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## Chapter 6



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# FEUDALISM IN MALAYSIAN SOCIETY: A STUDY IN HISTORICAL CONTINUITY

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The aim of this chapter is to discuss the historical continuity of attitudes and values from the feudal period to the present time. The recognition of this continuity is important for the purpose of understanding and explaining certain events in Malaysian society, particularly those pertaining to its political history. The history of Malaysia has been characterized by the absence of mass uprisings or any attempt thereto. What happened was the frequent emergence of conflicts between hostile and contending groups of chiefs and princes, between each other or against European colonial powers. The mass of the people had never been involved as in the case of a civil war or a general uprising. The Malaysian records from the 14th century onwards confirm the above.

The continuity we are interested in is a cluster of phenomena for which the term *psychological feudalism* is here suggested to differentiate it from its previous political, economic and judicial order of which those phenomena were the constituent psychological elements. The term *feudalism*, as a historical, social, political and economic order, is not easy to define. Historically speaking it has been a method of government characterized by the following traits:

(a) The presence of a big gulf between the poor (usually peasants) and the rich (usually noblemen and chiefs), in the economic, social, political and judicial field, (b) the

political order was dominated by hereditary groups having at their disposals large estates, (c) the prevalence of the manorial system of economy wherein a large, self-sufficient estate was cultivated by the peasants for the master, often a royal personage who rewarded them with strips of land, the fruits of which were in the main part retainable, (d) at the head of the manorial hierarchy was the feudal lord, immune from the supervision of higher authorities, yet possessing judicial, economic, fiscal and administrative rights, (e) the relation between the lord and his dependants was one of enfeoffment, the lord having the right to the unpaid labour and services of his dependants, (f) grants of land for cultivation were not to be withdrawn at will by the lord, (g) the warrior class dominated the feudal order, and (h) the feudal order lacked functional division and favoured decentralization of power and administration.

The feudal societies of the Malays, the Chinese and the Indians contained all the above characteristics. There were also numerous differences between feudal societies. Without going into further detail, suffice it to say that the institutional and judicial system of feudalism in Malaysia gradually disappeared since the beginning of modernization during the latter part of the 19th century. Despite this, however, the psychological traits remain. It is these traits that constitute psychological feudalism. In the context of psychological feudalism, the relationship between those in power and those dependent on them is characterized by personal attachment to the leader or man in authority rather than to the principles he stands for. The leader or the man in authority, whether he is a bureaucrat, a political celebrity, a teacher or a business manager, expects the subordinate to be loyal and faithful in a manner that sometimes comes into conflict with the norms and ethics of the work or profession. He is supposed to be loyal under almost all circumstances even if these circumstances violate the present values and philosophy of Malaysian society.

Before we isolate the historically continuous traits, it may be desirable to raise certain questions of approach and conceptualization. It has long been recognized by social

scientists that we should not view the state of society as an overall equilibrium, an overall harmonious integration. In every society there are elements of conflict and strain. There is the process of differentiation in the value system of the society. The dominant and the subjugated classes do not entirely share a common value system. As Wertheim puts it, 'We should not primarily look for the inherent structure of a given society, but for the value systems adopted in different layers of society. We have, in the first place, to learn how members of different segments of society view society as a whole. The division of society might even be based upon a distinction according to the value systems accepted. Instead of searching exclusively for integrative expedients, we should with equal intellectual force try to detect strains and conflicts in society, as possible agents in future change'.<sup>1</sup> The initial step in tracing elements of continuity is to differentiate the attitudes and value systems prevalent in the different sections of society. We have also to make the distinction between theory and practice. The absence of the above considerations has caused a misleading interpretation of the Malay system of values and attitudes towards kingship and all that it entails such as loyalty and obedience to the ruler.

Scholars on Malay history and society are generally inclined to regard the *Sejarah Melayu*, a Malay text of probably the 16th century, as the oldest written source on Malay life and thought. Unfortunately until now the predominant interests in the *Sejarah Melayu* have been literary and historical. A further enquiry cannot fail to reveal the conflict and protest elements in the *Sejarah Melayu*. The work was deliberately written on royal command with the intention of recording and transmitting to future generations the account of the deeds and customs of the Malay rulers.<sup>2</sup> The identity of the author is unknown but he appears to be a pious and cultured Muslim. His restraint towards passing a moral judgement on the cruel deeds of some of his royal characters would gain the approval of Ranke. Though no eulogist of Malay royalty, he did suggest the justice, humaneness and nobility of character of some of the Malay rulers. He was preoccupied with the history of Malacca.

