned

themselves with Tunku Kudin, a Kedah prince who had the backing of financial interests in Singapore and Yap Ah Loy, the Capitan China of Kuala Lumpur.

WAR MOVES TO KUALA LUMPUR

Prior to 1870, most of the fighting were for the forts at the mouths of the Klang and Selangor rivers. After that, the main centre of struggle was for the mastery of Kuala Lumpur by which the victor would have an effective control of its lucrative tin revenues. Tunku Kudin eventually tipped the balance late in 1873 by bringing in Malay mercenaries from Pahang.

The occasion for British intervention in Selangor was provided by an act of piracy at Kuala Langat instigated by one of Sultan Abdul Samad's sons against a Malay trading vessel from Melaka. The Governor of the Straits Settlements, Sir Andrew Clarke visited Kuala Langat in February 1874 to negotiate a treaty for British control through a resident whose advice the Sultan must seek and follow in all matters except those involving Malay custom and the Islamic religion.

At this juncture, my attention is focussed on a photograph of Sultan Abdul Samad posing with his retinue. Looking closely at the monarch's facial expression, I have to agree with the opinion of Clarke and his advisers, including Attorney General Thomas Braddell, who felt that he looked courteous, kind and had a good personal disposition. The British were also impressed by Sultan Abdul Samad's alert knowledge of all that went on in his realm.



Sultan Abdul Samad posing with Malay royals and officers at Singapore's Government House in 1890.

BRITISH GETS A FOOTHOLD

Sultan Abdul Samad readily agreed to an agreement similar to the Pangkor Treaty recently signed by the Perak Sultan. He never had the reality of power in Selangor and the presence of a British Resident would undoubtedly strengthen his position as ruler.

Sultan Abdul Samad also agreed to pay an indemnity for the act of piracy and appointed a mixed Anglo-Malay court to try the accused men who were duly found guilty and condemned to death. In accordance with Malay custom, Sultan Abdul Samad supplied the keris of execution.

A few months later, it was discovered that the main prosecution witness had made a grave mistake and the innocence of the condemned men was proven beyond doubt. Despite that, Sultan Abdul Samad decided against

standing in the way of the British and their imperious and inexplicable ideas of what ought to be done. It was an attitude of which countless other similar examples were seen throughout colonial Malaya.

At first, Swettenham was sent to Selangor in the middle of 1874 as Assistant Resident. He described his stay at the Sultan's stockade by the river bank as appalling. The place was flooded twice a day during high tide and mosquitoes could only be kept at bay by filling the air with smoke.



The Sultan Abdul Samad building is one of Kuala Lumpur's most recognisable buildings today.

SULTAN AT A PERSONAL LEVEL

Sultan Abdul Samad, according to Swettenham, had manners as mild as those of a missionary. The ruler, already 70, was a small and wizened man with a kindly smile, fond of a good story and had a strong sense of humour. His amusements were gardening and hoarding money. Rumours swirled that there was \$100,000 worth of tin buried under Sultan Abdul Samad's residence on Parcelar Hill (Bukit Jugra today) in Kuala Langat.

Swettenham remained in Kuala Langat for about a year before moving to Perak in the spring of 1875. By then, JG Davidson was already appointed the first British Resident of Selangor. Selangor was on the verge of great prosperity by the time Swettenham returned in 1884 as the third British Resident. He replaced Davidson's successor, William Bloomfield Douglas.

At that time, Sultan Abdul Samad was nearly 80 but still in excellent health. In 1886, he left Jugra for the first time in six years to attend the opening of the railway from Klang to Kuala Lumpur. The Sultan hadn't been to Klang for 16 years. The Sultan and Sir Frederick Weld, Governor of

compartment of the inaugural train.

During the trip, the Governor was angered to find that the third class passengers travelled much more comfortably in open coaches compared to his small and very stuffy carriage. Sultan Abdul Samad concurred, saying cynically that it wasn't best bullock cart ride he had ever had.

Their arrival in Kuala Lumpur was greeted with festivities. Weld invested the Sultan with the insignia of the Most Distinguished Order of Saint Michael and Saint George (KCMG). The Governor noted that the Selangor ruler was "richly dressed in Malay fashion, wearing diamonds in excellent taste."

During his three-week stay in Kuala Lumpur, Sultan Abdul Samad was feted to various sporting events, Malay and Tamil entertainment and loyal addresses. He even planted a tree in the market place to commemorate his historic visit.

Hoping that the monarch would visit Kuala Lumpur on a more regular basis, a site on a hill above Sultan Street Station was chosen for an Istana. A palace was in fact built two years later but there's no record of Sultan Abdul Samad ever visiting Kuala Lumpur again.

In the last years of his life, Sultan Abdul Samad's mind was constantly haunted by memories of the fears and anxieties of long ago. He frequently referred with dismay to the time when territorial chiefs were constantly fighting in almost every part of Selangor and he was powerless to end their dissensions.

Towards the end of my research, I'm overwhelmed by a deep sense of admiration for Sultan Abdul Samad. Here was a man who had outlived all his contemporaries and managed to maintain full use of his physical and mental faculties during his golden years.

His wit saw him through all the vicissitudes of the era like a cork in water, bobbing on top of a sea of troubles that Selangor faced. No other Malay Sultan had the uncanny ability of riding out political storms as well as he did and after realising that British intervention was as inevitable as death, he took full advantage of their presence to prosper his beloved Selangor. At 11 am on Feb 6, 1898 the wise old Sultan passed away at the ripe age of 93.

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