The incident relevant to our theme was the murder of Bendahara Seri Maharaja by order of Sultan Mahmud Shah. According to the *Sejarah Melayu*, the Bendahara was murdered because of the intrigues and slander of Laksamana Khoja Husain. It was suggested to the Sultan that the Bendahara intended to usurp the throne. Without further investigation he ordered the Bendahara and his family to be put to death. The attitude of the Bendahara is of interest here. He accepted the command without a murmur. His retainers and his family were prevented by him from resisting. His son, Tun Hasan, was on the point of attacking the two messengers sent to the house for the execution with the royal *kris*. The Bendahara exclaimed, 'What, Hasan, would you commit treason? Would you spoil the name of your ancestors? Never was there any disloyalty in Malay tradition'.<sup>3</sup> He further said, 'If any of you resists, I shall take him to account in the Hereafter'.

As apparent from the above, the Bendahara accepted his fate and refused to condemn the misdeed of his sovereign even when he himself, his own life, was the object. The author of the *Sejarah Melayu* gave a dispassionate account of the killing without a single comment. However, he did portray the innocence of the Bendahara.<sup>4</sup> The problem which arises here is the attitude of the Bendahara. Was it the perfect expression of the Malay conception of loyalty to the ruler? Was he the embodiment of the Malay system of values? Was the attitude of the Sultan likewise an expression of the Malay system of values? What about the attitude of the Bendahara's son? Was it not the expression of the Malay system of values to honour and defend one's father, to prevent injustice, to defend one's family against tyranny, and to condemn it at least in one's conscience?

In another incident the opposite took place. Another Sultan by the name of Mahmud was killed at Kota Tinggi in August, 1699. Mahmud was said to be a capricious and neurotic ruler. Hamilton, who saw him in 1695, suggested that he was fond of the male sex. One day when the youthful Sultan Mahmud was asleep, someone brought a ripe jack-fruit. The wife of an influential captain (hulubalang) craved

for a piece of the fruit as she was then confining a child. When Mahmud noticed the damaged fruit, he was wild with anger and ordered the woman to be ripped open. Her husband, Megat Seri Rama, resolved to avenge her death and thereupon conspired with some leading dignitaries to execute his plan. The Sultan was killed while he was being carried on his way to the mosque.<sup>5</sup> We may also ask here whether the attitude of Megat Seri Rama is an expression of the Malay system of values, the rejection of tyranny, of absolute despotism unbridled by moral scruples. Before executing his revenge he declared that he was going to commit treason. He offered to make the Dato Bendahara Sultan. The Dato Bendahara and some other influential persons approved Megat Seri Rama's design. The whole affair appeared to be an attempt to get rid of an unbearable and youthful tyrant.<sup>6</sup>

It is apparent that the attitude of Megat Seri Rama is in sharp contrast to that of the Bendahara of Malacca. Both were Malays living in a similar cultural and political order. The social scientists have made the distinction between the system of values and the deviation therefrom. As far as the behaviour of rulers is concerned, the continuous domination of the powerful deviating from the collective norms, the system of values, has shaded the demarcation line between what is permissible and what is prohibited. Objectionable actions became acceptable through successive repetition by the powerful. Through the mechanism of conditioned reflex they were assimilated into the intellectual and emotional makeup of the observer continuously exposed to such actions. The clearest instance is perhaps the perennially prevalent corruption in Asian countries. Though the systems of values in these countries prohibited corruption, it became accepted by many people as an unavoidable practice too deep-rooted to combat.<sup>7</sup>

A clear instance of the Malay system of values which opposed misrule and corrupt practices is the *Undang2 Sungai Ujong*, the Digest of Customary Law of Sungai Ujong. Its conception of right and wrong is basically identical with the commandments of the great world religions. The digest

itself is Islamic in tone and principles. The king is exhorted to be fair, just, generous, patient, courageous and protective towards his subjects. He will be ruined if he is unjust to his subjects.<sup>8</sup> From this and many other Malay texts, it is apparent that the Malays do not all share the same values and attitudes towards particular events and issues.<sup>9</sup> This is not something peculiar to the Malays. It is a phenomenon which has long been recognized by sociologists and anthropologists.

From the history of the Malays we obtain the picture that two value systems existed side by side, at some points in conflict with each other, at others not. By value systems here we mean those which actually influenced behaviour, not the ideal theoretical systems. An instance of the conflict in value systems was furnished by Maxwell. He said, 'Forced labour is naturally hated by Malays and is evaded as much as possible. Travelling in the interior of Kedah I have seen the Malay peasant running from his fields into the jungle at the sight of the Raja's elephants, lest he should be called upon to form one of the train. In Perak the establishment of British influence has led to a general "strike" on the part of the peasantry against the system to which they formerly submitted peacefully. A Malay Raja in Perak, who in 1876 was able to supply me with the men of two or three villages in order to convey the baggage and stores of a detachment of troops from Blanja to Kinta, now finds it difficult to procure men to pole his own boat without paying them. Men required to perform work for the Government of the state, as at present constituted, are scrupulously paid, or provided with ample rations'.<sup>10</sup>

In the traditional feudal Malay society, the cultivator or tenant of the soil was expected to perform compulsory services in return for his right to cultivate the soil and live on it, in addition to the proportion of the yield claimed by the chief or ruler. There seems to be no codified definition of the nature and extent of the compulsory labour (*kerah*) which the superior can demand. To quote Maxwell again, 'In a Malay state, the exaction of personal service from the *ra'yat* is limited only by the powers of endurance of the

latter. The superior authority is obliged, from self-interest, to stop short of the point at which oppression will compel the cultivator to abandon his land and emigrate. But within this limit, the cultivator may be required to give his labour in making roads, bridges, drains and other works of public utility, to tend elephants, to pole boats, to carry letters and messages, to attend his Chief when travelling, to cultivate his Chief's fields as well as his own, and to serve as a soldier when required. Local custom often regulates the kind of service exacted from the cultivator in a particular district. Thus in Perak one district used to supply the Raja with timber for building purposes, while rattans and other materials came from others; the people of one locality used to furnish the musicians for the Raja's band, while another had to provide nurses and attendants for his children'.<sup>11</sup>

The Malay peasant who ran away from his fields into the jungle to avoid the Raja's party acted in conformity with his value system. The manner of avoidance, escape rather than defiance, was the institutionally established mode to cope with such a situation. We shall consider this as one of the continuities. However, let us now describe some of these continuities. The first we can discuss is the lack of a clear and consciously upheld distinction between what is private and what is official. In its modern form, it assumes the fusion between the interest of the individual and that of the state. The group in power ignores the distinction between private and official, as in traditional feudal society where such a distinction was often not drawn. The illustrations used here should not be confused with malpractices or criminal behaviour. They were considered proper and legal by the participants. The following is one instance from the State of Pahang in 1965. 'Members travelling on Legislative Assembly business are entitled to mileage allowances. It has been the practice for members of the Legislative Assembly to make travelling claims among other things, in respect of attendance at political meetings, civics courses, opening of mosque and public buildings, funerals of Assemblymen, Bulan Bahasa meetings, Koran Readings and election work. Recently, the Attorney-General has expressed

the opinion that Legislative Assembly business must be restricted to mean only business directly connected with meetings of the Assembly or a Committee thereof or with business specifically instructed by the Assembly or a Committee thereof to be taken by a member. The attention of the State Government has been drawn to this legal opinion'.<sup>12</sup>

Another instance of the lack of distinction between private and official business concerns the use of telephones. In the state of Trengganu in 1963, the telephone account of the State Secretariat amounted to \$12,918.16. This is more than \$1,000 per month. The charges included telephone calls made from government quarters on official telephones. 'Proper records of the trunk calls do not appear to have been kept and it is noteworthy that no collection was made for any private trunk call'.<sup>13</sup> Similarly in Kota Bahru, in the state of Kelantan, charges for private calls from certain officers at Police Contingent Headquarters had not been collected for up to four years. The amount outstanding in 1961 was \$1,544, of which \$861 was then still uncollected.<sup>14</sup> The above instances are two of the numerous examples in the different sectors of administrative activity. This phenomenon is to be distinguished from criminal practices. Those who made use of government facilities for private ends often felt that they were entitled to do so. In the feudal period the distinction between the two was often hazy.

Perhaps the most significant continuity of attitude is to be found in the relationship between the political leader and his followers, or between the subordinate official and his superior. In the Malay feudal society, the most serious disturbance in the relationship between a subordinate and his superior was a challenge or a defiance. A challenge or defiance might lead to an outbreak of hostility or it might not. Even if the challenge or defiance occurred outside the struggle for political power, it could lead to serious consequences. A subordinate might challenge the soundness of his superior's decision, or a follower might reject the leader's views. The adoption of such an attitude would be met with determined resistance. One instance a few years ago was the expulsion of a party member by the central leadership

without any reason given because the member concerned challenged the leadership for not agreeing with his candidacy for a particular constituency. The state division of the party (UMNO) had nominated him as a candidate for the general election.

On the other hand party members who negatively affected the image of the party by their behaviour were earnestly protected. The best instance of this sort is the case of the previous Minister of Education. He sued for libel an Opposition Member of Parliament who made the allegation that he, the Minister, was involved in corruption. The Minister lost the case and resigned. The Cabinet submitted for his legal fees 88,323 Malaysian dollars. There were severe criticisms against this by the Opposition Members. They claimed that public funds should not be spent on a thereafter failed to vindicate his name. They deplored the Minister who went to court on his own initiative and Cabinet's statement that the Minister was innocent before the judge pronounced his decision.<sup>15</sup> This case illustrates the continuity with the feudal past. In the feudal society the subordinate could rely on the assistance of his master even though he was wrong. As a matter of fact royal protection had been granted to criminals and murderers, as evidenced by the practice concerning slavery and servitude. If a person was guilty of a serious crime, one way to avoid punishment was to run to the ruler and declare himself as his slave. Thereafter no one would dare to touch him.<sup>16</sup>

The important conditions to obtain protection from feudal rulers and chiefs were unflinching loyalty and subservience towards the master. In return for these, protection was granted irrespective of the nature and degree of the crime. The modern version of this relationship is found in the political party. As long as the individual is loyal and subservient to the leader, he can rely on his protection in the hour of need. His misdemeanours and excesses may be tolerated, but never a challenge or defiance to the leader. This idea of challenge is often inclusive of mere disagreement on issues which do not enter into a power struggle for leadership. The leader manages his party as though it is a

manorial unit with him as head of the manor. In his set-up, status, seniority and age prevail over youth and initiative. He keeps his party colleagues around him as though they were manorial attendants who by sheer devotion and proximity to him remain in their positions. In the party structure and the Cabinet hierarchy there is very little mobility. This again reflects the manorial outlook and condition.

Another continuity which can easily be identified is the tendency to spend on festivals, ceremonies, entertainments and recreational projects, beyond what can be rationally justified within the context of the situation. The feudal value of pomp and grandeur prevails upon the intention to save and economize. We may note some instances here. In March, 1966, the Prime Minister requested an additional sum of \$203,323 on \$200,000 for the purchase of stars, badges, ribbons, and so forth, for two new orders of chivalry which the government introduced then. Thus the sum required totalled \$403,323.<sup>17</sup> In 1964 the state of Trengganu purchased \$43,300 worth of medals.<sup>18</sup> The state of Kedah purchased \$75,246.09 worth of medals (one hundred and seventeen) in the same year.<sup>19</sup> In February, 1968, one hundred and nine persons received the decorations of Kedah.<sup>20</sup> Trengganu conferred ninety-two decorations in the same year.<sup>21</sup> Perlis, the smallest state of Malaysia, honoured forty-five persons in 1969.<sup>22</sup> The Yang di-Pertuan Agong, as Head of the Federal State, decorated five hundred and fifty-five persons this year (1968) on the occasion of his birthday. Selangor conferred forty-five honours in 1967.<sup>23</sup>

It may safely be estimated that more than one thousand persons receive decorations each year throughout Malaysia. In the last ten years since Merdeka, Malaysia must have spent millions in medals and ribbons. Judging from the price of the Kedah purchase, \$75,246.09 for one hundred and seventeen stars and medals, the average cost is about \$655. If we consider one thousand pieces at \$300 each (average) for the whole of Malaysia, it will come to about \$300,000 (0.3 million) a year. In addition to recurrent expenditure, such as buying medals, stars and ribbons, there is the

ceremonial send-off and welcome for the Yang di-Pertuan Agong. On the 20th and 21st of September, 1965, the Malaysian government spent \$28,000 on the ceremonial send-off for the Raja of Perlis and the welcome of the Sultan of Trengganu as Yang di-Pertuan Agong.<sup>24</sup> The state visits of the Prime Minister of Korea in September, 1965, and the Prime Minister of South Vietnam cost \$30,000 and \$19,000 respectively. Each visit lasted about three days.<sup>25</sup>

The Auditor-General's report of 1964 included a total expenditure of \$1,038,711 for the purchase of cutlery, crockery and glass for Parliament House, overseas missions and some government houses. They were probably for two thousand place-settings for Parliament, overseas missions and for Parliament House Canteen. The report did not mention the total. It said: 'In October, 1963, the Treasury approved the ordering of 500 place-settings of cutlery, crockery and glass for Parliament House and of supplies for six Federal Government Houses up to a limit of \$406,400, subject to quotations being submitted in the first instance. However, orders were apparently placed without prior reference to the Treasury, and the quantities ordered exceeded those approved by 400 place-settings for Parliament, 100 places of cutlery and 200 crockery for Parliament House Canteen and 600 places for Overseas Missions. The Treasury limit was exceeded by \$632,311 and the stores-purchasing regulations were varied without prior Treasury approval. I have not yet received the Treasury's comments on this matter or been informed how previous equipment in Overseas Missions will be utilised. Funds were voted to pay the whole order under three heads of expenditure in the First Supplementary Estimates 1965'.<sup>26</sup> It appears that one place-setting may cost more than \$500.

Another item of expenditure worth noting is the construction of the Sungai Way Golf Course in the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur. The cost was estimated at \$4.1 million.<sup>27</sup> Smaller golf courses are constructed in the states. This has now become a fashion. The state of Pahang might have spent \$100,000 to extend the Kuantan Golf Course.<sup>28</sup> In 1963 the state of Malacca spent \$396,325.84 for the con-

struction of a golf course.<sup>29</sup> There are numerous other expenditures on entertainment, banquets, festivals, state visits and golf courses which need not be recounted here. Suffice it to say that the mood and desire to spend on such objects have been continuous with the feudal past where the ruling power put a high premium on luxury, entertainment and recreation. There is an apparent contradiction in the professed aims of the government and its propensity to spend in projects which it considers as non-essential.<sup>30</sup>

It is not the intention here to construct a typology of continuities or analyze deeper the effect and significance of certain continuities. For this purpose it would be best to select a single topic and treat it in both its synchronic and diachronic dimensions. It is also necessary here to correct any possible one-sided impression of Malaysian development owing to the fact that only the elements of psychological feudalism have been prominently emphasized. This emphasis is necessary to show its existence rather than the degree of its dominance in the Malaysian scene. The degree of influence exerted by psychological feudalism has yet to be studied. No suggestion at the moment can be reliable or is worth offering on the influence of psychological feudalism in Malaysia.

The presence of historical continuities identified as psychological feudalism cannot be denied. Their overt manifestations are obvious. It would require an enormous amount of time to gather disconnected and scattered facts to illustrate the continuities in the different sectors of social life. Recently Inche Tahar bin Haji Kamin, seventy years of age, a witch-doctor (*bomoh*) was flown from West Malaysia to East Malaysia on the occasion of the state visit of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong, the King, to East Malaysia. His assignment was to stop the rains from falling, which he was believed to have accomplished at a royal wedding some time ago in the capital. In Sabah he was believed to have succeeded in preventing rain for more than three days, the period of the state visit.<sup>31</sup> In the various sectors of social life we find continuities from the feudal period in the realms of beliefs, attitudes and reaction patterns in crisis situations.